Mistress of Pemberley

by sqbr

Summary

Fitzwilliam Darcy is not the man he always thought he was.

An alternate universe exploring the consequences of one key change to the plot of the novel.
"Georgiana," said Fitzwilliam with affectionate amusement, "Are you reading a book of property law?"

"Yes," said Georgiana, for there was no use denying it. She carefully placed her bookmark and closed the book. It was large and heavy and made a soft thudding noise that vibrated through the library table. "I...I am approaching marriageable age, and so I have decided...decided that it is time that I understand how best to protect my inheritance when I marry."

"Is there some particular reason you are worrying that your inheritance might need protecting?" asked Fitzwilliam with just a hint of concern. "A particular husband you have in mind who you do not trust to have your best interests at heart?"

"Oh no!" said Georgiana, realising with pain that her lie had reminded him of Wickham. "Truly, I promise you, I have no intention of marrying any time soon, and no particular husband in mind for when I do. But am I not allowed to wish to understand my responsibilities?"

"Of course," he said. "And I would not wish to discourage you. Perhaps it is a topic I am knowledgeable enough about to offer you help with. If not I can ask the steward, should you so wish it." He opened the book back up to the marked place and looked at her with surprise. "Why the section on entails? You are not the heir, such questions should not trouble you, at least not until you have your own children whose inheritance may need defending."

"What of your children?" asked Georgiana.

"Well...as long as I have children I need not worry either. Pemberley is entailed to the eldest child, regardless of sex." He smiled briefly. "Unlike many other gentlemen, I may have as many daughters as I wish."

This was happy if not unexpected news. "If you did not have children, could you adopt?"

"Adopt?" Fitzwilliam had clearly never considered this possibility. "I suppose...no, no I could not. As I recall, the entail specifies children of the body."

Georgiana's face fell and Fitzwilliam looked at her in confusion. To him her questions must appear to be of purely academic interest. "So if something were to happen to you and you did not have any...children of the body, I would inherit Pemberley?"

"Yes," said Fitzwilliam. "Though I must warn you that I intend to live for a long time, and to provide you with many nephews and nieces. I would not celebrate your ownership just yet, unless there is something you know that I do not."

Despite herself Georgiana blushed, and Fitzwilliam gave her a penetrative look. Damnation.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing!" she said.

He glared, and she felt herself quail. She was absolutely helpless in the face of one of Fitzwilliam's glares.

"I am sorry, Georgiana, but I do not believe you. And I thought we had both promised not to keep secrets from one another."
Georgiana felt a pang of guilt, and sighed. Perhaps it was better to tell him after all.

"You are right, I did promise, and I apologise for lying. But I only kept the truth from you for your own good," she said. He did not seem to find this idea credible. "Before I tell you, however, you must promise not to think of me any differently. And you must remember that I do not think any differently of you."

"Georgiana," said Fitzwilliam, alarmed by her serious tone, "What on Earth is it?"

And so she told him.

Elizabeth was beginning to suspect that Mr Darcy was not the man she'd thought he was.

His portrait stood out from those of the other Darcys, and not only because of Elizabeth's familiarity with him. They were all tall, but many of the other Darcy men had an almost hulking quality that Darcy did not. Even his sister was an imposing figure, though the shy sweetness of her smile undercut any intimidating effect her statuesque figure might otherwise have inspired. Darcy, however, was of a moderate build, despite his height. He looked more like the descendant of scholars than of the sword wielding soldiers and grizzled patriarchs lining the walls of the gallery.

Looking at Darcy's portrait, Elizabeth felt able to examine his features in a way she would never have dared with the real man. Larger than life, his painted features smiled at the world with an expression both good natured and slightly restrained, as if he felt a little self conscious in front of the painter and his intended audience. An audience which did not, one assumed, include Elizabeth, though she had seen him smile in that way at her before.

How strange to be in this house as a tourist, almost a stranger, and yet to know that she could have been mistress of it. And how unexpected the glowing account of him they had received from his housekeeper. She made him seem...almost human. Elizabeth did not know what to think. And what would Darcy think of her, if he knew that she had walked these halls, examining his personal possessions as if they were objects in a museum? Elizabeth had never felt the sting of rejected affection, nor was Netherfield grand enough to attract outside visitors, but she still felt a deep sense of unease imagining Darcy's feelings if he was made aware of her presence.

Elizabeth reminded herself that the housekeeper had said he wouldn't be back until tomorrow at the earliest, and tried to not to feel like a voyeur. After one last, conflicted glance at his portrait she rejoined her aunt and uncle and left the house, never expecting to walk it's halls again.

Elizabeth had spent much of the last few days interrogating herself about her feelings for Mr Darcy.

Could she marry him? For there was still hope from his recent behaviour that he remained willing to marry her.

He was so altered now in her eyes from the man she had rejected those few months ago. He had been so generous and forgiving, though seeing her and her family could only bring him pain. Watching Darcy in his element, welcoming visitors to his house and commanding his loyal servants, it was easy to imagine a happy life by his side as mistress of Pemberley. He would be a good husband, of this Elizabeth was sure. Seeing the kindness with which he treated his sister, the way he gently encouraged Georgiana to inhabit her role as lady of the house, Elizabeth couldn't help but compare his behaviour to the disdain with which her father treated her mother, or the thoughtlessness that Charlotte experienced at the hands of Mr Collins. Would she ever meet such a man again? If intelligence, compassion and a huge fortune were not enough to tempt her into
matrimony, perhaps she should admit defeat and remain single forever.

And then there was the fact that he was in love with her. Or had been. Elizabeth had reached the advanced age of twenty one without having ever lost her heart to another, but she had certainly felt the odd romantic pang, such as her ill considered partiality towards Mr Wickham and an embarrassing girlhood infatuation with Charlotte that her friend had kindly pretended not to notice. Darcy's feelings had seemed much stronger than any such passing fancy, if they could inspire him to propose to Elizabeth despite the degradation of linking his family's name with hers. (Despite the marked improvement in Elizabeth's opinion of Mr Darcy, remembering the precise wording of his proposal still made her angry with him) What would it be like to be married to a man who held her in such high esteem?

And what if she grew to esteem him so herself? Elizabeth had always thought Darcy handsome, and had quickly learned to reverse the disdain that had prompted the finality of her rejection of his proposal. But since seeing him at Pemberley there had been an added dimension to her appreciation. It was impossible not to like a man so good natured and generous, and given their history Elizabeth found it impossible not to consider him now as a man. She found herself wondering what would have happened if she had accepted his proposal, how his already open and friendly demeanour towards her would change if there was a stronger bond between them than that of shared acquaintance. When he smiled at her she felt her heart lift and wished to inspire more such smiles. When he offered his hand to help her into a carriage Elizabeth wished to grasp it, to prolong the contact between his strong, delicate hands and her own.

Yes, Elizabeth was strongly beginning to suspect that she would have very much enjoyed being Mrs Darcy. It was a pity that this realisation had come just as the likelihood of this event ever occurring had plummeted to nothing.

She watched Darcy pace the room, his face dark and serious. He appeared to be nearly as upset by the news that Lydia had eloped with Wickham as Elizabeth was herself, though of course he had not broken into tears. And why wouldn't he be upset? Here went any hope of an alliance between their families, any chance of a match between Elizabeth and himself.

Of course this was not the first time she had broken his heart, but it was the first time he had broken hers. Elizabeth took a moment from worrying about Lydia to feel sorry for herself, and curse herself as a fool for only realising what hope for happiness she had held in her hand now that it was gone.

Such selfish meditations were overcome by thoughts of Lydia, and Elizabeth lost herself in tears. It was some minutes before she came back to herself, interrupted by Darcy's voice, speaking in kinder tones than she had once thought him capable of.

"I am afraid you have been long desiring my absence..." he began, and Elizabeth prepared herself for him to make some excuse to leave. This would probably the last time they spoke before he cut himself off from her, and her scandalous family, as quickly as decorum would allow. But then he stopped.

"Miss Bennet..." He looked very unsure of himself. "As you say, this unfortunate affair might have been prevented had I not required of you such secrecy about Mr Wickham's nature, and his history of misdeeds."

Elizabeth had not thought to blame Darcy in any way for her sister's situation, but she had to admit that what he said was true.

"It pains me to further impose upon you, but...there is one more confidence I feel I must share. I
realise you already have much on your mind, but this information is relevant to your current
distress."

"You can rely on my secrecy," she said. "Please, if it can be of any benefit to Lydia, I would
much rather know."

"I am not sure this information can be of benefit to anyone," he said darkly. "But I should tell you
nonetheless. As with your sister's...mistake, there is no keeping the truth a secret forever, and you
deserve better than to find out the truth about me from gossip."

"About you?"

"Yes," said Mr Darcy. "You see, this not just your family's disgrace but mine as well. It has come
to my attention recently that I am not the man I always thought I was. That in fact, Mr Wickham is
my brother."

Elizabeth could hardly credit it. Already overwhelmed, she had to sit and let the information sink
in.

"So your father, and...and Mrs Wickham..." She looked at him in horror. "Tell me that Wickham
is not Georgiana's brother too."

"No!" said Darcy. "No, we are at least spared that disgrace, and that pain. And I am no bastard,
Miss Bennet, though part of me wishes I were. Then I would not be so closely tied to a man I
disdain, nor so utterly distant from the woman I have always thought of as my sister. I am George
Wickham's full brother, the legitimate child of Mr and Mrs Wickham. Georgiana is a true Darcy,
and no blood relative of his. Or mine."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, for the moment all thought of her own sisters pushed from her mind. "Poor
Georgiana. Does she know?"

"It was she who discovered it," said Mr Darcy (as Elizabeth could no longer help but think of him.
The name Mr Wickham had entirely different connotations, especially now) "There was a letter
addressed to my mother... but the details do not matter, not at present." He frowned at a spot on
the ceiling. "Since finding out the truth I have sought to prepare Georgiana to take her rightful
place as heir to Pemberley. But as you have seen yourself she is still not ready."

Darcy shook his head. "I am sorry, I am being distracted by thoughts of my own problems, I have
had so few people to talk of them with. What matters is your sister and my... brother. I am not the
powerful man I have been raised to consider myself, but what resources I have to command are at
your disposal. Your family and mine must do everything we can to force this... unfortunate
situation to a more happy conclusion."

"Yes," said Elizabeth. Everything else was strange and unexpected, but that was one truth she
could fully hold onto. "Yes we must."
It seemed that Elizabeth was doomed to be dissatisfied with her lot, even when she got exactly what she wanted.

For weeks all her thoughts had been focussed on the hope that Lydia and George Wickham might be married, to dream of seeing her sister at Longbourn safe, happy, and free of any scandal.

Yet somehow looking at Lydia’s smug, self satisfied face now that she was married did not fill Elizabeth with joy. Neither did seeing Wickham so at ease in her family's house, so full of cheerful recollection and friendly conversation though he must be aware that everyone present knew of his wickedness.

The mystery surrounding Lydia and Wickham's marriage did not help to set Elizabeth's mind at ease. How had Wickham been persuaded to marry Lydia? You only had to see them together to know that he was far from being in love, and the amount of money he had demanded from their father in recompense was not enough to live on, let alone sufficient for a bribe. The only information she had was the letter Mr Gardener had sent Mr Bennet shortly before Lydia and Wickham's marriage and return to Highbury, and it was frustratingly vague. It made no mention of Mr Darcy whatsoever, but Elizabeth was sure he had been involved somehow.

Elizabeth wondered if Darcy felt the same mixture of relief and dread seeing Lydia and Wickham together, and how he felt to be a sort of brother to Elizabeth now. She certainly felt strange knowing that she was a sort of sister to him. But there was no denying that Lydia and Wickham's marriage had brought some happiness. Mrs Bennet was in raptures, Elizabeth had never seen her so happy. Lydia, too, was much happier with her situation than Elizabeth could have imagined a short time ago, so happy, despite all the pain and trouble she had caused, that it made Elizabeth irritated just to look at her.

There was alas no avoiding Lydia or Wickham during the ten torturous days of their visit to Longbourn. Lydia kept hunting down her sisters and gleefully lecturing them on how best they might follow her example and obtain husbands of their own, clearly enjoying the chance to be the grown up sister, at least in her own mind. Even out in the village Elizabeth was not safe, Lydia was determined that everyone know of her joy and despite their mother holding numerous parties to display her newly married daughter to the neighbourhood Lydia liked to spend her days promenading up and down the main street with Wickham on her arm, just to make sure everyone had seen her with him.

"Is my husband not handsome?" asked Lydia, after Elizabeth failed to avoid meeting them on the street. "You must try not to be too jealous, I am sure you will find someone willing to marry you before you get too much older."

Elizabeth gave her sister a thin smile. "I am glad to know you have such confidence in me despite my advanced age," she said. The sarcasm sailed right over Lydia’s head but not over Wickham's if his subtly pained smile was any guide.

Wickham was handsome, there was no denying that. Even knowing his true character, Wickham had a very pleasing countenance, and his smiles had not lost all of their charms even though Elizabeth now knew that they were false. She did not envy Lydia her husband though, not at all.
"You must not tease your sisters, so, dearest," said Wickham, in a tone almost entirely devoid of sentiment. He gave Elizabeth a friendly smile, and Elizabeth felt a pang of nostalgia for the friendship they had once shared, even though the man she had come to like so much had been pure fabrication.

As with Darcy she examined his features for the expected resemblance, and once again found it. How strange, that they should have grown up together as near brothers and never known that they were brothers in truth. She had no doubt that Wickham remained ignorant that Darcy was his brother: if he had known, there is no way he would not have tried to twist the relationship to his further advantage. She also had little doubt that Darcy’s claim about being Wickham’s brother was true, it seemed impossible that he would deliberately lie, and just as impossible to imagine him admitting to it unless he was absolutely certain. How it could be true was another mystery however, one that kept niggling at Elizabeth despite her best efforts to tell herself that it was none of her business.

A little voice kept reminding that that it would be her business if they were married. Darcy's main objections to her had related to her family, and the relative lowness of her birth. How could he raise such objections now, when his real family and birth had been revealed to be undeniably worse? Of course, regardless of his objections, the actual reason they were not married was that she had rejected him. Darcy was no Mr Collins, to continue pursuit when he had been told to desist. He would not approach Elizabeth again unless she gave him reason to think her opinion of him had changed, and that would be impossible to do unless she saw him. Did she want to chase him down and throw herself in his path? Shower him in smiles and hints until he proposed to her again? Elizabeth found herself looking upon Charlotte’s advice on attracting men with much less disdain than she had before, and even felt a slight twinge of pity for Caroline Bingley. It would be deeply unpleasant to make such a spectacle of herself only to have Darcy reject her, but the more time went on the more painful it seemed to sit alone at home with no hope of ever seeing him again.

Elizabeth never considered writing to Darcy, she was not yet desperate enough to deviate from the expectation of female passivity to that extent. At least, not until Lydia convinced Elizabeth that she had no choice but to write to Darcy as urgently as possible.

Mr Darcy,
I am sure it must be a shock to you to receive a letter from me, though you cannot be any more shocked than I was to find myself writing it...

Mr Darcy,
I hope this letter finds you well. Unfortunately I bring bad tidings, Mr Wickham your brother Mr Wickham...

Mr Darcy,
I find myself in possession of facts that I feel I must import to you with utmost speed.

But first I offer my heartfelt thanks, both on behalf of myself and on behalf of my family. I do not know exactly what part you played in the marriage of my sister Lydia to George Wickham, but I do know that without your help my sister's lot would have been very dire indeed. We owe you a great debt, one we will likely never be able to repay.

It pains me that I must follow these thanks with further bad news. It seems that George Wickham
has become aware of your relationship to him, or is at least aware that he has a living brother.

As you probably know, the Wickhams have been visiting us here at Longbourn. I had already guessed that you helped to promote the match, despite my uncle Mr Gardener's silence on the subject, but I knew for certain after my sister mentioned your presence at their wedding. She quickly told me that it was a secret, and I did not press her for further details. If you wish to keep the help you have provided a secret then I shall do so. But I do not think it's revelation would do you any material harm: most would simply assume you to be motivated by kindness towards an old family friend.

However, my sister is reliably unreliable when it come to keeping secrets, and it became evident that this was not the only confidence she was keeping. During a conversation between Lydia, our mother, and myself, our mother made a comment expressing regret for the fact that Mr George Wickham is without family.

I cannot remember the precise wording Lydia used, but she replied that there was another Mr Wickham, one she did not like so much, but whose existence should hopefully be to her husband's advantage.

I must have exhibited some expression of shock, for she then laughed and said that she and Mr Wickham had found it surprising too. When our Mother pressed for further details she refused to supply them, which suggests to me that she does not know any.

I can only hope that Mr Wickham does not hold enough information to do you damage, or that if he does he can be persuaded not to hurt you with it. From Lydia's statement, it seems likely that he only found out recently, and has not yet decided on a course of action. I wish you every success preparing for whatever action he takes, and thank you again for the kindness you have shown our family.

I am sorry to bring such unpleasant tidings. If there is anything that I may do to assist you, please let me know. Yours,

Elizabeth Bennet

Elizabeth tensed every time the mail arrived, though she knew no reply would be forthcoming. It was one thing for her to send a letter to Mr Darcy, seen only by his servants and perhaps Georgiana, but quite another for her family to observe him sending one to her. And she did not need a reply, she had passed on the information he needed and he would use it or not as he saw fit. There was no need for them to communicate further at all.

Of course needing is quite different to wanting. She wanted a reply very much.

Elizabeth was so distracted that she was taken entirely by surprise by another impossible seeming event: the news that Mr Bingley was returning to Netherfield.

"I knew it!" crowed Mrs Bennet. She had returned from a visit with Lady Lucas with the unexpected news and an air of agitation. "For all this talk of the city and it's charms, any gentleman with sense will always come back to the country in the end. Any gentleman without sense too. Not that it is anything to me. No, I do not care for Mr Bingley, nor his sisters neither. They are not at all the people we thought they were, are they Jane?" Jane blushed and did not answer.

Elizabeth felt for her sister. Though Jane claimed to be unaffected by Mr Bingley's return she was visibly rattled every time his name was mentioned, and it happened frequently as his return approached. But it would be hard to say which of them was paler when he finally came to
Longbourn. For Bingley came not alone, but with Mr Darcy.

He still loves me thought Elizabeth, her breath catching at the sight of Darcy's tall figure approaching through the garden. But perhaps he did not. It was far too soon to speculate, about him or Bingley. Perhaps both men intended nothing but politeness by the visit. She had seen hope dashed too many times to give in to it quickly now.

Such an awkward tableau the five of them made, seated together around the tea table, and so much between them all that must remain unspoken. Jane and Elizabeth both longed to speak, yet remained silent. Darcy too was even more taciturn than ever, barely fulfilling the requirements of basic courtesy. It was left to Bingley and Mrs Bennet to fill the void of conversation, a task the latter at least was more than qualified to fulfil.

Once they had all said their hellos Mr Bingley became very awkward, answering Mrs Bennet's questions briefly and having little to say to Jane. Listening to her mother prattle and ask leading questions to minimal response Elizabeth heartily wished that Bingley and his friend were back to London, or anywhere else but here. She was glad to have the excuse of the needlework in her hands to cover her own inability to speak, and to distract her from the desire to stare at Mr Darcy to try and read his thoughts. From what she could see, he was as focussed on his feet as she was on her work, and the few looks he sent her way were more troubled than affectionate. But she had never been able to read him well.

Elizabeth was restitching a difficult section for the second or third time when she looked up and saw Jane smile for the first time. Bingley had asked her some simple question about a book she'd been reading before his departure, and the fact that he remembered the book at all was enough to bring some colour to Jane's cheeks.

"It has been a little while since I finished the book," said Jane. "But as I recall I quite enjoyed it."

"Yes, I suppose it has been some time," said Bingley. Was that embarrassment colouring his cheeks? "Well, you shall have to tell me what you've been reading in the meantime."

"Indeed she shall!" said Mrs Bennet happily, then quickly shut her mouth to allow the two to converse uninterrupted. And so they did, before long they were chatting so comfortably it was almost as if Bingley had never left.

By the time Bingley and Darcy departed, making promises to return soon, Elizabeth was quite convinced that Bingley cared as much for Jane as he ever had. It brought her so much joy to finally have some hope for Jane's happiness that her own uncertain state seemed almost bearable by comparison.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I took so long to write this, I had to describe events which were almost but not quite the same as canon which was both uninspiring and intimidating (Jane Austen described it better!).

Elizabeth was beginning to despair of ever speaking to Mr Darcy again.

She had had plenty of opportunity to see him. First there was the afternoon spent watching him look at his feet. Earlier this evening she'd had a fantastic view of him being pointedly snubbed by Mrs Bennet. And now, after dinner, she had a fine view of the top of his head as he stood crowded around by gentlemen at the other end of the room.

And strictly speaking she had spoken to him this evening when he'd come to get a cup of coffee. But she'd been so busy playing hostess that all she'd managed was a brief question about Darcy's sister before she was dragged off by some cousin of Charlotte's. At least she'd managed to hear him telling her that Georgiana was well. Elizabeth would take her good news where she could find it.

As a guest of the house Darcy was much freer to seek out Elizabeth's company than she was to pursue his, but instead he chose to talk to Bingley, when he wasn't standing around being diffident. Bingley should be talking to Jane! And Darcy to her! What was the point of the two of them coming all this way if it was only to talk to each other? It was almost as if their lives didn't revolve entirely around the needs of the Bennet family.

Elizabeth told herself not to be so silly and tried to concentrate on serving more coffee. There was starting to be something of a queue.

"You have put sugar in my cup three times now, you know." The vicar's wife proffered her cup towards Elizabeth with a look of strained patience.

"Oh, Mrs Winters, I am ever so sorry!" said Elizabeth, pouring a fresh cup. "I was distracted."

Mrs Winters gave her a sympathetic smile. "That is quite alright, dear. I understand how you must feel."

For a moment Elizabeth was overcome by a mortifying sense of embarrassment. Had she been that obvious? She took a calming breath and convinced herself that nobody here could have the slightest idea what she was feeling. Well, Jane might, or perhaps Darcy himself. But not Mrs Winters the vicar's wife. She must be thinking of something else.

"Disappointment in love is such a trial." Elizabeth barely suppressed a gasp. "And to lose the man you love to your own sister! It was a wicked business, everyone thinks so."

For a moment Elizabeth was confused. Did she think Elizabeth was in love with Bingley? But she'd never...And then she realised: Mrs Winters thought she was in love with Wickham. And apparently, so did "everyone else". This was possibly even more mortifying than the truth.

"And as for that Darcy..."

There was a quiet cough. Elizabeth looked up and was faced with the man himself. Mrs Winters blinked up at Mr Darcy and then smiled with every indication of sincerity.

"Why hello Mr Darcy," she said "So good to see you in the neighbourhood again. Will you be coming to church on Sunday?"
Mr Darcy answered with a negative, and said he would be leaving town the next day. Beyond that, the conversation went entirely over Elizabeth's head, so overcome was she by mortification and other intense emotions. She stood in a daze serving coffee to a faceless blur of guests until Jane took over and she could finally find a quiet corner and sit down.

Jane handled the job much better than Elizabeth had, and soon the queue had dwindled to nothing. And this despite Bingley approaching Jane for a cup at least three times, not to mention dawdling to talk to her afterwards. Now there was a man unambiguously in love.

And where was Darcy? He was...well. He appeared to have vanished. And then, just as Elizabeth was wondering if he had tired of trying to make smalltalk and escaped back to Netherfield, she saw him at her shoulder.

"Mr Darcy!" she said in surprise. She just barely refrained from asking him how he was able to keep sneaking up on her like that.

"Miss Bennet," he replied, with an incline of his head.

And then, lacking any interruptions or other obligations, they stayed next to each other in silence for a good ten minutes.

"Miss Bennet," began Darcy at last, as if continuing some briefly interrupted conversation, "I recall the great pleasure you took in walking when I saw you in Kent. Do you still find time for the occupation now that you have returned home?"

Elizabeth felt herself flush, recalling what had passed between them the last time he had seen her taking a walk in Kent. Why was he bringing it up now? Yet she would rather converse on such an awkward topic than squander their last few moments together in silence.

"Yes," she replied. "The countryside around Meryton is not as lush as that in Kent and it has been many years since any part of it held much novelty, but I still find pleasure in walking through it."

"I am glad to hear it," said Darcy. He was glad that she was...exercising? That she was not moping about the house unable to find joy in her old pursuits? She felt certain that there was some subtext to Darcy's questions that she was missing.

"I too enjoy walking," he said. "I hope to take a walk tomorrow morning, before I depart for Pemberley. Perhaps I will see you."

"Perhaps..." she said, her mind suddenly awake to the possibilities. Yes, an "accidental" meeting would be about the only way for the two of them to converse in private without creating gossip. She looked up and tried to read Darcy's expression. Was he suggesting what she thought he was suggesting? "Although that would depend on where you were walking."

"I had not decided yet," he replied. His expression as he looked back down at her was superficially mild, but he held her eyes far longer than was necessary. "Might you be able to make a recommendation?"

Elizabeth thought quickly. Where was a location that was secluded enough for secrecy but not so out of the way as to arouse suspicion in anyone who happened to notice them there? She felt like some fallen woman organising an assignation with her lover in a tawdry novel, although she was sure that Mr Darcy's intentions were entirely honourable. Luckily she liked solitude on her walks, so this question was not as difficult to answer as it might have been.

"The woods to the south of Meryton are quite pretty at this time of year," she said at last. "Go left
when you reach the crossroads leading towards the village from Netherfield instead of right, and you should find the path without too much trouble."

"Thank you."

Then Darcy returned to standing next to her in silence, but this time Elizabeth found that she did not mind it. Her only complaint for the rest of the evening was that the evening lasted so long. It seemed like an eternity until the guests were gone and she could prepare for bed, and nearly as long after that before she could calm her thoughts enough to sleep. What did Darcy want to speak to her about so urgently that he was willing to abandon propriety so much to do so? Or had his "hidden meaning" been all in her mind? Morning could not come soon enough.

Morning arrived with strong winds and hail.

Looking out the window as she woke Elizabeth was confronted with an uninspiring vision of grey clouds and muddy soil speckled with white.

Why could it not have been rain or snow? she thought to herself with dark amusement. At least then my discomfort would be tinged with an air of romance. Who ever heard of a heroine struggling to meet her beloved through hail?

Sarah looked at her with disbelief when she asked to be dressed for a walk. "You cannot be thinking of going out in this nasty weather, Miss Bennet!" she said "You'll catch your death of cold!"

"Perhaps it will clear by the time I am dressed," she said. "It was so sunny yesterday. And I have errands to run." Which was true, as it happened, although those errands did not require her going anywhere near the woods.

"If you say so, Miss Bennet," said Sarah, clearly unconvinced but aware that not was not her place to tell Elizabeth what to do.

The same alas could not be said for Mrs Bennet.

"Perhaps it will clear," said Elizabeth, sounding ridiculous even to herself as she spoke up over the relentless clattering sound of ice against the roof.

"And perhaps it will turn into a blizzard!" said Mrs Bennet. "I need you here Lizzie, not gallivanting about in the mud. If you go out your sister Jane is sure to follow and then where will we be if Mr Bingley should arrive?"

"I have intention of going out, mother," said Jane. "And nor should you, Lizzie, what if you become ill?" There was real concern in her eyes, and Elizabeth felt like the worst sort of deceiver.

"I am sure it will be fine," she said, stubbornly, "I am wearing my thickest boots, and I really do have to..." She trailed off, her voice suddenly sounding oddly loud in her ears. She then realised that the noise of the hail had stopped. There was a final patter of rain against the glass of the window and then the room became brighter as the sun came out from behind a cloud.

"There, I said it would clear," she said, trying to hide the surprise in her voice. "May I leave now?"

"If you must," said Mrs Bennet. "But Jane is to stay, I don't care how sunny it is."

Since Jane had had no intention of leaving in the first place they both happily acquiesced to their
mother's demands, and Elizabeth escaped the house as quickly as she could before it started to hail again.

The clouds hung low against the sky in a patchy carpet of grey, but while the wind still whipped across the trees for the moment the weather remained clear. The white crystals of ice freckling the landscape sparkled in the sun and crunched under Elizabeth's feet. She decided to view the sudden change in the weather as auspicious.

What did Darcy want to talk about? Did he have further questions about Wickham? Elizabeth did not think she had anything useful left to impart.

There was no way Darcy was going to propose again. She knew that. Even if he wanted to, his situation in life was too uncertain right now to suit matrimony, and it was all too likely that he would have no interest in marrying her now even if he was able.

And yet the thought brought warmth to Elizabeth's wind chilled face. She found herself imagining herself at Darcy's side as mistress of....Mistress of what? Not of Pemberley, that was Georgiana's now, by right if not yet in practice. Would she still marry Darcy if he was forced to join the army or become a lowly cleric like any other minor gentry without land or title? Was he still just as handsome without his beautiful house and thousands of pounds?

Yes she decided. Yes he was. She would even want to marry him if he was poor, and given Georgiana's generous spirit he was unlikely to ever suffer that fate. In fact there was a certain charm to the image of the two of them making a life together in some cosy little house, with only a few servants to wrangle and no great name to live up to.

Well thought Elizabeth, if nothing else this experience has proven me not entirely shallow. At least not on the subject of money, I cannot say for certain that I would still love Darcy if he was ugly.

But how awkward it would be to be imagining herself as his wife when they met, and how embarrassing when his purpose turned out to be entirely different, as it certainly would. She needed to think about something else.

Elizabeth busied herself for the rest of her walk by constructing plausible excuses for why she might be at this end of town. She was steeled for interrogation by some passing acquaintance, although she walked this way not infrequently and it was unlikely that anyone would care. And as it turned out, she walked the whole distance from Longbourn to the woods without encountering a single soul. She did see some cows, but they were too busy contentedly chewing their cud to ask any awkward questions.

It was only when she reached the woods that she remembered quite how large they were, and how easy it would be for two people without a pre-arranged meeting place to completely miss each other in the trees. But she need not have worried. Darcy had forgone his usual plain black clothing for a vibrant red coat this morning, and she had not gone two steps into the woods before she noticed it flashing between the trees like the plumage of a large, sober faced bird.

The path twisted and turned as it navigated it's way around the ancient twisted trees of the wood. Darcy's profile slowly revealed itself as Elizabeth made her way past oak and elm, his expression serious and patient as he searched for her with his eyes, and then lightening with a smile when he finally saw her.

They smiled each time their eyes met as they made their separate ways along the path, meeting in the middle in a small clearing littered with leaves and ringed with mushrooms. It was like something out of a fairytale, or a dream. Perhaps if Elizabeth blinked she would wake up.
"Good morning Mr Darcy," she said when they met, trying not to appear nervous. "What a happy surprise. I see that you took my advice about where best to take a walk."

"Indeed," replied Darcy with a small smile. "I have great faith in your judgement, Miss Bennet."

"I thank you for the compliment," she said, "Although I am not sure that I deserve it."

He looked at her sharply and she blushed. Then followed another of the awkward pauses that took up so much of their interactions these days.

But she was not so restricted by proprietary now as she had been at Longbourn. "Mr Darcy," she said, "I feel certain that you wish to speak to me about something. If it is at all in my power to offer you assistance in any way it would be my honour to do so, even if the only assistance I can offer is a friendly ear. I am greatly in your debt, so much so that I...."

"Miss Bennet," interrupted Darcy. "Please do not...do not consider yourself in my debt. It is I who..." He frowned. "It is I who must apologise. I am sorry to make you meet me here in secret like this, it pains me to be forced to such subterfuge."

"I am sure you must have good reason for it," said Elizabeth.

"Perhaps," he said. "It seemed so last night, but...no matter. You are here now. And you are right, I do wish to speak to you. I have indeed come to ask yet another favour of you, I am afraid," he said. "And also, to tell you the truth."

Chapter End Notes

I was going to go out this morning, but thus far the weather has been a mixture of sunshine and hailstorms. VERY FUNNY UNIVERSE.
"Miss Bennet," said Darcy. She smiled at him expectantly, though what she was expecting she wasn't sure. "I am of course grateful for your discretion with regards to the unfortunate circumstances of my birth. For you to believe such an outlandish tale without pressing for details was kindness enough. But for you to risk public censure in order to protect my privacy...words cannot express my gratitude." There was an openness to his expression that made her heart ache. She had worried that might hate her...but there was no hatred here, only trust and admiration.

Elizabeth shook her head. "What is a single letter compared to the effort and expense you have gone to saving my family from ruin? I would happily send a thousand such letters and still not consider the ledger balanced. You speak of my discretion, but the only secret that weighs on me is the fact that your kindness towards my sister goes unacknowledged."

"I am not sure that I would call it a kindness," he said. "And my motivations were hardly selfless, while yours..."

Elizabeth laughed. "Enough! We will be here all day arguing about which of us is more grateful, and I am sure neither of us will convince the other to our satisfaction. Let us declare it a draw."

"As you wish," said Darcy with a small smile. What a happy argument, would that all her conflicts with him had ended so amicably. But then his open expression became more guarded, and he looked away, into the trees. "Well then, Miss Bennet," he began, pacing a step or two away before turning back to face her. "Whether I remain in your debt or not, you have been remarkably patient. I am sure you must be curious about the circumstances that led to my irregular upbringing."

And now we came to the real reason he had called her here. The tiny part of Elizabeth that had hoped he might propose again whimpered in disappointment, but she tried not to let it show. "I could lie and say that I am not curious," said Elizabeth, "If I thought that you would be fooled by such a blatant fiction. But intrigued as I am, your personal history is still none of my business. I would much rather stay ignorant than cause you undue pain or force you to betray a confidence."

"That is very kind of you," said Darcy, glancing up at her briefly. "But to be honest it would be a relief."

Elizabeth smiled. "Oh, so I am doing you favour again?" she said. "Then by all means, continue, that I might be less in your debt." Darcy stared down at her in surprise. She laughed nervously. "I am sorry, I should not tease you on such a serious subject, I am sure it cannot be funny to you."

"All the more need for teasing," said Darcy, with a weak smile. "I have had little opportunity for laughter of late. I have been speaking to my solicitor, and...but I should start at the beginning." He looked at her seriously. "Before I do, are you comfortable? Should I..." He glanced around the clearing as if searching for a chair, but of course there was none to be found.

"I am fine," said Elizabeth. "Please, continue."

Darcy nodded, and shifted his shoulders, as if settling into the role of storyteller like an old jacket. His voice took on a distant air. "Some 29 years ago a boy named Fitzwilliam Darcy was born, the only son and heir of Anne and James Darcy." How odd it was to hear him speak of "Fitzwilliam Darcy" as someone separate to himself.

"He was born earlier than expected, and the wetnurse his parents had contracted could not be
found. Luckily, or so it seemed, Mr Wickham was able to offer the temporary services of his own family's wet nurse, a Mrs Brown. He had hired her for his own son, born but a few days earlier."

Darcy paused. "As you know, that child was myself. I was named James then, James Wickham."

James Wickham thought Elizabeth, trying to fit the name to the man in front of her. It was not a bad name, but hardly as grand as Fitzwilliam Darcy. She decided it suited him, though he would always be Darcy in her heart of hearts.

Ignorant of her thoughts, Darcy continued. "I was a robust child, by all accounts, and no trouble to Mrs Brown. She was happy to take on a second charge, especially since she was paid extra to feed him various medicines as recommended by the Darcy’s doctor. Although Master Darcy seemed healthy his parents were determined that he should have the absolute best of care."

"But he died anyway..." said Elizabeth, beginning to get a feel for where the story was headed.

"Yes," said Darcy, ruefully. "Yes he did. I do not doubt that Mrs Brown did everything in her power to keep the boy alive. But still he died, not more than three days after he was put into her charge."

How strange, to know that the real Fitzwilliam Darcy had been dead for nearly 30 years. Darcy spoke of his namesake's death with his customary stiff coolness. "Mrs Brown was terrified, convinced that the Darcys would punish her for her failure. It is my opinion that she was wrong, but we will never know. They were rich and powerful, and Master Fitzwilliam was their only heir. James Wickham, on the other hand, was much more expendable."

A hint of bitterness had crept into his voice.

"So she decided to switch them," said Elizabeth, slowly. Darcy nodded. "How terrible! And how unnecessary! But why did noone notice? Or did..." Elizabeth barely stopped herself from asking if either set of parents had somehow been complicit in the deception. They were both Darcy’s parents in one way or another, and he might not appreciate the insult.

"Nobody noticed because such a possibility did not cross anyone's minds. Who wishes to look closely at a child's corpse? Beyond the doctor, of course, and he was only concerned with the cause of death, not the child’s identity. As I grew I came to resemble my biological parents more and more, but not so much that anyone doubted my paternity."

"And you grew up with your real parents and brother unknowingly by your side," said Elizabeth.

"Yes," said Darcy. "I knew them well, certainly better than most men would know the family of their father's steward. I am glad that I had that chance. But I still..." His brows furrowed. "Mrs Wickham never entirely recovered from the death of her son, I wish she had known the truth before she died."

As Elizabeth opened her mouth to try and say something comforting Darcy straightened and schooled his face into a familiar mask of stiff formality. "But I did not bring you here to complain about old injuries. The relevant facts are that I am, by blood, the son of Mr and Mrs George Wickham senior, and that neither they nor my assumed parents, the Darcys, ever found out."

Because they had all died before the truth came out. How sad, though the kind of life Darcy would had led as the younger brother of George Wickham...perhaps it was better this way. "What happened to Mrs Brown?" asked Elizabeth.

"Once I was weaned, she moved away, afraid of discovery. The guilt of what she'd done weighed on her heavily, and she never worked as a wet nurse again. Her deception might have remained a secret forever had not her guilty conscience eventually overcome her fear. During an extended illness she decided to come clean, and sent a letters explaining the facts to both sets of parents, not
realising that they are dead. It is from one of those letters that I learned the truth a few months ago. By the time I tried to find Mrs Brown to learn more, she had died herself.

"What a shock that letter must have been," said Elizabeth. "And I see... George Wickham, does he have a letter too?"

"I suppose he must. Mrs Brown was very ill when she wrote to my mother, the address was wrong in many particulars, and her writing was almost illegible. I had hoped that Mrs Wickham's letter had gotten lost before it could reach her eldest son, but apparently not." He shook his head. "And it was a shock. One of the worst I have have had. To know that my parents, my sister, are no more related to me by blood than any stranger on the street...and then there are the practical consequences." He frowned. "I am not mentioned at all in my father...in Mr Darcy's will by name. Instead it specifies that Pemberly is to be inherited by his heirs of the body."

"Oh no!" said Elizabeth. "But surely...surely nobody would take it away from you now. Especially not Georgiana!"

Darcy's previous grim expression lit up with a smile. "If it were up to Georgiana, I would keep Pemberley forever. She was the one who read the letter first, and tried to keep the truth from me, from everyone, for in her opinion I am as much her brother as ever. But her wishes do not change the law. Whatever Mr Darcy would have done if he knew the truth about my parentage, the fact is that he did not know, and that calls into question everything I inherited: not just Pemberley but my position as Georgiana's guardian, too. Colonel Fitzwilliam and I have been working with my solicitors to transfer my assets to Georgiana and make him her sole guardian, but the need for secrecy has made progress slow. Not that we will have to worry about that for long, I imagine." His smile had entirely faded now.

"But..." began Elizabeth. He seemed so fatalistic about it all, surely there was a less dramatic solution. Darcy held his hand apologetically. "Please, Miss Bennet, let me finish. I have kept you here too long already, and my story is nearly done."

"I am, as I said, incredibly grateful for your efforts to inform me of George Wickham's likely knowledge of my relationship to him. It was my intention to keep up the pretence of being Fitzwilliam Darcy until Georgiana was established securely as mistress of Pemberley, but to do that now would court too much scandal. I have discussed the matter with my family, that is, with the Darcys and Fitzwilliams, and they are in almost unanimous agreement that to have the truth made public while I am living under this identity would cause terrible damage to the Darcy name, and to Georgiana's security. Colonel Fitzwilliam and my agents can finish the necessary tasks here without me. It is my intention to travel abroad for a few years, perhaps until Georgiana comes of age, and to let the scandal of my low birth break while I am gone. It is a coward's way out, but I cannot see a better way to minimise the damage." Elizabeth gasped and covered her mouth. Abroad for five years? She might never see him again! And poor Georgiana, left to manage that big house all by herself at such a young age. Oh, this could not be.

Darcy was too caught up in getting out the difficult words out to pay much attention to Elizabeth's reaction, his eyes focussed on the muddy ground by his feet. "And so this is good bye, Miss Bennet," he said, stiffly. "It is possible that we will see each other again before I depart, but it is equally likely that we will not. And before I go..." His courage failed him. He stopped. The world, too, seemed frozen in place as he collected his thoughts, the forest clearing waiting in expectant silence. "...before I go I have one last favour to ask of you. I know that it is too much, that to request anything of you now is the worst sort of presumption, but Miss Bennet, would you...would you be willing to be a friend to my...to Georgiana?"

He was watching her reactions now, and as Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise and denial his face fell. "I know that you are not well acquainted, and I am loathe to ask, but...she has so few
friends, and she is to take on such a heavy responsibility. Captain Fitzwilliam will do his best, but she will never confide in him, they do not share the affinity that she and I do, that I hope...I am sorry. I ask too much."

"No, no, you do not ask enough!" said Elizabeth quickly. "Of course I will help Georgiana! As long as she does not consider it an imposition: we are near strangers, though I like what little of her I have seen. But you overestimate my abilities, I am not...I can never be a replacement for you. Must you leave, and leave so soon?" Elizabeth stepped forwards, her hands unconsciously reaching towards Darcy in supplication until she clamped them together against her stomach. Yes, it was Georgiana's well being she was so concerned about.

"What else would you have me do?" asked Darcy. His voice, his eyes, all spoke of stifled desperation.

"I do not...I do not know!" cried Elizabeth. "I am sorry, you have had so much longer to consider it, if there was some other solution...and yet there must be. To leave behind your family and friends for so long...could you not fight to keep your inheritance? You say that Georgiana does not want it, so why force it upon her? You could reveal the truth publicly yourself, noone could blame you for being the victim of such a crime. Then you could continue to live as you have always done."

"Even if it were possible..." said Darcy, his tone full of regret, "It could not last. Georgiana would not challenge me, she is too unselfish, but what of her husband, when she marries? What of her children? Or her children's children? I would much rather give up my inheritance willingly now than drag my descendants into a bitter squabble that might never be settled to anyone's satisfaction."

"Oh," said Elizabeth. And despite herself, she could see the truth in his words. Really, she had always known that he must give up Pemberley. Whatever the particulars his birth, the man in front of her thought like a Darcy. He had been raised to love his role as master and caretaker of Pemberley and the Darcy name, and the only way to properly safeguard that role for future generations was to give it up. "Oh I am so sorry."

"It is not such a terrible fate," said Darcy. "I still have my health, my friends, my education. And I am still a gentleman, I am sure my life will remain quite comfortable, if not as rich as I have been used to. What little inheritance I might have had from my birth parents is long gone, but I am hardly the first youngest son forced to go out into the world and find honest work. You have often accused me of being prideful, Miss Bennet. Perhaps this new life will teach me some humility." There was no accusation to his words, but Elizabeth felt a pang of guilt regardless.

"I would never have wished this upon you," said Elizabeth, "not even when...not even when I had so little understanding of your character as to accuse you of false pride. I do not doubt that you will find success in whatever career you pursue, but...but to leave behind everyone who loves you, to have to start out again alone, it is....it is just such a shame." She could feel tears pricking at her eyes. Oh this would not do. She tried to blink them back without being too obvious about it. "So what will you do?" she asked, forcing a friendly smile onto her face. "Will you join the church?"

"I...very much doubt it," said Darcy, his tone soft, almost confidential. "I am no orator. I have a degree in law, but would be similarly ill suited to the bar. I have thought, perhaps...that I might be a steward. It would honour my father, both my fathers, in a way. And is one of the rare occupations at which I can claim to have any practical experience, if not of the usual kind. Bingley has offered to try to find me a position in Scotland, since he has family there."

"Scotland!" said Elizabeth, with relief. "Oh, that is not so very far. I had thought you would be
gone to another country entirely and I would never..." She caught herself too late. Darcy's eyes went wide. "You must not stare at me so, Mr Darcy," she said, with a nervous laugh. "You make me...I..." She blushed and ran out of words entirely.

"I am not Mr Darcy," he said, softly. "Not to you, who knows the truth."

"But I cannot call you Mr Wickham," she said. "That name has altogether too unpleasant a connotation. And I can hardly call you..." She trailed off again. Oh this was all too embarrassing. It was so much easier talking to him when he was telling his story and she had nothing to do but listen and ask simple questions.

"Miss Bennet, I..." He stepped closer to her, so close she was sure she could feel the heat radiating from his body, but perhaps that was just her imagination. She shivered and his breath caught. He looked at her sadly, so sadly she felt her heart would break. There was a message in his eyes if she could just decipher it. "I am glad I met you," he said. "I am sorry for the pain and trouble I have caused you, and am glad for what little help I have been able to offer. I have every hope...every hope of your future happiness. You should not..." This close she could see the faint flush of pink on his cheeks as he blushed and looked away. "I know that your family's financial state has been a cause of much concern. It should not trouble you for much longer. I spoke with Bingley last night, after we left. I told him who I was, and I told him what I had done, how I had lied about your sister. I feel certain that he will declare himself to your sister soon, if he has not done so already. They are, as you always insisted, two people very much in love."

"Oh," breathed Elizabeth. Such happy news on such a sad occasion, her heart did not know if it should be heavy or light. "Oh thank you."

He smiled. "I am glad that you and your sisters will be comfortable. And to know that you...you need not settle for anything less than perfect happiness. I would want you to have nothing less."

There was such affection in his voice. She could not mistake it for anything but love, a love that had given up any hope of being returned.

"Then how can you leave?" she asked, afraid and ashamed of her daring, but not willing to let him simply walk away.

He started. His eyes searched hers, uncertain of her meaning. She looked back at him unflinchingly, though the coward in her wanted to look away and deny the declaration implicit in her words. A look of mutual understanding passed between them. He knew. He loved her, and knew that she loved him, and whatever happened next there was no letting go of that fact.

"But I must leave," he said, sadly, his hand reaching for hers. Elizabeth felt his gloved hand brush softly against her own cold gloved fingers and she shivered. "And I cannot...I could never ask...you deserve a proper home, as a gentleman's wife, with your household, able to see you family and friends."

"You are a gentleman," she said. "And I would rather..." Her courage failed her now, and she looked away. But she did not let her words falter. "I would rather live a comfortable but humble life with a man I... can respect, a man I truly esteem, than wallow in luxury alone, or with...with someone else."

"Miss Bennet..."

"You may ask anything of me," she said. "Whether your name is Fitzwilliam Darcy or James Wickham, if you are a rich gentleman or...or a slightly less rich gentleman. Do not think to protect me from myself, if you wish something of me then ask."
He took her hand in earnest now, his fingers intertwining with hers. "Elizabeth," he said. "I was abominable to you as Fitzwilliam Darcy, and you rightly rejected me. I will always remember what you said..."

"Oh no do not remind me!" said Elizabeth.

"No, you were right. Not in the particulars, perhaps, but about my general faults. I was so arrogant, so selfish and spoiled...I cannot think of how I addressed you without pain, though your words have taught me to be a far better man than I ever was. But can you...have your feelings changed? For mine have not. I cannot offer you fortune or family, not any more. But what little I have...will you share it with me?"

"Yes." Elizabeth. "Even if I have to wait, or move to Scotland, or become Mrs Wickham...yes."

He laughed then, and gave a smile of pure joy. Never had he looked so beautiful. "Even then?" he said. "Has your opinion of me been so changed? I cannot believe it! I do not deserve such happiness."

She then made pains to reassure him that he did, and more. Then followed an awkward but joyful joint accounting of their various hopes and feelings over the months of their acquaintance, and happy assurances of their mutual affection.

"But what should I call you?" she said, hand still clasped in his. "I cannot express how much joy it brings me to hear you call me Elizabeth, would it bring you like joy if I called you James? I must own that I still think of you as Fitzwilliam, though I would happily call you any name as long as it meant I could you my own."

"Fitzwilliam, then," he said. "Though I am no longer the Darcy heir I was still christened Fitzwilliam Darcy, and it is the only name I have ever known. If any were left who mourned James Wickham then I would likely return to that name, but my only family now by blood is my brother, and the less I am reminded of my connection to him the better."

"Fitzwilliam," said Elizabeth luxuriantly, letting the syllables slide across her tongue. "Mmm, yes. So then I will be Mrs Darcy after all?" She couldn't help grinning as she said it. She was going to be married to Darcy. To Fitzwilliam, that is. Her very own beloved Fitzwilliam.

"Yes," he replied, grinning just as wide. "You will be Mrs Darcy. Though alas I will still have to move to Scotland. Are you sure that you wish to..."

"Yes," said Elizabeth. "I will move to Scotland and be your wife, and we will be very happy. This is your fate, Fitzwilliam, do not try to escape it."

He laughed. "Very well," he said. "Who am I to question fate?"

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