

## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines A Truth Universally Acknowledged

Prologue - from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 3

*Elizabeth Bennet had been obliged, by the scarcity of gentlemen, to sit down for two dances; and during part of that time Mr. Darcy had been standing near enough for her to overhear a conversation between him and Mr. Bingley, who came from the dance for a few minutes, to press his friend to join it.*

*"Come, Darcy," said he, "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance."*

*"I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this it would be insupportable. Your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with."*

*"I would not be so fastidious as you are," cried Bingley, "for a kingdom! Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them, you see, uncommonly pretty."*

*"You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room," said Mr. Darcy, looking at the eldest Miss Bennet.*

*"Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you."*

*"Which do you mean?" and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me."*

### Chapter 1 - A Truth Universally Acknowledged

*It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.*

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, line one

Elizabeth Bennet wholeheartedly agreed with the general consensus that her sister Jane was the prettiest girl in Meryton. It bothered her not a whit that Jane was prettier, for Elizabeth knew that she was also uncommonly pretty. Confident of this, Elizabeth was not affronted by Mr. Darcy's unkind remark. In fact, she found it rather amusing.

What a strange man, she thought. Elizabeth loved the study of character, and the unknown Mr. Darcy now intrigued her considerably. What would cause a man who was surely sensible to behave so strangely? She had met with snobbery before, but there seemed to be something more behind his odd behavior.

Why would a gentleman come to a dance and then stand around by himself all evening? Mr. Darcy had yet to converse with anyone outside his own party, but he did not seem particularly interested in their company either.

Seeing that the gentleman himself was now casting anxious glances her way, Elizabeth smiled in private delight. Yes, she thought, making Mr. Darcy's acquaintance, as such, should be most diverting, but how to accomplish it?

Darcy felt his uneasiness increasing. He was never comfortable with crowds of strangers, and now he feared the young lady had overheard his insult. Although he had refused to acknowledge as much to Bingley, Darcy now found himself thinking that this other Miss Bennet was strikingly attractive.

Being occupied thusly, Darcy did not see Sir William Lucas moving towards him until avoidance was no longer possible. Elizabeth had noticed, however, and was quite pleased. While not a very clever man, Sir William was quite sociable and a determined matchmaker. Elizabeth knew that if she merely walked that way, Sir William would insist on making the introduction she so desired.

Once Sir William had engaged the reluctant Mr. Darcy in conversation, Elizabeth rose and sauntered toward the refreshment table, which was just beyond the gentlemen. Sir William, of course, demanded her attention as Elizabeth drew near.

"Oh, Miss Elizabeth, have you met Mr. Darcy? He is the friend of our new neighbor at Netherfield."

As Sir William made the introduction, Elizabeth's behavior was all that was proper. However, she could not control her smile. Seeing the

mischievous gleam in her eye, Darcy's fear of him. Darcy now demanded that he make amends, or perhaps, if he asked her to dance it would suffice. Then he would be spared the embarrassment of owning his faux pas.

"Miss Bennet, would you do me the honor of dancing the next with me?"

"What a *handsome* offer, Mr. Darcy, especially as we are not *particularly acquainted* ." Elizabeth's dimples deepened as she teased him further. "I thank you, sir, but I find myself preferring punch to dancing at present. Perhaps, you might be *tempted* to join me."

Determined to gracefully accept whatever punishment the lady deemed appropriate, Darcy bowed and said, "Certainly, Miss Bennet. Please allow me to get some punch for you."

Gratified to have brought two such handsome young people together, Sir William continued on his rounds. Elizabeth was quite content to forego further dancing under the circumstances, as she anticipated that conversing with Mr. Darcy should prove to be most amusing. She resumed her seat and happily waited for the gentleman to join her.

Darcy felt considerable trepidation as he returned carrying two glasses of punch. As a man who commanded respect in any circle, he was not used to being teased, and the lady had most definitely been teasing him. She did not appear to be angry in the least, but rather to have found a source of secret amusement in his boorish behavior. It was puzzling. Most single young women of Darcy's acquaintance were only interested in matrimony and were, therefore, all too eager to please an eligible bachelor. Darcy took some small comfort in the thought that he would evidently be spared those types of attentions from Miss Bennet.

Nearing the lady, Darcy sighed and squared his shoulders. Well, if he must spend a half hour's time in the lady's company as penance for his rudeness, so be it. Darcy would do his duty. A half hour of Miss Bennet's revenge could not be any more tedious than a half hour of fending off Miss Bingley's overtures.

Caroline Bingley was the unmarried sister of Darcy's friend and host Charles Bingley, and her undignified pursuit of Darcy was a source of continual irritation. She could not grasp the fact that Darcy had no interest in her. Had he not been genuinely fond of Bingley, Darcy would have dropped the acquaintance long ago just to avoid the man's sister, but there were few whom Darcy considered true friends. Therefore, he did his best to fend her off as politely as possible. Still, it was very tiresome.

These thoughts led Darcy to the conclusion that he would infinitely prefer Miss Bennet's playful taunts to Miss Bingley's pointed attentions. However, to his considerable surprise and relief, Miss Bennet made no further references at all to his earlier rudeness. Perhaps, the lady was satisfied that he had suffered enough.

Elizabeth had, in fact, decided to leave off teasing Mr. Darcy, at least for the present. Perhaps, he was simply nervous in company, an affliction that she well understood. After all, her dearest sister Jane was rather shy of strangers. Of course, Jane was so beautiful and soft-spoken that she never offended anyone, even when she was very ill at ease herself. Elizabeth, however, always watched over Jane if she knew her sister to be anxious. Tonight Jane was surrounded by her family and friends, and she was clearly enjoying their new neighbor's attentions so Elizabeth felt no particular worry for her sister's peace. Perhaps Mr. Darcy merely has no one to watch over him, she thought. Elizabeth resolved to understand the gentleman better before she made up her mind to dislike him.

To Darcy's delight, he found Elizabeth Bennet to be a most engaging conversationalist. She was not only lively and charming, but she was also quite well read. That was certainly not common among the young women of his acquaintance. Caroline Bingley was forever attempting to impress Darcy by pretending to have read something she plainly had not.

Darcy quickly decided that Elizabeth was not attempting to impress him at all. It a most refreshing change, as she seemed more intent upon understanding him than with proving her worth. Darcy warmed to Elizabeth's sincere interest and they were soon chatting amiably. It was a shared delight to discover that they had read many of the same authors. Elizabeth eagerly solicited Darcy's opinions on various works and did not hesitate to offer her own. While Darcy did not agree with all of her conclusions, they were well reasoned and Elizabeth became quite animated in explaining her views. Her knowledge of Latin and Greek texts also commanded Darcy's respect. Most of the young ladies he encountered in London read little enough in their native tongue.

Darcy could not recall when he had conversed so easily with an attractive young woman, and when Elizabeth asked about the irrigation methods he used at Pemberley, Darcy's shyness was completely forgotten. Although a gentleman of the first order, Darcy had the heart of a farmer. He loved his land and took a very active role in the management of his estate. Her comments and questions made it clear that Elizabeth's reading encompassed her father's agricultural journals, and Darcy was delighted to tell her of his plans for Pemberley.

Darcy was fascinated by the young woman before him. He definitely remembered someone saying that Mr. Bennet's estate was entailed, but Elizabeth showed an understanding of its management that far surpassed that of the few ladies Darcy knew who actually *would* inherit their father's lands. Darcy was both surprised and disappointed when the set was over. The time had passed far too quickly, and Darcy chafed at propriety's demand that he relinquish Elizabeth's company.

Reluctantly he rose and bowed. "I have greatly enjoyed our conversation, Miss Elizabeth. If you are so inclined, I would be honored to dance the last set with you."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," she said with a smile. "That would be very agreeable, sir. I shall look forward to it."

Seeing another young man moving towards her, Darcy reluctantly bowed again and stepped away. Of course, he could not monopolize the lady all evening. That would surely raise speculation and gossip. Darcy also chided himself not to read too much into Miss Elizabeth's acceptance of him as a dance partner. Had she refused his second invitation, propriety would have demanded the lady forego dancing for the rest of the evening.

Still, Darcy was gratified by her acceptance. He found himself looking forward to dancing with Miss Elizabeth. That was most unusual as Darcy

could not remember the last time he had actually danced at all. Usually Darcy looked forward to the last set because the end of another tedious evening. Without hesitation, he positioned himself for a good view of Miss Bennet and her current partner. He found it extremely pleasurable to watch her graceful movements for the lady danced as well as she talked.

Darcy's considerable enjoyment in watching Elizabeth Bennet dance was interrupted by Caroline Bingley. Caroline had observed Darcy sitting with one of the Bennet girls throughout the previous set. Had she not been dancing at the time, Caroline would have moved to separate them immediately. As that was not possible, she had to content herself with watching them closely which had proven less than reassuring, as Caroline distinctly saw Darcy smile at the country upstart at least twice. Darcy rarely smiled, and she had never seen him smile so at a woman. Jealousy, of course, did not enhance Caroline's charms.

Her voice dripping with disdain, Caroline began with an appeal to Darcy as a fellow sophisticate. "Ah, poor Mr. Darcy, how bored you must be to actually engage in conversation with one of these rustics."

"On the contrary, Miss Bingley, I think your brother will be quite content with the society in Hertfordshire," Darcy politely disagreed. "I was most pleasantly entertained by my conversation with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She is a *truly* accomplished young woman. In fact, I have encountered few who are so well read, and with such decided opinions, too. I assure you I have been most agreeably engaged."

That said, Darcy promptly forgot the lady at his side, as he returned to watching the other--the one who did interest him--dance. A lone curl had escaped its confines to trail down the nape of Elizabeth's neck. When the figures of the dance denied Darcy a view of her very fine eyes, he found himself drawn to that curl. His mind actually wandered to the prospect of winding that errant curl around his finger and perhaps brushing the soft skin beneath it. Realizing that such reflections would not do, Darcy cast about for a suitable diversion.

Fortunately, the lady by his side was the perfect antidote for rising desire, and she was determined to claim his attention. Realizing that Darcy's gaze was now fixed on Elizabeth Bennet, Caroline launched a new attack on the lady. It was simply beyond her ken that a woman from the backwaters of Hertfordshire could rival herself for accomplishments.

"It is kind of you to speak so generously of my brother's neighbors, but we are friends, Mr. Darcy. You may speak candidly with me. I am certain the remarks of an Eliza Bennet cannot truly equal the manner of discourse afforded us in the broader society of town."

"No, you are quite right, Miss Bingley. I found Miss *Elizabeth's* conversation far superior to most of what passes for discourse within our circle. Now, if you will excuse me, madam, I must go and claim my partner for the last set."

Caroline Bingley's outrage at Darcy's persistent praise of Elizabeth Bennet was nothing compared to the anger she felt upon seeing him now claim that lady as his partner. Caroline had assumed that Darcy was engaged to dance the last with her sister Mrs. Hurst. After all, everyone knew that Darcy did not care to dance unless his partner was a particular acquaintance. Caroline's dissatisfaction was compounded by the fact that she herself was not engaged for the final set of the evening, leaving her no choice but to sit in jealous rage, as she watched Darcy and his chosen partner from afar.

The result of Caroline's denigration of Elizabeth Bennet was not at all what she had intended, for Darcy's admiration of Elizabeth was only heightened by Caroline's slights. While Darcy was already quite interested in Elizabeth Bennet, Caroline Bingley had unwittingly solidified his estimation of Elizabeth's worth by her own contrasting behavior. Darcy was, in fact, most grateful for Caroline's assistance as he now realized just how very much he wanted to engender Elizabeth's good opinion.

As he was leading Elizabeth onto the dance floor, Darcy surprised her by apologizing for his earlier insult. "Miss Elizabeth, I was unhappy and upset earlier this evening, and without thinking I said something to Mr. Bingley that I wish I had not--"

Elizabeth blushed as she interrupted him, "Please, Mr. Darcy, my father has always warned me that those who eavesdrop should not be surprised if they do not like what they hear. There is no need for you to apologize."

"But I am truly sorry. What I said was not only unkind, it was completely untrue." His voice dropped to a whisper as Darcy daringly continued, "I hope you will forgive me, for in truth I find you very tempting, Miss Elizabeth."

Elizabeth blushed anew as she replied softly, "Very well, sir, it will be as if it never happened."

Emboldened by the look of gladness in Darcy's eyes, Elizabeth playfully continued, "That is, of course, conditional upon your remaining charming and attentive, sir. Should you displease me in the future, I cannot promise that your earlier slight will not be held against you once more."

Darcy actually laughed as he confessed, "I do not have a great deal of experience in being charming, Miss Elizabeth, as my friends can well attest, but please be assured I will make a special effort on your behalf."

"Then I shall look forward to it, sir."

They said little else as they danced, but both enjoyed the set immensely. Darcy found himself eagerly anticipating every movement where he would be close to Elizabeth or allowed to touch her hand. Whenever the dance allowed, Darcy's eyes were firmly fixed on hers and a slight smile played about his lips. Elizabeth returned his smiles demurely, but found her heart was beating rapidly.

Caroline Bingley was not the only one who watched Darcy dancing with Elizabeth. Darcy's admiration of her was plain to the entire room. Earlier the locals had been abuzz over Mr. Bingley's noticeable preference for Jane Bennet. However, by the conclusion of the final set, the ladies of Meryton were all watching Mr. Bingley's friend and Miss Elizabeth most intently. Although Darcy had remained distant from the general populace, his obvious admiration for one of their own inclined the good people of Meryton to accept him. Perhaps, he would improve upon closer acquaintance.

When the music drew to a close, Darcy tucked Elizabeth's hand into the crook of his arm. "Please allow me to escort you to your family, Miss

Elizabeth. I would be most happy to properly make their acquaintance."

Elizabeth maintained the appearance of calm as she thanked him. Inwardly, however, she was praying that her mother and younger sisters would exercise some restraint during the introductions. She need not have worried.

Mrs. Bennet had been happy to gossip the night away with her friends, openly speculating about Jane and Mr. Bingley. However, a man of Mr. Darcy's consequence was far beyond her expectations--and he seemed to be interested in Elizabeth, no less. Mrs. Bennet was awed by the prospect and eager to cause him no offense. She was quite satisfied to see Mr. Darcy escorting Elizabeth across the room, and sharply admonished the younger girls to stand up straight and be on their best behavior. Even Lydia complied after her mother pinched her arm. As her mother's favorite Lydia was seldom chastised for any infraction. Anxious to remain the favorite, she stood demurely by her mother's side, wondering at this sudden anxiety to impress the tall somber stranger.

Elizabeth was able to introduce Mr. Darcy to her mother and sisters without any embarrassment. "--I am sorry, sir, that I cannot also introduce you to my father. He did not accompany us this evening."

Darcy was all politeness as he replied, "That is regrettable. I trust Mr. Bennet is well."

"Oh, yes, thank you, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet answered quickly. "My husband is quite well. Mr. Bennet prefers smaller, family gatherings and so we left him to his books this evening."

"I quite understand, Mrs. Bennet," Darcy assured her, "as I am fond of a good book myself. I look forward to making your husband's acquaintance during my stay at Netherfield."

"Mr. Bennet would enjoy that as well, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet assured him. "You must visit us at Longbourn while you are in the neighborhood."

"Thank you for the invitation, Mrs. Bennet. I will look forward to calling upon you at the earliest opportunity. Now, however, I see my party is waiting so I will bid you goodnight, ladies." Darcy bowed to the Bennet ladies in general before turning to Elizabeth. He kissed her hand. "Thank you for the dance, Miss Elizabeth. I enjoyed it very much."

"As did I, Mr. Darcy. Goodnight, sir."

Mrs. Bennet managed to contain herself until they were in the carriage. Although Elizabeth was amazed at her mother's restraint, she was also exceedingly grateful for it.

"Oh, Lizzy, your father has always said how clever you are. I confess I never thought it so, but Mr. Darcy! Ooh! You are a clever, girl."

Mrs. Bennet left off her raptures and began admonishing the younger girls that they were to be very careful in Mr. Darcy's presence. He must see that all the Bennet girls were well brought up young ladies. This was most important for if Mr. Darcy fell in love with Lizzy, then he might introduce them to other rich men. She prattled on all the way home. Mr. Bingley and his five thousand a year were quite forgotten in Mrs. Bennet's enthusiasm for Mr. Darcy.

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Mrs. Bennet was the sort of woman who gave more credence to her own fancies than she did to the true facts of any given situation. Therefore, she was the only Bennet who was not surprised that Mr. Darcy came to call upon them the very next morning. She greeted him quite civilly and instructed Mary to ring for tea.

"It is so nice to see you this morning, sir. Kitty, please go and invite your father to join us so that he might meet Mr. Darcy. Do sit down, sir. Lizzy dear, move Kitty's sewing aside so that Mr. Darcy might have a seat."

Mrs. Bennet's maneuver of Mr. Darcy into the seat beside Elizabeth did not surprise any of her daughters. However, the delicacy and ease with which she accomplished it was most uncharacteristic. Breathing a silent sigh of relief, Elizabeth smiled up at Darcy as he happily joined her on the sofa.

Mrs. Bennet, who was never at a loss for words, continued the conversation, "It is a beautiful morning. I am surprised you are not out shooting, sir."

Darcy looked a little self-conscious as he replied, "Actually Mr. Bingley did invite me to shoot with him this morning, Mrs. Bennet. Although I enjoy the sport, I just did not find myself so inclined today. It seemed like the perfect day for a ride, so I decided to accept your kind invitation to call."

"Well, we are most happy that you did, Mr. Darcy. Ah, here's Mr. Bennet."

Having heard all about Mr. Darcy's attentions to Elizabeth the previous evening, Mr. Bennet was truly anxious to make the man's acquaintance. He was astonished when Mrs. Bennet introduced them very politely with almost none of her usual fluttering and carrying on. If this was the effect of Mr. Darcy's presence on his wife, Mr. Bennet decided that Darcy might be a convenient fellow to have around.

The visit passed quite pleasantly and all too soon Darcy realized he should go. Sensing his reluctance to leave and thinking him a sensible young man, Mr. Bennet extended an invitation for Darcy to dine with them the following day, if his friends at Netherfield could spare him. The invitation was gratefully accepted.

Although she behaved remarkably well throughout the visit, Mrs. Bennet was still, however, Mrs. Bennet and could not resist throwing Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth together just a bit.

"Lizzy, Jane, walk out with Mr. Darcy. I want you girls to gather the last of the fall herbs. Perhaps, Mr. Darcy would like to see the gardens before he goes."

Darcy allowed that he would indeed enjoy a stroll through the gardens of Longbourn. He had encountered enough matchmaking mamas to realize what Mrs. Bennet was about, of course. However, in this instance it worked to his advantage so Darcy was not the least bit affronted. He rather appreciated Mrs. Bennet's assistance.

Darcy's patent delight eased Elizabeth's embarrassment. At least Mama had sent Jane out with her. Of course, propriety demanded as much, but Elizabeth knew her mother would easily cast decorum aside when it suited her purposes. The sisters stopped in the hallway for their wraps.

Darcy instantly reached to take Elizabeth's shawl from her. "Please allow me to assist you, Miss Elizabeth."

Feeling pleased for her sister, Jane pretended not to notice this marked attention, and tactfully excused herself to fetch a basket for the herbs.

Darcy carefully placed the shawl around Elizabeth's shoulders, his fingers lingering lightly for only a moment. He was rewarded with a shy smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

Although there was little left in bloom this time of year, Darcy could see that the Longbourn gardens were well planned and well tended. The three of them wandered the various pathways amiably for some time. As Elizabeth animatedly described the different plantings, Darcy could almost envision the gardens in full bloom. He found her enthusiasm positively enchanting.

When they had made a complete circuit, Jane set about gathering the herbs. She refused Elizabeth's assistance, insisting there was little left to gather, and Darcy happily seized the opportunity for a relatively private conversation with Elizabeth.

"Would you care to sit with me, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked, gesturing to a nearby bench.

They sat in companionable silence for a moment before Darcy said, "I can imagine this must be a delightful place when in full bloom."

"Yes," Elizabeth eagerly agreed. "When everything is in blossom this is one of my favorite spots. Even now I can almost imagine that I smell the fragrance of the mid-summer flowers--" Realizing she was getting 'swept away' as her mother called it, Elizabeth blushed and said, "I suppose that sounds silly, sir, and here I had fooled you into thinking I was quite a sensible young lady."

"It is not silly at all, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy reassured her. "Fragrance can be truly intertwined with memories. My dear mother, for instance, loved roses. She always wore that fragrance and roses were scattered throughout our home when in season. She has been dead for many years now, but I still think of her whenever I smell roses. The reverse is also true. I cannot think on her long, but I smell her perfume."

"I am sorry, Mr. Darcy. It must have been difficult to lose your mother at such a young age."

"It was, Miss Elizabeth, but we will speak of that another time. Today is far too beautiful for such solemn conversation." Darcy leaned toward her and continued softly, "I believe we were discussing fragrances. Just as my mother loved roses, I believe that you, Miss Elizabeth, favor the scent of lavender. I hope I am correct, for after last night, I think a whiff of lavender will always cause me to think of you."

Elizabeth colored with pleasure as she averted her gaze. "I am impressed, sir. I doubt many gentleman would notice such things."

Darcy found himself wanting to touch her cheek. Of course he would not attempt such a liberty but Darcy was surprised at the strength of the impulse. Instead he gazed at Elizabeth and waited until she lifted her eyes to meet his. Only then did he speak.

"I think it takes the right inspiration for a man to find himself interested in such things. I must admit I am not always so observant, nor so talkative."

Elizabeth laughed as she said, "So then you could not tell me what scent Miss Bingley prefers? Or what flowers Mrs. Hurst favors?"

Darcy laughed along with her, "No, Miss Elizabeth, I could not, for they do not inspire me." His tone became more serious as Darcy quietly added, "Now, as for you, Miss Elizabeth--well, I must confess that I find *you* very inspiring."

While other young men had admired her, Elizabeth had not experienced such particular attentions before and she felt her pulse quicken. It was Elizabeth's habit to resort to wit when something made her uncomfortable and she relied upon that strategy now, teasing Darcy to break the tension she felt.

"Thank you, sir. I do not think I have ever been deemed 'inspiring' before. I believe I have been called 'exasperating,' 'entertaining' and even 'impertinent' but never 'inspiring.' That has a much more poetic ring to it. I am in your debt for such an epitaph, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy laughed. He was not the least bit disconcerted by her playfulness. On the contrary, he delighted in the quickness of her thoughts and feelings. "You, Miss Elizabeth, are not only inspiring. You are also delightful, and I must be going before Miss Bingley sets the hounds on me."

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to laugh with delight. She was enormously pleased to learn that Mr. Darcy, who had initially seemed so serious, indeed had a sense of humor. Darcy thanked both sisters for their hospitality and expressed his pleasure at the thought of seeing them tomorrow.

Jane and Elizabeth lingered outside for some time. It was a mild, sunny day and they both enjoyed the peace of the garden.

"Lizzy," Jane began, "I do not mean to pry, but I must say that I like Mr. Darcy. He seems very kind and agreeable."

When Elizabeth did not reply immediately, Jane gently continued, "I think he must like you very much to call so soon."

"I like him, too, Jane, or at least I like what I know of him. I must confess my first impression of Mr. Darcy was not very favorable, but I think that is because he is shy with strangers. I realize now he is truly amiable. Mr. Darcy is a clever, well-read man and he did not seem to be the least bit affronted by my having opinions of my own. Now, that is a rare virtue in a man."

"Oh, Lizzy," said Jane fondly, "you are just too clever for most men. The fact that Mr. Darcy respects your opinions may mean you have at last met a man whose intelligence equals your own."

"And what of Mr. Bingley, dear Jane. I have wanted to ask, did you find him as agreeable as I found his friend?"

Jane blushed slightly, "Yes, Lizzy. He is a most pleasing young man. We did not engage in any serious or lengthy conversation so I would not think I know Mr. Bingley as well as you know Mr. Darcy. Yet, I am certain he is very charming. His manners and conversation are just what a young man's ought to be. I hope we shall see them both very often."

"So do I, Jane."

Arm in arm, the sisters returned to the house where Mrs. Bennet was already busy in a flurry of activity planning tomorrow's dinner.

Darcy enjoyed the ride back to Netherfield. His spirits were lighter than they had been since--well, for some time-- Darcy quickly cast his unpleasant memories aside, determined that nothing would spoil his delight in the day. It was a beautiful day and Darcy was exceedingly pleased over his success with Elizabeth thus far. Darcy had never been able to converse easily with young women, and he had certainly never engaged in idle flirtations. Yet, there was something about Elizabeth that made him feel easy. He found himself speaking to her of what he thought and felt without analyzing every possible nuance, as was his long time habit. Darcy felt as if he could talk to Elizabeth forever, and happily, she seemed to enjoy his company as well.

Darcy arrived at Netherfield just in time to join his hosts for lunch. As usual Bingley was delighted by the morning's activities. Of course, it had long been Darcy's opinion that Bingley was delighted by almost everything.

"I say, we had marvelous shooting this morning, did we not, Hurst? It is a pity you did not come with us, Darcy. Did you have a pleasant ride?"

"I did, thank you," was Darcy's succinct reply.

"Were you out riding all this time?" Bingley politely pressed.

"No, I called at Longbourn this morning."

Bingley whose suspicions had been raised the night before could not resist teasing his friend, "And how is Miss Elizabeth this morning?"

Without batting an eye, Darcy replied, "The Bennets are all quite well, thank you, Bingley. I passed a very pleasant morning in their company. In fact, I have been invited to dinner there tomorrow evening."

Bingley was surprised at such directness from his friend who was always so circumspect. While Bingley had thought Darcy might prefer Elizabeth Bennet, he had never dreamed Darcy would call so soon. "Well, I must admit I am surprised, Darcy. You say that I am impulsive, but here the recalcitrant bachelor is rushing in far faster than I would dare."

Darcy merely smiled and continued eating his lunch. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hurst watched her sister in concern. Caroline was clearly seething, but striving to regain her composure. As usual when her emotions were high, Caroline Bingley could not control her tongue.

"Really, Mr. Darcy, I cannot believe that you would desert us for the likes of the Bennets. They are nobody in the grander scheme of things."

Darcy did not raise his voice, but his gaze was steely as he replied, "On the contrary, while the Bennets may not be active participants in London society, Mr. Bennet is a gentleman. His family has held Longbourn for countless generations. His daughters are, therefore, a gentleman's daughters and as such should be accorded the proper respect."

Bingley was not the least affronted by this opinion. In fact, he agreed with Darcy. While his father's success in trade enabled Bingley to live a gentleman's life, he knew this was not the same as Mr. Bennet's claim to that title. Bingley was content to be proud of his father's success and grateful for the opportunities it afforded him.

Caroline on the other hand was obsessed with what she could not have. She wanted to be a lady of the first rank, something that would never happen unless she was able to marry very well, indeed. Without another word, she flounced from the room, wanting to scratch Elizabeth Bennet's eyes out. With a murmured apology, Mrs. Hurst followed her, hoping to soothe Caroline's ruffled feathers before she broke something expensive. The gentlemen continued with lunch as though nothing had happened.

## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines The Misfortune of Knowing Anything

### Chapter Two - The Misfortune of Knowing Anything

*A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.*  
Jane Austen, **Northanger Abbey**, Chapter 14

Mr. Bennet was inclined to think well of Mr. Darcy. After all, Darcy seemed an intelligent fellow, and the fact that the man admired Elizabeth recommended his judgment and taste. However, upon reflection Mr. Bennet realized that his impulsive invitation had encouraged the acquaintance without any assurance that this would be agreeable to Elizabeth. Eager to know her opinion, he invited his favorite daughter to join him in a walk after breakfast.

"--I want to see how the repairs to the Sedgewicks' cottage are coming along, Lizzy."

Elizabeth was quite pleased at the prospect of a private walk with her papa. She hurriedly changed into her stout boots and the two of them were soon walking out across the estate.

The Sedgewicks were tenants of Mr. Bennet and their cottage had been hit by lightning. Quick action by the family and their neighbors had saved the house from total destruction, but the damage was still considerable. Knowing that winter would soon be upon them, Mr. Bennet had made the repairs a priority and was paying additional laborers to get the job done quickly. When Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth were well away from the family's listening ears, he broached the subject that was uppermost on his mind.

"Mr. Darcy seems quite taken with you, Lizzy. I hope I have not made you uneasy by inviting him to dinner this evening."

"No, certainly not, Papa," she reassured him. "I have enjoyed Mr. Darcy's company thus far and I would like to know him better."

Mr. Bennet thought that Elizabeth's blush spoke far more eloquently of her opinion of Mr. Darcy than did her words. He smiled but refrained from the impulse to tease her. After all he himself had often complained that Elizabeth's younger sisters were far too silly over young men. It certainly would not do for him to make a joke of such things--especially with his most sensible daughter.

"I am glad to hear that you are not adverse to furthering the acquaintance, my dear," he said. "Mr. Darcy seems a nice young man and I have hopes that he will prove an interesting conversationalist. Your mother mentioned that you sat out an entire set with Mr. Darcy at the assembly. Tell me, Lizzy, what did the two of you talk about?"

"It began as your very ordinary, excessively polite conversation," Elizabeth replied. "In other words, it was nothing of consequence or inordinate interest. In fact, I think Mr. Darcy is rather shy as he had very little to say initially, but then I asked him what he had read most recently. From that point on our conversation was much like the ones we share. We compared our views of various poets and authors, and we even talked a bit about his estate. Mr. Darcy became most animated when I asked about his irrigation methods. I believe he is like you in that regard, Papa."

"Ah, another farmer masquerading as a gentleman, is he?" Mr. Bennet asked with a chuckle. "I knew I liked the man."

They ceased speaking of Mr. Darcy when they neared the Sedgewicks', but Mr. Bennet was satisfied that he had not imposed upon his daughter in the least by inviting the man to dinner. He returned home later that morning, equally pleased by the progress made in repairing the cottage. Unfortunately, his solitary return to the house did not go unnoticed. Mr. Bennet had almost reached the sanctuary of his library when his wife caught him.

"Good heavens, Mr. Bennet," she exclaimed, "do not tell me that you have left Lizzy out loitering about with the workmen. It is highly improper and what if Mr. Darcy--"

Mr. Bennet cut her off, knowing that it was wisest to stop his excitable wife's hysteria at its inception. "Lizzy is kindly paying a call on Mrs. Robert Allen although it is not *her* duty."

His tack was well chosen, as Mrs. Bennet knew exactly whose responsibility it was to make such calls. Robert Allen was one of their tenants and his wife had been quite ill recently. Tenants and sickness were of little interest to Mrs. Bennet, but she could not openly criticize Elizabeth for performing the duty that she herself neglected. Murmuring something unintelligible, Mrs. Bennet hastened away to torment the housekeeper with instructions she had already repeated several times.

Mrs. Bennet had never understood Elizabeth's insistence on making such a fuss over their tenants, but she found herself thinking that at last there

might be some benefit from her daughter's eccentricity--provided, of course, that Mr. Darcy shared her husband's view of a landlord's responsibilities. Heavily influenced by her own ideas of true gentility, Mrs. Bennet decided it was equally likely that such a fine gentleman would be horrified by the prospect of his wife roaming the estate-- No, they had best hide Elizabeth's oddities until they knew more of Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Bennet's musings had the fortunate effect of sparing the housekeeper; however, they were of little consequence otherwise as Mr. Darcy would soon learn of Elizabeth's solicitude for their tenants quite by happenstance.

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Mr. Jones, the local apothecary, had pronounced Mrs. Allen to be out of danger several days ago. However, she was recovering from a bad bout of pleurisy and Elizabeth wanted to make certain that she continued to improve. To Elizabeth's relief she found Mrs. Allen contentedly sewing by the fire. She received Elizabeth kindly, insisting she stay for a cup of tea.

"Tea would be lovely, Mrs. Allen," Elizabeth agreed, "but I was hoping there might be some manner in which I could assist you today."

"No, Miss Lizzy," her hostess replied, "you have done too much already. You may think I was too sick to recall all the time you spent here while I was abed, but I remember it all. Now you sit back and just keep me company for a spell. I have yet to venture out, so tell me all the happenings at Longbourn."

Elizabeth spent a happy half hour in Mrs. Allen's company and then left with every intention of walking straight home. However, the beautiful autumn morning was simply too fine to be wasted away indoors. Elizabeth was extremely fond of a long walk and it was perfect weather for roaming through the countryside--crisp but not cold with a clear cloudless sky overhead. Knowing the house was surely in chaos by now preparing for the evening's dinner guest, Elizabeth happily set out in the opposite direction. She enjoyed the physical activity of striding across the dormant fields as well as the privacy it afforded her to think on Mr. Darcy.

It must have been a very absorbing train of thought for in her preoccupation, Elizabeth neglected her skirts in crossing a stile and found herself caught. She carefully adjusted each layer of her clothing and discovered to her dismay that it was her dress, which was ensnared. Had it been the old coat she was wearing or her petticoat, Elizabeth would have wrenched herself free and continued on her way. The dress, however, was nearly new and Mama was certain to notice if she ripped it. Elizabeth did not fear the scolding that would cause, but she desperately wanted to avoid any excuse for Mama to further restrict her activities. Her mother's idea of what constituted a proper lady's life was very limited and, in Elizabeth's opinion, very dull as well.

Elizabeth ceased striving to free herself when she heard a horse approaching. Anxious to conceal her unladylike predicament, she managed to sit upon the stile and hoped the rider would pass her by without drawing near enough to necessitate a formal greeting. Alas, the rider not only saw Elizabeth, he turned to meet her. Elizabeth felt her color rise when she saw the gentleman's face.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said with pleasure as he dismounted and gave a very proper bow.

Realizing she must confess all or appear quite rude indeed, Elizabeth replied, "Good morning, Mr. Darcy. Please forgive me for not rising to give you a proper curtsy in return." Her voice dropped as she continued, "I seem to have gotten myself into a bit of a predicament."

Forgetting himself, Darcy closed the gap to her side, "Good heavens, are you injured, Miss Elizabeth? Please tell me how I might assist you."

Elizabeth smiled as she replied, "Pray do not be anxious, sir. I am very well this morning. However, I was not paying attention to my skirts when I clambered over the stile and now I am well and truly caught."

Darcy chuckled in his relief. "Well and truly caught--I do believe that I can sympathize with your situation, Miss Elizabeth."

His meaning was unmistakable and Elizabeth felt herself flush anew as her heart began to race. She quickly dropped her eyes for Elizabeth did not trust herself to return Darcy's gaze without yielding to a sudden yearning to caress his cheek.

The gentleman was not at all disappointed by her reaction. On the contrary, it pleased him to know that he could affect her so. Darcy reached for Elizabeth's hand and kissed it, as propriety would allow. However, he permitted his lips to linger for a moment and then to brush her hand a second time. Darcy felt rather than heard her gasp, and with that encouragement he dared to retain Elizabeth's hand in his own until she raised her eyes to meet his.

When she began a stammered apology, Darcy immediately interrupted her, "No apologies are necessary, Miss Elizabeth. I find you uniformly charming and these little surprises only enhance your other considerable charms."

Darcy was able to free her without tearing the dress, but it necessitated his reaching around Elizabeth in a manner that both found very disconcerting.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," she managed as he helped her down from the stile. Darcy was gazing at her mouth in a very particular way, and Elizabeth instinctively knew that an immediate change of subject was required.

"My frock and I appreciate your gallant rescue from my most unladylike difficulty," she said with a playful curtsy. Then looking up at him through her lashes Elizabeth continued, "I would not impose upon you further were it not of the direst necessity, but I fear I must prevail upon your kindness a little more, Mr. Darcy."



The gentleman was extremely grateful for her lighthearted request as he had been seriously thinking of kissing Elizabeth here and now, and that would simply not do.

"Certainly, Miss Elizabeth," he answered with a courtly bow, "I would be willing to offer any assistance in my power."

Elizabeth colored again--and very prettily Darcy thought--as she smiled up at him impishly.

"I am afraid, sir, that my unladylike exploits will one day be the death of my mother or so she often tells me. May I prevail upon you to spare her life by not mentioning the details of our meeting this morning?"

Darcy chuckled, "Certainly, Miss Elizabeth, it will be our secret--provided you allow me the honor of seeing you home."

"Ah, I see that you are not above blackmail, sir," Elizabeth teased him.

"Not if it secures me the pleasure of your company," Darcy replied.

As Darcy was accompanied by his horse, they abandoned the cross-country footpath Elizabeth had been traveling and followed the lane. Neither was in a particular hurry to part company, so they ambled slowly toward Longbourn, talking of everything and of nothing with Darcy's mount trailing behind them. Darcy thought it remarkable that he felt so easy in Elizabeth's presence. Their conversation flowed naturally, and when he lapsed back into his characteristic silence, Elizabeth did not seem to be troubled in the least. It felt to Darcy as if she understood him.

They were still some distance from the house but well within the boundaries of Mr. Bennet's property when a small boy's voice was heard shouting, "Miss Lizzy, Miss Lizzy!"

Without a thought Elizabeth lifted her skirts and sped across the field toward the source of the sound. Darcy followed her somewhat at a loss to understand what was happening until he espied movement in a tall tree up ahead. A lad of no more than eight or nine was climbing down as fast as he could while Elizabeth raced to meet him.

Elizabeth was anxious for she had recognized the voice immediately as belonging to Johnny Clay, and his family were the Allens' nearest neighbors. Darcy arrived in time to hear her ask the breathless boy, "Is it Mrs. Allen, Johnny?"

He shook his head and answered, "No, Miss Lizzy--it's Ma."

"Your mother? Is she ill or injured? Shall I send for Mr. Jones?"

"No, ma'am. She wants you, Miss Lizzy," Johnny insisted. "Ma slipped with the knife and cut herself something awful. Mrs. Allen is with her, but they cannot stop the bleeding. I went to Longbourn and they told me you were gone--"

The boy stopped suddenly and hung his head in embarrassment. After a moment he haltingly continued, "Well--you see, Miss Lizzy-- Miss Jane came out and--but I just couldn't tell Miss Jane what was the matter. She would be bound and determined to help, but--"

Elizabeth smiled, knowing full well why Johnny did not want Jane anywhere near his mother just now. Everyone at Longbourn knew that Miss Jane swooned at the merest sight of blood.

Elizabeth hugged him and said, "You did the right thing, Johnny, to spare Miss Jane's feelings that way. Thank you for being so considerate of her and how clever you were to climb the tree to watch for me. I will go right now and we will set your mother to rights in no time."

The boy seemed to grow a foot taller in response to her praise and Darcy noted the devotion in his eyes as he smiled at "Miss Lizzy." She then turned to Darcy. He glimpsed the worry behind her smile, but Elizabeth's manner was calm and composed as if nothing were the least bit wrong.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Darcy. I seem to have completely forgotten my manners. This is Johnny Clay. Johnny, this is Mr. Darcy. Would you be so kind, sir, as to take Johnny on your horse--he knows right where my medicine basket is--and then perhaps you might give him a ride home."

"Certainly, if that is your wish--"

"Thank you," Elizabeth interrupted him with a radiant smile. "Johnny, you go with Mr. Darcy and I will just take the short way straight through the woods. I will see you gentlemen shortly."

Elizabeth curtsied and then hastened away without a backward glance. The confident smile which had been for Johnny's benefit disappeared as soon as she turned her back to them. Elizabeth's mind was racing ahead to Mrs. Clay's injury and what might be required to treat it. When she was certain Darcy could no longer see her, Elizabeth picked up her skirts again and ran in earnest. For his part, Darcy stood there staring after her until he felt a slight tug at his side.

"I think we had best go on like Miss Lizzy said, sir," Johnny urged him.

Understanding a boy's concern for his mother, Darcy managed a small smile, "Johnny, is it?"

The boy nodded and Darcy continued, "I am sure Miss Lizzy will take excellent care of your mother, but you are right. We had best go for her things as she requested."

Darcy gently placed the lad atop his horse and then swung up in the saddle behind him. Darcy was certainly not lacking in sympathy for the boy and his mother, but his thoughts were filled with Elizabeth Bennet. She was most definitely unlike any other young woman of his acquaintance. When they reached the manor house Darcy rode around back as young Johnny directed and waited while the lad ran in through the kitchen door. He soon

returned carrying a large covered basket. Darcy found himself wondering just what all was inside as he helped the lad back onto the horse and then handed the basket up to him. At Johnny's direction they crossed several fields and then followed a meandering footpath. The path was barely wide enough for the horse in some places. That combined with occasional low hanging limbs and uneven ground necessitated a slower pace, and Darcy took advantage of this to draw his young companion into a discussion of Elizabeth.

"Are you certain Miss Lizzy will be able to take care of your mother, Johnny? I would be happy to ride to town for the doctor," Darcy offered.

"Oh, no, sir, Mr. Darcy, sir. Miss Lizzy will have Ma as right as rain in no time. She almost always knows what to do. Besides there ain't no doctor in town. Mr. Jones--the apothecary in Meryton--is real nice, but Longbourn folks would rather have Miss Lizzy for most ailments. And not just because of the money neither," Johnny hastened to add. "Miss Lizzy is special. My gram says Miss Lizzy is part fairy. She is probably just funning when she says that, but Miss Lizzy does have a healing way about her. Everybody says so. You may not have seen it yet being a foreigner and all, but there ain't nobody like Miss Lizzy."

"Oh, no, Johnny," Darcy assured him, "I have noticed that Miss Lizzy is not like most young ladies. Actually, I think it would explain quite a bit if she were part fairy, for I agree that Miss Lizzy is very special."

By the time they reached Johnny's home, Darcy had learned quite a lot about Elizabeth. Her exploits and accomplishments were evidently legendary among the inhabitants of Longbourn. In addition to her "doctoring," Miss Lizzy had taught almost all of the women on the estate to read including Johnny's mother. She was evidently quite active as a child, beginning her heroics at an early age for Johnny insisted that Miss Lizzy had rescued a tenant's toddler from the millpond when she herself was only six. He went on to solemnly assure Darcy that Miss Lizzy could still climb a tree or skip a rock better than any boy alive. She had been hurt countless times honing those skills and Johnny recounted an impressive litany of injuries--her most recent mishap being a broken arm Miss Lizzy suffered when she fell from a tree three years ago.

"--Of course, she only climbed the tree that day to rescue a cat," Johnny explained. "Miss Lizzy don't climb for fun anymore now that she's all growed up."

Darcy managed to keep a straight face as he solemnly inquired, "And what became of the cat?"

"Oh, Miss Lizzy managed to break its fall, and the cat was just fine."

When they arrived at the Clay's cottage, Darcy tethered his horse to a nearby tree and followed the lad inside. He was impressed by the general air of order and cheer within the small dwelling. Everything was neat as a pin and there were colorful curtains at the windows. Remembering what Johnny had said about Elizabeth's reading lessons, Darcy noticed a Bible and several other books on the table by the bed.

Mrs. Clay was lying there with Elizabeth standing at her side. The woman was dreadfully pale and appeared to be somewhat glassy eyed from the shock of her injury. Elizabeth was holding the wounded hand well above Mrs. Clay's head, no doubt to slow the bleeding. It was also obvious from the way Elizabeth gripped it tightly that she was applying considerable pressure to the wound. However, Elizabeth's face and voice betrayed none of her tension and concern.

"Ah, there you are and just in time, too. Johnny, I had Mrs. Allen put the kettle on before she took your brothers and sister to her house. Would you please make your mother a cup of tea and lay out a clean towel for me? Then I need you to go and help Mrs. Allen with the younger children."

The boy nodded and immediately went to the kettle.

Looking back over his shoulder, Johnny asked, "Should I make some for you and Mr. Darcy, too, Miss Lizzy?"

"No, thank you. I do not think either of us care for tea right now, Johnny, but your mother will need some with her medicine."

Once Johnny was busy, Elizabeth quietly spoke to Darcy, "I had not planned to impose on you thusly, sir, but the wound is worse than I expected and I could use your assistance if you are willing."

"Certainly, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy replied. "However, you will need to instruct me as I am not experienced in these matters."

Her relief was palpable. "Thank you, sir. Mrs. Allen would have stayed to help, but I did not want the children to be upset and they are too young to be left alone."

When Johnny had placed the cup of tea next to Miss Lizzy's basket on the table, he obediently headed toward the door. Seeing the boy's anxious glance back at his mother who was lying pale and still on the bed, Elizabeth urged him on.

"It will be fine, Johnny. I promise to do my very best. Now you run along."

Johnny's face brightened considerably as his confidence in Miss Lizzy allowed him to believe her. With a nod and a smile he was gone.

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth asked, "would you please watch out the window to be certain Johnny does not turn back?"

Darcy wondered at the request but did as she asked, watching until the boy was completely out of sight. "Johnny is gone. Now, how may I assist you?"

Elizabeth ignored his question for the moment and said to her patient, "He is gone now, Mrs. Clay. Mr. Darcy watched him go, so you may cry out if you need to. Do not worry in the least about us. I assure you that Mr. Darcy is quite trustworthy and there is no one else near enough to hear a thing, so you do what you need to in order to get through this."

Darcy had thought the woman was nearly unconscious, but he realized now that Mrs. Clay had been so silent and still because she was exerting

every bit of self-control not to alarm her son. She still did not cry out, but means began to escape her lips.

"We need to close the wound as quickly as possible," Elizabeth said. "I think this will go fastest, Mr. Darcy, if you will take my place putting pressure on the injury while I see to my supplies."

Darcy nodded as he hurriedly removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

"Mrs. Clay," Elizabeth said as if the circumstances were perfectly ordinary, "this is Mr. Darcy. He is a friend of our neighbor at Netherfield. Mr. Darcy, may I present Mrs. Clay."

Darcy could not help himself; he bowed from force of habit, but felt a little less silly when Mrs. Clay offered him a slight nod of her head.

"Now that you two have been properly introduced," Elizabeth continued, "I am going to give your hand to Mr. Darcy. He will continue to put pressure on it while I prepare to close the wound."

Mrs. Clay nodded her understanding, but remained silent as if afraid her self-control would be lost if she tried to speak. Darcy took a piece of clean cloth from the basket and folded it several times as Elizabeth instructed.

"--the cloth I am holding against the wound is soaked through. Let us leave that in place for the moment. I want you to apply the clean cloth over that and hold her hand like so. Put as much pressure on the wound as you can. It should only take me a few minutes to assemble all I need."

Darcy nodded and took the injured hand between his own. He could not help wondering who attended to such needs at Pemberley. Of course, the physician would be summoned from Lambton for serious matters or when it was requested, but what of the more ordinary illnesses and injuries? Did the tenants appeal to Mrs. Reynolds for help or did they tend to one another? It was sobering to realize that he who prided himself on being such an attentive master and landlord really did not know.

Darcy was soon distracted from this introspection by the fascination of watching Elizabeth at work. He decided that she must have planned her course of action carefully while she waited, for everything was done decisively with an economy of motion. After donning a heavy apron that she withdrew from her basket, Elizabeth poured half of the tea into a second cup and then added something to both cups from what appeared to be a gentleman's flask. Seeing Darcy's quizzical glance, Elizabeth flashed a mischievous smile.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy, it is brandy, and no, I did not steal my father's flask. He gave it to me for this purpose. The brandy will ease Mrs. Clay's suffering and help her to relax."

Having explained the brandy's use, Elizabeth proceeded to administer it. As Darcy was holding the injured hand, she had to lean in very close to him in order to gently lift Mrs. Clay's head. Elizabeth seemed not to notice that they were almost touching, but Darcy was grateful that his hands were well occupied at the moment for Elizabeth's nearness tempted him to take her in his arms.

"Here, Mrs. Clay," she urged, "I need you to drink this. It will help."

When the cup was empty, Elizabeth returned to the table and began removing various items from her basket, including a small basin that she placed on a chair by the bed along with the towel and another measure of brandy.

"For cleaning the wound," she explained as she drew a second chair up to face the first.

With Darcy looking on Elizabeth threaded a very fine needle with a length of silk after holding the needle's point in the flame of a candle. Satisfied that she was ready, Elizabeth administered the second dose of brandy and tea. She then sat down in the empty chair beside the bed and placed the towel across her lap.

"Now, Mr. Darcy," she said, "in a minute I will ask you to lower Mrs. Clay's hand over the basin. When you do that I want you to strip the cloth away from her wound as quickly as you can and hold her hand with the palm up where I can see her injury. When I have cleaned the wound, please place her hand in my lap and do what you can to keep it still while I work."

Darcy nodded his understanding. Once Elizabeth indicated she was ready, everything seemed to happen very quickly. The brandy was poured over the wound, and then Darcy did his best to hold the injured hand steady while Elizabeth sewed the two sides of the laceration back together. He could not help but admire her absolute concentration and the quick efficiency with which she closed the injury. When she had cut the thread, Elizabeth lifted the candle to take a closer look at her handiwork. Satisfied that the stitches would hold she began to bandage the injured hand. When the wound was well protected, Elizabeth proceeded to draw a length of yellow ribbon from her apron and tied it around the bandage.

Darcy smiled knowing the ribbon was not actually securing the bandage, but was merely added to cheer the patient. Mrs. Clay appeared to have dozed off and Elizabeth carefully placed her injured hand at her side.

"What now?" Darcy whispered.

"I will just tidy up a bit and then stop by Mrs. Allen's to let her know all is well."

After he had helped Elizabeth set the cottage back to rights, Darcy sat down at the table and watched curiously as she removed various herbs from her basket. Clearly Elizabeth knew exactly which ones she wanted and proceeded to combine her choices in a jar.

Seeing his interest, she explained, "I am making a tea to promote clotting in the event that any of the stitches come loose. It is mostly Shepherd's Purse, but with a little aster and several other herbs to improve the taste."

When she was done Elizabeth placed the jar in the center of the table and methodically repacked her supplies. The soiled apron was tied up into a

neat bundle and secured to the side of the basket. Darcy was definitely impressed. He could not help comparing Elizabeth to the young women he knew in London and the ladies of London came up sadly lacking.

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said as they stepped outside. Now that the crisis was past, she began to feel awkward and in her anxiety Elizabeth began to babble. "I am very grateful for your assistance today, and I hope you will forgive me for trespassing upon your kindness, Mr. Darcy. Truly, I had not intended to impose upon you thusly, but-- It would have-- It would have been difficult to manage alone. You really need not wait to see me home as I have already taken up too much of your time. Besides, I am quite safe here and I know that your friends at Netherfield are probably expecting you."

"No further thanks are necessary, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said when she drew breath, "and I certainly do not regard it as an imposition to see you home. It is my privilege. Shall we take the horse along to the Allens' or will we be returning this way?"

Elizabeth smiled up at him as she replied, "It is little matter in terms of distance, but if you would care to see the creek, bring the horse and we will return to the house another way."

"I am most interested in furthering my knowledge of the beauty of Hertfordshire," was Darcy's pointed reply as he untied his horse.

Elizabeth's blush confirmed that she had caught his compliment. However, her answer was couched to be properly neutral. "Surely our local beauties pale beside those of your home county, Mr. Darcy, for I have often heard praise of the wild peaks of Derbyshire. I am sorry if your visit to these parts has been marred by today's unpleasantness."

"Nonsense, I was most happy to be of assistance," Darcy replied. "It would seem that you have considerable experience in tending to such matters, Miss Elizabeth."

Her blush deepened but Elizabeth determinedly held her head up as she answered him, "You are correct, Mr. Darcy. I have been treating our tenants for a number of years now, much to my mother's chagrin. She does not think it becoming behavior for a lady, but Mama just does not understand. It is a part of my heritage. Longbourn is a small estate of little consequence to anyone except those of us who live here, but we have a longstanding tradition of caring for one another. Most of our tenants are from families that have tended this land for as many generations as my father's family has held it. Unfortunately my mother is not much inclined to visit them--even for happy occasions like weddings and births--and Mama is certainly ill suited for the sickroom."

Seeing that Darcy seemed sincerely interested, Elizabeth continued, "Jane and I, however, grew up calling on the families with Papa. Jane is wonderful with the children and everyone loves to have Jane come to visit, but she is so very sympathetic that she becomes--overwhelmed when witnessing another's suffering. Jane could not possibly assist me as you did today. When I realized how often our people were ignoring a small injury or lesser illness because they did not think it serious enough to send for Mr. Jones, I began to read anything I could find on related subjects. I started out making simple remedies for colds and sore throats, and people said it helped them so I continued studying. Once Mr. Jones realized what I was about, he began taking me along whenever he was called to a Longbourn family. Now everyone comes to me for most of their ailments."

Darcy was speechless in his admiration, but Elizabeth interpreted his silence as disapproval.

"I realize this is not the sort of behavior you are used to in young women of your acquaintance," she continued stiffly.

"No, I cannot imagine any other woman I know doing what you did today," Darcy agreed with a smile.

Elizabeth was not looking at him and so missed his smile and the warmth in his eyes. Having endured her mother's constant laments that no man would want a woman who sought out the ill and injured, Elizabeth completely misunderstood Darcy and took offense.

"I am sorry if I have shocked you, sir, but I am not sorry for what I did today to help Mrs. Clay. Perhaps you should return to your friends now. The footpath will lead you back to the lane."

She angrily reached for her basket, but Darcy refused to relinquish it. When he had Elizabeth's full attention, Darcy placed the basket on the ground and took her hand.

"You have completely misunderstood me, Miss Elizabeth. I agreed that you are uncommon, but that was not meant as an insult to you in any way. You are unlike any woman I have ever known, but the things that set you apart are some of the things I admire most about you. In truth, I was quite impressed today. My admiration for you increases each time we meet."

Elizabeth dropped her eyes as she realized how greatly she had erred. "Please forgive me, Mr. Darcy," she whispered. "I did mistake your meaning and I responded ungraciously. I am afraid that--"

"You need not apologize at all," Darcy interrupted her, "if you will only allow me to see you home."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy," she murmured. "I would enjoy your company."

They were warmly welcomed at the Allens'. Having already heard a great deal of Mr. Darcy and his horse from young Johnny, Mrs. Allen was very pleased that Elizabeth had brought the gentleman around. Her home was just as neat and inviting as the Clays' had been and Darcy wondered if this were somehow Elizabeth's influence as she was obviously highly regarded by the families on the estate. If Darcy had been captivated by Elizabeth before, he now found her utterly fascinating. Once the introductions were completed he happily sat back to observe her. Elizabeth was every bit a lady and yet so at ease in a simple farm cottage. She gratefully accepted Mrs. Allen's offer of tea and then turned to give Johnny instructions for making his mother's special tea when she awoke.

"--Now you just be sure your mama has a cup of that tea when she wakes up and another cup at bedtime. It will help her get better, and tell your

mama she is not to get that hand wet for at least a week. That means you will have to help with the washing, young man."

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Lizzy," Johnny cried with a smile and was off. He ran home to tend his mother just as fast as his legs could take him.

Satisfied that Mrs. Clay would be in good hands, Elizabeth tried to determine how their hostess fared. She was pleased to see that Mrs. Allen did not appear to be overly tired, but concerned that she might have taken on too much.

"Surely, I could find someone else to take the Clay children for the afternoon, Mrs. Allen--"

"Now you need not worry on my account, Miss Lizzy. I truly am feeling better and the little ones amuse each other for the most part. They will be fine here until their Papa comes to get them this evening." Mrs. Allen turned her attention to Mr. Darcy as she continued, "Miss Lizzy looks out for all of us and I doubt a doctor all the way from London could do as well."

"Yes," Darcy said with a smile, "Johnny has already assured me that everyone at Longbourn would much rather be treated by Miss Lizzy than by Mr. Jones. After seeing her in action, I can understand why."

Mrs. Allen beamed at him. Emboldened by her smile and Elizabeth's obvious embarrassment, Darcy leaned across the table and added in a loud whisper, "Of course, I have never seen a London physician who is half as pretty as your Miss Lizzy either."

"You go on now, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Allen laughed good-naturedly. "You watch out for this one, Miss Lizzy. He has a silver tongue."

Darcy was surprised by how much he enjoyed their brief visit with Mrs. Allen. When they were saying their goodbyes, she embraced Elizabeth.

"Thank you for what you did today, Miss Lizzy. Clara Clay has been my nearest neighbor all my married life. She will thank you when she is able, but for now I thank you on behalf of Clara and her family."

"I was glad to help, Mrs. Allen. If the little ones tire you out, send word and I will find someone to help."

When they left the Allen cottage, Darcy tied his horse's reins to the handle of the basket. This innovation allowed him to easily manage both with his left hand leaving his right arm free. He offered it to Elizabeth and was very pleased when she accepted it without hesitation. The path by the stream was broad and the surrounding countryside was beautiful. They walked in silence for some time before Darcy dared to broach their earlier misunderstanding.

"I am sorry that I did not make my meaning clear earlier, Miss Elizabeth, when I commented on how unique you are. I meant it as a great compliment."

"Pray, do not trouble yourself over it any further, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth reassured him. "I only hope you can forgive me for losing my temper. I have endured considerable criticism for my nursing activities and I am afraid that caused me to take offense. I apologize for losing my temper. I must admit that tendency is one of my failings."

"Let us think on it no more," Darcy replied. Then leaning down he whispered in her ear, "While I would hope to never merit your wrath, Miss Elizabeth, I must confess that I found you most attractive with your eyes flashing."

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When he returned to Netherfield, Darcy was delighted to learn that Caroline Bingley was still keeping to her room. She had not left her bed since fleeing the dining room the previous day. Caroline's self-imposed confinement actually made a pleasant change for the other occupants of Netherfield--with the possible exception of Mrs. Hurst.

Sisterly duty compelled her to check on Caroline from time to time. Thus she was forced to bear the brunt of Caroline's ill humor. Mrs. Hurst made the mistake once of trying to reason with her sister, by pointing out that Darcy had never shown any particular interest in her.

"If Mr. Darcy is not interested in marrying you, Caroline, then why do you care whom he marries? What does it matter whether he should choose Elizabeth Bennet or the daughter of an earl? Either way Mr. Darcy would be married to someone else."

Her pragmatism was not appreciated. Mrs. Hurst did manage to evade the vase Caroline threw at her, but it was a close thing. She did not return to her sister's room for some time.

All the inhabitants of Netherfield were well aware that Caroline was not ill. She was angry. Bingley went so far as to suggest that perhaps Mr. and Mrs. Hurst should return to town and take Caroline with them. Since this suggestion came after the vase incident, it was not well received.

Caroline would have been most displeased to know that while she was brooding over Mr. Darcy, that gentleman scarcely gave her a thought--other than the occasional sigh of gratitude at being spared her company for the day. After his morning, Darcy could think of little else but Elizabeth. The character and determination he had witnessed today only increased his already considerable admiration of the lady. Fortunately, Bingley was not a demanding companion and he did not seem at all offended by Darcy's woolgathering. Although he had spent most of the morning in Elizabeth's company, Darcy could hardly wait for the evening's dinner engagement at Longbourn.

Elizabeth was also looking forward to their next meeting; however, she--who was normally at home in any company--experienced the novelty of being decidedly nervous about the engagement. She kept telling herself it was just a simple dinner, but it was difficult to believe that when everyone

else's actions indicated otherwise. Mrs. Bennet in typical fashion was agonizing over every detail of the menu and presentation, but strangely said nothing at all of Mr. Darcy. Such uncharacteristic behavior from her mother was quite unnerving. Elizabeth would have expected her to carry on embarrassingly as Mrs. Bennet was wont to do when any unmarried man paid the slightest attention to one of her daughters. However, Mrs. Bennet remained stubbornly silent regarding Mr. Darcy. The only indication that she recognized Elizabeth as the object of his interest was her insistence that Lizzy go upstairs early and take extra care with her appearance. Elizabeth did not mind for she found herself wanting to look especially nice. In truth, she wanted Mr. Darcy to think her beautiful. Jane who was always sensitive to her sister's feelings followed Elizabeth upstairs.

Offering the silent encouragement of her presence, Jane removed the pins from Elizabeth's hair and began to brush it. It had long been a bedtime ritual between them and Jane knew that it would help relieve her sister's fit of nerves.

When Elizabeth seemed more herself Jane began to put her hair back up. "Do not worry, Lizzy. It is obvious Mr. Darcy likes you very much. If his friend had shown so much interest in me, I would be struggling not to think about wedding clothes."

Elizabeth could not help smiling at this. "That is not so, Jane. However, in such a case our mother might be selecting fabric." Her expression grew more serious. "Mama has been strangely silent regarding Mr. Darcy. She has said almost nothing of the matter since her first effusions on the ride home from Meryton. Do you think she fears he does not care for me?"

Seeing her normally confident sister's anxiety, Jane could not help but smile, as she answered, "No, Lizzy, I think Mama believes Mr. Darcy is quite seriously interested in you and she does not know how it happened. It is all quite beyond her comprehension."

Jane patted Elizabeth's shoulder and then walked over to look through her dresses. "Think of it from Mama's perspective, Lizzy. You talked of books, you danced one set and then Mr. Darcy with his reported ten thousand a year all but followed you home.

"Mama cannot understand it, because you did not simper or flirt. You did not flatter Mr. Darcy. You were not even wearing a new dress. You were simply yourself, dear Lizzy. Mama thinks of this as a game with set rules. Mr. Darcy's interest in you has made her doubt that. She is afraid that if she does not understand the rules, she may accidentally ruin everything for you. That is why she is so silent. That is why she is so restrained in front of Mr. Darcy."

Jane's explanation was entirely logical, and Elizabeth sighed with relief. "Oh, Jane, you are such a comfort to me," she said. "I had not thought of it that way. I really do not know what is the matter with me. I feel excited and yet anxious, too, about Mr. Darcy and that is not like me."

"Oh, I do not know, Lizzy," said her sister with a teasing smile. "You have never been in love before. This could be quite normal."

Elizabeth blushed as she protested, "Jane, you must not say such things. I am certainly not in love with Mr. Darcy."

"Perhaps not," Jane willingly agreed, "but if he continues to talk to you the way he did in the garden yesterday, I think you soon will be."

"In the garden?"

"Do not worry, Lizzy," Jane said. "I was not listening and I do not mean to imply there was anything improper about your conversation. However, I could not help but notice that Mr. Darcy was talking to you in a very particular way and that you seemed to enjoy it very much."

With a soft smile, Elizabeth whispered, "I did, Jane. I must confess I did."

Turning to more practical matters, Jane held up a soft blue dress. "What of this, Lizzy? You always look well in it. You could wear my new slippers and I think Mama's pearls would be lovely with this neckline."

By the time Jane was done fussing over her, Elizabeth felt like a princess. "Thank you, Jane. I feel much better. It was silly of me to be so uneasy over a simple dinner."

Jane hugged her and whispered, "No, Lizzy, it was not silly at all, but you do look especially beautiful tonight."

The dinner was excellent. Mrs. Bennet always set a very good table and tonight was no exception. Darcy, however, was oblivious to the meal itself. He only had eyes for Elizabeth. In fact, he found it difficult to carry on a normal conversation. He had come prepared to admire her, but tonight Elizabeth Bennet was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld. Darcy did not notice her dress or the carefully chosen jewelry. It was rather the way Elizabeth looked at him that caused his chest to ache. Her countenance glowed with happiness.

Darcy's silence caused Elizabeth to fall silent, too, but she was not displeased. All his looks proclaimed his regard for her. With the pair of them content to merely look at one another, it fell to the rest of the Bennets to carry the conversation at dinner. Elizabeth's parents and older sister were quite happy to relieve Mr. Darcy of that burden since it was obvious that the gentleman's silence was caused by his admiration for Elizabeth. The three youngest Bennet girls were rather quiet, having been thoroughly admonished beforehand by both their parents.

When the ladies left the table, Mr. Bennet offered the younger man his best port. "Here you are, son. It looks like you could use it."

Darcy realized that he had practically been gaping at the man's daughter throughout dinner. "I am sorry, Mr. Bennet, if I have been rude this evening. Please be assured of my respect for Miss Elizabeth--"

"Do not trouble yourself to apologize, sir. I am not affronted in the least. I do understand. She takes your breath away, does she not?"

"Yes, sir, she does." Darcy was too surprised to be less than honest with Mr. Bennet. "It almost hurts to look at her and yet I find I cannot look away."

"Well, drink up, son. Then perhaps you will be able to talk to my daughter."

Darcy was not used to such openness. In fact, he could only think of three people he had trusted implicitly since the death of his father: his sister Georgiana, his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and Bingley. Yet, Darcy found himself trusting Mr. Bennet just as he had instinctively trusted Elizabeth. Most people of his acquaintance had hidden schemes and motives. You had to be on guard because what they said was often not what they meant. Darcy was confident that sort of deceit would never even occur to Elizabeth or her father. He could not have explained how he knew that, but he was certain nevertheless.

Darcy suddenly realized he felt comfortable again. "Thank you, sir, for the drink and the talk. I think I am ready to rejoin the ladies."

Upon entering the drawing room, Darcy did not hesitate but made straight for Elizabeth. She gave him a ready smile and he took the seat beside her. Determined that he would speak to her, Darcy made some inane comment about the weather, which Elizabeth answered politely. The rest of the family conversed around them, allowing them a modicum of privacy.

Realizing that everyone was determinedly not listening to them, Darcy grew bolder. He quietly spoke what was uppermost on his mind.

"I am sorry if I neglected you at dinner, Miss Elizabeth. I arrived most anxious to talk with you and yet when I saw how beautiful you looked I found myself speechless."

Elizabeth blushed, but managed to reply. "Thank you for the compliment, sir. I hope you were able to enjoy your dinner."

"I honestly do not even remember what we had," Darcy whispered, "but please do not tell your mother. I would not want to offend her."

Elizabeth laughed at that and the awkwardness between them soon dissipated. Their conversation turned to poetry and the current renaissance of the art form. Sometime later Darcy's glance happened upon the pianoforte in the corner of the room. "Do you play, Miss Elizabeth?"

"I play a little, Mr. Darcy," she replied, "but certainly not very well. Surely you are accustomed to musicians of the highest caliber."

"I think you are laboring under a misconception of me, Miss Elizabeth. Of course, I enjoy a fine performance by well-trained professional musicians. However, that does not preclude my enjoying the informal performances of my family and friends in a small family party such as this. They are two very different types of performances and I judge them accordingly."

He smiled at her hopefully. "Would you please oblige me, Miss Elizabeth? I would dearly love to hear you play."

"Please, sir, I would not have you expect too much, but I will play if it meets with my family's approval." Raising her voice slightly, Elizabeth addressed her mother, "Mama, Mr. Darcy has expressed the desire for music. Would you mind if I played something for him?"

"Not at all, child. I am sure we would all enjoy some music."

To Elizabeth's surprise, Darcy rose and followed her to the instrument. "May I offer to turn the pages for you, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth had thought to play something from memory, but Darcy looked so keen that she had not the heart to refuse him. Fearing that the gentleman's nearness might prove to be very distracting, Elizabeth chose a score she knew well. She elected to sing and accompany herself, as her singing had often been praised and Elizabeth considered her performance on the pianoforte to be merely average.

Darcy was predisposed to be pleased by Elizabeth's performance, but it far exceeded his expectations. Her voice was sweet and clear and her music seemed to be an extension of Elizabeth herself. It flowed from her quite naturally, with simplicity and great feeling.

When Elizabeth's song was ended, Darcy took her hand, ostensibly to help her from her seat and murmured, "Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I enjoyed that immensely."

Elizabeth knew that her sister Mary would be anxious to follow her at the instrument. Unfortunately, Mary had a marked tendency to choose music that was far beyond her abilities. To prevent an embarrassing display, Elizabeth sweetly asked, "Mary, would you perhaps play the Chopin for us? It is a particular favorite."

Highly gratified by the request, Mary hastened to oblige her sister. She did, in fact, play the Chopin rather well, or at least well enough. It hardly mattered, as Darcy was not truly listening. Under the cover of the music he whispered, "Your song was almost as beautiful as you are, Miss Elizabeth."

"This is too much flattery, sir," she whispered back.

Undaunted, he replied, "It is not flattery at all. I speak only truth. You are the most captivating woman of my acquaintance, and I am truly your captive, my dearest Miss Elizabeth."

Seeing her hand resting lightly on the sofa between them, Darcy was unable to resist. He placed his hand atop hers as if by accident. However, he allowed it to linger just a moment, so that Elizabeth would realize he had done it purposefully. He even allowed himself to lightly press her hand with his own before he removed it. Darcy was pleased to note that Elizabeth seemed to hold her breath when their hands touched. Yet, she did not seem displeased in the least.

Darcy thought a day spent in Hertfordshire without seeing Elizabeth would be unbearable. Eager to spend time with her, he asked Mrs. Bennet for permission to call upon them the following morning. She assured him they had no particular plans and that he would be most welcome. Realizing it was time for him to return to Netherfield, Darcy warmly thanked all the Bennets for their hospitality and then turned to bid Elizabeth a more personal goodnight.

He kissed her hand as propriety allowed and gently squeezed her fingers as he released them. "Thank you again for the beautiful song, Miss

Elizabeth. It was truly lovely."

Elizabeth was acutely aware that her entire family was watching them, but she managed to smile at him shyly. "You are most welcome, Mr. Darcy. It was my pleasure to sing for you."

"Goodnight, Miss Elizabeth. I shall see you tomorrow."

"I shall look forward to it, sir."

Mr. Bennet walked their guest out. Elizabeth was afraid her mother would burst into audible raptures before Mr. Darcy was out of the house. However, Mrs. Bennet surprised her once again by gesturing to the girls to be quiet. Not a word was said until Mr. Bennet's return assured them that Mr. Darcy was indeed gone.

Mrs. Bennet who could contain herself no longer began to gush, "Oh, Lizzy, you looked so pretty tonight and Mr. Darcy was so attentive. He is quite the gentleman, is he not girls? I want no nonsense from you younger girls about soldiers and such. Mr. Darcy is a true gentleman and that is what you want in a husband. Remember that."

The younger girls all nodded dutifully. Mary and Kitty took her words to heart, but Lydia simply agreed in the hopes that it would end their mother's admonitions.

Surprisingly, Mr. Bennet voiced his agreement with his wife. "Listen to your mother, girls, for she is right in this case. It is easy when you are young and silly to be swayed by a man's looks or his uniform, but character is what counts. Mr. Darcy is rich to be sure, but your mother is correct in saying he is a true gentleman. A real gentleman will not trifle with a woman's affections or treat his wife unkindly. This is most important, for looks will change over time, but character rarely does. Mr. Darcy likes our Lizzy here. That speaks well of him. He has also made his intentions known in an honorable way and is spending time with all of us with a desire to know her better. This shows his respect for Lizzy and her family."

Finally unable to hold her piece, Lydia said, "But, Papa, it all seems so boring. Mr. Darcy just stares at her and kisses her hand when he leaves. I want my life to be more exciting."

Staring at his youngest in obvious displeasure, Mr. Bennet said, "I think you have just proven that you are too young to be fully out in company yet, Lydia. Those proper attentions are quite exciting when they come from the right person. Am I right, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth could not help blushing, but she knew her father was trying to make a very important point with Lydia. "Yes, Papa, I find Mr. Darcy's attentions very pleasing."

Lydia looked at her sister with some interest. "But is it *romantic*, Lizzy? It does not seem so. It all seems so tame."

Elizabeth firmly held her youngest sister's gaze as she said, "Yes, Lydia, it is very exciting. I now understand the reasons for so many of propriety's demands. The simplest touch or look can be quite overwhelming when accompanied by true feeling. Without careful adherence to many of those regulations that can seem so silly, it would be far too easy to be swept away before one realized it."

Everyone remained very still, uncertain of how to respond to Elizabeth's honesty. Mrs. Bennet was looking at her second daughter as if she had never seen her before.

Mr. Bennet finally broke the silence. "Thank you, Lizzy. I have never been prouder of you. I realize that it is very uncomfortable to speak of such private things, but you have done your sisters a great service tonight. I hope they will take your words to heart."

Turning to his wife, Mr. Bennet continued, "Mrs. Bennet, do you not think we have five very fine daughters?"

Mrs. Bennet managed a reply as she continued to stare at Elizabeth in what seemed to be amazement. "Oh, yes, Mr. Bennet. I am proud of all our girls."

Finally moving her gaze from Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet addressed her daughters in general, "Now it is time you went up to bed, my dears. Go along, girls. Your father and I will be up directly."

After the girls were gone, Mr. Bennet looked at his wife with compassion in his eyes, "I think you begin to understand what I mean about Lizzy's uncommon intelligence now, Mrs. Bennet."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Bennet. Why the way she explained things to her sisters was amazing, and she spoke so collectedly. She said it so well. That was exactly what I have wanted them to understand. I have talked to the girls so often about propriety and the importance of being careful—but Lizzy, she said what I wanted to say, but never could. I do not think I have ever understood Lizzy, but you are right, my dear Mr. Bennet. There *is* something special about her."

Mrs. Bennet paused obviously deep in thought. As it was extremely rare for Mrs. Bennet to think before speaking, Mr. Bennet found himself curious to know what she would say. What she finally uttered could not have surprised her husband any more if it had been said in perfect Greek.

"I wonder, Mr. Bennet, we do not know Mr. Darcy all that well. Do you think he is good enough for Lizzy? She must marry someone who will appreciate her."

Smiling, Mr. Bennet reached over to pat her hand, "Yes, Mrs. Bennet, I think Mr. Darcy might be good enough for her. He has impressed me with his integrity and his obvious respect and admiration of Elizabeth. Of course, in the end it will be up to them."

Mr. Bennet stood and offered her his arm. They were half way up the stairs when Mrs. Bennet recalled his earlier comment to Lydia.



"Mr. Bennet, did you mean it when you said poor Lydia was too young to be out?"

"Yes, Mrs. Bennet, I did. Lydia is more boisterous than our other girls. She is also less mature than the others were at her age."

"Oh, but Mr. Bennet, she will be so disappointed."

"I realize that, but we must be certain that she is ready to conduct herself as an adult and as a lady before we allow Lydia such liberty," Mr. Bennet insisted. "As it is, she has only attended one assembly and some small parties of neighbors. Lydia will still be allowed to participate in our family parties, but no more dances, until she is ready. I want all of our girls to attract the attention of gentlemen we can be proud to call our sons, Mrs. Bennet."

With her thoughts happily diverted to their daughters' eventual marriages, Mrs. Bennet was willing to defer to Mr. Bennet's decision—at least for the moment. "Well, if you are certain, Mr. Bennet. I am so glad you like Mr. Darcy. I do, too. I wonder if his friend Bingley might do for our Jane. Did you know that he danced with Jane twice at the Assembly?"

"Yes, I do recall that, my dear," Mr. Bennet answered. He allowed her to prattle on for some time, happy that Mrs. Bennet had not protested too much about Lydia.

## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines Attentions and Intentions

### *Chapter Three - Attentions and Intentions*

*...for jealousy had not yet made her (Caroline Bingley) desperate,  
and her attentions to Mr. Darcy were by no means over.  
Jane Austen, **Pride and Prejudice**, Chapter 45*

As he was dressing the following morning Darcy realized that he had, in fact, been neglecting his host. His delightful preoccupation with Elizabeth Bennet had left room for little else in Darcy's thoughts. Bingley was, of course, too agreeable to take offense, but Darcy had no desire to trespass upon his friend's forgiving nature. Determined to rectify his error without forfeiting today's planned visit to Longbourn, Darcy resolved to invite Bingley to accompany him. Delighted to find Bingley alone in the breakfast parlor, Darcy immediately set about persuading his friend to join him in calling on the Bennets.

"--You certainly seemed to enjoy the eldest Miss Bennet's company at the Assembly," Darcy reminded his host, "and you are tired of shooting. You said so yourself, Bingley. Why not ride to Longbourn with me? It will give you the opportunity to further your acquaintance with the Bennets."

"Thank you, Darcy," Bingley replied somewhat stiffly, "but I am not ready to entangle myself. I would not want anyone to misunderstand my intentions."

"Bingley, it is simply a morning visit," Darcy said with a shrug. "Come or not, as you choose, but you seem rather out of sorts this morning. In fact, you sound like-- Well, you do not seem to be yourself."

Even though Darcy had stopped himself from saying it, Bingley realized that he had sounded like Caroline.

"I am sorry, Darcy," he said with a sigh. "You are quite right. I am not myself. Caroline came downstairs for dinner yesterday and she was relentless in her criticism of the local society in general and the Bennets in particular. I am afraid that I allowed her to carry on because it was simply easier to listen than it would have been to stop her. I must not do so in the future. It would seem that Caroline's diatribes--in addition to being most unpleasant to endure--do sometimes have a residual effect."

Darcy gave his friend an understanding smile as he breathed a silent prayer of thanks that he not been present for Caroline's denunciation of Hertfordshire. Hoping to cheer Bingley he asked again, "So then, am I to have the pleasure of your company this morning? It looks to be a very fine day."

Bingley held back a laugh at this as it decidedly looked like rain, but he agreed nonetheless. After all, the opportunity to observe his besotted friend in the company of Miss Elizabeth would be worth a soaking and he would enjoy knowing her elder sister better. In addition to her considerable beauty, Bingley had found Miss Bennet a most agreeable companion.

"Yes, Darcy," he replied with a smile, "I think I will join you. I really should become better acquainted with my neighbors."

"Especially the pretty ones," Darcy added with a laugh.

Her head held high, Caroline Bingley swept into the breakfast parlor a short while later, but to her great disappointment only the servants were there to admire her regal entrance. Although Caroline never stooped to consider what her inferiors' opinions might be of her, it would have infuriated her to know that the entire Netherfield staff regarded her with contempt. While they allowed that Mr. Bingley was very polite and gentlemanlike, the Netherfield servants universally regarded his unmarried sister as an ill-mannered, pretentious shrew. Her continual criticism of the Bennets had only increased the staff's dislike of Caroline. While he might not be as wealthy as some, Mr. Bennet was considered to be a very fine man and the best landlord and master in Hertfordshire. Even though his wife was something of a silly goose, to have Mr. Bennet for a master was considered the most desirable of service situations. It had not escaped the servant's notice that Caroline stubbornly refused to admit the truth. Elizabeth Bennet was the daughter of a gentleman--something Caroline Bingley was not.

Caroline had, in fact, decided that the Bennets were merely what passed for gentry in the wilds of Hertfordshire. Surely sufficient time in their company would convince Mr. Darcy that these rustics were beneath him. As a matter of course, he would then recognize the truth that she was the only woman here worthy of his attentions. To that end Caroline had insisted her maid redress her hair twice that morning before she declared it acceptable to the servant's great relief. Confident that this latest fashion would attract Mr. Darcy's notice, Caroline sallied from her chambers intent upon displaying her own infinite superiority over the likes of Eliza Bennet. She was, therefore, quite furious that the gentlemen had already departed for the stables. The two servants in attendance shared a knowing smirk behind her back, certain that avoiding Caroline's company had been the gentlemen's tacit reason for hastening on their way.

It had been far too early for a morning visit when Darcy and Bingley abandoned the breakfast table, but the gentlemen had justified their early

departure by declaring their desire to ride in earnest before turning toward Longbourn. Fortunately the clouds held back for a time and the gentlemen were still dry when they reached their true destination. No sooner had they been shown into the Longbourn morning room than it began to rain. To Darcy's surprise all the ladies of Longbourn were within save the one he most desired to see. Mrs. Bennet welcomed them warmly although she did appear to be somewhat preoccupied. Darcy returned her greetings politely, but he was anxious to know why Elizabeth was not present. It was only by great force of will that he answered the dictates of propriety instead of demanding her whereabouts immediately.

"I hope you do not mind that I invited Mr. Bingley to join me this morning, Mrs. Bennet."

"No, of course not, Mr. Darcy," she reassured him. "It is very good of you to bring Mr. Bingley. Kitty, please go and tell your father that the gentlemen are here. I am sure he will be well pleased to see you both. Please sit down, sirs."

The fact that she had not mentioned summoning Elizabeth caused Darcy's already considerable apprehension to increase. He hid it admirably, but knowing Darcy well, Bingley discerned his friend's anxiety. Wanting to ease Darcy's mind, Bingley ventured to ask, "And what of Miss Elizabeth this morning? I trust that she is well."

Although the inquiry had been directed to her mother, Jane ventured to speak first as she feared her mother's response. Elizabeth's departure shortly after breakfast had occasioned quite an outburst from Mrs. Bennet, and Jane had no desire for such a scene to be repeated before their guests.

"Thank you for asking, Mr. Bingley. Lizzy is quite well this morning. She left shortly after breakfast on an errand, but she must have been delayed as she definitely planned to return before your arrival, Mr. Darcy. I know that she will be very glad to see you, too, Mr. Bingley."

Relieved by her tactful reassurance, Darcy said, "It is rather early for a morning visit, particularly after such a short acquaintance. I hope we have not disrupted your routine."

"Oh, no, Mr. Darcy," Mrs. Bennet gushed, "you are always welcome here. Indeed, you are welcome, too, Mr. Bingley."

The gentlemen were spared her waxing eloquent on just how welcome they were at Longbourn by the arrival of Mr. Bennet. He greeted the young men politely and the ladies were relegated to the role of listeners as the gentlemen soon fell into a discussion of their respective estates. Bingley quickly discerned that Mr. Bennet was even more actively involved in the running of his estate than Darcy was. In such like-minded company, Darcy was far more loquacious about his plans for Pemberley than was his wont. It was rare for Darcy to be so animated in company, and Bingley sat back in amazement. Not only did he enjoy witnessing his friend's enthusiasm, but Bingley also found the discussion between Darcy and Mr. Bennet to be quite educational.

Tea had arrived somewhere during this discourse and Darcy was just finishing his second cup when the sounds of Elizabeth's return could be heard from the hallway.

"Oh, Miss Lizzy," the housekeeper could be heard scolding her, "you are soaked through. We must put you to bed."

Listening intently Darcy was barely able to discern her answer.

"No, I am damp to be sure, Mrs. Hill, but I am quite well. Please send Sarah up to help me change and then I will join our guests."

Darcy had to restrain himself from running into the hall, so eager was he for Elizabeth's company, and he would have found it well nigh impossible to tear himself from this place without seeing her. Fortunately no one else seemed desirous of his departure so Darcy's only trial was to school himself to at least appear to be calm and rational.

Although she was usually far too preoccupied with herself to pay very much attention to anyone else, Mrs. Bennet had been watching Mr. Darcy closely and was more than satisfied when she observed that his attention was firmly fixed on the sounds of Elizabeth's return.

Perhaps Elizabeth's errand this morning was not a complete waste of time Mrs. Bennet admitted to herself. It seemed that the waiting had only increased Mr. Darcy's eagerness for her company. Although her daughter had not intended it so, Mrs. Bennet decided that it had proven to be good tactics.

"Kitty," she said aloud, "I just heard Lizzy in the hallway. She must be drenched after walking home in the rain. Would you please take Lizzy a cup of tea and help her to change? We do not want to chance her catching a cold."

Mrs. Bennet was only slightly concerned for Elizabeth's health, but she was very concerned for Mr. Darcy's patience. A man of his consequence was surely accustomed to having his own way. The short wait had seemed to pique his interest in her daughter, but she did not want to see him sorely tried.

Darcy had lapsed into silence upon hearing Elizabeth's voice, and Bingley cheerfully steered the conversation to questions about Hertfordshire in general and the local society in particular. Mr. Bennet left most of the answers to his wife and daughters, as he was quite content to observe the young man who was eagerly awaiting the arrival of his favorite daughter.

When Elizabeth entered the room, only a lifetime of practiced restraint kept Darcy from rushing to her side. He managed a proper bow and a murmured greeting, but when Mrs. Bennet directed Lizzy to sit by the fire Darcy moved to sit beside her as a matter of course.

Although their reasons for doing so could not have been more dissimilar, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were both eager to aid Darcy in his suit. While Mrs. Bennet valued Darcy's position and fortune, Mr. Bennet respected the man's character and appreciated his sincere admiration of Lizzy. He believed that Mr. Darcy might truly deserve her. In an attempt to draw the general company's attention from the young couple, Mr. Bennet questioned Bingley about his plans for Netherfield. Following his example, Mrs. Bennet began a quiet conversation with her younger daughters

leaving Jane free to attend her father's discussion with Mr. Bingley. These well meaning machinations resulted in Darcy having the opportunity for a relatively private conversation with Elizabeth.

"And how is Mrs. Clay this morning?" he quietly asked. Once his momentary panic over Elizabeth's absence had subsided, Darcy had easily deduced what would have taken her out in the chancy weather.

Anxious not to reawaken her mother's ire over the matter, Elizabeth's answer was equally quiet. "She is much better, Mr. Darcy. Thank you for asking. Although Mrs. Clay will need to be careful of her injured hand until it has completely healed, her color and strength have returned."

Although her answer was calmly given, Elizabeth felt a slight blush rise in her cheeks. She had observed Lydia watching them and whispering to Kitty. No doubt the previous evening's family discussion had roused their curiosity. While Elizabeth could not entirely blame the younger girls, their scrutiny made her uncomfortable. In an effort to mask her embarrassment, she reached for the workbasket beside her seat. It was not her own, but Jane was too tenderhearted to begrudge Elizabeth her handiwork even if she did make a hopeless tangle of it in her distraction.

Elizabeth managed a sensible inquiry about the gentlemen's ride from Netherfield as she fixed her eyes on the sampler in her hands. Darcy assured her their ride had been very pleasant and then he leaned in closer on the pretext of admiring her embroidery.

"That is very pretty, Miss Elizabeth," he said. "My sister would admire it, I am sure."

Darcy then whispered quietly in her ear, "As I admire you, Miss Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's blush deepened as she murmured her thanks. She could not resist a surreptitious glance toward her sisters--a glance that confirmed she and Darcy were indeed being watched. Although he had not noticed Elizabeth's younger sisters' observation of them, Darcy easily perceived her preoccupation.

He quietly said, "I do hope I have not offended you in some way, Miss Elizabeth."

"Oh, no, sir," she hastened to reassure him. "I am very pleased to see you this morning. Please forgive me if I have neglected you, Mr. Darcy. I am somewhat distracted today, but I would not wish you to think that anything is amiss. It is just a trifling family matter--nothing to do with you, sir. I enjoy your company--very much."

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy replied. "I am most glad to hear it, but please know that if something troubles you, it is a matter of concern to me as well."

Elizabeth gave him a radiant smile in response and in her determination not to worry Darcy, she soon forgot her sisters' prying eyes. Seeing that the rain appeared likely to continue for some time, Mrs. Bennet invited the gentlemen to remain through the morning and join them for luncheon.

Bingley regretfully declined as he had an appointment with the Netherfield steward. Although Darcy appeared resigned to accompanying his friend, it was clear that he wished to remain at Longbourn, and Mr. Bennet obligingly spared him the awkwardness of saying so with a second invitation.

"Since your host has another commitment, perhaps you would like to stay and see my library, Mr. Darcy. I have some agricultural texts that might interest you."

Darcy allowed that nothing would please him more, and Mr. Bennet excused himself to order the carriage made ready to carry Bingley back to Netherfield. Darcy's contentment was so great that even Bingley's smirk as they parted a short time later could not discomfit him. Darcy enjoyed the time he spent with Mr. Bennet in the library although he found himself somewhat distracted by the mere knowledge that Elizabeth was somewhere nearby.

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Bingley had not been long returned to Netherfield before he wished he were back at Longbourn. Caroline had scarcely allowed him to draw breath before she began her inquisition. It did not please her to learn that the gentlemen had called at Longbourn that morning, and she was furious to learn that Darcy was still there.

"What does he mean hobnobbing with those hobbleddehoys?" she ranted to Louisa when their brother had withdrawn to his study.

Realizing that anything practical or truthful she might say would merely increase her sister's ire, Louisa wisely murmured something indistinguishable under her breath. Taking that for agreement, Caroline nodded and continued her pacing.

"I will not have it. I will not," she suddenly declared, stamping her foot impatiently.

Caroline then reverted to pacing about the room muttering under her breath. Although Louisa could not make out most of Caroline's ravings, she heard enough to grow alarmed that Caroline might go too far and thereby injure their brother's friendship with Darcy. That would not do. Louisa had no desire to jeopardize their annual invitation to visit Pemberley, or the cachet that accompanied being associated with Fitzwilliam Darcy, however remotely.

"Caroline, you must regain control of yourself," she admonished. "Mr. Darcy has demonstrated a clear preference for the Bennets' company. Any overt move against them on your part will infuriate him and rightly so."

Louisa had rarely stood up for Caroline, but she felt her courage growing with each word. Caroline was so surprised that she was momentarily speechless and her sister took advantage of that rarity to press her case.

"While you have long harbored aspirations regarding Mr. Darcy," Louisa continued, "he has never encouraged you. In fact, he has been most determined in his refusal to be drawn in by your attempts to curry his favor. Caroline, you must abandon whatever schemes you may be hatching. The man is simply not interested in you."

Louisa made the substantial error of initially interpreting Caroline's silence as a pause to consider her sound advice. In truth Caroline was enraged beyond the power of speech. Louisa realized her sister was beyond reason when Caroline stormed from the room, and slammed the door so hard that the windows shook.

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Darcy had enjoyed discussing agricultural methods with Mr. Bennet, but he was most eager for the opportunity to converse with Elizabeth privately. In hopes of achieving that end he commented on what a fine afternoon it promised to be as the entire party was lingering round the table after luncheon.

"--I am delighted that the rain has finally ceased as I have yet to see much of the area. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, would you perhaps permit your daughters to walk out with me and point out some of the fine prospects here about?"

"I am willing if it pleases the girls, Mr. Darcy," was Mr. Bennet's answer. He gave Lydia a look, which said she must remain behind and she silently began to pout. Mr. Bennet was, however, grateful for her silence.

Mary expressed a wish to also remain behind and practice on the pianoforte, so it was quickly settled that Jane, Elizabeth and Kitty would walk to Oakham Mount with Mr. Darcy. The girls gathered their bonnets and coats and the four of them set off. Darcy immediately offered Elizabeth his arm and Jane and Kitty naturally followed behind them.

Aware of her duty to safeguard Elizabeth's reputation, Jane made sure to keep Darcy and Elizabeth in sight, even as she deliberately slowed her pace to allow them the chance for a more private conversation. Soon she and Kitty were well behind them affording Darcy the opportunity he so desired. Although he was quite pleased by the return of Elizabeth's liveliness, Darcy was still somewhat concerned regarding her earlier lack of spirits.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, "I fear it is time I begin to expose my faults to you. I must confess that I can be prone to worry and I often assume the worst. I was most anxious when you did not seem quite like yourself this morning."

"Please accept my apologies, sir," Elizabeth said as the color rose in her cheeks. "I am very sorry to have caused you any apprehension. I am very well, and I was truly happy to see you this morning, Mr. Darcy. I was only a little embarrassed earlier, but please do not think you did anything wrong, sir. It was not you, but rather something regarding my sisters."

Elizabeth knew that she was talking in circles, and she paused for a moment, searching for the right words to explain her meaning without embarrassing herself further. However, Elizabeth found it difficult to concentrate. She was quite distracted by the intensity of Darcy's gaze as he waited for her to continue. Although she was loath to expose herself, Elizabeth was far more unwilling to offend or injure him.

Feeling that she must explain or risk just that, Elizabeth took a deep breath to steady herself before she said, "I was somewhat distracted earlier. I feared that my younger sisters would be paying particular attention to us this morning because of--a family discussion that took place after you left last night. Feeling that we were being examined caused me to feel--uncomfortable. I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable as well, Mr. Darcy."

"Please do not trouble yourself over that. Your reassurance has made me easy again. However, I was most sincere when I said that anything of concern to you is also of importance to me," Darcy persisted. "Might I ask if your family discussion-- Was it in some way about me?"

Elizabeth's blush deepened. It was not in her nature to lie, but her voice was barely audible as she answered, "Yes, it was--in an indirect way, Mr. Darcy. I am afraid that my youngest sister Lydia has some very silly ideas about men and what she considers to be 'romantic.' My father was trying to impress upon her the importance of judging a man by his character first and foremost. He did refer to you as an example of an honorable man."

"That was very kind of your father." Darcy's voice softened and he looked at her searchingly as he continued, "I hope you were able to assure your sister that a man's being honorable does not preclude his also being 'romantic,' Miss Elizabeth."

Although she could not face him just then, Elizabeth was determined to be honest with him. With her eyes firmly fixed upon Darcy's boots, she answered, "Yes, Mr. Darcy, I spoke quite frankly to my sisters regarding that very subject which is why I felt that we were under scrutiny this morning."

"Oh," Darcy said, as his heart began to race. A hasty glance back over his shoulder confirmed that Elizabeth's sisters were still well behind them. Darcy reached out and gently lifted her chin. "Will you not look at me, Elizabeth?"

She raised her eyes hesitantly, captivated by the soft caress of his fingers as they moved from her chin to her cheek.

"Elizabeth Bennet, I have known you less than a week and yet it seems I have known you my whole life. I am surprised by how quickly I have grown to love you, but I do. You are unlike any other woman I have ever known. Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

Tears came to Elizabeth's eyes as she reached up to cover his hand with her own, "Yes, sir. I would be happy to be your wife."

Darcy found it hard to believe that she had agreed, "Then, you do consent?"

"Yes, Mr. Darcy."

Knowing that they had best resume their walk if he were to maintain any semblance of self-control, Darcy tucked her hand back into the crook of his arm and they walked on.

"Now, my dear Elizabeth, I do ask that you begin to address me less formally when we are alone. I cannot have my wife whispering 'Mr. Darcy' into my ear in private moments."

"Certainly, sir, but I do not know your Christian name."

"Fitzwilliam. It was my mother's family name."

"Very well--Fitzwilliam," she said enjoying the feeling of intimacy that came with addressing him so familiarly.

Darcy felt a burning desire to kiss her, but this was neither the time nor the place. For the moment, he must be content with the knowledge that Elizabeth would be his wife, but Darcy found himself hoping that Mr. Bennet would agree to a *very* short engagement.

Sensing that Darcy was struggling for composure, Elizabeth changed the subject. "Please tell me about your sister, Mr.--I am sorry--Fitzwilliam."

Darcy gazed down at her lovingly as he asked, "What would you like to know about Georgiana?"

"I would like to know all about her since she will soon be my sister, too," she answered shyly.

Darcy smiled at that happy thought and began to tell her about Georgiana. By the time they reached Oakham Mount their entire party was reunited. When Kitty learned that she and Georgiana were the same age, she expressed an eagerness to learn more about Mr. Darcy's sister, too. Realizing that Elizabeth's connections would soon be his as well, Darcy gave Elizabeth a wry smile and then obligingly began answering Kitty's questions about his sister. They led the way back with Elizabeth and Jane following closely behind them. The two sisters linked arms and walked in a companionable silence. Elizabeth did not dare say anything of her new understanding with Mr. Darcy until her father had given his consent, but she could think of little else. For her part, Jane's suspicions were raised but she knew that Lizzy would confide in her at the earliest opportunity and so was content to speculate privately on what might have transpired between Mr. Darcy and her sister.

When they reached Longbourn the ladies went in to join their mother and Darcy headed for Mr. Bennet's library as if eager to resume their earlier conversation. Mr. Bennet was not wholly surprised to see him again so soon.

"Well, I see you have come back, Mr. Darcy. Did you have a nice walk with the girls?"

"Yes, sir. However, I must confess I do not remember what we saw, although your daughters dutifully pointed out many sights of interest along the way."

"I see, so am I to understand that you were distracted by my Lizzy again, Mr. Darcy?" Mr. Bennet asked with a smile.

"I must confess that I was, sir," Darcy answered with a nervous smile of his own. "Your daughter is quite unlike any other woman of my acquaintance, and I admire her greatly. In fact, I cannot imagine my life without her. I realize this may seem sudden, Mr. Bennet, but while we were walking--I asked Miss Elizabeth to be my wife."

"And what did Lizzy have to say, Mr. Darcy?"

"She has accepted me, sir. I am here to ask for your permission and your blessing."

"So Lizzy accepted you, did she?" Mr. Bennet asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Mr. Darcy," the older man began, "allow me to tell you something about my daughter. When Lizzy has made up her mind, do not oppose her. Your marriage will be much happier for it."

"Then we have your consent, sir?"

"Yes," Mr. Bennet said to Darcy's considerable relief. "You have my consent and my blessing. It would appear that the two of you are well suited to one another. Might I dare to hope for a long engagement?"

"We did not presume to discuss a date before gaining your permission, sir," Darcy replied. "However, if Miss Elizabeth is agreeable I would hope for a very short engagement. It is not my desire to part you from your daughter, but I cannot remain in Hertfordshire indefinitely. Nor can I abide the thought of a long separation."

With a self-deprecating smile, Darcy went on to confess, "In truth, I find myself dreading the short trip to London that will be necessary to have the settlements drawn up and procure a special license. Please be assured, Mr. Bennet, that you and your family will be welcome to visit us at any time, either in town or at our estate in Derbyshire."

Mr. Bennet was very pleased by Darcy's reference to his estate as theirs. It reassured him that his dearest daughter would be esteemed and treasured by her husband. In his opinion, too many men of Darcy's sphere viewed their wives as trophies or prized possessions. Although Mr. Bennet considered his daughter to be a treasure beyond price, propriety demanded that he make it plain that Lizzy herself would be the only wealth gained by Mr. Darcy in the marriage.

"Are you aware, sir, that Lizzy has no dowry?"

"She told me as much, herself, Mr. Bennet, but it is truly of no matter to me. In fact, I am most anxious to make her my bride."

"As, yes, the impatience of youth," Mr. Bennet rejoined with a sigh. "I do understand your impatience as I was once a bridegroom myself. I will leave it to you and Lizzy to select your wedding date. The rest will somehow fall into place. It always does, Mr. Darcy. It always does."

"Thank you, sir," Darcy said as he clasped Mr. Bennet's offered hand with a smile.

The two gentlemen were almost to the library door, when Mr. Bennet stopped and said, "Knowing my wife as I do, Mr. Darcy, perhaps it would be best if you and Lizzy discuss the length of your engagement before we announce it to the family."

Darcy did not understand him, but was nonetheless eager to have the matter decided. "Certainly, Mr. Bennet, I would wish to finalize this decision as soon as possible. However, I hope you are not implying that Mrs. Bennet will be unhappy with the news."

Elizabeth's father was somewhat amused by the younger man's anxiety. Evidently Darcy had a propensity to assume the worst. That could be quite diverting, Mr. Bennet thought. No sooner had he made that private observation than a flash of insight followed. Remembering all the grief that had already befallen Darcy, Mr. Bennet realized that this young man tended to expect the worst because that was what he had experienced. Thoughts of teasing Darcy were immediately abandoned and Mr. Bennet hastened to reassure him.

"No, do not worry, sir. I believe my wife is disposed to think very highly of you. She did ask me last night if I thought you were good enough for Elizabeth. However, I am confident she was not discounting your merits at that moment, but rather valuing our daughter's. For a mother to hold her daughter in such high esteem is not a bad thing at all."

Seeing Darcy's nod of understanding, Mr. Bennet continued. "I only suggest the date be set before we inform the rest of the family, so that Mrs. Bennet will not get carried away. My wife loves to entertain, Mr. Darcy, and she has long awaited the pleasure of planning a daughter's wedding. If her fancies are allowed to take flight, Mrs. Bennet will be thinking of what month will be best for flowers, ordering custom-made lace for Lizzy's bonnet--that sort of thing. It may then prove difficult for my wife to accept a shorter engagement gracefully. Should Mrs. Bennet be unhappy, I fear it will dampen Lizzy's happiness as well; however, if Mrs. Bennet knows the length of your engagement at the outset, she will not be disappointed by its duration."

"I understand you," Darcy said with relief. "Do you think Miss Elizabeth's desires are similar to her mother's? I would not want her to forego her own wishes just to please me."

Mr. Bennet smiled as he answered, "I have never considered Lizzy to be like her mother in any notable way, but women are full of surprises. Have a glass of wine, Mr. Darcy. I will find Lizzy and send her in. Then you can ask her what she would wish."

Darcy was grateful for the offered wine. He sipped it as he thought of how anxious he was to marry Elizabeth as soon as possible. Yet, he did not want to make her unhappy. Darcy steeled himself to accept disappointment with grace.

All thoughts of disappointment left him, when Darcy realized that Elizabeth had entered the room. She had, however, briefly glimpsed his anxious expression before Darcy replaced it with a smile. Elizabeth was somewhat relieved when he rose and took her hand, but she could not help thinking that there must be something wrong for him to have looked so unhappy a moment ago.

"Pray, tell me what is the matter, sir? I thought you would be pleased that my father has consented to our engagement. Are you now hesitant?"

"Certainly not, Elizabeth, I have no reservations," Darcy said as he led her to a chair and tenderly kissed her hand.

"I have no reservations about our engagement," he repeated, "none at all, my love. You caught me thinking of what a selfish being I am."

"Selfish? Whatever do you mean?"

"I was thinking of how to persuade you to the shortest engagement possible," Darcy replied, "when I realized that you might have very different wishes. Is that not selfish of me, Elizabeth?"

"I would not be so quick to condemn you for your thoughts," Elizabeth said with a smile, "when they concluded with concern for my wishes."

Darcy smiled in reply and squeezed her hand. "Have you thought about when we should be married, my love?"

"No, I must confess I have been too overcome by general happiness to think of such mundane matters," Elizabeth replied, "but it seems that you have already considered the matter. Please tell me what your thoughts are--Fitzwilliam."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand as she said his name, and Darcy thought his heart would literally leap out of his chest.

"If we are speaking frankly, my love," he said, "I would wish for us to marry very soon. But I do understand that will mean leaving your family so I will not press you. I told you, Elizabeth, I am a selfish being. I cannot bear the thought of being separated from you, but I know that duty demands I leave Netherfield soon."

Darcy looked away as he continued in a tone above a whisper, "I must also confess that I am most anxious for you to be my wife, Elizabeth."

When she did not answer immediately, Darcy feared he might have said too much.

"Please forgive me, dearest," he hastened to beg her pardon. "I am sorry if I have offended you."

"You need not apologize," Elizabeth said, "as you have not offended me in any way." She reached out and gently brushed his cheek as she continued, "Do not worry so, Fitzwilliam. I share your desire that we not have to endure a long separation."

Elizabeth's voice dropped to a whisper as she added, "I also share your desire that we become man and wife."

Darcy's relief was evident. "Then you do not think me ungentlemanly?"

"No," she reassured him with a smile, "my opinion is quite the opposite. In truth, I think it is wise that we not have a long engagement."

Seeing that he was waiting for her to continue, Elizabeth shyly turned away as she continued, "I have never understood how one could be tempted to disregard propriety until recently. Yet, when you are near me, when you take my hand or look at me in a certain way, I feel the desire to be closer. I do not want to worry about being proper with you. I must confess, I am not well educated in such things, but--"

Elizabeth's voice dropped to a whisper, "I love you, Fitzwilliam. I am not at all afraid of you. I do, however, begin to fear myself."

Darcy gripped her hand tightly but remained quiet, his head now bowed and his eyes closed. Misinterpreting his silence Elizabeth feared she had affronted him.

"Have I said too much, sir? Have I shocked you by speaking so directly? I had hoped that since we were to be married, I would not have--"

Darcy opened his eyes and looked at Elizabeth with an intensity that left her speechless. "No, dearest," he whispered. "You have not said too much. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for you, my love. Hearing you say that you love me-- I had hoped, but I did not expect--," Darcy kissed her hand as he collected himself.

"I love you, Elizabeth," he continued, "and I, too, desire that we be honest with one another, never having to pretend what we do not feel or ignore our deepest feelings. If I could trust myself more I would ask to kiss you now, but I dare not."

Elizabeth, who was both relieved and disappointed that he had not kissed her, smiled and returned to the original question, "So then, sir, when shall we be wed?"

Darcy began to think through the legalities of the matter. "Let us see, today is Friday. If I send an express to my attorney, he should have the settlements prepared by Wednesday or Thursday. I will procure a special license while I am in town. That is all that is necessary by law, but what of you? What do you require--Lizzy?"

Darcy watched to see what Elizabeth's reaction would be to his addressing her as her family did. He was not disappointed. She was obviously surprised, but her face glowed with pleasure.

"I do like the sound of that," she whispered. "Those who love me best have always called me 'Lizzy.'"

"Then I shall call you 'Lizzy' often to remind you of my love for you. Now speak to me truthfully. I do not want you to forego your own wishes just for me, dearest. If you require a long engagement, tell me now and I will endeavor to retain my sanity."

Elizabeth actually laughed as she replied, "You are fortunate then in your choice, sir, for I have always considered the bridegroom to be my only real concern in planning a wedding. Little else matters to me, but we must allow my mother to fuss a bit. What if we are married a fortnight from tomorrow? Would that suit you, Fitzwilliam?"

Darcy was immensely relieved. "In truth I would prefer a seven night," he teased her, "but I shall persevere for another week."

They sat discussing their future contentedly. Darcy was eager for Elizabeth to know all about her new family and the homes they would share in London and Derbyshire. Neither even noticed when Mr. Bennet entered the room. He stood in the doorway for a moment enjoying the sight of his daughter's happiness.

Finally he announced his presence by asking, "So have you decided when you will marry?"

Darcy rose and enthusiastically shook Mr. Bennet's hand. "Yes, sir. Elizabeth and I have decided that a fortnight from Saturday will be our wedding day."

"Goodness," Mr. Bennet exclaimed. "We had best inform your mother, Lizzy, so that she will not miss a moment of your engagement. No doubt she will enjoy it thoroughly."

All the family seemed genuinely happy for them when Mr. Bennet announced Elizabeth and Darcy's engagement. Mrs. Bennet grabbed her husband's hand, her eyes brimming with tears. "Oh, Mr. Bennet, what excellent news."

She then turned to Elizabeth and said, "Oh, my dear Lizzy. I am so happy for you, my dearest girl." She embraced her daughter tightly and then Mrs. Bennet's tears began to flow in earnest.

"My, my, how foolish I must seem to you gentlemen. Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bennet. Just to think that my little Lizzy has finally grown up and will



soon be a married woman. You are a real lady now, Lizzy, but you were such a funny child." Mrs. Bennet patted Elizabeth's hand affectionately. "Goodness me, where are my manners? We need not stand about. Hug your sister, girls, and then let us sit down comfortably. I hope you will stay for dinner, Mr. Darcy."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bennet. I must confess it would be difficult to tear myself away, especially at this moment. I am most anxious to hear about my intended's childhood." Remembering young Johnny's recounting of Elizabeth's exploits, Darcy was eager to learn more.

"You said she was a funny child," he prompted his future mother. "How so, Mrs. Bennet?"

"Well, Mr. Darcy, Lizzy has always been unique. I do not think I understood her when she was little, but Mr. Bennet always did. Lizzy worried and vexed me, as she was so active--not at all like Jane. Lizzy was into everything and always asking questions. I am sure Lizzy's stockings required twice as much mending as all the other girls' together."

"Mama, I am certain Mr. Darcy is not interested--"

"On the contrary, my dear, I am quite interested." Darcy reached over and took her hand. "We may have a little Lizzy of our own one day. I want to know what terrors the future may hold."

Everyone laughed. It was so unexpected to see the dignified Darcy openly teasing Elizabeth. It made them all feel comfortable with him as if he were already a part of the family.

Darcy was definitely a persistent man. He soon had the whole family engaged in telling stories of Elizabeth's childhood exploits. She had obviously been imaginative, active and fiercely independent from a very young age.

It was some time before Mrs. Bennet turned the conversation to more practical matters. "Now, my dear children, have you thought about when the ceremony will be?"

Remembering Mr. Bennet's words regarding his wife's expectations, Darcy felt it best that he deliver this news.

"Yes, Mrs. Bennet," he answered, "we would like to marry a fortnight from Saturday."

"But, Mr. Darcy, that is so soon and then you will take our girl away."

"I am sorry to part your family, Mrs. Bennet, but I hope you will come to visit us both in town and at Pemberley. My responsibilities will not allow me to linger in Hertfordshire much longer, and I do not think I could bear to leave your daughter behind. I hope you will forgive me."

This declaration touched Mrs. Bennet and she smiled as she said, "I understand you, sir. However, this leaves us no time. We must sit down this afternoon and decide what must be done."

Darcy explained his plan to send an express to his solicitor right away so that the settlements would be ready when he went to town next week. Mrs. Bennet eyes shone at the thought of the marriage settlements. Surely, Elizabeth would have considerable funds under her control as Darcy's wife. Mrs. Bennet was also very pleased by the notion of her daughter being married by a special license as no other family of their acquaintance could claim that distinction.

Mr. Bennet offered to help by calling on the rector directly to request his services, and Elizabeth assured her mother that she needed little else to be happy.

"--It will be a small private ceremony, Mama. We only plan to invite our families and a few close friends. Mr. Darcy and I can write our letters this evening or tomorrow morning. If you will plan the wedding breakfast, then it is all settled."

"But what of your wedding clothes, Lizzy?" her mother asked. "There is no time."

Elizabeth smiled impudently, "Well, Mama, since we are having a very short engagement to accommodate Mr. Darcy, I think it would be most ungentlemanly of him to complain of my wardrobe."

Darcy smiled back affectionately, "You are quite right, my dear. In truth, Mrs. Bennet, I think your daughter is the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld. I must confess that when we are together I scarcely notice what she is wearing. I am far too captivated by the lady herself."

All the Bennet ladies beamed at him and Lydia could no longer restrain herself. With a large sigh, she exclaimed, "Oh, Lizzy, you are right. He is romantic."

Elizabeth blushed and Darcy laughed out loud. Seeing that Elizabeth was genuinely embarrassed, Darcy quickly turned the subject back to the topic of clothing. "I can assure you, Mrs. Bennet, that my younger sister Georgiana will be only too happy to help your daughter shop for a new wardrobe when we return to London after the ceremony. Please do not give it a thought. Georgiana will make certain she is outfitted for the Derbyshire winter as well as the London season."

The rest of the afternoon passed in a flurry of happy activity. Mr. Bennet called at the parsonage to make the necessary arrangements and Darcy dispatched the express to his solicitor and another to his sister, as well. Darcy also sent a message to his hosts at Netherfield informing them that he would not return until after dinner.

This caused Caroline Bingley considerable consternation. What could Darcy mean spending all day and half the night, too, with the Bennets? She was all but snarling by the time Darcy returned to Netherfield that evening.

"So, Mr. Darcy, I am glad to see that the Bennets finally released you. What pretext did they use to prevent your leaving?"

"There was no pretext at all, Miss Bingley. I was happy to spend as much time as I could at Longbourn. It is, after all, only natural for a man to want to spend time with his future wife."

Bingley leapt up to shake his hand. "Darcy, you really did it. Oh, she is a lovely girl. I am very happy for you. I wish you great joy, my friend. So when is the wedding to be?"

"A fortnight from Saturday. You are all invited, of course. It will be a small private ceremony with only our families and a few friends in attendance."

"So then your uncle the earl will be braving the wilds of Hertfordshire to attend?" Caroline snapped venomously, unable to restrain herself.

"I hope so," Darcy replied mildly, choosing to ignore her tone. "I will write to all my family before retiring for the night. I do not expect my Aunt Catherine to make the journey, but I sincerely hope Lord and Lady Carlisle will be able to join us. I am eager for them to meet Miss Bennet as I am certain they will be very pleased with her."

"I doubt that," Caroline said under her breath, but to her regret Darcy heard her.

"That is right," he replied coldly. "You move in very different circles, so you have never met my uncle and his wife, Miss Bingley. It is, therefore, perfectly understandable that you would have no way to correctly anticipate their reaction. My uncle has long encouraged me to marry for affection so I am confident of his support. I am equally confident that he will admire Miss Bennet, for his wife is the only other woman of my acquaintance who equals her in intelligence and liveliness. Yes, I am certain my uncle and aunt will like her very much."

Mrs. Hurst whispered her congratulations to Mr. Darcy and hurried the enraged Caroline from the room. Hurst actually rose from his usual place on the sofa to shake Darcy's hand.

"Never took you for such a romantic fool, Darcy, but I wish you well."

Rather than being affronted by this remark, Darcy laughed aloud. "Hurst, I must admit I have surprised myself this time. By the by, while she did not call me a fool, the youngest Bennet sister Miss Lydia also credited me with being romantic."

The three gentlemen settled in for a very pleasant chat before retiring. Darcy was eager to speak of his beloved, and Bingley and Hurst were only too glad to oblige him by listening.

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## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines Crime and Punishment

### Chapter Four - Crime and Punishment

*Vanity working on a weak head, produces every sort of mischief.*  
Jane Austen, *Emma* , Chapter 8

Unfortunately Mr. Watson, the Meryton clergyman, was not given to gossip and his wife was away for several days visiting her mother. Therefore, the local populace remained ignorant of the impending marriage until the following day. Happily for those who delight in such tidings, one of the Netherfield servants journeyed into Meryton early the next morning taking Mr. Bingley's horse to the blacksmith. While waiting for the horse to be shod, the man could not resist whispering the news to a friend, and by midday the entire community knew of Miss Elizabeth's engagement to Mr. Darcy. There were the skeptical few who privately wondered if she might be marrying the man for his fortune; however, none would dare to actually speak such a slander. The Bennets were well liked in Meryton and Miss Elizabeth was a particular favorite.

It was soon generally agreed that Mr. Darcy must be very much in love with the young lady to secure her so quickly, and those who had witnessed the pair at the Assembly encouraged this view. Their testimony also supported the theory that the gentleman's regard was returned in equal measure. The inhabitants of Meryton cheerfully rejoiced in their neighbors' good fortune and thought Mr. Darcy must be a very fine gentleman indeed. It was highly gratifying to have a man of quality agree with their assessment of Miss Elizabeth's merits and so quickly, too.

To everyone's surprise Caroline Bingley deigned to grace the Netherfield breakfast room the following morning and was unexpectedly cheerful. Although she continued in her failure to congratulate Mr. Darcy upon his engagement, Caroline did refrain from criticizing his intended. Darcy was grateful for the opportunity to eat his breakfast in relative peace but gave this material change in Caroline's attitude little consideration, as he was much preoccupied with thoughts of Elizabeth. Bingley and Louisa, on the other hand, not only lacked Darcy's present happy preoccupation, but had also lived with Caroline their entire lives. Although grateful that she had not spoilt everyone's breakfast, Caroline's brother and sister watched her with suspicion and a steadily growing sense of uneasiness.

Louisa, having been Caroline's confidante until quite recently, was rapidly becoming alarmed by the slight gleam of satisfaction she observed in her sister's eyes. Caroline had been thoroughly enraged when Louisa escorted her upstairs the previous evening, and Caroline was not known for quickly recovering from such a state. Although Louisa managed to maintain her usual cheerful air, she was already considering how to best discover exactly what Caroline was scheming, for only a plot for revenge could account for the sudden change in Caroline's demeanor.

As soon as she knew Darcy had departed for Longbourn, Louisa went in search of her brother. She found Bingley in his study. He was deep in thought but it was quite apparent that he was not thinking of the correspondence that sat before him. The door to the room was open as if he were expecting company and Louisa quietly stepped inside and closed the door behind her before speaking.

"Charles," she began, "I know you saw it too--how strangely Caroline was behaving this morning."

"Yes, I did," Bingley said with a sigh. "I am relieved to know that whatever mischief Caroline is plotting, you are not a party to it."

Louisa could not help blushing as she recalled how often she had been a willing party to Caroline's schemes and intrigues.

"I have no excuse for my past actions, Charles," she said, "but I am determined that I will no longer allow Caroline to rule me as she has all our lives. It has taken far too long, but my eyes are open at last to her cruelty and her folly. We have behaved very badly in so many ways, and I apologize for my part in it. You have been very patient with both of us."

"Your apology is accepted," Bingley said with an encouraging smile, "and I heartily endorse your resolve, Louisa. I am also grateful for your assistance, as I am uncertain how to proceed. However, I fear that if we do not act quickly, Caroline will ruin the family name and destroy my friendship with Darcy."

"I am convinced that we will garner nothing useful from confronting Caroline directly," Louisa replied, "at least not until we have some idea of her plans. However, the servants might be able to assist us."

"The servants?" Bingley asked naively.

"Yes, the servants," Louisa answered with a slight smile. "I am certain there is little that escapes their notice, and I would warrant that Caroline is not a favorite with the staff."

A short while later Mrs. White, the Netherfield housekeeper, knocked on the study door. Bingley's summons had surprised her, as he had

heretofore little interest in the day-to-day matters of running the household. Having expected Bingley's unmarried sister to be present, Mrs. White was surprised and pleased to find Mrs. Hurst at his side instead.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs. White, thank you for coming so promptly," Bingley began. "Please sit down."

The housekeeper raised an eyebrow at this unexpected and, therefore, suspicious courtesy. However, she complied after a moment's hesitation. There was an awkward pause, as Bingley was uncertain of how to proceed.

Observing his consternation, Louisa quietly said, "Charles, would you like for me to explain our concerns to Mrs. White?"

Bingley's relief was palpable as he murmured, "Yes, please, Louisa. You will know how to express it properly."

Bingley had no notion of how one properly asked one's staff to spy on one's sister, but he hoped that Louisa would be able to manage it. It would not do to stir up more trouble by alienating the housekeeper. Mrs. White had been firmly fixed at Netherfield for many years and had the confidence and respect of the entire staff.

Knowing that Caroline had treated the woman abominably, Louisa wisely began with an apology. "I would like to express my personal regret for what may have been a difficult transition for you and the entire household staff."

Mrs. White nodded her head slightly as she answered with dignity, "Thank you, Mrs. Hurst, for your concern, but it is expected of those of us in service to weather such upsets. I trust the staff's performance has met your expectations."

Sensing a slight thaw in the woman's manner, Louisa smiled in relief as she said, "Certainly, I think it safe to say that you and your staff have exceeded my brother's expectations. Although I am merely a guest here I have also been impressed by your ability to adapt to unexpected changes. I fear my sister's demands are sometimes unreasonably excessive and I would hope to overcome any misunderstandings that may have arisen from her *assumption* that she would be in charge of our brother's household."

Charles had to admire his sister's finesse, as the housekeeper visibly relaxed at this indication that Caroline would *not* be supervising the operation of his household. Realizing he would only be able to curtail Caroline's folly by limiting her influence and freedom of action, Charles hastened to reinforce this point.

"Yes, Mrs. White," Bingley said, "I am afraid Miss Bingley has assumed she would be in charge of my household here as I am unmarried at present. However, I find our opinions on many issues are too dissimilar for her to effectively act on my behalf. I have relied on my sisters in such matters in the past so I fear you may have to bear with me as I learn what sort of direction and assistance you require from me to keep the household running smoothly."

"That will not be a problem, sir," the housekeeper said with no little satisfaction. "I would be happy to explain how things have been done at Netherfield prior to your occupancy and show you the household accounts. Then you may decide what changes you wish to implement and how active a role you would like to assume in day to day matters."

"That is an excellent suggestion, Mrs. White," Bingley answered with a smile, "and I shall look forward to it. As I am somewhat occupied at present with learning more about the farming of the estate, I would like for you to continue managing the household in your usual excellent manner. Please consult me directly if you feel that there are any matters which require my attention. We will be having additional houseguests soon for Mr. Darcy's wedding. Mrs. Hurst will advise you in matters relating to our guests and any special entertainments or arrangements required."

"Yes, sir," Mrs. White murmured as she offered up a silent prayer of thanks for being delivered from the officious interference of Caroline Bingley. The housekeeper was quite pleased, as she had not only been delivered from Caroline's whims and tempers, but Mr. Bingley had also given her a free hand to run the house as she saw fit.

"There is one other matter upon which we would like to consult with you," Louisa said. "It is a matter of the utmost delicacy."

"You may assured of my discretion," the housekeeper replied calmly even as she was inwardly struggling to restrain her great curiosity.

"Our sister is behaving in a manner that is most peculiar," Louisa explained, "and we are somewhat fearful that she may not be quite herself at this time. It is very embarrassing to discuss, but my brother and I fear that Caroline may be acting in a manner that is detrimental to her own prospects and to our family's reputation."

The housekeeper was not certain what was suspected, but she was eager to protect the family's reputation as the Bingleys were now tied to Netherfield.

"I do not wish to pry," Mrs. White responded, "but it would be helpful if I had a more specific line of inquiry to pursue. We do not want to start rumors among the staff by asking too many questions."

Louisa was pleased to see that the housekeeper had not only understood her, but was also willing to be of assistance. She looked to Charles and at his approving nod, Louisa continued.

"I do not think my sister is a physical danger to herself or anyone else," she said reassuringly, "and Caroline has very little acquaintance here in the neighborhood. However, I am concerned about her letters. It would not do to have her corresponding with anyone outside the family when she is not herself."

"I understand you now, ma'am," the housekeeper said, "but I fear it may be too late. Miss Bingley sent a letter to the express office first thing this morning. She tried to do it in secret, too, having her maid take it directly to one of the stable boys along with the coin to pay for it."

Seeing the look of dismay that passed between Mr. Bingley and his sister, the older woman quickly continued her explanation. "Eddie is a good lad though and he came to me straightaway. He knows that I frank the letters from Netherfield and that I need to know when someone goes to town just in case I have more business for them there. I'm sorry, but I had no reason to question Miss Bingley's instructions, so I sent Eddie on to town after I made the entries in the ledger."

"Entries?" Bingley inquired.

"Yes, sir," Mrs. White explained, "I added the sum the maid had slipped him to the household income and then I entered the charge for franking the letter. The letter is gone, but I always notate the address when we send a letter express. Would that information be helpful?"

"Yes, it would be very helpful," Louisa said.

It seemed an eternity to Charles and Louisa, but in fact the housekeeper returned rather quickly. Mrs. White had hurried as fast as she dared without occasioning curiosity and gossip among the staff.

Appreciating the need for discretion the housekeeper carefully closed the door behind her before she said, "The letter, sir, was to a Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park in Kent."

Charles' face blanched and Louisa gasped. This was far worse than they had suspected. As Caroline had not been introduced to Lady Catherine, no benign explanation for such a letter was possible. Seeing their reactions, Mrs. White felt sorry for the Bingleys. Obviously their sister was far worse than she had feared. Murmuring her assurances that she would be sure to inform them of any other post *before* it left for town, Mrs. White quietly left the room and shut the door.

Charles and Louisa sat in silence for a full five minutes. Whatever the outcome of Caroline's machinations, her actions were unforgivable. Louisa was wracking her brain for a solution, and Charles was initially consumed by thoughts of how in the world he would break this news to Darcy. However, he soon remembered that as the head of the family he was responsible for Caroline.

"Aunt Bridget," he finally said with another deep sigh. "Removing Caroline to Ireland will ensure that she can do no further harm to Darcy and Miss Bennet, and perhaps our aunt will be able to do Caroline some good."

Louisa nodded, seeing the wisdom of it immediately. Bridget Wexler was the widow of their mother's brother. As the Wexlers had no children, they had taken a particular interest in the young Bingleys and the families had been very close for a time. Bridget Wexler had returned to Ireland after her husband's death, and she now lived in the quiet hamlet where she had grown up. Based upon her letters, Charles guessed it to be about half the size of Meryton. Although their uncle's profession had not garnered him the same degree of wealth their father had amassed, Uncle Wexler had been a very successful attorney and had left his widow well provided for. Aunt Bridget was a kindly woman, and Charles did not doubt she would take Caroline in for a time.

"I think you are right, Charles," Louisa agreed. "It will limit Caroline's ability to cause further mischief and time with Aunt Bridget may help her to change. Aunt Bridget will treat Caroline kindly, but she will not encourage her selfishness."

Charles wished it were possible to send Caroline on her way before Darcy returned from Longbourn. Unfortunately, they would need to secure a companion for her journey. As an unmarried woman she simply could not travel all that way alone. Charles and Louisa decided to confront Caroline and confine her to her room, but not to mention her imminent Irish journey until they had found a proper traveling companion.

Darcy enjoyed a very pleasant day at Longbourn, its only detraction being his introduction to Elizabeth's Aunt Phillips. Mrs. Phillips had heard the rumors of their engagement and rushed to Longbourn intent upon confirming that it was indeed fact and then chastising her sister for not informing her directly. Aunt Phillips was a well known and famous busy body in the environs of Meryton and it irritated her excessively to hear such news about her own niece from someone not at all connected with their family.

Elizabeth was not excessively fond of her aunt. In truth, she thought Aunt Phillips a vulgar, unintelligent woman who exerted far too much influence over Mrs. Bennet. While Elizabeth harbored no illusions regarding her mother's abilities, she appreciated her general good will and high spirits, for such was Mrs. Bennet's nature when she was not specifically vexed over something. Aunt Phillips not only lacked this liveliness, but she was also somewhat malicious. While Mrs. Bennet might sometimes be resentful and slow to forgive, she was not generally mean spirited. Elizabeth had often speculated what their mother might have been like if she had not been continually subjected to the influence of her older sister, but sadly, Aunt Phillips was a very real presence in their lives and Elizabeth dreaded exposing Darcy to her least favored relation.

Thus it was that Darcy, who was seated beside her, heard Elizabeth sigh deeply when her aunt's voice resounded from the hallway. Darcy did not know who was about to burst in upon them, but he gently squeezed Elizabeth's hand in silent reassurance as they rose to greet this noisy guest. Elizabeth was thankful that Mrs. Hill ushered her aunt into the parlor quickly so that she might see Darcy was present before she embarrassed them thoroughly with her loud exclamations.

Elizabeth had just completed the introductions when her father entered the parlor, and she silently blessed Mrs. Hill for fetching him before she went upstairs for Mrs. Bennet. Mrs. Phillips was somewhat cowed by the combined presence of Mr. Bennet and Mr. Darcy, and she sat silently gazing at Darcy as Jane rang for tea. Mr. Bennet shared Elizabeth's opinion of her aunt and generally avoided her company whenever possible. However, knowing what anxiety this introduction might occasion for his daughter he was determined to offer any possible assistance.

Mrs. Bennet soon joined them and happily received her sister's congratulations. When Mrs. Phillips began to chide her sister for not hastening to inform her of the news or at least sending word by Lydia, Mr. Bennet actually intervened. He knew that Mrs. Phillips favored Lydia above the other girls and he was not anxious to encourage that partiality as he thought it an ill influence upon his already silly youngest daughter.

"While your concern for *all* our girls is very much appreciated," Mr. Bennet stated, "you must understand that we have all been quite busy with the wedding arrangements. And as for Lydia coming into Meryton on her own, I am afraid that is out of the question. She is not yet of sufficient maturity to venture into society on her own. Therefore, I intend to be very cautious of Lydia until I deem that she is ready to make wise decisions and to conduct herself properly in company. She will not be leaving home for the foreseeable future without her mother or one of our two older daughters as chaperone."

"But surely Lydia should be out by now," Aunt Phillips unwisely protested. "She is almost a head taller--"

"I was not speaking of her stature," Mr. Bennet interrupted her in a tone that brooked no further protest, "but of Lydia's manners and judgment."

Lydia had not entirely escaped Darcy's notice at the Assembly and he was pleased by Mr. Bennet's declaration. In fact, he thought it a wise course of action both for Lydia's future and her family's honor. Seeing Mrs. Bennet's anxious glance between her husband and her sister, Darcy decided he would speak his mind.

"As guardian to my younger sister, I have some experience with such decisions," Darcy said, "and I think you are very wise to protect your daughter until she is truly ready for the pressures of a broader society. My sister is very reserved, and although Georgiana is of an age when many young women have already come out, I have determined that she needs time to become more confident before she is expected to act as an adult among other adults."

Mrs. Bennet smiled. The seeds of doubt raised by her sister's protest were banished by Mr. Darcy's ready agreement with Mr. Bennet. If they agreed, it must be the correct opinion. Seeing Elizabeth's grave expression and fearing Mrs. Phillips could not contain her silliness much longer, Mr. Bennet suggested a walk outside.

"You are a bit pale this afternoon, Lizzy. Perhaps you have stayed indoors too long," he said. "Let us take a walk outside. Would you care for a breath of fresh air, Mr. Darcy?"

Mr. Darcy allowed that he would enjoy taking a stroll in the garden and soon the three of them had made their escape. When they were beyond the hearing of the ladies in the sitting room, Mr. Bennet surprised Darcy further by saying, "There, there, Lizzy, do not let that very silly woman distress you. When you are married and gone from here, you need hardly ever see her."

Elizabeth gave her father a small smile and he in turn smiled at Darcy as he patted Elizabeth's hand.

"Would you be kind enough to escort Lizzy outside, Mr. Darcy? I believe the fresh air in the east garden will do her good, and if you will confine yourselves to that area, I can chaperone you from the comfort of my library. I shall expect you to join me in half an hour's time."

Darcy managed to restrain himself to a proper nod and smile of thanks. The east garden was in full view of the library so Mr. Bennet was not leaving them completely unchaperoned, but Darcy knew that he would never have been allowed such a liberty if he did not have Mr. Bennet's full confidence. As Darcy was eager to understand Elizabeth's sudden quiet, he very much appreciated Mr. Bennet's arranging an opportunity for them to speak privately.

They took a turn around the garden in silence and then Darcy led Elizabeth to a bench. He was careful to choose a seat in plain view of the library window, and when they were seated he gently took her hand.

"Will you not tell me what has you so dispirited, Elizabeth?" Darcy asked. "Is it something to do with your aunt's visit?"

Elizabeth blushed and then turned away as she answered, "I know it must be mortifying to know that you will soon be connected with such people. I fear that you will have regrets--"

"Do you think me such a snob?" Darcy asked with concern.

"No, certainly not," Elizabeth replied as she turned to face him. "When I spoke of regretting my connections, I was not referring to my aunt's station, but to her character. We cannot help the circumstances of our births, but each of us is responsible for our choices and actions. My mother's brother is not a gentleman's son, but in his deportment and character Uncle Gardiner is as fine a man, as you will ever know. However, my Aunt Phillips is--"

Elizabeth broke off. There was no delicate and proper way to say what she truly thought of her aunt's behavior. However, she felt she must finish what she had begun lest Darcy misunderstand her.

"If I, who am related to them by blood, find my aunt's conduct mortifying--and sometimes my mother's and my younger sisters'--it would be irrational for me to expect more forbearance of their incorrect behavior from you. If you were to have regrets later, then I would wish we had not married."

Darcy clasped both of Elizabeth's hands as he sought to reassure her.

"Elizabeth, I am eight-and-twenty and I have never cared for a woman as I care for you."

Elizabeth started to speak, but a look from Darcy stopped her.

"No, dearest," he continued, "I need to tell you everything. I have never loved anyone outside my family until I met you. Although I am capable of admiring a pretty face, I have never been even remotely interested in another woman. I have always hated assemblies and balls, because I am by nature shy and awkward with strangers. I never know what to say to new acquaintances, but when I met you it was as if the sun had suddenly come out from behind a cloud. My shyness was overcome by my overwhelming need to know you, and the melancholy that has haunted me since my father's passing is gone. I am now happy in a way I never expected--because of you, Elizabeth--because you have agreed to be my wife. Please do not speak of my having regrets again."

Elizabeth found it impossible to speak at all at that moment, but her heart was in her eyes as she gazed up at him.

"I love you, Lizzy," Darcy whispered, "and I always will."

Elizabeth boldly raised his gloved hand to her lips and gently kissed it.

"Thank you, Fitzwilliam," she whispered.

Darcy in turn lifted Elizabeth's hand to his lips, but instead of kissing the back of her gloved hand, he daringly turned her hand and kissed the bare skin on the inside of her wrist.

"Forever, Lizzy," he whispered.

By unspoken agreement, Darcy and Elizabeth began to speak of inconsequential things as their half hour was almost over and they must soon return to Elizabeth's father. For his part Mr. Bennet had observed them more carefully than either realized. In fact, though he sat holding a book as if he were reading it, not a page was turned until he saw the young couple rise and walk toward the house.

Mr. Bennet was pleased. He had observed the return of happiness to his daughter's face and he was himself relieved to know that Darcy's regard for his daughter did not seem at all lessened by her less than desirable relations. Soon Elizabeth and Darcy were at the library door and the three of them enjoyed a lively discussion of modern poetry until it was time for dinner.

It was a very satisfied Darcy that returned to Netherfield later that evening. He smiled to himself as he remembered Elizabeth's tentative kiss of his hand and Darcy's smile broadened as he recalled the softness of her skin when he had dared to kiss her wrist. However, Darcy's smile quickly faded when he entered the Netherfield library and saw the grave countenances of Bingley and Hurst.

Louisa had confided all in her husband that afternoon and even ventured to apologize for allowing Caroline to interfere in their marriage. Hurst was not surprised by the depths of Caroline's selfishness, but he was most appreciative of his wife's including him in something meaningful at last—even if it was a family crisis. He quickly accepted her apology for past wrongs and firmly pledged his support to Bingley and Louisa as they sought to rectify Caroline's wrongs as best they could. Bingley had always thought of Hurst as a rather indolent fellow, but seeing him assert himself to raise his wife's spirits during the afternoon, Bingley decided that he had underestimated the man. In another surprising move, Hurst had insisted upon being with Bingley when he told Darcy about Caroline's letter.

"If Darcy requests to continue the conversation with you privately," Hurst said, "I will, of course, honor his request. However, this is not an instance where you have personally wronged him. We are striving as a family to make amends for Caroline's transgression. Therefore, I must be at your side."

And so it was that a very happy Darcy found Bingley and Hurst, nursing their brandies and looking for all the world as if someone had died. Darcy found Bingley's gravity particularly alarming as Bingley always smiled.

"Good God, gentleman," Darcy began, "please tell me no one died today."

That drew a small smile from Bingley, but then he abruptly rose and crossed to the brandy decanter without a word. Darcy did not find this comforting and so looked questioningly at Hurst.

Hurst gave him a weak smile and said, "Sit, Darcy. No one is dead that we know of, but this may take some time and you will definitely want the brandy."

Knowing the extent of Bingley's distress, Hurst took it upon himself to enlighten Darcy as gently as he could.

"I am afraid Caroline has done something to cause you and Miss Bennet harm, Darcy. Bingley and Louisa were both very alarmed by her rapid acceptance of your engagement, as we all know Caroline's sulks tend to go on for days. They suspected her of mischief and through a discreet discussion with the housekeeper they discovered that Caroline sent an express this morning to your aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"What?" Darcy sputtered as he nearly choked on his brandy.

Bingley could not face his dearest friend for shame, but Hurst immediately moved to Darcy's side and pounded on his back as he caught his breath.

"I wish it were a bad joke, but it is not," Hurst continued. "Caroline has not yet divulged the exact contents of her letter, but we are all confident that it would not have cast your engagement in a flattering light. Perhaps we should have summoned you from Longbourn, but we did not want to stir up the local gossips and we could not think what was to be done today."

Darcy nodded. In truth, he would not have willingly foregone his private interview with Elizabeth, particularly since the letter was already on its way and there was no way to avert all associated unpleasantness.

"I will be happy to leave at first light and carry any message you wish to your aunt, Darcy," Hurst offered.

"And I am most willing to write a letter explaining my sister's unreliable mental state, if you wish it," Bingley added, having finally found his voice.

Darcy sat there silent and unmoving as he considered the best remedy to such a situation. When he finally raised his eyes to address his companions, Darcy's eyes were dark with anger.

"And what of Caroline?" he asked.

"For now she is confined to her quarters," Bingley answered. "However, I have written to our aunt in Ireland and Caroline will be sent to her as soon as I can arrange a suitable traveling companion. I have already made up my mind that Caroline will remain with our aunt for at least a year if she wants my continued support and protection. If she refuses, then she will be irrefutably cast off and on her own."

Darcy nodded. Although Caroline was a woman of independent fortune, he knew that she could not live in the style she craved on her own income. That degree of comfort required Bingley's financial support. Caroline was also far too consumed with social standing and public opinion to choose being cast off by her family. The ensuing scandal would render her a social outcast and make her virtually unmarriageable. With those as her only choices, Caroline would definitely be on her way to Ireland soon.

"Perhaps, I might be of assistance in speeding Miss Bingley on her way," Darcy said after quietly contemplating the situation. "Georgiana's companion is a very respectable woman, the widow of a clergyman. I believe Mrs. Annesley would be willing to accompany Miss Bingley to Ireland, as she has family there and it would allow her the opportunity to visit them. If you would not mind Georgiana joining us in a few days, then Mrs. Annesley could accompany her to Netherfield and then journey on with your sister."

Bingley's relief was palpable as he responded, "That would be wonderful, Darcy. I did not want Caroline traveling with someone who might be malleable to her schemes and opinions."

"Then Mrs. Annesley should do very well. Not only is she the widow of a clergyman, but she is also a very upright woman of strong convictions. I shall write to her tonight."

Hurst hated to reintroduce the topic of Darcy's aunt, but knew he would be remiss if he did not attempt once more to assist in the matter.

"And what of your aunt?" he inquired. "Is there some way that we might be of use in that situation?"

"Thank you," Darcy said with the ghost of a smile, "but I think it would only lend credence to any allegations Miss Bingley might have made if I were to take any precipitous action—particularly since we do not know exactly what she wrote to my aunt. Fortunately I myself sent letters to town at first light for all my family. Therefore, Miss Bingley's letter will not be the only intelligence that Lady Catherine receives of my plans. It would be ridiculous for her to put any credence in a letter from someone so wholly unconnected with her when she has my letter for comparison.

"Knowing Lady Catherine, I am certain there will be some unpleasantness as a result of this, but we will answer her objections or questions when they are raised. While I do not enjoy the same type of relationship with Lady Catherine that I have with Lord Carlisle and his family, we are still family. I shall be very disappointed in her if she takes the word of a stranger over that of her nephew."

"Well, if you change your mind after sleeping on it," Hurst said, "please let me know. I have no scruples regarding Sunday travel in such a circumstance and I would be happy to be of use."

Darcy lay awake for some time that night. He finally drifted off thinking that a possible altercation with Lady Catherine might be well worthwhile to secure the absence of Caroline Bingley whom he had found increasingly difficult to tolerate. It would also now be understood and expected that she was not included in his invitations to Bingley. Darcy had never considered Lady Catherine to be particularly acute, but surely she would see through the machinations of such a fortune hunter.

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It gratified all of Meryton to see the grand Mr. Darcy anxious walking up and down outside the church the following morning as he eagerly awaited the Bennets' arrival for services. Darcy had ridden on ahead of his friends in his impatience to see Elizabeth. He greeted the entire Bennet family politely but Darcy's gaze was firmly fixed on his bride whose blush only enhanced her loveliness in his opinion. There were many smiles directed at the young couple as Darcy escorted Elizabeth down the aisle and into the Bennets' family pew. Elizabeth's color deepened, but Darcy decided he did not care if the whole world smiled at his happiness.

Bingley and the Hursts arrived just before the services began. There were whispered wonderings at Caroline Bingley's absence, but there was no great concern. After all, Caroline had made it very plain that she cared little for anyone in Hertfordshire. Mr. Darcy left with the Bennets soon after the service was concluded, but the rest of the Netherfield party lingered for some time. Acknowledging Caroline's selfishness, had forced Louisa to reconsider her own life and she had decided she was in great need of improvement. Louisa's first and most important step in correcting her faults was her apology to Mr. Hurst and a newly formulated resolve to treat him with the respect he was due as her husband. Louisa had also realized that with Caroline's encouragement, she had become a silly snob. The Bingleys were not of exalted lineage. Their father had been a very successful tradesman. Regretting her past foolishness, Louisa had decided to exert herself to make friends in Meryton. She moved determinedly through the crowd acknowledging those whom she had met and seeking introductions to new acquaintances. The surprised populace received her efforts kindly and immediately began to reformulate their opinion of Mrs. Hurst; attributing her former coldness to her much reviled sister's influence.

Meanwhile Caroline was still confined to her quarters. Her prevailing emotional state had progressed from fury to fear, and even while the rest of the family was at prayer, Caroline sat pondering her fate. She knew Charles could not keep her locked in this room indefinitely, but Caroline sensed her punishment would be of some duration. She had never known Charles to be outraged and she now felt torn. Caroline still wanted revenge and would be delighted if Lady Catherine came storming into Hertfordshire to take Eliza Bennet down a peg, but the saner portion of Caroline's mind was beginning to hope that absolutely nothing would come of her letter to Lady Catherine. If nothing happened, Charles would be far more likely to relent and allow things to return to normal.



Caroline had tried to assert her authority as mistress of the house that morning by summoning the housekeeper. However, Mrs. White had not come. Instead she sent Caroline's maid Monique back to her with a note.

Dear Miss Bingley,

Please forgive me for failing to appear in answer to your summons. Mr. Bingley has left strict orders that no one other than Monique is to enter your chambers without his express permission. I shall be happy to fulfill any request in my power; however, you will need to make such requests through Monique.

Sincerely,

S. White

Caroline had crumpled the note in anger and tossed it into the fire, but as she watched the flames consume it, her fears began to gnaw at her. She knew Charles was not capable of cruelty, but what if he allowed Darcy to decide her punishment. For all her determined pursuit of the man, Caroline had never really considered his character, but she did so now for her fate might be in his hands. She found herself fearful of a certain uprightness in Darcy's nature. While Caroline would have said her brother was a very good man, she realized that Charles was far less fixed in his principles than Darcy was. Darcy lived by a very demanding moral code and he expected no less from the rest of the world. What would he judge fit punishment for deceit, cruelty and petty revenge? The very question made Caroline shiver and draw closer to the fire.

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## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines Confessions and Connections

### Chapter Five - Confessions and Connections

*If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.*  
Jane Austen, *Emma*, Chapter 49

The ensuing days were full of happy activity at Longbourn. To Darcy's great delight the Bennets had extended an open invitation for him to spend as much time with them as he was able. Thus Darcy hurried out the door each morning and Bingley knew not to expect him for dinner.

Although Mrs. Bennet had the other girls busy with preparations for the wedding, she demanded little of the bride. In her mind, Elizabeth's primary responsibility was to keep Mr. Darcy happy, and if Elizabeth could accomplish that, Mrs. Bennet was quite delighted to supervise everything else herself.

Thankful for any time he could spend in Elizabeth's presence, Darcy especially enjoyed those rare moments of privacy which allowed him to speak to her without the restraints demanded by propriety. The normally reserved gentleman found himself surprisingly eager to express his affections and assure Elizabeth of the fervor of his regard.

In an ironic twist of fate, the lively and outgoing Elizabeth often found herself tongue-tied in the face of his endearments. In the excitement of the moment, she had proclaimed her love for Darcy on the day of their engagement, but Elizabeth had said nothing more of her feelings since then. Darcy, however, was not discouraged. He of all men understood her reservedness, and he was confident that his affections were returned, as it was every day implied in the way that Elizabeth looked at him, the way she said his name. Having full assurance from her conduct that their attachment was mutual, Darcy discovered that Elizabeth's shyness pleased him. Her demure acceptance of his words of love and her reluctance to return them was eloquent proof that she had never played at love and flirtation.

After all the coquetry and machinations Darcy had witnessed in the 'first circles,' Elizabeth's glowing reticence was like a breath of fresh air to him, and for now Darcy was quite content to enjoy his own newfound ability to speak of his love. It delighted him to see Elizabeth blush and to know that his whisperings had disconcerted her.

They were enjoying a rare moment alone in the sitting room favored by the family in the mornings. Darcy knew that someone would be bustling back into the room at any moment, so he leaned closer to Elizabeth and softly murmured in her ear, "I love you, Lizzy. Will you not tell me that you love me, too?"

Elizabeth was decidedly pleased by Darcy's declarations, and she definitely did not want him to cease expressing his affections. Having lain awake for sometime the previous night considering how to encourage him to continue until she could comfortably respond in kind, Elizabeth now replied with a sparkle in her eyes that belied the seriousness of her words.

"Mr. Darcy," she said in mock solemnity, "I begin to fear that I may have been deceived regarding your abilities. I was under the impression that you are quite intelligent. Yet, you seem to have difficulty in remembering vital information."

Darcy was not the least bit disconcerted by this new tact. He laughed and leaned in once more to whisper, "It is vital, Lizzy, for it makes me happy to hear it. Please say that you love me."

Sighing as if he were asking a great deal, she turned to him and said quietly, "Very well, Mr. Darcy, I still love you."

Elizabeth's mocking frown quickly dissolved into a tremulous smile as Darcy's expression grew serious. With his eyes never leaving hers, Darcy raised her hand to his lips and kissed it tenderly. He then clasped her hand to his chest and whispered, "You need not say anything that makes you uncomfortable, dearest, for I do love you, Elizabeth, and I know that you love me."

Elizabeth could not speak for a moment. It was as if his soul lay bare before her. Without effort or forethought she found herself leaning towards him to whisper, "I do, Fitzwilliam. I do love you."

He drew her into his arms and held her close, gently kissing her brow. "I am glad we are to be married soon, Lizzy. Thank you for agreeing to a brief engagement."

They sat thusly for some time enjoying the new feeling of intimacy between them, and strangely no one interrupted them. Finally Darcy pulled away and said with a smile, "Now, my love, I think a change of activity is required unless I am going to throw aside my honor and take you to Gretna Green."

"I am rather attached to your honor, dear sir," Elizabeth responded with an answering smile. "What distraction do you require?"

After a moment's consideration Darcy replied, "Perhaps a walk to Oakham Mount. I am rather fond of the place."

Rising, Elizabeth extended her hand to him and replied, "Come then, Fitzwilliam, let us see which of my sisters can be spared to accompany us."

They were soon walking out with Jane and Kitty for companions. As they neared a narrowing of the way, Darcy whispered, "Would you mind if I walk with Miss Bennet for a bit, my love? I know she is dearest to you, and I would like to know her better."

Elizabeth's answer was a ready smile and a nod, and she was soon walking ahead arm and arm with Kitty enjoying the day. Darcy and Jane followed them in companionable silence for several minutes before Darcy roused himself to speak what was on his mind.

"I hope you do not mind my company, Miss Bennet. I realize that you are Miss Elizabeth's dearest sister and so I was hoping for the opportunity to further our acquaintance."

"I do not mind in the least, Mr. Darcy," Jane reassured him. "Lizzy is very dear to me, as well. In truth I would find it most difficult to part with her if I were not certain of her happiness."

"Please know that her happiness is of the greatest importance to me, also," Darcy replied. "Although our acquaintance is brief--in fact, some would say that becoming engaged on such short acquaintance is very unlike me, but I feel that in essentials I know your sister entirely. I realize there are many particulars I have yet to learn, but I am eager to make those discoveries. Miss Elizabeth is quite unlike anyone else I have ever known."

"Lizzy has always been unique," Jane said with a smile, "and I think you are well suited to one another. However--"

Jane's expression grew serious as she considered how to continue. After a moment's pause she said with a sigh, "It has not always been easy for her. Lizzy's liveliness, her intelligence, her inner strength-- Our mother has never understood her and she has spent considerable energy trying to force Lizzy to become someone she is not."

"Your mother--" Darcy echoed in puzzlement, "but she seems to regard your sister's abilities so highly."

"I am afraid that is a rather recent development, Mr. Darcy. Mama only began to think so well of Lizzy when--" Jane broke off in embarrassment.

"When I became your sister's suitor?" he asked, having readily perceived what recent event might have changed Mrs. Bennet's perspective.

Seeing Darcy's darkening visage, Jane gently tried to explain. "You must not think ill of Mama, Mr. Darcy. It is only natural that people fear what they do not understand. I myself would find it impossible to forgive her oppression of Lizzy, were I not confident that Mama's primary concern has been for Lizzy's happiness. Mama could not envision a man who would admire Elizabeth for her 'oddities' as Mama calls them, and she has worried that none would admire her enough to overlook them. It is a sad truth that as a gentleman's daughters without independent means, marriage is our best hope of securing a safe and hopefully happy situation. I think our mother has been excessively fearful for Lizzy's prospects. You must realize that we have little acquaintance outside of Hertfordshire, and in this limited society there are very few marriageable young men."

Darcy nodded, seeing the truth of Jane's words. He shuddered to think of his beloved Elizabeth left destitute by her father's death and forced into a loveless marriage or the dreary life of a governess. In that light her mother's fears were quite justified, although he bristled to think that the woman could have so underestimated her daughter's worth.

Seeing Jane's anxious expression, Darcy endeavored to set her mind at ease, "I do understand, and I shall endeavor not to hold your mother's misguided fears against her. I must confess that I am still at a loss to understand your reasons for addressing this, since your sister's future is no longer in question and you obviously do not desire to set me at enmity with Mrs. Bennet."

Jane sighed with relief. It was awkward to speak of such things, but she was determined that Elizabeth's husband would have the benefit of understanding her family and how they had shaped her.

"My intention in relating this history is simply to help you better understand Lizzy," she explained. "I believe that Mama is now sincerely aware of my sister's merits, but life at Longbourn has not always been easy for Lizzy. She has always had to be very strong to remain true to herself, and she is not used to relying upon anyone else."

"But the two of you seem to be so close?"

"We do love one another dearly, Mr. Darcy, but there is also some reserve between us--at least on Lizzy's part. Because her--uncommon virtues have not always been prized or encouraged, Lizzy has grown used to hiding bits and pieces of herself away. I have often worried that she keeps her deepest feelings and worries to herself. Seeing you together, I am convinced that in time Lizzy's deep affection for you will overcome that habit, Mr. Darcy. My concern is that you might misunderstand her at some point in the meantime and think that Lizzy does not trust you when in fact she does."

Darcy was deeply moved by Jane's concern and her revelation. He thought with satisfaction of Elizabeth's words of love earlier that morning and the deepening bond between them. Placed in the context of Jane's confession, it was far more significant than he had realized.

Smiling down at his companion, Darcy offered her his arm, "Thank you for trusting me, Miss Bennet. I take your meaning and I shall not forget what you have said."

By unspoken agreement, they increased their pace and soon overtook their companions. Kitty and Jane walked a bit ahead on the way back to Longbourn, allowing Darcy and Elizabeth a degree of privacy, and the couple strolled along in contented silence for some time.

Although sensible of the touch of Elizabeth's hand upon his arm, Darcy was preoccupied with thoughts of Jane's admission and the new sense of closeness he felt with Elizabeth. When he could contain his feelings no longer, Darcy stopped and took her by the hand. Elizabeth gazed up at him expectantly, but Darcy found it difficult to speak seeing the unguarded affection in her eyes.

Lifting one hand to caress her cheek, he finally said, "Elizabeth, my love, you have changed me and for that I am grateful."

Her reply was a sincere look of puzzlement, and Darcy happily explained his meaning. "I did not think myself capable of such deep feeling, and I certainly never expected to care for anyone the way that I love you."

It was a profound relief to articulate his emotions. Darcy gently kissed her hand and moved as if to resume their walk. However, Elizabeth stopped him by drawing his hand back to her cheek and whispering, "I love you, too, dearest."

Darcy was overwhelmed. He wanted to take Elizabeth in his arms. He wanted to cavort across the fields. He wanted to shout his joy from the rooftops. That is what he wanted to do, but Darcy settled for leaning in to rest his forehead against hers and whispering, "You have made me the happiest of men, Lizzy, by loving me and allowing me to love you. Tomorrow I must away to London and Georgiana will return with me, so we will have few moments of privacy then, but know that I am thinking of you every minute and longing for the day when you will become my wife."

"I am also eager for our wedding day to arrive, Fitzwilliam."

Realizing how fragile his self-control was at the moment, Darcy merely smiled as he returned Elizabeth's hand to his arm and the pair resumed their walk. Suddenly recalling something Jane had said, Darcy glanced down with a mischievous grin.

"I must say that I am most grateful that your father's estate is in Hertfordshire, my love," Darcy said.

"I am equally happy that your friend Mr. Bingley chose to let Netherfield Park," Elizabeth replied mistaking his meaning entirely.

"Thank you for that sentiment, my dear," Darcy continued. "However, I was considering the matter of geography from a whole other view as I now believe we were fated to meet, Elizabeth, no matter where you resided. Yes, I am most grateful that you grew up in Hertfordshire, my love, and I shall forever be indebted to this marvelous county for keeping you safe for me."

"I must confess that I am agog with curiosity, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth answered, "as I do not understand your meaning. Why should Hertfordshire be considered safer than any other county in England?"

"Oh, forgive me, my love," Darcy said in delight. "I did not mean to be cryptic. I was thinking on my earlier conversation with your sister in which Miss Bennet commented on the dearth of eligible bachelors in Hertfordshire, a circumstance for which I am extremely grateful. Otherwise you might have been spirited away by another before I arrived on the scene."

Elizabeth choked back a laugh as she exacted her revenge. "I suppose the society is somewhat limited here in Meryton, dear sir, but you are mistaken in assuming that there have been no other offers for either of us. Of course, those gentlemen were not from Hertfordshire. Perhaps that is the source of your misunderstanding, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy was startled to silence. Pretending not to notice his sudden glower, Elizabeth continued on as if musing to herself, "Yes, I think that explains the misunderstanding entirely. So, Mr. Darcy, do you not think we are living through a great age of poetry?"

"Elizabeth," Darcy said tersely, "I do not wish to seem boorish, but you must explain. I cannot bear to go through life wondering if every man I meet was one who happened to propose to you."

Satisfied that he had been suitably punished for his presumption, Elizabeth turned to face him. "I love you and only you, Fitzwilliam. I am sorry if my teasing has disturbed your peace, but you were entirely too smug. Jane and I have both had admirers. You must remember that we have spent considerable time with our aunt and uncle in London."

"And other offers?" he asked.

"Yes," Elizabeth answered him gently. "Of course, Jane as the eldest and the prettiest of us has excited far more interest than I have. I have only had 2 offers of marriage, Fitzwilliam, yours and one other when I was very young. It was most uncomfortable to reject him, so I quickly became adept at deflecting attention from gentlemen who did not interest me. Jane, bless her, is too sweet and kind to resort to such tactics and has had to turn down several such requests."

"May I ask why you rejected the gentleman?" Darcy asked. "I trust he was a gentleman and not someone wholly unsuitable."

"No, he was not wholly unsuitable," Elizabeth answered softly. "He was a gentleman of great worth and respectability and I liked him very much."

"Then why would you have--"

"Risked my future by refusing to marry him?" Elizabeth finished his question.

Darcy nodded. He knew that she loved him and that she was pledged to him, but he found himself desperate for her answer.

"I have always been resolved that only the deepest love would induce me to marry," Elizabeth replied, "and yet, I might have faltered if he had cared for me less. I was newly out in company and inexperienced. I did not understand the depth of his feelings until it was too late."

"Too late," Darcy repeated in alarm.

"Yes, if I had understood his feelings, I would have distanced myself until I knew his heart was safe," she explained, "but, alas, I only thought he felt friendship for me until he made his declaration. I would not have injured him for the world."

"And yet you refused him," Darcy said with no small satisfaction. "However, I must confess that I do not understand why you might have been tempted to accept the gentleman had he loved you less, Elizabeth."

"Do you not?" she gently queried. "Think on it, Fitzwilliam. Two friends with a sincere regard for one another and an easy camaraderie between them might grow to love one another as man and wife and be very happy together. There is an equal exchange of affections and expectations in such a union, but a marriage where one partner loves the other desperately and that love is not returned--"

Turning to him with tears in her eyes, she continued, "Surely, you understand my character too well to believe that I would be able to pretend such affections. Therefore, he would have been most unhappy eventually, and it is difficult to say which of us would have been more miserable. I would have been continually burdened by the guilt of disappointing him and he would have been constantly trying to win his wife's heart. Although he was disappointed at the time, I am convinced that the gentleman is far happier now without me than he would have been had we married."

Darcy clasped her hand tightly to his chest. "I do understand, Lizzy," he whispered. "I am afraid I was a bit jealous to think of another man loving you, but I am only sorry for him now. I know how bitter my own disappointment would have been had you refused me."

The thank you she whispered was so soft that Darcy barely heard it, but he had to smile when she gazed up at him impishly and said, "Ah, but I am afraid there is nothing I could long refuse you, dearest."

With that she suddenly tore off down the path, quickly leaving a laughing Darcy behind. Soon the dignified gentleman from Derbyshire was running after her. With his longer legs it was no great feat to overtake Elizabeth, and they were both still laughing when they rejoined Jane and Kitty in the Longbourn garden.

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Bingley's morning was not so enjoyable. He had decided it was time to visit Caroline. Bingley felt it his duty as her brother to ascertain her physical well being during her confinement, and being of a sanguine disposition he also harbored some small hope that Caroline had begun to regret her misdeeds. Bingley quickly discerned that she was entirely unchanged in either respect. Caroline appeared very well indeed and also wholly unrepentant. She answered his polite inquiries coldly and maintained an attitude of proud disdain until Bingley bid her good day and turned to leave. Realizing he fully intended to continue her punishment, Caroline decided to sacrifice some dignity in an attempt to gain his sympathy. After all, it was a gambit that had worked well with her brother in the past.

"Please, Charles, do not leave me here," Caroline beseeched him. "I was distraught when I wrote the letter. If you will but release me, I promise to apologize to Mr. Darcy."

"And what of Miss Bennet?" Bingley asked evenly. "And Lady Catherine? Your falsehoods have also imposed upon them."

"Of course," Caroline replied, "I will write to Lady Catherine today if that is your wish."

"And Miss Bennet?" Bingley persisted.

His sister blanched. To humble herself before Elizabeth Bennet would have been unthinkable a few short days ago, but Caroline simply could not face another day of solitude. It was now Wednesday, and she had been confined to her room since Saturday. The intervening days had been very long with only Monique for company. Although an excellent maid, the girl left much to be desired as a conversationalist, and for all her pride in being a very accomplished woman, Caroline found it difficult to fill the tedious hours. She had never been a great reader, her needlework was laughable and criticizing those of her acquaintance was not so very amusing without an audience. Caroline bit back the harsh refusal that was her genuine response and swallowed her pride.

"Certainly, Charles," she answered stiffly. "I will make whatever amends you think necessary."

Bingley eyed her carefully. Given the degree of Caroline's contempt for Elizabeth Bennet, this was an important concession or would be if she were sincere. It was Bingley's hope that his sister's character was not beyond repair. However, he knew Caroline far too well to believe this was anything other than an attempt to avoid further punishment. Her antipathy for Elizabeth Bennet was too strong and it had taken Caroline entirely too long to answer. "Still," Bingley thought, "it may be a beginning."

"Very well, Caroline," he replied aloud. "I will consider what you have said."

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked, choking back the rancorous tirade she longed to unleash. She had expected an offer of such great condescension on her part to be eagerly accepted.

"Yes, I believe it is," Bingley replied evenly. "I can think of nothing further to discuss at this time. Is there anything more you wish to address, Caroline? Perhaps something you would request for your diversion during your confinement?"

"Then you will not relent?"

Hearing the trace of bitterness in Caroline's tone, Bingley answered her firmly, "No, not at this time. I hope rather than believe you to be sincere. However, apologies alone will not atone for your transgression. I think it best that I leave you to your thoughts. Please ring for Monique if you require

anything further."

"Louisa," Caroline blurted out as he was leaving the room, "might I see her?"

"Perhaps," Bingley answered. "I will consider it."

With a brief nod, he left the room, locking the door behind him. Caroline waited until Bingley's footsteps had retreated down the hall, before giving vent to her rage. When she was certain he would not be returning quickly, Caroline grabbed up the first thing her eyes happened upon and threw it across the room. However, that act engendered little satisfaction, and the sound of shattering glass brought her back from the brink of a full-blown tantrum. Previously it had been Caroline's custom to take great delight in such destruction as it not only relieved her hostility, but also afforded her the need to purchase new things afterwards. However, with the return of reason, Caroline remembered that there would be no shopping expeditions in her immediate future. She rushed across the room and retrieved what had been her favorite mirror. Alas, now it was a beautiful empty frame. The entirety of its glass lay in shards upon the floor.

Caroline wanted to weep, but even in solitude her pride would not allow it. "Charles may do what he will," she thought bitterly, "but I will never be sorry. I only hope Lady Catherine heeds my advice. After all they are not married yet."

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Darcy left for London shortly after daybreak the following morning. He planned to see his solicitor, procure the marriage license and return to Netherfield with Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley on the following day. However, Darcy was loathe to leave Elizabeth for even such a short time, and the bittersweet knowledge that Elizabeth and Jane would be arriving at Netherfield later that morning made it more difficult for him to depart.

Although Darcy hoped there would be no incident resulting from Caroline's letter to Lady Catherine, he was particularly anxious that nothing occur while he was in town. Elizabeth had assured him she would be safe during his brief absence. However, Darcy took little comfort in her assurances as Elizabeth had never met his aunt and did not know just how vitriolic Lady Catherine could be. Mindful of Darcy's worry over the matter, the family at Netherfield was equally anxious to minimize any harm resulting from Caroline's faux pas. Each did their best to set Darcy's mind at rest, but Louisa Hurst had finally resolved his dilemma by inviting the two eldest Bennet sisters to stay at Netherfield while Darcy was away. She had attempted to pretend the invitation had nothing to do with the prospect of trouble from Lady Catherine, but Darcy was grateful nonetheless.

"It will give us a chance to become better acquainted with your fiance, Darcy," she had insisted, "as you are so very possessive of her time and attention. I would also welcome the Miss Bennets' assistance in preparing a suitable reception for Georgiana."

Darcy was vastly relieved. He knew that Bingley and Hurst would protect Elizabeth in his stead as best they could; however, it was disappointing to think that she would be at Netherfield while he was not. Realizing he must content himself with the thought of seeing Elizabeth upon his return, Darcy urged his horse on.

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The Miss Bennets were warmly received by Louisa Hurst later that morning. Although Elizabeth did not expect Lady Catherine to come tearing into Hertfordshire based upon Caroline's letter, she was grateful for Mrs. Hurst's invitation. A respite from her mother's constant bustle over the wedding was most welcome, and it was Elizabeth's hope that the company at Netherfield would distract her from the pangs of missing Darcy.

Elizabeth had felt strangely bereft when she awoke that morning to the knowledge that Darcy was already gone from Meryton. Having always fancied herself to be a very independent young woman, Elizabeth was surprised to realize that her disposition was no longer hers alone to command. Darcy's presence had become entirely necessary to her happiness and contentment. Even as she responded to Mrs. Hurst's welcome, Elizabeth found it oddly comforting to simply know that Darcy had inhabited this house. She felt an irrational urge to seek out his chamber as if the nearness to his things would make up for the absence of him, and Elizabeth could not help smiling at her own foolishness. Mindful of her companions, Elizabeth exerted herself and she was soon able to fully attend the conversation around her.

The day passed more quickly than Elizabeth had hoped it would. The Hursts and Mr. Bingley had proven to be very agreeable company and were happy to speak of Darcy as often as she wished. Elizabeth would have been vexed with herself had she realized just how often she turned the conversation to her soon-to-be husband. Her hosts, however, found this evidence of her affection for Darcy to be very gratifying and Jane was delighted by their gracious indulgence of her sister. Of course, Jane could not help also noticing how often Mr. Bingley directed his conversation to herself and it pleased her greatly. Bingley's gentleness had put her at ease from their first meeting, and Jane found his manners equally engaging upon closer acquaintance.

When the ladies withdrew to dress for dinner, Bingley and Hurst lingered in the library for a quiet chat about several estate matters. They were just rising to follow the ladies upstairs when a very flustered servant burst in upon them and announced, "Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

Before Bingley could draw breath to instruct the servant to admit their guest, Lady Catherine herself stormed into the room ungraciously pushing the frightened servant aside.

"Where is he? Where is my nephew?"

Bingley nodded to dismiss the servant even as he turned to the task of introducing himself as her host and welcoming Lady Catherine to Netherfield. Lady Catherine's answer to his introduction of Hurst was nothing more than a snort as she took a seat and repeated her inquiry.

"Where is my nephew?" she demanded. "I have no time for pleasantries. I must see Darcy at once."

"I am afraid that Mr. Darcy has gone to town, Lady Catherine," Bingley replied.

"Ah, so he's come to his senses," Lady Catherine interjected before Bingley could elaborate. "I knew he would recover himself and not marry a country nobody. Well, it appears I have no further business--"

"Excuse me, Lady Catherine," Bingley interrupted her with great politeness, "but I believe there has been some misunderstanding. Mr. Darcy has gone to town on business and plans to return tomorrow, bringing Miss Georgiana and her companion with him. He will then remain here until the wedding next week. Perhaps you would like to stay for the wedding as well."

"The wedding!" Lady Catherine shrieked. "I see it is well I have come. There will be no such wedding. My nephew is related to the finest families in England and he will not marry--"

"Lady Catherine, I presume."

The quiet voice immediately drew all eyes to the doorway where stood a very calm, very still Elizabeth Bennet.

"Miss Elizabeth," Hurst said as he quickly crossed the room to meet her. He protectively escorted Elizabeth to a seat as far from Lady Catherine as possible.

Recovering from his momentary shock, Bingley made the obligatory introduction and then lapsed into silence. Lady Catherine merely glowered at Elizabeth for several minutes before addressing the company.

"Please leave us," she said. "I must speak with this young woman alone."

Uncertain of how to reply to such a request, Bingley was grateful that Hurst spared him the trouble by speaking first.

"I am afraid that I cannot grant such a request, Lady Catherine. As our guest, Miss Bennet is under the protection of my brother Bingley and myself and your conduct thus far would not induce me to indulge you."

"Yes," Bingley added, "I fear that some misunderstanding may have resulted from the unfortunate actions of my afflicted sister and, therefore, feel that in Darcy's absence, we must be a party to any discussions you wish to have with Miss Bennet."

"So you refuse to oblige me," Lady Catherine said scornfully and then directed her gaze upon Elizabeth. "You must be very pleased with yourself, young woman. My nephew has resisted the wiles of fortune hunters who were far more beautiful and better connected than you are. I shudder to think what arts and allurements you must have used to tempt him."

"I have used no schemes or arts upon your nephew," Elizabeth coolly replied before either man could jump to her defense. "It might well please you to think so ill of me since we have not been acquainted previously, but for you to cast such dispersions on your own nephew is reprehensible. I am shocked that you who have known him all his life would think so meanly of Mr. Darcy as to imagine that he would behave ignobly or debase himself--or his family--in any way. Mr. Darcy's wealth is as nothing compared to his integrity and I am proud that he has chosen me to be his wife."

Elizabeth rose and crossed the room. She paused in the doorway and turned to say, "If you should decide to apologize to your nephew for so belittling him, I shall be happy to forgive you, but until such time I have nothing further to say to you. Good day, Lady Catherine."

Elizabeth managed to reach her chamber before bursting into tears. It was there that Jane and Louisa found her a short while later, Mr. Hurst having alerted his wife.

"There, there, Lizzy," Jane soothed her as they helped the distraught Elizabeth to her bed.

"Take this, Miss Elizabeth," Louisa said, offering her a glass of wine. "It will help to calm your nerves."

Elizabeth silently accepted the wine and found she did feel somewhat calmer.

"What of Lady Catherine?" Elizabeth finally managed to ask.

"She has fled Netherfield and I daresay Hertfordshire as well," Louisa answered with a smile. "My husband said that you were magnificent."

"I am so proud of you, Lizzy," Jane whispered. "I know that I would have been too upset to say anything with such a woman attacking me."

"I know that what I said was correct, but I was angry and now I fear I was disrespectful of--" Elizabeth dissolved into tears anew. "What if I have ruined everything? What if Mr. Darcy--"

"Do not entertain foolish worries, my dear girl," Louisa said. "Mr. Darcy's only concern in this will be for you. He has never expressed any great regard for his aunt and I doubt that it will be a terrible imposition upon him to have a breach in their relations. You must calm yourself or he will be very angry with himself for not being here to protect you from her."

That drew a small smile from Elizabeth. It did sound very like him, and for his sake she would exert herself to forget the violent emotions of the day. For Darcy's sake, she would calm herself, so that she could truthfully assure him all was well when he returned.

"We will delay dinner to give you a chance to compose yourself, Miss Elizabeth," Louisa said with a smile. "It is no trouble I assure you, and I fear for the gentlemen's sanity if you do not join us for the evening. Both of them are quite beside themselves with worry. I will go down to assure them all is well and leave you to your sister's care. Take as long as you need, my dear."

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The following morning saw a flurry of activity in the guest wing of Netherfield. The ladies had resolved on a number of improvements to the rooms chosen for Georgiana. In addition to bedecking her bedchamber with flowers from the Netherfield conservatory, they had decided to transform the adjoining chamber into a sitting room for her personal use. This would allow the reticent young girl a personal retreat among the unfamiliar environs. The room was entirely refurnished that morning with pieces chosen from various locations throughout the house. A small escritoire was placed just so and stocked with various fine papers and utensils. A selection of appropriate books was placed on a shelf beside a comfortable chaise. One corner of the room was furnished as a small sitting area where Georgiana might entertain guests or enjoy the companionship of Mrs. Annesley. The finishing touch was the addition of a small easel and a variety of drawing supplies positioned by the east window.

When all was arranged Elizabeth eyed the room with satisfaction. Louisa and Jane had gone to freshen up after their morning's exertions, but Elizabeth lingered, reviewing each detail. She made a few minor adjustments, but all in all Elizabeth was very pleased with the room. From what she knew of the girl who would soon be her sister, Elizabeth deemed it to be a perfect haven for Georgiana. With a sigh of satisfaction Elizabeth hurried off to change so that she would be ready to welcome Darcy and Georgiana to Netherfield.

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Georgiana Darcy vacillated between eager anticipation and nervous agitation as they journeyed from London. She was delighted by her brother's happiness but anxious at the thought of meeting so many strangers. Darcy sought to distract and reassure his sister with cheerful conversation and anecdotes about the Bennets and Hertfordshire in general and his beloved Miss Elizabeth Bennet in particular, but the nearer they drew to Meryton, the more prone Darcy was to lapse into silence. Georgiana and Mrs. Annesley shared several amused glances at his uncustomary abstraction. Clearly his thoughts were on Miss Bennet.

In his eagerness to see Elizabeth, Darcy barely restrained himself from leaning out the coach window as they drew up to the house. He could not, however, restrain his smile when Darcy glanced up to see Elizabeth standing at the drawing room window unabashedly watching for his return. Her smile of welcome warmed his heart. She could not come rushing into his arms anymore than Darcy could abandon his sister at Bingley's doorstep to race up to the drawing room, but it was enough to know that Elizabeth was as eager for their reunion as he was.

The formal introductions were soon accomplished and Elizabeth set about the more daunting task of becoming acquainted with the shy Miss Darcy. Georgiana returned every smile but said little. Thinking that it might be easier for them to converse without so many onlookers, Elizabeth suggested that perhaps Georgiana would like the opportunity to rest after their journey. Darcy appreciated Elizabeth's concern for Georgiana's comfort but he was quite irritated when Elizabeth insisted that she would show his sister to her quarters.

"That is really not necessary--"

"Of course it is not necessary, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth agreed with a smile, "but it is something that I want to do. This will give us a chance to chat and we promise to return in time for dinner."

Darcy realized she was not to be dissuaded. He was perplexed when Louisa murmured something to Mrs. Annesley and all five ladies swept from the room. Muttering under his breath, Darcy crossed the room and poured himself a glass of wine. Bingley and Hurst could scarcely contain their laughter at Darcy's fit of pique.

"Really, Darcy," Hurst chided him good naturedly, "you must allow that Miss Bennet will not always be able to devote her every moment to your amusement. There will be servants to manage, parties to plan, friends, relations, not to mention children of your own one day--"

"Yes, Hurst," Darcy interrupted him, "I understand your point. However, Miss Elizabeth and I have spent some portion of every day together since we met excepting yesterday and I had hoped-- Could not Mrs. Hurst have shown Georgiana upstairs?"

"Sit down, Darcy," Bingley urged. "While the finer points escape me, I know that this is a momentous event for the ladies. They were bustling about all morning readying Georgiana's chambers."

"But could the servants not have done that?"

"So you or I would have supposed," Bingley agreed, "but the workings of a woman's mind are far beyond my comprehension. They not only personally inspected Miss Darcy's bedchamber, but they also redecorated the adjoining room as a private sitting room for her use during her stay."

"But she will be here for scarcely more than a week," Darcy protested.

"My thoughts exactly," Hurst agreed, "but the ladies--especially your Miss Elizabeth--wanted your sister to have every comfort. They went up and down the stairs a dozen times at least, choosing furnishings from different rooms. The servants were run ragged and Bingley and I finally fled. It was



a most unlikely day for shooting and trudging through the brush was infinitely preferable to being drawn into their project."

"Yes, it was quite an undertaking," Bingley agreed. "I know that servants were dispatched to Longbourn at least twice to fetch things that Miss Elizabeth deemed necessary to outfit the room to her satisfaction."

"And heaven help me," Hurst moaned. "I think their morning enterprise has inspired my wife to redecorate the townhouse."

"Well, I can see that marriage will be most educational," Darcy agreed dryly, his good humor restored. "If one small sitting room can wreak such havoc, I pray my wife never decides to redecorate Pemberley in its entirety."

"If so, you will have our sympathies and an open invitation to hide at Netherfield," Bingley replied with a smile. "However, I think you will be very happy together, Darcy, and I am happy for you."

The sudden earnestness in Bingley's tone alerted Darcy that all was not as it seemed. "I sense more than your previously expressed good wishes behind that remark," he said. "Pray tell me what I am missing here."

His companions exchanged a glance and at a nod from Hurst, Bingley began. "I am afraid that we had a visit from your aunt yesterday."

"Lady Catherine was here," Darcy uttered in shock. "Tell me everything. I must know. Is Elizabeth-- Was Lady Catherine unkind to her?"

"In all honesty," Hurst replied, "Lady Catherine did not get very far with her attack before your lady stopped her and rather magnificently, I might add. Lady Catherine began by insinuating that Miss Bennet is a fortune hunter who has somehow taken you in and at that Miss Bennet would hear no more."

"Yes," Bingley added, "your Miss Elizabeth was far more affronted by Lady Catherine's lack of respect for your judgment and character than she was by any slurs against herself. She chided her ladyship for casting dispersions upon your integrity."

Darcy felt his eyes moisten. After so many years on his own, it moved him deeply to think of Elizabeth more concerned with defending his honor than her own.

"I shall never forget the look in Miss Elizabeth's eyes," Hurst said softly, "when she informed your aunt that until such time as her ladyship apologized to you, Darcy, she would have nothing further to say to her."

"And what was my aunt's response?" Darcy asked.

"It was amazing. Lady Catherine had stormed into the house, ranting and shouting," Bingley explained, "but after Miss Elizabeth spoke to her thusly Lady Catherine said nothing. She simply left the house without another word to any of us."

"And what of Elizabeth?" Darcy whispered.

Meeting Darcy's gaze, Hurst softly replied, "I believe she was most distressed at the time. However, we left her comfort to the ladies and Miss Elizabeth seemed to rally quickly. She rejoined us within the hour, and we passed a very pleasant evening. Perhaps that accounts for the ladies' morning project. There is nothing like pleasant occupation to distract one from unpleasant memories."

"This is entirely my fault," Darcy said, rising to pace the room. "I know my aunt's failings. How could I have believed that she would react rationally in such a circumstance?"

"Darcy you must not blame yourself. Hurst and I were in the room and we could not prevent Lady Catherine from saying something unpleasant."

"At least I am grateful that you were there," Darcy allowed. "I shudder to think of Elizabeth facing such a character alone. Do you think that Elizabeth blames me?"

"I am certain that she does not," Hurst said. "She was staring out that window for hours just to see you return. That does not seem to be the act of a woman who is upset or angry with you."

The recollection of her dear face watching him alight from the carriage brought a smile to Darcy's face. "My thanks to you both. You are true friends. I cannot imagine what damage might have been done had Lady Catherine accosted Elizabeth at Longbourn."

Both men assured Darcy that no thanks were necessary and by tacit agreement their conversation turned to inconsequential matters. Darcy was beginning to worry about what could be keeping the ladies so long when a servant entered and presented him with a note from his sister.

*Miss Georgiana Darcy requests her brother's presence in her sitting room for tea at his earliest convenience.*

Darcy could not help but smile as he recalled countless "tea parties" he had attended when Georgiana was small. It all came rushing back--the sensation of forcing his taller frame into a small chair to join his sister and her dolls around the little table, Georgiana's chubby little hands carefully pouring imaginary tea from a toy tea pot into tiny cups, her childhood lisp. Gesturing to the note in his hand, Darcy rose and explained, "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I have been invited to tea with my sister. Could you please direct me to her rooms?"

Bingley and Hurst exchanged a laugh.

"Just head towards the guest wing and ask any servant," Bingley advised. "They all know the way."

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## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines Of Fits and Fashions

### Chapter Six - Of Fits and Fashions Irish Fashions, That Is

*I believe I have been very rude; but really Miss Fairfax has done her hair in so odd a way -- so very odd a way -- that I cannot keep my eyes from her. I never saw any thing so outre! Those curls! This must be a fancy of her own. I see nobody else looking like her! I must go and ask her whether it is an Irish fashion. Shall I? Yes, I will -- I declare I will --*

Frank Churchill to Emma Woodhouse in  
Jane Austen's, *Emma* , Chapter 26

From Chapter Five:

*Gesturing to the note in his hand, Darcy rose and explained, "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I have been invited to tea with my sister. Could you please direct me to her rooms?"*

*Bingley and Hurst exchanged a laugh.*

*"Just head towards the guest wing and ask any servant," Bingley advised. "They all know the way."*

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Bingley was correct of course. The first servant Darcy encountered barely contained her smile at the request and led him directly to Georgiana's sitting room. Darcy's disappointment at finding his sister alone was quickly forgotten in the joy of witnessing her delight in her surroundings. Georgiana was brimming with enthusiasm for her quarters and jabbered away totally devoid of the extreme self-consciousness, which had crippled her of late. Not since their father's passing had Darcy seen her in such a state of excitement and now after the devastating events of last summer--Darcy had not yet found the right opportunity to tell Elizabeth of Georgiana's narrow escape from what would have been a disastrous elopement, but even without knowing the source of his sister's distress, Elizabeth had somehow managed to successfully revive her spirits. Georgiana insisted upon showing her brother everything, even requiring Darcy to read the titles of the books carefully arranged on the shelves.

"I can certainly understand why you are so pleased, Georgiana," Darcy said when the tour was completed. "Everything appears to have been thoughtfully chosen to accommodate your tastes and habits. I must say that I am impressed since you were not previously acquainted with either of the Miss Bennets and Mrs. Hurst does not know you very well."

"It is wonderful, is it not?" Georgiana said with a giggle. "I feel as if I could never thank the ladies enough--of course, Mrs. Hurst whispered that it was all Miss Elizabeth Bennet's idea--but I must also thank you, Brother, for Miss Elizabeth insisted that you played an important part in this."

"Although it is very gracious of her to include me," Darcy said with some surprise, "Miss Elizabeth is entirely mistaken. I am afraid that I had nothing to do with this."

"It is you who are mistaken, dearest," Elizabeth said from the open doorway. "It was only because of all the lovely things you had told me of your sister that we knew what would please her."

Darcy crossed to take her hand as Elizabeth continued, "You are very fortunate, Miss Darcy. My father dotes on me, but I do not think he knows me half so well. Of course, in all fairness to Papa, perhaps that is because he has five daughters and a wife to keep straight, while your brother has only had you--until now, of course," she added smiling up at Darcy.

"Yes, and I fear that you will be far more demanding of me, my love," Darcy replied with amusement.

"I daresay you are right, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth allowed with a mischievous grin, "however, you have only yourself to blame, sir."

Georgiana giggled to see her sedate older brother teasing and being teased in turn while Darcy demanded with a grin, "And how is that, my dear Miss Bennet?"

"Why because you have showered me with such constant attention and admiration, sir, that I fear I am already grown quite accustomed to it," she answered with a smile. "I begin to dread the trial it will be when matters of business come between us."

Remembering his own irritation when Elizabeth had insisted upon accompanying Georgiana upstairs, Darcy gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he answered quite seriously. "What you say in jest is quite true, dearest. It will be a trial when responsibilities intrude upon our time together. I found myself missing you just as desperately when you came upstairs with the ladies earlier as I did when I was in London."

Seeing his sister's blush, Darcy turned to include her in their conversation. "Pray forgive me, Georgiana. I did not mean to embarrass you, but I fear you will have to grow accustomed to my sentimentality. There is much talk of fortune and position in relation to marriage, but I have never desired a union based solely upon such things. It seemed pointless to join myself for life to someone I could easily live without. I had despaired of ever finding a woman who would interest me for a week much less a lifetime. However, Miss Bennet captured my attention at our first meeting, and I must say that every time I am in her presence, I find her more fascinating still. It is my earnest hope that you will become good friends as you are the two I hold dearest in the world."

Both ladies beamed at him as Elizabeth answered softly, "I believe we shall."

With the arrival of tea their conversation turned to lighter topics. Elizabeth asked several questions about Pemberley and Georgiana was soon regaling her with tales of the various inhabitants of the great estate. Darcy contributed little to the conversation, delighted by Georgiana's lack of reserve with Elizabeth. When it was time to dress for dinner, Darcy insisted upon escorting Elizabeth to her door. She and Jane were to return to Longbourn after dinner and Darcy felt that he must have a moment of private conversation with her if he were to survive the night.

"Thank you for making Georgiana so happy," he said as they walked slowly down the passageway. "I have not seen her so ebullient in such a long time."

"You are most welcome," Elizabeth replied. "I must confess that my initial thoughts were of you, Fitzwilliam. I wanted to alleviate your anxieties for your sister's comfort among so many strangers, but now that I know her-- Miss Darcy is a very sweet girl, and I see that it will not be difficult to regard her as another sister for her own sake. I only hope Miss Darcy will not be overwhelmed by her introduction to my large, noisy family. Then all will be well."

"Hearing her chatter on today, I believe Georgiana will be able to hold her own with your younger sisters," Darcy said with a chuckle.

"I was thinking that she and Kitty might get on very well," Elizabeth said hesitantly. "After all, they are close in age and not too dissimilar in temperament--that is, if you would not object."

"Why would you think I might object?" Darcy asked, guiding her to the nearest window seat. "Please tell me you are not still worried about my opinion of your family, Elizabeth. After what went on here yesterday, I can hardly uphold my family as superior to yours in any way."

Seeing her blanch, Darcy clasped Elizabeth's hand tightly in his own. "I apologize for distressing you, my love. I did not mean to bring it up so abruptly. Bingley and Hurst told me of Lady Catherine's visit."

"Please forgive me, Fitzwilliam," Elizabeth said with stricken eyes. "I fear I have placed a wedge between you and--"

"You must not apologize to me, dearest," Darcy stopped her. "It is I who must apologize to you. I deeply regret my absence. Dealing with my aunt should have been my unpleasant duty--and mine alone. Lady Catherine is completely devoid of tact, even under the best of circumstances, and I can well imagine her displeasure at our news."

Darcy gently raised her chin until Elizabeth's eyes met his own before continuing, "According to Bingley and Hurst you behaved with great dignity, and if you *did* offend Lady Catherine, it was only in defense of *my* honor. Thank you, my love. I have been on my own for so long that I would not have expected it of you, but I am most grateful."

"Then you are not disappointed in me?" she asked softly.

"Disappointed--hardly," Darcy said lifting her hand to his lips. "I am pleased and proud that so fine a lady has agreed to become my wife."

"I love you, Lizzy," he added in a whisper, "and as long as I have you and Georgiana, I need no other family."

"You will always have my heart," she murmured into his chest as Darcy drew her close.

They sat in silence for a moment, and then resumed their slow walk down the corridor. When they arrived at Elizabeth's door, Darcy kissed her hand again.

"I know it is impolite to rush a lady, but please dress quickly, dearest," he said. "I am already dreading your departure for Longbourn this evening."

"I shall be happy to oblige you, dear sir," Elizabeth responded with a radiant smile, "as I, too, dread our parting."

Mrs. Annesley and Georgiana were quietly occupied in Georgiana's sitting room the following morning when a servant delivered a message saying that the gentlemen hoped Mrs. Annesley might be free to join them in Mr. Bingley's study. Neither lady was surprised by the request. Placing his sister's comfort before his own had long been Darcy's custom, so he had discussed the matter with Georgiana as a matter of course, before requesting her companion make the journey to Ireland. Any anxieties Georgiana may have felt as to Mrs. Annesley's absence were as nothing compared to the comfort of knowing that she would be spared Caroline Bingley's company for the foreseeable future. Although Georgiana had politely endured the woman's flattery and fawning attentions, she had never been fooled into believing that Miss Bingley had any sincere regard for herself--nor for her brother although becoming his wife was assuredly Miss Bingley's aim.

As for Mrs. Annesley, once informed of the situation with Mr. Bingley's sister, she had fully expected that their journey to Ireland would begin as soon as possible. The good woman smiled at the prospect of seeing her sister again. Her own happiness in the plan had initially been somewhat diminished by concern for Miss Darcy. Having a sincere regard for the girl, Mrs. Annesley had been anxious regarding her charge's response to the changes that would be occasioned by her brother's marriage and her own simultaneous departure. However, meeting Miss Bennet and observing her consideration of Miss Darcy had allayed those anxieties and increased the older woman's already considerable respect for her employer. Mrs. Annesley was now eagerly anticipating their departure, having full confidence that Mr. Darcy's marriage would greatly increase his sister's happiness.

With Darcy and Hurst looking on, Bingley apprised Mrs. Annesley of their plans. "First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to assist us in this delicate matter. It is our proposal that you depart for Cardiff on Monday morning. As Miss Bingley is--not herself at present, we have chosen Cardiff over Liverpool or Bristol. There will be less chance of my sister encountering anyone of her acquaintance there should your crossing be delayed, which might be upsetting for her. You will travel in my coach under the protection of Mr. Hopkins, and he will remain with you in Cardiff until you actually set sail."

The very respectable Mr. Hopkins had been in the service of the Darcy family for many years, and Mrs. Annesley was vastly relieved to know that he would be accompanying her on the first leg of what would surely be a trying journey.

"That is excellent news," she replied. "Although I do not anticipate any complications, I shall be glad of Mr. Hopkins' assistance and his company. My relations will be available for any aid we require in Ireland and I am confident that I can easily arrange the rest of our journey when we reach Dublin. Please try not to worry, Mr. Bingley. I shall see your sister safely to Mrs. Wexler's."

The gentlemen all expressed their thanks and Bingley reviewed the financial arrangements he had made. Due to Caroline's "instability" he would be entrusting Mrs. Annesley with the funds for their journey as well as some personal correspondence for his aunt. Mrs. Annesley nodded her understanding.

"I believe you have thought of nearly everything, gentlemen," she said, "except for my introduction to Miss Bingley. We must have the opportunity for a proper conversation before setting out together."

Bingley frantically looked to his companions for assistance, as he feared that such a meeting would cause Mrs. Annesley to retract her agreement to the plan. It was not an unreasonable request, and having a better knowledge of the woman's character, Darcy had expected no less of her. He merely nodded his agreement to Bingley with a slight shrug of apology.

Hurst, however, shared Bingley's apprehension. Seeing his brother's desperate glance, Hurst took a deep breath and attempted to dissuade her.

"I fear that in her present state," he began, "Miss Bingley may not be the most agreeable traveling companion. Perhaps it would be best if your introduction were delayed--"

"Until we were on our way?" Mrs. Annesley finished with a raised eyebrow. "I hardly think that would be proper, gentlemen."

"Of course, you are correct," Hurst quickly retreated, perceiving that on this point of propriety she would not yield. "I apologize for suggesting it, madam. We are somewhat beyond our depth in this situation and are eager that no further unpleasantness mar this happy time for Mr. Darcy and his bride."

Satisfied that she had carried her point, Mrs. Annesley nodded her acceptance of his apology and then proceeded to reassure them. "I do understand that this is not a journey of your sister's design or instigation, gentlemen, and I assume that Mr. Darcy has vouched for my discretion, else you would not have sought my assistance."

"Yes, of course," Bingley replied, having recovered the power of speech.

"Then may I assure you that I am also not one to be turned aside from a duty I have undertaken merely because it proves to be unpleasant," Mrs. Annesley said firmly. "I realize your sister may not be amenable to idle pleasantries at this time. Indeed from what I have been told of her current state, it may be beyond Miss Bingley's power to exert herself to be nominally polite. However, my conduct is determined by my own sense of decorum and, therefore, I must insist upon being introduced to your sister properly before our departure."

Mrs. Annesley's firm grasp of the situation encouraged Bingley and Hurst. Darcy had obviously prepared her well for dealing with Caroline at her most unpleasant.

"Yes, of course, we must introduce you," Bingley agreed politely. "Forgive us for suggesting otherwise. As Miss Bingley's maid will make all her preparations, I plan to wait and inform my sister of her imminent departure tomorrow afternoon. Perhaps, I might introduce you tomorrow evening after she has had the opportunity to--accept my decision."

With that settled, all was arranged. Bingley breathed a sigh of relief as he settled back at his desk after the others had withdrawn. Although he did

not relish the prospect of informing Caroline of his decision, it would all be over soon and the morning's discussion with Mrs. Annesley had given Bingley confidence that she was well chosen for the task. He hoped rather than believed that Caroline would take advantage of this as an opportunity to improve her character. However, there was comfort in knowing that he would have done his best to aid her.

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Darcy felt some trepidation as he and Georgiana approached Longbourn that afternoon. While he had every confidence that the Bennets would welcome his sister whole-heartedly, Darcy was far less certain of Georgiana's reaction to Elizabeth's relations. He was delighted by the sudden re-emergence of the happy, chatty little sister he had thought lost long ago, and Darcy could not help but worry that she would shrink back into shyness among the lively and numerous Bennets.

Darcy's worry only increased when Georgiana's timidity returned during the introductions. However, a glance from Elizabeth stopped him from intervening to shield her as was his wont, and Mrs. Bennet quickly hustled Georgiana over to join Kitty and Lydia who were occupied at the corner table--Kitty with her sketch book and Lydia trimming a new bonnet. Darcy was left to join Elizabeth by the fire, hoping his sister would be happy in the company of her companions. Despite his determination to watch over her, Darcy was soon deep in discussion with Mr. Bennet over his planned improvements for the stables at Pemberley.

Elizabeth silently blessed her father for distracting Darcy from his worries, even as she kept a watchful eye on the trio in the corner. To her great satisfaction, Kitty and Georgiana were soon deep in discussion of Kitty's sketches, and Elizabeth was delighted when her soon-to-be sister actually giggled at something Lydia had said. So engrossed was Darcy in his conversation with Mr. Bennet that he almost started when Kitty's voice reminded him that Georgiana was also present.

"May I take Miss Darcy out to see the puppies in the stable, Mama?" Kitty inquired.

"Why certainly, child," her mother answered, "if she wishes to see them. Not everyone shares your passion for animals, Kitty. Would you like to see the puppies, Miss Darcy? Please do not feel you must go out just to oblige Kitty."

"Oh, yes, please," Georgiana answered with a smile. "I adore animals. I miss ours so when we are in town."

Knowing of Elizabeth's hopes that Georgiana and Kitty would become fast friends, Jane slyly intervened when Lydia moved as if to follow them. "I believe you mentioned a cousin who is a colonel, Mr. Darcy. Pray may we expect the pleasure of meeting him this week?"

Being much more interested in officers than in puppies, Lydia settled back into her chair as she eagerly awaited Darcy's reply. Elizabeth smiled in satisfaction as the animated chatter of the other two girls faded down the passageway. Darcy discreetly squeezed her hand in gratitude even as he answered that his cousin would indeed be coming for the wedding.

By the end of the afternoon, the girls had obtained the necessary permissions for Georgiana to stay the night and a servant was dispatched to Netherfield to fetch her things. Darcy was delighted, not only by his sister's happiness, but also by the opportunity this plan afforded him to remain at Longbourn for dinner. He had been prepared to sacrifice time with Elizabeth for his sister's comfort while in Hertfordshire, but Darcy preferred spending every possible minute at Longbourn.

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After seeing Georgiana happily settled in Kitty's room for the night, Elizabeth retired to her own chamber; however, sleep eluded her. Perhaps it was merely excitement over the wedding, or perhaps it was anxiety over the changes that would follow--leaving her family and her beloved Longbourn. After considerable tossing and turning, Elizabeth rose and stirred the fire back to life. She then relit her candle and curled up under the covers with a book. Her eyes did not grow heavy, but so engrossed was she, that Elizabeth jumped when her reading was interrupted by a soft knock at her door. Expecting it to be one of her parents urging her to rest, Elizabeth was surprised to find Georgiana standing outside her room. She motioned for the girl to come inside and then quietly closed the door behind her.

"Are you ill, Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth inquired.

"No," Georgiana said. "I am sorry. I did not mean to worry you. I am well--only--I could not sleep. It has been such a happy day, but now I feel a little anxious and sad."

"Pray what has distressed you?" Elizabeth asked. "Please come get under the quilts and tell me how I may help."

When they were both settled into Elizabeth's bed, Elizabeth looked at her young guest and gently asked, "Did one of my sisters do something to offend or worry you?"

"Oh, no," Georgiana replied, "your sisters have been most kind--especially Miss Kitty. I like her very much."

"I am glad to hear it," Elizabeth said with a smile. "I had especially hoped the two of you would become friends. Kitty is often lost within the middle of our large family. I think she has longed for a particular friend."

"As have I," Georgiana replied softly. "I waited until she was asleep because I wanted the chance to speak with you privately, Miss Bennet."

"As we are to be sisters in a seven night, I think you might call me Elizabeth--particularly in such a setting as this," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Georgiana smiled with pleasure. "I would like that very much, Elizabeth," she whispered shyly, "and I hope that you will address me as Georgiana. I have often longed for a sister, but I will confess that I was anxious when Fitzwilliam told me he was getting married. I was afraid that you would be--"

The girl broke off in embarrassment, but she had not offended Elizabeth.

"Like Miss Bingley," Elizabeth whispered mischievously.

"Yes," Georgiana replied with a giggle and a blush. "Someone like that--Fitzwilliam has always attracted the attention of women that I would not care to consider my acquaintances, much less my relations. Thank you for rescuing him, Elizabeth. He is quite changed by his affection for you."

"I realize our acquaintance is brief, but I do love him dearly," Elizabeth said forcing Georgiana to meet her eyes. "I was fully prepared to love you if only for his sake, Georgiana, but now that we have met, I consider myself blessed to be gaining such a sister. I do not mean to pry as to the cause of your distress this evening, but if I may assist you in any way, you only have to ask."

After much hesitation, Georgiana finally began, "I almost made a terrible mistake last summer, Miss--Elizabeth. Has my brother spoken of it to you?"

"No," Elizabeth assured her. "Fitzwilliam has said nothing directly, but I do know that he has been worried over your lack of spirits."

"Dear Fitzwilliam," Georgiana said with a sigh. "He is the very best of brothers. I was sad when our father died, but I never worried over what would become of me. Fitzwilliam has watched over me all my life, and I knew that he would continue to take care of me. If Fitzwilliam has told you nothing of my unhappy experience, it is only out of a desire to protect me, but I think you must know, Elizabeth. If we are to truly be sisters, then I must tell you of Mr. Wickham."

Georgiana lapsed into silence and Elizabeth squeezed her hand.

"You may speak to me of anything, Georgiana," she whispered, "but do not feel that you must confide in me. I would not wish to pry."

"I never thought that you would," Georgiana replied, "but I think it is important that you know--and I hope you will be able to understand."

Georgiana drew a deep breath and began her tale, "Mr. Wickham is the son of our father's late steward--"

Once she had begun, Georgiana did not stop until she had told Elizabeth everything about George Wickham and his attempt to lure her into an elopement. She spoke of his charm, her confusion and the constant pressure from her companion Mrs. Young to accept him.

"There were so many evidences of their prior acquaintance; yet I did not see it. Mrs. Young kept telling me what a fine gentleman he was and how lucky I was-- I shudder to think what might have happened, had Fitzwilliam not come to visit," Georgiana concluded. "I had never seen him so distraught, not even when our father died, and he has been so unlike himself ever since--until he met you-- I hope that you can still love me a little, Elizabeth, now that you know what trouble I have caused my brother."

Elizabeth had been careful to maintain a calm demeanor throughout Georgiana's account, lest the uncertain girl misinterpret her shock and outrage as displeasure with herself. Seeing that Georgiana had now talked herself out, Elizabeth hastened to reassure her.

"Dearest Georgiana, you must not blame yourself," Elizabeth gently chided. "You were taken advantage of by a life long acquaintance--a man whom you believed to be a sincere friend of your family--not to mention Mrs. Young who had deceived your brother into believing she was trustworthy. The shame is theirs and I know that your brother would agree with me."

"Do you really think so?" Georgiana whispered.

"I am confident of it," Elizabeth reassured her. "Fitzwilliam always speaks of you with great pride and affection. Remember your excitement over your rooms at Netherfield. Those rooms are a reflection of how your brother sees you. Everything was chosen based on his recollections and remarks. He is not disappointed in you, my dear, but knowing how seriously your brother takes his responsibilities, I would imagine that he has been torturing himself over how he failed to protect you--"

"While I have been wretched over disappointing him," Georgiana concluded, feeling the truth of Elizabeth's assertion. How like Fitzwilliam to blame himself entirely-- It explained so much.

"Exactly," Elizabeth continued. "I will not say, 'Think on this no more,' as that is a wholly unreasonable expectation, but I hope that you will come to me--or your brother--if you find yourself worrying over Mr. Wickham--or anything else."

"I will," Georgiana said softly. "Thank you, Elizabeth. I have wanted to speak of this, but there has been no one in whom I could confide. Fitzwilliam becomes so upset at the thought of Mr. Wickham, and my aunt tries to pretend it did not happen."

"Thank you for trusting me," Elizabeth said, "and should your anxiety over this return, I shall be delighted to remind you that you were not at fault, dear girl. You were naive, which is exactly what well brought up young ladies are supposed to be. That is why they must be so carefully chaperoned. I am very sorry that you had to learn such a lesson at such a young age, but I am grateful that you are here with me now--safe and whole.

"And I assure you," Elizabeth continued with a grin, "that you will not be taking any more journeys to Ramsgate without your brother and me as traveling companions--at least not until you are well married, young lady."

The teasing tone in which this was uttered had the desired effect. Georgiana giggled.

"I think I shall like having a sister very much," she said with a smile, "and I do want you to look out for me, Elizabeth. I have been worried ever since--about making an even bigger mistake. Fitzwilliam has told me that I could not have a better guide than you as I move into a broader society. He trusts you implicitly. I do not mean to be a bother--"

"You are not and will not be a bother," Elizabeth stopped her. "I am honored that you would wish for my advice and I shall try to not be too free with it. In truth, it will be a refreshing change to have a younger sister who actually desires my counsel."

Georgiana giggled as Elizabeth blew out the candle. Her earlier unrest forgotten, Elizabeth drifted off shortly after she had determined that Georgiana was sleeping peacefully beside her.

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Bingley was not by nature inclined to procrastinate. However, he had determined that he would delay informing Caroline of her trip to Ireland as long as possible, and had, therefore, decided to speak with her on Sunday. Bingley's sole motivation in waiting was to lessen the time everyone else would have to endure her displeasure. It also seemed ideal timing as the Darcys were engaged to spend the entire afternoon at Longbourn. Although Caroline was sequestered in the family wing, Bingley and the Hursts assumed that her reaction to the news might well be heard throughout the house, but they dared to hope that Caroline's wrath would subside to an ignorable volume by the time Darcy and Georgiana returned. Prior experience with a displeased Caroline also caused her relations to justifiably fear that she might become somewhat violent. It was, therefore, decided that Bingley and Hurst would inform Caroline of her travel plans while Louisa entertained Mrs. Annesley in the farthest reaches of the house.

"Ireland," Caroline shrieked, turning over the nearest chair. "No, indeed! You are insane if you think I am traveling to Ireland now. The season will soon begin and I must be there. Just send me back to London. I will happily agree to that as I cannot wait to quit this dreadful place."

"I am afraid that alternative is not open to you, Caroline," Bingley replied, "unless you are ready to sever all ties--and I do mean *all* ties--with your family. You will either spend a year with our Aunt Wexler or we will no longer consider you a part of our family. Please consider this carefully for should you choose that path, there will be no turning back."

"A year," Caroline wailed. "I cannot believe you would be so cruel. I did nothing but write a letter, and it caused no harm. How can you choose someone like Eliza Bennet over your own sister? She is nobody!"

"On the contrary," Hurst objected in obvious irritation, "Miss Elizabeth is a lady, a neighbor and soon to be the wife of Bingley's dearest friend."

"Your behavior was abominable, Caroline," Bingley scolded, "and I will not have you ruin my friendship with Darcy or this family's reputation. I believe being with our Aunt Wexler will do you good, and you need time to recover from your obsession with Darcy, which is why I have stipulated a year. Should you return to England before a year has passed or engage in any correspondence designed to create difficulties for any of the Darcys, then you will be cast out of the family and forfeit any further financial support from either of us."

"But surely Louisa has not agreed to this," Caroline insisted. "Where is she? I want to see my sister."

"I assure you, Miss Bingley, that my wife and I are in full agreement with Bingley," Hurst said firmly. "Louisa is not present because she has felt the brunt of your temper far too often and preferred *not* to be a party to this particular discussion. She will of course see you before you leave and looks forward to corresponding with you while you are away."

Caroline gaped at the men in disbelief. She had initially believed this to be some sort of cruel charade to further punish her, but they appeared to be quite serious.

"Do you really expect me to simply leave and go to Ireland without a protest?" she asked.

"I do," Bingley replied, "if you expect any further financial support or recognition of our relationship from me."

"But--but that means I have no choice," Caroline said flatly, her rage having given way to shock.

"We have made every arrangement possible for your comfort," Bingley hastened to assure her. "Miss Darcy's companion, a very respectable widow named Mrs. Annesley, will accompany you all the way to our aunt's, and I have secured your maid's agreement to continue in your service. You will all leave for Cardiff in the morning under the protection of Darcy's man Hopkins and sail from there as soon as weather permits."

Caroline sat in stunned silence, unable to grasp the reality that her brother would not yield. Bingley had chided her for indecorous behavior in the past, even going so far as to withhold her allowance on rare occasions, but Caroline had always been able to wear him down. That would not be possible from Ireland. Bingley and Hurst exchanged a glance confirming their shared opinion that it would be best to leave her while Caroline was relatively calm.

"We will leave you to your preparations then," Hurst said as the two men edged toward the door.

"Yes," Bingley agreed. "Monique will be up directly to begin packing your things, and I shall return with Mrs. Annesley this evening so that you might be properly introduced."



After locking the door behind them, Bingley turned to Hurst and said, "Well, that went rather well."

"I am afraid it went too well," Hurst replied. "I find it difficult to believe that Caroline will accept your terms so easily. It is wholly unlike her."

Both men jumped at the sudden sound of breaking china followed by a scream of, "Ireland!"

"Ah," Hurst said feeling strangely relieved, "that was more the reaction I was expecting."

The afternoon was punctuated with such noises emanating from the family wing. Understanding that her mistress would eventually wear herself out, Monique decided that she would wait until the evening to pack the personal articles Miss Bingley kept in her room, and start with her clothing. Monique had considered quitting her post when Miss Bingley's disgrace began; however, good positions were not so easy to come by, and Mr. Bingley had offered the maid additional compensation if she would stay the year in Ireland with his sister. Having no close relations whom she would be leaving behind, the girl had decided that she could last another year with Miss Bingley.

"Surviving a year in Ireland with Miss Bingley will be the easy part," Monique thought as she walked up the stairs after dinner to being packing the trunks. "It is getting her there that will be difficult."

There was a loud crash from within just as Monique reached for the knob to the service door to her mistress's quarters. The girl shrugged and retreated toward the back stairs. There was plenty of time yet and she could use a cup of tea while she waited for her mistress to settle down.

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## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines Egress and Entrance

### *Chapter Seven - Egress and Entrance*

*You have delighted us long enough.*  
Mr. Bennet to Mary Bennet in  
Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 18

For all the attendant anxieties, the required introduction of Mrs. Annesley and Caroline Bingley on Sunday evening was a brief and quiet affair. Of course Bingley and the Hursts had taken great care that it should be exactly so, devoting most of the previous afternoon to preparing a room for the event. They selected a small parlor as the site, their primary consideration being its proximity to the family wing. Then under the guise of another decorating scheme, Louisa had ordered the servants to strip the room of everything but the rugs, draperies and furniture. The staff wisely made no comment, but many knowing looks were exchanged as they accomplished the hasty removal of all things breakable or easily thrown, particularly after Louisa had announced that she would wait until Monday to refurnish what was to be her morning room.

The barrenness of the room did not escape Mrs. Annesley's attention, but rather confirmed her suspicions regarding the odd noises occasionally heard from that end of the house. The woman breathed a silent prayer of thanks that she would have Mr. Hopkins' aid until they were safely away from England, even as she graciously accepted the proffered cup of tea from Louisa. Perceiving her hostess's distraction, Mrs. Annesley kindly spared her the burden of making small talk by steering the conversation to the morning's sermon, carefully couching her remarks so that Louisa need only make perfunctory replies to satisfy the demands of propriety. It is well she did so, for Louisa's preoccupation increased with each passing minute. The women were just finishing their tea when Caroline finally entered the room escorted by Bingley and Hurst. As Caroline looked rather smug and the gentlemen were plainly exasperated, it was clear that she had engineered their delay.

Caroline swept into the room, thinking to intimidate Mrs. Annesley by playing the grand lady. Caroline had mistakenly reasoned that the mere widow of a clergyman would be easily cowed by the proper display of her qualities. Sadly for Caroline's schemes, Mrs. Annesley had known many great ladies--both in terms of rank and character--and she immediately decided that this young woman satisfied neither standard for greatness. Had she been less fixed in her principles, Mrs. Annesley might have been sorely tempted to put the affected young woman in her place. As it was she did entertain the thought, albeit only briefly, but Eleanor Annesley had determined long ago that her own conscience would be the sole determinant of her conduct. Therefore, she merely offered a kindly smile in response to Caroline's condescending sneer. Satisfied that the forms had been observed, Mrs. Annesley saw no purpose in prolonging the encounter once the introduction had been made.

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Bingley," she said, "and I look forward to furthering our acquaintance during our travels. Please excuse me now as I have not completed my preparations for the journey."

Caroline's eyes narrowed as she barely acknowledged these words with a nod. While some might have misconstrued her silence, Caroline's relations knew that she was inwardly seething. Although Mrs. Annesley had been polite and cordial, Caroline chose to take offense at her ending the interview.

"How dare that insignificant woman dismiss me as if I were insignificant," Caroline silently railed, "as if I were not a very accomplished and superior young woman--as if I were some poor spinster being shuttled off--"

In hopes of covering Caroline's coldness, her relations bid Mrs. Annesley a most cordial goodnight even as they watched their sister in considerable alarm, for to their experienced eyes Caroline was clearly growing more livid with each passing moment. Happily they regained their family privacy not a moment too soon.

As Mrs. Annesley withdrew, Caroline glanced about for something--anything--she could destroy to vent her rising temper. She had been too occupied with her own schemes to adequately note her surroundings upon entering the room, but now Caroline perceived the room's barrenness. She immediately understood its significance. Her loving family had anticipated her temper and taken measures to forestall a full-blown tantrum. Oh, how Caroline wanted to hurt them--her loving family indeed. If no other weapon were at hand, then she would simply use her tongue.

"Yes," Caroline thought with an evil smile, "I will shred them all with my tongue--Charles, Louisa, and the insufferable Hurst. How dare they presume to pack me off to Ireland with a nonentity like that insufferable widow as traveling companion."

Alas that release was also denied her as Caroline's mounting fury had rendered her incapable of comprehensible speech. Unable to articulate the choice words that sprang to her mind, the lady stamped her foot in frustration and flounced from the room. Bingley followed at a discreet distance and to his vast relief Caroline hastened directly to her own chamber. Bingley locked the door behind his sister with a sigh and returned to the Hursts.

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When Caroline Bingley had regained the power of rational thought, she began plotting her revenge. Direct action against her family was impossible while Bingley controlled the family's wealth, but she could hurt them nonetheless by exacting her revenge upon Eliza Bennet, soon to be Mrs. Darcy. Caroline had finally accepted that reality. Darcy was determined to have her for his bride, and he could be most intractable, particularly when he was angered. Caroline could see now how foolish she had been to oppose the match directly, but it was, alas, too late to undo the past. However, by injuring the wife, Caroline would also be injuring the husband and, therefore, her brother who was particularly fond of Darcy.

Men might demand satisfaction with rapiers or pistols on a deserted field at dawn, but between women it was a subtle and far more devious thing. Women destroyed and triumphed over one another with words and the battle ground was more often than not a drawing room or ballroom. Caroline smiled, knowing that a whisper in the right ear would suffice. After all, gossip was the favorite past time of most women of her acquaintance, and the general dismay over Darcy's engagement would predispose most of the unmarried ladies of London--and quite a few of the married ones--to believe any manner of evil of his bride. Although she loathed the idea of being stranded in Ireland, Caroline decided it would be to her advantage. Charles could hardly associate her with Eliza Bennet's downfall when she was so far removed from the scene. Caroline was still trying to determine exactly whom she might best use to bring down the proud Miss Elizabeth Bennet when she nodded off. While it cannot be said with any certainty that her dreams continued in that vein, it is a fact that Caroline awoke feeling that she had slept very well indeed.

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Even before the coach was away from Netherfield the following morning, a lone rider set out from Meryton. He was, however, not bound for Wales, but for London. Reaching town well before midday, the rider hastened to make his report without stopping to don his uniform. Fortunately he was not bound for Horse Guards where his nonmilitary attire would have raised unwanted questions, but went straight to an elegant townhouse in the most prestigious quarter of London. Despite the man's humble appearance, he was admitted to the fine house immediately.

"Well, Sgt. Murphy, what is your report?" his host asked as soon as the servant had left them alone. "Does the situation warrant intervention? Shall I--"

Colonel Fitzwilliam broke off, embarrassed by his own lack of manners.

"Forgive me for beginning so abruptly, Murphy," he apologized while pouring the man a drink. "Please have a seat. You must have ridden like the devil to arrive so early. Here. Would you like something to eat?"

"Thank you, Colonel, sir, but this will set me to rights."

Murphy gratefully accepted the seat and the offered brandy, which he eagerly downed before continuing, "I must confess the horse did the work, sir. I am fit, you see, but you look to be faring poorly, Colonel. I warrant you have been worrying again. My report should set your mind at ease though. By all accounts, your cousin is marrying a very fine lady--"

"A fine lady," Colonel Fitzwilliam interrupted him, "but I have never heard of her and according to the inquiries I was able to make discreetly here, neither has anyone else."

"Well, I do not mean 'fine' in that sense, sir," Murphy explained, holding out his glass for a refill. "I do not think the lady is in line for the throne and such, but I was quite thorough in my investigation--"

Fitzwilliam could not help but smile at that. While not an especially handsome man, Murphy had an unfailing natural charm. Men and woman alike warmed to him instantly and there were few who would not confide in Murphy once they had been subjected to a little deliberate attention from the man. No doubt half of Meryton was already lamenting his absence including a sizeable portion of the unmarried women.

"Yes, I was quite thorough," Murphy continued satisfied by the colonel's smile. "The general opinion in Hertfordshire is that this is a love match and your cousin is a most fortunate man."

"A love match," Fitzwilliam repeated in wonder. "I am astonished. That is so unlike Darcy."

"Yes, sir," Murphy cheerfully agreed, "it is surprising, but there is no other way to account for it according to the locals. Mr. Darcy met the lady at a local assembly and he called upon her the very next day and every day thereafter until she accepted him."

"Pray did you see the lady?" the colonel asked.

"Aye, Colonel, I did--they were both at Sunday services, but I took care that Mr. Darcy did not see me."

Understanding what a sacrifice it was for the staunch Catholic to attend a protestant service, Fitzwilliam thanked him warmly. Then endeavoring to understand his cousin's uncharacteristic behavior he ventured to say, "And I suppose the lady is *very* beautiful."

"Aye, sir," the sergeant agreed, "but not in the way you mean, Colonel. Miss Bennet--or Miss Elizabeth as they call her in Meryton--is pretty to be

sure, but not remarkable so at first sight. Her older sister is considered the family beauty and she is truly one of the most beautiful ladies I have ever had the fortune--

"Darcy's bride?" Fitzwilliam interrupted him.

"Sorry, sir," Murphy responded with a grin. "I forgot that you will be seeing the other Miss Bennet soon enough for yourself. But as to Mr. Darcy's Miss Bennet--she is not so *very* beautiful when you first see her, as she is after a bit. It creeps up on you and I do believe the lady has a pair of the finest eyes God ever gave a woman."

"And what else did you learn of her?" the colonel prompted him.

"Quite a bit actually, sir," Murphy continued. "The lady seems to be something of a local heroine. By all accounts she is universally admired. Everyone speaks of her cleverness, but I heard not a whisper of her marrying your cousin for his fortune. I heard quite a lot about her kindness in general and her care for their tenants in particular."

"Their tenants?" Fitzwilliam repeated in shock.

"Aye, they say she is as good at doctoring as the local apothecary--started out as a wee lass when she found out their people were sometimes reluctant to send for him. She did not want their folks to do without doctoring because they were worried about the bill. The tenants call her "Miss Lizzy" and they say she is part fair--"

Murphy stopped himself realizing that portion of the story would do nothing to calm his colonel. Having grown up with tales of leprechauns and other "faerie folk," the sergeant had found the tale of Darcy's bride being part fairy both amusing and impressive, but Colonel Fitzwilliam, while a fine man, had almost no imagination. The sergeant quickly resumed his report taking a tack that should restore Colonel Fitzwilliam's peace of mind.

"From the way the locals speak of her," he continued, "Miss Elizabeth would have made a fine soldier--if she were a man--one you would want her at your side in battle--even going up against Boney himself."

Fitzwilliam sat back in thought. This was praise indeed from his faithful sergeant and not at all what he had pictured or feared.

"Thank you, Murphy," he said after a time. "You have done me a great service. I was prepared to act rashly in what I thought was my cousin's behalf before you volunteered to look into his engagement. Based on what you learned in Hertfordshire, it seems that Darcy has no need of my rescue. My mind is considerably eased; however, I know my cousin, as you do not. I must ascertain his state of mind before I will be fully reconciled to the match. I think I will go into Hertfordshire a day earlier than planned. I must speak with Darcy privately before my parents arrive. Would you perhaps accompany me into Hertfordshire? I may have need of you."

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And so it was that Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived in Hertfordshire late Wednesday afternoon, only to find that neither of his cousins was currently at Netherfield. Bingley greeted him warmly, explaining that Darcy and Georgiana were having dinner with the Bennets that evening.

"--but allow me to send a message to Longbourn that you have come," he said. "The Bennets will certainly release Darcy and Georgiana from their obligation to hasten a family reunion."

Having decided that his best hope of ascertaining Darcy's true state of mind was to catch him unawares, Fitzwilliam assured Bingley that it was not necessary to summon his cousins, and the affable Bingley was easily dissuaded. He was soon expressing his joy at the opportunity to further their acquaintance and speculating as to the degree of Darcy's surprise in finding his cousin already come to Netherfield.

Meanwhile Sgt. Murphy was settling back in at the inn in Meryton. Of course the locals there only knew him as Thomas Murphy, a fine fellow who had recently stopped over on his way to London and had now announced his intention to rest in the friendly environs of Meryton for several days before returning to Warwick from whence he had ostensibly come.

While the sergeant was having a pint with the friendly folks at the inn, the colonel was sitting down to an elegant dinner at Netherfield. Although the conversation around the dinner table included commonplace references to Darcy's bride and the wedding itself, nothing particularly revealing was mentioned, and the colonel found himself sorely tempted to press his hosts for more information about the Bennets on several occasions. He refrained, of course, as it would be highly irregular for a dinner guest to subject his hosts to a thorough interrogation. Fitzwilliam also took great care to hide his frustration, lest it be construed as opposition to the match. In addition to being terribly closed mouthed about his private affairs, Darcy could also be quite stubborn in the face of resistance or what he deemed to be interference.

Although his hosts were congenial, the colonel found it taxing to pretend a happy nonchalance he did not feel, all the while hoping his companions would reveal something important. More than once, he wished that Murphy were at his side rather than hidden away at the local inn. The Irishman would have been able to elicit all manner of information from his hosts without their even knowing he did so. The colonel could not help but smile at the thought that Murphy had probably learned more of Darcy's present state while dining at the inn than he had among Darcy's close friends. There was nothing for it, the colonel resolved, but to wait and hope that Darcy would arrive shortly to allay--or confirm--his fears.

If Darcy was surprised to find his cousin present upon his return to Netherfield, Colonel Fitzwilliam was no less surprised. The initial source of his astonishment was the news that Georgiana had decided to stay the night at Longbourn. Understanding the depths of her shyness, Fitzwilliam was amazed that Georgiana would enjoy such intimacy with people she had only just met. This startling development was quickly forgotten, however, as

the colonel comprehended the change in Darcy's demeanor. It was staggering. He had never seen his cousin's countenance so open, nor could he remember a time when Darcy had appeared so happy. Fitzwilliam glanced at Bingley questioningly and Bingley's response was a nod and a wink. After the obligatory pleasantries, Darcy excused himself to place something in his chambers and promised to rejoin them shortly.

"Your cousin is a changed man," Bingley said with a grin once Darcy's footsteps had echoed down the hall. "Perhaps it was unfair of me not to warn you earlier, but one must really see Darcy to fully appreciate the transformation that has come over him. I assure you that he is the same as he ever was in his principles, but Darcy's outward behavior and manner has altered considerably since meeting Miss Bennet. Just wait until you see them together. It is most amusing."

"And the lady?" Colonel Fitzwilliam asked in considerable relief. He had been perplexed by Bingley's earlier avoidance of discussing the topic at length, but now it was clear. Bingley had simply wanted him to experience the alteration in Darcy without forewarning. He was taken aback by the sharpness of Bingley's reply.

"After seeing your cousin's happiness, do you still doubt his choice?"

"No," Fitzwilliam answered evenly. "Darcy's happiness is my first concern in this matter and those fears have undoubtedly been laid to rest. However, I am most curious to know about the woman who has succeeded in capturing his heart when so many others have failed in the attempt."

Bingley's smile returned as he hastened to satisfy his guest's curiosity.

"In that case I will be happy to enlighten you, sir. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a fine young woman, and they are very well suited to one another. In fact, Miss Elizabeth may be the only woman of my acquaintance who is clever enough to hold your cousin's interest."

"Ah, so she reads Chaucer and Milton--" Fitzwilliam said with a laugh.

"--and the agricultural journals, as well, I believe," Bingley added with a chuckle. Then meeting the colonel's gaze, Bingley continued very seriously.

"I also believe Miss Elizabeth's integrity and strength of character to be a match for Darcy's--something I would not have expected of so young a lady," he said, "and she is most definitely a lady in every way. There is nothing improper or objectionable about her. Miss Elizabeth's ardor is, therefore, restrained in comparison to your cousin's but it is no less evident."

Rising from his chair, Hurst said, "Well, if you two gentlemen are going to sit here gossiping like old hens, I think I will join my wife upstairs. Good night, Bingley, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

His murmurs were audible as Hurst quitted the room, "Just as well-- I do not think I can stand another case of Darcy's raptures."

"Raptures?" Fitzwilliam repeated incredulously.

"Oh, yes," Bingley answered with a smile. "Get Darcy to talk about 'his Miss Elizabeth' and you will see. I must admit that after all of Darcy's chiding me for my impulsiveness, I find his recent behavior very amusing."

"It is plain that you have no concerns for his future contentment," Fitzwilliam said in relief.

"I would hope that I am not so careless a friend to your cousin," Bingley replied earnestly. "Had I any reservations regarding the soundness of Darcy's choice, I would not have encouraged him. I banished my sister from this house because of her attempts to interfere, and I will do the same to you, sir, should you threaten his current state of happiness."

Fitzwilliam was somewhat taken aback by this forceful reply from the easy going Bingley. It raised his opinion of the man considerably.

"Please accept my apologies, Bingley," he said. "I did not mean to imply that you would be cavalier regarding Darcy's future, and I happily admit that in my anxiety for my cousin, I have allowed myself to imagine difficulties where none exist."

"Your apology is accepted, Colonel."

"Thank you, Bingley, but did you really evict your sister?" Fitzwilliam asked with a smile. "I thought she was visiting a relation."

"That part is true, but the visit was at my insistence," Bingley replied grimly. After a moment's pause, he continued with a sigh.

"No doubt Darcy has alluded to my sister's shameless pursuit of him through the years. He has always been courteous to Caroline, but never offered her the slightest encouragement. I am afraid she became rather unhinged when Darcy announced his engagement. My sister can be very unpleasant when provoked and I could not have her ruining my closest friend's well-deserved joy, so I dictated Caroline's departure. She is now in route to Ireland, where Caroline will remain with our aunt for at least a year--if she desires further financial support from me."

"Bingley, I am impressed," Fitzwilliam said in honest admiration. "I underestimated your regard for my cousin. Pray, why a year? Darcy and Miss Bennet will be married in a few days' time."

"Yes, but my sister can be quite--persistent--even when she has been proven wrong," Bingley explained. "I want to be certain that Caroline has abandoned her foolish notions before I allow her back into London society. It is also my hope that our aunt will be able to exert a positive influence upon her so that Caroline will derive personal benefit from her time away from us."

The Colonel was astonished. He had always thought of Bingley as weak and easily swayed, but it appeared the young man did have his own convictions and was fiercely loyal to Darcy.

When they heard Darcy's footsteps in the hall, the two men fell silent. As Bingley and Fitzwilliam were both lively conversationalists by nature, Darcy correctly assumed that they had been speaking of him, nor did he blame them, knowing that his life was far more interesting at the moment than either of theirs.

"No doubt Fitzwilliam was quizzing Bingley about Elizabeth and her family," Darcy thought upon entering the silent room.

He was not, however, angered or dismayed by the prospect. In addition to being cousins, Fitzwilliam and Darcy shared the guardianship of Georgiana, a tie that had kept them close through the years. It was, therefore, understandable that Fitzwilliam would be curious about his cousin's bride, and Darcy had no fear of Bingley's answers, as he was confident of his friend's whole-hearted support. Seeing that his companions were already supplied with brandy, Darcy simply nodded to them and crossed the room to pour one for himself.

That done, Darcy seated himself directly across from his cousin and said, "All right, Fitzwilliam, I am happy to see you, but I suspect your early arrival has a purpose. Ask your questions so that we may all retire at a reasonable hour."

Seeing that Darcy was not the least bit affronted by his concerns somehow alleviated the Colonel's anxiety even more than all of Murphy and Bingley's reassurances had. Fitzwilliam actually had the grace to appear embarrassed.

"I am sorry, Darcy" he began. "I must confess that I had worked myself up into an apprehension regarding your impending nuptials, but seeing your happiness and hearing your friend speak of Miss Bennet-- Well, I realize that it was foolish of me-- It all seemed to be so unlike you."

Fitzwilliam was relieved and amazed to see Darcy actually smile at him.

"On the contrary, Fitzwilliam," Darcy explained, "it is *exactly* like me. You may know me best of all and I am certain you will agree that I can be very selfish and impatient. When have I ever been slow to pursue something I truly want?"

Fitzwilliam chuckled and nodded his head as the truth of Darcy's point drove home.

"Rest assured," Darcy continued, "this marriage is what I want. I can understand how my past behavior may have caused you to believe that I had no interest in marriage. After all I have long taken pains to avoid any such entanglements. However, marriage has long been my aim, but I was determined that I would only marry for true affection. Therefore, I had no interest in marriage until I met Miss Bennet."

"I hope you will forgive my presumption, Darcy," Fitzwilliam apologized.

"Of course," Darcy answered. "I perfectly understand that your fears were motivated by your regard for me, Cousin, and I am gratified that you hold me in such high esteem. I am not afraid of your questions, so ask them if you will. Tomorrow you will meet Miss Bennet and you will begin to truly understand, but for now how may I allay your anxieties?"

"My anxieties are banished," the colonel said with a smile. "Simply speak to me, Cousin. I would hear more of your betrothed."

Darcy quickly warmed to his favorite subject. He recounted their meeting at the assembly and confessed that he had not only made a slighting remark about the lady, but that she had actually overheard it.

"I wondered why you were suddenly so attentive to Miss Elizabeth," Bingley exclaimed in delight, "and particularly after you had flatly refused to stand up with her. Am I to understand that she actually heard your unflattering comment and called you on it?"

"Yes, Bingley, that is exactly what happened," Darcy said with a grin, "and I am most happy that she did so. I expected to spend a tedious half hour listening to her prattle on as atonement for my rudeness. However, after initially teasing me about my ungenerous remark, Miss Bennet was very kind. She seemed to sense my discomfort with strangers and somehow managed to put me at ease."

"And exactly *how* did she achieve that, Cousin?" the colonel asked. "Surely, half the mamas in London will be dying to know."

After a moment's pause to consider how he might explain Elizabeth's affect upon him, Darcy said, "While Miss Elizabeth is extremely clever, she is wholly without the artifice and slyness that is so common among our London acquaintance. She did not exhaust us both with attempts to rouse my admiration. I was, in fact, impressed by her natural sincerity and her expectation of no less from me. We spent most of the half hour discussing books. Her intelligence and her depth of understanding surprised me. Those are rare enough traits in a young woman who is also uncommonly pretty."

There was a moment of silence before Darcy added, "I thank God every day that she has accepted me and that her family has consented to a brief engagement."

Fitzwilliam was quite moved by his cousin's eloquence, but he also felt as if he had pried into something deeply personal. To lighten the atmosphere, the colonel addressed his next question to their host.

"So tell me, Bingley, is it true? Is the lady uncommonly pretty?"

"That she is," Bingley answered with a smile. "Of course, her elder sister Miss Jane Bennet is even lovelier. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever beheld, but Miss Elizabeth is very pretty, too. It is also universally acknowledged in Hertfordshire that Miss Elizabeth is uncommonly clever. Therefore, I must agree that your cousin has chosen well. After all, there are few ladies who would actually enjoy discussing literature with your cousin."

"No doubt you are right, Bingley," Fitzwilliam acknowledged with a grin. "I daresay there are even fewer ladies with whom Darcy would enjoy such a discussion."

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Meanwhile in Cardiff, Eleanor Annesley consoled herself with the knowledge that their ship was to sail on the morrow. Although she considered herself a woman capable of great forbearance, Mrs. Annesley had abandoned any hope of Caroline Bingley proving to be a tolerable traveling companion long before the coach had left the environs of Hertfordshire.

Given the younger woman's propensity to complain, Mrs. Annesley was intensely grateful for Mr. Darcy's insistence upon Mr. Hopkins acting as their escort. Not only was he a very pleasant and capable man, but Mrs. Annesley also suspected that the presence of Darcy's man had a mitigating effect upon Caroline's rudeness. She shuddered to think of what the last three days would have been like without his company as Miss Bingley was not only generally disagreeable, but she also found something to criticize at every turn.

Mrs. Annesley's had originally estimated Caroline Bingley to be an over indulged and rather selfish young woman who would never be considered a beauty, but was still somewhat attractive and reasonably intelligent. A greater knowledge of the young woman had changed her opinion entirely. Caroline Bingley was, in Eleanor Annesley's current opinion, a wholly disagreeable person who possessed no virtues to compensate for her lack of character and consideration. She complained and whined repeatedly like an overwrought child and at her most pleasant Caroline was merely condescending. Mrs. Annesley allowed herself the brief indulgence of wishing her companion a serious bout of *mal de mer* during their crossing, after which she knelt to ask the Almighty's forgiveness for her unkind thoughts, as well as His assistance in enduring her current unpleasant duty.

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Caroline, conversely, gave Mrs. Annesley no thought at all as she sulked in the adjoining room. Her thoughts were centered on those she had left behind in Hertfordshire. Given as she was to criticizing everyone but herself, Caroline still could not grasp how she had failed so utterly in her attempts to captivate the elusive Fitzwilliam Darcy and his beautiful estate in Derbyshire. Had Darcy elected to marry a lady possessed of superior fortune or rank, Caroline would have been able to accept her defeat, but his choice of an inconsequential chit like Eliza Bennet was simply beyond her ken.

Her inability to comprehend the events that had turned her path to Ireland had in no wise lessened Caroline's determination that Darcy, Elizabeth, and by extension her brother would feel her displeasure. Darcy's position might force society to include Elizabeth in their functions, but with few exceptions the women of the first circles--whether they be dowagers, debutants or somewhere in between--were quite adept at the discreet yet unmistakable cut. Not having been born into the first circles Caroline had endured their snobbery--all the while ingratiating herself to those who would allow it--but her own past mortification would be as nothing to the humiliations awaiting the new Mrs. Darcy.

In a rare flash of insight the previous morning, Caroline had perceived that she need not bother to commence any correspondence about Darcy's bride. Once news of their marriage was widely known, her acquaintance would undoubtedly write to "dear Caroline" for details of the amazing match, and she, being all politeness of course, would answer them in vague generalities--nothing explicit, merely enough left unsaid or hinted at to fuel the fires of gossip.

"Yes," she thought smugly, "it will be quite easy to manage."

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## Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines New Acquaintances and Old Enemies

### *Chapter Eight - New Acquaintances and Old Enemies*

*There is no charm equal to tenderness of heart.*  
Jane Austen's *Emma* , Chapter 31

Colonel Fitzwilliam was delighted by Darcy's invitation to join him in calling on the Bennets the following morning. Both were avid horsemen and as Darcy had become well acquainted with the countryside, they abandoned the road and headed out across country, following various lanes and footpaths and in some instances, riding directly across the now dormant fields.

When they had reached Mr. Bennet's land, the men slowed their pace to allow conversation, and Darcy began pointing out landmarks and describing various improvements and farming techniques Mr. Bennet had adopted. Fitzwilliam was not at all surprised by Darcy's knowledge of the Longbourn estate, as agriculture was one of his passions. Darcy's love of farming—once regarded as an oddity—was now merely an accepted fact within the family. The colonel was astonished, however, by Darcy's apparent knowledge of the inhabitants of the estate. Once the gentlemen were on Bennet land, everyone they encountered acknowledged their presence with friendly waves and smiles. Many of the tenants even dared to call out greetings to Darcy. To Fitzwilliam's amazement their greetings were returned in kind, and his cousin called many of them by name.

As there was no one else in sight, both men looked around curiously when, "Morning, Mr. Darcy," rang out from a nearby stand of trees. The source of the voice proved to be a lad who was quickly climbing down the tallest tree.

"Good morning, Johnny," Darcy said with a smile and proceeded to introduce him to his cousin.

The colonel could not help but like the boy who shyly tugged his cap and grinned up at him.

"I hope everything is well at home," Darcy said with a nod to the tree from which Johnny had accosted them, "and I trust your mother is feeling much better."

"Oh yes, sir, Mr. Darcy," he answered with a grin. "I was just having a look around. Then I heard your horses and climbed up higher for a better look. He is a beauty, sir," Johnny added as he reached out to pet the muzzle of Darcy's stallion.

"Thank you for asking about Ma, Mr. Darcy. She is pert near as good as new, but she still has to drink her special tea every day. I was just on my way to fetch some more from the Longbourn stillroom."

The boy's eyes lit up with excitement when Darcy offered him a ride and the three of them were soon proceeding toward the manor house. Although there was nothing particularly imposing about that structure, the colonel was most impressed by the air of cheerful industry that surrounded Longbourn. It reminded him of a well-run company of soldiers, where the men had confidence in their officers and trusted their leadership. Clearly Mr. Bennet was a leader in the best sense of the word.

The boy who ran up to take their horses shyly whispered, "If you've come to see Miss Lizzy, sir, she be in the stables."

"Thank you, Peter," Darcy replied. "I am here to see Miss Lizzy. Perhaps you would be good enough to run ahead and tell her we are coming along behind you. The colonel and I will bring the horses."

With a nod the boy immediately ran off as fast as his legs could carry him and Fitzwilliam raised an eyebrow at Darcy in question. His cousin merely smiled and shrugged in reply.

"So, Johnny," Darcy said, "what do you suppose has Miss Elizabeth in the stables at this time of the morning? Do you think she has developed a sudden passion for riding?"

The boy giggled at that thought, "No, sir, my guess would be something to do with one of the cats. If it were a person or one of the horses, Peter would have been more serious like."

"I bow to your greater knowledge of Longbourn," Darcy said with a smile. "We shall assume you are correct until it is proven otherwise."

Johnny thanked him for the ride and ran toward the back of the house. When Darcy and Fitzwilliam reached the stable door, Peter was waiting to take their mounts. He was still slightly out of breath but managed to say, "You go on, sirs, while I see to the horses. Miss Lizzy is waiting for you—in the very back."



It amused Fitzwilliam that he was about to meet Darcy's fiance in a stable and that Darcy did not seem to think it peculiar in the least. With his longer legs Darcy set a pace that the colonel and was hard pressed to keep. When they reached the last stall Elizabeth, Georgiana and Kitty were waiting to receive them, along with two little girls who were hiding behind Elizabeth's skirts. Elizabeth was grateful for Peter's warning. Otherwise Darcy's cousin would have first glimpsed her sitting in the hay.

Darcy presented his cousin to the Misses Bennet and Elizabeth in turn introduced the two bashful little girls. "These are the stable master's daughters Hannah and Emily. They invited us out to see the new kittens being born."

Reverting to her former shyness, Georgiana greeted her cousin quietly, but Fitzwilliam could not miss the light in her eyes when she told him that Miss Catherine Bennet was her particular friend.

Elizabeth immediately offered to return to the house, but the girls had already turned back to the kittens so the colonel obligingly professed a fondness for animals. He was rewarded by a dazzling smile from Elizabeth as she mischievously offered him his choice of hay bale or loose straw for a seat.

"I trust your assistance was not required with the delivery," Darcy said with a smile when they were all seated in the straw.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam," Georgiana enthused, "it was amazing. Are they not the sweetest little things?"

"Yes, they are sweet," Darcy allowed, "but then newborns always are. I remember you--"

"Oh, no, brother," Georgiana interrupted him, blushing furiously, "please do not go on about when I was a baby, and please do not encourage him, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth could not help laughing as said, "I must confess that I would like to hear about what a sweet baby you were, Georgiana, but in deference to your wishes I will deny myself that pleasure--for now. However, I do intend to hear all of your brother's tales when you are not present to be embarrassed by his praises. I expect that Colonel Fitzwilliam also has some stories to tell."

Georgiana giggled even as she reached out to pet one of the kittens. Taking advantage of the distraction provided by the animals, Darcy leaned in to whisper, "I love you, Lizzy," even as he covered her hand with his own.

The colonel missed this private exchange as he was watching Georgiana closely. He could not recall the last time he had heard her giggle, and the familiar way in which she addressed Darcy's Elizabeth had not escaped his notice. Clearly Georgiana was happy with Darcy's choice. His "painfully shy" cousin and her "particular friend" were now animatedly debating which of the kittens was the sweetest while each held one of the younger girls on her lap.

Darcy was distracted from his blushing bride by the sensation that he was being watched. He glanced up to find that young Johnny was now standing in the doorway clutching a large basket that no doubt contained some treats from the Longbourn kitchen as well as the prescribed tea. Darcy returned Johnny's stare with a smile and motioned for the boy to join them. The lad was clearly pleased by the invitation and he happily crossed the stall to examine the now nursing kittens before moving to take a seat beside Darcy.

"So, Johnny," Darcy said, "Miss Lizzy will be my wife in two days time. Did you think it would all turn out so well the day we first met?"

"Yes, sir, I reckoned you'd be marrying Miss Lizzy, and I can't blame you for making it soon," was Johnny's matter of fact reply, "though folks will miss her something terrible 'round here."

"I am sorry that I will be depriving you of Miss Lizzy's company," Darcy said, "but I am curious as to why you were not surprised by our engagement. Many older and supposedly wiser folks were quite taken aback."

Knowing he was numbered among those "older and wiser folks," the colonel stifled as chuckle and sat back with a smirk to await the boy's answer.

"Well, it's like this," Johnny began, "first off, you went along with Miss Lizzy on her doctoring call, when you could have just as easily dropped me off and been on your way. That made me think you were in a fair way to being right smitten with Miss Lizzy."

"You were quite right," Darcy replied. "I was already quite 'smitten' with Miss Lizzy. Was there anything else you noticed?"

Johnny's face was a study in concentration and Darcy was now intrigued as to how the lad would answer. From the cessation of conversation around them, Darcy surmised that he was not alone in his curiosity.

"When folks first meet Miss Lizzy, she's Miss Elizabeth of Longbourn," Johnny began, "but it's mostly just folks around here that knows Miss Lizzy--the real her with all the things that make her special. I figured that you already liked her a heap when you kept me talking about Miss Lizzy that day, but when you saw her doctoring--then you saw part of what makes her Miss Lizzy. You seemed to be a real fine gentleman and as such I reckoned you'd want a real fine wife, so once you saw inside her I just knew you'd be set on winning Miss Lizzy."

"You are an astute judge of human nature for one so young," Darcy said quite seriously. "I am proud that you deemed me to be so wise a man on such a short acquaintance."

"Aw, weren't nothing, Mr. Darcy," Johnny said with a pleased grin. "Any addlepatented fool could have seen it coming."

What would have once been unthinkable happened, Darcy laughed aloud. The sound startled his cousin as Darcy rarely laughed, but Colonel Fitzwilliam found it even more revealing that the others of their party did not seem to think it unusual. He caught Georgiana's eye and slightly inclined his head towards Darcy as if to ask what she thought of this change in her brother. To Fitzwilliam's astonishment, Georgiana actually

winked at him and thought her amusement at being turned to address Kitty. Darcy now sat beside Elizabeth holding her hand and from time to time when he thought no one was looking, Darcy would whisper in her ear. From Elizabeth's blushes and smiles his whispers were clearly of a personal and romantic nature.

Between wondering at Georgiana's gaiety and observing Darcy with his Elizabeth, the good colonel hardly knew where to focus his attention. They lingered in the stables, until Elizabeth shivered slightly, whereupon Darcy immediately insisted that they return to the house.

"We must get you warm," he said. "Please forgive my thoughtlessness. You were all out here for sometime before we joined you--"

"You must not worry so," Elizabeth interrupted him. "I am very well, dearest."

"Yes but I would have no ill *befall* you even for a litter of new kittens--especially two days before our wedding."

At Darcy's emphasis on the word "befall," Kitty smiled and whispered, "Later," to Georgiana, Johnny smirked, and Elizabeth colored with embarrassment. Even the stable master's daughters who had been too shy to speak in front of the gentlemen giggled.

While he was curious to know the story behind the joke, Fitzwilliam was struck by the strangeness of his cousin making a joke at all. He could not remember Darcy exhibiting such levity since--well, since long before his father died.

"Poor Darcy," he thought. At that point Fitzwilliam's mind was made up. He would not only support the match. He would actively do all that he could to protect Darcy's bride from those who would hold her in contempt for her lack of fortune and connections. Clearly Elizabeth had made Darcy--and yes, Georgiana, too--very happy. If there was never any other cause, that alone made her worthy of his unqualified loyalty.

"We are all very well," she reassured Darcy once more with a gesture to include their younger sisters, "but I do agree that it is time we went in for a cup of tea. Mama will be beside herself if she finds us entertaining callers in the stable. Johnny, would you be so kind--"

"Sure thing, Miss Lizzy," the boy answered with a grin before running out.

"What exactly has young Johnny gone to do?" Darcy asked with a grin of his own.

"He has gone to the house to see if Mama is aware of our transgression," Elizabeth answered blushing, "so that we might--"

"Plan the wisest way in which to return to the house?" the colonel cheerfully suggested.

"Why yes, Colonel," Elizabeth replied. "Our mother is sometimes--troubled by her nerves and we go to great lengths to--protect her sensibilities."

"I see that you are marrying a lady of unusual talents," the colonel teased his cousin. "She has great promise as a diplomat. Miss Elizabeth, you are no doubt up to the rigors of London society. My question is are they ready for you?"

Johnny soon returned with his report. "Tis well, Miss Lizzy. Your ma don't even know that the gentlemen have come. Peter told Bess and she told Mrs. Hill, of course, but Mrs. Hill decided that Mrs. Bennet should not be disturbed. She is above stairs right now and Mrs. Hill says to come on in and then she'll send Bess to fetch your ma."

This was all delivered in one breath. Johnny gave a quick tug on his cap at Elizabeth's thanks and then grabbed up his basket to leave.

The colonel was vastly amused. Clearly everyone at Longbourn was aware of Mrs. Bennet's 'nervous condition' and conspired with her family to prevent her fits. Fitzwilliam could not help but admire the way Elizabeth managed an obviously difficult mother. He also could not help but speculate that she would soon be equally adept at handling his sometimes-moody cousin.

"Oh, Darcy," he thought, "you have chosen very well, indeed."

The visit continued in the parlor with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in attendance. Although no one could supplant Darcy in her mind as being most deserving of her particular attention and courtesy, Mrs. Bennet was in raptures over meeting the colonel, as he was the son of an earl. The colonel for his part quickly perceived that Mrs. Bennet was obviously not a bright woman, but he found her fluttering and babbling quite forgivable while in the presence of her eldest daughter.

Even Murphy's lavish praise had not prepared Colonel Fitzwilliam for the sight of Jane Bennet. He thought Elizabeth's elder sister was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen and her charms were only enhanced by her seeming unawareness of them. In Fitzwilliam's experience, great beauties were generally not only conscious of their beauty, but also willing to exploit it for any purpose that might be perceived as an advantage. Yet here was a young woman whose kindness seemed as great as her loveliness.

Neither parent was insensible of the colonel's admiration of Jane. Mrs. Bennet was quite ready to throw aside her hopes of having Jane well settled at nearby Netherfield, in favor of seeing her closely related to a member of the peerage.

Mr. Bennet, however, was concerned for his daughter. Any son of an earl would be expected to marry *very well*--particularly a younger son who would not inherit the title and attendant lands. Thus the colonel could not dare to entertain serious intentions towards a young woman in Jane's situation-- no matter how much he might admire her. As Darcy's kinsman, Mr. Bennet presumed the colonel to be an honorable man who would not deliberately trifle with a young woman's affections, but he was also painfully aware of the small circle in which they lived, and feared it would be all too easy for a young woman of Jane's limited experience and acquaintance to misunderstand the colonel's admiration and be disappointed. Mr. Bennet was considerably relieved when he noticed Darcy eyeing his cousin as if Darcy shared his concerns. This suspicion was confirmed a short while later when Darcy murmured, "Do not worry, Mr. Bennet. I shall put him on guard," while bidding him farewell.

It had been planned that Darcy and Elizabeth would meet each other's visiting relations at the evening's dinner party. However, now that Elizabeth

had met his cousin, Fitzwilliam, for her to meet Fitzwilliam's parents as well. In truth, he also dreaded the idea of forgoing her company for the entirety of the afternoon. Understanding something of his power over Mrs. Bennet, Darcy wisely broached the subject to her first.

"I realize that there is much to be done here and that I will soon be depriving you of your daughter's company by taking her away," he began, "but I am anxious for Miss Elizabeth to meet Lord and Lady Carlisle. Would it be--do I ask too much--"

"Of course you want Lizzy to meet your relations," Elizabeth's mother replied, interrupting Darcy in her eagerness to please him. "Why that is only natural, Mr. Darcy.

"I myself am sometimes anxious over such things," she continued in a conspiratorial whisper that could still be overheard by most of their companions, "so leave it to me. Lizzy will go back to Netherfield with you so that you can introduce her to your family upon their arrival, and I will manage everything here."

Elizabeth smothered a smile. She could not help but be pleased at how well Darcy had learned to maneuver her mother, even though she blushed at the thought of what Colonel Fitzwilliam might be thinking.

For his part, the colonel was musing that Darcy must be truly besotted. Darcy, who had mocked and derided many mothers of decidedly higher rank for much less silliness, seemed to take Mrs. Bennet's weaknesses in stride.

"Mr. Darcy is most anxious to introduce you to Lord and Lady Carlisle, Lizzy," said Mrs. Bennet, "so I really think you must go along to Netherfield. Do you not agree, Mr. Bennet?"

"Certainly, my dear," the smiling Mr. Bennet murmured. He was glad for his daughter's sake that Darcy seemed to have accepted her mother's foibles. "I shall have the carriage readied while Lizzy and Miss Darcy fetch their things. James will wait at Netherfield until you, and perhaps Miss Darcy, are ready to return home, Lizzy."

With the inducement of such fair companions, Darcy and Fitzwilliam eschewed riding back to Netherfield in favor of going along in the carriage. Darcy's only regret was that propriety demanded he sit across from Elizabeth instead of beside her. While this afforded him a lovely view, he considered the inability to touch her a severe deprivation. The foursome chatted of everything and nothing until Colonel Fitzwilliam had the misfortune to touch upon a sensitive subject.

"But what of Lady Catherine, Darcy?" he asked mischievously. "Will she brave the wilds of Hertfordshire for this event or did she just threaten to send you a hideous, but expensive gift?"

Only Elizabeth returned his smile, but it was a perfunctory gesture that did not reach her eyes. Georgiana paled noticeably even as she patted Elizabeth's arm, and to Fitzwilliam's surprise Darcy braved propriety and prudence by daring to cross the moving carriage to sit at Elizabeth's other side and take her hand. He looked torn between despair and absolute fury.

"You need not worry so for me, dearest," Elizabeth said quietly, ignoring their companions entirely. "I am well. What a fool I would be to fret over Lady Catherine's good opinion when I have been so fortunate as to gain yours?"

To Fitzwilliam's wonder, the brewing storm he had observed in Darcy's countenance was gone and he smiled down at Elizabeth contentedly. Elizabeth returned Darcy's smile and then blushed as she remembered they were not alone.

With an impish smile she continued, "Having withstood the lady's presence, I can assure you all that I am not so fragile as to be shattered by the mere memory of your aunt's visit."

"Her visit--" Fitzwilliam echoed incredulously. "Do you mean that Lady Catherine was actually here?"

"Yes, Fitzwilliam," Darcy said flatly, "Lady Catherine traveled into Hertfordshire to express her displeasure and disapproval of the match. Unfortunately I was in town at the time and so the distasteful task of listening to her complaints fell to Eliz--Miss Elizabeth."

"It was hardly a satisfactory arrangement for her ladyship," Elizabeth said smiling up at Darcy, "but as her remarks were quite unkind towards Mr. Darcy as well as myself, I was most happy to spare him the unpleasant duty of hearing her out."

"Fortunately Bingley and Hurst knew enough of Lady Catherine to deny her a private interview with Miss Elizabeth, else I fear it might have been even more distressing," Darcy added grimly.

Seeing that the tension had returned to his jaw, Elizabeth squeezed Darcy's hand and smiled up at him. Her attentions had the desired effect and his anger subsided once more.

"Her visit did result in our first disagreement," Darcy added, returning Elizabeth's smile. "However, I seriously doubt that development would bring much joy to Lady Catherine were she to understand the exact nature of our disharmony."

"Yes, we continue to be at opposites over the situation," Elizabeth happily agreed. "I could easily forgive Lady Catherine's mistaken notion of my character. There was, after all, no degree of prior acquaintance between us, which makes her false assumptions regarding my motives entirely understandable. However, I found her unfair criticism of Mr. Darcy, whom she has known all his life, most offensive and have demanded that Lady Catherine apologize to him. Mr. Darcy, on the other hand, while quite willing to graciously overlook your aunt's insult to himself, insists upon an apology for her mistreatment of me, so it is a hopeless case you see."

Fitzwilliam was delighted and amazed by the change in his cousin. The Darcy of old would have sulked and ranted for days after the mere mention of such an affront, but his cousin sat before him smiling happily at his fiancée. Certainly Lady Catherine would not be forgiven until she had satisfied

Darcy's exacting sense of justice, but Darcy seemed content to live with the breach and unwilling to waste his happiness upon such a cause.

"Please accept my apologies on behalf of our family, Miss Bennet," the colonel said after a pause. "Knowing my aunt, I can well imagine the vitriolic nature of her remarks. I also offer my congratulations and admiration for your courage under fire. It is a quality highly prized in my profession."

"Thank you for the commendation," Elizabeth replied. "I accept it most gladly, but your apology is entirely unnecessary. It was Mr. Darcy who was injured by your aunt and I am afraid only Lady Catherine will be able to apologize suitably for that."

Elizabeth turned to Darcy, and Fitzwilliam saw her whisper something to his cousin but her voice was pitched too low for him to hear what she said. The colonel dearly wanted to know what he had missed for the change that came over Darcy's countenance was remarkable. His former smile seemed as a frown by contrast with the happiness that now suffused his countenance.

Elizabeth had in fact whispered, "I love you, dearest."

To Fitzwilliam's surprise Georgiana winked at him--again. The colonel cheerfully returned her wink this time, as he sat back to speculate exactly how long it would take his parents to realize that this marriage would be one of the most important blessings of Fitzwilliam Darcy's life--and of near equal importance to his sister, for Georgiana had clearly undergone a metamorphosis during her short time in Hertfordshire. That much was obvious. Georgiana's ease with the entire Bennet family and her particular friendship with one of the younger Bennet girls had already attracted her cousin's notice.

Fitzwilliam knew he had been somewhat distracted at Longbourn first by observing Darcy's fiance and then by the eldest Miss Bennet, but he studied Georgiana now across the carriage. To his considerable relief, she truly seemed like herself again as if the summer's unhappiness had never occurred, but the alteration was far greater than the mere restoration of Georgiana's naturally sunny disposition. Although still soft spoken, she exhibited a new found confidence. This was proven when they arrived at Netherfield. His painfully shy cousin now seemed entirely comfortable in a room full of adults. It also did not escape Fitzwilliam's notice that when she moved to join Darcy and Elizabeth on the sofa, Georgiana sat beside Elizabeth.

Fitzwilliam could hardly wait for his parents to arrive. Although they would strive to support his cousin in almost anything, he knew that they would not be without misgivings about this sudden marriage, and the colonel found it amusing to privately speculate as to which of them would succumb to Elizabeth's charms first. Of course, neither of his parents would openly oppose the match as that would only result in scandal. However, it would be interesting to see just how long it would take them to be truly happy with Darcy's choice.

Although Darcy was delighted to have Elizabeth's company for the afternoon, his desire to introduce her to his relations upon their arrival was thwarted by the simple fact that Lord and Lady Carlisle were still not present when Elizabeth was obliged to return to Longbourn to greet her own guests.

"I am sorry, dearest," she apologized as Darcy walked her out, "but I do not want to neglect my aunt and uncle who have surely arrived from London by now."

"Think nothing of it," Darcy assured her. "While I am anxious to introduce you to my uncle, I must confess that my primary aim was to afford myself the pleasure of your company for the afternoon. Lord and Lady Carlisle will no doubt arrive shortly and you will meet them soon enough."

When the carriage was out of site, Darcy sighed happily knowing that the entire Netherfield party would soon follow Elizabeth to Longbourn. He had no doubt that Lord and Lady Carlisle would breeze in with barely enough time to dress for dinner. Darcy who was unfailingly punctual had long since accepted their penchant for tardiness as it was beyond his control.

"Our wedding, however, will begin on time whether they are present or not," Darcy thought with a chuckle as he walked back into the house.

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Even as Lord and Lady Carlisle were settling in at Netherfield a short while later, another newcomer was taking a room at the inn in Meryton. Sgt. Murphy could not help but overhear the stranger introducing himself to several of the militia officers at a nearby table.

"Please allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen," he said smoothly. "I realize we are not acquainted but I hope to be numbered among you as a fellow officer when Colonel Forrester returns from town. I am George Wickham, just rode in from London myself, but formerly of Derbyshire."

Murphy's expression hardened as he thought to himself, "Things are about to get interesting."

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Meanwhile Caroline Bingley was wishing she had never heard of Ireland. Although Caroline had boarded the ship with her head held high and sneered at their spacious and well appointed quarters, she was secretly pleased that Charles had spared no expense and that Mr. Hopkins had procured every possible comfort for their journey. Their fine quarters combined with the fact that she was attended by both a maid *and* a traveling companion would no doubt impress upon the other passengers that she was someone very important. Alas, Caroline's fantasies of being admired by fawning shipmates were shattered shortly after the ship set sail by the reality of seasickness.

Mrs. Annesley emotions alternated between gratitude at being relieved of the tedium of Caroline's condescending remarks and guilt for having briefly wished such a fate upon her. Of course, Mrs. Annesley was too sensible a woman to believe her musings had caused the malady. However, she deeply regretted having wished such an evil upon anyone, particularly when confronted with the reality of Caroline's wretchedness.

Given the sudden onset of Caroline's illness and the relative calmness of the sea, Mrs. Annesley knew that she was in for a very rough time of it and would probably remain ill throughout the voyage. As the smell of food would likely worsen Caroline's discomfort, Mrs. Annesley insisted upon attending her so that the maid might take her supper and enjoy a little fresh air before returning to her mistress.

"--We are expected to reach Dublin in two mornings' time, Monique. In the meantime you and I will take turns staying with Miss Bingley," she said. "Go on now. You must keep up your strength to care for your mistress. After you eat, I suggest a brief respite on deck. Although it will be chilly, the fresh air will do you good and a walk on deck will help you adjust to the ship's motion."

"Yes, ma'am," the maid replied crossing to the small dressing room for her cloak. "I'll do just what you said, Mrs. Annesley, and then I'll come back to spell you."

Monique bobbed a curtsey and fled the cabin, grateful for Mrs. Annesley's assistance and guidance. Mrs. Annesley nodded and set about replacing the cool compress she had applied to Caroline's throat in hope of lessening her nausea.

For once in her life Caroline lacked the strength to complain. She accepted the older woman's ministrations without comment. Surprisingly the compresses did help and she was finally able to drift off to sleep.

Mrs. Annesley breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that the more Caroline was able to sleep during their crossing, the less unpleasantness they would all have to endure. Reasonably certain that Caroline would sleep for some time, Mrs. Annesley took a seat at the small desk and began to write a letter that she would send back to London just as soon as they reached port, "Dear Mr. Darcy--"

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**Lasting Impressions by Pamela St Vines  
What Became of Wickham**

*Chapter Nine - What Became of Wickham*

*The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means.*  
Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's ***The Importance of Being Earnest***

Lord and Lady Carlisle arrived in Hertfordshire equally curious to meet Elizabeth Bennet, but with very different aims. Lord Carlisle was eager to meet the young woman who had captured Darcy's heart, while his wife was anxious to determine what might be salvaged from what Lady Carlisle considered to be a most unfortunate match.

Although he was not given to sentimental expression, Lord Carlisle had been excessively devoted to his younger sister Anne, and was, therefore, very fond of her children--particularly Darcy, for Lord Carlisle thought the son was very like his mother. When people commented on Darcy's resemblance to his father, Lord Carlisle merely smiled for it was true that his nephew had inherited his father's height and coloring. Few saw beyond that physical likeness, but in Lord Carlisle's opinion, Darcy's eyes and, more importantly, the intelligence and depth of feeling behind them were very like his mother's. That similarity had been readily apparent when his nephew was a boy, but grief and loss had magnified Darcy's natural reserve so greatly that his deepest thoughts and feelings were now rarely displayed--even in the intimacy of their family circle.

It had pained Lord Carlisle to see Darcy gradually assume the mask of studied indifference, which he now wore almost constantly. Therefore, while Lord Carlisle had offered his own sons the usual good counsel of exercising prudence in choosing a bride, he had spoken to Darcy of marrying for true affection, for in the uncle's mind only the happiness of requited love might restore his nephew's former disposition and warmth.

Having long encouraged him thusly, Lord Carlisle had received Darcy's letter announcing his impending marriage with secret delight and was reconciled to the match almost entirely once he had recovered from the unexpectedness of it. Lord Carlisle only required the opportunity to assure himself of a strong mutual affection between Darcy and his bride before offering their union his unqualified and wholehearted support.

The earl had never lied to his wife. However, in the interest of his own domestic harmony, he also had not informed Lady Carlisle of his opinion and subsequent advice that Darcy marry for love. Thus Lord Carlisle found it necessary to hide his excitement upon reading Darcy's letter. Ignorant of the dissimilarity of their views, his wife had proceeded to rage at the impudence of their nephew in daring to betroth himself to a young woman without his uncle's blessing and guidance. When Lady Carlisle's tirade had run its course, her husband had begun the delicate task of guiding her towards acceptance of Darcy's choice.

"I understand your disappointment, my dear. However, Darcy is his own man and has been managing his affairs without assistance for some time. While I am happy to offer any advice he seeks, it would be foolish of me to be affronted by Darcy's independent decision in this matter when I have long encouraged him to be confident of his own judgment in everything else.

"As we cannot undo what has been done, we must consider what is best for the family now," the earl had continued smoothly. "For Darcy to go back on his word would cause a huge scandal, something to be avoided at all costs. Therefore, Darcy and Miss Bennet must marry as planned."

"Yes, of course," Lady Carlisle had conceded, acknowledging the wisdom of his words. "A jilt now would be far more disastrous than the marriage itself."

Pleased by this admission, the earl had attempted to console her.

"I do not believe that Darcy's integrity and intelligence would allow him to settle his affections upon a girl who is entirely unworthy of our notice. It is now our task to minimize any damage by assisting the new Mrs. Darcy's introduction to society. After all, we do have Georgiana's future to consider."

Seeing his wife sigh and square her shoulders in that particular way, Lord Carlisle had smothered a smile, knowing that his point was successfully made. While she might rage against Darcy's marriage in private, Lady Carlisle would protect the family by presenting a united front to the public.

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Their late arrival at Netherfield dictated that Lord and Lady Carlisle hasten to their rooms almost immediately to prepare for the evening's dinner

party at Longbourn, the change in Darcy's demeanor did not escape his uncle's attention. Lord Carlisle retired to his dressing room inordinately satisfied by his nephew's evident happiness. He was also pleased by the liveliness of Georgiana's greeting.

Lady Carlisle, on the other hand, had been too engrossed in her own irritation with Darcy to note the changes in her niece and nephew. While she now accepted the inevitability of the match, Lady Carlisle was still quite put out that she had not been consulted. After all, she had offered to assist Darcy in arranging a suitable marriage on numerous occasions, and each time he had declined, stubbornly insisting that he would handle such matters for himself.

"True to his word, Darcy managed it all himself," his aunt thought bitterly, "and in so doing he has saddled the family with an unremarkable connection at best."

Although determined to do her duty by publicly accepting her new niece, Lady Carlisle was resolved to do no more. While she had great respect for the sanctity of their family's name and reputation, Lady Carlisle firmly believed that simply marrying into the family did not entitle one to every consideration due a blood relation. Her eldest son's wife was already uncomfortably aware of that distinction. Although Lady Carlisle would never demonstrate or allow disrespect of her new daughter in public, the viscount's wife had felt the sting of Lady Carlisle's slights often enough in private. Margaret was, after all, only the daughter of a baronet. It was hardly a particularly worthy connection in the opinion of Lady Carlisle, who was the daughter of a marquess as well as the wife of an earl.

Lady Carlisle had deemed Margaret to be rather like her connections--not objectionable, but not particularly impressive either. Now in light of Darcy's engagement to a young woman with no connections whatsoever, Lady Carlisle found herself thinking rather fondly of Margaret. Charles had at least selected someone of acceptable rank and fortune, and in light of his peculiar lack of ambition, she now realized that her son's choice might have been far worse. These musings were interrupted by the maid holding a mirror that Lady Carlisle might check the dressing of her hair. Satisfied that her appearance bespoke her station, Lady Carlisle could not help smiling at the thought of intimidating Darcy's country girl bride.

"It is just as well the girl firmly understand her place," Lady Carlisle thought smugly as she joined her husband.

Lord and Lady Carlisle finally descended the stairs, to find only Darcy and Georgiana awaiting them. The others had gone ahead in the first carriage, a plan proposed by Colonel Fitzwilliam so that the Bennets would not worry about the fate of their guests.

"--and I do feel that I should go on ahead with Bingley and the Hursts," the colonel had added, "so that I might apologize for the delay caused by my parents' late arrival. Do you not agree?"

Amused by Darcy's struggle to hide his irritation at their tardiness, Fitzwilliam could not resist adding, "I shall also be happy to convey any more personal messages to Miss Elizabeth--"

"That will not be necessary," Darcy had cut him off. "I am quite capable of speaking to Miss Elizabeth for myself. However, your plan is a good one."

As duty demanded he accompany his uncle and aunt this evening, Darcy unhappily agreed to Fitzwilliam's proposal and Georgiana volunteered to wait with him while the others went on ahead. She attempted to distract her brother from the passing minutes by chattering on about the Bennets, and Darcy appreciated her efforts. Nonetheless he was considerably relieved when his uncle and aunt finally made their appearance. Darcy forced himself to smile and endeavored to hide his pique. In fact, he thought he was handling it all rather well until Georgiana smothered a giggle and squeezed his fingers as Darcy helped her into the carriage. That drew a genuine smile from him and Darcy began to relax. Comforted by the knowledge that they would soon be at Longbourn, he sat back to enjoy the ride.

Even as her husband talked of inconsequential matters with the young people, Lady Carlisle studied her nephew across the carriage. He did seem happy, annoyingly so. He also seemed calmer--an interesting and possibly alarming change. Darcy had always been rather quick to anger, and Lady Carlisle had often used that to maneuver him--subtly prodding Darcy into a temper and then graciously accepting his apology later. He had always been far more amenable to her influence in those moments of contrition. But this Darcy looked as if he would not be so easy to provoke.

"Ah, well," Lady Carlisle thought with a sigh, "even the strongest of infatuations will not last forever. This will fade and he will be as himself again, and Darcy has always been clever. Perhaps the girl will be someone I can train to represent the family properly."

That thought brought a rare smile to her lips. It did not escape Darcy's notice and he wondered just what scheme his aunt might be hatching at the moment.

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With the skill of much practice, Lady Carlisle immediately began rating and cataloging the Bennets' assets and tastes before Darcy had time to complete the introductions. The Bennet home was somewhat smaller than she had dared to hope for and yet it was also somewhat better than she had expected. The furnishings were of excellent quality and well proportioned to the size of the rooms. All in all it was a very inviting and comfortable house. Similarly the Bennet ladies were all well dressed. Their gowns were simply styled, but the fabric was of unmistakably fine quality, such as could only be procured in London. Lady Carlisle was pleasantly surprised.

"Well, I suppose Darcy's infatuation is to be expected," Lady Carlisle thought even as she acknowledged Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. "After all the girl is quite a beauty."

To her great surprise, however, it was not the very beautiful, fair haired girl that Darcy introduced as his fiance, but rather the petite brunette beside her. Despite her pique with Darcy, Lady Carlisle was now intrigued. The girl was pretty to be sure, but no more so than dozens of higher ranking

young women that Darcy did not notice. Almost against her will, Lady Carlisle's hopes began to rise that this marriage would not be the disaster she had expected it to be.

"What is it that makes you so special, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?" Lady Carlisle wondered even as she politely acknowledged the introduction.

The only other guests in attendance were the Netherfield family and the Gardiners, Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife from London. Sensing Lady Carlisle's propensity to dismiss them all as inferiors, Elizabeth was excessively grateful for her father's earlier suggestion that Lydia and the Gardiner children spend the evening with Aunt Philips. Mrs. Bennet had welcomed the idea, as she was most anxious that nothing happen to mar the evening and her mind was considerably eased by the prospect of having the children out from under foot.

Surprisingly, Aunt Philips had eagerly agreed, expressing her happiness to relieve her "dear sister's nerves" at such an important time. Elizabeth had privately wondered if Aunt Philips might be a bit apprehensive at the prospect of being in such exalted company. Whatever the reason, it had all worked out wonderfully in Elizabeth's opinion. Between her Aunt Philips' absence and Aunt Gardiner's calming presence, her mother would appear to best advantage.

Mrs. Bennet loved to entertain and she had spared no effort for this significant event. Even Lady Carlisle privately acknowledged that the table was impressive. The silver had the patina that only came with age and each piece had been polished to perfection. Everything was elegantly arranged and Lady Carlisle could not help admiring the beautiful place cards even as she wondered at the irregularity of the seating arrangement. She and her husband were properly placed beside their host and hostess, but Darcy and Elizabeth were seated together in the middle of the table. Mr. Bennet noticed her glance of disapproval at the young couple and quietly offered an explanation.

"I see that you are wondering at our unorthodox seating arrangement, Lady Carlisle. Surely you know how intractable your nephew can be when he is determined. While we have found Mr. Darcy to be most agreeable on the whole, my wife has entirely given up attempting to separate him from Lizzy at the dinner table. Since he insisted upon being seated at her side, my wife, who certainly would not wish to offend either yourself or Lord Carlisle, simply placed them in the center of the table. Had she not arranged the table to suit him, I can assure you that Mr. Darcy would have moved us around to make it right in his opinion."

Lady Carlisle smiled. It did sound exactly like Darcy and she could not help admiring Mr. Bennet's good humor and direct address of her unspoken question. When the ladies retired to the drawing room after dinner, Lady Carlisle even deigned to compliment Mrs. Bennet on the unusual place cards.

"I do not think I have ever seen so much artistry exhibited in something so simple as a place card," she said. "Did you order them specially from London or were they created by a talented local?"

Mrs. Bennet beamed with pleasure as she replied, "Actually the artists are present. Miss Darcy, Kitty, do come here. Lady Carlisle was just admiring the place cards. The girls spent an entire afternoon designing and creating them."

It was evident to all that Lady Carlisle was scrutinizing the company--particularly Elizabeth--but the other ladies did their best to converse normally as if unaware of her examination. Even Georgiana exerted herself to inquire after her cousins.

Elizabeth had refused to bend before Lady Catherine's insults and she had no intention of groveling for Lady Carlisle's approval now. Therefore, although she felt Lady Carlisle's observation keenly, Elizabeth was determined to conduct herself normally. She was polite and friendly but she refused to cower before Darcy's aunt.

Lady Carlisle found this somewhat disconcerting. She had put many a London snob in her place with just a look, but Darcy's country miss met her gaze and her questions with equanimity.

While the ladies were undergoing Lady Carlisle's inspection in the drawing room, the atmosphere in the dining room was far more relaxed and congenial. Having seen enough during dinner to assure him that Darcy's affection was returned in kind, Lord Carlisle was free from any misgivings about the match and eager to know his companions. He was already slightly acquainted with Bingley and Hurst and to Lord Carlisle's great delight, Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner were not only amiable gentlemen, but also intelligent and well read. As they neared the half hour mark, Darcy's impatience to rejoin Elizabeth had not escaped the notice of his companions, and Mr. Bennet could not resist the opportunity to tease him.

"I am certain the ladies would forgive us if we linger a while longer," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "What say you, Lord Carlisle?"

Mr. Bennet lifted the port decanter as if to refill his guests' glasses and Darcy, who was clearly at his patience's end, missed the mischievous smile that accompanied his uncle's reply.

"I do believe I would enjoy another, Mr. Bennet."

At Darcy's audible sigh, the entire company broke into laughter.

"I apologize, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth's father said with a smile. "Perhaps it was unfair of me to tease you, but consider it practice for life with my Lizzy."

"No apology is necessary, Mr. Bennet," Darcy said with an answering smile, "as long as we now going to rejoin the ladies."

This elicited another round of good-natured laughter as the men rose to adjourn to the drawing room. Falling in step with Mr. Bennet, Darcy whispered, "I cannot help remembering my first dinner at Longbourn and the hospitality and friendship you offered me that night. Thank you, sir."

Smiling at the memory of Darcy's awkwardness on the evening in question, Mr. Bennet replied, "I am confident that you would have found the courage to speak to Lizzy even without my assistance, but I am pleased to have been of use. Perhaps it is Lizzy who is in need of rescue this



evening. While you please most congenial, I am not as sanguine regarding your aunt's opinion of the match."

Darcy was not surprised by Mr. Bennet's acuity. He had learned that Elizabeth's father missed little.

"I am confident that Miss Elizabeth will win my aunt's full support in time," he said, "but in the interim, it is perhaps best that we not leave them unattended too long."

Elizabeth was seated on one of the sofas with Lady Carlisle on one side and Jane on the other when Darcy entered the room. Smothering a smile, Jane immediately murmured something about helping their mother with the coffee and vacated her seat, which Darcy happily occupied. Taking Elizabeth's hand he leaned forward to address his aunt.

"I trust you have been kind to my affianced, Lady Sarah."

"Mr. Darcy--" Elizabeth began but Lady Carlisle interrupted her.

"No, you do not know me yet, my dear," she said feeling oddly pleased by Darcy's directness, "but Darcy is quite right. I can be rather unbearable when I am out of sorts or crossed. Truthfully, I have yet to form an opinion of your young lady, Darcy. I promise not to be unkind unless I decide that I truly do not like her."

"Then I am satisfied," Darcy said with a smug smile, "for I know that you value intelligence and integrity, Aunt. Therefore, you will find it impossible to dislike Miss Bennet once you are better acquainted."

Elizabeth felt her courage rise with Darcy's presence and his touch. She had politely endured his aunt's thinly veiled disdain and inspection for the last half hour and now could not resist responding to Lady Carlisle's pronouncement.

"I do appreciate your willingness to find a *reason* to dislike me before actually doing so, your ladyship," she said sweetly. "I cannot recall ever having received such an offer before. Clearly I have much to learn of how things are done in the first circles."

Elizabeth glanced at Darcy, fearing she might have upset him by challenging his aunt, but Darcy merely widened his smile and squeezed her hand. Meanwhile his cousin, who had been unashamedly eavesdropping on the conversation, turned away with a laugh.

"Well played," the colonel thought. Although she appeared to be taken aback by Elizabeth's boldness, Fitzwilliam knew his mother would respect Elizabeth's wit and self-confidence. Assured that Darcy did not require his assistance, Fitzwilliam crossed the room to join Miss Elizabeth's beautiful older sister.

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While his colonel was enjoying dinner with the Bennets, Sgt. Murphy spent the evening in the common room at the inn so that he might find out more about George Wickham. "Know thy enemy," had stood Murphy in good stead all his career, and although Colonel Fitzwilliam had never spoken of Georgiana's near misstep, his faithful sergeant had pieced enough together to know that this man was definitely no friend to his colonel and, therefore, by extension himself.

Mr. Darcy had brought Miss Georgiana to town unexpectedly last summer and the two of them, Darcy and Fitzwilliam, had held many secret councils. Knowing his colonel was distraught over something, Sgt. Murphy had done what any good sergeant would do to protect his colonel. He had spied on him, easily learning enough to identify the cause of the gentlemen's distress as a certain George Wickham, who had grown up near Pemberley. Finally one day the sergeant overheard enough to surmise the particular nature of the offense.

"You cannot call him out, Fitzwilliam," Darcy had said in a tone that made the sergeant's blood run cold. "If *that* were an option, I would have killed him *myself* in Ramsgate. You must think of Georgiana. You know how people are. It would make no matter that she is entirely innocent. A breath of scandal and she is ruined forever. Is it worth destroying her life to have your revenge?"

The sergeant had then understood his colonel's frustration. He clearly had cause to kill Wickham, but could not lest it reflect on Miss Georgiana's reputation.

With a shake of his head, Murphy brought his mind back to the present, for the source of his colonel's unhappiness was now here before him--George Wickham himself, sitting twenty feet away, smiling as if he thought himself a very fine fellow. The sergeant easily decided that *he* would kill him. After all Murphy's chosen profession required that he kill honorable men simply because they wore the wrong uniform. To kill a true scoundrel who had injured his colonel's kinswoman would not give the sergeant a moment's pause. In Murphy's eyes, it was a duty that would also be a pleasure.

Of course, the sergeant had no intention of calling the man out. Such folderol was for gentlemen--and rather silly in Murphy's opinion. Preferring not to tip his hand, Murphy would simply wait for the right opportunity and then he would kill Wickham nice and quiet like. The loyal sergeant did not consider the act a murder so much as an execution. Murphy's only pause was to consider how he might accomplish it without engendering any suspicions that he had a hand in it. In the field he would simply kill Wickham the night before a battle and then hide him where he would be discovered among the next day's dead. But here in quiet little Meryton there would be no battle to cover his tracks.

If only there were a plausible reason for Wickham to leave town without enlisting, Murphy reasoned, then he could just kill the man and take his body far from Meryton. It would be easy to make it look like he had fallen from his horse in the dark or been set upon by highwaymen. It did not escape

Murphy's notice when Wickham began eyeing the barmaid in a particular way. Murphy knew Mary to be a good girl, the kind who would one day marry the blacksmith's apprentice or the innkeeper's son. She was not the type to give herself to strangers for a few coins or a little attention.

Murphy slumped over the table so that it would appear he was dozing, but inside he was tightly coiled instinctively knowing that Wickham's lust would be his downfall. The inn was quiet now. The officers had finally returned to their billets for the night and the townsfolk, to their homes, leaving a sleeping Murphy--or so he appeared--and Wickham nursing another pint by the fire. Murphy overheard the innkeeper bidding Mary to see to the fire and bar the door, and as his heavy footsteps retreated up the stairs, Murphy smiled to himself. Wickham had been drinking heavily and the sergeant was confident that the scoundrel would give him just the opening he required soon. He expected the rogue to attempt a liberty with the girl. Murphy would then "wake" and stop him. The humiliation of his ungentlemanly conduct could be spun into a plausible reason for the man to change his mind and go elsewhere to enlist, and Murphy had no doubt he could spin it. To Murphy's surprise, however, Wickham did more than grab the girl. He pulled a knife and threatened to harm her if she did not accompany him to the stables.

Evidently Wickham had also discerned the girl's character Murphy thought sourly, and knew she would not accommodate his demands willingly. The scoundrel probably assumed he could intimidate her into keeping silent afterwards, with her being just a servant and him being an officer and all.

An enraged Murphy silently followed them out into the night. Mary was quietly crying and begging Wickham to let her be when the sergeant slipped into the stable. The girl's eyes widened at the sight of him, but she did not give his presence away. Murphy crept in close and hit Wickham over the head with a bottle he had brought along for just that purpose. Wickham staggered and went down. Murphy uttered what comfort he could to the sobbing girl even as he grabbed a length of rope and began to tie Wickham up.

Realizing she was now safe, Mary finally stopped crying and whispered, "What will you do with him?"

"That is not for you and me to decide," Murphy lied. "You are safe now so I say we leave him tied to this post for the night. Then in the morning I will speak to your master. He and the magistrate can decide what to do with him."

Murphy gagged his prisoner for good measure and then escorted Mary from the barn. She thanked him repeatedly before slipping up the stairs to her room. Murphy also retired to his chamber, but only to wait until he was sure the entire town was asleep. In the wee hours of the morning, Murphy slipped back out to the stables. Wickham was conscious and his eyes grew wide with fear. The sergeant simply knocked him out again and tied Wickham's body across one of the horses. Murphy checked to be sure all was still quiet outside before he led the horse from the stable.

Thanking all the saints that the inn was situated at the edge of the village, Murphy slowly led the animal across country, counting on the grass to muffle the sounds of its passage. When they rejoined the road a mile or so from town, Murphy mounted the animal, riding behind Wickham's body until they were well away from Meryton. The sergeant was thankful for the full moon as he searched for the place, feeling vastly relieved when he finally found it. The gully was just as Murphy had remembered it--definitely steep enough and not far from the road. He urged the horse to pick up speed and then reined her in abruptly just before it was too late. If any tracks were left, it would appear that the horse had stopped just in time. Unfortunately that would not prove true of her rider. Still astride his mount, Murphy unbound Wickham's body. He turned the horse slightly and threw Wickham over the side head first down into the gully. The sergeant heard the crack of his skull on the rocks below with deep satisfaction. Wickham was dead or if not yet, he would be by the time anyone found him.

Murphy rode the mare back toward the village at a gentler pace. A mile or so from Meryton the sergeant abandoned his mount and slipped back into town on foot. All was quiet when he re-entered the inn. Murphy quietly barred the door and slipped upstairs where he quickly fell into an exhausted sleep. His last conscious thought was that it had been a good night's work.

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Knowing that he was obligated to spend most of the day with his guests, Darcy quietly made his way downstairs early the next morning with the intention of slipping away to see Elizabeth before he would be missed. Although Darcy spoke kindly to the stable boy, his eagerness to be off was unmistakable. The lad, having rightly interpreted Darcy's impatience to mean he was going to see Miss Lizzy, saddled the horse as quickly as he could, all the while hiding his grin from the gentleman. Never dreaming his intent was so easily divined by a mere boy, Darcy rode out for Longbourn.

In his eagerness to see Elizabeth, Darcy had not stopped to contemplate the oddity of his calling at such an early hour, but he flushed with embarrassment when the servant ushered him in to join the family at breakfast. To Darcy's relief the Bennets did not seem unduly surprised and Mr. Bennet interrupted his attempt to apologize for his untimely call.

"You need not apologize, Mr. Darcy," the older man reassured him. "It does a father's heart good to see his daughter so valued by her future husband. Please sit down and join us. I am sure the morning air has given you an appetite."

Even as her father was greeting their guest, Kitty moved to an empty chair across the table to allow Darcy the seat beside Elizabeth. No further persuasion was required. Darcy took the vacant chair and was content. Many smiles were shared around the table, but the family graciously resumed their assorted conversations, realizing that Darcy neither wanted nor needed their attention. Clearly he had come to see Elizabeth for he could scarcely tear his eyes away from her. Darcy boldly took advantage of the conversations buzzing around them to lean in and whisper, "I love you, Lizzy."

His heart pounded when she squeezed his hand under the table, and faintly whispered, "And I, you, Fitzwilliam," in response.

Everyone pretended not to notice their murmurs, but Mrs. Gardiner could not help smiling and nodding to her husband. Having grown up in Derbyshire, she was more fully cognizant of Darcy's wealth and position, and it pleased her to see his unabashed affection for her niece.

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While Darcy was so pleasantly engaged at Longbourn, Murphy was explaining the previous evening's excitement to Mr. Smyth, the innkeeper.

"--I trust I will not come to any trouble for striking the man," the sergeant said feigning uncertainty, "but it would not have been right to let him hurt the poor girl--"

"No, of course not. Do not even think on it," Smyth assured him. "You did the right thing. You stopped Wickham from doing Mary any real harm and then you tied him up for the law to deal with."

Murphy started to protest, "But--"

"No. You did right," Smyth repeated firmly, "and you are a better man than I am. I might have done him permanent harm if I'd been the one to stop him. It is not uncommon for a man to be a little forward if he's had too much to drink. Mary is used to handling such foolishness, but to pull a knife on the poor girl and after he made such a pretense of what a gentleman he was."

"Ah, 'tis just lucky I woke up when I did," Murphy smoothly agreed. "I felt the need for a little fresh air before going up to bed and that's when I heard the commotion from the stables."

"Twas the good Lord looking out for Mary, it was," the innkeeper avowed.

"Well, I have never been mistaken for an angel of mercy," Murphy said with a grin, "but there is for sure a devil out there in your stable. Make no mistake of that. I tied him up good. He hasn't enlisted yet so I don't know if we should bother the colonel or go straight to the magistrate, sir?"

At Smyth's behest, they went to the stable first that he might have the satisfaction of railing at the miscreant himself. There they found the broken bottle and a length of rope attesting to the validity of Murphy's story but no Wickham. When he saw the first stall empty, Smyth swore under his breath.

"Oh, no," Murphy said contritely, "I thought I had him all secure, sir, but it looks as if the bugger has escaped."

"And taken my best mare with him," Smyth said disgustedly.

"Oh, 'tis all my fault," Murphy lamented. "I thought it best not to disturb anyone so late and now he's gone and stolen your horse, sir."

"Not your fault, Murphy," the innkeeper consoled him. "You did your best. Well, there is no need to hurry now. Let us go back inside and have a bite of breakfast. Then we will call on the magistrate."

Murphy was an accomplished actor and he managed to maintain a serious expression as befit the situation, but inside he was smiling. The sergeant's only regret was that Colonel Fitzwilliam did not already have the pleasure of knowing that the lying, conniving cheat was dead.

"But then," Murphy thought philosophically, "what the colonel doesn't know, cannot hurt him."

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Even as Murphy was congratulating himself on evading prison, Caroline Bingley was convinced she had entered one. An elderly manservant was waiting at the docks in Dublin to drive them to Mrs. Annesley's sister's home. Caroline was still wan and pale, but the return to solid ground immediately made her feel somewhat better.

"I 'pologize for coming to fetch you in the cart," the servant said, "but Mr. Cassidy has the carriage."

Mrs. Annesley assured him that it made no matter, even as Caroline inwardly seethed. In Caroline's view, what was merely a slight at the docks proved to be source of great annoyance when they reached the home of Mrs. Annesley's sister. While far from grand, Mrs. Cassidy's home was spacious and comfortable, and the neighborhood was much better than Caroline had expected. Her pleasure in that surprise quickly evaporated when Mrs. Cassidy explained that while her son Michael would be pleased to convey Caroline to her aunt's, he would be away on business for at least a seven night more. Mrs. Cassidy graciously offered her hospitality in the meantime.

Realizing that Caroline's temper was rising, Mrs. Annesley thanked her sister for her kindness and hurried Caroline upstairs murmuring about her recent illness as excuse. When they had reached the privacy of the room appointed for Caroline's use during her stay, Mrs. Annesley accompanied her inside and shut the door behind her.

"I know you are disappointed, Miss Bingley," she began, "but you must collect yourself. My sister has kindly opened her home to you, and my nephew will see us to your aunt's in safety and comfort. However, you must be patient. This is not Netherfield. You do not have your brother's wealth and good will to smooth things over for you here. You are a guest, and if you want to be treated like a fine lady, then I suggest you begin to act like one. Monique and I will help you to endure the wait as best we can, but you must exert yourself. Now I am going downstairs to visit with my sister. I

will have some tea and toast sent up for you. I suggest you take that and then go to rest so that you might be fit for company later."

Caroline was shocked. She had never been spoken to in such a fashion. She grabbed up a hand mirror from the dressing table, heedless of the thoughtfulness that had placed it there for her use. Caroline's intent was to smash the mirror against the wall, but her hand was stayed by a chance glimpse of her own reflection. Caroline gasped in horror when she saw the madness and malice in her eyes.

"No," she thought, "that cannot be me. I am Caroline Bingley. I may not be a great beauty, but I am widely admired for my height and my well-appointed appearance. I am--"

Caroline fell on the bed sobbing. She did not want to grow into a bitter old woman, and she certainly did not want to be alone, but sadly she had not the least idea of how to change her fate.

As Mrs. Annesley had ordered Monique to bed for several hours, the second maid was charged with delivering tea to their mysterious guest. The girl heard Caroline weeping through the door, and uncertain of the best course of action, she quietly crept away still carrying the tea tray and sought out Mrs. Annesley.

"Excuse me, ma'ams," the maid murmured to the two sisters who were happily sharing their news in the parlor, "but the woman what come with you, Mrs. Annesley--she's crying. I did not know if I should disturb her. Do you think she'll still want her tea?"

"No, Sally, I think not," Mrs. Annesley said softly. "We had best let her have her cry. Poor Miss Bingley has not been well. You may return to your other duties and I will see to her in a bit."

Seeing the question in her sister's eyes, Eleanor Annesley waited until the maid's footsteps had faded down the hallway before she said with a smile, "No, Carrie, I will not tell you Miss Bingley's story. That is for her to tell, but I will say that she is a most unhappy young woman."

"Poor dear," Mrs. Cassidy clucked sympathetically. "Well then, perhaps a good cry will ease her distress."

"Yes," her sister agreed aloud, even as she thought, "It would require much more than a good cry to cure what ails that woman--it would take a miracle."

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Back in Meryton, the missing horse had wandered into town later that morning--none the worse for wear--to the innkeeper's great satisfaction. The mare's reappearance was actually a cause for universal rejoicing in the village for not only had their neighbor's property been safely recovered, but the local gossips also had fresh cause for denouncing the villainous Wickham. By the time the animal returned, their wagging tongues had already judged him to be not only wicked, but cowardly, too, and the good folk of Meryton delighted now in adding incompetence to the man's list of failings. There was much laughter over the clumsy horse thief who could not keep his seat. Happily with Mary unharmed and the animal safely back in the inn's stable, there was no inducement to hunt the blackguard down, and Sergeant Murphy settled in to enjoy a few more peaceful days encamped at the inn.

Meanwhile news of such magnitude quickly spread throughout the village, and Aunt Philips took it upon herself to escort Lydia and the little Gardiners back to Longbourn that she might personally enlighten her relations. With such a shocking tale to relate, Aunt Philips was in her element and as soon as the young ones had been taken upstairs, she regaled the remaining family members with her account of the inept reprobate. Everyone was most entertained--everyone except Elizabeth, for she recognized the name of Wickham and was immediately concerned for Darcy and Georgiana. Not wanting to raise any unwanted questions, she pretended to share the company's amusement until she could discretely slip away with murmured excuses.

Although she would normally desire to spare Darcy her Aunt Philips' company, Elizabeth wished with all her heart that he had not already returned to Netherfield, for she deemed it imperative that he know of Wickham's recent presence in the neighborhood. Although the man's return to Meryton seemed most unlikely, Elizabeth would not risk the possibility of Darcy and, even more importantly, Georgiana encountering him unawares.

Such news would surely reach the Netherfield servants, but as the family had not yet formed any intimate acquaintance in the neighborhood, Elizabeth thought it likely they would not learn of these events until the evening's dinner engagement. Her mother was no doubt already relishing the prospect of enlightening them, but Elizabeth could not allow such news to take Darcy and Georgiana by surprise in company. Their reactions might expose them to curiosity that was best not aroused.

In the safety and relative privacy of her chamber, Elizabeth set about composing a note to Darcy. She paused after writing the salutation, considering how to proceed. She could not write of Wickham, for that would surely raise unwanted questions if the message were read by anyone else, and while reading another's letter would be an unthinkable breach of privacy, Elizabeth was not so naive as to believe that it was impossible or even unlikely to occur. Therefore, she decided upon a more subtle approach.

*Dearest Fitzwilliam,*

*Your visit this morning was a wonderful surprise, and I should now be vastly contented. However, I find the thought of so many hours before I see you again very trying. I feel like young Johnny Clay, high atop the tree, except that I am longing and watching for your return. Who would have thought that such a distressing day would end so well? Yet, that day ended very well indeed--for the Clays--and for us. I*

*am confident that all will be equally fine today and that my foolish worries will be vanquished entirely when I see your dear face again. All my love to you--and dearest Georgiana. I wish you were both here.*  
Your Elizabeth

Elizabeth glanced back over the note and was satisfied. It read like the emotional ramblings of a nervous bride, but she trusted that Darcy knew her well enough to interpret it otherwise. Although their engagement allowed the familiarity of private correspondence, there had been little need as Darcy and Elizabeth had been in each other's company almost daily. Hoping that the novelty of the note would also arouse Darcy's suspicions, Elizabeth slipped down the back stairs and out to the stable where she asked Tom, who was easily the most accomplished rider at Longbourn, to follow after Mr. Darcy and deliver the letter. To Elizabeth's satisfaction, the young man grinned shyly and blushed at her request. He undoubtedly assumed it to be a simple love letter, which was as she had hoped.

Tom was glad to be of use of Miss Lizzy and quickly set off at a gallop toward Netherfield and Darcy. Conversely that gentleman in his reluctance to leave Elizabeth behind--even for the day--had ridden away from Longbourn at a very sedate pace. When he was nearing Netherfield and the prospect of a day spent politely ignoring his aunt's remarks and questions, Darcy had even allowed his animal to graze a bit. This delay allowed Tom to reach the Netherfield stables just behind him.

Darcy's surprise at receiving the note was as nothing when compared to his astonishment at its contents. He knew enough of Elizabeth's mind to realize that this was not a mere love letter, and he had to admire her cleverness. It was all so vaguely worded as to be easily misconstrued by most. Darcy would have been thoroughly delighted by her ruse were he not anxious to know what had alarmed her. As soon as a fresh horse was readied Darcy set out for the borders of Longbourn and Johnny Clay's "watching tree," for he did not doubt that Elizabeth would be there waiting for him.

Darcy wondered if he had foolishly misunderstood her note, when the tree came into view and there was no sign of Elizabeth. Then chiding himself that she would surely exercise caution not to be seen when they were meeting privately the day before their wedding, Darcy urged his horse across the field and into the stand of trees. When he had ridden far enough into the woods so as to be hidden from view, Darcy was arrested by the sound of his name softly spoken from above. Looking up he saw his affianced perched in a nearby tree.

Had Elizabeth not looked so relieved to see him, Darcy would have been torn between laughing at her antics and scolding her recklessness. As it was he quickly dismounted and moved to assist her in climbing down. When she was safely on the ground Elizabeth made no move to leave Darcy's arms, but rather she clung to him.

"Dearest," Darcy whispered, "what has happened to distress you so? Please tell me."

"My Aunt Philips arrived shortly after you left this morning," Elizabeth began and Darcy's expression tightened.

"Oh, no," Elizabeth hastened to explain, "my aunt is not the cause of my anxiety. It was rather some news that she brought from Meryton--"

She proceeded to relate the facts of Wickham's arrival in the neighborhood and the subsequent events including his ignominious departure as Darcy held her close.

"--it seems unlikely that Wickham will return," Elizabeth concluded, "but I could not risk either you or Georgiana encountering him without warning. I would also hate for her to learn of this in a public setting. It is sure to be distressing and we cannot risk her reaction occasioning impertinent speculation."

"You are right, my love," Darcy agreed, his ardor only increased by her desire to protect Georgiana. "I must return to Netherfield immediately so that she will be prepared. Were it not necessary that I return my sister, I do not think I could willingly leave you now."

Darcy tightened his arms around her and dared to lean in so that his lips brushed against Elizabeth's ear as he whispered, "I love you, Lizzy."

She trembled and buried her face in his chest as she whispered, "I love you, too, Fitzwilliam--you and Georgiana."

The mention of his sister's name was sufficient reminder to Darcy of his duty. He hastened back to Netherfield and Georgiana while Elizabeth rambled on through the wood so that she might compose herself before returning to the house. Confident that Darcy would act to protect Georgiana's interests, Elizabeth forsook her worries and was soon more agreeably engaged in contemplating the new life that she would begin tomorrow as Fitzwilliam Darcy's wife.