

## Chapter 8 ~ For the Love of a Daughter



It had taken a few days, but the troubled travellers had settled themselves nicely into the Darcy's London townhouse. After receiving comfort against her cousin Fitzwilliam's shoulder, it was left to Georgiana to see her cousin, Lady Adele up to a spare bedchamber and to sooth her agitated spirits. Everyone assembled knew that Adele hated messes and discords of every sort and Fitzwilliam, after sending her off with his sister, made sure a good deal of sherry went up to her.

About an hour after their arrival, it was then left to the young men of the family to dissect the specific causes of the distress and Colonel Jonathan Fitzwilliam took an inappropriate amount of pleasure in telling the rather shocking tale to his brother and cousin.

“We arrived at Rosings a few days after your engagement announcement had made its untimely and might I be permitted to say, rather unwelcome appearance. Once there, our good aunt was discovered to be indisposed due to the ill-effects of a fit of rage.” He laughed. “Oh how I wished I was there to see that,” said the Colonel lifting one eyebrow for emphasis. “Adele appealed to Cousin Anne for an explanation and she told us that her mother had been in that state for several days since Darcy's letter arrived; the poor girl, to have such a mother.”

The colonel's thoughts seemed to wander for a moment as he rubbed his chin in reflection; he thought it strange that for the first time in his life he actually felt sorry for his cousin Anne. It was Lawrence who impatiently called his brother back to attention.

“And, brother, and!”

“Lady Catherine somehow found the strength to rouse herself sufficiently to join us for dinner that evening. She hadn't sat down at table for two minutes before she requested, or rather, *demand*ed our own opinions on the subject of your engagement, Darcy. Adele unwisely made it known how happy she was for you; I on the other hand knew my aunt's disposition well enough to keep my mouth shut.” Jonathan now sat, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes at the reflection of something awful. “And such language against poor Miss Bennet, that I, as a soldier would never dare repeat in the company of men!”

Darcy swore an oath and with a black look of silent rage, walked to the window and stared out; the brothers exchanged a look. Even with Darcy's visible anger, it did not stop the Colonel's satisfaction in making further humorous assertions.

“And you all know how Adele can be when she knows she is in the right; she has that nasty Fitzwilliam side to her character that feels compelled to set people straight. Naturally, my sister made the grievous error of *suggesting* that Lady Catherine was in the wrong for saying such terrible things about a respectable young woman.” The Colonel made a mock sort of shutter. “I am certain that you can also imagine how our aunt reacted to that. Lady Catherine then abused Adele so abominably and such a fuss was raised, that there was no way I would dare entertain the idea leaving my sister at Rosings; we set off for London almost immediately; so much for my jaunt down to Brighton!”

Darcy made no answer; he continued to stare out of the window and kept his thoughts to himself. Lawrence asked, "But it has been several days, John, where have you both been all this while?"

"Oh, Lord, it only gets better; listen to this: after we departed Rosings, which by then it had come on to darkness and rain, we were obliged to seek lodgings in the next town. As befitting the dramatics of the situation, especially when travellers are in a frantic state, naturally there was nothing to be had. We made it as far as Bromley, if you can believe it and bribed a reluctant innkeeper to open up his door as it was well after midnight. I know I didn't get a wink of sleep that night and I expect Adele didn't either by her poor looks the following morning. Allowing another day for the mud and after a bit of bother about the horses, I sent an express off to mother and father explaining our new circumstances and telling them where we would be. I am not sure how father will behave upon receiving the news, but I doubt it will be pretty."

"Enough," said Darcy, "exasperated with the tale and equally angered and upset. "Enough!"

"But Darcy, you haven't heard the worst part. What do you think my reward was for this extremely tedious and trying adventure: a cousin who doesn't feel compelled to offer me a very, very, large Brandy."

Darcy, so caught up in his own fury and the various tales of misery, had neglected to show the Colonel any hospitality and went to pour the Colonel and his brother a drink, saying, "You must stay, Fitzwilliam; Adele is far too upset go anywhere at present."

"Keep sharing the excellence of your cellar and I can stay as long as you like," replied John, trying, as was his custom, to keep the moment light.

A great sigh escaped Darcy's lungs. "I can't help but feel it is the least I could do for your troubles; it is my fault, after all."

"Yes, yes, Darcy, everything is always your fault; it is even your fault that Lady Catherine has the manners of a pirate," said the colonel rolling his eyes.

Darcy had sat down on the edge of his chair, his fingertips rubbing at his temple.

Colonel Fitzwilliam added, "Come now, Darcy, none of this; don't be so downcast. I say cut off the old bat and have done with it. I for one would not consider it any great sacrifice to see the last of Rosings Park for the rest of my life. What say you to this plan, from now on we make Brighton our spot for Easter idleness?"

Lawrence, equally offended by his aunt's abominable behaviour as he was by his brother's flip remarks replied, "Oh, shut up, John! Why must you always joke at a time like this?" Lawrence had been watching his cousin's changing emotions with apprehension and tried to reassure him with words of support. "Darcy, I do not agree in any way with Lady Catherine's objectionable conduct, nor can I agree with my bother; as we both know, families can not settle their differences by avoiding each other."

Colonel Fitzwilliam was incredulous. "This, from a man who locks himself away in attics to avoid his own family?"

“You know very well, what I meant, John! Lady Catherine should be taken to task now for her words and beg her nephew’s forgiveness. You know very well that can never be accomplished without some sort of rational, open communication.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Lawrence. While you have hidden yourself away in Lincolnshire with your dead leaves and jars of green muck, Darcy and I have been obliged to visit the old tyrant year after year, and with each successive visit she gets balmier and balmier. She rules Rosings like it is a country unto itself and those fortunate enough to set foot within its noble halls had better know who is queen and who is vassal.”

“Gentlemen,” said Darcy, cutting off the argument between the two brothers before it could come to its likely and eventual crescendo, “This is my affair, and I will deal with as I see fit. You both did not know this, but I have already received a most unpleasant letter from Lady Catherine on the subject of my engagement and I had already made up my mind then and there never to see her again. But I will say this, Lawrence, I respect your opinion in the matter and it does you credit that you wish to maintain the family peace, but I happen to agree with your brother in this instance; Lady Catherine has wielded far too much power in this family for long enough and I intend to put a stop to it here and now!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam, gratified that Darcy concurred with him, gave his brother a superior sort of look that said: *so there!*

But Lawrence could not be easy. He felt it was a mistake in not confronting Lady Catherine with her behaviour as soon as possible. He knew in his heart that Darcy was in error but thought better to cross him as they had only just begun to heal their own breach. But if Lawrence could count on one thing and one thing only, he knew for sure that none of them had heard the last from Lady Catherine de Bourgh.



One morning, not long after the arrival of the additions to the household, the two Darcy’s had taken leave of their houseguests for the morning in order to pay a call. It was decided between them that it could not be put off any longer for it would be seen as a slight and Darcy was very mindful of all he owed the couple that he visited that day.

Fitzwilliam and Georgiana entered the handsome house on Gracechurch Street and handed their calling cards to the servant after being shown into the front hall. When the butler turned away, Georgiana proceeded to fidget. She tugged at her pelisse, pulled at her gloves, and tightened the ribbons of her bonnet. Just as she went to tug at her pelisse once more, her brother reached over and enclosed his large hand over her small one. Georgiana let out a sigh and smiled a little as her brother returned her smile with one of his own as means of encouragement.

The butler returned and showed them both upstairs into the drawing room. Upon their entrance, Darcy was very surprised at who he found, for there, standing next to Mr. Gardiner at the mantle stood none other than Mr. Bennet and sitting next to Mrs. Gardiner on the settee, was Jane.

The two ladies stood. “Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy, thank you so much for calling; you are most welcome,” said Mrs. Gardiner, happily coming forward to shake their hands.

Georgiana, expecting only the two she knew, naturally shrank from meeting two strangers and tightened her grip on her brother's arm as he moved forward.

"Georgiana, you remember the Gardiners, do you not?"

"Yes, indeed; hello Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner; it is s-such a pleasure to see you both once again."

"Hello, Miss Darcy," exclaimed Mr. Gardiner. "I am happy that you were able to come. We had just about given up on seeing you both on this trip to London."

"Please, forgive the tardiness of our call; a family matter and unexpected houseguests prevented our visiting before now," explained Fitzwilliam.

"I was only jesting, Darcy," replied Mr. Gardiner, all smiles and ease, "We both know that you are a busy man. Come, shake hands with my brother."

Mr. Bennet now came forward to shake his prospective son-in-law's hand, smiling and saying. "I imagine we are something of a shock to you this morning, eh, Darcy?"

"No, not at all; a very welcome surprise, sir."

"I imagine it would have been a far more pleasing surprise if I had brought one daughter in particular and not the other."

In truth, Darcy was a little disappointed, but he bore it very well. "No indeed, sir; I just..." he bowed to Jane, "I am happy to see you both, but, Miss Elizabeth; she is well, is she not?"

"Very well indeed, sir," replied Jane. "She bids me to tell you she looks forward to your return to Hertfordshire as soon as you are able." Jane wished to be able to explain to him more fully the reasons for her coming to London, but then, she did not fully understand the reasons for making the journey herself. Elizabeth seemed so eager to let her have the pleasure of visiting her aunt once she found out that their father meant to be in town for a week. Jane had protested several times, but it was all settled by their father agreeing with his second daughter, saying that Lizzy would have her trip to London soon enough.

Mr. Bennet, seeing something akin to regret in Darcy's eyes, could not help but jest with the lad. "Come now, Darcy, no use in hiding your disappointment. And before you have made it up in your head that I am some sort of tormenter for keeping Elizabeth away, I'll have you know that it was at my Lizzy's insistence that her sister come along. But that is a rather long and boring story which, I am sure, this charming young lady has no wish to hear."

Darcy introduced his sister to the gentleman.

"An honour, Miss Darcy." With a fatherly twinkle in his eyes he took the young lady's offered hand and kissed it. "My daughter, Elizabeth, has spoken of you often."

Georgiana smiled and nodded; she liked him immediately. There was something very old fashioned and charming about him. His eyes showed a spark of good humour combined with a harmless sort of mischievousness that made her realize she had nothing to fear.

“I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Bennet.” Shyly, she next looked upon the young lady in the room. In Georgiana’s opinion, she was one of the loveliest people she had ever seen. From what she had gleaned from her brother’s previous statement, she knew it to be one of Elizabeth’s sisters, but she was curious to know which one. Her brother immediately obliged.

“And this is Miss Elizabeth’s elder sister, Miss Jane Bennet.”

Jane was no less curious about meeting Miss Darcy herself, especially after all she had heard about her from her sister and Miss Bingley.

“How do you do, Miss Darcy? It is a great delight to meet the person who will be my new sister.”

Georgiana was struck by Miss Bennet’s serene smile and soft manner of speaking; she seemed so lovely, so elegant, and so becomingly ladylike that Georgiana could not reconcile it in her head how such a one as Miss Bennet would have the heart to cause someone as pleasant and affable as Mr. Bingley so much heartache. Georgiana could only think that her appearance must be deceiving and felt unequal to the task of measuring up to what she thought must be Miss Bennet’s exacting expectations.

“M-Miss B-Bennet, a pleasure.” She curtsied and looked at her shoes.

“Shall we all sit down and have some tea?” asked Mrs Gardiner. “How do you take your tea, Miss Darcy?”

“Just milk--thank you.”

As they all went to take their seats, Jane noticed Miss Darcy’s reluctance to part from her brother. As Fitzwilliam went to take a seat near the two gentlemen, Miss Darcy hesitated and looked at her with uncertainty; Jane saw instantly that the young woman was exceedingly shy of her and outstretched her hand. “Come, Miss Darcy, sit with me; since we are now to be relations, you must know that I am all anticipation of knowing you better.”

Georgiana looked to her brother; he smiled and nodded in encouragement and she obediently went to take a seat next to Mrs Gardiner and across from Miss Bennet.

After a few moments silence, Jane handed the young lady her tea and saw that she would need to initiate the conversation. “I know from my sister that you play the pianoforte very well, but I suppose everyone asks you that.”

“Yes. No! I mean... your sister is very kind.”

Jane smiled and arose to take Darcy his tea. When she returned she asked, “Elizabeth also says that you have a very beautiful instrument at your home in Derbyshire.”

“Oh, how very kind.” Georgiana stared at her lap.

Jane then asked, “She had so much pleasure in meeting you there. I also know that that she was extremely disappointed that her stay had to end so abruptly.”

“Yes, it was, I mean, I would have liked to have seen more of her—and you, as well, Mrs. Gardiner.”

Georgiana knew little of the reasons why the Gardiner’s stay in Derbyshire had been interrupted, but something along the lines of George Wickham had been assumed by the way her brother’s mood had suddenly changed around that time. She had last seen Fitzwilliam thusly at Ramsgate and her brother, once so forthcoming, had been decidedly closed mouthed on the subject. Until he felt the need to confide in her, she felt very uncomfortable even thinking on it. She kept worrying the strings of her reticule and glancing over towards her brother, seeing that he was totally engrossed in his conversation. She suddenly felt very alone.

Jane shared a look with her aunt. They both could see that the young woman felt very ill at ease at the mention of Elizabeth’s reasons for leaving Derbyshire. She turned the conversation onto a more neutral topic.

“Tell me, Miss Darcy, do you go to a great many plays or musical evenings while you are in town?”

“Oh no,” she said quietly, ducking her head.

Jane looked and nodded with encouragement, hoping Miss Darcy would go on.

“Yes?”

“My brother doesn’t allow me out much in company, as yet.”

“Oh?” said Jane as she nodded again.

“I chiefly keep to my books and music.”

“I see,” said Jane smiling.

Georgiana continued, “But when there is a play I wish to know of, like “The Rivals”, which was performed just the other night,” she said, finally smiling with the change to this new subject, “my guardian, my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, tells me about the performance and acts out all the parts.”

Mrs Gardiner and Jane laughed. Georgiana did not know what it was that she said or what caused so much amusement and her face showed her discomfort.

Mr. Bennet, always on the look out for a good laugh (even if it had the taint of a lady’s kind of joke), asked, “What do you ladies find so amusing?”

“Miss Darcy was just telling us of her cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” replied Mrs Gardiner, “He seems a most amusing gentleman.”

Darcy, from across the room smiled and added, “Amusing is only the half of it, Mrs Gardiner. Elizabeth is already acquainted with him and I believe finds him a great favourite. You all must come and meet him and his brother and sister while they visit us in London. I am sure my sister

joins me in hoping that you will all dine with us,” and he turned to Mr. Bennet, “that is, if you and Miss Bennet are in town for a time, sir.”

“We are only in London for a few days on business; actually, it is something that I wished to discuss with you, Darcy, but it will keep until then. Jane and I would have no objection to joining you any evening convenient before the end of our week in town.”

“What say you to that, Georgiana,” asked her brother. Georgiana was still trying to work out what had made the ladies laugh that she did not hear at first. “Sister?”

“W-Would you all please come to our home for dinner in two days time? My brother and I would be honoured.” Georgiana had never been especially easy at issuing invitations. She had always felt so overwhelmed with the thought of entertaining people she hardly knew.

“Oh, thank you, Miss Darcy, we would be delighted,” replied Mrs. Gardiner accepting for all.

Darcy saw that Georgiana seemed to relax visibly after her duty had been performed and Miss Bennet seemed to be going out of her way to set his sister at ease. He watched them both talk together for a time, easy in the knowledge that Jane had accepted her most readily.

As they journeyed home, Darcy asked his sister what she thought of those she met.

“Mr. Bennet is very nice. I found him delightful.”

“I’m glad you found him so,” said Darcy, “Elizabeth and her father are extremely close. I am sure it would gratify her to know that you begin to like him already. And what of Miss Bennet; how did you like her?”

Georgiana hesitated a moment before answering. “She seems nice enough.”

Darcy was perplexed. He would have never believed Jane Bennet could ever be described in such a way. “Nice enough? Come now, Georgiana, Miss Bennet is reckoned a dear, sweet girl, as I have heard said of her character many times. Did you not enjoy making her acquaintance?”

“She is... oh, Fitzwilliam, you know I hate speaking ill of anyone,” said Georgiana now greatly upset with herself. “But I must say I can not like her as well as I do Elizabeth. It distresses me to tell you so, but I feel I must be truthful. Ever since Elizabeth wrote to me and told me of her sister’s refusal of Mr. Bingley’s suit, it has pained me greatly and I feel so aggrieved for Charles. We both know that he is the dearest man in the world. How could she make him so unhappy?”

A pain shot through Fitzwilliam Darcy’s chest. Would he never be free of all his guilt over his interference in Charles Bingley’s affairs? At that moment he felt he must tell his sister everything that he had held back and he called to his coachman to take the long way home through the park.

“Georgiana, please listen to me. Please don’t hold her refusal of Charles Bingley against her. I have kept much from you and I hoped that you would never need to hear me lay out anything about my deplorable actions. It also pains me greatly for you to know all of my bad behaviour and to see that I am not so much the good, kind brother you have always thought me to be. I

hope that when you know it all, you can find some way to forgive me.” He took a calming breathe and grasped his sisters hands. “Please indulge me for I must return to the very beginning of this story and tell you all of how I slighted a very worthy young lady....”



That very evening at dinner, after Fitzwilliam Darcy put away a letter (that he had already read ten times after it had been slipped to him as he left the Gardiner’s) he told all his family of what they were to expect. “Some of my fiancé’s family are in London at present and Georgiana has invited them to dine with us on Wednesday evening.”

Adele looked up, all curiosity. “So, we are to meet the relations to the famous Miss Elizabeth Bennet? I must say that I am all anticipation, cousin. Heavens, I haven’t anything decent to wear. Georgiana, you must come to me after dinner so that we may go over all my gowns.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam added sarcastically, “Just think of that, Darcy, three trunks full of frocks and nothing decent to wear; women!”

Adele reached over and slapped her brother on the shoulder causing the Colonel to yell out in pain. “OW! That is my bad arm, I’ll have you know!”

Adele’s hands flew to her mouth and she was profusely apologetic which only caused the colonel to laugh and point out that it was actually his other shoulder that was injured which earned him an even harder punch.

Georgiana, hardly attending to any of the conversations and busy consulting several lists she had hidden on her lap, sighed deeply as she shuffled the papers about. Her anxiety was great and she was exceedingly nervous at having so many to please. Additionally, she felt extremely guilty at not being very friendly to Miss Bennet and hoped to make it up to her by planning a magnificent dinner. “I was thinking, brother, instead of baked apples for dessert, we might have flambé of nectarines. Miss Bennet told me that she has a great love of that fruit.”

Darcy was gratified that Georgiana had a change of heart after all he had told her of the Bennet’s recent misfortunes. “This is your dinner party, my love; you may serve anything that you wish. Lawrence there hardly knows the difference between the two, so I am sure he will offer no objection.”

Lawrence chuckled, he and Darcy had not teased each other in such a long while that he had to smile that they were once again in each other good graces.

“I seem to remember a young boy who ate his way through an entire peck of strawberries and then blamed it on that rascally son of your father’s steward,” supplied Lawrence, laughingly.

Three people at the table immediately tensed.

“Now there’s a name I have not heard of in a while: George Wickham; I wonder what ever became of him?” added Adele, casually, as she buttered her bread.

“He is to become my brother-in-law,” was Darcy’s terse and somewhat wry response.

Colonel Fitzwilliam’s head spun around and he blinked several times before finding his voice. “What in heavens name are you talking about, Darcy?”

Georgiana, who now knew the whole of the story, came to her brother’s defence. “He has married Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s youngest sister.”

“WHAT!” exclaimed the Colonel, turning his head back and forth between both of his cousins, not believing anything he was hearing? “Someone please tell me that this is not true and that I am in some kind of nightmare? You can not be serious, Darcy!”

“It is a very long story,” replied Darcy evenly, reaching for his own bread, “And one that I am not inclined to tell you tonight and on an empty stomach.”

“Well it would seem that all I have is time, Darcy!” he said, throwing his napkin down and coming to his feet abruptly; ignoring the pain it caused to shoot through his leg.

“Please sit down and calm yourself, John,” said Adele, highly alarmed at her brother’s uncharacteristic response. She had never seen his face so red with anger before that it quite unnerved her.

Darcy nodded to all the servants attending the table to take their leave. When the door was closed he said, “It is exactly as Georgiana has said,” replied Darcy. “He is now married to Miss Lydia Bennet, as was. That is all that I have to say on the subject and I would thank you to sit down to finish your dinner”

Lawrence regretted introducing the topic of George Wickham and he and his sister shared a look, both wondering what could be the matter with the other three.

The colonel sat down but none at the table believed him finished with the subject. He breathed heavily a few times and tried to adjust his body in the seat comfortably but it was all to no avail, he must be heard.

“And you intend to marry into this family after all George Wickham has done to you and...”

Darcy’s fist connected with the table, causing the ladies to jump. “You forget yourself, Cousin,” said Darcy, forcefully, trying desperately to remain in control of his temper.

“I?” The colonel scoffed loudly, “I forget *myself*? Is this how you treat your family--by allowing that snake into it? George Wickham as your brother; I will not stand for it!”

“It would seem that you have no choice but to accept it, Jonathan! I will never give up Elizabeth to oblige you or anyone and if you wish, I will be happy to provide the carriage to take you back into Kent.”

At the mention of Kent and what it implied, Jonathan immediately checked himself. He was angry with Darcy but would not stand for any comparisons being made between himself and his

aunt. He stared off into the distance, fuming. “And just where was I when all of this happened?” he asked quietly after a few moments silence.

“Recovering in Lincolnshire,” replied Darcy, taking a calming breath as he removed his handkerchief from his pocket for his sister, noticing her teary-eyed stare.

The Colonel also noticing his young cousin's tears, added, “Can you not see that you have upset your sister by all this business, Darcy?”

It was now time for Georgiana to come to her feet, incredulous, “My brother has done no such thing, Jonathan; it is you who I am upset with!” Her voice shook but she pressed on. “How dare you speak to my brother in such a way; how dare you do it and in his own house? I have a great deal of compassion for Mrs Wickham and I will thank you kindly if you do not further insult her, my new sister, or my brother while you are a guest in this house!”

Darcy was exceedingly alarmed to see his sister behave in such a way and yet, at the same time, he was exceedingly proud of her.

Colonel Fitzwilliam would have never thought Georgiana would ever have the need to speak anyone, especially to him, in such a way. A muscle in his cheek quivered as he fought to maintain his emotions. He had always been Georgiana's greatest champion and he was equally amazed as he was hurt to know that she now no longer thought very much of him.

He cleared his throat. “Well, then, I will go.”

He stood and limped his way towards the door. The pain on his face, whether it was from the pains of his injuries or from the pain of having been spoken to by his ward, inspired in Georgiana all of her natural compassion. She leapt to her feet and ran around the table, crying pitifully.

“Oh no, John, no; I am sorry! Forgive me. Please don't go, I beg you!”

Colonel Fitzwilliam refused to listen or to look at her. His hand was on the doorknob just as Georgiana reached him. She forgot herself and tugged at his bad arm, trying to wrap her arms around his neck.

“Please, John, don't go; I forgot myself for a moment; say you won't go like this!”

Lawrence and Adele did not know what to make of the scene. There had to be more to this story than what met their eye, but it was not in either of their natures to ask what it could be about. By now, Fitzwilliam had come up to his sister to pry her fingers away which caused her to cry out all the more.

“Please, John, please! Don't leave us!”

Colonel Jonathan Fitzwilliam had bravely faced the enemy in battle, been shot in the shoulder, stabbed in his leg, but at that moment as he looked down at the tear-streaked face of his young cousin, every bit of strength in him crumbled and he stayed Darcy's hand and swept Georgiana up in a loving embrace.



The next morning was spent in relative quiet. The cousins all seemed to think that quiet pursuits about the house were more preferable to shouting matches over meals.

Darcy and Lord Whitfield sat a little apart from the rest of the group in the corner of the morning room playing at chess with the only sounds heard in that area being the chime of the clock on the mantle above their heads and those uttered between the two stoic gentlemen at a particularly cunning move on their opponent's part.

Adele occupied herself with a novel from her cousin Georgiana's collection. She was especially scandalized that Darcy would let his sister read such a book and she would have said something to him to that effect if she were not so thoroughly engrossed in the heroine's outrageous plight.

Jonathan was serving penance for his earlier transgressions. He had made his apologies to all, and now he sat in a chair directly across from Georgiana for most of the day with both hands held out in front of him with wool wound around them as she fashioned balls of the yarn for her knitting.

He checked all sighs of impatience and amused them both by pulling faces, imitating each of the other occupants of the room. And when they were not quietly laughing at the expense of the others, they both found great enjoyment from Georgiana being obliged to tip the colonel's teacup to his lips since both his hands were occupied. His reward was Georgiana's soft touch as fed him bits of cake, her kisses to his forehead, and her unspoken forgiveness.

The Darcy's butler entered silently with the silver tray which bore a calling card upon it. He walked straight to Mr. Darcy, bowed, and said something to him and Lord Whitfield very quietly. Everyone else looked over just as Lawrence said quite loudly, "What? Here? Now?"

The door to the drawing room then opened from the opposite side and everyone turned round to see who it would be so bold as to come through a door before being properly announced. A tall boy of about eight years old stepped in to hold the door open for an elegant woman dressed all in red, who was closely followed by her stately husband holding onto the hand of a smiling three year old girl.

The gentleman spoke, "Well, Jonathan, we received your express. Tell me, what has my sister Catherine done now?"



Not long after, Mrs Gardiner and Jane were paying their own call upon Miss Darcy. When the door was opened and cards were given to a footman, the two ladies were shown into a sitting room. As they passed through the hall, they could hear a great commotion going on in another part of the house as there was much talking and bustling about by the servants.

They waited an extraordinarily long amount of time to be greeted by the mistress of the house but took the time to look around at the elegance of the bright and sunny room, all the while secretly envisioning Elizabeth there receiving her own guests.

“Perhaps we have called at an inconvenient time for Miss Darcy,” said Mrs Gardiner to Jane as she began to stand hoping to discreetly summon a servant to take their leave.

Georgiana suddenly burst through the door, out of breathe and a little flushed with embarrassment. “Forgive me, oh forgive me. I only just heard. I do apologize! You must understand, we have just had unexpected guests and I am so sorry that you had to wait so long!”

In her rush to explain all she had inspired nothing but compassion in the two ladies.

“Please calm yourself on our account, Miss Darcy,” replied Mrs Gardiner, “It is of no great consequence. It would appear that we have chosen to call at a most inconvenient time for you. We can easily visit some other day when you are at greater liberty.”

They both moved towards the door and Georgiana was mortified. “Oh no, please don’t go. I so want you to stay. Let me just summon my brother so he may explain it all. After you see the reasons for my muddle, I do so hope you will consent to stay.”

Georgiana did not give them time to answer and rushed from the room before they could stop her; they both heard her feet running up the stairs.

“Poor thing,” said Jane, feeling for the young girl’s predicament. “Perhaps we ought to go anyway and spare her this embarrassment?”

“I don’t think we can,” replied Mrs Gardiner, “She would only be even more mortified upon her return to find us gone. I fear we must wait upon her brother as she asks.”

They returned to their seats and waited another moment. However, they were caught off guard at the sudden appearance of a very young girl with large brown eyes and long blond curls peeking around the door. When she was seen, she gasped, and quickly ran away.

The two ladies shared a bemused smile with Jane being especially taken with the child. Very soon whispers and more footsteps were heard.

“Are you sure? In here?” It was boy’s whispering voice they heard and when they looked to the door a handsome, raven-haired boy looked in. He blushed profusely as his eyes meet Jane’s and he darted out of sight almost as soon as he was seen.

More whispering from the other side of the door followed and Mrs Gardiner and Jane waited in anticipation at what more they were to expect.

The boy suddenly reappeared again, stood tall, and entered the room. He was dressed in a coat with a wide white collar and short pants of dark grey and the girl came in behind him dressed in a frilly white frock. The boy stepped forward formally and bowed in a very gentlemanly fashion. Both ladies could trace a passing resemblance to Mr. Darcy for he was very fine boy for his age which Jane suspected to be about eight or nine.

As both of the ladies stood to return his bow, he extended his hand towards Mrs Gardiner, "Edward Fitzwilliam, at your service, ma'am."

They were both charmed by his courtly manners, but just then, out in the hall, they heard a woman's voice call, "Now, where have those children gotten themselves to? Edward, Delphie, where are you?" The door was thrown open widely as the woman immediately entered the room.

The woman was dressed in an elegant dark red travelling coat and hat, the likes of which the two ladies had hardly seen before. Mrs. Gardiner and Jane correctly surmised that they were in the presence of someone of great consequence and each curtsied deeply. The lady simply inclined her head regally and immediately brought the boy to task.

"Well, Edward, are you going to introduce me or not?"

"I would like to very much, Grandmamma, but I can not, for I have not yet learned their names myself."

"Oh, honestly." She removed her glove and held out her hand to Mrs Gardiner. "Philadelphia, Countess of Matlock, and you are...?"

"Mrs Edward Gardiner, ma'am," she said, taking it.

But before she could introduce her niece, the Countess simply looked in the young lady's direction, raising her eyebrows, asking, "And you are...?"

"Miss Bennet, your ladyship," replied Jane with another low ladylike curtsy.

The ladies stern face instantly broke out into a broad, infectious smile. "Oh, my goodness gracious, Miss Bennet; are you really Miss Bennet? Oh my, this is indeed a very great pleasure!" The Countess then grasped her grandson's shoulder. "Edward, my dear, run along and tell your grandfather to come and meet the lovely Miss Bennet this instant!"

The two children set off, narrowly avoiding Georgiana and Fitzwilliam as they both rushed into the sitting room. Darcy was all apologies. "Please forgive us, Mrs Gardiner. It would seem that the Darcy's are determined to show you just how bad mannered we truly can be. Pray, be seated, oh, forgive me, may I introduce you to my aunt, Lady Matlock?"

Mrs Gardiner smiled warmly. "We have already met and I now ask that you beg our forgiveness for we can see that you are very busy today. We will call another time."

"You mustn't leave; I won't hear of it," exclaimed Darcy.

Georgiana too joined him in the entreaty. "Oh, no, do not leave; tea is now being served in the drawing room and we would be pleased if you stayed to take it with us."

Lady Matlock could not take her eyes away from the face of Miss Bennet and wished to congratulate her nephew for obtaining the hand of such a exquisite prize. She discreetly nudged him in the side, whispering, "She is so lovely, Fitzwilliam."

James Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Matlock now came running into the parlour at his wife's summons. He fought to catch his breath as he looked around at all the faces in the room and was immediately struck by the loveliness of young woman who stood before his wife.

"Is this her, Fitzwilliam? Is this your Miss Bennet? Of course, it must be her. My, my, Fitzwilliam, she is a rare treasure." And turning back towards Jane said, "Well, come my dear; let's have a look at you."

"James, you can be such a brute. Apologise to Miss Bennet and Fitzwilliam this instance. Fitzwilliam, please tell your uncle that he may not inspect your fiancé as he would a herd of cattle."

Fitzwilliam laughed, instantly seeing their mistake. "No! No, Aunt Philadelphia; you have made a mistake; this is Miss Jane Bennet, my fiancé's elder sister."

Jane smiled at the Countess's error and replied, "I am sorry, your ladyship; it would seem that I was not very clear. It is true; it is my sister who marries Mr. Darcy, not I."

Mrs Gardiner detected a slight disappointment on the Countess's side. She could see with her own eyes that Lady Matlock was instantly taken with Jane as she never stopped looking at her. However, almost as soon as the frown appeared, it was gone, for the Countess's eyes now glowed with a great deal of warmth.

The Countess reacted by boldly stepping forward and taking hold of Jane's arm and leading her out of the room.

Lady Matlock said to Jane, "Walk with me, my dear; Georgiana has just ordered some very lovely tea in the drawing room and you must come up and meet the others."

Darcy and Georgiana exchanged a brief questioning look, but made to follow, with the Earl offering his own arm to Mrs Gardiner.

Jane did not quite know exactly what to do. She turned with her own inquiring look to Mr. Darcy and he simply smiled at her fluttered expression and indicated with a nod of the head that she should carry on as he knew very well that no one should disagree with any wish of this particular aunt.

"So, you are the elder sister? You must forgive me my child, but when you said Miss Bennet I naturally let my emotions take control of me; we have all been plagued with curiosity in meeting the woman who could capture my nephew Fitzwilliam's heart."

Jane could not be insensible of the compliment and said, "I am so sorry to disappoint you, Ma'am."

"Disappointed? Oh no, my dear, I am not in the least bit disappointed."

They began to ascend the stairs and the two children standing watch at the top of them, took it upon themselves to race back into the drawing room before their nurse could find them and put a stop to it.

Edward burst through the drawing room door to tell those there what they were to expect. "Papa, Miss Bennet is coming! Oh, wait until you see her! She is very..." he paused, not quite certain what word he could accurately describe her to his satisfaction. He would have called her beautiful but he felt a certain tightening in his throat at the thought of uttering such a word to describe a girl. He simply cleared his throat and said, "Grandmamma called her lovely."

Delphie, not to be outdone by her brother, wanted very much to tell a story of her own, even if she was not quite sure what she was telling. She grabbed at her father's hand knowing that he should stand when a woman entered a room. "Stand up, Papa; two ladies coming, two ladies coming."

"Children, calm yourself," said Lord Whitfield, as he stood, "You both behave as if you'd never met with ladies before in your life."

The colonel, confused at whom he was to meet based Edward's cryptic and breathless herald of the arrival of a Miss Bennet, was naturally delighted as he always was when meeting friends, old or new. He observed his sister going through the usual rituals of most women by checking her gown for straightness, smoothing her hair, and pinching her cheeks.

He liked women well enough, and Miss Elizabeth Bennet was by far a very superior example of her sex, but he could never exactly see himself taking the plunge in the manner of his cousin Darcy. In his opinion, it was all so... extreme. Women were meant to be admired, and all the better from a distance, preferably from an entire continent away.

The door to the drawing room opened to admit the excited Countess. She stood aside to admit another, taking a particular interest in what would be the immediate reactions from either of her two sons once they looked upon the fair one who followed.

Upon Jane's entrance, Lawrence smiled politely and bowed and Lady Matlock could see a slight spark of interest in his countenance as he beheld the beautiful face. But Lawrence had never been the one to show anyone *all* his cards at once and she was satisfied in knowing that at least he found her somewhat attractive.

It was her younger son's reaction that held the most promise. His face had turned extremely pallid. Something very significant, she was certain, was stirring within John. He could not look away and he stared unblinkingly at the young woman. She thought her son had ceased breathing and for a moment thought of going up to him to pat him about the face to awake him from his reverie.

For Colonel Fitzwilliam's part, he hadn't a coherent thought in his head since the lady's entrance, but every single sense in his body was heightened. The very sight of her captivated him: the delicate curve of her blooming cheek; the halo of blonde curls that framed her face; the fullness of her tantalizing lips; everything about her had him immediately spellbound. He did not dare look away, for to look away would be sheer torment and in his opinion tantamount to a sin.

As she came closer, the aroma of her perfume reached its long, bewitching tendrils out to him and danced enticingly beneath his nose. She smelled of county wild flowers, and of fields of heather, and of long, slow, romantic walks in the rain.

He heard her name.

Jane.

His brother and sister seemed amazed at something, he did not know what. They all seemed to laugh at some explanation or another and before long his mother brought her over to stand before him. He recalled taking her hand; so delicate, so soft.

He daren't kiss it, for he knew if he did, he must surely melt away.

So he bowed or so he thought; he couldn't remember.

But the hand rested there for a moment, warm and supple against his rough, hardened palm; almost as if it belonged. And then, with some exertion of hers and after some hesitation of his, it was gone.