



A Slap for Lydia

Author: *Harriet Knowles*

Category: Historical

Description: Fitzwilliam Darcy has dealt with the matter of Elizabeth's sister, the former Miss Lydia Bennet.

Finally he is able to return to Hertfordshire to see Miss Elizabeth.

He hopes profoundly that she might agree to him calling upon her — it has been an agonisingly long time since she refused him at Hunsford.

Surely her sense of justice will permit him to prove he is a better man?

And — she did smile upon him in the summer.

Before her youngest sister had torn them apart.

Elizabeth Bennet finds Lydia's loud and vulgar behaviour is more than she can bear.

She is utterly grateful for Mr. Darcy's acts in saving them all from ruin.

But he could never wish to see her again, knowing who her new brother-in-law is.

Will her own unladylike retaliation and her new brother-in-law forever forbid Mr. Darcy from seeking her out?

Total Pages (Source): 12

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:01 am

1

Elizabeth ground her teeth, enraged. Why had Papa given in and permitted Lydia and her new husband to come to Longbourn? She had never been so tempted to leave her own home before now. But why should she? She had done nothing wrong.

She dropped her head. Nothing except spurn the proposals of an honourable man, due mostly to the lies and smooth talking of Mr. Wickham.

Mr. Wickham, who was now her brother-in-law. She felt sick.

She took up her needlework with new determination not to allow her youngest sister to raise her anger again.

Mr. Darcy had been kind to her when she had met him at Pemberley this summer; and she had hoped that her vicious words after his proposals had been forgiven.

Then she had heard of Lydia's elopement, and Mr. Darcy had turned away from her. He must be disgusted that Mr. Wickham was now her brother. No, she would never see him again; and it was entirely due to her spoiled and heedless sister — and her husband, Wickham!

She shivered; she had been embroidering a handkerchief as a parting gift for Lydia, but last night she had ripped away the words she had stitched

Best wishes for your new life, sister

Now she had started new words —

Goodbye, Good Riddance

She smiled slightly at her stitching. Mr. and Mrs. Wickham ought to have left Longbourn three days ago, and she could not understand why Papa did not exert himself to send them on their way.

“Newcastle is such a lively city, Mama. My dear Wickie says there are balls and parties nearly every night. I will need a lot more ribbons to take with me, so I can make over my new gowns.” Lydia pouted over at her mother, hanging on her husband’s arm.

Elizabeth felt sick as Mama replied.

“Well, of course you shall have new ribbons, my dear! I must have my beautiful daughter looking as if she comes from a wealthy home!”

A red mist seemed to descend over Elizabeth. She clenched her fists, but nothing seemed to help. Her other sisters were still — too still — staring at their own needlework, and Elizabeth snapped.

“Stop this Endless. Selfish. Talk, Lyddie!”

She jumped to her feet, took two steps and dealt Lydia a ringing slap, the sound echoing loudly through the room.

Elizabeth carried on, although soon almost drowned out by her sister’s shrieks of shock and rage. “You are determined to remain a stupid, brainless little flirt all your life, and I am ashamed to call you my sister!”

As Lydia took another breath, Elizabeth heard Mr. Wickham's quiet voice. "Well done, sister Elizabeth!"

She turned and dealt him a stinging slap, too.

"So why did you leave me to do your dirty work, sir?" she spat. "Do you want to be known as the man with the most vulgar, ill-behaved whore-wife in the whole regiment?" She stood there, her bosom heaving, as she fended off Lydia's blows.

"And why are you still here, anyway? Do you want to be posted as a deserter and hanged — not that I would blame you wishing for that with the prospect of life with her for a wife!"

"Enough!" Papa's voice bellowed from the door, and Elizabeth realised that both Lydia and Mama were in full voice.

It was a pity, they probably had not heard what Elizabeth had so wanted to say.

She looked at Lydia with contempt. Satisfyingly, there was a bright red handprint across her left cheek. That would not fade quickly — she hoped.

"Papa, Lizzy slapped me," Lydia immediately started pouring out a tale of woe. "And she slapped dear Wickie, too. An officer! How dare she hit an officer, and her youngest sister, too? I wasn't doing anything!"

Papa's eyebrow rose. "I strongly doubt that, Lydia. You have been impossible ever since you learned to open your mouth. If it was Elizabeth who struck you — then she must have been goaded past all endurance, because she — unlike you — is a gentlewoman." He glared at his youngest daughter and then at Mr. Wickham.

"I believe you have overstayed your welcome. My coach will take you to the post stop

in the morning. You had better walk into Meryton later today and book your seats.”

He turned and slammed the door behind him.

It was wrong of her to do so, but Elizabeth grinned at Lydia. “I am glad. Less than twenty-four more hours to endure.” She turned to tidy away her sewing. “I believe I will take a long walk — away from Meryton.”

Mary jumped to her feet. “May I join you, Lizzy? I believe the fresh air will be a nicer atmosphere than in here.”

“May I come, too?” Kitty jumped to her feet.

“And I.” Jane was not even looking at Lydia.

“Of course; all my sisters who bear the name Bennet are very welcome.” Elizabeth cast a wary glance at Mama out of the corner of her eye.

Her mother was looking rather shocked, and pale. Doubtless, Papa had interrupted what was going to be a relentless tirade against Elizabeth for so assaulting her poor, poor, Lydia.

Outside Longbourn, they were surprised to see Mr. Bingley waiting by the door. Elizabeth was glad Jane was with them, but her sister grasped her arm. “Lizzy! Don’t leave me!”

Elizabeth drew a deep breath. Her temper had cooled somewhat, and her equilibrium was being rapidly restored at the prospect of the Wickhams being gone immediately after breakfast the next day.

“Good morning, Mr. Bingley. We had heard you might be returning to Netherfield

Park, and we are very glad to see you.”

Mr. Bingley looked exceedingly embarrassed.

“Would you like to join us on our walk, sir?” Elizabeth had to keep the conversation going, hoping Jane might exert herself to be polite. “We are not going too far, as my sisters do not walk as fast as I do!”

Mr. Bingley looked very eager. “I would like that very much indeed.” He looked a little anxious. “That is ... if Miss Bennet agrees.”

Elizabeth nudged Jane, and whispered. “Do help him, Jane. He looks very uncomfortable.”

Jane smiled cautiously at Mr. Bingley. “You are very welcome, sir. It is always a good thing to have an escort.”

He bowed, looking relieved, and replaced his hat upon his head. Offering Jane his arm, he then drew closer to Elizabeth and spoke quietly.

“I am sorry for what has happened; you, of all people, must have been driven beyond all reason.”

She looked up at him, startled. He had heard what she had done. How mortifying! She knew a blush was colouring her cheeks.

He shook his head. “Do not be disturbed. I believe Darcy was quite impressed, and he at once discovered an urgent errand needed to be undertaken.”

Mr. Darcy had been here? He had heard her behaving like ... like a fishwife?

Elizabeth dropped back to walk with Mary and Kitty, as Jane bore her escort slightly ahead.

Mr. Darcy had been here . Elizabeth bit her lip. It seemed he might have been willing to see her again after ... after all this. And now, by losing her temper, he had found an urgent excuse to avoid her.

Mary squeezed her arm. “Don’t be upset, Lizzy. You did what none of us dared to do, but needed doing all the same.”

Elizabeth looked at her. “You are not going to berate me for failing to turn the other cheek?” She recalled the handprint on Lydia’s face, and tried to hide her smile.

“No, Lizzy. You must know that we only wish Lydia had a matching mark on her other cheek.” Kitty seemed quite excited about it all. “She has needed the shock for a long time.” She hesitated. “I do hope they will go and Papa does not change his mind and let them stay.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I hope so, too.” She was surprised, but pleased, that her sisters had unobtrusively sided with her by walking out together; but another part of her wished she was alone, striding briskly out for the long circuit up Oakham Mount, out by Shenley, and then back by the eastern lanes.

Mr. Darcy. Now she would definitely never see him again, if he had heard her assault on her sister through the open window.

At least Mr. Bingley was here, walking with Jane. She hoped very much he would not break her heart anew. If the two men had arrived together, though, it must mean that he had told Bingley that Jane had missed him. Her heart beat a little faster. Perhaps he would not separate them again?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:01 am

2

Darcy reached Lucas Lodge in short order, his horse tossing its head and blowing. He dismounted, and patted the animal. He nodded at the groom.

“A good drink and a rub down. I will need him again soon.”

Then he turned to the butler, and produced his card. “I would be grateful for an interview with Sir William, if you please.”

A few moments later, the servant returned and led him into Sir William’s study.

Darcy had not been impressed with the man last autumn, but he was the local magistrate, and since the militia was still in Brighton, this was Darcy’s only recourse.

“It is very good to see you back at Netherfield, Mr. Darcy!” Sir William was as effusive as ever. “And is Mr. Bingley with you? But how may I assist you? You look as if this is not a courtesy call.”

Darcy bowed his head. “Thank you, Sir William. Bingley has returned with me. But I am here to speak to you in your capacity as magistrate for the town of Meryton, and ask how many constables you are able to call upon for a matter that will require one — or possibly several, for a number of days.”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “Sit down, Mr. Darcy, and let me call for coffee. Then you can explain the situation.”

It had taken several hours, but finally Darcy was trotting back to Longbourn; a hired hack chaise and two of Sir William's volunteer constables following him.

He stopped a few minutes away from the house, and nodded at them. "Wait here until you are summoned to the door." He dismounted and handed the reins of his horse to one of the grooms. Now he had to get to see Mr. Bennet without Wickham observing him.

Could he really bear the thought of tapping on the glazed summer doors of Bennet's library? He frowned; he really wasn't the sort to skulk around like that. Then he huffed a laugh.

Miss Elizabeth was not the sort to deal such a ringing slap to her sister. But she had done so. It had been utterly diverting, and he was not at all able to censure her in his mind; that young woman had quite deserved it. Not to forget that she had struck Wickham, too.

The smile was wiped from his face. He must get Mr. and Mrs. Wickham away from Longbourn before the day was out. Wickham would not allow such an insult to go unpunished, and tonight was just the moment he would choose.

Bennet waved the decanter at him, but it was far too early to start drinking — and the chaise was waiting.

"I am sorry, Mr. Bennet. My errand is urgent, and I would prefer to take coffee with you after I have apprised you of what I am doing."

Bennet's eyebrows rose. "Very well." He looked pensive for a moment. "Am I to understand that Mr. Bingley is here on your advice? He will not break my Jane's heart again?"

Darcy bowed his head. "Yes. And I hope not, sir."

"His attentions and then vanishing like that caused her great humiliation and embarrassment in the town." Bennet's eyes were hard.

"I am sorry for it, and I do believe that if Miss Bennet can bring herself to forgive him, he will make a loyal and attentive husband."

"Well, I do not expect your unorthodox way of entering my study was solely about Bingley. What is your urgent business?" Bennet leaned forward and leaned his elbows on the desk, steepling his hands in front of him.

"Very well. I have some concerns about the safety of your youngest daughter, if Wickham decides to avoid taking up his commission." Darcy had to be careful what he said. He did not want to alienate the man.

"It appears he has delayed his departure from here long enough that he is in danger of being posted as a deserter."

"He will be catching the post coach tomorrow, Mr. Darcy. I am certain his smooth talking manner will get him exonerated from such difficulties. At least the first time."

Darcy nodded reluctantly. "I apologise for this, sir. But Bingley and I arrived here together, and I am aware the Miss Elizabeth struck Mr. Wickham, such that I believe she may not be safe from him if he remains in this house with her overnight."

Bennet scowled. "With what happened at Brighton, I am aware of his unsavoury habits. But you seem to be implying something more?" He raised a questioning eyebrow.

Darcy nodded reluctantly. "While he has not generally proved to be a violent man; on

occasion, he has been known to — be determined to impose himself as a form of revenge on a reluctant female.”

The lines on Bennet’s face deepened. “Then Mrs. Wickham has made herself an uncomfortable bed to lie in.”

“Indeed.” Darcy could hardly feel sympathetic for the foolish girl, although it would not do to say so. “However, if Wickham attempts to take his anger out on Miss Elizabeth, there would be no recourse — and even if he wasn’t married already, I doubt she would chain herself to that man.”

Bennet huffed. “She would for the sake of her sisters. But I doubt she would stay with him. Although, as you say, he is already married now.”

Darcy was not inclined to think of even the possibility. “Might it be better if she did not have to suffer through any risk?” He drew breath before Bennet. “I have taken the liberty, sir, of obtaining Sir William’s assistance and have two constables and a hired hack chaise waiting at this moment to convey Mr. and Mrs. Wickham to the north without delay. It will also prevent them taking the opportunity to dally yet further in town. I will also be writing to Colonel Featherstone to ask for leniency for this first offence —if only for the sake of your youngest daughter.”

Bennet’s eyebrow rose. “You know the man?”

Darcy grimaced. “I do.” He hadn’t wanted his involvement in the aftermath of the elopement known here, but Bennet was not a stupid man.

“Well, I think there is a story here. I will need further information, Mr. Darcy. But I suppose at this moment, we need to put your plan into action.” He leaned across his desk and rang the bell.

When the housekeeper answered, he sent her and the butler to begin packing the couple's effects. Then he turned a wry smile on Darcy.

“Very well, let us go and inform my guests that they have definitely overstayed their welcome.”

Darcy followed him through to the sitting room. Even though the formal calling hour was long past, he would at least see Miss Elizabeth today.

From behind Bennet, he could see Wickham's face turn white as he saw Darcy. The man knew very well that if he did not turn up to his position, Darcy had promised him the next step was Marshalsea.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:01 am

3

Elizabeth looked up as Papa entered the room, and she saw the figure of Mr. Darcy behind him. Her heart began to race. After what Mr. Bingley had said, she had thought she would never see him again. But here he was.

He glanced her way briefly, but his expression was set impassively as he sought out Mr. Wickham, and his icy glare would have terrified Elizabeth.

She was very pleased to see Mr. Wickham seemed as afraid as she would have been, had that glare been directed at her.

“Well, Mr. Wickham, and Mrs. Wickham, it appears you are to be spared the indignity of the post-coach. You are fortunate.” Papa’s tone was wry.

Surely Mr. Darcy would not send them in his coach! That would be tantamount to a reward, wouldn’t it? She set herself to listen to Papa.

“Lydia, Mrs. Hill has begun to pack your belongings. You are to go upstairs and be ready in twenty minutes. Anything not packed by then will be left behind. You will not return to Longbourn.”

It wasn’t just Lydia’s eyes that were round with shock. All the sisters and Mama stared at him. But he had not finished. “Elizabeth, you are to go upstairs and supervise Lydia; your task is to ensure that she does not take anything that is not provably hers. I will not have her liberating any of your sisters’ belongings.”

Elizabeth got to her feet amid the tumult of noise that was Lydia and Mama. As she passed Mr. Darcy, they exchanged a glance, and her heart beat faster. This must be his doing, surely?

“Mr. Wickham, you are to go outside with Mr. Darcy, who will explain to you why you have escorts and then have you listen to their instructions. Then you will have no more than ten minutes to check Mr. Hill has packed all your effects. Within thirty minutes, you will both be gone from this place.”

Elizabeth glanced back into the hall from halfway up the stairs. Wickham, pale with anger — or was it fear? was walking outside. His head was held high, but somehow his manner showed he was afraid. Mr. Darcy followed him. In contrast, he was upright, his manner as always; a tall aristocratic man, utterly in charge of everything.

Elizabeth swallowed. Might she get a chance to speak to him after the coach had gone? She turned back and followed Lydia into the guest chamber.

Mr. and Mrs. Hill were there, methodically folding and placing items into the two trunks. Elizabeth slid a glance at the soiled menswear lying scattered over the floor before averting her eyes and shaking her head at Lydia’s crumpled gowns and body linen.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the folding, Mrs. Hill. It is obvious that Mrs. Wickham is not concerned about her clothes being crumpled.”

Lydia stuck her tongue out at Elizabeth. “The maids will wash and iron everything when we arrive, so I don’t need to worry.”

“I won’t worry at all, Lydia — there probably won’t be maids unless you can afford to pay them. Now help Mrs. Hill, or you won’t be finished and will have to leave some things behind.”

“Well, help me, then!”

“No.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “Papa sent me to make sure you did not take anything that does not belong to you.”

Lydia tossed her head and went to the mirror to examine her face. “Hill, I need that jar of salve, too. This mark is not going to go down for days.”

“No, miss.” Hill was imperturbable and obviously not inclined to give Lydia the distinction of a married woman. “The salve belongs to the household. You will need to buy some at the apothecary next time you stop.”

“This is all your fault, Lizzy!” Lydia screamed at her. “How can Papa send me like this? I will look terrible in front of all our new neighbours.”

“That might be the least of your worries,” Elizabeth muttered under her breath, and then she wished she hadn’t as Lydia was revitalised in her invective.

Elizabeth looked at the clock. Seven minutes left.” But Lydia was not looking. She was in front of the mirror, carefully pinning her bonnet into place, pinching her cheeks and practising her pout.

Elizabeth caught Mrs. Hill’s gaze and shrugged. “Will you be done in time, Mrs. Hill?”

“Yes, Miss Lizzy. The master said I can throw out anything that’s left after the trunks have gone down.”

Lydia growled, but could obviously not think of anything further that might get her aims.

Then Mr. Wickham came sullenly into the room, glowering at Elizabeth. “Out, miss perfect!” he said contemptuously.

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow, and then looked at the man behind him in the doorway.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Benson?”

The man nodded at her. “Sir William has arranged us constables to escort Mr. and Mrs. Wickham to Newcastle, Miss Elizabeth. I have escorted this man upstairs to see to his packing —and protect the ladies.”

“That is good of you,” Elizabeth said, watching Lydia who was sorting through the detritus on top of the dresser.

Mr. Darcy was standing impassively to one side of the family as they gathered to bid farewell to Lydia and Mr. Wickham — who was behaving in his usual charming manner to Mama. Elizabeth was glad to see all her sisters were as stony-faced as she knew she was.

Papa was standing with them, but his arms were crossed and his face also unsmiling.

Lydia had not noticed. She was chatting away to Mama about the balls and parties and asking to be sent ribbons and other trifles “... as soon as I have sent you our direction.”

Then she was giggling as she turned to her sisters. “And you will be able to write to me as you are not married and will have more time than I will.”

Elizabeth turned her back on the thoughtless girl, and was astonished when all her sisters, as one, followed suit. Then they all walked away.

“Jane!” Mama said disbelievingly.

Elizabeth tucked her arm in her sister’s. “Be strong, dearest.”

And she glanced at Mary and Kitty. “Thank you too, for standing with me.”

“I wonder if she will ever learn.” Mary said quietly. “But I think you will miss her most, Kitty.”

There were tears in Kitty’s eyes. “Well, at least I will not have to hide my things any more,” she said bravely.

“It will be wonderful.” Elizabeth tried to encourage her. “We can all sit around the big table to make over our bonnets without any drama.”

“Ooh!” Kitty’s eyes were shining. “It sounds as if it will be great fun.”

Elizabeth made a vow that she would take more notice of her younger sisters. After all, she supposed it to be partly her fault that Lydia was as she was. And she wondered if Lydia had really not noticed the cut from her sisters.

As they turned into the sitting room, she heard the sound of the chaise leaving the driveway, and saw Mr. Darcy following Papa into his bookroom.

Darcy nodded at Mr. Bennet as the man waved the decanter at him. "I think we could both do with a drink, sir."

"Indeed." The man was grimacing. "I know it needed doing, and I am relieved that they are finally gone and my other daughters are all safe." He shook his head. "But Lydia is my daughter, and it has been hard to send her off in this way."

"I am sorry for it, Mr. Bennet," Darcy murmured. "Although I am happy that he can no longer cause further damage to your daughters, either physically, or to their reputation. It must have taken you a great deal of courage."

Bennet's gaze was startled. "I suppose I thank you."

Darcy smiled wryly. "I just hope your daughter does not importune her mother too much for fripperies and money. I must warn you, Wickham will never have enough."

Bennet nodded. He looked exhausted, but he turned to the mantel and rang the bell. When the butler entered, he sent him to return with the housekeeper.

"Take a seat, Mr. Darcy. I would like to have a word with you when I have spoken to them."

Darcy waited as inconspicuously as he could in the chair by the window. His thoughts were in the sitting room, and he wondered how Miss Elizabeth fared after the scenes this morning. As if from a distance, he heard Bennet speaking.

“Mr. and Mrs. Hill, thank you for your assistance this morning. In future, all post to this house will come to me. I will check the sender, and then return to you the letters that the ladies may receive. No post at all is to go directly to any family member.”

The butler bowed and the housekeeper curtsied. “Yes, sir.” “Yes, master.”

Then they were gone, and Bennet almost collapsed into the chair opposite Darcy. “At least my family will not have a direction for them.”

He looked older. Just in this short time, he looked older. Darcy was under no illusion that the man could like his youngest daughter’s behaviour, but he obviously had the love of a father.

“Gardiner assisted very much with ensuring Lydia married and lifting the ruin on my girls,” Bennet sounded as if he were talking almost to himself. “But I always knew she was a foolish girl, and my other daughters found it very difficult to live in such a household.”

Darcy was relieved to hear that Bennet had no suspicion of his own earlier involvement in the marriage arrangements. But he also considered that Bennet and his wife were at fault for failing to provide discipline and an education to their youngest daughters.

Bennet, at least, had paid a heavy price, and Darcy would not be so cruel as to speak of it.

But he was unprepared for the man’s next words. “While I am grateful that you arranged the ... removal of that man from Longbourn, I am still unsure why you might have gone to such trouble, Mr. Darcy.”

Bennet might look older, but his gaze was still piercing.

Darcy bowed his head. He was not yet ready to reveal his intentions — at least, not until after he had the opportunity to speak to Miss Elizabeth. He spoke carefully. “Wickham was my father’s godson. Father loved him, paid for his education, and could see no bad in him. Wickham has repaid that with living financially at a station he cannot afford, and uses his education to impose himself on young women as if he were a gentleman.” He shrugged. “It is my duty to mitigate what is my father’s fault for giving him ideas above his station.”

“Oh. I thought it might be something else.” Bennet slumped back in his chair.

“What would that be?” Surely the man had not guessed?

Bennet shrugged. “You apparently arrived here with Mr. Bingley in time to hear what went on, but would have expected Wickham and Lydia to have been gone some days previously. I doubt you were here merely to ensure Mr. Bingley would see my eldest daughter.”

Darcy thought he was best not answering that. But his silence was obviously as incriminating as speaking would have been, judging by the man’s expression.

He rose to his feet. “I thank you for the drink, Mr. Bennet, and for your assistance in arranging Wickham’s departure from Longbourn.” He dare not ask to see Miss Elizabeth, not today.

If Bingley’s return had been accepted by Miss Bennet, then they could return tomorrow, and hopefully there would be no surprises.

The following morning, he rode out early, as was his habit. He’d had little sleep, and it was barely dawn. An early morning mist was curling above the fields, hiding any unevenness underfoot and he took care not to ride too fast until he was safely on the lane.

So it was nearly half after six when he reached Oakham Mount, and he rode slowly up the path on the west side.

Elizabeth — Miss Elizabeth — had told him during a stroll at Pemberley that it was her favourite walking destination when she was at Longbourn, and he had looked for it on the map.

But perhaps it was too early for her this morning, and he tried to prepare himself for a disappointment. But it was not necessary.

He counted himself exceedingly fortunate when he broke through the trees into the clearing which looked out over the sunrise and he saw her figure on the bench, silhouetted against the sun.

He smiled. He would know her anywhere, and he coughed to announce his presence, although he was sure she would have heard his horse. They had not been that quiet. But she seemed startled, and rose as she turned.

“Mr. Darcy!”

He bowed. “Good morning, Miss Elizabeth. I hope you are not displeased that I recalled you telling me of this destination and came here, hoping to see you?” Please do not let her be provoked.

But she smiled at him, and his heart jumped in his chest. “How could I be angry with you, Mr. Darcy? And I have wanted to speak to you.”

“I am at your service, madam.” He bowed again and stepped to the bench where she had moved along to one end. “With your permission?” He indicated the bench, and at her nod, sat down.

He must be very careful. He recalled the last time he had seen her before returning to Hertfordshire. In that small parlour at the inn in Lambton, she had turned away from him, her face a mask, and said goodbye with a finality that had shaken him to the core.

But it must have been because she knew that a gentleman would turn away from a ruined family. At least, he hoped that was what she had thought.

Elizabeth stared out at the view, hardly able to face Mr. Darcy. But she was glad he was here. Regardless of propriety, she had wanted privacy to speak what she must.

“I must thank you, sir, for your aid to my family.” She bowed her head, happy that her bonnet would be hiding her expression. “Twice over; because even before the events of yesterday morning, I knew that you aided us in the marriage of my youngest sister and relieving the ruin of all our family.”

There was a long pause, and then his voice was quiet. “I am sorry you know of it, Miss Elizabeth. It was never my intention that you should.”

“You must not blame my aunt. Lydia revealed it first, and so I demanded that my aunt tell me everything. No one else in the family knows, so you may be reassured of that.”

“I thank you. I would prefer it to remain between us alone.”

“And my aunt and uncle!” She laughed, and the atmosphere between them seemed to lighten a little. But she could not afford to feel hopeful. Yesterday, from what Mr. Bingley had said, it was obvious that Mr. Darcy had heard her slap Lydia, and while she could not be sorry for it, she knew it was so unladylike as to render it impossible for him to ... to ...

She could hardly formulate her thoughts and hopes and they trailed off.

After a few moments silence, he spoke quietly. “Despite that you now know the facts, I trust Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner not to reveal more.” His voice was gentle, and tears started to her eyes and she had to look down.

There were some moments of silence, and then his voice was quiet and warm. “Will you not look at me, Miss Elizabeth?”

She could not show him her tears and instead reached into her reticule for her handkerchief to pat her face dry. Now she could look at him, and the tenderness in his gaze nearly caused her undoing.

“What has distressed you, my dear?”

It was his words of endearment now that caused her discomposure and her startled gaze seemed to cause his eyes to darken more. The lump in her throat made it hard to breathe.

“You just ... you just called me dear.”

He bowed his head. “I am sorry, Miss Elizabeth. But it is how I think of you.” He paused a moment before holding his hand to his cheek, his lips turned up. “And now you may slap me for my indiscretion.”

Were his eyes dancing mischievously? The staid and serious Mr. Darcy?

Her shoulders slumped, and she looked down. “I know it was terrible behaviour, sir. The impropriety was unforgivable — and that you and Mr. Bingley heard it! I am utterly ashamed.”

She could sense he was there, her whole body seemed to be afire; and she knew he moved closer to her. Then he took her hand.

“Do not be ashamed, Miss Elizabeth.” His voice was very soft. “Small children the world over may receive a slap in the nursery for misbehaviour. Perhaps your youngest sister did not at that time receive the lessons she ought, being that she was the youngest?”

She could not prevent her expression, and she responded with a watery smile. “It might have made for a more comfortable life for us all, Mr. Darcy.” She shook her head. “And perhaps for Lydia, if she had not had to marry him. I do not expect her feeling that she has a good marriage will last very long.”

“I am sorry for it,” he said quietly, and she knew he meant every word.

She took a deep breath, not wanting to talk about Lydia any more; there had been enough drama about her these last weeks.

“Do I have you to thank for bringing Mr. Bingley back to Hertfordshire?”

He huffed an embarrassed-sounding laugh. “I confessed all to him after Hunsford. I could not allow my misconceptions and wrong actions to stand and cause either of them continued misery.”

“Then that is another thing I must thank you for, sir.” Elizabeth smiled at him. “Jane was happy last evening.”

He was still holding her hand, and the contact — even through their gloves — was causing her utter distraction. She could barely think.

“I am pleased,” he said carefully. “And I hope you are pleased, too, Miss Elizabeth.”

He drew a deep breath and twisted more on the seat so he was facing her.

“Miss Elizabeth.” He sounded apprehensive, and she tried to suppress a smile. “I was sorry at the abrupt end to your visit to Derbyshire. I thought then we were beginning to understand each other rather better, and that my attempts to be a better man than I was at Hunsford might incline you to forgive me for my dreadful words on that terrible occasion.” His fingers pressed her hand slightly.

Elizabeth swallowed. “Your letter had already gone a long way to explaining yourself, Mr. Darcy, and I thank you for it.”

He raised her hand slowly to his lips, his gaze never leaving her eyes.

Elizabeth swallowed, and drew her hand away. Mr. Darcy drew slightly closer.

“What is it, Miss Elizabeth? Have I not yet proved myself enough of a better man?”

Elizabeth turned away and looked out at the landscape. “It is nothing like that. Not at all.” She gave a tiny smile, and then turned to look at him, knowing her expression showed her pain.

“I cannot afford to allow my feelings to run away with me, Mr. Darcy. I have the disaster of having that man as a brother-in-law now, and you surely cannot conceive of joining a family with that insurmountable obstacle.” She dropped her eyes to look at the ground. Anything rather than watch his expression change.

Mr. Darcy took her hand again, and the gentle pressure drew her gaze back up to his face. “I know that, Miss Elizabeth.” He looked slightly amused. “I arranged it.”

His hands both now fully enclosed hers and he brought them up to rest against his heart.

“Everything I did was for you. I beg you do not send me away. I would like to call on

you, Miss Elizabeth, and see if I may persuade you to like me a little more than you have done in the past.”

She knew her features softened. He was not asking too much. There had been so many changes and a great deal of drama; she needed a pause in things that were happening. If Mr. Darcy was calling on her, despite what had happened, she might be able to permit her heart to hope.

She met his gaze. “I hope you feel strong, Mr. Darcy. While I would like it if you were to call on me; it will mean Mama will be very loud.” She felt pained. “She can be ...” she lowered her voice with mortification “... she can be very vulgar.”

His grip tightened on her hand. “She is your mother, Miss Elizabeth, and therefore worthy of my respect. I hope you will allow me to prove to you that I am able to show that respect.”

Finally, she could allow herself to smile. “Will you brave Papa later today to gain his consent, Mr. Darcy?”

He nodded at her, his eyes both tender and passionate. “I will; but also, when we are alone, might you call me by my given name — or, preferably, the name my family call me — William.”

Elizabeth could feel her face warming in a blush. Never before had she called any grown man by their given name.

“William.” Her voice was low, and his chuckle wound its way around her heart, warm and comforting.

“I like the sound of my name on your lips.”

She must stop this, or she might find things progressing too fast. How could she feel sure of him so soon?

“I believe it is time for me to return to Longbourn, Mr. Darcy — William. I do not want to be missed at breakfast.”

His smile softened his features. “Of course, my dear. I would not wish your father discomposed before I ask him for his consent.” He rose to his feet and offered his hand.

She accepted it, rather than say that she was quite capable of standing up by herself. It was rather pleasant to be feel cherished, and she shivered.

“Are you cold?” He looked concerned. “Let me give you my coat.”

“No, sir. I am not cold, and there is no better way to warm up than by walking briskly.”

“May I escort you home?”

She shook her head. “Much better not. I suppose you will be arriving with Mr. Bingley at the calling hour. The presence of your friend may even distract Mama for today!” She laughed, and he bowed slightly.

“Please take care, Elizabeth, and I will see you again very soon.”

Darcy allowed his horse to amble back to Netherfield in a way he would not normally do. But he wanted to be able to think back with pleasure at the morning so far, and the horse was able to do as he wished.

Elizabeth. How fortunate he was that she had been there so early. And that she had consented to his request that he call upon her. When she had agreed, he had been tempted to amend his request and ask for a courtship. But he had forced himself to consider her wishes above his.

He shuddered; he would never want to be refused by her again, never wish to see her face angry and her words filled with fury, as she had spat them at Hunsford. He had spent many months of sleepless nights; many months berating himself for his injudicious words — and his blindness in not seeing her dislike of him.

But today was for forgetting all that. His Elizabeth needed to be wooed. She needed to see a better man, and it would take longer than a few days to convince her of the change in him.

And she would need to be properly courted. Ladies liked to feel loved and cherished. Why would not his Elizabeth wish the same?

He set himself to think of little things he might do for her, actions which would prove to her that he had improved to gain her good opinion.

And perhaps she would agree to correspond with Georgiana. At Pemberley, his sister

had begun to think of Elizabeth as a friend, a lady of about her own age who was kind and pleasant company. He huffed a quiet laugh. Elizabeth was totally opposite to Miss Bingley — Georgiana was afraid of her ; and yet, she already trusted Elizabeth, even though they had been little in company.

“Darcy!” Bingley’s voice crossed the hall before his friend did. “I was wondering if you intended to miss breaking your fast this morning. You are not usually out so long as this.”

Darcy clapped him on the shoulder. “Yes, I took a new route, watched the sunrise and forgot the time.” They walked together back into the breakfast room, where the sun shone through the east-facing windows.

His mouth watered as he looked at the repast on the side table, and he moved to fill his plate. His appetite was restored this morning, now he knew Miss Elizabeth would allow him to call upon her.

“Will you forgive me the lesson on estate management this morning, Darcy? I wish to return to Longbourn as soon as it is a reasonable hour.”

“Hmm?” Darcy looked up. It was enjoyable here without Bingley’s relations. They could not, of course, entertain without a hostess, but Bingley seemed happy to call at Longbourn — and Darcy was too, now he had spoken to Miss Elizabeth. “Oh. Yes, of course.”

Bingley had finished eating and leaned back, coffee cup in hand. His smile was knowing and Darcy prayed he would not flush.

“Did you meet anyone this morning — apart from seeing the sunrise, of course?”

Darcy shrugged. “If you feel free to ask me questions, then I will be able to of you.”

He raised his eyebrows, and Bingley beamed.

“Indeed, I will tell you freely. Miss Bennet is a veritable angel, Darcy, and so forgiving. I told her I had no knowledge of her being in town this last winter, and knowing that; it was why I had left my sisters behind when I came to Netherfield on this occasion.” He sighed. “She has pardoned me and accepted my apology. We had a wonderful conversation and she told me of her work in the stillroom for the tenants of Longbourn.”

Darcy was listening idly to the news of the lady he devoutly hoped would become his sister-in-law. “That is commendable, Bingley. I am happy she is an estimable woman.” He raised an eyebrow. “And have you discovered whether she has affection for you?”

“I ... Not exactly. I believe so, but she is cautious of exposing her heart to me, given that I abandoned her so cruelly last November. I asked her if I may court her, and she has consented, so I will speak to Mr. Bennet this morning.”

Darcy smiled to himself. “A good course of action, Bingley.” And I am on a similar path, if you but knew it.

His friend leaned forward. “Let us take more coffee in the library, Darcy. There is something I would speak to you about.”

Once the door was closed, Bingley looked closely at his friend. “I am happy you have agreed to come to Longbourn. But I am puzzled as to why. I know as well as anyone that you are besieged by Lady Catherine on one side demanding that you marry her daughter, and that on the other side is your other aunt, lining up strings of debutantes to parade before you, because she wants you to wed within the first circles.”

His gaze was sympathetic, but with some steel behind it which puzzled Darcy.

“So, why are you coming to Longbourn? If I have my way in courting Miss Bennet, then Miss Elizabeth will be my sister. I saw the way you looked at her at Pemberley. Would you be better to stay away from her, if you cannot meet expectations?”

Darcy rubbed his chin and looked across the room. But his eyes were unfocussed. How much dare he tell Bingley?

“You know very well, Bingley, that I am not promised to my cousin; nor to any of those simpering town-loving misses. I hope you trust that I am not the sort of man who will raise expectations nor will I be ungentlemanly.”

His friend looked exceedingly discomposed. “No, no, not at all! It was just ... just that you cannot, of course, align yourself with any family that now numbers Mr. Wickham amongst it. He will never cease to use your name when amassing debts!”

Darcy scowled; it was what Miss Elizabeth had said, that this was an insurmountable obstacle . And she was not wrong. Except that it was the only way. Miss Elizabeth must be his, he loved her far too much to just ride away.

He became aware that fresh coffee had arrived and a footman was holding out a cup to him. He nodded apologetically and took it. “Thank you.”

He was soon deep in thought again. How could he mitigate the problem of Wickham? He had warned Bennet, who seemed to be determined that he would not allow his wife and daughters to be importuned for money. So that was one avenue open to Wickham which had been blocked.

Tempting as it was to get the man sent to the continent — to an unsurvivable front-line — he could not do it because of Mrs. Wickham. Miss Elizabeth might have slapped her and been goaded beyond endurance at that silly child’s behaviour, but she still loved her sister. And he didn’t want a widowed Mrs. Wickham returned to

Longbourn. Even though he hoped to have Elizabeth at Pemberley, she would still wish to visit them regularly. No, it would not do.

Elizabeth sat next to Jane, quite enjoying the relative peacefulness. Relative, only because Mama was bewailing how she missed her youngest daughter, Elizabeth tightened her lips. Mama would soon forget — at least, she hoped so. Her mother had ever been a character of the moment, unable to think much beyond the present, and Lydia might soon be ... not forgot, but out of the immediate day-to-day life at Longbourn.

Jane, beside her, sighed, and Elizabeth glanced up. “What ails you, sister?” she murmured. “Is it Mama?”

“I feel bad about resenting it, Lizzy. After all, she is missing Lydia, being the first day. But Mr. Bingley is calling this morning. He wants to get Papa’s consent to court me! I think Mama will be quite distracted.”

Elizabeth nodded. “A courtship! I should think she would be.” I will not say that Mr. Darcy is going to see Papa too. She raised her head and looked at her mother.

“Mama, do you not want to call upon Aunt Philips? You can tell her that Mr. and Mrs. Wickham had a private chaise all the way to Newcastle, at such expense!”

It did not take too much persuasion to get Mama and Kitty into the coach and she waved them off along the drive with some relief.

She was just in time. No sooner had they turned to re-enter the house than she saw Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley turning in from the lane. She smiled, it was a great relief

that Mama was going the other way and would not have passed them, or she might have turned back.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” She waited while Jane, as the eldest, spoke for both of them. “Please join us within.”

Elizabeth could feel Mr. Darcy’s searing gaze upon her, but he seemed more serious now with that frown on his face than he had been earlier, up on Oakham Mount. Had he had second thoughts?

She steeled herself. It was only since this morning that she had allowed herself to hope. She must distance herself from her feelings. She could not allow herself to be embarrassed by anyone noting that such feelings were not required.

In the sitting room, it was just she, Jane and Mary with Mr. Darcy, who looked stern. Mr. Bingley must have asked to see Papa at once.

Did he really not approve of Mr. Bingley and Jane? But then, why would he have brought Mr. Bingley back with him, and why would he be pursuing her if her family was so unsuitable for even Mr. Bingley?

She shivered and glanced at Mr. Darcy out of the corner of her eye, then dropped her eyes in a hurry; he was staring at her! There must be something wrong. He had changed his mind, she thought despairingly.

But then, why had he come? It would have been easier for him to leave Hertfordshire, and return to London — or rejoin his sister at Pemberley.

She drew a deep breath. “How is Miss Darcy, sir? I hope she is well and still enjoying the new pianoforte.” She knew her voice was higher than it ought to be, and winced at her own anxiety.

Mr. Darcy smiled, looking rather relieved. "I had a letter from her yesterday, Miss Elizabeth. You are right, she is enjoying her music, although I know she misses company when I am not there." He hesitated. "I wonder if you might enter a correspondence with her? I believe she would like to be friends."

"I would be pleased to continue our acquaintance by letter, Mr. Darcy. She is a pleasant girl, and very accomplished." Elizabeth's own hopes rose again. Surely he would not suggest a continuing connection with his sister if he did not wish to see her again?

His eyes softened, and she took rather more encouragement from that than she supposed she ought.

Then Papa entered the room with Mr. Bingley beaming behind him. "Well, well, my Jane." Papa offered his hand to her sister and drew her to her feet. "I have given my consent to Mr. Bingley entering a courtship with you, my dear. I hope you will take time to become fully acquainted with each other." He looked around the room. "And prepare yourselves for effusions of joy when your mother hears of it!"

It was only a few minutes later that Elizabeth found herself on Mr. Darcy's arm as they followed the other couple through the gardens.

He bent his head to murmur in her ear. "How did you arrange your mother be calling somewhere this morning? I presume it was you?"

Elizabeth huffed a laugh. "I think you know me very well already, sir. I suggested Mama and Kitty go to my Aunt Philips to tell her that Lydia and her husband had a private chaise all the way to Newcastle, and how much it must have cost!"

He chuckled. "I can see you are adept at framing almost anything to be advantageous!" His expression turned serious. "Has your mother not accepted that

her youngest daughter needed to leave Longbourn?”

“Well, it is early days yet, Mr. Darcy. And while Mama has always been relentless in the need for us to marry, I don’t believe she thought much about what would happen after the wedding day itself.”

He nodded, sympathetic, and she was emboldened to continue. “I do believe, sir, that if Mr. Bingley’s courtship of Jane leads to marriage, then perhaps they ought to discuss whether or not to take an estate rather further away from Longbourn.” She grinned. “As I believe I have mentioned to you before, I do believe it is possible that a woman may be settled too near her family.”

He laughed delightedly. “I am happy you remember our more polite conversations of the past.” His expression turned rather more whimsical, and he lowered his voice. “Although I do wish you remembered this morning’s.” He raised an eyebrow. “You agreed to call me by my given name,” he murmured, and the passion in his voice made Elizabeth’s legs go weak.

“William,” she whispered.

“Thank you.” His gaze was searing, and Elizabeth struggled to maintain her composure. “Are you going to give Mr. Bingley and Jane their day in the sun and speak to Papa tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “If you do not object, I would still like to speak to him today. As long as he knows my intentions are honourable and consents to it, the fact that I am officially calling on you does not need to be broadcast unless you wish it to be.”

Her heart swelled at evidence of his concern to ensure she shared in making decisions, and she smiled at him. “If you wish to speak to him now, then when Jane asks, I can say you needed to tell him something about Lydia.”

His eyes softened. “There is something I can mention to him about that, so it would even have the benefit of being true.” He glanced around at Mr. Bingley, and as that gentleman was not looking at them, took her hand and raised it to his lips, the pressure of his fingers causing a lump to rise in her throat.

“Thank you, William,” she murmured, breathlessly.

The housekeeper announced Darcy to Mr. Bennet who welcomed him into his library, and ordered coffee while glancing curiously at him.

Finally, he sat opposite him and raised a brow. “Do you have any further information about Wickham, Mr. Darcy? I thought it would be a little soon to have heard from him already?”

Darcy nodded. “There is another reason entirely that I have called on you, sir. But while we are on this subject, I might ask that you send on any begging letters from Mr. Wickham — or from him using his wife to write — to me to deal with. It is best that he has a single creditor, or that I discover any difficulties he is in relatively soon.”

Bennet looked older. “I will do that, although I do not like it.”

“I doubt it will happen very much, Mr. Bennet. Wickham usually sends creditors my way directly, by using my name to guarantee being able to gain credit.”

“Very well. What was the other matter you wished to speak about?” Bennet didn’t seem to be too pleased to have Darcy in his bookroom, and he thought the embarrassment of needing him to assist getting rid of the Wickhams was still a little too raw.

“I have the consent of Miss Elizabeth to call upon her, and I would wish to make my intentions known to you, sir, and gain your consent.”

The man's eyebrows rose in unfeigned surprise. "My Lizzy? Intentions? But ..."

Darcy smiled painfully. "I am not surprised at your shock, Mr. Bennet. I am aware that I insulted your daughter before we were even introduced properly; and that she harboured a firm dislike of me due to my stupid behaviour. But she has forgiven me, and I am hoping for your consent to call, so that I may prove to her that I am worthy of her."

"With what aim?"

Darcy bowed his head. "I am aware I need to allow Miss Elizabeth the time to get to know me better. But, for myself, I would like to progress to a formal courtship and then marriage."

Bennet raised his eyebrows. "I cannot think your family will approve."

"My sister and my cousin are the only family who matter to me. They have met Miss Elizabeth and both like her very much. The rest of my family? I will ensure that no disapprobation harms or discomposes your daughter."

"Very well. I suppose you do not want to broadcast this consent too much, until you request a courtship, Mr. Darcy? Or my cousin's noble patroness may wish to call and berate you that you are engaged to her daughter."

Darcy winced. "There is no contract; I am not obliged, and I am my own master. But I will ensure that is made very clear to her. Again."

Bennet chuckled. "From what I have heard from my cousin and from Lizzy, your aunt is a redoubtable woman who does not suffer anyone to cross her."

Darcy smiled ruefully. "Should I go to Kent to tell her once more of my unbending

refusal to marry Miss de Bourgh, I suggest you cover your ears. Her lamentations will undoubtedly be heard throughout the south of England!"

Bennet chuckled. "Well, begone and see Lizzy. I thank you for your courtesy in informing me of your intentions." He waved Darcy away and laid a hand on a book beside him, his own intentions clear.

Darcy rose and bowed. "Thank you, Mr. Bennet."

Elizabeth was waiting for him, curled up in the window seat beside the front door, and she put her finger on her lips as he approached her. Then she took his hand and drew him along the hall to the back parlour.

Leaving the door ajar, she drew him to stand by the window and kept her voice low. "How did Papa seem when you spoke to him?"

He took her hand. "Dearest Elizabeth. He was surprised; of course he was. But before he could say anything much, I told him that I knew you had disliked me, but you had forgiven me and consented that I attempt to prove myself worthy of you." He lifted his other hand and tucked an escaped curl behind her ear, the intimacy of it shocking her. She could barely concentrate on his words.

"Then he was only concerned that I protect you from the disapprobation of my family and I was able to inform him that I had already considered the issue, for you already know the only two members of my family whose opinion I care about."

She smiled at the mischief in his eyes. "I do not imagine one of those two is Lady Catherine!"

His eyes darkened. "You are correct, Elizabeth. Now, before I am tempted too far, perhaps we had better return to the sitting room and rescue Bingley and your sister."

“Mary is with them.” Elizabeth sighed. “But I suppose we ought to return to company.” But these stolen moments had been — wonderful. And he had called her dearest Elizabeth ! She drew the memory closer, knowing she would be thinking of it all night.

Once she sat beside him in the sitting room, the tea things refreshed, she saw Mary slip out to go to the piano to practice, and she smiled. The presence of guests, especially gentlemen, always discomposed her most reserved sister.

William glanced at her and the other couple, and raised his voice slightly. “I believe the weather is set fair for the next few days. Perhaps, Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, you would like to go out in my chaise tomorrow. I wondered if you have perhaps already been to Aldwickbury House? I have heard it is a fine house to visit and the grounds are extensive. It is not more than four miles along some pretty lanes.”

Elizabeth glanced at him as Jane and Mr. Bingley expressed happy surprise. William — she liked thinking of him as William — was looking down at her, an eyebrow slightly raised.

“It sounds wonderful,” she sighed. “And Mama will think we are only there to chaperone the courting couple.” She let her eyes dance. “We can continue to know each other better without her suspecting a thing!”

His smile could almost be called smug, and Elizabeth tipped her head on one side and gave him her best challenging look.

“I know!” His chuckle reminded her that she was not going to hold out against him for long, not now he was flirting — Mr. Darcy; flirting! — with her.

Jane and her beau were so caught up in each other, they were blind to William taking

her hand and pressing it between her fingers. “I am hoping you know of other places we may take outings; perhaps a picnic one day. Then, in a week or so, you may persuade your parents that a few weeks in town would give Bingley and I the opportunity of our escorting you both to the theatre.”

Elizabeth stared at him. “You have this all planned out, don’t you, sir?”

She caught her breath as he bent towards her. “I have been thinking of nothing else, Elizabeth, since I gained your consent this morning. You are a lady worthy of being pleased, and I will let nothing stand in my way.”

Darcy stood in front of the mirror at Darcy House as his valet hurried around him, straightening his jacket, adjusting his cravat. He wanted to look his best tonight.

The last three weeks had been wonderful. He and Elizabeth had spent nearly every day in close company — along with Bingley and Miss Bennet. But he was not prepared to wait much longer. The torment had been exquisite. But torment it had been, and last night he had wondered if Elizabeth might feel the same.

She, of course, being a lady, could never say anything, but must wait for him to broach the subject. Although she was a strong personality in her own right; perhaps the fact that she had not hinted at her readiness meant that she would not yet wish him to speak?

He shuddered; this was the most important thing in his life, and he was abominably afraid of ruining it all. Now he had hope again, he could not bear it to be cruelly snatched away.

He had just nodded at Maunder that he was ready, when there was a knock at the door. “Enter!”

The butler opened the door. “I apologise for disturbing you, sir. Lady Catherine de Bourgh has called and insists she cannot wait.”

Darcy sighed, his aunt must have seen the write up in the papers that he had been seen in company with Elizabeth at the theatre, and around the galleries and museums

of town. And Lady Catherine was never prepared to wait.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones. I will come down now. I will not offer her any refreshment, so please ensure the housekeeper does not bring any in.”

The butler’s eyes bulged. “Yes, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy grinned as he remembered the man’s shock as he hurried down the stairs and turned into the drawing room. It was time he finally ensured his aunt understood that he would never change his mind.

He dipped his head at his aunt as he entered. “I was not expecting you, Aunt, and I am due to leave in five minutes, so you had better say what you came here for.” He crossed his arms and stood by the door.

He had seen her twice in the last fortnight. Being polite had not worked, now he must be rather ruder than was really comfortable. He smiled; Elizabeth would be proud of him.

“Well, nephew! Sit down then. We will wait for refreshments, then you will tell me how I can assist you to get rid of this upstart fortune hunter!”

“No, there will be no refreshments.” Darcy glanced at the clock. “Three minutes remain until I leave.”

Lady Catherine spluttered at him. “I have never been so offended in my life! Darcy, you cannot leave behind the honour of the Fitzwilliam family. Your mother would be shocked, and your father mortified at what you are doing.”

“You are completely wrong, madam. And if you happened to be right, then it would not matter. I am my own master, you have nothing to say to me!”

She drew breath, and he smiled. Now he knew that he would stand firm, there was no way she could upset him.

Ten minutes later, he hurried down the steps towards his coach. Once fairly on the way, he finally relaxed into the seat. Five and twenty minutes, and he would be greeting Elizabeth. Beloved Elizabeth! His heart began to race.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, his aunt's shocked face appearing in his mind. As soon as the five minutes he had given her had passed; he had summoned the butler, along with five footmen.

"Lady Catherine is leaving this house now. She is not to be offered refreshments; she is not to be permitted to retire, as Matlock House is so close. Once she deigns to leave this chair, she is not permitted to sit on another, and she is not to be offered the hospitality of this house. Every step taken towards the door is not to be reversed, and once she leaves here, she is not to be readmitted." He had looked round at all of them. "Am I understood?"

Mr. Jones nodded. "Do I understand correctly that if Lady Catherine is still sitting here in two hours' time, we wait until she moves?"

"Correct." Darcy turned back to her.

"Goodbye. I will send a note to Matlock House to expect you shortly."

He smiled slowly; it was not unexpected, but he had wondered how he could ever bring himself to be so ill-mannered.

But of course, if it was to protect Elizabeth, then it would be done.

As the coach pulled up outside number twenty-three, Gracechurch Street, Darcy was

ready to step down and hurry up the steps. Entering the drawing room, he bowed at the ladies and nodded at Bingley before turning to Mrs. Gardiner. “Good morning, madam. I am sorry that I am a little late.”

Her eyes were almost as mischievous as Elizabeth’s when she wanted to be.

“That is quite all right, Mr. Darcy. When our guest left here to go to Darcy House, we quite expected you to be later than you actually are. You must have been quite — firm with your aunt.”

Darcy knew his face was shocked. “She came here?”

“Indeed. Do take a seat and Elizabeth can explain what happened while I see to a fresh tea tray.”

“I am so sorry she imposed herself on you, Elizabeth. Are you well?” Darcy sat as close as he dared to Elizabeth, wanting nothing more than to reach for her hand.

Her gaze was astute. “I think she may have been ruder to you than she was even to me, when I turned down her kind and generous offer.” Then her eyes danced. “I do hope you are not going to throw me over, sir, for if you were, then I ought to have accepted the four thousand pounds she offered me!”

“Four thousand pounds?” Darcy’s voice broke, and he winced at the attention he drew to himself.

“Well, you know, it would have to be a considerable sum for any lady to throw away Pemberley and ten thousand a year.” Her words ended in a sultry laugh, and Darcy’s gut twisted.

“But is it enough to throw away a gentleman who is still attempting to prove himself

worthy of winning you?” His pulse thundered in his throat. This was not how he had envisaged this morning.

Elizabeth leaned closer to him, her lavender scent drifting around him. He swallowed.

“Never,” she whispered. “Nothing she could ever do or say would do that.”

It was the sign he had wondered if he would ever get. He took her hand, oblivious of the others in the room, and kept his voice as low as he dared. “Might you do me the honour of permitting me to make the request for a private interview with you; dearest, dearest Elizabeth?”

“Yes.” Another sultry whisper, and Darcy had to stop himself drawing closer to kiss her. He pressed her hand and rose to his feet.

A few minutes later, they were standing by the window in the little music room at the back of the house. It was as far away from the open door as they could be.

Darcy hardly knew what to say, but he was encouraged at her standing so close to him. He took both her hands in his.

“Dearest Elizabeth. Thank you for agreeing to this private interview.” He had to stop and take another breath — he was certainly making a hash of this. “I know I have officially only been calling upon you, and therefore the next step would be a formal courtship.” He searched her expression. “If that is what you would agree to, dearest, then that is what I will request. But ... I believe ... do you think we may perhaps be beyond that?”

He dropped to one knee. He could not remember the words he had spoken so often in his dreams; so he must do the best he could. “I love you, Elizabeth. I love you as I have never loved anyone before. I can imagine no other beside me all the days of my

life and will do all in my power to make you the happiest of ladies and protect you from all troubles, if you will but agree to become my wife.”

He pressed his lips to her hands for a long, long moment, before raising his eyes to her face.

Elizabeth knew the tears running down her face must be causing the shock on his face, and she hastily smiled through her tears.

“They are tears of joy, William. Do not be dismayed.”

He rose from bended knee and hesitated, still appearing uncertain, and her own heart knew pain at the sight of this and she pressed herself into his embrace. “Yes, dearest William. I will marry you. I believe I love you more than you love me.”

“Impossible!” His arms came round her fully and he crushed her to him, his lips meeting hers in the briefest of pleasures, and the sensation echoed right through her.

“Beloved Elizabeth, thank you. Thank you for consenting to be Mrs. Darcy.” His voice was thick with emotion, and his forehead touched hers. “Might you agree to it being as soon as possible? I am impatient to make you mine before some other drama tries to part us.”

She huffed a little laugh. “I am not certain how much Mama will wish to make of the occasion — having not had the pleasure of arranging Lydia’s wedding, I expect she will wish to make much of the next.”

His arms tightened further around her. “Then we will have to hurry Bingley and your sister to make a declaration. Then she will be so busy planning that one, we can be married and gone, causing her barely a ripple.”

“Oh, William! We cannot do that; I must be with Jane on her wedding day — I promised to stand up with her, you see.”

There was a quiet cough from the door, and William reluctantly dropped his arms. Elizabeth shivered at the feeling of loss.

They turned to see her aunt smiling gently in the doorway. “Am I to wish you joy?”

William took Elizabeth’s hand. “We would be glad of your good wishes, madam. Elizabeth has honoured me by accepting my plea for her hand.”

Elizabeth reached up on tiptoe to his ear. “And the rest of me,” she whispered, and his hand tightened around hers.

“Perhaps, Mrs. Gardiner, we might change our plans for the morning. Rather than the museum, I would like to walk out with Elizabeth in the park. Might we see if Miss Bennet and Bingley would agree?”

Soon they were walking along the Serpentine in the Great Park, the sun sparkling on the water, and Elizabeth sighed happily. Her hand was resting on William’s arm, the warmth of his presence doing strange things to her equilibrium, and, as she glanced at him, her heart beat a little faster. For the first time, he seemed relaxed, standing a little taller, his stance more open than she remembered before.

What would it be like, to be married to him? She knew she blushed at the thought.

He chuckled and looked down at her. “I hope you are not becoming concerned about all the new things that you will learn, my dear.” He sounded indulgent, before he dipped his head towards hers, and lowered his voice still further. “You are the strongest of ladies. A lady who will even do the unthinkable to discipline her sister who had needed such from the nursery. No, we will learn together, dearest. All I ask

is that we end each day in full accord with each other and that you tell me at once if I do anything to offend.”

She knew her smile was rather uncertain. “I remember how much I loved Pemberley when I visited, William. I am a little troubled whether I can be a good mistress of such a large estate.”

“Together, Elizabeth. We will care for the estate together. My staff are very good and you will be perfect — you are kind, strong, and experienced from looking after the tenants at Longbourn. Pemberley is no different except in scale.” He squeezed her hand with his arm.

“Now, madam, if you would care to step off the path just here, there is an interesting planting around the corner.”

Elizabeth tried to stop her lips twitching. She had been aware that William was steering her away from the busy path, and somewhat ahead of Jane and Mr. Bingley, and she was right. No sooner were they secluded behind a planting that was only interesting because of its dense foliage, than he drew her to him, and took her in his arms.

His lips on hers were both gentle and demanding. Elizabeth wasn’t about to try to work out how that could be, she was more concerned with her legs, which were threatening to buckle beneath her. His arms tightened more and he lifted his head. “Are you well?” he murmured.

“Mmm-hmm.” Elizabeth wound her arms round his neck. “Do pay attention, William. You can hold me up while you continue.”

He chuckled. “I could. But we might be discovered.” He dropped a brief kiss on her forehead. “Perhaps you will agree now to marry me very soon.”

“You have an — unusual — way of being persuasive, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth laughed.
“Very well, if Papa consents and if you can persuade Mama. And, if you can arrange it that I will still be available to stand up with Jane, then I will agree.”

His eyebrow rose. “And the other nine requests?”

Elizabeth frowned. “Nine?”

“You seem to be setting me the twelve labours of Hercules, Miss Elizabeth. I would know them all before I begin the list.”

They laughed together and returned to the path.

Darcy slouched in the comfortable chair in his library at Darcy House. He pondered Bingley who was nursing a large brandy in the chair opposite.

“May I ask you something, Bingley?”

His friend smiled affably. “Of course.”

Darcy grinned wolfishly. “I don’t know if you remember speaking to me, back at Netherfield, after we had returned to Longbourn?”

Bingley looked puzzled. “Perhaps you can remind me.”

“You said that — if you had your way in courting Miss Bennet, then Miss Elizabeth would be your sister. And you asked me to stay away if I could not meet her expectations, given that I was expected to marry in the first circles.”

Bingley’s face cleared and he laughed. “So I did.”

Darcy didn’t give him a moment to expound further. “But now Miss Bennet is going to be my sister, and very soon. Are you going to meet her expectations?” He smiled again, to remove any sting Bingley might feel if he did not realise he was teasing him. His levity was new.

Bingley was staring at him. “I hardly recognise you, old chap. Love suits you if you can now play jokes on me.” He smiled, a trifle anxiously. “I want nothing more than

to secure Miss Bennet as soon as I may. But I have been constrained by the fact that I abandoned her so cruelly last November. She has been kindness itself to allow me to court her — do you think it has been long enough to convince her that I can be constant?”

Darcy became serious. “I cannot tell, Bingley. And I am very conscious that I was in error last time, when I, so dreadfully, tried to order your life. But you will never know unless you ask Miss Bennet. She is not the sort of lady who will open her heart until she knows yours.”

Bingley looked determined. “I will ask her, perhaps, if she is happy to continue with the courtship, or if she feels she has discovered enough about me for me to be able to ask her ...” he looked up, his face suddenly anguished. “But what if she says she knows enough to know we are not suited, Darcy? I could not bear it if she sent me away.”

Darcy shook his head. “It is what I was afraid of. I was fortunate that Miss Elizabeth gave me a hint, and I realised it was then or never.” He drew a deep breath. “You will never know without asking, and I have not had any intimations from Miss Elizabeth that her sister has tired of your company.” He drew his hand across his mouth.

“You might perhaps ask her if there is any further way during your courtship that she wishes you to prove your constancy. From her answer, you may get some intimation of her state of mind.”

Bingley leaned forward. “That is a wonderful idea, Darcy! I thank you, and charge you with ensuring we have some time of privacy tomorrow so I may speak to her.”

It seemed a long time since Elizabeth had agreed to marry him, but in truth, it had not been so many weeks. They had been filled with activity, Bennet’s consent sought, settlement arranged, a trousseau for Elizabeth, new gowns for the other ladies —

Darcy had speeded that part up by sending a modiste and seamstress to Longbourn and thus silenced any dissent in that area.

Netherfield was familiar and comfortable. His friend had asked an elderly aunt to be his hostess, and she was a great deal more agreeable than Miss Bingley.

But they had been able to host the ladies here, these last few days before, finally, Elizabeth would be his bride.

Her sister had asked Bingley to continue courting her for at least three months, but she had indicated that she would listen with pleasure to anything he said after that, so Bingley was tolerably cheerful about it all.

And now the day had dawned. Today, he would take Elizabeth as his wife.

Darcy had ridden out early, and returned to find his bath waiting, and his valet beside his new suit and shirt laid out on the bed.

As he leaned his head against the chair back, Darcy tried to keep his expression still while Maunder shaved him. It was important to look his best for Elizabeth. Everything must be perfect for her today — and always.

He thought through the next few weeks in his mind. The ceremony. The wedding breakfast at Longbourn. A short wedding trip to Cornwall, because Elizabeth had never seen the sea. Then, at last, he could take his bride to Pemberley. Home. It would be the proudest day of his life.

He was standing before the altar, looking down the aisle, as Elizabeth moved towards him on the arm of her father. Her elder sister was behind her; the reason Darcy had chosen Bingley as his groomsman rather than his cousin. But he had no time to spare before his gaze settled on Elizabeth's luminous beauty, her gaze on him and her smile

for him alone. He must not wish this day away — after all, it could never be repeated — but he wanted to be alone with Elizabeth, driving away and knowing they would be uninterrupted and undisturbed for several weeks.

Elizabeth nestled into William's side. It still felt forward to be so close to any gentleman, despite having been married nearly a month now.

"Pemberley." His murmur roused her some time later, and she sat up, patting her hair.

"I can't wait to be home with you. This time you can show me everything."

His lips touched her forehead. "I will call for tea. Then you will feel strong, and we may begin to explore our home after that."

She huffed a laugh, and looked out at the grand front entrance and all the staff lined up in long rows to meet her, the new mistress of Pemberley.

William's hand squeezed hers, warm and comforting. "They are all delighted I have married for affection, Elizabeth, and not been compromised by Miss Bingley or another of her ilk."

They were sitting over their tea, perusing all the post that had been waiting for them, when Elizabeth stifled a gasp, recognising the hand on the direction of the letter she had just picked up. Her husband's thigh was pressed against hers as they sat close together, and he must have felt the tremble that went through her, because he turned to her at once.

She held it out to him. "Lydia must have seen our marriage notice in the papers."

His eyes were dark with sympathy. "Would you wish me to see what it says before you distress yourself, dearest?"

She nodded, and rested her hand on his leg for comfort.

He smiled understandingly down at her and broke the seal to scan the letter quickly, his lips twitching.

"I think you would have expected it to be what it is, Elizabeth. But, in short, you do not need to read it, and I would certainly not wish you to begin the habit of sending her money."

Elizabeth sighed, and leaned against him. "You read it to me, William. Then you can advise me what to do."

Dear Lizzy

La! What a surprise to see you married to that dull Mr. Darcy after all. But I was still the first of all the sisters to be married.

I know you will be surprised that I am writing to you, because you must feel very guilty that you hit me so hard at Longbourn.

But I am quite ready to read an apology from you, Lizzy, and if you can send me ten pounds, or even only five, then I will quite forgive you.

I must stop now. You will find out soon that married life means you are too busy to write. But you will have lots of servants, so you can find the time to write to me, at least.

Your sister,

Lydia Wickham

William folded the letter and placed it on the table in front of them. Then he turned to Elizabeth, concern etched on his features, as he felt her shudder.

She smiled up at him, reassuring him that she was laughing, not crying. “She has not changed a bit, William, has she? I think Wickham is quite punished by his marriage.”

He smiled wryly. “I had thought that when I watched them marry that day. I think he already knew his life would not be one that he would wish for.” He waved at the letter. “But you need not be concerned for her, Elizabeth. The trustees will give her the money she needs, provided she can prove it is for her, rather than demanded by him.”

“It was very clever of you to settle the money on her that way, so he could not get his hands on it, but has to treat her well.” Elizabeth reached up and kissed him. “Thank you for looking out for her and being so generous, just because she is my sister.”

She twisted the fabric of her skirt between her fingers. “Do you think the staff will notice if we retire to our apartments to rest for a few hours? I have need of time alone with you.”

His eyes darkened. “Of course.” He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “I am hoping you will not slap me, but instead show that you love me as much as I love you.”

“You will have to wait and see,” she breathed, and took his hand as she rose to her feet.

She closed her eyes in bliss as they lay, sated, on the bed in the mistress’s chamber. Her murmur was very quiet.

“Are you ever going to let me forget about the time I slapped Lydia, the day you

returned to ask to call on me? I thought you must surely never wish to see such a ill-behaved lady again in your life!”

He rolled towards her, and pressed a kiss on her forehead.

“You are much improved, madam.” He used his most austere voice, before he laughed. “No, Elizabeth, my beloved. I loved you as much that day as I think I ever have. You stand up for what is right, and you protected your sisters. You are perfect — and perfect for me, too.”