Might Have Been

by snowberryrose

Summary

"Death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.” ~Steve Jobs
A story that explores the possibilities if Darcy had reacted to his parents' death differently and if Mrs. Bennet left behind 4 daughters after giving birth to the long-awaited heir to Longbourn.

Notes

I have no hope of ever reaching the genius of Jane Austen, but this story would not leave me be until it was written. This particularly posting is a revision of an earlier version posted at FFN under the same name. I think of it as Pride and Prejudice in a parallel universe; I only hope Miss Austen forgives me for the liberties I have taken with her characters.
Propriety

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire was no stranger to impropriety. As the sole heir to a grand estate, he was raised, beginning at an early age, in all that was proper. As such, he had a keen eye for breaches of conduct in those with whom he interacted. Shopkeepers, businessmen, eligible young ladies and their determined mama's; no one was safe from the master of Pemberley's discerning eye. With such thorough knowledge of the finer aspects polite behavior, Mr. Darcy was fastidious in maintaining all appearances of a well-bred gentleman. His reserve, as much a product of much practice as an effort to hide an inherent shyness when in company unfamiliar to him, caused not a few acquaintances to view him mistakenly as haughty at best and spiteful at worst. But wealth and prestige gained him such respectability that even those who dared to take offense found such deficits easy to forgive.

Those privileged enough to be privy to the true Fitzwilliam Darcy, however, knew to look for the barely noticeable twitches at the corner of his mouth and the hidden spark of mirth in the depth of his eyes. For, in truth, Mr. Darcy was one who was in possession of a witty humor. As a boy, he often derived amusement from the harmless follies of others, a practice encouraged by Lady Anne Darcy's love of the ridiculous and tempered by the previous Master Darcy's benevolence towards his fellow men. Though such tendency became better hidden as the experiences of loss and increasing responsibilities gifted the young man with a solemnity often mistaken for universal disapproval, it never lay dormant. The closeness he shared with his younger sister, despite the years that separated them, further ensured that such lightheartedness was never extinguished. Indeed, from the moment he had first beheld her infant form, resting so peacefully in quiet oblivion of the tragedy that marred her entry into the world, young Fitzwilliam Darcy had felt a rush of protectiveness over the poor motherless creature. When he observed the overwhelming sorrow that threatened to rob him of a father as well, he promised, with all the naivety of a child but the conviction of one much older that he would ensure that his sister should not be a stranger to joy and laughter. To please his father, he attended to his tutors and quickly exceeded the expectations placed on the heir. When not at his books or riding the estates at his father's side, however, he made certain to accompany his sister in all her whimsies and discovered a hitherto unknown talent for mimicking others. Even when he was obliged to leave for University, he was mindful to visit home whenever possible to reenact silly scenes from his experiences to the great delights and adoration of Miss Georgiana Darcy.

When their father finally passed from the heartbreak that had slowly leached at his life, the Darcy siblings took much solace in one another. While other young men might have grown bitter for having to shoulder the many responsibilities of the young Master of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy found that his darling sister's youthful innocence and exuberance for life prevented him from hiding away his heart. For all that brother and sister were often alone in such a large establishment as Pemberley, their days were filled with laughter and true contentment.

Of course, visitors were always welcome at Pemberley, particularly the presence of the amiable Colonel Fitzwilliam, cousin to the Darcy siblings. What both Darcys lacked in social grace, the good Colonel made up for with such gentlemanly charm that those with whom he conversed always left his company delighted at having made his acquaintance. The Darcy siblings also felt a great indebtedness to their good cousin. For Colonel Fitzwilliam it was who insisted on Mr. Darcy's openness with his sister. Knowing the siblings' shy dispositions and predilections for hiding their emotions, Colonel Fitzwilliam made good use of his battlefield experiences and managed to help brother and sister confide in one another in their grief and so emerge from the mourning period all the stronger.

So it was that as Fitzwilliam Darcy faced his Aunt Catherine and her idiot sycophant of a
clergyman, Mr. Collins, only his cousin saw through Darcy's serious mien. The good Colonel knew that in his mind, Darcy was already planning a re-enactment of such a scene for dear Georgiana once they reached Pemberley on the morrow. Though neither cousin could stand the ostentatious bearings of their most beloved aunt, propriety as well as family obligation demanded that they continue to suffer through their yearly Easter visits to Rosings. Finally, the droning voice of Mr. Collins and his multitude of platitudes for the most gracious and honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh ceased long enough for the grand lady herself to order imperiously the cousins to their carriage, for certainly though she, and her daughter Anne, greatly enjoyed the young gentlemen's presence, it would be most unwise to leave too late after the sun had risen. After all, young gentlemen of good breeding should not laze around the mornings but should rather apply themselves to practical task of good industry. Resisting the strong urge to roll his eyes, Colonel Fitzwilliam bowed as was expected and exited the morning room as quickly as he could while still staying within the bounds of polite behavior.

Neither cousin said a word nor looked at one another until their carriage safely left the oppressive confines of Rosings Park. Only when the trees successfully hid the grand estate from view did they feel at ease to breathe in the free air and release their tensions in uproarious laughter. Grasping the sides of the carriage for support, Darcy caught his breath and admitted wryly, "I know laughing at Aunt Catherine is most un-gentlemanly, yet I cannot but continue to think her most ridiculous. I am only sorry that Cousin Anne has to live with not only such a mother but also the scintillating company of Mr. Collins."

Colonel Fitzwilliam replied with a chuckle, "Letters from Anne have been quite amusing since the installment of the rector. He is too respectful of our Aunt to be fond of her, and much too mindful of the elevation of her position above him to understand her condescension. Such were Anne's words; and I have found little cause to fault her judgment. Indeed, interactions with the good clergyman have only illuminated further deficits on which Anne was too kind to remark."

"Perhaps our esteemed relation only wished for a source of amusement; your mother has certainly mentioned that Aunt Catherine is far too isolated at Rosings."

"Then she might have accepted my father's offer to obtain her a lapdog; the results may well have been similar. Besides, you know my mother retains grand hopes to introduce Anne to the Ton."

"For good reason, no?"

The Colonel sighed, his levity momentarily forgotten, "I should not have told her of my intentions."

His cousin gave him a look of incredulity as he commented dryly, "As I recall, she gave you little choice in the matter."

"Indeed. Woe to whoever should attempt to hide truths related to matrimony from my mother!" Was the Colonel's rueful reply.

His eyes alit with curiosity, Darcy asked frankly, "When will you quit your lonely life as a soldier, retire your regimentals, and make our Cousin Anne the happiest of woman?"

"I expect my mother's joy may well eclipse Anne's!" The sigh that accompanied such an apparent flippant remark, however, revealed well the Colonel's wistfulness. "I do so hate to make Anne wait. Though her letters have always managed to raise my spirits even when the conditions inside my lodgings were hardly better than the wretched battlefields outside their confines, I cannot claim enough fondness for such a life that I would be sad to see an end to it. But what can I do? My income is as yet insufficient to permit me to marry, leastwise, not without relying on my wife's
inheritance or my parents' generosity. Though I know I would be well-supported on both accounts, I cannot in good conscience offer for Anne without some security to my own name."

Sobering immediately at the Colonel's mention of his life in service to the crown, Darcy attempted at levity to return some cheer to the carriage ride, "And you must have some footing on which to challenge Aunt Catherine's authority...To think that you, the son of an Earl, is not as free as I, a humble gentleman farmer, to secure your happiness."

Not one given to melancholy, the Colonel took the comment for the purpose it was intended, "Humble indeed! My dear cousin, if Pemberley was less prosperous and the Darcy name less ancient, you may well have escaped Aunt Catherine's greatest desire to call you son as well as nephew. As it is, only my fondness for dear Georgie has kept me from challenging you for a claim to our fair cousin; Georgie has suffered enough losses for me to think of robbing her of a brother as well."

"As though you could hope to usurp my title of fencing champion within the family."

"Ha! But you have been growing soft for want of exercise, hidden away as you are at Pemberley. I demand a match to test my talents."

"You shall have it, cousin. Only I do hope your vanity stands ready to be destroyed!"

"As one of His Majesty's finest soldiers, I shall show no fear!"

Such talk caused a spirit of glad anticipation to re-descend between the cousins. Both were quite eager to return Pemberley, not only for the delightful company of young Miss Darcy, but also for the lightening of spirit that was necessary after a stay at Rosings. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, with all her imperiousness of manner and firmness of opinion, was a woman whose very presence demanded deference from all but those with the steadiest temperamnet. Her servants were all suitably in awe of the great lady and her neighbors appropriately appreciative of her generosity; thus, her reign was absolute. Her fondest wish, one which the grand lady had determined will be fact, was for her daughter to wed Darcy, thus joining their two great estates. Her family, however, was well aware that Anne and Richard shared great affection from one another from the very moment he had rescued her from falling in the creek in their youth. Lord Matlock, who had always been friendlier with the younger of his two sisters, chose not to apprise Lady Catherine of the situation. He only watched over the growing closeness of his son and niece with great satisfaction and prepared himself for the smirk of triumph when his sister should realize how well her plans had been thwarted. Lady Matlock, having been acquainted with the Fitzwilliam family long before she became one of its members, was more sympathetic to her sister-in-law. As a mother, she understood Lady Catherine's love for her daughter even if she could not agree with the overprotectiveness with which such affection was expressed. Surely Anne had no need to have her mother dictate all aspects of her life! All efforts to allow Miss de Bourgh a proper London Season, however, were thwarted with notifications regarding the young lady's indifferent health. Lady Matlock thus had to satisfy herself with regular correspondence with her niece and rare meetings when her husband could be prevailed upon to visit with his sister.

Certainly young Anne de Bourgh had suffered a serious illness, a most dreadful fever that almost claimed her life and left her more frail than her cousins, but she was no invalid. She was small of stature, particularly when seated next to both her mother's person and personality. Her pale complexion, however, was not unlike that of her maternal grandmother, a commonality she shared with her eldest cousin, the Fitzwilliam heir. She possessed a quiet disposition, but enjoyed what limited pursuits she was allowed. In particularly, she delighted in driving her horse and phaeton through the parks of her home and was not an infrequent visitor to the prior occupants of the parsonage. Though deferential to her mother in most matters, Anne was not without her own thoughts. Taking advantage of the many occasions during which her mother insisted that Darcy
accompany her for a brief walk in the well-manicured gardens, she had explained to him, in gentle tones, that she did not wish to marry him, no matter her mother's designs. Darcy was only too relieved to hear her words. Though he was fond of his mother's namesake, he was too much Lady Anne's son not to hope for more spirit in a wife. Besides, even then he had known that Anne's letters were Richard's greatest treasures while Richard's presence always made Anne's eyes shine the brighter. Indeed, seeing his two cousins so content in each others' company was the only real joy Darcy had in the yearly pilgrimage to Kent. Despite his natural abhorrence for deceit, he minded not the duplicity of escorting Anne from the house only to have the Colonel replace his position at her side once they had reached the gardens.

Though the Earl and Countess of Matlock made their pleasure at the match known to Richard and offered to settle a most generous estate on him and his bride, the Colonel, as he had indicated to Darcy, was not yet willing to approach the formidable Lady Catherine. Alas that the Colonel inherited the great stubbornness of the Fitzwilliams, for he was insistent on making his fortune quite independent of his parents' influence and connections so that he may be a worthy suitor for the hand of his beloved. His father was wont to blame such desire on his son's perusal of the ideologies of the former Colonies in the wake of the most unpleasant business of keeping an alliance from forming between the Americans and the dastardly French. But Darcy, who had learned to be independent at a young age, could not fault the Colonel for his wished to stand before Aunt Catherine as his own man.

A mention of Miss Darcy's progress with her embroidery caused the Colonel to touch the breast pocket where a handkerchief from Anne lay.

Catching the momentary lapse in his cousin's jovial manners, Darcy sighed, "If only you had a maidenly aunt who could conveniently leave you a fortune."

"Ah, but Aunt Cordelia had made a most advantageous marriage to the Duke of Chesterton and left behind two sons in addition to the heir when she passed."

"And your uncle cannot be prevailed upon to take pity on you?"

"You forget, cousin, that my maternal grandparents had quite severed the connection after Aunt Cordelia's passing. I never knew the reason for it, but suffice to say I must be the master of my own fortunes. But enough talk of my future, should you not attend to Aunt Catherine's talk of your prospects?"

"You know very well that her heavy-handed hints are but reminders that I should make an offer for Anne," Darcy retorted, "and as we both know such an event shall never come to pass, I can ignore her well enough. Besides, for your sake, I must maintain the charade that I intend to heed her wishes. She might well find a more unscrupulous suitor in a fit of pique should I find another lady to be Mistress of Pemberley."

"My debt to you is great," the Colonel admitted, "and I little know how I shall repay it. I can only promise that should you find a young lady who can bring you the happiness you desire, I shall endeavor to sing your praises such that she will have no choice but to fall in love with you."

"Such talk of matrimony! Has your mother finally given up hopes that Reggie might return from the Continent and settle at Milton Hall with a viscountess at last?"

"Letters from my brother have been particularly sparse as of late. He did manage to send reassuring words of his safety at Sicily, where His Majesty's Navy has a strong presence."

"No mentions of when he might come home? Though Georgie has delighted in the packages from abroad, I imagine Aunt Matlock would rest easier if both of her sons were on British soil."
The Colonel shook his head, "Reggie, for all his apparent ease of temperament, is as stubborn as any Fitzwilliam."

"And so your mother has turned her eyes to you?"

With a laugh, the Colonel remarked, "I believe you are to be her next target, Darcy! You are now four and twenty and have successfully taken over the running of Pemberley. Mother is of the opinion that it is high time that you were wed, if only to ensure that Georgie will have someone to help her prepare for her coming out in a few years' time."

Darcy allowed his alarm to show at such a comment, "Heavens forbid! Has she forgotten the disasters of last summer?"

"Only you deemed it a disaster, Mother was quite pleased with your popularity."

With a groan, Darcy shook his head, "Save me from well-meaning relatives! You know well, Richard, that the manner of wife I hope to find is rare indeed; I have little chance of finding her in one of the Ton."

The Colonel nodded, "Yes, your parents' felicity, brief though it was, did much to shape your opinions in such a matter. Even the strength of your father's grief cannot keep you from wishing to marry only for the deepest affection."

"You need not make me sound like a heroine in the novels young ladies are wont to enjoy."

"And what would you know of such novels?"

"I must ensure proper reading material for my sister," replied Darcy with great dignity despite the knowing look on his cousin's face. Nonetheless, he could admit to himself that he did feel some emptiness that neither the most melodious songs from his sister nor the most outrageous tale from his cousin could fill. Now that the mourning period for his father had ended and his authority as the Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire was mostly established, he knew he was expected to find a wife to care for Pemberley as its Mistress and to provide a guide for his young sister.

Seeing the furrow between Darcy's eyebrows, the Colonel asked, "You are determined, then, to find a true partner?"

Darcy's reply was steadfast, "I love Pemberley, but the Darcy wealth draws enough from other sources that I cannot always be available to care for the needs of my tenants. And though Hendricks is an invaluable steward, I cannot in good conscience keep him from his family; I have seen what the neglect of a father can do to a young man who was otherwise full of promise...I am not opposed to marriage, especially if it be one build on friendship and love, but the Mrs. Darcy I seek is unconventional indeed."

And where was he to find such a woman to answer his heart's yearnings? Certainly not within the rigid confines of the tearooms or among and the banal chatter at the balls Lady Matlock had already insisted that he attend. Though society demanded that a well-bred young lady be well-read, propriety demanded that she restrict her repertoire of literature to the Good Book, the works of the great poet, or the frivolities of popular novels. Where could he find a woman who dared to acquire knowledge regarding the practicalities of being a landowner, a partner with whom to share the demands of ensuring that his tenants were well-fed, well-clothed, and well-sheltered from the harsh Derbyshire winters?

Richard Fitzwilliam found that he could not find a reply to his cousin's impassioned inquiries. Darcy's unique wishes regarding the attributes of his future life partner did not surprise his cousin.
After all, the late Lady Anne and the elder Master Darcy had made a love match. The Colonel's own parents, who Darcy respected though they could never replace his own parents, had also built a marriage out of mutual respect. That Darcy should seek the same was not unexpected. Despite all the fame of the wealth and prestige tied to his name, Fitzwilliam Darcy was at heart like all the Darcys before him, a simple country gentleman who wanted nothing more than to provide for those in his care and share in the fruits of his labors with those he loved.

"I can only wish you well, cousin."

Darcy coughed lightly, his cheeks slightly tinged with color at the outpouring of thoughts he had not meant to share, "Thank you, Richard."

The Colonel said no more but only nodded in reply.

Indeed, both young gentlemen could only commiserate together as the countryside raced by outside the carriage, little knowing that a letter from one Mr. Charles Bingley, lying innocuously in the pile of correspondences on the table of the Master's study in Pemberley, would play a role of great import in the achievement of both their desires.
Homecoming

The return of the young Master Darcy and his esteemed cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam was a most happy occasion for the myriad of individuals who called the grand estate of Pemberley their home. Mrs. Reynolds, the matronly housekeeper who kept a tight watch over the daily up-keeping of the Darcy home, could be seen bustling about and ordering the other servants in a manner that was more severe than her usual wont. The younger footmen and maids, however, found that they could not find it in their hearts to complain of Mrs. Reynolds's meticulous demands. Such was their joy in the return of their most beloved Master that even the youngest scullery maid breathed not a single unkind word as she tackled the mountain of dishes the cook stacked in her little corner in preparation for the homecoming feast.

Those fortunate enough to serve in the great house itself further found the monotony of their duties lessened by the melodious notes coming from the music room as Miss Georgiana Darcy poured forth her happiness at the imminent return of her darling brother in the best way she knew. Golden ringlets glowed in the bright afternoon sunshine spilling through the immaculate window panes (for any house with Mrs. Reynolds at the helm could have no less than perfect windows) as blue eyes slid across black notes on the music pages and nimble fingers turned the plain markings into a live thing of beauty that pranced through the halls on dainty joy-lightened feet. The cheerful notes of the song greatly suited not only young Miss Darcy Georgiana but also the anticipatory atmosphere of the entire estate.

A sudden discordant note was the only reply the footman who delivered the long-awaited message of young Master Darcy's return received before he found himself quite alone with a now silent pianoforte. Smiling in indulgence at the genuine affection between the Darcy siblings, the footman likewise abandoned the now quiet room and retreated to the servant quarters to await Mrs. Reynolds's next command. If the other servants were startled at the replacement of the lively song by the graceful figure of their young mistress, they made no comment but rather attacked their various tasks with renewed fervor so that Mr. Darcy and his honored guest could have no complaints and no doubts of the happy reception of their return.

In her exuberance, Miss Georgiana flew through the gleaming hallways of her home with little care for propriety and the sedate pace that was demanded of her as a young lady of good fortune and genteel upbringing. Only the rather stern look on Mr. Darcy's visage could cause her to skid to a stop, drop her gaze to the ground, and curtsy politely as she had been taught. Any shame she might have felt at her breach in good behavior was curtailed, however, at the good-natured chuckles from both her guardians. Raising her eyes slightly, Georgiana was overjoyed to detect the teasing gleam in her brother's eyes and the smile that threatened to crack the stern mask he so carefully cultivated. With an answering chuckle of her own, Georgiana could only throw herself into her brother's embrace.

Though the Colonel observed such a reunion fondly, he could not help but exclaim in mock despair, "My goodness, Georgie, what would Aunt Catherine say if she knew your brother and I were raising such a wild maiden whose conduct lacked any sense of decorum?"

Any sting Georgiana might have felt at his teasing words was soon relieved of its existence, however, when he too hugged her in greeting.

Releasing her, he marveled at the change in her appearance, "My dear cousin, have you grown once more? I do declare, you shall soon rival even your brother in stature! Where is the little girl who used to tug on my coat for hidden sweets? I do hope Mother was able to replace your wardrobe again during your visit to London? Your brother and I are poor guardians in such a
regard for we are quite helpless when confronted with choices of laces and ribbons."

Miss Darcy flushed at her cousin's observation, still rather unused to her new height and the other changes occurring in her form, "Aunt Matlock was most kind."

Noting her discomfiture, her brother spoke, "Now Richard, your mother is only too aware of the deficiencies of having two bachelors raise a young girl. I am certain she did all she could to correct our errors."

Though she smiled gratefully at her brother, Miss Darcy could not allow him to malign himself so, "Oh no, Brother, Aunt Matlock was most complimentary in your guardianship. She has ever had the highest approval for Miss Annesley and continues to praise your judgment in choosing such a wonderful governess for me."

"I doubt she had much good to say about my worth as a guardian, then, neglectful as I am," the Colonel commented dryly.

"Do be careful, cousin," Darcy said with a smirk, "one might think you were envious."

"Envious?! No, not I. I shall gladly leave the burdens of Mother's and Aunt Catherine's attentions to you; only you are capable of withstanding the expectations that come with them, after all."

"Thus freeing you to act as you will?"

The Colonel chuckled, "Indeed, I am but a coarse soldier, unfettered by the bounds of propriety."

"Ah, but you still heeded Aunt Catherine's command to 'stand up straight, Richard, for someone with military training, you ought to have much better posture.'"

Clutching a hand to his chest at such perfect mimicry of his aunt's voice, the Colonel groaned, "I fear no man, but in the face of either my Mother's or Aunt Catherine's displeasure, I am quite lost. If only we could acquaint them with that silly little man who calls himself Emperor, this war might be over the sooner."

Georgiana frowned at this reminder of her cousin's occupation. Putting aside her shyness and making her sensitive and observant nature known, she insisted, with all the gravity of her almost fourteen years, "Such dreary talk of war, Cousin Richard, when your visit and Brother's homecoming should be one of only joy. Would you and Brother not prefer to refresh yourselves before supper is to be served this evening? I cannot but think that you must be exhausted after your journey. Tea is to be served in the West Parlor, but can be readily sent to your rooms if you so desire."

Trading looks of amused fondness at their young charge's efforts at playing the role of a most gracious hostess, Darcy and Fitzwilliam were nonetheless thankful for her perception of their fatigue and gratefully retired to wash away the weariness of their road from their faces and exchange their tired traveling attire for clean ones.

The afternoon passed quietly. Miss Darcy, once the comforts of her relations were ensured, returned to her lessons in French and Italian under Miss Annesley's watchful eye. Now and then, Miss Darcy would pause in the sewing of a shirt for her brother to ask her governess regarding a certain turn of phrase, but for the most part, the soft murmur of their voices as their conversation flowed effortlessly from one language to the other provided a soothing background as they focused on genteel tasks of industry. The Colonel took full advantage of Pemberley's astounding library; though if pressed, he could not have recalled much regarding the book he chose, so intent was he to bask in the warm sunshine in his most comfortable seat. Even Darcy, his loyal hounds at
his side, took a few moments to walk the woodland trails and allow the familiarity of his surroundings to reset his equilibrium. He was never truly at ease when away from Pemberley for all that he was no stranger to travel. He treasured times such as these when he could simply be Master of his realm and of himself.

Supper that night was a sumptuous affair as the three cousins reacquainted themselves with each other's company. Georgiana delighted in her brother's retelling of the many follies of the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh just as much as he had thought she would while he in turn was quite pleased at the progress she had made with her studies. As such, though custom dictated that the gentlemen sequester themselves for brandy after the evening meal, Darcy and Fitzwilliam found themselves unwilling to part from Miss Darcy's company. So, instead, the three retired to the music room where Georgiana re-conjured the music sprite with her skilled fingers.

The Colonel gave a great hum of contentment as he nursed his drink, "I see now that I truly have no need to pass along Aunt Catherine's advice that you must practice a great deal if you expect to excel at the instrument. I am certain if our aunt could but hear your playing, she would certainly rescind her opinion."

"The credit must be given to Aunt Matlock," Miss Darcy protested, "for securing the services of a London master for me. Or to the composer, for Cousin Reggie has made the foreign tune quite easy to play even for one of my meager skills."

"My brother has not neglected his correspondence with you, then? I do hope, Georgie, that you will remind him of his obligation to inform our parents that he still remains among the living? A six-month with no word from him is quite worrisome; I certainly have no desire to become Lord Milton."

Miss Darcy nodded obligingly but added, "Aunt Matlock would also like reassurance of your health, I think."

The Colonel had the grace to look ashamed, "Then I shall go pen a letter this very night!"

Darcy, much amused at the interplay, turned to his sister with a chuckle after the Colonel had left their company, "Perhaps I have been wrong to keep you at Pemberley, Georgie, you seem to have learned much courage during your stay in Town."

"Oh! I am not so very brave. I fairly begged Aunt Matlock to allow me to escape so that I might greet you when you returned. Though...my own homecoming was not so pleasant." Miss Darcy murmured, a shadow passing over her face.

"Georgie?" Darcy waited with bated breath, trying desperately to gain control over his growing sense of disquiet.

When Georgiana did finally speak, Darcy was so alarmed at the tale that he could not help but tense his fingers into fists at his sides and fight the urge to run for his sword. Georgiana, staring at her own clasped hands, noticed not her brother's strong reactions but rather rushed through her story in a trembling voice.

It seemed that but a day after Miss Darcy's return and two days prior to Darcy's, a certain gentleman had come calling at Pemberley to request for the Kympton living. When Mrs. Reynolds made it known that Master Darcy was not at home, Mr. George Wickham, for it was that most disreputable gentleman, made his displeasure known and thundered down the steps towards the nearby village of Lambton where he no doubt drowned his perceived sorrows in spirits and decried his pitiful treatment at the hands of the Darcy family to any who would listen and all who would not. To his great detriment, Mr. Wickham was deep enough in his cups so as to forget that
those with whom he kept company were familiar with the honorable nature of the Darcys and would allow no one, especially not one who had at one time been one of their own, to spew such infamous lies. So it was that Mr. Wickham awoke from his drink-induced haze to find himself slumped in a darkened alley buried beneath a large and rather pungent pile of refuse, his once-handsome face quite marred by hideous bruises and his once-spotless shirt quite ruined by bloodstains.

Miss Darcy would not have known of these circumstances had Mr. Wickham been in his right frame of mind. However, that gentleman, if he still deserved to be called such, was either still mind-addled by drink or simply delirious from the beating he had received from the good townspeople of Lambton, decided that it would be to his benefit to approach Pemberley again in his still inebriated state. His gruesome figure caused quite the stir in an otherwise quiet night as he pounded incessantly on Pemberley's door, an annoyance that he then accompanied by loud accusations that did not bear repeating in polite company. Mrs. Reynolds, bless her heart, made quite sure that the front doors were remained steadfastly closed and sent the swiftest footman to the Lambton for the town constable. Much as a general commanding troops to battle, Mrs. Reynolds quickly had the household staff run about to secure all entryways and windows so that the raving madman could find no possible way into the confines of the Darcy home. Amidst the chaos, Miss Darcy's trembling figure could be seen at the top of the grand staircase, her pale complexion exceeding even the white marble that surrounded her. Seeing the young girl's wide-eyed fear, Mrs. Reynolds was quick to accompany her young Mistress to her own room and summoned Miss Annesley to keep her charge in relative safety until the constable had dragged Mr. Wickham beyond either eye-sight or hearing.

"I did not think George would be so ungrateful as to say the things he did...he was so altered from my memory of him...he was always so charming, but his dreadful shouts!"

Darcy drew his sister into his comforting embrace, "My dear sister!"

Miss Darcy sighed even as she wiped at the tears that had gathered in her eyes, "I am only so very glad that Papa never lived to see such a day...I do not know if he could have borne it."

Marveling at his sister's tender heart, Darcy inquired softly, "Why did you not summon me from Rosings? I could have returned the sooner had I known."

"Mrs. Reynolds wished me to, posthaste, and even Miss Annesley was troubled that I did not wish to send for you, but I could not bear to curtail Cousin Richard's time with Cousin Anne; his leave is not so very long."

Feeling at once proud and concerned at his sister's selflessness, Darcy sighed, "And how do you fare, Georgie?"

Miss Darcy hesitated but a moment before responding to the obvious concern in his voice, "I was...I am most frightened; but also comforted that I am not all alone. Mrs. Reynolds has always looked so disapproving when George's name should be mentioned, and this incidence has only strengthened her determination to allow no harm to befall me. Her vigilance influenced our entire staff to acquire a heightened desire to protect their home; Miss Annesley has barely allowed me to leave her sight...how strange it is! Pemberley had once been George's home as well. And now...you have ever said that the constable is an honorable man, Brother, so I trust him to keep his word to watch over George. But I cannot escape a feeling of wrongness...Papa would have surely received George with only joy, and yet..."

As her words faded into silence, Darcy found himself at once angry at Wickham for his thoughtless behavior and most impressed at the strength of his sister and a glimpse into the considerate young woman she was fast becoming. Taking a moment to reign in his warring
emotions, Darcy strengthened his hold on his now trembling sister.

"I think George has long forfeited his right to call Pemberley home."

A slight nod from Miss Darcy indicated her reluctant agreement.

Brother and sister sat in silent contemplation until the former murmured, "Though I am sorry that you had to bear such an event without my presence, I am so very proud of you, Georgie, for your fortitude. And I think both Mama and Papa would have been very proud of their daughter as well."

Such praise only caused fresh tears to fall from Miss Darcy's eyes as she released the tension and fear of the past few days. Her words, though spoken brokenly, remained audible, "You are here now, Brother, I know all will be well."

At such a show of faith, Darcy could only kiss her gently on the brow and push a handkerchief into her hand. His heart steeled further against his erstwhile friend and he vowed that George Wickham would meet a most deserving end for the harm he had brought.
Consequences

Colonel Fitzwilliam's reaction when Darcy related the astounding story regarding Mr. George Wickham's most unexpected visit was perhaps a bit more violent than either man could have foreseen. But Darcy found that he really could not blame his cousin for viciously stabbing his fencing sword at a practice dummy as though it were the wicked man himself. To the outsider observer, perhaps fencing practice might not have been the best time for the telling of such a tale, but Darcy firmly believed that the shredding of a practice dummy was of little consequence when compared to the shredding of Wickham's black heart, no matter how much the other man deserved it.

Even when the Colonel, no longer able to ignore the ache in his lungs, paused for breath, Darcy could tell that his ire had not lessened.

"How dare he! That...that scoundrel!"

Darcy could only nod quietly as his cousin continued his tirade.

"After all your father had done for him! Allowing him to share in your lessons with the tutors and granting him a gentleman's education...I will not deny that he is a clever man, he certainly made quick study of the vices, but I cannot forgive him for the troubles he had caused you. As though Fitzhugh was not enough source of contention! I never could understand why you always protected him, Darcy, and settled his debts. He deserved no such magnanimity. And now, he comes demanding what he had already rejected! And frightening Georgiana in the process! That...that...little worm!"

Giving a last few slashes of his sword, the Colonel lowered his arm at last.

Handing his cousin clothe to mop his brow, Darcy remarked calmly, "I wonder if your anger derives more from his actions against my father or against Georgie."

Taking the proffered article gratefully, the Colonel nonetheless glared at his host, "George Wickham is scum, pure and simple; his crimes against your family are too numerous to count. You will not be angry, I know, in honor of the memory of your youthful friendship, but I am beholden to no such restrictions."

Darcy could only sigh in reply. Despite his disapprobation at Wickham's actions and the flash of rage he had felt in the face of his sister's tears, Darcy could find a little room in his heart to pity the man he had once looked upon as a spirited younger brother. The elder Mr. Darcy's generosity had given young George all the same opportunities as the Pemberley heir, but such favor was for naught for his hopes of transforming George into a gentleman were firmly dashed by Wickham's actions. For all that he could not but disapprove, Young Master Darcy could forgive Wickham's gambling (from which he more often gained losses than success) and visitations of the houses of ill repute (from which he doubtless contracted who knows what afflictions). Such practices were not uncommon; gentlemen of better families and even greater wealth had fallen to prey to their baser instincts with no societal censure.

"What will you have me do? I had promised my father that I would look after George."

"You cannot mean to order his release?!" the Colonel was aghast.

"He has suffered enough, I think, these past few days. I cannot imagine that the constable would have been kind."
"No indeed! His own niece had been a victim of Wickham's salacious charm."

Darcy sighed again. He had tried his best to hide what George had become from the former Master of Pemberley, knowing quite well that the elder Mr. Darcy had grown weak of heart ever since Lady Anne's passing. In the face of his father's almost all-consuming sorrow, Darcy had not the heart to destroy further a bright spot in his father's life. Though he did not understand the elder Mr. Darcy's favor of his steward's wayward son, Darcy knew he wanted to keep his father from undue suffering. Only on the elder Mr. Darcy's deathbed did Darcy discover that his father had never been ignorant of George's leanings but had instead received regular reports on the young man's numerous misdeeds. The elder Mr. Darcy it was who arranged for the unfortunate maids and shopkeepers' daughters after George's dalliances with them, he who placed any resulting children in good homes, and he who paid off the many creditors who ever nipped at George's heels.

"I cannot burden our good constable with George's presence; better that I send George on his way."

"With some moneys in his purse no doubt; Darcy, you cannot continue to fund Wickham in such a manner! Even out of memory for your father, good man that he was, you must know that such actions only add to Wickham's ruin! Besides, you had kept your promise; you had given him the value of the living so that he could pursue his professed interest in law. You owe him no further debt."

Darcy's resolute voice belied his wearied expression, "I do not intend to replenish his funds this time; he had squandered all his chances for such generosity when he revealed his heartlessness."

"Even Georgie could not forgive him," he added with a sad smile when his cousin gave him a look of incredulity, "She never spoke his name in my presence afterwards, not until yesterday."

Miss Darcy, then but a child of ten, was sensitive to George Wickham's absence at her father's funeral. Growing up in Pemberley with the very best of brothers, Georgiana had nonetheless always been rather fond of George, who made certain to have little ribbons or sweets for her when he returned from Cambridge. He had been like another cousin, perhaps not as dear to her as Colonel Fitzwilliam, but a welcomed presence nonetheless, particularly since her dear Papa always seemed to regain some semblance of happiness in George's presence. For George of all people not to be present when her Papa left at last to join her Mama left a distinctly unpleasant feeling in her memory. Though not privy to the vast misdeeds of young George Wickham, Miss Darcy took note of the sadness in her brother's eyes when he read the missive and the tensing of Mrs. Reynolds's mouth when young Master Darcy requested that George Wickham be barred from the house when the Master was not in attendance.

The Colonel nodded in approval but muttered darkly, "His punishment is still too light for my taste."

Darcy shook his head, "George Wickham can no longer claim the Darcy name as protection. He shall either mend his ways or reap the appropriate consequences."

"Can you truly wash your hands of his affairs?"

"You doubt my conviction?"

His anger abating, the Colonel was again capable of rational thought, "Wickham is not a fool; he has always managed to keep up appearances and hide his less than savory nature under the glamour of charm and cordiality. He must know that you are far less inclined to believe his tales of woe and give him access to Pemberley's wealth without question. He could not have expected
anything more than a frigid reception here and in Lambton. And yet...he still ventured a return. Do you not think that true desperation must have driven him back to Derbyshire?"

When his words met with only a stony look, he stated, "Such suspicions already crossed your mind."

Refusing to fidget under his cousin's shrewd gaze, Darcy replied evenly, "I had planned to ride to Lambton so as to discover the depth of George's misdeeds."

"Then I had better accompany you."

"You do doubt me."

"You are too honorable a man not to offer some form of aid if the circumstances be truly dire, even for your mortal enemy. You are fortunate not to be born a younger son; you would not last a day on the battlefield!" Raising a hand to forestall further argument, the Colonel insisted, "For all your words to the contrary, you still see Wickham too much as the boy that he had been and not the man that he is. I do think you ought to listen to the counsel of your elder in this matter."

"Barely eleven-months!" Darcy protested. When his cousin remained unmoved, Darcy resorted to glowering.

The Colonel, to his credit, remained undaunted and only seemed amused, "You cannot hope to sway me with such a somber visage; a glare from the Master of Pemberley is nothing to a look from the Countess of Matlock." He paused before admitting, "I worry for you, cousin. You have Wickham in a corner and desperate men are capable of desperate deeds."

"You cannot think he would dare harm me!" Darcy's startlement easily replaced his indignation.

"I would rather not take that chance. For Georgie's sake and your own, I offer my aid."

Softening further at the mention of his sister, Darcy finally relented.

Just as the cousins were to mount their horses, however, their attention was drawn to a lone horse and rider approaching Pemberley in haste. At the utterance of the name of Ashbury, Darcy and Fitzwilliam grew quickly alarmed. The missive the messenger delivered further added to their consternation and the gentlemen retired at once to the Master's study to reflect on the new tidings.

Sir Andrew Ashbury, the author of the missive, had been simply Mr. Andrew Ashbury when he made the acquaintance of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy in their second year of study at Cambridge in quite an unconventional manner. For Mr. Robert Ashbury, the younger son of the baronet, was as unlike his older brother as Wickham was unlike Darcy. So it was a matter of course that Mr. Robert Ashbury should become a ready companion of Mr. George Wickham and enter into all manners of disreputable dealing as a result. Indeed, Mr. Andrew Ashbury met Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy when both gentlemen had to rescue their wayward charges from the grave displeasures of a London constable who had caught the two younger men when they failed to procure the right payment for their purchased goods. The two gentlemen soon found that they had more in common than just trying brothers and thus began a most excellent friendship that was further cemented when both were obliged by unfortunate circumstance to take up the reins of running their respective estates quite earlier than either had anticipated. Messages between Pemberley and Willowmere were thus not an uncommon event.

The contents of the current missive, however, held such grave news that Darcy could not feel the usual pleasure at receiving a letter from his friend. Just as Darcy and Sir Andrew had maintained their acquaintance, so it seemed had Mr. Robert Ashbury and Mr. George Wickham. The latter
relationship, however, proved detrimental to the health of both participants. Being young men of rather rash tempers, they had challenged each other to a duel over a shared interest in one of the houses of ill repute. Unfortunate for both young men were their states inebriation at the time such that a misstep on the part of Mr. Ashbury led to a fatal wound at the hands of Mr. Wickham. The presence of witnesses and the frequency of his visits to this particular establishment made Mr. Wickham's identity quite a certainty and Sir Andrew was faced with great insistence from his family to seek just compensation. Despite his knowledge of the breach between Darcy and Wickham, Sir Andrew could not help but send a message to his good friend, particularly when Wickham was nowhere to be found in London following the ill-fated duel.

Quite soon after Darcy and the Colonel had perused the missive in all its horrifying detail, Sir Andrew himself was shown into the study. Darcy quickly made the proper introductions between his friend and his relative and the three young gentlemen began to discuss the appropriate fate for George Wickham.

"I thought to approach you while you were in Kent, my friend, as Rosings is conveniently situated, but when I had returned from London, you had already returned to Pemberley."

Darcy nodded his thanks as his cousin snorted, "All the better, perhaps; Aunt Catherine would have demanded Wickham's head."

Though he agreed, Darcy coughed and sent a quelling look at the Colonel, "I am grateful, Andrew. How fares Lady Adelaide?"

Sir Andrew shook his head, "Mother vacillates between resignation and anger; her humor has not yet recovered from the combined death of her husband and her brother. I did my best not to add to her burden with Robert's troubles these years past, but the demise of her son could not be hidden...I know you had cut ties with Wickham, but I had hopes that you might have an inkling of his bolt-holes? Though I have little love for the way Robert had sullied the Ashbury name with his most indecorous behavior, I cannot but seek some justice for my mother's sake."

Darcy and the Colonel exchanged significant looks.

"George is in Lambton."

"In Lambton!"

"Sullying the jail and fouling the air."

Darcy ignored the Colonel's mutterings, "What do you hope to do, Andrew? The courts are lax in such matters for all that death in duel is legally murder. And forgive me for saying, but surely your brother is not without fault."

Sir Andrew sighed dismally, "I know you are right, Darcy, Robert's wildness knows no cure and was only made worse after gaining the small fortune our uncle left to him. Not much remains of it now, of course, my brother never was one for proper accounting and Wickham, the leach, had been the one to manage it for him...Robert's death may have been his own doing in part, but he was a victim of that wily serpent nonetheless...Yet though I would love so to see Wickham hang, I cannot allow such a travesty to fall on your conscience."

With a look of dawning understanding, the Colonel surprised his cohorts with a chuckle, "And so the little thief was caught, was he?! I imagine you must have removed his access to the funds, Sir Andrew?"

At the answering nod, he continued, "So he has no money to grease his escape from this situation,
particularly since my cousin has indicated a refusal to aid him. He is not only a murderer but a thief and a trespasser. I say it’s off to Australia for him!"

"George may find death preferable."

"I care nothing for his preferences!"

Despite his own feelings, Sir Andrew was taken aback at the vehemence in the Colonel's voice and could not help but seek reassurance from his friend, "You are certain, Darcy? Treatment of such prisoners is not known to be gentle and Australia remains a wild land."

"But if he survives, he may yet have a chance at a new beginning."

"You still have hope of his reformation!" The Colonel's astonishment was clear.

The baronet was more sympathetic as he clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder, "Very well, I will arrange for it."

Despite the Colonel's grumbles, Darcy looked gratefully at his friend and the two shook on the deal.

And so it was that scarcely a week after his return to Derbyshire, Mr. George Wickham found himself on a ship bound for Australia, the chains on his wrists rubbing most unpleasantly against the newly made brands that indicated the enormity of his misdeed. Darcy spoke to no one regarding his last conversation with his childhood friend and his carefully maintained blank expression when he emerged from Wickham's cell revealed nothing of his thoughts. Sir Andrew made no comment and only nodded at the few whispered words from his friend before turning to speak with the constable. Even the Colonel dared not pry and could only follow silently behind his cousin's rigid stature after Darcy mounted his steed. Only when the two had reached Pemberley's lands did Darcy spur his horse to a furious speed as he raced across the fields. The Colonel watched him go and, shaking his head, turned his own horse towards the main house, where he knew a worried Georgiana was waiting.
Aftermath

The constable observed the removal of his niece’s seducer with grim satisfaction even as he surreptitiously slipped a few coins into the tavern-keeper’s hands. Turning away from the cheering crowd as the carriage containing George Wickham rolled away from Lambton, he made for the quiet plots in the churchyard. After laying a single flower on the grave of his niece, he turned to those of her parents.

“It is done.” He said simply, head bowed in silent prayer.

He was not the only one to rejoice at the removal of Mr. George Wickham from the country of Derbyshire; the man had stolen more than mere goods and merchandise from many of the merchants and shopkeepers. Toasts were made for the health of the Master of Pemberley, for certainly it was he who finally gained the courage to do what the previous Mr. Darcy could not or would not. That Sir Andrew and his men were the ones who were actually observed manhandling a rather filthy and scowling George Wickham into a pair of manacles and the confines of an enclosed carriage were conveniently ignored. The people of Lambton remained quite determined to ascribe the credit of ridding the region of that particular blight to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

The subject of the many good wishes from the town was unaware that he had done any great service. Nonetheless, though Darcy would have been quick to dissuade the townspeople from singing his praises and insist on giving his friend all the credit, he certainly would have agreed that he too was at least partially glad to have seen the last of George Wickham. For now, however, he was much too focused on the impact of latest events on his dear sister to consider the implications of these particular events on his own reputation.

For her part, Miss Darcy had been only initially shaken by the tidings that Sir Andrew had brought. Though she had been more disinclined to think too well of George after the events following her father’s death, Georgiana still found it difficult to reconcile the young man of her memories who had smiled so charmingly at the world at large and her father in particular with the irresponsible scoundrel who had fallen so low as to commit murder, albeit with the aid of perhaps not a little inebriation. Her concern, however, quickly shifted to another target.

Miss Annesley, who had become more a companion than governess as her charge grew, was unsurprised to find Miss Darcy in the Portrait Gallery.

A soft cough drew the young lady’s attention away from the painting of her departed mother. Accepting the silent hug from the older lady gratefully, Miss Darcy wiped away a traitorous tear.

“I should not weep for George, I know, but I cannot but feel as though someone ought. He has no family left but Brother and me. I feel more kinship to him in some regard, I suppose, as we both grew up without mothers. And old Mr. Wickham could not bear to look at the son who possessed so many of the features of his wife, just as my Papa could rarely bear my presence without thinking of Mama.”

“Transportation may be a more humane choice; Mr. Wickham still has a chance to make something of himself.” was Miss Annesley’s gentle reminder.

“And so like Brother to provide an opportunity still. And yet…I cannot but see Papa’s disappointed gaze. He had loved George so!” More than he loved even me, was her silent thought, one that brought her further guilt.
Miss Annesley’s hold tightened, “You are not to blame yourself, Georgiana.”

She had known George Wickham but a little, hired as she was not too long before the young Master and his…friend…were to depart for University; nonetheless, she had always despised him for supplanting Miss Darcy in the elder Master Darcy’s affections. Though the little girl laughed merrily in her brother’s presence and sparkled with the care he showed her, she was too sensitive a child not to feel the neglect of her father. She was, in a word, lonely. And when young Mr. Darcy did remove from Derbyshire, Miss Darcy was often left to her own devices and felt quite bereft even in a home as lovely as Pemberley. Miss Annesley was consequently more than delighted to encourage her young charge’s interest and gift in the pianoforte. Indeed, she suspected that the music room became Miss Darcy’s place of refuge because it kept the oppressive silence at bay. Even this sanctuary, however, did not provide perfect protection. Rarely, the older Master Darcy would abandon his many responsibilities to sit quietly in the room and listen with a soft expression on his face as his daughter wove almost tangible tapestries of thought and emotions with her growing mastery of the instrument.

Miss Annesley learned not to remark on Miss Darcy’s fallen expressions when her father would depart without a word at the conclusion of the songs. She could only feel her own heart break as Miss Darcy asked the portrait of her Mama, time and again, why her father could not love her. As time passed, the governess watched quietly as silent resolve replaced the tears. She observed helplessly as Miss Darcy learned to hide her hurt and instead acquired the skill to observe carefully those around her so that she could use her music either to soothe her Papa’s worries or to reflect his pensive states of mind. Miss Annelsey wondered if Master Darcy ever appreciated his daughter’s consideration or if he was too safely cocooned in his own misery to notice.

“You need not be angry on my account, Miss Annesley.”

No longer surprised at Miss Darcy’s perceptive nature, Miss Annesley instead remarked drily, “George Wickham is a fool, to have thrown away your father’s favor and your brother’s friendship so easily.”

“He never did learn to treasure that which was truly precious.” Miss Darcy’s voice was at once wistful and wise as she repeated a sentiment that she had once overheard Mrs. Reynolds declare to Miss Annesley. Glancing again at her mother’s laughing face, she added, “I willingly shed tears for George, for he has no one else to pity him, but I think I weep more for Brother.”

Before Miss Annesley could make her reply, the steady sound of boots heralded the Colonel’s arrival. His grim expression caused Miss Darcy to sigh, “Brother went riding?”

The Colonel nodded, “Indeed, at a speed that would have both his aunts exclaim their disapproval.”

“They need not worry; Magnus will keep him safe.”

“That horse of his is as knowledgeable about your brother’s moods as you are, Georgie.”

A faint smile crossed Miss Darcy’s face, “Then you had better prepare for battle, Cousin.”

“He blames himself.”

“Of course he does,” was the young lady’s reply, “he thinks he has failed.”

“And we must not let him, Georgie.”

The young heiress nodded her head but her expressions still spoke of her worry. For all that she wished to soothe her brother’s troubled thoughts, she could not imagine confronting her guardian.
The Colonel sighed, recalling the appalling silence in the aftermath of Master Darcy’s death, “And
you, Georgie? Forgive me, but I see signs of tears.”

Miss Darcy’s smile returned momentarily, “I am well, I assure you. Miss Annesley has done much
to keep me company. Though Brother did not wish to, nor was he obliged to, I am glad he told me
a little of George’s troubles. You see, we still reap the benefits of your influence, cousin.”

The Colonel looked at her sharply but obligingly chuckled ruefully in remembrance of that
particular occasion, “I hope this matter will not demand similar dramatics, though I am prepared to
try on the role of disgruntled guest again if I must. May I count on you then, Georgie, to
collaborate?”

“Me, cousin?! Surely I could not!”

The Colonel waved aside her concerns, “Oh, you shan't have any spoken lines, you need only
help me set the scene.”

At her dubious look, he gave his best imploring expression, “Do say you will, Georgie? We
cannot allow your brother to sulk so.”

Her concern for her brother easily defeating her own sense of unease, Miss Darcy acquiesced.

“Excellent!” the Colonel clapped his hands, “then I must go plot! Ladies.” So saying, he bowed
and exited the Gallery with much more enthusiasm than he had entered it.

Miss Darcy turned to her remaining companion, a frown marring her features, “I hope you do not
disapprove, Miss Annesley. I do not know what mad plan Cousin Richard will wish to enact, but I
know he means only to help Brother…”

Miss Annesley chuckled good-naturedly, “And help Mr. Darcy he shall; much as he had done at
least once in the past.”

Much relieved, Miss Darcy turned again to the portrait on the wall, “We are so blessed to have
such caring relatives.”

Sensing that her young mistress was entering another pensive moment, Miss Annesley gave her
charge one last hug before granting her privacy.

“Do you remember, Mama? When I was worried I would lose Brother? He was grieving, I know,
and attempting to hide his sorrows in the responsibilities that became his as Master Darcy of
Pemberley and half of Derbyshire. I felt so very alone then…”

The brief joy of having her beloved brother home once more was soon eclipsed by the shadow of
the burdens he bore after the death of their father. After her various aunts and uncles left
Pemberley, Miss Darcy once again felt the silence closing in on her and sought solace in the one
friend who had never abandoned her. Colonel Fitzwilliam had observed the growing frequency
and duration of her seclusions in the music room and could not help but be concerned for his
young cousin. His agitation grew as he observed Darcy’s efforts at drowning his sorrows in sheer
exhaustion. Finally, after one dinner too many during which even the slightest clink of silverware
seemed an affront to the somber mood of the household, Colonel Fitzwilliam pounded his fists on
the table, heedless of the agitated protestations from the crystal goblets and china plates, drew
himself to his full height, and declared that he had had enough. Startled by this unexpected
behavior from the usually jovial Colonel, the Darcy siblings were further shocked at the
accusations he laid at their feet and could only stare wide-eyed at each other when, in a fit of
exasperation, the Colonel decided to abandon the dining room and finish his meal in his own
quarters.

“I excused myself soon enough, not knowing what words to say, and Brother allowed me. I think he must have been as bewildered as I was...but Cousin Richard’s words must have spurred him to action, because we began to be family again. We could talk as we used to once more; Cousin Richard had made such a fuss when he heard me laugh, shortly before he had to depart, which of course only made Brother chuckle as well. We were so unnecessarily silly, though Brother would never admit to it, even now!”

In those healing days, Darcy learned to recognize the unexpected maturity in his younger sister while Georgiana found herself quite content to put aside her false bravado and allow herself to be taken care of by a most understanding brother. The Colonel was quite delighted to be informed via lengthy letters from both parties of the growing bond between his favorite cousins; they had both been forced by circumstance to grow old before their time and he was glad to see them recovering some of their youthful spirits.

“He is afraid that we might regress now, after this matter with George…I am…I am afraid as well, Mama. I cannot lose Brother a second time, not now, not when we have but recently healed…”

Darcy’s sullenness was palpable during supper; his thoughts so preoccupied that he neglected to note the concern on his sister’s face. She spoke not a word but only acquiesced obligingly when he revealed the restrictions on her movements the next morning. Though the Colonel scowled slightly at the list Darcy brandished of the approved companions for his sister, he bit back his words of reprove when he noticed the obvious decrease in his cousin’s tension at having made these plans. The Colonel allowed his cousin three more days of brooding before putting his plan into action.

Returning from a visit to the tenants, Darcy was alarmed when he did not find his sister at her drawing lesson. He wandered the halls of Pemberley, too frantic to think of summoning a servant or asking for Miss Annesley. He felt afresh all the guilt of not only failing to make certain of his sister's safety during his absence but also a Master's duty to all those under his protection. When none of her usual haunts within the house revealed her presence, he made quick strides towards her favorite corner of the gardens. He felt immediate relief but then great puzzlement at the sound of his cousin’s voice and Georgiana’s answering laughter. Rounding the corner of the hedge, he paused at the sight before him. Georgiana, face flushed, stood in position with a tree branch in her hand as the Colonel answered her pose with a similar one of his own.

“What is…what is the meaning of this?!” He gasped.

At the sound of his voice, Georgiana dropped her makeshift sword immediately and glanced at him with apprehension. The Colonel replied jovially, “Darcy! I am of course teaching our dear Georgie how she may better protect herself. A sword may not always be available, but certainly a tree branch or even a candlestick might do. And I must say she is quite the natural. She may well give you a fair fight once she is trained!”

“And did Georgiana ask for such lessons?” Darcy kept his voice carefully measured.

“Of course not!” the Colonel exclaimed, ignoring the thundercloud overshadowing Darcy’s expressions and Georgiana’s flush of embarrassment, “But I must do my duty as one of her guardians and ensure that she is not defenseless; we cannot always be with her, after all...Now then, Georgie, I do think you are making excellent progress; do thank Miss Annesley for me? She was so gracious to allow me to steal you away from your other lessons.”

Georgiana murmured a few indecipherable words before escaping the gardens and the tense atmosphere between her guardians.
Darcy’s frown had turned to a glare, “Richard! You cannot be serious in teaching Georgiana to fence…I absolutely forbid it!”

“Forbid it?! Darcy, must I remind you that Georgiana’s guardianship was left to the both of us? On what grounds do you object?”

“It is…it is most ridiculous!”

“Ridiculous that I should wish her to be able to protect herself?”

“She has no such need.”

The Colonel’s voice softened as he repeated, “We cannot always be at her side, Darcy.”

The Master of Pemberley’s expression remained mutinous.

“She does not blame you, cousin.” His effort only earned him another glare. Nonetheless, the Colonel persisted, “she worries for you, as I do. Do not shut us out, Darcy.”

The two gentleman stood in silence, one calmly and the other deeply conflicted. Finally, Darcy admitted in a low voice, “I have failed.”

“And heavens forbid that Fitzwilliam Darcy be imperfect!”

“I failed them both!” Darcy’s voice rose in agitation.

“You have not.” The Colonel insisted, “Wickham made his own choices; you are not his keeper. As for Georgie…you trained your staff well; they were fully capable of protecting her in your stead. You could not have foreseen such a rude interruption to her peace…But if you continue to brood and ignore her, than you have indeed failed. For all her bravery, Georgiana still needs you, Darcy. You are her Brother, the solid pillar on which she builds her world. Do not make her faith misplaced.”

The next day, a deeply contrite Darcy made his way towards the figure of his sister. She only laid a gentle hand on his arm as the two studied the painting that depicted both their parents when Lady Anne first became a Darcy.

Georgiana finally broke the silence, “Do you think Papa would have approved?”

Her question caused his thoughts to stumble and he could only gape at her profile.

“Papa…though you esteemed him greatly, Brother, Papa was not a perfect man. Mrs. Reynolds always said that he indulged George more than was wise, far more than he did either you or me. But perhaps Papa felt like he could not; we were Mama’s children, to draw us close surely only reminded him of his loss. But George, George was safe…”

“Georgie, you cannot doubt that Papa cared for us.”

Miss Darcy turned to face him, “I know, Brother, I do. But I have not your luxury; my memory of him consists mainly of his growing wistfulness and the increase in frequency with which he would clutch the pocket-watch held a miniature of Mama. I was there, the day before he finally grew too ill to leave his bed. I caught a glimpse of his still form, in this very Gallery. He paid no attention to our illustrious predecessors and gazed only at the portrait of his dearly departed. I think I knew then, that he would join her soon.”

“Georgie…”
Despite the pain in his voice, Georgiana felt a need to reiterate her thoughts and continued, “You found me here, remember? I was saddened at his passing but oddly happy as well. I think, I think I rejoiced that Papa could finally laugh again.”

“I did wonder at your lack of tears.” Darcy finally owned after a pause.

In lieu of answering, Georgiana turned her attention to the portrait on the wall. The Lady Anne Darcy of oil and canvas was in the full bloom of health and bore little semblance to the pale and wane creature she had become in the days before her passing. Her twinkling eyes seemed to hold a joyful secret, one that beckoned the observer to partake in some untold joke. Basking in the adoring gaze of her husband, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Drawing strength from the portrait’s smile, Georgiana turned to her brother again, “Then, as now, you sought to protect me.”

Darcy could only stare at his sister in silence before smiling wryly, “You always were older than your years, Georgie. I had forgotten.”

His observation caused her to blush and say, not without some trepidation, “I do not truly wish to acquire the skill of fencing.”

Her open admission caused him to chuckled merrily, the first time in many days, “Had Richard not made a respectable name for himself in the Army, I daresay he would have found much favor on the stage!”

Georgiana, delighted at his reaction, nodded her agreement, “Aunt Matlock would be much horrified, to say nothing of Aunt Catherine.”

“Though Cousin Anne would be aptly named, had Richard chosen to become a bard instead of a soldier.”

“May I share this tale with her, Brother? I cannot but think she might find it diverting.”

“And she has little enough entertainment at Rosings. Very well, I suppose I can sacrifice my dignity for the sake of our cousin’s amusement.”

He was rewarded with an impulsive hug from his sister. “Oh thank you, Brother! You are so very considerate!”

“Though I do need reminding at times.” Pressing a kiss to her brow, he said, “Now then, before you dash off to write your message, we should inform Cousin Richard that an encore is not necessary. I shudder to think of the contents of an Act II.”

Nonetheless, despite the good cheer that had begun to return to Pemberley, it would be weeks before Darcy stopped being haunted by the specter of might-have-been’s.
The happenings surrounding George Wickham and the various duties as Master of Pemberley and half of Derbyshire kept Darcy much occupied such that well nigh three weeks had passed before he was able to take pause and begin to glance through his growing pile of less urgent personal correspondences. Sorting through the stack, Darcy was much disgruntled at the plethora of letters from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, each one no doubt containing detailed instructions on how he was to conduct himself and unlooked for advice on how to raise Georgiana. Setting that pile aside for when his aunt's overbearing ways were more likely to amuse than irritate, Darcy collected a smaller selection from other, more amiable, writers and departed for the library. His entrance drew an absent-minded smile from Georgiana as she stared quizzically between a carefully arranged floral display and her own attempts at capturing it on paper. The Colonel, so focused was he on a rather rare book on ancient battles, merely grunted in greeting without lifting his eyes from the tome in his hands. Smiling slightly at such peaceful scenes of domestic joy, Darcy settled himself at a side table and broke the seal on the envelope addressed in his Uncle Matlock's firm handwriting.

The morning thus passed quietly, with the occasional shuffling of pages from the Colonel's book disrupting the steady scratch of Darcy's pen, and would have continued thus but for Darcy's joyful discovery of a letter from his good friend Mr. Charles Bingley. Shaking his head at his friend's enthusiasm, evident even through the lifeless words on the page, Darcy's eyes widened at the tidings within the missive. Indeed, the first story that Mr. Bingley related was so unexpected and drew such a startled laugh from Darcy that it finally caused the other two occupants of the library to look up from their own tasks.

"Why Darcy," his cousin exclaimed, clutching at his heart, "I do wish you would give some forewarning before interrupting my reading so suddenly."

Darcy waved aside the Colonel's good-natured dramatics, "But if you only knew the tale, Richard, I think you would easily forgive me my transgression."

"Indeed?"

Darcy only nodded and returned to finish perusing the contents of his letter.

"Well?" the Colonel demanded impatiently when no further reply was forthcoming, "with such an intriguing comment, you cannot expect me to sit idle."

Darcy set aside his letter momentarily, "I would not wish for the lady’s reputation to suffer."

"Ah, has Mother written to you of her latest victory?"

Darcy answered in the negative but revealed, "Aunt Matlock does play not an insignificant role. As does a particular sister of Bingley’s"

"That shrew?!"

At the pointed look Darcy gave him, the Colonel coughed and turned to his younger cousin, "I do beg forgive for my bluntness, Georgie, but I cannot in good conscious render that particular lady any other descriptor."

"Richard!"

Ignoring Darcy’s reproachful look, the Colonel continued, "Your brother may be a paragon of
proper behavior, but I am beholden to no such dictates, particularly when this particular lady only derives the most enthusiastic encouragement from his distant politeness. She was not the only lady determined to become Mrs. Darcy when your brother deigned to show his presence in Ton last year, nor will she be the last, but I must admit that she was the most persistent. Why, I think even Lady Shaftesbury faltered in enumerating her daughter’s many charms to your brother in the face of Miss Bingley’s obvious intentions.”

“A gentleman ought not gossip,” Darcy intoned.

“Oh pish posh, you know I speak only the truth. You cannot imagine my relief that as the younger son of an Earl I was much too undesirable a target for her mercenary intents. Why the look of disgust on her face when she discovered I was obliged to work for my living!”

Glancing bemusedly between her relatives, Miss Darcy ventured a quiet opinion, “Surely Miss Bingley cannot be as you described her, Cousin Richard. Mr. Bingley was certainly very amiable and kind when he came to visit with Brother; I cannot imagine his sister to be altogether very different.”

“And you, dear Georgie, are much too generous. Not all siblings are as you and your brother, so polite and genteel in your manners.”

His praise caused Miss Darcy to blush and Mr. Darcy to shift in his seat.

Shaking his head and smiling at his cousins’ discomfiture, the Colonel added, “And modest! Which is an attribute sorely lacking in Miss Caroline Bingley. Now then, Darcy, enough of the suspense, has Mother finally decided to take Miss Bingley in hand? She was non-too-pleased with the lady in the past; only your friendship with Mr. Bingley saved Miss Bingley.”

Despite his own personal opinions regarding the pursuit of that particular lady, Darcy was too much a gentleman to reveal all the details of the story. Instead, he only nodded towards his cousin, “I believe Miss Bingley is to forgo the rest of the Season and instead go visit with an ailing aunt in Shropshire.”

The Colonel guffawed loudly, “Then the slight must have been grave indeed. Mother never did enjoy publicly humiliating a foe, preferring instead more subtle means; she must not have thought much of Miss Bingley’s intellect or capability to understand such hints. And what has Bingley to say on the matter? I trust it will not prove detrimental to your friendship?”

Darcy refused to comment on the cut his aunt had engineered but did admit shortly, “Bingley is glad to be master of his own household once more.”

“Of course he is!” The Colonel exclaimed, “the man may have the patience of a saint, but even he must be tired of enduring the company of such a sister.”

“Richard…”

Seeing the frown on her brother’s face, Miss Darcy spoke soothingly, “I do feel for Miss Bingley, but the Ton is often fickle in its opinions. A new scandal will arise soon enough such that when she returns for the next Season, her blunder might well have been forgotten.”

Nonetheless, Georgiana was of a mind to be grateful for her aunt’s clever actions in saving Darcy from further grief. Her brother’s good breeding and gentlemanly behavior would have doubtlessly prevented him from ever confronting Miss Bingley on her behavior and apparent delusion of his regard, an inaction that would have led to years of fruitless pursuit on the part of the lady until her quarry would finally dash all her hopes by choosing another.
“And what would you know of the fickleness of the Ton?” her cousin’s questions disrupted her thoughts.

“Not much, I own,” Miss Darcy answered quietly, the blush returning to her cheeks, “but I have heard and seen enough during Aunt Matlock’s teas to know that while the Ton thrives on gossip and intrigue, money and position can easily buy forgiveness if not forgetfulness."

“Mother will be proud to have a protégée such as you, Georgie!”

“I…I am quite content to remain at Pemberley.”

“And deprive Town of one of its brightest jewels?! Surely not! Mother would never agree to it.”

Georgiana looked helplessly at her brother, who did not disappoint as he quickly came to her rescue, “Really Richard, Georgie is young yet. We have no need to speak of her coming out so soon.”

“As though you would ever consent to such an event before she is at least five and twenty!”

His lips twitching slightly at his cousin’s comment, Darcy nonetheless attempted to steer the conversation to its original purpose, “I do believe Aunt Matlock’s consideration necessitates a token of appreciation. Georgie, will you assist me in this task?”

While Miss Darcy gladly nodded her acquiescence, her cousin took the opportunity to observe, “So you do admit that Mother has acted in your best interest.”

Darcy would not dignify such a suggestion with a reply, though his silence only added to his cousin’s amusement.

“’Tis well, I suppose, we certainly have little enough space for another Aunt Catherine in the family. But whereas our aunt has both the wealth and the title to be deemed simply eccentric, Miss Bingley’s condescending behavior only reveals an exaggerated sense of self-import. She would certainly be appalled, should Bingley ever make it known to her, at the portion of her allowance that still derived from his continued participation in trade. Oh do not look so disapproving, Darcy. You know I hold none of the disdainful views of my father for those who make their living in such a manner. And young Bingley has certainly shown himself to be a shrewd businessman; even you found some happy returns from investments at his suggestion no?”

“I have indeed. And our friendship is such that I cannot in good conscience condone more unkind words towards his sister.”

The Colonel sighed in defeat at the firm tone of Darcy’s voice, “Oh very well, we shall speak no more of her. What other news from Bingley? Has he finally decided to fulfill his father’s dream and join the ranks of the landed gentry?”

Nodding in recognition of his cousin’s concession, Darcy shared the latter portion of his friend’s missive, “Not as yet. Rather, he has hopes of a new investment and wrote to seek some assistance. He recently made the acquaintance of a Mr. Edward Gardiner who, among his many interests, is somewhat of a connoisseur of rare tomes. Bingley had been much impressed by Mr. Gardiner’s good sense and business acumen as a tradesman and the quality of his other stocks. Bingley also freely admits, however, that he was never a great reader and wondered if I might render some assistance in discerning the quality of Mr. Gardiner’s taste.”

“Are you to London then?” Georgiana asked resignedly.

“Hmm…I think not. I find that I am most reluctant to leave Pemberley at this particular time.”
“You need not stay on my account, Brother.”

Darcy studied his sister a moment, a tender look crossing his features at her efforts to be brave, “I know, Georgie. But I must travel later this summer to see to the investments in Manchester and elsewhere and think that I would like to remain at home for some time before I must leave it again.”

“But what of Mr. Bingley?”

“I had hopes that a certain someone might go render assistance in my stead.”

Catching his eye, the Colonel raised an eyebrow, “You cannot mean me?!”

“And why not? Did Aunt Matlock not despair of any peaceful moment with her younger son until she discovered your bibliophile leanings? If the Army did not require your attentions, you would have surely done as much to add to the Fitzwilliam library as I have to the Darcy one.”

“You only wish to avoid the Ton again; for all that the coast is clear of overbearing sisters.”

Making no move to deny such accusation, Darcy reminded his cousin, “Surely you must pay your respects to your parents before you must depart again, particularly with no recent news from Reggie.”

“How like you to remind me of my duty! But I am at your disposal; if you tire of my company then I shall not overstay my welcome.”

Both Darcys protested greatly at such forlorn phrasing.

“You know you are always welcome at Pemberley, Cousin Richard!”

“Bless you, Georgie, and be gladdened that you were not born a younger son; our lot is sorely dependent on the generosity of our family!”

“Really Richard, Pemberley’s doors are always open to you, you need not claim the part of a poor relation! I only thought that perhaps Bingley’s request may bring a new possibility for your future felicities.”

Putting aside his playful manners, the Colonel speculated shrewdly, “If this Mr. Gardiner is truly as skilled as Bingley believes, perhaps they might find a third partner in their venture.”

“Quite so,” Darcy nodded, “your fortune must not necessarily come from the battlefield...and surely you have made Anne wait long enough.”

“Careful, Darcy, you are sounding quite like the match-making mama’s of the Ton.”

“Heavens forbid.” Darcy muttered dryly.

“But surely Aunt Catherine, to say nothing of Uncle Matlock, would not approve?” asked a concerned Georgiana.

“Must she know of the source of my wealth, should I make my fortune with Bingley? She could be easily led to believe that I had simply received very generous compensations from the Army for my many years of loyal service. I am certain Anne will assist me in maintaining the charade, the dear girl. As for Father, I trust Mother’s ecstatic reaction to my future marriage will quickly do away with any objections he might wish to voice.”
Miss Darcy remained uncertain at such deception and glanced at her brother for guidance.

Darcy’s voice was gentle. “You know I normally abhor all manners of disguise, Georgie, but I think the happiness of our cousin reason enough to make an exception.”

“All Darcy, I had no idea you held me in high enough esteem as to compromise your principles!”

“You must have misunderstood me, Richard, I speak of Cousin Anne’s happiness.”

Clutching a hand to his heart, the Colonel exclaimed plaintively, “How you wound me!”

Georgiana’s worries gave way to giggles at her cousin’s exaggerated swoon. Darcy only smirked before asking, “You will go?”

The Colonel’s nod was answer enough and Darcy turned to pen his own missive to inform Bingley of the Colonel’s imminent arrival.
The trip the good Colonel undertook eventually bore such bountiful fruit that even the participants of the venture were amazed at their unforeseen success. With Mr. Bingley's enthusiasm, Mr. Gardiner's shrewdness, and the Colonel's geniality, the three men quickly found new clients not only for their literary venture but also other aspects of the trade such as fragrant wines from the continent and exotic fabrics from the Far East. The Colonel found that his skill with many languages and his various experiences abroad, even in times of war and upheaval, made him quite a formidable opponent in the battle of negotiations. The tactics he had so astutely applied during his life in the Army also made him a keen participant in the business world. Bingley was delighted to renew his acquaintance with the Colonel and was a most willing teacher in guiding the Colonel to keep up appearances of being the idle rich while still maintaining their joint interests in trade. So it was that merely three months after he had left Pemberley, Colonel Fitzwilliam found himself a civilian once more, a silent, but by no means inactive, partner in one of the most promising business ventures in London.

While the Lord and Lady Matlock were delighted that their younger son was now safe from becoming involved in the brewing military troubles abroad, they were nonetheless surprised at his unexpected foray into the world of trade. In their society, the younger son of a good family was usually restricted to the law, the clergy, or, as the Colonel had chosen, the army to make their fortune. That their son should flaunt custom and enter into company with those whom society deemed beneath his station was unthinkable but for the reality of his success. Only upon meeting Mr. Bingley and Mr. Gardiner in person, sixth months into the intriguing partnership, and receiving letters from Darcy vouching for the character of the former did the Earl and his Lady begin to accept fully the newfound prosperity of their younger son. Though certainly prone to being neither proud nor full of condescension like their sister residing at Rosings, the elder Fitzwilliams were nonetheless well aware of social propriety and the possible ramifications of their son's actions on their entire family's good name. To observe the ease with which the Colonel and Mr. Bingley balanced the demands of their social and business obligations further raised new possibilities in their mind so that even the Earl was not above purchasing some rare tomes or vintages from his son's business partners. The Lady also found the imported Eastern silks much to her liking and caused quite the shift in London fashion that Season. That the Colonel made certain to apply for his cousin Anne's hand from a most startled Lady Catherine not quite two years after leaving His Majesty's Army further appeased the Lord and Lady, who had been most anxious for their son's personal happiness.

An unusually warm spring afternoon it was when Darcy spied his sister's excited figure rushing towards him where he sat quietly under the shade of a large tree awaiting a fish to bite. In an excited voice and with her eyes sparkling to rival the sunshine dancing on the waters of the stream, Georgiana apologized for disrupting his solitude in a voice that suggested that she was not sorry at all and quickly launched into the good news they had just received from their cousin Richard. Gently taking the letter from Georgiana's hand, Darcy quickly scanned its contents to assure himself of the Colonel's upcoming nuptials. Smiling, he quickly began to gather his fishing gear so that the siblings could return to the house to prepare for what was certain to be the event of the Season.

"Oh Brother!" Georgiana exclaimed as the siblings walked up the path to their home, "Is it not the most wonderful news?! I am so happy for Cousin Anne! And for Cousin Richard of course! Though I am most curious, how Aunt Catherine must have reacted?"

Chuckling at her enthusiasm, Darcy asked, "Dear Georgie, did you not read that portion of the letter?"
Glancing at him ruefully, Georgiana owned that she had been much too focused on sharing news of the Colonel's engagement with Darcy to peruse the letter beyond that initial joyful proclamation.

Smiling indulgently, Darcy was quick to end his sister's suspense. "Well, it appears that Aunt Catherine was … most seriously displeased!"

Her eyes growing wide in shock, Georgiana gasped, "Displeased?! Brother, surely not!"

Darcy nodded and answered with the most solemn voice he could muster, "I'm afraid so … she was most displeased that he had hid his intentions from her all these years."

Disregarding Georgiana's cry of outrage at his teasing, Darcy explained that after Lady Catherine was roused from her surprise with the aid of some strong smelling salts, she immediately set to admonishing both the Colonel and Anne of hiding their attachment from her and forcing her to waste all her energies on ensuring a match between Darcy and Anne.

With his best Lady Catherine impression, Darcy exclaimed, "It is not to be borne! That any daughter of mine should be so inconsiderate as to disregard her mother's wishes! And Richard! I must be having words with my brother…what do you mean by courting Anne all this time without my express permission? Your behavior is certainly not fit for that of a gentleman! And certainly not one who shall be Master of Rosings!"

Her good humor returning somewhat with Darcy's imitation, Georgiana nonetheless worriedly asked whether the Lady Catherine had granted her permission for the match. Seeing her genuine concern, Darcy quickly desisted in his mockeries of their most ostentatious relative and re-assured his sister that after many years of loving looks, lengthy letters, and secretive glances, Richard Fitzwilliam and Anne de Bourgh were finally to be joined in joyful matrimony.

“Though even I must admit surprise; Richard certainly spoke not a word of his intentions when we were at Rosings for Easter. I suppose my suspicions should have been raised when he chose to remain a few days further in Kent rather than join me on my return to Pemberley, but Sir Andrew invited me for a brief stay at Willowmere and I fear my focus was distracted.”

“How did you find Lady Adelaide?” Georgiana asked, her earlier happiness at her cousin’s news dimming somewhat in remembrance of the Ashburys’ loss.

“She was quieter than on our last acquaintance; the combined loss of her husband, brother, and son in so short a time took its toll. She is recovering somewhat; otherwise I do not believe Sir Andrew would have issued an invitation. I imagine news of Anne’s engagement will do much to cheer her.”

“Just as her niece’s marriage must have this past year?”

“And what would you know about that matter?”

“Only that Aunt Matlock had made mention that Lady Shaftesbury, that is, Lady Cooper as she demands to be called now, has been quite insufferable since her daughter, Lady Cecilia, married Lord Portland. Aunt Matlock says that she, Lady Cooper that is, has been positively preening ever since her mourning period ended. Aunt Matlock has not a very high opinion of Lady Cooper, I’m afraid.”

A bemused Darcy listened to his sister’s chatter, “Are you gossiping, my dear sister?”

Georgiana looked horrified, “Oh! I ought not, I know. Only, Lord Shaftesbury had been Lady
Adelaide’s brother and I only thought…”

Handing his fishing gear to a nearby servant on the patio behind the main house, Darcy was quick to dispel his sister’s worries, “Fear not, Georgie. After a visit with Aunt Matlock, you cannot be expected to be ignorant of the events of the Ton. I do believe such knowledge will only prove helpful when you become an active participant, which will likely be sooner than I like.”

Though his last words were spoken in an undertone, Georgiana knew him well enough to shake her head and slip her hand into his, “Not so soon. Whatever Aunt Matlock may think, I simply do not think I am ready to leave Pemberley. It is my home.”

Darcy only squeezed her hand lightly, though his relief was great. Truthfully, though he had successfully ignored the portions of Lady Matlock’s letters regarding Georgiana’s coming out in years past, he could not deny that his sister was fast becoming a proper young lady of good sense and gentle humor. She had finally settled into her height and now moved with an easy grace that belied her age. Even Miss Annesley had made mention that her presence as governess was now superfluous. News of his cousins’ impending matrimony was certainly a cause for celebration, but it was also a sign of change.

A tug on his hand drew his attention back to the present as Georgiana asked in a determinedly cheerful manner, “Do you think Aunt Catherine’s anger will cause a long engagement?”

“I expect Aunt Matlock will ensure that the ceremony occurs in a reasonable time. We have but to await our instructions.”

Indeed, the next few weeks saw even more letters coming to Pemberley to inform the Darcy siblings of the particular events that were to occur in celebration of such a union. The ceremony itself was to be held at Rosings, for Lady Catherine was most insistent and the Colonel and Anne were much too relieved regarding the Lady’s consent to mind the manner of their wedding. Even the thought that the insufferable Mr. Collins would be presiding over the event could not dim the couple’s joy at finally being able to show their regard for one another openly. So palpable was their happiness that even Lady Catherine found herself smiling on occasion at the most unexpected (for her) couple. What was concerning, however, was Lady Catherine’s insistence on a three month preparation period before the long-awaited ceremony was to take place. This requirement, more than anything else, convinced both the Colonel and Anne that Lady Catherine remained quite miffed at their perceived disobedience. Nonetheless, the Colonel found he had no choice but to obey. In addition, though he would have much preferred to stay with his beloved, propriety demanded that the Colonel remove himself from being under the same roof and for any interactions with Anne to be closely chaperoned. So it was with great reluctance that the Colonel returned to London where his mother found his subdued behavior so alarming that she immediately set forth to return him to good spirits.

Lady Matlock, being as stubborn of nature as her sister-in-law when occasion called for it, managed, in an intense battle of wills, no small amount of letters, and one particularly memorable visit, to shorten the engagement period to one month. As befitting the Fitzwilliams’ social standing, she insisted upon throwing a grand celebration of the engagement in London and inviting the whole Ton. Though quite aware of their discomfort in society and large gatherings, she was most particular in mandating the presence of the Darcy siblings. But it was her detailed plan on aiding the happy couple more than family dictates that led to the Darcys' acceptance of her invitation. With careful maneuvering, Lady Matlock convinced Lady Catherine that it was necessary for Anne to stay with the Fitzwilliams to better prepare for her trousseau and for the societal graces that would be demanded of her once she becomes the daughter-in-law of Lady Matlock. The society in Kent was after all nothing to that of London and Anne, so used to the seclusion of Rosings, must utilize the month to prepare herself for the challenges of becoming a
leading figure of the Ton. To prevent any breach of good conduct, the Colonel was to stay with the Darcys in their townhouse.

Besides, as Lady Matlock wrote to Darcy, Georgiana would also benefit from the presence of some female guidance. Though the Lady was confident in Darcy's abilities to raise Georgiana to be as accomplished and proper as a young lady of good family should be, she was well aware that he was woefully unprepared to provide guidance in a social setting. And while he could hide his discomfort behind his mask as Master Darcy of Pemberley and half of Derbyshire, such taciturn behavior would only prove detrimental to Georgiana's marriage prospects.

This latest reminder of Miss Darcy’s future proved most difficult to ignore despite Georgiana’s claim that she had no wish to become a debutante as yet. Though her bearings bore the maturity and her eyes hinted at the wisdom of one older than her years, Georgiana still retained a trusting nature that would make her easy prey to the many fortune hunters that encircled London society like a flock of carrion birds. While Darcy would have liked to protect Georgiana from any such young men, he knew that she possessed the same streak of independence he did. Certainly, Lady Matlock, among all their family members, was the best person to help Georgiana acquire the skills of navigating the pitfalls that came with being an accomplished, well-dowered, and most eligible young lady. Nonetheless, a small hint of apprehension for the changes ahead marred the otherwise genuine happiness Darcy felt for his cousins as the Darcy carriage brought the siblings closer to London.
Meetings

Despite his mental preparation, Darcy still found himself greatly overwhelmed at the sheer number of teas and assemblies Lady Matlock had planned. Georgiana, for her part, had become immediately engrossed in the veritable storm of lace, flowers, and ribbons that descended upon the Fitzwilliams' townhouse in a shower of white and cream and beige. Their poor Cousin Anne, who shared Georgiana's rather quiet nature, clung to the younger girl's hand with great alarm growing in her eyes as Lady Matlock began to recite the tremendous list of guests who simply must be invited to the engagement ball. So preoccupied was Georgiana in comforting Anne and sharing in her dear cousin's astonishment at all that a society wedding entailed that she had little time to pity her brother's discomfort.

Fortunately, the Colonel was more than willing to rescue Darcy from the active social calendar of the female members of their family. The Colonel, who found even his gregarious nature overwhelmed by the flood of congratulations from his family's many acquaintances, was further disappointed at the growing length of time his mother was wont to monopolize his future bride in matters of great import to the wedding. The arrival of Georgiana in London helped distract Lady Matlock somewhat and the betrothed couple did finally manage to steal some time away together to ponder fully the merits of an elopement. Nonetheless, the Colonel found himself more often than not bereft of the company of his beloved. The intrigues of the Ton had never been of much interest to him and so he chose instead to use his time in more productive manners. Darcy, who would otherwise not dream of accompanying his cousin on his business calls, was so grateful for the escape from the most restrictive environment of parlors and ballrooms that he made no comment on having to traverse through the less fashionable parts of London. Besides, he quite enjoyed seeing Bingley again and found the other gentleman's exuberance and perpetual good humor much easier to bear than the matchmaking mamas of London society.

Because of the close association among the Colonel's business partners, Darcy also finally had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Edward Gardiner. Darcy was delighted at finding a man just as sensible and well-mannered as he had expected from descriptions from both Bingley and Fitzwilliam. Likewise, Mr. Gardiner found Darcy to be quite an honorable young man who saw and understood more than he let on with his impassive expressions. It was thus not long after their meeting that Mr. Gardiner invited Mr. Darcy to tea at the newly acquired Gardiner townhouse, situated quite near to the Bingley residence which, since Lady Matlock’s actions two years prior, had been lacking in a Mistress.

To his great surprise, Darcy discovered that Mrs. Gardiner hailed from Derbyshire and had formerly been Miss Taylor, the only daughter of the Lambton book-store owner, prior to her marriage to Mr. Gardiner. Indeed, while Mr. Gardiner was the owner of their business, Mrs. Gardiner played no small part in evaluating and examining the books. Softening his usually reserved manner in the easy company of the Gardiners and the familiar company of Bingley and Fitzwilliam, Darcy found that he had never enjoyed a social gathering more. His growing regard for the Gardiners in addition to his own bibliophile leanings thus ensured that Darcy was a frequent visitor both to the Gardiners' shops and to their home.

During one such visit to the lending library to inspect the Gardiners' newly expanded reading room, Darcy was alarmed to find a young lady, a lock of chestnut curls wrapped around her finger as she pondered the tome in her lap, reposed in his usual window seat. The slight crease between her eyes indicated great concentration on her reading material so that she seemed quite unaware of her surroundings. So it was that Darcy's sharp intake of breath so surprised the lady that the book fell from her hands and landed with quite an unceremonious thump on the floor at her feet. In his hurry to apologize to the young lady and pick up the dropped object, Darcy quite lost control of
his own fingers and his own book fell to join that of the lady's. Blushing at his uncharacteristic clumsiness, Darcy felt his breath hitch further at the genuine laughter and good humor dancing in the lady's eyes. Clearing his throat to reclaim his composure, Darcy finally managed to retrieve both tomes from their sad positions and held out the lady's copy to her. Glancing briefly at the title, he almost dropped the book again in bewilderment, for the two books were quite identical in looks.

Startled to speech, Darcy blurted out the first thought that came to mind, "Oh! This is a rather surprising read for a young lady such as yourself to peruse, is it not?"

The brief flash of anger in the lady's eyes and the slight indignant raise of her eyebrow immediately alerted Darcy to the harsh tone of his statement. Clearing his throat again, Darcy added quickly and uncomfortably, "That is...I mean...that is to say...well, I personally find nothing wrong if said young lady is interested in estate management. But perhaps she might be so good as to share with me her reasons for forgoing the usual novels that I have been told gentlewomen enjoy? I'm afraid not many young ladies of my acquaintance would find treatises on crop rotation quite so intriguing."

Tilting her head slightly at the softened tone with which he made his inquiry and looking at him thoughtfully, the lady replied archly, "Perhaps she would, if she knew to what manner of gentleman with whom she was speaking. After all, he could very well only be feigning curiosity but then only express further condescension once he ascertained her reasons."

His curiosity piqued at this non-answer, Darcy inquired, "Ah, then perhaps the lady would be greatly comforted by knowing my name?"

The lady replied in surprise, "Your name? What good is your name to me?"

Darcy felt his own eyebrows rise in surprise at this most unexpected response, "Why, so that you might better assess my character based on my reputation of course."

To which the lady only chuckled and stated, "But reputations are such fickle beings; it seems but a sneeze could change the manner of their appearance. And a name, though no doubt carrying quite a lot of clout in certain circles, is never quite enough for me. What care I if you were a duke and owner of great estates or merely the lowest of servants who toil in such grand houses? Did not the great poet himself question 'What's in a name?' Names, good sir, are as inconsistent as their cousins, reputations. No, I would much rather know of something much more dependable and of firmer substance, something no amount of names can disguise."

Intrigued, Darcy asked, "Then what would you know of me?"

Laughing merrily now, the lady replied, "Your character, of course! But I fear that is the subject of great and lengthy study, one which our brief encounter little permits."

Quite unknowingly, Darcy found himself smiling to match the lady's high spirits, "Are you then, a study of character?"

The lady nodded, "Perhaps so, such as I am able. The society around my home is quite unvaried, which lends itself well to lengthy study. But I have withheld from ascertaining characters upon first impressions for, as my sisters have warned me, I have a tendency to see first that which most amuses me...But enough, I have responded to all your inquiries and you have yet to answer mine."

Laughing outright now, Darcy exclaimed, "All but my original question, miss!"
But he thoughtfully added, "But I shall indulge the young lady as much as I am able, though I must beg some lenience in her reception of my reply. Asking a gentleman to sketch his own character is a bold request. An overstated opinion of myself would certainly leave a most unfavorable impression on the lady whereas an understated opinion might convince her of a false modesty. Indeed, I fear you have given me a Herculean task... But I am not usually one to shy away from a challenge, even at the great risk of mistakenly portraying my very self... Very well, I find that I am usually of a taciturn nature in company and do not reveal my good humor but to a select few with whom I am of long acquaintance. I once thought of myself as possessing a rather decided mind, that my good opinion, once lost, would be lost forever. But such conduct in a close relative and her ability to alienate much of our family rather convinced me of the folly of such a mentality. Indeed, my own sister has often warned me against such rigidity. So I find myself still much dedicated to my principles but quite willing to consider the opinions of others."

Clapping, the lady said with an amused smile, "Bravo! Not many would have indulged my fancy and you have acquitted yourself quite well. It appears indeed that we should both be quite grateful for the presence of sisters in our lives and their abilities to point out our deficiencies so that we may better ourselves. So to reward your efforts, I will answer your original inquiry regarding my rather curious choice of reading materials."

At a nod of acknowledge from Darcy, the lady continued, "I do own that such a book is quite odd to find in the hands of a gentlewoman, but I am not one of the fashionable ladies of the Ton and never possessed the desire to be such a lady. I am but the daughter of a country gentleman and, as my dear mamma is not here on earth to chastise me and my sweet brother is some thirteen years my junior, have little penchant for all that might be considered appropriate reading. My dear Papa, from whom I no doubt inherited my stubborn nature, found little cause to forbid me from such material, particularly since he has little patience for such things, preferring instead his library of philosophical works. And I find that I could not quite stand by and see our tenants suffer for want of proper management of our estate... And now I have no doubt shocked you with the extent of my un-ladylike behavior..."

Solemnly, Darcy shook his head, "Nay, you suppose false. While I do find your conduct most singular for the daughter of a gentleman, I cannot fault your kind considerations of your tenants. I am but a country gentleman myself and am prone to think well of all those who would show such dedications to those within their care."

Blushing slightly at the earnestness of his gaze, the lady grasped her book a little tighter. The chiming of the nearby clock caused her to gasp slightly as she curtsied politely in farewell. "Alas, I fear your opinion is not one often shared among gentlemen of my acquaintance. I also fear that the afternoon has quite run away from me. I must depart, for my good aunt is expecting company tonight and will require my assistance with my little cousins."

Darcy bowed back and stated, "Then I shall not keep you. But I do hope that we may meet again soon. I am most curious as to your opinions on our shared book choice. And, perhaps, should you deem my character acceptable, we may eventually learn of each other's names, fickle though they may be."

Smiling widely at his reply, the lady departed, leaving a deeply intrigued Darcy in her wake.
Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the young lady Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy had chanced upon, was usually not one to fixate upon the various gentlemen of her acquaintance. They invariably either censured her for her participation in the management of her father's estate or were more focused on the beauty of elder sister. As such, she felt no qualms about dismissing their frowns of disapproval as easily as she laughed at their blundering attempts to impress Miss Jane Bennet. But, as she sat in front of her looking glass prior to her aunt's dinner party, she could not help but recall the truth infused in a certain gentleman's voice when he expressed admiration for her care of her tenants. Though she had initially been piqued at his implication of the unsuitable nature of her reading choice, her sisters' warnings regarding her rashness in judging others had quickly resounded in her mind. The gentleman's efforts to correct for his initial comment and the serious considerations he took in answering her rather audacious request made her grateful again for her sisters' admonitions.

Though the gentleman had professed himself to be a mere country farmer, Elizabeth had keenly noted the quality of his clothing and the golden signet ring upon his finger. That she had behaved so impertinently towards a man of no small means now brought a blush to her cheeks. Certainly, her words to him had an element of truth; she truly cared nothing for the status that came with a title or an old family name. Even though her visits to her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner had exposed her to society outside her home hamlet, she could not always curb the quickness of her mind and sharpness of her tongue. But she could find it in herself to regret giving offense to those with sound characters. Despite the brevity of her interaction with the gentleman, Elizabeth suspected that he was a man of good principles. Otherwise, she might not have revealed so much of her situation to him. So used was she to dismissal from other gentlemen, however, that though he had expressed his hope in meeting her again, she could not but doubt his sincerity. Besides, the true possibilities of their paths crossing again were slim, a thought that brought a touch of something akin regret that she dared not acknowledge.

The entrance of another young woman disrupted Elizabeth's musings and she turned to greet her sister with a smile. The so-called plain Bennet girl, Mary certainly did not possess the same distinguishing features that gained her sisters their reputations for being local beauties. The soft curls that framed her face, quite unlike Elizabeth's wild tangle, suited her quieter nature. The genuine happiness shining from her face further made her quite a pleasant, if not stunning, creature to behold. With excitement, Mary procured a letter that had newly arrived from Longbourn while Elizabeth had been at the book shop. Easily obtaining forgiveness from Elizabeth for reading the letter first, Mary launched into the news their sister Jane had thoughtfully imparted.

As Elizabeth listened with great pleasure at the new courtship between Miss Kitty Bennet and Mr. John Lucas and laughed heartily at their housekeeper's despair at the new scrapes of newly turned seven-year-old Tommy Bennet, she reflected again upon the changes that had been wrought by Mrs. Bennet's death.

Elizabeth had been three and ten, old enough to feel uneasy when her mother did not rise from her bed the week following the birth of the long-awaited Longbourn heir. After four daughters in as many years, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had rather despaired of ever having a son to inherit the estate. The years of Elizabeth's childhood were thus often disrupted by fits of Mrs. Bennet's nerves as she bemoaned their fate as a result of the dreadful entailment. The birth of Thomas Bennet, the younger, was thus a most welcomed surprise. Alas that the miracle baby did not come without a cost. Though Mrs. Bennet was greatly comforted that she had managed to produce an heir before closing her eyes for the last time, her daughters were left to witness the heartbreak of their father.

Mr. Bennet, for all that he had begun to closet himself in his study with increasing frequency in
order to avoid his wife's most sensitive nerves, had cared deeply for the mother of his children. In death, her faults were easily forgiven, and he remembered only that she had been his steady companion the past fifteen years. Not in a proper state to care for his four girls let alone an infant, he was much relieved when his wife's brother, not yet having children of his own, offered to care for the children until Thomas Bennet, the elder, reclaimed his faculties as master of Longbourn. Madeleine Gardiner, though a young bride at the time, was a most capable and educated young woman and quickly rose to the challenge. She came to love her nieces and nephew and reared them with a firm but gentle hand. Under her guidance, the girls found that they were encouraged to deport themselves as true ladies and pursue such hobbies as befitting young gentlewomen.

Kitty, who had began to show signs of being perhaps a bit wild, particularly benefitted from Mrs. Gardiner's guidance. She discovered a particular talent in capturing the likeness of her surroundings on paper and the genuine praise she received gave her the courage to give voice to her loneliness and sense of neglect. Kitty’s admission, made with a flood of tears that almost drowned Mary’s quieter murmurs, sparked a sense of shame in the second eldest Bennet.

“Oh Jane,” she had cried in dismay to Jane later that evening, “how blind I have been! To think that I flattered myself in possession of an uncommon insight to my fellow man! My discernment, my abilities are nothing but the illusions born of pride. I know not those who share my very blood; my sisters are but strangers to me.”

“My dear Lizzy, you must not blame yourself. I too must shoulder the responsibility; more so, I daresay.”

“You are too good, Jane!” Elizabeth remained determined to examine herself with the same harshness she had previously used in her judgment of her sisters, “No, I have allowed my restlessness to overpower my good sense; how ill-tempered I have been!”

Jane sought only to comfort her distraught sister, “We each wear grief differently; you only miss the woods and walking trails of home. London, despite its many diversions, has no such refuge to offer. And our Uncle's books are nothing to Papa's library. Your sisters are well-acquainted with your wit, Lizzy, and know that you do not truly intend harm with your comments.”

“And yet my thoughtlessness has surely already wrought harm! You are too kind to take offense, Jane, but Kitty has ever sought to please. And Mary, her quietness hides a tender heart. I was wrong to have dismissed such tendencies for simple silliness and meekness. How easily I held Mama responsible when in truth, I was no better in my neglect of my sisters.”

Jane shook her head, “No Lizzy. The fault lies with me for not providing the proper guidance. I have failed in my duty as the eldest.”

“But you have not! Your serenity strengthened the tenuous bonds that still hold us together.”

“I only hope not to be a burden to our Aunt and Uncle.” Jane murmured.

Mrs. Gardiner, on her way to wish her nieces goodnight, overheard this quiet remark. Taking note of the obvious distress of the two elder Bennets, she patiently listened to their woes. Her wise counsel proved instrumental in establishing the foundations for a new closeness among the four sisters despite their varying temperaments. When Mr. Bennet reclaimed his children a year later, he was most heartened at the changes in his girls and knew he owed the Gardiners a debt he could not hope to repay. Consequently, when Mrs. Gardiner expressed her hopes of yearly visits from at least one of the girls, Mr. Bennet found that he could not find it in his heart to deny her request.

The ensuing six years saw the Bennet girls rising to the occasion quite admirably. Jane’s forgiving nature was tempered by her sensibleness, making her a kind but capable Mistress of Longbourn.
Kitty, the youngest and in possession of the most fanciful nature of the four sisters, often described Jane as a ribbon of fine silk, beautiful in appearance but also capable of bearing heavy loads. Mary, the third child and the quietest of the four, found music to be her comfort and her chosen method for communicating her thoughts and feelings. What she could not say in words, she would elicit from the old pianoforte in the drawing room. It fell to Elizabeth, the second eldest and the most spirited sister, to become Mr. Bennet's helpmate before young Tommy would be of an age to acquire the skills necessary to oversee the estate. Possessing a curious mind, Elizabeth found the challenges of estate management quite stimulating and had little regrets at being thought unladylike by some of her neighbors.

Seeing the thoughtful expression on Elizabeth's face and being quite used to her older sister's habit for occasional introspection, Mary paused in her telling of the news from home and waited quietly for Elizabeth to re-enter the present. Smiling gently, Mary then teased Elizabeth, remarking that perhaps she was upset that John Lucas had chosen Kitty for the recipient of his regard. Elizabeth merely laughed in reply and jokingly exclaimed her frustrations at the good-natured plotting of both Mary and their good friend Charlotte Lucas for a union between the Lucas heir and Elizabeth.

"Remember, dear sister," Elizabeth remarked, "for all that John Lucas and I were conspirators in our childhood games, it was always Kitty for whom he played hero and she who he sought to save from the Dread Pirate Lizzy. No, I cannot feel anything but joy for our dear sister. John's steadiness will help ground her fanciful spirits. Having had much practice, he will do well as her protector."

Mary smiled kindly at her sister's sage observations, "I am certain you are correct, Lizzy; we have always been able to depend on your judgments of character. Though...what will our neighbors say to the youngest Bennet daughter being courted when the elder ones do not yet even have gentlemen callers? Is it not a breach of propriety? I do not wish for idle gossip to ruin our sister's happiness."

Elizabeth nodded in recognition at Mary's insightful comments, "Ah, but Bennets are not known to be fond of convention, are we? Certainly Papa caused quite a stir when he made us older girls wait until Kitty was of age so that he could allowed all of us to be out at once. Aunt Phillips was particularly put out that Jane should miss her chance. But if I recall correctly, we were all quite willing to enter society together. And our neighbors, having been our acquaintances for many years, must be used to Papa's oddities. I believe they are more wont to pity us for having such a father than to judge us for the effects of his decisions. Besides, we are not completely without gentlemen callers; Jane certainly has more than her share of admirers. Uncle Philips's last assistant, for one, wrote quite the sonnets in praise of her beauty."

Mary chuckled in remembrance of the overstated hyperboles that youth had used in an attempt to show his admiration for the oldest Bennet. "Quite so. But you know as well as I do, Lizzy, that for all her gentleness, Jane's heart is not easily touched."

Elizabeth sighed, "Indeed, she sees her beauty as a burden that prevents gentlemen from appreciating her for her character. I fear that with the responsibilities of both mother and sister on her shoulders, our Jane has learned to be quite guarded in defense of her heart."

“I do so wish she might have come to London, if only to prove Aunt Phillips false in her conjectures that Jane has little time remaining to make a good match. She has ever reminded us that there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them."

“I do think Jane has greater chance for happiness with a good man, no matter the size of his
fortune.”

Mary did not know what to say to such a dry remark and so stayed silent.

Elizabeth shook her head, as though to clear her mind of unwelcomed thoughts. “We made our entreaties, but Jane would not be moved. She proclaimed contentment with her present circumstances.”

“But is she truly?” Mary’s doubt made Elizabeth sigh again.

“I fear we have all learned to regulate our emotions these few years…and Jane never was one to share her thoughts openly without cause. Tommy, for all his scrapes, has certainly been a blessing; his antics have kept laughter in our lives and the light from withering in Papa's eyes…But enough of these dreary topics. The news is much too joyful and the day too lovely for us to dwell on these somber thoughts…Tell me, Mary, how did you find the new music shop?”

Brightening immediately, Mary launched into a spirited description of her day's trip and the new pieces of music she had acquired. She added, "I am so grateful for Aunt Gardiner. Did you know she had acquired the services of a music Master for my sake for the duration of our stay? I do not know quite how she managed it, for I hear that the Master also has the honor of tutoring the niece of Countess of Matlock. The shopkeeper was quite effusive in his praise of the talents of that young lady; I do hope that I might have the chance of hearing her play sometimes, though I doubt very much that I ever will, considering that our social circles are so dissimilar."

A gentle chuckle interrupted the sisters' conversation and the Bennet girls rose quickly to curtsy to their aunt. Mrs. Gardiner smiled gently at the wistful express on Mary's face, "Be careful what you wish for, Mary, for it may very well come true. I have it on good authority from your uncle that Colonel Fitzwilliam, our newest business associate, is to dine with us tonight. He is the son of Lady Matlock and thus the cousin of Miss Georgiana Darcy. He is a jovial sort and can certainly be applied to for making the proper introductions. If not, then certainly Miss Georgiana's brother, who will also be in attendance, might also be prevailed upon to make the effort. Come, let us descend to the ground floor, our guests are to arrive soon. It would not do for us to be late to our own dinner party!"

Glancing at each other with excited smiles, the Bennet girls dutifully trailed behind their Aunt Gardiner.
Mr. Charles Bingley, whose townhouse was situated with the most convenient proximity, was the first to arrive. His cheery disposition quickly left a most favorable impression on the Bennett ladies, though Elizabeth was to remark later to Mary that for all his easy smiles and unassuming manners, Mr. Bingley held a seriousness in his eyes that sharpened to reveal a most active mind particularly when discussing the newest business developments with Mr. Gardiner. Indeed, Elizabeth mused that Mr. Bingley could very well be wearing a mask that was more jovial than his true character in an effort to dissuade others from ever feeling him as a threat. Such a tactic no doubt played not a small role in his continued success as a businessman. Much alarmed at such an assessment, Mary asked Elizabeth if perhaps the existence of the mask was a sign of a dishonest nature, to which Elizabeth was quick to observe that Mr. Bingley was genuinely of a kind nature but that just as Jane hid her true self behind a serene countenance, so Mr. Bingley was careful to conceal his intelligence from all but his trusted friends. He, like Jane, bore the marks of someone who had to shoulder heavy responsibilities before his time.

But such speculations were not to occur until the next morning when the young ladies had a chance to discuss their new acquaintances and the events of a most delightful evening.

The arrival of Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy were greatly anticipated, particularly as both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Gardiner were full of favorable comments on the characters of both young men. Upon learning from Mr. Gardiner that Miss Bennet was a study of character, Mr. Bingley had laughed merrily and remarked that she might find Mr. Darcy a difficult study, since he was of a habit to retreat behind an unreadable countenance in an effort to hide his discomfort in unfamiliar company. His comment quite ensured that it was a most curious Elizabeth who waited for said gentleman to arrive.

When the sound of a carriage approaching finally came, however, Mr. Gardiner was most surprised to see the lone figure of Mr. Darcy being admitted to the parlor. The gentleman was quick to offer explanations for his cousin’s absence.

“Richard has tasked me with the unpleasant duty of apologizing to his friends for his lack of manners. Mrs. Gardiner, he promises that a package of sweets from Gunter’s will arrive for the children on the morrow.”

Madeleine Gardiner laughed, “Emily and Edmund are quite spoiled! With such tantalizing treats, I suppose I must forgive him.”

A small smile crossed Darcy’s face in remembrance of his cousin’s ease with the younger Gardiners before he added, “Though I believe him to be truly contrite for reneging on his promise of attendance, I do not believe him to be truly sorry for the opportunity to spend time with his fiancée. For all his professed indifference for the Ton and his social obligations, Richard proved most willing to brave his Mother’s displeasure and insisted on accompanying Cousin Anne to Lady Cooper’s soiree.”

Mr. Gardiner chuckled, “Brave indeed! He has been most vocal regarding his opinions of Lady Cooper; to hear his tales, I would imagine her to be an awful dragon such as in one of my children’s storybooks.”

“Richard does have such a dreadful tendency to gossip, one that I dearly hope Georgie will not acquire. I shudder at the thought!” Despite Darcy’s words, his expression bespoke of fondness for his cousin.
“As though Miss Darcy could under your guidance!” Bingley exclaimed.

Darcy flushed slightly at the comment, a faint coloring that grew more noticeable when his gaze fell upon the other ladies within the room. “Forgive me, I should not speak so frankly with ladies in attendance.”

His comment reminded Mr. Gardiner of his duties as host.

Mary, who had moved to stand slightly behind her sister when the gentleman was announced, was startled to feel the shift in her sister’s posture. Her puzzlement only grew when Elizabeth made no move upon Mr. Gardiner’s introduction of his nieces. Giving a slight tug to her sister’s skirts, Mary was relieved when Elizabeth sank into a curtsey as was proper.

Darcy took the opportunity a bow offered to collect himself. As he straightened, his expression had given way to one of mischief seldom seen in company new to him. "Miss Bennett, I hope that the knowledge of my name will not greatly impact your efforts in sketching my character. Though I am certain to one for whom names and titles hold so little weight, such knowledge will not cause undue harm."

Glancing curiously between his guest and his niece, Mrs. Gardiner remarked, "Mr. Darcy, it appears that you have already been acquainted with my niece?"

Darcy nodded, "Indeed. We had a most…enlightening…conversation in your book shop earlier this afternoon. I had arrived in my customary corner only to find that Miss Bennett had stolen my favored seat. What is a gentleman to do but confront such a usurper, despite the fact that we share such similar tastes in read materials?"

At such a challenge, Elizabeth found her voice at last, "Mr. Darcy, I find that I cannot help but refute your no doubt kindly given title of usurper. Indeed, I believe that I might have the better claim to that particular window seat; it has consistently been my kind companion since our acquaintance seven years past and has always patiently waited for my return. Though I would not expect a great gentleman such as yourself to notice such frivolous details, another worthy soul might have noticed that the cushion in that particularly corner bore my initials. Thus, if anything, I believe I might be quite justified in giving you, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire, the dubious honor of being the usurper."

Though he knew Darcy did not possess the pride that his circumstances certainly would have imparted to a lesser man, Bingley still felt his eyebrows rise at Miss Bennett's audacity in speaking thus to his good friend. Mary, who was no stranger to her sister's wit, was also worried that Elizabeth would offend the gentleman and thus ruin any chances of her meeting the famous Miss Georgiana Darcy. Taking care to hide the motion in the folds of their skirts, she silently squeezed Elizabeth's hand in warning. The Gardiners likewise turned their sharp gazes upon their niece. Darcy, however, found himself delighted that Miss Bennett appeared as keen as he was on resuming their verbal sparring. The dismissive tone with which she had referred to his status quite convinced him of the validity of her earlier words and reinforced his admiration for her conviction not to allow status to cloud her judgment. Fighting a grin, he replied, "Perhaps so, Miss Bennett. But even you cannot fault someone who only wishes to care for your friend in your absence. I believe I would not be incorrect in stating that with your many responsibilities, you are not able to visit that particular corner as much as either you or it would like. And I would hate to see such a sunny corner bereft of good company. So, I humbly beg your permission in keeping it safe from other encroachers when you are not able. I find myself quite enamored of that particular seat and the cushion which currently occupies it and am loathe to part from it."

Feeling Mary's fingers relax in their hold before withdrawing completely and finding her own
emotions calm at the realization that Darcy did not take offense at her impertinence, Elizabeth pretended to think deeply before replying, "If that be the case, I cannot find it in myself to deny such a heartfelt application for the position of defender for my particular friend. If I am to share that corner with someone, I am glad that it is with someone who can appreciate its worth."

Darcy bowed solemnly in recognition of the responsibility now given to him before allowing a wide smile to cross his face. Finding her breath catch slightly at the way such an expression emphasized Darcy's handsome features, Elizabeth was grateful when Mr. Bingley asked Mary in a conspiring manner, "Is it ever thus with your sister?"

Mary chuckled shyly, "Aye. Lizzy is most fierce in her defense of her friends, be they human or otherwise."

Though she trembled under the combined attentions of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, Mary continued in the telling of her sister’s strengths, "Why, I believe our sister Kitty was quite vexed when Lizzy insisted on adopting an abandoned rooster that simply would not acknowledge the difference between the moon and the sun and kept the household from sleep for many nights before it finally learned. Cook was most adamant in turning it into stew or some other dish for supper but Lizzy was most insistent. To this day, I am not quite certain how she managed it, but we were all certainly thankful."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled in remembrance, "Ah yes. I believe Kitty remained quite disgruntled until you were able to gift her with a soft kitten to call her own."

Mary nodded, "Yes indeed. Though it would not do to forget to mention that, of course, Snowball was the result of another rescue attempt on Lizzy's part. The poor creature had been the runt of the litter and was being quite starved by its willful siblings. Lizzy insisted on feeding it milk and soft cream by hand until it was out of danger."

Blushing at the telling of these stories, Elizabeth tried to shift the credit, "I am certain the new set of drawing pencils Jane procured for Kitty did more to sooth her."

At the mention of Jane's name, Mr. Bingley asked, "Is Jane another sister?"

Glad for the change of topic, Elizabeth nodded, "Jane is our elder sister and Kitty our youngest. Kitty has quite the talent for drawing and also making up stories, which does quite well in keeping our brother Tommy occupied. I fear seven year olds are not at an age conducive to understanding the concept of keeping still."

Mr. Gardiner laughed, "Sometimes I am convinced that young Tommy makes it his goal to drive Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper, to Bedlam. I find fortuante that the Bennett estate is in the country where he has the space to run wild, else Mrs. Gardiner and I might find ourselves permanently hosting our nieces because our nephew certainly would have caused the house to collapse! Not that it would be a trial to have the girls with us, but there is something to be said about being able to stay in the comforts of one's own home."

Mr. Bingley remarked with a good-natured laugh, "Darcy would most certainly agree; only his cousin's upcoming nuptials could bring him away from his beloved Pemberley. Even a letter from me did nothing but bring his Cousin as a substitute!"

The rest of the evening thus passed in pleasant conversations and good cheer. The gentlemen were suitably impressed with Mary's skill on the pianoforte and their genuine appreciation gave Mary the courage to remark to Darcy that her skill was most likely nothing compared to that of his sister's and that she dearly hoped that she might meet Miss Darcy. Darcy, who saw the same gentle nature that was in Georgiana in Mary, was happy to find a potential friend for his sister.
Though Georgiana never made complaints to him, Darcy knew his sister felt the loneliness of not having young ladies of similar age or interest in their immediate neighbors in Derbyshire. So it was with great happiness that he promised to arrange such an introduction. What he did not say and, indeed, what he could not yet admit to himself, was that he was even more glad of finding another opportunity to increase his chances of interacting with the enigmatic Miss Elizabeth Bennett.
The following day saw a rare reprieve for Georgiana from the daily task of supporting her Cousin Anne through all of Lady Matlock's kindly meant but detailed instructions on how best to comport oneself as a leader of London society. Sipping her tea and relishing in the peaceful environment of the Darcy townhouse, Georgiana took a moment to study her brother. Used as she was to his contemplative moods, she noticed a rather odd expression on his face that she could not recall observing in the past.

Deciding to satisfy her curiosity, Georgiana remarked gently, "Brother, I fear I have been remiss in keeping you company these past few weeks. With less than a fortnight left until the wedding, Aunt Matlock has only become more energetic in her efforts to mold Cousin Anne and me into everything that a proper societal lady should be. While I am most grateful for her attention and the chance to further my friendship with our cousin, I find that I have missed times such as this when we can speak with one another of the thoughts on our minds."

The twitch to Darcy’s lips betrayed his amusement, "Proper societal ladies? I suppose you mean that Aunt Matlock is doing well in molding you and Cousin Anne in her own image!"

“Really Brother, your teasing is more befitting of Cousin Richard! Aunt Matlock is most vociferous with her opinions, certainly, but she is not given to malicious intent. She only seeks to prepare us for the demands of out station.”

“I am justly reprimanded. My gratitude to our aunt is without bounds, as already I see before me the effects of her continued tutelage. My taciturn nature would have certainly caused you to wither for want of company.”

Holding up a hand to forestall Georgiana’s protestations, Darcy admitted ruefully, “You have too much of Mama’s cheerfulness to allow my dourness hold much sway over your character."

Miss Darcy exchanged her teacup in favor of her brother’s hand, "You judge yourself too harshly, Brother."

Darcy shook his head even as he squeezed his sister’s fingers in return, “I am aware of my deficiencies and am only too glad that they need not be yours as well. You are blossoming, Georgie, I only wish that Mama and Papa could bear witness to your growth.”

At Georgiana’s downturned eyes, Darcy added with more levity, “Though I beg of you, sister mine, to grant me some time before I must sharpen my sword in preparation for any future gentlemen callers."

Georgiana’s next words revealed the worry that her smile could not completely hide, "Seeing all the arrangements that must be made for Cousin Anne’s marriage to Cousin Richard has made me realize that I am in no rush to enter the whirlwind that is London society. Besides, I know how much you despise all the machinations and manipulations that are so pervasive in the Ton. I believe we would both like to have ample opportunity to recuperate at Pemberley before being so exposed again."

“That is a plan to which I heartily give my agreement.”

A comfortable silence fell between the siblings before Georgiana disrupted it once more, "Though, Brother, perhaps the company of a sister might lend me courage? Once the time comes?"
Darcy considered his sister's question solemnly. Despite the many admonishments he had received from both Aunt Matlock and Aunt Catherine regarding his unwed state, he had not thought that Georgiana would also remark on the matter. Nonetheless, he could not deny that her words made a certain sense. One eligible Darcy already created quite enough excitement among the matchmaking mama's. The addition of another Darcy to the marriage market would certainly ensure that neither would find a moment's peace. He was not adverse to the idea of marriage, but he knew that the probabilities that he would find the type of life partner that he longed for were quite slim. At this thought, quite unbidden, the sparkling eyes of Miss Elizabeth Bennett entered his mind. His response thus slipped out before he had time to ponder its ramifications, "Perhaps you are correct."

These words hung in the air between the siblings for only a brief moment. Forgoing her earlier subtly, Georgiana asked, "Are you certain? I have never heard you verbalize your approval for any schemes of our aunts, and even sometimes our Uncle Matlock, to introduce you to certain young ladies of their acquaintance. What has happened to so change your mind?"

Deciding that he could not evade his sister's observant eye any longer, Darcy related the recent dinner party at the Gardiners to Georgiana. In particular, he spoke of his confusion with respect to one Miss Elizabeth Bennett. "I openly admit to curiosity, for she is unlike any other young ladies of my acquaintance. Her wit easily makes fools of even the most intelligent of men, but she shares her observations so charmingly that she could never give offense. She possesses great curiosity about the world and yet appears oddly content with her own place in it. I cannot make out if she professes her opinions in earnest or to seek amusement from their reception."

Georgiana listened to this deluge of thoughts with growing alarm, "Brother, I must own that I find it quite disconcerting to think that any lady should have caught your attention."

"Perhaps my friendship with the Gardiners predisposed me to act in an unguarded manner towards their niece."

"Yet though you had known the late Lord Shaftesbury for longer duration, you remained ill at ease with his daughter when you were last present for the Season."

Darcy groaned in remembrance, "Hence my reluctance to return to Ton in subsequent years. I was only fortunate that Lady Cecilia, unlike her mother, was not one to gossip; better to be thought proud than a buffoon."

"You were neither when you conversed with Miss Bennet."

"No," Darcy admitted, "I somehow found myself having merry discussions with not only Miss Bennet but her sister as well."

"Miss Mary plays the pianoforte, does she not?"

Darcy nodded, "She is of a quieter disposition and was obviously discomfited in the presence of two unknown gentlemen. But Miss Bennet incorporated her sister into conversation with such ease that Miss Mary's sweetness was well revealed. I learned enough of Miss Mary to deem her an appropriate companion for you, Georgie, but of Miss Bennet, I remain at a loss. I would like to hear your impressions."

Georgiana’s astonishment was clear, "I am to meet them?"

"As Aunt Matlock is so fond of reminding me, you are sorely lacking in female companionship."

"Miss Annesley has fulfilled the role quite well," Georgiana protested.
“That she has, but I believe Aunt Matlock would prefer that you interacted with young ladies closer to your age.”

“Cousin Anne…”

“Cousin Anne is family.”

“If you think it best, Brother.” Gone was the confidence she had earlier displayed, as Georgiana glanced demurely at her clasped hands.

Darcy frowned at such a response. “Miss Mary, I understand, shares your love of music and seems to possess some skill on the pianoforte. Her technique is perhaps not as refined as yours, but then she has not yet had the opportunity of extensive instruction in that area. Indeed, she was most eager for a chance to be introduced to you; she has heard much praise regarding your talents.”

Her cheeks reddening in modesty, Georgiana only nodded.

“I believe you will find in her a most mild-mannered young lady.”

Again, Georgiana nodded.

Finally, Darcy sighed, “Georgie? Was it not you who suggested that I renew my acquaintance with Lord Portland? ‘Neither you nor I have so many friends that we could dismiss so easily the opportunity to make a new one.’ Those were your words, were they not?”

When Georgiana remained silent, Darcy felt obliged to speak in defense of the Bennet ladies, “They are not of the first circles, but their manners are pleasing. And as our Aunt and Uncle Matlock think well of the Gardiners as well, I imagine they will have little protestation for the association.”

At last, Miss Darcy spoke, “I trust your judgment, Brother, and my curiosity is piqued at your descriptions, only…”

She hesitated, then spoke in a rush, “…You are certain they are not like Miss Bingley?”

Startled, Darcy could only repeat that lady's name in astonishment.

Nodding, Georgiana explained, “Aunt Matlock had less than kind words regarding that lady; she took no small pleasure, methinks, in the fact that Miss Bingley seems to have abandoned London for good.”

“What gave her cause to share those opinions with you?”

“Mr. Bingley took tea with them, I believe, a small test of Cousin Anne’s skills as hostess. And…I have overheard comments from other ladies who share in Miss Bingley’s belief that Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire is a, a desirable catch…for both his connections and his riches. I…I do not believe they were truly malicious, but nor did I wish to pursue friendships with those intent on pursuing you.”

“Georgie…”

“No, do not apologize,” the forcefulness of her words greatly contrasted with her previously hesitant tone. Her voice softened again, this time with a touch of wistfulness, “I would like to have friends for whom Darcy is but a name.”

To her surprise, her comment only drew a chuckle from her brother.
In response to her questioning gaze, Darcy explained, “I do not make light of your wish. Only, if you knew Miss Bennet’s opinion on the matter of names, you would welcome the chance to meet her, I am certain.”

“Oh?”

Darcy nodded and described his first meeting with that lady, concluding, “Miss Bennet is of a rather decided nature, I suppose, but not intractable.”

A smile began to make itself known on Georgiana’s face, “She sounds…not unlike you, Brother!”

Darcy mirrored her expression, "Quite so. Thanks to you and Cousin Richard, I am not ignorant of such attributes in my own character. And, like Miss Bennet, I also hold the opinions of my sister in high esteem. If you would rather not meet them…”

Georgiana quickly shook her head, “Oh! But I would like to, very much indeed. I cannot allow my own apprehensions stand in the way of possible new friendships. Besides, I do trust in your judgment, Brother; I am certain I shall be fond of the Miss Bennets as well.”

“I am not fond of the Miss Bennets, I merely think their open manners a refreshing contrast to the affected manners of much of the Ton ladies.”

The look he received spoke clearly of his sister’s disbelief. “You always were fond of puzzles, Brother, and Miss Bennet is an enigma that you are determined to solve.”

“Will you not play the new song?” Darcy asked after a pause.

Hiding a smile at his obvious deflection, Miss Darcy nonetheless acquiesced easily. She was patient; she could wait until she had observed the interactions between her brother and Miss Bennet before forming an opinion. But, as she caught the odd expression return to her brother’s face, she felt certain that such an occasion would only confirm her current suspicions.
Consideration

Despite the Darcy siblings’ mutual agreement to host the Bennet sisters for tea, almost a fortnight passed before a suitable occasion for all parties could be arranged. Though not given to impatience, Darcy found himself visiting the lending library daily in hopes of encountering Miss Elizabeth. He knew well that he had no right to think of her so intimately, but his mind stubbornly baulked at the careful control he usually practiced in honoring the dictates of society. Besides, Miss Elizabeth was not an altogether inappropriate appellation given the existence of an older sister, though currently absent, who could rightfully claim the title of Miss Bennet.

Darcy’s efforts were rewarded but twice with Elizabeth’s bright presence. Her quickness in forming rebuttals ensured that he had no time to lapse into discomfort, despite their location in so public a place; the screen next to their particular corner did little to block the view from the rest of the reading room. Had he not been so content in the presence of the young lady, Darcy would have certainly been frustrated at this second betrayal of his mind. But he could not deliver self-admonishment for labeling that particular corner theirs. Even on days when she was not seated in her usual spot, he found himself absentmindedly tracing her initials on the pillow that did indeed call that particular window seat home.

Unbeknownst to either Darcy or Elizabeth, Mrs. Gardiner was not unaware of these meetings. Though a sensible woman, Madeleine Gardiner could not deny that she wished great happiness in matrimony for her darling nieces. Her knowledge of the Darcys, both through childhood memory and her faithful correspondence with friends in Lambton, gave her great comfort in the honorable nature of the current master of Pemberley. Nonetheless, she took measures to ensure that Elizabeth’s reputation was not in danger. If Mr. Gardiner noted the persistent frequency of Mr. Darcy’s presence at his dinner table, he was shrewd enough not to comment but rather left matters in his wife’s capable hands. Besides, he truly delighted in the company of so well-mannered a gentleman and was not above enjoying the glow of affectionate pride whenever his niece should render Mr. Darcy speechless in their verbal spars. In his observation, Darcy was ever polite, though Mr. Gardiner supposed the intentness of the younger gentleman’s gaze on Elizabeth was more than mere attentiveness. Still, he was confident that he had no need, as yet, to inform his brother-in-law of another suitor for a Miss Bennet.

Unfortunately, though Elizabeth appeared to listen to Darcy’s opinions in a most attentive manner, an honor she accorded few gentlemen of her acquaintance, and always greeted him with a bright smile, Mrs. Gardiner could not ascertain with confidence a partiality on her niece’s part. The invitation that arrived for the Bennet girls to take tea with Miss Georgiana Darcy thus made her even more determined to speak with Elizabeth on the matter.

With an air of great resolve, Mrs. Gardiner approached Elizabeth, who was sitting comfortably with a tome that no doubt Darcy had recommended.

Glancing up at her aunt's face and seeing the seriousness of her expression, Elizabeth carefully marked her page before setting aside her book.

Taking a seat from which she could observe Elizabeth's face, Mrs. Gardiner began rather bluntly, "Lizzy, pray, what is your opinion of Mr. Darcy?"

Slightly unsettled, Elizabeth blinked before repeating in a confused voice, "Mr. Darcy?"

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, "I wondered if you had perhaps adequately sketched Mr. Darcy's character through your lively discussions?"
With an arched eyebrow, Miss Bennet inquired, “Is Uncle Gardiner hoping to entice Mr. Darcy to become an investor?”

“Oh Mr. Darcy has early been a supporter of his cousin’s venture with your uncle. Why, I believe they are completing plans to establish a circulating library in Lambton, with contributions from Mr. Darcy’s personal collection!”

“Oh how marvelous! What of Meryton? Papa’s collection is quite extensive, but he protects it as jealously as a dragon its hoard. Even John Lucas could not remove them from the study but was obliged to peruse them under Papa’s watchful gaze. A true circulating library would certainly be well-received, particularly compared with the lending shelf currently available.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled, “And it would certainly aid in the joint Bennet-Lucas enterprise to foster literacy in the young, no?”

Elizabeth nodded, “Charlotte is most adamant; she believes it a most practical skill, a sentiment to which I can lend my full support.”

“Yes, bibliophiles as you both are, I would expect no less. As for young Mr. Lucas, surely your father only wished to observe the young man who is currently courting one of his daughters.”

Elizabeth laughed in reply, “I suspect you are correct. Papa is a keen observer such that Mr. Lucas’s request could only have been expected. Though our neighbors often consider Papa’s actions nonsensical, we know he is not without his reasons.”

“And he has taught you well, Lizzy.” Mrs. Gardiner commented slyly.

“You are persistent, Aunt! Surely you have no need of my opinions when you have already indicated your favor for the gentleman?”

“I do not favor Mr. Darcy.” Mrs. Gardiner protested.

“No? Then I suppose I must determine Emily to be the responsible party. Ah! Am I to congratulate my cousin? She has made an impressive conquest! And at so youthful an age!”

“Emily is quite fond of Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Gardiner admitted lightly, “though I suspect her heart to be given to Colonel Fitzwilliam or, rather, to the hidden treats in the Colonel’s pockets.”

“The son of an Earl! How Aunt Phillips will gasp! Though poor Miss de Bourgh, she knows not the danger!”

Fighting a chuckle, Mrs. Gardiner admonished her niece, “Do not think to distract me from my purpose, Lizzy!”

Capitulating at last, Elizabeth replied, "Oh very well. My manners are not so ill as to refuse the inquiries of a most beloved relative. I must admit that my study remains but superficial. Mr. Darcy has all reasons to be proud, and yet he is not. He is learned enough that I can have no doubt in the impressive caliber of his library, but he is never harsh, even when our opinions differ not insignificantly. I suppose, in some ways, he even reminds me of Papa.”

Seeing her aunt’s incredulity, Elizabeth explained, her voice growing solemn, "Papa is…well, our neighbors do not always speak of Papa in the most flattering terms. I fear Mama’s passing affected him rather deeply. Had she lived, her love of socializing might have bought him more forgiveness for his perceived oddities. As you know, most of Papa's idiosyncrasies arise from his general discomfort in company, a trait to which Mr. Darcy has freely admitted. Only Papa hides his discomfort in sarcasm and dry humor while Mr. Darcy reputedly puts on a mask of indifference.
and polite disinterest. I have yet to observe Mr. Darcy’s public visage, but Mr. Bingley’s comments paints such a picture quite convincingly. At the core, however, I believe both Papa and Mr. Darcy are careful observers of human nature and can laugh at the follies of others and, more importantly, those in themselves.”

Intrigued by Elizabeth’s analysis, Mrs. Gardiner noted, "Superficial? I fear for the contents of more detailed an analysis!"

Elizabeth just laughed lightly, her natural good humor returning. "Much remains supposition, but perhaps I have given the matter some thought. I could certainly do no less when my first conversation with the gentleman revolved around the importance of such a subject! Mr. Darcy is not above requesting a report of progress on my study, brief as our acquaintance has been."

"And what do you say?"

Elizabeth smiled, "Nothing to cause offense, I assure you. Only the truth, or rather, the truth through my eyes. I do not think he minds, though, even when my impertinence oversteps the bounds of good behavior."

“He is much too polite to remark upon any offense.” Mrs. Gardiner agreed easily.

“Perhaps so, but I do not believe he would hide true thoughts from a friend.”

Deciding that she might as well reach the heart of her inquiries, Mrs. Gardiner quietly asked, "And are you friends?"

Elizabeth laughed merrily at her aunt’s tentativeness, “Certainly! I do hope you would not choose the present time to admonish me for daring to acknowledge such a friendship, Aunt Gardiner! I know well those of the Darcy surname operate within a circle a great distance above the one in which I inhabit. The Bennet name, though not without history, certainly suggests none of the gravity that would enable those of us who bear it to be on visiting terms with noble families, even those without titles themselves."

Shaking her head at Mrs. Gardiner’s frown, Elizabeth added, “Oh, certainly Mr. Darcy has never mentioned the difference between our stations. Indeed, he has behaved quite admirably in the face of my provincial manners. Yet, despite my uncle’s close partnership with his cousin and, it seems, an association with Mr. Darcy himself, I am certain our acquaintance will not survive beyond the duration of my time in London. I only endeavor to enjoy the company of a learned mind in the time that I am allotted.”

“And yet you are to meet his sister. Though a gentleman may not correspond with an unmarried lady, surely you and Miss Darcy may exchange letters.”

Still Elizabeth protested, “You presume much from a single invitation, Aunt. I believe that Mary, not I, will become the recipient of such missives from Miss Darcy. Indeed, was it not our very purpose to ensure an introduction between the two?”

“And what of Mr. Darcy’s purpose?"

“He adores Miss Darcy and is as protective of her as my sisters and I are of Tommy. Still, I believe he is glad of a friend for his sister.”

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head at her niece’s reply, "My dear Lizzy, for all your cleverness, sometimes I fear you miss that which is plainly before your eyes. As much as Mr. Darcy respects your uncle and adores the children, surely you cannot imagine them to be the cause for his many visits?"
“What can you mean?!”

“Feigned ignorance does not become you.”

Elizabeth could only gape before declaring, “My dear Aunt, you cannot mean that Mr. Darcy has formed an attachment to me! Why, that thought is...impossible!”

“Why should it be impossible? You know that I keep regular correspondeces with my friends in Lambton, and they have repeatedly remarked on how no lady has ever caught Mr. Darcy's attention. Indeed, his cousin, the Colonel, has remarked that Darcy has ever remained unfailingly polite but detached in the presence of ladies. Can you not detect a difference in behavior with regards to yourself?”

“Have you not considered that his behavior speaks more to the nature of the ladies of the Ton than his preference for my company?” Elizabeth retorted.

Mrs. Gardiner owned that she had indeed entertained such considerations and found them wanting.

Elizabeth insisted, “I am but an interesting anomaly. I cannot hope to obtain more of his regard. I do hold him in some esteem, but, though I care not for status, society does. I am not ignorant of this fact. You yourself taught me to be aware of it, Aunt. And Mr. Darcy, when he chooses a lady for courtship and marriage, would certainly be cognizant of this fact as well. His character is such that I believe the future Mrs. Darcy, whoever she may be, will certainly be a most fortunate creature. But his wealth and connections are such that I cannot in good conscience consider myself as a possible candidate.”

Mrs. Gardiner stubbornly countered, "And yet, he is a gentleman and you are a gentleman’s daughter. Are you not equals? Besides, Mr. Darcy does not strike me as one who cared for what society would say, at least not when it comes to matters of his personal happiness. The Colonel even made comment that Mr. Darcy is determined to marry for affection much as his parents had done.”

Still, Elizabeth shook her head, "Dear Aunt Gardiner, I know you wish to see my sisters and I happily settled. I am not adverse to such a prospect, but I know myself to possess a most singular temperament such that the post of maidenly aunt is not so frightful...Do not look so grim, aunt, I could never bend readily to another’s will. I fear matrimony is too restricting a state for me not to feel stifled. If you must consider for our marital happiness, then perhaps you will render me aid in convincing Jane to come to London. She is too kind a creature to become shackled to any of the foolish young men within our sphere. And she certainly has beauty and manner enough, if not for an Earl, than certainly a lesser baronet!”

Though she would have much preferred to interrogate her niece further on the matter of Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Gardiner knew that any efforts would prove futile in the face of Elizabeth’s deflection and obvious determination to end the discourse. Nonetheless, she could not stop herself from making one final plea, “I do hope to see all you girls find the same felicity in marriage that I have had. For you, especially, Lizzy; the gentleman who can enjoy such intellect in a wife is rare indeed. Do say you will consider my words despite your disagreement with their contents?”

Elizabeth’s promise was easily and solemnly given, to the great satisfaction of her aunt, who then noted dryly, “Alas Mr. Bingley is not a baronet.”

“No, he is not.” Miss Bennet admitted, “but he is quite amiable and, more importantly, sensible. Many far more stupid youths have admired Jane.”
“Lizzy!” Despite her reproachful tone, however, Mrs. Gardiner gave in to the temptation of mirth.

Her eyes sparkling, Elizabeth added, “Oh, they have been harmless; some even tolerable and, dare I say, likeable. But our Jane deserves to marry for much more than mere like.”

“But there certainly are not so many men of kindness and sense in the world as there are good women to deserve them,” voiced Mrs. Gardiner.

“Jane’s goodness must be rewarded. It must.” Elizabeth declared vehemently, “And so she must come to London, for I see little reason for Mr. Bingley to venture to Hertfordshire.”

“You are most convincing! Though I admit to being easily swayed in matters of my nieces’ happiness…I do not what may entice Jane to London when she has so long resisted a visit, but the idea of a lending library in Meryton certainly has merit and, with the summer upon us, a holiday in the country would not be out of the question for a gentleman of Mr. Bingley’s disposition and means. I must discuss such possibilities with your uncle.”

“How easily you plot, Aunt Gardiner!” Elizabeth exclaimed as she recovered her book.

Mrs. Gardiner only laughed at her niece’s teasing, “How easily you inspire me!”

Her third time through the same passage without comprehending its meaning, however, made Elizabeth pause and frown at the offending page in annoyance. Though she fervently believed in the soundness of her reasoning in regards to her aunt’s questions, she could not deny the fluttering of her heart when Mr. Darcy smiled at her in a certain way. She had tried to convince herself that such a reaction was no more than her vanity basking in the attentions of a handsome gentleman, but her Aunt Gardiner’s comments made her doubt her own convictions. Was it indeed possible…?

Mrs. Gardiner’s words regarding Mr. Darcy’s preference to marry for his own happiness despite the expectations of the Ton matched well her own assessment of his independence. And yet…her own Papa’s actions with regards to her departed Mama had convinced her that a marriage without mutual respect was doomed to allow mutual disregard to supplant whatever affection that had once existed. Did she hold such respect for Mr. Darcy? And what of his opinions? Surely her assertion that curiosity drove his continued conversations with her could not be false?

Unused to such disequilibrium, Elizabeth wished a moment for Jane’s company. The sound of her own sigh brought startlement and a self-admonition. Really, she had no cause to behave in so silly a manner. What use were idle speculations when her friendship with Mr. Darcy remained in its infancy? She would continue her study of his character in her remaining time in London. And afterwards…well, her philosophy was to look upon the past only as it gave her pleasure. She will certainly recall this visit only with joy for the diverting conversations such a brief friendship has
provided. Besides, if Aunt Gardiner's plot was to succeed, Elizabeth's attentions will surely be drawn to ensuring Jane's happiness. The decision made, Elizabeth nodded resolutely to herself and returned to her perusal of Virgil's *Georgics*. 
Teatime

The most anticipated meeting between the two Miss Bennets and Miss Georgiana Darcy exceeded all the tenuous hopes of the latter's brother. All three young ladies had been predisposed to think well of each other even prior to the meeting and the initial invitation to tea, accepted with much joy on Miss Mary's part and no small amount of curiosity on Miss Elizabeth's, would give way to a lasting friendship.

Despite her nerves, Miss Darcy played the part of hostess in a manner that would have earned her a pleased smile from her Aunt Matlock. Though her other aunt would have certainly frowned at the spirited manners of the elder Miss Bennet, Miss Darcy only found her guest as fascinating as Mr. Darcy had led her to expect. Indeed, the young heiress suspected that even had Aunt Catherine been present to offer her condescension, Miss Bennet would have simply responded with laughter and no small amount of audacity. Miss Bennet’s air of energy might have easily eclipsed her sister’s presence had she not displayed a gentle side in ensuring Miss Mary’s participation in the conversation. The younger Miss Bennet was not aloof in the haughty manners of the daughters of Earls and Dukes; rather, Miss Darcy could tell that she was just as shy as the hostess. Nonetheless, somehow, not even halfway through the first cup of tea, Georgiana found herself in a merry discussion with Mary regarding the merits of Ignaz Pleyel versus his master, Joseph Haydn. Their passion for similar topics was such that Georgiana thought it perfectly natural to invite the Miss Bennets to the Darcy townhouse’s music room.

“I do wish you could see the room at Pemberley, Mary,” Georgiana declared, arm in arm with her new friend, “my brother is much too generous such that I can truly want for nothing. Why, he had a harp installed even here so that I may continue practicing.”

Mary chuckled freely, “My sisters are always willing to copy music for me. Even Tommy, for all his dislike of sitting still, has offered his services. They each have their own preferences, so my collection is eclectic indeed.”

Such a comment of course caused Georgian to query for the details of the preferences, a request that Mary was only too glad to fulfill.

Darcy looked on the scene with fond surprise and turned to offer his gratitude to Miss Elizabeth, “I have never seen Georgie so animated in company. I fear I have caused her to be isolated too long and so imposed my own taciturn nature on her.”

Elizabeth smiled brightly at the soft chatter that floated back from the young ladies, “She is a dear girl, though I must claim some envy. I certainly could not have acted the part of hostess in so graceful a manner.”

With some surprise, Darcy opined, “I cannot imagine you failing at any venture, Miss Bennet.”

Despite her amused chuckle, Elizabeth could not completely hide the pink tinge to her cheeks, “I fear you are mistaken. Even Jane, in possession of infinite patience, was reproachful that my stitches never seemed to settle into straight lines.”

“And yet the pillow for the reading room is quite charming,” Darcy protested.

Elizabeth shook her head ruefully as she settled into a chair, “Because it was the twentieth, if not thirtieth, attempt. And not managed without a price, I assure you. My poor fingers know well the lot of a pin-cushion!”
Darcy answered with furrowed brows, thinking on the many decorative pillows that littered Pemberley’s sitting rooms, “I had little thought sewing to be such a difficult craft.”

“Oh, but it isn’t! My struggles merely reflect my own deficiencies rather than any difficulties in the task itself. Should you choose to take up sewing, Mr. Darcy, I have no doubt you shall have none of the trouble I did.”

Darcy’s startled expression only added to Elizabeth’s amusement.

Her laughter drew a smile from Georgiana, who glanced happily at the dazed look on her brother’s face and the bright eyes of Miss Bennet. Her own eyes dancing a bit mischievously, Georgiana inquired, "Miss Elizabeth, do you play? Perhaps you could delight us with a song as well?"

Elizabeth turned her attention to her young hostess and merely chuckled gently, "Alas! I fear your brother is to learn even more of my deficiencies today. I have neither Mary’s skill nor her patience with the pianoforte. While I can make my way through some simple tunes, I never did find the desire to become a true virtuoso. In the presence of two talented musicians, I would be much ashamed to show my own meager abilities."

Miss Darcy only smiled in recognition of her response and turned back to Mary and their duet.

Though he had not thought to ask Miss Elizabeth if she played, Darcy found himself intrigued by his sister's request so that he could not help but add, "Miss Bennet, surely one song could do no harm? I do not believe someone as courageous as you would fail to rise to the challenge of a mere instrument."

Arching her eyebrow, Elizabeth replied, "I do not fear the pianoforte, Mr. Darcy. On the contrary, I share in my sister's enjoyment of good music. I only lack the impetus to practice as much as I should. I would hate so for you to judge me too unladylike to associate with your sister."

Having regained his voice, Darcy retorted, "Ah, but you must understand my character enough to know that I can be quite unyielding, particularly in ensuring my dear sister's happiness. A young lady she has deemed worthy of her friendship will suffer no censure from me. Besides, I do not think I could ever think less of you, Miss Bennet."

The quiet earnestness of his last sentence made Elizabeth wonder if he had intended to utter it at all. Nonetheless, she was determined not to acquiesce so easily. "Perhaps not of me, Mr. Darcy, but I cannot help but note that you made no mention of my worth as a lady. Does not society expect an accomplished woman to fulfill all obligations in possessing a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and modern languages? I fear as much as I enjoy a well-played song, my fingers are too stubborn to comply with the demands of a pianoforte. And though I enjoy singing during my daily tasks, my voice is of no great consequence. Kitty is the artist in our family, not I. Dancing I am also fond of, but partners are in such short supply at home. As for modern languages, I can count no great skill unless you agree with my sister Jane that the estate ledger sheets are a language onto themselves."

Darcy nodded solemnly but stated, "Perhaps, Miss Bennet, society would demand all that and more in a young lady. I have one aunt who profess to be the authority on all that being a proper lady would entail and another aunt who truly possess such knowledge. Fortunately, Georgiana is of a mind to heed the latter. But I find that my own opinions quite differ from that of my worthy aunt and indeed society in general."

Seeing Elizabeth's surprise, Darcy continued, "While I admit that all those attributes are important, they reveal nothing of a young lady's mind or her true interests. I have known many a young lady who possess all those and more and yet derive no pleasure from their skills."
“You speak harshly, Mr. Darcy.”

“Then I must beg your pardon, for I mean little offense. Had a Miss Darcy not existed, I might have not felt a need to reconsider society’s dictates. Forgive the comparison, but I cannot tolerate the thought that others would use such a list to judge my sister as I might judge a horse I seek to acquire.”

Elizabeth merely tilted her head and inquired, "Perhaps then, you can enlighten me on your view of what being an accomplished lady entails?"

Darcy chuckled, his earlier gravity forgotten, "Miss Bennet, again you show your talent in making rather impossible requests. I cannot quite do so without completely discounting my own sister’s many accomplishments! But, perhaps if you would agree to play a song then I shall be more willing to impart my views?"

“You demand a heavy price.”

“Surely one tune cannot be too difficult,” he protested.

“The dignity of the composer, to say nothing of that of the musician, surely adds value to your request.”

“As I believe neither to be in danger, the cost remains minimal.”

“You speak as one who is unused to disappointment!”

He received her comment, delivered with an air of flippancy, with unexpected seriousness, “My cousin once observed that had he not possessed the freedom that derives from being family, I would be the kind of man to whom he should never dare refuse any thing for which I condescended to ask.”

She chose her reply carefully. “And my sisters have observed that I am not given to deference; you may ask, but so might I refuse.”

“And so we meet in stalemate.”

She nodded but added with a challenge in her eyes, “Or is such a conclusion unsatisfactory to your vanity?”

“My vanity?! ” He considered her a moment before releasing his chuckles, “I find my vanity making only retreats since making your acquaintance, Miss Bennet. You have bested me so frequently that I can now only humbly implore you for a song.”

“I would appear ungracious indeed to refuse you now. Alas the instrument is currently occupied.”

“Then I must beg my sister’s indulgence.” Though he turned his head away, she still caught the smile hovering over his lips.

Miss Darcy was only too glad to give up her seat to her guest. Playing a song that was well-known to her, Elizabeth let the familiar notes take her to Longbourn and the happy days of laughing with her sisters and chasing after young Tommy. When the notes faded away, she was surprised at the applause that rang in the room.

Georgiana was the first to speak, "Miss Elizabeth! You do yourself a grave injustice in belittling your own talents. Why, I could almost see in front of me partners circling in a merry country dance!"
Mary smiled in recognition of the particular song, "I remember when you first learned that song, Lizzy. Tommy had just learned to run and while he was quite delighted with new-found mobility, we were all quite exasperated at his boundless energy. When we informed Aunt Gardiner, she had sent us the music for that song and it quickly became a favorite among us all. Though I do believe Lizzy plays it best; there's an impish quality to the music that I think suits her quite well."

Elizabeth smiled at their praise but vacated her position, "That may be so, but it is really the only song I can play with a great deal of confidence. But enough; I turn the pianoforte back over to those who appreciate it much more than I do. Besides, Mr. Darcy, I believe I have fulfilled my share of our bargain, might you now fulfill yours?"

As the two younger ladies returned to the duet they had been practicing, Darcy looked at Elizabeth thoughtfully before saying, "Miss Bennet, I believe your song has expressed my thoughts quite eloquently." At her incredulous expression, he added, "Indeed. Though I can see that you do not possess the same technical proficiency on the pianoforte as your sister, I take equal pleasure in hearing you play. Your emotions with regards to the song blended perfectly with the notes such so that even the few missed notes seemed only part of its rustic charm. Miss Mary was correct in saying that the song suits you in its spiritedness."

Though pleased, Elizabeth brushed aside his observations. "You need not add to my vanity simply because yours suffers; I seek only your answer."

Darcy smiled at her persistence, "I suppose I cannot stall much further... I claim no expertise and hope you will not judge me too harshly for my views. I would seek genuineness in the air of a truly accomplished lady. I care not for her proficiencies in dancing, music, or drawing, so long as she is willing to try and improve. Not merely for the skills, but for the joy of a challenge. I suppose I can bow to convention in one sense, for my accomplished lady must also improve her mind by extensive reading. Someone accomplished in regulating themselves, someone in possession of strong convictions but remain willing to bend an ear to others’ thoughts, whether they be titled lords and ladies or merely lowly servants."

Elizabeth allowed herself a brief moment to wonder at the intentionality of his words before saying lightly, "Those are some lofty requirements, Mr. Darcy. If I may be so bold, have you met any young ladies who fit such a description?"

As she had intended, Darcy chuckled, “At least one, Miss Bennet.”

“I trust you to mean your own sister? She is doubly accomplished, both by society’s standards and that of her own brother.”

“But perhaps I can now be generous and expand that number.”

“Oh?”

“I can think of one other.”

“She must be accomplished indeed to have gained your favorable opinion."

“That you are, Miss Bennet.”

The steadiness of his gaze belied the teasing tone of his voice such that Elizabeth found herself momentarily speechless. Smiling to defuse her own unease, she insisted, “And once again I find I must question your judgment, Mr. Darcy. Though my courage has always risen to the occasion, I have not the drive for self-betterment that you seek in your accomplished lady. Surely my playing showed that I am more than content with my meager abilities?”
Darcy shook his head, “Georgiana was correct; you judge yourself too harshly. You had stated that you play poorly, yet I do not find it so, because you derive real pleasure from the song. Did you not also admit that you had revised your tendency to judge harshly on a first impression? Your devotion to your tenants also shows your consideration of others. And I do not believe I have met any lady who reads in subjects as varied as you do.”

“You are too kind to your friends, Mr. Darcy.”

“Should friends not be kind to one another?”

“Indeed, and not be given to false flattery.”

“You wrong me, Miss Bennet! I only seek to share my observations.”

“Then I must offer gratitude for you good opinions and express my sadness that society is not likely to share them.”

“But what care you for the opinions of those so wholly unconnected with you?”

With a laugh, she admitted, “Your vanity is surely celebrating this pause in its retreat.”

“What is to be my prize for this victory?”

Again, she laughed, “You would not ask if you had not already thought of it.”

“A dance,” he declared obligingly.

“A dance?”

He nodded, “If you will but allow me the great honor of a dance at my cousins’ engagement ball, I can then judge your accomplishments as society might.”

Blinking slightly at his boldness in making such a request, Elizabeth had only begun to reply when a loud laugh from the doorway interrupted her stuttering words.
Plans

With a happy cry, Georgiana abandoned any appearance of decorum and rushed to hug the man in the doorway, "Cousin Richard! What a pleasant surprise! I did not think you would want to part from Cousin Anne this day!"

The Colonel smiled at his young cousin's enthusiasm, "I had not wished to, but Mother had tasked me with a message for your brother. She truly has no pity on her poor son, not only am I to be parted from my betrothed but I must also undertake the herculean task of convincing your brother to accompany us to Almack’s for refreshments tonight."

"Not for dancing?"

Miss Darcy’s question drew a scowl from her brother and a laugh from her cousin. “Oh Georgie, surely you know that your brother will only brood in a corner and scowl into his tea after his obligatory dance with Anne? Even Mother has admitted that she has no other requirements of your brother than his attendance."

“If not for her insistence, I would not put forth the ten guineas.”

His response drew another laugh from his cousin, “How ungrateful you are, Darcy! To possess such a coveted voucher and take no pleasure in it. There are not a few unsatisfied ladies who failed to secure one this and every Season.”

“I shall gladly give up mine if I could.”

The Colonel shook his head, “And so you would, cousin.”

His gaze then fell on the other occupants of the room, "Ladies, my apologies for my ill manners. Colonel Fitzwilliam at your service.”

Darcy shook himself from the unpleasant idea of attending Almack’s and made the introductions.

After the formalities, the Colonel exclaimed, "Ah! So you are the nieces Gardiner had mentioned to me! He certainly never said how charming you are; if I weren't an engaged man!"

Chuckling quietly at the Colonel's jovial manners, Mary remarked shyly, "And you have not even met our sister Jane yet; she is by far the beauty in our family."

The Colonel raised his eyebrows, "There are more of you?! Darcy! You must take Bingley with you and meet these other ladies at once! ‘Tis high time both of you were married."

Darcy groaned, "Just because you are soon to be joined in holy matrimony with your beloved does not mean Bingley and I are in any hurry to share your happy state."

Sighing dramatically, the Colonel turned to Georgiana, "Ah the Darcy stubbornness. I hope for your sake, dear Georgiana, that you have not inherited it. I cannot imagine what Mother would do if you were ever to tell her your intentions of becoming an old maid. She might just swoon dead away!"

Georgiana only rolled her eyes at her cousin's antics, "I do believe I will leave the swoon-inducing comments to you, Cousin. You seem particularly gifted in that area. Why, Anne told me that you quite shocked Aunt Matlock when you declared your intention to settle at a nice estate in the country until Aunt Catherine finally decides to relinquish her hold on Rosings. Aunt Matlock was
quite concerned that all her work in molding Anne for Society would be for nought if you decide to hide her away from the Ton."

The Colonel grabbed his chest in jest, "Ah Cousin, how you wound me! Tell me Darcy, how did our shy little Georgiana come to acquire such confidence? Perhaps it is the influence of Miss Bennet? Gardiner has told me much about her rather unique temperament."

Elizabeth smiled impishly at the exchange and remarked, "Or, perhaps, Colonel, we have only the Darcy stubbornness to blame?"

Chuckling, the Colonel could only nod in reply.

Curious, Darcy asked, "What's this about you hiding in the country?"

Turning serious, the Colonel sighed, "Alas that we do not all have a place such as Pemberley to hide from the excitements of Ton. Anne and I had spoken of it. Neither of us find the intrigues of London, well, intriguing; the quiet country life would suit both of us much more. Neither of us particularly enjoys the thought of living with Aunt Catherine however, so we were thinking of finding our own estate somewhere we can settle into the newly-wed life. Mother was not so amenable to the idea, though I did remark that perhaps Reggie would marry a society lady for her to train as a successor. She seemed even less amused to be reminded that Reggie had yet to wed."

Georgiana explained to her guests, "Cousin Reggie has been abroad for many years now. My talents on the pianoforte are really nothing compared to his; he is the true musician in the family. But it would be unseemly for the elder son of an Earl to pursue such an interest here in England and so he has remained abroad where such things matter less."

The Colonel nodded, "I think Mother is afraid that Reggie would bring home a foreign bride. Not that she would mind so terribly since it would mean Reggie was settling down at last, but she would much prefer an English rose to be the next Lady Matlock."

Darcy asked, "Will he be returning home for the wedding?"

"Yes. We just received news today; he had hoped to arrive in time for the engagement ball, but the seas have been rather unpredictable lately so it seems more likely that he'll be here for the wedding itself. But enough about him. Darcy, I came today to seek your counsel, seeing as how you're the most proper country gentleman of us all. I dearly hope you may know of a quiet estate where Anne and I can finally settle in relative peace. As much as Anne appreciates Mother's efforts, she really does not enjoy London society and I find my loyalty to her supersedes any demands Mother might make."

Darcy thought for a moment, "I do not know of any estates available in Derbyshire, but I can certainly consult my agent. Perhaps you seeking a country home will aid Bingley in deciding to be a landowner as well."

The Colonel laughed, "If it were up to you, we would all be country gentlemen! Nonetheless, I thank you, cousin. I would prefer to be somewhat close to London, since I will still need to make trips for business."

At this comment, Elizabeth spoke, "Forgive my boldness, but perhaps I may be of assistance. Our neighbors in Hertfordshire recently expressed a desire to join their only daughter in Scotland. Their estate, Netherfield Park, is somewhat larger than my father's estate and has proven quite prosperous under the Morrises capable hands. I do not know if they wish to sell their estate or merely lease it, but it is a short trip from Netherfield to London."
The Colonel turned to her in surprise, "Hertfordshire you say? That is indeed most conveniently situated. If you can vouch for the local attractions, I do believe I would be most interested in speaking with these Morrises. The London crowd has not suited Anne and I believe some fresh air would benefit her greatly. I must admit I am also eager to be away from all my social obligations as the son of Earl Matlock here in town."

Mary smiled happily at the thought, "Oh Georgie! Do say you will come to visit us at Longbourn should your cousin decide to take Netherfield! It would be ever so much fun! You could meet Jane and Kitty and Tommy as well. I'm certain they would be most excited to make your acquaintance; as Lizzy says, company is quite unvaried and showing a new friend the wonders of our home would no doubt add to our own happiness and appreciation for what we have."

Georgiana's eyes sparkled at the idea of meeting more young ladies with whom she could be friends and turned with a pleading expression towards Darcy, "Brother, do say we may visit! According to both Miss Mary and Miss Bennet, Miss Kitty is quite the artist and you know how I could never really manage to do well in capturing reality on paper. Perhaps Miss Kitty may give me some words of advice?"

Though happy with his sister's enthusiasm, Darcy was careful to remain practical, "Georgie, we do not even have an invitation from Cousin Richard yet; it would be unseemly for us to visit unannounced. Besides, we are not yet certain that Netherfield Park will be suited to our cousins."

At the slight look of disappointment on Georgiana's face, the Colonel was quick to remark, "You know you need no invitation to visit any home of mine, Darcy! You are both certainly welcome to invite yourselves over as much as you wish; after all, I do not believe I often seek permission to disturb your peace at Pemberley. I am certain Anne feels the same way as well; she has not forgotten your forbearance in the face of Aunt Catherine's most insistent manners. As for Netherfield, I cannot help but think that any country that produces such lovely ladies as the Miss Bennets can only be perfect for me and Anne. Nonetheless, if it would help you feel more comfortable with my plans, Darcy, why do you not assist me in making the arrangements? I had hoped to take Anne to Ramsgate and the seashore for a month-long sojourn after the wedding. While we are away, you could perhaps help finalize the last details for us? It would be so lovely to return to a home of our own without obligations to either Mother or Aunt Catherine. And Mother can only be appeased by the knowledge that both Anne and Georgiana would be practicing their duties as hostess."

Darcy looked thoughtful as he replied, "I do find myself intrigued by this new estate. And if Miss Bennet can vouch for the skill of the current owners in the upkeep of the land, then I expect little objection on my part. Though perhaps I may make the suggestion of inviting Bingley along on this adventure? He has mentioned briefly of his father's wish that he make something of the Bingley name; perhaps he can start learning the responsibilities of a landowner at your new home?"

The Colonel laughed at this turn of events, "But of course Bingley may join us. I imagine he would be quite desolate in London without our company; he could do with a bit of a holiday as well. We shall be quite the merry party!"

As Mary and Georgiana grinned at each in joy, Elizabeth remarked, "I see I must write to my father then. He can help arrange a meeting with the Morrises on your behalf, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

Thanking her for her aid, the Colonel turned again to the younger ladies, "Now that is settled, Georgiana, why do you not share with me the new piece Mother insisted that you practice for the ball?"
Blushing, Georgiana spoke, "I do not know if I am brave enough to play by myself. Fortunately, Miss Mary has agreed to be my partner in this venture; she is quite talented as well and I believe the crowd would intimidate me less should I have a friend next to me."

Finding courage from her sister’s encouraging nod, Mary explained in answer to the Colonel’s curious gaze, "I am most honored at the request. Aunt Gardiner mentioned that we had been invited to the ball as well, no doubt thanks to your generosity, Colonel. So it is but a small way in which I can show my appreciation. Besides, I too remember the first time I played at an assembly and the great comfort I drew from my sisters’ close presence. I can do no less for a friend as dear as Miss Darcy."

Smiling in approval at her genuine kindness towards his cousin, the Colonel agreed, "Very well! Then if you do not mind, I would love to have a preview of your performance."

The rest of the visit passed in good music and even greater company. The Colonel was much impressed with Miss Mary's talent and was glad that his cousin had discovered such a good friend. Drawn quickly into the witty discussions between Darcy and Miss Bennet, he was also most happy to find the young lady quite sensible and humorous. Being of an astute nature, the Colonel was not above giving Darcy a pointed look that warned the gentleman of an impending conversation.

Indeed, when the Miss Bennets departed and Georgiana left to ensure that supper instructions had been given, Colonel turned to Darcy with a knowing smirk, “Your scowl was more severe than usual at the prospect of attending Almack’s.”

“I see no purpose in my attendance.”

“Not even to render me assistance in keeping the well-wishers at bay?”

“You have no such need, Richard, and well you know it. You delight in company.”

“Hmm. I will deny it. And I found the Miss Bennets to be excellent company. You have chosen well.”

“Do speak plainly.”

“You are cross today! I merely meant to congratulate you on choosing such wonderful companions for Georgiana.”

Darcy’s glare eloquently imparted his disbelief in the Colonel’s expression of false innocence. “Then you will not mind if I take your leave to attend to the latest reports from my steward.”

“Ah and how fares Hendricks? Is he horrified at the prospect of impending fatherhood?”

“Richard, I have not the time to attend to gossip with you.”

“I see you are not in a mood to be teased. Very well, you will heed your own counsel, but I feel obliged to ask for your intentions with regard to Miss Bennet. Oh, do not look so offended. I know you are not one to trifle with any young lady’s affections, but do you truly think her suitable to be Mistress of Pemberley?”

Darcy bristled, “Miss Bennet is a friend and I will not stand to have her insulted.”

“Peace, cousin. Do you think so little of my consideration of Georgiana’s guardianship? I find no fault in the Miss Bennets as companions for her. I merely wish to prepare you for questions from Mother, to say nothing of Father.”
Silence fell between the cousins before Darcy finally sighed, “Am I so transparent?”

“You think highly of her judgment; that fact alone was reason enough for me to wonder.”

Darcy only sighed again, "I fear my reply will not satisfy your curiosity, for I barely known my own hopes. I do admit that Miss Bennet is unlike any other lady I’ve met and I am more than a little intrigued. But I am determined to seek nothing more than friendship for now; I have no wish to give false hopes."

"To the lady or to yourself?"

When no answer was forthcoming, the Colonel added, "While I can agree with your cautious approach, Darcy, I do hope you will remember to be more careful in your actions."

Darcy flinched at these words, a movement his cousin did not miss. After much insistence from the Colonel, Darcy finally admitted to his request of the lady.

“Then dance you shall. But not only with Miss Bennet. Mother will be pleased; you can practice tonight at Almack’s. Oh do not sulk!"

“I do not sulk,” insisted Darcy haughtily.

The Colonel gave an undignified snort, “You know very well that any attention you pay Miss Bennet will place her under scrutiny. And you know as well as I do that the Ton is not nearly so concerned for your happiness as Mother is. I fear I must caution you to be careful at the ball; it would not do to draw unnecessary attention to your friendship with Miss Bennet, particularly if you wish to continue your acquaintance without any outside influence or pressures."

Darcy looked troubled at the Colonel's words, "While I am certain that Miss Bennet would bear the curiosity of the Ton quite well, I am not yet certain of the nature of our relationship to expose her to those who would bear her ill-will."

The Colonel nodded, "I will say that the Miss Bennets seem a blessing for both you and Georgiana. I think Anne will find good friends in them as well; but for Georgiana, she is lacking in close female companionship. Thus, I dearly hope that Netherfield will be as wonderful as Miss Bennet believes it to be."

Though Darcy agreed, he still could not help but worry about his conduct towards Miss Elizabeth in the public sphere. The easy friendship that had developed between them had seemed so natural to him in the casual atmosphere of the Gardiner's home, the book shop, and the music room that he had forgotten to consider the consequences of societal opinions. With a slight frown, he felt almost a sense of relief that she had not yet replied to his request for a dance. Though he would not withdraw such a request since it had already been made, he would put more consideration into planning his future interactions with Miss Elizabeth.
Gossip

Elizabeth was as good as her word in contacting her father and quickly received a reply. Mr. Bennet made no effort to hide his curiosity regarding his daughters' new acquaintances but nonetheless held back from asking too many questions in favor of detailing the logistics for the Colonel's visit to Netherfield. Unlike their father, Jane and Kitty had no qualms in sharing their long lists of inquiries via letters to Elizabeth and Mary. The latter two sisters tried their best to describe their new friends and made gentle reminders that Jane and Kitty would most likely meet the Darcy siblings and the new Fitzwilliam couple quite soon. Tommy only sent word, via a most amused Mr. Bennet, that he was saddened at the fact that Lizzy's new friends did not consist of a boy his age with whom he could play and could she and Mary please return soon. Kitty's stories could only keep him occupied so much, and with Mr. Lucas calling almost daily, she had little time to weave new tales for Tommy.

In response to their brother's pleas, Elizabeth and Mary decided that they would return to Longbourn after the Colonel's engagement ball. Upon learning of their decision, the Colonel and Darcy insisted that they accompany the young ladies to Hertfordshire rather than allow them to take the stagecoach. They were, after all, going the same way to meet with the current owners of Netherfield Park.

Bingley, after making certain that his presence would be welcomed at Netherfield, was particularly excited at the prospect of trying his hand at estate management during the month while the Fitzwilliams would be at Ramsgate. Though he certainly enjoyed the attractions of living in London, he could not deny that he wished to fulfill his promise to his late father to bring the Bingley name into those of the landed gentry. The absence of his sister brought much sought peace but also too much quiet. And so the matter was decided with much anticipation on the part of all involved.

During the intervening days prior to the Ball, Mary found herself a regular visitor to Darcy townhouse to practice her duet with Georgiana. On one such occasion, she even had the opportunity to meet Miss Anne de Bourgh, in whom she quickly found another friend, and Lady Matlock, who was quite kind despite expectations. Mary shared with Elizabeth that Miss de Bourgh's gentleness was reminiscent of Jane. Elizabeth had laughed and speculated that such calmness made her ideally suited to keeping the Colonel's more gregarious nature in check. All in all, Mary felt quite content in these new friendships and felt quite fortunate indeed.

As for Elizabeth and Darcy, they continued to meet as was their wont. If Elizabeth found Darcy's manners a bit more subdued than usual, she made no mention of it. She was most curious, however, that he never pressed her for an answer. Though she was hesitant to remind him, she could not but feel a small pang of disappointment. Not one to stay in a state of melancholy, however, Elizabeth quickly scolded herself for having any expectations beyond friendship and settled into their now-established pattern of discussing books, philosophy, and the nuisances of estate management. Nonetheless, she could not help but harbor a small hope that he would repeat his request.

The night of the much anticipated event finally arrived and all plans seemed to be realized to the letter much to the relief of Lady Matlock. Anne, with the Colonel's steadfast support, acquitted herself quite well such that though much of the social elite of London town found her a bit reserved, they could not deny that she was of most excellent breeding. While some of the matchmaking mama's sighed regarding the loss of another eligible young man from the marriage market, even they could deny neither the genuine affection the Colonel showed his betrothed nor the most becoming blush on her cheeks at his attentions. Though the ladies of the Ton were quite
disappointed that the upcoming marriage between the Earl of Matlock's second son and Miss Anne de Bourgh of Rosings lent itself to little gossip beyond the very obvious fact that it was indeed a love match, they found their attentions satisfactorily diverted by the presence of the Gardiners and their nieces.

That the Colonel should greet these individuals with obvious pleasure was of no surprise to the Ton, for certainly he was known to be most peculiar in his choice of acquaintances. But for the Earl and Lady Matlock to welcome these guests personally, well, the ladies, and not a few gentlemen, were instantly intrigued. The particular friendship among the younger of the two nieces, Miss de Bourgh, and Miss Georgiana Darcy and the duet shared by said lady and Miss Darcy only added to their resolve to learn more about these particular guests.

Mrs. Gardiner, being a lady of good sense, made no effort to hide her husband's occupation in trade and gave the other ladies the deference that they believed was their due. Though the most old-fashioned ladies retained some reservations about associating with one of the nouveau riche, the show of approval from the Lady Matlock was enough to convince all but the most stubborn to treat the Gardiners and their nieces with at least a semblance of civility. Besides, the matchmaking mama's were comforted by the fact that neither Bennet girl, in their opinion, seemed of particular beauty. Certainly, the younger one could be called plain if one were to be uncharitable and the older one had such an intelligent gleam in her eyes that suggested too much as though she was laughing at the room in general.

Elizabeth and Mary were not unaware of the whispers that their presence had generated. Their Aunt Gardiner had warned them during the carriage ride of some of the snobbish attitudes they were likely to encounter. But Mary was too fond of both Anne and Georgiana to think much of the whispered comments and Elizabeth was too amused to care for the condescending manners of the other attendants. Besides, her attentions were drawn to the distinctly uncomfortable way in which Darcy carried himself.

Darcy had claimed his usual somber Master of Pemberley and Derbyshire visage and surveyed the crowd around him with a distinctly disdainful eye. Elizabeth, who had been informed of his great dislike for large gatherings by the gentleman himself, was nonetheless intrigued at the drastic change in his demeanor. Gone was the Darcy who could chuckle with her at the telling of one of Tommy's antics or send her into peals of laughter in sharing an impression of Lady Catherine. Instead, this Darcy seemed quite a proud creature who carried himself in such a way as to suggest his general disapproval for the frivolities around him. He deigned to dance a few songs, but appeared to derive no pleasure in them.

Observing him carefully and deciding to tease him about his bearings at a later time, Elizabeth found her musings interrupted by a certain Lady Cooper.

"Ah Miss Bennet! I see you have discovered one of the most elusive bachelors of the Ton!"

Elizabeth curtseyed politely and nodded but was given little opportunity to speak as Lady Cooper continued, "Indeed, I am quite surprised to see Mr. Darcy in attendance. While certainly he is family to both the Colonel and Miss de Bourgh, he is not known to frequent large social gatherings. Besides, we were all quite convinced that he was to wed Miss de Bourgh. Imagine my surprise then, to hear that the Colonel was to be the groom! No matter, it is obvious that the Colonel cares for his bride-to-be. Why I believe he is absolutely besotted with her. Though I do think it too bad that he should do so knowing of the prior attachment of his cousin. But I suppose he could little control the desires of his heart, and Miss de Bourgh certainly seems happier with someone less severe of countenance."

When she finally paused for breath, Elizabeth commented that she had been unaware of any prior attachment between Darcy and Anne.
Lady Cooper nodded sagely, "Ah yes. I am sure they tried to keep it within the family, but it was quite assumed that it would be so. My late husband’s sister lives in Kent, you know, and I have had the opportunity to meet Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who assured me that such an arrangement was made while the children were still in their cradles. Not that Mr. Darcy ever made any remarks on the matter; he is such a quiet man. But he never did look at any lady when he did attend these gatherings. Not even my own Cecilia, who is quite the beauty, could draw a glance! No, I am convinced that he must have been violently in love with Miss de Bourgh…see how reluctantly he dances! He never was one for dancing, but then he no doubt felt no reason for it. And now, poor Mr. Darcy, to have to celebrate at such an occasion! He is trying, the poor man, but I can little blame him for being more discomforted than usual."

Lady Cooper would have no doubt continued in such a vein had not the gentleman himself approached the two ladies to request a dance of Miss Bennet. Lady Cooper seemed quite surprised at this turn of events and could only gape openly at the usually unsociable Mr. Darcy asking a tradesman's niece, no matter if her father was a gentleman, to dance. Elizabeth, however, was more than happy to escape a lady who reminded her much too strongly of her Aunt Philips, the queen of gossip in the small town of Meryton, and so accepted his request with alacrity.

The initial quiet of their dance, however, proved such a most disconcerting contrast that Elizabeth began to wonder, against her better judgment, if perhaps Lady Cooper's words held any amount of truth. Deciding she would break the silence, Elizabeth remarked, "Mr. Darcy, I had begun to think that you were becoming ashamed of our acquaintance. I am but the daughter of a minor country gentleman while you are the great Master of Pemberley."

Darcy only raised an eyebrow at her familiar teasing and remarked, "Nay Miss Bennet. I could never be ashamed of our acquaintance."

Determined to prevent him from lapsing into silence once more, Elizabeth continued, "Very well. Then I must consider other reasons for your reticence. Why, Lady Cooper was just sharing the most peculiar piece of information with me that left me quite uncertain of what to think."

Darcy merely sniffed and spoke, "Forgive my bluntness, but Lady Cooper is not known to be a reliable source of information. She displays the utmost disregard for the privacy of others; I cannot abide such penchant for spreading the most ridiculous of ideas."

Intrigued by the vehemence of Darcy's words, Elizabeth asked, "Really? Then I suppose I should not believe that you had once been attached to your cousin Anne and are even now madly in love with her?"

So great was Darcy's shock that he almost stumbled during the next step of the dance. When he regained his composure again, he could only say, "Miss Bennet, I had thought you more discerning than to believe the words of a woman such as Lady Cooper. I normally try not to speak ill of others, but to suggest that! I have never been, am not, nor ever will be, in love with Anne. I care for her as I care for Georgiana and could not be happier that she and Richard finally made their regard for one another known."

Nodding in agreement, Elizabeth nonetheless admonished him lightly, "Then perhaps you ought to show more of your professed happiness, to prevent others from attributing any veracity to Lady Cooper’s words."

Darcy shook his head, "I care not what the Ton will say. But should you request reassurance of my completely platonic feelings for my Cousin Anne, Miss Bennet, I would be happy to provide it."
Somewhat unsettled by his reply, Elizabeth said more sharply than she intended, "You need prove nothing to me, Mr. Darcy. Though you did not deny that you had once been attached?"

His posture stiffening a little, Darcy also remarked more curtly than was wise, "That, Miss Bennet, is a family matter."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, "Ah. Unfortunately, that is precisely what Lady Cooper suggested as well."

Perhaps it was the crowded dance floor, or his forced sociability, or simply the unpleasant thought of Lady Catherine and her repeated insistence that he marry Anne prior to the Colonel's proposal, but Darcy found himself quite irked at Elizabeth's willfulness in speaking on the subject. So, as the notes of the song drew to a close, he bowed stiffly, remarked bitingly that he had thought she would have better sense, and turned his back on a greatly surprised Elizabeth Bennet, only to be accosted by Lady Cooper herself.

"Why Mr. Darcy! What a surprise it is to see you dancing at such a gathering! And with a relatively unknown lady of little consequence!"

Darcy tensed even more at this thoughtless comment, particularly in Miss Elizabeth's hearing. "Not at all Lady Cooper. My aunt and Uncle think quite well of the Gardiners, an opinion I have little cause to contradict. Indeed, my sister has made the acquaintance of both Miss Bennets."

Lady Cooper blinked in surprise but quickly recovered her composure, particularly in the face of possible new gossip. Ignoring the thunderous look on Darcy's face, she remarked, "Ah, yes, Miss Mary accompanied Miss Darcy on the pianoforte, did she not? A remarkable performance, though I must admit that I did not expect such mastery in one of such humble origins. 'Tis a shame that dear Miss Darcy is not yet out; she had already captured the attentions of quite a number of gentlemen. I imagine you must be quite proud. Nonetheless, do you find Miss Bennets to be a suitable companion for dear Miss Darcy and, dare I say it, for yourself? Certainly they have not the same breeding as Miss de Bourgh."

Darcy tried desperately to prevent himself from glaring at the lady. "My Aunt has no objections to the continued association."

"Lady Matlock has ever been generous."

Darcy heard clearly the implied insult but before he could muster a reply, Lady Cooper continued to speak. "Indeed, I can only assume that it was at her urgings that you sought out Miss Bennet. Quite magnanimous of you, Mr. Darcy, for surely she cannot compare with your other dance partners of the evening. Did I not see you dancing with Lady Sarah? She looks well tonight, nothing to my Cecilia had she been able to attend, of course, but apparently well enough to catch your attentions. The Duke of Clearbourne would be a worthy association..."

As graciously as he could through gritted teeth, Darcy interrupted, "Madame. I am fully aware of my obligations to my family in terms of my future marriage and am certain that those closest to me would wish me felicity no less than the one shared by my cousins. If you will excuse me, I had promised my cousin this next set."

As graciously as he could through gritted teeth, Darcy interrupted, "Madame. I am fully aware of my obligations to my family in terms of my future marriage and am certain that those closest to me would wish me felicity no less than the one shared by my cousins. If you will excuse me, I had promised my cousin this next set."

His curt bow effectively ended their conversation as he made his escape.

Robbed of one conversation partner, Lady Cooper quickly turned to Elizabeth, who had been too fascinated at the exchange to take offense. "You see, Miss Bennet, how eager he is to accompany Miss de Bourgh. I could never be uncouth enough to suggest that he was jilted. No, I dare not! But he had never danced so much! Why, just the other night, at Almacks’..."
But Elizabeth was never to find out what Lady Cooper had to impart, for a gentleman interrupted the lady once again.

“Miss Bennet, might I have this dance?”

“Oh, Andrew! How fares your poor mother? I do hope she is recovering well? I simply must find an occasion to visit her.

“Mother is recovering, Aunt, though still not well enough to entertain.”

“Dear Adelaide! She sent the most darling shawl for my Cecilia's wedding, certainly fit enough for a countess. But then, Adelaide did always have exquisite taste. I do hope you will pass along my greetings?”

“Yes Aunt, I am certain she will be delighted to receive them. If you will excuse me, this next song is one of her favorites and I had promised that I would not sit idle.”

“Oh, you always were such a good son, not like your brother…but there, I should not speak ill of the dead, and my own nephew at that!”

“Thank you Aunt, for your indulgence,” Sir Andrew replied neutrally.

“Oh it does brighten my heart to see you young ones grow.”

Nodding politely, the gentleman led the now amused Elizabeth towards the dancing.

“I am grateful for the rescue, sir.”

“No need, Miss Bennet, you are not the first to be so entrapped.”

“Nonetheless, I wish to offer my gratitude. Only, you have me at a disadvantage. You know my name and I do not know yours. I am not in the habit of dancing with strange gentlemen, no matter how their gallant ways”

Sir Andrew blushed as he paused in his steps, “Forgive me. Sir Andrew Ashbury.”

Elizabeth laughed not unkindly as she curtsied in response, “Have no fear, Sir Andrew, I too am in possession of a loquacious aunt. She is a font of information, certainly enough to drown any curiosity.”

The first strands of the song saved him from having to make a reply. He spoke even less than Darcy had, but Elizabeth did discover that he hailed from Kent and was acquainted with both the bride and groom to be. His estate was named Willowmere and he had a fondness for his dogs. She could glean little else.

Finally, as the steps of the dance concluded, she curtsied once more, “I thank you once more, Sir Andrew.”

Again, he insisted, “No need, Miss Bennet, it is I who must thank you. A friend had shared with me your fondness for dancing. He expressed hopes that you would not be without partners.”

“I was not aware you and I shared acquaintances, for surely I have never been to Kent.”

“But you met Darcy in London, did you not?”

“Oh!”
Sir Andrew nodded, “I am in his debt for his aid in resolving the matter of my brother’s death. He is a true friend and insisted that I owed him nothing. Nonetheless, a dance is a small thing, particularly with so pleasant a partner. Good evening, Miss Bennet.”

With a brief bow, he left as suddenly as he had appeared, leaving a thoroughly confused Elizabeth. She had little time to ponder the information he had imparted, however, as another gentleman, an Army associate of the Colonel, approached her for the next set.

Darcy’s satisfaction at his friend’s gesture was short-lived as his scowl returned when he spied Miss Elizabeth laughing with another of her dance partners. He had immediately regretted his abrupt dismissal of Lady Cooper and hoped that Miss Elizabeth would not misinterpret his words as any disparaging remarks towards her family or, heavens forbid, as agreement with Lady Cooper’s insults. Unfortunately, Darcy found that the young lady assiduously avoided him for the rest of the evening. He watched her as often as he dared, in hopes that convey his apology through his gaze alone. But though Elizabeth met his eyes on occasion with a thoughtful look on her face, she gave no indication that she wished for his company again. Even when their paths crossed during one of the dances, she seemed politely distant. So, groaning to himself regarding the troubles of balls, Darcy hoped that she would be more amenable to an explanation during the journey to Hertfordshire.
The morning haziness took great affront to the Colonel's excitement for his upcoming meeting with the current owners of Netherfield Park, for the clouds frowned upon the carriage as it left the confines of London-town. Despite successfully lulling two of the travelers to the land of Morpheus, the sky remained grim, as though the wakefulness of the others was a source of great offense.

Elizabeth, however, found that under Darcy's earnest but sorrowful gaze, sleep quite eluded her. Finally, after a few failed attempts to ignore the Colonel's soft snores and Mary's weight, Elizabeth spoke in a soft whisper, "Mr. Darcy, should you not be resting? You and the Colonel have a rather busy day ahead of you. It would not do to have your wits dulled by lack of sleep."

Darcy blinked at being spoken to in such a mild tone, for he had expected Miss Elizabeth to be much offended after his comportment at the Ball. "I thank you for your concern Miss Bennet. But I have become used to rising with the sun and so the early hours have little effect on me."

Elizabeth nodded agreeably, "I see we are indeed kindred spirits, for I much prefer the mornings as well. Jane will berate me for muddying my skirts during my rambles before much of the household is awake, but I fear I cannot find it in myself to be truly sorry. The quietness of the mornings, even on such a gray one, brings me peace; I can begin each day anew without the burdens of the prior day's mistakes."

Darcy looked at her questioningly, uncertain if she spoke in generalities. Deciding that ambiguity and guesswork little suited his peace of mind, Darcy stated, "Then please allow me to begin this day anew with an apology for my blunder this past evening. I have little to say in way of my defense except that I did not mean to offend. When reflecting upon my behavior, I can only admit to shame at the brusque way in which I treated you and Lady Cooper. I did not behave in a gentlemanly manner and am most sincerely sorry that my actions robbed me of your company for the rest of the evening."

“Oh!” exclaimed Elizabeth, who then immediately moderated her voice in response to a shift in her sister’s posture, “I sought not an apology from you, Mr. Darcy, but rather wished to make my own.”

“I do not understand; you have done nothing to give offense.” Quizzicalness easily replaced his regret though not his sincerity.

“Then you are in possession of a far more generous disposition than I had credited you.”

“Surely my conduct towards Lady Cooper has convinced you otherwise?”

“Ah Lady Cooper. Despite her title, I admit to feelings of superiority, of mind if not of heritage. And yet, did I not treat you as abysmally? My behavior may indeed be worse, for I did it as someone who has claimed friendship.”

“I hardly think…”

“No Mr. Darcy. I am as resolute to shoulder the responsibility of my crime as you are to absolve me of it. Surely, Lady Cooper insulted me most deeply, but I am not beholden to her through friendship or goodwill and so her words have not the sting she intended. Indeed, her behavior has fully persuaded me to think her most ridiculous. But I behaved as poorly in causing you discomfort. I presumed much and pressed you for answers you were unwilling to give.”
Darcy insisted, “You have done no wrong. We have ever been open with our opinions in our prior discourse. I should not have acted in so impatient a manner to your inquiry.”

“What words did you utter that were not the truth? I acted nonsensically. My sisters have ever warned me that my curiosity does not always feel compelled to abide by the laws of propriety. I knew Lady Cooper’s ascertains were likely to be false; she is too fond of sharing her own conjectures for me not to doubt the veracity of her words. Even had they held a morsel of truth, I should not have requested a recounting of your disappointed hope. Certainly not in a ballroom! The subject must be tiresome to you.”

Darcy appreciated her honesty and returned it in kind. “I will not deny that Aunt Catherine has made no secret of her wishes for my future choice of a bride. I rather took advantage of it, using it as a shield from the necessity of engaging in social interactions.” A rueful smile accompanied Darcy’s admission, “I should not be cross that others would misconstrue my reasons when their misunderstanding so suited my needs.”

“You do not relish in playing the part of a mournful young Werther?”

As she had intended, his answering chuckle lightened the tone of their conversation. “I do not believe myself to be given to the dramatics of that forlorn gentleman, but I can agree with his distaste for the affected superiority of the aristocracy.”

“But you are so gifted in affecting such a haughty air of disinterest!”

Darcy coughed lightly in embarrassment.

Smiling at him gently, Elizabeth continued, “I have received ample descriptions of your discomfiture in company. I cannot fault any but myself for not giving the warnings due consideration. Besides, I am in your debt; I shudder at the sort of gossip Lady Cooper might have concocted had you given indication to our friendship. Better to be pitied than to be thought mercenary.”

“Pitied? Certainly not, Miss Bennet! You were no charity case!”

“I find no shame in being the recipient of the generosity of friends, Mr. Darcy, particularly as it ensured a ready supply of dance partners.”

Darcy looked away from her knowing gaze but recovered enough to say, “You are too charming to want for partners, Miss Bennet.”

“Tell me, Mr. Darcy, are you in possession of a brother?” Chuckling at his perplexed expression at so sudden an inquiry, she explained, “How agreeable you are this morning! I can only imagine that the Mr. Darcy with whom I danced was but a cunning look-alike. If we had not been previously acquainted, I would have been quite terrified at your approach, even though you saved me from the wisdom of Lady Cooper.”

"Was it so terrible?"

"Lady Cooper? She was most direct in sharing her conjectures, in a manner not unlike my Aunt Philips. I must warn you, Mr. Darcy, should your cousin truly decide to take Netherfield, you are likely to meet many other Lady Coopers in our small town. Visitors, particularly those in possession of a good fortune but not the burden of a wife, are often placed under much scrutiny."

"I did not mean Lady Cooper, Miss Bennet, but rather the impression I left upon others."

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow, "I thought you cared not for the opinions of the Ton?"
Darcy colored slightly, “But I would rather not appear inconsistent to those I consider friends.”

"Sir Andrew thinks highly of you.”

Darcy’s blush deepened, “Andrew is of an honest disposition, but too polite to remark on my deficiencies. Georgie has offered gentle admonitions, but she has not made a study of characters. In this matter, at least, I find that I value your opinions more.”

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to blush, “That is high praise indeed, for me to reach, if only in this matter, a status above your own sister's!”

“You are a rarity, Miss Bennet, for having the courage to speak your true thoughts.”

“You need not use such pretty words for my impertinence! Surely I can say little that will please you.”

“Had I wished for only deference in a conversational partner, Miss Bennet, you may be sure that I would have left your Uncle’s lending library in a high dudgeon after you insulted my name without even knowing it.”

“Then I ought to be glad that you are not a spiteful man. I would have painted you as such a villain that Mary never would have wished to meet your sister.”

“My crime would have been grave indeed. Glad I am that I have not deprived my sister of so dear a friendship or myself of a so clever an advisor.”

“You are determined to be agreeable! Very well, I found your performance puzzling if not frightfully rude. I, who have seen you smile, knew that the severe look upon your face was not typical but instead hid a kinder soul than the one you chose to present. I understand your reasons, for you do guard your privacy jealously. Yet though you were within your rights to evade the inquiries I posed, you could have done so in a less abrupt manner. As for poor Lady Cooper, I fear she may never dare to approach you again! Though, I do not believe a true apology is forthcoming for that particular lady?”

Darcy agreed, "Indeed not. I find that though I regret the manners of my speech in reply to her comments, particularly those of degrading nature to you and your sister, I cannot regret the message I conveyed. Though, perhaps, as you suggest, I could have done so with more finesse."

Elizabeth could not resist the urge to quip, "Are you in the habit of defending all your friends to those who would wrong them? Shall I call you Sir Darcy from now on given your propensity for championing their cause?"

"I must own that my taciturn nature when in company offers little opportunity for making friends. So, those that I do have, I take care to protect.”

“You are very difficult to tease, Mr. Darcy, when you speak with such reasonableness.”

“Then I must add that I found Lady Cooper quite rude to devalue you and your sister simply because of your Uncle's connections in trade. Your relatives are among the most sensible individuals I have had the chance to meet and far surpass the vast majority of the Ton in showing capability for having sound judgment. Miss Mary also showed herself to be quite gifted in her duet with Georgie. And your sparkling personality, Miss Bennet, easily won over all those with whom you interacted. I quite envied your ease in a roomful of virtual strangers.”

Ignoring the compliments he paid her, Elizabeth insisted, "But strangers do not have to remain so;
a gate will always be closed if you do not try for the latch. Perhaps, Mr. Darcy, you only need further practice."

"Perhaps so, Miss Bennet. Would you be so kind as to be my guide? I can think of no one more equipped to ease my manners in the company of others."

Though she wanted to laugh at the idea of stately Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and half of Derbyshire requesting assistance from her, Elizabeth found that the almost pleading look in his eyes ensured that she could only reply in the affirmative. "With such a willing pupil, how can I refuse?" The happiness that spread across Darcy's face made her heart flutter in a way that she did not acknowledge. "Perhaps, once we improve your manners in public, you may find the same sort of happiness for yourself that your cousins have found, one that might also fulfill your familial obligations."

Darcy colored again at having his own words from the previously night returned to him. "I fear in my haste to be rid of Lady Cooper's company, I revealed far more than I intended. My Aunt Matlock would certainly prefer that I select a lady of the Ton to be the future Mrs. Darcy, but I believe her chief priority is my happiness. She and Uncle Matlock are uncommon in their social circle in that they chose to wed out of affection for one another. My own parents also shared a unique partnership. But I should like to think that even should I find a young lady that society might deem below me, if she be someone I deem worthy, my family would likewise rejoice with me. So, my familial obligations and my future happiness need not be mutually exclusive."

The intensity of his gaze hinted at a sentiment that he did not yet feel ready to divulge. Cognizant of her own resolution on the matter, she feigned ignorance. "You are not obliged to reveal such family matters to me, Mr. Darcy."

“They are not so very secret. Even Lady Cooper can ascertain some of it. Indeed, Mother might have been a duchess had she been of a mind to accept His Grace, the Duke of Clearbourne. Her choice to accept my father was a great source of speculation, or so Aunt Matlock has informed me."

“I had no idea you were so well informed in gossip.”

“I may disapprove of the practice, but neither do I wish to be ignorant.”

“The better to sustain your disapproval?”

His lips twitched with suppressed laughter even as he answered seriously, “The better to avoid being embroiled in circumstances in which I have no wish to take part.”

“Your caution compliments your reserve.”

“And your kindness compliments your cleverness, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth blushed but refused to be daunted, "Why do you insist on using my name so often? I have noticed that almost every time you speak with me, you call me by name."

Clearing his throat and biting back the words that he truly wanted to say, Darcy was thoughtful, "I had not realized I had been doing so. It brings me comfort, I think."

“Alas that I must return the appellation to its rightful owner once we arrive in Hertfordshire. Though Jane is much more deserving of it and wears it with much more grace. But truly, I shall not be sorry to shed the burden of being Miss Bennet and return to being simply Miss Elizabeth. And you, Mr. Darcy, you must adjust your address to me. You cannot hope to gain favor from the neighborhood if you snub Jane.”
Darcy's eyes widened slightly at the thought, "Very well, Miss Elizabeth. Practice, as the sages maintain, does after all make perfect."

Elizabeth smiled encouragingly, "You are an uncommonly accommodating pupil! This bodes quite well for your future studies. Perhaps now we may practice some polite topics that you will use in conversations. Tell me, Mr. Darcy, are you a great reader?"

"You know very well that I am, Miss Elizabeth. Or are you also in possession of a twin with whom I have been meeting in the book shop?"

Elizabeth laughed gaily, "I certainly do know of your bibliophile leanings, but others with whom you might desire to converse will not. And you must be prepared to speak on all manners of topics with strangers in the future. I thought it best to begin with one more familiar to you."

Darcy nodded in recognition of the wisdom in her words. "I suppose so…Though before we are to begin my education, I must once again offer my thanks."

"Whatever for? You have given me a most entertaining diversion."

"Then allow me to offer my gratitude for your generosity in forgiving my less than gentlemanly actions."

Elizabeth waved aside his comments, "I understand well enough that you had no intentions of malice behind either your words or your conduct. Your reactions to Lady Cooper only demonstrated your abhorrence for gossip and for falsehoods. I cannot fault your protection of your privacy." She added with a twinkle in her eyes, "Besides, we cannot all of us be perfect, even a most worthy gentleman such as yourself."

"But surely I behold before me a most perfect young lady, in both her insightful understanding of her fellow mankind as well as her ease in public."

Elizabeth only laughed, "Alas! I fear your compliments, though pretty, fall short of the mark, for my faults, as you have discovered and will no doubt continue to discover, are many. But compared to you, certainly I have some skill in conversing with strangers. So, let us tarry no more but return to the matter at hand."

Darcy smiled in agreement and began to speak of his literary pursuits, feeling quite fortunate that, contrary to his comments from the prior night, Miss Elizabeth did indeed possess a keen mind as well as a forgiving heart.
The sight of the stately Darcy carriage rolling through the streets of Meryton drew the attention of the entire town. That the carriage should stop at Longbourn to deliver the Miss Bennets safely to their home and gather Mr. Bennet to help with the introduction to Mr. Morris further piqued the townspeople's interest. The gentlemen had but only begun their negotiations when the purpose of the visitors became known. Whispers swept through the town at the possible addition of new, young, and wealthy gentlemen to the neighborhood. And so it was that Elizabeth and Mary had scarcely changed from their travel attire that their Aunt Philips descended upon the household.

Settling down in the parlor and taking the cup of tea graciously offered to her by Jane, Mrs. Philips leaned forward curiously, "Lizzy, Mary, my dear nieces, what adventures you must have had in London! Tell me, how did you find my brother? I expect he is doing quite well for himself if he could introduce you to such wealthy young men as the ones who escorted you home!"

Lizzy and Mary, unsurprised at the speed with which their aunt received such information, glanced at each other in amusement at her obvious manners.

Elizabeth replied curtly, "Both Uncle and Aunt Gardiner are quite well. Mary and I had a merry time at the grand ball given by the Earl and Countess of Matlock in celebration of their son's engagement. The Colonel expressed hopes of settling with his bride at Netherfield."

Mary, aware of Elizabeth's intent to tease their aunt, added, "We were quite fortunate that Colonel Fitzwilliam holds such respect for Uncle Gardiner, else I doubt we could have obtained an invitation. I do not believe I have ever seen such an array of colors and fashions. Why I believe one lady even had ostrich feathers in her hair! And another lady had a gown made of four different sorts of Indian muslin!"

Mrs. Philips found herself quite distracted at Mary's hints of the newest London fashions and wished to inquire in depth at the new trends that Elizabeth and Mary had observed. "From India!" she exclaimed, though she certainly had little idea of the actual physical locations of such an exotic sounding place. Her curiosity at the new prospective owner of Netherfield, however, soon outstripped even her love for ribbons and lace. Fluttering her fan, she persisted, "But what of this Colonel Fitzwilliam? The son of an Earl and an officer as well! How dashing he must look in his uniform! 'Tis such a pity he is to be married, but mayhaps he has a brother or other gentleman friends who will decide to visit him at Netherfield?"

Seeing the slightly weary look on Elizabeth's face and sensing Mary's hesitancy in revealing the true extent of their friendship with the Colonel, Jane interrupted, "Aunt. Mary stated that the Colonel is to be newly married. I cannot but imagine that he may wish for some quiet days with his bride before inviting visitors. Besides, we are not certain if he is to take Netherfield!"

“Oh but of course he is to take it!” Declared Mrs. Philips impatiently, “What could he find wanting with the establishment? ‘Tis positively grand, surely comparable to any country estate
those great men might wish to acquire. What of his companion?”

“His cousin has his own estate in Derbyshire.” Elizabeth responded carefully.

“Cousin! My dear Jane, I do hope you will set your cap for him, you simply must; you can do worse than the nephew of an Earl!”

“Oh Aunt, surely a gentleman with such connections has better prospects.”

“Is your father not a gentleman? He may not be altogether respectable, such oddities that man possesses, but a gentleman nonetheless. I do hope this cousin is not one of those unpleasant prideful peacocks. I cannot abide such condescension, as though the country were filled with savages. Bah! You certainly have beauty enough, Jane, certainly more than Mrs. Long’s niece. I see no reason he should not consider you.”

“We do not know if he is to stay. He may well return to his estate.”

“What nonsense! Great men never stay at their homes long. If he does not stay this summer, surely he will return for the shooting season. Your father does little enough to control the birds here, surely he will not mind the assistance.”

“He may well be married already.”

Annoyed, Mrs. Philips turned to Elizabeth, “You need not sound so disapproving, Lizzy. Your father will not and your mother cannot ensure your futures, but I will not sit idle. You may be content to linger at Longbourn, but Jane shall not.”

“I too am determined that Jane shall be happy.”

“And how is she to manage that if she is not married? She will make a fine wife for him.”

“They might not be suited to one another.”

“And why not? She has a pleasant face, an agreeable nature, and enough practice in running a household. He is in possession of enough riches to supply her with fine clothes and finer carriages.”

“But their characters…”

“Do not speak to me of characters! You are too much like your father. One cannot live on character alone. Now then, will you not tell me of this cousin?”

Taking her cue from the stubborn set to Elizabeth’s lips, Mary kept her silence. Even Jane, who cared little for conflict, knew not what to say.

Mrs. Philips glanced among her nieces in despair, knowing that when they presented such a united front, she could gather little information from them. The Bennet ladies, though well-liked for their polite manners, were known to be tight-lipped. Even Kitty, who visited the most with the neighborhood ladies, could not be depended on to contribute to gossip. Sighing at what she knew to be a losing battle, Mrs. Philips nonetheless remarked, “Oh how you girls vex me! I have no doubt that you know more than you are telling. If only your mother had lived! She certainly appreciated news of such significance. No matter, you may keep your own counsel and I shall not disturb your peace any longer.” Sniffing with disappointment, Mrs. Philips departed as suddenly as she had come.

Once the door closed behind her, Jane turned to her sisters and quickly gave them large hugs, "Oh
Lizzy, Mary! How glad I am that you are home! I have full faith that our aunt and uncle would look after you, but I find myself breathing easier now that you have returned. I do not know how Kitty and I managed, particularly as Tommy seemed to have acquired the skill of tree-climbing and gave us quite the scare when we could not find him one evening. And the pianoforte has been silent and sitting quite forlornly waiting for your return Mary. Kitty tried to play only to have Tommy demand that she stop. He has appointed himself its champion in your absence."

Quickly forgetting her state of pique during Mrs. Philips’s visit, Elizabeth returned her sister's embrace, "Dear Jane. I am so happy to be home! I have missed you, and Kitty and Tommy of course, but I find I most certainly missed your wise counsel."

Likewise, Mary smiled, "As for how you managed, I am certain you did quite well without us. You have always been so capable. As I told Lizzy, you have become part sister and part mother for us younger girls. I do not think anything is beyond your capabilities, dear sister."

Jane laughed and blushed modestly as she returned to her seat, "You think so well of me, Mary, and give me far more credit than I deserve. But never mind that, tell me of your time in London! Your letters, wonderful though they were, cannot have done justice to reality. Mrs. Hill, bless her, took Tommy with her to help her carry her various purchases so that we may have time to speak without distraction. She really is the best housekeeper we could possibly have; Lizzy, I do hope you remembered to bring her a gift; she deserves a most generous one. Kitty is away visiting at Lucas Lodge but I am certain she will not begrudge my impatience."

Elizabeth admitted, "I fear Aunt Philips's visit is not without merit. For Colonel Fitzwilliam has not only a cousin but also a brother and other gentleman friends. In fact, I believe the cousin and one such friend, if not the brother, will be visitors should the Colonel decide to take Netherfield."

Jane gasped softly, "Oh! What news! Your reticence to our Aunt Philips was well planned. She would have the entire town in an uproar over the prospect of two new gentlemen in the region. It simply would not do for them to arrive amidst so much idle speculations. But tell me, how did you find the future Mrs. Fitzwilliam? Will she be a good neighbor you think?"

Here Mary answered, "Oh yes! Anne is quite kind. She is the only daughter of Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings in Kent, where Cousin Collins is currently serving as the clergyman, but carries herself with none of the haughtiness one might expect of a lady of her standing. Why, I thought I would die of shame when I learned of the connection with our cousin, but Anne seems only amused at the silliness of our cousin and did not judge Lizzy and I at all based on his habits. I think the country will suit her well. She is just newly beginning to discover her own footing, for her mother kept her quite sheltered, but I believe she has managed quite well so far. What Lizzy failed to mention is that the Colonel has another cousin, a Miss Georgiana Darcy, who has been a most attentive helpmate to Miss de Bourgh. For all that she is not yet out, Miss Darcy carries herself with a certain grace that hints at a maturity beyond her years."

Lizzy nodded, "Mary’s fondness for her friends has loosened her tongue, but I can find no fault in her praise."

Mary blushed but added, "I do feel most fortunate to be able to call both ladies friends. Georgie and I even played a duet at Lady Matlock’s ball! It is quite lovely to share my love for music with someone who understands whole-heartedly."

Jane smiled, "Then I look forward to meeting both ladies. With such high recommendations from both of you, I cannot help but think that I would like to be their friend as well."

Mary nodded enthusiastically "And they are most willing to make your acquaintance, Jane. Anne had not many childhood companions beyond her cousins and seems to appreciate her newfound
freedom in developing friendships. Georgie also grew up in relative isolation. The poor girl lost both her parents so young and had only her brother for company. Though she loves her brother and enjoys a close relationship with him, ten years remains a large gap."

At the mention of Darcy, Jane noticed that Elizabeth flushed slightly. Ever perceptive, Jane turned to her sister in concern, "Lizzy? What is the matter?"

Mary was quick to assuage Jane's worries, "Our clever sister is much more qualified to give an assessment of Mr. Darcy. I believe they have become quite good friends after their many meetings at the lending library and Aunt Gardiner’s table. Indeed, I do believe our Lizzy has finally drawn the attentions of a gentleman who might be worthy of her."

Turning sharply to Mary, Elizabeth made to refute such a claim, only to be interrupted, "I may not be the study of character you are, Lizzy, but neither am I blind. I can plainly see the attentions he pays you. What's more, I can also see your respect for him. And we all know that you are most discerning in the way you treat the gentlemen of our acquaintance. I do not believe I have ever seen you exercise such patience with any of them."

Jane found her curiosities roused, "Lizzy, tell me truthfully, is this the same Mr. Darcy about whom you wrote me? He certainly seemed the perfect gentleman in your letters."

Elizabeth nodded, "Yes, a gentleman he certainly is. What I wrote to you, Jane, has most certainly held true. In my estimation, he is a man of sound principles who is also willing to seek advice, even from a lady. Indeed, he asked me during our journey home to help him acquire the necessary skills in growing more comfortable in company. He is such a private man, but is quite dedicated to improving himself."

Jane raised her eyebrow, "That is high praise indeed and quite unlike you."

Elizabeth sighed, "I know. I had not thought that a man existed, beyond Papa, who would truly value my thoughts and opinions. But Mr. Darcy has consistently shown me, in words and action, that what I have to say also matters. Like Mary, Aunt Gardiner was most convinced of his regard for me and I was quite unwilling to believe …"

Pausing to gather her thoughts, Elizabeth glanced down at her clasped hands, "But he pays me such compliments and looks at me so intently…"

Jane and Mary glanced at each other thoughtfully; while not secretive, Elizabeth was more prone to jesting than returning similar inquiries in so serious a manner. It was Jane who interrupted the silence with her gentle voice, "Are you now more willing to believe?"

Elizabeth looked up at her older sister, "I…my heart may have become entangled without my permission, but with my sisters, I can only be truthful… Our friendship is as yet of short duration, but…he thinks so well of me that it makes me want to strive to be the person he sees. I do not wish for him to put on me a pedestal and yet, at the same time, I am frightened that he should discover that in reality I am not as brave as I pretend to be."

Jane drew in a deep breath, "Oh my. You are not in the habit of wishing to please others. But Lizzy, from what you say of Mr. Darcy, I do not think he seeks perfection. Indeed, he showed you such great trust in sharing his own deficits that I do not believe he would judge you for your shortcomings. If you think he could make you happy, why not take a chance to find out? If he is not the man you think he is, then it would do well for you to know before your friendship progresses any further. And if he is, then I will be among the first to congratulate you."

Nonetheless, Elizabeth looked at her apprehensively, "Is it really so simple?"
Mary shook her head, "Oh Lizzy, your cleverness guides you well, but it also leads you to overthink things. I do not believe Mr. Darcy will disappoint; but just know that no matter what, you will always have your sisters on your side."

Smiling gratefully, Elizabeth straightened her shoulders as the sparkle returned to her eyes, "With such strong support, how can I remain afraid? I will allow our friendship to progress as it will. Now, you give such excellent advice, Jane, that I hope you will heed it as well should you meet a gentleman worthy of your attentions."

Mary added, "Perhaps Mr. Bingley might do. What think you Lizzy? Did you not remark that he and Jane had much in common?"

Ignoring the blush rising on Jane's cheeks, Elizabeth nodded, "Indeed. I believe both are of such sweet natures that they cannot help but complement one another. What luck then that Mr. Bingley is to visit Netherfield should the Colonel find it to his liking!"

Finding her voice at last, Jane protested, "Never mind your teasing. Really, Aunt Philips makes enough effort on my part. I am content and have little time to consider such things."

Turning serious again, Elizabeth shook her head, "Ah dear Jane, then I must impart an excellent piece of advice from our Aunt Gardiner. She reminded me that it would not do to allow my responsibilities to my family to prevent me from thinking of my own future. The same, I think, applies to you. You have been so good to us younger girls and kept the household running so smoothly. I know you think your selflessness goes unnoticed, but we certainly are grateful for it. If I am to give myself a chance at happiness, then you must too. All I ask is that you open yourself to the possibility."

Jane slowly nodded. Mary's chuckle broke the silence that had settled among the sisters. "Ah, I see I must keep both of your accountable to your promises! Perhaps Kitty will keep me company in ensuring that our elder sisters find their happiness!"

"And how do you propose we do that?" Kitty's voice from the doorway led to another round of hugs as the four Bennet ladies were reunited. When the situation was explained to Kitty, she clapped her hands in glee, "Oh I see that John and I are quite the trend-setters! Is it not a universal truth that one happy couple often begets another? Mary, I will most certainly help you keep our sisters accountable; I can think of no other young ladies so worthy of happiness."

Shaking hands solemnly with one another, Mary and Kitty quickly broke into giggles at the look on their elder sisters' faces. Glancing at each other in a resigned manner, Elizabeth and Jane merely shrugged and joined in the laughter despite their bewilderment at the role reversal that had just occurred. Mr. Bennet, hanging his hat in hallway, smiled at the sound of merriment emanating from the parlor and felt grateful once again that his girls are so close with one another.
Mr. Bennet's entrance into the parlor was met with happy exclamations from his daughters. Feeling his own face relax in reflection of their joyous smiles, Mr. Bennet offered his own welcome, "My dear girls! So you have returned to us at long last! I was beginning to think that the diversions of London would steal you from the quietness of life in the country…but perhaps we should be grateful to you for bringing some of London society to us. You have certainly set the town all aflutter with the visitors you brought to our small corner of the world. Alas that your poor Papa is not one for company and cannot share in the general enthusiasm!"

Elizabeth laughed at her father's comments, "All the intrigues of London town cannot keep me away from our home. Indeed, for all our adventures, Longbourn was constantly on my mind. I read of a new method for crop-rotation in Uncle Gardiner's bookshop and am quite impatient to try it out with our land."

Kitty giggled at her sister's interest in farming, "Oh Lizzy, you may discuss business with Papa later, but now I would like to hear of these visitors. Lady Lucas was quite astounded at the news and insisted that I come home once she heard that you and Mary had arrived in a most grand carriage. Papa, I do hope your news will not disappoint?"

Mr. Bennet laughed merrily at her interest, an expression so reminiscent of the curiosity he had once seen on his wife's face, "I see you are most insistent! I shall not keep you in suspense any longer and only say that we shall have new neighbors quite soon!"

The Bennet girls glanced at each other with wide smiles at this news, though Elizabeth turned to her father with a significant look, "Papa, do you approve of these new neighbors?"

Mr. Bennet, who was as practiced a study of character as his second daughter, knew almost at once that this pointed question deserved an honest answer. Something in Elizabeth's expression and the kind words a certain young gentleman made regarding said daughter put Mr. Bennet on guard. Taking a moment to consider, he replied, "An afternoon's acquaintance is certainly very little to learn what a man really is."

At her disappointment, however, he added, "An afternoon spent in business transaction, however, may offer insights into his motivations. Colonel Fitzwilliam seems a jovial sort of man who professes to have little patience for the social intrigues of the Ton and would much rather find a quiet place to enjoy the company of his future wife. Being a dedicated country gentleman myself, I find his opinions quite instrumental in earning my approval. He is perhaps a bit too out-going for my liking but seems to have a steady head on his shoulders. If nothing else, his cousin will guide him along the right path in managing an estate." Casting a shrewd look at his daughter, Mr. Bennet asked, "Any particular reason that you are so interested in my opinions?"

Again, the four Bennet girls glanced at each other, but left Elizabeth to speak on the matter, for it was really her secret to tell. Elizabeth just blushed and replied quietly, "No particular reason, Papa. Only that Mary and I had become quite good friends with the Colonel and his family and only wish to have your approval of our continued associations with them."

Raising his eyebrow slightly at what he knew to be a falsehood, Mr. Bennet nonetheless allowed his daughters to keep their own counsel. "I see. Well then, you should know that I heartily give my approval for the continuation of such friendships. In their letters of introduction, your Uncle Gardiner had nothing but the highest praise regarding the Colonel's honest nature while your Aunt Gardiner was also most enthusiastic in describing the quality of the entire party's characters. Though I beg of you, should any major changes in these friendships arise, that you appraise me of
them. I believe it is a father's prerogative to know for certain when his support, if not his protection, is needed."

Blushing again at the hidden approval in her father’s words for her new-found friend, Elizabeth nonetheless nodded.

Seeing that she understood his meaning, Mr. Bennet decided to change the topic, "Now then, your Uncle Gardiner mentioned that he would send some new volumes with you? Something about Plato even? Do show me the way to these books!"

Laughing at his enthusiasm, Elizabeth made her way upstairs to retrieve the tomes and join her father in the study. Their departure caused the rest of the family to turn to their usual afternoon habits. Mary made her way to her pianoforte, greeting it as she would an old friend. Kitty joined her in the music room with pencil and sketch-pad in hand, hoping to capture Mary’s likeness on paper as part of her project in sketching her sisters in their element. Jane smiled indulgently at her siblings, happy to have the family whole once more, as she turned to make certain that the cook would make select favorites treats of Lizzy and Mary in celebration of their homecoming. And so, music filled Longbourn once more and provided a cheerful background for the quiet scenes of domestic life.

Of course, being that the youngest member of the family was a rambunctious lad of seven, the quiet state of the household did not remain that way for long. Indeed, a most disturbing thud brought all the girls to the front hall where they found a dusty-looking Tommy and an exasperated Mrs. Hill.

Looking at their stunned faces, Tommy cared not for the mess on his own clothing but sprang to hug his favorite sister. "Lizzy! You are home! I am ever so glad! Look, I managed to carry the flour all by myself! I am quite strong now!"

Smiling at his youthful energy, Elizabeth tried without much success to say sternly, "Now Tommy, as glad as I am to see you, I fear the front hall is not the best place for that sack of flour. Why do you not show me how strong you are in helping Mrs. Hill carry it to cook?"

Tommy turned to her with a pout, "Must I? It is so heavy!"

Chuckling softly, Mary spoke, "It certainly looks that way. But surely a strong young man like you can handle it; did you not carry it all the way from town? What's the small distance to our kitchen in comparison to that?"

Tommy turned to Mary and also gave her a hug, "Mary! I am happy to see you too. Kitty tried to play your pianoforte but I made certain that it was protected! I took very good care of it, as I hope you saw."

Mary hugged him back, not minding the flour that clung to her own dress, "Yes dear Tommy, I did see indeed. And I thank you for your vigilance."

Kitty sniffed in mock-disdain, "I still do not see why I could not play the pianoforte, Tommy."

Tommy just blinked up at her and said with all the bluntness of his youth, "Because you don't make it sing like Mary does!"

Smiling ruefully, Kitty chuckled at his directness, "Perhaps so, Tommy. Now, Lizzy and Mary both received hugs, where is mine?"

Tommy just grinned up at her impishly, "But I see you every day, Kitty! These were special homecoming hugs!"
Kitty just laughed and made to tickle her younger brother, causing him to shriek with laughter. Lizzy and Mary glanced at each other briefly before joining Kitty in her quest.

Meanwhile, Jane spoke gratefully to Mrs. Hill, "I do hope Tommy was not too much trouble; though I am so thankful you decided to take him with you."

Hill just smiled back at her young mistress, "Never you mind, Miss Jane. Master Tommy's a good lad. He just has too much energy for my old bones. I am glad that Miss Lizzy is back; I think she is the only one who can keep up with him!"

Jane smiled at the happy scene in front of them, "I am glad as well." Clearing her throat a bit, Jane spoke with her best eldest sister voice, "Now, children, I do believe the flour still needs to be taken to the kitchens. After that, Tommy, you do need to be cleaned up. Papa would not like it if you soiled his study with so much flour and you still have a lesson with him today."

The other girls desisted in their tickling as Tommy looked at Jane with imploring eyes, "Must I Jane? Lessons are so dull; I would much prefer to show Lizzy my new trick in climbing the trees in the orchard."

Jane just looked at him sternly, "Yes Tommy, you must." Seeing the disappointed look on his face, she softened, "Why do you not show Lizzy your trick tomorrow? Indeed, I believe a picnic luncheon would be just the thing to welcome Lizzy and Mary home. Mayhaps cook will be so kind as to provide us with fresh cream for the strawberries in the garden."

Perking up at the mention of his favorite treat, Tommy nodded and obediently went to pick up the previously discarded bag of flour and made for the kitchen with a new spring in his step. His sisters looked each other in amusement at the easy distractibility of their younger brother and helped each other brush the flour off their own dresses.

Hours later, a much more subdued Tommy joined Mary and Kitty in the music room. Seating himself quietly next to Kitty, he glanced curiously between Mary at the pianoforte, completely enthralled in her music, and the sketch of the scene on Kitty's paper. Turning the picture so that Tommy might better see it in full, Kitty asked quietly, "And what do you think of this Tommy?"

Tommy looked at the image as solemnly as a young lad could and nodded, "I like it very much. I think it will be very nice to have when she leaves us. Will you be making one for Lizzy too? I think I should like one of Lizzy best."

Kitty blinked at his surprising answer, "Whatever do you mean, Tommy? Neither Mary nor Lizzy are leaving for another trip. Why, they have only just returned!"

Tommy sighed as his whole body seemed to slump, "But I heard someone say in town today that Lizzy and Mary came home in a large carriage and that certainly the gentleman who owned that carriage would only offer them transp…transport…because he was set on marrying one of them."

Kitty smiled a bit at Tommy's efforts to use larger words. "I think you mean transportation, dear."

Tommy nodded but remained worried, "That means one of them is going away soon, doesn't it? Papa said we are to have new neighbors soon and that I was to be on my best behavior when they come, but I don't want to be! Not if they're going to take Lizzy or Mary away!"

Kitty hugged her little brother close, "Dear Tommy. I do not think either Lizzy or Mary is in any hurry to leave Longbourn. But nor can they stay here forever. Remember when we spoke of Mr. Lucas coming to call on me and how, if all goes well, I will be leaving to stay at Lucas Lodge?"
Tommy stubbornly shook his head, "But that's different! We've known Mr. Lucas for ages and ages! And his house is only down the path!"

Kitty sighed, "But you want Lizzy and Mary to be happy, do you not? You might be surprised, but sometimes grown people have to leave their families and make new ones."

Tommy replied, "I do want them to be happy. I want all of you to be happy; you're the bestest sisters in the world! I just do not want you to leave!"

Kitty hugged him again, "I know little one. And I'm certain none of us truly wish to leave. But it's all part of growing up and starting new adventures. Why, in a few years, you'll be leaving too to attend school."

Tommy nodded, "I suppose so. But that's not for ages and ages!" With another thought, a growing look of horror dawned on his face, "Oh no! This means Jane will leave too, doesn't it?"

Kitty nodded, "I'm afraid so. In fact, by rights, as the eldest, she should be the first to marry."

Tommy muttered petulantly, "It's not fair! I don't want to lose my sisters! Can't you make time stand still?"

Kitty shook her head ruefully, "I'm afraid that is beyond my skills. But Tommy, you will never lose us. We might not be with you, but we will always be your sisters. Besides, have you not always wanted a brother? As time passes, you might just gain four different ones! Think what fun that will be!"

Tommy shrugged, "I suppose so. But will you promise to ask for my approval before deciding on these new brothers?"

Kitty chuckled, "I cannot speak for my sisters, but certainly I will be sure to consult your opinions."

Elizabeth, just entering the room, heard the end of her statement and could not help but ask, "Opinions on what?"

Tommy looked at her seriously, "Opinions on my new brothers of course. Kitty said that sometimes grown up people have to leave home to create new families. She said that in such cases, I will not lose my sisters but gain new brothers."

Looking at Kitty curiously, Elizabeth remarked, "Kitty is very wise in saying so."

Tommy agreed, "I think so too. So, I just wanted her to promise that she would consider my approval for potential new brothers. And she agreed. Lizzy, will you promise too? And Mary? And Jane?"

Sending Kitty a look that indicated that she will have to repeat the entire conversation, Elizabeth nonetheless solemnly addressed Tommy, "I promise, too, Tommy. Though you had best ask both Mary and Jane individually as well since I cannot speak for them. But perhaps that can wait a little while, Jane sent me to summon you for supper."

Kitty rose to put her drawing materials and tap Mary gently on the shoulder. Tommy reached up to grab Elizabeth's hand. Squeezing his fingers gently, Elizabeth looked down at him with a gentle smile, "Fear not, Tommy, we will ensure that we find the best brothers for you. Have faith in your sisters."
To the vast amusement of the elder Mr. Bennet and the great comfort of the younger, both Jane and Mary gladly gave Tommy the promise he desired. During the promised picnic luncheon, Tommy showed Elizabeth, and indeed all his sisters, his new found talent in defying gravity. Seated securely in the old plum tree, Tommy had a grand time throwing the ripe fruits to his sisters on the ground below. The pile of plumes grew steadily larger until finally Jane begged him to stop, saying that she did not think they could possibly eat that many. Elizabeth, however, just laughed and suggested that they share the fruit with their tenants. Her plan was agreed on by all the siblings and Mary hurried back to the house to gather more baskets as the rest of her siblings began to gather their blanket and the various plates and dishes from their meal.

Elizabeth waited anxiously as Tommy made his way back to the ground, releasing a relieved breath when his feet finally made contact with the grass. The young boy grinned up at her, "See, Lizzy? I have been practicing so that I could show you!"

Elizabeth nodded in approval, "Such skill you possess! Did you know, though, that I was the first to climb this tree?" Seeing his surprised look, she continued, "I gave the household quite the scare, as Jane tells me you did too. Papa, of course, just laughed at my actions. Though Mama was not so forgiving of my torn stockings; she even made me mend my own hem! You are quite lucky, Tommy, that tree climbing is a much more acceptable pursuit for a young boy."

Tommy just looked at his sister in wonder, "Is there anything that you cannot do, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth just laughed, "Certainly, Tommy. No one person can do everything and do them well. For example, no matter how much I care for our tenants and our land, Papa is the current and you the future Master of Longbourn. And with that privilege comes heavy responsibilities."

Tommy made a face, "Papa says that too. And he insists that I begin to act like a gentleman. Jane too, she is forever making sure that I am behaving properly…but there's not much fun in that; I should not run or shout or dirty my clothing. It seems like such a big bother."

Elizabeth smiled indulgently, "I see that we are indeed very similar; I found it difficult to behave like a lady as well. Indeed, I think most of our neighbors still find me quite unladylike. But though it is important for you to learn the proper manners, those are not the responsibilities to which I refer."

Tommy looked thoughtful before saying, "I suppose you mean the ones about me becoming Mr. Bennet of Longbourn someday, do you not?"

"Indeed. You are quite a clever boy to have understood my meaning. Our family has been privileged to have such loyal tenants. But you must remember, Tommy, that such loyalty and trust are earned through our actions."

"That is why you're taking the plums to the tenants, is it not?"

Elizabeth nodded, "Indeed. And I will not be the only one going; I think you should accompany me as well. Not only do I think it will be good for you to observe my interactions with those in our care, but I also find myself in need of a strong lad to carry the basket. And after seeing your skill with the flour sack yesterday, I think the plums will be very safe in your hands."

Jane, with the picnic basket securely held in her hands, greatly approved of this plan. "I think it will be excellent practice for you Tommy. Not only will you be able to accompany Lizzy on such
an important task, but you can also strengthen your arms for the fencing lessons you've been
begging for!"

Kitty, who was gathering plumes into the baskets Mary had brought back, also agreed, "And
when you come back, maybe we will have some plum tarts ready for you!"

Mary, seeing the gleam entering Tommy's eyes at the promise of such treats, nudged her sister
playfully, "That is if you do not eat them all first, Kitty! I know how well you like such treats…
even more than Tommy likes his strawberries!"

Her comment drew a shrug from Kitty and chuckles from the rest of the siblings. So, with laughter
and good cheer, the Bennet siblings passed the afternoon gathering fruit in the orchard.

Elizabeth did indeed take Tommy with her on her visit to the tenants. In fact, Mr. Bennet found
such a tactic so helpful in calming Tommy for his afternoon lessons that he encouraged Elizabeth
to allow Tommy to accompany her on as many such visits as possible. For his part, Tommy found
his admiration for Lizzy rising. She was genuinely kind but also had a strength that ensured that
the estate remained efficient and prosperous. Her patience with the most stubborn of tenants as
well as the most troublesome of account figures made him see the importance of learning to do
sums properly. Seeing the respect with which the tenants treated Elizabeth and their genuine
gratitude for her wise counsel also left a strong impression on Tommy's young mind. Though he
did not cease his more energetic adventures, Tommy did make a silent vow to himself to be just as
kind and dependable as his sister was capable of being.

Of course, for all his convictions, Tommy retained all the curiosities of a young child and the easy
distractibility typical of a boy his age. The new hoop, a gift from his Uncle Gardiner, and the
brilliant summer sunshine proved a lethal combination with respect to his abilities to focus on the
rather boring page of arithmetic problems. Fully exasperated at his lack of attention, Mr. Bennet
heaved a sigh and sent him outside to calm his restlessness. Grateful for the chance to escape the
quiet house, for his sisters were all away visiting the various tenants who had taken ill in a sudden
wave of summer colds, Tommy grabbed his hoop and stick and made for the door.

With a mighty swing of his arm, Tommy sent his hoop speeding around the curve in the path and,
with a loud loop, made chase. As he rounded the corner, however, Tommy felt his smile disappear
as the hoop made to collide with an unsuspecting gentleman who was turned to speak with the
driver of his carriage. Disregarding the manners that Jane had insisted were quintessential for him
to possess, Tommy opened his mouth to give a great shout. Before the sound left his throat,
however, the gentleman turned suddenly, saw the incoming object, and quickly reached out a
hand to halt its path of collision. Tommy sighed in relief but found his eyes widening as the
stranger began to walk towards him. Screwing his eyes closed, Tommy waited for the
admonishments to begin.

To his surprise, the young gentleman's voice was kind as he asked, "Was this your hoop?"

Slowly opening his eyes, Tommy looked up, and then up and up, at the gentleman's kind face.
Seeing the apprehensive look in the young lad's eyes, Darcy, for it was that particular gentleman,
knee down to the lad's level and repeated his question, "Was this your hoop?"

Tommy tilted his head at the soft smile on the gentleman's face and nodded, "Yes sir. I am most
sorry to have almost hit you. Please do not be upset; Jane would not like it if she knew I got in
trouble again. And I fear Lizzy would be most disappointed as well; and I do so hate to make my
sisters sad."

Darcy's smile widened as he realized the identity of the young lad. Nodding his head in
recognition of the boy's concerns, Darcy remarked, "I too have a sister who I believe would be
most dissatisfied with me if I were to blame an innocent for what was most certainly an accident. Besides, you did seek to warn me, did you not? I fear I just did not give you the time to carry through with the warning."

Grateful for the gentleman's understanding but still wary, Tommy replied, his knuckles white hoop now firmly clutched in his grasp, "Thank you sir. But I do not think I should be speaking with you without proper introductions. Mary always did warn me against speaking with strangers."

Darcy chuckled, "Ah, but I do not believe we are complete strangers young Mister Bennet."

Tommy gasped, "How do you know my name?" Glancing carefully at the emblem on the carriage that was still waiting patiently on the road, Tommy's eyes widened, "Oh! You are the one who brought Lizzy and Mary home! You are to be our new neighbor!"

Darcy, finding that curiosity had chased away any trace of fear from Tommy's eyes, slowly rose to full height and bowed carefully, "Indeed. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy at your service. My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, recently leased the property from the current owners. He has instructed me to prepare Netherfield."

Tommy recovered some of his own manners and bowed as he had been taught, "Well met Mr. Darcy. I am Thomas Bennet, the younger, but I would much prefer to be called Tommy. Or else it would be quite confusing, for my Papa is also Mr. Thomas Bennet. I suppose you are here to see him?"

Darcy hesitated a moment before saying, "Not quite…While I welcome the opportunity to speak with your father, I had hoped to call upon your sister, Miss Elizabeth."

Studying Darcy carefully, Tommy drew himself to his full height, which to his chagrin was still much too short when compared with Darcy's imposing stature. "And what do you want with Lizzy? As her brother, I demand you tell me of your intentions."

Somewhat startled at the transformation in the boy's demeanor but impressed with his protectiveness towards his sister, Darcy replied carefully, "I had the great honor of making Miss Elizabeth's acquaintance while she was visiting with her Aunt and Uncle in London. We share many similar interests and I find her one of the most intelligent ladies of my acquaintance. I had come to see if she would be able to offer some guidance to my younger sister, Georgiana, in settling the household at Netherfield. I believe Miss Elizabeth's familiarity with the surrounding neighborhood and her inherent good sense makes her an excellent guide for my sister."

Nodding in approval at Darcy's honesty and the praise regarding his favorite sister, Tommy remarked, "I cannot fault your intent. Lizzy is the smartest person I know, though I think Jane or Kitty might be better if your sister wished to know about the best shops in town…I hope you know how lucky you are in having Lizzy for a friend." Pausing in thought, Tommy then asked suspiciously, "You are not here to take her away, are you?"

Seeing Darcy's surprised expression, Tommy elaborated, "When Mr. Lucas from down the path came to call upon my sister Kitty, he also voiced high admirations for her. Though you use different words in describing Lizzy, I do believe your comments are just as heartfelt as his were about Kitty."

Fortunately for Darcy, he was saved from having to answer by the presence of Miss Elizabeth herself. Quite unnoticed by the conversing gentlemen, she had been approaching from the road. Her empty basket in hand, Elizabeth fought a laugh at the uncomfortable look on Darcy's face and the inquisitive one on Tommy's. Deciding to rescue her friend from the bluntness of her younger brother, Elizabeth interjected, "Mr. Darcy! What a pleasant surprise! I trust the wedding was a
success?"

Darcy turned to her in relief and felt his breath catch at the sight of her joyful expression. Bowing to allow himself a moment of composure, he greeted her, "Miss Elizabeth. Yes, Aunt Matlock was quite satisfied with the wedding. I believe my Aunt Catherine took issue at the insinuation that she was incapable of executing a celebration to rival any in London and made certain to organize perhaps the most lavish gathering Kent has seen in the past decade. The happy couple is only too grateful to escape the madness unscathed. They are likely appreciating of the quietness of the seashore at Ramsgate."

Elizabeth smiled warmly, "I am glad to hear of it. And I hope your journey from Kent was without incident?"

Darcy nodded, "Georgie and I tarried a few days longer at Willowmere at Sir Andrew's invitation."

“Oh! But I thought Lady Adelaide was not yet entertaining guests."

“She is much recovered and has even renewed her friendship with my aunts. The happy celebrations for my cousins proved more effective than any tonic the physician could offer."

“How wonderful! And how do you find Netherfield?"

“I must own that I have not yet examined it as thoroughly as I should. Georgie is exploring it as we speak but I thought that I might call upon you to see if you had any sage words of advice as she begins to set up the household in preparation for Richard and Anne."

Elizabeth laughed, "Alas! I fear my sister Jane is much more knowledgeable than I am regarding the particulars of running a household. If Georgie had questions about building new henhouses I might have better advice to give."

Tommy, who had been quiet until now, remarked, "That is just what I said as well!"

Looking down, Elizabeth noted, "I see you have met my brother Tommy. I hope the young scamp did not prove himself too much of a nuisance."

While Tommy exclaimed his indignation at her teasing, Darcy only felt himself relaxing further, "Not at all! In fact, young Mr. Bennet and I share opinions on a most important subject."

"My goodness, are you also fond of climbing trees, Mr. Darcy? For I cannot imagine another topic on which my brother would exalt."

"While I did enjoy in such a pass-time in my youth, we spoke of a far more serious subject."

"Then I fear I am lost, I cannot think of one that would gain precedence over so exciting an activity."

"We spoke of the importance of sisters."

"Ah! That is a topic on which Tommy can certainly contribute, being burdened with four of his own to provide an unsolicited education in bonnet mending and purse netting. He is young yet and so must heed our admonishments, but the day will come when he can throw off the shackles of our opinions."

"Lizzy!" her brother protested, "Mr. Darcy and I both think highly of our sisters."
"That we do. Why, Mr. Bennet was just sharing with me his opinion that you are the cleverest person he knows…a point I find I most heartily support."

"I forgive you such exaggerations, Mr. Darcy, on account of your fatigue from recent festivities. Tommy, I believe some of the tenant children were going to the field for a game of rounders. I will gladly return your hoop. I suspect you are too restless to sit with our guest, even if you find yourself in agreement on the matter of sisters."

Nodding happily at the thought of other playmates, Tommy bowed briefly to Darcy and then departed.

Happy that their brief separation had not created any change in the easy manners of their conversations, Darcy asked curiously, "Does young Mr. Bennet often play with the tenant children?"

Elizabeth nodded, "Certainly. There are not many children Tommy's age among our neighbors and my sisters and I are often unavailable to keep him company. I know it is perhaps shocking to you that we should pay so little attention to the class difference between Tommy and the tenant children, but given the small nature of our community and the young age of the children, such things are not quite looked upon with too much censure. Besides, our neighbors do seem to think Papa quite odd in allowing his children to pursue a variety of interests and have just accepted Tommy's friendship with the other children as another quark of the Bennet family."

"Do you think that is…wise? Will it not foster resentment as the children grow older?"

"The thought had crossed my mind. But I believe Tommy and the other children will receive more benefit than harm from this arrangement. Tommy will learn to share and appreciate the different skills of the other children. Likewise, I hope their childhood friendship will develop into a sense of mutual respect and trust as they grow older. Perhaps by forming personal attachments even at their young age, the children will grow up in such a way as to be confident that Tommy will always be willing to listen to their opinions. With so many of the youngsters in the region leaving to seek work in the mines and the cotton mills, hopefully these friendships will help us retain our tenants as well."

Darcy found himself much impressed with Miss Elizabeth's reasoning, "I find your approach very progressive. I fear not many of the landed gentry would be willing to consider it necessary to offer enticement for their tenants."

"And do you count yourself among that number?"

Darcy shook his head, "No. My Uncle Matlock, being an Earl and thus brought up with the importance of class distinctions, has berated me many times on my laxities with my tenants. But I find it such a small gesture to allow them to fish on my land or offer to build them an assembly room where they may discuss their opinions openly without fear of interference from the Master of the estate. I find it has worked quite well in empowering them to solve some of their own disputes. My steward is much thankful for the decrease in petty disagreements."

"I am glad that we are of like mind on this matter, though I have chosen to focus more on the children, perhaps because of Tommy's age. I am fortunate that my father agrees with my venture in giving the children an opportunity to learn to read and do simple sums. I am only in the beginnings of making my idea a reality, but I have high hopes of my success. For now, I think it is enough that Tommy can gain some practical experience. I know he is young, but he is quite bright and eager to learn."

Smiling in remembrance of the uncomfortable expression on Darcy's face when he was
conversing with Tommy, Elizabeth could not help but observe, "As you have discovered, Mr. Darcy, experience is a most reliable tutor. Your were quite brave in withstanding Tommy's interrogations; I can only hope that you show the same fortitude when faced with gossiping ladies instead of precocious young lads. But enough, I do not believe your purpose in visiting Longbourn was to hear me expand upon my opinions on education."

Darcy chuckled, "I never tire of hearing your opinions, Miss Elizabeth, even if they are made at my expense. But you are correct in that my visit does serve another purpose. Georgiana had rather hoped that your father, you, and your sisters might come to tea in two days time? She is rather impatient to be reunited with Mary and meeting the other young ladies as well."

Elizabeth smiled brightly, "I am certain Mary will be delighted to see Georgiana as well. But I believe Papa will have the final say; though I find it difficult to believe that he would deny his daughters something that would bring them much joy."

"And even if he were of such leanings, no doubt you could quite easily persuade him otherwise."

Elizabeth merely laughed in reply and took his arm as Darcy escorted her up the path to the main house.
The reunion of Miss Georgiana Darcy and Miss Mary Bennet was as happy an occasion as could be expected. Darcy, who smiled so rarely in company, found that he was positively beaming at the ease with which Georgiana interacted with the other Bennet ladies. Mr. Bennet, who had determined the young gentleman to be a serious sort, found himself revising his perception of his host. The memory of Elizabeth’s pointed inquiry as to her father’s approval of these new additions to the neighborhood further added to Mr. Bennet's determination to examine the young man with care.

Elizabeth, not unaware of her father's shrewd gaze, was quieter than her usual wont. Though, her silence served another purpose as she observed Darcy's reactions at meeting her sisters. To her secret delight, Darcy did not appear to have forgotten her words of advice. He put great effort into greeting each Miss Bennet and exchanging pleasantries tailored to what he knew of their interests. Nonetheless, his expression was one of relief when the young ladies’ attentions were drawn to Miss Darcy and her inquiries as to the shops in Meryton. He lost the thin veneer of forced exertion when he turned to elicit Elizabeth’s opinions regarding the upkeep of hedge that marked the boundary between Longbourn and Netherfield. Mr. Bennet looked upon these proceedings thoughtfully, though he found his musings interrupted when Elizabeth and Darcy made to include him in their discussion of the best crops for the region's particular climates. Their discussion might have continued until the end of the visit but for Tommy’s insistence at having a share of the conversation. Despite Mr. Bennet’s frown at his son’s interjections, Mr. Darcy only politely responded with more inquiries as to Tommy’s opinions of fruit trees.

“I do so love the plums, of course, and the apples as well, though I also enjoy the trees themselves as well. They are ever so much fun to climb and I fancy I can see to the ocean from my perch! I can well imagine myself as a swashbuckling pirate, surrounded by the spoils of raids.”

Even as Mr. Bennet hid his grin and Elizabeth grumbled good-naturedly at the sort of stories Kitty had been concocting, Darcy nodded seriously, “But what would you do with the gold? So much bounty surely must make you a target of much envy.”

“Oh! But I shan’t keep the treasure!” Exclaimed Tommy, “My sisters would safe-guard it for me, of course! They will ensure that the bounty is well distributed for those who truly in need of the comforts it can purchase.”

“You are very generous, young Mr. Bennet.”

The young boy only gave a dismissive wave, “Lizzy says we have an obligation to those in our care.”

“You sister is very wise.”

Mr. Bennet the younger might have missed the blush on his sister’s cheeks, but Mr. Bennet the elder raised an eyebrow at Darcy’s admiring tone.

“Oh. All my sister are clever.” Tommy continued, “Besides, I have little use for the riches myself, the adventure is the true prize. I only care for the presence of my trusty sword.”

Darcy could not altogether avoid a quirk of the lips as he made inquiry regarding the young pirate’s skill with the sword.

“Oh, passably well, I suppose.”
When Darcy voiced his disbelief that so successful a corsair is not more gifted, Tommy thought a moment before nodding determinedly, “I suppose I must have guidance. Very well, I shall befriend a gracious admiral who, though disapproving of my livelihood, decided to offer his protection when he discovered my reasons.”

“A very gracious admiral indeed! And what is the name of this generous individual?”

At this question, Tommy’s enthusiasm for his tale flagged but a moment before he looked at his host with pleading eyes, “I do not know…perhaps you would, Mr. Darcy?”

“Hmm…I suppose it may be possible that one of the pirate’s sisters shared her concern for her brother’s safety with a friend acquainted with a capable swordsman. Though he is a colonel and not an admiral, I’m afraid.”

At Tommy’s puzzled look, Darcy added, “And if my cousin will not accept you as a pupil, I hope my services will do?”

Even Mr. Bennet could not hide his amusement at his son’s wide-eyed astonishment.

“Truly, Mr. Darcy?”

“As long as your father does not object.”

“Oh, Papa, please?”

Mr. Bennet found that he was not as immune to his son’s best beseeching look as he had hoped. “Mr. Darcy, you know not what you offer! The young scamp will try your patience such that the sword might suit him better in his side than in his hand. Still, you seem ready enough for a challenge. If you willingly sacrifice your sanity on the altar of generosity, I will say little to discourage you.”

Only Elizabeth’s look prevented the child from demanding a lesson at that very moment. Darcy, however, must have seen Tommy’s impatience as he gave assurance, “A gentleman always keeps his word. And I give you mine, young Mr. Bennet.”

The visits thus ended most satisfactorily on all the attendees’ parts. Georgiana was happy to have secured an affirmative response from Kitty regarding drawing lessons, an invitation from Jane to Longbourn to examine Jane’s methods in running a household, and an agreement from Mary to continue practicing duets together. Darcy was grateful for Elizabeth’s offer to show him around the land in the region so that he might have a better idea of the scope of his cousin’s new home. So, brother and sister decried convention and waved merrily from the doorway as the Bennet carriage made its way home.

Neither the news that contrary Mr. Bennet had paid a visit to the new residents of Netherfield nor the identity of the additions to the neighborhood stayed secret for long. Mrs. Long, who considered gossip her chief recreational activity secondary only to exaggerations of her nieces’ accomplishments, gave her companions a smug look as she revealed her knowledge. “I hear the Darcys have a great estate in the north and a great fortune besides. Ten thousand pounds, likely more! Miss Darcy is to inherit thirty thousand pounds at least!”

“Really Edith, must you be so vulgar? Besides, they are unlikely to stay, only long enough for their cousin to return from his wedding trip,” sniffed Mrs. Philips.

“You are only cross that your nieces have told you nothing of the Darcys,” declared Mrs. Long with a triumphant smirk.
“My nieces need not tell me all they know, particularly when they were the first to be issued an invitation to visit at Netherfield. I can little imagine that Mr. Darcy will care to look at any other young lady after meeting my Jane,” her grin was nothing if not vindictive as Mrs. Long flushed at the slight.

Lady Lucas interjected quickly, “Do you think they will attend the assembly?”

“Oh, but surely they must! And as I expect gentlemen to be few, surely Mr. Darcy will offer to stand with young ladies other than the ones with whom he can claim prior acquaintance.”

“Though he may well favor those he knows more. And he has already danced with Lizzy and Mary; they attended the Countess of Matlock’s ball you know.”

Mrs. Long and Lady Lucas shared a long-suffering look at this little-needed reminder.

“I do hope,” ventured Mrs. Long, “that Miss Darcy will prove more agreeable than that dreadful Miss King; she gives herself such airs simply because of the ten thousand pounds she is to inherit. As though she were not the subject of her uncle’s charity and pity. Why, for her mother to have run away with a valet!”

“Oh! I heard tale that old Mr. Watson had disowned his daughter, but not the reason,” Lady Lucas replied.

“Oh yes! All in years past, of course, but my memory has never been found wanting. Mr. Watson might have refused his son the inheritance but for the lack of other suitable heirs. Had the misanthrope not met with that dreadful hunting accident, he might have outlived even his son out of sheer stubbornness. Fortunately for Miss King, her uncle is not given to the same miserliness.”

“I heard tale that she was serving as a governess when her uncle summoned her to Hertfordshire,” Mrs. Philips whispered in a conspiring tone, thus moving the conversation to further discussion of the troubles of the Watson family.

Even so, Mrs. Philips had difficulty forgetting Mrs. Long’s earlier words. Thus, despite having little hope of gaining any new insights from her tight-lipped nieces, she determined that a visit to Longbourn must be made without delay. Drawing close to the entrance-way, she was astounded at the laughter that floated out the window and the beautiful music that accompanied it. Her astonishment only grew when her gaze fell on the blonde seated demurely between Jane and Mary.

Jane’s introductions did little to diffuse her aunt’s excitement. Full of glad anticipation of Mrs. Long’s jealousy, Mrs. Philips spoke with great enthusiasm, “Miss Darcy! How delighted I am to make your acquaintance! Why, you have been in the neighborhood a full three days and yet none but my nieces have managed successfully to call on you!”

Georgiana tensed slightly at sheer volume of Mrs. Philips’s declarations but a slight squeeze of her hand from Jane gave her a little more courage to speak. Softly, she replied, "I am pleased to meet you as well, Mrs. Philips. My brother and I do not mean to offend our neighbors. Only we are yet new to Hertfordshire and have been much preoccupied with acquainting ourselves with Netherfield. We are only stewards, you see, until my cousins arrive, and so have focused more on making the estate fit to be seen than returning the calling cards left to us.”

Mrs. Philips nodded emphatically as she petted the young lady’s hand in what she considered a comforting manner, "No harm done, my dear, your circumstances are quite understandable. Though, goodness me, are you not too young to be running a household by yourself? Why, you are but a child!”
Mary made to speak in defense of her friend, but Georgiana's next remark successfully diffused the situation, "Oh I suppose some might say so Mrs. Philips. But I do not think it is ever too young to begin learning, and the Miss Bennets have been so helpful in guiding me. My brother and I both find ourselves quite fortunate to count them as our friends. You must be so proud to have such kind and capable nieces!"

Kitty's lips twitched in merriment at the stunned expression Mrs. Philips's face and even Jane had to suppress a smile of amusement. Mary made quick to offer her aunt sugar for her tea, after which Mrs. Philips recovered enough to say, "Well. Yes. It is such a pity that my sister did not live to see her girls grow into such lovely young ladies. Though certainly nothing to your accomplishments I am sure. But tell me, Miss Darcy, surely you and your brother will attend the assembly later this week? I imagine your household will be quite set up to your satisfaction by then, and it would be a most excellent opportunity to introduce you to the rest of the neighborhood."

Georgiana only smiled blandly, "I am afraid I am not yet out, Mrs. Philips, so I do not believe it would do for me to attend. However, I will be certain to pass on the invitation to my brother so that he may meet the neighborhood on my behalf."

A gleam entered Mrs. Philips's eyes, "Yes. I do hope that he may do so…though I am certain our small town assembly will not be as grand as the ones he's used to in….where is it that you hail from, Miss Darcy?"

"Pemberley in Derbyshire. Though I must admit that my brother does not make it a habit to attend balls; why I believe my Cousin Richard's wedding celebration was the first gathering he attended in two years' time!"

Undaunted at the suggestion of Darcy's anti-social leanings, Mrs. Philips persisted, "And is your brother married?"

"No, he is not."

"Ah, but certainly he must be seeking a bride! For a young man of fortune as I imagine him to be must be in want of a wife!"

Kitty winced at the directness of such a comment, "Aunt Philips, you cannot expect Miss Darcy to reveal all her family secrets, now, can you? And I do not think she is in a position to question her older brother in this matter. Why, Tommy certainly never divulges his secrets to me, for all that I am his older sister!"

Jane nodded gratefully at Kitty for the change in subject, "I do not believe Tommy divulges secrets to anyone other than Lizzy, or that new hoop of his. He is an intelligent boy, our Tommy, though I fear the distractions of the great outdoors is proving too much for his abilities to focus on his lessons. Why just yesterday Papa had to threaten to curtail the tenants visits with Lizzy for him to settle quietly!"

Mrs. Philips, however, would not be distracted from her purpose, "You must forgive the high spirits of my nephew, Miss Darcy, for I can only imagine that your brother would not wish to be bothered by the whims of a child."

Now it was Mary's turn to wince at her Aunt's thoughtless comment, but Georgiana again proved more than capable of responding, "Not at all Mrs. Philips. In fact, my brother has often stated that his closest friend outside the family, Mr. Charles Bingley, has the enthusiasm of any curious puppy. So you see he is not adverse to those of more energetic temperament. Truth be told, I have often suspected that for all his own solemn conduct in public, my brother prefers the company of those who are quick of mind and light of spirit."
A playful expression that was more often seen on Elizabeth's face found its way to Mary's as she remarked, "Georgie, did you not mention that Mr. Bingley was to visit Netherfield as well? Mayhaps he can accompany your brother to the assembly?"

Georgiana lifted an eyebrow slightly, "Indeed, Mary. Mr. Bingley is to arrive on the morrow I believe; I fear business in London had detained him."

The Bennet ladies turned to their aunt expectantly and Mrs. Philips's reaction to the news of the imminent arrival of yet another gentleman to the region did not disappoint. Flushing in excitement that she would be the first to impart such an important piece of news to the rest of the neighborhood ladies, Mrs. Phillips sat down her teacup and rose as quickly as she could, "Well, my dear girls, I shall impose upon your hospitality no longer. Miss Darcy, it was a pleasure to have met you and I do so hope to see Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley at the assembly this week. Now, I fear I must go ensure that our cook has prepared the evening roast correctly; Mr. Philips is quite particular about his meat you know."

The Bennet girls and Georgiana only nodded politely as she made her exit. Only when Kitty signaled from the window that Mrs. Philips had made her way far down the lane did laughter burst forth merrily.

Amidst her giggles, Kitty commented, "Mary! Whatever possessed you to bait our aunt like that? I would have expected such an action from Lizzy but not our dear, quiet, sweet Mary! But oh, the look on her face; I can just see her determination to spread such a piece of gossip!"

Mary only ducked her head modestly, "I really do not know what possessed me to say such things. I usually do not mind our aunt so much, but I am quite astounded that she conveniently forgot that our Jane was but fifteen when she took up the role of Mistress of Longbourn! Besides, I could not sit quietly while she made Georgie uncomfortable"

Georgiana smiled gratefully, "And bless you for that Mary. I was trying my best but I fear she was most insistent...a bit like my brother's hound when it's after the scent of a particular squirrel."

Her comment drew a shocked silence which was quickly interrupted by a fresh round of giggles.

Jane reclaimed her composure first, "Poor Aunt Philips, I fear we have been unkind to her. She really does mean well. But Georgiana, I am very proud of the way you held your ground during her interrogation."

Her comment drew a blush from the younger girl, "I am really grateful, truly, to have friends such as you and your sisters. I do not believe I could have been so brave without your company and support."

Kitty remarked, "I'm sure you would have found the bravery. However, any time you need help facing down another creature hunting for information, please feel free to call on us. There must be some strength in numbers, even if we are mere squirrels to her hound."

Despite her half-hearted efforts at scolding Kitty for such a comparison, even Jane found that she was not immune to the laughter that arose.

So it was a merry scene that Elizabeth found when she returned to Longbourn. "My dear Georgie, what have you done to my sisters? I have not seen Jane laugh with such abandon in...well, suffice to say I have missed the sound. Do we have need to replace the tea?"

Georgiana merely laughed at her teasing, "You need not worry Lizzy. Only I suspect Mrs. Philips might not agree."
Kitty chuckled, "You would have been so proud of Mary, Lizzy! She proved quite a skillful fisherman in baiting our Aunt with news of Mr. Bingley's arrival."

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled as she said, "Ah! I see! Say no more, I can easily imagine the attentions Aunt Philips must have brought upon Georgie. And perhaps now she will find an even larger audience in town since Mr. Bingley has arrived a few hours earlier than expected."

She smiled gratefully at Mary for the offered cup of tea as she continued to explain, "Tommy and I left Netherfield a bit earlier today since his fencing tutor had to go greet his friend. As grateful as I am for your brother's attention to Tommy, Georgie, I do believe my brother will be glad to have a new playmate. Since discovering that age is no barrier, Tommy has shed any shyness in satisfying his curiosities. Fortunately, he seems to hold Darcy in great esteem. Indeed, I do believe I've spied Tommy pacing in the garden, trying to emulate Darcy's manners of walking!"

Jane shook her head, "So that was what he was doing! I was growing quite concerned with his behavior and was considering speaking to Papa. Well, I suppose he could do worse than attempting to look the part of a gentleman at last."

Mary chuckled, "That must explain his inquiries into the existence of a tonic for growing taller; he must be envious of Mr. Darcy's height!"

Kitty tilted her head thoughtfully, "What of Mr. Bingley, Georgie? Is there danger that Tommy would wish to emulate him as well? If Mr. Bingley is truly as energetic as you say, then I fear we might soon have two Tommy's on our hands!"

Georgiana's eyes grew wide, "Oh dear...I had not thought of that! Sometimes I do think Mr. Bingley is like a small child, or at least he possesses the exuberance of one. But I do not think we have much to fear. For all his playfulness, Mr. Bingley can be quite serious as well. He's almost the opposite of my brother in some ways. Brother is so grave in company but quite open in private whereas Mr. Bingley is more spirited in public and more serious when among friends. Of course, Mr. Bingley, unlike my brother, actually enjoys social gatherings, so I am almost certain he will make an effort to attend the assembly this week."

Elizabeth nodded, "And Darcy has promised me that he will attend as well, for the practice. I have never met a man so dedicated to improving himself and confronting that which makes him uncomfortable. Amusement aside, I cannot fault Tommy for copying him. You are fortunate to have such a brother, Georgie."

Georgiana smiled slyly, "I suppose so. Though, I have not seen any efforts on his part to become more sociable until he met you Lizzy. I believe you are the one to bring out the best in him."

As Elizabeth blushed, the other Bennet girls glanced at each other knowingly, happy that Georgiana approved of the attentions her brother was showing their sister.

Just then, the sound of a carriage interrupted the ladies' conversation and Mr. Darcy and another gentleman were shown into the parlor.

Darcy bowed, "Ladies, please forgive my timing, but I believe it is time for Georgie to return to Netherfield; she does still have some lessons of her own to finish. But before I take her away, allow me to introduce Mr. Charles Bingley."

Darcy's companion bowed politely to the assembled ladies. "I hope you do not mind my intrusion, but the day was too lovely for me to stay cooped up and I simply had to accompany Darcy on this errand. It is lovely to see you again, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary."
Kitty and Jane each rose and curtsied as Elizabeth made the introductions and the gentlemen seated themselves. As Jane smiled warmly in welcome, Kitty remarked, "Our brother Tommy would most heartily agree with your assessment Mr. Bingley. Sometimes I believe the sunshine must be a siren that calls out with a voice only Tommy can hear; he is forever finding excuses to enjoy the outdoors."

Mr. Bingley smiled, "You must be speaking of Darcy's new fencing pupil! Imagine my surprise at arriving at Netherfield only to find my host in the back gardens with a tree branch in his hand. I have never seen Darcy so relaxed at any place that was not Pemberley! It must be something about the country; perhaps you are right Miss Kitty, there might just be a magical quality in the air."

When Darcy chuckled at his friend's fanciful declaration, Bingley added, "See! And now he is laughing!"

Darcy retorted, "You have seen me laugh before, Bingley! Do not make me out to be some austere ogre. But I must own that I have felt very relaxed here in Hertfordshire."

Elizabeth chuckled, "Perhaps you feel that way now, Mr. Darcy. But the upcoming assembly will surely change your mind."

Georgiana added, "Indeed. I fear you can hide behind estate business no longer. We just had a visitor from one of the town ladies and she was most insistent that you attend."

While Darcy fought a shudder at the thought of gossiping ladies, Bingley found himself intrigued by the mention of the assembly. "Oh? I see I have arrived just in time! Darcy, do say you plan to attend!"

Darcy sighed, "We most certainly will, my friend. I cannot shirk the task my own tutor has given me nor can I deprive you of the pleasure of a country dance. But alas, I fear we must truly depart now; Georgie still needs to finish her translations for the day."

Being the considerate hostess she was, Jane was reluctant to allow her guests to leave so close to supper time. "Oh but surely you can stay for dinner! The afternoon has quite run away with us and I had not realized the lateness of the hour. It would be easy to add three more places to the table."

Darcy rose and bowed in appreciation but said, "Thank you Miss Bennet, but our own cook prepared quite the feast in anticipation of Bingley's arrival and I would not be comfortable with letting her hard work go to waste."

Jane nodded but asked, "Perhaps tomorrow for luncheon then? Tommy has been requesting another picnic and I do think it would be a perfect occasion to show Mr. Bingley the beauty of the countryside. I think Papa would be quite glad to have some fishing companions as well."

Her invitation was accepted with great delight and the Bennet sisters bid their guests adieu with great anticipation for the planned outing.
Later that evening, in their shared room, Elizabeth looked ponderingly at Jane as the eldest Bennet sat braiding her hair in reparation for sleep. "Jane, tell me truthfully, whatever possessed you to suggest a picnic?"

Jane turned and blushed slightly, "I hope you do not think me silly, Lizzie, but I had given your words and Aunt Gardiner's advice some thought. As much as I love our home, I cannot avoid the fact that I am now approaching two and twenty. Though I would not mind staying at Longbourn, I have no wish to be a burden on Papa. Besides, Tommy will grow up one day and I doubt his future bride would want a maidenly sister-in-law in the way. No, I must think of the future, of my future."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, "And what do you envision for your future, Jane?"

Jane smiled a little wistfully, "Truthfully? I am not really certain. I have been so focused on our family that I have scarcely had time to think about one of my own. But since our talk, I have given the matter a little more consideration. I have always known that I must marry well, so that I can give the rest of my sisters opportunities to meet wealthy young gentlemen. But now, with Mr. Lucas courting Kitty and Mr. Darcy's friendship with you, such pressures are lessened if not non-existent. I can bear to be a little selfish now and I think, more than anything, I would like to have someone I can rely on, someone I can care for but who can also care for me….I can admit, though only to you Lizzy, that sometimes it is a little lonely to be the oldest."

Elizabeth left her seat to give Jane a hug, "I am sorry not to have seen the extent of your struggles. I, who have prided myself on my ability to understand others, have failed my most beloved sister. You always seem so brave, so collected; you have been the hearth that kept our family warm. I have often wished that you would laugh more and be more open with your emotions, but I did not think to see that your sense of duty has precluded you from thinking of your own happiness."

Jane leaned on her sister, "Do not apologize, Lizzie. I did not mean for anyone to see. And I am not all alone; Aunt Gardiner has been a font of wisdom these past few years. I am not unhappy either; how can I be with such wonderful sisters and brother, no matter the scrapes in which he involves himself? But I must admit that I quite envy you your Mr. Darcy and hope that there is someone who would look at me the same way he does you."

"Oh Jane, he is not my Mr. Darcy!"

Jane chuckled, "Deny it if you will, but mark my words, he will be soon. And I do not think I would be incorrect in saying that you would not mind if it were so, dear sister. Besides, I am certain Georgiana knows of it and approves of it as well."

Lizzie blushed, "I daresay you knew of my feelings on the matter before even I was aware of them. You and Aunt Gardiner are both so perceptive. So yes, I do admit that I like Mr. Darcy very well. But, we were speaking of you! Does the picnic mean you are willing to begin searching for your own happiness? Perhaps, dare I say it, with Mr. Bingley?"

Jane sighed, "Perhaps. I was being a bit spontaneous when I suggested it but…"

Lizzie nudged her playfully, "But?"

Jane blushed again, "I must own that he is quite handsome and amiable. And if nothing else, from
all that you and Mary and now Georgiana have shared about Mr. Bingley, I find myself intrigued. He can certainly understand my sense of duty. It is strange, but though our meeting was brief and we spoke not a word to one another, I have the strangest feeling that maybe, just maybe… It has been long since a gentleman has visited Hertfordshire."

Lizzie smiled gently and gave her sister another hug, "I for one think you would do well together. You are both inherently all that is good that you cannot help but understand each other perfectly; so full of good humor that a fight shall never occur between you! But really Jane, it matters not what I think; your opinion is the only one that matters."

Jane chuckled, "Mine and Tommy's you mean. Our brother was most insistent that we allow him to pass judgment on our future life partners and I did give him my word. And you must not forget that Papa must be applied to as well."

Elizabeth laughed with her, "I suppose so, but I do not think either Papa or Tommy will mind if you are truly happy…To think, all this time, no matter what others may say, you have been the practical one and I have been the romantic… We shall just have to see what tomorrow brings!"

Smiling at her sister, Jane could only nod in agreement.

Unbeknownst to the elder Bennet ladies, a similar conversation was taking place in Netherfield. Seated in Darcy's study with a newly acquired but already extensively marked-over map of the region spread across the table, Bingley looked not at the depicted terrain and Darcy's meticulously written notes but at the map's owner. Taking a sip of brandy for courage, Bingley asked, "Darcy, forgive me for my forwardness, but what are your intentions towards Miss Elizabeth?"

Darcy looked up from his perusal of the map, startled at his friend's directness. "Whatever do you mean, Charles?"

Bingley waved his hand expressively, "I have never seen you like this. You have been so… so happy lately!"

Darcy raised an eyebrow, "And that is a bad thing?"

Bingley sighed, "Well, no. On the contrary, I am delighted to see you so relaxed. It is just… you were never interested in socializing until you met Miss Elizabeth. The Darcy I know would not have agreed to attend a country assembly so readily. And yet, for all your sighs and groans, I do believe you are looking forward to this dance. I can only suppose that Miss Elizabeth is the tutor you referred to earlier and that she must somehow be helping you with a particular task."

Darcy sat down his pen and considered Bingley thoughtfully. "I suppose my behavior lately must seem a bit odd from your point of view. I did indeed request Miss Elizabeth's assistance in gaining more skills when in company and she was the one who mentioned the assembly as an excellent opportunity for practice. As for my intentions, I must admit that I am very fond of Miss Elizabeth and indeed of the entire Bennet family. I owe them a great debt of gratitude for treating Georgiana as one of their own."

Bingley nodded, "I can tell that they are indeed a close-knit family; it is good for your sister to have such friends. But Darcy, can you deny that your attentions to Miss Elizabeth derive from more than gratefulness?"

Darcy sighed at Bingley's persistence, "Miss Elizabeth is the most intelligent but also the most independent young lady of my acquaintance. Though we agree on many principles, our opinions run contrary to each other enough that I always manage to learn something new. Conversing with her is always a challenge and I find myself looking forward to each encounter."
Astounded at Darcy's admission, Bingley said emphatically, "Good gracious, Darcy, that is high praise indeed, particularly from you. Have you asked her father's permission to court her then? Am I to congratulate you soon?"

Darcy shook his head, "I do not wish to act in a presumptuous manner, particularly where Miss Elizabeth is concerned. Before I ask her father, I must know that she would not be adverse to such an action."

"And do you not think that she would be amenable to a courtship?"

Darcy hesitated but then decided to trust his long-time friend, "I...Despite our many conversations, our acquaintance is still of short duration. And I cannot risk losing our friendship."

"You cannot?"

Darcy shook his head, "No, I cannot. I had not thought that I could ever meet someone who I can look upon as a partner. But Miss Elizabeth is not only such a one; she also makes me want to be a better man. And perhaps my behavior lately has reflected this change...I scarcely know when my curiosity has become more but I find that I am desiring of her good opinions and am loath to lose it."

Darcy's declaration was met with stunned silence as Bingley stared at his friend incredulously. When the latter gentleman did speak, it was with clear astonishment. "I had not thought I would see the day when the proper and collected Fitzwilliam Darcy would be so shaken by a woman, and a country lass at that; I suppose love will make fools of us all. Darcy, I do not know if I am the right person to give you advice on matters of the heart, having had little experiences of my own, but surely, some things are worth the risk? Forgive me for the analogy to trade, but high risk is often linked with high returns and it seems your lifelong happiness would qualify as such."

Darcy sighed again, "Perhaps. Though in this situation, it is no longer just my happiness."

Bingley nodded, "You are correct of course. But I trust it will all work out for the best."

Darcy chuckled slightly, "Ah Bingley, you and your eternal optimism. I am glad you have joined us here in Hertfordshire...But enough of my troubles. What think you of the other Miss Bennets?"

"Oh they are all quite charming! Though with such gracious relations as the Gardiners, I could expect nothing less. Miss Kitty seems to possess a most vivid imagination while Miss Bennet is a most gracious hostess. She is quite the beauty, is she not? Your Cousin Richard certainly had the right idea, if only in jest, that you and I come to Hertfordshire. I feel as though I could happily settle in a town such as this."

Now Darcy was the one to raise an eyebrow, "Oh?"

Bingley's words belied his seemingly nonchalant shrug, "You might be surprised, but Caroline had sent a letter to me in London to seek approval of her new suitor. It seems that caring for our spinster Aunt, whose character I am afraid to say is much too like Caroline's for comfort, has truly opened my sister's eyes. She has finally realized that her haughty manners were not conducive either to making friends or for attracting the attention of possible admirers. I fear I have not been the brother I should be as she struggled to remake herself. But perhaps my negligence was to her benefit for she found more qualified guidance from the local pastor. Indeed, the young man came to call upon me for permission to court her. Even had I not received the request from Caroline, and you know that Caroline is much more in the habit of demanding than asking, his great patience would have led to my consent. Really, even during our short conversation, I found the man to be quite the saint. But I suppose one must be so if one is to have such an impact on my sister."
Darcy blinked owlishly at his friend as he digested this piece of news. Finally, he found his voice. "Bingley, I do not think I will ever be used to your mild manners of delivering important news. From your tone, I would have thought that you were doing nothing more than describing the weather! That must have been the business that delayed you? I suppose congratulations are in order for Miss Bingley…though that she should find a clergyman! I do not think anyone could have foreseen such an odd couple."

Bingley smiled blandly, "Oh, you need not fear that Caroline will become too unrecognizable. No amount of patience can successfully make over her entire character. She has had, after all, a lifetime of practice. Despite our strained relationship, I do care for my sister and made certain to ensure the qualifications of her suitor. It seems that he stands to inherit not a small fortune when his uncle, who unfortunately (or fortunately, I suppose for Caroline) never sired any children, decides to give up the ghost. The good pastor cared not for the sum, of course, other than the fact that it will allow him to provide comfortably for Caroline. But being a business man myself, I was most impressed with the number and happily gave my consent."

"Forgive me if I am being unkind, but are you certain Miss Bingley will be happy with such a man?"

Bingley chuckled, "You mean am I certain that Caroline is not acting out of mercenary means? You need not be so delicate, Darcy, I of all people know the lengths Caroline will go to achieve her desires. The thought had crossed my mind, the promise of a house in London of course did no harm to his appeal. But I think she really does care for him. Perhaps because she has finally found someone who will not react to her tantrums or judge her for her faults. He will prove most pliable to her opinions I think, and not to his detriment. He certainly needs a guiding hand for his inheritance. Truly, his nonchalance with regards to earthly goods is frightful but for his genuine piety."

Darcy chuckled, "I suppose my Aunt Matlock's intervention has been the making of Miss Bingley's good fortunes."

Bingley nodded, "Though I would not tell Lady Matlock to expect a letter of gratitude. Caroline also took the opportunity to hint at my own marriage prospects, or rather, the lack thereof. Little does she know, of course, that in visiting my good friend Darcy, I have also become acquainted with the lovely Miss Bennets."

"I see. So you have decided to take Richard's advice and find yourself a bride?"

"As much as I have enjoyed the bachelor life, I find that I yearn for a home of my own. Spending time with the Gardiner children in London and seeing you with young Mr. Bennet made me realize that the time has come to establish a family. And with your instructions in estate management during this stay, I think I am ready to find a helpmate in honoring my father's memory and bringing credit to the Bingley name."

"Why do I feel as though you already have someone in mind for that role?"

Laughing, Bingley remarked, "Perhaps the duration of our friendship has been too lengthy if we can read each others' intents so well. I must admit, the eldest Miss Bennet did catch my eye. She is beautiful, to be sure, but it is her serenity that I find most intriguing. I cannot explain it, but somehow I sense that her calmness is as practiced as my exuberance. Neither of which is completely false, but both of which act as protections that enable us to carry forth our responsibilities. I think she can understand my obligations to family. Also, despite her merriness in the presence of her sisters and Miss Darcy, I have the feeling that Miss Bennet is not in the habit of expressing her emotions. And I find that, despite the short duration of our meeting, I wish to hear her laugh."
Darcy looked at his friend wonderingly. Though he knew well Bingley's powers of observation and capability for seriousness, both of which serves him well in expanding the Bingley fortune, he had not thought that such tendencies would carry so well to his personal life. For all his outward charm, Bingley was also not one to make decisions lightly. "Perhaps you and Miss Elizabeth should trade notes on studies of character. I do not believe anyone, other than perhaps her sisters, can read Miss Bennet so well. Miss Elizabeth did reveal to me that the loss of their mother left deep impressions on each sister. The strongest impact was felt by the eldest Miss Bennet. From all that I have heard and all that I have seen, she has responded to her responsibilities quite well. Certainly her siblings look to her to maintain the peace of the household and ensure that the daily nuisances of running a receive their proper care. I had not thought to see beyond her placid countenance or ponder her feelings on the situation."

Bingley smiled, "I would not have expected you to do so. Not only have you been rather…distracted… by the presence of another Bennet sister, but you have always been dedicated to your duty. Indeed, you have always known of the expectations placed upon you. The Darcys are an old and established family and though you too have had to shoulder responsibilities at a younger age than expected, you could count on the experience of your forbearers and the Darcy name itself; you have been trained since birth to know not only the duties expected of you but also how to perform those tasks. But the Bingley's are a relatively new family and I have been charged with the task of forging a new path so that our name will gain new respectability. Though I am glad for your aid and the opportunity your cousin has provided me in allowing me to acquire the new skills here at Netherfield, this task sometimes weighs heavily on me. Miss Bennet bears a similar burden. Though Longbourn has an heir and is no doubt a prosperous estate, as the eldest of four sisters, she must marry well. And I think Miss Bennet knows this fact and might, in consideration for her family, sacrifice her own happiness for duty."

"I suppose you are speaking not only of Miss Bennet but also of yourself."

"Indeed. To elevate the Bingley name, my own marriage need be based on careful consideration so that I can add credibility to our status among the gentry. Thus, though I do not agree with Caroline's prior manners with respect to her pursuit of you, I can understand her reasoning. What luck then that Miss Bennet should be the daughter of a gentleman and I an aspiring gentleman with a fortune."

As he poured himself a glass of brandy, Darcy remarked, "But that seems so…calculated."

Taking another sip of his drink, Bingley answered, "Maybe so, particularly to you who has the freedom of choice. Certainly the Ton will be aghast should you marry a young lady of no great fortune and few connections, but the worth of the Darcy name will soon allow them to focus on a new distraction. But I cannot completely ignore the businessman in myself…You need not look so concerned, Darcy, for me or for Miss Bennet. After seeing the genuine affection between your cousin and his new bride, the Gardiners, and even the Lord and Lady Matlock, I am quite convinced that a happy home is worth more than doing my duty. Indeed, seeing the joy in their unions has shown me that happiness and duty are not mutually exclusive. I truly believe I can come to care for Miss Bennet just as much as, if you will forgive my presumptiveness, you care for Miss Elizabeth. Indeed, I already find myself sufficiently intrigued and perhaps a little drawn towards her. The practical consequences of pursuing her, should my instincts prove correct and the lady grow to return my affections, are just added benefits."

Taking a drink from his own glass, Darcy stated, "I think most people underestimate you, Charles. Behind your geniality and sometimes fanciful remarks hides a very practical mind. You weigh your decisions with much more care than people may credit you. It is no wonder that you have profoundly added to the Bingley fortune."
Bingley dismissed his friend’s remarks kindly, "But like you, I think I grow weary of the bounds of practicality. If given the choice between my happiness and my duty, I fear I will disappoint my ancestors and choose to be selfish. Fortunately, I hope neither of us will have to face such a decision. We can only see what tomorrow will bring."

"And that is a thought I can drink to." So saying, both friends raised their glasses in a silent pledge of mutual support.
The next morning saw a flurry of activity in Longbourn as the Bennets made a failing attempt to contain their excitement. Tommy was so enthralled with the small glimpse he had caught of Darcy’s friend that he insisted on holding onto his fishing rod throughout breakfast and continually packed and repacked the little box of gear that he had received for his birthday. Even Mr. Bennet found that his spirits were raised by the happiness that permeated the household and used various fishing related problems for Tommy’s arithmetic lesson.

The inhabitants of Netherfield also found themselves in good cheer and could little restrain their impatience.

Kitty, who was in the front garden gathering fresh flower bouquets for the household vases, was the first to spy the coming carriage. Quickly grabbing her basket, she rushed to the main house to warn her sisters. Elizabeth, just finishing her weekly report on the tenants for her father, stood in alarm at her news, “Oh! But they are early! Papa and Tommy are still closeted in the study, Mary has yet to return from visiting Mrs. Brown, and Jane is still supervising the packing of the baskets!”

As though Elizabeth’s words had summoned her, Jane entered the room bearing a large basket. “I do believe Mrs. Hill, bless her, outdid herself. I only had to step into the kitchen for cook to hand me the prepared basket.” Seeing her sisters’ faces, Jane paused, “Whatever is the matter?”

The words were barely out of her mouth when the Netherfield party entered with two baskets of their own. After the good mornings were exchanged, Georgiana said with a slight blush, “I hope you will forgive our early arrival; I simply could not sit still and wait any longer and begged my brother to allow us to leave earlier than we had planned. Though, I see we have indeed come too early. Oh, I am sorry!”

Elizabeth laughed, “You needn’t apologize, Georgie. I just hope you do not mind that we may be negligent hosts for a little while.”

Darcy stepped forward with his basket, “Perhaps it may help that our cook has decided to prepare a feast for us already.”

Examining the mouth-watering offerings from Netherfield, Jane was quick to exclaim, “Oh dear! I fear your cook must be much like ours in packing more than we could possibly eat. It would not do for these delicious items to spoil in the day’s warmth; we should probably sort through them and take only what we will need.”

Kitty smiled at her sister, “Do not worry Jane, Georgie and I are fully capable of accomplishing that task. Why do you and Lizzy not take the gentlemen to Oakham Mount first? We can meet you there once Mary returns.”

Sparing a shy glance at Bingley, Jane blushed slightly, “Kitty, I am not sure it is proper for us to go without a chaperon.”

Kitty laughed slightly, “Then take Tommy with you. In fact, I think I can hear him in the hall now. It would be good exercise for him; I imagine the climb might tire him out enough so that he will not scare away the fish with his enthusiasm later during the day.”

At the still doubtful look on Jane's face, Georgiana spoke up, “Oh do let us sort through the food, Jane. You and Lizzy should have time to rest a while during this beautiful day. Think of it as an
opportunity for Kitty and I to practice our skills in housekeeping. You can pass judgment on our efforts during luncheon!"

Elizabeth linked her arm through her sister's, “Well Jane, I think they leave us little choice but to follow their plan.” Looking at Darcy and Bingley, she added, “That is, if the gentlemen are agreeable as well?”

Darcy and Bingley looked at each other and, mindful of the previous night's conversation, nodded resolutely.

With a wide smile, Bingley bowed gallantly, “I would be honored to escort such lovely ladies on this adventure.”

Jane sighed in defeat and handed her basket to Kitty. “Very well, allow me to speak to Papa.”

Mr. Bennet easily gave his permission, “It will be good for me to have a small respite from the young scamp before I join you with the other ladies.” His fond smile at Tommy made the young boy know that his father was merely teasing.

And so, Jane and Lizzy grabbed appropriate headgear and allowed Tommy to lead the expedition. The young lad, delighted that Mr. Bingley was of a humorous spirit and, more importantly, of shorter stature than Mr. Darcy, lost no time in pouring forth all manners of questions as to the gentlemen’s experience with the noble sport of fishing.

Chuckling at his insatiable curiosity, Kitty and Georgiana turned to the task of consolidating the large collection of food. Before they could begin, however, Mr. Bennet made certain to ask, with a sparkle in his eyes, “Kitty, dear, do my eyes deceive me or are you trying to play matchmaker?”

Despite her blush, Kitty responded with a toss of her head, “Oh Papa, I am not merely trying!”

“Hmm. My goodness, you are as determined as your Aunt Philips to rob me of my daughters! If I subscribed to her belief, I should have no use for daughters save for the sons they may bring home to me. Nonetheless, I am determined that you shall have only sons, so that young Lucas will not have to suffer the indignity of such loss.”

“Oh Papa!”

“Ah, yes, laugh if you will, silly thing that you are. You would have found a willing enough partner in your Mama, but I fear your poor Papa is doomed to suffer loneliness in his old age.”

Kitty kissed her father’s cheek in reply, “You shall always have Tommy.”

“Hmm. And he shall certainly drive me to an early grave. Still, I suppose such a fate is better than Bedlam.”

“I cannot help but wish for happiness for my sisters and am not above providing the circumstances to allow for such happiness.”

Mr. Bennet’s expression softened at Kitty’s reply even as Georgiana admitted, “I must own that I am a co-conspirator in this task. I would so love to have Lizzy as a sister. She would fill Pemberley with such laughter!”

Her host nodded knowingly, “And I suppose Mary is the third in your merry group.”

At the girls' guilty nods, he shook his head, “You are determined to conspire against me! But like you, Kitty, I find that I cannot deny them a chance to be happy. Besides, did you not tell Tommy
that he would not be losing sisters but gaining brothers? I suppose that means I will be gaining more sons...a thought that will provide your Aunt Philips with much joy.” Looking at Georgiana thoughtfully, he added, “Though if all my new sons have sisters, I suppose I can be satisfied with new daughters as well.”

As Georgiana’s smile grew, Mary’s gentle voice rang out from the doorway, “I am glad you think so, Papa, for we already look upon Georgie as one of our own.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled, “Then you must find a gentleman with sisters, Mary. No less than ten will do, I insist upon it! For now, I will not interfere, unless I feel that I really ought to, for I trust in your sensible judgment.”

Mary gave her father a hug, “Thank you Papa; your approval means much to us.”

Kitty nodded in agreement from her place next to Georgiana. Mr. Bennet looked at his girls with misty eyes but then cleared his throat, “I will leave you girls to your task and go examine my own fishing gear. It would not do to lose to Tommy once again in catching the largest fish!”

Unaware of the important conversation taking place in Longbourn, the elder two Bennets were trying their hardest to keep from laughing at the mind-boggling speed with which Tommy fired questions at Darcy and Bingley.

When the young boy finally paused for a breath after asking the other two gentlemen whether they thought fish had their own language and if they did whether it was possible to learn to speak it, Elizabeth could not help but let her laughter escape, “Tommy! What a question! I really must speak to Kitty about the manners of stories she creates for you…Or maybe you no longer need her tales but can surpass them with your own?”

Tommy merely grinned cheekily and instead turned to Darcy, “Do you ever tell stories, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy smiled indulgently down at him, “I am not in the habit of creating fanciful narratives, but my sister does greatly enjoy the impressions I do of people I meet.”

His eyes shining brightly, Tommy looked at Darcy pleadingly, “Oh, please, will you not show me?”

Taking a moment to consider, Darcy glanced at Elizabeth with a playful look, gave Tommy a small wink, cleared his throat, and repeated as best he could a few words from the initial meeting in the reading room.

Delighted at the uncanny likeness of Darcy's voice and tone to that of his favorite sister, Tommy clapped merrily even as Elizabeth fixed Darcy with a look of mock indignation, “Though I remain impressed with your particular talent, Mr. Darcy, I do not know if I enjoy being the subject of your sport…I see you have already corrupted my brother into your accomplice in teasing me! Though maybe it is Tommy who has corrupted you!”

Knowing her words were in jest, Tommy's grin only widened even more, causing Elizabeth to retaliate through tickles. Shrieking with laughter, Tommy danced away and then turned to run forward on the path, calling over his shoulder, “Come Lizzy, Mr. Darcy! See if you can catch me!”

Turning to her companions apologetically, Elizabeth curtsied briefly, “I do beg your forgiveness for the impropriety of my future actions. But I cannot allow this challenge to go unheeded!”

To her surprise, Darcy nodded his head and said, “Have no fear Miss Elizabeth, I do believe I will join you in catching the little troublemaker.”
Laughing merrily, both turned to chase after Tommy's retreating figure.

Left behind on the path, Bingley and Jane found themselves quite alone in their more sedate pace. Eager to see if his impressions of the lady were correct, Bingley broke the companionable silence, “Have you ever wondered, Miss Bennet, if your brother possesses some elven heritage? I do not believe I have ever met a lad as curious as he…nor one with such obvious enjoyment of life and such power over those around him. Why, he even influenced Darcy to break convention and run after him!”

Jane chuckled lightly, “Tommy is a very special boy, to be sure. I think somehow all the best attributes of my sister are combined in him. He has Lizzy's intelligence, Kitty's imagination, and Mary's sweetness. He even shares in Papa's strong dedication to family. For all that he is but seven, he is adamant about protecting my sisters and me.”

Turning to her inquisitively, Bingley asked, “And what of yourself, Miss Bennet?”

Jane blushed slightly, “I…I have not given much thought to the matter.”

“Then allow me to share my impressions, if you would not mind, Miss Bennet.” At Jane's nod, Bingley continued, “I believe that young Mr. Bennet is perhaps too young for the attribute he received from you to be obvious. But I do think as he grows older, he will have a strong sense of considerations for the thoughts and feelings of others. Though Miss Elizabeth has no doubt played a role in stressing such a lesson in interacting with your tenants, I believe it is from you that he will have learned to curb his own selfishness. He can easily become spoiled, but for the good nature he shares with you.”

Jane’s silence caused him to pause on the path, “Forgive me! I presumed much…”

“Please,” Jane replied, her composure and her pace regained, “you have no cause to apologize. I forgot, you see, that you are acquainted with my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner as well as Lizzy and Mary. We are as yet strangers in person, but not strangers, I think, in our knowledge of one another.”

“No. I have heard only the most complimentary remarks from your family.”

“They are too kind,” Jane murmured before asking more boldly, “You have two sisters of your own?”

Bingley nodded, “But I am envious of your brother; his sisters present more unity than mine ever have.”

Jane smiled kindly, “I think you have too rosy a view of the Bennets. Longbourn is no stranger to noisy days.”

“If Tommy is anything like the adventurous youth I was, I can imagine well the uproar.”

“Tommy does his share, but my sisters and I are not blameless. As a child, Kitty was prone to illness, none of severity, but a lingering cough that did little for Mama’s frayed nerves. Mary had little opportunity to practice her pianoforte, for Mama often complained of headaches. So her chords were less than melodious. But I suppose with Lizzy forever coming home with ripped hems and muddy skirts, Mama had good cause to wish for quiet.”

“Did you not have a governess?”

“Papa declared that none could survive us after Lizzy snuck slugs into poor Miss Hampton’s
“sewing basket.”

“I cannot imagine that you did not attempt to stop her.”

“I have no memory of it, being but four at the time, but I do not imagine I could have. Even then, Lizzy’s stubbornness was without equal.”

“‘Tis well she did not know my sister. Caroline once sheared off a good length of our governess’s hair when Miss Davies dared to suggest that my sister repeat a lesson.”

“Oh my. They would have been quite the terrors!”

“Of course, once Caroline became the grand age of eight, she deemed such deeds un-ladylike. I think she finally grew tired of the praise and attention Louisa received for her demureness.”

“I cannot imagine having such a contentious relationship with my sisters.”

Bingley chuckled, “No, I expect not. You are too kind to foster conflict and too good to inspire jealousy, Miss Bennet.”

A blushing Jane was saved from responding as Tommy announced his presence with a rush of footsteps. “Come, Jane, Lizzy and Mr. Darcy already set up the blanket at the top, beneath that great big tree. I had almost forgotten how tall the Mount is…why I think you can see all the way to London from there!”

Chuckling at his enthusiasm, Jane and Bingley allowed themselves to be pulled forward around the last bend in the path.

Seating themselves beside Elizabeth and Darcy, they dutifully surveyed the surrounding countryside and looked at the landmarks Tommy assiduously pointed out, particularly the stream on the other side where the gentlemen were to fish later that day. When the lad paused for breath, Bingley commented, “Hertfordshire is indeed a beautiful country…one can feel quite at peace surrounded by the rolling hills, the sprawling meadows, and the bubbling brooks. Truly a peaceful place that soothes the soul.”

Darcy remarked, “Why Bingley, I had no idea you were a poet!”

Bingley just smiled serenely and quoted, with his eyes on Jane, “A Poet could not but be gay, In such a jocund company.”

Elizabeth noted his look and the returning blush on her sisters’ cheeks and allowed herself a brief moment of satisfaction. Nonetheless, knowing of Jane’s inherent shyness, Elizabeth sought to divert the attention from her sister. “I must own that this is one of my favorite locations in the region. I fear when I was younger, I would often escape here to avoid the various tasks given to me.”

Darcy turned to her, surprised at her comment, “Oh? You mean you were not always the responsible young lady I know you to be?”

Jane chuckled, “It is surprising, is it not? But I fear Lizzy is correct, thought perhaps because those particular tasks were not much to her liking. Mama always did despair of Lizzy’s lack of interest in ribbons and laces and her inability to sew in a straight line.”

Laughing, Elizabeth nodded, “I fear I was not a very proper young lady.”

Tommy, who had been inspecting the large tree under the shade of which the group sat, cried out
in surprise, “Lizzy! Is this your name I see here?!”

Rising to join him, Lizzy traced her fingers over the uneven 'E.B' curved into the side at the height of a young child. “Why yes, Tommy, it is.”

The rest of the group joined them in appreciation of the mark as Elizabeth explained, “I must have made this when I was about your age...I think Mama was complaining of her nerves again, Mary was just learning to play the pianoforte, and Kitty was crying over something or other. Jane must have been trying to soothe her. But I simply could not stand the noise any longer and so made my escape.”

Darcy observed, “It is a long way for a child to go, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth shook her head in reply, “Even then, I was quite the adventurer. Though I do remember being so exhausted that I fell asleep leaning against the trunk. Fortunately, Sir William and his son found me on their way to fish in the stream and returned me to Longbourn before anyone noticed my absence. And to think, now Mr. Lucas is courting Kitty! How quickly time passes.” Breaking the pensive silence as the group returned to their picnic blanket, she asked, “And what of you, Mr. Darcy, were you always the proper gentleman you are now?”

Bingley chuckled, “I would have said, before today, that I had a difficult time imagining Darcy as a child. For all his good humor, Darcy has always carried himself so properly that I could not imagine a young Darcy soiling his clothing climbing trees. Such behavior would certainly have been beneath his dignity.”

Jane asked with a smile, “You speak as though from experience, Mr. Bingley.”

Bingley nodded, “I can only be frank and say that I was the bane of my sisters' efforts to have proper tea-parties with their dolls. But it was much more fun to pretend to be a giant than to sit and listen to their idle chatter.”

To which Darcy said with raised eyebrows, “Now that image I can easily picture. As for misadventures of my own childhood, I am afraid our housekeeper at Pemberley would gladly tell such tales should you choose to visit. But I had the happy excuse of not being alone in my adventures...George and I could claim equal blame for much of our misdeeds.”

Jane asked curiously, “George? I was not aware you had a brother, Mr. Darcy.” But seeing the quick shadow that passed Darcy's face, she was quick to regret her inquiry. “Forgive me, I had not meant to pry into your memories.”

Sensing Darcy's reluctance to reply, Bingley explained softly, “George Wickham is the son of the late Mr. Darcy's steward. Indeed, Darcy's father was Wickham's godfather and raised Darcy and Wickham almost as brothers. Sadly, Wickham has not turned out to be the gentleman old Mr. Darcy hoped he would be. I fear Darcy still blames himself, though wrongly of course, for not playing a larger role in helping guide Wickham along the right path.”

As he spoke, Darcy silently stood and moved closer to the tree where Tommy was in search of a rock to carve his own initials into the bark, next to his sister's. Upon hearing Bingley's explanation, Elizabeth likewise stood and moved to join him. Seeing the tense set of his shoulders and the furrow between his brows, she surprised even herself by taking one of his hands in hers. Startled at the gentle pressure of her hand, Darcy turned to look at her and made to speak, only to have Elizabeth shake her head.

“We each have our crosses to bear, Mr. Darcy, you need not speak of yours if it brings you such grief. Though I now understand your question regarding Tommy's interactions with the tenant
children better… I can only imagine that Mr. Wickham was one who came to resent the difference in your stations.”

The softness of Darcy’s voice did not lessen the anguish of his words, “I do not know if it is grief for George I feel, or merely sympathy for my father’s disappointments. I knew quite early the manner of man George had become and yet, there was naught I could do to turn him from his path. Sometimes I look at Bingley and even Richard, I see the man that George, had he put forth the effort, could have been… I think it is also for our lost friendship that I mourn. Despite the gap between us now, we had at one time been the best of playmates.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “That may be so, but we each also choose our own paths. I do not know the particulars of what occurred, and I have no wish to know unless it would ease your burden, but I do know that you are not responsible for his actions any more than I am responsible for that of my sisters, no matter our closeness… Do not blame yourself, for such behavior only absolves Mr. Wickham of his part in his crimes. You should not be obliged to shoulder the blame for something he has done.”

Darcy let out a deep sigh at her insight into his emotions. “Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I think both Richard and Georgie have been trying to tell me so for a long while now…”

Elizabeth nodded in acknowledgement of their wisdom, “But they are family and perhaps too close to the situation. Whereas I am an outsider who has the benefit of objectivity. I just hope that you will begin to believe in our words.”

Quite unconsciously, he lifted her hand and pressed upon it a soft kiss. “I can only promise to try.”

Blushing at the tenderness of the moment, Elizabeth squeezed his hand to let him know that she was not offended at his breach in propriety before withdrawing her hand. “And I know you to be a man of honor, so I trust in the strength of such a promise. Now come, perhaps we should lend Tommy a hand, he does seem to be struggling so with that rock of his. Do you perhaps have a pocket knife that you can lend him for his task?”

Though Darcy admitted that he did not think to bring his pocketknife with him, Bingley did when applied to, which did much to earn him great favor from Tommy. Indeed, once he finished his task, with the help of that gentleman, Tommy turned to him and said seriously, out of hearing of his sisters, “I like you, Mr. Bingley, almost as much as I like Mr. Darcy. In fact, if you wish to continue your friendship with my sisters, I would gladly give both of you leave.”

As Bingley blinked in surprise at the insightfulness of the young boy, Darcy understood the gravity of his comment. Nodding solemnly, Darcy said, “Thank you, Mr. Bennet. I promise to be a good friend to your sister.” An action which Bingley, recalling Jane's words regarding Tommy's protectiveness, was quick to replicate.

Tommy nodded somberly before his youth exerted itself once more. With a wide grin, he exclaimed, “Oh look! I can see Papa and Mary and Kitty and Georgie on the path! They are just in time as my stomach is starting to make funny noises!” So saying, he turned to wave at the figures making their way up to the summit. Chuckling at his infectious cheerfulness, Darcy and Bingley joined him as he made his way towards the blanket to share his observation with Jane and Elizabeth.
On the day of the Meryton assembly, Mr. Bennet found his study to be a particular beneficial place of refuge as his usually tidy home seemed almost to burst with ribbons, sashes, and girlish giggles. He did not truly mind the commotion, removed as he was from it via a most dependable door. His daughters would call on him when his presence was required, and not a minute sooner. Surely, he preferred his books for company, but even he could not deny his daughters the chance for merriment. Indeed, Mr. Bennet, having a great fondness for the country and the amusement his neighbors afforded him, could not claim complete apathy to assemblies. Being fully aware of his own follies, he could thoroughly enjoy the silliness of the besotted youths who trailed after Jane or the furrowed brows of the young men who dared to converse with Lizzy. His trust in his daughters’ abilities to dispatch of unwanted suitors may well be interpreted as negligence, but he had long accepted the truth that he was ill-equipped to provide proper guidance in the matter of matrimony. That his daughters so obviously wished for his good opinions regarding the suitors they had chosen was touching because of the non-necessity of such a gesture.

A knock on the door disrupted his thoughts. With a word of assent, it opened to reveal his eldest daughter.

“Ah, Jane! How well you look! But my opinions will surely pale in comparison to the compliments of your young man.”

“You know I do not care for the attention of so many gentlemen, Papa.”

“They are doomed to failure, the poor milksops, for they can speak not a word of sense in your presence. But do not judge them too harshly; they are not the first nor will they be the last to be struck simple by the allure of youth and beauty.”

“Oh Papa.”

“Besides, you mistake me, my dear, I refer to one particular gentleman of your acquaintance.”

Jane blushed prettily even as she made an attempt at denial.

“I only hope that Mr. Darcy is at least a passable dancer, else his quietness will make him an undesirable companion.”

“Mr. Darcy!” was Jane’s startled exclamation.

“Why yes, your Aunt Philips has assured me that a Bennet will surely become mistress of Pemberley before the summer’s end. And I dared not contradict her for fear of upsetting her nerves; your uncle would not thank me for it.”

“Oh, but…”

Before Jane could complete her thought, however, Mr. Bennet had made to join the rest of his daughters. Through the open doorway, she could hear Georgiana’s voice and Elizabeth’s answering laugh. “I must return to Netherfield to ensure that my brother will keep his promise to you, Lizzy. He is not above slipping a pebble into his boot to feign injury!”

“Well, Jane, shall we join your sisters?” Mr. Bennet asked expectantly.

“Papa, you cannot mean Mr. Darcy!” Jane insisted.
“No? But your aunt is convinced he is halfway in love with you already. My, what an unpromising turn of events. A girl might enjoy being crossed in love to give her distinction among her peers, but for a young man, even one as dignified as Mr. Darcy, such a state can only be cause for scorn.”

At the troubled look on his daughter’s face, Mr. Bennet made an effort at reassurance, “But I care not for the young men’s plight. No, my priority is my daughters’ happiness. And Mr. Darcy, for all his fortune, cannot buy my acceptance if you are determined to refuse him.”

So saying, he turned his attention elsewhere, “Ah, my dear girls, how lovely you look! I do not think I will complain at having my house turned into a haberdashery or a ribbon shop if it results in such visions.”

Mary smiled, “We have Georgie to thank! She shared with us many of her observations of the latest fashions from her time in London.”

“Oh, my contribution is very little. I do think, though, that love can be a great beautifier.”

Ignoring her friend’s pointed look, Elizabeth nudged Kitty playfully, “Mr. Lucas will surely be the recipient of many jealous glances tonight with you on his arm.”

Mr. Bennet laughed, "I see Tommy's idea for me to bring a sword with me to chase away the suitors tonight does have merit after all. Though he did make it known to me, before he went to bed most reluctantly, that I should feel free to be less severe with his friends. A most peculiar request, I assure you. I must admit, it will take a little practice for me to be used to taking advice from a seven-year-old."

Elizabeth’s voice betrayed none of her hesitation, "And do you intend to practice tonight, Papa?"

“Hmm...no time like the present to start. Of course, I cannot be too generous, even for your brother’s sake...It is one of the few pleasures of a father in such a circumstance, to strike some fear into his daughters’ admirers. It would not do to make it too easy. On that, I am certain even Tommy would agree.”

The Bennets arrival at the assembly drew wide smiles from their neighbors, who knew the Bennet ladies well. True to prediction, John Lucas could be seen gazing at Kitty with such devotion that Lady Lucas immediately began to plan the wedding breakfast menu in her mind. Jane, of course, was quickly whisked away to the dance floor and, to her surprise, so was Mary. Fighting the blush in her cheek as she overheard Mrs. Long’s passing remark that Mary Bennet seemed to have blossomed at last, Mary made a silent note to thank Georgiana with a new piece of music.

Elizabeth's smile at the happy occupations of her sisters broadened as she spied her good friend Charlotte Lucas. Despite being a year Jane’s senior, Charlotte had always preferred Elizabeth's livelier disposition. Indeed, when both girls were younger, they would more often be found searching the woods for pirate treasure than sipping tea with their dolls. But like Jane, Charlotte also knew that, as the older daughter, she had a responsibility to marry well. Unlike Jane, however, Charlotte did not possess a natural beauty on which she could rely. Rather than becoming resentful, Charlotte had decided not to dwell on something she could not change. Ever practical, she made certain that she was a capable housekeeper and read broadly so that at least in conversation, she would not be found wanting.

At the moment, however, Charlotte was too happy to think on the realities of her situation. "My dear Lizzy, you have been unkind to keep me in the dark about the Darcys!"

Elizabeth laughed, "I do apologize, Charlotte, but there was little enough to tell beyond what I had
already shared. Mary and I made the acquaintance of the Darcys whilst in London and are only too glad to continue the friendship."

Charlotte frowned slightly, "You have not heard the rumors then?"

Elizabeth looked alarmed, "Rumors?"

Charlotte nodded, "Mama is not one to let gossip pass unheard; she has lamented quite often lately that Kitty would tell her nothing of the new residents of Netherfield and is quite indignant that Mrs. Philips actually met young Miss Darcy. Your aunt made much of the fact that you and your sisters are so well acquainted with the Darcys."

Elizabeth sighed in relief, "I am glad that Aunt Philips refrained from embellishment."

Charlotte shook her head, "Do not rejoice too early, my friend. Mrs. Philips was full of kind words for your selflessness in making the acquaintance of such a wealthy young gentleman so that Jane might dazzle him with her beauty and thus raise the fortunes of your entire family."

Caught between disbelief and laughter, Elizabeth settled on a fit of light coughing.

Charlotte looked as amused as Elizabeth felt, "Indeed, that was my reaction to such a ridiculous notion…or rather, it would have been had I been anywhere but our sitting room. But I really doubt Mama or Mrs. Philips would have appreciated having tea poured into their laps."

Stifling her chuckle, Elizabeth agreed, "Certainly not."

Charlotte continued, "I know you too well to think that you would be friends with someone who cared so much for outward appearance. But I do claim curiosity at Mr. Darcy’s character. I can little imagine that you have not already rendered an opinion."

Elizabeth made to reply but her attention was caught by the sudden hush in the room as the gentleman of their conversation arrived at the assembly. Bingley’s customary good-natured smile served to emphasize Darcy’s formal bearings. As Sir William made his way to perform his duties as the Master of Ceremonies, Elizabeth caught Darcy’s eye with an encouraging smile. Though he did not return the expression in kind, Darcy lost a little of his tenseness. Turning back to Charlotte, Elizabeth said with a no small amount of mischief in her voice, "Mayhaps you will discover for yourself soon."

Indeed, Sir Lucas was already walking with the two gentlemen in their direction. "Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, allow me to introduce you to my daughter Charlotte and her good friend Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I do hope you are fond of dancing, for both young ladies are quite sought after as partners. What luck that you have caught them in a free moment."

Bingley nodded in acknowledgement of Sir Lucas's words, "Ah, I am indeed quite fond of dancing. Perhaps you might join me for a turn, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth happily agreed and, with one more look at Darcy, followed Bingley towards the dancers. Left to his own devices, Darcy found himself glaring slightly at Bingley's retreating back for stealing the first dance with Miss Elizabeth. But catching the arch of her brows, he remembered his promise and turned to his companion. "Miss Lucas, I hope you would do me the honor of a dance."

Watching from her place on the dance floor, Elizabeth was much relieved as Darcy showed himself to be a most capable dancer. Bingley’s chuckle brought her attention back to her own partner. Smiling ruefully, Elizabeth said, "I do apologize, Mr. Bingley, for I fear I am being a poor partner."
"Have no fear, Miss Elizabeth, for I too am anxious to see the results of your tutelage. I do know that Darcy had hoped to secure you for the first dance, but I thought it would be more fitting if he were to put forth his new skills to practice immediately…what is it that the Colonists say? Sink or swim is it?"

Elizabeth chuckled, "And it seems he is managing to stay afloat for now, though Charlotte is one of the more sensible young ladies I know. I do wonder if he would do as well with one of the sillier girls."

Bingley's eyes twinkled in mirth, "Then you must point them out so that I can be sure to approach them… with Darcy at my side, of course."

"Poor Mr. Darcy, little does he know that his friends are hatching such devious plans for him."

"I would not go so far as to say devious…more like just providing the right venues for extra practice. That is, after all, the point of his attendance tonight, is it not?"

Elizabeth laughed, "No wonder Papa has made such positive remarks regarding Tommy's progress with arithmetic…you are indeed a most strict tutor. Though, if I may be so bold, what of your purpose in attending, Mr. Bingley? Surely you are not in need of extra practice as well."

Bingley's eyes betrayed him as they strayed towards a blond head on the other side of the room. Elizabeth nodded to herself knowingly as she commented, "Ah, perhaps practice of a different kind…I do hope, Mr. Bingley, that you are aware that young ladies may not be as open with their regard for fear of idle gossip. But we Bennets are known for our loyalty, to one another and to those we truly care for, and even the shyest dispositions may hide a most passionate nature, particularly if we sense a threat."

Satisfied with Bingley's solemn nod showing his understanding of both her advice and her warning, Elizabeth curtsied as the strains of music drew to a close, "Go forth, Mr. Bingley, I wish you luck."

Bingley bowed but had one more thought to impart, "Miss Elizabeth, I hope you will take heed of your own words as well."

John Lucas's request for the next dance prevented Elizabeth from pondering the meanings of Bingley's words but when Darcy finally managed to secure her as a partner for the third dance with a look of profound satisfaction, she thought she quite understood.

"I hope my performance has been to your satisfaction thus far, Miss Elizabeth."

"I find that I must confer with Charlotte as well, for her impressions matter much, but I do not believe her comments will be unfavorable, particularly as you danced with her sister for the second set."

“Miss Maria is very different from her sister.” Darcy said neutrally.

Fighting a chuckle, Elizabeth nodded agreeably, “But no less pleasant I hope?”

“She is…tolerable I suppose.”

“Only tolerable? Why, Maria is quite the expert on lace; you must have gleaned some wisdom so as better to accompany Georgiana in her search for new trimmings for her bonnet!”

“I cannot offer sound judgment for I do not believe she spoke more than three phrases on that or
any other matter.”

“And were you discomfted by her silence? How very odd, Mr. Darcy.”

“Odd, Miss Elizabeth?”

When the dance returned her to his side, she was glad to see the hint of a smile. “Oh but of course. I was given the impression that you preferred silence during a dance.”

“You were misinformed.”

“Was I? And I have such trust in the source of my information, a gentleman intimately familiar with you I believe.”

“Then he has misled you most unkindly. I prefer silence only when intelligent conversation is lacking.”

“And do talk of gowns and fashion suit?”

“Only when they serve a need. As you said, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Maria’s insights might have been helpful in making me a better companion for my sister.”

“Poor Maria, your reputation must have frightened her.”

“Perhaps her conversation would not have been intelligent, if she could allow such a silly thing as reputation to influence her behavior.”

Elizabeth laughed as his smile showed itself at last.

With a pleased look, Darcy asked, “Dare I venture to guess from your smile that your assessment is a favorable one?”

“I hate to disappoint in saying that my smile derives not from your behavior but that of another.”

"Am I such a poor partner that I have lost your attention already?"

"Not at all, Mr. Darcy. It is only that I believe I have underestimated Mr. Bingley…I do believe I received a warning of sorts just now."

At Darcy’s furrowed eyebrows, she continued, "You need not worry so, for his words only raised my estimation of his character and his dedication to his friends."

"Will you never stop speaking in riddles, Miss Elizabeth?"

Looking almost shyly at him, Elizabeth had only the chance to say, "That depends, Mr. Darcy,” before the steps of the dance separated them once more.

When they were reunited, Darcy commented, "How clever of you, to answer with yet another riddle."

"A lady cannot divulge all her secrets, else how is she to retain a gentleman’s attention? It would not do for him to see her too well; without the mystery, he might discover that she is not as clever as she might seem."

Though her words were stated with her usual teasing tone, Darcy could not help but feel that Elizabeth was telling him a larger truth about herself. Her next remark, however, gave him little time to pursue his suspicions.
“I did not think you would admit defeat so soon.”

“Defeat?”

“Why, yes! You danced but two songs before seeking my company, even when other young ladies stand without partners.”

“I only wished to ensure you had no further instructions to give.”

“How reasonable an answer! Very well, I will grant you a dance with each of my sisters so that you may gain some reprieve during the evening.”

“You are too kind.”

“I am not unreasonable, Mr. Darcy. I know this evening requires no small effort on your part. Though, I imagine your presence may be the result of the lack of a suitable pebble.”

“Georgie is determined to divulge all my secrets.”

“Only the ones most certain to cause embarrassment.”

“The prerogative of sisters?”

“You do learn uncommonly fast, Mr. Darcy.”

“I have a most capable teacher, Miss Elizabeth.”

Smiling, Elizabeth curtsied, “I thank you for the dance, Mr. Darcy, but you must complete your assignment.”

“Then I must go in search of Bingley.”

“Not Sir William?”

“As you so kindly reminded me, gentlemen are few tonight. I do not wish to malign Sir William, but I do think Bingley might be a better choice for young ladies wishing to dance.”

“If you continue to smile as you do, Mr. Darcy, you might not have need of Mr. Bingley’s assistance.”

“If my future company remains as pleasant as my present one, then my smile will naturally stay.”

Laughing now, Elizabeth replied, “You are an obliging pupil. As such, you had better not waste another moment.”

She was still smiling as she settled herself next to Jane.

“You seem amused, Lizzy.”

“I should not be at the misfortune of another.”

“Misfortune?”

“Mr. Darcy knows not what he has done.” She explained Darcy’s unknowing participation in Mr. Bingley’s plan.
“Poor Mr. Darcy.”

“You need not feel too much sympathy, Jane, for he did promise to practice tonight.”

“I suppose.”

“Oh Jane, Mr. Bingley’s happy manners will ensure that no offense will be taken.”

“He is certainly very amiable,” Jane admitted.

“And handsome and sensible and good-natured and thus everything a young man ought to be?”

Jane blushed even as she insisted, “Do not make me to be a swooning damsel in one of Kitty’s novels.”

“No, I suppose you would not be so effusive even though you do agree with the sentiment.”

“Lizzy!”

“Oh Jane, you need not fear admitting that you like him.”

Jane’s silence was her only reply.

Elizabeth sighed, “I should not press you so.” Jane’s smile indicated her forgiveness as the sisters’ conversation moved on to safer topics.

Nonetheless, Jane could not help but recall her own dance with Mr. Bingley.

“Forgive me, Miss Bennet, but you seem troubled.”

Jane started and almost missed the next step, “I do apologize for my inattention, Mr. Bingley.”

“No, please, I can be quite dull when I speak of business.”

“Not at all, Mr. Bingley; you demonstrate the same dedication to your profession that Lizzy shows towards the estate ledgers.”

“Though you are truly interested in neither.”

Jane blushed, “I lack the understanding I think. I am not as clever as my sister.”

“You are too generous, Miss Bennet. You forgive easily the faults of others but do not hesitate from maligning yourself.”

Jane knew not how to reply and so opted for silence.

“Forgive me; I ought not to be so open with my opinions.”

To his surprise, Jane responded with a shy smile, “I give you leave to speak freely, Mr. Bingley. In truth, I am wary of the careful speech of others.”

“Then you must allow me to tell you how beautiful you are.”

Jane flushed and would not meet his eyes.

“I should not make such inane comments; you must receive constant reminders of it.”
“Sometimes,” Jane murmured, “I wonder if it is not a curse.”

“You fear that others see no more than your appearance,” he said kindly after a pause.

She met his eyes, startled at such honesty.

His smile was too brittle to be an expression of joy, “I do not know how much you have been informed of my situation, Miss Bennet, but I must admit that my sisters and I are the first Bingleys to enjoy the comforts of our current wealth. My father's greatest wish was for me to bring new meaning to our name, a task that I may have been remiss in completing. As the younger brother, I fear I was always more inclined to act in such a way as was expected of me. My sister Caroline, in particular, is of a rather insistent temperament such that in order to keep the peace, I learned to claim the role of a cheerful fool. I suppose I became so practiced in such behaviors that it became almost second nature. Of course, I will not deny that it has its uses. But sometimes, I grow weary of hiding. Thus, I am glad of having friends such as Darcy, who abhors all manners of disguise, no matter how benign, and insist that I stay true to myself. Still, it does weigh on me that I cannot be so open with my own family…I greatly envy you your closeness with your sisters.”

Jane's brows furrowed at she caught the loneliness in Bingley's words, “But Georgie, that is, Miss Darcy, said that you are quite fond of company. Surely there are others with whom you feel comfortable being yourself as well.”

Bingley shook his head. “Alas. Though I do enjoy social gatherings, sometimes I can feel alone even in the midst of a crowd. Though we may seem different outwardly, Darcy and I are similar in that we find few that we are willing to trust and in whom to confide. But for him and now your uncle and the good Colonel, I have few confidantes. Perhaps my experiences in trade have marred my general optimism and led me to ponder at the motives of all those I meet.”

“Then I must thank you for the courtesy you have extended to me in terms of giving me your trust.”

He studied her carefully before admitting, “You possess such an air of serenity, Miss Bennet, that I cannot but be comfortable confiding in you. I imagine you have much practice in hearing the confessions of your siblings.”

She made no comment to deny his observation.

“Longbourn might be a noisy home, but you are the keeper of peace.”

“You give me too much credit; I do no more than is my duty.”

“And yet, in giving to others, sometimes you wonder if you have also lost yourself.”

Silence fell between them again until Jane met his eyes again, “I ought to be angry with you for your presumption.”

He inclined his head but made no attempt to apologize.

She sighed, “But I am not. I care deeply for my family. But sometimes, I wonder at who I have become. Lizzy has her books, Mary her music, and Kitty her art. But I… I have so long allowed the expectations of others to dictate my actions that I have scarcely given thought to my own wishes.”

Looking at her kindly, Bingley responded, “As my friend Darcy has recently discovered, one can always alter one’s behavior. One only has to…practice.”
Despite the somberness of her thoughts, Jane found herself returning his smile, “Though I do not think the practice of selfishness is usually encouraged.”

“Is it truly selfish to wish to avoid self-neglect?”

The end of the song prevented Jane from replying though, in truth, she found she had no answer to give.
The morning sun dawned on a rather sleepy Longbourn. But for Tommy's habitual high spirits as he begged his sisters for details from the assembly, the household remained rather quiet as each Bennet recuperated from the events of the prior evening in their own way. Jane could be seen gazing thoughtfully into space, the basket of sewing quite forgotten in her lap. Mary rustled through her music, seeking inspiration for a song that she could compose for Georgiana. Kitty sat petting Snowflake, a kitten from Snowball's last litter, with one hand as the other held her drawing pencil, poised to capture scenes from the Meryton assembly.

Even her tiredness, however, could not keep Elizabeth from her customary morning walk, though she did curtail the distance. Instead of tramping through her family's woods, Elizabeth found herself on the path to Lucas Lodge and, by happy coincidence, met Charlotte just as the elder Miss Lucas was on her way to Longbourn. Laughing at the similar intentions each had, the young ladies linked their arms and walked along the old creek just as they had done when they were little girls.

"Well Lizzy, for once I cannot censure Mama or Mrs. Philips for their interest in gossip. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley did provide quite the distraction at the assembly last night."

"And how did Lady Lucas react to Mr. Darcy dancing the first set with you?"

Charlotte chuckled, "Mama is as ecstatic as you can imagine. I am certain she will be bragging about the honor I had received to Mrs. Philips later...'twill be for naught, though, for it was quite obvious, at least to me, that Mr. Darcy has already lost his heart to another. Would you not agree, Lizzy?"

Fighting her blush, Elizabeth nonetheless tried to say nonchalantly, "I think him only well-mannered."

Charlotte shook her head at her old friend, "Oh Lizzy, you may be able to divert others with your apparent cleverness in changing the subject, but I know you too well to allow for such distractions. Mrs. Philips will not enjoy being proven wrong. But then, she always was partial to Jane."

“And who can blame her? Jane is all that is good and kind.” Elizabeth’s voice held no trace of envy.

“Certainly not Mr. Bingley,” Charlotte replied helpfully, “he attempted for subtlety, but Mama was quick to note that he danced twice only with Jane.”

Elizabeth only smiled in reply, “She will remind Aunt Philips of her observations, of course.”

“Of course.”

The two walked on in companionable silence before Charlotte commented, “You must encourage Jane to reveal more than she usually does.”

“Must I?”

“Even the most persistent suitor will surely give up without encouragement to spur his intentions.”

“And if Jane does not wish for his attentions?”
“Because he is only a tradesman?”

“Charlotte! Jane would never be so unkind. Besides, Mr. Bingley is a gentleman.”

“And a clever one at that; his respectability is cemented by his friendship with Mr. Darcy.”

Again, Elizabeth laughed, “How droll you are!”

Charlotte only shrugged noncommittally. “Jane is fortunate to have the freedom of choice.”

Her next comment was softer, “We are not all so fortunate.”

Lizzy paused in her step and turned startled eyes to her friend at the bitter tone, “Oh Charlotte.”

Miss Lucas shrank from the pity in her friend’s gaze. “Though you need not worry, Lizzy, for Mr. Darcy is more than a reasonable choice.”

Resisting a blush, Elizabeth insisted, “I have never known you to be such a romantic, Charlotte, and see things that simply are not there.”

Charlotte, however, remained undaunted, "And I think the lady doth protest too much. You forget, Lizzy, that I know you perhaps almost as well as your sisters do, and I have never seen you smile so kindly at a gentleman. And your name was often on his lips when he spoke of certain texts that he greatly enjoyed.”

Elizabeth sighed in defeat, "I suppose it is my own fault for enjoying such cleverness in my friends."

Despite her conviction at the truth of her own words, Charlotte still felt her eyes widen at the implied agreement in Elizabeth's words. "If I were of the temperament to squeal like Maria does, you can be sure that you may very well have lost your hearing. Elizabeth Bennet! What do you mean by keeping such a secret from your oldest friend?"

"I am not so certain I have any such secret."

Fighting the temptation to roll her eyes, Charlotte snorted in a distinctly unladylike manner, "Even you doubt the truth of that answer. I may not aspire for romance in my own life, but neither am I oblivious to such happenings around me. Though, Lizzy, are you certain you know what you are about? He is a handsome man, to be sure, and quite well connected if Mama and Mrs. Philips are to be believed. And I suppose I could find little fault in his manners during our brief interaction. But he is from above our social circles...though I know your courage would rise to the occasion quite admirably, I would hate for you to be thought of as a fortune hunter or worse... I would hate to see you be hurt unnecessarily and live to regret bestowing your regard on the gentleman.”

Though grateful at Charlotte's practical counsel, Elizabeth could not help but defend her friend. "He is too honest a man to give false hope.”

“Nonetheless, promise me you will tread carefully. Wounds of the heart are much more difficult to heal than wounds of the flesh. And though I believe Mr. Darcy to be as honorable as you claim, I do not believe even you can truly control your heart.”

“I should not encourage his attentions as Jane must do Mr. Bingley’s?”

“But she offers respectability in exchange for security.”

“How cold such a union would be! What of affection?”
“I have always thought that if feelings must be a factor, then it is better for the gentleman to care a little more than the lady.”

“You have such curious ideas, Charlotte! But despite your words, I know you would not truly behave in such a manner.”

A week passed peacefully, though not without significant laughter on Elizabeth’s part at Darcy’s irritation of the frequency of callers at Netherfield. Mrs. Philips’s vexation was great at Mr. Darcy’s lack of preference for her eldest niece. Despite the compliments she received regarding her dinner party, she remained peeved. Her refusal to speak of the gentleman lasted until Lady Lucas made an observation as to Mr. Bingley’s attentions. Charlotte silently observed Mrs. Philips's transformation but made no attempt to hide her amusement from Elizabeth.

“Mr. Darcy has returned to Mrs. Philips’s good graces, though Mr. Bingley has replaced him as her favorite. Her focus on bringing about the success of the match will allow your own courtship to pass unnoticed.”

Elizabeth knew better than to respond to her friend’s teasing. Waving good-bye to the Brown children, she reminded herself that the estate required her undivided attention. When she arrived at Longbourn, however, she was alarmed at the sight of an irate Mr. Bennet watching a black carriage leaving in a cloud of indignant dust. Forgoing decorum, she rushed to her father’s side, “Papa, what has happened?”

Mr. Bennet's shoulders slumped as he caught sight of his daughter. Nonetheless, he tried to make light of the matter. "Ah Lizzy, I see you have returned. I do hope your visit was satisfactory."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Brown is much recovered from her illness…Papa, something must have happened, you do not look at all well. Please, will you not go in and sit down?"

Waving aside her concern, Mr. Bennet insisted, "No, dear child, I fear I must leave for town on a matter of some delicacy."

Just then, the other Bennet ladies and an uncharacteristic sullen Tommy came down the stairs. Seeing their pale faces, Elizabeth grew even more concerned. "Something has happened, please Papa, tell me."

Mr. Bennet just sighed, "I regret that my task cannot wait, but I trust your sisters will explain the matter to your satisfaction. Only please, remain inside until I return." So saying, he went to grab his hat and call for the Bennet carriage.

Seeing the growing worry on Elizabeth's face, Jane drew a breath and said, "Come Lizzy, it may be best for you to be sitting for this."

Once settled, however, it seemed that no one knew quite where to begin. Finally, Elizabeth turned to Tommy, "What has happened?"

Tommy's scowl grew deeper as he muttered, "Stupid cousins with their stupid requests."

Mary made to admonish him, saying, "Tommy, you are being unkind!"

Tommy only shook his head petulantly, "Well, I am not sorry to have said it. He should not have angered Papa so."

Kitty nodded, "I fear I agree with Tommy on this matter."

Elizabeth digested their words and came to only one conclusion. "Cousins…You cannot mean
Mr. Collins!

The grimace on Tommy's face only confirmed her suspicions. "But...but...he has no cause to visit...not since Tommy's birth."

Jane's nodded and made to explain. "Mr. Collins had...another purpose..."

Elizabeth found herself growing impatient, "Well, what did he say?"

Kitty winced, "You know how thoughtless he can be. Even I remember how long-winded he was when we met him at Mama's funeral. Time has not improved his manners, I'm afraid. It took even Papa at least half an hour to decipher that our cousin's patroness, the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had advised him to choose a wife."

"And he thought to do so among one of us?"

Mary nodded to show her agreement with Elizabeth's incredulity, "Papa had already refused his written request, but our cousin was convinced of his patroness's wisdom. He thought his physical presence might alter Papa's conviction."

Jane sighed, "At least he attempted to provide his reasoning."

Kitty rolled her eyes, "If you can call it reasoning. He stated that he was doing so out of concern for both Papa's and Tommy's health. He said that illnesses had a predilection for both the old and the young and so they would be most affected should something unfortunate happen. In such an instance, we would be left alone and he saw it as his Christian duty to provide an opportunity so that we may be well taken care of should such an event happen. Really, his intellect is dizzying."

Tommy interjected, "When Papa continued to refuse, the buffoon grew increasingly agitated."

"Though more at the prospect of disappointing Lady Catherine than Papa's anger. Our cousin does not appear to possess a good sense of self-preservation...or any sense at all."

"Kitty!"

Despite Jane's exclamation, even she found that she could not deny the truth of the statement.

"What caused him to depart?"

"When Papa mentioned a breach of contract. Mr. Collins paled dreadfully and scurried away like the insect he is." Kitty supplied helpfully, ignoring Jane's pointed gaze.

Elizabeth nodded even as her siblings shared puzzled looks.

Tommy was the one to ask, "You know something, Lizzy. You and Jane both."

"I...I saw it when clearing Papa's study."

"Will you not tell us?"

Elizabeth hesitated but at the reluctant nod from Jane, sighed, "I had hoped that we had laid the matter to rest. You see...when Mama passed, our cousin came with his father, we assumed to pay their regrets and condolences. But the elder Mr. Collins was a rather...difficult...man and, though we never quite had proof, but I thought I caught him hovering over your crib with some ill-intent. We could never be sure and I was just a child then, but Jane had just requested that I attend to you while she attended to Mary and Kitty. I stepped into the nursery and saw Mr. Collins..."
with a pillow in his hand and looking at you with a contemplative expression. He was quite startled when I asked if he was lost on his way to find Papa and left immediately after patting me on the head in the most patronizing manner you can imagine. I thought his behavior quite odd and made certain to inform Papa as soon as I could. I also made certain that you were never left unintended for the rest of the Collins' visit."

Mary gasped, "You mean, you think Mr. Collins had planned to…"

Jane nodded sadly, "I'm afraid so. Though I would hate to think anyone capable of even considering such a deed, particularly one who is family, that was our conclusion. Papa confronted him, of course, but Mr. Collins just claimed that Papa was delusional with grief. He also made rather derogatory comments about Mama in full hearing of our other guests that made Papa angry enough to demand his immediate removal from Longbourn."

Kitty asked with wide eyes even as she hugged Tommy close, "You do not think our cousin wishes to complete the deed?"

The Bennet heir himself was taking the news rather well. Whereas another child his age would have cried or made a fuss, Tommy only looked defiant. From the safety of Kitty’s arms, he said bravely, "Well, it is good that I am learning to fence from Mr. Darcy, is it not?"

Jane shook her head, "Oh Tommy, I do think our cousin ignorant of his father’s intent. Papa seemed to think that unlike his father, Mr. Collins is a foolish but harmless man. Besides, he can have no reason to wish you harm."

"What of the contract?" Mary reminded her sister gently.

"The previous Mr. Collins was a man of excess and did not think to provide for his child’s future. When he passed, the current Mr. Collins had no way of supporting himself and was desperate enough to call on Papa for aid. Papa agreed to support his wish to attend seminary in exchange for an end to any association."

"And the penalty for any breach in contract?"

"Ten thousand pounds."

The stated sum caused widened eyes and gasps.

Elizabeth added dryly, "but sadly not enough a deterrence when compared with his patroness’s displeasure."

Kitty looked at her in alarm, "You are not supposing that he will try to force one of us to marry him?!"

Elizabeth shook her head, "I do not know enough of our cousin's character to have a good sense of his motivations. But Papa asked me to stay inside today and seemed more relieved than usual at seeing me home."

A knock at the front door made everyone jump. Tommy bravely looked out the window and informed his sisters with no small amount of relief, "It is Georgie and Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley!"

Stopping himself from clutching her hands, Darcy nonetheless looked at Elizabeth in obvious concern, "Are you well, Miss Elizabeth? Your father spoke only briefly of your troubles."

Elizabeth looked surprised but grateful. "Papa went to Netherfield? I do not suppose he made you
privileged to all the details…"

Darcy shook his head, "Only that you had a rather unwelcomed visitor this morning and that he would feel more comfortable if you and your sisters were not alone during this time. Are you in danger, Miss Elizabeth?"

Darcy found himself relaxing slightly when Elizabeth responded in the negative, but her next words brought back his concern. "No…at least, I do not believe so. I think Papa only called upon you and Mr. Bingley as a precautionary measure."

When she did not continue, he insisted, “This is no time to remain mysterious.”

She shook her head stubbornly, “I do not wish to burden you with what is essentially a family matter.”

“You need not be so brave at all times.”

“Brave?” She almost smiled at the word, “I make no pretense at bravery, Mr. Darcy. I only wish to spare you the unpleasantness.”

“You must tell me.”

“I must?”

“Please.” His obvious worry dampened her indignation.

“My cousin is in want of a wife.”

Darcy’s eyes widened as he made certain to clasp his hands tightly to prevent himself from hugging the young lady close to himself. Resolutely squashing the distracting feelings Elizabeth's words had wrought in him, he asked, “But he will not find one among the Bennets.”

“No. Papa is determined that Mr. Collins remains forever in Kent.”

“Mr. Collins…Kent…you cannot mean Mr. William Collins, my Aunt Catherine's clergyman?”

Her nod did little to settle him. Her next words added to his astonishment.

“I fear your Aunt was the one to advise him of the wisdom of matrimony.”

Before he could react, she added, "Please, do not think to apologize for your Aunt's encouragement of our cousin. Her advice is not wrong, really, as I am certain it would be better for the congregation if the parsonage had a Mistress that the congregation could approach for their troubles. Besides, she is most likely not aware of the animosity between the Bennets and the Collinses."

"How did you know I was thinking of apologizing?"

Elizabeth smiled for the first time since her return, "I know you, Mr. Darcy, and your tendency to shoulder blame that does not belong to you. In truth, I can perhaps pity your aunt. She recently lost her daughter; she may well wish to seek a female companion in the form of her parson's wife."

Darcy raised an eyebrow at such an idea, "I had not thought Aunt Catherine to be capable to loneliness. I fear I had always been more focused on escaping Rosings without saying words that I am certain would most seriously displease her."
“I only make conjectures. I regret to say that neither do I know enough of our cousin to understand his reasons for following such advice. Indeed, you may have had more opportunities to interact with him.”

Darcy caught himself before he was going to share a most disparaging comment. "Yes, Richard and I did have the opportunity to make your cousin's acquaintance during our customary Easter visit to Rosings last year. He is...of quite a different caliber."

"Mr. Darcy, surely our friendship is such that you would feel comfortable sharing your true thoughts. I would not be offended, for even based on what few memories I have of my cousin, I can tell you that my impressions are not at all favorable."

"Very well, then. To be blunt, Miss Elizabeth, I found him to be quite the buffoon. I fear his words held more references to the opinions of my Aunt than the lessons from the Good Book. He put me in mind of a male peacock, so puffed up was he with an overstated sense of self-importance. And yet he was as obedient as the best trained lapdog in his absolute loyalty to my Aunt. I could little reconcile these two conflicting aspects of his character and could only think of him as simply lacking in any common sense or will of his own."

Elizabeth looked thoughtful at such a description, "A most unfortunate combination that would preclude any young lady of sense to consider him adequate for the post of a husband. But perhaps for our circumstance, such a character will prove beneficial. I am a little more hopeful that we can expect no ill-will from our cousin, at least none that is of his own initiation. It may be that the Lady Catherine sees the same silliness in him and though only that a wife may provide some manner of guidance for my unfortunate cousin."

Darcy smiled slightly at her optimism, "I regret to say that I do not share your goodwill regarding my Aunt's motivations. I have long thought of her as an example of the worst sort of pride that accompanies those with a title."

Elizabeth just shook her head, "Ah, but I cannot believe that someone who raised your Cousin Anne to be such a kind and gentle creature can be all that bad. Though she does seem to be rather overbearing from the stories I have heard, I do believe she holds genuine affection for her daughter. Certainly, Mrs. Fitzwilliam harbors no small amount of love for her mother."

"That may be so, but what of your cousin? Do you believe there is danger of him trying to fulfill my aunt's instructions?"

Elizabeth sighed, "Though I no longer think it likely, I cannot be certain. But perhaps there are some other circumstances afoot. I wonder at Papa's errand...I do not suppose he made you and Mr. Bingley privy to such detail?"

Darcy thought on her question and could only say, "Alas, not in specifics. However, I do believe he said something about going to see a Mr. Philips in town?"

Elizabeth looked thoughtful, "Uncle Philips? Perhaps my suspicions will prove correct...Well, it would not do to dwell upon the topic and speculate when I do not possess all the information. Come, let us rejoin my family and find a game that may distract our attentions until Papa returns."

Darcy nodded and made to follow her when Elizabeth stopped and admitted, "Mr. Darcy, thank you. I am very grateful for your presence. Despite the circumstances, I do feel quite safe." Had Elizabeth not been steadfastly avoiding Darcy's eyes, she might have seen such a look of joyful hope that would have left her little doubt as to that gentleman's feelings towards her. As it was, she could only blush slightly at her own openness as she turned to her family.
As Elizabeth and Darcy were examining the motivations of Mr. Collins and his patroness, Bingley and Jane were having a far less philosophical conversation.

After his initial rashness in approaching her, Bingley did not quite know what to say to Jane. Finally, deciding that it would not do for him to merely stare at her like some imbecile, he said "Miss Bennet…I hope you are well…"

Jane smiled, though a touch of sadness marring her normally serene countenance, "As well as could be expected…I suppose Papa made you aware of our visitor this morning?"

Bingley nodded, "Not in details, but he did say that it was a rather unexpected and unwelcomed intrusion?"

Jane sighed, "I fear that is true. The visit did not…go well."

Bingley looked at her earnestly, "Miss Bennet, please, you need not bear this burden alone."

Jane's smile again, this time with some true warmth, "Forgive me, I had forgotten that Papa called upon you for aid. Our visitor…Well, I have not seen our cousin since I was a child. Indeed, the last time I believe was at my Mama's funeral during which he did not…leave a very favorable expression. He was not rude, at least I do not believe he intended to be, but he seemed to hold much affection for the sound of his own voice. I should not speak ill of others, particularly one who is family, but, well…I was ever so surprised when he became a clergyman."

Bingley asked curiously, "And what is his business in Hertfordshire?"

Jane replied honestly, "It appears that at the advice of his patroness, our cousin is in want of a wife, preferable among one of us. At Bingley's look of alarm, Jane quickly added, "Papa has already refused, in writing as well as in person, but I fear Mr. Collins is most insistent. I think his patroness is one whose opinion he actually holds above his own. She must be a formidable lady to overshadow his own sense of importance."

"May I ask who his patroness is?"

Jane blushed as she admitted, "Oh dear…I should not speak so openly of someone I have never met, particularly as she is a relation of Mr. Darcy."

Bingley thought on her comment and could only say, "You must be speaking of Lady Catherine de Bourgh!"

Jane nodded, "Have you had the chance to make her acquaintance?"

Bingley shook his head, "No. Though I feel that your impressions must be quite close to the truth, based on tales I have heard from both Darcy and the Colonel. Indeed, I have thought at times that my sister Caroline may share some personality traits in common with the great Lady. You need not feel a sense of disquiet at your comments regarding that Lady, Miss Bennet, for I have heard her own family make worse comments."

His comment made Jane chuckle slightly, "I thank you for your comforting words, Mr. Bingley, though are you not afraid that they might reflect badly upon your friends?"

Though initial gratified that he had succeeded in raising Jane's spirits, Bingley quickly grew abashed at her comment. "I did not mean to speak ill of my friends. I fear I find myself distracted."

The way he looked at her left Jane with little doubt as to the cause of his distraction and she could only glance down demurely at her clasped hands with a deep blush staining her cheeks.
Seeing her embarrassment, Bingley cleared his throat softly and returned to the matter at hand, "Do you believe your cousin will be successful in his search of a wife?"

Jane returned her gaze to Bingley as a troubled look found its way back to her face, "I do not believe so, particularly with Papa so adamantly against such a union. But I do hope he manages to find some manner of happiness."

Bingley smiled softly at her kindheartedness, "Your kindness does you credit, Miss Bennet."

Jane blushed as she admitted, "I do not know if it is really kindness or a form of selfishness. If Mr. Collins should find a partner with whom to share his life, then mayhaps he will leave us Bennets in relative peace."

To her surprise, her words only made Bingley's smile widen. "You see, Miss Bennet, selfishness is not an altogether ill practice."

"No," she owned with a chuckle, "I suppose not."

"But I fear I have been selfish in keeping your company to myself…I am certain you would like to rejoin your family."

Jane nodded but before turning away, said shyly, "I am glad Papa called upon you, Mr. Bingley."

Watching her rejoin her family, where Georgiana was doing quite well distracting Mary and Kitty with stories from her cousin’s travels, Bingley's whisper was heard only by the vase of flowers in his corner of the parlor, "Anything for you, Miss Bennet."
Quarrels

Tommy was, despite his initial protests, sleeping fitfully when Mr. Bennet finally returned to an anxious household. Mustering a tired smile at his daughters as they bustled about arranging the cushions on his favorite chair and retrieving a late dinner tray from the kitchen, he nodded his greetings to the Darcys and Bingley.

When the plate on the tray bore only remnants of his meal, Mr. Bennet spoke into the waiting silence, "While ordinarily I would like to shield my children from the details of such an unpleasant business, I find that I cannot find it in myself to lie to my family. Miss Darcy, as my Mary has already claimed you for a sister, I fear you have little choice but to bear with the consequences."

As Georgiana answered his slightly teasing grin with a soft smile of her own, the Bennet children felt some of their tension ease. If their Papa could still retain some of his dry humor, the matter must not be as dire as they feared. Taking a draught from his glass, Mr. Bennet continued, "I trust that Jane and Lizzy have acquainted most of you with news of our most surprising visitor this morning."

Darcy nodded again, "A visit for which my Aunt Catherine is responsible."

"But you make no apologies for her."

"No," Darcy chanced a glance at Elizabeth, "I have been admonished regarding the futility of such a gesture."

Mr. Bennet spared a brief chuckle, "Indeed. You can no more be held accountable for the behavior of your aunt than I can be for the senselessness of my cousin."

"Has Mr. Collins truly departed?" Mr. Bennet wondered if his eldest daughter noticed that Bingley stood closer than was strictly polite at the obvious distress in her voice.

"Oh yes, though his absence will cause no great regret in Meryton. He made no arrangements for a lengthy stay, though perhaps he had other assumptions as to his accommodations."

Elizabeth frowned at such presumption but Kitty gave an unladylike snort, "He cannot have thought we would welcome him at Longbourn."

"No doubt he thought it our Christian duty to play host to family."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Mr. Bennet smiled at the looks of annoyance around him.

"And your visit with Uncle Philips, Papa?"

In lieu of answering Elizabeth directly, Mr. Bennet turned to one of his guests, "Tell me, Mr. Darcy, does your aunt attend to her post with any regularity?"

"Aunt Catherine never misses an opportunity to share her wisdom."

"Then I shall expect a quick resolution to this matter."

"She will not be pleased."

"I care nothing for her pleasure!" The startling sharpness of his tone did away with any measure of comfort in his children.
Only Elizabeth felt brave enough to murmur, “Papa, please, Mr. Darcy meant only that Mr. Collins will not enjoy the manner of his reception when he returns to Kent.”

Looking tiredly at Elizabeth, he rubbed at his forehead, “I am an ungracious host. I should not be cross when I am in your debt, Mr. Darcy.”

The gentleman inclined his head, “I would do no less for my sister.”

“No, I suspect you would not hesitate to ruin any man who posed a threat to you and yours.”

He returned to the last of his meal, the clinking of the silverware doing little to disturb the silence.

Clearing his throat, Bingley flushed slightly under the attentions of so many but spoke bravely, “If I may be so bold as to propose an additional solution?”

With raised eyebrow, Mr. Bennet lowered his fork, "I do not believe I understand your meaning, Mr. Bingley."

With a small glance at Jane, Bingley continued bravely, "I had hoped for more time to gain the lady’s trust, but I cannot deny that despite our very short acquaintance, I have come to care a great deal for your daughter. I would be the happiest of men if you would allow me to show such regard through a formal courtship. I wish to offer what protection I can."

Despite his internal joy at such a request, Mr. Bennet retained his serious mien, "Despite knowing the conflict within our family you would still wish to join it?"

"No family is without troubles. My sister Caroline…well, suffice to say Darcy is not the only one with a demanding relation."

Meeting Mr. Bennet’s assessing gaze steadily, Bingley felt hopeful at the sudden smile he received.

"Very well, if my Lizzy is willing, I suppose I can only consent to such a courtship."

The look of alarm on Darcy's face, though quickly hidden, and the jumbled protests from his girls did much for Mr. Bennet's amusement, but it was Jane's plea that truly made him smile.

"Papa, please do not torture Mr. Bingley so.” The softness of her voice belied her insistence, “You know very well that Lizzy is not the intent for his suit."

"Is that so? Well, my dear girl, perhaps you can correct an old man's mistake?"

Jane's blush deepened but, taking a deep breath, she looked directly at Bingley and declared, "I happily accept your offer of courtship, Mr. Bingley."

The smile that spread across said gentleman's face at hearing his desired reply only broadened upon the good wishes from all assembled.

Mr. Bennet's cough, however, interrupted the merriment, "Hmm…Do not be hasty, child, for I do believe your Mr. Bingley sought permission that has yet to be granted."

Chuckling softly at the pleading look in Jane's eyes and the reproachful one in Elizabeth’s, he quickly added, "But how I can refuse such a courageous suitor who not only put forth a most logical argument for his request but also managed to embolden my eldest to see to her own happiness? I have observed your care of our family, dear Jane, and am glad that you have found someone who will care for you with the same dedication."
Gently laying Jane's hand into that of Bingley's, Mr. Bennet continued, "Though it is but a courtship, I do believe we all know that I will soon be parting with a daughter. Mayhaps it is unfashionable to show such care for my girls, but our neighbors have always called me idiosyncratic. So, I gladly give my consent. I trust you are aware, Mr. Bingley, that should you prove false, you will face not only my disappointment but also Tommy's wrath."

Bingley nodded solemnly in acknowledgement but quipped, "I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Bennet, but I find myself much more frightened of Tommy."

His comment drew laughter from everyone as Mr. Bennet admitted, "Very wise of you, Mr. Bingley. You will do well in this family."

News of the formal courtship between Mr. Charles Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet soon spread throughout Meryton. Mrs. Philips could be heard alternatively exclaiming in raptures at Mr. Bingley's fortune and declaring to any who would listen that she just knew Jane could not have been so beautiful for nothing. The eldest Miss Bennet was too universally loved, however, for her aunt's boasts to raise any envy. Even Mrs. Long tersely expressed her congratulations once she realized the improvement in her own nieces' prospects. Tommy was much disappointed that he had missed such an important event but was greatly comforted when both Jane and Mr. Bingley individually sought his approval in private.

The only person whose happiness was marred slightly by this new development was Mr. Darcy. The persistent joyous exaltations from his friend made him keenly aware of his own wishes for marital felicity. Georgiana, despite her growing confidence under the influence of her friends, settled for meaningful glances that gave no doubt as to her expectations.

So it was that as Darcy and Elizabeth, in their role as chaperons, accompanied Bingley and Jane on an afternoon stroll along the country lanes, Elizabeth found herself deeply concerned at the uneasiness in her friend. Allowing Bingley and Jane to walk further up the path within eyesight but out of hearing, Darcy and Elizabeth walked in uncharacteristic silence until the lady finally spoke.

"I hope the Colonel and Mrs. Fitzwilliam are finding Hertfordshire to their liking? I fear we have none of the diversions of London nor the fresh seaside breezes of Ramsgate, but we do have a certain pastoral peacefulness that I think would suit them well."

Relieved at an easy topic for conversation, Darcy was more loquacious in response than her question truly warranted, "You are indeed correct in that my cousins both seek a certain amount of peace in their lives. Richard is blessed with a happy nature such that he has already established good relations with his neighbors. As for Cousin Anne, I do not recall ever seeing her so happy. Under Mary and Georgiana's guidance, she is starting to learn to play the pianoforte, a task my Aunt Catherine did not allow for fear that practice would tax Anne's health overly much. Miss Bennet has been a blessing in helping Anne acquire the skills for running a household. Why, I believe Anne even spoke of hosting a ball soon to allow for a formal introduction to all her neighbors."

Suddenly aware that he sounded like a gossiping matron, Darcy lapsed into silence once more. Again, Elizabeth posed a query, "And what of you, Mr. Darcy? Are you to return to Derbyshire now that your task is complete?"

He wished the brim of her bonnet did not hide her expressive eyes from view. "I do miss Pemberley," he admitted finally, "but somehow the prospect of returning there is no longer as joyful as it once was."

“You have made a most favorable impression on the neighborhood; your absence will be
mourned.”

“Will it?”

Despite a momentary pause, her response was one of flippancy, “But of course. You are, after all, the gentleman who brought not only Mr. Bingley but also the son of an Earl to Hertfordshire.”

“I believe that honor rightfully belongs to you. Without your knowledge of the Morrices, we would have no cause to be in Hertfordshire.”

“I am no gentleman.” She replied, glancing at him briefly with a smirk.

Feeling his own lips quirk in response to her high spirits, he nodded agreeably, “Most fortunate, else I do not think I could permit your continued friendship with my sister.”

“What will you do when she is out?” Even her headgear could not hide her amusement.

“I have determined that such an occasion will never come to pass.” He replied with an authority worthy of his heritage.

“Even a gentleman with your influence cannot halt the progression of time.”

Darcy gazed a moment at the figures of Bingley and Jane, his levity forgotten, "No, I suppose not.”

“Perhaps ‘tis well that you should depart,” Elizabeth quipped in an attempt to diffuse the somber mood, “Aunt Philips remains in raptures about Jane’s courtship, but even she will soon remember that a gentleman remains unclaimed.”

Darcy shuddered, “I am grateful she has not had the opportunity to meet my Aunt Matlock. The propensity for matchmaking does not recognize titles.”

“Surely you have no cause for worry; you have had much experience rejecting young ladies others have chosen to be your intended.”

“Richard has been telling tales again.”

“He will bear your displeasure willingly to spare his wife your ire at her part in the telling.”

His exclamation of “Et tu, Anne?” only added to Elizabeth’s laughter.

“Perhaps you are in need of a wife after all, if only she may champion your honor.”

“Should I not be her defender?”

“Surely the privilege of being Mrs. Darcy will provide enough security?”

“But will it bring her happiness?”

He stood still, waiting for her answer with a calmness he did not feel.

“I think,” she said finally, her gaze still turned determinedly from his, “that if she is as concerned for your happiness as you are for hers, then you shall be quite content with one another. But come, we must catch up with Jane and Mr. Bingley; we are being poor chaperons indeed if we allow our charges to leave our sight!”

They quickened their pace and Darcy silently scolded himself for his lack of courage in speaking
more plainly. He vowed to find an opportunity to make his intentions known.

An unexpected visitor to Netherfield, however, disrupted his best laid plans. The Colonel and Anne, gracious hosts that they were, were quick to brush aside Sir Andrew’s apologies for arriving unannounced and insist that he rest well from his travels. The reunion between the old friends was one of delight such that the master of Willowmere felt even heavier of heart at the information he had to impart.

"Darcy, old friend, I fear this is no mere social call."

Darcy sighed, "I had feared as much. I cannot imagine you would so readily leave Lady Adelaide's side."

Sir Andrew nodded gravely, "Then I will leave you in suspense any longer. I receive regular reports on Wickham’s doings…"

Darcy felt his fists tighten in apprehension as his face turned into a scowl, "What has he done now?"

Sir Andrew moved his hands in a nervous manner, "I suppose there is no easy way to say this… Darcy, Wickham is dead."

Darcy turned to his friend sharply, "Dead?"

Sir Andrew sighed, "Conditions for prisoners are not ideal…inhumane even for a man such as Wickham. The guards think nothing of using the convicts for sport. Wickham, wily man he is, tried to ingratiate himself with his captors. Unfortunately, his miscalculation inspired the ire of his peers and…"

“Stop.” Darcy’s voice was weary, “his death was not a happy one.”

After a moment of silence for his childhood companion, he sighed, "I fear I must trouble you once more, my friend, if you would…I know it would sooth old Mr. Wickham's soul if his son could be buried in English soil, besides that of his family."

Sir Andrew only shook his head, “I fear…I fear they left no remains for burial. I cannot…I hold little love for Wickham, but even I did not truly wish for such an end.”

The Colonel's reaction to the news was brief. "Good riddance,” his jaw set stubbornly, he refused to react to Darcy’s drawn eyebrows. Georgiana, however, was not so untouched. Had she known the details of George’s passing, her gentle soul would have certainly recoiled at the violence. As it was, her attentions were more focused on the internal conflict within her brother. Unlike the last Wickham derived incident, however, she knew precisely who to approach to help her with Darcy.

The friendship between the occupants of Netherfield and Longbourn was such that the figure of Elizabeth Bennet striding down the path towards the Fitzwilliams' home was no longer an oddity. What was striking about her presence, however, was the straight set of her shoulders and the purposeful look in her eyes as she made her way towards not the main house but the stables with little consideration for the mud drenching her hemline. Her eyes softened somewhat at the sight of the normally immaculate Darcy with his waistcoat flung aside, shirtsleeves rolled up, and a horse brush in his hand. Nonetheless, her voice remained steady when she spoke his name.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy, you will stop this at once."

Startled, Darcy dropped his brush as he turned to her. "Elizabeth! I…” Under any other circumstance, he would have appreciated the picture she represented, her eyes flashing with
determination and purpose.

Elizabeth did not allow him to speak, though her voice was not unkind, "I know very well the tidings Sir Andrew has brought. Georgiana made certain that I was aware of it. I am sorry for your loss."

Darcy frowned, "Am I to have no privacy?"

Elizabeth's lips twitched slightly, "Surely you know by now that a prerequisite for the post of a sibling is the destruction of any preconceived notions of privacy. They do so out of their genuine worries and I can tell you that Georgiana is most concerned about you. Indeed, she was adamant that I ensure your well-being."

Darcy's brows furrowed, "I do not need a nurse-maid."

Elizabeth retorted, "Good thing that I am not one. I am here as your friend, someone who cares deeply about you, and I cannot sit idle while you tear yourself apart with your undeserved sense of guilt."

"And you know so well that it is undeserved?"

Arching an eyebrow at his sharp tone, Elizabeth refused to back down, "Mr. Wickham's death was not of your making. He sowed his own seeds and reaped the consequences. Am I sorry that a man has died? Yes. But so too do I rejoice that he may no longer cause harm in the world."

"How easily you read me, but what do you know of George that you can put forth such a judgment?"

Elizabeth bit back a sharp retort at his mocking tone and replied in a more reasonable manner, "Enough. Or have you forgotten, Mr. Darcy, that I am also friend to your sister? She has told me some of your dealings with George Wickham. Georgiana is more observant than you might credit her."

"She should not have shared such details regarding our family's concerns with you."

Despite her best efforts, Elizabeth felt her temper flaring at Darcy's persistent petulance. "Why should she not? It is as much her story as yours to tell. Besides, are you not well aware of the secrets within the Bennet family?"

"That is different!"

"How so, sir? Because my family is of little import and you are a Darcy? Are you so obsessed with maintaining an image of perfection that you would deny even your friends the opportunity to see chinks in your armor?"

Though he did not mean to, Darcy felt his weariness getting the best of him as he exclaimed, "No! But you should not speak on things of which you have such limited knowledge. You cannot understand…"

Elizabeth's patience finally snapped, "Of course I cannot, if you will not speak of it. You are so focused on burying your thoughts and feelings deep inside yourself that you would rather brood alone in this stable than share the burdens of your mind. While I usually admire you for your independence, in this instance it is a foolish act that not only hurts you but those around you as they watch you suffer."

"You dare call me foolish?!!"
She set her chin stubbornly, “Yes! And much more besides! You are foolish, and careless, and in your pride and conceit think you can have control over life and death! To think I thought you a friend! When now I see evidence of your selfishness! You care nothing of the distress you are causing your sister!”

“Enough!” The roar of his voice ended even her tirade. His eyes were stony as he gritted out, “Madam, you have said enough. I bid that you return to Longbourn and leave me be.”

Too stunned and angry to feel hurt, Elizabeth spun on her heels and left Darcy alone with his thoughts.

Elizabeth’s expression was one of such fury that a concerned Georgiana was almost too afraid to accost her on the path to the main road.

“My presence is no longer welcomed.” Elizabeth informed her shortly before continuing on her way.

Georgiana stared at her friend’s retreating figure with a sense of dread. “Oh Brother, what have you done?!”
Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was not prone to fits of rage. Rather, his anger simmered below the surface in a brooding manner that gave little evidence as to his internal turmoil. Georgiana, with the advantage of years of close observation of not only the moods of her departed father but also that of her brother, was very aware that though Darcy appeared polite and almost conversational during supper that night, he was not as well as he would have others believe. So it really was no surprise to her that Darcy should insist that she stay at Netherfield while he departed alone to Pemberley two mornings hence. Deciding not to confront her brother in company, Georgiana waited until Darcy had departed to his study to write letters informing his steward and Mrs. Reynolds of his imminent arrival to make her opinions known.

Darcy looked up as she slipped quietly into the room, caught the determined expression on her face, and sighed. "Georgie…"

For one of the few times in her life, Georgiana interrupted her brother, "I would like to accompany you to Pemberley. I do not think it right that you should bear this burden alone."

When he did not respond, she added after only a moment of hesitation, "You have had six and twenty years to brood on your relationship with George, surely enough time to suffer alone. I had thought you would have moved beyond this…whatever this is. Did you not promise Lizzy that you would try?"

Darcy stiffened at the mention of that particular lady, "I do not wish to speak of Miss Elizabeth."

"You are angry with her."

Darcy steadfastly refused to answer.

“Oh I wish you would not be!"

Still he remained silent.

“She only came at my behest; I could not bear it if I should be the cause of your quarrel."

His sister’s obvious distress caused him to turn towards her. “I would not dare to be angry with her; I have no right.”

Georgie’s eyes widened at the bitterness in his voice, “Oh surely not?”

"You did not see the fire in her eyes, Georgie. Damn Wickham, even in death he cannot stop providing troubles for me."

Georgiana raised an eyebrow at her brother's harsh tone; Darcy’s emotions must be strong indeed for him to curse the name of one who has already passed. "Then I must accompany you to Pemberley. I simply must! If I do not, then I know you will hide away there and try to rid yourself of the memories of these past few months."

Darcy laughed humorlessly, "I did not think the day would come when my younger sister would dictate my actions."

Her insistence only grew, "I only do that which I must. For your sake. We will return to Hertfordshire, though, won’t we? Do say we will!"
“You may of course return to visit with Miss Mary. Anne will be glad to have you.”

“Oh but you will not, will you?”

“I will, of course, come see Richard at his request.”

“But never to Longbourn again! Oh Brother! You are set against it; I know your mind to be made up! But I cannot believe it of Lizzy. No I do not. Words spoken in anger cannot be believed!”

Darcy did not trust himself to speak. Brother and sister stared at one another, one in anguish, one in hope.

Finally, Georgiana said with strength she had not known she possessed, “You will write to Mrs. Reynolds to expect two Darcys at Pemberley. If you do not, then I certainly shall. And do not think to leave without my knowing, I am certain that Cousin Richard would lend me his swiftest carriage should the need arise.”

Quitting the room before Darcy could broker any further arguments against her decision, Georgiana paced in the music room, ignoring the poor pianoforte in the corner. The sun was her only witness as she nodded resolutely to herself. She spoke a few quiet words with her cousins. Then, she called for paper and pen and scripted her own instructions to Pemberley’s ever reliable housekeeper. Looking over her work with a satisfied nod, she called for the maid to request that the letter be posted at the earliest convenience and an earlier than usual waking time for the next morning.

Georgiana’s arrival at Longbourne was received with pleasure from Elizabeth, who managed a wan smile.

“Oh Lizzy! You are faring no better than Brother!”

“Let us not speak of him,” Elizabeth implored with a semblance of her spirit, “the morning is too lovely and the day too new to stand for ruin.”

“But I must! We are to leave for Pemberley tomorrow.”

For a moment, Miss Darcy thought Elizabeth would relent, but that moment passed quickly.

“We shall miss you dearly. Do say you will not neglect your correspondence?”

“Certainly; I could not abandon such dear friends and the sisters of my heart. But Lizzy, I had hoped, that is…” Now that the time had come to reveal her plan, Georgiana stumbled. But, seeing the exhaustion so clearly written in her friend’s features, she pressed on, “I had hoped, you see, that I would not return to Pemberley alone.”

“Why I am certain Mary will be glad to accompany you. Do you wish for me to speak with Papa?”

“No Lizzy, I was hoping that you would come and stay, if only for a little while.”

“Me? Come with you, to Pemberley?” The second eldest Miss Bennet gasped.

“I would not dream of taking you from Longbourn if the harvest season was sooner, but the summer is young yet. Do say you will?”

Despite her companion’s imploring eyes, Elizabeth did not give the sought-for answer, “I fear I would not be welcomed. Surely the Master of the estate would object to my presence.”
“Please Lizzy, I do not trust myself to see to Brother’s grief. I am too obliging, but you, you can talk sense into him. Please, I am so frightened of the silence!”

Elizabeth could only engulf the young girl in her arms…poor, motherless child! Still, she would not be swayed and it was a dejected Miss Darcy who returned to Netherfield.

Mrs. Fitzwilliam shook her head at the decidedly wilted appearance of her young cousin. She had an inkling of the heiress’s plan and, seeing Darcy’s figure disappear once more in the direction of the stables, decided to do her part to see to Pemberley’s future.

It could not be said that Mrs. Anne Fitzwilliam was an altogether different creature than Miss Anne de Bourgh had been. Certainly she maintained her sweetness. But whereas it had once appeared closer to meekness, her time away from her mother’s instructions had reawakened her curiosity for the world. Her lips set in a grim line, she descended upon Longbourn with a quiet insistence that did more to move Elizabeth’s intractable mind than all tearful pleas from Georgiana. Neither young lady revealed the details of their conversation, but as Mr. Bennet observed the sparkle of mischief return to his daughter’s eyes, he could not deny her most unconventional request. And so, a satisfied Mrs. Fitzwilliam returned to Netherfield bearing a missive for Miss Darcy that caused the plaintive songs of the pianoforte to transform into ones of great joy. The courier was busy indeed as he carried not only Miss Darcy’s hurried letter to Pemberley but also a request from Mr. Bennet. No matter his eccentricities, Mr. Bennet was no fool and he would, as much as he was able, protect his daughters’ reputations.

Had Darcy been his observant self, Georgiana’s strange behavior on the morning of their departure might have alerted him to the game afoot. Instead, he assumed the extra luggage meant only that Georgiana had done a little more visiting to the shops in Meryton in the company of the Bennet ladies than he had supposed. If her hand trembled slightly as he handed her into carriage, well, he could little blame her for her sorrow in departing from her friends. But as he made to settle himself, Darcy was frozen in his spot at the serene figure of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, looking for all the world as though she was sitting comfortably in the parlor at Longbourn.

Tilting her head slightly in recognition, Elizabeth turned to Georgiana, "Aunt Gardiner had spoken of a possible trip to the Peak District for next summer, but she will forgive me for making a trip to Derbyshire without her; a chance to stay at the famed Pemberley is not to be missed!"

“I do believe Pemberley to be the most wonderful place in the world,” declared the ever loyal Miss Darcy, “I am only too glad to repay your kindness for hosting me so often at Longbourn.”

Turning to the still stunned Mr. Darcy, she said, as sweetly as she could manage, “Brother! Are we not in a hurry to reach home?”

Dumbfounded still at the additional presence within the carriage, Darcy finally stirred himself to take the seat opposite the ladies, who quickly resumed their own conversation.

“I fear I must rely on you then to tell me of the attractions I might find in Derbyshire. Aunt Gardiner had told me much of her youth there but I imagine quite a lot has changed in the intervening years.”

Georgiana was only too happy to share her thoughts. They paid little mind to Darcy’s still silent presence as the carriage rolled away from Netherfield. Though if one were to see the sly glances both ladies occasionally cast at that gentleman, one would be aware that though Elizabeth’s interest in Pemberley was not a pretense, her interest in the reactions of its Master was no less genuine.

On the steps of Netherfield, Sir Andrew was astounded by the riotous laughter that burst forth
from his hosts once the Darcy carriage was out of view.

Anne was the first to recover as she explained, "I apologize for the unseemly display from my husband, Sir Andrew. 'Tis only that the occasions in which we find Darcy so cleverly outwitted and outmaneuvered are few."

Still chuckling, the Colonel added, "Indeed. And to think that our little Georgie should be the mastermind at work! A pity she was not born a boy; His Majesty's army could have used a General of her tactical brilliance. Those Bennet ladies have certainly been a most positive influence on her."

The still puzzled Sir Andrew could only ask, "I do not believe I understand your meaning."

His remark only caused the Fitzwilliams to share another look of merry understanding. Finally, the Colonel took pity on his confused guest, "Well, Andrew, it appears that Darcy has gone and fallen in love! With a young lady who is more than a match for him in temperament if not in wealth. She will ensure that he survives this new development intact. I am certain that Georgiana's invitation for the young lady to visit Pemberley at this time was not by coincidence. Mark my words, if Darcy is not engaged this time next year, I shall eat my hat!"

Anne cautioned, "You should not make such a comment, my dear, knowing Darcy's extreme caution in all things related to family, I fear you will make yourself sick with such an odd choice of a meal."

The Colonel, heedless of the presence of their guest, only kissed her cheek fondly, "As though you could hide your part in Georgie's plan from me! Oh to be a fly on the walls of that carriage!"

A most surprised Andrew Ashbury exclaimed, "Darcy! In love?!" A memory came to him them, of a dance but a month prior and a rare smile crossed his face. "Miss Bennet is fond of dancing."

The Colonel turned to him with a wide smile, "All the Miss Bennet are, I believe, even shy Miss Mary. But Miss Elizabeth Bennet has the added quality of not being easily awed. She will do quite well for him if ever my cousin decides to act. In fact, why do you not stay with us for a few days, Andrew? Anne is well acquainted with the Bennet ladies. They are frequent visitors in our home such that you are certain to make their acquaintance." With a slight smirk, he added, "Who knows, mayhaps you shall find the next Lady Ashbury here...it does so seem that the air in Herefordshire is particularly conducive to settling matters of the heart."

Anne, recovered from her blush at her husband’s spirits, gladly added her entreaties for a longer stay, saying that Bingley, despite his preoccupation with courting Miss Jane Bennet, would no doubt appreciate the company now that Darcy has departed. And so Sir Andrew found himself a guest in the Fitzwilliams' home, his curiosity greatly piqued regarding the family and friends of the lady who had caught the heart of his good friend Darcy.

That particular gentleman was of course unaware of the merriment his predicament had generated for his cousins. Indeed, as he determinedly stared out the window, Darcy did not seem to acknowledge anything but the passing countryside. In truth, however, Darcy must admit that he was more than aware of every syllable that passed Miss Elizabeth's lips and every laugh that filled the carriage with good cheer. As he stared at the passing fields, he saw not trees or crops but the sparkle that no doubt shined in her eyes and the glow of happiness that enhanced her beauty. The nearness of her presence was both a source of joy and a source torture. He wanted nothing more than to gather her into his arms, apologize for his poor behavior, and share with her all the burdens of his mind.

But he steeled himself against such thoughts. He had no right. She had rejected his friendship and,
though it pained him, he would honor her choice. Her presence at Pemberley will not sway him. Elizabeth! At Pemberley! How differently he had pictured her introduction to the home of his ancestors. Could he bear to see the flush of joy suffusing her dear face at seeing it? Surely Elizabeth would love Pemberley as she could not, now, love its Master. Could he bear to see her sparkling eyes disappear among the woods, hear her laugh of delight at the sunbeams playing on the lake, and see her lithe figure dance with the ripples in the stream and know, that her visit would be a temporary one? The halls will surely remember her laughter and forever berate him for his failure in keeping its source at Pemberley.

His hands clenched at his side. No, he must not think on it, of his disappointed hopes. Not when he must consider George’s death. He will have a stone erected in the little churchyard. Next to the one for the mother who had doted on her son and the one for the father who never knew the kind of man his son had become. Was that the final push? He remembered George’s face, ghastly in its paleness, when he saw the earth swallow the last of his family. Something in young Wickham died that day as well. But Darcy, caught in his growing responsibilities as befitting Pemberley’s heir, did not know it. Did not know until next he met George’s eyes and beheld only resentment. How brittle George’s laugh had been when Darcy confronted him about Mabel Lawson’s death. How salacious his grin when he spoke of the pleasures the constable’s niece had brought him. How scornful his voice when decrying Darcy’s protestations. When had the change occurred? Had he been blind? Had George always had the inclination to behave sinfully? The question hunted him. Could he have prevented George from his fate? George Wickham had become a taint upon the Darcy name, a source of grim resignation. But once, once he had been a friend, a brother.

Sometimes, he truly wished that his sister did not possess her keen sense of intuition. He wished for the solitude Pemberley afforded him, for the weight of his duties that reassured him and gave him purpose. He wished to mourn, to try to find forgiveness. For George and for himself.

An exclamation of delight broke through his thoughts. As Elizabeth listened with growing pleasure at Miss Darcy’s description of Pemberley’s library, Darcy could not help but imagine Elizabeth curled up in a particular chair by the fire with a book in her lap and perhaps that pillow from their corner in her uncle’s lending library nestled by her side. In truth, in the hazy dream-like state between sleep and wakefulness, Darcy had often had visions of her in various rooms in Pemberley. In all his thoughts she had not been a visitor but had been rather at home, with him and, when he dared to think of such things, their children. But no, such visions will remain dreams. He was not worthy of her.

As the carriage carried its occupants further away from Hertfordshire, Darcy steadfastly remained silent while the ladies filled the small compartment with their chatter. But the trip was a long one and even the most comfortable carriage could not completely relieve the taxing effect of being on the road. So, as the conversation trickled to a small stream until it stopped in Georgiana’s even breathing as she slumbered, Elizabeth closed her own eyes and feigned to rest as well. All the while, however, she could not but be highly aware of Darcy’s close presence. She saw the minute movements in his features as he glowered at the sight outside the window. How she had scoffed at Anne’s comment that Darcy “needed” her! And yet, despite her anger, she had agreed to this trip. And now, beholding him thus, she was glad she had. All remnants of her fury dissipated. He should not shut out everyone who cared for him. She, Elizabeth Bennet, would not allow it.

The thought almost made her laugh at herself. Who was she to make such a determination? Georgiana stirred slightly besides her. Ah, but who else would dare?

From their first encounter, she had been one of the privileged few. She marveled a moment at Darcy’s self description, “I find that I am usually of a taciturn nature in company and do not reveal my good humor but to a select few with whom I am of long acquaintance.” Their association was
not long, but during it, he had humbled himself before her, had listened to and applied her advice. How could she have called him proud? Shame welled up and brought with it a fleeting comment from her aunt. Mrs. Phillips, undaunted at matching her eldest niece with Mr. Darcy, had confided in her second eldest niece, “I do not know what I could have been thinking, to match dear Jane with Mr. Darcy, rich as he is. Why, he is so very solemn, a man of so few words. Not rude, no, but not so at ease as Mr. Bingley. No, Mary will suit him much better. She is just the sort of docile wife great men such as Mr. Darcy requires!” Elizabeth, remembering Darcy indulging in a game of pirates with Tommy just that morning, had struggled not to laugh. Mr. Darcy, solemn! The very thought was ridiculous. And yet, seeing the grim furrow of Darcy’s eyebrows, Elizabeth knew her aunt’s opinions well reflected that of the neighborhood. For all his improvements, Mr. Darcy will never possess the natural affability of his friend.

No wonder Anne had sighed when Elizabeth demanded why Mr. Darcy’s family allowed him to develop the disgusting habit of wallowing. “Fitzwilliam is so very capable,” Anne had remarked in her gentle way, “in handling himself that none, aside from Mama, ever felt it necessary to question his judgment. He is so very dutiful, but will go about things in his own way.” Why had she not recognized his independence, so reminiscent of her own? Elizabeth fought a sigh. Jane had said once that Elizabeth could not be pressed to share her thoughts. Patience was required to allow Elizabeth to make the choice. Patience, a virtue in which Elizabeth knew herself to be sorely lacking. Still, Georgie entrusted Elizabeth to keep the silence at bay. She was not one to disappoint a friend.
Forgiveness

Her first morning waking up at Pemberley, Elizabeth was puzzled at the unfamiliar ceiling above her. Sitting up in bed, she glanced around a tastefully decorated room that nonetheless spoke of wealth. A young maid entering the room with a pitcher of wash-water settled the heavy object on its stand before catching Elizabeth's curious gaze. Curtsying quickly, the maid spoke in a shy voice, "Begging your pardon, Miss, I am Daisy and will be serving you during your stay here. Miss Darcy said to inform you that breakfast is to be served on the veranda this morning. I am to take you there after helping you dress."

Elizabeth blinked for a moment, astonished at the luxury of having her own lady's maid. The Bennets, thought certainly not poor as the result of Elizabeth's diligence, had still decided to employ a single maid for the girls. Seeing that the young girl, who could not have been much more than fifteen years of age, was still awaiting instructions, Elizabeth remembered herself, smiled graciously, and spoke cheerfully.

"Good morning Daisy! I am very glad to make your acquaintance. I fear you will find me a very bothersome guest, for I am sure to ask many questions so as to prevent becoming lost in this grand estate rather quickly. I am very grateful for your assistance."

As Daisy assisted Elizabeth through the morning toiletries, she felt her tenseness melting away under the influence of Elizabeth's sunny disposition and genuine interest in not only Pemberley and the surrounding lands, but also Daisy and her own family. Startling even herself, Daisy found that she was quite comfortably chattering about the scrapes of her many younger siblings and laughing freely as Elizabeth likewise shared some of Tommy's misadventures. Later, when Daisy returned to the servants' quarters, she found herself swarmed with inquiries as to the new guest. Even Mrs. Reynolds, despite her admonitions to the other servants to cease the gossip and carry on with their work, could not hide her curiosity. Some of the older servants retained their skepticism and discounted Daisy's glowing reports as opinions born of naiveté, but as the days progressed, even they began to develop a grudging respect for Miss Darcy’s friend.

That particular lady was unaware of the curious glances that were sent her way, for the servants of Pemberley were well-trained in discretion. Of course, her lack of attention could also be the direct result of her wonderment at the tour of the building that Georgiana was so enthusiastically giving her. Her great reluctance to leave the well-stocked library made Georgiana laugh and only the promise that she could return to the library that afternoon to peruse the collections more in depth helped Elizabeth turn away from the room of treasures. The portrait gallery containing both paintings and statues of Darcys past and present was another highlight, though of a different type.

Standing beneath the likeness of old Mr. Darcy and Lady Anne Darcy, Elizabeth felt her friend's excitement dim slightly. Turning to Georgiana, she made to remark on the likeness of Darcy to his father and the beauty of Lady Anne and was surprised to see that the young girl was looking between the picture of her mother and Elizabeth's face with a considering expression on her face.

Catching Elizabeth's unspoken question, Georgiana smiled with a bit of sadness, "I had not realized it until now, but you look quite a bit like my mother. Not physically perhaps, but in your carriage. You both have the same inner joy and strength about you and such an air of determination and self-confidence. When I was young, I have often looked at her likeness and wished that I could be as strong. I so wish that I could remember her voice or the sound of her laughter."

Wrapping her arms around her friend, Elizabeth said softly, "I think you are more like her than you might believe, Georgie. Is it not your fierce love for your brother that led to my presence here
at Pemberley? Did it not take bravery for you to oppose his plans and instead carry out one of your own? Besides, you have borne the duties of the Mistress of such a large estate with fortitude and strength. My maid, Daisy, was full of praises for your abilities despite your young age. You and Jane are much alike in that your strength is of the quieter sort, but never doubt your worth, Georgie. I think your mother and your father would be proud to see the wonderful young woman you have become. Certainly, I know your brother is. And I certainly am proud to call you my friend."

Georgiana nodded softly, though her smile dimmed at the mention of her brother. With a little sigh that her companion did not miss, Miss Darcy said, "Come, Lizzy, 'tis too lovely a day to waste in such sorrowful thoughts. I had ordered that luncheon be served near the lake behind the house. Let's see if my brother has finished with his papers and decided to rejoin more pleasant company."

Giving her friend’s hand an encouraging squeeze, Elizabeth allowed herself to be pulled to another area of the vast estate.

Unfortunately, Darcy did not make an appearance at either luncheon or dinner. Soothing a worried Georgiana, Elizabeth remarked that after so long away, Darcy must have much estate work to manage. Her stories of some of the sillier quarrels she had to settle among Longbourn’s tenants caused Miss Darcy’s smiles to return. When three days passed with no sign of that gentleman, however, even Elizabeth could not fight the sense of distress growing within her. Finally, after a supper during which Georgiana only picked at her food with little effort to eat it, Elizabeth decided that the time had come for her to act.

The next day, Elizabeth waited outside Darcy's study and intercepted the maid who was to bring the luncheon tray to him. Holding a finger to her lips in a plea for silence, Elizabeth took the tray from the curious maid with a reassuring smile. Taking a deep breath and knocking firmly on the study door, Elizabeth was gratified to hear a gruff, "Come in."

Any other day, Elizabeth would have looked around the study more carefully to settle her curiosity as to Darcy's preferred working environment. In consideration of the present circumstances, however, she looked only at the figure behind the large desk strewn with papers. Darcy's head was bent over a leaflet with great concentration, his pen making strong strides across the page so that the scratching sound resonated in an otherwise quiet room. Hearing her footsteps and the sound of the door closing, Darcy gestured vaguely to a side table and stated in an absentminded but still authoritative voice, "You can leave it there."

Smiling to herself that he had not noticed her presence, Elizabeth did as she was told. Instead of leaving him to his work, however, she approached the desk and stood overlooking his work. When he made no indication that he noted her presence, she coughed lightly.

"What is it?" She might have found the swift change from annoyance to confusion on his face endearing but for her aggravation.

Fully intent on berating him for worrying his sister, she caught sight of the dark circles under his eyes and the sheer exhaustion upon his face, and bit back her harsh reprimands. Unthinkingly, she sighed his given name, "Oh Fitzwilliam, what have you done to yourself?"

At her voice, Darcy's astonishment gave way to relief as he too seemed to forget convention and whispered her name. With that single word, Elizabeth understood that he had been trying to keep himself so occupied that he did not have the energy to spare a thought for anything else. Moving slowly so as not to startle him, she plucked the pen from his hands and carefully set it in its holder. Gathering the sheets of paper into a more or less organized pile, she stood, retrieved the tray, and set it down in front of him.
"You must eat. I will cut your meat for you if I must, but you will eat. Then you will soak in a nice, warm bath and go to sleep. Once you awake, you will join Georgiana and me for a stroll in the gardens. It will be good for you to be out in the sunshine and not cloistered in this room. Besides, Georgiana has worked herself up to quite the state regarding your well-being and seeing you thus would only add to her distress."

So saying, she made to stand to find the bell that would summon a servant so that the proper preparations could be made, only to be stopped by Darcy's hold on her hand.

Looking up at her with a resigned expression, Darcy asked quietly, with a voice rusty from disuse, "And what of you?"

Elizabeth's eyes softened but she spoke with a teasing lilt to her voice, "Of me? Why, I have been enjoying all the hospitalities Pemberley has to offer, particularly the wealth that is your library… truly, I fear I might never wish to leave with such a library at my disposal, though I must admit that the pleasantness of my days have been slightly marred by the poor manners of my host. Really, to leave a guest so unsupervised! I am sorely disappointed in Pemberley, if this is the manner its Master chooses to treat his friends."

"Friends," he whispered, half in disbelief and half in wonder.

Squeezing his hand, she replaced her hand with a fork and made certain that his fingers closed securely around that cutlery. "There now, you will eat while I give the proper directions."

The bewildered maid whose task it had been to take Darcy his luncheon had returned to the servant's quarters only to be accosted by Mrs. Reynolds' questions as to the Master's state. Indeed, such was the loyalty that the Darcys inspired in their servants that the majority of the servants waited with baited breath for her answer. When the poor maid made it known that Miss Bennet had taken in the tray herself, the gathered assembly looked at each other in confusion. So it was that when the bell for the Master's study sounded, Mrs. Reynolds announced that she would go see what the fuss was.

If Elizabeth thought it odd that the housekeeper herself would be the one to answer her call, she made no mention of it. Instead, she gave her instructions in a kind but firm voice. Over her shoulder, Mrs. Reynolds caught sight of the slight smile to her Master's features and the ferocity with which he attacked his food in astonishment. Each tray from the previous few days had been returned to the kitchens with the meals mostly intact. To see such an improvement in Darcy's constitution did much to soothe the old housekeeper's mind. Nodding in approval at Elizabeth's plan, Mrs. Reynolds only said quietly, "God bless you, Miss Bennet," before leaving to assign orders to the maids to heat up water and Darcy's manservant to prepare the Master for rest. Without question, the various servants jumped to accomplish the tasks assigned to them, though they were quite startled at Mrs. Reynolds' chuckling comment to Daisy, "Well, Daisy, you were certainly in the right about Miss Bennet…you mark my words, she will be the making of him!"

The next afternoon, a well-rested and clean-shaven Fitzwilliam Darcy made his way to the music room to the great happiness of his sister.

Catching sight of Darcy walking through the doorway, Georgiana stopped mid-song, a rather maudlin one, jumped out of her seat, and ran to him. Darcy laughed and caught her waist before swinging her through the air. Releasing her onto the ground again, he turned to the laughing eyes of Elizabeth, who sat perfectly at ease with a bit of sewing in her lap. "Well, Miss Bennet, I hope you are satisfied with your work."

Elizabeth adopted a mock-stern face as she nodded, "Good afternoon, Mr. Darcy. I am indeed quite satisfied."
Glancing from one to the other, Georgiana clapped her hands upon realizing Elizabeth's role in her brother's sudden appearance. Hugging her friend in gratitude, she exclaimed, "Oh Lizzy! Why did you not tell me?"

Elizabeth only smiled, "Well, Georgie, I was not confident at all that your brother would listen to my instructions. We both know how mulish he can be. But I fear even the great Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire is no match for three days of insomnia."

Her comment caused Georgiana to look sharply at Darcy, "Brother! Please do not tell me that you have not rested for these past few days!"

The chagrined expression on Darcy's face, however, confirmed Elizabeth words, as did the gentleman's reply. "I would, dear Georgie, but I fear I cannot but be truthful."

Sighing in resignation, Georgiana stated, "Well, then my debt to Lizzy is even greater! As is yours, Brother."

Darcy nodded and smiled softly, "And well I know it. I am sorry to have worried you, dear one. Please forgive me."

Georgiana returned his smile, "All is well again, Brother…though…I do expect some compensation for the worries you have caused me."

Darcy bowed gallantly, "Name your price! Even should you ask for the moon, I shall endeavor to retrieve it. Though I beg of you, Georgie, to be more reasonable in your request."

Georgiana's smile widened as she remarked mischievously, "Oh certainly. I believe I can be most reasonable."

"I await your instructions."

Georgiana smiled at Elizabeth as she said, "Very well…you are to introduce Lizzy to the woods this afternoon. You know I much prefer the formal gardens and am not as familiar as you are with the more remote parts of the estate. And I believe Lizzy is one who would share your appreciation for the wild beauty of those spots."

Elizabeth made to protest, saying, "But Georgie, do you not wish to spend time with your brother? He has so newly returned to you."

Georgiana just shook her head, "Oh I have faith in your abilities to keep him from going back to his cave of a study, Lizzy. Besides, you have been so kind as to keep me company close to the house these past few days. I know you often walk through the country lanes in Hertfordshire and have severely curtailed those walks out of consideration for my preferences. You must be feeling rather restless. No, I insist."

Darcy interjected before Elizabeth could protest more, "I fear you hold some responsibility over my actions now, Miss Elizabeth. After all, it is you who kept my servants from waking me from my slumber."

Elizabeth blushed at having been caught out, "I did not mean to turn your servants against you. Though Mrs. Reynolds played no small part in making certain you obtained your rest."

Darcy chuckled, "And who was it that gave Mrs. Reynolds such an idea?"

Elizabeth smiled ruefully, "I see I am easily outnumbered, though I find it quite unfair as I have no
siblings to side with me. But I must admit that I do find myself intrigued as to the land here; it just
seems so much harsher and yet no less beautiful than the soft hills of Hertfordshire."

Georgiana clapped her hands, "Very well, 'tis decided then! Now, I believe we have time for a
spot of tea before you must set out. Brother, you must gather your strength so that you can keep
up with Lizzy."

Darcy's protest that he was fully capable of touring his own lands only brought more chuckles
from both ladies. As their laughter rang in the halls, Mrs. Reynolds smiled to herself at the thought
of a future in which Miss Bennet would make Pemberley her home and keep such happiness
within its walls. Glancing out the windows later at the figures of Master Darcy and his guest
making their way to the boundaries of the formal gardens and the beginnings of the woods, she
vowed silently to help her young Mistress in her quest to make such a future a reality.

Their walks became a daily routine as Mr. Darcy acquainted Miss Bennet with the woodland
trails. Stopping now and then so that he might explain the various properties of a few plants native
to the region, Darcy was pleased to observe the obvious pleasure Elizabeth took in examining the
wonders of nature around her. And so their friendship resumed, both a little wiser for their quarrel.

One day, following the bends of the creek, he began to speak. "I had a charmed childhood, I
think. Mother and Father were so very happy together. I thought the world of Mother. She had
such a way about her! She could make the dreariest day glow with fun. She was so very kind.
When Mrs. Wickham passed, Mother thought it the most natural thing to care for George. I
resented him at first, I think, for I was a selfish little beast and had no desire to share. But I could
not bear Mother's disappointment and so forced myself to be kind to him. Even then, George had
so much more spirit than I, and a certain gift for mischief. Mother always said that George needed
extra care to keep the good in him from being overwhelmed." His gaze roamed the far side of the
shore, as though seeing the ghost of yesteryears. "She would have been sorely disappointment in
me."

He would say no more and Elizabeth, mindful of her own epiphany during the journey to
Pemberley, held her tongue, though not without some effort. Her patience was rewarded such that
days later, when she stood with Darcy in front of the newly installed stone in the graveyard, she
understood the sorrow and regret in his gaze.

"Can you not forgive yourself?" she asked softly.

He made no answer but simply sighed and offered his arm for the return journey. He silence
continued until Pemberley came within view, but rather than turning towards it, he led her down a
new path. They walked on in silence until they arrived at a stone tower she had never seen before.

"My mother loved the stars," Darcy said from his place next to her on the stone bench, "Father
said because she was one of them, the brightest star in all of Derbyshire. We spent many evenings
gazing up at the heavens from here. Georgie talks to her portrait in the gallery but I, I feel closest
to her here. I had often thought to bring Georgiana here, so that she might feel closer to our
mother, but somehow, I was always reluctant. Somehow, this place feels sacred to me. Am I
selfish for wanting to keep it to myself?"

Elizabeth shook her head, "No, not at all…I feel honored that you have decided to share this place
with me."

He turned towards her then, his gaze steady, "You were not wrong. What were your words? ‘…
and in your pride and conceit think you can have control over life and death.’"

Elizabeth blushed, "Do not repeat my foolish words to me! I have grown ashamed of my hastiness
in uttering them. I abused you, abominably. I acted as no true friend would.”

He was quick to acquit her of her embarrassment, “Words of anger are not to be believed. Were that I were as wise as Georgie!”

She was all astonishment, “You cannot have believed that I truly wished to end our friendship.”

“I fear I was not in possession of my best judgment.”

“No, I suppose not. But then, neither was I. My temper is my worst flaw, I assure you, though not my only one.”

“And my pride only one of many. How right your father had been! I hold the power to ruin men, and I did, I did!”

“But not without regret. You acted in mercy, to spare his life. You still mourn him as a friend, for the brother he might have been.”

“Might have been,” he repeated quietly and was silent, but in contemplation. “George made his own choices. He was given many opportunities, but still he erred. In shouldering blame, I absolve him of his responsibility, his guilt. He never did learn.” Suddenly he smiled, “What a fool I have been!”

“I did not think such a thought would bring you joy.”

He merely laughed, “How light I feel! No longer will I be plagued by ghosts of the past. I am grateful, so grateful that Georgie brought you to Pemberley!”

“Though she defied your wishes?”

“I never forbade her from inviting friends to stay.”

“You have recovered your wits! I was beginning to think they were becoming wasted from disuse.”

“Would you have mourned their death?”

“Most certainly; I cannot be friends with a dullard.”

“Then glad I am they have not abandoned me. Your friendship is so very dear to me.” You are very dear to me. He thought, but did not say. Their friendship was still too newly recovered. But he will share it soon, he will!

Georgiana rejoiced in the company of her friend and her brother. She did not always follow their conversation, but the return of Lizzy’s witticisms and her brother’s easy smile lightened her heart. She wished, how she wished, that life at Pemberley would remain forever thus. Alas, Elizabeth did not yet have reason to call that lovely estate home.

“Oh, must you go, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth chuckled, “Longbourn needs me, Georgie. But fear not, I will write.”

“Oh but surely you can stay.”

“I cannot remain a guest forever.”

“Must you be a guest?”
“Why Georgie! How can I be anything else?”

Georgiana flushed and found that she could not answer, certainly not when her brother had yet to speak. “Just a few days more? Please, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth’s expression gave no hint as to her suspicions, but she was too observant not to surmise her friend’s meanings. Darcy continued to be as courteous as ever but sometimes she caught his gaze and it spoke of an admiration deeper than friendship. And did she wish for such admiration? Despite Mrs. Gardiner’s conjectures and Charlotte’s admonitions, Elizabeth found that her thoughts regarding the gentleman were not as settled as she would have liked. She cared for him, respected him, enjoyed his company; he had become a friend as dear as her sisters. Still, could she leave Longbourn for Pemberley? Suddenly aware that Miss Darcy still awaited an answer, she smiled, “Oh very well. I suppose I can abandon my duties a little while longer.”

Her thoughts though, remained troubled. Deciding that a walk would help most with her present mood, she took advantage of Georgiana’s afternoon lesson and made for the maze in the gardens. Its twisted path reflected well her unease but even the quiet sanctuary at its center offered little wisdom. Absentminded collecting blooms for a bouquet on her return journey, she only hoped that Jane’s romance fared better.

The tenseness in the air, however, penetrated even her thoughts. She made her way through the halls, wondering at the watchful silence. The sound of a sneering voice drew her to Georgiana’s favorite veranda.

“Fitzwilliam, I presume.” an accented voice proclaimed, “I will have my revenge for the wrong you have done to me and my family. I will hurt your sister as you have hurt mine. Perhaps then you will understand the depth of my pain.”

She turned the corner and the flowers fell from her fingertips. A wide-eyed Georgiana stood with a gun to her head. A ring of footmen, makeshift weapons in their own hands, surrounded their Mistress and her strange attacker. Darcy stood still and she wondered at his calmness.

"Sir. I am indeed Fitzwilliam Darcy, but I do not believe I have had the honor of meeting either you or your sister."

The stranger laughed bitterly, "Oh you would deny it! I have not made it across Europe and the Channel to hear your empty denials! I sworn on the tombstones of my forbearers that you would pay and so pay you shall!"

Still, Darcy spoke in the most soothing tone he could muster, though his hands clenched at his sides. "I fear you have the wrong man, for I have not been to the Continent in many years. Indeed, I have travelled little beyond the borders of our fair isle my entire life."

"Lies!" The stranger cried, as he wildly waved his arm with the gun. Elizabeth stood, as still as a statue, but the stranger still saw her.

"Oh! And I suppose this is another of your conquests! Will you discard her as easily you did my sister?!"

Darcy’s expression grew grim, "Surely we can then discuss this matter as civilized men. I really do not know of your sister or your family. If one of my countryman has done wrong by your sister, than I humbly beg your forgiveness on his behalf."

"What good are your apologies?! I have no use for it! It will not bring my sister back to me!"
Sincerely, Darcy said, "Nonetheless, I am very sorry for your loss."

"Not sorry enough!"

The events following such an emphatic exclamation occurred too fast for Elizabeth to have full recollection afterwards. Maybe Darcy moved too quickly to reach for Georgiana or maybe the stranger simply decided to change the target of his wrath, but whatever the circumstance, the shot of a gun being fired rang through Pemberley and signaled a rush of action at the end of which Elizabeth found herself on her knees, Darcy’s head cradled in her lap. The sound of the stranger being restrained and carried away by the loyal footmen and the quick orders from a white-faced Georgiana to the throng of servants that had rushed from inside the house simply washed over her as she felt Darcy’s blood soak through her handkerchief and into her skirts. Looking at his still face, too still, she could only whisper, “Please, don’t leave me. Please. You cannot. I will never forgive you. Please…”
Letters

A knock on the door woke Elizabeth from a restless slumber. Opening her eyes, she stretched out the cramps in her body from her most unusual choice of a resting place. Georgiana quietly entered the doorway and whispered, "Go, Lizzy, you have been sitting vigil all night. Brother is no danger. The tonic is forcing him to sleep. You should go rest. You know he will be most upset to find that you have neglected your own health when he wakes."

Elizabeth smiled tiredly but her eyes remained fixed on the prone figure on the bed, "Yes, he would be. But I cannot abandon him now. What if he wakes while I am gone?"

Georgiana shook her head, "Then I will have a Daisy fetch you. Please, Lizzy, if you will not sleep, then at least go read some of your letters. I think news of home from your sisters might help distract your worries."

"But…"

"Please go. I will sit with him. You insisted that I gain some rest, now I am insisting the same. And surely you know now of the Darcy stubbornness."

Elizabeth sighed, "That I do. Indeed, I am relying on the Darcy tenacity to see your brother through this disturbing turn of events. And you? Are you quite well?"

Georgiana smiled bravely, "It was a most frightening experience, I will not deny it. But I have also learned that I have much for which to be grateful. Chief among them the loyalty of the servants to my brother. I do not think I could have managed to hold my stillness without the way they came to my rescue."

Elizabeth hugged her friend, "They are not only loyal to your brother, dear Georgie, but to you as well. And you have shown yourself to be truly worthy of such loyalty. I am so proud of your courage."

"I do not think it was courage. Perhaps just more of that Darcy stubbornness. So, in keeping with such a characteristic, I must insist once more that you go rest. I cannot have you fall ill yourself, Brother would never forgive me."

Elizabeth blushed but acquiesced. Georgiana took the seat that had been vacated. Looking at her brother's sleeping face, she said softly, "You must wake, Brother, if not for mine than for Lizzy’s sake."

Allowing her feet to guide her with little thought as to her destination, Elizabeth was not surprised to find herself in the library where a stack of letters had been placed on the end-table next to the stuffed sofa that she had taken to frequent. Smiling softly at Georgiana's thoughtfulness, she broke the seal on the topmost letter.

My dearest Lizzy,

What news we have just had from your Papa! I am well aware that he is not prone to writing lengthy communications, so an message from Hertfordshire was in his writing was a cause for great concern. You can little imagine your Uncle Gardiner's surprise when he saw that the letter was addressed not to him but to me! His surprise was of course nothing compared to mine when I had a chance to examine the content of such an unexpected letter. You know of my opinions on Mr. Darcy and though I do trust him, he is but a man. I can only assume that by agreeing to
travel to Pemberley at the invitation of his sister, you are no longer so adverse to his suit. Though I am happy for you, my dear niece, I cannot but worry about the impropriety of the situation. And I fear that though your Papa reluctantly let you go, he is concerned as well. Do not be angry with him, child, for he is informing me of this trip of yours out of love and protectiveness. And it is with these two things in mind that I have decided to visit my hometown a little earlier than usual this year. What luck that your uncle had surprised me with the purchase of a cottage near Lambton as an anniversary present. If it brings me a little closer to Pemberley so that I may provide some supervision to your blossoming romance with that estate's Master, then so be it. I know you to be of a most sensible nature, but I was young and in the throes of love myself once. I hope my arrival will be received with joy and not anger.

Your loving Aunt Gardiner

Elizabeth set down the letter with a wry smile on her face. Blossoming romance indeed! But not completely false. All her doubts had fallen away and she admitted, finally admitted, that she thought of the Master of Pemberley in more than friendship. She shuddered, the sunlight doing little to warm her, as she recalled his stillness. The bullet that had grazed, thank goodness only grazed, his head had wounded her heart. Only when faced with the possibility of loss did she know, understand truly what her answer would be. She stared at the letter for a moment, lost in her epiphany. How very unsurprising it was! How easily she read her aunt’s words and accepted them, now, as truth. Throes of love; what curious phrasing! She did not feel a loss of control as the words might have implied. Rather, she felt only contentment, a sense of satisfaction as a restlessness she had not known existed finally settled. Fitzwilliam has ever treated her as an equal; she need not fear a loss of self. Blushing at the familiarity of using his given name, even only in her thoughts, she determined to speak to Georgiana regarding the possibility of hosting her Aunt Gardiner at Pemberley.

Turning to her other letters, she hoped they would distract her from her worries regarding the gentleman who now held her heart. Charlotte’s neat handwriting, no doubt imparting practical advice as only her friend could, was a source of joy. Soon enough, however, Elizabeth felt her brows furrowing as she read the words.

…In your absence, I have become rather fond of the new Mrs. Fitzwilliam, though I do not know if I could say the same of her esteemed mother, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, at least on our initial acquaintance. I fear I might have borrowed from some of your impertinence at supper that night and made comments which were probably not becoming that of a genteel lady. Well, certainly not a docile lady. But strangely, I think the Fitzwilliams’ guest, Sir Andrew, was amused rather than offended that I was determined to oppose his opinions on the degree of education a woman should receive. I also found a strange ally in the Lady Catherine. But in retrospect, perhaps the situation was not as odd as it had seemed at the time. Lady Catherine had, after all, been the manager of her own lands and estate for these many years. She certainly was not against female independence and responsibility. I suppose her approval cemented my current decision. I do hope you will return to Hertfordshire soon, my friend, for I might not be here when you do. You see, Lady Catherine expressed some wishes to hire a companion when she returns to Kent and Anne of course recommended me. And somehow, that dinner party quite convinced the Lady that if not completely suitable because of my lack of connections or beauty (oh do not roll your eyes, Lizzy, I know I am no beauty), I could at least offer her some amusement. And at three and twenty, I have little prospects but to become a burden on my parents and my brother. Though I know John and Kitty would provide well for me, indeed, they have taken the time to reassure me of such, I cannot ignore my sense of guilty and discomfort. So, I will be leaving for Rosings soon. We have often spoken of adventures when we were children, how strange it feels now to start one of my own!

Your friend,
Charlotte Lucas

Elizabeth, despite her chuckles at Charlotte’s comment (for she had indeed found herself rolling her eyes at the self-disparaging mark on Charlotte’s looks), found herself tearing open the next envelope written in Jane’s neat script in hopes of finding some manner of explanation for Charlotte’s tale.

Dear Lizzy,

I do hope you are well and that the roads were not too rough for your travels. Tommy has been rather desolate after your departure and made all sorts of threats to follow you to Derbyshire to ensure that Mr. Darcy behaved himself. It would be quite intimidating if he didn’t look so adorable with that scowl on his face. But you need not worry about our dear brother, for he soon found his focus taken by the Fitzwilliams’ new guest. As you can imagine, the addition of a new eligible gentleman to the neighborhood, particularly so soon after the sudden departure of your Mr. Darcy, made for very easy gossip. Aunt Phillips of course was most curious and made certain to pay another visit to Longbourn to see if we knew of Sir Andrew Ashbury. Sadly, we could only disappoint her (though I do believe our Aunt might be used to disappointment when it comes to gossip and us Bennet girls). Interestingly, Charlotte has become the one with most information about him, for she has had the most chance to speak with him. He is a man of few words, but seems not to mind listening to Charlotte’s discourse with Lady Catherine. Indeed, I am glad to see Charlotte so spirited. I do not mean to scold you, dear sister, but I do believe Charlotte has come to feel perhaps a bit neglected during your pre-occupation with your gentleman. Anne has been a good friend to her, but I have not seen that same sparkle in her eyes in quite some time. I do hope she wrote to you regarding her acceptance of Lady Catherine’s offer for the post of a companion. I think you will feel quite vindicated that you were certainly correct in your speculations that Lady Catherine had spurred our Cousin Collins on in his pursuit of a wife out of loneliness. As odd as it might seem, I think Charlotte will do quite well in Kent. She and Lady Catherine are both strong women who share a conviction that women in general are not helpless creatures wholly dependent on their fathers, brothers, or husbands. And Charlotte longs for a purpose. Certainly it does not hurt that the Ashbury estate, Willowmere, is but an afternoon’s ride of Rosings. You will forgive me for casting such tenuous thoughts on the matter, but it may very well be that Kitty was right and that one happy couple most certainly begets another….Speaking of Kitty, I spy her writing a rather extensive letter to you and since she is the best storyteller in our family, I will leave it to her to share the details of the latest happenings…

Rather than answer Elizabeth’s questions, Jane’s words only added to her confusion. So, with great impatience, she turned to letters from her other siblings in hopes of clarification. Mary’s message contained no further revealing details, though her descriptions of Bingley and Jane’s utter devotion to one another brightened Elizabeth’s spirit. Tommy’s message, filled with splotches of ink in unexpected spots and odd little doodles in the edges, further made Elizabeth smile but did not bring calm to her state of mind. Fortunately, Kitty’s letter, as Jane had promised, was far more revealing of the situation.

Dearest Lizzy,

I suppose Jane has already informed you of the most interesting developments of late after your departure from Hertfordshire. I can only guess that she was most reticent on some of the details that you seek, so hopefully I will be able to calm your worries. But first, I must reassure you that you need not fear that your departure caused too much stir in our small community, though I suppose it did cause some jealous comments from some of the ladies that you were to be a guest of such a wealthy family as the Darcys. But I think our neighbors have reconciled themselves to the thought that if a young lady should receive such an honor, then she might as well hail from Hertfordshire. Indeed, you might be hailed as a local heroine if you manage to ‘catch’ Mr. Darcy.
I do not profess to understand this form of logic (or approve of such vulgar manners of speech), but I will not question it if it means that your reputation remains intact.

Lady Lucas was certainly curious as to the task that had drawn the Darcys away from Hertfordshire, but when I steadfastly refused to comment, she desisted in asking and instead just remarked that at least she is certain that the Darcys were to return, if only to return you to Longbourn. John (and I know it is improper of me to call him such, but it seems quite ridiculous to have to address him as Mr. Lucas when we have known each other all our lives) did raise a slight concern as to the suitableness of your trip, but I was quick to reassure him of Mr. Darcy's character. I hope I am not wrong in doing so, but I have ever trusted in your judgment, Lizzy, and have yet to regret it. Besides, while a part of me certainly understands John's concerns, I cannot but own that I find the entire matter quite romantic. Though I have enjoyed the few romance novels that Papa has deemed suitable for me to read, I find it quite attractive that you should be the heroine of your story and save the hero of your tale instead of the more traditional plot of those books. I find it also quite like you to inturn what is expected in a courtship. It is positively thrilling, particularly when compared with that of Jane and Mr. Bingley. Their reasonableness can be quite maddening at times. But I suppose, as John would remind me, that perhaps it is a good thing that not everyone in the world is as flighty as I can be.

I must also tell you that in the excitement of these recent few weeks, the plight of our unfortunate cousin, Mr. Collins, has all but been forgotten, to Papa's great pleasure. Alas that the peace did not last long. I am certain the matter would have faded completely from everyone's memories but for the most unexpected arrival of Anne's mother. I was fortunate (or mayhaps unfortunate) enough to be sitting with Anne in the Netherfield garden at the time. We were so focused on our easels (and Anne has turned out to be quite the artist, though her talent lies more in the paint brush and mine with the pencil) that it quite startled us when a servant announced the presence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the West Parlor. Anne and I had meant to clean the paint off our hands prior to meeting the great Lady, but she surprised us further by finding us out almost before the maid had finished her notification. From what little I have heard about the Lady, I had expected her to treat me quite coldly or simply be offended at our lack of proper attire. I had a hideous apron over my new yellow gown. I had been so proud of the light green trim, all the rage in London I hear, but felt positively dowdy under Lady's Catherine condescending gaze. But she was much too overjoyed to see her daughter to pay attention to me. Why she appeared almost human as she examined her daughter for evidence of harm. Anne, once she recovered from her surprise, was likewise happy to greet her mother and made certain to introduce me. Mayhaps 'twas her praise with my artistic skills or perhaps her none-too-subtle emphasis on the words 'close friend,' but Anne quite made it known to Lady Catherine that she would not give up the friendship with us Bennets. How I trembled under Lady Catherine's gaze! How she sniffed to learn that I went by Kitty. A name fit more for a common house-pet than a young lady, her gaze appeared to say. Why, I do believe she thinks me an affront to all Cathertines! I wished to run away, of course, but Anne insisted on showing her mother our art. Do you know, I think Lady Catherine thawed a little. She sniffed at the provincial scene of my drawing of course, but offered no opinions other than to express her displeasure that Papa did not see fit to see to it that I received more formal education. Perhaps she took pity on a fellow Catherine. I know you are fond of saying 'What's in a name?' Lizzy, but it turns out in this instance that it was not completely irrelevant.

I do not suppose Mary, modest creature that she is, informed you of her interaction with Lady Catherine? She had taken to playing the pianoforte in the Netherfield music room in Georgiana's absence at Anne's great insistence (and really, Lizzy, we must see to it that we procure a better instrument for Mary at home...perhaps for her birthday? I would most willingly give up my pin money for the year if you believe it would help). The servants at Netherfield are instructed not to mind Mary's presence and since Mary is such a quiet and tidy person, they have little cause to complain of her visits. Not that the Netherfield staff would ever complain of course. Mrs. Turner
would never allow it. I can hardly believe that she is Mrs. Hill's relation. Why, our Mrs. Hill is so very jolly, even when Tommy tries her patience. But Mrs. Turner, oh, how she can glare! But even she can take lessons from Lady Catherine, I believe. Nonetheless, our Mary quite impressed Lady Catherine with her, Mary's, skill on the pianoforte. Mary was certainly not aware she had an audience. Indeed, I do not believe she would have played had she known that Lady Catherine was walking in the corridor just outside the music room. But play she did and Lady Catherine was so shocked at the quality of the music that she was quite kind to our Mary. When Mary was introduced to her as another Bennet sister, she, Lady Catherine I mean, had the most peculiar look on her face. At least, I imagine it might have been peculiar, for I certainly was not present to witness it. Poor Mary was of course mortified that she had been overheard by so great a person, but from what Anne said, she behaved quite well such that Lady Catherine thought her a most proper young lady.

Indeed, I believe it might have been Lady Catherine's idea that Anne host a dinner party for Netherfield's closest neighbors. So of course the Lucases and us Bennets were the main attendees. Lady Catherine, being somewhat of a forthright temper, was quick to remark that Jane was certainly the beauty among us girls. When informed of the courtship between Mr. Bingley and Jane or, more specifically, of the timing of such a courtship, she gave Mr. Bingley the most sharp of looks. To his credit, Mr. Bingley only smiled in his usual manners which I think unsettled Lady Catherine even more. The cold manners with which Lady Lucas treated her, particularly her thinly veiled derisive comments regarding 'the woman who would send a toad of a man to terrorize one of the most prominent families in the region,' and 'the audacity of a mere parson to think that he would be fit for a lady of the Bennet girls' caliber' must have also caught her off-guard. John had frowned at his mother when she made such a reference to our Cousin Collins and glanced at me worriedly, but I for one was more wont to give a great cheer at Lady Lucas's bravado (though of course I refrained from doing so in polite company). I know you think her a most horrid gossip, Lizzy, but Lady Lucas really is quite sharp and kind when she intends to be. Though I suppose it does not hurt that she has accepted me as a future-daughter-in-law (though John has yet to ask me the important question and I despair that he ever will) and thinks, though perhaps not wrongly, that whatever affects the Bennets will in turn affect the Lucases. And though Sir William's knighthood is but a happy accident, Lady Lucas would be most definitely affronted to have her family tied to a clergyman like our Cousin Collins.

I suppose that consideration might have been Sir William's motivation when he made to ask Papa how you were enjoying Pemberley. Though I cannot be sure Sir William truly meant more than an inquiry of curiosity. He is not so shrewd! The shock on Lady Catherine's face was so great that I thought her eyebrows would fly clean off her forehead! Though she spoke no words, you can be sure that the look she gave both Anne and the Colonel was one that demanded an explanation. But whereas Anne might have at one time trembled beneath such a glare, I am proud to say that she only lifted an eyebrow at her mother with a slight shake of her head and then moved to bring Charlotte to Lady Catherine's attention. I do believe the Colonel was quite proud of his wife as well, for I distinctly saw the wide smile upon his face despite his efforts at covering it up with his napkin.

Speaking of Charlotte, I suppose that was the other great surprise of the evening. I expect Mr. Darcy might have already told you of Sir Andrew Ashbury, for I imagine they must be great friends. But I do not suppose Mr. Darcy made you aware of the more traditional manners of that gentleman. He was certainly no snob as I suspect Lady Catherine to be, but despite his courteous manners, he seemed distinctly uncomfortable among us country-folks. But I suppose I can little blame him...he is after all a baronet. His Sir is certainly more meaningful than that of Sir William! Charlotte, however, did not seem at all intimidated by his title or his more reserved manners. Indeed, I think you have been a stronger influence on Charlotte than perhaps you know. For she was quite spirited in her conversations with Lady Catherine and cared little for stern looks her mother was sending her way. Lady Lucas is determined that her daughter will not pass
up a chance for making a favorable impression on this visitor. We had all expected Lady Catherine to scold Charlotte for her strong opinions, or at least for the most outspoken way she was behaving, but the great Lady quite surprised us by not only agreeing with Charlotte but joining her in reprimanding the "more archaic views" (her words, not mine) regarding the capabilities of women.

In view of these happenings, I suppose I should not have been surprised when Lady Lucas informed me that Charlotte was to leave Lucas Lodge and travel to Rosings as Lady Catherine's companion. Lady Lucas was certainly miffed, I can assure you, for she still cared little for Lady Catherine. But she did reluctantly agree, particularly when she was made aware that Sir Andrew's estate was also in Kent. I do not think she has given up her idea that Charlotte will still make the match. As she would tell me, she often despaired of her "plain" daughter and her lot in life. Tis quite sad, really, for Charlotte is such a lovely person, certainly more sensible than Maria who, despite being closer to my age, I cannot but treat as a younger sister, and a much younger one at that. At least John was never one to disparage his sister. Indeed, I do not believe I would be as fond of him if he did. You know that Charlotte has often been our chaperone during the walks John and I would take, and on such a walk, he made certain to speak with Charlotte regarding her decision. He said (and I fully agree) that she would always have a home in Lucas Lodge and that we would provide quite well for her should she never marry (it really was quite thrilling when he said we!); she had no need to seek an occupation so far away from home. But Charlotte remained adamant (and really, I think John blames you, Lizzy, for the stubbornness in Charlotte's character. Though I think it can only be a source of assistance when she must be in the company of Lady Catherine) and insisted that she would like an adventure of her own.

As for the Lady Catherine, Anne tells me that she did have to explain the connection between you and Mr. Darcy to her mother. You needn not fear, for she said nothing of the romantic attachment between you two (and really Lizzy, must you deny the truth? You cannot still be playing coy? Only Aunt Phillips clings to the idea that Mary is the Bennet who shall become a Darcy. We are, of course, too kind to correct her). Though I do think Lady Catherine suspected something; say what you will of her overgrown sense of pride, Lady Catherine is certainly not stupid. Anne emphasized that Georgiana found you to be a dear friend and that Mr. Darcy thought well of all the Bennets. The Colonel was also kind enough to say that he had found us to be the best companions for Anne and fully intended to ensure that such a friendship continued. He may have also made mention that his mother, Lady Matlock, had met you and Mary in London and greatly approved of the association. Strangely (at least in my eyes), Lady Catherine proved not so difficult to convince. Maybe Lady Matlock's influence extends beyond London's borders. Though Anne was confident that the fact that her mother could find little fault in us Bennet girls' comportment, particularly Jane's genteel manners, Mary's gift and obvious dedication to the pianoforte, and even my talents with a drawing pencil (and being a fellow Catherine), did much to smooth the road. So, though I do not believe Lady Catherine to be altogether happy with the fact that you are visiting with her niece and nephew, she could not deny that you are still a gentleman's daughter. A country gentleman, to be sure, but a gentleman nonetheless.

And it appears that Mr. Bingley's plan did play a factor as well. For after discovering that two of us Bennet girls are already being courted by young men of independent wealth (John had made investments of his own, you know), Lady Catherine had remarked to the Colonel, "Well, Richard, I see that your time in His Majesty's troops were not all a waste. It seems you have learned something about strategy after all." To which the Colonel had merely smiled enigmatically and said, "Oh but I cannot claim credit. I fear young Mr. Bingley is the mastermind in this case." Anne said that she had been initially afraid that her mother would throw a tantrum that a mere tradesman's son (no matter his current respectability and wealth) should outwit a member of the peerage. But perhaps Lady Catherine had truly mellowed now that her dear daughter is so happily settled, for she had only nodded in a rather resigned manner and remarked that the world is no longer as it had been in the days of her youth.
Still, Anne says that I should warn you that it remains likely that Lady Catherine will write directly to Mr. Darcy regarding us Bennets. She is not certain if the words will be altogether kind and begs of you that should Mr. Darcy grow too angry, that you convince him not to cut ties with the de Bourghs. I really do hope it does not come to that, Lizzy, though I remain confident in your capabilities to have the matter well in hand.

In closing, I think it would greatly amuse you to know that Tommy has taken to calling Lady Catherine the 'dragon lady' despite Jane's numerous admonitions. I do believe he is most impatient to have Mr. Darcy as a brother, for he seems determined to resent anyone who might become an obstacle to the fulfillment of such a wish. Tis quite puzzling, for he also threatened to challenge Mr. Darcy to a duel if he harms you in any way during this visit. I truly do not understand our brother at times. Nonetheless, I do agree with his hopes that you will return home soon. We all miss you very much.

Your sister,

Kitty

Putting the gossipy letter aside, Elizabeth adopted a rather pensive expression as she thought on the news from home. Though delighted that her good friend Charlotte might have discovered a chance for happiness, she also found herself worried that Charlotte should come to harm in a location to far from home. From what little she knew of the Lady Catherine, she had great difficulty in believing that the great lady could be so accepting of the Bennets as suitable companions for her daughter. Looking back through Kitty's most informative letter, however, Elizabeth realized that perhaps Anne gave her mother little choice in the matter. And strangely, though Lady Catherine seemed to wish for nothing but agreement to her opinions, Mr. Collins came to mind, her actions showed that she was capable of respect for young ladies possessing of a certain strength of mind.

A knock on the library's door made her pause in her considerations of all the news from home. Taking in the elated look on Dasiy's face, Elizabeth stated before the young maid could even open her mouth, "He has awakened."

At Daisy's nod, Elizabeth gave a great sigh of relief. Despite the doctor's repeated reassurances, Elizabeth had remained apprehensive regarding that gentleman's state. A wide grin broke through her countenance as she ran towards Darcy's chamber, leaving Daisy to smile indulgently in her wake. The young maid then made to tidy up Elizabeth's pile of letters before departing to share the good news with the rest of the servants. Humming merrily to herself, Daisy's eyes shown bright as she thought on the obvious dedication Miss Elizabeth had towards Master Darcy. Settling the thick bundle of letters in a neat stack, she sighed at the obvious romance occurring. In her mind, it was a done thing that Pemberley will soon gain a new mistress who was full of kindness and good cheer.
When Fitzwilliam Darcy opened his eyes, he was momentarily disoriented. Turning his head towards the soft gasp he heard, he was puzzled as to the reason that his sister would be in his bed chamber. Before he could speak, however, Georgiana clapped her hands joyfully, "Oh Brother! You are awake! I must have someone inform Lizzy!"

As Georgiana turned to give instructions, Darcy blinked the sleep from his eyes. Raising his hand to the heaviness he felt on his head, he was alarmed to feel the texture of cloth.

"Oh, I wish you would not touch it!" Georgiana exclaimed, "We must keep it undisturbed, for fear of infection."

Her distressed cry reminded him of the previous day’s dangerous situation."Are you well, Georgie?"

Or at least, that was what he intended to say. But his voice seemed unwilling to cooperate and a croak was all Georgiana heard. Bringing a cup of water to her brother's lips, Georgiana was quick to reassure him, "Have no fear, brother, Lizzy and I are well. You are the only one who has been harmed. Indeed, Lizzy was beside herself with worry and insisted on sitting vigil overnight." At the look of concern that passed Darcy's face, she added, "Precisely so, I told her you would be most unhappy about her lack of care for herself, but Lizzy would not hear of it. I could barely persuade her this morning to allow me to relieve her position. I expect her to be in the library, checking on letters from her family. I do so hope their news might sufficient distract her attentions, if only for a short while."

Regaining his voice at last, Darcy nodded in approval and spoke, "And what of you, Georgie?"

Georgiana put away the cup and returned to her seat with a soft smile, "Lizzy had asked me the very same. And I find that I can only repeat the truth…I am quite well. I am very thankful for the loyalty of our servants and for your timely arrival. Oh I am so very glad your wound is but a superficial one. We had to shear some of your hair to be sure, but…"

At her brother’s look of alarm, Georgiana giggled, “Your vanity need not suffer so! The bandage will hide the patch and, once it grows back, your hair will hide the scar. Do not look so worried! Lizzy will not think you less handsome.”

Georgiana's smile lingered for a moment before she grew serious again, "There, I should not embarrass you so. Though, I am concerned at what is to happen to that foreign gentleman? Mrs. Reynolds made certain that the Lambton constable came and dragged him away to be kept under lock and key. But I could make little sense of his accusations towards you."

Darcy's expression became clouded again as he thought on his attacker. "I could gather little from his shoutings, only that he believes I have wronged his sister in some way. I fear he thinks of me as the worst cad. It is fortunate that he was contained but I fear that the matter will not be elucidated until I have a chance to speak with him without a weapon held against me. For now, I can only hope that Miss Elizabeth will not believe his ravings."

As though his words summoned her, the lady of their conversation appeared in the doorway. Elizabeth's expression brightened as she caught sight of Darcy conversing readily with Georgiana. Forgetting propriety, she rushed to his side and clasped the hand lying on top of the coverlet in her own and bestowed upon it a kiss. Georgiana smiled indulgently at the couple before standing softly and quitting the room to give them some measure of privacy.
Darcy gently used his other hand to tilt Elizabeth's face so as to meet her eyes with his own, "Dear Elizabeth, I am well."

At the sound of his voice, Elizabeth seemed to remember herself as she stood. "Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, in my gladness at your recovery, I forgot my place."

He held fast to her hand, “Elizabeth.”

She turned to him with questioning eyes and he wondered if he had ever seen anything so beautiful. “Elizabeth,” he said again, appreciating the flush in her cheeks at his obvious challenge of propriety.

Once may be accident, twice may be explained away by his injury, but thrice, surely such a breach of conduct was intentional!

He could feel the pulse in her wrist quicken as he continued, “My Elizabeth. Surely you must know.”

Though she avoided his gaze, he pressed on, the words forming of their own accord but no less sincere for their spontaneity, “Your place is at my side.”

“You presume much.” She murmured, utterly failing to look disapproving.

“I do! But you know it of me. I am presumptuous and proud and too used to getting my own way.”

“You speak of a stranger, for I know you to be kind and generous and caring.”

Her response gave him hope. “Then you will stay?”

She looked at him then and his grasp tightened, “You who are so astute can have no doubt as to the depth of feelings I hold for you, but I will say it nonetheless. I love you.” The simplicity of such a declaration surprised even him. “I love you,” he repeated, amazed at the pleasure he felt at finally giving voice to his feelings, “I had hoped, planned, for a more opportune moment, a more suitable setting, but my patience has waned.”

Elizabeth trembled and yet still she did not remove her hand.

Darcy’s thoughts, now made audible, relished in their freedom. “I should wait, but I find that I must tell you…I know no other way to express it but this, in which I no longer think in terms of you or I, but us. So much so that this hand I hold, this dear, dear hand, is but an extension of my own. Did I think Pemberley to be home? How could it have been, without your presence to bless it? It can never be home again unless you are here. Marry me, Elizabeth. Be my helpmate. The place at my side can only ever be yours.”

Her lack of answer might have alarmed him but for the reply he read in her expressive eyes. Her own realization had been so recent that she did not at first trust the sense of wondervment and contentment swirling through her with each word from Darcy. Finally, a sense of elation settled on her, a lightness as her smile grew wide. Finding that words were inadequate to express herself, she raised his hand, still intertwined with her own, brought it to her lips, and settled upon it a gentle kiss. Nonetheless, she could not help but quip, “Is it not customary for a lady to be courted before a proposal is made?”

“If you should desire it, I will.” He vowed solemnly.

Still she smiled, “Your injury makes you uncommonly agreeable.”
Was she laughing at him? “You deserve a proper courtship.”

“I think I will settle for an improper one.” Was her brisk reply, “Indeed, I believe you have already accomplished that feat quite admirably.”

In wonderment, Darcy asked, "Then you accept?"

Yes, she was surely laughing at him now. “I will make an improper wife,” she warned, “and cannot promise to obey blindly.”

“I have no wish for such subservience. Indeed, a wise friend had once declared that I am in need of a champion.”

“Is your honor in danger?”

“My happiness is.”

“Then we will be quite content with one another.”

Awarded with her affirmation, Darcy found that he felt paradoxically tongue-tied. Elizabeth likewise remained uncharacteristically quiet until both parties tried suddenly to speak at the same time.

Finding that he lacked the strength to oppose her insistence that he be the first to complete his thought, Darcy remarked, "I am sorry that I cannot immediately travel to Hertfordshire to ask for your father’s blessing. Fortunately Hertfordshire is not far from London so that I may meet with my solicitor without spending too much time bereft of your company."

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled in merriment, "How quickly the romance of the moment is ruined with such practical concerns! My poor Papa, he will be quite upset to learn that you have made me an offer so far from his watchful gaze. And you must brace yourself for Tommy’s wrath.”

Here it was Darcy's turn to chuckle, "Oh I do not think Tommy will be overly upset.”

His continued explanation matched well the contents of the letters she had received. “He had made it known to me, during our picnic on Oakham's Mount, that he quite approved of me and Bingley. Certainly I will be sure to speak with him, but I do expect to meet with resistance.”

“You are very certain of yourself.”

“I do hold some leverage as his fencing instructor.”

"But is not the Colonel a passing swordsman himself? Mayhaps in your absence Tommy will have switched his loyalty. Indeed, he may even feel compelled to seek a duel for my honor.”

Darcy's brows furrowed, "Have I offended you?"

Elizabeth shook her head, "I rather feared that I offended you in my daring demand to be allowed to see you, in your own chamber no less!”

“What is mine is yours, Elizabeth. I will have no secrets from you.”

She blushed and was silent until suddenly, she found herself chuckling. At Darcy's curious look, she explained, "I was just thinking upon our first meeting, when I insisted that I cared more for a person's character than his name or titles. I could little assess yours, however, as such study requires lengthy study. I do believe that the rest of my life would most certainly count as such."
"Our life, you mean."

Returning his heartfelt gaze, she repeated. "Yes. Our life."

They might have been content to gaze at each other in a besotted manner but for the yawn that escaped the gentleman. Elizabeth only laughed at Darcy’s mortification.

“There, you must not overtax yourself.”

“I am quite well,” he protested.

Spying a book on a nearby table, she insisted, “I shall read to you.”

Too late, he remembered the nature of the book now in her grasp.

“Why, Mr. Darcy! I did not think Ms. Radcliffe suited you.”

Shaking her head at his embarrassment, she reassured him, “But your secret is now mine to keep as well.”

“Though I fear,” she added as she opened the book, “I have not a hidden noble lineage as does our heroine, the fair Ellena.”

“And yet Vivaldi loved her when she was but a poor orphan. Her origins are of little importance to him.”

She smiled brightly at him and began to read. Sighing in contentment, he allowed her voice to lull him to a well deserved rest.

When Darcy next woke, he was suddenly seized with uncertainty. His elation forgotten, he wondered if he had simply dreamed the events of the prior day. The gladness of his reception when he joined her for an afternoon in the gardens did away with much of his doubt. Still, he could not help but wonder, “Elizabeth, you do not regret your answer?”

She turned away from watching a particularly adventurous bird as it played in the small fountain, “How unlucky a question! Do you regret your question?”

“I was afraid I had only dreamt it.”

“Do you make it a habit to dream of proposals?”

His silence was answer enough.

She shook her head, “I cannot regret promising myself to so honorable a gentleman.”

"Are you certain? Our visitor laid some rather dismal accusations at my feet."

Elizabeth remained undaunted, “I do not know the crimes of which the unwelcomed guest spoke, but I have faith in my conclusions as to your character such that I can only be sure that the accusations were the ravings of a madman. A misunderstanding of the most dreadful sort must have taken place.”

Great was his relief. “I do intend to interview the gentleman more closely. My instincts tell me that a great injustice has been done to him and his family. I also wish to know precisely how he came to know of my name and my location.”
“You have some suspicions.”

“George’s death cannot erase his sins in life.”

“How many?”

“Too many.”

She sighed, “Surely you cannot mean to conduct the interview in person? His temper appears volatile and as he holds you responsible for his sister’s ruin, I cannot be certain of your safety.”

How he wished to hold her and offer his reassurance. But Fitzwilliam Darcy, even when swamped with emotions, still retained some vestiges of mental capacity. The impropriety of being alone with her, though they remained in full view of the house, was already an indulgence. In conjunction with the knowledge that she had consented to be his wife, these thoughts quickly alerted Darcy to the necessity of redirecting the focus of the conversation to a safer topic.

"You need not fear. Out unwelcomed guest is quite well guarded in Lambton. I believe I owe the town constable a bottle of the finest wine from Pemberley’s cellar this coming Christmas time; I have needed his aid these past years. Still, I do feel some amount of pity for my attacker.”

Expressing clear astonishment, Elizabeth cried, "But how can you?! He tried to hurt not only you but also Georgiana!"

“You do not forgive easily.”

She eyed the bandage, startling in its contrast to his dark curls.

“As a brother myself, I can little imagine the lengths I would go to punish someone who would dare harm my own sister in such a manner. And I do believe Tommy, as young as he is, would agree with me whole-heartedly. Even you, Elizabeth, cannot deny that you would seek vengeance against any who would dare commit a crime against one of your sisters.”

While Elizabeth reluctantly agreed, she added, "I would hope, though, that if you were in such a position, you would not turn to violence."

Darcy only sighed regretfully, "I do not know what measures I would undertake. For anger is a strong emotion. I hope I have not shocked you with my lack of self-control in such a matter?"

Elizabeth could only look at Darcy thoughtfully, "No, for I cannot say with absolute confidence that I would not be blinded by rage as well. Still, I do hope you will be careful…In fact, mayhaps I should accompany you?"

Darcy suppressed a shudder at the thought of exposing Elizabeth to the types of men who resided under the watchful eye of the constable, "There is no need. While I do not question your courage, the prison is no place for a lady. Besides, I think your presence here in Pemberley will provide much needed comfort for Georgie." At the mutinous set of Elizabeth’s expression, he added, "But if it would soothe your worries, I will ensure that I am accompanied by the most trustworthy of manservants. I will take no chances for my safety."

Elizabeth sighed, "Very well. I see in this matter you are resolved. Though, do wait until the doctor pronounces you recovered. I will not have you visit your attacker physically weakened."

He smiled indulgently, "As you wish, Mrs. Darcy," and was gratified at the uncharacteristic shyness such an appellation induced in her. Though he would have been content to stare at her for the remainder of the day, he knew she still needed to be distracted from her worries. So, he
inquired, "Georgiana made mention that you had received some letters from Hertfordshire? Tell me, what news from our friends?"

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at this new interest in gossip. Nonetheless, she began to tell him of the most interesting of developments as told by her sisters.

When Georgiana joined them, bearing a basket of treats, she smiled with the perfect contentment of one who has had her wishes become reality. Looking up at her entrance, Darcy explained, "Georgie, I fear we have underestimated our Aunt Catherine. Would you believe that she has hired Miss Charlotte Lucas to be her companion? Indeed, I believe she may even be playing matchmaker!"

Georgiana nodded, "Oh yes! Mary made mention that Lucas Lodge was to lose a resident. Though…Aunt Catherine? A match-maker? Surely not when she had failed so miserably in her prior attempt? Oh I do hope she will meet with equal success in her latest attempt to find Mr. Collins a wife."

Elizabeth gasped and almost spilled her dish of berries, "Oh I had not thought of such a possibility! How selfish I have been in rejoicing that Lady Catherine appeared to accept that Mrs. Collins will not have borne the Bennet name."

Darcy was quick to say, "Miss Lucas is in possession of a sensible nature. She will not act in a manner so detrimental to her happiness."

"Too sensible, perhaps," Elizabeth appeared unconvinced.

"I will write to Andrew." Darcy offered, "he will be glad to hear of our engagement. He holds no fondness for Mr. Collins and, if I should mention that Miss Lucas is a particular friend of yours, he will see to it that she is protected."

"I am grateful," some tension seemed to ease from her frame.

Concerned that she had caused her sister-to-be's distress, Georgiana drew a letter from the basket, "Oh Lizzy, I had almost forgotten, a message had arrived for you from Lambton."

Startled, Elizabeth quickly broke the seal and glanced through the words. "Oh! 'Tis from my Aunt Gardiner! She had written that she was traveling to Derbyshire, but I had not expected her arrival so soon! Or for my Uncle Gardiner to accompany her!"

Darcy spoke in wonder after she shared the details, "It seems that while Bingley and Richard have been sitting idle in holiday in the country, your uncle has been busy expanding their business empire. How fortunate that he is looking to expand into Derbyshire! Now I will no longer have to travel to London to visit my favorite bookseller but can remain close to home."

Georgiana and Elizabeth glanced at each briefly before rolling their eyes at Darcy's great dislike of leaving Pemberley. Catching their shared look, Darcy made a mock pout, "Hmm…I believe I have caught a glimpse into my future!"

Despite her chuckles, Elizabeth was quick to retort, "Ah, but your predicament is of your own making, so you cannot play at being the victim."

Darcy smiled at her, "Indeed it is, though I find that I have little cause to regret my situation. Soon I will not only have my preferred bookseller nearby, but also the lady with whom I desire to spend the rest of my life. With these wishes granted, I will have no need to leave home."

The tenderness with which he looked at her brought a deep blush to her cheeks and an indulgent
smile to Georgiana's face. Determined not to allow him to derail her thoughts, Elizabeth turned away from the intensity of his gaze towards Georgiana, "I had hoped, Georgie, that it might be possible for my Aunt and Uncle to join us at Pemberley? Their cottage is not quite ready to receive them. I know it is perhaps a bit daring of me as a guest to make such a request…"

Despite Elizabeth's uncertainty, Georgiana was quick to agree, "Oh, but what a lovely thought! I greatly enjoyed meeting your Aunt while we were in London, she was always so kind to me. Besides, you will be Mistress of Pemberley soon, Lizzy, so that your family will also become our family and we cannot allow family to stay at an Inn when they would be welcomed in our home."

Darcy nodded in approval, "Well spoken, Georgie. I trust you will make the necessary arrangements for the Gardiners' stay?"

Georgiana nodded, "Indeed I will. Now, Brother, I must insist that you return to the house. We are already ignoring the doctor's wishes in allowing you out of bed."

Darcy frowned, "I have no wish for sleep any longer. But for the unseemliness of the bandages, I would gladly visit with my tenants. I cannot sit idly by here for I would go mad from the inactivity."

Elizabeth could not resist saying in a teasing voice, "Is your brother always such a poor patient?"

Georgiana shook her head, "I hardly now, for he is rarely ill. Brother is fortunate to be in possession of a healthy constitution."

Elizabeth nodded, "I think I can relate to his restlessness. I do not mind acting the part of assistant and scribe if a chair may be spared for the study."

Georgiana agreed gratefully, "Then I will go see about your Aunt Gardiner."

Darcy broke in with a resigned tone, "And so it begins… I see that my life is no longer my own."

As Georgiana turned away to complete her tasks, Elizabeth looked at him fondly, "No, as you had said, what is yours is mine now too. And so, your health is as much my responsibility as it is yours."

The arrival of the Gardiners in the town of Lambton was not the curiosity it might have been, for Mrs. Gardiner retained close friendships with her childhood friends and Mr. Gardiner had proven himself to be shrewd businessman in his visits to reclaim the old Taylor homestead. Indeed, some of the more wizened townsfolk could recall the days when a young Edward Gardiner had first encountered the spirited Madeleine Taylor and somehow managed to distract her from her books long enough to carry her away as a wife. Many had hoped that young Mr. Gardiner would stay on in Lambton and take over for Mr. Taylor, but those who knew Miss Taylor realized that her adventurous nature made the prospect of leaving Lambton for London much more exciting. Nonetheless, Mrs. Gardiner's almost yearly visit to her home country to catch up with old friends and pay her respects to the graves of her parents quite ensured that she continued to be looked upon as one of Lambton's own.

So it was that when a breathless child from the inn arrived at Mrs. Hattie Longfield's door with a message for Mrs. Madeleine Gardiner, the apothecary's wife was profoundly interested regarding the urgency of the matter. When the seal of the Darcy family was observed, her curiosity only grew.

"Well, Maddie, I can see that you have had some important news. Will you not share it?"

Mrs. Gardiner carefully folded the message and placed it in her reticule before replying. "Indeed,
Hattie. Edward and I had the pleasure of meeting the Darcys this past year during their time in London for the marriage of their cousins. It appears our presence in Lambton has not gone unnoticed and we have been invited to stay with them a while."

Mrs. Longfield, being of an astute nature, knew at once that her old friend was not telling the whole truth. "Now Maddie, we have been friends for long enough that I know when you are keeping secrets from me. Surely you know that hiding things from me is futile, I who was the first to notice your preference for your Edward so many years ago?"

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, "Ah Hattie, you do know me too well. Very well, perhaps I should have mentioned that one of my nieces is also currently a guest at Pemberley."

Mrs. Longfield nodded knowingly, "Oh yes, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, is it not?"

Mrs. Gardiner looked shocked, "But how did you know?"

Mrs. Longfield sighed, "I am no gossip, but in a town as small as Lambton and with a family as prominent as the Darcys, such a thing cannot remain secret for too long. Meg, the girl we hired to help tidy up the shop, has a younger sister in Pemberley. Daisy's a young thing, dependable but perhaps a bit excitable and she has yet to acquire the solemn close-lipped nature of most of the Pemberley servants. She simply could not wait to share with Meg how lovely she thought the new guest at Pemberley has been; it appears that your niece has made quite the favorable impression on the staff. Besides, Mrs. Reynolds recently sent a request to my David for certain herbs. The servant was as discrete as could be, of course, but we did gather that someone has been injured recently. I heard the constable also paid a visit to the estate...I do hope it's not that dastardly Wickham again. I knew that lad would not turn out well, despite all that the Darcys did for him. And he has only repaid them with sorrows... It would be a shame for anything to happen to such a lovely family. They are so well-liked locally."

With great alarm, Mrs. Gardiner remarked, "Oh dear, there was no mention of any conflict in the message, and Lizzy made no comment on it in her last note to me."

Mrs. Longfield was quick to reassure her friend, "Then you need not fear, I am certain the dangers have passed. Nonetheless, I will keep you no longer but allow you to go in search of the truth, for I know you will have no rest until you find it."

Mrs. Gardiner nodded gratefully at her girl-hood companion and her chief correspondent who kept her abreast of news in Derbyshire, "My thanks Hattie."

Mrs. Longfield brushed aside her gratitude, "What are friends for? And you can be sure that I will remain mum about everything. Now, go on, Maddie. Just be certain to stop by before you leave for London again! It has been too long."

Despite her worries regarding her niece, Mrs. Gardiner managed to muster a true smile, "I will indeed, dear friend."

Returning to the Rose and Crown, Mrs. Gardiner was glad to see her husband's horse being taken to the stables. Finding Mr. Gardiner in their rooms, she quickly showed him message from Pemberley and shared her anxieties regarding the extra news from Mrs. Longfield. Quick to reassure his anxious wife, Mr. Gardiner agreed that the couple would depart for Pemberley as soon as could be arranged and send for their belongings at a later time. Fortunately, Georgiana had planned ahead and the Darcy carriage was waiting for the Gardiners as soon as their decision had been made. When the Gardiners arrived at Pemberley, they were graciously welcomed by Georgiana and
ushered into a comfortable looking sitting room. Turning to a nearby maid, Georgiana asked politely that Elizabeth be summoned from Darcy's side. At such a request, Mrs. Gardiner felt her eyebrow rise in speculation. Seeing her curious look, Georgiana quickly explained, "I fear my brother is a bit indisposed at the moment. He insists he is mostly recovered, but Lizzy was most insistent. He sends his apologies for being a poor host."

While Mr. Gardiner replied that it was no trouble, Mrs. Gardiner asked quietly, "I do hope he is alright?"

Georgiana smiled reassuringly, "Oh yes, the doctor expects him to make a full recovery." At the growing worry on the Gardiners' faces, she added, "Oh dear, I fear I have started at the end of the story rather than the beginning…and normally, I would not be so open with the happenings lately, but seeing as we are to be family…Oh dear, and now I have ruined the surprise! Oh I do hope Lizzy forgives me…"

Looking at each other in confusion at their hostess's jumbled thoughts, the Gardiners felt grateful when the door opened to reveal their niece.

Seeing Elizabeth, Georgiana also breathed a sigh of relief, "Oh Lizzy, I am so glad you are here. I believe I am making a mess of explaining recent events to your Aunt and Uncle."

Mr. Gardiner spoke up, "Yes, as glad I am to see you, dear niece, you do have much explaining to do…what is this Miss Darcy mentioned about us being family?"

Elizabeth blushed but replied truthfully, "Uncle, Aunt, I am glad you can join us. I had not planned on saying anything until Mr. Darcy had spoken to Papa, but, well, he has asked and I have answered and…well.."

Mr. Gardiner cleared his throat, "I see…well, then should you not be returning to Hertfordshire soon?"

Elizabeth nodded but a shadow crossed her face, "I am certain he intended to, only…"

At her hesitancy, Mrs. Gardiner remarked, "Only you had an unexpected visitor of some sort?"

"But how did you know?"

Mrs. Gardiner smiled a bit at the irony of hearing such a question from her niece when just hours before the same words had passed her own lips. "I am good friends with Mrs. Longfield, the apothecary's wife, and learned from her that Pemberley had recently sent some requests for certain herbs and medicines. While I am most happy to see that you and Miss Darcy remain unharmed, I do not think I would be wrong in presuming that something has happened to Mr. Darcy?"

Elizabeth sighed and confirmed her Aunt's insightfulness. Taking a brief moment to gather her thoughts, she, with some interjections from Georgiana, made known to her relatives of the events of the prior day. Describing Darcy's proposal with the barest of details, Elizabeth caught the look on her Aunt's face and knew that a private conversation would be due for later. As she further told of the unexpected visitor, she saw her Uncle's brows furrow in thought.

Mrs. Gardiner was the first to break the silence. Turning to Georgiana, she was quick to say, "Oh you poor dear! I am so glad you did not come to harm." Forgoing convention, she gave the young girl a hug of support.

Rather than being affronted at the personal touch, Georgiana found herself leaning into the older woman. Her shoulders quivered as the reality of the dangers she had been in finally settled. Though she had not lied when she reassured both Elizabeth and Darcy of her emotional state, she
also had been too overwhelmed with the joy of having Elizabeth as a sister soon and her worries for her brother. She had not allowed herself to linger on the incidence of the prior day but, in retelling the tale, she felt her panic returning. With Mrs. Gardiner's arms around her, she felt the gravity of the situation hitting her and could not help but tremble in remembrance of the fear that had left her near-paralyzed.

As Mrs. Gardiner did her best to soothe Georgiana, Mr. Gardiner turned to his niece. "Well Lizzy, while I am happy for you and Mr. Darcy, I do not know if I can approve of you persisting to be alone in his company, particularly as he has yet to speak to your father. Nonetheless, I do understand the special circumstances involved… I see that your Aunt and I have arrived just in time. Though I have no doubt of your courage, there is something to be said about having family close by when in a crisis. So, when your Mr. Darcy feels well enough to receive me, I will speak with him regarding our next actions for your unpleasant visitor. You can be sure that I will be certain to accompany him on his errand to discover the stranger's motivations."

Elizabeth nodded in acknowledgement and smiled gratefully at her Uncle. "Thank you, Uncle. I had extracted a promise from Mr. Darcy that he would not travel alone to Lambton. But I must admit that my worries are much lessened on knowing that your steady presence will be nearby as well."

Mr. Gardiner smiled in return, "There now, child, you need not be too relieved, for I do plan to be most severe with Mr. Darcy in your father's absence. Much as my father-in-law had once been reluctant to gift me with his treasure, I am certain your father would be loath to part with his, much as he would be assured of your future happiness."

At such a comment, Mrs. Gardiner, her arms still around a now calmer Georgiana, remarked, "Ah yes. Papa always managed to be most clever in his hidden insults to you, with many literary allusions if my memory serves me. I think it was your ability not only to understand his meanings but to respond with barbs of your own while still maintaining a visage of respect that impressed him the most. Of course, I think Papa thought it most fitting that I remained oblivious to your attentions until Hattie remarked on the matter."

Regaining her equilibrium somewhat, Georgiana asked curiously, "How so, Mrs. Gardiner?"

"Ah, but you must call me Aunt Gardiner as well since we are truly to be family soon! As for that, well, I think my friend Hattie, that is, Mrs. Longfield down in the village now, can tell the tale better than I can."

Georgiana pleaded, "Oh, but please, I would love so to hear the story."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled, "Very well then. You see, Mr. Gardiner had been in town, still just establishing himself as a tradesman…"

As Mrs. Gardiner told her tale to a most captive audience, laughter filled the parlor and quite chased away any vestiges of sorrow or discomfort. Georgiana, from her position next to Mrs. Gardiner, felt her heart warm at the thought that her future was certain to hold many such occasions when she would be surrounded by the love and support of family. As she found herself chuckling at tales of the courtship between a most earnest Mr. Gardiner and an oblivious Miss Taylor, she sent a silent word of thanks to the heavens for sending Miss Elizabeth Bennet into the Darcys' lives.
Miss Mary Bennet was a rather quiet young lady. Growing up in a household of sisters, each with a distinct personality of her own, she had always felt a bit overlooked if not a bit neglected. Her mother's thoughtless comments regarding Mary's lack of physical beauty, so often echoed by the Bennets' neighbors, though certainly not out of ill-intent, had at one time caused the young girl no end of distress. As time went on and these comments reached a level of banality, Mary no longer paid them any mind but began to accept her own inferiority in the company of her sisters. She felt no resentment, no regret in acknowledgement of such an idea, but rather quietly carried on with her life. Because no one expected her to speak up or distinguish herself in any way, Mary embraced her quiet nature and sought solace in her music. In the notes she coaxed from the Bennets' old pianoforte, an instrument that was a part of her mother's dowry despite the lack of any interest Mrs. Bennet had in it, she came to reach a certain level of tranquility that stood in sharp contrast to Jane's dutiful thoughtfulness, Elizabeth's almost restlessness in sharpening her mind, and Kitty's playful spirit.

Such an existence would have continued thus, perhaps lasting until each of the other Bennet girls had children of her own, but for Mrs. Bennet's death. Sent to live with her Uncle and Aunt Gardiner, Mary found for the first time that her opinion was valued. So when Kitty, with all the dramatics that her nature demanded, revealed her hurt, Mary could only murmur her assent. In the years that followed, Mary came to understand that being alone and being lonely were separate entities that may at times overlap but nonetheless were distinct from one another. Safe in the knowledge that her family valued her contributions and truly appreciated her gift in the musical arts, Mary became more comfortable with her place. Nonetheless, because old habits were difficult to shake, and the long-established opinions of those who have known her since even before her formal entrance into the word were even more so, Mary still found it difficult to make friends outside her immediate family. Her friendship with Miss Georgiana Darcy was thus of equal significance to both parties.

So it was that when Mary heard the strains of a pianoforte as she walked through the familiar halls of Netherfield, now blissfully free of the presence of the intimidating Lady Catherine de Bourgh, her heart lifted in joy at the thought that her friend had returned from her sojourn in Derbyshire. As her steps drew her closer to the source, however, she realized that the music had none of the lightheartedness that was characteristic of the songs Georgiana preferred. Instead, this song was filled with sorrow, regret, and a certain amount of bitterness. The style of playing was also different. Whereas Georgiana seemed to build a partnership with the instrument, this musician seemed to be fighting with the keys as though the pianoforte was the demon causing the negative emotions. Her hands on the doorknob, Mary hesitated a moment at the undertone of anger within the song. Nonetheless, her curiosity as to the identity of the person who was able to express these emotions so masterfully made her open the door even as her gentle nature shrank from the strength of despair woven through the tune.

Blinking her eyes at the sudden darkness within the normally sunlit music room, Mary found that it took a moment to see the features of the person seated behind the pianoforte. A lone candelabrum cast just enough light to create a small island of clarity of the gleaming black and white keys but also created enough shadows that Mary thought for a moment it was Mr. Darcy who sat on the bench. As her eyes gradually adjusted, Mary realized that the gentleman was similar in height and coloring to Mr. Darcy but had none of his bearings. Whereas Mr. Darcy gave the impression of health and energy, this gentleman looked pale and wane; and where Darcy's height made him an oftentimes imposing figure, this gentleman's long limbs gave him an almost skeletal gauntness. But what struck Mary the most was the expression of utter hopelessness on this gentleman's face. As the notes of the song swirled around and, indeed, through her, Mary felt that
she was intruding on a most intimate moment. Making to back away out of the music room, Mary stumbled in the darkness and caused a stack of sheet music to fall from a nearby table. The rustling of the papers, while certainly not loud, stood in enough contrast to the melodies of the song that the player at the pianoforte drew pause and glanced up sharply.

Meeting the stranger's eyes and making to apologize for her intrusion, Mary felt the words die on her lips in reflection of the stranger’s eyes. The blank look on his face stood in direct contrast to the overwhelming emotions that had filled the music just moments before. At seeing her, the stranger's eyes seemed to hold a flicker of curiosity that was quickly stamped out even as the two musicians stared at each in eerie silence. Finally, even Mary, who had been long acquainted with silence and thought of it as a good friend, found that the oppressive stillness unsettling. Her voice trembled slightly as she whispered her apology and quickly made her exit.

Back in the hallway, she stood with her back on the now once-again closed door and breathed a large sigh of relief at having escaped a most unusual encounter. Feeling her heart slow to its normal rate, particularly when she heard no sounds on the other side of the door that would suggest any movement on the part of the mysterious gentleman, Mary made to leave Netherfield for the safety and familiarity of her own home, determined to forget the gentleman and his music.

Had they been less focused on their respective beaus, Jane and Kitty might have remarked on the fact that for the next few days, Mary was playing on the pianoforte at home once more and appeared determined to avoid Netherfield. But neither Jane nor Kitty made mention of such an observation, for which Mary was grateful as she did not know if she could adequately explain her reasoning. Nonetheless, even as she played her own songs, she could not help but remember some of the chords wrought under the stranger's fingers and, quite unbidden, those same notes would find their way into her own compositions.

Of course, given that the residents of Netherfield have long since become friends with all of the Bennets, Mary's determination to forget the encounter was sorely tested. Jane was the first to remark to Mary that the Colonel's brother was visiting the newlyweds and that Anne was a bit flustered at his unexpected arrival, particularly given his absence at their wedding. Smiling absentmindedly, Mary felt her own curiosity satisfied for the time being. Recalling that Georgiana had made mention that her Cousin Reggie was the true musician in the family, she felt a bit silly that she had not realized the identity of the mysterious gentleman. Kitty was the second one to mention the Viscount. Or rather, she made more mention of his garbs of black more than the man himself. Kitty remarked that black was not at all a suitable color for the Colonel's brother, for it quite made his pale visage appear even more ghastly. In comparison to the health glow in the Colonel's cheeks, the Viscount's paleness was positively porcelain and ghostly. Her only observation as to the person himself was a passing comment that the Viscount seemed a rude sort of man, given to responding only in monosyllables. Even Tommy, whose boisterous spirit was so often infectious to those around him, found that he could not rouse the gentleman to play. Indeed, Tommy was of the opinion that the Viscount seemed to be in mourning, a sentiment to which Mary found herself agreeing after her second encounter with the Viscount.

This meeting occurred once more at Netherfield, when Anne decided that she should formally introduce her Cousin Reggie to her friends. Mr. Bennet quickly found himself drawn into conversation with Mr. Bingley and Tommy regarding the young boy's progress in his studies. The ladies found themselves intrigued by the letter Anne had received from her mother regarding Charlotte's integration into the household at Kent. Though she found that she was happy for Charlotte and the ease of her transition, Mary could not help but glance at the Viscount out of the corners of her eye and consider him carefully.

Mary might not have been the study of character that Elizabeth was, but she was still a keen observer with an intuitive mind. The Viscount's expression, which some might have mistaken for
haughty disdain, seemed only tired and almost resigned to her. He seemed barely aware of his
surroundings; his mind far away from his present location. Even the Colonel, the soul of easy
conversation, floundered at drawing more than perfunctory responses. His glance falling on Mary,
the Colonel grasped at the chance.

"Reggie, I fear Georgiana has not yet returned to be your partner on the pianoforte, but perhaps
you will find Miss Mary a suitable replacement? She is likewise talented and, to my untrained
ears, would do quite well."

The Viscount nodded in understanding of his brother's words but otherwise made no response
until his gaze fell on Mary. A fleeting flash of recognition lit in his eyes and then, for the first time
since the beginning of visit, he initiated a conversation. "Miss Mary, I have heard much about you
from my Cousin Georgie. I can only imagine you are the friend who was so kind as to play a duet
with her at my brother's engagement ball."

Relief filled the Colonel at this sign of life in his brother so that he was quick to say, before Mary
could answer for herself, "Oh yes. Miss Mary did very well and left quite the impression on
Mother. 'Tis a pity that you were not there to see it, Reggie."

At such a comment, the Viscount seemed to resort back to his silent state. Dismayed at this turn of
events, the Colonel, rather uncharacteristically, turned to Mary with a pleading look before
departing to join Bingley's more cheerful company.

Gathering her courage, Mary murmured, "'Twas no trouble to play with Georgie. I found it quite
the honor, really, and feel fortunate that she considers me a friend."

The Viscount returned his attention to Mary, his eyes piercing. "Neither one of you has many
friends to boast of, do you?"

Though she flinched from the directness of his blunt remark, Mary only nodded in agreement.
"Aye, we both find that we are sometimes overshadowed by those of greater consequence in our
families. Besides, for all our love of music, neither of us welcomes the attention of being on
stage."

The Viscount smiled a bit bitterly, "Then you can well imagine the feelings of one who, like you,
prefer the silence outside the limelight but has little choice in inhabiting that spot."

"I can little imagine it, for even your mentioning of such an idea brings an ill feeling to me."

When he remained silent, she said, a trifle crossly, "But surely your position offers you certain
luxuries as well? You must have many instruments at your disposal. I am quite envious of
Netherfield's pianoforte and am thankful that Anne does not mind that I practice here. Also,
Georgie tells me you travel extensively abroad on the Continent, does that not expose you to even
more styles of music and other musicians?"

The Viscount's expression again seemed far away as he whispered, "I have indeed met many on
my travels, certain individuals who I do not believe I will ever forget."

Just then, Anne's voice broke into the conversation, "Oh Mary, will you not return your music to
us? It has been many days since I heard your playing in Netherfield's halls. As gifted as Reggie is,
I fear he plays such dreary tunes that he has caused the entire staff to slow down in their tasks."

Blushing at having been caught out, Mary answered, "Oh, but I did not wish our pianoforte at
home to feel abandoned…"

At the word 'abandoned,' the shadow seemed to return to the Viscount's face. Nonetheless, he
remarked, "Please, do not mind my presence, Miss Mary, I am willing to share the pianoforte. Besides, I expect my sojourn in the country cannot last long before my parents remind me of my responsibilities to Milton Hall."

Mary glanced at him curiously and was surprised to see an earnest expression on his face. Her brief impatience faded and she could only nod.

That evening, as they prepared for sleep, the Colonel and Anne found themselves in a serious discussion regarding the Viscount.

Anne, a worried look on her face, asked, "Has Reggie spoken of his troubles?"

The Colonel sighed, his usual smile absent from his face, "No, my dear, I fear Reggie is very ill indeed. I fear I was never as close with my brother as I was with Darcy; we were of such different temperaments. I only hope that he will be able to hide his ailment from our parents, for Mother is certain to be most alarmed. But the more she insists on finding the cause of his ailment, the more Reggie will shrink within himself and his music. It was ever thus."

"I do hope Georgiana returns to us soon. Reggie always did have a soft spot for the dear girl. And even if he does not tell her his secrets, her presence would certainly soothe his hurt."

The Colonel nodded, "Indeed, I hope you would not think me presumptuous, but I had hoped that Reggie might make friends with Miss Mary and can share some of his burdens with her in Georgie's absence. I do not believe them to be interchangeable, but certainly Miss Mary carries with her a certain air of tranquility and kindness that I hope would soothe his soul."

Anne's worry deepened, "Are you so worried about his soul?"

The Colonel sighed again, "I do not know. But I do know that he has suffered some form of tragedy such that his dark cloud seems in danger of becoming permanent. Reggie has ever been sensitive, but this somberness is uncharacteristic even for him. I think Mother's insistence in finding Reggie a bride also grows out of her hope that should he have a companion, his spirit would be less moody and secretive."

Anne looked at her husband sharply, "Is that also part of your motivation in introducing Mary?"

"I must admit that I did not think of such a thing. I had only hoped that Reggie might have a friendship with one not in our family. And Miss Mary seemed an ideal candidate given her musical inclinations and her sweet nature. If he should develop tender feelings for her, well, so much the better, for she is a dear girl and will be very considerate for his sensitivities. And I think perhaps Reggie will likewise benefit from the responsibilities of protecting her gentleness, particularly in the face of the scandal it would cause if the next Lady Matlock were to be one of the younger daughters of a minor country gentleman."

Anne thought carefully but remarked, "Not if she were to be the sister of the next Mrs. Darcy. And you and I are both fully aware that Darcy is set on putting Miss Elizabeth in such a role. But there, we are speculating on the future when the present has more pressing matters."

The third meeting between Mary and the Viscount was almost a mirror image of their first. This time, Mary was the one seated at the bench. Having decided that she was being silly in avoiding Netherfield after having made the Viscount's acquaintance formally, Mary chanced a visit. Sunlight poured through the windows and seemed to dance in recognition of her merry tune. Suddenly, as a thoughtful expression crossed her face, the notes changed to a slower, more sorrowful sound. Nonetheless, a thread of hopefulness ran through the song, like the first ray of sunshine that signaled the end of a storm. The sound of applause interrupted her playing and she
looked up to see the Viscount's still figure watching her from the other side of the pianoforte.

Seeing her startlement, the Viscount spoke quietly, "Miss Mary, I hope you would forgive the intrusion. I am glad that descriptions of your talent have not been exaggerated."

Mary blushed at his praise and murmured her thanks.

Seating himself in a nearby chair, the Viscount continued, "Was that one of your own compositions?" At Mary's nod, he added, "I can tell that it holds a story that you wish to convey. Would you mind terribly telling me the story?"

Mary shook her head regretfully, "I fear you are asking the wrong Bennet if a story is what you seek. My sister Kitty is much more gifted in that area."

"Then I will venture a guess, if I may. I think it is a story of loss, of regret, of sorrow; but ultimately, also of recovery and renewal. But I do not know if you have managed to convey the darker elements of this story as well as you could have."

Rather than be offended at his feedback, Mary nodded in acknowledgement of his observation, "Indeed. I have been blessed in that I have yet to experience a loss deep enough that it would give me the experience necessary to fully capture the hollowness of absolute sorrow. I fear my lack of such experiences leaves much to be desired in my playing."

"Perhaps so, but I would not wish such a loss on one such as yourself. Indeed, I would not wish such a loss on anyone."

Sensing that his gloom was again returning, Mary gently reminded the Viscount, "But if one were to have the support of a loving family, than certainly recovery from such a loss, while slowly and arduous, is not an impossibility."

At her sentiment, the Viscount only looked a bit more thoughtful as he remarked, "Perhaps, though I believe some hurts run too deep for even the balm of family to be of much help."

"Then mayhaps music will soothe your hurt as much as it does mine. Will you not share with me some of the songs you have learned abroad?"

"Maybe upon our next meeting, Miss Mary." So saying, he stood, bowed, and left Mary to her own thoughts.

Despite Mary's misgivings that she had offended the Viscount, he stayed true to his promise and shared with her some of the techniques and songs he had learned during his travels. Gradually, Mary stopped counting the number of encounters she had with the gentleman. As she relaxed in his company and he in hers, the Colonel and, of course, Anne, began to hope that the Viscount was on the road to recovery. Nonetheless, Mary remained careful not to mention the Viscount's loss again.

One afternoon during which Mary found herself trapped at Netherfield for a few hours longer than usual because of the onset of a sudden summer storm, she played a song that she had written in anticipation for Lizzy's homecoming.

The Viscount's appearance in the middle of a song no longer surprised her, so used was she to his quiet ways. "Is that song for another one of your sisters?"

Mary smiled at him and patiently waited for him to answer his own question in this game of theirs.

Taking his now habitual seat whenever he joined her for one of her practice sessions, the Viscount
remarked, "I can only imagine that it is for Miss Elizabeth, the one I have yet to meet but, if I am to believe my brother and his wife, one whom I will soon call family."

Mary nodded, "Yes. Aside from Tommy, I do not believe anyone can match Lizzy's curiosity for the world around her. She is quite clever and well-read, even in topics that our neighbors might find unladylike. But Papa could not censure her readings, particularly when the results made our tenants quite content and our lands quite profitable."

A rare smile crossed the Viscount's face at such a comment, "Then she sounds like an ideal match for my cousin Darcy. He is a man of the land. Pemberley and its people benefit greatly from his care and dedication. Your sister's intelligence will provide a welcomed challenge to my studious cousin and, I hope, her wit will help bring out the spark of humor in him."

Mary's fondness for her sister lent her courage to speak, "I too believe Lizzy and Mr. Darcy will be most happy together, a fact that I think will soothe my Papa's sorrows at parting with a daughter."

A brief silence fell then, such that the sounds of rain hitting the windows were magnified though, fortunately, the sound of thunder had already faded. Glancing at the wild weather outside, the Viscount's next words signified a change in mood. "I find myself rather envious of both my brother's and my cousin's good fortunes. They have found their hearts' home whereas I am to be forever parted from mine."

At such a comment, Mary stilled and waited for him to complete his thoughts.

Still looking at the sheets of rain outside the window, the Viscount continued his story. "I know my conduct lately has greatly worried my brother and Cousin Anne. But I could not bring myself to speak of it, for the wounds were still too fresh. Even now, I find a kinship between the storm outside and the struggles within myself, for I too have loved once and, I believe, still do…"

When it appeared that he would not speak further, Mary turned back to the instrument to show her sympathies.

"I thank you, Miss Mary. I do not find it easy to speak, for all that I have had a year to grow used to her absence."

When the Viscount fell silent again, Mary dared to breathe her question, "What happened to her?"

His silence was long but just as Mary made up her mind to apologize for her daring, he spoke. "There was a child, our child…but perhaps God decided to punish me for my deception towards my parents, keeping my marriage from them, for He saw it fitting to take away the two dearest things in the world to me."

His eyes slid from hers, as though he could see the figure of his departed just beyond her shoulder, "Mother would deem her an inappropriate bride for a Fitzwilliam, to say nothing of Aunt Catherine’s disgust at her lowly origins. I cared not for the scandal! I only wished to protect her. Our meeting was unexpected, our courtship brief, but our marriage held such happiness. I could not tell Richard the truth; I could not bear to think of celebrating the success of his love story so close to the anniversary of when I buried my heart."

Mary's eyes grew wide at this admission even as she began to wonder as to the Viscount's motivations in telling her his secrets.

"I am a man in sorrow, Miss Mary. You cannot understand the depth of my hurt, nor should you bear the burden of my grief, but I must ask it of you. I wish you to understand the nature of my
warning. Richard and Anne mean well, but I cannot allow you to become an unwitting player in their plans."

Mary almost gasped in surprise, for she had never thought to ponder on her association with the Viscount as anything more than the meeting of two minds so attuned to music. As she thought on the matter more, however, she scolded herself for being so naïve as to be ignorant of the significant looks that had passed between the Colonel and Anne or how others might have seen the multitude of occasions in which she was alone in the Viscount's company.

At her troubled expression, the Viscount said softly, "I do not mean to malign your character; you are a young lady of integrity, one I should be glad to call friend. But neither do I wish you to suffer disappointed hopes. I am so very tired and only wish to live out my days in seclusion as a widower."

Mary, who found her voice at last, spoke, "You have not offended me. Indeed, I am honored that you should think me a friend. You may be assured of my discretion."

"You are a curious creature," the Viscount declared in his blunt way, "not many young ladies would so easily give up the chance of becoming a viscountess and, in time, a countess."

"I have not the beauty, wit, or grace for so prestigious a station," Mary murmured.

A sound that might have been a snort, had Mary thought the gentleman capable of making such a sound, startled her enough to meet his gaze. 

"If those are the requirements for privilege," he said scathingly, "a London Season would be dull indeed for want of participants."

He made no apologies for her look of alarm but did soften his tone, "The storm has abated; I wish you a safe return to Longbourn."

When Mary rose from her curtsy, he was already gone.
True to Georgiana's assertion, Darcy was in possession of a healthy constitution such that even the physician was astounded as to the speed with which he recovered from his wound. The cheerful mood that permeated Pemberley at the Master's return to health culminated in a celebratory dinner party. Surrounded as he was by family, Darcy felt fully content such that even the expectant look from Mr. Gardiner could not dim his happiness. The assembled party found themselves so unwilling to dissociate after supper that the gentlemen easily capitulated to the ladies' demands that they forgo their post-supper brandy. The rest of the evening thus passed in a celebratory spirit, filled with laughter and friendly competition in games of cards and charades. The shadow of the reason for Darcy's needed recovery was, for the moment, easily eclipsed by the joy at Darcy's current health.

The soft drizzle of the next morning prevented Elizabeth from taking her usual morning walk but provided the perfect opportunity for her Aunt Gardiner to accost her for the previously promised discussion. Both ladies being early risers, they were awake while Georgiana still slumbered. Finding Elizabeth, Mrs. Gardiner studied her niece carefully. Nestled in her habitual chair, Elizabeth looked quite at home within the Pemberley library. Mrs. Gardiner felt a tug on her heartstrings at the absent-minded manner in which Elizabeth would twist the new ring on her finger as she perused through the tome in her lap.

Darcy had taken Elizabeth to the tower in Pemberley's woods despite her protests that he was not to overtax himself. He had given her the ring with an almost boyish shyness, his eyes hopeful for her approval. Recognizing the green stones, so reminiscent of the trees and fields she so loved, from Lady Anne’s painting, Elizabeth’s radiant smile met his tenuous one. Nonetheless, Darcy's hand still trembled as he made his offering.

"I do not wish to be presumptuous, for I have yet to speak to your father or, in his absence, your uncle, but I could not wait for their consent. I feel as though you already carry a part of my heart with you and this ring seems but a tiny token in recognition of that fact. I know you wish to wait, so as to ensure Longbourn’s care. I ask only that you accept this small token, so that I may know that it is close to you when I cannot be." 

The wind rustled her wild tresses softly as Elizabeth bent to consider the ring in his outstretched palm. Without hesitation, she had then glanced up at him and nodded solemnly. With shaking fingers, he had slipped the ring onto her finger before lifting it to his lips for a kiss. Elizabeth's soft chuckle had broken the seriousness of the moment as she quipped, "It seems hardly fair that I should now carry a token of your regard while you should have nothing but my words to keep you company!"

Darcy matched her lightheartedness as he answered, "How do you intend to remedy that, madam?"

Elizabeth's laughter grew and she withdrew her hand to retrieve her gift for him. "I do not know if this will be fit to be seen in company, for my stitching is ill indeed, despite my best efforts and Jane's patient tutelage when we were young. But I can say safely that it is entirely of my own making."

Holding the handkerchief in his hand, Darcy smiled a bit at the intertwined “E” and “F” that adorned the corner. "It matters not, for it is enough that you would spend time on a task you find unpleasant simply for me. I will treasure this and place it close to my heart."
The presence of the ring on Elizabeth's finger caused quite the stir at the celebratory supper that evening and was, perhaps, the impetus for the looks that the Gardiners sent Darcy's way. Likewise, the ring provided Mrs. Gardiner with an opening for her conversation with Elizabeth.

"Well, Lizzy, you can have no doubt as to the nature of my questions. The presence of the ring, if not your smile, declares to the world that you are in perfect contentment."

Elizabeth found that her propensity to answer evasively was more difficult to set aside than her book had been. But as she glanced at the instigator for her aunt’s question, her features softened.

Satisfied with such a response, Mrs. Gardiner continued, "I am happy for you, dear niece. For I think you and Mr. Darcy will do quite well together. But I suspect you have no need to hear my opinions on the matter."

Elizabeth smiled as she settled herself for an interrogation, "This volume holds but a sliver of the accounts for the running of the estate here, but it is enough as a starting point."

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, "Would I be correct in saying that you might treasure that book of accounts even more than you might the ring you bear?"

"How well you know me, Aunt! Though both are dear to me. One shows me his heart and the other his soul, for Mr. Darcy has made caring for his tenants his life's work and this book includes not only the finances but also his notes on each of the families who make Pemberley their home. Everything from birthdays and marriages to their personal interests and preferences, he has meticulously recorded them all. He has entrusted me with the task of learning about the good people who have enabled the Darcys to lead lives of comfort."

"Does it not frighten you? To have the responsibility of being Mistress to so much?"

Elizabeth smiled wryly, "Oh yes, I would be fool not to be afraid. But despite my fear, I also feel a sense of excitement at the upcoming adventures. For I know I will have the most attentive of tutors. Mr. Darcy's confidence in me does much to bolster my own spirits and Georgie's willingness to share her expertise does much to comfort me."

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, "You always were one to seek new manners of ways to improve your mind, Lizzy. Are you to embark on this particular adventure soon?"

Elizabeth sighed regretfully, "I cannot leave Longbourn unless I can be assured of its care. I would like to see it through one last harvest and spring planting."

"The wait is a long one."

"Mr. Darcy understands the reason for the delay and has offered his support."

"Yet though you are the one to impose it, I think Mr. Darcy might bear it with more grace."

Elizabeth spared a chuckle, "He is in possession of more patience, I own. But I shall have much to occupy me. Mrs. Reynolds is a most capable housekeeper, but I will not have it be said that the Mistress of Pemberley neglects her duties."

"But how little you care for the opinions of others!"

"I had the luxury of such freedom as Lizzy Bennet, but as Elizabeth Darcy, I fear the scrutiny will be greater."

"Can you be happy with such limits?"
“Limits? My dear aunt, how can you speak so? When I shall have so great an estate as Pemberley in my care?” Growing tired of being forthright, even with so beloved a relation, she waved a hand nonchalantly as she added, “And so wondrous a library at my disposal? I could never love Mr. Darcy as much if he were not in possession of so stately a library.”

A lady of sense, Mrs. Gardiner knew well when a strategic retreat was necessary. “Even your Papa may be induced to travel to visit with so vast a collection.”

Thus diverted, the ladies began to speak of more frivolous matters, allowing the gentlemen to meet for their own conversation.

Even though Darcy sat in his usual seat facing Mr. Gardiner across the width of his strong oak desk, he could not help but feel as though he were a young schoolboy about to face reprimands from a schoolmaster. Fortunately for Darcy, Mr. Gardiner proved just as strict but much more understanding than a schoolmaster might have been.

After a moment of awkward silence in which neither gentleman knew quite how to begin, Mr. Gardiner cleared his throat. "Well, Mr. Darcy, I suspect you have an important question to ask me in my brother-in-law’s absence?"

Darcy, who usually held such tight reign over his emotions, found that in this instance, he needed a moment to find his inner calmness. After all, it was not every day that one sought permission for the hand of one’s beloved. Even though Darcy logically knew that he would like meet with little, if any, opposition, he still felt a tendril of doubt and worry. Nonetheless, his voice was, for the most part, steady when he spoke. "Yes…I would like to apologize for the timing of such a request, for I understand the impropriety of my question at a time when Miss Elizabeth is a guest in my home and so far away from her father who should, rightly, be the one I turn to for permission. However, I am now even more convinced that I am a better man with her by my side. So, yes, I humbly ask, sir, while Mr. Bennet is not present, for your blessings on our union."

Despite his best efforts at appearing stern, Mr. Gardiner could not hide his approval for earnest young man before him. Nonetheless, thinking on his brother-in-law’s habits, he said in a teasing voice. "Are you seeking my forgiveness or my permission, Mr. Darcy? If it is the former, than I fear you have done an ill job indeed in showing any remorse for your actions."

Darcy had the grace to blush.

"Brother Bennet will no doubt rejoice in your discomfort, but I am a businessman. Before I give you my blessings, I wish to make certain that my niece will be well taken care of in her future life."

Darcy was deliberate in his reply. "Miss Elizabeth is in possession of a most independent spirit; I have no wish to cause any damage to a trait that I so cherish in her. She has bestowed on me a great honor in choosing to become my wife, my partner in all our future endeavors. All that I possess are hers and I look forward to her opinions on how to improve the yield of our land while still ensuring the happiness of our tenants. Because of her, I have already sensed many changes in myself and I believe, indeed, I look forward to, discovering even more as our life together progresses."

Mr. Gardiner nodded in approval. "You are aware, are you not, that Lizzy will bring little to this marriage? Longbourn is certainty a most profitable estate for its size, but with four dowries to provide, I fear its resources will be stretched. Besides, Lizzy has little skill in the running of a household for Jane has always had such things well in hand. A gentleman of your position would certainly desire a wife who can manage a house as large as Pemberley."
"I care little for what finances Miss Elizabeth may bring to our union, for I truly believe her value cannot be matched with any monetary amount. As you say, I am in possession of a certain station in life, that station allows me the freedom to choose with my heart. As for the domestic duties of a wife, I have no doubt that a lady of Miss Elizabeth's intelligence will readily acquire the skills. I know that both Georgiana and Mrs. Reynolds are more than willing to provide their aid. I myself will do what I can to smooth the transition. I have had some experience, even if they be limited, in such a role for I was both Master and Mistress for a period after my parents' death. I discovered many similarities to the managing of a household and the overseeing of an estate."

Mr. Gardiner's smile widened at such a reply, "Bravo, Mr. Darcy, you have withstood the interrogation well. I gladly give you my blessings and welcome the day when you officially join our family. And I suspect my brother Bennet will share much the same sentiment though he will certainly be more severe with you than I have been. I am willing to entrust in your sense of honor and am confident that nothing untoward will occur as my niece continues her stay at Pemberley, for I fear Mrs. Gardiner and myself might not be the strictest of chaperons. I remember the days of our betrothal and the sense of wonderment I would feel at the realization that she had consented to be mine. So, I do not begrudge the morning walks I know you and Elizabeth take together. Only…I hope you know that I am entrusting my niece's reputation to you?"

Mr. Darcy nodded solemnly, "I do. And I give my solemn promise of the utmost discretion."

"Good lad. Now, on to a much more unpleasant matter that nonetheless is as urgent…what are you plans for your attacker?"

When next the residents of Pemberley reconvened, the ladies were surprised at the solemn expressions on the gentlemen's faces as they entered the music room mere moments before time came to dress for supper.

Georgiana paused in making suggestions to her friend to look inquisitively at her brother and Mr. Gardiner. Looking from one gentleman to the other, Elizabeth ventured a guess, "Uncle, Mr. Darcy, what tales from our mysterious visitor?"

Settling himself near his wife, Mr. Gardiner gestured for Mr. Darcy to begin.

Sighing, Darcy paused for a moment before saying, "It is as I feared and this has all stemmed from a grave misunderstanding. Though I suppose it brings us little comfort now, I am confident in saying that I was not the intended target of his anger. Instead, I fear my cousin is the one at fault."

Elizabeth blinked, "Colonel Fitzwilliam? I suppose it is easy to mistake his last name for your first and he has been to the Continent, but…"

Her words died away as Darcy shook his head.

Georgiana's voice trembled as she asked, "Is it Cousin Reggie?"

Darcy turned to his sister sharply, "Yes, but how did you know?"

Georgiana shook her head sadly, "I did not. But I did begin to suspect as I thought on the matter some more. Cousin Reggie and I have always kept a regular correspondence, for he likes to tell me of the musical traditions he has encountered in his travels, but this past year I have sensed a darkened tone in his letters. His professed joy at Cousin Richard and Cousin Anne's nuptials, though sincere, seemed to me to hide a small sense of bitterness. I had wondered at his absence at the wedding, though I had assumed that it was result of the conflict on the Continent. But now…"

Darcy sighed once more, "You are perceptive indeed, dear sister, if you could sense Reggie's
troubles through his letters. But Reggie always was closest to you out of anyone in our family. I fear that the story I am to impart will do little to paint my cousin in a positive light. Though, I am certain, given what I know of Reggie's character, that this version of events is not at all complete."

At the nods from the ladies, Darcy sighed and commenced the tale. "My Cousin Reggie has always been quite the musician, but as the eldest son of my Uncle Matlock, he had certain… expectations…he was to fulfill. And perhaps shyness in company is a family attribute, for Reggie has always been a quiet sort who shied away from the attentions of the Ton. And so he decided, with some reluctant approval from my Aunt and Uncle, to prolong his Grand Tour of the Continent. He has sent many fascinating tales of local culture, particularly of the musical persuasion, back to England and, I believe, expressed some hopes of publishing a collection of his studies. My Aunt Matlock, of course, has always hoped that Reggie would return home and find a bride with whom to settle down, if only to ensure the continuation of the Fitzwilliam line. But Reggie has steadfastly remained abroad and now, perhaps, we may know the reason."

Here Darcy paused again as he thought on the best words to use. "It seems that my Cousin has found a love even greater than his music during his travels."

At Georgiana's startled gasp, Darcy sighed again, "Indeed, he might have become a father."

Mrs. Gardiner raised an eyebrow, "But is that not a fortunate turn of events? Will he not then return with his family to England?"

Elizabeth, who had been studying Darcy's expressions carefully, saw that he appeared to be struggling with a heavy burden. In a daring move, she gently reached to hold one of his hands in her own, "I do not believe that to be possible."

Darcy smiled gratefully at her and squeezed her hand in return, "No, I fear Elizabeth is correct. For mother and child are no longer among the living…"

"Oh! Poor Cousin Reggie! He must be devastated!"

Darcy nodded at Georgiana, "Indeed, I expect him to be quite heartbroken. But, as with every story, there are other parties involved. And our mysterious visitor, it seems, is the young lady's brother."

Here Mr. Gardiner took over the narrative, "And not just any brother, but her twin. Though the two were separated when they were quite young and had little contact with each other, our visitor remained devoted. He was sent to live with their mother's family, who, as I understand it, belong to a minor line of nobility. They had been much offended when their only child ran off with a fisherman and demanded that she give up her eldest son so that he may continue the family name. But I suspect the material wealth of his surroundings did little to make up for the lack of emotional warmth he experienced under the care of his grandparents. He was sent to the Continent for an education befitting his station and only returned to the island to take on the title of Baron after his grandparents’ deaths. He quickly made his way to his siblings’ village, full of joyful anticipation at being reunited with his true family, only to discover a house in mourning. The younger brother had the sad duty of informing the elder of the death of their sister in childbirth. I suspect that it was a man consumed by grief and maddened by despair who came to England with no knowledge but the Fitzwilliam name and a vague sense that the Viscount had been a regular correspondent with a young female relative. I truly do not believe he was in his right mind when he came to Pemberley."

Darcy nodded, "He was, however, quite lucid when I thoroughly explained my identity. I do not believe him to be a violent man in general, particularly as he seemed shocked by his own actions and apologized sincerely and profusely for the shock he had caused Georgiana. He consistently
repeated that his sister would be ashamed of him if she knew of his conduct. I do believe him to be weary of body and spirit after the events he has suffered. I have no doubt he still holds much anger towards Cousin Reggie, but at least he appeared to accept that I am not he."

Mrs. Gardiner asked the question that was on all three ladies' minds as they digested this story, "Then what is to be done with him? He cannot linger in Lambton prison if he requires healing from his grief."

Georgiana thought for a moment but spoke bravely, "Brother, mightn't we host him as a guest at Pemberley? We can protect him from the prying eyes of the townspeople and our staff is well known for their discretion."

Darcy glanced in surprise at his sister, "The thought had occurred to me, especially as, through Cousin Reggie's connection, he can be counted as family. But, Georgie, are you certain that his presence will not cause you discomfort? No matter the grief that spurred his actions, he did hold you at gunpoint...I have no wish to have him in our home if it would disturb your peace."

Georgiana shook her head, "I would not have suggested it if I did not think I could bear it. I have no objections if Mrs. Gardiner and Lizzy are willing to have him here as well. I cannot but feel pity for him and the sudden way in which his dreams for the future were shattered."

Turning to Elizabeth with a question in his eyes, Darcy was satisfied at her smile of reassurance, "If Georgie is willing, then how can I have objections? Though, perhaps, I may suggest that we house him in the East Wing a little further away? He may have the solitude to reflect on his grief there and hopefully build a new dream for the future."

Mr. Gardiner remained a little troubled, "While I do agree with Mr. Darcy that the Baron is not by nature a violent man, I still fear for his presence here. I think, likewise, the servants will remain on high vigilance if he is to stay at the main house. Is there not an alternative housing for him? Somewhere he may still feel like a guest but will disturb the servants' equilibrium less?"

The master of Pemberley pondered briefly before saying, "I think old Mr. Wickham's cottage might do. It is closer to the lake in quite a tranquil corner. Mrs. Wickham's garden remains well tended by our staff and the cabin has a rustic feel to it that might appeal to the Baron's sense of home. It is also near enough to the main house that he may feel free to join us for tea or a meal should he wish."

At the nods of all assembled, he stated, "Then it is decided. I had better speak to Mrs. Reynolds so that she might notify the staff. Indeed, perhaps I had better speak to them myself as well. I do hope that they will understand our reasoning."

The staff took the news of the most recent guest to Pemberley surprisingly well though, true to Mr. Gardiner's prediction, most of them vowed silently to be increasingly vigilant in protection of the Darcys and their current guests. The strongest of the menservants were glad that the servants' quarters had a good view of the cottage, for they were determined to keep watch over its occupant. The maids assigned to making the cottage ready were determined that the newest guest would have little cause to complain. They hoped that he would realize that not all of the rich were despicable and that the servants thought quite well of the Darcys indeed. So it was that Darcy and Elizabeth found the cottage clean and organized on inspection. Its cupboards and pantries were well stocked and the closets even had rods, tackles, and baits for fishing.

Sitting on the small dock that hung over the water, Elizabeth and Darcy found themselves basking in the tranquility of their surroundings.

Elizabeth was the first to speak, "I suspect my Uncle Gardiner thoroughly interrogated you as to
your intentions?"

Darcy chuckled as he indicated the ring on her finger, "Though I believe the presence of this ring did much to reassure him of your acceptance."

Elizabeth smiled as well, "Just as the book of records you had given me did much to reassure my Aunt of your determination to treat me as an equal."

A companionable silence fell again until Elizabeth yet again broke it, "You are worried about your Cousin Reggie, are you not?"

Darcy sighed, "Reggie was never very forthcoming regarding his emotions, preferring to keep his thoughts to himself. Yet he is of such a sensitive nature that I fear for his health should he choose to keep this most recent hurt bottled within himself."

“You see your father in his stead.”

“My father never recovered. For Georgie’s sake, and perhaps for mine, he lingered. But Reggie… if the child had not been lost, perhaps he might have found a reason press on. As it is, I am concerned he might act rashly.”

“Surely your uncle will not stand to see his heir so despondent.”

“Uncle Matlock, though a capable statesman, never truly understood either of his sons. He will press Reggie to do his duty, and not comprehend my cousin’s reluctance. He will recognize Reggie’s loss, of course, but will have no patience for his sentimentality.”

“What is to be done?”

“I know not,” Darcy admitted, “Richard writes that Reggie is currently a guest at Netherfield, I can only take comfort in the fact that he has chosen to be with family rather than self-imposed exile at Milton Hall.”

“Then there is hope,” Elizabeth declared resolutely.

He smiled briefly at her conviction. “I feel for Reggie. If I should lose you…”

“You would still not abandon your duty to Pemberley, nor disappoint those who care for you.”

“I cannot promise…”

“You must.”

“Elizabeth.”

In his eyes, she read clearly his fear and was humbled. Taking his hand in hers, she said solemnly, “You have survived loss and you will once again, if necessary. You are not one to shirk your responsibilities.”

“You have such faith,” he marveled.

“It is not misplaced.”

Mindful of his promise to Mr. Gardiner, Darcy settled for lifting her hand to his lips for a soft kiss.
Giovanni Giuseppe del Mastei had never been comfortable with the title of Baron. Despite the constant reminder of his duties from his grandfather, his heart still yearned for the simple joys of his youth. On many sleepless nights, as he stared at the grandiose canopy above his bed, he would find his thoughts drifting to the warm hearth of the nursery by which he and his sister had played under the watchful eyes of their nurse. Closing his eyes, he recalled his mother’s sweet voice telling of the curious *donas de fuera* whose beauty belied their caprice and heard his father’s laughter as he partook in his children’s fancies. The silence of his reality was all the more deafening.

His dislike of his grandfather was born in childish caprice and only increased as Giovanni grew older. The gentleman’s condescending tunes had easily overwhelmed his mother’s soothing murmurs. Even from the hallway, Giovanni could hear the strain in his father’s voice. Elena’s quiet sobs, in addition to the fearful tugs on his sleeve finally persuaded him to retreat to the nursery. As he wiped away his sister’s tears, he felt powerless; the devil had come. No good could come of it. When dusk brought his parents to the nursery, his dread only grew. When they told him of his grandfather’s demands, he found himself once again wiping away someone else’s tears. Using what words he could, he simply whispered, "I will protect you, Matri, I will."

In years after, on his loneliest nights, he would feel a sense of regret at the innocence with which he had made such a promise. In the dark, foreboding manor that he lived, he learned to ask no questions, to make no allusions to his past life. But he bore it. He bit his tongue, oftentimes tasting blood, at the cruelties of his grandfather, but he refused to cower like his grandmother. The Baron might have mistaken his grandson’s silence for meekness, but Giovanni thought only of his mother, safe now, safe from this brute. Her death was a shock. Indeed, the message from his father lay ignored on his grandfather’s desk until Giovanni accidentally stumbled upon it. How he begged then to see his family! “We are you only family,” his grandfather had thundered. Perhaps he read the secret truth in Giovanni’s defiant gaze, the young man’s rejection of any connection he might have with the Baron and his wife. But the sting of the slap Giovanni received was nothing to the anguish that flared and burned within him. He had never known such physical punishment; his grandfather had no need for it to maintain his control. As the letters ceased, no doubt the result of his grandfather’s interference, Giovanni began to plan, all the ways he would utilize his freedom when the day finally arrived.

Had he seen the flinch his silent grandmother could not altogether hide, he would not have been surprised at her presence in his chambers. How sad her pinched face looked, her once youthful beauty as withered as a flower that never sees the sun. And in that moment, he pitied her; that she had neither the strength nor the opportunity to escape as his mother had done. She fearfully pressed an object into his palm and, still silent, stole away as suddenly as she had appeared.

The miniature of his mother was carefully hidden and jealously protected. He continued to act the role of the dutiful grandson, hiding well his revulsion at his grandfather’s looks of grudging approval. He went to the Continent gladly, even knowing that his movements remained carefully monitored. He scorned the debauchery of the youths his grandfather had deemed acceptable company but neither was he free to make acquaintances as he willed. So continued a lonely existence.

When his grandparents finally passed, Giovanni felt no sadness, only a sense of stunned disbelief even as the ship bore him back to Sicilian shores. He supposed that the impassive mask he wore did well to convince others of his grief, for no words of reprimand came his way. Only after the lawyers had left the study (his study now) with a respectful bow after addressing him as 'Baron'
for the first time did Giovanni begin to feel any emotion. The beginnings of a smile began to form as the burden on his shoulders lightened. With eager hands, he grasped his grandfather’s pen (his pen now!) and scribbled a letter to his siblings. The plans he had so carefully concocted would soon finally come to fruition. The servants of the manor had been thrown into a dither when the new Master quickly began to make plans for the arrival of his family, but Giovanni cared not for their opinions, not when he was so close to reclaiming the happiness of his youth and tugging it into his present. Looking back, perhaps he was a touch mad then, crazed with hope, feverish with what he saw as the end of his longings.

That madness only rose to a peak at the discovery of an almost empty house. His father lived long enough to pass his legacy to young Roberto but Elena, sweet, darling Elena was gone. Giovanni felt his rosy view for his future shatter a second time. Gone. What a funny word it was. Gone where? He had asked, not yet realizing the significance of his brother's sad eyes. What had happened to her in his absence? Did she marry? No matter, he would see to it that she received her share of the fortune. But no, she was gone. Gone. With a permanence that staggered Giovanni. Grief came then and pierced through the wall he had built around his heart. Years of loneliness, of loss, of hopelessness crashed over him. The small light that had been lit at his initial realization of freedom died, quenched with the thought that despite all his sacrifices, he could not protect his family. He remembered little of the weeks afterwards, did not recall much beyond seeing her tombstone, standing silently next to that of his parents. He saw again in his mind's eye her tear-stained face from so long ago, the trembling of her body as he tried to shield her from a danger that even he did not yet understand. He heard not the soft words of his brother nor felt his touch of comfort. He was as a block of ice, frozen, and yet, at the same time, a fire burned within him to make somebody pay.

When the shot of the gun sounded, he felt as though he was finally waking from a nightmare, made worse because it was one of his own creation. He had stared at the blossoming red, so reminiscent of the flowers that his mother had grown and his sister had later tended, and felt instantly ashamed. The gun felt foreign in his hands then, the metal strange and rubbery even as it slipped from his fingers. He made little resistance as he felt strong arms grab him and stronger ropes tie his limbs together. Only later, as he stared at up at the ceilings of his jail-cell, did the tears come. His shoulders shook at the realization that he had almost torn asunder a family much as his own had been, that he had become the unfeeling beast he had silently accused his peers of being.

Days passed, but for Giovanni, the changing light held no meaning. For the first time in years, he prayed, whispered words to the departed to forgive him for his rashness. He made no pleas for guidance to his future.

When the Englishmen came, Giovanni felt only a sense of peace. At last, at long last he was to be reunited with his parents and sister. He felt fortunate that he had arranged for his brother to inherit, that he had, despite everything, managed to provide for the last living member of his true family. He was thus ill-prepared for the sympathetic looks he received for his story and even more surprised when they came again with an invitation to his victim’s estate. The cottage almost made the tears reappear. Though the structure was foreign in its English-ness, it exuded a sense of warmth that wakened even his withered soul. He had nodded his thanks then, his words too disjointed to express his gratitude.

He slept well those first few days, allowing himself to calm and recover. The simple meals of bread and cheese with fish he caught through his own efforts did much to cleanse his body while the tranquility of his surroundings did much to renew his spirits. When he felt sufficiently well again, he went in search of paper and pen so that he might inform his younger brother of his wellbeing and his solicitors of his intention to provide compensation to the Darcy family for the damages he had caused. As he walked through the grand halls of Pemberley, so unlike the dreary walkways of his grandparents' manor for the obvious happiness that infused its walls, he could sense the many eyes upon him. But he accepted the scrutiny, for certainly he deserved worse for
his actions. He received no offers of help despite the wealth of servants that must exist for such a large establishment, but nor did he expect any aid.

The sound of laughter drew his attention, a sound of genuine joy that he has not heard for a long time. Quite unbidden, his feet turned in the direction of the sound only to stop in an open doorway. Looking into the room, he felt uncertain about his reception and so hesitated until one of the young ladies within caught sight of him. He felt shame burn within him as he recognized the young girl whom he had held at gunpoint, particularly as her face held no disgust but only pity as she turned to speak a soft word to her brother.

At Georgiana's bidding, Darcy also looked towards the doorway and smiled in welcome. Beckoning Giovanni forward, Darcy informed the rest of the room's occupants, "Ah, and here is our guest! Baron del Mastei, may I present my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, my betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and her aunt, Mrs. Madeleine Gardiner. Mr. Gardiner I believe you have already met."

Giovanni took a breath to steady himself before stepping into the room. "Please, just Giovanni. I am not yet in the habit of using my title. Indeed, I find myself searching for my grandfather when you address me as such."

Darcy nodded as he indicated a seat for Giovanni, "Very well, Signor, I hope the cottage is to your liking?"

Giovanni flushed at the genuine care of his host, "Oh yes. I fear I do not deserve such kindness, particularly after my actions. I am truly sorry for my intrusion, then and now; particularly towards you, Miss Darcy. It was unconscionable of me and, I assure you, not at all representative of my character. I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, but nonetheless I feel deep remorse for my actions."

After a small glance at her brother and seeing only his gentle nod of approval, Georgiana murmured shyly, "You have been through a large string of sorrows, sir, and have my sympathy."

Giovanni wondered at her generosity even as he turned to another young lady, "Miss Bennet, I fear I must also express my shame at the hurt I have caused you. I have little to say in defense of my actions and can only offer my sincere apologies."

Elizabeth did not possess the easy temperament of her sister-to-be, but even she could not completely harden her heart against the humble young man. "My own brother, though years younger, would have defended his sisters had he believed they were in danger."

Despite the coldness still present in her tone, her eyes, when he dared meet them, were kind. Giovanni allowed a tentative smile to cross his face. The effect of this smile was as a curtain opening on a stage and Mrs. Gardiner found herself startled at the youth of their guest. So surprised was she that she could not help but remark, "Oh, but certainly you are young to hold a title of Baron? Why, I cannot believe you to be much older than our Georgie?"

Catching herself and the impoliteness of her question, she added, "Forgive me my directness, I have no intention to offend."

Mr. Gardiner only chuckled at his wife's comment, "Ah, my dear, your reaction was much similar to mine when I first met Signor del Mastei, for I too was astounded at his youthful visage."

Seeing the curious looks from the ladies, Giovanni flushed slightly but said honestly, "I am not yet one and twenty."
Mrs. Gardiner shook her head sympathetically, "So young to have experienced so much sorrow in life."

Sensing his guest's discomfort at the focus of attention on his past, Darcy remarked, "Did an errand bring you to us? You looked to be searching for something?"

Giovanni nodded gratefully at his host, "Oh yes. I had hoped to find paper and pen. I wish to let my brother know that I have not come to harm. I must also contact my solicitors for some funds. I do not feel comfortable living here at your expensive, not when it is I who owe you much."

Darcy shook his head, "We can do no less for family."

"Family," he whispered to himself, even as he insisted, "Please, it would ease my feelings of guilt if you would allow me to offer some manners of compensation. If not in monetary value, then perhaps some goods from my estate? Some wine from the local region perhaps? Think of them as gifts, from one cousin to another on our first meeting."

Darcy sighed, "If you must insist, then I would welcome what goods you would gift to us. Now, why do I not show you to the study so that you may complete your business? Ladies, Mr. Gardiner, if you will excuse us…"

Within the confines of the Master's study, Giovanni found himself studying his host carefully as Darcy arranged the pens and papers neatly for Giovanni's use.

Taking a breath for courage, Giovanni said, "Please, do not trouble yourself too much on my account. In view of what I have done, I am not worth all this care that you have shown me. While I am grateful, your kindness only increases the weight of the guilt I feel."

Darcy paused. "I have learned, that guilt can be as an old wound, festering until it consumes even that which had been healthy."

Giovanni blinked in surprise at this sudden comment.

"My cousin, though you may have no wish to hear of him, is surely no stranger to it."

Giovanni stiffened at the mention of his late sister's seducer. A tense silence reigned before his reply. "My father was a self-made man. When I called him a fisherman, I spoke only the appellation my grandfather had chosen. In truth, Patri provided a life of comfort if not luxury. He understood the need to cherish, a word I fear was ever a stranger to my grandfather. He had been given much, but still desired more."

He fell silent again.

"Much has been taken from you."

"I do not excuse myself for my actions."

Darcy nodded, "I can little imagine the fervors of your mind."

"And yet you judge me not for them." His gaze bespoke of curiosity.

"What cause have I to offer my censure?"

"The price of your life, of your sister's life."

"The latter reveals the reason for my understanding. I too am a brother."
Giovanni’s laugh held appreciation for such bluntness, “But for your cousin, my sister may yet be among the living.”

“My cousin surely tortures himself with the same thought.”

At Giovanni’s continued silence, Darcy added, “You remain jealous of your grief, too much to accept it may be shared. I hope you may soon begin your recovery.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy, you have shown me more kindness than I deserve.”

“You will find, Signor, that our family pride does not preclude us from caring for our own.”

Giovanni proved to be a considerate guest. His guilt barred him from seeking the society of those in the main house, but his figure could often be observed traipsing on the estate. The master of Pemberley watched from afar, an idea forming to hasten the Baron’s recovery.

“It troubles you,” Elizabeth remarked one morning, “that Signor del Mastei continues to show a preference for isolation.”

“He and I are too similar in temperament.”

“Your generosity continues to astound me.”

“You do not agree?”

“Your character determines your actions while his circumstances dictate his.”

“But do not our characters result from our experiences?”

In response to her silence, his tone softened, “Your pity does not move you to forgiveness.”

Elizabeth sighed, “He is as a new hatchling, with no sound measure of his propensities in feeling anything but anger.”

“He poses no danger; else I would not have him at Pemberley.”

“I do not question your judgment.”

“Then you will agree should I make an offer for him to accompany us to Hertfordshire?”

“To what end?”

“He must learn that his grief is shared.”

“If we can be assured that he will not be armed.”

“Your ambiguity is intentional.”

“I have no wish for your vanity to suffer a second time.”

But for the counterbalance his arm offered her, she might have fallen at the abrupt pause in his step. “Elizabeth.”

The warmth of his fingers beneath her chin finally caused her to meet his gaze. She sighed, “You do as your conscious guides you, as much for the Signor as for your own cousin.”

“He is too young to hold such bitterness.”
She inclined her head in agreement but remarked, “Your ambiguity cannot be a matter of chance.”

The quirk of her lips, not quite a smile, nonetheless reassured him.

When the invitation was put forth, the Baron took two days to reach his decision. Making up his mind to seek out his host, he approached the main house with no little apprehension. To his dismay, he was informed in formal tones that bordered on coldness by Mrs. Reynolds herself that the Master was away on a drive to introduce Miss Bennet to the Darcy tenants under the watchful eyes of Mr. Gardiner. The housekeeper had almost expected a gentleman of the Baron’s status to raise a fuss about her less than respectful tones and felt her opinions of the young man rise slightly at his quiet acceptance of her silent reprimands. Studying the Baron carefully, the loyal housekeeper saw a glimpse of the hurting and lonely child within, a figure so reminiscent of her poor Master on the passing of his father that she felt her own expressions lose a little of their grimness. Speaking in a softer tone, she informed Giovanni that Miss Georgiana and Mrs. Gardiner were in the music room if he was looking for company.

His colors rising at such a show of pity, Giovanni quickened his pace in the direction indicated and thus missed Mrs. Reynolds’s mutterings that it would just be like the Master to offer shelter to a hurting soul and that, given what she had learned of Miss Bennet, she had better expect such a trend to continue in the future. Sighing in fond exasperation, she made a silent note to herself to tell the other servants to be more relaxed in their treatment of this particular guest.

Giovanni felt his steps slow as he walked down the corridor, for it occurred to him that he would surely become lost in so large an establishment without a guide. As he wandered through the hallways, he chanced upon the Portrait corridor and passed under the watchful gaze of generations of Darcy’s past. But whereas he had always felt judged and then deemed unworthy by the figures that adorned the walls of his grandparents’ manor, here he felt only kindness and a genteel curiosity. So busy was he in examining his surroundings that he almost missed the young lady standing beneath a particular portrait, her chin uplifted as though she sought counsel from a voice others could not hear. The white of her dress and the serenity of her bearing made her appear as one of the marble statues that adorned the gallery. The thoughtful expression on her face and the questions gleaming from her eyes gave her an air of youthful innocence but also a certain element of pondering maturity.

Giovanni felt his breath catch at such a sight. With the sunlight highlighting her golden curls, she truly appeared as an angel. Standing there, beholding her thus, he felt like a bumbling fool, his limbs clumsy and his own soul so dark in comparison. But Giovanni’s amazement at her presence was not just because of her beauty but also from the sudden return of the shame he had thought had been conquered during his last few days of respite. When he has seen her last, he had only thought to make amends to her and her brother for the troubles he had caused. But now, he felt another, stronger, wave of self-depreciation at the thought that he could have even considered hurting such a pure creature. He knew it was sacrilegious, but right then, he wanted to fall at her feet and ask her to absolve him of all his sins. He would have no doubt continued to stare at her thus, heedless of the impropriety of such an action, if she did not turn suddenly with a resolute nod to her head, as though she had finally reached a decision of sorts.

Her eyes widened as she caught sight of him and her questioning voice broke his silent vigil, "Oh, Signor del Mastei, my apologies for being a poor hostess and not noticing your presence."

Giovanni shook himself as he barely remembered to bow. "Please, Miss Darcy, it is I who must apologize."

Georgiana smiled slightly, "Must you truly? I do not believe you have stopped showing your sincere remorse since my brother invited you to stay. If we have forgiven you already, surely you
may begin to forgive yourself?"

Giovanni found he did not know how to respond.

Georgiana only looked at him sympathetically, "But perhaps your burden is a heavy one that will take more than a few days to lighten, no matter our reassurances or your peaceful surroundings."

"You are wise for one so young." Giovanni almost winced at his words, for certainly, they could be interrupted in a condescending manner, but before he could seek to make amends yet again, she only laughed lightly.

"Indeed. So I have been told, by my dear brother and my new sister-to-be, who I truly believe to be the most perceptive people I know. My dear Mama (she gestured to the painting above them) could certainly have little foreseen that her daughter would have to fulfill the role of Mistress of Pemberley at only five and ten. But I do rather think that she would be proud of me."

Unbidden, Giovanni felt himself smile in answer to her laughter, "Do you often seek counsel from her?"

Georgiana nodded, "I do not remember her, beyond perhaps some vague feelings of comfort and protection that may or may not be the result of my own hopeful imaginations. And certainly my brother does what he can, but there are things for which a daughter would like to seek counsel from her mother. Of course, now that I have Lizzy and Mrs. Gardiner and, indeed, all the other Bennet sisters, in my life, I find that such needs have decreased. Nonetheless, I do like to come visit her, if only to update her on my life."

"Forgive my question, but why do you not then visit her grave?"

Georgiana shook her head, "Oh no, that would not do at all! I do go with my brother yearly, to lay fresh flowers upon her tombstone, but I never quite felt the same connection there. From all I have heard, my mother was a woman full of life and activity. The silence of her grave and the sleepiness of the family plot run too contrary to her person for me to feel her presence. But here, beneath her laughing eyes and her cheeks full of the bloom of life, I can make believe that I am surrounded by her spirit and energy." Glancing at Giovanni again, now suddenly shy at such an open admission, she blushed and said softly, "I hope you do not think me silly."

Giovanni felt his own smile broaden at the sudden show of girlish hesitancy "Not at all. I have but one image of my mother…my grandparents did their best to erase all traces of her existence from their life. My grandfather certainly never spoke her name. I would occasionally catch my grandmother looking at me with a strange expression on her face, as though I were a ghost that she wished she did not have to see. But such occurrences were few and, as I grew older, almost nonexistent."

Feeling the weight of her sympathetic gaze, Giovanni coughed lightly, "Forgive me, I did not mean to be so somber. Nor did I mean to disturb your thoughts. If you will tell me the way, I will retreat to the cottage."

"Oh, but certainly you must stay for tea. That is, if you do not mind only having Mrs. Gardiner and me for company. I fear my brother, Lizzy, and Mr. Gardiner will not return until supper time from their errand."

At his look of hesitancy, she insisted, "Please. It will do you no good to be alone for so long. Besides, I find myself quite curious about life on the Continent. I have had little chance to travel and only know of the world outside our fair isle's shores through stories from my cousins. Cousin
Reggie in particular has been most helpful in sharing tales of the musical traditions he has encountered. Why, he would even send me sheet music from his time abroad! I was just playing such a piece now, and Mrs. Gardiner said it reminded her of a booklet of children's stories that she went to retrieve for teatime."

Suddenly, Georgiana paused, "Oh, but, I do not suppose it would help your healing to hear me speak of my Cousin Reggie."

At the furrow of her brows and the look of distress on her face, Giovanni yet again berated himself for causing her pain. Bowing, he said, "Please. I would be honored to join you and Mrs. Gardiner for tea. And, if you would, I would like to hear of my brother-in-law, if only to try to understand how he could have stolen my sister's heart."

Georgiana smiled again but she made no remark other than to say, "Very well. We are to take tea in the music room."

If Darcy was surprised by the Baron's presence at supper that evening, he made no comment. The ease with which the Baron and Georgiana entered into conversation, however, greatly startled him. When Giovanni indicated his determination to accept the invitation to Hertfordshire, Darcy could not help but feel a twinge of unease.

The attentions the young gentleman paid the Darcy heiress was also not lost on the Gardiners. In the privacy of their chambers, Mr. Gardiner looked at his wife questioningly.

Feigning innocence, Mrs. Gardiner continued to brush her hair at the vanity until he cleared his throat meaningfully. When she continued to ignore him, he capitulated and spoke her name insistently, "Maddie."

Turning to smile at him triumphantly, she only chuckled more at the look of annoyance on his face. "I daresay the young Baron will not be the last to notice the charms of young Miss Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy will never approve of such a suitor."

"I daresay Lizzy will offer more opposition."

"You need not look so relieved, husband mine."

"They are children still; the Signor even more so despite his capacity to endure."

Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, "You have no wish to own to the passage of time. Why, soon even our own Emily will have her share of suitors."

At her comment, Mr. Gardiner only groaned and placed a pillow over his face. Speaking to his niece's suitor and speculating upon the future of his niece's sister-to-be was already quite overwhelming without thinking of his own daughter's future prospects.

Taking pity on her husband, Mrs. Gardiner stood, settled herself on the bed, and gently removed the pillow, "I should not tease you so, particularly when you have years before you must worry about chasing away suitors from our daughter. Besides, I am certain that she will have quite the number of cousins ready to protect her honor, to say nothing of her brother."

Mr. Gardiner chuckled, "Poor Edmund, not yet out of nappies and he already has such a heavy responsibility."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled as well. "Indeed, but I do not fear for our son, for I am certain he will have appropriate role models he may emulate. Certainly there can be no brother as attentive as Mr.
Darcy towards Georgiana or as fiercely protective as the Baron towards his sister."

Slipping an arm around his wife, Mr. Gardiner sighed, "I do miss the children. I have every confidence in their nursemaid, but still…"

Mrs. Gardiner nodded her head in agreement.

"My dear, I hope you would not mind if we are to miss the theatrics that are certain to ensue in Hertfordshire. I have a mind to return to London now that our business in Derbyshire is complete and we were able to find a most acceptable overseer for the bookshop."

Mrs. Gardiner nodded again, "Ah yes, Hattie's younger brother will do well for the post. If nothing else, I will feel safe in the knowledge that my friend has ensured the lad's sense of responsibility after their parents' passing."

"And such a head for business! 'Tis a pity that we almost have no more nieces left to give in marriage. Mayhaps we can arrange for Mary to visit Lizzy quite often once she is installed as Mistress of Pemberley?"

Mrs. Gardiner lifted an eyebrow in surprise, "Why, Edward! I did not think you would seek to try your hand at matchmaking as well!"

Mr. Gardiner only chuckled, "I assure you, my dear, that I only jest. Indeed, I leave our nieces' and our daughter's future happiness in your much more capable hands. I will only commiserate with our Brother Bennet at the sad duty of a father in giving away a daughter."

To which Mrs. Gardiner could only grant a soft kiss on her husband's cheek and a gentle squeeze to his hand. "Not so soon, though, for you will find that a mother's heart does break a bit as well at seeing her children grown. And our nieces are certainly as much my daughters as Emily is."

Holding his wife and bringing her closer to his side, Mr. Gardiner quipped, "And so, my dear, I must own up to the passage of time and admit that certainly we must be growing older."

Despite her laughter, Mrs. Gardiner managed to retort, "Not older, only wiser," before her husband's kiss left her bereft of words. Mrs. Gardiner's thought of, 'Ah, so not so old after all' was happily dispelled as she found herself sufficiently distracted.
Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam believed himself to be in possession of a most practical nature. Born a second son, he never saw reason to waste his energies on useless resentment of unchangeable facts. Besides, his position was not without its freedom from certain expectations. His brother’s statements thus proved an unlooked-for surprise.

“I find myself in need of a drink.”

A heavy silence fell, interrupt only when the Colonel declared, “You are mad; or else jesting in the least amusing of ways.”

The Viscount was unmoved, “For the good of the family, I must. I cannot ensure the continuity of the Fitzwilliam line, but you can.”

“You cannot ask it of me, of Anne.”

“I cannot allow myself to enter a marriage of convenience. I will not…Richard, I regret laying upon you such a heavy burden, but it must be done…”

The Colonel’s anger lent him eloquence, “You regret?! You cannot be serious, Reggie. Did you think that I would have no wish for the title? Did you not think that my reason for moving to the country was because I did not wish to remain in London? Did you consider Anne at all? How she would feel at being told that she would have to become the next Lady Matlock? No. You thought nothing of us.”

“Anne is Aunt Catherine’s daughter. I have no doubt that under Mother’s tutelage, Anne will do her lineage proud.”

“And what of me? I have been searching for peace and am loath to part with it now that I have finally gained it. I think I deserve a chance to forget the screams of my comrades and the smell of burnt flesh.”

The Viscount, unused to such candor from his brother, remained silent.

The Colonel paid him no mind but continued his tirade, “I have hid your state from our parents, justly I thought for you were in need of healing…I did not think that you would…You cannot deny your duty. What is it that you wish for? Freedom? Have you not had enough of the wandering life? Did you not think of our parents’ fear of losing their sons? I had a duty to my orders, but you! You cannot embrace of the pleasures of your privilege and shoulder none of the responsibilities!”

Pausing to catch his breath, the Colonel glared at his elder brother, daring him to answer his questions.

Two spots of bright color had been growing on the Viscount's pale face, making him appear as a porcelain doll. A flash of annoyance sparked in his eyes as his posture straightened, his long limbs now rigid with indignation. “Do not presume to know me, little brother. You have no idea of the extent of my sufferings.”

“And what ideas have you of mine?! To serve the Lord or the King, I made my choice. I have no regrets; my regimentals suit me more than the cloak of a clergyman. Still, what could you know of the anguish and regrets that continue to haunt me?”
The Viscount rose to his feet, towering over the table between the brothers, “Do not you dare trivialize my loss!”

The Colonel likewise rose and retorted, “What have you lost?! Besides your sanity? That is, if you were ever in possession of it?”

The brothers stood thus, each resolute in his indignation. The Viscount's sudden sigh disrupted the tense silence. He deflated, collapsing into his seat. His words, when they came, were cloaked with such defeat that the Colonel also resumed his seat. “Imagine if you were to lose Anne. Not only Anne, but also your child.”

The Colonel blinked at the unexpected nature of his brother's reply. His lips moved soundlessly before he cleared his throat, “You have my condolences.”

The Viscount only nodded in acknowledgement at the peace offering. “I find myself envious,” he spoke after a moment, “that Uncle Darcy still had Georgie. But I? I have nothing. Cannot you see, Richard, that I am not fit for the responsibilities ahead? I know not what demons hunt you, but surely you are better suited to do honorably by the Fitzwilliam name?”

“Mother will not stand for it, to say nothing of Father.”

“It cannot be helped.”

“Your decision is not sound.”

“Is it not? How can I think to protect our family’s interests when I could not protect my family?”

“Your family does not end with your loss.”

The Viscount’s reply was rueful, “Miss Mary would agree with you.”

“Miss Mary has learned much wisdom from her sisters.”

The brothers sat in silence once more. Studying his brother, the Colonel ventured an opinion. “You blame yourself.”

“Would you not?”

The Colonel sighed, “Save me from guilt-ridden relatives! I wonder if it is a family trait, for both you and Darcy seem keen on shouldering blame that is not rightfully yours.”

“And yet…”

“No. Her death, and that of your child, was not of your making.”

At the recalcitrant look on his brother's face, the Colonel tried another tactic. “Did you seek help for her?”

The Viscount almost looked offended, “Only the best physicians I could find. I could not be with her, not during her struggles to bring our child to the world. But afterwards, I held her…I felt her tears soak through my shirt, the growing frailty of her hands as she slipped away from me to join our son. I could not hold on to her. I could not protect her.”

“Did she blame you?”

The Viscount shook his head, “No, but she still left. I cannot help but think that it is my
punishment. If I had not married her…”

The Colonel sighed, “Reggie, it does not due to dwell on such thoughts, on the might-have-been’s. The truth of the matter is that you did marry her and I can only imagine that your lives were blissful, if you truly cared for her as I do Anne. But now that she is gone, you cannot stop living.”

“’Tis easy for you to say, for you still have Anne.”

“Indeed, perhaps so. Nonetheless, neither are you without help. You are not just a Fitzwilliam, but the Fitzwilliam heir. You were born with many advantages but with them come certain responsibilities. Use that to keep living. Besides, did you not wish to record tales from your travels? Now you may do so and perhaps relish in positive memories of your beloved.”

“I…”

The Colonel shook his head, “I have no wish for the title, Reggie.”

At last the Viscount sighed, “What would you advise?”

“You would follow my counsel?”

“I would take it under advisement.”

The Colonel’s answer was brief, “Do not be so hasty in your decision.”

“You believe my reasoning to be compromised?”

“Do you not?”

“You would protect Anne.”

“You would do no less.”

The Viscount’s eventual answer was resigned, “Very well, if you could bear to have me disrupt your peace, I will continue to trespass on your hospitality.”

“Perhaps, in time, you will recover your heart.” Despite his words, the Colonel held little hope in view of his brother’s despondent state.

The continued presence of the Viscount in Hertfordshire drew increasing interest from the townsfolk, particularly when he attended a local assembly and sought out Miss Mary Bennet for the first dance. The Viscount seemed oblivious to the raised eyebrows and looks of stunned disbelief sent his way. For her part, Mary was only happy to see her friend’s unnatural paleness fade and a small sparkle of life return to his eyes. Though she was glad for his company and their many musical exchanges, she remained cognizant of his earlier warnings regarding the effects of his lost love. Strangely, with such knowledge, Mary found herself speaking freely with the gentleman as she would little do otherwise. The removal of any possibilities of romantic entanglements with the gentleman enabled her to smile blithely at her Aunt Phillips’s persistent questions. Even Tommy’s concerns regarding the gentleman’s attention to her only brought about a soft chuckle as Mary patiently explained the nature of her friendship with the Viscount to her curious siblings. Kitty’s expression spoke clear her disbelief but at the look from Jane, the youngest Miss Bennet held her tongue.

Mary remained unaware of the strength of such a friendship until she was faced with the guest who accompanied her sister and the Darcys upon their return to Hertfordshire. At Anne’s request, she had been at Netherfield to join the Fitzwilliams’ on their trip to Oakham Mount. The Colonel
had been most insistent on ensuring that the Viscount did not stay in the music room all day. Since their conversation, both brothers seemed determined to interact with one another more often than was their wont, as though to make up for lost time. Anne said nothing directly to either gentleman but her gentle smile could not be mistaken for anything but clear approval. Quite by coincidence, the Darcy siblings arrived at Netherfield precisely as the four were ready to embark on their trip. The otherwise joyful reunion was made tense by the introduction of the Baron and the Viscount to each other. As the others stood in shocked silence at the punch the Baron delivered to the Viscount, Mary found herself propelled fourth by an unknown power. The sound of the ensuing slap made all eyes turn to Mary. Almost shaking with indignation, Mary was not aware of the attention on her but instead focused on the newcomer.

“How dare you?! Can you not see that he has been suffering? Just as you are passing through a dark cloud, so is he. Can you not perceive that he has laid all the blame on his shoulders and has suffered for it?”

A gentle touch on her shoulder put a stop to her impassioned words. Turning to see the Viscount's gentle eyes, Mary blushed as the realization of her actions and the attention upon her person dawned on her. Her indignation fled, chased away by her sense of embarrassment and shame. Only the weight of the Viscount's hand kept her from running away as she desired.

“Miss Mary. Please. You need not be angry on my account, for I know I deserve, at least in part, the punishment laid upon me. Please, I am not hurt; it is nothing compared to the pain I hold in my heart.”

Before Mary could gather her wits for an adequate response, the Viscount turned to the Baron, “I do not begrudge your anger, sir, not when I know you are suffering from a most grave loss. And I am willing to shoulder my part of the blame for causing such a parting among siblings. But I cannot beg forgiveness for having known your sister…she was my joy and I can honestly say that I did all that was in my power to protect her. I regret that our meeting could not have occurred under happier circumstances but, nonetheless, I hope to call you brother for, in truth, that is what we are.”

As Mary drew comfort from her friend's presence, so too did the Baron feel his anger fade, to be replaced by self-incrimination, at the sight of the disappointment on Georgiana's face. Bowing towards his host, he calmed himself enough to say, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, my apologies for my unseemly display, particularly as you have been so gracious in granting my stay. Miss Mary, I cannot fault your actions, nor your words, for I have indeed been selfish in thinking that my hurt is my own. I…It seems that since my arrival in your fair land, I have been apologizing for my actions. I can only say that I am not yet in full control of my emotions and beg your forgiveness.” Turning to the Viscount, he added, “Your cousins have shown me great kindness and I have not returned their care in kind. Please, if you are willing, perhaps we may begin again.”

The Viscount studied the Baron and, finding him to be sincere in his request, nodded solemnly. “If my brother would excuse us, perhaps we can find our way to Oakham Mount, for I believe we have a conversation to hold that has been a long time delayed.”

The Colonel quickly gave his consent and so, with one last reassuring smile at Mary, the Viscount led the Baron onto the path away from Netherfield.

Breaking the awkward silence that had fallen, Georgiana stepped up to Mary and gave her a warm hug, “They will be alright, have faith my friend.”

Sighing, Mary nodded reluctantly and allowed her friend to steer her indoors again.

Anne gave Darcy a stern look, strangely reminiscent of her mother’s most disproving gaze, as she
remarked, “Well, cousin, your letter could have little prepared us for such a meeting. Did you not
remark that the Baron had recovered much?”

Darcy sighed, “I had thought as much, but I fear Elizabeth was correct in her speculations that the
Baron would have difficulty keeping his emotions in check.”

The Colonel raised an eyebrow at Darcy's use of his lady's given name. “Why Darcy, is there
some other piece of news that you have yet to share with your family?”

Cursing his slip of the tongue and his cousin's attention to detail, Darcy could only nod reluctantly
at the equally curious gaze from Anne.

At such a gesture, Anne's expressions brightened immediately, “Oh! But what wonderful news!”

Darcy shook his head, “I have yet to speak to her father or Tommy.”

The Colonel only laughed and clapped his cousin on the back, “Have no fear, dear cousin, I do
not think you will meet with much opposition. Her father will tease you without mercy, but he
would be blind not to see the happiness between you and Miss Elizabeth. You need not be so
grim about that matter.” Sobering again, he added, “Though perhaps you had better review the
Baron's story once more with us; letters are not sufficient to enable us to reach a full
understanding.”

Darcy nodded and followed his cousins' lead in re-entering Netherfield.

While Darcy answered inquires from the Colonel and Anne, Georgiana and Mary found their way
to their usual refuge. Even though both sat in front of the pianoforte, the instrument stayed silent.
Both young ladies were also uncharacteristically grim of face as Georgiana still held a protective
arm around her friend.

Finally, Mary took in a shuddering breath. “I must apologize, Georgie, I do not know what came
over me. I did not mean to behave in such an unladylike manner. Please, promise me you will say
nothing of it to my sisters; they would be so disappointed in my conduct.”

Georgiana turned to her friend with a sad smile, “I do not think they will be too severe with you,
for all you did was in defense of a friend. And I have learned that the Bennets are nothing if not
good friends. My Cousin Reggie is lucky indeed to have you in his life. Nonetheless, if it would
sooth your worries, I promise not to breathe a word of this incident.”

Mary smiled gratefully as the girls fell into silence once more.

Drawing a deep breath, Georgiana asked gently, “Mary? What is your opinion of my cousin?”

Mary looked up at her friend, startled, “But whatever do you mean?”

Georgiana sighed, “Reggie is…I can only imagine how heartbroken he is at the moment. I know
some of what transpired, from the Baron's perspective. And I have been witness to his hurt; he has
not had an easy life and this latest blow may have just been one too many. I agree with the merit in
your words, for both gentlemen are hurting. 'Tis only...Reggie is not one to share his thoughts,
even worse than my brother sometimes, and yet, I can only surmise from your actions that he has
made much of his thoughts known to you…”

Mary pondered her friend's words for a moment before replying honestly, “The first time I
chanced upon your cousin, it was here in this room. I was captured by the music he wrought but
startled by the pure anguish within both it and him. And so I suppose our friendship was born of
my curiosity. But, Georgie, you must believe me when I say that I seek no more than friendship.
He told me of his tale as a warning of sorts. I know his heart belongs to another. I have heard the whispers of the townsfolk, I think even my own sisters do not believe me when I say that his attentions are completely innocent, but I know it is so. I...I feel so protective of him, as I do of all my siblings... I am silly, Georgie, for what need has he of my protections? Oh what he must think of me now.”

Georgiana gently pulled Mary's hands away from covering Mary's blushing face, “I for one am glad that my cousin has such a dedicated protector. I do not believe Cousin Reggie will think any less of you; indeed, I think he will feel only gratitude that someone should care for him so. Besides, I think I can understand your sense of protectiveness, though perhaps my own is directed not so much at my cousin...”

Mary looked at the younger girl questioningly at such an unexpected comment.

Georgiana described fully her first acquaintance with the Baron and what she knew of his tale. “I was so frightened and, yet, at the same time, I could not help but pity him. Later, when he told us his story, my forgiveness was easy to give, particularly as Brother was not seriously harmed. He has suffered so much that I cannot begrudge him a new beginning. He is in years my elder and yet, sometimes I feel as though even I may have advice for him as the wall of ice around his heart melts. He seems so lost that I wish to offer what support I can. 'Tis a bit strange, I who have been protected by my brother, should now wish to become the protector.”

Mary nodded, “Indeed. Since Mama's passing, I think my sisters and I have served as each others' protectors. Certainly, Jane and Lizzy have taken pains to shelter and support me in consideration of my shyness in company. Kitty's vivaciousness also serves as a welcomed distraction. Your cousin's presence in Netherfield and the friendship between us has drawn unprecedented attention from the townsfolk; though perhaps such attention is also the result of being the last unattached Bennet girl, if my Aunt Phillips is to be believed. It has been quite unsettling. And yet, I find myself growing braver as a result and my thoughts more concerned with the impacts on your cousin's healing.”

Georgiana smiled wryly, “Aunt Gardiner said the such concerns for others are only part of our growth into young ladies of kindness, generosity, and strength.”

Mary smiled back, “Dear Aunt Gardiner, I do not know what I would do without her guidance. She was the one who first not only to notice but also encouraged my efforts with the pianoforte. Her counsel has always been sound. Since I believe we have her blessing, what say you that we assist your cousin and the Baron in their road to becoming true friends?”

Nodding eagerly to show her agreement, Georgiana extended her hand for a solemn hand shake as she had seen her brother do in the past with his acquaintances. Mary returned her gesture before both girls smiled at one another again and changed the topic of the conversation. It was not long before music once again filled Netherfield's hallways.

Elizabeth's return to Longbourn was a joyous event. The timing of her arrival was such that Jane was visiting with the tenants, leaving Kitty to be the first to greet Lizzy. Quickly spying the new ring upon her sister's hand, Kitty had squealed in a rather unladylike manner, rather ensuring that both Tommy and Mr. Bennet left the sanctuary of the study to investigate the cause of such a noise. Tommy, on seeing his favorite sister, forwent the manners he had been taught and immediately ran to her for a welcome home hug, his voice joining Kitty's excited inquiries as he babbled about the events that had occurred in Elizabeth’s absence. Mr. Bennet followed at a more sedate pace, though his eyes twinkled in mirth at the happy scene before him.

When the noise level from his children showed no sign of abating, Mr. Bennet finally coughed to draw their attentions. Raising an eyebrow, Mr. Bennet said dryly, “Dear Lizzy, the wildness of the
North seems to have agreed with you. As glad as I am to see you, daughter, I cannot approve of your dreadful timing. With such an interruption to his lessons, I doubt Tommy will wish to finish it.”

Elizabeth just smiled in reply and gave her father a soft kiss on his cheek, “Dear Papa, how glad I am to be home again.”

“As are we, my dear girl.” Turning to Kitty, he said, “As for you, young lady, what is the meaning of such a noise? I do hope your Mr. Lucas is not in danger of losing his hearing before his time?”

Undaunted by her father’s teasing, Kitty merely grinned and gestured to her sister's hand, not trusting her voice to share her suspicions.

Turning his gaze where Kitty indicated, Mr. Bennet felt his eyes widen at the ring he beheld. Taking a deep breath, he looked at Elizabeth's blushing face and said, “I suspect I should expect an audience with your young man on the morrow?”

At Elizabeth's nod, he sighed, “I do believe we ought to adjourn to the sitting room where I may sit to recover from news of such a magnitude.”

As the Bennet children followed their father, Tommy tugged on his sister's hand, of which he had yet to let go. Glancing down at her brother's face, Elizabeth was surprised to see the resigned expression upon it.

Tommy's voice, when he spoke, was quiet though not low enough to escape his father's hearing. “Lizzy, does that mean I am finally to have a brother?”

Kitty interjected before Elizabeth could reply, “Does the idea not appeal to you? I thought Mr. Darcy was your good friend?”

Tommy nodded but said, “He is, but…Derbyshire so far away! Papa has been insistent that I improve in my geography and I cannot help but notice the distance. Why can he not join our family here instead of taking Lizzy away?”

Elizabeth chuckled and squeezed her brother's hand, “Alas, Tommy, I do not believe that is done! And even someone such as I who have flaunted some traditions cannot find it within myself to challenge this practice. Besides, would you have Mr. Darcy abandon his responsibilities?”

Tommy shook his head, “No, but, will you not be abandoning yours?”

Surprised by such an unexpectedly serious question, Elizabeth took time to settle herself in her favorite chair as she thought on the best reply.

Fortunately, Mr. Bennet came to his daughter's aid. “Now Tommy, what responsibilities can you mean? If you mean our tenants, then I must remind you that they are more our responsibilities as Masters of Longbourn. Lizzy has done admirably at the helm and spared me from tasks I have found unpleasant. But I cannot hold her prisoner out of my selfishness.”

“Oh Papa.”

A shake of Mr. Bennet’s head interrupted her protestations, “Dear child, your Aunt Phillips has always seen fit to remind me that I am meant to lose my daughters, even you, Lizzy. My only regret for my indulgence of laziness is that through my inaction, I decided my own fate. I do not think your Mr. Darcy would like you half as well if you could not discourse intelligently on crop rotation or the virtues of various breeds of sheep.”
“I do intend to see Longbourn through the harvest and one more spring planting.”

“Mr. Darcy has agreed?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“He is a generous man indeed!”

“Or mayhaps he simply cannot find it in himself to deny Lizzy her wish.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled at Kitty’s comment, “He is simply too astute. What is a few months’ wait to a whole lifetime of happiness?”

Young Tommy persisted, “But surely out tenants will miss Lizzy.”

“Young scamp! Do not displace your own reluctance onto others! The tenants will not begrudge Lizzy her happiness. I know Mr. Darcy had accompanied her on her visits to them and they all think highly of the gentleman. Indeed, I believe Mrs. Brown will find herself gaining a few jars of jam from our Mrs. Hill for correctly predicting that your sister's suitor would declare himself before returning to Hertfordshire.”

In a rare moment of somberness, Mr. Bennet added, “Besides, I must repeat that I do not believe our tenants to be your sister's responsibility. I know you feel as though it has been your duty to care for them, Lizzy, a thought I have done little to discourage, particularly as you seemed so fond of the responsibilities. But the holiday has ended and I must take up the mantle of Master of Longbourn once more. The strength of you and your sisters these many years have allowed me to pursue my own interests, but I know I have truly been remiss in my duties.”

“Oh Papa, I did not mean to undermine your authority in any way…”

Mr. Bennet again waved away Elizabeth’s words. “No, dear child, you did no such thing. I admit that it must run contrary to convention for a father to be so well protected by his daughters, but I find that I only feel grateful for the efforts of you and your sisters. I have always been so proud of you girls, particularly as I know I have not played an active role in the wonderful young ladies you have all become. As I had said when Mr. Bingley asked to court Jane, it is difficult for me to part with any of you. This old house will lose some feeling of home when you are gone. But I also cannot stand in the way of your happiness. No, my dear, as saddened as I am, I am also full of joy that you have found such a worthy young man who admires you for your strength but will likewise support you in your times of weakness. It is far beyond what any father could wish for his daughters. Besides, I find that I feel quite invigorated at the prospect of taking up the reigns of Longbourn once more.”

Smiling at the almost youthful enthusiasm on her father's face, Elizabeth nodded, “Thank you, Papa.”

Tommy’s grumble broke the tender moment between father and daughter, “‘Tis all very well, but I suppose all it means is that my lessons will only increase in intensity now.”

Elizabeth chuckled, “Yes, Tommy, but I believe I can successfully motivate you. I am entrusting the care of our tenants to you now, and I have faith that you will not disappoint.”

At her words, Tommy straightened his posture and nodded solemnly. Nonetheless, he turned to Kitty and quipped, “At least Mr. Lucas lives just down the lane.”

Mr. Bennet added, his teasing manners returning, “Ah yes. Kitty, perhaps I ought to have a few
words with Mr. Lucas. He was the first to request permission to court a daughter of mine and yet Mr. Darcy seems to have beaten him to the ultimate question! Indeed, I do believe Mr. Darcy managed to skip a step altogether! Should I be having words with your young man about toying with your affections? I have not been the protector I ought to have been to you girls, but there is no time like the present to start improving.”

Blushing deeply, Kitty shook her head, “Oh no, Papa, John, that is, Mr. Lucas, has been all that is gentlemanly. He has been most attentive. 'Tis only that I wish to learn more from Jane regarding the skills necessary in running a household. He is so good to me, that I wish to extend my education a little longer so that I may be a worthy wife to him.”

Nodding his head proudly at the maturity of his youngest daughter, Mr. Bennet sighed a tad wistfully, “And now it seems only Mary is left; how proud your mother would have been at having such worthy suitors for you girls!”

Kitty's eyes shined as she remarked, “Ah, but perhaps not for long!”

Elizabeth leaned forward, her curiosity aroused, “Oh? How so?”

Mr. Bennet also looked intrigued as Tommy remarked incredulously, “You cannot mean the boring old Viscount!”

In response to Elizabeth's look of disapproval, Tommy cringed slightly but said, “Well, he truly is no fun! He spends most of his days either in the music room or in the Colonel's study. He doesn't come fishing with us nor does he even fence!”

Kitty shook her head in amusement at Tommy's words. The young boy was capable of such maturity and yet is still a child in so many ways.

Elizabeth felt her lips twitch as she too fought a smile at her brother's complaints. “Kitty, you had better explain your words.”

Before Kitty began to speak however, Mr. Bennet stood and gestured to his son, “Ah, then perhaps we shall leave your ladies to your talk, Tommy still has the remainder of his lesson to finish.” Despite Tommy's scowl, he stood and followed his father back to the study, still grumbling about stuffy old Viscounts.

Once they departed, Kitty wasted no time in sharing what she knew of the Viscount and his most curious friendship with the third Bennet sister to a most attentive Elizabeth.

Supper at Longbourn was a most happy affair as the Bennet family rejoiced in being reunited once more. But the true reunion among the sisters was after the supper table had been cleared away and Tommy had already been put to bed with a round of kisses from his sisters. Mr. Bennet just smiled knowingly at his girls before he too bid them good night. Moments later, the sisters could be found in a happy heap, sprawled on Jane's and Elizabeth's beds which had been pushed together for this particular purpose.

Jane was the first to speak, “I am so glad you are home, Lizzy. And so, so happy for you and Mr. Darcy!”

Elizabeth smiled, “But Papa has yet to formally give his permission!”

Kitty snorted, foregoing ladylike behavior in the company of her sisters, “Oh pish posh, you must be mad to think Papa would withhold his blessings! Indeed, I think he supported such a match from the first time he met your Mr. Darcy.”
Mary added in her usual quiet manner, “Papa certainly wants us to be happy.”

Kitty nodded, “Indeed. Now, then, Jane, when do you think Mr. Bingley will make you an offer?”

Jane blushed at such a blunt question, “Kitty! We should not speculate on such a thing!”

Elizabeth wrapped an arm around her sister but her eyes shined as she remarked, “Perhaps we ought not to, but I do find that my thoughts are traitorous and turn in such a direction as well. I expect any young lady who has accepted a proposal from her beloved would wish to see her sisters as happily settled.”

Jane’s blush deepened but she found herself being open and honest with her sisters. “I…I do believe Mr. Bingley would like to find a home for us first.”

Kitty clapped her hands as such an admission while Mary asked in a puzzled manner, “But does not Mr. Bingley already have a home in London? It is quite close to Uncle Gardiner’s townhouse if I remember correctly.”

Jane nodded, “Well, yes, but Mr. Bingley felt that a country home would suit him the better. Besides, it was his father’s dream that the Bingley's should become landed gentry and thus gain some manner of respectability.”

Elizabeth remarked thoughtfully, “And I cannot see our sister as one of the society ladies of the Ton. They would not know what to do with one who is so good and kind! I expect Mr. Bingley only seeks to protect our Jane’s angelic nature from the vile gossipers of London.”

Jane’s eyes seemed to glint dangerously as she raised her chin resolutely, “I am not a shrinking violet to be protected. I am quite capable.”

Elizabeth only smiled at this show of spirit and determination from the eldest Bennet. When others looked at Jane Bennet, they saw only her beauty and her serenity; few were privileged to see the strength underneath. And Elizabeth was quite certain that Mr. Bingley was one of the few outside the family who recognized it of his own volition.

Catching her knowing grin, Jane bowed her head as she looked at her clasped hands, once again the demure young lady she usually presented to the world. Her voice was soft as she remarked, “And I know Mr. Bingley does not think so of me. Nonetheless, I must admit, it is quite nice to be protected.”

Such words left the other girls no option but to join Elizabeth in hugging their sister.

Finally, Jane looked up once more, “Now, enough about me, what of you, Kitty? After all, your courtship has been of the longest duration.”

Kitty groaned as she made to hide her face behind her pillow, “Not you too!”

Elizabeth merely laughed and explained, “Papa asked Kitty a much similar question earlier today.”

Kitty lowered her pillow, “And I shall provide the same answer now as I did then. I am in no hurry to wed, leastwise not before I have learned all I can from Jane before Mr. Bingley steals her away from us so that I may be as efficient in running my own household.” She then turned an expectant gaze upon Mary.

When Mary made no acknowledgement of the curious glances sent her way, Kitty sighed and said, “And now, dear Mary, I believe ‘tis time for you to share.”
Looking startled, Mary only gaped at her sister for a moment before saying, “But, I… I have nothing to share!”

At the look of disbelief that passed between Kitty and Jane and the curious look that was on even Elizabeth's face, Mary insisted, “I know what you ask of me, and truly, Lord Milton and I are merely friends.”

Elizabeth broke the silence in as gentle a manner as she could, “I know that you think that now, Mary dear. But I thought much the same when I first met Darcy. And now… well… we still are very much friends, but we have become so much more.”

Mary sighed, “I know, Lizzy. But my circumstance is much different from yours… If you only knew…”

Biting her lip in worry, Mary was grateful when Jane laid a calming hand on her arm. “Do not worry yourself so, if he has told you something in confidence, then we would not want you to break such trust. We only wish to protect you, to ensure that you would experience the same happiness that we have been blessed with.”

Kitty made to protest but restrained her curiosity at the look from Jane.

Elizabeth, however, spoke, “I think I know a little of the Viscount's tale.”

Mary looked at her, startled.

Elizabeth nodded, “I have not yet informed Papa of this, for I wished for my homecoming to be a happy event and thought I would tell him on the morrow. But… I cannot keep it from my sisters. We had intended to return sooner from Pemberley, only we were interrupted by an unexpected guest.” And so Elizabeth acquainted her sisters with Baron's and, by extension, the Viscount's story. Ending the tale, she added, “The Darcy's took the Baron to Netherfield, to give the two gentlemen a chance to resolve their differences in a civilized manner. I just hope that their meeting went well.”

Mary took a deep breath in and said hesitantly, “Not exactly…” Gathering her courage at supportive expressions on her sisters' faces, Mary described her day's adventures, including her half of the later conversation with Georgiana.

On completion of the tale, Jane put her arms around Mary. For her part, Mary leaned gratefully into her sister's support and added, “I am in earnest. Besides, once you are all married, and such happy events are quite soon in our futures, Papa will need someone to keep house for him. Why should it not be me? I have no aspirations for my future, other than to be of use to my family.”

Jane sighed, “Oh Mary, you need not sacrifice your own chance for happiness. The Viscount might never recover from his lost love, that is true, and I heartily support your resolution to support him as a friend, but you should not resign yourself to becoming merely an observer of others' happiness. Unless, of course, you find that you truly wish never to marry. In such a case, we will of course provide you with all of our support. But Mary, it must be your choice.”

Mary shook her head, though the motion did nothing to soothe her inner turmoil, “I hardly know what my wish is; I never had the need to think on it. I will admit to some moments of envy of your good fortunes, and yet somehow I never thought to wonder if such happiness would be in my future. I suppose I should have, when Papa finally allowed us out into society, but I did not. And now, there will be so many changes in our future.”

As Mary sighed, Elizabeth spoke aloud her thoughts. “Not all change is bad and really, I fear
change is inevitable as time passes. Besides, though we shall carry the names of our future husbands, in our hearts we will always be the Bennet girls.”

“Georgie said that Aunt Gardiner had made a similar comment, that our response to the changes around us is what determines our characters just as our mentality towards uncertain will help us build strength.”

Jane nodded, “Aunt Gardiner has ever been a helpful guide for us.”

Kitty added, “I for one will hold on to the hope that you shall find a gentleman worthy of you, Mary. If you are adamant that the Viscount does not suit such a role, then I can only respect such a decision. Though, I do think it would be so romantic if he were to realize that he simply could not live without your support.”

Mary shook her head at Kitty’s fanciful nature but could not fight the small grin that crossed her face.

Jane squeezed Mary’s hand as she made a last plea. “Do say you will think on it, Mary. We only wish to see you happy.”

Mary nodded her acquiescence and, as she glanced at the supportive circle of her sisters, felt that no matter her future, she would always feel joy at the care of her family.

When Mary rose the next morning, she was surprised to see Elizabeth pacing in a decidedly distracted manner in the ground floor hallway. Catching sight of the closed study door and Elizabeth's slight frown as her gaze fixated in that direction, Mary knew at once the significance of the event that was occurring. Squeezing her sister's hand gently, Mary said softly, “Have no fear, Lizzy, Papa will certainly give his consent. Come, why do you not sit with me a while? The poor carpet is in danger of becoming quite bedraggled indeed if you continue to pace.”

Elizabeth sighed heavily but allowed herself to be tugged towards the pianoforte. “Oh Mary, I know I should not worry. 'Tis only that they have been in there for so long now… Mr. Darcy insisted that he would be the one to inform Papa of the events in Derbyshire. I do not know which is worse, that the stubborn man should insist on shouldering responsibility or that I would consent to his request.”

Mary smiled to herself as she opened the instrument and heard Elizabeth settle herself in a nearby chair. For all the exacerbation in Elizabeth's tone, Mary knew that her sister was truly fond of her gentleman. With such a thought, she began to play a song that she hoped would help soothe Elizabeth's restlessness.

Her plan seemed to be working well until Elizabeth jumped up at hearing footsteps enter the room. To her disappointment, the open doorway yielded not Darcy's tall figure but that of Jane.

Jane of course took no offense but could only offer her sister a gentle shake of the head and a sympathetic smile. Coming to sit by Elizabeth, Jane remarked, “I trust you are well this morning, Lizzy? Or at least, as well as can be expected?”

Elizabeth sighed but nodded.

Satisfied at such a reply, Jane sought to comfort her sister and perhaps distract her a little from the event in the study. “I myself find this morning quite enjoyable, if not a little bittersweet. It was quite kind of Mr. Bingley to accompany Mr. Darcy this morning, as I am certain the presence of his old friend will help soothe Mr. Darcy's uncertainties. But I fear he has brought some unexpected news to me. It seems that Miss Bingley's suitor has managed to secure her hand in marriage and
requested a meeting with Mr. Bingley to gain his approval. This, along with other business, caused Mr. Bingley to declare an end to his holiday and a return to his livelihood."

“Oh Jane, but that means you shall be parted!”

“Oh Jane, but that means you shall be parted!”

“Only for a short while. I do believe Uncle Gardiner made mention of some plans for the holidays and, well, London really isn't so far from Hertfordshire.”

“What does it mean for your courtship?”

Jane only smiled serenely, “Perhaps it is a test of our courtship, to see if the old adage is true and whether or not absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder.” At the disappointed look on Elizabeth's face, her smile broadened, “Not all of our beaus move as swiftly as your Mr. Darcy nor as eager to forgo convention, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth blushed at her sister's teasing. Though Mary gave no outward sign of having heard the conversation, the decidedly spirited turn of her song gave evidence of her amusement.

Jane took pity on her sister and added, “We are invited to dine at Netherfield tonight. I do believe it is intended to be a celebratory affair though you may now satisfy your curiosity as to your future cousin, the Viscount. I would be curious as to your insights into his character.”

At Jane's words, Mary seemed to miss a note in her playing as she turned sharply to her sisters. Her inquiries, however, were forestalled by the cough that sounded from the doorway.

Elizabeth immediately stood, her eyes weary until she answered the wide grin on Darcy's face with one of her own. The gentleman himself seemed to see only his betrothed as he strode purposefully across the room and brought Elizabeth into his arms, lifting her body in a twirl. They happy couple blushed when Jane's gentle voice offered her congratulations, a sentiment that Mary was quick to echo.

Elizabeth quickly extracted herself from Darcy's arms as Darcy tried to school his features, though his colors remained heightened from a combination of his joy and slight embarrassment at having been caught in a moment of open emotion. Mr. Bennet's dry voice caused the room's occupants to turn again to the doorway, “Well, Lizzy, I hope you can see that I have returned your Mr. Darcy to you in one piece.”

Elizabeth smiled gratefully while Mr. Darcy remarked sincerely, “I promise to care for her, Mr. Bennet.”

The older gentleman nodded and patted the younger gentleman's shoulder, “I know, my son, I know you will. Now, Jane, was not your Mr. Bingley here earlier as well? Should I expect a repeat of this morning's experience now?”

Jane blushed but shook her head, “No, Papa. Mr. Bingley returned to Netherfield though he did invite us to dine there tonight.”

Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow, “I see that plans for celebration had been underway already. It seems, Mr. Darcy, that your friends have the utmost confidence in you.”

Darcy only replied, “I have been blessed, sir.”

Mr. Bennet nodded in approval, “Very well, I am certain that Lizzy would like to know the content of some of our discussions. And you do still need to speak to Tommy as well, he is quite protective of his sisters. Where is the young scamp this morning?”
Mary spoke up, “I believe he is in the orchard, Papa, I do believe some of the apples are finally ready for picking.”

“Ah, then Mr. Darcy, perhaps you and Lizzy would like to go retrieve my wayward son for his lessons?”

Elizabeth and Darcy nodded in agreement, grateful that Mr. Bennet was given them a chance to speak in private with one another regarding the events of the morning.

When they had left the room, Mr. Bennet turned to his remaining daughters, “Well, my dears, it seems that the Bennets will be one fewer in number in the not so distant future. I do hope that you will allow your old father some time to recuperate before leaving the nest as well. I fear I shall go mad before long with only Tommy for company.”

Jane just smiled at her father’s words, informed him of Mr. Bingley’s plans to depart for a little while, and gave him a soft kiss on the cheek before departing to resume her tasks for the day. Mary likewise returned her attention to her pianoforte, the merry notes reflecting her mood. And so as Mr. Bennet settled himself with a favorite book, life in Longbourn returned to some semblance of normalcy.
A gust of wind accompanied Elizabeth as she made her way through Longbourn's doors in a flurry of fluttering skirts. Though the breeze remained warm, the crisp scent that swept through the front hall gave a hint of the impending shift in weather. Settling her burden down carefully, Elizabeth made to remove her bonnet and shawl and gave them to a scolding Mrs. Hill.

“Ah Miss Lizzy, I do wish you wouldn't put yourself through so much trouble in such weather. I am certain that Mrs. Brown could have waited until tomorrow to receive the cold remedy! Certainly Martha is a good girl and could have cared for her dear Ma and the other children. What would Mr. Darcy say if he knew you were wandering about in such a ghastly wind!”

Elizabeth, her cheeks rosy from her exercise, only laughed good-naturedly at Mrs. Hill’s grumblings. “Dear Hill, Martha is a good girl to be sure, but with the new twins to care for, I am certain she appreciated even a small reprieve. Mrs. Brown's cold is but a trifle, though it does not stop Martha from being the helpful soul she is. Really, there was no need for Martha to work herself into illness as well. As for Mr. Darcy, that man would have looked at me in quite the exasperated manner I am certain, but really he is at fault for asking such a one as myself to be his future bride. I believe his admonitions would be token at most; I fear he will be one to encourage rather than curb my wild ways.”

Despite the young lady's seemingly flippant remarks regarding her betrothed, Mrs. Hill knew her charge well enough to hear the fondness in her words. Shaking her head in amusement, she said, “You do not fool me, Miss Lizzy, I know his absence has been hard on you. I know you to miss him.”

Elizabeth's expression softened, “That I do. But I cannot begrudge Pemberley her Master, particularly during this time of harvest. Derbyshire is of much colder climates that their harvest is certain to be of greater importance than ours. I do hope Mr. Darcy, the stubborn man, is caring for himself with the same dedication he has for his tenants.”

Mrs. Hill smiled gently, “You needn't fret, Miss Lizzy, I am certain young Miss Georgiana is ensuring his wellness for you.”

Elizabeth nodded, “Dear Georgie, yes I am confident Darcy is in very capable hands. Now, whatever shall we do with all this bounty? Martha, the dear girl, was quite insistent that I bring these roasted nuts back with me. However she found the time for them while caring for 4 young children and her ill mother I shall never know. That girl is the model of efficiency.”

Mrs. Hill took the basket in her arms, “Ah, I shall carry them into the kitchen before young Master Tommy is aware of their presence. He will surely devour them all and spare not a single one for anyone else!”

Elizabeth's answering chuckle was lost in another gust of wind as the door opened once more to admit a giddy Kitty and a quieter Mary. Glancing at her sisters with twinkling eyes and a warm greeting, Elizabeth felt certain that the youngest Bennet sister’s heightened colors were as much the result of the wind that had swept her curls into a mass of disarray as the effects of a certain gentleman.

Catching her sister's teasing gaze, Kitty only rolled her eyes, “Oh, you needn't behave so, Lizzy! Had Mr. Darcy been here, our positions would surely be switched!”

Elizabeth laughed as she helped her sisters remove their outer garb. “I must own that you are right,
Kitty. How shamelessly cheerful I would find myself! I fear I find myself rather jealous of your
good fortunes of having your suitor so close at hand, even if you must withstand the close
chaperoning of your family.”

As Mary gave Elizabeth a short hug, Kitty likewise smiled in sympathy. Quickly shrugging off
her momentary sadness, Elizabeth led the way to the parlor, “Never mind that. Was the ride into
town at least productive? I expect Mr. Lucas was much obliged to obtain some new ribbons for
you?”

As she settled herself by her sewing basket, Kitty nodded and began to unload the small parcels
she had brought back from Meryton. “Oh yes, but they were such lovely shades of cranberry and
would look so festive in our Yule time decorations that I simply could not resist. I also managed to
obtain some of the raw sugar Jane likes with her tea. Mrs. Johnson was quite appreciative of the
apple tarts we had sent her niece for the birth of the new Carpenter baby and simply refused to
take any payment. I believe Mary even found a new book that she thought would be an interesting
read. Oh, and of course a new marble for Tommy for his collection. I know Papa says that we
spoil him too much, but he has been rather studious of late, hasn't he?”

Mary smiled at her sister's chattiness and added from her habitual position at the pianoforte, “Yes,
he has indeed. I do not know what it was that Mr. Darcy said to him prior to his departure, but it
 certainly made enough of an impression for our Tommy to settle his spirits.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “I still say we give Darcy too much credit. Why can't it not be that our
Tommy is truly maturing of his own accord and contributing to the various changes around us in
his own way?”

Mary shook her head and gave her sister a fond but sympathetic look, “Oh Lizzy, do not speak so
of your gentleman. His absence is keenly felt, particularly by you I expect.”

Kitty paused in her neat folding of the papers that had been wrapped around her parcels. “Oh
goodness me! That does remind me. How could I have forgotten the most important parcels?
There now, Mary, put aside your biography of some composer or other and have a gander at this
rather thick letter from London! I expect the Viscount has sent you yet another new music piece.
And, here, Lizzy, is the packet from Derbyshire for you. Mr. Darcy cannot be here with you, but
he certainly does his part to keep the messengers between Hertfordshire and Derbyshire in
productive employment.”

Deciding not to comment on the sudden brightening of Elizabeth's features, Kitty quickly
distributed the various letters. “Ah, and I had better go find Jane so that she might have her epistle
from Mr. Bingley. She would likely welcome a reprieve from the household accounts and, well, I
do need the extra practice.”

So saying, Kitty quickly left her sisters to their private enjoyments of their respective messages.

A moment of silence fell in the parlor as Elizabeth and Mary both perused their messages with
great delight. The tranquility of the room was interrupted when Jane entered the room, a letter of
her own in hand. Aside from brief smiles in greeting, the three Bennet sisters again settled
themselves in a restful peace.

Only when Mary made to try out the new piece of music that had indeed been sent her way did
Jane and Elizabeth stir themselves to acquit to their room so as to put away their precious bundles.
Patting the bundle of letters fondly, Elizabeth glanced towards Jane, her cheeks flushed. “Oh dear,
I fear I have become quite transparent. Has my humor been so ill of late that everyone should
remark on Mr. Darcy's absence?”
Jane, giving the ribbon that held together the stack of papers from her own suitor one last tug, moved to sit by her sister. “No Lizzy, you have continued to be kind, though perhaps your wit has become a tad more biting.”

Elizabeth sighed, “Ah, and if you say a tad, Jane, then I must truly have been horrid. I cannot seem to help it, despite the fact that it has been many weeks since the Darcys’ returned to Derbyshire. The coming harvest should have kept me quite occupied, but somehow, I find my traitorous thoughts turning to the North more often than not. Oh drat that man for affecting me thus.”

Jane smiled serenely, “You know you do not mean it, Lizzy. Besides, you would not have agreed to his suit if you were not so fond of the gentleman.”

“I know, Jane. ’Tis only I did not expect to feel such emptiness without his near presence.”

“But perhaps that is the sign of true affection. And this separation will not last.”

“And yet the spring seems so far away and his written words, though plentiful, cannot begin to make up for his absence.”

The sisters sat in silence until Elizabeth appeared to physically shake herself, “There now, I have been a selfish creature to forget that I am not the only one to miss a suitor. How fares your Mr. Bingley?”

Jane’s smile widened at the thought of that particular gentleman. “Very well, though quite busy, but I suppose that is to be expected. As you know, his sister's suitor was granted approval and they are now happily settled. Mr. Bingley, of course, was only too happy that it was a brief affair. I fear even with his knowledge in trade and his growing fondness for the changes that has been wrought in Miss Bingley, he still cannot abide reading the chatter regarding laces and ribbons from his sister. His partnership with the Colonel and Uncle Gardiner is faring very well. They were quite pleasantly surprised at the Baron's capabilities in helming an extension into the musical arts.”

Elizabeth blinked, “Oh yes, even Mr. Darcy had made mention of that strange turn of events. I cannot blame the Baron for wishing to put off returning to the house of his grandparents, particularly given his past history with that estate. It was still a surprising move for him to stay in England and perhaps even stranger for he and the Colonel to become such good friends. It seemed, when the gentlemen made ready to leave Hertfordshire, that he was even building camaraderie of sorts with Lord Milton!”

Jane shook her head, “You need not sound so shocked, Lizzy, Signor del Mastei, though young, is still a good sort of man. Though I suspect both Mary and Georgie played no small part in the advancement of that particular friendship.”

Elizabeth laughed, “Indeed! Who would have thought it of our sweet, quiet Mary and our guileless, innocent Georgie? Though their gentleness was just the push the gentlemen needed to set aside their differences. Speaking of which, what do you think of our Mary’s prospects?”

“Oh Lizzy, just because you are to become happily settled does not mean you ought to begin playing match-maker.”

“I will not deny it. But I do not see the harm in wanting all my sisters to be as happy as I have been blessed to be.”

“All in good time, Lizzy. Matters of the heart cannot be hurried, rushed, or forced. You must curb
your impatience and allow events to unfold as they will.”

With an impish grin, Elizabeth replied, “Ah, but I have neither your goodness nor your patience, dear Jane.”

Jane lifted an eyebrow at her sister's teasing, “What is the advice you had given Mr. Darcy? Ah yes, I do recall quite clearly now; since you admit to such a deficit in your character, you must then take the time to practice more.”

Elizabeth nodded at Jane's firm tone of voice, “Yes, dear Jane. As unbearable as all this waiting is, I suppose I can only grin and bear it or risk becoming quite the hypocrite by rejecting my own advice.”

As the elder two Bennet's penned their replies to their respective suitors, the third Bennet sister found herself in quite the quandary. Though her fingers tried to bring the notes of her new song to life, she discovered that her mind was quite distracted by the gentleman who had sent her the particular new piece. Since the Fitzwilliam heir had departed for London to be with the Lord and Lady Matlock and fulfill his social duties as befitting his station, Mary had received letters from him with the same regularity as her sisters received from their beaus. She had initially been quite startled at both his request to write her and her father's agreement to allow such an action, for it wasn't entirely proper for a young gentleman to write so directly to an unattached young lady. But she supposed that the Viscount was to be family once Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were to wed and perhaps that was the reason Mr. Bennet allowed such communications. His first letter had been quite formal, particularly compared with the friendship that had developed between them. It left Mary in quite the quandary as to her response and his letter had lain untouched for quite a few days before she forced herself to sit down and examine it once more. Biting her lip thoughtfully, she had taken a deep breath of resolve before putting pen to paper. As she waited for the ink to dry, she had wondered if perhaps she was right in replying in a manner as though she were speaking to him in person. She had quickly addressed the letter and sent it with the outgoing mail so as to avoid following her initial instinct of shredding the paper. She had waited with great apprehension and had torn open the next letter with expediency that did not escape Lizzy's sharp eyes. But Mary cared not, for she was certain that her sisters would respect her privacy. The return missive from the Viscount, written with words in a much more relaxed tone, made her sigh in relief. And so their friendship was continued on paper with the Viscount describing the various balls he simply had to attend at the urging of Lady Matlock and Mary sharing the simple joys of her life with her family. Sometimes Mary found herself wondering if the Viscount found her tales drab in comparison to the excitements of Town, but more times than not, she found herself worrying about her friend. Beneath the glittering world he described in his letters, Mary could not help but think that he was deeply unhappy. But she did not quite know how to help him and so instead continued to send him gentle words of support.

When the Viscount began to send her folktales he had heard during his travels, some of which she shared with her siblings to their delight (particularly young Tommy, who stated decidedly that perhaps the Viscount was not so dull after all), Mary was put in mind of Anne's off-handed remark that the Colonel had encouraged his brother to record such tales. Enlisting Anne's help (and pointedly ignoring her friend's curious gaze), Mary was glad when the Viscount agreed to give the effort a try. Indeed, with this new purpose, the Viscount seemed happier. As for Mary, she was not unaware of the speculations that ran rife in Meryton with regards to her relationship with the Viscount. Indeed, she knew her own sisters would glance at her ponderingly when they thought she was not looking. But Mary, for all that she preferred to remain in the background, was quite aware of the world around her even if she did not always have the insight that Elizabeth did. Giving up the piece for a loss given her troubled state of mind, Mary soon found herself staring unseeingly at the notes before her.
Though she verbally professed that only friendship existed between her and the Viscount whenever her Aunt Phillips made a direct inquiry before her sisters could distract her, Mary could sometimes feel herself wavering. As she observed the Elizabeth's odd moments of physically shaking herself free of a contemplative silence and even the slight pauses in Jane's movements before she returned to her sampler, she would ask herself if her own face would sometimes mirror a similar expression of longing. She also wondered at the object of her longing. Unlike her sister, she had no particular person to cause her longing. Was it certainty for her future that she wished for, the knowledge that she would not be alone in life? Or was it simply a desire to understand the small changes she had noted in her sisters? For all her words to the contrary, Elizabeth had seemed to become softer, her wit less a defense against others and more a cause for shared enjoyment. Jane, still as beautiful as ever, laughed more and was more open with demonstrating her emotions. Closing her eyes, Mary heard Jane's voice again, asking Mary to consider her own wishes for the future. Despite her pondering, Mary was no closer to an answer.

Excerpts from letters between Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley:

Dear Sir,

You leave me in quite the quandary, a state in which I am not certain I wish to stay. I suppose it must be too early in our betrothal for me to express such unhappiness towards my future intended, but I readily lay the blame at our lack of a proper courtship. For is it not through courtship that we are meant to learn the worst of one another? Woe to me it is then, to have agreed to follow your lead in a foray into the unconventional and to have agreed to tie my life to one whom I am not quite certain how to address in letters. I suppose Mr. Darcy might have done quite well; it is, after all, what polite society would dictate of my address to you in company. But you must admit that it is quite incongruous for you to call me Miss Elizabeth while I am banned from the use of your first name. And yet, the nature of your family is such that Mr. Fitzwilliam simply would not do either, even if one of your cousins is a Viscount and the other prefers the Colonel title. I suppose I could find it amusing that I who had one time refused to hear your name should now be so fixated upon such a seemingly trivial matter, but you will forgive my lack of laughter in the face of the genuine distress I feel. I do hope you shall provide some guidance in this matter, or I suppose I must continue to address my letter to a most generic (and unimaginative, Kitty would say) 'Sir.'

Now as to your inquiries into the crops of this year's harvest at Longbourn, I fear it likewise left me in a bit of a bind. But perhaps I should be comforted by your obvious lack of practice in writing to a young lady, for it does well to convince me that you are not the cad my dearly departed Aunt Philips had so often warned us against (yes, Sir, even at the tender age of five at which I thought it was a merely a type of fish and lived in agony each time Papa decided to pursue such a sport). Then again, as Jane would no doubt remind me, I am at risk again of becoming quite the hypocrite for I do recall telling you that your intended lady cared not for flowery words or poetic phrases. But even I, in all my practicality, must own that some words of regard from you, particularly given the length I can expect of our separation, would not be remiss should you wish you convey them. I do not expect the expertise of the Bard, mind you, though perhaps you shall discover a hitherto unknown talent?

In accordance with good manners, however, I feel obliged to reply to your inquiries. I expect the harvest this year to be a good one, which is all the more encouraging for I fear the winter is to be quite a harsh one. My sisters and I have already begun to prepare extra blankets for our poor tenants. I find that I must in earnestness thank you for your influence on young Tommy for he has actually begun to be a help rather than a hindrance in helping Papa manage the estate. Why just the other day he was able to correct a sum I had completed! For you, good sir, you have the thanks of our entire family…
Dear Madame,

I must own that your letter left in me in quite quandary as you claim I have you left you; the effects of such laments from a lady are dire indeed upon the gentleman who has obtained her hand. My only wish is for your happiness, a charge that your father, in his generosity, also laid upon me when he did me the honor of permitting my suit. It is thus with deep chagrin that I should be the source of such great distress for you. And so it is that I find I must accord you the courtesy of using a similarly unimaginative manner of addressing you. I hope that in this way, at least, you shall feel that we are equal. Indeed, if you wish me to address you as such in person, you have only to utter the word. I do not wish you to be discomforted, particularly in my company. Though, I beg of you, dear Miss Elizabeth, to forgive in advance the slips of tongue and pen I am certain to make in addressing you by name. I find that from our very first meeting, after which you left me quite bereft of your appellation, your name has become a treasured word to me and the honor you do me of allowing me to utter it has been a source of great joy.

As for the decidedly unromantic subject matter of my letter to you, I fear I must again beg your forgiveness for such a crime. As you so astutely made note, I am not in the practice of writing to young women, particularly one to whom I have entrusted my future happiness. Indeed, I must be honest with such a lady and say that I have only written to two young women in my life. But I do not believe either instructions to my younger sister or perfunctory communications to my Cousin Anne are good models for the letters I have been writing to you. I do not know if I possess the ability to turn a pretty phrase, but for your sake, I shall endeavor to try.

Though I must admit that I am gladdened by your willingness to discuss the state of Longbourn's farms, for I do so intend to keep you abreast of Pemberley's doings as well. I look upon you as a partner and I shall endeavor to treat you as such, even at the risk of ruining the romance that I suppose should be typical of a letter from a suitor (though again, I find I have little experience in this area). As for young Tommy's progress, you need not thank me for your family, for I fear I only thought of you...and perhaps also of a selfish desire to quicken your father's transition back into the saddle of Master of Longbourn so that the day on which you shall be back by my side will arrive the quicker. I hope you will not think less of me for such an admission.

I am glad to hear that Longbourn is to have a good harvest. Predictions of a harsh winter are indeed likely to be true, for the chill in the wind here is greater than we would usually expect. Fortunately, my tenants are knowledgeable about their business, for all that their Master has been a rather absentee one. They are greatly cheered, I believe, by news of our betrothal and so have fortunately been too distracted at the installing of a new Mistress to balk at my faults as a Master...

Dear beloved,

Bravo Mr. Darcy! I must praise you on the manners in which you have replied to my teasing comments. You do yourself little credit for I find your words pretty indeed. Though now I fear I must find new ways to keep you on guard, for it would not do at all for my comfort to allow you to gain any advantage over my wit. And as my comfort is paramount in your wishes, then you must allow me to indulge in my fancies. My only criticism, sir, is the lack of guidance you provide in the manner in which I should address you. No matter, I have decided to approach this matter in
what I believe to be an appropriate manner; I shall simply try different appellations until you find the one that you find least offensive. So, do tell me, what is my success on this first try?

Since you have been so kind to remind me of your regard for me in such pretty phrases, I feel quite obligated to return in kind. Though I do find myself curious whether young gentlemen are also wont to seek such reassurance as young ladies do? For I do read much in the way of poetry one way but none quite in the opposite direction? Would I be in breach of propriety in doing so? But I find that your honesty deserves honesty in turn. And I can only be truthful and say that I mind not your “slips of tongue and pen.” Indeed, I must own that I never quite thought much of my name until I heard the sweetness with which you allow it to fall from your lips. I have ever been Lizzy to my family; Elizabeth is used infrequently except on occasions of severe mischief on my part (which somehow seemed to be more often prior to Tommy’s birth). And yet, when I hear it from you, it no longer seems so out of place. I hope you do not find my boldness shocking, for I fear I am much in the habit of making such bold comments though, perhaps, never on such a daring subject matter. Mrs. Hill has often remarked on my impetuous nature and I have often replied that you would not mind. But with your presence so far away, I can only hope that my certainty is not misplaced.

Sometimes I wonder at you, Mr. Darcy, for being in possession of such intellect and yet being so blind so as not to see the devotion you have inspired in your servants and your tenants. Even during my short stay at Pemberley I could readily see the respect they grant you. They would truly guard you and Georgiana with their lives…as I believe they intended to do when Signor del Mastei first made his presence known. It was quite awe-inspiring and I feel truly humbled that they should be so accepting of my presence then and in the future…

Miss Elizabeth,

Glad am I to read of your enjoyment of my use of your name for great is my pleasure in doing so. I do hope, however, that you would persist in your quest in finding an appropriate appellation for me. Though I smile at reading the word 'beloved' from you, I fear 'dear beloved' sounds much too similar to the clergymen would say in the circumstance of someone's passing for my comfort. I heartily look forward to other choices from your clever mind.

I can never mind your boldness, for your impetuous nature is one of the things I treasure most about you. Your spirit is a spark that has brightened my world. I do not know if gentlemen are in the habit of seeking pretty words from their ladies, for it is not a subject that we feel comfortable addressing. Even among close friends, the semblance of confidence and self-assurance must, after all, be kept up with the utmost care. For myself, I will admit that hearing or, I suppose, reading, such words from you is much welcomed. Indeed, I fear I quite startled my manservant with the smile your letter left upon my visage. In response to your boldness, I hope you will forgive my frankness. I wish you would not mention lips, for it only wreaks havoc on my thoughts as I long to lay a kiss upon yours. I must apologize for taking such liberties with you, if only in my thoughts, but I cannot truly be sorry. You have undone me, Miss Elizabeth, such that I feel consumed by thoughts of you and loving you. Without the words of your letters and the handkerchief you had gifted me, poor substitutes that they are, I would surely go mad…

Forgive me, I was called away by a matter of some urgency. Though perhaps you will find the interruption welcome, for I have revealed more than propriety would allow. I beg your forgiveness for overstepping such bounds but own that I cannot help but be honest with you.
It seems the first snow has decided to grace us with its presence. Georgiana was most insistent that I join her in celebrating in our usual way. It is a remnant of my boyhood, when my mother would fetch me from my tutors and make me sit and watch the snow with her over cups of hot cocoa. I had made it for Georgie when she was younger but in recent years, she has made it a tradition to use such a tantalizing drink to entice me from my study. She really is growing too fast for my comfort; I often catch myself looking at her now and wondering where the time has gone. When did the small child who looked at me with such sad eyes become the graceful young woman I see before me now? Aunt Matlock is insistent that I allow Georgiana to be out upon her birthday, but I am most reluctant to let go of her, if only to spare her the cads that your Aunt Phillips had once warned you of. I think I have managed to convince my aunt to allow Georgiana some reprieve until at least after our marriage, stating that I wish to make your transition into Mistress of Pemberley as smooth as possible. If we are to have a daughter, I fear she might become an old maid indeed, for I shall be most reluctant to relinquish her hand. Though, perhaps if she were to inherit her mother's tenacity, I might have little choice in the matter…

My Darling Darcy,

You are too kind in your words to me, truly. I am in much danger of becoming quite the vain creature such that you would be certain no longer to recognize me upon our next meeting. Though I enjoy being correct in my estimation to Mrs. Hill that you would not be one to curb my headstrong nature, I find myself rather breathless at the depth of your words. I am glad that I have chosen to read your letter in the privacy of my own chamber, else my sisters would surely remark on the queer look on my face and the heat in my cheeks.

Propriety would dictate that I respond to your words with censure and berate you for sharing thoughts that would damage both our reputations. I do claim much startlement but none of anger. I can hear the sincerity in your words, surely as if you were speaking them to me. I am not used to such forthrightness; shocking, is it not, when shyness is not a ready part of my nature? But in matters such as these, I can only follow your lead in entrusting me with such intimate thoughts. My courage has risen to the challenge. And so, I can only assure you that I absolve you of any wrong in claiming a kiss of me, for a kiss I would gladly grant. Do you think me wanton for such words? For feeling no shame at my willingness to allow such liberties when spring comes and I can again see your dear face?

If the snow has already come to you, then it cannot be long before visiting Hertfordshire. And with it comes the Yule-time. Kitty has already begun planning decorations. Jane decided to allow her the opportunity this year of being in charge, as a practical lesson in managing the household funds. Mary is in charge of the holiday supper, though Jane is of course keeping a close eye on both girls. As for me, I find that I am a party to both activities; I have much to learn with regards to running a household but fortunately Jane is a capable and patient teacher. And really, I find that it is not too dissimilar to helping Papa with the estate. Nonetheless, I too find myself surprised at the fast passing of time and the changes it has wrought in my sisters. It seemed not so long ago when we were only playing pretend with our dolls. And now, most of us are preparing for homes of our own. If we are to have a daughter, I shall have to enlist the help of her aunts, for despite trying, my embroidery will never be more than passable.

Yule time will also bring with it the Bennet family tradition of the Great Winter House Cleaning. 'Tis not as inclusive as the one in the Spring, of course, as the weather proves quite a detriment to allow for a full cleaning. But nonetheless Papa insists upon it every year, always stating that we cannot enter into the season of the New Year with the old year's dust. It also means a time for us Bennet girls to go through our dresses to see if any can be donated to the church for the less
fortunate. In recent years, Kitty has always insisted that she add a few bows here or a piece of lace there so that the dresses are almost like new for their next owner. There will also be, of course, the round of visits that must be done. Sir Lucas, as befitting his knighthood, hosts the most marvelous Ball every year. Lady Lucas's pudding is simply legendary for its scrumptiousness. I myself am looking forward to seeing Charlotte again. Since the Colonel and Anne plan to be at Rosings for Christmas, I do hope it means she will be home soon. It really has been too long since I have seen her… I do not suppose you have heard from Sir Andrew? Or even, mayhaps, your aunt, Lady Catherine? I am still convinced of her efforts at matchmaking and pray that her intended champion is of no relation to me...
My dear Lizzy,

How happy I am to be recipient of such felicitous news from you…

And indeed, Charlotte Lucas found herself smiling broadly as she poised her pen to reply to her friend’s letter. A sudden moment of uncertainty, however, seized her. Though the congratulations she offered were sincere, she could not quite shake an odd feeling of...something she could not quite identify. Placing her pen back in its place, Charlotte made to stand and move to the window of her room in Rosings, hoping that the view it afforded of the gardens below would offer her some inspiration. Leaning her head against the cool glass, Charlotte felt her smile dissipate and her brows furrow as she pondered at the source of her unease.

She readily admitted that she was truly happy for her friend, particularly given the almost palpable sense of cheerfulness that Lizzy was able to communicate even through the written word. Perhaps it was the manner of Elizabeth's telling of her news that disturbed Charlotte so…the Lizzy she had always known was usually so level-headed that this…this effusive expression of happiness painted a contradictory side of her friend that Charlotte found difficult to reconcile with the Lizzy who had sworn that she would always make decisions with her mind and not her heart.

Ah, but perhaps she has finally discovered someone who has managed to make profound impressions on both. Sighing at this traitorous thought, Charlotte drew her arms around herself. She had never thought herself as a romantic, but being such a close witness to her friend's almost fairytale-like happy ending made her yearn for something that she knew to be beyond her reach. For such magical endings did not happen to plain and ordinary young ladies such as Charlotte…

No, all she could gain were the attentions of that silly parson! Gazing at the misty fog that hid the world from her view, Charlotte could not help but feel a great sense of dissatisfaction. The small part of her that she had thought was locked away made itself known with a bitter voice as it reminded Charlotte of the manner of life she could expect with such a man. She had never dared to hope for affection, particularly as the years passed and no chance of matrimony presented itself. She thought that the promise of security would be enough, but Lizzy’s happiness was too close a reminder of the possibility, no matter how small, of a different outcome.

Sitting down to face her unfinished letter, however, Charlotte could not put the words to pen. Her own engagement seemed now too bleak; surely the news would only mar her friend’s happy state. Charlotte frowned at the blot of ink that resulted from her hesitation. Placing the pen aside again, she gave the letter up for loss.

Sleep did not come easily to her that night; she remembered not her dreams, only the sense of hopelessness and terror that caused her to wake at odd intervals. When she awoke, she felt with renewed certainty what actions she must take.

My dearest Eliza,

How happy I am to be recipient of such wonderful news from you! If I were just your friend, perhaps my congratulations and well wishes for your future felicities could end thus, but as I am your closest friend outside the company of your sisters, I feel obliged to convey my satisfactions at having predicted such a match as now exists between you and Mr. Darcy. He will now certainly eclipse Mr. Bingley as Mrs. Philips’s favorite. I do hope you have given Mr. Darcy due warning, although you might well allow him further opportunities to practice his mastery of the art of conversing unaided. I have little to say regarding your gentleman with which you could find fault;
I find him a more than tolerable dance partner. I can easily excuse his terseness in conversation because of his obvious regard for you. I cannot abide it should you be unhappy, even as I have little hope for equal happiness.

You are kind to ask after my situation. I can well understand your disbelief, but I must insist again that Lady Catherine is not the “dragon” Tommy made her out to be; her rule may be tyrannical, but she is a benevolent despot. My education in the skills that would turn me into a proper lady’s companion is such that my days are ones of industry. I have yet to find a skill for which I can claim distinction, but Lady Catherine has not uttered further directions regarding my skills with the French language. For that alone, I claim great satisfaction. Lady Catherine has not yet given me leave to join her when company calls, but I live in hope that I shall not disappoint when I am to receive such a command.

You need not fear, Lizzy, that I shall sacrifice the “core of my character” so readily to fulfill the expectations of others. I can think of no greater assurance to offer than the news that I am no longer to become your relation. You must remain satisfied, then, with merely my friendship. Lady Catherine has yet to make her opinions known on the matter, but I must do as my conscience demands of me. That the guiding force of my actions should have momentarily taken on your voice I will excuse as the resultant momentary madness of unrestful slumber. Worry not for me, my friend. If Lady Catherine sees fit to dismiss me over my daring in the changing of opinions after but a day, at least I shall depart with the knowledge that I have been armed with the skills to manage the most difficult of mistresses.

Your friend,

Charlotte Lucas

The summons from the lady of the household came as Charlotte had expected. Taking a breath to steady herself, she entered the room.

Lady Catherine’s visage was impassable. “Miss Lucas, I would hear your thoughts on Sunday’s worship.”

“Surely Mr. Collins already has thoughts on the matter.”

“Mr. Collins has neither the capacity nor inclination to perform his task without proper guidance.”

“Fortunate is he to be in possession of so magnanimous a patroness.”

“I find it my duty to provide direction for those in need. But I do begin to find him tiresome. What he requires is a worthy wife of sense.”

Charlotte steadied herself as she responded, “Surely such a requirement must preclude such a young lady from agreeing to his suit.”

“As a sensible young woman, would you be adverse to such a man?” Lady Catherine’s gaze held no indication of the manner of the desired reply.

“Mr. Collins has security to offer,” Charlotte replied carefully.

“But security alone is not enticement enough?”

“A lady of sense would only be too aware of his deficits. Her need for such security must thus outweigh her unwillingness to live in perpetual mortification.”

A bemused look passed Lady Catherine’s features, “It has been long, Miss Lucas, since someone
of as humble origins as yourself dared to express themselves so directly and impertinently in my presence.”

Charlotte gathered her courage. “Is daring a desired trait for my continued employment?”

“Your employment is greatly contingent upon my opinions of your usefulness.”

When Charlotte made no attempt at a response, Lady Catherine made a sound too dignified to be merely a huff of annoyance. “You are an active, useful sort of person, Miss Lucas. Collins could do well with a wife such as you. He has expressed his shock but even now, I can offer assurance that you will be well settled.”

“Surely indecisiveness is an undesirable quality in a parson’s wife.”

“I thought you to be too sensible, Miss Lucas, to wish to marry for affection.”

“Happiness in matrimony is only a matter of chance.”

“Yet your choice proves your lack of conviction in such an opinion.”

“I must give my thanks to your ladyship.”

“I fail to see the source of your gratitude.”

“Young ladies of my position, Lady Catherine, have little choice besides matrimony or employment to avoid becoming burdens.”

“Of your position? Yes, I suppose you cannot avoid the fact that your father has his origins in trade. He thinks well of his knighthood, but I suppose in what limited society he has available to him, such a rank is to be celebrated. What mortification he must feel that a daughter of his should choose her current position.”

“My mother certainly persuaded him that a husband can be gained from what must be a temporary disgrace.”

“Yet you think so little of matrimony.”

“My opinion of the institution matters not; I have not fortune enough to hope for a more honorable shelter.”

“How you do contradict yourself!”

“Then I am fortunate indeed to have the guidance of your ladyship.”

“Enough. I have little use for empty words. You will not deliver the desired answer?”

“I can only give the answer that I so desire.”

“You are certain.”

“I am.”

“Very well.”

“Lady Catherine?” Charlotte was bewildered. Was this to be her dismissal? Before she could ask for further clarification, however, a footman cleared his throat and announced the presence of a caller. Without a word, Lady Catherine swept from the room.
Charlotte stood stunned a moment before she made up her mind to retreat. If her return to Hertfordshire was to be imminent, better that she prepare for such a parting. Glancing about the room that was no longer to be hers, Charlotte wondered at herself. What madness had possessed her to throw away the one chance at security? And yet, despite the many emotions warring for dominance, regret was sorely lacking. She was not given to impulsivity, but now that the deed was done, she must stand firmly. Her resolution must have surprised Lady Catherine, but no more than it did herself. Suddenly, Charlotte laughed; an active, useful person indeed!

“I must attend to a matter of estate on the morrow.” Lady Catherine’s statement gave no indication of her previous displeasure.

Charlotte, who had prepared herself for a formal dismissal, recovered herself, “My assistance is assured.”

Lady Catherine sniffed, “A trifling quarrel among some of the cottagers. That my steward should seek my assistance speaks much to his incompetence. I shall have no need of your services, Miss Lucas. You may entertain yourself as you see fit, though I do insist you spend the time in worthwhile pursuits. Young ladies ought not remain too idle.”

“Yes, Lady Catherine. I thought a turn around the park would do well if the day proves favorable.”

“A most wise choice, though you ought not test your strength unduly. A hat would not be amiss, nor an additional parasol. You are no beauty and a coarse complexion would do you little favors.”

“Yes Lady Catherine.”

“I do wish you would make attempts at improvement in your painting. You lack the skill, having suffered for proper instruction, but my taste is not without its refinement. I shall inspect your work when I return.”

“Yes Lady Catherine.”

“And you must see to it that my maid is aware of my detest for her lackadaisical nature; if she cannot maintain my wardrobe to my satisfaction, I can easily find a replacement.”

Lady Catherine’s litany of instructions did not lessen, but Charlotte minded not. Indeed, she found such demeanor comforting; here was prove that her position was safe.

In the days and weeks that followed, Charlotte pondered the odd nature of the conversation and Lady Catherine’s demeanor, but could not decipher a reason for it. She finally attributed it to one of her employer’s eccentricities. The matter of Mr. Collins was never spoken of again. But for the increased stringency of Lady Catherine’s requirements for pursuits she deemed necessary for her companion, the event may well have never occurred.

…Lady Catherine would have made a worthy governess for all that such a position is beneath her dignity. Though I found her derision for Mama’s inability to provide me with such guidance unnecessary for the progression of my abilities, I must own that her methods are not without results. I shall never be a virtuoso, but I can now claim varying levels of proficiency with the harp, the lute, and the pianoforte. Lady Catherine has declared my voice hopeless, “as plain as you features and even less worthy of notice,” but I can still claim some knowledge of Italian and German. You will offer your condolences for so condescending a taskmaster, Lizzy, but I assure you I have no need of them.

You supposition, though made in jest, that Lady Catherine’s motivation to molding me in the
image of a proper young lady lies in her inabilities to ensure such behavior in the future Mrs. Darcy may well be true. But I mind it not, for the benefits I reap shall serve me well. Though her ladyship has made no comment to indicate an ending to my service, she has made mention of the happy placement of Mrs. Jenkinson’s nieces as governesses with respectable families and Mrs. Jenkinson herself as companion to Lady Metcalfè’s youngest daughter once Anne no longer required the services of a companion. I cannot but think that my fate is to be similar one once she commands the return of Anne and Colonel Fitzwilliams to Kent. Such a future no longer frightens me; I can claim some pride in self-reliance.

I must also relate to you, dearest friend, of a most curious encounter the likes of which will certainly alter your considerations of Lady Catherine’s character. She is not one given to praise, but her declaration two days ago convinced me that my progress has been great...

“I am to entertain tomorrow. I shall summon you when I have need of you. You are not to shame me with your behavior.” Lady Catherine’s comment was made without ceremony.

Nonetheless, Charlotte found that she had to hide a smile, “Yes Lady Catherine.”

“Now then, play on. You show much improvement in your technique, but you must not sacrifice form for the sake of rapidity. You play as your paint, with too little attention to the minutiae which make lend beauty to both pursuits. Do begin again.”

Not one given to vanity, Charlotte nonetheless could not help but take care with her appearance when she next woke. When the morning passed not unlike any other, however, she began to berate herself for her silliness. Then, in the middle of scribing yet another letter of instructions to Miss Darcy in Lady Catherine’s sitting room, the announcement that a visitor had been situated in the drawing room was made.

“Do fetch the hyderanga blossoms from the gardener, Miss Lucas; our guest is particularly partial to them.”

Despite her curiosity at the identity of the guest, Charlotte quietly did as she was bid.

When she entered the drawing room, basket of blossoms in the crook of one arm, she had but a brief moment to register the petite figure sitting quite comfortably across from Lady Catherine.

“Ah, you must be Miss Lucas!”

Charlotte curtsied.

“And what beautiful blossoms!” The lady’s smile, however, was tinged with sadness.

“I remember, Adelaide.”

“Yes, you have had them sent to me even when I was most neglectful of our friendship.”

“With good reason.” Charlotte had never such a tone of tenderness in her employer’s voice.

“Bless you, my friend.” Lady Adelaide briefly touched the varying colors of the petals before turning once again to Charlotte.

“Miss Lucas, I have wished to make your acquaintance during visits past, but I fear Kate always had need to task you with other errands.”

Further bewildered that this lady dared address Lady Catherine in so familiar manner, Charlotte could only make a demure murmur of her unworthiness.
“Oh nonsense,” Lady Adelaide insisted, “having been well acquainted with Kate’s peculiarities these many years, I must voice my admiration of your strength in withstanding them.”

Lady Catherine did not smile, though her expression lost some of its sternness, “Adelaide,” she scolded, “do not think to turn my own companion against me!”

Lady Adelaide’s laugh chased away all traces of sorrow, “If I know you, my friend, then I am certain Miss Lucas was engaged in part for her ability to form her own opinions. You never did suffer fools well.”

“Yet you had a way of taming even the most foolish.”

Lady Adelaide laughed again, “Perhaps so. Or he lived in fear that my brother could easily ruin him with but a word!”

“Oh do not worry yourself, Kate. I am well enough to speak of Anthony. Yes, both of them. My late brother and husband may have shared a name, but they certainly shared little else.”

“Yes, Lord Shaftesbury was a man of great intellect.” Lady Catherine’s dry comment was not without a hint of humor.

Lady Adelaide answered with a similar flippancy, “Yet he chose so poorly with Esther!”

Glancing again at Charlotte, she continued in a more somber tone, “There, we shall speak no more ill of my sister-in-law. We cannot leave Miss Lucas with an ill impression of my relations. Besides, I must depart now if I have no wish for Andrew to fetch me in person. He does worry so, my son. Do say, Kate, that you will pay a visit? I grow tired of solitude.”

“But of course, Adelaide. You had no need to ask it of me.”

“A good day to you, Miss Lucas.”

…When you have recovered from your disbelief, Lizzy, I hope you will give thought to this matter. I had though myself reasonable assured of Lady Catherine’s character, but her behavior surely speaks to greater complexity that I had initially thought to credit her. I eagerly await your assessment…

That Lady Catherine should pay a return visit to Lady Adelaide was a matter of course; so she had stated, so it was done. What Charlotte had not expected was the command of her presence. The trip proved a quiet one as Lady Catherine was disinclined for conversation. Charlotte dared not sleep, however, but rather stared at the passing countryside. Kent, what brief glimpses she caught of it, was a beautiful country. Nonetheless, when the carriage did at last stop, the sudden lack of motion made Charlotte feel as though she had just woken from a dream.

Having had little opportunity to examine the homes of the gentry, other than the ostentatious flair of Rosings, Charlotte took in her surroundings with not a little curiosity. The building that rose before her appeared no less forbidding in its grandeur; the many turrets piercing into the sky as though in defiance of the very heavens. Had Charlotte been of a more fanciful nature, she might have supposed that the house hid dark secrets. The inside halls, however, proved a different world entirely. The drawing room itself was in shades of cream, the gold accents made gentler with the softness the soft fall of the drapery. Whether the result of the room itself or the very presence of its mistress, Charlotte found herself at ease in a way she never could be at Rosings. The day concluded with a tour of the gardens.
When Charlotte offered her admiration of the many blossoms, she was met with a wry smile.

“I’m afraid I have neglected them dreadfully these years past,” Lady Adelaide offered, “so I must accept your praise on behalf of the gardener. You must come again in the spring; our cherry orchard gives rise to a veritable storm of petals when the breeze decides to stir the branches.”

“Such a breathtaking image you paint!”

“I expect Hertfordshire to have its own share of charming features. Tell me, Kate, how well does Anne like it?”

“Anne likes it as well as she would like anywhere that Richard has determined shall be home. The society is of course more restricted, but her neighbors are respectable enough.”

“How grudgingly you admit it! But one is to become your relation, is she not?”

“I can do little to dissuade Darcy to break such an engagement. I find some measure of comfort that her father can make claims, no matter how tenuous, to being a gentleman.”

“As though you could ever persuade Anne’s son to behave in a manner contrary to his own wishes.”

Lady Catherine made no attempt to raise disagreement but looked so cross that Charlotte immediately voiced her admiration for the sweeping branches on the banks of the small river that cut across the estate.

Lady Adelaide only laughed, “But certainly the willows must be magnificent, they are the estate’s namesake.”

Charlotte could not think of a suitable reply to such a revelation.

“You are well acquainted with the future Mrs. Darcy, are you not Miss Lucas?”

When Charlotte nodded her affirmation, Lady Adelaide continued, “Then do say you may put my friend’s mind at ease that she is not a lady of mercenary intent.”

Charlotte was only too glad for the opportunity to speak in her friend’s defense.

“Oh Kate, Anne would have found her positively delightful!”

“Anne has made friends of all the Bennet.”

Such words only gained her a look of reproach, “You know well, Catherine, of which Anne I refer. Can you not, even now, lay aside the old rivalry?”

“Rivalry?! You know well that my opponent never saw herself as such.”

Such a comment only drew a sigh from Lady Adelaide, “Anne only ever wished for your happiness.”

“I had no need of her pity.”

“Your pride has ever been your worst fault. Oh do not look so; your glares have no effect on me. Still, I will not pursue further a topic that brings you sorrow. I have given thought to a soiree to mark the end of my mourning.”

“If it pleases you.”
“Oh Kate, how can you express such antipathy!

“Unlike you, I have no fondness for such frivolousness.”

“Oh but you simply must attend; no one shall dare offer criticism in your presence.”

“As though anyone has ever offered an unkind opinion of your parties, Adelaide!”

“But surely my skills have fallen ill from disuse.”

“Then I am certain Andrew can lend his assistance.”

“Andrew?! What a laughable thought! No, no, I require a lady’s assistance.”

“Do not look to me, Adelaide. For the sake of our friendship, I will attend, but you must go elsewhere for you aid. What of Cecilia?”

“You know well her health remains tenuous. The loss of a babe leaves a deep wound indeed as I am certain you are aware.”

Lady Catherine offered only a sigh in reply.

“Forgive me, Kate.”

Lady Catherine shook her head impatiently, “If you must have aid, then I hope Miss Lucas will do.”

“Oh certainly!”

And so Charlotte found herself a guest at Willowmere for an education of a different sort. Lady Lucas’s fondness for setting a fine table meant Charlotte was no stranger to the complexity of planning for the success of such an event. Such experiences, however, proved inconsequential in the planning of a ball at Willowmere.

Lady Adelaide agonized that the invitations were sent but a month before the event. “But I suppose there is no help for it. Any later and the weather will not stay so fine. Now then, we simply must have roses. Only the white and pink ones will do. Though I profess great fondness for the yellow ones, they are ghastly for young ladies’ complexions. We have need of the more natural shades. Do fetch me my hat, Miss Lucas, so that I may observe in the gardens which ones will best suit our needs.”

When Charlotte returned with the object, she had cause to pause in hallway.

“Why Andrew!” She heard Lady Adelaide exclaim, “I did not expect your return until two days hence.”

Sir Andrew Ashbury laughed, “I can of course go forth and return then if it should please you, Mother.”

“What nonsense! But I must admit that I shall test your patience for I am all aflutter with these preparations.”

“I am at your disposal. What tasks have you for me?”

“The success you found on your journey must have sweetened your tongue.”
“More so the joy of seeing your return to good spirits, Mother.”

A pause and then, “Dear child, worry not for me. Besides, Kate has lent me the services of Miss Lucas.”

“Miss Lucas?”

“Do not feign ignorance, Andrew. You think well enough of her to have made mention of her to me, in letter and in speech. She is our guest until the ball’s conclusion.”

The silence ensured that Charlotte felt uneasy at remaining hidden. And so, pushing the door open, she offered the desired object.

“Lady Adelaide, your hat.”

Turning, she curtsied, “Sir Andrew.”

“Miss Lucas.” He made as to speak more, but his mother interrupted him.

“Oh, yes! Come, Miss Lucas, we have many tasks still left to accomplish!”

The presence of Sir Andrew provided much happiness for his mother. Charlotte’s interactions with Willowmere’s master, however, remained brief. What occasions they did have for conversation was fraught with politeness such that it was with some surprise when he endeavored at a longer conversation.

The gentleman was the first to break the silence, “I hope you find Kent to your liking, Miss Lucas.”

“I cannot say for I have seen little of it other than the grounds of Rosings and now Willowmere.”

“You are a very frank young lady.”

“Surely you must know that I seldom express opinions that are not my own.”

A pause and then, “I cannot imagine that would please Lady Catherine.”

Charlotte allowed herself a smile at this quip, “My thoughts need not always be shared; so long as I retain my conviction.”

“Then I must make inquiry to hear them?”

“I cannot imagine my opinions could be of much interest to you.”

“You think too little of yourself.”

“I am no less frank with others than I am with myself.”

The gentleman again broke the silence, “You must find occasion to see more of Kent.”

“If Lady Catherine so wishes to give me leave, I am at her disposal.”

“You admit to no curiosity for yourself?”

“What use is curiosity if I lack the capability to satisfy it?”

“And if you had the means?”
“What use is supposition when reality must disappoint?”

“Do indulge me, Miss Lucas.”

Charlotte was silent a moment but then revealed, “I would see the sea.”

“I had thought, given your enjoyment of literature, that you might have a wish to see Canterbury.”

“What is Canterbury but a church?”

“Yet it holds the relics of a saint.”

“Who, prior to his death, was but a man.”

“What is the sea but a mass expanse of water?”

“Yet Lady Adelaide mentioned your great fondness for it.”

Another pause before he inquired, “My mother makes mention of me?”

“She has demonstrated her great fondness for you.”

“As she is growing fond of you, I believe.”

“I only serve as I am able.”

“And for that alone, you have my gratitude.” So saying, he made his departure.

Charlotte knew not what to make of such a conversation and so gave little thought to it. Besides, with the ball but two weeks away, she had little occasion to spare a thought for any but the preparations that still must be undertaken.

The evening before the grand event, she found herself too restless for slumber. The gown that Lady Adelaide had insisted be prepared was finer than any Charlotte had ever worn. Though Lady Adelaide had declared her satisfaction that Charlotte cut a fine figure, she felt unsettled at the image she caught in the mirror. Her practical nature rebelled at feeling so much like a Cendrillon. Giving sleep up for loss, she gathered her dressing gown and made for the library. Finding some comfort in the recounts of an Ashbury ancestor who had taken to the sea, she was surprised when her peace was interrupted.

“Sir Andrew,” she quickly stood so as to curtsy.

“Be at ease, Miss Lucas, I did not mean to startle you. I did not think I would find another here at this late hour”

She shook her head, “That you should have need to peruse your own library ought to cause no startlement.”

“As you are present, may I then request your aid?”

“Surely you have greater familiarity with the collection?”

“I seek answers but not among the written words.”

“Then I am at a loss; but I will render you aid as I am able.”

“Your dependency must offer you great protection in the face of Lady Catherine’s demanding
ways.”

“I can little speak ill of my source of livelihood.”

The gentleman nodded his agreement but remained silent. Finally, just as Charlotte thought to return to the book in her hand, he spoke, “I have no sisters.”

When he spoke no more, Charlotte tilted her head in curiosity.

“I have no sisters,” he repeated, “so I have little understanding of your need for continued employment.”

Charlotte’s patience was well rewarded when he then added, “Are you not a gentlewoman? Can your choice not interrupted as an insult to your father and brother? That some may see it as a sign that they are not able to care for you?”

“You see only a wound to a men’s pride and consider not the danger to women’s. I could not allow myself to become a burden.”

“No! Certainly not a burden. A responsibility, yes, but never a burden.”

Charlotte shook her head at his earnest tone, “My father has another daughter still at home and my brother will have need to support his own family. My choice grants my family a measure of freedom.”

“What of marriage?”

“Marriage?” Charlotte laughed, “How well your thoughts align with those of Lady Catherine! Marriage is perhaps the most honorable institution through which a young lady may secure her future. And yet, I am without prospects.”

“I cannot believe that a lady of your intelligence should be left wanting of such a choice.”

“Intelligence is not often a requirement when young gentlemen are in search of wives.”

“Is intelligence an attribute of importance when young ladies are in search of husbands?”

“The occasion may occur that a foolish man is the only choice.”

When faced with Sir Andrew’s frown, Charlotte could not help but offer gentle admonishment, “My answers are not pleasing to you.”

“Would you accept such a man?” His question was abrupt.

“I…”

“Miss Lucas?”

She turned from his gaze and kept silent.

“Miss Lucas.”

Still she stared only at the book in her hands.

“No… You cannot mean…he did not…”

“Has Mr. Collins made you an offer?” His words were rushed, as though spoken in great
agitation.

At last she looked to him, “How did you...”

“Simple deduction, Miss Lucas. Mr. Collins is the only man with whom you could have come in contact in your position as Lady Catherine's companion.”

He did not require her nod to know the truth of his supposition. His voice was hesitant as he asked, “And the manner of your reply?”

“My current presence at Willowmere rather than the parsonage must give you your answer.”

Feeling foolish, he simply nodded.

At his abashed look, she felt compelled to offer further explanation, “You asked for the reason of my continued employment, Sir Andrew; I have merely decided it to be the lesser of two evils.”

When he stayed silent, she made to stand, “The hour is late; I must make another attempt at slumber. I have no wish to disappoint Lady Adelaide.”

The doorknob was in her hand when he at last spoke. “And if you were to receive a third choice?”

“Then I shall consider it when it presents itself.”

“How practical an answer.”

She smiled tiredly, “I cannot afford to be anything but.”
A worried Lady Adelaide watched as her son entered the room in which she sat with her embroidery in her lap. His presence only caused her frown to deepen, particularly when he reached for the decanter on the table. Seeing the grimace on his face as downed his glass, Lady Adelaide laid aside her sewing. She waited as he poured himself another. After his third such glass, Lady Adelaide finally laid a hand on his wrist.

“Enough, Andrew.”

His scowl spoke eloquently of his state of mind.

“Must you?” She asked, not without reproach.

He only stared at the glass in his hand.

“Andrew,” she implored once more.

Finally, he sighed, “My anger is not directed towards you, Mother.”

She also shook her head, “I did not think that Lady Duncan would dare attend, not with Kate in presence.”

He snorted, “She gives herself such airs, as though the fortune she gained through the Viscount’s death could erase the scandals of her past. He only married her because she carried his child and he was too aged to hope for siring another one.”

“Andrew!”

“I will not hold my tongue, Mother.”

“You anger is just. But surely you can derive some pleasure in the dressing down Kate saw fit to deliver.”

“And well was it deserved!”

“The evening was not all lost. I daresay Lady Duncan shall not dare stir from her estate now.”

“She would do well to hide!” Sir Andrew at last set down his glass, much to the relief of his mother. “I cannot imagine to what purpose she would think to do you such great dishonor.”

“Can you not?”

“What could she think to gain in creating such a scene?”

“You must know that Lady Duncan cannot resist the attention, even should it add to her infamy.”

He was silent, no doubt brooding still.

She allowed him his moment before inquiring, “Andrew?”

“Yes Mother?”

“Though I am pleased that you are so eager to be angry on my behalf, I cannot help but think that you have another reason for your fury.”
“I…”

“Lady Duncan’s insult was not to me but to Miss Lucas.”

When he remained silent, she sighed. “You must know, my son, I have no other demand for your marriage but that you be happy. I can little expect you to make a match for the sake of title when I refused Earls and Dukes in favor of your father.”

He made no reply other than, “Her courage is to be admired.”

“Yes, Miss Lucas did acquit herself well, did she not? Even had Kate not accosted her, Lady Duncan was already beginning to waver when she could find no sign of weakness in her quarry.”

“She had no need of rescue.”

“Does she not?”

He looked to her, puzzled.

“I have done what I can, Andrew.”

“Mother?”

“Did you really think that Lady Catherine would have been amenable to keeping Miss Lucas in her employment after Miss Lucas refused to become Mrs. Collins?”

“How did you…”

She only smiled serenely, “Kate is not unreasonable when I reminded her of the unhappiness within her own marriage. Besides, she could little deny me my request when her own nephew should become attached to a young lady with neither fortune nor connections.”

“And if I should prove unsuccessful in my suit?”

“Miss Lucas is in possession of too much practicality for it to end in failure.”

“I do not wish for her choice to be dependent upon such sensible considerations.”

“Oh Andrew, how little you understand her lot!”

Charlotte’s words from the library came to him then and he grimaced.

“Besides, you would not think so well of her if she did not behave in so practical a manner.”

He found he could not refute such a comment.

“How am I to begin?”

“You already have, you must now continue.”

When Lady Adelaide and Sir Andrew were announced at Rosings, they were curious when only Charlotte received them.

“Lady Catherine sends her regrets, Lady Adelaide, but she has claimed a headache and has refused all company.”

“Has she indeed?”
Reading well the lady’s intent, Charlotte made her plea, “Please, Lady Adelaide, I cannot allow such a disturbance.”

“Nonsense.” On seeing Charlotte’s frown, Lady Adelaide continued in a kinder voice, “worry not, Miss Lucas, I am no stranger to Kate in such a mood. No blame will befall you, I assure you.”

A reluctant Charlotte could only watch as Lady Adelaide left the room with a great sense of purpose. She had almost forgotten Sir Andrew’s presence until the gentleman spoke.

“Miss Lucas, I would offer my apologies.”

“Whatever for, Sir Andrew?”

“You were gravely insulted in my home.”

“Oh. It matters not, truly.”

“Lady Duncan had no right…”

“Please, her words had no power to harm me. What did she utter that I had not heard in the past? One cannot turn a common sparrow into a swan.”

He required no words to make his indignation known.

“Please,” she implored again, “Lady Adelaide has my eternal gratitude for affording me so wonderful an evening. Mama will surely be in raptures when she reads of it in my letter.”

“Was it indeed a pleasant evening?”

“Did you think otherwise?”

“I am convinced now of Mother’s recovery.”

“A most pleasant cause for celebration,” she agreed readily.

They retreated to silence. Or rather, she returned to her basket of needlework and he gave himself over to a restless sort of pacing.

Finally, he could bear it no longer and settled himself close enough to watch her yet far enough not to frighten her sensibilities. “What task occupies you?”

“Merely some mending from Miss Clarkson.”

“Miss Clarkson?”

“Oh yes. Her aunt, Mrs. Hendricks, used to care for the orphaned children of the parish. Since Mrs. Hendricks’s passing this past spring, Miss Clarkson has been somewhat overwhelmed with the amount of mending that must be done.”

“You are of an industrious nature.”

Charlotte laughed, “Lady Catherine has determined that I am an ‘active, useful’ sort of person. It would not do to disappoint her.”

“No, I suppose not.”
He berated himself for allowing the conversation to lapse again. And yet, he knew not what to say. She must have taken pity on him.

Nodding at the book on the side table, Charlotte made her request, “I was too unsettled at Lady Catherine’s illness for reading to suit, but if you grow weary of waiting for Lady Adelaide’s return, I would not mind hearing the words.”

Sir Andrew seized the opportunity and turned the book to the marked page. He hesitated when he came to Caliban’s lines, not knowing if he should utter such language in the presence of a lady.

“Sir Andrew?” She must have noticed his hesitation.

He coughed, “Forgive me. I had forgotten that the Bard had written such colorful lines.”

She merely smiled, which he took to be her permission for him to continue his reading.

The scene in another part of the house was not so serene. As she had suspected, Lady Adelaide found Lady Catherine not in her bed but in her study.

“So you have come. What news of your son’s pursuit of my companion?”

“You need not sound so cross, Kate!”

Lady Catherine’s scowl only deepened. “That Darcy should lower himself so cannot be helped, but that I should not only find but support it in my own home!”

“Oh Catherine.”

“You have no need to take such a tone with me, Adelaide! I cannot imagine what had caused me to agree to your request.”

“And yet your defense of Miss Lucas will not soon be forgotten.”

“No matter her origins, she is now of Rosings. I can little allow such insult to pass unheeded.”

“Your pride can surely not stand the assault.”

Despite the glare she aimed at her friend, Lady Catherine’s reply was one of lament. “How I had envied Anne! How convinced I was that in her happiness, she cared only to laugh at my sorrows.”

“And yet your daughter bears her name.”

“Yes, my brother did not fail to make his disbelief known that my pride allowed her to bear any name but mine.”

“But you had your reasons.”

“You know I did! The name was given in hope that she would be as fortunate as my sister.”

“She is certainly happily settled now.”

“Did you come to reminisce?”

“No, I came to offer my apologies.”

Lady Catherine’s lips thinned, “A man did not wish for a clever wife, I was told. But Anne was clever. It should be said that a man does not wish for a clever wife if she is not also beautiful…”
How determined I was to be married before her. Anne attempted to warn me, but I thought she was merely envious that I should succeed in my endeavor…Lady Duncan was not the first, nor the last of Lewis’s indiscretions.”

“But she was the cause for your discovery.”

“I should not have cared; told myself I did not. Such deeds were not uncommon in those of our acquaintance. Yet, my anger lost me my child.”

“You did not know…”

“And so my Anne became all the more dear to me. When she fell ill…” She sighed again, “But for your friendship, Adelaide, I would have behaved foolishly.”

“You have repaid your debt handsomely.”

“They were merely flowers.”

“You know well I speak of more than the hydrangeas.”

“I could no more abandon you to your darkness than you could leave me to mine.”

“I was never in danger.”

“Yet so great was your melancholy, I had cause to fear.”

“Do let us not speak of it now; we must find another diversion to raise our spirits after so distressful a reminder of the past.”

“What mad scheme have you concocted now, Adelaide?”

Ignoring Lady Catherine’s doubtful tone, Lady Adelaide persisted, “I have had a letter from Daniel.”

“Daniel Weston?”

With not a little impatience, Lady Adelaide continued, “But of course! Cecilia, the dear child, has finally had some success with recovery.”

“Lord Portland is a most attentive husband.”

“Indeed.”

When Lady Catherine made no further inquiry, the mistress of Willowmere grew impatient, “Well, Kate, are you not curious as to the reason for her improvement?”

“She is your niece.”

“You are determined to be difficult! But I will tell you nonetheless.”

“I can little stop you.”

“She found healing in the waters of the sea.”

“She did not find the fashion unscientific to the extreme?”

“Oh she does not think it cures all ills, but neither does she discount the benefits that can be
derived. She expressed her thanks that we should have lent them our cottage. I must admit that her words were reminders that it has been long since my last holiday.”

“Then I must bid you a pleasant journey.”

“You have no cause to.”

Lady Catherine studied her friend with no little annoyance.

“I am determined.” Lady Adelaide put forth, rather unnecessarily.

A pause, then, “Miss Lucas must, of course, accompany me.”

“How well we understand one another.”

“I have gone mad.”

“You simply suffer from lack of purpose now that Anne has wed; inactivity has ever been a source of torment. Besides, you think well of Miss Lucas, more than you care to admit.”

In lieu of remarking on such a comment, Lady Catherine simply stated, “I trust you to make all arrangements.”

Careful to hide her triumph, Lady Adelaide merely nodded her affirmation.

If Charlotte Lucas felt any excitement for the journey, she hid it well enough. Indeed, when Lady Catherine announced a wish to rest when they finally arrived at their destination, Charlotte only nodded dutifully and made to make arrangements for the unpacking of the carriages.

“Oh leave such a trivial task to the maids, Miss Lucas.” Lady Adelaide’s smile indicated no exhaustion despite the length of their journey, “Our stay is meant to be a holiday.”

“But surely…”

“I find myself desiring to reacquaint myself with the sea. And though he stands with such stillness, my son surely begins to feel impatient. He would have long abandoned us had I not indicated my wish for accompaniment.”

Sir Andrew made to protest, only to be interrupted.

“You must serve as my attendant, Miss Lucas, if only to spare him the slowness of my pace.”

“I…”

“Oh do attend to Adelaide, Miss Lucas,” Lady Catherine spoke impatiently at the hesitancy in her companion’s voice, “and spare me the duty of such an effort. Besides, as I expect you to make a sketch of the waters, such a walk will surely allow you to choose the proper coloring.”

And so, with an ease that spoke of great familiarity, Lady Adelaide guided Charlotte along the path. The cottage, in truth a handsome house with its own gardens and even a small orchard, sat atop a gentle hill some distance from the town itself. Crops of trees proved excellent shelter from the wind. The path, however, took the walkers some distance away, up a small incline overlooking the water before diving more steeply to a patch of sandy shore.

Despite her words, Lady Adelaide proved herself more than capable of the excursion. Indeed, she was the first to crest the hill and laughed as she glanced back at her companions.
“Mother always did find the air at Breezeport invigorating.”

Charlotte offered a smile, “The better to watch over her adventurous son, I imagine.”

Arriving at the summit, her smile suddenly turned to an expression of wonder as she took in the view before her. Words failed her in that moment, though later she was to write to her dearest friend:

*You cannot imagine the expanse of it, Lizzy. Water as far as the eye could see, and beyond! A blue skirt trimmed in white if that blue skirt should come from the very heavens. That Lady Catherine should wish for me to capture such vastness with a mere sketch! An impossible task! And yet, I endeavored and have sent you a poor imitation of so marvelous a sight.*

“Do remember to draw breath, Miss Lucas.” The laughing comment from Lady Adelaide reminded Charlotte of her present company. Even so, she could only look in astonishment at the relaxed countenances of the Ashburys.

“…waves upon waves upon the shore, the persistence of Time, evermore.”

Charlotte looked questioningly at Lady Adelaide, who in turn smiled at her son, “Andrew is not often moved to poetry, but his sentiment greatly reflects the reverence that touches our soul whenever we should behold such grandness.”

“Merely a rhyming game we used to play,” he explained, not without embarrassment.

Pleased, Sir Andrew found the courage to ask, “Would you care for a closer inspection?”

“Oh!”

“We have but to follow the path.”

Her eyes turned again to the wonder before her and she nodded her answer.

Lady Adelaide laughed again, “I shall merely observe your journey from this most convenient vantage point. I have exerted myself enough for one day and must gather my energies for bathing on the morrow. Andrew, do take care. The path is steep in parts.”

“Yes Mother.” With one last look at Charlotte to ensure her assent, Sir Andrew led the way to the path.

They walked in silence though not of his choosing. He wished to know her thoughts and yet felt uncertain of how to begin. Again, she must have anticipated his wish.

“Do you often visit the seashore?”

“Oh yes. Father obtained the property when Mother declared a liking for it. We visited it as often as we could, even before the town grew to accommodate the current fashions.”

“What fond memories you must have!”

“Father was not much given to activity, but he did so to please Mother. We always managed a merry time; decorum always did seem much easier to bend at Breezeport.”

“How came it to acquire such a name?”
“Mother dubbed it so, for the various winds that make it their home.”

“I thought you might have christened it, so well did you describe the waves.”

He dared to glance at her then and, though her gaze was turned to the path, thought he detected honest admiration. His admission was made with a blush, “I was not much older than young Tommy Bennet when I uttered such a phrase.”

“Then you are in possession of a more poetic soul than I; I was adventuring for pirate treasure at such an age.”

“Such must be the source of your wish to visit the sea.”

She stumbled slightly, surprised that he should have remembered.

“Miss Lucas!”

She nodded her thanks, “Lady Adelaide did well to warn us of the path’s steep nature.”

Sir Andrew did not dare allow his steadying touch on her arm to linger. “And now that you see it before you, do your youthful imaginings suffer much disappointment?”

“Disappointment?” She was aghast at such a suggestion, “I was never a creative child and left such fancies to the Bennets. But even they could not imagine anything so majestic! And the sound! Why, we only thought the sea to be a lake, though certainly a large one. We quite pitied Poseidon, to be in possession of so small a realm. But oh, how silly we seem now. To live surrounded by water our entire lives and not know truly how small our fair isle is.”

“But all the mightier for our size.”

“Such loyalty is to be commended.”

“I but profess the pride of all Englishmen in these troubled times.”

She was quiet at such reminder of the fate of her countrymen, some of whom must have found their eternal sleep beneath waves similar to the ones she so admired.

“Forgive me,” Sir Andrew stated, not without chagrin, “you must not allow my dourness mar your enjoyment of this day.”

She made to reply but a particularly playful breeze snatched her headgear and sent the walkers on a merry chase across the sand.

Finally, Sir Andrew was able to wrestle the hat from the thief that had attempted to steal it. He shook it to remove the sand that still hid within the braiding. “I fear its adventure has made the ribbon rather bedraggled.”

She only laughed, “As I am in possession of little vanity, I shall not suffer. Besides, the ribbon is not so ruined that a wash will not soon render it acceptable for company once more.”

“Your hat is curiously lacking in ornaments.”

“I did not know you to be so well versed in such fashions.”

“My cousin,” he was quick to explain, “though she is in possession of a learned mind, has but one weakness, one in which my aunt also indulged. I must own, however, that while my cousin’s trimmings seemed natural enough, my aunt’s often seemed more fitting for the table.”
“How offended they would be at the plainness of my humble bonnet.”

“I find no offense in the article; it is no mere ornament but rather serves a steady purpose.”

She looked wistfully at the incoming waves, “Alas that it cannot serve its purpose this very moment. I fear Lady Catherine will be all admonishment should I linger without the benefit of a reliable covering.”

“Then I must echo Mother, we are meant to be on holiday. The sea will not disappear should we choose to return another day. Besides, she is determined that we should all bathe on the morrow. Then, you shall become intimately acquainted with the waters.”

With one last glance at the seashore, Charlotte turned to follow his lead for the return journey.

...Sea bathing, I have found to be an unpleasant business until one is within the sea itself. I suspect you shall have greater luck maintaining your equilibrium, Lizzy, than I did. Gentlemen of course cannot bathe with the ladies, so Individual bathing carriages were hired for our purposes. They are curious contractions, the bathing carriages. A mere wooden box with a steeple roof, a small cutout preventing the inside from complete gloom, sits atop a carriage of sorts. It serves as a dressing room, in which one is to divest oneself of one’s clothing while the horses lead it into the waters until it is a proper distance from the shore. The experience is most unpleasant, particularly with the knowledge of strangers in such close vicinity, for all that the wooden walls appeared sturdy. Two ladies, with arms that surely compare to those of sailors, stand at the ready at the top of the stairs to encourage the bather’s entry into the waters. It is mortifying, to be clad only in a shift in the presence of strangers, so I found no difficulty in seeking to hide myself beneath the waves. From the shriek and accompanying mighty splash I heard from one of my neighbors, I can only guess that I had ruined the dippers’ fun with my readiness. The waters provide not only shelter, but also a soothing coolness despite the sun that shined above us. My dippers, having recovered from their disappointment, taught me means to stay afloat so that I may look above me and study the shapes of the clouds without undue injury to my neck. I must own that I found it wonderfully soothing and suspect such an excursion would calm even your restless spirits.

Though my mortification was to return when the dippers informed me that other bathers not infrequently shed all their clothing in their pursuit of the activity. Though I can now understand the practical reasons for such a choice, for exchanging my soaked chemise in favor of a dry one on the return journey was not without difficulty, I cannot entertain such an idea for myself...

Whether the influence of the frequent bathings or the peaceful environs of Breezeport itself, Charlotte found even Lady Catherine’s tempers calmed. Nonetheless, Lady Catherine proved no less demanding on the quality of the sketches and paintings Charlotte were to make. So, Charlotte not infrequently found herself following the path on the property for the convenient vantage point from which to observe the ever changing moods of the water. On one such occasion, Sir Andrew found her frowning at her easel in despair.

“Surely the view is too beautiful for a frown.”

She recovered quickly from her surprise at his presence, “Indeed, I could not look upon a more pleasing scene. Thus my poor attempts must only cause offense.”

He drew closer and studied her work. “I see before me a pretty picture.”

“But merely pretty. How can I hope to capture the depth of emotion such a scene must inevitably inspire?”

“Do you truly feel so deeply?”
Charlotte smiled wryly, “Surely to do so can only be a disadvantage in one with such little ability.”

“Yet it is not altogether avoidable.”

“What one feels and what one can reveal of such feelings are not infrequently incongruous.”

With a last morose look at her work, Charlotte made to gather her tools.

“Are you so ready to admit defeat?”

“My endeavors must wait another day, Lady Catherine will be wanting assistance with her correspondences.”

“Lady Catherine had accompanied Mother to town on a visit with Lady Metcalfe, who had recently come for her own holiday. I suspect their return will be delayed.”

“You did not accompany them?”

Sir Andrew studiously avoided her eyes, “I had no wish to impose upon the ladies in the absence of Lord Metcalfe and his sons.”

When she made to return to the main house, he spoke, “Miss Lucas, would you accompany me for a stroll?”

She paused, painting still tucked beneath one arm.

Seeing her hesitation, he added, “I only wish for some company in the orchard. The gardener had reported that some early apples may soon prove ready.”

“I have cause to return first to the house.”

Taking the easel from her grasp easily, Sir Andrew insisted, “Then allow me to assist you.”

After she ensured that her painting was stored properly, Charlotte paused at the top of the stairwell. She could see Sir Andrew’s figure, waiting patiently in the doorway for her return. Her own voice sounded in her mind, a question she had once posed to another, “Do you know what you are about?” Sir Andrew chose that moment to glance up and give a small smile that she could not help but return. When he offered his arm, she took it with only a little hesitation.

The return to Kent was made not without great regret on the part of all the party. Though Sir Andrew wished to continue his visits to Rosings, Lord and Lady Portland’s invitation to their aunt and cousin for a stay at Welbeck Abbey could not be ignored.

Looking to her son as their carriage finally made the return journey to Willowmere once more, Lady Adelaide smiled to herself at his obvious impatience.

“I do not think you will find Miss Lucas much altered.”

“It is not in her nature.” He agreed.

“And yet you fret.”

He was relieved that their arrival served as a convenient excuse to avoid a reply.

Taking his arm, Lady Adelaide commented, “Mr. Darcy did you great honor in attending Cecilia’s ball. A pity that Miss Darcy is not yet out, though I expect Beatrice to have her way once a new
Mrs. Darcy becomes settled at Pemberley.”

“Lady Matlock did much to shield Darcy from insincere congratulations on his upcoming nuptial.”

Lady Adelaide laughed, “She came prepared for battle, both for Darcy’s sake and for that of her own son. I little envy her position.”

“Lord Milton’s return has been the cause of much speculation, though he was absent.”

“The speakers will do well to feel trepidation should they persist. Neither Beatrice nor Catherine will stand for it.”

“Lady Catherine cannot truly support either match.”

“But for the sake of family unity, she will bear it. Besides, with news that Anne is with child, I expect her to be well distracted.”

His gaze sharpened at such news, “Mother?”

“Oh heavens, did I fail to inform you? Kate insisted that Anne and Richard return to Rosings, though I suspect more for her sake than that of the child.”

Her comment caused him to pause suddenly on the path. With nary a word, he turned sharply and, with an alacrity that startled the servants, took hold of a horse and sped off in the direction of Rosings. Lady Adelaide only watched his disappearing figure with a well-satisfied smile.

Despite the urgency of his ride, Sir Andrew found his efforts thwarted as he was informed that Miss Lucas was visiting with Miss Clarkson at the Children’s Home. That she was expected to return soon was little comfort to him as he paced restlessly. When he had finally made up his mind to go in search of her, the door opened.

“Sir Andrew.”

He marveled at her calmness.

“Sir Andrew?” Her voice became uncertain at his continued silence, “Is Lady Adelaide well?”

“What? Oh, yes! Mother greatly enjoyed her time in Nottinghamshire.”

She nodded.

“Miss Lucas,” he began, but then stopped.

“If you would speak with Lady Catherine, I fear she is occupied at present. She is determined that the nursery be perfection.”

“The nursery, yes, of course. Lady Catherine is to be congratulated.”

They sat in silence once more.

“Are you to return to Hertfordshire?”

“Lady Catherine has given me leave to visit with my family for Yule.”

“And then?”

“I remain at Lady Catherine’s disposal.”
“And if she should have no need of you?”

Despite her discomfiture at the interrogation, Charlotte answered truthfully, “Miss Clarkson will surely welcome my assistance.”

“What would you be adverse to another position?”

“If one is offered, I will of course give it due consideration.”

He resumed his pacing, his inner agitation too much for him to remain seated. “Mother is very fond of you.”

She watched his restlessness, greatly puzzled at his behavior.

“I cannot always be at Willowmere. I would that someone I trusted keep her company.”

“Is Lady Adelaide in need of a companion?”

“I…” turning to look at her again, Sir Andrew knew not quite how to answer, “yes…no…”

Finally, “Mother may not be in need of a companion, but I am in need of a wife!”

Charlotte paled.

“Oh confound it! Miss Lucas, forgive me. I did not mean…”

“What did you mean?” Her steady voice belied none of the uncertainty she truly felt.

“I…you are a very dependable young lady, Miss Lucas.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Please, I…my purpose in uttering such words is to impress upon you that I recognize your worth. You must know, Miss Lucas, of my admiration for your steadfastness.”

When she made to speak again, he shook his head, “Please, Miss Lucas. I…I had asked you once, of your reply should a third choice present itself. I now bring myself to you, as such a choice. I would gladly be your protector, if you would but have me.”

To his great surprise, a tear escape down her cheek.

“Miss Lucas!” He sat next to her and, not knowing what other action to take, offered his handkerchief.

“Forgive me. I fear my behavior fits not your opinion of me.”

“My ineloquence surely makes me an insufficient suitor.”

“I did not think…I did not dare hope…”

“Miss Lucas?”

“I…yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”
They studied one another, one with growing certainty and the other with growing happiness.

“Mother will be delighted.”

Her answering grin indicated her understanding of his meaning.

“Glad am I to bring her such joy.”

A sudden thought came to her then, “Oh, but Miss Clarkson!”

He laughed, “Surely in your position as Lady Ashbury, you will be able to provide her further support. Why, you may even hire a maid with the express purpose of completing the mending!”

“Lady Ashbury?” The appellation felt foreign on her tongue.

“Certainly, you can little remain Miss Lucas after we marry.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“You seem uncertain.”

“Only overwhelmed, such good I will be able to do for the children!”

“Already your practical nature shows itself.”

She blushed, “I do not accept simply for such a purpose.”

“You do not?”

“I am likewise fond of Lady Adelaide.”

He laughed, “Then I must inform her of the happy news!”

He glanced back at her from the doorway, “May I call upon you on the morrow?”

“You may.”

With one last smile, he departed.

Staring at the doorway where he had been, Charlotte shook herself and laughed.

*My dearest Lizzy,*

*You cannot imagine my happiness at sharing news of a most felicitous nature…*
Fitzwilliam Darcy sighed in relief as he finished the last word in reply to the latest message from his steward. He did not mind Mr. Hendrick's request for a few days leave so as to visit his wife's family. Indeed, Darcy found himself only too happy to grant such a request, particularly as Hendricks has proven himself a most capable steward during the Master of Pemberley's many travels in the past year. Nonetheless, Darcy also readily admitted to feeling no small amount of jealousy that Hendricks could spend the year's end at his wife's side. Touching his breast pocket, in which the handkerchief from Elizabeth lay, Darcy smiled in a self-depreciating manner at just how easily he found himself distracted with thoughts of his beloved. Looking around his study, he could not help but remember the day when she had gently but firmly demanded that he stop his relentless self-incrimination at George's fate. He could still hear the tenderness in her voice as she called him by name. Glancing down at the latest letter from her, he felt his smile widen at the manners of her address. 'Sweet William' she had written and Darcy found that he was sorely tempted to give her leave to call him such when next they met, if only to hear her voice give rise to such an intimate appellation and see the blush in her cheeks at such a daring breach in propriety.

A knock on the door disrupted his musings as Georgiana's figure slid into view. Seeing the expression on her brother's face, Georgiana chuckled slightly, "Ah, Brother, I believe I have caught you once again thinking of Lizzy."

Darcy nodded, unashamed at having been found out. "She would quite proud of you, methinks, for not reacting to my teasing."

Darcy laughed at such a comment but only asked, "what errand brought you to my study?"

Georgiana smiled mischievously, "I only wished to share news that we have received a parcel of sorts. I have no inkling of its contents but I rather thought that you would like to open it with me, particularly as it is addressed from Hertfordshire!"

At such words, Darcy quickly stood and, with a laughing Georgiana as his guide, hastened to discover the location of this mysterious package.

Brother and sister gathered in their cozy corner of the music room as they slowly dismantled the layers of ribbons, fabric, and oilcloth that hid the contents from view. Using his pocket-knife, Darcy carefully pried open the small wooden crate to reveal a regular bounty of gifts. Each Bennet sister had decided to contribute a small item for Georgiana. Jane sent a new reticule, embroideries of musical notes running through the smooth white silk. As she studied it carefully, Georgiana gave an excited gasp that it was the notes for 'Ode to Joy.' Elizabeth had sent a bottle of clear liquid that, when Georgiana opened it for a whiff, smelled of the wildflowers that she had helped the Bennet sisters gather over the summer. Mary sent a new song as well as a carefully knitted shawl. As she searched for the one from Kitty, Georgiana found herself catching her breath at the wistful look on her brother's face. Darcy had a booklet open in front of him, drinking in the sight of the happy face that smiled at him from the scene that Kitty had skillfully captured with her drawing pencil. Elizabeth was depicted with her head turned, as though to say something to an unseen audience positioned behind her. Her hair was tousled by an unseen wind and her hands, firmly grasping a basket holding various goods no doubt intended for her tenants, were positioned so as to make the ring she bore on her finger most obvious to the viewer. Though the picture was lacking in color, the playful expression on Elizabeth's face and the twinkle in her eye was ever present.

Settling down her presents, Georgiana moved to sit by her brother. "'Tis a remarkable likeness."
Darcy could only nod his assent.

Gently, Georgiana turned the page to another scene, this one of young Tommy and Darcy in the gardens at Netherfield, their waistcoats flung aside as they practiced fencing moves with tree branches held in their hands. Tommy's face was one of youthful concentration while Darcy's had a proud smile hovering around his lips at the growing skill of his pupil. Another turn showed Georgiana and Mary huddled at the old pianoforte in Longbourn, their backs were to the viewer but one could see from the bent of their heads that they were deep in discussion over their task. Yet another drawing showed showed their merry party atop Oakham Mount. The gentlemen could be spied in the valley below, fishing rods in their hands while the ladies chatted in the shade of the great oak tree. Still other pages of memories awaited the Darcy siblings' discovery.

Pulling the booklet away from her brother, Georgiana said, "I know you miss her, Brother, but she would not want you so consumed by melancholy. I for one am astounded by Kitty's skill (would that I could draw as well!) and am quite thankful for her thoughtful gift."

Darcy turned to his sister gratefully, "Forgive me my brooding, Georgie. You are of course correct. Yuletide is a time for reflection and for family, and you, darling sister, are the dearest family I have."

Georgiana nodded and made to gather the various objects back into the box, glad at her brother's return to equilibrium, when she suddenly paused. "Oh! It appears we have forgotten something!" Drawing the object out from the straws that had been in the box, she exclaimed, "Why, I do believe 'tis a pillow! A rather old and well-loved one, I daresay, if the fraying edges are any indication."

Darcy turned to the object in her hand and felt laughter bubble up through him, "Ah dear Elizabeth, of course you would not miss a chance to tease me!"

Taking the rather abused pillow from his sister, Darcy remarked as he traced the faded letters, "I hope you recall, Georgie, that I met Miss Elizabeth first in her uncle's book shop. Sadly, I was not able to gain her name until supper at the Gardiners' that very night. After a spirited discussion, she gave me leave to protect a certain window-seat and the pillow that lay upon it. I suppose, as it has been many months since I have been to London, that she did not wish my charge to feel neglected."

Georgiana smiled as well, "And it is so like her to send you a gift that is at once precious and amusing. Though I do wonder what possessed our friends to send a parcel such as this?"

Darcy reluctantly laid aside the precious pillow. "Was there no accompanying note?"

A slight frown creased between Georgiana's eyes before she discovered the letter that she had so carelessly flung aside in her excitement at finding the various objects in the box of wonders. Blushing slightly at her haste in her child-like exuberance, Georgiana sheepishly handed the papers to her Brother.

Darcy only smiled in indulgence, the corners of his eyes softening further at the uneven script of the letter as he read it out loud:

Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire

Dear Sir,

I hope this letter finds you and your sister quite well. I am pleased to say that my family is quite well. Indeed, my eldest sister has been most insistent that I practice my penmanship, as befitting a
young gentleman. And so I have, under my sisters' most obliging attentions, become the scribe for this letter.

But I can only be honest and say that I find the proper way of address from one gentleman to another to be quite tedious (is that not a great word?! I am proud to have learned it this week!), so I think I will just write as I wish. Of course, when I said as much out loud (a mistake), Jane just shook her head at me. But Lizzy laughed and ruffled my hair (even though I suppose I might be too old for such a thing now, I am after all no longer seven but eight!), and I do so love to hear Lizzy laugh. And I think that since you are to take her away from us soon, I shall make her laugh as often as I can.

There, now Papa has given me a frown. I do not like to make him so worried looking. I think he is afraid that when I become Master of Longbourn, I shall burn it to the ground by mistake. As though I learned nothing from Lizzy's teachings! Well, I suppose I had better get back to the proper matter for this letter.

Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy (though why can I not call her Georgie? She did not mind at all during the summer?)....(here was a space in the letter, that Darcy imagined to be the gap in which Mr. Bennet scolded his young son, for the next portion was quite lacking of Tommy's side comments and written in penmanship that was much more careful in its strokes.)

Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy, I hope you will accept this humble package from Longbourn. My sisters have been most kind in granting gifts to me this season, for I know the Yuletide to be a time for prayer and contemplation and not selfish considerations. But I thought it most egregious that one must be a child to reap the joy of presents and as my sisters often tells me that the joy is more in the giving than the receiving, I thought it most marvelous to share such simple joys with our friends who are no longer in Hertfordshire. Along with small items for Miss Darcy from my sisters, I hope you will find two rather special objects as well. Lizzy of course would tell no one of the significance of the pillow she had our esteemed relatives, the Gardiners, send to her from London, but I think anything that can make her eyes sparkle so must be a joke at your expensive, Mr. Darcy. And as I have been told that it would not do for brothers to be so peaceful at all times by Colonel Fitzwilliam, I suppose I can take pleasure in such a fact. My favorite, indecorous though it must be to choose a favorite among the handiwork of my sisters, for they all poured much care and thought into their gifts, is the one from my sister Kitty. She has made such a booklet for each of our new friends in commemoration of the happy times we have had. I hope it, and our fondest wishes to you during this season, will bring you good cheer as we pass from the old year into the new.

Your friend,

Mr. Thomas Bennet (Tommy Bennet) of Longbourn in Hertfordshire

Georgiana chuckled both in response to the letter itself and to the last two images she came upon as she examined Kitty's book. "See how Tommy frowns at the page with Mr. Bennet looking so closely over his shoulder. And here, see the look of triumph as he scratched out his proper name and signed the letter in his chosen fashion."

Darcy glanced at the opposing drawings and could not help but say in as close an estimation of young Tommy Bennet's voice as he could, "But Papa! You are Mr. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn! What if Mr. Darcy were to become confused as to the writer of this important letter?!"

Georgiana's eyes widened at such a fitting approximation of the young boy's expressions before allowing her giggles to claim her. When she had managed to reclaim her breath, she commented, "As though we could really mistake the author of such a note! Though, Brother, it was ever so thoughtful of young Tommy to galvanize his family in such a manner. I feel quite obliged to send
our friends something in return, if only to show our appreciation of their thoughtful parcel."

Darcy nodded and said in his usual voice, "Indeed, I find I must agree with you. Perhaps we may send them some of Pemberley's finest wines? We Masters of Pemberley have built quite the extensive collection over the years."

Georgiana nodded but added thoughtfully, "I suppose. I do believe Mr. Bennet might appreciate such a gesture. But I fear our gift will not appear as considerate as the ones we have received."

"Then why do we not carry forward their thoughtfulness? I have ever relied on my steward to keep me informed of the needs of my tenants and their families, particularly during this time as the chill in the wind nips at the bones, and have made arrangements to have supplies sent accordingly. What say you, Georgie, to accompanying me on some more personal visits this year? As young Tommy reminds us, the joy is in the giving more than the receiving."

"Oh! What a marvelous plan! I see that Miss Elizabeth has indeed done wonders for your disposition, Brother. Though I am certain no one can doubt your dedication to all who would make Pemberley home, I fear that your presence in society might have misled some to call you haughty or even proud."

Taken aback at such a remark, particularly from his usually mild-manner sister, Darcy could only say, "I had not thought that my behavior could be misconstrued as such…Why have you never remarked upon it?"

Georgiana sighed, "I suppose…I suppose I never gave it much thought, for certainly I understood what you were like within the privacy of our own home. And certainly those who would examine your actions could find little fault in your role as a proper gentleman or a thoughtful Master. 'Tis only, while I was in London with Aunt Matlock, I heard no small number of comments when other young ladies thought I was not present that remarked on the good fortunes of she who would become Mrs. Darcy no matter that she would be in want of a husband who is more than indifferent."

Startled both at the contents of his sister's reply and the serene manner in which she offered such an explanation, Darcy could only shake his head, "I did not wish for you to become so disillusioned as to the goodness of others, dear sister."

To his further astonishment, Georgiana only laughed. "You can have no fear of that, brother, not whilst we are to become family with the Bennets. They have shown me the meaning of true friendship. And you have become quite altered under Lizzy's influence…truly, Brother. Your inner kindness and dedication to your tasks shows more now through the severity of your public visage. Indeed, I fear that should we ever to London again, the Ton may very well confuse you for a newcomer!"

"Has the change really been so great?"

"Perhaps I do exaggerated, but certainly your discomfort when not in the company of family has lessened somewhat. Even you must admit to it."

Darcy nodded, "Aye, that I do. But so must I admit to a change in you as well, dear sister."

At her inquisitive look, Darcy smiled, if a bit sadly. "I once asked you, whence went the shy little girl I used to know to be replaced by the kind, confident young lady I see before me. The events of this past year have only borne out this transformation. Loathe though I am to admit to it, you have truly grown up, and I fear the day on which I must give your hand to one who truly deserves you."
Georgiana reached across the space between them and squeezed her brother's hand as she was wont to do, "And I fear you are brooding once more. I truly look forward to Lizzy's presence at Pemberley, if only to keep you from retreating into your thoughts when confronted with matters that cause you discomfort. As I informed both our aunts, I do not feel the need to rush my entry into society. I do so wish to enjoy the pleasures of having a doting brother and sister and a simple life in the country. Despite what growth you have observed, I fear I am still very much a girl who only wishes to languish in the protective happiness of her home."

Kissing his sister's brow, Darcy remarked resolutely, "Glad I am to hear of it. Very well, I think when we present such a united front on the matter, our aunts can only capitulate to our wishes."

The next week found many tenants staring wide eyed as they waved off the Darcy siblings while clutching at the various blankets, woolen mittens, and even small toys or candies for the children. Their astonishment lay not so much in the care they received from their Master, for all knew quite well that Mr. Darcy was one who planned well so that his tenants could be comfortable. Nay, their surprise was at the gentle manners of the man who had a kind smile on his face and a merry sparkle in his eyes. Why, that he should personally help with the repairs to old Mr. Thompson's roof was almost unheard of even based on the generosities of Darcys past. His answer to one small child who dared voice the question of "Why?" thus quickly spread like wildfire through the village. "You must thank the future Mrs. Darcy, for her generous spirit is quite catching. May the Lord bless you and your family, little one." Many tankards, filled to the brim with fine beer sent by the Master of Pemberley himself, were raised that evening in the Tenants' Hall to the health and happiness of the new Mistress. Great was the celebration for their Master to find such a jewel.

The Darcys themselves found that young Tommy Bennet's words rang true, for neither had ever felt so warm in such a cold winter season. Together, they had stood underneath their parents' portraits, sending prayers to the heavens to thank the Lord for their blessings and to seek His guidance for the coming year.

As for the small crate of parcels that had set these events into motion, Georgiana soon discovered that Kitty's notebook was ever placed within easy reach in a certain corner of the library where Elizabeth had sat during her visit and her brother had taken to frequenting. All but one picture remained intact in the tight bindings, but Georgiana did not begrudge her Brother his small act of thievery, not when having the drawing in his possession made for a slight improvement in his undercurrent of melancholy. As for Darcy, he found himself, perhaps for the first time since he was a little boy, impatient for sunny days when he could once again race outdoors, wishing that the winter could pass faster so that he might leave Pemberley to be at the side of his beloved. Though Pemberley would ever be thought of with fondness on his part, he felt quite certain that home had come to have a new sort of meaning. Nonetheless, he did what he could to immerse himself in the quiet days with Georgiana, treasuring the quiet evenings by the fire as the siblings chatted over inconsequential things or even just sat in contemplative silence. He knew in his heart that such days would come to an end earlier than he truly wished.

Not a fortnight passed after the first parcel, when Mr. Darcy found himself receiving yet another surprising gift. He stared a moment in shock at the brevity of the accompanying note before abandoning his study in search of his sister to share the news. Had there been any servants about to hear him, surely they would have stared at his mutterings of, "Oh heavens, surely the world is ending!"

At his entrance into the private sitting room, Georgiana paused in her attempts at applying some of the drawing lessons she had gained from Kitty. "Brother, what is the matter? You have the most peculiar expression."

Darcy sat down across from her and said in a quizzical manner, "Do you recall when Miss
Elizabeth shared with us the news that Aunt Catherine has taken on a companion?"

Georgiana nodded, "Why yes. Miss Charlotte Lucas, I believe?"

"Then you must recall our speculations that Aunt Catherine was playing match-maker?"

Again, Georgiana nodded, "Yes…but…surely, you cannot mean to say that we were correct?!"

At such a reply, Darcy laughed, "I can hardly believe it myself, but for this letter from Sir Andrew. I had seen him at Lady Cecilia’s ball but two months ago and he writes to tell me of his marriage!"

"Marriage? To Miss Lucas?"

"I must admit to being quite as astonished as you, Georgie. But my friend clearly writes that he finds his circumstances quite satisfactory."

“Oh surely the credit must fall to Lady Adelaide and not Aunt Catherine!"

“And yet Aunt Catherine must have allowed the courtship to occur; Miss Lucas was after all in her employ."

“Will they be happy, Brother?"

“I little know! Though Andrew is truly content, this shilling is most telling."

At Georgiana's curious look, he explained, "Despite the romance that led to his parents’ union, Andrew has ever discounted my notion to marry for affection. No, he was quite adamant that though he hoped to respect his life’s partner, he truly did not believe that romance must play a role in the wooing of his bride. Of course, foolish youths that we were (and I suppose the glasses of wine we imbibed did much to cloud our judgment), we made a bet that should he marry for affection, then he must compensate me for my foresight and wisdom. Though we initially discussed the possibility of some portion of the land of Willowmere, I am glad that we settled upon the lump sum of a simple shilling. I am surprised that he remembered such an agreement, long ago as we had made it. But I suppose its presence along with this letter reassures me of the truth of the matter more than any further explanations he might have written."

Georgiana chuckled at the image of her Brother making such a bet with his friend, "I cannot imagine you to be so irresponsible as to make such a bet or any bets at all, but perhaps the fact that you settled upon a shilling over Sir Andrew’s land as the item for exchange is to be commended."

Picking up her pencil and turning to her drawing once more, she did not see the look on Darcy’s face at her next absent-minded remark, "I suppose I can also be glad that you did not make such an arrangement with regards to the order in which you would marry, for I might have found myself no longer able to call a portion of our land our home."

So it was that when Darcy spoke, Georgiana almost dropped her pencil in surprise, "Do you truly wish for Miss Elizabeth to become your sister so soon?"

Studying her brother carefully, Georgiana replied, "Not as soon as I believe you hope to call her Mrs. Darcy."

Darcy smiled wryly, "Indeed. But Miss Elizabeth and I are agreed that we must wait until Mr. Bennet feels quite at ease in his role as the proper Master of Longbourn once more. And as Miss Elizabeth knows her father more thoroughly than I ever could, I fear I find myself at her mercies for the exact timing of our union."
"My poor brother, to have such a large decision outside your powers of control. By this one action, I am convinced of your care for Lizzy. You would not so humble yourself for many."

"In truth, I find that Miss Elizabeth has a power over me that I had little expected to feel. I never expected to feel such emptiness without her presence at my side."

Georgiana considered her brother for a moment before making her next inquiry. "Do you think Papa felt such towards Mama? I have often thought that he did, particularly in the way he has sought out her portrait in years past. I suppose observing him act thus has influence my own tendency to find some measure of peace in the Portrait Gallery."

Darcy sighed, "Yes, I do believe he did. I wish they could be here to meet her and share in our happiness."

"They are, in their own way. Was it not you who told me that those we love are never truly parted from us? Now, Brother, you have disrupted my drawing for enough time, and I am certain you have other tasks on which you must focus. So, please, cease your ponderings and distract yourself with industry."

Giving his sister a soft kiss on her forehead, Darcy left with a smile to attend to the pile of papers that did indeed require his review.

Mr. Charles Bingley studied the rather thick packet of documents that had accompanied a letter from Colonel Fitzwilliam in great puzzlement before a slow smile of wonder began to spread across his face. Such was his excitement that he immediately dashed a note to the Gardiners to beg forgiveness for his absence at supper that evening. Calling for his valet, he gave impatient instructions before making his way to his solicitor’s office.

And so it was that a very much startled Miss Jane Bennet found her suitor on the doorsteps of Longbourn with no forewarning of his arrival. Mrs. Hill, at Bingley's behest, had only told her Mistress that a parcel of sorts had arrived upon the doorsteps and necessitated her inspection. Miss Bennet’s amazement only grew when, with an excited voice, Mr. Bingley pressed a ring of keys into her hands and asked, "Miss Bennet! How would you care to be the new Mistress of Netherfield?!"

Stunned by such an abrupt event, Jane gathered her wits enough to mutter a quiet greeting and request that Mr. Bingley remove himself from the chill of the outdoors and into the warmth of the parlor. Bingley, realizing the suddenness of his arrival, smiled in apology and followed her into the cheery atmosphere within Longbourn. As Jane made to sit down, however, he found himself growing impatient as he had not been for many years, certainly not since shouldering the duties of the Bingley business and expanding its interests into an empire. He seemed not aware of his own actions as he knelt on the ground before her, clutched her hands in his, and gazed beseechingly into her startled eyes.

Beholding her sweet countenance, he could only say, "Please Miss Bennet...no, my dear Jane, I can wait no longer. Long have I wished to have a home, with you at my side, but I have refrained from making the request of you until I had such a home to offer you. Fortunate are we in our friends, for Colonel Fitzwilliam has decided to follow Anne back to Rosings and has left Netherfield Park in my care. I know you deserve more romance than my dismal proposal and I fear I shall always remain at heart a businessman with no tongue for words of tenderness...but, nonetheless, I hope, dearest, for you to end my suspense. Do say, please, that you will be by my side when I begin to make the Bingley name a respectable one. Do say that you will be my
helpmate in making a better life."

As he spoke, Jane's startlement slowly melted away to be replaced by an almost impossible tenderness. The reality of his presence and the question he asked of her sank into her slightly dazed mind as a beautiful smile spread across her face. Indeed, Bingley would recall, in years afterwards, that in that one smile he saw his future lying ahead of him; he saw calm days in which they would sit quietly in each others' company, busy days in which they would together care for their home, and even playful days when they would chase after their children. When she spoke, he was much gratified that these visions would certainly become reality.

"It is so like you, Mr. Bingley, to consider so well for my comforts. I know you had hoped for us to settle close to Hertfordshire, if only so that I may remain close to my family. Though I was prepared to follow you elsewhere to make our home, I am still filled with gladness that Fortune has so smiled upon us. I do not mind your lack of poetic words, for I have ever been a simple country girl. Besides, your deeds speak louder than the most perfect of sonnets can…I gladly give you the answer you seek…Indeed, I believe I have been yours since that fateful walk to Oakham Mount when you truly saw me for myself. I will gladly be your partner in our future life." She blushed at her own words, unused was she to making such frank speeches.

His answering smile and the joy shining from his eyes, however, rather reassured her that he did not mind such conduct. Nay, if the tremble she felt as his hands tightened their grip on hers was an accurate reflection of his opinions, he rather enjoyed hearing her declaration, quiet though she had uttered it. So the couple may have remained, he with his expression speaking of utter adoration as he looked up at her and she with her cheeks flushed at the intensity of his gaze but for a sudden gust of wind that caused the tree branches to knock against the window and so startle both from their moment.

Jane was the first to drop her eyes to her lap, "Please, Mr. Bingley, you need not remain kneeling. We have chairs enough for your comfort."

Bingley nodded in agreement but made no move to release her hands. "I fear I am behaving in a manner most unlike myself; I who am so used to weighing my decisions carefully. And yet, when I received the Colonel's letter this morning, I could not bring myself to curtail my excitement. Since I parted from you, dear Miss Bennet, loathe as I was to do so, I found myself growing impatient as I have not been since a child at finding the perfect home for us. I fear my solicitor thought me quite mad for the awful rush I made this morning…but, I simply could not wait."

Jane smiled gently at him and squeezed his hand in recognition of her understanding. Nonetheless, she laughed slightly uncertainly at their current circumstance. "Mr. Bingley, I fear you have caught our household at an odd moment. Papa has taken Tommy with him to speak with our tenants regarding plans for the spring planting. Lizzy is likely at Lucas Lodge to lend what aid she can to Charlotte Lucas in shielding her from the excitements of both Lady Lucas and Lady Adelaide as they prepare for her wedding in but a week. Mary is acting as chaperone for Kitty and Mr. Lucas during their trip into town for the post-master. I fear it is not…proper…for us to be alone like this."

"Would you like me to remove myself from your side then?"

Jane laughed again as she shook her head, "I know I should ask such of you and yet, like you, I find that I am driven to behavior unlike that of my usual wont. I feel as though that I shall wake soon and find that this has all been a dream."

At such an admission of uncertainty, Bingley found that he could not help but raise her clasped hands to his lips and bestow upon them a soft kiss.
Jane gasped softly at his gesture but glanced up shyly again to meet his gaze. A happy smile tugged at her lips as she remarked, "You are quite bold for a dream."

Bingley could only kiss her hands again as he protested, "I assure you, dear Jane, I am no dream. But I promise you that I will endeavor to make all your dreams come true."

The helpful wind again broke the couple from their dazed moment. This time, it was Bingley who coughed slightly and said in a more serious tone of voice, "Though I fear that despite Darcy's excellent tutelage, I still find myself overwhelmed at the concept of becoming a landed gentleman."

"Oh, but you shall not be alone. I am certain that Papa would not mind offering some advice. Indeed, I do believe I have heard him say to Lizzy that it is through his teaching of Tommy that he has come to realize that he was not quite as deficient as he believed in fulfilling his duties. And from what Anne has told me, Colonel Fitzwilliam has already made preliminary plans for the new planting season, so at least your transition shall be made easier."

Bingley nodded, "Yes, he explained as such to me in his letter. I am very much thankful to have such dear friends."

"But is it not proper for family to aid each other in such important tasks? And, through Lizzy and Mr. Darcy, you are to become cousins of sorts with the good Colonel, are you not?"

"I had not thought of such a connection! I see that I am honored indeed by your acceptance, Miss Bennet, for I fear I am very much reaching above my station. That you who should be so well connected should consent to the suit of a humble tradesman such as I will cause quite the scandal should it be known to the Ton."

"Then it is good, is it not, that I do not make it a habit to visit Ton nor brave its social obligations?"

Bingley smiled at his betrothed (his betrothed! How well that sounds!), "You would prefer a simple life, surrounded by the love of family with occasional visits from good friends."

Jane agreed, "Yes. And as you desire much the same, with perhaps some occasional interruptions for your work, we are certain to be happy in our future life."

At his shocked face, she smiled gently, "Did you think I would fail to understand? Mr. Bingley, your mind craves challenges and you will not be satisfied with a sedentary life, particularly as I am certain that you will master the skills necessary to become a landed gentleman rather quickly."

"How well it is you understand me?! Do you not mind that I shall continue to be tainted by the stink of trade?"

"How can I? When my own uncle can count himself among your number? No, Mr. Bingley, I cannot find it within myself to censure you for the source of your income. Not when it shall maintain your happiness. Besides (and here her blush deepened), if we are to be blessed with two sons, then certainly the younger could benefit from having such a livelihood at his disposal."

With a strange expression on his face, Bingley asked softly, "Do you think often of children?"

Jane found that she could not quite meet his eyes at such a question, "I…Would you believe me to be forward if I were to say yes? I have become used to caring for my siblings and…I had thought that perhaps you would hope to continue the Bingley name?"

Bingley's answering laugh caused Jane to look up at him again, quite startled at such a response.
"Dear Jane! I would gladly fill Netherfield Park with our children, if it be your wish! I had wished to ensure that it would indeed be your wish, and that you would not see it only as a duty."

"I must repeat your earlier sentiment. How well it is that you understand me! I would not see it as a duty, making a life with you could never be merely a duty."

Bingley kissed her hands once more after which he finally released them. "I fear, dear Jane, that I must remove myself from your company or else offend you dreadfully with further unseemly behavior. I would speak to your father without any crimes against your reputation on my conscience."

When Elizabeth returned from Lucas Lodge shortly before supper that evening, she stopped in the middle of a tirade regarding the tediousness of lace and flounces to gape at the look on her sister's face. Though Jane looked at first glance to be her serene self, Elizabeth noticed the heightened colors and the brighter eyes. Not resisting the urge to tease, she asked, "Dear Jane, have you received yet another letter from Mr. Bingley? 'Tis either that or you have caught the fever from the Carpenter children."

Jane only laughed and replied enigmatically, "Something even better than a letter, dear sister."

Before Elizabeth could demand answers, however, the door opened again to admit a giggling Kitty. Even Mary had a wide smile upon her face.

"Oh Jane! Is it true? Has Mr. Bingley returned to Hertfordshire? We heard from Mrs. Hamilton, who was on errand from the Inn, that he had taken lodgings there. 'Tis quite mysterious, as she had expected he to stay at Netherfield, but it seemed he had taken rooms for the remainder of the month in Meryton!"

Jane's eyes widened for a brief moment at Kitty's excited chatter but nonetheless her lips curled in a secret smile.

Elizabeth exclaimed, "Oh! I suppose the gentleman himself is most definitely better than a letter! I had wondered what was to become of Netherfield now that the Fitzwilliams have removed to Rosings."

At the curious looks on all three sister's faces, Jane finally nodded in confirmation of their suspicions but only said, "I expect we shall have a guest for supper today."

"Who is to come for supper?" Mr. Bennet's voice rose above the excited replies of his daughters as he made his way into the household with young Tommy at his side.

Jane obediently took their outer garments in hand and replied, "Mr. Bingley, Papa."

"Oh? Has he made a visit to these parts?"

Jane nodded, her glow of happiness not dimming.

"And I suppose he will be seeking a private audience with me? Alas! In so short a time, I am to part with another daughter. But perhaps it is as well, with all this talk of Charlotte Lucas's wedding, I have been receiving odd looks and heavy hints from your Aunt Phillips regarding you girls' as yet unwed state. I can only suppose from her glares that she is deeply offended at the lack of a definite time for these events. Lizzy, you must warn Mr. Darcy that your Aunt's ire is great indeed that though you were the first to become engaged, Miss Lucas shall beat you to the altar. As though the matter were a race! I do not profess to understand her admonitions to have you 'secure your future husband' as I am certain Mr. Darcy would find himself most secured at present."
With a kiss to her father's cheek, chilled from the outdoors wind, Elizabeth replied instead of the blushing Jane, "Dear Papa. Perhaps we may wish to placate Aunt Phillips after you have spoken with Mr. Bingley? I can only guess, from the news Kitty has brought, that he would not wish to set foot in Netherfield until he can safely call our Jane his wife."

"Oh? Why, I did not think Mr. Bingley to be a romantic. I had long thought that he may well be the most practical of my future sons. Though I suppose it does soothes a father's worries that such behavior bodes well for his daughter's future happiness. Now, dear Jane, you have allowed Lizzy to reply for you, but I would hear from you, child, as to Mr. Bingley's intentions for his call this evening?"

Jane flushed but replied steadily, "I do believe Lizzy is correct and we shall be able to end some of our Aunt Phillips's suspense."

"How kind of your gentleman to consider the well-being of our family members!"

Tommy interjected his opinion before Jane could reply, "Will he take you away, Jane? Lizzy will be moving to Pemberley, what about you? Do you have to go so far away too?"

Jane smiled gently and knelt to speak with her brother, "Not so far, unless you consider Netherfield of great distance?"

Tommy's eyes grew wide, "Netherfield?! Oh! I do like Mr. Bingley! But what about the Colonel? I will be sad to lose my fencing tutor…"

"I fear the Colonel will be living in Kent at Rosings for the foreseeable future, but I am certain he will endeavor to keep up his correspondence with you, Tommy. I do not believe him to be one to forsake his friends. Indeed, 'tis due in part to his generosity that Mr. Bingley acquired Netherfield."

Much placated, Tommy stated, "That will be most fortunate and almost makes up for losing Lizzy."

Mr. Bennet, eyebrow raised at such news, only stated, "I see I shall have much to discuss with your young man!"

Mr. Bingley's audience with Mr. Bennet was indeed a rather long one, and Lizzy found herself playing the role of supporter as Jane tried without much success to focus on the mending in her lap.

"Dearest of Janes, you cannot be so nervous as to expect Papa to reject Mr. Bingley. Why, you should be celebrating!"

Jane finally put aside her sewing basket in defeat, "I know I ought not be worried…but I do believe Mr. Bingley would like to wed sooner than perhaps Papa might like. Is it so wrong of me to feel such eager anticipation at becoming Mistress of Netherfield? I cannot but feel some guilt, as though I am supplanting Anne in her role."

Elizabeth shook her head, "I do not think anyone can begrudge you your happiness. You have been so patient in waiting for Mr. Bingley. I do believe most would see it as your just reward for being such a kind soul."

"And what of Charlotte? Such news will surely distract from her own wedding. I would not so wish to take attention from her, particularly as she has often been ignored in times past. I do not wish to overshadow her joy."
Giving her sister a quick hug, Elizabeth replied, "Oh no, you need not worry about Charlotte! In truth, she has become quite frustrated with the scrutiny placed upon her and Sir Andrew. I do not believe that she enjoyed so much attention from our neighbors. No, I believe she may well thank you for shifting the limelight so that she may gain some measure of reprieve. Indeed, Sir Andrew himself may thank you, for I find him to be like Mr. Darcy in the way he guards his privacy so assiduously."

Jane sighed gratefully, "Thank you Lizzy."

Mary and Kitty entered the parlor at that moment and, seeing the apprehension on Jane's usually serene countenance, were quick to offer their own reassurances. Young Tommy even made to climb into her lap as he often did as a much younger child.

And such was the scene that Mr. Bennet and Mr. Bingley came upon when they finally exited the study.

"Well, dear Jane, you can see that I have returned your suitor to you quite intact. Tommy, will you not greet your new brother-to-be? That is, I assume you to also bestow your blessings on this union?"

With a happy laugh, Tommy sprang up and made his way to Mr. Bingley, "Oh yes, welcome to our family, Mr. Bingley! I am ever so glad that you shall not be taking Jane so far away. Thank you for that."

Bingley offered the young boy a smile in return, but his eyes remained fixated on his beloved, "No, young Master Bennet, it is I who must thank you for allowing me to carry away such a treasure."

“But only down the lane!”

At such a blithe reminder from young Tommy, the family broke into happy laughter.
As Elizabeth had predicted, Charlotte Lucas was full of joy at the news that another wedding was to occur in Hertfordshire.

Indeed, Charlotte could be heard to exclaim, “You cannot imagine my relief, Jane. Having had little experience of it, I find all the attention difficult to bear.”

“Surely Lady Adelaide’s presence presents a source of distraction?”

Charlotte only looked more morose, “Mama has taken it upon herself to introduce her to all our neighbors.”

Jane looked sympathetically at her friend even as Elizabeth quipped, “The poor Miss Hamptons, their aunt will now be satisfied with no less than a Duke!”

“Mrs. Long has been all politeness, but she does not now come often to Lucas Lodge of her own volition.” Charlotte observed.

“She only wishes the best for her nieces.”

“Oh Jane, what aunt does not? Yet she must suffer, and doubly so, at seeing young ladies of sense gain their just rewards.”

“The Miss Hamptons are all in possession of sweet natures,” was Jane’s gentle admonishment.

“They will certainly make the most dutiful and accommodating of wives,” Elizabeth agreed readily.

“Oh Lizzy, how easily you forget that most gentlemen would wish for such simplicity. That we should have encountered the three in England who are in possession of more hardy souls can only be attributed to the greatest of luck.”

“What a horrid thought! You cannot truly believe it, Charlotte.”

Charlotte only gave a slight shrug.

“No,” Elizabeth continued, “I must hope to add three others to that number.”

“Three?” Even Jane looked curious at the preciseness of the number.

“Why certainly! If aunts must wish for the best for their nieces, than surely sisters must wish the same for sisters.”

“Mr. Darcy must rejoice that you think so dearly of his sister.”

“Mr. Darcy has naught to do with my friendship with Georgie; Mary has long claimed her as kin.”

At the knowing looks from her companions, Elizabeth made to divert the conversation, “What news of the Children’s Home, Charlotte?”

Charlotte at once brightened, “Sir Andrew has offered his support and has obtained new property to support it. The house is large enough for the children have their own rooms and the grounds expansive enough for even the most quarrelsome boys to find their own favorite haunts. Miss
Clarkson even wrote to me of a new addition, the poor child was abandoned on Christmas Eve! Penelope is her name and Miss Clarkson declared her a little angel in looks and temperament...

Compared to the Ashbury ceremony, the wedding of Miss Jane Bennet to Mr. Charles Bingley was a simple affair to the joy of couple and the consternation of Mrs. Philips. Despite that lady’s approbation, the couple was soon wed in holy matrimony with only the bride's family in presence. Mr. Bingley’s wide grin at the vision his blushing bride presented as she made her way to him on her father’s arm left no doubt as to his happiness. The gentleman would have difficulty recalling the events of the morning or indeed of the ceremony itself. No, the memory that would stay with him was the radiant smile on Jane's face as he crossed over Netherfield's threshold with her in his arms.

“My dear Mrs. Bingley, welcome home.”

The couple had no regrets that they did not have far to travel from the church to their new home. Likewise, they were thankful of the careful consideration of their family, friends, and neighbors for not disturbing their peace for a week.

The quick succession of two weddings in Hertfordshire did little, however, to calm Mrs. Phillips worries regarding the engagement of next Miss Bennet to Mr. Darcy. Convinced as she was that the length of the separation if not the distance will prove their undoing, she made certain to call upon Longbourn whenever she could spare a moment to remind Elizabeth of the importance of such an event. Lady Lucas’s great satisfaction at having married off her plain daughter to a baronet must have added to Mrs. Phillips’s sense of urgency.

“I do apologize for disturbing you, Jane,” Elizabeth bemoaned, “but I cannot stay at Longbourn without dreading the sound of our aunt’s shrill voice in the hall. I fear even in my dreams I can hear her demands.”

Jane listened to her sister’s complaints but also offered her own admonishment, “And yet though your find her inquiries grating, surely you have given thought to the matter?”

Elizabeth sighed, “I regret now the imposition of such a wait. Despite his dislike of the tasks, Papa is not deficient in his ability to maintain our estate.”

“Then…”

“Yet how am I to broach such a topic with Mr. Darcy?”

“Only with open honesty, I imagine.”

“I…”

“Surely you do not admit to fear.”

Elizabeth fell silent.

“Lizzy?”

“Jane, I know I ought not allow Aunt Phillips to unsettle me, only…”

“Her words are ever around you.”

“Just so…”

“Has Mr. Darcy given indication of any decline in his regard?”
“Quite the contrary!” Elizabeth blushed at some of the contents in the letters she had received.

“Then I imagine the communication of your desire for a wedding of your own can only be met with great joy.”

“I…”

“Oh Lizzy, I do so hate to see you so despondent.”

“I am well enough.”

Jane was too kind to point out the falsehood of such a statement, though she did say, “Papa did well not to forbid your correspondence.”

“Aunt Phillips would certainly be aghast should she know of such a breach in proper behavior.”

“Then you must take advantage of Papa’s generosity.”

“Jane?”

“Surely you have no wish to continue practicing patience?”

Elizabeth stared in wonder at her sister, “How direct you are, Mrs. Bingley.”

“As you reminded Lady Ashbury, Lizzy, ‘tis the duty of sisters to look after one another.”

Reclaiming her spirit, Elizabeth could not help but state, “Marriage has made your bold, Jane. Should it have the same effect on me, my impertinence will become rudeness; though in possession of a hardy soul, Mr. Darcy shall surely lament such a transformation!”

Jane only laughed and wished her sister well. With Elizabeth’s departure, Jane found herself in a moment of silent reprieve. Settling herself for a moment, Jane fingered the edges of the demure cap upon her head and smiled at the changes that had occurred. And so Mr. Bingley discovered her in a most pensive mood when he returned from a visit to Longbourn to seek some advice from Mr. Bennet.

Seating himself next to her, Bingley said softly, “What has caught your thoughts, dearest?”

Jane smiled at him, “Just the changes that have occurred and are still to occur.”

“How odd a question!”

“Please, I wish to know.”

“Oh Charles, I could not be happier, here with you in our wonderful home.”

He smiled at the ease with which she used his Christian name. Taking her hand in his, he murmured, “Glad am I for such a reply.”

“Surely you can have no doubt that I would answer thus.”

“And yet I find it my duty to seek your reassurance.”

“How gladly I provide it.”
“Jane, my sweet, beautiful wife…”

Jane, blushingly accepting the kisses he saw fit to bestow upon her, nonetheless reveled in the feeling of his nearness and the sense of security and contentment it gave her.

Taking Jane’s words to heart, Elizabeth sent a letter on its way and tried to wait with patience for the reply. On a rare sunny afternoon, she escaped the confines of Longbourn and the sympathetic looks from her siblings to regain her equilibrium. Breathing in the crisp air and turning her face up to greet the sunbeams, Elizabeth laughed out loud and, after a quick glance around her to make certain that no one would observe her lapse in proper behavior, flung her bonnet off her head, held up her skirts, and raced forward in high spirit. Her giddy laughter was interrupted suddenly when she heard the sound of a horse and rider. Turning around sharply, she felt her breath catch at the figure that made to dismount said horse before making his way towards her with the reins in hand.

Blushing that the gentleman should catch her in such an open moment, she curtsied and lowered her eyes demurely to the ground.

When she glanced up again, she felt almost unsteady at the look of unfiltered joy in the blue eyes that met her own. Her breath caught and she found any words lost as she marveled at his closeness.

Mr. Darcy was mindful that they were in a public space and fought against his inner urge to gather her into his arms as he wished. Instead, he could only softly whisper, “Miss Elizabeth” and suppress the shuddering of his tall frame when their fingers brushed as he handed her the pin he had brought.

Elizabeth, still caught up in the intensity of his gaze, could only nod absentmindedly as she drank in the reality of his presence.

The spell was broken when Darcy’s lips curled into a smile as he remarked, “Have I finally robbed you of speech, Miss Bennet?”

To which Elizabeth had to blink away her wayward thoughts of how becoming such a smile was on his face before responding with a laugh, “Your improvement is great indeed, Mr. Darcy, for you to greet me in such a teasing manner. To whom do I owe a word of thanks for this change?”

“I have only taken my tutor’s advice to heart and taken opportunities to practice over the winter.”

“Oh? Then I must thank this tutor, for I am deeply in his debt.”

“You know very well that it is a she, Miss Bennet. Indeed, I do not believe you to be ignorant to the identity of my tutor, not when you are intimately acquainted with her.”

A teasing sparkle shining in her eyes, Elizabeth remarked, “Am I now? Should I be fighting the green-eyed monster of jealousy regarding a contender for your affections?”

The Darcy of a year ago would have been alarmed indeed by such a proposition. The Darcy of the present, though more used to Elizabeth’s teasing ways, knew enough of her character to understand the undercurrent request for reassurance beneath her words. The letters that had sustained them during their separation could not replace their actual persons. So it was with a tender voice that he bid her to look at the item that she still clutched absent-mindedly in her hands. “I do not believe such an action to be merited, for I would feel comfortable giving such a gift to only one person.”

Elizabeth glanced down at the trinket and felt a blush suffuse her cheeks as she realized its significance. “Is it not an act of self-importance and perhaps even haughty pride for you to pick a
pin containing a flower that should share your name?"

Gladdened at her good humor, Darcy replied, “Perhaps. But I do believe the recipient of such a gift was ever in search of guidance for a manner of address for her betrothed. I wished to reward her patience and grant her an answer as to my preference.”

“But do you not find it a soft name for such a man as he? Perhaps if he were a babe or child, such a name might match his sweetness, but I should feel foolish addressing a gentleman of his consequence and serious bearings in such a way, particularly as I have heard him professed to be a model gentleman, a man without fault.”

Darcy only retorted thoughtfully, “Perhaps in company such a manner of address would not do, but certainly in private such a sentiment may be excused. After all, I have found that the lady who should utter such a name has truly caused her gentleman to become less guarded. Perhaps inside every real man a child is hidden that wants to play and he requires only the right companion to remind him of such joys in life that lies beyond merely fulfilling his duties.”

Elizabeth laughed at such a reply, “How you flatter me, Mr. Darcy! For I can read between your words and see the compliment you desire to pay me. I suppose, as your future wife, my duty is to obey your wishes in such a matter.”

“Then you still wish to be my wife?”

“I do not recall expressing a wish for the contrary.”

“When you wrote that you sought an end to our engagement…”

“And yet the rest of the letter surely made my feelings on the matter quite plain.”

In lieu of a reply, he simply made a request, “Will you not speak the flowers' name?”

Elizabeth only laughed again, “Wherefore shall come the pleasant surprise that an unexpected gesture of tenderness would bring if I were to act as expected?”

Looking at her in a considering manner, Darcy suddenly met her teasing look with one of his own as, without warning, he bent down and bestowed upon her lips a soft kiss. “A gesture such as this perhaps?”

Elizabeth appeared greatly startled and her expression might have been mistaken for reprove but for the blush in her cheeks and the brightness of her eyes. But as she still made no sound, Darcy hurriedly made to explain that she had, after all, given her permission, in the written form no less, for such an action.

The beginnings of his apology for acting without a spoken affirmation was interrupted as Elizabeth gave a shy smile before dancing away from his side towards her destination to deliver the goods in her basket.

Mrs. Brown greeted Elizabeth with a smile, “Ah, Miss Lizzy, I must thank ye for these rosehips. They have certainly done wonders for my cough.”

Elizabeth smiled, “Oh but you must thank Lady Lucas, for she it was who provided me with these particular samples. I fear none of my sisters have inherited our mother's knack for helping roses flourish, though Kitty, bless her, certainly tries, and we have become reliant on Lady Lucas's generosity this year.”

Mrs. Brown shook her head, “Nonetheless, Miss Lizzy, I know without ye asking for these from
Lady Lucas, I would have been forced to be without this past winter. It'll be a sad day when yer gentle- man finally takes ye away from us.”

A squeal of laughter floated through the window, drawing both ladies' attentions to the scene outside. Darcy could be seen swinging a young boy through the air before placing him in the saddle behind his sister. The wide smile on his face matched well that of his young charges and Elizabeth was much reminded of his earlier comment regarding the hidden child.

Mrs. Brown, as though reading Elizabeth's thoughts, declared, “I have often said, that a child who does not play is not a child, but the man who does not play has lost forever the child who lived in him. I am glad to see that yer gentleman is capable of such laughter. I do not wish for you to wilt from lack of joy, Miss Lizzy. But I see now that there is little danger of that with the gentleman yonder.”

Later, after Darcy bid a fond adieu from the Brown children, he walked alongside an uncharacteristically subdued Elizabeth. The clip-clop of his horse's shoes seemed extraordinarily loud in the ensuing silence.

“Miss Eli-, Miss Bennet, are you well?”

At the concern in his voice, Elizabeth was quick to offer a small smile and a word of reassurance. At his continual doubtful look, she admitted, “How odd it is that I should feel shy now, when the letters we have exchanged have certainly done more than enough to bare my thoughts.”

“Open though they were, our words had the safety of distance.”

“I little think that the lack of such distance should be the cause of alterations in my behavior.” The sharpness of her tone caused his brows to furrow once more.

“Forgive me,” she sighed at length.

“Your temper reveals your disequilibrium.”

“As your patience shows your understanding.”

“I should not like to be the cause of your ill humor.”

Elizabeth quickly made to absolve him of such a crime, and admitted with no little frustration, “I know not the source of unsettlement!”

“I can only imagine,” he proposed, “that the thought of leaving home is a bittersweet one.”

“What is Longbourn but a house?”

Her inquiry eased his worries, “The love of your family has surely made it a home. I can stand your loathing for my selfish daring to remove you from such a happy establishment.”

“Selfish! Not at all, Mr. Darcy, you must recall that my acceptance was gladly given.”

“Alas that your acceptance of my person cannot be made without acceptance of all the duties that accompanies the post of Mrs. Darcy.”

His observation proved too close to the truth. Elizabeth looked down and played with the pin still clutched in her hands, “I have no wish to bring disgrace to so venerable a name.”

“Such uncertainty is most unlike you.”
When she gave no reply, he pressed on, “You have no cause to worry about your reception in society, my aunt will see to it that the Darcy name remains respected.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “My courage remains undaunted at the opinions of others.”

“Then…”

“I fear the loss of your good opinions.”

Her admission was made in so small a voice that he scarcely thought he heard it correctly. “Miss Bennet?”

“I fear my reliance on you. I, who have prided myself on my independence of mind!”

“Your honesty deserves mine in kind.”

“Mr. Darcy?”

“I fear that I will fail to bring you happiness. All my accomplishments are for naught if I cannot ensure the preservation of your laughter.”

She slipped her hand into his, “How silly we are!”

He squeezed her hand, acknowledging the trust she placed in him, “How fortuitous that you have overcome your shyness.”

Elizabeth laughed, startling Darcy’s horse. At the sudden snort form the animal, Darcy withdrew to an acceptable distance, “I fear Magnus is longing for his stall at Netherfield.”

“Then you will not make a visit to Longbourn? Tommy will no doubt wish to show you his improvements with the noble sport of fencing.”

“Loathe though I am to disappoint you and Tommy, I fear I must return before Georgiana has a search party sent to look for me. But perhaps you might convince your father to accompany you and your siblings to Netherfield for supper? Mrs. Bingley had expressed a hope for a visit from her family and I do believe Georgiana would be glad to see Miss Mary once again.”

Elizabeth nodded agreeably and the rest of the walk was spent in a companionable manner as they spoke of events of the winter that did not make their way into letter form. When they finally were to part ways at Longbourn’s gates, Elizabeth turned to Darcy and declared, not without a blush, “The loss of Longbourn shall not be so terrible, not when I am to make a home with you, Sweet William.”

So quickly did she turn away, she missed the dazzling smile that befell Darcy’s visage. Anyone who might have seen him then would certainly have gaped in disbelief that this man had at one time been called stern.

Darcy’s smile did not dim even as he settled himself in Netherfield’s library. His relaxed pose caused the co-inhabitant in the room to laugh merrily.

“So your quest has proven successful.”

Darcy glanced up from his book but did not deign to answer.

“You are, of course, not obliged to share the details of your reunion with me, but from your expression, I can only guess that your betrothed’s summons were not made in vain.”
“And I have your wife to thank, I believe.”

“My Jane?”

“Miss Elizabeth wrote that it was at her sister’s advice that she wrote to me of her request.”

“Miss Bennet is in possession of more than one sister.”

“But surely only Mrs. Bingley’s words can hold sway over my Elizabeth’s actions.”

Bingley merely laughed at his friend’s triumphant expression.

“When is the happy day to occur?”

“I know not,” Darcy admitted.

“It matters not which day has been chosen, I expect you have already obtained the license.”

The color of Darcy’s cheeks only increased Bingley’s laughter.

“I only wish to be prepared.”

“You need not be so defensive with me.”

“Nor with her.”

“Ah! My Jane again?”

“Lady Ashbury I believe.”

“Yes. Lady Adelaide proved most eager to introduce her new daughter to the Ton. As her friend, Mrs. Darcy will no doubt wish to offer her support.”

Darcy’s cough only led to another laugh on the part of his host, “She has not spoken of it with you?”

“Our time was brief.”

“Then she certainly will when the Bennets join us for supper. I must say, Darcy, you look oddly calm at such a proposition.”

“I would destroy Hell itself for her.”

“Your devotion is to be commended, for you may well have to prove your mettle.”

“Neither Aunt Matlock nor Lady Adelaide will stand for any direct insult.”

“You know very well that the weapons will be well-hidden.”

“The battle must still be waged. She did well enough as Miss Bennet, I cannot imagine that she will not be victorious as Mrs. Darcy.”

“Happy am I,” Bingley finally stated, “that Jane and I can maintain our insignificance.”

“But your children surely will have need to wage such battles in the future.”

“Heavens!”
“The price of respectability must be paid, my friend.”

“Oh surely not; we have friends enough to arrange marriages among any future progeny.”

“Mrs. Bingley will surely not stand for it.”

“Nor truly would I support it, I daresay. But who can tell what our children may do? We must first arrange for you to be married.”

Bingley’s words were also chief among Darcy’s thoughts and, it seemed, among Mr. Bennet’s.

“Mr. Darcy,” he commented after supper, once the ladies withdrew, “at last you grow impatient. Surely your presence in Hertfordshire indicates my loss of yet another daughter.”

“I came only at Miss Bennet’s request.”

“Did you indeed? And should she never summon you, would you have remained in Derbyshire?”

“I do not believe Miss Bennet to be in possession of such cruelty.”

“Hmm. I suppose not; for all her wit, my Lizzy retains a kind heart. Very well sir, what date would you name?”

“I am at Miss Bennet’s disposal.”

“How strange. It is the duty of wives to obey their husbands, I have not heard it said that husbands must obey their wives.”

“Yet they must honor one another.”

“And you are determined to honor my Lizzy’s wishes in this matter?”

“I am.”

“And if she should declare it to be tomorrow?”

“I can only oblige.”

“How accommodating a groom you are! Though I suspect the license you have among your possessions to reveal your own wishes on the matter.”

“I only wish for her happiness.”

“How delightful I find your replies! Yes, you will do quite well for my Lizzy. Come, let us join the ladies so that we may finally allow Mr. Phillips some reprieve from his wife’s nerves.”

Had Mr. Phillips known of Mr. Bennet’s consideration, he would have surely offered gratitude at such an attempt to bring improvement to his comfort. Mrs. Phillips, though greatly comforted that her wayward niece heeded her advice at last, remained cross. Her words having little effect on her husband, she turned to her friends for sympathy.

“Scarcely a week to prepare for the wedding breakfast! Fanny would not have stood for it. But Lizzy would surely not listen to me!”

“Elizabeth Bennet never did give credence to anyone’s opinions but her own.” Though she had been united with Mrs. Phillips in annoyance with Lady Lucas’s constant reminders of Lady Ashbury’s good fortune, Mrs. Long found that she could not but mutter crossly at the newest
reminder of her own nieces’ lack of luck.

Mrs. Phillips did not take kindly to so grave an insult. “Mr. Darcy certainly finds her agreeable enough, and he is a gentleman of exquisite taste. Why, one only has to see Miss Darcy; how fine her gowns are!”

“I little think Miss Darcy’s appearance has any reflection on her brother. Is her aunt not a countess? Surely her part in ensuring the young lady’s wardrobe is not insignificant.”

“To think that my Lizzy shall soon be able to claim her as a relation! Why, I imagine even Lady Ashbury shall not have as successful a time in London!”

Lady Lucas looked affronted, “My Charlotte has recently made the acquaintance of her new cousin. She writes that Lady Cecilia, Duchess of Portland, has become a particular friend.”

“I daresay they will both fare better than Miss King.”

United once more in joint condescension, Mrs. Phillips and Lady Lucas were only too glad to participate in this new topic of discourse. Whatever misgivings Mrs. Phillips had about her niece’s impending nuptials were thus momentarily forgotten, though her fretting could not completely end until the newly wedded Darcys made their way to the waiting carriage.
The first social venture into public the newly married Darcys made was a rather covert affair. The candlelight, reflected so well in the multitude of crystal chandeliers hanging from the theater’s ceiling, quite prevented Darcy from holding his wife close to him as he had grown accustomed to doing during the week immediately following their marriage. Instead, he found himself retreating to some of his behavior prior to their betrothal. Elizabeth, having become familiar with the weight of his gaze upon her person in the short time since becoming his wife, only lifted a delicate eyebrow in recognition of his discomfiture in public before allowing her attention to be captured by the story unfolding on stage. As she lost herself in the merry quarrels and witty rapport between Beatrice and Benedict and the dreadful misunderstandings and subsequent heartaches of Claudio and Hero, Elizabeth was quite unaware that her husband was gaining a new appreciation for the play simply as a result of her own enjoyment of it. Indeed, Darcy would spend the majority of the time appreciating the flush of excitement in her cheeks and thinking upon how the shine of her fine eyes put even the multitude of lamps on London’s streets to shame.

'Twas only as the Darcy’s were well-hidden within their carriage that Elizabeth made to remark upon the outing.

“I must applaud you for your genius, husband, for timing such a venture to coincide with a most important ball. I have no doubt that our time would not have been as peaceful otherwise.”

Darcy smiled at her, the expression shattering the reserved and impassive mask he had worn earlier that evening, “I thank you, wife, but I fear the credit must be given to its rightful owner. Without Aunt Matlock’s information that Lady Jersey would be at the aforementioned ball, I doubt we would have found the other boxes at the theater so deserted.”

“Then we must thank Lady Matlock for seeing to a most wonderful evening, and perhaps even for Lady Jersey's most convenient timing. I understand many would seek her approval so as to obtain the most coveted right for the purchase of a voucher to Almack’s.”

“Ah yes. But we need not concern ourselves too much, for the Darcys have ever retained a right of entry despite the infrequency with which my Father and I have exercised it.”

“Are you not afraid that news of our union shall cause the withdrawal of such a privilege? After all, I believe the guardians of that wondrous hall are rather diligent in preventing all but the most exalted of bloodlines to enter its sacred environs. To admit one such as I…why, surely the heavens shall render all guests blind with lightening and deaf with thunder!”

Darcy chuckled at the mock-dramatics of his companion, “Perhaps. But I do not care for such a loss. Indeed, I might well find it convenient to send a letter of gratitude to the guardians for allowing me to escape what would certainly be a most tedious evening and instead allow me the pleasure of indulging in the company of my wife without social decorum to restrict my frank admiration of her unparalleled beauty and wit.”

Despite herself, Elizabeth found a blush suffusing her cheeks. “How reasonable your words sound! I must confess that the alternative you offer sound much more pleasant. But shall it not hurt dear Georgie in the future? I do not wish for her chances at happiness to be harmed.”

“I would like to think that he who should win my sister will care not for her wealth or her connections but instead for her own kindness and unique strength. No, perhaps it shall be better for us to lose our right to Almack’s, if only so as to remove some of those who would use my sister for material gain from the throng of suitors who will surely flock towards her once she is
formally presented at Court.”

“You seem more comfortable than I would expect at the prospect that such a day may dawn upon us quite soon.”

Darcy sighed, “I cannot keep her hidden away forever, however much I wish it were within my power. Alas, she is too bright a jewel to be hidden properly. I shall be greatly saddened at her parting from Pemberley, but I am comforted that I shall not be alone when she does.”

Elizabeth’s lips trembled slightly with a barely suppressed grin as she remarked, “I see the truth now, Mr. Darcy! You chose a wife so as to keep loneliness at bay! Am I then merely a placeholder? Surely a man such as you would not lack for female companionship should you truly seek it?”

At the surprise on his face, Elizabeth almost regretted her words, particularly as the clip clop of the horses drew to a stop and the bustling of the servants forced their attentions elsewhere. Only once the servants had been dismissed as their Master and Mistress made for sleep did she reach to take his hand in hers, “Sweet William, I am not ignorant of the ways of the world...Though he is a peace-loving man, Papa was most willing to teach us certain maneuvers so that we might protect ourselves. I know ‘tis unconventional and quite impolite to speak of such things, but I also cannot expect you to be an innocent as I was on our wedding day.”

Darcy sighed and drew her into his arms as he remarked, “I have learned not to keep secrets from you, Elizabeth. If you truly wish to know...”

Elizabeth shook her head, “No. I care not for this matter, truly. I am deeply comforted that I alone have the privilege of being your wife.”

“And you alone have the privilege of holding my heart in your possession.”

“And no greater gift can I ever imagine being given.”

“I love you, most ardently, Mrs. Darcy.”

“And I you, Mr. Darcy.”

Such sentiments could of course only be followed by an appropriate expression of emotions as the couple found their lips occupied in another manner to indicate their love for one another. Mr. Darcy it was who finally drew away. Gazing down tenderly at the flushed cheeks and glittering eyes of his wife, he smiled softly and allowed an errant curl to twist around his finger, “Dear Elizabeth, I fear I shall wake soon from this dream.”

“This dream? You speak as though you have had others.”

Darcy looked away from her teasing gaze, hoping but knowing the futility of such hope that his perceptive wife would not catch his discomfort. At the slight tug on the ties of his shirt, he found himself drawn back to her impish smile.

“You, Mrs. Darcy, are much too clever.”

“But did you not choose me precisely for my cleverness?”

Darcy smiled and smoothed her hair behind her ear, “I chose you for many reasons, Madame, one of which was your ability to haunt my thoughts and my dreams. I do not know how you managed it, but somehow you have slowly become an essential part of me. During each social engagement, I could see your encouraging smile and hear your gentle encouragements in my mind. When
Georgie and I handed out gifts to our tenants during Yule, I felt warmed with thoughts of your approval. Walking in Pemberley's woods, I found myself seeking the sound of your footsteps and your laughter in the wind. You have softened my exterior such that I find my mask quite weakened. I fear I can no longer hide behind an unsociable mien with you in my life.”

Elizabeth was thoughtful in her reply, “Aunt Gardiner warned me that marriage will alter me, that both of us shall find ourselves transformed so as to truly become one… When I was young, I had not thought I would ever wish to change, that I would forever remain the way I was…willful as Mama would inform our neighbors in frustration. I suppose, I had always been proud to be the clever Bennet sister and thought that my intelligence gave me the authority to judge those I encountered. Jane did once say that I see only that which would amuse me most; she always admonished me in viewing the flaws in others' characters without the context of their strengths. I did not always care to look further or deeper than a first impression. I fear before Mama's passing, I was guilty of seeing only a single facet even to my dear sisters. I suppose, as tragic as the event was, Mama's death was also a form of blessing…do you think me horrid for saying so?

Darcy studied her thoughtfully before remarking, “Though it is an odd sentiment to be sure, I do not believe you mean it in malice. And perhaps, for you, Mrs. Bennet’s death was a defining moment in which your life diverged from its previous path. Her passing provided the opportunity for change.”

“Allow me then, to indulge in a fancy of that former path.”

Darcy smiled, “Then we must borrow from some of your sister Kitty's creativity.”

To which Elizabeth retorted, “It troubles me, sir, that you should express any doubt in my abilities so soon into our marriage. And to think you declared yourself besotted! Why, this distrust runs quite contrary to expectation that you would think me a woman without fault! Besides, is she not now our sister?”

Darcy laughed again and nodded in agreement with her last comment, “But did you not yourself reveal to me that you can be a woman of false confidence and spent an entire afternoon attempting to convince me of flaws in your character such as your impatient nature? I implore you, Mrs. Darcy, to allow me to love all of you, flaws and all.”

“Oh you are dreadful to tease in matters such as these…I cannot but find my resolve to reply with a flippant remark soften when you are so in earnest. Very well, we shall simply be two imperfect people in love, the fools that we are. Nonetheless, I am determined to ponder at what might have been. I expect it to be a most amusing pursuit.”

Darcy's nod signified his acquiescence as the couple retreated to their own thoughts in silence. Elizabeth laughed suddenly, “I just had a thought that the play we had seen tonight was rather appropriate as I imagine we might have been much as Benedict and Beatrice were, sworn to scorn each other for eternity.”

“And how have you come to such a startling conclusion?”

“Well, you must admit to your tendency to be rather unsociable on first acquaintance in formal settings. I was only fortunate that you were already well acquainted with my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner so that I was presented with the Darcy beneath his proper mask of indifference. No, if I were still of the persuasion to judge others on first meeting, then I would have thought you proud indeed and such would have been the label I applied to you. I would have felt, perhaps, duty bound to deflate your ego…and so I imagine our encounters would have been filled with contention much as in the play.”
“But perhaps I would have thought differently, perhaps I would only try to uphold my mask in an effort to hide my fascination with the young lady who would dare challenge me.”

“Would you still have loved me, even if I were to remain foolish and think the worse of your character?”

“I cannot say, for I imagine just as you would have been different, I might have been as well. Just as your mother's passing was a pivotal moment for you, so too was Richard's intervention after my Father's death. Without him, I fear I would have become stoic indeed and allowed my responsibilities to keep any emotions at bay. But I would hope that we would have both progressed enough in our maturation to hold some civil conversations that might have eventually turned to friendship.”

“Your good breeding might have dictated your actions, but I would have certainly felt no desire for your good opinions.”

“Yet for the sake of your sister, surely you would have retained your politeness.”

“Do you then imagine the Bingleys to be Hero and Claudio?”

“Would such a comparison not be apt?”

“I would hope Mr. Bingley to have more faith in my sister’s goodness and so save her from humiliation of the acutest kind.”

He found that he had no reply to give.

“Gladdened am I that they were spared similar heartache.”

“As am I.”

A silence fell once more, as Elizabeth settled herself on the bed she shared with her husband, her head tucked beneath Darcy's chin, her ear pressed against the reassuring sound of his beating heart. Darcy pressed a kiss into her hair as his arms closed around her protectively. Stroking the hair that tumbled down her back, he marveled again at the contentment he felt with his current situation.

He had always been captivated by his wife's expressive eyes but he found that he could barely breathe as he had seen her walking towards him on her father's arm, eyes shining with love and happiness. Were it not for a soft cough from Bingley, who stood as witness at his side, Darcy surely would have forgotten that his lungs needed air. Like Jane, and over the vociferous protestations of Mrs. Phillips, Elizabeth had insisted on a simple affair for the wedding ceremony. Even her dress was but the old lilac gown she had worn for the Netherfield ball made anew with laces and alterations under Jane's skillful hands. She walked with a bouquet of silk flowers that Mary had crafted and bore pearls in her hair that Kitty had so carefully arranged. Her only jewelry consisted of the ring on her finger and a pair of earrings that Georgiana had brought from Pemberley. Armed with such tokens from her sisters, a hug from Tommy, and a kiss from her father, Elizabeth found herself standing before the priest, Darcy a solid reassuring figure next to her. She had felt the tremble in his fingers as he finally slipped the wedding band onto her finger and had made certain to squeeze his hand reassuringly as they turned to face their beaming audience.

The wedding breakfast passed in a haze. Likewise, he could little remember their walk to the carriage that would carry them to London. He did recall Bingley thumping him on the back, joy infusing his words as he exclaimed “And now we are truly brothers!” He dimly recalled giving a
fond kiss to Georgiana's cheek, a firm shake of young Tommy's hand, and a promise to care for Elizabeth in response to the sadness he saw in Mr. Bennet's eyes. But his main focused remained upon the feeling of his wife's hand in his. Even when they were alone within their carriage and their well-wishers were left behind, he could not bring himself to release her hand. Only the questioning look in her eyes stirred him to action as he gathered her into his arms and breathed in the scent of wildflowers that seemed always to surround her. Elizabeth had been much startled but accepted his kiss gladly, thankful that Darcy had insisted upon a closed carriage instead of the open one Mrs. Phillips had wanted.

When they finally drew away from one another, Darcy took a deep breath, “Elizabeth, forgive me, but I found it necessary to assure myself that I am allowed such liberties now that you are indeed my wife.”

Smiling at her new husband, Elizabeth remarked, “I do not know whether to worry or rejoice that your first sentence to me in our married life is an apology. While it bodes well for my prospects in winning future arguments, it does concern me that you should know so little of my preferences to think that your behavior would offend me. Have I not assured you in the past that your attention is not unwelcome?”

“Indeed, you have, but I fear such a sentiment was tendered while we were but engaged. I believe it bears repeating now that we are man and wife.”

Elizabeth's eyes twinkled with their usual mirth, “Very well, then, since I have just promised to obey you, husband, I shall say again that you need not apologize for your actions; they are no doubt easily explainable by the excitement of today's events.”

Darcy felt his breath catch yet again as he choked out, “I beg of you, repeat that particular phrase, please?”

Drawing close to him almost unconsciously, mesmerized by the intensity in his blue eyes, Elizabeth whispered, “Very well, husband…”

She had only begun to speak when she felt her lips claimed once more. When the necessity of breathing forced the couple to once again break apart from one another, Elizabeth remarked quietly, “Perhaps we ought to distract ourselves with another topic of discussion…Will you not tell me of the townhouse and its staff? I would like to be prepared.”

Darcy took a deep breath to calm himself. “Perhaps you are correct.”

And so their travels to London advanced until Elizabeth suddenly felt the day's events catching up with even her energies. Despite her best efforts, a yawn escaped her. “Oh dear. That was terribly rude of me…I did not mean to interrupt your tale…”

Darcy only drew her to his side and bid her lay her head on his shoulder, “Please rest, dear Elizabeth. You are not yet used to long carriage rides. I can recall that you and Georgie both slept rather often during our journey to Pemberley. When you wake, we shall be in London.”

Smiling gratefully at him, Elizabeth had done as he had suggested and surrendered herself to sleep.

Elizabeth's voice interrupted Darcy's memories as she whispered, “Where are you, Sweet William?”

Darcy's hand paused in its movement as he replied, “Only reminiscing upon our wedding day...and the first time I beheld your long tresses without the usual bindings.”
Elizabeth chuckled slightly, “You quite startled me, your blushing bride, when I saw you reflected in my vanity mirror. I had meant to braid it as usual but you did not allow me sufficient time.”

“Something so lively should not be contained.”

“Perhaps so, but it was a monstrous duty to untangle it and wrest from it the many pins Kitty had so skillfully hidden.”

“A task in which I believe I was able to succeed mightily.”

“Indeed. My maid had been quite surprised that I insisted on dismissing her and tackling my hair myself. But perhaps she may begin to take lessons from you. You wielded the brush so well and utilized such patience that the knots had no choice but to fall away under your ministrations.”

“And for you to fall under my spell?”

Feeling her husband's own laughter reverberate through his chest, Elizabeth could not help but smile as well at such a comment. She felt a sudden jolt of emotion that she alone should be privy to this particularly side of the man to whom she had committed the rest of her life. “I do not recall many sorcerers who are featured in fairy tales, only sorceresses, sirens, or even witches.”

“Ah, but are there not incubi who visit maidens in their sleep?”

“Do you fancy yourself a demon, sir? Then I must sorely disappoint you and shatter such an illusion, for I was quite awake and fully in control of my faculties.”

“And yet, did you not fall prey to my seductions?”

“That I did, and quite willingly under such gentle persuasions.”

She felt Darcy's arms tighten around her form and, raising her head slightly, caught the dark glimmer of desire in his eyes. She was thus not surprised when he whispered in a slightly husky voice, “Then perhaps you shall allow me to persuade you once more?”

Rather than reply with words, Elizabeth drew up herself so as to show her agreement in a manner that was quite satisfactory to both parties.

When Elizabeth woke next, she felt peacelessness such as only the early morning could bring. Whether by Darcy’s instructions or because of their own astuteness, the servants had made no move to disrupt the happy couple but rather waited to be summoned each morning since she had been introduced to them as their new Mistress. Whatever the cause, Elizabeth was grateful for the moment of reprieve for it allowed her the liberty of basking in the fresh feeling of a new dawn. The heavy drapery over the windows hid most of the morning light from view, though a few stubborn rays did manage to sneak their way around the fabric and provide enough light for Elizabeth to appreciate the face of the figure lying next to her. Darcy in slumber had fascinated her since the first morning when she managed to waken before him. In repose, he seemed so carefree, so relaxed from the duties that normally lay upon his shoulders. He appeared almost…innocent and youthful. Of course, Elizabeth knew Darcy was not too many years her senior, but the seriousness with which he conducted his many responsibilities gave him an air of maturity befitting a gentleman who had seen many more winters. She marveled that he had granted her the privilege of seeing his softer side, of sharing his uncertainties and vulnerabilities with her. For that is how he seemed in sleep…vulnerable…For a man as strong as he to admit to such weakness and to know that so much of his hopes and dreams involved her was a humbling experience.

Young Elizabeth Bennet had given little thought to the manner of man she would marry. Indeed, though she thought it a matter of course that her sisters would one day have homes and families of
their own, Elizabeth had not expected such things of herself. No, she was much too content with caring for Longbourn to consider stirring from the land she so loved. Meeting Darcy was thus an unexpected event. Smiling to herself, Elizabeth wondered if their chance encounter had been another 'defining moment.' Their friendship had developed so quickly and their romance so naturally that Elizabeth could scarcely believe her current circumstances but for the solidness of her husband lying next to her. She remembered telling Jane that only the strongest love could persuade her to matrimony, a love that was the meeting of like minds as well as like hearts. At the time, she held no illusions that she was being more idealistic than practical. And yet, tracing the sleeping face of her husband with the tips of her fingers, Elizabeth could not but feel contentment steal over her.

Dear Jane…even her marriage could not keep her from caring for her sisters. Despite the deep blush that stained her cheeks, Jane had done what a mother would have and helped soothe Elizabeth's apprehension regarding the wedding day and, perhaps more importantly, the wedding night. Elizabeth was of course no stranger to the idea of mating and reproducing, not when she had been responsible for knowing any increases in the estate's livestock. But speaking of bulls and cows or pigs and sows was vastly different from experiencing the most intimate of human connections. As a great reader, she was not unaware of the heavy innuendos or ribald humor that was inherent in the Bard's plays. But as she had spied Darcy’s reflection in her vanity mirror, she could feel herself trembling at his nearness.

That he had appeared in only his shirt and breeches should not have surprised her as much as it did. Perhaps she had become used to seeing him with the many layers of proper attire. Even while he had lain in his own bed during his convalescence from the gunshot wound, he had been careful to arrange the pillows and covers so that he would not upset her maidenly sensitivity. In the few stolen moments of their engagement and the lingering kisses he had bestowed upon her, she had received a hint of the depth of emotions of the man she now called husband. But even those small glimpses were not adequate to prepare her for the answering longing she felt within herself. The intensity of his gaze and the look in his eyes as she met it in her mirror was enough to cause the brush to fall from her startled fingers. He had deftly caught the falling brush in his own hands and, even as she sat stunned, moved it gently through her tangled strands. Just as the knots surrendered to his touch, so Elizabeth found herself surrendering to his caresses.

But this surrender did not mean she was to lose herself, mused Elizabeth as she sensed a change in Darcy’s breathing indicating that he would soon join her in the waking world. Elizabeth Darcy would retain the fierce independence and sparkling wit of Elizabeth Bennet. But just as her closet gained a new set of raiment, so she must adopt a new bearing under the mantle of the new Mrs. Darcy. As Darcy's eyelashes fluttered open and his eyes met her earnest gaze, she smiled in greeting.

Blinking the sleep from his eyes, Darcy remarked, “And what has you so happy this morning, dear wife?”

“Ought I to have a reason to be happy this morning? Is the beauty of a new day not enough cause for a smile?”

“Perhaps. But I fear the drapes are hiding much of the world from view. Even had they been drawn, I imagine the perpetual fog that lies over London would diminish even the brightest of sunshine.”

“Then perhaps I am happy because of the company I keep.”

Darcy raised a challenging eyebrow, “Indeed? And who is the lucky gentleman who should inspire such gladness?”
Elizabeth laughed at his playful manners, “Why, he is the husband of the new Mrs. Darcy of course!”

“But is he not a most unsociable creature? I have heard tale that he was severe of bearings; a man of few words. Surely he cannot have obtained a wife as charming as the new Mrs. Darcy!”

“You do yourself a great injustice, then, for the Mr. Darcy I know is a man of responsibility but also of humor. I believe laughter and joy will not be lacking in that particular marriage.”

At her words, Darcy could not help but give her a chaste kiss to show his appreciation. “Such a prospect is certainly enough to bring a smile onto my face.”

“Have you any plans to introduce me to further diversions that London has to offer today?”

“Why Mrs. Darcy, I had always thought you to be an adventurous sort. Does London hold no interest for you?”

“London is full of culture to be sure, and I am glad to be able to explore it with you, but I fear I find life in the country much more to my liking. I miss having the open space to fully breathe… the city feels so constricting and I feel like such a spectacle…despite the interesting characters I am certain we shall meet, I find everything a bit exhausting. I would like to gain what strength I may before announcing myself to the world.”

Darcy nodded in understanding, “I have often felt such a restrictive feeling, perhaps because I know my conduct falls under the close scrutiny of many eyes, not all of which are looking with kind intentions. While others may enjoy the hustle and bustle of the city-life, I only find it exhausting and…foreign.”

“It is a different world, truly.”

“Then we are agreed? The notoriously reclusive habits of the Darcys shall be continued?”

“And thus we have dashed your Aunt Matlock's hopes that being married shall bring about a softening of your determination to remain aloof. Her disappointment will be great indeed when she realizes that neither Anne nor I are of the inclination to become her successor.”

“I fear she might begin to pin her hopes, however tenuous, on Cousin Reggie.”

“And how is the Viscount? Mary would share little of their correspondences beyond the stories he wrote of his travels. Even Georgie was unusually non-forthcoming beyond reassuring me that he was recovering well from his loss.”

Darcy sighed as he thought on the last missives he had received from his cousin. “At Richard's urgings, Reggie did make his tale known to my Aunt and Uncle. They were saddened for him and sympathized with his pain but…I suppose Aunt Matlock did feel a small sense of relief that Reggie might still find an English bride. I am not certain she fully supports his decision to mourn his lost wife and child formally for the next two years…but Reggie is determined that the world be made aware of his intentions. I suspect such a move also grew out of his desire for some reprieve from the expectations that his permanent return to English soil also signaled his desire for a wife.”

“Lady Matlock must be comforted that mourning would not excuse the Viscount from his social obligations as it would have had he been a woman.”

“Quite. Though it is to her credit that she has refrained from pressing him to attend too many social events of the Season beyond those of musical leanings. Indeed, I believe he was even able to hear the famous Angelica Catalani in concert before she left English shores.
“Has he then become a great patron of the arts?”

Darcy chuckled at such a question, “I suppose so, though such actions has wrought some unexpected consequences. Aunt Matlock has certainly made references to the increasing number of young ladies who insisted on displaying their skill with the pianoforte at various balls at which Cousin Reggie did make an appearance. Even my Uncle Matlock had made mention that Reggie's return may very well have caused an increase in the sound throughout London as young ladies made to practice more for his sake.”

“Do you wish that I would tend to my musical skills for you more often?”

Darcy shook his head, “Only if that is to be your wish. I do not believe I would enjoy the sound should you find the pursuit tedious…certainly when Mother insisted that I learn in my youth, Papa would make a long-suffering face before retiring with alacrity to the room that was furthest from the pianoforte.”

Elizabeth turned surprised eyes to her husband, “I had no idea you played!”

“I do not believe I possess beyond the rudimentary skills…certainly only enough to claim that I can play but not that I do.”

“Oh, but I must insist on hearing your music! Just as at onetime you had been insistent on a display of my lack of talents!”

“But how comfortably languid I find myself at present! If we are to exit our chambers, certainly we must dress with a semblance of propriety so as not to startle our servants with our untoward appearance…”

Elizabeth thought for a moment before sharing a daring idea. Darcy had stared at her disbelievingly at such a bold plan before allowing her enthusiasm to overcome his better judgment. A few moments later, the Master and Mistress of the Darcy townhouse could be seen clad in securely fastened robes over simple breeches and shirt for Mr. Darcy and a light chemise and morning dress for Mrs. Darcy as they stepped stealthily through the hallways, their footsteps softened by the slippers donning their feet. Whether by Providence or skill, the couple was successful in evading their own staff. Only when the door to the music room had been securely closed and locked did the Darcy's allow themselves to collapse on the pianoforte's bench with helpless laughter.

Pausing for breath, Darcy remarked, “I have not felt such fear of being caught in my own home since Richard insisted that we evade our nursemaids while we were to be napping and instead escape to climb the trees in Pemberley's orchard! Whatever possessed you to think of such a plan?!?”

Still chuckling lightly, Elizabeth replied, “When I was young, particularly when my height was short enough so that his work table hid me from view, I would often sneak into Papa's study to obtain books that interested me…He can be so engrossed in his own reading that it became a sort of challenge for me to snatch a book from the shelves without his knowledge. Though of course Papa caught onto my game after a while, and he began actively leaving books he thought I would enjoy in easily manageable locations. Nonetheless, I did manage to acquire some skill in traveling through the household undetected, which proved quite helpful when I wished to hide a torn skirt or stocking from Mama. Besides, I could not allow your earlier denouncement of my lack of a sense of adventure go unchallenged!”

Darcy smiled at her answer, “How delightful is your enjoyment in this particular adventure!”
“But is it not invigorating in a way?”

“I find I can only agree with your assessment.”

“Excellent, for we shall have need of a repeat for the return trip! For now, however, I believe you owe me a song.”

“Only if you would play one as well.”

“I see from your expressions that you are determined to have your way. Very well, I suppose as reward for participating in my silliness, I shall compare my ill playing to yours…we shall see which one of us is more deficient.”

Seeing that he could no longer delay the purpose of their journey, Darcy opened the instrument and, after a few practice chords, commenced on the last song that he had learned from his Mother, a song that he had avoided thinking on for many years since her passing. As the notes flowed from his fingertips, he remembered her efforts to smile at him from the cloud of sheets and pillows that surrounded her. Her pale face, so lacking in its customary rosy glow, was a shock to the young Fitzwilliam Darcy. The soft look in her eyes seemed as a mockery to the usual good humor they typically contained. Her hand was weak as it made to grasp his wrist. “My dear boy,” she had said, “My poor sweet son. Forgive me for leaving you so soon and with such a heavy responsibility. But you are not only a Darcy but a Fitzwilliam and I believe you to possess the strength for the days ahead. Your Papa will need you aid and your sister will need your protection…but most of all, they will need your love. Do not shut them out, despite the scars upon your heart.” Two days later, she was gone.

Darcy's playing was disrupted as he felt a gentle touch upon his wrist. As though she sensed the sorrow within such a memory, Elizabeth's voice was soft as she murmured, “You have greatly underestimated your skills…as you had once observed, the emotions of the player can truly transform their playing.”

Resting his own hand on hers, Darcy replied, “It puts me in mind of my mother…she thought that learning the pianoforte would soothe my boyish spirits. I fear I was not the best pupil, George’s mockery ever a source of torment. Not until she was gone did I begin to practice in earnest, hoping to reward the patience she had shown in life by passing on some elementary skills to Georgiana. I suppose, in my own way, I hoped to allow some of her love flow to my sister from beyond the grave. Of course, the pupil soon exceeded the tutor and, with other demands on my time as Papa began my training in become Master of Pemberley in earnest, the pianoforte was left to Georgiana's skillful hands.”

“Despite your lack of practice, your fingers seem to remember their pathways across the keys quite well.”

Darcy nodded but, shaking the sense of gloom that had settled upon him, said instead, “Now then, the day should not be one for melancholy. If Georgie were here, she would certainly admonish me for my brooding, particularly in the presence of such delightful company as yours. Will you not play a song for me, Elizabeth, to chase away the dark clouds?”

With a soft kiss to his cheek, Elizabeth turned to comply. As her sweet voice joined the simple country tune from the pianoforte, Darcy found himself reflecting again upon his good fortunes at finding such an understanding partner.

When the couple retired again to their rooms, they were delighted though chagrined to find that the servants had laid out some breakfast items in the private sitting room in their absence.
Helping herself to a pastry, Elizabeth remarked with a laugh, “Perhaps we were not so clever as we thought! It seems our servants were well aware of when they might find our chambers empty so that they might make it orderly. But I shall make no complaints; for all that they might think their Mistress a most silly creature, they have provided an excellent breakfast!”

“They cannot think you silly, certainly not having met you in person. I believe you have won their love with how happy you have made their Master.”

“If the ladies of the Ton knew your gift of such a honeyed tongue, I fear you would have been ensnared long before our meeting.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow imperiously, “Do you think me so weak as to fall for such trickeries?”

“Oh do not look so affronted, husband, I only seek to compliment your powers of flattery.”

“Then you must congratulate yourself for being the muse for such words…though I maintain that I speak but the truth with no intents of exaggeration.”

“Ah, but you are not an impartial party! Your opinion is thus rather unreliable in such matters. Is it not said that love is blind? That lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit?”

“I must disagree, for I do not believe either of us to be blind to the faults in the other. Certainly not when we have both been adamant that those faults be made known to one another. I love not a perceived vision of perfection…rather, your follies only make you more dear to me, for then I should feel that you have need of my presence in your life. Likewise, I treasure that your strengths should compliment so well my own deficits.”

Elizabeth hummed contently to herself. “Or perhaps for the challenges we present to one another? I who insist that you practice your skills in interacting with others and you who by virtue of our marriage have brought me new social obligations and challenges?”

“Is it not better that we should grow and change together? We share now more than a name.”

“Nonetheless, does it not frighten you that you should wish to change for another? Do you not resent a loss of self?”

“Do you?”

Elizabeth sighed, “Perhaps I feel the shift more strongly, as it is I who have experienced a change in name. I find myself wondering at the sort of person that Elizabeth Darcy should be.”

Darcy paused and studied his wife carefully, “Must she be too different than Elizabeth Bennet had been?”

“Certainly. Society would expect her to be a lady of grace, one who holds herself with self-assurance and who is confident with her station in life. Many will be eager to critique every aspect of her person, from her dress to her ability to withstand constant scrutiny. Though Elizabeth Bennet could afford not to care for the opinions of others, Elizabeth Darcy has not the luxury. Not when judgment on her would reflect poorly upon the legacy of the family of which she is now a part. I do not wish to be found wanting, nor do I wish to bring shame to the Darcy name.”

“You need not trouble yourself so, not when you are already the woman in your descriptions. Besides, the Darcys have a certain reputation for being polite but rather unsociable, respectful but distant, a family of individuals who would rather rest in the comforts of their country estate than brave the Ton. I have no wish to shatter such expectations. As such, as Mrs. Darcy, you should feel no obligation to meet the expectations of the Ton, not when we shall often be at Pemberley,
far from the wagging tongues of gossipers.”

“And yet, I still feel as though I am on the brink of change…I began to feel it when Charlotte braced for the Season, it grew with Jane's marriage, but now that I have become a wife, I find myself at times overwhelmed. I have only realized now that I have had little preparation for this task, this new life I am to lead…And, in truth, I find myself afraid that my courage will crumble, that I will no longer be able to laugh at the derision from others that you had chosen for personal happiness rather than respect the demands of duty to marry one of equal social standing. I could not bear to be the cause of grief for you. I find that my happiness has become inexplicably tied to yours. It is a prospect I could not have envisioned.”

Setting down his own cup, Darcy reached across the table to grasp her hand gently in his, “Dear Elizabeth, then be comforted that such dependence is not misplaced…I shall ever be by your side. You look to me for answers and yet I find I have none to offer other than this: I have had little proper instruction in being a husband. I can only allow my determination to make you happy to dictate my actions. Despite all that has happened, I remain a stubborn man, set in my ways and indeed, expectant of others to obey my commands. By virtue of my responsibilities, I have become used to making decisions without consulting others. I do not wish for my presumptive behavior to harm you. But, I also have faith. We were in possession of friendship ere we married. I believe that shall be our anchor. You have already changed me for the better, even Georgie has remarked upon it. So, despite my apprehension, I have only the greatest of hopes that our future remains bright.”

With a squeeze to his hand, she released it and returned to her breakfast. “I have long held the philosophy that I should look upon the past only as it gave pleasure. I did not think to apply it as optimism for the future.”

“How fortunate that your husband is in possession of such wisdom.”

She laughed at his arrogant tone, “And sufficient pride to ensure that all insults shall be given the inattention they are due.”

“I might suggest that as Mrs. Darcy, you learn to adopt the same air of indifference.”

“And yet you had disagreed with my assertion that Mrs. Darcy must be a different creature than Miss Bennet had been.”

“I merely did not offer my assent to such an opinion.”

“How carefully you parse the words.”

“My only defense against the wit of so clever a wife.”

“And what is to be my defense against the intelligence of my husband?”

“Such a secret I am not at liberty to reveal.”

“No?”

“I must retain what advantage I can.”

“To what end?”

“My wife is not one to tolerate fools.”

“You are mistaken! I find foolishness most amusing.”
“Yet you have no wish to observe its many forms today.”

“I had promised Charlotte the honor of hosting the first true introduction of Mrs. Darcy to London town.”

“How fortuitous.”

“Besides, I find that my present company offers more than satisfactory entertainment.”

“Do you mean to offer compliment?”

His bewilderment only caused her further laughter. “You were gracious in providing a private concert.”

“Fool as I am, I can deny you very little.”

“But even your generosity has limits.”

“You are too clever not to be aware of the answer.”

Her laughter at the prim manners in which he sipped his coffee nonetheless brought a smile to his lips.
The Ashbury townhouse had seen its fair share of grand balls, but none were associated with such eager anticipation as the one that would feature the elusive Mr. Darcy and his new bride. Whispers of the Darcys’ attendance had begun a full week prior to the event itself as speculations ran rife as to the identity of the new Mrs. Darcy. A great deal was said regarding the happy reports from well-compensated shopkeepers on the vast expense that Mr. Darcy was willing to spend on the new Mrs. Darcy’s wardrobe. Not a few young ladies felt jealousy stir within them at Mrs. Darcy’s good fortune for having acquired such a doting husband. When it became known that the new Lady Ashbury was acquainted with the lady who was the feature of so many conversations, those who were not fortunate enough to receive an invitation made with alacrity to rekindle friendships with those who did.

So it was that Charlotte found herself besieged with inquiries that she had no intention of answering. Instead, she smiled politely and did her best to hide the quirk of her lips at the thought of such reactions. Only in private with her husband did she admit to a perverse sense of satisfaction at the great fuss that would be made over ladies of such humble backgrounds this Season. Sir Andrew only chuckled as he responded, “But the Ton seems to be convinced that your ancestry is greater than it is.”

Charlotte had shaken her head at the gullible nature of the London elite, “It was only a happy misunderstanding, one that your mother found little cause to correct. Indeed, you cannot deny that it has been to our benefit.”

“Though I grant you that Mother’s calculation has saved us from too much mischief, I am still discomforted that we should perpetuate a falsehood.”

“Though I agree with you in principle, I can also see the advantage of upholding such a ruse. Besides, our only action has been inaction.”

Sir Andrew’s rueful smile at his mother’s skill turned to one of pride as he remarked, “And I suppose I can little argue that it is by your own merit that you were able to impress the Countess de Lieven with your demonstration of your ability not only to understand but to expand upon natural philosophy.”

“Your cousin proved sly indeed in demanding such a conversation of me…certainly I could not have helped the Countess's comparison of my humble self to the Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne in her conversation with Countess Esternhazy.”

“It is a happy accident, is it not, that the Duchess's maiden name had also been Lucas?”

“A fact of which no doubt Cecilia was aware. My protestations have done little to prevent speculations of my ancestry to remain an item of idle chatter.”

“And to think that you had worried so extensively about your reception!”

Charlotte laughed but fixed her husband with a stern look, “As though you did not glower at some of your old acquaintances for their unkind remarks towards me…such an action was unwarranted, I assure you. I have no wish for you to sever ties with your old contacts simply for my sake.”

Sir Andrew sighed, “It was not only for your sake that I did so. Their actions were not befitting that of gentlemen and they were thus not worthy of association.”
Charlotte gave a smile at his protective nature but said, “For Lizzy’s sake, I would not have you alienate those who would look to her to find fault. She shall certainly not be able to hide behind whispers of distant family ties to nobility, not when she had attended a ball as Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Your loyalty to your friend is to be commended. But I little think our actions will have much impact; Mother had such an air of self-assurance after her conferences with Lady Matlock that I can little imagine they would allow for any indignities to befall Mrs. Darcy.”

And indeed, the Darcys would find themselves not without friends as they descended their carriage and made their way to the reception hall. As their names were announced, the conversation seemed to cease for a moment as the ladies studied the new Mrs. Darcy carefully. Much would be said about the quality of the rare shade of green silk she wore and the price of the lace that trimmed it. Those who were old enough to remember the late Lady Anne Darcy gasped at the diamond set the current Mrs. Darcy bore, for certainly those jewels had not been seen outside of the Darcy treasury for many years. Her head held high, Elizabeth maintained the perfect image of calm and confidence as she allowed a small smile to grace her lips. The obvious fondness with which Lady Adelaide and Lady Ashbury greeted her caused a wave of whispers to float through the crowded room. But perhaps the biggest shock was the genuine smile, small though it was, upon Mr. Darcy's face as he led his wife to the dance floor. No one could recall Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy looking so at ease at a social event and certainly not so eager to participate in the dancing unless forced. Why, at one point he could even be seen to laugh as he bent his head to better hear a comment from his wife!

A certain Miss Matilda Bainbridge, a young girl of only six and ten who was experiencing her first Season in London, could be heard whispering to her older sister with great excitement, “Melinda, who is she? She holds herself as a princess! And Mr. Darcy! He is just as handsome as you had said. Oh, they do make a striking couple, do they not?”

Miss Melinda Bainbridge, a young lady of five and twenty who was becoming fearful of having the dreaded term 'old maid' applied to her, sniffed rather disdainfully, “He is a handsome man, to be sure, but I find her to be no great beauty. Her figure is much too thin, her nose much too sharp, and her hair much too coarse.”

Matilda’s eyes widened in surprise at her sister's unflattering comments, “But how can you say such things?! I think her quite beautiful. And her eyes! How they shine with happiness and good humor. Certainly Mr. Darcy must think her quite handsome, for he has yet to leave her side! Oh, they must love one another quite deeply.”

“Oh do not be ridiculous, Matilda, men of Mr. Darcy’s wealth and station do not marry for love. You must push those foolish thoughts from your head. No, I am convinced that she must be an heiress of great fortune with an impeccable pedigree. See how the Lady Ashbury greets her as a friend… and you know it is said that Lady Ashbury is related to the famed Cavendish clan. No, whoever she is, the new Mrs. Darcy will certainly be too high to associate with the likes of us.”

“But… she appears quite friendly. I cannot believe that she would be a snob. Lady Ashbury certainly is not. Why, she was quite kind to me when I lost my fan at the last ball you made me attend and even accompanied me in my search for it!”

Melinda turned to her sister sharply, “Why did you not mention that you had made Lady Ashbury’s acquaintance? Do you not remember what Papa said? Connections are everything … how could you have not mentioned such a thing earlier? Mama might have had an excuse then to approach Lady Ashbury and thank her in person.”

Deeply chagrined in the face of her sister's scolding, Matilda lowered her eyes to the ground as
she muttered a quiet apology.

Seeing the droop her sister's shoulders, Melinda sighed, “Forgive me, Mattie, I did not mean to sound so harsh. It is easy to forget that this is your first Season. Let it be a lesson to you, however, that we do not attend balls solely for our own enjoyment but also for the sake of furthering our connections and, hopefully, finding a good match. 'Tis a harsh reality that you must accept; you must put aside your childish dreams of love and romance.”

Though Matilda nodded to show her understanding, she could not help but cast a last wistful glance at the Darcys.

Elsewhere in the room, a certain Mrs. Loretta Townsend could also be seen observing the newlyweds. She had thought herself quite clever in managing to attract a gentleman of Mr. Albert Townsend’s wealth. Certainly she often held her recent marriage to a man of such consequence as a sign of superiority over her sisters. What cared she that he was more than twenty years her senior? He owned a townhouse in the fashionable part of London and numerous estates within England and abroad. Why, the pin money he settled upon her was certainly more than a year's allowance from her parents. She could afford the latest fashions, no matter how complicated the design or how fine the fabric. Yet why did she feel so gauche when compared to the simple design of the new Mrs. Darcy's gown? Surely the material was expensive, but the cut was almost countrified in its plain nature. And yet, somehow, it suited Mrs. Darcy such that she appeared dressed as finely as any lady of consequence. Indeed, she looked as a wood nymph who left her forest home so as to inspire jealousy from the mere earthly maidens. And the way Mr. Darcy's eyes fixated upon her! It was almost unseemly how they tracked her movements when she left his company to follow Lady Ashbury as she introduced her to some of the other guests. Even though he seemed deep in conversation with Sir Andrew, Mr. Darcy appeared to know the instant that his wife returned to his side if the soft look he sent her was any indication. Glancing at her own husband, who seemed more interested in the glass of wine in his hand than her presence at his side, Mrs. Townsend felt a sudden wave of envy. Certainly Mr. Darcy would not leave his wife alone in their townhouse while he retired to an estate in the country. Mrs. Townsend tried to tell herself that she preferred such an arrangement, that she could enjoy society while she remained young and vivacious, that she cared not for the dreary company of a husband who seemed fonder of sleeping and fine vintages than her company, but she could not help but feel a sudden sense of loneliness that she would remain but an ornament upon her husband's arm.

As the Darcys left the dance floor in favor of searching for refreshments, they were unaware of the disdainful sniff that Mr. David Leigh gave at the open smiles on their faces. Turning to his companion, Mr. Leigh remarked emphatically, “I would have never taken Darcy for a fool, to marry such a country nobody. Just look at them, it's indecent the way they smile at each other. And what shall happen when her beauty fades? I will tell you! He will find that she is utterly unsuitable to wear his mother's jewels. No, it is an abomination! He will live to regret his choice, you mark my words!”

Mr. Percy Spencer nodded in agreement with his old friend as he was often wont to do, “Ah yes. I daresay she will not be received well by his family! Why, for Lord Matlock to welcome such an obvious social climber into his family, unthinkable!”

A third figure joined the two gentlemen and rolled her eyes at their commentary. Mrs. Lucinda Leigh closed her fan with a determined snap as she turned disapproving gazes upon her husband and her brother, “Oh really, then why is it that I see Lady Matlock embracing Mrs. Darcy as fondly as she would a daughter of her own blood? And see how Lord Matlock nods at Mr. Darcy! That is certainly not a show of disapproval!”

Mr. Leigh waved aside his wife's words with a snort, “The Fitzwilliams are too well-bred to cause
a scene in so public a space. Their forbearance in the face of such an atrocity is a credit to their good manners.”

“Age must have addled your eyes if not your mind, for certainly mere politeness would not cause the Fitzwilliam heir to ask a dance of his new cousin.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to observe such a scene. Mr. Spencer muttered reluctantly, “Perhaps you are correct, sister, and Mr. Darcy's family does welcome such a union.”

Mrs. Leigh shook her head at her brother, “Of course I am correct! I have actually spent time speaking with the young woman and I find her to be a lady of great sense.”

At the disbelieving look from her husband, she continued, “Unlike you two, who would rather nurse your drinks and pass judgments from a hidden corner...why, you two are worse gossips than any women when you are together! I have made effort to find out more about Mrs. Darcy. It is true that her father is but a country gentleman, but she is a genteel lady of spirit and profound intelligence. Certainly more than I can say about the lady your nephew chose!”

“At least Caroline came with a substantial dowry.”

Mrs. Leigh continued her speech as though she had not heard her husband’s muttering, “I cannot imagine Anne Darcy's son choosing a woman who could not think for herself. Need I remind you that Lady Anne had been a woman of quick wit herself? No, I am convinced that she would have rejoiced in gaining such a daughter-in-law as Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy.”

The Viscount's chosen manner of address to the new Mrs. Darcy as they moved to the notes of their dance was carefully enunciated so that the words could not be mistaken. Had Mrs. Leigh known of it, the determined look with which she fixed her companions would have certainly gained an even greater expression of superiority. “Cousin Elizabeth, how well you look tonight. I believe one of Darcy’s greatest deeds was to bring you into our family.”

Elizabeth only curtsied as they made to commence the steps of the dance, “Lord Milton. I trust time has been a boon to the recovery of your spirits?”

At his nod of agreement, she added, “I must thank you, on behalf of my family, for the stories you have sent us. They did much to entertain us during the long winter and quite revised my brother's opinion of you.”

A rare smile passed over the Viscount's face as he remarked, “Ah yes, and how is young Master Bennet? Is he still a fencing enthusiast?”

“Tommy seems to have settled some of his liveliness and has become more focused in his studies to Papa's joy. It seems that the marriage of his two eldest sisters has truly impressed upon him the passage of time and the changes it shall bring. But yes, his interest in fencing remains quite strong. Why, just yesterday we received a letter from him expressing his gratitude at the fencing manual Mr. Darcy had seen fit to send him. Perhaps it is well that he had also sent some instructional manuals in Latin and Greek, otherwise I believe Papa would have definitely despair ed of my brother's tutelage.”

“Perhaps, if he retains such interest as he grows older, your brother might be introduced to Henry Angelo's Fencing School? I believe it to be a most popular playground for enthusiasts of the sport.”

“Perhaps so. For now though, I think it suits Papa more that Tommy focus on his studies.”

“Has Mr. Bennet considered sending him away to school?”
Elizabeth shook her head, “No, I do not think Papa would choose such a venue, not when he could just as readily tutor Tommy himself. Though he may not seem it, Papa really is a dedicated scholar of the Greats. And I believe Papa would like Tommy to develop a connection with our land and its people, something he could not do if he were away. I suppose, eventually, Tommy might attend University, but that is still in the distant future.”

“A very astute choice. Indeed, I fear my peers at Eton were sometimes more attentive to learning about certain vices that their positions offered than they were to their studies. But never mind that, I trust the rest of your family are well?”

“Quite well, I believe. Mr. Bingley and Jane are well settled in Netherfield now. Indeed, I believe Mr. Bingley has been enlisted as another tutor for my brother, at least in the fields of arithmetic and economics. Kitty continues to send me regular updates of tales from home. I expect it will not be long before her own suitor finally applies for her hand in marriage. Perhaps she shall satisfy our Aunt Phillip's hopes of a more extravagant wedding. Certainly Sir Lucas would not mind hosting such a celebration again.”

The Viscount seemed almost to hesitate before asking quietly, “And Miss Mary?”

Elizabeth smiled to herself at his almost anxious tone, “Mary has settled into the role of Miss Bennet now that Jane and I have married. Despite the plethora of romances around her this past year, she seems to possess no inclination to seek such for herself. No, she remains determined that one sister ought to stay to keep house for Papa, even though both Jane and Kitty will not be far from Longbourn.”

The Viscount nodded and spoke no more on the subject, though Elizabeth fancied that she sensed a feeling of relief in the smoothing of his furrowed brows. Her observations were soon forced to end, however, as the strains of the song drew to a close and the Viscount returned her to Darcy’s side.

At the pensive look on his wife's face, Darcy raised an eyebrow inquisitively only to be met with a slight shake of her head in reply. Understanding that whatever had captured her thoughts was a matter of discussion in more private a setting, Darcy only nodded slightly before turning to the gentleman at his side. “Signor del Mastei, I trust you remember my wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy?”

Elizabeth turned in surprise to the figure standing quietly beside her husband as she sank into a perfunctory curtsy, “Signor.”

The Baron bowed in response, “I must offer my congratulations on your nuptials.”

“You have my thanks.”

Darcy coughed slightly at his wife’s curtness, “The good Signor has just informed me of his intention to make England his permanent residence.”

“And I suspect you were most willing to find an acceptable establishment for him, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy relaxed slightly at his wife's teasing tones, “I do believe ‘twas you who served such a role for the last cousin who required it.”

The Baron looked from one to the other in bewilderment but stated, “I would be most indebted to you both for any assistance you can render.”

“What of your brother? Will he also join you in your new home?”
The look of excitement on the Baron's face was quite in contrast to the subdued expressions that the Darcys remembered of him. “Oh yes! Roberto is most kind to a brother such as I in accepting my offer. But perhaps he is finding himself besieged by a sense of youthful adventure. He is a good lad, my brother, made more mature by the circumstances within our family, but he has had little opportunity to travel in his eighteen years. I could not forgive myself if I did not offer him a chance to expand his horizons or if I did not give myself this chance to reunite with what family I still have remaining. Indeed, I find myself quite envious of the improved sibling attachment between my brothers-in-law. I must, of course, return occasionally to ensure that the leases on the family's properties are sufficiently fulfilled, but I believe we shall benefit from some distance from a land that holds such painful memories for us both.”

As the Darcys conversed further with the Baron, the Fitzwilliam heir found himself greeted by a past Cambridge acquaintance. Though he wished to sigh at the appearance of one who had succumbed to the vices to which he had earlier alluded, the Viscount found that he could not ignore such a direct form of address as he wished. Mr. Benjamin Fitzhugh, who appeared quite intoxicated by the fine wine in his glass as revealed by the unnaturally flushed colors of his cheeks and the glassy appearance of his eyes, seemed heedless of his inebriated state as he landed a hearty slap on the Viscount's shoulder.

“Ah, Reginald Fitzwilliam…so the prodigal son returns! I heard tales that you have returned to English shores, but as I did not see you in the clubs, I gave little credence to such news!”

The Viscount's stiff stance quite revealed his great level of discomfort at his present company. But perhaps fortunately, Mr. Fitzhugh gave him little time to respond as he continued speaking, “We were all quite envious of you, when you did not return from the Continent with the rest of our cohort. Ah to have the wealth to continue leading such a life of leisure as your must have done. Did you finally have enough of the pleasures that such a life could offer? Though I myself find it unlikely…I cannot understand why you would forsake those pursuits for the strict rules that dictate our behavior here in England. Though I suppose you could do as I and many of my companions have done and simply continued such habits while waiting for our fathers to give up the ghost and finally bind ourselves to the family's estates.”

“You are not in your right mind, Fitzhugh, to utter such loathsome words. Your conduct is most unbecoming a gentleman of your station.”

Mr. Fitzhugh, however, only took another draught from his goblet. “Oh you always were quite stuffy. I see that time has not changed you. Nor, I expect, your cousin…Ah yes, the proper Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire…ha! Wickham always did say he was a stuffed shirt who knew not the first thing about pleasing a woman! I expect George must be laughing from beyond the grave at the sight of your cousin with such a wife on his arm. I suppose she is pretty enough and I have heard tales of the liveliness of country girls…Though, surely if he had wanted her, he would have been at liberty simply to take her…”

At such vulgar insinuations, the Viscount finally reached the end of his tolerance. In a dangerous voice that was quite unlike his usually bland tones, he stated clearly, “I would tread carefully, Mr. Fitzhugh. You are speaking of a member of my family and I must remind you that the Fitzwilliams are not of a mind to forgive easily transgressions against us. I shall forget your insults this once, for I can readily lay the blame at the drinks you have imbibed. But I must warn you that should you repeat such thoughts again, I shall not be as lenient. Nor, I expect, will my cousin…and you must remember that Darcy held the fencing title for all the years he was at Cambridge?”

Such was the vehemence in his voice, his meaning, if not his exact words, was able to penetrate even Fitzhugh's drink-addled mind. Turning to wave down a passing servant, the Viscount gave curt directions before walking away without a backward glance, “Please do accompany Mr.
Fitzhugh to his coach. I fear he is in no state to remain in public.”

So incensed was he, the Viscount found himself leaving the crowded hall altogether as he sought some measure of peace in the moonlit garden. Though he had not expected his cousin's marriage to meet with universal approval, he could not have foreseen such uncouth declarations. He supposed, despite the manner of their delivery, Fitzhugh's statements revealed certain opinions that other gentlemen of his persuasion also held. Despite his absolute loathing of such perspectives, the elder Fitzwilliam son could spare an ironic smile that his brother-in-law's long-held prejudices with regards to young men of wealth were not altogether in the wrong. Had it been another man, perhaps the Viscount would have felt a twinge of regret at the viciousness of his reply, but Fitzhugh had been quite condescending towards young Mr. Darcy when the latter had first entered Cambridge. The actions of a gentleman in his last year of study towards one who had just begun his years at that exalted institution were certainly expected to hold a small amount of derision, but Fitzhugh had been positively cruel towards the shy and reserved Darcy. Reginald Fitzwilliam did not think himself a petty man, only one with a long memory for past transgressions. Running a hand absently through his hair, he sighed wearily. How he longed for the quietness of his music room, the safe sanctuary in which he did not have to fake a smile or bite back his true opinions of those around him. He supposed that he had been spoiled with the joy of solitude as a result of his station and his travels, but he did find the London throng oppressive. Glancing up at the moon, he felt a sense of longing for the simplicities of his life in Sicily. Had anyone been near to hear him, they would have felt a shudder at the raw pain in his voice as he whispered the name of his departed wife. “Ah Elena, how well I would have borne it all had you remained at my side!”

How intolerable he found men such as Fitzhugh! How he longed for a measure of simple truth in the people he encountered! He had almost forgotten the pettiness and hypocrisies of High Society – that the very same gentlemen and ladies who held such disdain regarding even whispers of a breach in propriety should themselves exhibit behavior of the most scandalous sort. Quite unbidden, a passage from Miss Mary's latest letter rose in his mind's eye. He had taken to sharing such observations and frustrations with her via the written word; he might have regretted revealing such dark thoughts but for the gentle manners of her reply. She had inquired whether he truly believed he might have been happy should he have succeeded in bringing Elena back to England. His first feelings had been deep resentment. Indeed, he had to physically remove himself from the letter to prevent himself from shredding it to pieces. Only when he was certain that he had conquered his anguish in the music room, after quite startling the maid who had been dusting in the corridor outside with the cacophony of sounds he made, did he dare return to examine the rest of her reply. Now, looking at the shadowy garden, he felt only self-incrimination at even the thought of exposing Elena to such a society. No, though Elena would not have been lacking for material comforts, her spirit surely would have been crushed under the onslaught of unkind gazes and even more hurtful words. Would he have been happy, in the face of her unhappiness? How could he, who claimed to love her so, have thought of subjecting her to such vitriol? And oh how he did love her! Sometimes to the point of madness when he had truly considered giving up all to live with her in a simple house in a simple village. But perhaps, such a love as theirs, so full of optimism and unrealistic expectations, would not have fared well under the pressures of his station. No, mutual attachment was simply not enough; his will alone was not enough to offer sufficient protection. Darcy and his bride had certainly shown him the bitter truth of the deficiencies of his own love. For marriage should not be built on an expectation of perpetual and eternal felicity but rather a daily commitment to share, to understand, and to support. He wanted to believe that he had such a bond with Elena or perhaps he would have developed such a bond with her had they been granted more time. But he rather suspected that the rush of affection he felt for her was still too new for him to know for certain if he could have made her truly happy. With a wry smile, he saw truly now that he had been selfish in planning for a future without thinking of Elena's opinions. Given the choice, would she have followed him? Knowing all that she would have to endure, would she have given up her home for his? The passage of time had eased some
of the hurt of his loss. The startling friendship he developed with the Baron and the new sense of brotherhood with the Colonel had offered sufficient distractions such that his world was no longer in perpetual darkness. Nonetheless, he still found himself with moments of pain and, in the face of the Darcys’ present happiness, a profound sense of uncertainty.

A swish of silk and the sound of light footsteps disrupted his musings and his wanderings in the garden. Schooling his features carefully so that his scowl was not so apparent, the Viscount turned to greet the approaching figure.

“Lady Cecilia.”

“Lord Milton.” As she rose from her curtsy, Cecilia Weston, Duchess of Portland, smiled a bit grimly. “I believe Lord Portland and I are deeply indebted to you for our cousin’s safe removal before he could bring further embarrassment to the family.”

When the Viscount gave little indication that he would own to such a deed, she sighed. “I fear Benjamin has not reacted well to Uncle’s insistence that he find himself a bride. Though I doubt marriage would curb his philandering ways... You must forgive me for speaking so bluntly, but Lord Portland looks to Mr. Darcy as a friend and will not abide by any filth that his cousin sees fit to spew from his mouth. Indeed, I expect Benjamin shall find himself the target a severe dressing down when he wakes on the morrow.”

“Lord Portland should not feel such a need. I believe I have sufficiently made my opinions of his conduct known to Mr. Fitzhugh.”

Lady Cecilia nodded in acknowledgement but said, “I fear reinforcements are much needed when speaking to him. But enough talk of my cousin, may I make an inquiry as to the wellness of yours?”

The Viscount glanced at her warily as he said, “As I am certain you have observed, my cousin is very content, perhaps deliriously so.”

His measured reply drew a slight chuckle. “You must not misunderstand me, Lord Milton, I have no intentions on sabotaging his happiness. No matter what my mother had said regarding my efforts to catch his attentions, I had always known that Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy will not find a wife within the Ton. He has no fondness for socializing and even now, I believe it is only with the influence of his bride and for the sake of his friend, Sir Andrew, that he has managed to acquit himself so well. Of course, I must admit to curiosity towards the new Mrs. Darcy.”

“As do we all, my dear.” Lord Portland joined them upon the garden path. “Lord Milton.”

A true smile began to appear on the Viscount's face, for he had always thought well of Daniel Weston. Unlike his scoundrel of a cousin, Lord Portland was a true gentleman whose conduct was above reproach. Besides, his expressions always sported a genuine kind humor that was often so lacking in men of privilege. “Lord Portland. I must offer my belated congratulations on your marriage. Not many would be brave enough to gain Lady Cooper as a mother-in-law.”

“Ah yes. Speaking of that particularly lady, I fear I must steal away my wife, for I believe I spied her approaching the Darcys, and we all know that no good must come of that.”

Lady Cecilia gave a long-suffering sigh, “No, indeed.”

“I must offer my thanks for your efforts to protect my cousins.”

Such a comment drew a surprised look from Lady Cecilia, “Oh but you misunderstand us, Lord Milton! I fear it is my mother who shall be in need of protection. I suppose you did not see it, but
Mrs. Darcy quite charmed Lady Castelreagh who, I believe, even called her a 'sweet girl' within the hearing of others.”

Lord Portland nodded in agreement, “It appears that Mrs. Darcy is of a curious persuasion and was greatly fascinated at Lady Castelreagh's tales of ostriches and kangaroos. Why she even elicited a laugh from Lady Castelreagh with her tales of childhood dreams of travel and adventure.”

Lady Cecilia continued smoothly, “Ah yes. Lady Castelreagh is thought to be quite dull, you know, and perhaps a bit addled based upon the rambling manners of her speech, so it was ever a surprise that she showed such delight in conversing with the new Mrs. Darcy. I fear my mother will find herself at a severe disadvantage should she utter unkind words.”

“Surely Lady Cooper would be more astute?”

With a sad shake of her head, Lady Cecilia replied, “Alas, no. I should not speak of Mama so, but she truly believes herself to be far more clever than she really is.”

Lord Portland chuckled as he commented, “Ah yes, I believe she still maintains credit for our marriage? Never mind that I had decided you would become my bride since the tender age of eight when our fathers first had us meet?”

Despite her blush, Lady Cecilia retorted good-naturedly, “Though if you recall, I thought you quite the beast for snatching my book and running away with it!”

“I only wished to ensure that I had your attention!”

Lady Cecilia turned to the Viscount, “You must forgive my husband, Lord Milton, he is clearly in a childish mood tonight.” And so, over Lord Portland's continued protestations, she led them away towards the direction of the ballroom, no doubt to offer what intervention they could before Lady Cooper made the grievous error of belittling one who had shown herself to be not without significant support in the Ton. As he watched the retreating figures of the Westons and heard their continued shared laughter, the Viscount rather thought that perhaps his estimations had been wrong and the world was not so full of gloom.

The adoring look Darcy sent Elizabeth, which quite bespoke of his pride in her charming manners with the newly departed Lady Castelreagh, left the lady quite flushed. She felt certain that had they been alone, he would have shown his approval in quite a more intimate manner. Though she still found the subtle rules of rank quite bothersome, Elizabeth could find it within herself to be grateful for Lady Matlock's guidance in sharing certain key pieces of information so that the new Mrs. Darcy would know well the various players upon that evening's stage. She knew well the implications of Lady Castelreagh's laugh; she had passed one of many tests to come in showing herself worthy of the Darcy name. Nonetheless, Elizabeth remained determined to approach such a task in her own way. And so she had behaved in a manner that was most natural to her, with a frank openness that quickly disarmed those with whom she came in contact. Indeed, in that single evening, the new Mrs. Darcy would gain the reputation for being a delightful conversationalist and even those who had thought her unfit for Darcy could admit to some admiration that she remained gracious in the face of the worst insults. As for Mr. Darcy, not one attendant of the Ashburys’ ball could deny that he was quite transformed in the presence of his charming wife.

This latter truth was reinforced with the conversation the Darcys had with one Lady Cooper. True to her daughter's fears, Lady Cooper simply could not muster the strength to resist the temptation of speaking to the former Miss Bennet. Fixing a most insincere smile onto her face, she said in what she imagined to be a sly voice, “Why, Miss Bennet! I did not expect to see you back in London…Are your Uncle and Aunt in attendance?”
Though Elizabeth could feel Darcy tense in anger at Lady Cooper's choice of appellations, she herself maintained a smooth smile as she replied, “Lady Cooper! How kind of you to remember my dear relatives. No, I fear they are as yet celebrating the birth of their newest child. Mr. Darcy and I have of course visited with our cousin and found him to be the most darling of infants. Surely we could not wish for a more perfect godson! But I shall of course pass along your kind greetings.”

Flipping open her fan to hide her surprise that Elizabeth chose not to remark directly upon the lack of proper address, Lady Cooper found herself saying, “Ah yes…Well, Miss Bennet, I do wish them well.” Turning to Darcy, she inquired, “And Mr. Darcy! You must allow me to express my surprise at seeing your presence – why, that you should attend to the Season in two consecutive years. Tell me, is another cousin to be married? Or is it you yourself who has finally decided to look for a bride? Alas, I fear my dear Cecilia has already made a most advantageous match.”

The gentle pressure of his wife's hand upon his arm soothed Darcy's ill-humor somewhat so that he was able to reply with a semblance of civility. “Not a cousin so much as a dear friend, Lady Cooper.”

“Ah yes, how silly of me to have forgotten your friendship with the Sir Andrew! And do you find that you approve of his choice? For all the whispers I hear of Lady Ashbury's ties to the Cavendish clan, I cannot be certain that such rumors are true. Indeed, I believe Lady Metcalfe distinctly told me of a young lady she had met on holiday, your own Aunt's companion in fact, who bears uncanny resemblance to the new Lady Ashbury.”

With the weight of Elizabeth's hand on his arm as a reminder to keep his temper in check, Darcy's tone was unexpectedly playful as he replied with a barely concealed smirk, “I find that I more than approve, Madame, for I believe I had played some part in their introduction, if only indirectly.”

Lady Cooper remained undaunted as she said, “How kind of you, Mr. Darcy, to care so much for the marital felicity of your friend. But perhaps you have found that the time has come to focus on your own prospects?”

Darcy's visage was one of mock innocence as he remarked, “I scarcely know what you mean, Lady Cooper, for I do not believe myself a bigot, nor am I one of those heretic sultans of exotic lands. But perhaps you are not yet aware of the news! Though I am certain a lady of your distinction must be aware…well, perhaps not then. I find I must impart upon you the latest of London gossip and introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy.”

Elizabeth curtsied before saying with a wicked gleam in her eyes to match the playful tone of her husband, “And I must thank you, Lady Cooper, for your most instructional words of wisdom upon our last meeting. Had you not made speculations upon Mr. Darcy's dark mood, I would have been most critical of his behavior and perhaps we would not be in the happy state we are in today.”

“Nonetheless, my manners were quite abhorrent. But perhaps my birth coincided with the rising of a most blessed star, for the Fates have been quite kind to me in granting me a wife who is in possession of a most understand disposition. Otherwise, my behavior would have certainly been made worse with thought that she might have then spurned the attentions of so ungentlemanly a suitor. For you see, Lady Cooper, I care for my wife rather dearly…one might even say…quite violently.”

Fighting the urge to giggle at the dumbfounded look on the other lady's face, Elizabeth nodded agreeable, “You must feel great satisfaction, Lady Cooper, for ensuring our current happiness.”

Lady Cooper, who found herself uncharacteristically stymied as to a proper response, was caught
between astonishment at the peculiar behavior of Mr. Darcy and shock at the new Mrs. Darcy’s words. And so, she was quite grateful when a familiar voice broke into the conversation.

“Ah Darcy! How fortunate I am to catch you. I fear my lovely Cecilia and I were on our honeymoon trip and so were not in Ton to celebrate the nuptials of Colonel and Mrs. Fitzwilliams. And now I hear they are to have a child? I must own that I do find myself having trouble thinking of Richard as a father… And this must be the new Mrs. Darcy? I must congratulate you, my friend, on finding such a beauty.”

As though she had not heard the kind words from her son-in-law, a smug look overtook Lady Cooper’s features as she pointedly said, “Cecilia, dear, what great honor you do to Mrs. Darcy. Surely you and Lord Portland have other acquaintances more deserving of your time?”

As the ladies curtsied to one another, Elizabeth was startled to note the apologetic expression on the Lady Cecilia’s face for it was quite at odds with the twinkle of mischief in her eyes. Ignoring her mother’s remarks, Lord Portland remarked with great enthusiasm, “My dear Mrs. Darcy, you must tell me from whence you obtained such fine silk for your gown. And the embroidery on the hem! Such a quaint design! I am sure Mother would be most curious as well, she is ever longing for the finest of materials, of course!”

Recognizing that Lady Cecilia might well be a kindred spirit, Elizabeth smiled a tad impishly, “It is a pity then, that my Uncle Gardiner is not in attendance tonight, for he had especially gifted the cloth from a rare shipment from the Far East. As for the sewing, I must credit it to my dear sisters for they jointly created the pattern.”

“Oh but then we must become better acquainted so that I might in time feel appropriate in begging you for an introduction to such gifted ladies with such good taste and ample creativity. Do you not agree, Mama?”

Such an inquiry, made with such sweetness, could only be answered with an affirmative reply despite the sourness of expression that accompanied it. And as Lady Cecilia made no efforts to curtail her continuous praise of Mrs. Darcy's ensemble, from the shine of the jewels (“Good gracious, seven generations in the family you say?”) to the delicacy of the fan (“Oh but what lovely craftsmanship – such fine carvings into such thin slices of ivory! A gift from your Aunt Gardiner? Why I must make my way to one of their shops if they be home to such treasures!”), Lady Cooper's smug expression could be seen to devolve into one of vast annoyance. Finally, she could tolerate her daughter's effusions no longer and begged leave of the small group on a false pretence of sighting a particular close friend.

Once she was certain that her mother was out of earshot, Lady Cecilia allowed her forced flightiness to drop in favor of a genuine smile. “I do so hope you will forgive me for my rather enthusiastic display. I simply could not allow Mama to ruin my chances of befriending you, Mrs. Darcy.”

Lord Portland laughed as he took in the raised eyebrow on Darcy's face at so swift a transition in manners. “Masterfully done, my dear. Had you not been born a lady, I am certain your talents would have made you quite the star on the London stage!”

Lady Cecilia's smile widened as she curtsied gracefully, “Why I thank you, Lord Portland! You compliment is entirely too much for a poor performer such as I.”

At such a silly display, Elizabeth found that she could no longer hide her grin of amusement nor check her chuckle of merriment.

“Ah yes, Mrs. Darcy… You cannot imagine our happiness at meeting you at last. We had heard,
of course, that Darcy had taken a bride but we could scarcely believe such a tale until we had
spied the occupancy of the Darcy box at the theater. He must have whisked you away rather
quickly for we simply could not find you to offer introductions after the play. But I suppose I can
little blame him, particularly in consideration of the fact that when my lovely Cecilia and I were
first wed, I too was rather possessive of her company.”

Lady Cecilia gave her husband a fond look before turning to Elizabeth, “Indeed. You see, Mrs.
Darcy, our husbands were somewhat acquainted at Cambridge. Certainly not enough to call each
other friends as Sir Andrew can boast of, but they had crossed swords enough within the fencing
club for Lord Portland to know of Mr. Darcy's silent disposition and his unease with social
confrontations. I had thought to distract my Mama's attentions, but perhaps our presence was not
needed at all?”

Lord Portland smiled broadly, “It did appear to me that you had it well in hand, Darcy old chap.
You must share your secret, for you must have grown skillful indeed to affect such an
uncharacteristically subdued expression on my mother-in-law's face!”

Darcy, who had grown much more relaxed in the easy company of the Westons, gestured proudly
to his wife as he said, “The credit must be laid at the feet of my muse; in her company, I am but a
mere pupil in the art of conversation.”

Elizabeth blushed at his praise but returned Lady Cecilia's smile with a wide grin of her own. “I
am most delighted to make your acquaintance, Lady Cecilia. I must confess, when Lady Cooper
spoke of you upon our initial meeting, she only made mention of your great beauty and none of
your joyful manners. I fear I had expected you to be a rather haughty debutante rather than the
happy creature I behold.”

“You will find, Mrs. Darcy, that my mother and I are not as close as she would have others
believe. I have heard tale of your witty ways from Lady Ashbury and knew that I simply must
make you my friend. 'Tis so rare nowadays to find a partner for intelligent conversation!”

“Oh, have you conversed often with Lady Ashbury?”

“Perhaps not as often as I would like, for Lady Adelaide makes certain that they keep quite the
active social calendar and Lord Portland and I are really not so fond of the London Season aside
from the many opportunities to attend plays and the opera. But as we are now cousins, our
association will surely not suffer.”

“Cousins!”

“Oh yes. Lady Adelaide is Papa’s sister you see.”

“How wonderful! For I have known Charlotte since we were little girls. Indeed, our friendship
necessitated that we brave the Season together.”

“Then our meeting must be considered fate. Do you plan to stay long in London?”

“Alas, no. Mr. Darcy is quite anxious to return to Pemberley and I must also admit to an
impatience to settle into my new home. Besides, I would not like to leave my new sister so bereft
of company.”

“Ah yes, Miss Darcy! Goodness, surely she must be close to an age at which coming out should
be considered?”

“Lady Matlock would certainly agree with you, but I fear Georgie is not so anxious to leave home
and Mr. Darcy is more than willing to allow her time.”
“Then I suppose I must be thankful that Nottinghamshire is but to the east of Derbyshire and thus will not provide too much difficulty for travel. For I dearly hope that we might become friends, Mrs. Darcy.”

“Oh, but then you must address me as Lizzy! Charlotte and I had planned on meeting two days hence; I would be delighted if you could join us at Darcy House?”

The invitation, so graciously given, was accepted with great happiness. As the two ladies found themselves on the fast road to becoming friends, their husbands were likewise renewing their acquaintance.

“I do not believe I have ever seen you so content, Darcy.”

Glancing briefly at his wife, who was animatedly conversing with Lady Cecilia, Darcy could feel another smile steal across his feature, “Indeed, I am. But so, I believe, are you, Lord Portland.”

“Ah yes. Much can be said about marital felicity but I truly find myself fortunate to be able to experience it for myself. Cecilia was most desirous of a meeting with Mrs. Darcy and I find that I can only comply with her wishes so as to ensure her happiness. But I must also admit to a more selfish reason for approaching you this evening, for I had wished to speak with you regarding a matter of some delicacy…”

At Darcy’s questioning look, he continued, “If you recall, Sir Andrew’s brother and Mr. Wickham were often seen in company of each other during their Cambridge days. I regret to say that my cousin, Mr. Benjamin Fitzhugh, made up the third member of their little trio. Indeed, I am of the belief that since he was their elder, he was the one to introduce them to opportunities for debauchery. I expect he wished to leave behind a certain kind of legacy ere he left the hallowed grounds of University and embarked on his Grand Tour. And, well, we both know that he most certainly succeeded. I fear time has not been kind to Fitzhugh and he has made no efforts to curtail his old habits. But recently, I have sensed a growth in his excesses that I had not thought possible. Indeed, I find that I owe a debt of gratitude to your cousin for stepping in tonight to remove him from polite company. I can only imagine that his changing mood is greatly influenced by the fates of his former protégés. I understand that neither Mr. Ashbury nor Mr. Wickham remain among the living.”

Darcy sighed even as he considered Lord Portland’s words. “I must confess, I had given little thought to the reason for Wickham’s behavior in school. Though I believe in the truth of your assertions, still I must maintain that even without your cousin’s guidance, Wickham would have found a way to the most disreputable inhabitants of London.”

“And yet you mourned his death.”

At Darcy’s look of surprise, Lord Portland explained wryly, “My uncle is a man of little patience. But for the lack of another choice for heir, Benjamin would surely lack the means to cause mischief. I fear the responsibility of checking his misconducts thus falls to me.”

“You need not reveal such intimacies to me.”

“My divulgence of these family matters is not without purpose.”

Darcy looked thoughtful but a moment, “You would help your cousin avoid a similar fate.”

“My cousin bears the consequences of my aunt’s indulgence and my uncle’s indifference.”

“Yet others should not suffer for his misfortune.”
Lord Portland acknowledged Darcy’s sarcasm, “Your anger is not misdirected. And yet…”

Finally, Darcy sighed, “Mrs. Darcy plans on taking tea with Lady Ashbury two days hence. Allow me to speak with Sir Andrew so that he might know to accompany his wife. I am certain that Mrs. Darcy shall tender an invitation to Lady Cecilia as well. Why do you not accompany her to our townhouse? We may then closet ourselves in the study to discuss such dreary matters while our wives no doubt make jokes at our expense?”

Lord Portland nodded agreeably before tendering his most sincere gratitude.

Darcy only shook his head once more as he said, “I do not know if we shall have more than sympathy to offer.”

“Such sympathy is already more indulgence than I could have hoped for.”
The lateness of their return to the Darcy townhouse prevented Elizabeth from remarking upon the
decidedly distracted manners of her husband. The furrow between his brows since he had
departed from the Westons' company was barely noticeable but for her growing understanding of
his moods. Though she detected no remnant unease the next day, she could not help but seek to
satisfy her curiosity. Putting her book aside, she interrupted his perusal of the latest news of
military campaign on the Continent.

“I hope you do not disapprove of my association with Lady Cecilia. I find her a most delightful
companion.”

Neatly folding his newspaper before placing it on the table next to her discarded book, Darcy
turned so that he could face her curious gaze. “Not at all, I find Lady Cecilia to be among one of
those rare creatures in the Ton for she is a gentlewoman of both beauty and sense.”

“Such praise from you, my husband! Ought I to feel some jealousy that you should apply such
pretty compliments to one who is not your wife?”

“If such is your choice, then pray do not allow my displeasure to stand in the way of your
determination. Though I would think that such a sentiment would prove rather ill for your
fledgling friendship.”

“As I am determined to like her, if only for her kindness to Charlotte, I suppose I ought simply to
accept that my husband might find other ladies admirable. It does quite unsettle me, however, to
find his good opinions bestowed upon one who might have been at one time a prospective bride.”

Darcy only shook his head, “Lady Cecilia was not under consideration for such a post.”

“Indeed?”

When he divulged no more, she remarked, “Ah and now I can feel some measure of sympathy for
my Aunt Phillips!”

“But not for one who bears passing resemblance to her.”

“You remain determined to detest Lady Cooper.”

“I claim no great liking for her treatment of you.”

“Surely your antipathy towards the lady caused you to refrain from making an offer for her
daughter.”

Darcy only laughed, “And I must repeat that I had never considered Lady Cecilia for the post of
Mrs. Darcy.”

“No?”

“No. Daniel Weston would not have stood for it.”

“Indeed?”

He smiled at her openly curious gaze and added, “Besides, the position could only ever belong to
you.”
“How fortunate for you, sir, that I was not of an inclination to refuse your offer!”

He laughed, “I would have been quite bereft of a wife and Pemberley would have certainly fallen to Georgiana’s son. Though, I daresay that since I am most reluctant to allow my sister to be exposed to suitors, perhaps it would have been quite lacking in an heir of the Darcy blood. I wonder if Richard’s child would have enjoyed becoming Master of both Rosings and Pemberley.”

At his pensive expression, Elizabeth merely raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “Surely you would have managed to find a wife, if only to provide you with an heir.”

Acquiring a rather pitiful expression, Darcy shook his head. “No indeed, I fear your refusal would have rendered me so broken of spirit that I would have hid at my country estate to nurse the wound to my pride. I fear that such heartbreak would be an ailment that lasts a lifetime.”

Continuing their charade, Elizabeth nodded reasonably, “How pitiable you would have been! I am glad to have spared you such a lonely fate. Nonetheless, perhaps Lady Catherine would have preferred the alternative outcome as it would have led to the joining of two great estates such as Rosings and Pemberley.”

“Mayhaps so. Though I must own that after the events of the past year, I can little claim to know my aunt’s preferences any longer.”

“We have had a rather interesting time, have we not, in learning new aspects of acquaintances both old and new?”

Darcy gave her a knowing look as he noted, “And by that remark, my clever wife, I suspect you to be making an inquiry into my conversation with Lord Portland.”

“I do not deny it.”

“Then as a good husband must, I will satisfy your curiosity. Lord Portland has a cousin who was a close associate with a certain steward’s son. This cousin has long held his own counsel on the comportment of a gentleman, but these years past have seen his actions reaching a new level of impropriety. Lord Portland is suspicious that the fate of Mr. Robert Ashbury and Mr. George Wickham had been the instigation for such worsening of character. Since I expect most of London is aware of Mr. Ashbury’s death, he wished to speak to me regarding Wickham’s end.”

Elizabeth was thoughtful as she replied, “Lord Portland is a most considerate relation to care so much for his cousin, particularly one who has no doubt caused his family not a small amount of worries.”

“Daniel Weston has always been a congenial sort, though I can claim no greater knowledge from our time at University. My interactions with him were few for we traveled in different circles given his propensity for company and mine for solitude.”

“Yet his speech denoted greater familiarity.”

“Our acquaintance was renewed when I offered him felicitations for his marriage.”

Her lips twitched before she regained her serious demeanor, “What of this cousin? What do you know of him?”

Darcy hesitated, “Mr. Benjamin Fitzhugh is not the sort of man I would like to acquaint you with, even if only in words.”

“I see, then I expect he to be one of those cad’s that I have been cautioned to avoid.”
At Darcy's nod, she added, “You need not worry about offending my sensitivities, particularly as I suspect that you have had some personal dealings with Mr. Fitzhugh that made for rather unpleasant memories.”

When he remained silent, she observed, “The vehemence in your tone combined with your reluctance to speak of him tells me that something about Mr. Fitzhugh, even beyond his deplorable conduct, truly causes you discomfort...I can only suppose, then, that you had some interaction of significance.”

“I would spare you such dealings.”

“And I must reiterate that my sensibilities are made of sterner material.”

“You are determined.”

She merely returned his gaze steadily.

Finally, he sighed and began to speak.

To aid in her comprehension of his tale, Darcy began with some discussion of his childhood and his early days at Cambridge. Remembering certain comments from Mrs. Reynolds and even Georgiana about Pemberley’s Master, Elizabeth was able to imagine portions to which Darcy gave no description.

To aid in her comprehension of his tale, Darcy began with some discussion of his childhood and his early days at Cambridge. Remembering certain comments from Mrs. Reynolds and even Georgiana about Pemberley’s Master, Elizabeth was able to imagine portions to which Darcy gave no description.

A young gentleman of seven and ten when he entered University, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy had received the best education that tutors could provide. Like his cousin, the Viscount Milton, Darcy had attended Eton. Unlike his cousin, however, Darcy had been withdrawn but two years into his education on the unfortunate passing of his mother. Thereafter, old Mr. Darcy chose to employ instructors rather than send his son and heir away for the simple reason that he could not stand to have his family separated so soon after the loss of Lady Anne Darcy. And so young Darcy had grown up in relative seclusion but for the company of the steward's son and rare visits from his cousins. If he felt any resentment at the lack of opportunity for friendships with his peers, Darcy made no mention of it. Instead, Mrs. Reynolds, Pemberley’s ever reliable housekeeper, was startled to note the shift in the young master's behavior from a rambunctious child who would happily race around the estate’s grounds to the quiet boy who had an air of seriousness little befitting his numerical age. Though young Master Darcy had always been in possession of a sharp mind, his intense focus on his studies to the exclusion of other childish pursuits rendered him a scholar to rival those who were years his senior. Such a transformation from laughing boy to solemn gentleman would have alarmed Mrs. Reynolds but for the obvious gentleness with which the Darcy heir treated his dear sister. Whereas old Mr. Darcy seemed to regard Georgiana always with a look of pain, Fitzwilliam Darcy was her hero, the one to whom she ran after a nightmare and the one who could be counted on to engulf her in a warm embrace so as to soothe her fears of the lightning and thunder. So it was that when the tutors declared that they had no more to teach young Master Darcy and that his knowledge was well beyond that of a first year at Cambridge, Mr. Darcy reluctantly allowed his son to leave home. Despite her brother's repeated promises to write, Miss Darcy appeared to wilt in spirit until the first of the letters arrived.

At Cambridge, Darcy quickly discovered that despite his academic prowess, the circumstances of his childhood little afforded him the social graces to make friends easily. The difference in temperament between him and George Wickham quickly ensured that they saw little of one another within the first week of their entrance to University. Indeed, within the first month, Wickham had found alternative accommodations than the one he was to have shared with Darcy. In truth, Darcy found that he did not mind the resulting solitude. And so matters might have remained, with Darcy earning the reputation for being quite the hermit, though a polite one, but for
the chance encounter with one Mr. Charles Bingley. Darcy had been in the library, searching for a specific tome among the dark recesses of shelving that hid the most obscure of the Classics, when he heard the sound of mocking tones and riotous laughter. He might have considered leaving well enough alone but for the brief glimpse he caught through the gaps in the shelves of George Wickham's face. At the sneer of glee on his childhood companion's visage, Darcy found himself compelled to step out of his hiding place. Studying the tableau before him, Darcy forced down a mental sigh at the behavior of his peers. A group of them were crowded around a wide study table, the center figure appearing much discomfited at his present circumstances. Darcy vaguely remembered the sandy-haired youth as a certain Mr. Charles Bingley, a gentleman who was wont to have an affable smile on his face. But in this instance, Bingley's face was surprisingly devoid of emotions as those around him continued to hurl insults at his humble origins. Though he cared not for confrontation, Darcy could not help but remark in a carrying voice, “Good evening, gentlemen.”

A clear disgruntled look upon his face, Mr. Benjamin Fitzhugh had turned to the one who dared interrupt his sport. Seeing Darcy, a cruel smile crossed his lips as he remarked, “Why, look, lads, ‘tis the Hermit! My, but I did not know it spoke!” Another round of laughter met such words though Darcy did note the slight hesitancy on Mr. Wickham's part to join his associates in their merriment.

“Well, Hermit, perhaps you can persuade young Mr. Bingley to reveal the names of his sisters – surely they would benefit from gentleman callers beyond the riff-raff that they presently encounter. Why, I flatter myself that they would feel quite grateful for our attentions. Of course, we would seek just compensations for introducing them to better society…” The exaggerated wink he gave his cohorts left little doubt in Darcy's mind of the manners of such compensations. “I say, Hermit, mayhaps you would like to join us? I suspect you are in need of the practice and they are, after all, only a tradesman's daughters…”

Glancing at the white of Bingley's knuckles as they clutched his pen, Darcy remarked, “Tradesmen their father might be, but their brother is to be a gentleman. As such, they are gentlewomen who are deserving of a respect. Besides, is it not a gentleman's duty to behave in a proper manner at all times but particularly when ladies are concerned?”

The sneer reappeared on Fitzhugh's face. “You are quite the innocent then for it is quite evident that you are not aware of the pleasures of the flesh! I must admit to some surprise, for you do not appear to lack the wealth for some easy pleasures. You must allow me to impart upon you some of my wisdom, hard earned through experience…I have found the daughters of the nouveaux riche to be particularly…energetic... as they try to enter a society that is quite above their station.”

Fighting a grimace at the blunt manners of Fitzhugh's speech, Darcy nonetheless answered calmly, “I see that the matter is a point on which we shall disagree.”

Growing impatient, one of the other gentlemen stated, “Why do we waste our time with him, Fitzhugh? He is clearly determined to uphold his title of Hermit.” His comment was met with quiet murmurs of agreement.

Fitzhugh shot the speaker a glare but said, “Ah but I consider it my sacred duty to introduce the innocent to the true pleasures of life. Nonetheless, I do tire of these two. What say you to a pint at the tavern, lads?”

At the answering cheer, Fitzhugh led his group away, though only after brushing Bingley's books from his table and spilling the pot of ink carelessly. Pushing roughly past Darcy, Fitzhugh muttered, “I shall not forget your insolence, Hermit…”

The silence remained even as the tension slowly ebbed. Bingley was the first to speak as a ghost
of a smile appeared onto his face, “I thank you for your aid.” Even as he quite ruined his handkerchief in an effort to contain the spreading pool of ink.

Darcy nodded in recognition and would have departed but for a spark of curiosity at Bingley's smile. “How can you still smile when the most grievous of insults have been made towards you and your family?”

Bingley paused in the gathering of his fallen books as he answered, “There is little use in protestation on my part, it would only make matters worse. Besides, what Fitzhugh said did have a kernel of truth. I am but the son of a tradesman. My father has made the business prosperous, but my origins remain quite humble. As for my sisters, I fear one of them is quite convinced that she is destined for better social standing.” At the look on Darcy's face, he was quick to add, “You must not mistake my comment. Caroline would never do anything untoward or improper, but I cannot deny that she is quite willing to forget the source of our family's current wealth.”

“But not you?”

Bingley almost laughed at such a question, his voice unexpectedly mild as he said, “How can I? When Fitzhugh repeatedly reminds of the truth of my circumstances? I am not ashamed of it…I am well aware that as the Bingley heir, it falls to me to see to it that my father's efforts have not been in vain.”

Darcy marveled at the determination in Bingley's eyes, the hidden steel so at odds with his gentle smile, and offered his hand for a proper introduction. And so began a most marvelous friendship.

True to his words, Fitzhugh did not forget his encounter with Darcy. When it became obvious that his two victims had managed to enter into friendship, he only increased the verbal abuse he heaped upon the two. That they should continue to bear his insults with steadfast silence was unbearable. That Darcy should quickly garner the reputation for being quite the swordsman and Bingley for being most pleasant company only served further to incense him.

“I will not repeat some of his comments, dear Elizabeth, but suffice it to say that I had opportunities aplety to appreciate Bingley's strength. As for me, once Fitzhugh realized that Lord Matlock was indeed my uncle, he desisted in making remarks where others might hear. Instead, particularly given Lord Portland's conjectures, I suspect that George Wickham became his spokesperson in dealings with me.”

“Is it not ironic that Mr. Fitzhugh should tolerate George Wickham when he expressed such distaste for Mr. Bingley? Would he not consider the son of a steward below that of a tradesman?”

“You are assuming that Wickham's origins were widely known. No, my erstwhile friend was clever and could pretend to be among the gentry. Why I even heard passing rumors that he was some foreign nobleman – these whispers caused Bingley and me no end of amusement I can assure you.”

“But surely the truth could not remain hidden for long?”

“And it did not. Perhaps the increased animosity between us grew out of it. George and I had always been rivals: in the stream for the largest fish, in the classroom with our tutors, and in the house for Father's affections. He resented being thought lesser than I simply because of the circumstances of his birth. I expect he felt entitled to a better life than the one he was fated but for Father's generosity. Still, the transformation from almost brotherly rivalry to outright contempt was more abrupt than I had anticipated.”

Elizabeth gave a gentle squeeze to Darcy's hand. Though he had come to terms with George
Wickham's death, Darcy was still grim when speaking of his childhood companion. Silence fell between the couple until Elizabeth asked, “Do you think Mr. Fitzhugh learned of Mr. Wickham's demise?”

“I would find it most surprising if he did not. Fitzhugh was obliged to stay an extra year at University to complete his studies. His group would expand to include Mr. Robert Ashbury. Whether it was a transition of sorts or whether because Lord Portland had entered Cambridge and was at liberty to report on Mr. Fitzhugh's doings to his father, Fitzhugh became oddly subdued. Instead, Wickham and Ashbury seemed to become the new leaders. I can only surmise that Fitzhugh kept himself informed of their doings in perpetuating his legacy.”

“Will learning of the death of Mr. Wickham aid Lord Portland?”

“I am not convinced of the utility of such knowledge in curtailing Fitzhugh’s behavior. However, I believe it will guide Lord Portland’s understanding of his cousin. Besides, I do find myself looking forward to renewing my acquaintance with Daniel Weston.”

“I must confess to great startlement. To think that the reticent Mr. Darcy should anticipate a social call! Combined with your manners at the Ball, such behavior would certainly convince the Ton that some form of witchcraft is afoot!”

“You know very well that the decision regarding my behavior for the last evening was the result of joint planning on the part of Aunt Matlock and Lady Adelaide with the sole purpose of thoroughly unsettling the Ton.”

“Nonetheless, I do believe you enjoyed reacting to Lady Cooper's words with teasing rather than outright denunciation.”

“It would be most ungentlemanly of me to admit to enjoyment of another's public humiliation.”

“Ah and Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire must remain ever the consummate gentleman.”

“Quite so, surely you would not have me be a hypocrite, particularly when I had claimed it a duty of a gentleman to treat ladies with respect.” Though he attempted to maintain a serious mien, he found that he could not prevent the twitching of his lips at the rise of Elizabeth's eyebrows and her knowing glance.

At the crack in his composure, Elizabeth gave a triumphant smile. “Ah so you did enjoy the flabbergasted expression on Lady Ashley's face at serious Mr. Darcy being so playful…and in public no less!”

“I must own that laughing at the follies of others can be enjoyable in public as it is in private. Nonetheless, I am determined to retreat behind my usual ways in the future…polite, but distant.”

“As you wish.”

“Are you not discomforted that your tutelage would be for naught?”

“No. I trust that you will apply your new skills when circumstances should call for them. Besides, I find that I rather enjoy having within my possession the privilege of seeing the private aspects of your character.”

At such a comment, Darcy could only draw close to her and breathe out his inquiry, “Do you truly, Mrs. Darcy?”

Despite the flush in her cheeks, Elizabeth bravely met his ardent gaze with one of her own,
“Indeed I do, Mr. Darcy.”

“And how fares your study of my character, Madame?”

“Quite well. Though I fear it shall remain a lifelong occupation, for I continuously discover new facets to fascinate me.”

“And what new aspects have you learned?”

Meeting his challenging gaze, she murmured, “You are a man of untold passions.”

“And how have you come to such a conclusion?”

His smirk gave her strength. “I daresay that is a most improper topic of conversation…I would fear to shock your gentlemanly sensibilities.”

“How…but surely I may be allowed a rest from propriety in the privacy of our own home?”

“But must not a gentleman be proper at all times?”

“Perhaps I was mistaken in holding fast to so unforgiving an opinion.”

“How shocking! Mr. Darcy in the wrong?”

“I freely admit to my deficiencies, particularly when faced with such tempting enticement.”

“I ought to add possessiveness to the list of your attributes.”

“If you must. Though I do not believe I can be blamed for deriving such enjoyment in your company.”

“No, I suppose not…and you did fulfill your obligations for socialization quite well. Shall I grant you a kiss as reward?”

“I had hoped to earn more than a kiss…”

Laughing at his pouting look, Elizabeth marveled once more at the playful side of her husband to which only she was privy. “We are to dine with your Aunt and Uncle tonight! How shall I meet their eyes without blushing?”

“I am certain you will manage.”

“You are quite incorrigible.”

“Only in your company, dear Elizabeth. Perhaps the London gossipers have the right of it, for you have bewitched me, body and soul…Besides, I believe I had warned you of my demanding nature.”

“Woe to me then for not heeding such cautions!”

“But I do not believe you find my company so unpleasant?”

With a slight smirk, even as she played with the curls at the nape of his neck as he pulled the pins from her hair, she commented, “It would be unladylike of me to admit to such enjoyment.”

“But did we not promise to be honest with one another?”
“I do remember making such a promise.”

“Then I believe I can excuse your lapse in proper behavior.”

Laughing outright now, Elizabeth shook her head before willingly allowing herself to indulge in her husband’s embrace.

Lady Beatrice Fitzwilliam, Countess of Matlock, was a gentlewoman of no mean intelligence. Not lacking in tenacity even when she had been a new debutante, she had benefited greatly from the tutelage of her future mother-in-law. She supposed that her marriage to Alistair Fitzwilliam had been looked upon as a matter of course given the long-standing friendship between their families, but such a union was not unwelcome to either party. Indeed, while she could not profess to an all-consuming passion for her husband as she observed between Lady Anne and Geoffrey Darcy, she did possess great fondness for him. They had, after all, been childhood playmates and grown used to each others’ company. For a marriage between individuals of their social standing, such contentment was more often than not lacking. Lord and Lady Matlock were friends, companions, and, with the birth of their sons, proud parents. Lord Matlock proved to be a most attentive father and Lady Matlock a most doting mother such that their joint care of their children only served to bind them closer together. When Richard left for the Army and Reggie for the Continent, her husband was her source of comfort. His arms became her sanctuary when nightmares of the unfortunate events that may befall her sons plagued her sleep.

She had felt no small amount of relief when Richard quit the military, though it did surprise her that her younger son should turn to trade for an occupation. Lord Matlock had grumbled somewhat at the perceived shame of such a turn of events, but she was quick to point out the benefits of such an arrangement, particularly when Richard declared his intentions to wed his cousin Anne de Bourgh at last. Indeed, Lord Matlock had become quite jovial with the news that he was to become a grandfather and had even provided a generous holiday bonus to their servants far exceeding that of their expectations. Lady Matlock was also quite overjoyed at the news, though she did feel a pang of disappointment that Anne had clearly indicated her preference for a quiet life in Kent rather than joining London society.

When her nephew had sent word that Pemberley was to have a proper Mistress at last, she felt a stirring of hope, for certainly Elizabeth Bennet was in possession of enough cleverness to succeed in the treacherous waters of the Ton. Such news had been made in Darcy’s usual manners, the words handsomely written but curt in their message. Lord Matlock had summoned his wife to his study to impart such news.

“Well, my dear, I expect you are satisfied at being correct in your estimations that Miss Elizabeth Bennet shall become Mrs. Darcy.”

At his gruff tone, Lady Matlock felt compelled to ask, “Surely you do not disapprove?”

“Disapprove?! When has Darcy ever cared for my approval? Certainly not when he decided to befriend that Bingley fellow at Cambridge nor when he built that meeting hall for his tenants! Just like his mother…Anne was always of a rather decided nature. When she told our parents of her intentions to marry Geoffrey Darcy, no amount of entreaties could sway her mind.”

“It was not altogether an uneven match.”

“No, I suppose not. Though Mother was convinced that Anne could have made a more advantageous one. Certainly she was not lacking in titled suitors.”
“But you cannot deny that Anne was happy with her marriage as I suspect Darcy will be with his.”

Lord Matlock waved a hand dismissively, “Of course he will be happy! Only the deepest affection could induce our nephew to choose a lady so below his station! You know as well as I do that Darcy wishes for a partner; I can only assume that this Miss Elizabeth Bennet can be dependent upon to hold firm opinions regarding crop rotation and animal husbandry.”

“So you do disapprove.”

“Tis not a matter of approval…should the Darcys join the Ton for the Season, I shall of course show my support of the new Mrs. Darcy…”

“But?”

Lord Matlock sighed, “I suppose I must echo Mother and Father, may the Lord rest their souls, and say that I had thought he could have made a more advantageous match.”

“Then you must be comforted that at least she is a gentleman's daughter. And Georgiana is fond of her and believes her to be a true friend.”

“Georgiana is young and sheltered; what would she know of spotting a fortune-hunter?”

“Good gracious, Alistair! You cannot believe such of Miss Elizabeth! Particularly not after meeting her relations in London.”

“I will allow that Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are honest, hard-working folk. Mr. Gardiner in particularly shows an aptitude for chess that I had not expected in a tradesman.”

With a sigh, Lady Matlock remarked “If you had any idea of how similar you sound to Catherine at this moment…”

Lord Matlock was most indignant in his reply, “As if I could possess even a fraction of her pride and conceit!”

At his wife's look of disbelief, however, his anger quickly abated. “Forgive me; I fear I did sound most unkind with regards to the future Mrs. Darcy.”

“And you own sister…I know you and Anne had always been friends, but I fear you did not see that Catherine felt quite marginalized. I have often wondered if she did not act as she did simply because she was lonely…But enough of my speculations on such a matter, we were speaking of Miss Elizabeth. It is my firm opinion that you misjudge Georgiana; our niece is not altogether naïve, for all that she has been kept in relative seclusion. But even if you did not trust in her opinions, surely you can trust Darcy's judgment.”

“And I do that. He is a good lad…I wish his parents could have seen the man he has become. They would have been proud, I think.”

“We are proud in their stead. And truly, I believe Anne would have approved of Miss Elizabeth…from what I could glean from Georgiana and Richard, they seem to be cut from the same cloth.”

“Then I suspect we may see some changes in our nephew as he truly comes to understand what it means to have a wife who is his equal.”

The conjectures that Lord and Lady Matlock had with regards to their nephew's betrothed, a common topic for conversation in the ensuing days, were interrupted by the unexpected return of
their elder son. Lady Matlock was not privy to the conversation between father and son, though she thought that the dreary tune that later floated from the music room bode rather ill for that particular reunion. Though she knew Lord Matlock cared a great deal for his heir, she was not unaware of the lack of commonality between the two men. Certainly they had both tried to understand their quiet, sensitive son, so different from his noisy, unruly brother, but neither felt that they truly knew him.

On this occasion, she entered her husband's study without waiting for summons. At the frown etched upon his features as he nursed his drink, she could only sigh once more. The two sat in silence until Lord Matlock finally turned towards his wife. “Our son is a widower.” He took another draught as he added, “Some girl from the Continent…There was a child.”

“Was?”

“Yes.”

She merely sighed.

“He intends to mourn their passing properly.”

“And what has he deemed to be proper?”

“Two years.”

“Two years!” Lady Matlock's eyes grew wide, “He is already eight and twenty!”

Lord Matlock slammed his glass down upon his desk, heedless of the sloshing liquid. “What would you have me do? I cannot command him to act otherwise. He is a grown man…I daresay his years of travels have habituated him to acting on his own counsel.”

Not for the first time, Lady Matlock asked, “Do you believe we did right in allowing him to live as he has?”

With a sigh, Lord Matlock's voice seemed more contemplative than truly angry. “I cannot say…he certainly sounded happy enough in his letters…”

“But to take a wife without our knowledge…What do we know of her? Certainly the Ton will hear of it, particularly as he intends to mourn publicly.”

After Lord Matlock had acquainted his wife with the sad tale of their son's misadventures in love, she nodded resolutely, “A Baron's sister then. That is what we shall say. Never mind the whole business with her parentage…she belongs to a titled family for all that she is foreign. That ought to stop some of the gossipers from speaking ill of a Fitzwilliam marrying abroad. Have we any way of substantiating her background?”

“Her brother remains in England. Reginald intends for us to play host.”

“Wonderful. We must insist that they be seen while they are in residence. I trust the Baron speaks the King's England?” At the answering nod, she continued, “Then we must show unity as a family. I will not have even the hint of scandal associated with this marriage.”

“Reginald will not wish to socialize.”

“He has little choice. He is the Viscount Milton and will be the Lord Matlock. 'Tis high time he acted accordingly.”
“I fear he may wish to abdicate such responsibilities.”

“Do not be ridiculous – Richard will not allow it. Surely you know enough of our son's temperament to know that he will do all in his power to protect his wife from a post she does not want. Besides, Reggie will cooperate. For the good of the family, he must.”

“He has expressed a concern that he might not remarry.”

“Stuff and nonsense; he is in pain now and it has clouded his judgment. There will be a new Lady Matlock, I will see to it.”

Lord Matlock looked dubious, “Even at the expense of our son's happiness? I do not think you are capable of such a deed.”

“And why should he be unhappy? He remains free to choose whom he will. We had long decided to grant our children such freedom.”

“I cannot imagine why, certainly our marriage was almost arranged and we are far from being unhappy.”

“Almost is not the same as was. Need I remind you that we both chose to comply with our parents' wishes?”

“And if he were to choose a lady of little fortune or connections?”

“He chose a Baron's sisters.”

“Ah, but she was a carpenter's daughter.”

Lady Matlock waved a hand dismissively, “As long as the next lady he chooses is English, I shall not complain; I believe our social standing is secure enough to weather such a possibility as you propose. And if she can influence his playing to songs of happier chords, so much the better.”

Despite their apprehension at housing a stranger (and a foreigner at that) in their home, the Earl and Countess of Matlock were gratified to discover that Signor del Mastei was a most conscientious house-guest. He was humble, polite, and well-spoken when he did choose to speak. Indeed, Lady Matlock would remark to her husband that young Giovanni was so quiet that she would sometimes forget his presence. She was at first mystified at the polite manners that typified interactions between her son and his guest; both men appeared to try their hardest not to cause offense. When the Fitzwilliams removed to London for the Season, such cordiality was seen by the Ton as a sign of true brotherhood, an opinion that Lady Matlock did her best to perpetuate, and the Viscount's marriage abroad was found to be more acceptable than it might have been otherwise. In private, however, she found herself curious as to the careful manners of both young men. Despite her numerous written entreaties to Anne, Georgiana, Richard, and even Darcy, she was no closer to a satisfactory answer. So frustrated was she at the younger generation's reticence, she took to hovering in the hallway of the music room, hoping that the music the Viscount chose to play would provide an insight into his thoughts and feelings. Of course, when Lord Matlock inquired into his wife's whereabouts in the afternoons, she adamantly refused to own to such motivations, particularly at the smug look on his face at having found her out on one such occasion. With the increasingly worsening climate as winter took over London with gusts of wind and staccato episodes of rain preventing the occurrence of the Fashionable Hour, Lady Matlock decided that such strolls as she was taking through the townhouse's halls were quite convenient as a replacement.

The Viscount seemed unaware of his mother's newfound habit or her looks of relief as he
continued to compose small ditties reflecting the various characters he has met in the travels so that
he might better illustrate some of the tales he wished to share with Miss Mary Bennet. The written
word, as many as he had sent via his letters, were not enough to convey some of the emotions he
associated with such memories. One afternoon, in answer to an inquiry she had sent regarding
Sicily in particular, he found himself playing a folksong that Elena had used to sing for him. A
smile hovered on his lips as he recalled the silly story of the poor shepherd boy who was cursed
with two left feet for unknowingly disturbing a slumbering fairy. It occurred to him then that such a
memory was the first one which was not associated with pain. His fingers stumbled at such a
startling thought, causing his hitherto unknown listener to remark, “Please, do not stop.”

Glancing up, the Viscount saw the pale face of the Baron, his eyes unexpectedly shining with
tears. “My mother used to sing this song to me. I suppose it was her way of cautioning me to walk
at a more sedate pace rather than running through the fields as I was wont to do. She did not wish
for me to offend any of the donas de fuera. Forgive me for disturbing your peace, ’tis only that
your song has brought me a longing for my homeland that I had not thought I could feel.”

Wordlessly, the Viscount nodded and turned back to his pianoforte; the Baron, having wiped
away his tears, sang the last chorus of the song, the cheerful tune at odds with his somber
expressions. As the notes faded away and silence descended once more, the Viscount studied the
Baron carefully. The younger gentleman's eyes bespoke of wistfulness and longing that seemed to
mirror the Viscount's own thoughts. With his hands clasped demurely in his lap, the Baron truly
looked in that moment vulnerable and fragile. As though he felt the Viscount's gaze, Giovanni
whispered sadly, “Forgive me, I fear my thoughts were rather far away…I wonder if perhaps I
should have heeded the words of the song, for I believe I have truly been cursed.”

Inexplicably, the Viscount felt a sudden rush of protectiveness towards his brother-in-law. The
words flowed from him before he had time to comprehend their irony, “Elena would not have
wanted you to grieve so.”

“I wish I knew that for certain…but despite our shared childhood, I fear I do not truly know my
sister…she cannot have remained the chubby child with too large eyes that I hold in my
memories.”

“Then allow me to assure you, Giovanni, she would have wanted you to smile…she always spoke
of you with admiration, her older brother who sacrificed his own happiness so that peace could be
kept within the family. She has not forgotten the moneys you would send, even when letters
became inconvenient.”

“She spoke of me to you?”

The Viscount nodded, “Indeed. She was most adamant that we should name our child
Giovanni…”

“Perhaps it would have been better if she had not done so…my name carries no blessings. Perhaps
if she had chosen another name, she and the child would have survived.”

“You cannot think in such a manner, for if you are cursed then I fear I am as well, and that is a
thought that greatly unsettles me. I do believe we mortals have enough trials and tribulations
without inviting the capriciousness of the supernatural…I too mourn her passing, but I am also
convinced that she would have been most upset if I should waste my remaining days. I readily
admit that I still find myself besieged by melancholy, but Miss Mary's words of wisdom and my
brother's insistent nature has helped me reclaim some of my equilibrium.”

“I wish I possessed your conviction. But it appears that all I touch have come to sorrow…”
“I cannot believe in so dreary a pronouncement!”

Giovanni sighed, “I have had a letter from my own brother; our homeland is besieged with unrest at the obsolete nature of the old feudal ways. The extraordinary taxes on exports have hurt those who depend on the land for their living. My grandfather had been sorely negligent in his management, being more willing to isolate himself to a life of riches than question the source of his wealth. And yet, I cannot bring myself to return to the house of my ancestors so that I may begin to correct for his mistakes; is it so wrong of me to feel no connection to the heritage that has been left me?”

“And yet, the situation in your family’s land greatly troubles you.”

“Your cousin, Mr. Darcy, is a most kind landlord. I have had the opportunity to observe the loyalty that is his reward for the genuine care he shows his servants. Despite the industrialization that I believe will creep into the economy of this nation, Pemberley will endure. Though I may not care for my title, I cannot deny that I feel responsible to the people who make my grandparents’ estate their home. They have done no wrong to deserve suffering.”

“What will you do?”

“I know not! I wish for a form of guidance but, alas, I am alone in this world.”

At such an anguished exclamation, the gentlemen lapsed into silence once more. His head in his hands, the Baron was the picture of dejection. Studying him carefully, the Viscount felt startled at his youth; the Baron behaved with such proper manners and held himself with such solemnity, he had forgotten that the lad was but one and twenty, certainly too young to have the weight of so many lives on his shoulders. Ah, but was Darcy not a similar age when he took over the management of Pemberley? In answer to such a thought, the Viscount recalled that Darcy still had aunts and uncles to guide him (whether he heeded their advice was an altogether separate matter). Giovanni, however, was as he had claimed…truly alone but for a brother in blood-relations. But am I not his brother now? Would not Elena wish for me to support him as I am able?

At such thoughts, the Viscount found himself saying, “Mother has determined that you are a Fitzwilliam in all but name. You will find that our family is not without connections…if you wish to make a new beginning, we will help you. You have but to ask.”

“But I little know what my plans are or even where to begin.”

“Then might I make a suggestion?” At the Baron’s nod, the Viscount continued, “Why not speak to Edward Gardiner? He is a tradesman of great astuteness; both my brother and my father hold him in great esteem for he has made helpful suggestions for their investments. By all accounts, he is a clever man who is knowledgeable about economies here and on the Continent.”

With a profound look of relief, Giovanni looked up, “Thank you.”

The Viscount allowed a true smile to grace his features as he replied, “We are brothers; I can do no less.”

Unbeknownst to either gentleman, an unseen observer had smiled to herself at such a comment. With a great look of satisfaction that both young men under her care were showing signs of beginning to heal from their heartaches, Lady Matlock left for her husband’s study, adamant that she would do her part in helping her family.

As the winter passed into spring, Lady Matlock would find her worries continually put to rest as the Viscount and Baron both began to smile again. After numerous lengthy meetings, the Baron
had decided to turn his Sicilian estate into a holiday destination for restless young men in search of adventure or young couples who wished to honeymoon in an exotic land.

When the signatures had dried on the proper paperwork, Giovanni said as he raised a toast in the company of the Viscount, “My grandfather would doubtless be apoplectic with rage at the thought of so many foreigners running amuck in his household. Particularly foreigners without titles as Mr. and Mrs. Thompkins are. Surely it must be a sin for me to feel such satisfaction at this act of rebellion.”

Chuckling lightly, the Viscount shook his head, “No, for it has not only brought you happiness but also a new direction for those under your care.”

“Ah yes, my brother has been sending quite positive reports of the reception of this plan. The older servants were of course rather doubtful, but the young generation seemed quite eager to be exposed to outsiders. My bankers, likewise, are quite ecstatic over the thought of an influx of foreign monies.”

“Will Roberto continue to oversee operations?”

“He intends to, though he has also expressed a wish to join me in England. I believe he intends to learn more regarding the running of a resort.”

“Then you must to Bath! ’Tis a most popular destination I believe.”

“Ah yes, I had spoken with a Mr. Bainbridge, who has grown quite wealthy in that particular city, enough to gain housing in the Royal Crescent. I believe he is willing to take on Roberto as a junior associate in return for some stakes in our venture. Mr. Bainbridge has not a few establishments under his management in Brighton as well, which might suit Roberto better as our Sicilian estate is closer to the sea.”

“And what will you do, my friend?”

“Me? I shall journey back to Sicily to ensure the smoothness of the transition and oversee the first summer’s operations. Despite the legal documents that were signed, I shall feel more confident that Bainbridge’s agents will not cheat me if I am to monitor their operations in person. I shall not forget your father’s words of wisdom to exercise caution in business matters. When I return, I expect to follow your lead and live the life of an idle gentleman! Mayhaps I shall finally agree with Mr. Darcy and settle upon an estate!”

“I cannot believe that you would so willingly take on such a leisurely existence. And you know well that I have not been completely idle.”

“Perhaps not…I do believe Mr. Gardiner might welcome my expertise as a consultant as payment for his wise counsel. With the birth of young Master Ethan, I believe he would wish for more time with his family.”

“The business has quite outgrown its partners, has it not?”

“Indeed, it has quite transformed the fortunes of those involved.”

The Viscount shook his head ruefully, “I did not think I would see the day when my brother willingly set aside his regimentals. And yet, he is soon to be a father.”

Despite the friendship between them, the Baron remained hesitant when asking pointed questions of the Viscount. And so, he inquired with a tentative voice, “Does it bring you pain? To know that he shall soon hold his child in his arms while you cannot?”
The Viscount studied the liquid in his glass as he thought on his reply. When the silence was in danger of becoming oppressive, he at last sighed. “I would be guilty of professing falsehoods if I declared that I feel neither pain nor envy at such a contrast in our situations. I can easily imagine that our children could have become playmates. And yet, how can I be upset that my brother should experience such happiness? I cannot bear to have my sadness shed a shadow on his joy...” Looking up again with a sudden smile, he continued “Besides, I am quite grateful at the distraction my nephew or niece shall offer for Mother's campaign to find a new bride for me.”

The Baron chuckled at his friend's return to good humor, “Lady Matlock is quite insistent, is she not?”

“I hope you do not take offense. I can assure you that she means no disrespect to your sister…”

"I cannot be angry with one who has shown me such kindness. Besides, I can easily imagine that she would wish for the reassurance that the senior Fitzwilliam line will continue. My own grandparents, after all, had taken me away from my parents to ensure such certainty for their own heritage. At least, I can be assured that your Mother’s intentions are not malicious...for I suspect she truly wishes for your happiness.”

The Viscount nodded in recognition of such a comment. “As I believe she has come to look upon you as another son of sorts, you may find that your own marriage prospects may not escape her attentions.”

“Oh, then it is most convenient, is it not, that I shall soon put sufficient distance between us?”

“But do not be surprised to find that she will have compiled a list of eligible young ladies upon your return!”

“My poor grandfather, not only will his estate be over-run by foreigners, but so will his bloodline!”

His eyes gleaming with curiosity, the Viscount asked, “Then you are not adverse to an English bride?”

Fighting a blush as the unbidden image of a certain young lady came to mind, the Baron answered with a soft voice. “I care not for the origin of my future wife. I only wish to be happy.”

Growing somber with the wistfulness in such a reply, the Viscount could only answer, “A state I dearly hope for you as well, brother.”

Lord Matlock had just settled himself in the library with the latest revision of the bill that had been proposed in the House of Lords when Lady Matlock entered the room. Taking in the excited manners with which she brandished the letter in her hand, he put away the tedious sheaves of paper with a relieved look. “You look as though you have news to impart. Indeed, I have not seen you so excited since finding out the identity of Reginald’s correspondent.”

Forgoing a proper greeting, Lady Matlock settled herself excitedly upon a nearby chaise, heedless of the wrinkles in her gown, to lay down the letter that bore the Ashbury seal. “Lady Adelaide is to return for the remainder of the Season!”

“Indeed? I was not aware that you maintained correspondence with Lady Adelaide.”
Waving aside her husband's comments, Lady Matlock responded, "Oh, just because you find her odd for being steadfast friends with Catherine does not mean I should forsake her company."

Pointedly ignoring his wife's admonition, Lord Matlock asked, "Has she determined that the time has come for Andrew to seek a wife?"

"A new Lady Ashbury is to accompany her."

His toned belied his surprise, "I was not aware that Andrew had been courting."

His wife's tone was triumphant. "Oh yes. A Miss Charlotte Lucas from Hertfordshire."

"That name is familiar to me."

"It ought to be...she was Catherine's companion."

Lord Matlock felt his eyebrows rise further at such words, "And what does Catherine think on the matter?" Privately, he wondered if he ought to pen a letter of apology to Sir Andrew for whatever insults Lady Catherine had seen fit to bestow upon the new Lady Ashbury.

To his vast surprise, his wife laughed gaily as she drew forth another letter, "Catherine is quite pleased...it seems she is partly responsible for the match."

"I am all astonishment."

"And I had always felt certain that Catherine had more depth than you believed. Nevertheless, I merely find it curious that Hertfordshire is again mentioned."

"Ah yes, the Bennets hail from there, do they not? Miss Bennet has wed Mr. Bingley, Miss Elizabeth is to become our niece through marriage, and Miss Mary has been gifted a pianoforte from our Reggie. Now this Miss Lucas has become Lady Ashbury. Gracious me, had I known that Richard's choice of a summer sojourn would result in such events, I might have demanded that he abandon his Army post the sooner. 'Tis a pity he has given up Netherfield Park, we might have been able to convince Reginald to retire there and find himself a new wife as well."

As the astounded look on his wife's face, he said with no small amount of smugness, "You see, my dear, I do pay sufficient attention when you speak."

"You are mocking me."

"Not at all. I am as hopeful as you that our son will recover from his loss. I would like to hold an heir in my arms before old age renders me too weak to do so. I cannot deny that writing to Miss Mary has rendered a gradual transformation in Reginald's behavior. Why, I do believe he has even left the music room and the townhouse of his own volition of late."

"Such words run contrary to your initial hesitations with regards to Miss Elizabeth. That I should find you now ruminating on her sister as a potential bride for our son?! Unfathomable!"

"Catherine cannot be the only Fitzwilliam sibling in possession of depth of character. Besides, I am not so old as to be intractable in my opinions...I also have my own news to impart. Darcy had sent word that he is to be married at last and intends to bring Mrs. Darcy to Ton for remainder of the Season. It appears she is great friends with Lady Ashbury."

Lady Matlock nodded in satisfaction, "It has been many months since their engagement, I had begun to think that their union might not occur before Richard's child is to be born. Did Darcy give a reason as to the delay?"
“Miss Elizabeth had wished it, for her father's sake. In that I can be assured that she is not after his wealth. A lady of less worth would have insisted upon both a quicker and a more extravagant event.”

“Still, 'tis a large leap from not thinking the worst of her to pondering upon her sister's merits as a fit bride for our Reggie.”

Lord Matlock hummed thoughtfully, “She is the only young lady in whom he has indicated more than a passing interest. Oh I suppose he is all politeness in company and will dance perfunctory dances with the young ladies you put in his way, but I rarely see him talking to them for more than is necessary. And yet, you have seen the letters he sends Miss Mary, he must singlehandedly be keeping London's stationary suppliers quite happy, and that he should purchase a pianoforte for her...Astounding! I suppose I ought to have a conversation with him considering the improprieties of his actions with regards to an unattached young lady, but I cannot bring myself to bring attention to it. Besides, they are to be cousins, are they not? And he has corresponded regularly with Georgiana, this might not be so different.”

With a look of surprise, Lady Matlock remarked, “You have given this matter much thought.”

“Have I? Hmm...with the end of Parliament drawing nigh, I suppose I was in need of other topics for rumination. I am as worried as you are with regards to our son's well-being. It is clear to me that Miss Mary provides a most positive influence. Did you know, he had consulted me regarding publishing a series of books regarding his travels abroad? Quite extraordinary! I do not believe he has actively sought my advice since that horrid business with Fitzhugh and Darcy at University.”

“Do you suppose he loves her?”

“Love? Goodness, what sentimentality Beatrice!”

She rose not to his bait, “You are oddly calm at the prospect of welcoming another country lass into the family.”

“Another country lass?! I had thought you would have more insight! Mary Bennet will surely not be merely a minor gentleman’s daughter.”

“What she lacks in wealth, she makes up for in connections.”

He nodded agreeably, “I shall, of course, leave the interrogation of Mrs. Darcy with respects to her sister in your capable hands, my dear. Having grown up with sisters of such dissimilar characters as Catherine and Anne, I expect I shall not know what to do when presented with sisters who hold such genuine affection for each other!”

“Then I shall reply to the affirmative as to our attendance at Adelaide's ball?”

“But of course! I expect that you already have some ideas as to how you wish to introduce the Darcys to Society.”

Lady Matlock decided not to dignify his comment with an answer.
“My dear Charlotte, marriage must suit you for you look truly radiant!”

“Such hyperbole must indicate great happiness. Thus, I must return the sentiment.”

Elizabeth only smiled, too content to mind her friend’s teasing. “Truly I am blessed with so attentive a husband. Though, we have yet to have a true argument, perhaps I ought to refrain from asserting such optimism.”

“I cannot imagine Mr. Darcy would willingly quarrel with you, certainly not based on the worshipful looks he sent you at the ball.”

“Adoration alone cannot mitigate the need for occasional flights of temper. Besides, Sir Andrew certainly made no secret of the target of his affection.”

With an uncharacteristic blush, Charlotte protested, “Surely you exaggerate…I cannot imagine a gentleman of his temperament to be given to such sentimental behavior in public.”

“Oh, but is it not said that the love of a good woman can truly transform a man?”

Both ladies turned to greet the source of the new voice and, seeing Lady Cecilia's beaming face, stood for a proper greeting. Rising from her curtsy, the Countess of Portland remarked, “You must not stand on such ceremony on my account; we are among friends, are we not?”

With a laugh, Elizabeth nodded agreeably, “Glad I am of such, for I find myself unwilling to make polite conversation regarding the weather or the latest fashions, particularly as I am sadly ignorant in the latter topic.”

“As for the former, I can assure you that rain is expected for this evening, for the skies were overcast on our arrival.” Charlotte provided helpfully.

“And now, having exhausted both topics, I shall feel no guilt for turning to my earlier assertion that behind any notable man is a woman who artfully plays a not insignificant role. Why, Mrs. Arbuthnot certainly plays a key role as hostess for the gatherings of the Tories. And I suspect that Princess Lieven's influence reaches beyond that of Almack's; one might have cause to wonder whether she or her husband is truly the ambassador.”

Charlotte turned surprised eyes to her new relation, “Oh, but I did not think you cared much for politics, Cecy.”

With a light laugh, Lady Cecilia replied, “My abhorrence for some of the politicians cannot stop me from acquiring knowledge of the facts.”

“You are rather fond of facts,” Charlotte commented.

“I can be no less under Papa’s tutelage.” Turning to Elizabeth, she explained, “Papa had been a member of the Royal Society and delighted in coming to London for the various speakers that would be hosted. As I had no brothers, he treated me as one would treat a male heir in that I was allowed to accompany him on many such occasions. He oversaw much of my education, which I own was quite odd for a lady.”

“Then we are kindred spirits, for my father likewise encouraged me in my pursuits that were ill-suited for a lady.”
“Charlotte has made mention; I daresay Mr. Darcy minds it not.”

“Though I fear politics were not among the topics of my education. Glad I am that Mr. Darcy has never indicated plans to implicate himself in matters of law or governance.”

“Yet even he cannot altogether claim complete antipathy with Lord Matlock and now Lord Milton in the thick of it. Indeed, I fear a time of change will be upon us and the privilege of the landed gentry may soon find itself under challenge.”

Charlotte arched an eyebrow at Lady Cecilia's insightful comments, “With such talk, one might conclude that Lord Portland is likewise embroiled.”

With another laugh, Lady Cecilia replied, “Oh, he may do as he wishes. Though I certainly have not the patience for it. No, I am satisfied with playing the part of a lady of leisure. But you, Charlotte! Did I not spy you speaking most animatedly with Lady Cowper at Almack's last week? Are we to expect you as a hostess of salons?”

Elizabeth turned in surprise to her friend, “Goodness, Charlotte, you certainly never mentioned this interest in your letters!”

“It’s are in its infancy, I assure you. And I readily lay the responsibility for it at your feet, Cecy.”

“Andrew always was in possession of a fine oratory, for all he is a man of few words on usual acquaintance. He would have made for a fine barrister had he been born a second son.”

“Though I fear I am too forthright to be of much aid,” Charlotte commented a bit morosely.

“Oh nonsense, Lady Cowper surely found you a delight. ’Tis a shame that Lord Cowper has no leanings of the political kind…his wife would have made him a most potent force…I suspect that Lord Palmerston will reap the fruits of her gifts in her husband's stead.”

“Cecy! What a thing to say, even in the company of friends.”

“Oh Charlotte, you need not act so outraged. Why, 'tis common knowledge that Cupid has found favor with more than one Patroness of Almack's. The intrigues might be considered positively scandalous if they did not occur among those who are tasked with dictating opinions on such things.”

“Happy are we not to fall into that number.” Elizabeth’s companions made sounds of agreement.

“Will you not tell me, Lizzy,” Lady Cecilia asked, “of your adventures in becoming Mrs. Darcy? I simply refuse to believe Mama’s outraged mutterings that you had taken advantage of Mr. Darcy’s sorrows at Anne de Bourgh's marriage to Richard Fitzwilliam.”

“Only if you would tell me of you and Lord Portland, for I believe Lord Milton made mention that you were childhood friends? And Mr. Darcy certainly gave reason for me to suspect that your own marriage is not without story.”

“You need not pretend interest, Lizzy, in a tale that surely lacks intrigue in comparison to yours. A pity that only two weeks are left of the Season; visitors traveling to examine the great estate of Pemberley will surely increase many-fold this year. Though as beautiful as the grounds are, I suspect that they alone will not hold the visitors' attentions.”

“I cannot imagine what you mean, Cecy.” Yet, despite her protestations, Elizabeth could not help her laughter.
“Feign ignorance if you will, Lizzy, I will not be put off so easily! I can be quite persistent when my curiosity is aroused. Now, do tell, what magic did you work to gain Mr. Darcy’s conversation?”

Elizabeth laughed again at such open curiosity. “No magic at all, Cecy; we met in a common enough place…in my uncle’s bookstore in fact.”

“Oh? And were you suitably impressed at the great Mr. Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire deigning to speak with a mere tradesman’s niece?”

Shaking her head, Elizabeth replied, “Not at all! Indeed, I fear I rather daringly told him that I cared nothing for his name but rather forced him to reveal something more telling.”

“And what was that?”

“His character, of course!”

“My goodness.”

“Not a few gentlemen have found themselves greatly humbled after conversing with Lizzy.” Charlotte’s voice was not without fondness.

“To my aunt’s despair.”

“Mrs. Phillips only minded your lack of attention to your prospects.”

“She gave them up for loss, surely, and was only piqued that my behavior should adversely affect the chances of my sisters.”

“I must own that under Lady Catherine and Lady Adelaide’s influence, I have learned to acquire little respect for gentlemen who would expect such submissiveness from their wives.” Charlotte admitted.

“Ah yes, rather like Lord Bessborough I suppose. He certainly does not shy from humiliating his wife in public; why the things he would say! Certainly not fit for polite company…one can perhaps assign little blame to her for seeking a kinder partner in the arms of others. And to think that Mama had wished for me to accept his son's suit.”

Elizabeth leaned forward eagerly in her seat as she asked, “And what did Lord Portland have to say on that particular suitor?”

Lady Cecilia chuckled, “You are persistent!”

“No more than you are, Cecy!”

“Then I must answer. Danny was mostly amused, assured as he was of my regard. He showed great satisfaction at announcing his intentions to Mama.”

“Not your father?”

“I fear Papa’s death prevented Daniel from applying for my hand.”

Lady Cecilia waved aside Elizabeth’s apology, “I shall always suffer some melancholy at mention of Papa’s passing, being far fonder of him than I am of Mama. Although, I must admit that Papa’s death likely set the necessary events in motion.”
Relishing in a most attentive audience, she continued, “The friendship of Papa and the elder Lord Portland was of such duration that Papa’s greatest regret was not having a sister to ensure that they were brothers in truth as well as spirit. Instead, when Papa passed, much of the estate passed to Uncle Cropley. Though Papa did leave me a small country estate, he also left a rather intriguing letter to which only Daniel and I were privy…”

Daniel Weston watched bemusedly as his childhood friend paced in an agitated manner as she waved the papers in her hands. He was surprised neither at finding her in her father's study nor at her reactions to the documents she had received upon her father's death.

Looking sharply at him with an agitated flounce of her newly black-dyed gown, Cecilia had commented, “Oh you would find it amusing! But I certainly do not enjoy being beholden to you for protection. Nor will Mama be happy with the knowledge that Papa left you in a position of authority to oversee her access to funds.”

“Surely you mind not the assistance in managing her expenditure?”

“I am grateful, I grant you, that you shall spare me her indignance.”

“Then I fail to see the source of your displeasure.”

“The principle of it, Danny!”

“Do enlighten me.”

“I do not care to be your ward when I am fully capable of making such decisions! Or have you forgotten that Papa had ensured that my education was not lacking in such things?”

“With the assistance you rendered me when my own father passed, I can hardly forget.”

“The friendship between our fathers made us more akin to family.”

His pause at her words was too brief to be noticed, “Then you cannot begrudge my assistance.”

She only scowled, “How calmly you sit!”

He smiled, an expression that did little to soothe her present mood. “Because I have in my possession a solution which will at once satisfy your principles and your father’s wishes.”

Pausing in her pacing to stare at him incredulously, she demanded, “And that is?”

“Why, we must marry of course. As my wife, you may jointly share in any decisions that need be made.”

Her lips moved soundless as her eyes widened at his words. Finally, she said in a strangled voice, “Marry you?”

"Did you not admit that we were already family? Such an arrangement would surely only formalize what is essentially already true."

A crease formed on his forehead at her continued silence, “Is it so fearsome a prospect?”

“I…no! I suppose it would be most practical…only…” Her voice sank into miserable silence. She wished he would not stare so intently at her.
“What are your misgivings?”

Cecilia found she could not meet his gaze.

“Cecy?”

“Your timing is most unfortunate.”

“I am most willing to wait for the duration of mourning.”

When she still stayed quiet, the crease broadened to a frown.

“Cecy?” he asked again.

“Do you not care for me as a brother for a sister?”

His voice likewise softened, though it lacked the hesitancy of her question, “I do not believe I ever truly cared for you in such a manner.”

Sinking into her favorite chair, she asked dazedly at the unexpected seriousness of his words, “No?”

With a firm shake of his head, Lord Portland answered, “Since your coming out, I have lived in fear that some other gentleman would claim your hand.”

“You never gave indication…”

“Did I not? Surely all my peers from Cambridge would disagree. The silly smile that would grace my face each time I received a letter from you, the glares that they knew to expect when they dared to ask a dance of you…I am home when I am with you, I can have no other.”

“Cecy?” He asked a third time when his declaration was met again with silence.

“I…I must examine the evidence.”

Hiding his disappointment, he vowed, “I will wait.”

“And should my conclusion not be to your liking?”

“I trust the facts will prove to be in my favor.”

“I made lists, if you can imagine, of quotations of the letters that had passed between us” Lady Cecilia shared.

“And what did you find?” Charlotte prompted

“That my confusion only deepened, so closely were the remarks intertwined. My temper was not soothed, I assure you, at such discovery. I treated him quite abominably when Mama insisted that he escort me to Lady Metcalfe’s dinner party after the mourning period had ended.”

Cecilia had willfully ignored the concerned look he sent her way at the petulant expression on her face. She remained steadfastly silent during supper, forcing him to converse with her mother, who was determined to recover the time she had been forced away from the Ton. She felt a perverse
sense of satisfaction that she was punishing him for the confusion he had caused her. When he sought her eyes over a thinly veiled attempt her mother gave at requesting a larger allowance and gave a slight raise of his eyebrows, however, she had to cough into her napkin to hide her laughter. And suddenly, in that moment of silent exchange of mutual amusement, she knew. The realization flooded over her with such unexpected certainty that she was in danger to spilling her drink.

“Mama was of course quite surprised when I finally made it known to her my reason for rejecting Mr. Ponsonby. She berated herself for not thinking on Daniel as a potential suitor, particularly given his ever dependable presence, but was quite happy at such a conclusion. An actual Earl was after all quite better than the younger son of one.”

“Oh, 'tis quite a romantic story, Cecy! I must applaud Lord Portland for his patience in awaiting a reply.”

“Then your own husband must be commended as well, though his wait was surely more bearable, assured as he was of your affections.”

“What can Charlotte mean, Lizzy?”

Her question prompted Elizabeth to begin her own tale. And so the afternoon passed most pleasantly.

The remainder of the Darcys’ time in London passed in a whirlwind of balls and assemblies. Though they attended Almack's but once, Elizabeth’s reception on the part of at least one of the Patronesses rather ensured that the new Mrs. Darcy's status was all but cemented. Even had any misgivings been voiced openly, the Darcys were soon sufficiently removed that they could afford not to care one jolt for them.

Mr. Darcy was particularly relieved to be ensconced at Pemberley once more. Indeed, as the carriage drew increasingly close to its destination, the smile on his face grew ever brighter until the servants gathered on the steps gaped at the open pleasure their Master showed at being home once again. Their approval for the new Mistress, having already been given when Elizabeth had been but a guest, was reaffirmed at her equally joyful expressions and her cheery greetings. Why, that she could call some of them by name and inquire after their families! Truly the Master had chosen well!

Elizabeth found her new role kept her suitably occupied, a challenge that her inquisitive nature greatly welcomed. Georgiana also happily reunited with her beloved brother and new sister, adding further brightness to the light mood that pervaded Pemberley. As he sat listening to the sweet voices of his wife and sister joined in a duet that first evening, Mr. Darcy felt certain that he was the most fortunate of men. When, with an impish smile, Elizabeth entreated him to take her place at the pianoforte, he laughingly protested knowing full well that he would eventually agree. And so the first weeks passed in an almost idyllic manner as the small family delighted in each others' company.

Despite this auspicious beginning, the Darcys soon found their peace disrupted. Lady Cecilia's prediction as to the numbers who had taken to visiting the great estate proved prophetic. The Inn-keeper at Lambton was most grateful for the increase in his business. Mrs. Longfield, in her correspondence with Mrs. Gardiner, noted wryly that surely all counties of England had sent a delegation to investigate the truth of the presence of a new Mrs. Darcy. The frequency of guests at Pemberley, however, only served to make Mr. Darcy increasingly irritable. Mrs. Darcy laughingly
remarked in response to his initial scowl, “Oh, Sweet William, they have traveled such a long way to view the estate, how can I not reward their persistence? Fear not, husband, the novelty shall soon wear off and you shall have your tranquility again.”

He had gladly accepted the kiss she offered him to soothe his spirits as he waited patiently for the stream of visitors to cease. Unfortunately, as the summer passed and no abatement was found, he found his patience severely tested. He might have borne these events better had Elizabeth been by his side as he hid from the visitors in his study, but he found that since his wife insisted on personally receiving of such unwelcomed callers, his time in her company grew noticeably shorter. Certainly they still spent the mornings hidden away in his study, where he had thoughtfully installed a writing desk for her use, to discuss estate matters, but the remainders of her days were soon fraught with interruptions and other demands on her attention. Even Georgiana had been enlisted to play hostess when those who could claim to be neighbors came to call; the act of speaking to so many strangers on such a regular basis proved quite beneficial for Miss Darcy to conquer any remnant shyness such that not a few mothers left with a determination to encourage their unwed sons to manage a meeting with the beautiful young heiress upon her official entry into society.

Though Darcy would occasionally join the ladies for tea, particularly when they were accompanied by gentlemen who had been acquainted with his late father, he found the blatantly curious looks he received from the ladies more taxing than he cared to withstand. Though he felt a sense of pride at Elizabeth's ease in company, he increasingly made excuses to stay in his study or the library. And so it was that for the past two weeks, Darcy often found himself quite alone until evening time. Even then, he found that his wife was would not infrequently already be asleep when he would join her in their bed. Though he would curl protectively around her, he could not but feel a sense of resentment.

On one rare evening when she actually remained awake, he decided to comment on his concerns. “Elizabeth, are you well? I could not help but notice that you have been quite preoccupied of late. I do not wish you to exhaust yourself.”

Blinking tiredly, Elizabeth commented as she put aside a letter that she had not had time to peruse when it had arrived earlier that day, “I suppose events have proven me too optimistic in hoping that we would be left in peace.”

“You need not greet each visitor, you know; we have servants enough to see to their needs.”

“I suppose, yet I do not wish for Mrs. Darcy to appear impolite.”

“How obstinate you are!”

“I only do what I perceive to be my duty.”

“I do not care for the exhaustion such duty has caused you.”

“Are you insinuating that I am incapable of performing my responsibilities as Mistress of Pemberley?” Her voice was unexpectedly sharp.

“No! I would never question your capabilities in such a role—only, what of your duties to your husband?”

“Whatever do you mean? Do speak plainly.”

Darcy sighed, “I have missed you, Elizabeth, missed your company these few weeks. I begin to feel as though I had no wife.”
“And so under the guise of caring for my wellbeing, you would complain of my deficiencies as a wife?”

Growing greatly alarmed at her persistent ill humor, Darcy protested, “Elizabeth, I…I merely miss spending time with you that does not include business of some sort. I miss our conversations…I suppose I am jealous that strangers may experience your ready wit when I, your poor husband, have been sadly bereft of it.”

“What will you have me do? I cannot abandon my duties as hostess.”

“And I maintain that you need not play hostess to all and sundry!”

“And pray tell how I should choose among the visitors? Perhaps I should ignore those of the parvenu in favor of those in possession of long and impeccable lineages?”

“You know I do not profess such opinions!”

“Your actions speak otherwise.”

A bewildered Darcy repeated her earlier question, “Whatever do you mean?”

“You cannot deny that you have only attended tea when those we host own an estate in the surrounding lands.”

“I … that is merely a coincidence!”

“Is it truly? Or are you ashamed to own that through our marriage you now have ties to those of less distinction?”

“Elizabeth! You cannot think such a thing of me…Do be reasonable! When have I ever given indication that I hold such unkind thoughts?”

“I am too tired to be reasonable! Oh, just leave me be.”

Gasping at such an abrupt dismissal, Darcy said softly, “You cannot mean that…”

Elizabeth was non-relenting. “I do. It is fortunate, is it not, that you have your own chamber available to you? I wish for some peace and quiet so that I may attain some rest.”

So saying, she turned over in the bed so that her back was to her confused husband. When he made no motion to leave his position at her side, her voice floated over to him, “I tire of your presence.”

Almost in a trance, Darcy found himself back in his own chamber, his large bed now an almost unfamiliar place for he had little cause to use it since his return to Pemberley. He slept poorly that night, tossing and turning as he thought on their conversation. A part of him felt anger at Elizabeth’s curtness but a greater part felt only concern at her most uncharacteristic behavior. When dawn broke, he resolved with great determination to find the cause for her irritability. As the day passed and he saw no sign of his wife, his worries deepened. Finally, admitting defeat at his complete lack of concentration on matters of business, he summoned her maid to his study, all the while wincing at the indignity of admitting to his ignorance as to his wife’s whereabouts. Speaking in as kind a voice as he could muster, he asked, “Daisy, do you know where Mrs. Darcy has gone?”

Daisy blinked at the Master of Pemberley, “She went with Miss Darcy to visit with Mrs. Dodson, I believe.”
“Ah yes, Georgie did make mention of offering her congratulations to her governess in person.”

When the next morning also brought no sign of his wife, Darcy was obliged to repeat his question.

“Oh! Mrs. Darcy is visiting at the Manse. ’Tis so good of the mistress to keep Mrs. Winthrope company in Miss Felicity’s absence.” The Master’s frown, however, kept Daisy from speaking more on the matter.

The third day, Daisy positively dreaded having to answer, so foreboding was the Master’s expression. “Oh! Meg had brought a note from Mrs. Littlefield for an invitation to tea.”

Mr. Darcy only set his jaw and departed for his study, not even remembering a word of thanks.

So matters might have stayed, both Mr. and Mrs. Darcy too stubborn to make attempts at reconciliation, but for a chance encounter in Pemberley’s woods.

Thinking that a walk would settle his disquiet, Darcy started when he spied his wife’s figure seated on the rock at a well-hidden bend of the stream. Just as he made up his mind to divert his path before she could turn around and spot his presence, however, a sound escaped from her that did much to change his irritation.

Elizabeth’s shock at feeling arms surround her form was only compounded at hearing the distress in his voice.

“Dear Elizabeth, please do not weep.”

Her tear-filled eyes met his worried gaze, yet his concern only caused fresh tears to fall. Feeling helpless, he could only press a handkerchief into her hands.

Even when she exhausted her tears, she would not meet his eyes and made to extricate herself from his embrace.

“Does my presence remain so odious to you?”

She stilled and at last turned towards him. “Are you not angry with me for my unkind outburst?”

Brushing an errant curl behind her ear, he said, “I will not deny it. And yet, I cannot bear to see you so distressed.”

Seeking his eyes for an answer, she asked, “Surely no husband can rejoice in such a most injurious insult?”

“I assure you that I derived no pleasure from it, and my pride was suitably bruised. Yet you are not obliged to withstand my presence…perhaps I was presumptive in the way I have behaved. If you would wish to have your quarters to yourself…”

“No.” Elizabeth’s voice was sharp as she interrupted. It softened as she made to explain, “No. I have become used to your figure at my side…I fear I cannot rest well without it.”

Though he secretly rejoiced that their brief parting had been as uncomfortable for her as it had been for him, Darcy only said solemnly, “Then I shall stay.”

Silence reigned anew until, with a sigh, Elizabeth lay back so that her face was turned upwards towards the clouds. When she made no further speech or movements, Darcy flung aside his tailcoat and made to copy her movement. He lay beside her so that their fingertips barely brushed against each other. When she sustained the silence so that it became almost oppressive, he felt
obliged to say, “I have not looked at the clouds in such a manner since Georgiana was a child. She was quite convinced that each cloud was the resting place for an angel.”

When she still made no sound, he too lapsed into silence once more.

Darcy’s voice carried with it a great deal of urgency as he exclaimed, “We cannot have this…this is intolerable! If I have affronted you in some manner, I wish for you to tell me so at once so that I may begin to address the wrong. This lack of words between us is insufferable!”

At her lack of response, Darcy insisted, “I suppose it is incongruous that I, who had insisted on keeping my inner thoughts quiet until you had forcefully rendered such a habit obsolete, should now myself begging for insights into your thoughts. But I must admit that I cannot begin to guess at source of your ill humor. Will you not take pity on your concerned husband?”

The barely audible sigh from Elizabeth was a blessed sound to Darcy as he took it as an indication that his pleas were not unheard.

“I had a letter from Jane.” Darcy’s patience was rewarded as Elizabeth added, “She is with child.”

“But is that not wonderful news? I imagine Bingley is overjoyed at the prospect of becoming a father.”

Turning to look at him, she asked in surprise, “Did he not write you?”

“I believe I spied a letter from him in my pile of correspondences. I have yet to peruse many of the missives.”

A faint smile made its way onto her face as she tried to tease gently, “What greater event has so occupied your time?”

“My foul mood has caused much disquiet. Daisy has surely been avoiding my presence.”

His attempt at jesting only caused her to sigh, “Poor Georgie has also suffered alongside our servants.”

Silence lapsed again until he again made his plea, “But surely our suffering has been the greatest. Elizabeth, even you cannot deny it.”

In lieu of replying, she sat up and threw a pebble absent-mindedly into the stream, “I did not think the task before me would be so exhausting.”

“Task?”

“Of playing at being Mrs. Darcy.”

Following her lead, he also straightened, but remained quiet.

“Oh I delight in calling Pemberley home, of being your wife and Georgie’s sister. And I would be content, if I only needed to think on these pleasures. But even here, where it should be home, I only feel resentment at having to play a role still.”

At the deepening pressure of Darcy’s fingertips on hers, she gained a little more confidence to continue in her efforts to explain, “In London, I could afford not to spare a thought for the opinions of those so removed from my circumstances. But here! I am obliged to give due consideration the impact of my presence on your prestige…not all our neighbors are glad to have one such as I bear the Darcy name, not when the last Mrs. Darcy had been a proper lady.”
“It is unlike you to become so despondent at the opinions of strangers.”

“Oh, I can laugh at their discomfiture at your glares whenever they should hint at their disapproval. Even in your absence, I can find enough foolish behaviors to amuse myself. Only… oh I ought not express discontent!” Frustrated with herself, Elizabeth threw another pebble into the water.

“Your troubles must be grave indeed for words to fail you.”

As he intended, his words brought a small smile to her face, “Not so grave that I should have spoken to you the way I did.”

“Words in anger are not to be trusted.”

“How quick you are to acquit me of such grave insult to your person.”

His touch soft as he caressed her wrist, Darcy owned, “My anger cannot withstand the sight of your tears.”

“Just as my pride cannot withstand the thought of your disappointment.”

His hand paused, “Disappointment?”

“The timing of our conversation had proved ill.”

He frowned at the cryptic nature of her reply before remembering the news she had shared earlier, “Elizabeth…I am not yet confident in my adequacy as a husband to wish for the additional task of learning to be a father.”

“But Georgie…”

“The foundation of Georgiana’s character had already been formed; I merely did my best not to impede her natural development.”

“You give yourself too little credit.”

“Are you not guilty of the same?”

Darcy smiled at her silence as he boldly intertwined his fingers with hers, “Dear Elizabeth. Your gladness at claiming Pemberley as home cannot be greater than the pride of Pemberley at claiming you as Mistress. In so short a time, you have gained the hearts of its people.”

“Their deference to its Master surely played a greater role.”

“I may hold their esteem, but you hold their affection. And even should you remain adamant in your opinion, I shall insist that the happiness you have brought to the Master is not an insignificant reason.”

“Such pretty words you speak, Mr. Darcy. I wonder at your purpose in speaking them.” The arch look she gave him rendered an answering smile upon his visage.

“And so my happy wife is returned to me! Glad am I to hear your laugh again, dear Elizabeth. Can I trust that our first quarrel as man and wife has now resolved itself?”

“Does not a quarrel involve two argumentative sides? I do believe you have been quite reasonable in the face of my dreadful behavior.”
"As I was forced to spend many restless nights away from your side, I do indeed count it a quarrel."

"Then you had better kiss me before I can turn this discussion into a second one."

Needing no further invitation, Darcy did as he was bid. The trees, the only witnesses to such a scene, would have surely blushed at his enthusiasm had they been able. Fortunately for the besotted couple, the trees remained steadfastly silent in respect for their privacy.

Despite the resolution of their initial quarrel, the Darcys were not immune to future flights of temper, particularly as Mr. Darcy tried to cajole his wife to delegate her duties among Pemberley's fully capable staff. Elizabeth gradually lost her compulsion to shoulder all the responsibilities as she grudgingly agreed with Darcy's urgings that she not over-reach herself. Indeed, many visitors would soon find themselves disappointed that Mrs. Reynolds rather than the Mistress of Pemberley greeted them when they sought a tour. A few, however, thought they caught brief glimpses of distant figures at the line of trees at the edge of the formal gardens that on second look had quickly disappeared. Those who dared to make inquiries as to the happiness of the couple would find themselves gently rebuffed by a most protective staff. Even Miss Darcy, during the occasions that she would welcome the guests to Pemberley, would only smile sweetly and say with a rather firm voice, "We are indeed a very happy household."

One such visitor to whom she uttered the phrase was a certain Mrs. Lucinda Bainbridge. Upon hearing such an answer, her younger daughter, Miss Matilda, had then turned to her sister and whispered, "You see, Mellie, I was quite correct and Mr. Darcy and Mrs. Darcy do love each other dearly."

Miss Melinda Bainbridge had only sniffed disdainfully even as she glanced at her opulent surroundings with no small amount of envy. Miss Darcy found herself disposed to like the younger Miss Bainbridge, particularly as the girl seemed genuinely interested in Mrs. Reynolds' descriptions of the architecture of the building and the history behind the various portraits and statues. So, when Miss Matilda asked if she could stay a moment more in the Portrait Gallery while her mother and sister visited the gardens, Miss Darcy made her presence known and reassured the maid whose turn it was that day to deliver the outside tour that she would keep Miss Matilda company and prevent her from becoming lost.

Miss Matilda's eyes had widened at such an arrangement but found herself alone with Miss Darcy before she could protest. With a soft voice, she said, "Oh, I did not mean to cause any inconvenience…I only wished to examine the decorations…Papa always said that the inanimate objects are often over-looked in their importance. But that the right statue could quite transform the atmosphere of a room. Papa manages resorts, you see, and is very careful about such things. Oh dear, and now I am babbling in a most unbecoming manner. Mother and Mellie would be most upset…"

Georgiana laughed not unkindly, "You need not feel uneasy, Miss Matilda, I find your genuine interest quite refreshing. Most visitors are more curious regarding my new sister, you see, and few ever appreciate the house itself."

"Oh but it is a marvel of architecture! Why it looks so at peace with the surrounding land, as though it truly grew from the land instead of being built by the hands of men. The whole effect is rather breathtaking…” She paused suddenly, her voice growing soft again with shyness, "I hope you do not think me silly for saying so…Mellie is forever saying that my imagination rather blinds me to reality."
Shaking her head, Georgiana smiled at the sweet innocence of the girl before her, “Not at all, Miss Matilda. Was there another room you wished to examine more closely?”

“Oh, could I?!”

“Of course, I am at your disposal.”

“Oh Miss Darcy, I would be forever grateful to you if you could show me the grand staircase again. The sweeping elegance of it rather takes my breath away…and I think Papa can be persuaded to incorporate something like it in a future venture.”

Smiling gently at her enthusiasm, Georgiana nodded and began to lead the way only to stop at a sudden gasp. Turning, she found Miss Matilda looking at the newest addition to the Portrait Gallery.

“Ah, this particular painting has only just been recently completed. ‘Tis somewhat based on a picture that my sister through marriage, Kitty Bennet, had drawn…a most remarkable likeness to that of my new sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy.”

“She is quite beautiful.”

“My brother would most certainly agree.”

“Mellie would have remarked on her stunning lack of jewels and the common-ness of the basket she holds in her hands…but I think she looks very approachable and quite friendly. I wished I had the opportunity to speak with her whilst we were in London.”

As the young ladies continued their walk, Georgiana inquired, “Were you in Ton for the Season?”

“Oh yes, my very first! Papa would have rather that Mellie were married first, but Mama had said that she would rather I had more time to catch a husband and that six and ten was as good an age as any to start. Mellie is nine years my senior you see, and becoming a bit desperate for marriage. Oh dear, and now I have said too much again…”

“Why we are the same age!” Miss Darcy exclaimed, purposefully ignoring her guest's rather unflattering remarks towards her older sister.

“Oh, but you did not accompany Mr. and Mrs. Darcy to London?”

“That is because I am not yet out. Despite my Aunt Matlock’s insistence, I would rather wait at least one more year. Besides, I have only recently gained a sister, I wish to keep her company a while before facing the Ton.”

“Oh, I am glad that you shall come to Town soon! I shall know at least one kind face then.”

“What of your sister?”

“I suppose I do have Mellie…but she would much rather flirt than keep me company. She finds me quite silly, I am sure, for she has little interest in traveling whilst I enjoy thinking of the different stories that I may encounter on different visits. Besides, I do not much like the gentlemen with whom she speaks…their eyes are most unkind and I feel quite uncomfortable in their company. Particularly Mr. Fitzhugh, he rather reeks of drink and leers in such an unbecoming manner, I cannot understand how Mellie could stand dancing with him.”

“You sound quite disapproving.”
Blushing, Miss Matilda nodded, “I am…Mama and Papa would not approve of me holding such a view. For them, connections are everything…I do not speak so in their company, for I know they do not like it, but I cannot help but feel that some of the gentlemen are rather indecent.”

Miss Darcy found herself greatly intrigued at the hidden depth Miss Matilda was showing. “You are not eager for marriage then?”

“I…I feel dreadfully unprepared for the prospect. Though, if I should find such happiness as your brother and sister…only I do not know if circumstances will allow it.’

“But seeing that such a match is possible makes you quite wistful, does it not?”

Miss Matilda sighed glumly, “I see that you do understand.” She quickly perked up, however, at their arrival at the wide staircase. With her hand outstretched to touch the banister, she turned in great excitement to her guide, “May I?”

Miss Darcy was much amused at her companion’s almost child-like enthusiasm, “But of course! You may even climb it if you wish.”

Clapping her hands gleefully, Miss Matilda reverently lifted one foot gently onto the marble staircase. Looking back down at Miss Darcy when she was a few steps up, she smiled in a self-depreciating manner, “You must think me quite odd, Miss Darcy, to derive such pleasure from so simple a thing.”

“Not at all, Miss Matilda, I think such a habit will bring you much joy in the future.”

“Oh do call me Mattie, Miss Darcy, at least while Mama and Mellie are not present. Mama insisted that Miss Mattie was an appellation that simply would not do since my coming out, but I still find myself startling at being addressed as Miss Matilda.”

“Only if you would call me Georgie.”

“Surely I cannot!” Matilda’s pink cheeks flushed even more at such a request, making her look even younger than her stated age.

Raising her eyebrow in a manner not unlike Elizabeth, Georgiana demanded, “And why not?”

“I…I…Mama would say that I must show you due respect for your station.”

“And what do you think?”

A look of surprise flashed across Matilda’s face at having her opinion sought in so direct a manner before a wide smile slowly replaced it. With confidence, she declared, “I think that I am glad to have made a friend.”

Later that afternoon, Georgiana resolutely made her way to the library where Elizabeth was examining the box of Bibles and children’s books that had been sent from Lambton courtesy of the Gardiners’ bookstore at her request for some suitable reading material for the neighborhood children. She was determined that future generations of Pemberley would not remain illiterate and, after discussions with Darcy, Hendricks, the local vicar, and his wife, decided that a small library of sorts both in the Tenants’ Hall and at the vicar’s Manse would not be amiss. Looking up and seeing the determined expression on her new sister’s face, Elizabeth put aside the stack of books in her arms and asked gently, “I see you have a most serious matter on your mind, Georgie.”

Georgiana nodded and said without preamble, “I think I made a new friend today…I would like to invite her to tea…do you think Brother would mind?”
“I do not see why he should.”

“But he grows so weary of visitors.”

“Of unexpected ones, certainly, but I do not think he would object to one who would be here at your invitation.”

“And if we were to have three guests?”

“Hmm…then I suppose you had better tell me of these prospective guests first.”

“Well, while you and Brother were visiting with the tenants, a Mrs. Bainbridge and her two daughters came for a tour. Since I had finished my French translations for the day, I thought I would join Mrs. Reynolds in greeting them. I thought that Mrs. Bainbridge and Miss Bainbridge had some snobbish airs about them but Miss Matilda seemed only curious at her surroundings. I had an opportunity to speak with her without her mother and sister and found her a delightful companion. I suppose I see a little of myself in her. Like me, she is youthful and innocent in appearance but I sense that she is in possession of strong principles and opinions of her own. I do not believe her family supports those views and so she does her best to keep them hidden. Her delight when I asked for her thoughts, however, revealed to me that she could benefit from having a true friend.”

Elizabeth nodded approvingly, “We shall turn you into a study of character yet, Georgie!”

Georgiana chuckled, “Under your careful tutelage, I can do no less!”

“I expect that you would wish to invite Miss Matilda to tea but feel obliged to extend the invitation to the other Bainbridge ladies as well?”

“It would only be polite otherwise I believe. Though I cannot be sure that Brother would approve; Miss Matilda seemed convinced that her family cared only for connections and surely he would be upset at receiving such guests.”

“That is a quandary…”

Any further thoughts that Elizabeth had on the matter would be postponed, however, as Mr. Darcy made his way into the library.

“Ah, and so this is where my favorite ladies have hidden themselves! I apologize for disrupting your conversation, but an urgent message has arrived from Rosings…Richard is a father as Anne has delivered a son! Aunt Catherine has requested our presence for the christening…we must be ready to travel on the morrow.”

Georgiana clapped her hands, “Oh, what wonderful news!”

Elizabeth also smiled and asked, “How does Anne? Has the child a name?”

Darcy nodded, “Oh yes, young Henry Fitzwilliam is said to possess his mother's eyes and his father's lungs. Poor Aunt Catherine will surely find that silence will be a rare commodity at Rosings now! Anne is in a state of happy exhaustion as only a new mother can be.”

“Brother! I am certain Aunt Catherine is much too happy at having a grandson to care for the lack of quietness.”

“We shall soon find out for ourselves, Georgie.”
In the end, Miss Darcy never did invite Miss Matilda for tea at Pemberley, though she did send a note, at Mrs. Darcy's urging and with Mr. Darcy’s reluctant approval, to Miss Matilda Bainbridge requesting that they further their acquaintance via the written word. While Mrs. Bainbridge dreamed of the rich young men that such a connection would surely introduce her daughter to and Miss Bainbridge glared at her sister for receiving such a request from a Darcy, Miss Matilda only smiled happily to herself at the thought that she had gained a new friend.
The letter, when it came, was not so surprising in the news it had to impart so much as the request it contained. Indeed, Mr. Bennet, who was not in the habit of receiving letters from any but the Gardiners and his beloved Lizzy, was quite surprised at the missive that Kitty had set on his desk. Ignoring the openly curious look on his daughter's face, Mr. Bennet waited until she had reluctantly left the study to help Mary review the household accounts before breaking the rather official looking wax seal. His eyebrows climbed further upward on his forehead as he read the words held within the pages. Indeed, his eyes swept the letter from beginning to end twice further before he set it down on his desk with a bemused expression on his face. And so Jane would find him, when she came for her weekly visit.

Her footsteps soft, Jane settled herself on the chair opposite him and remarked gently, "Papa, you look most perplexed."

Mr. Bennet regarded his eldest daughter in what he hoped was a stern manner, "My dear child, you really ought not risk your health and that of your own child with your persistent visits! Must I have word with your husband? Surely you must not task your strength!"

Smiling gently, Jane shook her head, "You need not fear, Papa, Mr. Bingley has been most protective. If the physician had not deemed me safe to travel the small distance between Netherfield and Longbourn, I doubt he would have allowed me even visits to my gardens. Indeed, he has insisted on accompanying me today; he would have come to pay his regards but I fear Tommy is monopolizing his attentions in a game of chess."

Mr. Bennet nodded in relief, "Ah yes, I did not think that Mr. Bingley would be so cavalier with your health. But nonetheless, as a father, I cannot help but give up my protectiveness of my daughters most grudgingly, even if they are happily settled with young men whom I hold in admiration and trust. I am glad you have remained close, Jane. I find that I appreciate your company, even though you no longer call Longbourn home."

Jane's smile was sweet but also tinged with a slight sadness, "But you rather wish that Lizzy had settled closer, do you not?"

A bemused expression returned to Mr. Bennet's face, "Have you taken up a study of characters in your sister's absence?"

With a laugh, Jane shook her head, "Oh no Papa. I have merely become attuned to your moods and the needs of our family."

Mr. Bennet patted her hand softly, "Well I know it, child. You have been all that a father could wish for in a daughter and all that your siblings could wish for in a sister. Indeed, I am in awe that a man as flawed as I could have created one as good as you."

Jane chuckled in an open manner that had grown increasingly common since her marriage, though her reply bespoke of the modesty that continued to characterize her bearings. "Oh, surely you exaggerate Papa. Why, Mr. Bingley was just observing the other day that my new habit of bursting into tears without the slightest provocation has become most alarming…though perhaps no more than my complaints that I can no longer abide the smell of meat for it quite turns my stomach. He is most indignant that any child of his should find such scrumptious offerings so offensive."

Mr. Bennet chuckled, "Perhaps I should speak with him and offer my wisdom as well as an
invitation to supper; Cook is providing a most excellent roast I hear. Nonetheless, I believe this phase will pass in its own time. Why, I recall that your Mama made rather peculiar requests of Cook in her time as well – strawberries and sardines on her toast! Really quite intriguing, though I was never tempted to try it for myself. With you, she developed such a fondness for sweetness! I do believe her tea became more sugar than water! But perhaps the amount she imbibed greatly influenced your temperament, for I cannot account for it otherwise."

"Oh dear, then I fear our little one will be in possession of a rather adventurous spirit for I find myself greatly enamored of the spices that Uncle Gardiner sent for Mr. Bingley to examine. Our Cook is quite bewildered at our joint fascination of such strong smelling samples; they do stain most dreadfully to her consternation. She is gracious indeed in utilizing it despite her doubtful fear of the any food from the 'heathens from the East'." Jane's expression gained a rueful look as she unconsciously held a hand to her abdomen as though reassuring her child of her love despite her teasing words.

A light of understanding dawning in his eyes, Mr. Bennet exclaimed, "Ah! That would explain the most peculiar visit I received from your Aunt Philips – she was most insistent that I put a stop to the poison that Mr. Bingley had you serve – a curry I believe it was called? I of course did not think much of it and indicated my full trust that Mr. Bingley knew what he was about. Why, the very idea that he might do you harm – most preposterous!"

Shaking her head at the irony of her father's current words when compared with his earlier comments, Jane responded, "I do hope she becomes more amenable to it, for I believe Uncle Phillips has taken a liking to it. Indeed, Mr. Hardy in town had paid Mr. Bingley a visit with the request of obtaining a supply for his shop in Meryton."

"Your Uncle Gardiner must be glad of such news, I am certain."

"Oh yes. Though I fear Aunt Gardiner will not thank us for adding more responsibilities that will take Uncle Gardiner away from her and the children."

Mr. Bennet waved a hand dismissively, "Oh, I do not think your Aunt Gardiner will have cause to complain much; no, such behavior will be more fitting of the unfortunate junior associates that your Uncle Gardiner has accepted as part and parcel of an expanding business empire. He must give up some direct control in return for some time with his likewise expanding family. Though I suspect he considers it a most beneficial trade on his part."

"I almost feel guilty that Mr. Bingley can no longer aid Uncle Gardiner in the same capacity as he had before our marriage."

His eyes softening at the concern from his gentle daughter, Mr. Bennet once again patted her hand. "Your Uncle Gardiner would much rather have you happily settled; besides, Mr. Bingley still remains close at hand, does he not?"

Jane nodded, "I suppose so; Hertfordshire really is not so far from London."

"Though perhaps a bit more far from Kent."

At such an enigmatic comment, Jane could only look at her father curiously. Seeing the thoughtful look on his face, however, she waited patiently rather than demanding an answer of him. And so father and daughter lapsed into silence, giving Jane an opportunity to appraise her father carefully. Taking in the lines on his face and the graying of the hair at his temples, she made a mental note to ask Mary and Kitty regarding Mr. Bennet's health and to write a letter to Elizabeth to see if a visit of some sort may be arranged. She was glad to see, however, that his eyes remained alit with intelligence and spirit. At the moment, his usual steady gaze appeared distorted as it turned
repeatedly to the pile of papers on his desk. His eyes flickered to them unconsciously, as though an invisible force pulled at his attentions. The slight creased between his brows was rather reminiscent of a similar expression on Lizzy's face whenever she was faced with a most interesting puzzle.

Finally, even Jane found her patience beginning to wane, "Papa? Have you had some unexpected news?"

Seeing his daughter's quiet determination that stood in such contrast to the hesitancy of her tone, Mr. Bennet chose to turn over the sheaf of papers for her perusal rather than answer her directly.

A great smile passed over Jane's face at the news of Henry Fitzwilliam's birth. She made to exclaim her excitement only to interrupt herself as her eyebrows rose and her lips formed around a single sound. "Oh!"

Mr. Bennet nodded in reply to her questioning look, "Quite so. And what do you think of that?"

Jane glanced through the letter one more time to ensure her understanding of the request before meeting her father's eyes. "I do believe our friends to be conspiring with the intent of furthering the friendship between a certain Bennet sister and a certain Fitzwilliam brother."

"I daresay they have more than friendship in mind." Mr. Bennet commented dryly.

Nodding her head in acknowledgement, Jane asked, "What shall be your reply?"

"Hmm...I do believe I shall have Mary a chance to voice her opinions. 'Tis quite an honor, after all, to be named godmother to the future heir of Rosings."

"Then you shall let her go?"

Mr. Bennet sighed, "'Tis a hard lot, to be a father to daughters; the time always comes when I must let you all go. But I suppose you did not mean it in such a sense... I see no reason why Mary should not journey to Rosings. Particularly as I expect your Mr. Bingley to do his brotherly duties and see to her comforts during the trip; he is to be one of the godfathers after all."

"You do not intend to accompany her?"

"No, my dear, even the prospect of seeing Lizzy cannot entice me to leave home and take to the road. I truly am not fond of traveling. Besides, I doubt Mr. Bingley would willingly accompany Mary unless he knew you would be well looked after."

Jane's lips quirked a bit as she fought a grin, "You have given much thought and planning to this matter, Papa. I little think that my opinion would sway your decision."

Humming in a self-satisfied manner, Mr. Bennet replied mildly, "Oh, I suppose. If your Mama were alive, she would have been most enthusiastic in agreeing to such a plan – to have a daughter married to a Viscount and the son of an Earl! She would have been ecstatic. Indeed, I expect she would have already started packing Mary's bags for her at the very moment that the letter arrived."

Still, Jane's cautious nature showed through as she asked, "What will you tell Mary?"

"Will there be much to tell? She is merely going in support of a friend."

"And the Viscount?"

"He is a friend as well, is he not? And being godfather to his nephew, though it is a duty he shall
share with your husband, is not to be taken lightly."

After a brief pause, Mr. Bennet did note, "Though I suppose the pianoforte was a bit much as a present for merely a friend."

Jane shook her head, "I believe Mary will continue to see him as a friend; she is adamant that his heart is indeed lost."

"But hers is not. And you know well that chances are small for her to meet an eligible lad if she remains at Longbourn. Perhaps she will follow the footsteps of Charlotte Lucas and find a love of her own in Kent."

"I did not think you cared to interfere much in such things, Papa."

"Perhaps regaining the responsibilities of the Master of Lonbourn has served as a reminder that I cannot barricade myself behind my books. I played little enough role in the romance of three of my girls, Mary is my last chance to exert some influence."

"Surely not, Papa, what of Tommy?"

"Ah yes, the young scamp shall grow up some day, what a disturbing thought! But he is an amiable sort and will have no trouble finding himself a bride with his open manners; perhaps it is fortunate that he inherited such sunny ways from his poor Mama. I would be most surprised if he would require my meddling…particularly with four sisters and other sundry female relatives available to lend him aid! Mary, though she is in possession of the same family support, is much too content with the state of things to seek out a beau on her own. I suspect she will feel obliged to stay home to keep Tommy and me company once Kitty finally becomes a Lucas; but I truly do not wish for her to hide herself away in such a manner. She is more like you, Jane, in such a matter of duty, more than I care to admit. And though it would bring me great comfort to have at least one daughter at home, I am not ignorant of the fact that she deserves her own happiness. And I have sensed the way the wind blows; as a farmer I am much attuned to the changing seasons and as a father I am likewise attuned to the shifting wishes of my children. Her heart is inclined towards him and his towards her; they are neither yet aware enough to acknowledge such a fact."

Returning the letter to the desk, Jane remarked wryly, "I forget sometimes, that Lizzy learned her ways of assessing the characters of others from a master of the art."

"Then you are not opposed to Mary's journey?"

"As though you truly required my approval, Papa, when you have already come to a conclusion. Nonetheless, I will offer that I find the idea a good one…Perhaps Lady Lucas has the right of it when she stated that one marriage often begets others, particularly among sisters as close as us Bennet girls. Though I do believe she said it as a none-too-subtle hint for John Lucas…Oh! I must write to Lizzy! I expect she would like to know of our opinions while she is at Rosings; the Darcys must be invited as well?"

"Indeed."

"I am certain she will offer her support in this matter."

Mr. Bennet chuckled, "Perhaps I ought to feel sympathy for our Mary; so many willing matchmakers determined to help her make a good match! As for Lizzy, I expect she will understand the situation quite well even without a letter from us. And even if we were to send one, it might not reach her at Pemberley in time before she must travel to Rosings."

"Then why do we not send word of our intentions with Mary? Being a letter carrier would give
her another purpose for this trip."

"So it shall be. Do summon Mary for me, my dear? I believe 'tis time I spoke with her."

True to Mr. Bennet's estimation, Elizabeth did indeed make a most accurate guess at the reasoning of the Fitzwilliams' choice of a godmother. She might have discovered the identity of the chosen candidate sooner but for the short time available to her to arrange for the packing of the luggage, issue the proper instructions for the care of the household in the Darcys' absence, and send a missive to the parson's wife that Mrs. Darcy would be regrettably be absent at the weekly lessons for the tenant children. Indeed, not until the Darcy carriage had left sight of the main house did she make her discovery.

Mr. Darcy smiled fondly at Georgiana's infectious enthusiasm for the newest member of their family and decided to add further to her excitement by saying, "You will be even happier to learn, Georgie, that you shall be reunited with a good friend at Rosings in addition to meeting our new cousin."

The young lady blinked curiously at her brother and sent a questioning look at Elizabeth.

Shaking her head, Elizabeth remarked, "I fear I know not of what he speaks, Georgie." Upon seeing the self-satisfied look on her husband's face, she added, "As you for, husband-mine, you look much too smug for my comfort. Indeed, I was not aware that your visage could contort in such a manner!"

"Contort you say? Why Madame, I have been led to believe that you find my face quite pleasing. Is it not so?"

Her eyes twinkling at Darcy's playful mood, Elizabeth ducked her head to hide her smile, "I do not deny such a truth."

"Then where-upon came your choice of words? Contort indeed!"

Georgiana chose to reply in Elizabeth's stead, "I think I know Lizzy's meaning. Such a look of superiority truly does not become you, Brother."

Sending a mock-hurt look at his sister, Darcy exclaimed, "Et tu, Georgie? How quickly you should abandon a most happy sibling relationship for a friendship of shorter duration?"

"But is not Lizzy a sibling as well now that she is a Darcy? And the bond between sisters is certainly no less than that between a brother and sister. I daresay that it might even be a closer bond in that we may share certain secrets that it would not do to share with any gentleman, even one as caring as you, Brother."

"And so my position as your confidante has thus been supplanted."

Elizabeth rejoined the conversation as she retorted, "Not supplanted, surely? I believe now my turn has come to find fault with your choice of words."

"Pray what word would you choose, Elizabeth?"

"Supplement perhaps…Surely you are aware that love and affection, particularly within family such as ours, only grows with the numbers that are added to it. But enough of our focus on vocabulary choices…will you not reveal the identity of this 'old friend'?"

"Oh yes, do tell, Brother!"
"Very well, I will leave you in suspend no longer. I expect this news to bring you gladness as well, Elizabeth. The child must have godparents to stand with him and our cousins have chosen Miss Mary, that is, Miss Bennet now, for the post of godmother."

Georgiana clapped her hands gleefully, "Oh! That is most excellent news! I have missed her company! I had thought that I might request permission to invite her for a visit to Pemberley, once Lizzy has become well settled. In the fall, perhaps?"

"Perhaps it is as well that she pay us a visit, if only so that you may have some portion of your allowance remaining with the elimination of the need to pay for postage. Greater fortunes than ours may be lost at such an expense!"

"You need not tease me so, Brother, particularly as you did your fair share of adding to such an expense before your marriage."

Smiling in acknowledgement, Darcy turned to his wife, "And what say you, Elizabeth, to my announcement?"

"Oh! I am glad of course! I must own that I have missed my sisters dearly..."

"But…?"

With the gentle pressure of Darcy's hand on hers, Elizabeth added thoughtfully, "But…who are to be the two godfathers?"

"Cousin Reggie and Mr. Bingley. One a brother by blood and another by fortune."

"Oh!" Georgiana traded a speculative glance with Elizabeth, "You do not think…?"

"Any suspicions I have can only remain such until we speak with Anne."

Darcy looked between the two ladies with open curiosity, "I know that look, Lizzy, what are you plotting?"

"Plotting?! I am affronted, Mr. Darcy. I do not plot. I am merely making an observation as to the possible motivations behind such choices."

"You speak in riddles, my dear."

"But do you not enjoy such a past-time? You are a clever man, I am certain you can solve this one as well."

A moment passed before Mr. Darcy began to chuckle. "Then I must maintain that you are plotting once again."

"And I repeat my refusal of such a conjecture. Besides, I believe much of the plotting has already been done. Now the question remains if anything should come of it. Particularly as I believe Papa will reach a similar conclusion as to our cousins' motivations."

"Do you foresee any opposition from Mr. Bennet?" Georgiana looked alarmed at such a possibility.

Rather than answer such a question directly, Elizabeth replied with a question of her own, "What think you, Georgie?"

The Darcy heiress tilted her head a moment before saying resolutely, "He will support Mary, just
he had once granted permission for your visit to Pemberley. He would wish Mary to be happy."

Elizabeth beamed at the young lady, "Such was my thought as well."

"I believe I can also see Aunt Matlock's hand in such a choice."

"Brother?"

Darcy shrugged, "She is most impatient with our cousin, I believe. Now that Richard has produced a child, she would wish to see Reggie make some gesture towards the continuation of the senior Fitzwilliam line. She is too astute not to notice Reggie's continued correspondence with Miss Bennet...and the extravagance of his gift to her."

"She was rather persistent in our conversations regarding my sisters while we were in London." Elizabeth offered.

"Just so. And she would have seen the close friendship between you and Miss Bennet, Georgie. Though she would wish to cement the Fitzwilliams' social status, at heart she is a mother who cares dearly for her children."

"What of Lord Matlock? Surely he will wish for a lady of greater standing for his heir?"

Georgiana shook her head at Elizabeth's question, "Oh no! For all his gruff manners, Uncle Matlock will capitulate readily to Aunt Matlock's wishes, particularly in matters of his sons' preferences. Besides, Mary would not only be Miss Bennet, a girl from the country, but also Miss Bennet, the sister of Mrs. Darcy. Such a distinction will mean much should she ever face the Ton as a prospective match for Cousin Reggie."

"And she certainly will, if our speculations become reality."

"It is fortunate, then, that she had made an initial positive impression."

"Poor Mary," Elizabeth murmured, "Little does she know that her family is plotting thus."

"So you do admit to plotting?" Mr. Darcy could not fight the urge to tease his wife once more.

Elizabeth smiled wryly, "Not yet. I believe I am still merely speculating; the real plotting may begin in earnest once we have spoken with our fellow conspirators at Rosings. And of course I must consult my own sisters; surely Jane and Kitty will both offer their own opinions."

"Then I shall leave the matter in the capable hands of the ladies in our family."

"Do not think you can escape so easily, Brother! We fully expect you to play your part where Cousin Reggie is concerned."

Darcy raised an eyebrow at the insistent tone of his sister's words. "But is not matchmaking the province of women?"

"And has not estate management been declared to belong to the realm of men? I do not believe such distinctions must hold true, particularly not within our family." Elizabeth retorted.

"But surely my lack of experience shall only prove detrimental to the desired effects of you fair ladies' plans?"

"Nonsense! If the stories Mrs. Reynolds tells of your youth are true, then you are not without some measure of deviousness, husband."
"I know not to what you allude."

"Surely you cannot be insinuating that Mrs. Reynolds has been telling me falsehoods of a certain young lad and the puppy he brought home despite his father's objections to a common stray as pet to the heir of Pemberley?"

"Puck was not just any pet; he was a dear friend, a most loyal companion for a rambunctious youth!"

"Ah! So our housekeeper does remain trustworthy and I have no cause to doubt the veracity of the tales of you teaching young Puck to distract the kitchen staff so that you might pilfer biscuits before supper time!"

Georgiana giggled at the image that such a comment depicted, "Did you really, brother?"

Smiling in fondness at memories of his childhood companion, "Puck always was a clever one, far more so than any of the hounds Papa would have preferred to be my companion. Why, he even managed to push Richard into the pond during one of our boyish quarrels. I fear Richard never quite liked to be near water since that time." A gleam of inspiration suddenly struck him, "Perhaps I shall obtain a puppy for young Master Henry when the time comes."

"Oh my, what would Lady Catherine say to such a new addition to Rosings?"

Darcy laughed, "Any child of Richard's will certainly not be satisfied with merely staying indoors. Even Anne was not always a quiet child. I suspect that we shall see much change come to Rosings in these coming years, particularly as both Richard and Anne are desiring of a large family. I suspect Richard will find himself beholden to an altogether different sort of army."

"And perhaps Aunt Catherine will enjoy exerting her influence over a new generation? But I do not care to speculate much further, particularly as we shall have the chance to observe her reactions for ourselves soon."

Darcy turned to his sister, "Then what would you have us discuss, Georgie?"

"I would so love to hear more of these stories to which Lizzy alluded."

"Ah, you desire to be entertained at my expense!"

Elizabeth shook her head, "Oh no! Mrs. Reynolds is most generous in her story-telling; she holds you in high esteem and would never dream of saying an unkind word. But in case you would wish to avoid embarrassment, perhaps you may share some tales of your own volition?"

"Hm…I suppose I can do so…but only if you would agree to my condition."

"That would depend upon the details of your demand."

"In the spirit of fairness, I propose that we each share stories of our youth with Georgie. I daresay you had some childhood adventures of your own, Elizabeth."

"I see you are adamant to press for such an exchange. So be it, I agree to your terms."

And so the Darcy carriage moved towards Kent with its occupants laughing as they shared fond recollections from youth.

At Rosings, another set of three were also reminiscing upon scenes from the past. Or, perhaps more accurately, only two occupants of the private garden were speaking as the third was still
much too young to do anything more than slumber in his new basket, a gift to which the trees at Willowmere lent not a few branches.

One of the ladies peeked into the bundle of blankets nested within the basket and, reassured of the young one's quiet repose, turned to her companion with a smile, "He is such a darling! You must be quite proud to have such a well-behaved grandson, Catherine."

The target of her words shook her head, "Ah, that is because you have caught him at a rare moment of quiet, Adelaide. Listening to his usual cries, I can have no doubt that he is indeed Richard's son. Truly, even at such a young age he has a loudness more befitting a battlefield!"

"Oh you cannot hide your fondness of him from me, Catherine. I have seen you dote upon your nephews and Georgiana from afar; this new babe must be all the more dear to you for being your direct blood descendant."

Lady Catherine did not deign to respond to so personal an observation but instead remarked, "As I behold him now, I cannot quite believe that he shall be Master of Rosings someday. Truly one as small and fragile as he will falter under the weight of such a responsibility. It is well that he slumbers while he could, in his blissful state of ignorance of the expectations upon his person."

"Did not Darcy look as such when he was born? And yet he has grown to be a most acceptable Master for Pemberley."

Lady Adelaide's words caused Lady Catherine to withdraw her hand from young Henry's downy head where it had unconsciously settled. "I suppose he has. And it will not be long now that he shall become a father himself. I wish Anne could have lived to see such an outcome. She was always so proud of him, such an attentive mother who bathed her children with her love. Certainly they were never in question of the fact that she had their best interest at heart. Even Georgiana… did you know, Anne had spent her last days writing letters to her daughter to be delivered each year upon her birthday? I do not think she managed more than eighteen before her hand grew too tremulous to hold her pen steadily. She would have been a natural with this little one. But me, I fear he shall know me only as stern Grandmother de Bourgh. I have not my sister's natural instincts with children. Even my own Anne, whom I admit to loving with a fierce pride that only a mother could feel, had only wished to escape my heavy-handed ways."

Placing her teacup onto its saucer, Lady Adelaide remarked, "It is not like you, Catherine, to be so melancholy. Even when you had discovered about Lewis's habits…"

Looking at baby Henry, Lady Catherine seemed oddly vulnerable, "I would only say such things to you, my oldest friend. With Lewis, I had my indignant fury to sustain me; how dared he make a fool of me?! When my family's lineage far outstrips his? With my own sister, however, I could not help but be consumed by my jealousy. Perhaps it would have been better had she been of a persuasion to lord her beauty and her ease among company over me. Instead, she was always so frustratingly kind and understanding that my conviction to outshine her through my marriage made the victory a hallow one."

"But sibling rivalry is to be expected, is it not?"

"Can it truly be called such when only one of us truly cared for the outcome? Truly, the competition I desired never manifested in reality. My battle could only be fruitless against a non-existent opponent. I did not understand her motivations, not until I held my own Anne in my arms. I could not have foreseen the sensations that swept over me at beholding her smile, her aunt's smile - such a guileless expression! My child could not have had any other name but that of my sister's. A sister whom I thought I hated until she entrusted me with the box of letters for Georgiana and extracted a promise from me to care for my nephew. Darcy was always such a
joyful child, secure in the knowledge of his parents' love for him and for each other. I saw him, perhaps I was the only one to have seen it, as he stood of Georgiana's cradle and promised to be her knight against all the ills in the world. I could wish for no less for my own child; that she would have such a caring protector and not make her mother's mistake. Perhaps I twisted Anne's wish to my own ends and willfully misinterpreted the promise as a hope for marriage. And in trying to push my will upon my daughter, I almost lost her."

Lady Adelaide was silent as she recalled the first few days when her friend had discovered Lewis de Bourgh's transgressions against his marriage vows. Young Anne de Bourgh had barely been a week old when her mother was forced to dismiss her personal maid, a girl who had been in her employ since her coming out, from the staff. Lady Adelaide, then herself a young bride, had sat with her friend as she stared unseeingly at the wall in her room. Lewis had of course left Kent conveniently on matters of business, leaving his wife to care for the repercussions of his actions and withstand the whispers among the staff. Catherine Fitzwilliam had never been one to shed tears and Catherine de Bourgh was not a woman to change her ways so readily. Her face betrayed none of her anguish but her eyes, burning with an intensity that caused Adelaide to shiver despite herself, spoke of her sense of betrayal. The two friends had continued to sit in silence, an eerie tenseness that made the servant who brought the tray of a simple supper meal of soup and bread almost stumble in her rush to escape the confines of so dark an atmosphere. Still, Lady Catherine did not utter a word nor show any signs that she possessed more life than the chair upon which she sat. When the shadows grew long and the windows only showed a world of darkness did she make to stand and move through Rosings' hallways, silent as a ghost, towards the nursery. Lady Adelaide, fearful of her friend's condition, had followed quietly. The scene that met her in the softly lit room brought hope to her heart even as she sent a silent thankful prayer heavenward that Catherine's strength had not deserted her. Lady Catherine had stood with baby Anne cradled in her arms, the gentleness of her hold at odds with the fierce determination in her voice as she promised to find a son-in-law who could be depended upon to care for Anne when Lady Catherine had passed.

With such an image in mind, Lady Adelaide remarked in a resolutely cheerful voice, "Elizabeth Darcy had told me once that she believed that the secret to a happy life is to think only of the past as its remembrances gives her pleasure, for she cannot alter the decisions that were made in yesterdays. I do not know if I can subscribe to her philosophy completely, but I do know that no one can blame you for acting with the benefit of your child in mind. And did you not fulfill your promise to both your sister and yourself? Are not Anne and Darcy are both happily married? Certainly to partners that you could not have foreseen, but partners of their own choice who also chose them in turn? And, looking at young Henry, I am convinced that the future holds much happiness as well. You may not have your sister's softness, Catherine, but I think this young one will do well to learn from your strength."

"Besides," she added with a chuckle, "it is well that he has you for a grandmother, otherwise he might have become much spoiled. His name, though a strong one, might certainly become a state of reality should he rearing be left to the sole responsibility of his parents."

A ghost of a smile hovered over Lady Catherine's lips as she exclaimed, "You always were an optimist, Adelaide!"

"Not at all! I merely conjecture that this child will need a source of discipline and who better than you to provide it, my friend?"

Lady Catherine shook her head, "No Adelaide, even Alistair would have agreed with my statement, though certainly he would have done so with great reluctance. In our youth, I had heard him question Anne as to our friendship. Anne had only admonished him for his lack of tact, saying that everyone deserved a confidante."
"Oh Alistair. He did seem quite eager to question my sanity for continuing my acquaintance with you. I am glad he has Beatrice to scold him now in Anne's place."

"I always did think well of Beatrice, though she was always more Anne's friend than mine, for all that we grew up together. She was truly accomplished and a worthy successor of Mother's place in Society. Her only fault is that she seems truly to care for that brother of mine."

Lady Adelaide looked at her friend knowingly, "You would not have capitulated to her requests of Anne's presence in London prior to the wedding if you did not truly respect her."

"She is a formidable opponent in a battle of wills. The Fitzwilliam family has no place for shrinking violets."

"Then I think you will think well of Mrs. Darcy; she certainly is of a propensity to give her opinions quite decidedly, though always in such a charming manner that you cannot but believe in the soundness of her reasoning."

Giving an unladylike snort, Lady Catherine waved aside such praise, "I suspect you say such things only because you were determined to think favorably of the young lady who means much to your daughter-in-law."

Matching her friend's actions with a roll of her own eyes, Lady Adelaide countered, "Perhaps my opinions were suitably prejudiced in her favor, but certainly you cannot argue with the fact that she has won over other members of your family and the Ton quite thoroughly. I refuse to believe that Beatrice had not written to you of Mrs. Darcy's success during the Season."

"I do recall some comments that Elizabeth Darcy has much in common with my late sister. Are you not afraid that I shall resent her based on this feature alone?"

"Your opinion is for you to decide, of course, particularly as you are to meet her in person soon, but I should think that you will like her simply for bringing Darcy happiness. And for all your comments to the contrary, you did love your sister in your own way…Besides, Charlotte has long been her friend and you cannot deny that you do trust her judgment."

"'Tis a pity your Andrew caught her first; she would have made a welcomed addition into my own family."

Though such a comment was made in her characteristic dry tones and without the warmth that such words might have implied otherwise, Lady Adelaide knew that they were high praise indeed coming from her friend. "You cannot be thinking of Reginald?!

"And why not? He is in need of a proper Lady Milton who might in time become a proper Lady Matlock. Charlotte would have filled such a role quite admirably."

"I cannot deny that; certainly she has already made quick study of becoming Lady Ashbury. She has even rekindled Andrew's interest in politics, can you imagine?"

"'Tis unfortunate that such a prospect had not occurred to me before I allowed her to become an Ashbury."

"Allowed her?! Surely not, Catherine. Even your prodigious will could not have kept my Andrew away from the lady God had intended for him!"

"You cannot know that, Adelaide, had Charlotte met Reggie first, who's to say that she would not have become a Fitzwilliam?"
Lady Adelaide shook her head, "No. I cannot imagine such an outcome. They are simply ill suited for one another; even you must be able to see the discordant aspects of their manners! Besides, I suspect that Richard and Anne have their own thoughts on the matter."

"You refer, I trust, to their choice of Miss Mary Bennet as godmother for my grandson?"

"An astonishing choice, is it not?"

"Is it? My Anne is quite fond of all the Bennet sisters, why should she not choose one of them?"

"I cannot fault Anne in her friendship for I myself am rather fond of the Bennets, but why should she choose the third daughter?"

"I expect because the duration of her acquaintance is longest with her; they had met in London after all."

"But did she not also meet Mrs. Darcy on that occasion? And as Mrs. Darcy is already family, would she not have made a more suitable choice?"

"Anne's interactions with Mrs. Darcy had been less than that with the other sisters; a fact for which I lay the blame at Darcy’s feet. I have no doubt he served as a suitable distraction… Adelaide, you know well my distaste for unnecessary convolutions in conversation, I wish you would seize your hints in favor of revealing your thoughts on my daughter's motivations."

"Very well, as you ask for directness, I shall say only that I believe that some matchmaking is afoot in the search for a Lady Milton."

"You cannot mean that Anne intends Miss Mary for Reginald!"

"No, such is not my meaning…"

Lady Catherine made to sigh impatiently at Lady Adelaide's choice to continue the game, only to be interrupted at the next sentences to be uttered. "I believe both Anne and Richard both intend for such an outcome. I wonder that such a possibility has not occurred to you."

"I will not deny that Miss Mary is an accomplished young lady; her skill on the pianoforte, despite the lack of benefit from lengthy instruction, is very nearly at the level of Georgiana's. She is a pleasant girl, quite mild mannered, very proper. But…I cannot imagine her in the post of Lady Milton! She appeared to me easily cowered and quite shy."

"Ah, but first impressions can be misleading. And with sisters such as hers, can you doubt that Miss Mary might be in possession of strength of her own? As for her quiet nature, have you not thought that Reggie would prefer sweetness in a wife? From what I observed in London and guessed from the few comments Beatrice saw fit to make, certainly he finds his music a more desirable companion than any of the human persuasion."

Any reply Lady Catherine might have made was interrupted as a footman announced the arrival of Lord Milton himself.

"Aunt Catherine, Lady Adelaide." As Reginald Fitzwilliam rose from his bow, both ladies could see that though he remained pale, his complexion no longer held the waxy appearance of the sickly.

While Lady Adelaide smiled kindly in greeting, Lady Catherine beckoned her nephew forward imperiously, "I suppose you would like to meet your nephew? Particularly as you are to be one of the godfathers?"
A slightly smile passed over Lord Milton's face as he glanced at the sleeping infant. "I see he already has the unruly curls of the Fitzwilliams."

"And well he should, his lineage is impeccable. Now then, are my brother and sister arrived?"

Tearing his eyes away from his nephew, Lord Milton replied, "Yes. Mother would like me to apologize for her lapse in manners but she had a slight headache and wished to rest a while."

"Ah yes, Beatrice was never fond of traveling. There, you have met your nephew now, do go join your brother and his companions at the pond; Anne had a wish for a picnic and I saw no reason why she should not have a reprieve to regain her strength in the sunshine. I expect this house will see its fair share of visitors quite soon. Darcy is bringing his wife and Georgiana and Mr. Bingley is traveling from Hertfordshire with Miss Bennet."

"Mr. Bingley, Aunt?"

"Why yes! Goodness, did you not know? Mr. Bingley is to share the responsibilities of godfather with you and Miss Bennet is to be godmother! I would have thought that Richard would have informed you of so important a decision. I really must speak with him on this oversight."

"Miss Bennet?"

"Truly you must have spend too much time abroad to have forgotten the King's English in such a manner! I can find no other cause for your insistence on repeating everything that I say. Yes, Miss Bennet. Now do move along, Richard will no doubt wish to see you so that he may extol his son's virtues to you in person. Really, I find that he is much too overly fond of the boy; such attentions will ruin him I am sure."

Though Lord Milton would have liked to ask further about the matter of Miss Bennet, he could not easily disobey what was certainly a direct order.

When his figure had disappeared beyond stone arch that marked the entrance to the small garden, Lady Adelaide turned to her friend in an admonishing manner, "Really Catherine, must you speak in such an abrupt manner to your kin?"

"They have become used to it; I cannot in good conscience leave their expectations unfulfilled. Besides, Richard really is the better person for Reginald to find the answers he seeks."

"Are you not afraid that Richard will blame you for disrupting whatever plan he had concocted with Anne?"

"Then it must not be much of a plan if a simple action on my part can cause any drastic alterations. I had hoped that he learned something from his days in the Army else the years he kept my Anne waiting were surely in vain."

As he hastened down the pathway to the destination that Lady Catherine had appointed for him, Lord Milton could not but think upon the news she had imparted. He knew well that Miss Bennet might have at one time referred to any of four individuals. Now that the older two sisters were married, however, it could only refer to either Miss Mary or Miss Kitty. The thought occurred to him that his Aunt Catherine might have intentionally left out the detail of which Miss Bennet simply to torment him but such an idea was dismissed as soon as it had formed. Besides, he did not truly care to know. Surely Miss Mary would have been a preferred conversational partner to the more loquacious Miss Kitty. No, his curiosity was merely piqued as the result of the suddenness of the knowledge that a Bennet had been made godmother. The matter decided in his mind, he paused upon the swell of the hill to gaze at the pond before him. Truly that particularly
body of water was nearing the size that made it more appropriate to call it a small lake. Though it lacked the liveliness of the streams that criss-crossed through Pemberley’s lands, the gentle ripples, reflecting the sun’s rays in a dazzling array of sparkles, that disturbed its otherwise placid surface made it no less beautiful.

A slight movement from the figures under the shade of a nearby tree caught his attentions and, as he drew nearer, Lord Milton could make out the welcoming look upon his brother's face as he waved in greeting.

"Reggie! I am glad to see that you have arrived at last. Have you seen my son? Is he not that most perfect babe that was ever born? I fancy that he will grow up to be quite the charmer, much like his father."

Anne closed her fan with a snap and nudged her husband playfully, "I do hope you will not claim all the credit for our son; I do believe I played at least a small part in his entry into this world."

Colonel Fitzwilliam deftly caught his wife's wrist and delivered to her hand a soft kiss, "I daresay you played more than a small part, my dear. Indeed, I must credit you with most if not all the effort in ensuring his safe arrival."

A soft chuckle from the Viscount caused the couple to break their locked gaze. As Anne snatched her hand back and sought to hide her blush behind the reopened fan, he lowered himself onto the blanket next to his brother. "I see marriage has suited you rather well, Richard; even the demands of fatherhood has not damaged your sense of romance."

Her moment of embarrassment forgotten, Anne remarked, "Do not encourage him so, Reggie, he shall see such praise as proof of his charm."

Richard merely continued to grin unrepentantly, "Oh I cannot claim to be the only charmer." Gesturing languidly to the waters, he added, "See Sir Andrew and Lady Ashbury in their boat? He was rather keen on making a show of his strength and insisted upon manning the paddles single-handedly."

Turning to the waters again, the Viscount could make out the bright white of a parasol and that of a gentleman's shirt as the boat that carried its occupants ever closer to the shore.

"Ah, I see that Andrew might have finally exhausted his energies."

As they watched, Sir Andrew tied the boat securely to its mooring before gallantly handing his wife from the vessel. In a rare moment of tenderness in public, Charlotte could be seen lifting her handkerchief gently to his brow.

"Perhaps we ought to avert our eyes from so private a moment." Anne murmured.

Turning away from such a sight in favor of reaching for a plum from the pile the rested on the blanket, the Colonel nodded in agreement, "Right you are, my dear. Now then, Reggie, do have a taste of this fruit! I must admit that I never quite understood Darcy's belief that the produce of one's own estate are all the tastier for the simple fact that it is the direct result of proper management from an estate's owner. You will find that I am a firm converter to his belief."

"And so you find the life of a gentleman farmer quite palatable?"

Humming contently, the Colonel agreed readily, "I must say I find it quite a happy change from the cold victuals of the camp-grounds. Though I still do not see how it could occupy so much of Darcy's time. Certainly the running of an estate keeps one quite active, but certainly not to the extent that he so often claims!"
Anne shook her head, "Have you forgotten that you have the benefit of Mother's presence at Rosings? She remains rather unconvinced that you have the seriousness required not to turn the estate to ruin."

"Aunt Catherine is wise indeed to retain the reigns of running Rosings."

"How you wound me, brother, in your doubts of my skills. You should feel fortunate that I am too kind a host to raise conflict with a guest. As for having aid, must I remind you that Pemberley now has a Mrs. Darcy in residence? Certainly she will help alleviate some of our cousin's burden."

"Are you not afraid that Darcy will resent you for disrupting his peace so soon after his marriage?"

"Resent me?! Why should he resent me? Surely the christening of a new Fitzwilliam is reason enough for him to stir from Pemberley."

"And based on Aunt Catherine's comment as to the identity of the godmother, I suppose Mrs. Darcy might appreciate the opportunity to see one of her sisters."

The Colonel and Anne traded a surprised look before Richard commented, "Oh? And what precisely did our esteemed Aunt reveal?"

Matching his brother's nonchalant tone, the Viscount replied, "Only that you had chosen a Miss Bennet."

"I suppose you are curious as to which one we have chosen?"

If the couple sought an answer to their speculations as to the Viscount's intentions towards Miss Mary, they were surely disappointed in his reply. "Should I be curious? I did not think Mrs. Darcy had a favorite among her sisters and if she did, surely Mrs. Bingley would hold such a position."

The Fitzwilliams shared another significant look but any further questioning was interrupted as the Ashburys made their way to the shade at last.

"Lord Milton! You have come to join our merry party." The two gentlemen inclined their heads in greeting as Charlotte curtsied and offered her own welcome.

"Do have something to drink, Andrew, you appear quite flushed."

"'Twas only a bit of exertion, quite invigorating really. Perhaps you may venture on such a task with Mrs. Fitzwilliam? " Nonetheless, Lord Ashbury gladly accepted the glass the Colonel offered to him.

Taking a similar glass from Anne with a grateful smile, Charlotte remarked, "It was oddly peaceful, Anne. If the Colonel can be persuaded to try his hand at rowing, you might likewise discover the water lilies on the far side."

"Alas I have too much the legs of a landsman; there was a reason I chose the Army rather than the Navy after all. I fear I cannot indulge you, my dear, if you wished for such a pursuit. Though perhaps my brother may be prevailed upon to play boatman?"

"If such is your wish, cousin, I would be glad to offer my services."

With a smile at so gracious an offer, Anne nodded and put aside her fan in favor of her own parasol. "I must own that I would like to see these blossoms."
As the cousins made their way to the boat, Sir Andrew turned to his host, "What game is afoot, Richard?"

"Game? I do not know your meaning."

"Come now, I have not missed the look that passed between you and Anne. I fear our arrival has interrupted a conversation of the most delicate nature."

"I would not wish to alter the outcomes by speaking my thoughts out loud."

"Do not press him so, Andrew, I expect whatever scheme he has planned will make itself known once the other guests arrive." Charlotte turned shrewd eyes to the Colonel, "Particularly, I believe, the contingent from Hertfordshire?"

"Your wife is much too clever, Andrew. Indeed, I have hope that my brother will find happiness again. And now I will say no more on the subject. Instead, what's this I hear about your attendance at an abolitionist meeting while in London?"

"Charlotte and I did indeed partake in such a meeting, but I fear I found their position much too radical for my comfort. While I agree with Charlotte's views on equality of mankind, I cannot support immediate emancipation. No, I am convinced that a gradual shift is needed, otherwise our economy would surely collapse."

"And though it irks me that the freedom of individuals must remain so curtailed, I can see the sense in my husband's reasoning. We may not feel the effects as keenly in England, but a sudden change will certainly undermine the economies of the colonies that rely on such labor."

"I imagine the plantation owners must be compensated for their loss of property?" the Colonel asked thoughtfully.

Charlotte nodded. "Quite. Even though I disagree most strongly with the treatment of any man or woman as an object to be bartered or bought, I cannot imagine that such owners would give up their workforce readily otherwise."

Even as he continued to discuss such a serious matter with his guests, the Colonel could not help but wonder if Anne was able to glean any further hints from his brother.

The boat was mostly silent as it bore its occupants across the pond. The only sign of its passing was the rhythmic splash of water as the strokes of the paddles propelled the vessel forward in its journey to seek out the water lilies. Neither Anne nor the Viscount made to dispel the peaceful quiet until the flowers were in sight. Only then did Anne speak.

Reaching out and caressing the petals of one flower gently, Anne murmured, "I must thank you, Cousin, for indulging my wish to see these blossoms."

"They are quite beautiful and well-worth the journey."

Turning back to her companion, Anne remarked, "I believe they are well suited for you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Are water lilies not optimistic symbols of delight and happiness? Do they not symbolize peace and new spirit?"

"As I cannot claim to be well versed in the language of blossoms, I must trust in the soundness of your knowledge."
"Then I must reiterate my comment that they suit you uncommonly well. You are much recovered of spirit; I am glad of it."

"Time has been kind to me."

"I hope you are not saddened at being named godfather."

"Saddened? Why should I be saddened?"

"I can only imagine that a godson is a poor substitute for a child of your own."

When the only reply she received was silence, Anne made quick to apologize, "I did not mean to remind you of your sorrow."

Settling the oars carefully to allow the boat to drift unassisted, the Viscount turned back to meet Anne's concerned eyes. "My sorrow is never far from my consciousness, though it has lessened in intensity. But you need not fear, for I am not offended. I merely feel grateful that I have such a caring family, who would help with my healing."

"Then you would fulfill Aunt Matlock's wish of finding a new Lady Milton to join the family?"

"I...my mourning period is not yet complete."

Anne's voice remained gentle. "Surely you know that the length of such a period is for you to decide? No one would think less of you for shortening it should you meet a lady who can bring you happiness once more."

"I have not thought seriously of remarrying."

"I hope you will not think my unheeded advice bothersome, but I simply must insist that you give it due consideration. We are not meant to go through this life alone; nor are we meant to live solely in remembrance of the past. I wish you to find a worthy companion to give you hope for the future."

"My brother is a lucky man to have you at his side."

Anne smiled, "For all his rough edges, Richard too cares deeply for your happiness. Promise me you will think on the matter?"

"I will."

Satisfied, Anne turned again to the flowers, "I wonder if our guests would appreciate bowls of these blossoms in their rooms. Perhaps I ought to have the servants gather some to brighten the main-house."

"Then may I suggest Sweet Williams for the Darcy's? Though the lilies are beautiful, I do not know if they quite suit Mrs. Darcy."

"I do believe you are correct. Lizzy does possess much more spirit than these docile flowers. Their tranquility suits Georgie and Mary much better."

"Ah, so Miss Mary is the chosen Bennet?"

"Oh yes. Mr. Bennet had sent word that he did not dare leave young Tommy to his own devices and that Mr. Bingley would help escort Mary to Kent."
"Georgie will be very happy to be reunited with such a dear friend."

"As will you, I expect."

"Me?"

"Yes. You shall have a partner for discourse and Mama will have no cause to criticize you for your lack of sociability."

"I must thank you, cousin."

"If you will but row us back to shore, I shall consider your debt paid in full."

"As you wish."
Friendship

Mary's first sighting of Rosings gave her a strange sense of foreboding. The sharp spires on the various towers put her in mind of the Gothic novels that Kitty was wont to read. The thunderclouds that threatened an imminent storm did nothing to dispel the feeling of gloom.

At her side, Mr. Bingley gave an appreciative whistle, “Quite an imposing structure, is it not?”

“It is certainly very…grand.” Mary's voice faltered as she wondered yet again at the Fitzwilliams' choice. Surely she was not worthy of the post of godmother to the heir of such a vast estate.

Her worries were momentarily dispelled as a cry of joy rang from the doorway and Georgiana flew towards her in a flurry of pink muslin. “Oh Mary! How glad I am to see you!”

Pausing only to dip a quick perfunctory curtsy to Mr. Bingley, Miss Darcy wasted no time in pulling Mary away from the carriage, “You must come meet your godson; he is the most darling baby I have ever seen!”

“Simply because he is the only baby you have had the opportunity to examine closely!” Mr. Darcy's voice was full of good humor as he and Elizabeth came to meet the travelers at a much more sedate pace.

“Then you had better be quick and provide me with a nephew of my own for careful comparison, Brother!”

Ignoring her husband's sputtering, Elizabeth smiled at her sister, “Mary! I am glad to see that you are none the worse for the road!” Turning to greet Mr. Bingley with a curtsy, she added, “Welcome to Rosings. Anne would be here to greet you herself, but she and the Colonel had gone to visit with the parson and his wife. I fear Mrs. Hempsworth has been ailing of late. Lady Catherine and Lord and Lady Matlock are currently at Willowmere to take tea with Lady Adelaide.”

“Lizzy! Oh, Papa and Jane sent letters with me for you!”

“All in good time…you must be weary from your travels; come, allow me to show you to your room so that you might rest.”

At the disappointed look on Georgiana's face, Mary shook her head, “I am well enough. Mr. Bingley is a most kind brother and ensured my comforts during the journey. I am quite eager to meet young Henry; I wonder if he shall be as troublesome as Tommy was.”

“If you are certain?”

Mary simply nodded.

Turning away from her brother with a triumphant smile, Georgiana grasped her friend's hand eagerly and tugged her towards the main house.

Mr. Darcy shook his head at his sister's antics, “It is well that Aunt Catherine is not in residence at present, she would certainly be appalled at Georgie's lack of manners. For a young lady who maintains that she’s ready to enter society, she remains remarkably like a child.”

Mr. Bingley smiled easily, “I find her manners easily excusable; indeed, I find myself honored that she feels at ease to act in so open a manner. I shall simply see it as a sign that she sees me as
Oh but surely you know that you *are* family, Mr. Bingley. Even Papa agrees that Georgie may be counted as an honorary Bennet. As you are husband to our Jane, so you are brother for our Georgie. Indeed, you might count doubly as a brother, for I do believe Mr. Darcy holds you in much esteem.”

Bingley smiled at so generous a statement. “And I had been of the mind that through my marriage I had successfully made Jane a Bingley rather than be made a Bennet. I must thank you, Mrs. Darcy, for pointing out the error in my reasoning.”

Mr. Darcy gave a hearty chuckle, “And now you have had a small taste of my life, Bingley. Mrs. Darcy has a certain gift in being in the right more often than not.”

“But I see that you are no worse for the wear, old friend. Indeed, I do not believe I have ever seen you so animated!”

“Marriage is a strange state of affairs, Bingley. Even when I find myself at the mercies of not one but two witty ladies, I cannot but feel blissful.”

Elizabeth turned away to direct the servants who were unloading the trunks in an effort to hide her blush at the fond look Mr. Darcy sent her way.

Looking again at his friend, Darcy directed their footsteps towards the main hall. Such an action proved quite timely for just as the doorway closed behind them and the servants disappeared with the luggage, the skies opened and torrents of rain made quick work of erasing the tracks the horses and coach wheels had made.

Raising her voice slightly to be heard over the loud crack of thunder, Elizabeth spoke, “I must thank you Mr. Bingley, for bringing Mary to us safely.”

“I was doing no more than my brotherly duty, Mrs. Darcy. Besides, Mrs. Bingley had impressed upon me that Miss Bennet was a more sought-after guest than my humble self. She wished for me to tell you that Mr. Bennet is most intent that Miss Bennet should experience a satisfactory renewal of *all* her friendships during her stay in Kent.”

Nodding in understanding, Elizabeth smiled slightly, “Dear Papa. I must write to him so that he might know that not a few individuals have taken shared interest that her stay should be pleasant. If you will excuse me, gentlemen.”

Bowing politely, Darcy and Bingley turned to a nearby parlor as Elizabeth left to pen such a letter.

Handing his friend a glass of spirits ere he poured one for himself, Darcy asked with a slight grin, “I see that you too have been enlisted in the scheme to add further to the connections within our family.”

Mr. Bingley laughed cheerfully, “Indeed, when I noted that such speculations held even Mr. Bennet’s attention, I knew that no escape would be available to me. Perhaps young Tommy said it best; he was of the mind that as long as Miss Bennet's happiness could be ensured, he would not resent having yet another sister move away from Longbourn.”

“And how fares young Master Bennet? His hand is much improved in the letters he has seen fit to send to Pemberley.”

“He remains resentful that he is not gaining more quickly in height despite my insistence that I did not truly grow until I was two and ten. The issue of his stature aside, I believe young Tommy is
growing in other ways. Though he may not say so, I know Mr. Bennet to be prodigiously proud of his son's progress in his studies. Tommy has also made excellent use of the fencing manual you sent; indeed, the book has already shown signs of being well worn-out given the frequency with which young Mr. Bennet peruses it. He still retains his boyish charm, but I can already catch glimpses of the man he shall become some day. Longbourn will rest in safe hands.”

“Mrs. Darcy will be glad to hear of it; her family is not often far from her mind. How goes your own adventures in managing Netherfield?”

“Well, I believe. Mr. Bennet is most kind in offering advice when I am in need. Though, I must admit that I am grateful that Netherfield is not to the size of Pemberley. I do not know how you manage it!”

“With the help of a trustworthy steward and now, fortunately for me, with the exceptional aid of Mrs. Darcy.”

“Nonetheless, I maintain that Netherfield is enough for me.”

“Once your own child comes, I expect your life will be full indeed.”

“I suppose so… I know 'tis early yet, but I was wondering if you and Mrs. Darcy would agree to be godparents for our little one?”

“Should not such a decision be discussed with Mrs. Bingley?”

“I would not offer if I had not discussed the matter with my dear Jane. She may be of a most gentle nature, but even she will not easily forgive my oversight in so important a matter.”

“Then we would be delighted.”

“Very good. Now, I hope you will forgive me, old chap, but speaking of my wife does remind me that I ought to send my own note to Hertfordshire. It would not do to worry her, particularly in her condition.”

Left to his own devices, Darcy made his way to the quarters that had been given to him and Elizabeth for the duration of their stay at Rosings. Standing in the open doorway that connected their parlor with a more intimate sitting room, he gazed across the dimly lit room at the figure of his wife. Her back was to him as she faced the wide windows that afforded a clear view of the wild storm that raged outdoors. When her body trembled slightly at the next clap of thunder, Darcy moved quickly across the room, picked up her discarded shawl from where it lay draped across the back of her writing chair, and wrapped both it and his arms softly around her shoulders.

At her surprised jump, he whispered, his breath close to her ear, “Forgive me for startling you. But you appeared chilled as you stood by the window. Will you not come away and be seated more comfortably in a chair?”

Leaning into his arms, Elizabeth's gaze remained fixed on raindrops that beat relentlessly against the windowpanes. “But the storm is so beautiful, in a wild, unconstrained way. As children, my sisters would often huddle together under the covers to hide from the storm…”

“But not you?”

Elizabeth smiled, though he could not see it, “No. I was born on a wild day such as this; the thunder was my friend as it greeted me when I came into the world. An ill omen, Mama had said, as though the lightning was at fault for engendering my temperament.”
“Did you not have a letter to write?”

“Worry not, I have not neglected my task. But my friend was calling to me and I could not help but come to watch it play.”

Pressing a soft kiss to the curls atop her head, Darcy sighed in contentment, “Then I hope it will not mind sharing your company.”

“You will find my friend most generous.”

As thought in agreement with her words, another flash of lightening briefly lit the sky, followed quickly by another clap of thunder.

In the brief silence that followed, Elizabeth remarked, “It is well that Mr. Bingley and Mary arrived in time to avoid such a storm.”

“Indeed; surely their carriage might have lost the road in such heavy rainfall.”

After yet another greeting from Elizabeth’s friends, Darcy asked, “Are we not being callous?”

“How so?”

“While I too agree that your sister and Cousin Reggie are well suited for one another, I cannot help but wonder if it is too soon still. If I should lose you…”

Instead of trying to speak over the sound of the next roll of thunder, Elizabeth turned so that she could gaze up at her husband. Holding her hand to his lips, she shook her head. When silence returned, she implored, “Hush, Sweet William, do not speak of so tragic a possibility.”

Moving his hands to her waist so as to hold her securely against him, Darcy sighed, “When we had quarreled after news of Wickham’s death, I feared that I would lose your friendship. But now…now my nightmares are even more frightening. I cannot lose you, Elizabeth.”

Pressing a soft kiss to his lips, Elizabeth maintained, “And you shall not. Ours is a happy ending, my love. And I only wish that our cousin would have a happy ending as well. We are not forcing a union between him and Mary, though it might seem it from all the speculations. We are merely giving them an opportunity to see if such a future would be welcomed. “

“We are presenting them with a possible choice, then?”

“Just so. Though my fondest wish would be to see our planning come to fruition, I will not force my sister onto a path that is not of her choosing. Nor would I wish to see our cousin make a decision before he is ready; such haste would only prove detrimental to his future happiness. His Elena will always occupy a special place in his heart, but love does not diminish the more one gives.”

Pausing in her explanation as she caught the slight grin on Darcy’s face, Elizabeth wondered, “Why do you smile so?”

Returning her kiss with one of his own, Darcy replied, “For your clever insights.”

“I am in danger of becoming quite the vain creature.”

They stood silently a moment more before Darcy looked towards the window as he observed, “I do hope your friend will forgive me for taking your attentions away from it. The storm appears to be lessening for want of your attentions.”
Elizabeth's figure trembled again, though this time with laughter. “I am certain my friend will visit again this season and in the future. The other visitors, however, might be less inclined to forgive our absence from tea today, particularly as our time at Rosings is meant to be a celebration of family.”

“Then we had better stir ourselves from our chambers. Will you grant me one last kiss before we must appear respectable once more, dearest Elizabeth?”

Laughing again at his earnest expression, Elizabeth gladly complied and was gratified to feel his lips curl up in a smile against hers.

As she followed Georgiana through the hallways of Rosings, Mary was relieved to find that the building’s austere exteriors hid a more pleasant interior. Indeed, fresh bouquets of flowers adorned many of the side tables, lending a cheerful contrast to the darkness of the furnishings. Listening to Georgiana’s cheerful voice as she chattered on about her happiness at seeing her cousins again, Henry, Willowmere’s beautiful trees, Henry, her joy at her brother's marriage, and baby Henry yet again, Mary could not help but feel at ease.

Arriving in the nursery, Georgiana quietly dismissed the nursemaid, who bobbed a curtsy before departing for a welcomed reprieve, and turned to the babe in the cradle.

“Is he not the most perfect child?”

Gazing down at the infant, Mary found she could only agree wholeheartedly. Henry Fitzwilliam, as though he was aware of the attentions upon his person, opened his eyes and squirmed under the bundle of sheets around him.

“He is a most active one!” Mary exclaimed, already enchanted by the infant.

“Yes indeed! Aunt Catherine blames Cousin Richard, of course, though I did hear Uncle Matlock whisper to Aunt Matlock that Cousin Anne was certainly most energetic as well…Would you care to hold him?”

“May I?”

“But of course! You are to be his godmother, are you not? Come now, do sit in the chair, here.” So saying, Georgiana removed her cousin from his crib with an ease that belied the short length of time with which she had been acquainted with such a task and placed him gently in Mary’s waiting arms.

“Oh! He is so small!” As she held Henry in her arms, Mary felt a strange sense of stirring within herself. Before she could think more on it, however, a loud clap of thunder disrupted the quiet scene. At such a disturbance, Henry Fitzwilliam made good show of his reputation of having inherited his father's lungs. Though she found herself greatly frightened by the thunder, Mary nonetheless stamped down her own panic in favor of clutching the babe even closer and rocking him in a gentle manner. When he still did not quiet down, Mary began to hum and then sing a song that Aunt Gardiner had used to calm baby Tommy. Slowly, Henry's distressed cries diminished to whimpers before an almighty yawn took him and his eyes closed again in slumber.

Georgiana was all astonishment at her friend's ease, “Why, you are a natural, Mary!”

Mary smiled gently at her friend’s praise but shook her head modestly, “I have had many
opportunities to practice when Tommy was young. We each helped Aunt Gardiner care for him after Mama's passing. 'Tis been many years since he needed such comfort, being more like Lizzy in their shared love of rainstorms, but I suppose such skills never quite left me.”

Another clap of thunder caused Henry to stir again, though he calmed quickly as Mary continued to hum gently. When the thunder made itself known a third time, the door flew open to reveal the Viscount. His eyes grew wide as he registered the sight before him. Drawing in the sight of Mary with baby Henry held so close to her bosom, he felt a sense of longing that was altogether different from the one associated with memories of his past. Anne's words returned to him and he wondered, for the first time, if perhaps he was glimpsing into his future. His blink of surprise, however, caused the thought to flutter away as suddenly as it had come, leaving little impression other than a vague feeling of restlessness.

“Georgie and…Miss Bennet! Forgive the abruptness of my arrival, I caught sight of the nursemaid as she passed the library and felt disturbed that she would leave Henry unattended. I only thought to look in on my godson to ensure his well-being.” He bowed awkwardly, his tall frame dwarfing the ladies where they sat.

Georgiana rose and curtsied in greeting but before Mary could do the same, he spoke again, “Please, Miss Bennet, there is no need for such a formal gesture between friends. Besides, Henry seems quite content to remain in his present position.”

Having recovered from her startlement, Mary inclined her head towards him, “Lord Milton.”

If Georgiana had hoped to see some hint as to a deepening regard between two of her favorite individuals, she was sorely disappointed. From her position at Mary's side, she could plainly see her cousin restrict the direction of his gaze to the infant in Mary's arms.

“As he seems to be quite at ease, I can see that my presence is not needed. I shall leave you ladies to your enjoyment of his company.”

“Oh, surely you need not depart simply because of our presence,” Georgiana insisted, “Besides, Mary might be growing weary from her travels and, now that she has done you the courtesy of calming your nephew, you might try your hand at holding him once more?”

The Viscount seemed discomforted as memories rose of the prior occasion on which he had attempted to hold his godson, “Surely that is not necessary, Georgie. He did not seem to appreciate my company on the last attempt.”

“Oh nonsense; a hungry babe is in no condition to be satisfied with anything that is not his meal. And as I suspect Aunt Catherine to be correct in stating that little Henry has also inherited Cousin Richard's prodigious appetite, you can little blame him for crying for his nurse. Do take advantage of this rare occasion in which he seems at ease.”

When the Viscount hesitated still, Georgiana sighed impatiently and stood to tug her cousin into the seat she had vacated. The Viscount's brows furrowed as his hands rested on his lap, “Georgie! I do not know how to hold a babe. Surely my brother will be most upset should I drop his son.”

“Do not be uneasy, Lord Milton,” Mary's soothing voice made him turn to her, “you shall not harm him. You need only cradle his head carefully; he does not yet have full control of it, you see.” So saying, she carefully laid little Henry in his arms, her touch light as she adjusted his hold on the infant. “'Tis not so different from learning the keys on the pianoforte; once you have held him, your arms will remember. You have no need to be so tense; Henry can sense your unease and will be unsettled because of it.”
The Viscount took a deep breath in and tried to relax the set of his shoulders. In an attempt to distract himself from his nerves, he asked quietly, “You are greatly at ease with an infant.”

Mary smiled as she adjusted Henry's cap, “As I had informed Georgie, my sisters and I bore shared responsibilities in the caring of our brother. And, after Lizzy removed to Pemberley, Kitty and I have taken it upon ourselves to visit with the tenants. The Sheppards have just had a new addition to their family; twins if you can imagine! Mrs. Hill is beside herself with joy, of course, as Pattie is the first of her daughters to give her grandchildren. But poor Pattie is quite overwhelmed with the unexpected second child.”

“Tis most generous of you to visit her so often.”

“You cannot know such a thing for certainly I have not written you about it.”

“But I know of your kind and generous nature, Miss Bennet.”

Her hands clasped demurely in her lap, Mary shook her head, “Children are easy to love; they have such an innocent wonder for the world. They are quite enchanted with the stories you have sent us. I do hope you do not disapprove of me sharing the tales you have shared with me?”

“Was it not Mrs. Darcy's task to provide some basic education for the tenant children?”

“Jane saw no need for such a worthy cause to be left unattended simply because of Lizzy's absence. Indeed, she and Kitty had gathered not a few young ladies of the neighborhood in a joint effort. Our new curate is quite supportive of it as well. His wife is a gentlewoman of no mean education and heartily approves of our efforts; she believes strongly that the congregation will learn more from the Good Book if they have the means to seek its counsel in their own time in addition to attending Sunday service. It has been a most beneficial effort, for I have found not a few of the young ladies greatly improved through such constructive use of their time. Though I suppose such changes have also made our elders quite astounded. Indeed, Mrs. Long was quite bewildered when her nieces chose to spend their pin money on some sweets for the children rather than ribbons for themselves.”

“You must be quite fond of this pursuit, for I do not believe I have heard you speak so readily in our previous acquaintance.”

Mary blushed but answered honestly, “Papa has said much the same. Though I do believe he understands; the title of Miss Bennet has fallen to me and I cannot but uphold it with the same dignity that my sisters have done so before me. Besides, I find expressing myself much easier when speaking of or to the children…” Despite her words, Mary was still not used to being the target of such scrutiny as the look the Viscount gave her. And so, she was quick to turn the course of their discourse, “And what of you? If I may be so bold, I am glad to see that the recovery of your spirit is readily apparent in person as well as in letter form.”

Shifting his gaze from her blushing face, the Viscount looked instead at the bundle of blankets in his arms, “My family has been most supportive as I readjust to life in England. And with the birth of this little one, they have given me hope for the future…”

So caught up were Mary and the Viscount in speaking with each other, they did not see the beaming smile on Georgiana's face as she observed the ease with which they fell into conversation. As though they were never parted! Miss Darcy had quietly settled herself on the seat in the window alcove, close enough to have oversight of the couple on the couch but far enough so that she would not be tempted to listen to their conversation. She did not mind that they had seemed to forget her presence, for certainly such an outcome had been her very goal in giving up her seat. As the sound of raindrops against the windows dimmed to a soft hum, she congratulated
herself on a job well-done.

And so the occupants of the nursery would have remained in their current positions but for the return of the nursemaid. If she thought it was a bit peculiar for Miss Darcy to be seated so far from the child's godparents or for the Viscount to be the one to cradle her young charge, she gave no outward appearance of her astonishment other than to address the message she had been tasked with delivering towards Miss Darcy.

“Beggin' your pardon, Miss Darcy, but tea is to be served in the Blue Parlor soon.”

Henry Fitzwilliam chose at that moment to wake from his slumber with plaintive cries.

Taking the baby from the Viscount easily, the nursemaid curtsied as best she could to Mary, “Mrs. Darcy had sent Elsa to show you to your quarters, Miss, to prepare for tea.”

As Mary murmured a soft word of thanks, Georgiana quickly made her way to her side, “Thank you, Alice… I believe I shall join you, Mary. Cousin Anne was most kind in placing us close to one another. Oh I cannot wait to show you the new book of songs Aunt Gardiner had sent, though I suppose she might have sent you one as well? We must play a duet again. Cousin Reggie, perhaps you would join us in such a pursuit?”

The Viscount answered in the affirmative and the three parted with easy smiles.

After the maid helped her change out of her traveling clothes and readjusted her hair in a more becoming style than the rather simple bun she had put it in for the sake of convenience, Mary had a moment to herself to glance around the room she had been given. Perhaps room was a bit of an understatement, she thought to herself as she glanced around at the opulence of her surroundings. Indeed, a more accurate name for her quarters would have been a suite. Though she shared a dressing room with Georgiana, she had her own sitting room in addition to the large bedroom she was in at present. Her window, accompanied by a comfortably arranged seat on which she was presented resting, gave a wondrous view to the well-cultured gardens below. The rain had gone away as suddenly as it began and, as the sun shined once more, the light sent many scattered rainbows across her vision as they glistened on the raindrops that still clung to her window. Through the haze, she could make out the bright colors of flowers in bloom, granting her quite a different impression of Rosings than her introduction to it. The glinting waters of a fountain below reminded her of the object she currently held in her lap. Dipping a finger into the water, she ran a finger absent-mindedly on the rim of the bowl, smiling at the pleasant humming tone it made. As she continued to gaze out at the park of Rosings, she could not help but think back to the Viscount's observations of the change in her manners.

They had written to each other so consistently that she was surprised to recall the length of their physical separation. Her words to him were true in that she felt a certain obligation to obtain the same poise and confidence that her neighbors had come to expect from the previous two Miss Bennets. She knew, from the thoughtful looks with which her father regarded her, that he was concerned for her future. Though Lizzy had much of their father's teasing manners and witty sense of humor, Mary was the one to inherit his taciturn nature and a tendency to shy from company. She was not unaware of the unspoken acknowledgement they had shared as Mr. Bennet informed her of the invitation to Rosings. He had not made much mention of the Viscount, but his eyes, as he commented dryly that she can now thank the Viscount in person for the pianoforte that now stood in place of the old instrument in their parlor, were too knowing for Mary's comfort. Thinking on the sly glances that Kitty (who had made a great fuss as to the quality of her gowns and insisted on lending her some of her own ribbons) and Jane (yes, even dear Jane had seemed to
hide a secret within her smiles!) had traded with one another as they helped her prepare her trunks, Mary could not help but shake her head at the obvious intentions of her sisters. They meant well, she knew, and felt touched that they should care so for her happiness.

Mary had pondered long on Jane's request that Mary think on her wishes for the future. The obvious contentment of her sisters caused the flickers of longing she had felt during the winter at Jane's initial question grew into a small ache. What lady, in the presence of such happy endings, would not express a wish for one of her own?

A knock caused her to pause in her musings as Georgiana slipped into the room.

“Mary? I believe we should make our way to the parlor now.”

Despite her words, Georgiana settled herself alongside her friend instead of making her exit. “You look thoughtful, my friend.”

Mary smiled slightly but, rather than reply directly, gestured to the shallow bowl in her hand, the single blossom floating peacefully on the water, “The water lily is quite beautiful.”

“Yes. Cousin Anne had them brought in from the pond especially for us. She said they put her in mind of our tranquility.”

“But one blossom is a bit lonely, is it not?”

“I suppose. Then perhaps I should bring mine so that our flowers may have a friend?”

Mary chuckled and shook her head, “But then only one of us will be able to enjoy their beauty. No, ’tis better that we leave them be. Now, come, did you not say we ought to remove to the parlor?”

Georgiana nodded but asked, “What were you thinking on, you appeared quite preoccupied?”

Mary hesitated but, seeing the genuine interest in her friend's expressions, gathered her courage, “I know what you are about, Georgiana Darcy. You and my sisters…and I suspect, through coercion, my brothers as well.”

Georgiana's eyes grew wide, “Whatever do you mean?”

Mary smiled kindly, “You need not be so surprised; perhaps if our circumstances had been different, my sisters and I would not be able to read each other as easily as we do. You are also honest folk so that any falsehood, even one by virtue of omission and in service of a loved one, is rather plain to detect. I know what you all would wish for; indeed, my neighbors in Hertfordshire had made no secret of their speculations since my meeting of your cousin. And I am grateful for your concern for my happiness…Only, I…You need not trouble yourselves so.”

Georgiana smiled wryly, “And we had thought we were so clever!”

“I did not mean to bring attention to it, truly, but neither do I wish to raise false hopes. I would wish for a family of my own, to have the same happiness that I detect in my sisters…but…”

“But perhaps not with Cousin Reggie?”

“Oh Georgie, he has recovered much, I grant you, but Elena will always hold special significance for him. I am fond of him, I own, and truly cherish his friendship. But friendship I am determined it will remain.”
Georgiana was silent before commenting, “You have changed, Mary.”

“We cannot remain static with time, particularly as new responsibilities continue to shape us. Nonetheless, you overstate my change. I only make my plea because I cannot bear to be the cause of so much disappointed hopes.”

“You would not have him?”

“Oh Georgie! Such impossibility! He has assured me that he shall never ask it of me.”

“On your first acquaintance perhaps…”

“Georgie.” Mary’s voice was firm.

“Oh very well!”

Despite Miss Darcy’s acquiescence, her expression was still recalcitrant.

“You do show your worth as an honorary Bennet, Georgie.”

“Lizzy's influence, I assure you.”

Shaking her head again, Mary smiled, “I think not, leastwise not completely. Though I do detect some of Lizzy's humor in your teasings, your strength is all your own. Your brother will be comforted that you shall be no damsel in distress when you are presented at Court.”

“You are attempting to change the subject.”

Mary looked guilty but not apologetic.

Georgiana allowed her silence. “Will you come with me then, Mary? Though I may be braver than I was, I would so like to have a friend, a sister, by my side. Lizzy will help, I know she will, but the Season is quite different for an unmarried lady.”

“I do not know if I can leave Papa…with Kitty no doubt marrying soon…”

“Oh please, Mary? I know Jane and Kitty will continue to care for him; they will both remain in easy distance. I shall speak to Lizzy and my brother, but I know they will agree with me. Please?”

“I…I cannot say no to so dear a friend! If Papa can spare me, then yes. For now, though, we had better go to tea ere Lizzy becomes worried that we have lost our way.” So saying, she stood and placed her bowl carefully on a side table.

Georgiana laughed, “Very well. I suppose I ought not to disappoint my aunts with my lack of punctuality. Though they will not be in attendance, I cannot but feel guilty at my lapse of proper behavior while in Aunt Catherine's household.”

Tea was a simple affair as the individuals were too good of friends to stand on much ceremony. The conversations mainly revolved around the state of affairs in Hertfordshire as Elizabeth made inquiries of Mary and Darcy and Bingley discussed some of their hopes for the yields of that particular year's harvest. Even the Viscount found that he could contribute to the conversation among the gentlemen as he reflected upon the changes Mr. Bingley had made upon the estate after taking over Colonel Fitzwilliams’ ownership, not the least of which was a restocking of the property's small lake with various sorts of fish. Such conversation lent itself well to Mr. Bingley's curiosities as to the fishing at Rosings, leading Mr. Darcy to suggest such an outing now that the storm had passed. Though he was invited, the Viscount demurred, saying that he had made a prior
commitment for the pianoforte. Darcy and Bingley had both nodded agreeably and, mindful of
their wives' plans, made no further entreaties and departed once the tea service had been cleared.

Mary and the Viscount turned for the music room but Georgiana shook her head a moment. With
a significant look at Mary, she added, “I shall join you shortly, but there is a private matter that I
must discuss with Lizzy.”

Mary nodded in understanding and offered her sister a soft smile when Elizabeth turned to her
with a curious gaze.

As he guided their way through Rosings' halls, the Viscount could not help but ask, “I trust
nothing is amiss with my cousin?”

Mary shook her head and replied simply, “I do believe Georgie would like to speak with Lizzy
about her coming out.”

“Ah. I suppose she is of age; certainly my mother is most anxious that the event should occur soon
despite Darcy's consistent efforts at thwarting her wishes…to think, I had once held Georgiana
much as I had held my godson.”

Mary turned to look at him in surprise, “And yet you claimed not to know how to go about such a
deed?”

The Viscount smiled, “It was a long time ago; I am more than thirteen years her senior and have
had little opportunity to repeat such a gesture in the subsequent years. Darcy was always quite
protective of her, even against her own kin. I was very much in need of your instructions, Miss
Bennet.”

“I was happy to oblige.”

“I suspect she will meet with some opposition from my cousin; he will not be eager to allow her
formal entry into Society. Perhaps it is well that she is enlisting the help of Mrs. Darcy.”

“Lizzy is indeed most persuasive. Though perhaps Mr. Darcy will be further comforted that
Georgie has requested my presence with her whenever she should make her venture into the Ton.
She shall not be alone.”

“Then you have agreed to her request?”

“Papa must give his consent, of course, but I cannot deny her such a simple wish, particularly as I
had benefited greatly from having my own sisters with me during my introduction to Society.
Surely Hertfordshire cannot compare to London, but for a new debutante the grandiosity of that
first ball makes little difference for the uncomfortable sensation of being placed under scrutiny. I
am glad for Papa's oddness in allowing my sisters and I the opportunity to withstand such
attentions together.”

“Though perhaps he may now be regretting such a decision as an unintentional consequence is the
alacrity with which you and your sisters have made successful matches. Had he chosen a more
conventional approach, perhaps he would not lose all of you in so brief a time.”

“Then 'tis well that I remain home still, is it not? To spare my father the loneliness of having all his
daughters wed?”

“But I imagine your turn will come sooner rather than later, particularly if you are to accompany
Georgiana for her Season.”
“You flatter me. I go in service of a dear friend, not for myself. I have little illusions that my lack of fortune will bring many suitors.”

“But certainly by virtue of your person you might? As your friend, I find myself distressed that you think so little of your prospects. Indeed, I cannot agree on your assessment of your merits. Though you are lacking in fortune, you are in possession of not an insignificant number of connections. Perhaps my cousin will need be doubly protective; for you and Georgiana. Indeed, as I think on the matter, perhaps I can persuade Georgie to spare you exposure to such Society.”

“You would have me go back on my word?”

“No. I find your desire to aid my cousin admirable, but I would be remiss in my duties as your friend if I did not seek to limit your exposure to a most unkind atmosphere.”

Mary was silent a moment as she settled herself on the bench at the pianoforte. “Your friendship compels you to protect me.”

In contrast to her calm demeanor, the Viscount found himself agitated at the sudden thought of Miss Bennet meeting someone like Fitzhugh. His brows furrowed as a dark look passed over his face; his feet paced back and forth, his mood too unsettled to allow him to sit.

Knowing no better way to try to soothe her friend, Mary put her fingers onto the keys of the pianoforte and began to play a song that she had been turning over in her mind. The soothing melody gradually caused the Viscount to cease his pacing. Heaving a great sigh, he spoke, “Is this song a new composition?”

Mary stopped abruptly and nodded.

“It puts me in mind of the water lilies in the pond here at Rosings.”

“How could you have known? It was such a blossom that inspired the tune; though I fear I have not thought much further than the few chords I have played.”

Standing directly across from her and bracing himself against the pianoforte, he smiled at her, an expression that was quite the opposite of his earlier distress. “Anne rather thought that Mrs. Darcy, Georgie, and you might like to see them in your quarters.”

“She thought well.”

“I am glad you approve, for we had quite the discussion over the meaning of such a flower. Indeed, we decided that it is too docile a choice for Mrs. Darcy.”

Mary smiled in agreement, “Lizzy has always been too lively to have the description of tranquil sit well with her.”

“Quite so. But now that I have had more time to ponder on the matter, perhaps I should have insisted upon different blossoms for you and Georgie as well.”

Intrigued, Mary leaned towards him, “What would you choose now, I wonder?”

“Daisies for Georgie. She may be grown, goodness knows she has the Darcy height, and almost out, but she still carries with her the simple enthusiasm of a child. Though perhaps, having been her elder all my life, she will always seem young to my eyes.”

“And she is at a time of transformation, on the cusp of entering a new stage of her life.”
“You refer, I believe, to the tale of Vertumnus and Belides.”

“Indeed, though I do hope my friend will have better fortunes than that poor nymph, who was forced to become a field of flowers to avoid a most persistent, though unwanted, suitor.”

“Persistent and unwanted suitors she will have aplenty, I expect. But Darcy shall be there to keep them at bay; she will not be forced to undergo so fantastic a change.”

Mary nodded in recognition. “Glad I am of such, for I would be greatly saddened to lose a friend.”

“And for you…the snapdragon, for graciousness and strength.”

“Though I am honored by such a choice, those words seem more suited for my sister Jane. Besides, does not the snapdragon imply deceit and concealment?”

“But I do believe you to be hiding.”

“Am I?”

“Do you not hide your own good works behind the deeds of others, Miss Bennet? In your tales of the neighborhood ladies, you make no remarks on your own efforts, though I imagine them to be plentiful indeed.”

Mary turned away from his scrutiny, “I am still discomforted by attention.”

“And yet you would accompany my cousin to London?”

“If Papa can spare me.”

“Then perhaps I should choose the gladiolus, for your generosity and to grant you the strength of a warrior.”

Turning back to him curiously, Mary commented softly, “I do not expect to do battle.”

Shaking his head, the Viscount reminded her, ‘Did I not write you of my views? I stand by them still. Besides, did we not agree from our initial acquaintance that we are both of inherently shy dispositions, more willing to keep away from a stage than be on it? I fear the Season is a perpetual play during which you are never the spectator.”

“That is a fearsome prospect indeed. But I am comforted that I shall not be the sole player on stage and can also spare my friend from feeling alone.”

“Your gentleness hides a stout heart.”

“Not at all. Even the thunderstorm, brief as it had been, terrified me.”

“And yet you did not flinch.”

“I could not. It would not do to frighten Henry.”

“So you gain strength when confronted with the needs of others.”

“I suppose so. In truth, I had not thought much on the matter. ‘Tis enough that I can contribute in some way.”

“You are a good friend, Miss Bennet.”
“I thank you, Lord Milton, but I only do that which any friend would.”

“I refer not only to your plans to support Georgie; I wish to thank you for myself as well. Your letters have helped sustain me and your thoughtful questions have made me see some truths about myself. I wonder if Elena would have choose to return with me, or resented that I would have planned for it without asking her opinions…perhaps I have lived too long for myself, without the need to consider for others.”

“I cannot believe it of you.”

“You are most kind, Miss Bennet. No, my brother was correct; I hide myself behind my music, expecting others to understand my moods through it but making no effort to express myself in more open ways.”

“I did not intend…”

“I know. But I am grateful nonetheless. There, I see I have caused you discomfort...shall we work to finish your song? I find that I likewise am fond of the quiet beauty of the water lilies.”

When Georgiana made her appearance a few moments later, she was delighted at the music that greeted her through the open doorway. Clapping her hands in enjoyment, she grinned widely as the occupants of the pianoforte bench looked up at her.

“Oh please, do not mind my interruption; ’tis a beautiful song.”

Mary smiled back at her friend, “Lord Milton is a gifted composer.”

The Viscount shook his head, “Do not mind her modesty, Georgie, Miss Bennet does herself much discredit in not making claim on her own work.”

Standing from his position at her side, he added, “But perhaps I should vacate my seat for you, Georgie, so that you might partner Miss Bennet in the duet you had desired?”

“Will you help us turn the pages, cousin?”

“Gladly.”

In contrast to tea, dinner that evening was a rather grand affair as the other occupants of Rosings returned from their daytime errands. Used as she was to the simple fares of home-grown and home-bred offerings at Longbourn, Mary was astounded as to the different options, particularly those born of the sea, that graced Rosings’ table. Hoping that she did not appear as countrified as she felt, she was careful to modulate her actions after that of Georgiana, who appeared at ease with the opulence. Lady Catherine, mindful of her discussion with Lady Adelaide, kept a careful eye on Miss Bennet and greatly approved of her understated uncertainty. Here was a demure young lady who knew her place and did not raise attentions when she ought not to do so. She spoke when spoken to but appeared more willing to listen to her conversational partners expound on their own stories. Indeed, Lady Catherine admitted to herself that if she had but one word to describe Miss Bennet, she would have chosen comfort. Even when Miss Bennet was out of her element in her current surroundings, still she made the best of her situation and hid her discomfort behind her gentle smile. She would make a wonderful wife to any gentleman wishing for a peaceful home, and certainly Lady Catherine can admit that her remaining unwed nephew was in need of such peace, but can Miss Bennet withstand the scrutiny that was part and parcel of the Fitzwilliam name?
That Lady Matlock should enjoy Miss Bennet's company was no surprise to Lady Catherine. Certainly Beatrice would welcome any young lady who could bring Reginald to partake in conversation. Oh surely Miss Bennet was not aware of it, but Lady Catherine saw readily that her nephew drew strength from the young lady's presence. Her continued observations of Miss Bennet only strengthened her certainty in her planned actions.

When the last of the dishes were cleared away and the ladies adjourned to the drawing room, Lady Catherine continued to watch the easy conversation among the young ladies as they busied themselves in gainful employment. Georgiana was trimming a set of handkerchiefs, Miss Mary was tatting a length of lace, and her Anne was embroidering a pair of slippers. Mrs. Darcy, who professed to have no great patience for womanly pursuits, appeared quite content to read through her book, a work on natural philosophy on loan from Lady Ashbury. Lady Matlock, who shared the settee with Lady Catherine, seemed quite content to focus on her own knitting of what looked to be a soft pair of booties for her grandson. Into this domestic quietness, Lady Catherine's question was thus quite loud.

“Miss Bennet, I trust your sisters are well?”

The suddenness of her request and the targeting of such a question towards Mary made all the other ladies look up in surprise. Though her hands trembled at being addressed so directly, Mary tried to keep her voice steady in her reply. “Very well, Lady Catherine.”

“Your eldest sister, Mrs. Bingley, she is with child, is she not?”

Still bewildered at being singled out for conversation, Mary nodded, “Yes.”

“And your youngest sister, Miss Catherine, she is not yet engaged?”

“No, Kitty is not, though I expect she will be quite soon.”

“Kitty is a most dreadful nickname, she is not a common household pet; what is the matter with using the name Catherine?” Lady Catherine sounded quite peeved.

“Nothing, you ladyship.” Mary replied honestly, “Kitty had difficulty saying her own name when she was little and, given her fondness for the kittens that were born on our estate, we thought it wise to shorten it to a form that she could pronounce. Besides, Kitty always felt that the name Catherine carried a sense of regalness that she did not feel she quite embodied.”

Nodding in recognition of the hidden compliment, Lady Catherine demanded, “Pray, how old are you, Miss Bennet?”

Despite the reproachful look her Anne sent her at so impolite a question, Lady Catherine waited expectantly for a reply.

“I shall be twenty this fall, your ladyship.”

“And you do not yet have suitors of your own?”

At her aunt's accusatory tone, Georgiana made to defend her friend. Only Elizabeth's hand on her arm stopped her from speaking out of turn. Lady Catherine took note of the small action and nodded approvingly to herself; good, Mrs. Darcy is a clever girl, she knows what I am about, I knew that Darcy would not choose a fool to be Mistress of Pemberley.

Mary too felt the shift in her friend's seating but only replied softly, “I have not had my sisters' good fortunes.”
“No? I suppose you would not have many opportunities in that small town… Do you not have an Aunt and Uncle in London?”

“I do.”

“Then surely you may visit them so as to prevent yourself from becoming a burden on your family!”

“Catherine!”

Ignoring Lady Matlock's outraged cry, Lady Catherine persisted, “Certainly they may introduce you to young men of their acquaintance.”

“I fear with three young children, my Aunt can afford to spend little time pondering on such things.”

“A pity that.”

Finally, Georgiana could hold her tongue no longer, “Mary is to accompany me to London, Aunt Catherine, for my coming out. I am certain she shall find a gentleman worthy of her affections.”

Lady Catherine's only acknowledgement of her niece's words was the piercing look she sent Mary, “And do you believe yourself to be a fitting companion for my niece, Miss Bennet?”

This time it was Anne's turn to cry out indignantly, “Mama! She is our guest!”

Heedless of her friend's distress, however, Mary felt only oddly calm as she replied, “I know not, Lady Catherine. But certainly she has honored me with her friendship and I can do no less than stand with her when she should have need of me. Besides, Miss Darcy is my sister by both happenstances of marriage and our own choices, surely the bonds of such sisterhood are beyond reproach?”

Silence reigned after such a response. Lady Catherine examined Mary carefully, searching for, but not finding, even a small hint of insolence. Instead, she saw only a gentle curiosity in Mary's steady gaze, a quiet assurance that her words were not in the wrong. The young lady's hands still visibly trembled, the knuckles white as she clutched at her tatting box in the folds of her dress, but her posture was steady. Finally, Lady Catherine allowed a grim smile to cross her face. Regally, she nodded in approval, “I hope my niece's words do come true; you would make a fine wife to any man, Miss Bennet.”

Without waiting for a reaction from the other ladies, she stood and announced, “I grow weary, I fear my age is not what it used to be. I do believe I shall retire now. Do make my excuses to the gentleman, Anne?”

Anne only had time to nod briefly before Lady Catherine swept from the room.

Lady Matlock, calmly gathering her knitting needles and yarn, also curtsied before retreating, “I would be happy to sponsor you when you accompany my niece to London, Miss Bennet. Alas, I too find these late evenings a bit much for a grandmother such as I and I must bid you ladies good night.”

With the removal of the older ladies, the younger ones could only glance at each in clear astonishment. When they had quite recovered from their shock, Anne made quick to hold Mary's still-shaking hands in hers, “Oh, dear Mary, I do apologize for Mama, she has such a way of speaking bluntly. I do hope you were not horribly frightened.”
Georgiana also put an arm around her friend, “I do hope Aunt Catherine's deplorable conduct will not color your judgment of the rest of our family.”

Feeling as though she had just awoken from an odd sort of dream, Mary shook her head, “Oh no. I am not offended. Such stringent interrogation cannot have been unexpected.”

Elizabeth, who had put aside her book and come to sit closer to her friends, nodded and smiled proudly, “You acquitted yourself quite well, Mary. That last statement from Lady Catherine, why… I do not believe she showed such high approval of me for all that I had Charlotte’s friendship and Mr. Darcy’s support to recommend me.”

Mary answered her sister's smile with a warm one of her own, “I suppose I passed the test, then?”

“Yes, dear one, you have.”

At such words, both Anne and Georgiana could only exclaim their surprise.

“A test? You mean to say that Mama's rudeness was deliberately planned?”

Mary's smile widened at the affronted expression on her friend's face, “I do not know if the exact words were preconceived, but certainly the intent was. You cannot expect for plans of my entry into your family to go unnoticed, Anne?”

Looking guilty, Anne muttered, “I suppose Richard and I were not very subtle with our wishes when we named you godmother.”

“Still, she might have asked for a private audience if she truly wished to test your courage,” Georgiana remained ruffled at the insults that her aunt had paid her friend.

Shaking her head, Mary explained, “Oh no, you need not blame your Aunt so, Georgie. She only wished to see if I could withstand the lashing tongues of the London elite. Nonetheless, I am glad for Lizzy's forewarning while we were dressing for dinner.”

The other ladies turned their surprised gazes to the former Miss Bennet. Elizabeth only smiled as her eyes twinkled in mischief, “Oh I knew what Lady Catherine was about as soon as she singled out Mary for conversation. I too experienced something similar; my interrogation was in the parlor at Willowmere when we went to visit with Charlotte. Though I must say that my version of such a confrontation was fraught with such sharp tones and glacial glares so as to make your conversation with Lady Catherine quite cordial, Mary.”

Another thought occurred to Georgiana as she grinned widely, her earlier anger forgotten, “And Mary! You have gained Aunt Matlock’s support! I daresay the ladies of the Ton will be courteous indeed with such knowledge.”

“Indeed, with the combined power of the Fitzwilliam, Darcy, and de Bourgh names, no one shall question your worth.”

“And Cousin Reggie will have quite the excuse for staying by your side; you will, after all, be under his mother's protection.”

Mary blushed at such comments, “I must entreat you, Anne, with the same plea I had made for Georgiana. I am grateful for your acceptance and your friendship, but please, do cease your plots, though they are kindly meant.”

“We mean only for your happiness, and that of our relation.”
“And well I know it! But neither of us is unhappy at present.”

“You are in possession of acontented soul, Mary.” Mrs. Darcy commented.

“Lizzy’s observation is not made without warning. She knows me to be too placid to raise objections if I did not truly feel strongly.”

Anne sighed, “Your determination is readily apparent.”

“I do not wish to appear an ingrate. Only…”

Anne sighed again, though she added kindly, “You have no need to explain. I see clearly that both Lizzy and Georgie have acquiesced. I suppose I can only follow suit. Though, you are still my Henry’s godmother. Whether or not you shall become a Fitzwilliam, you are still my friend.”

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