



A Fortunate Compromise (Sweet Standalone Pride and Prejudice Variations #6)

Author: *Beatrice Langford*

Category: Historical

Description: On the night of the Netherfield ball, an unexpected compromise will change everything...

When Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy are thrown into a shocking compromise, he doesn't think twice before declaring their engagement. Honour and duty demand that he protect the woman he compromised, however innocently. And Mr Darcy doesn't really mind, for his fascination with Elizabeth's dark eyes and sparkling wit is rapidly becoming too strong to resist.

Elizabeth Bennet refuses to be forced into marriage with a man who despises her. Something is strange about the compromise Elizabeth is sure of it. And so she proposes a compromise of her own: if she and Mr Darcy can find out who is behind their compromise and prove their innocence, they will no longer need to marry. She will gain her freedom, and surely Mr Darcy will welcome the chance to find a more suitable bride.

But as they work together, Elizabeth discovers that the proud, cold Mr Darcy she thought she knew is very different from the intelligent and caring man who would do anything to protect her. And she begins to wonder if she truly wants to be freed...

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As Elizabeth Bennet walked up the steps to Netherfield Park, it never occurred to her to view the coming evening with any foreboding. Quite the contrary. Over a series of dull and rainy days, the ball to be held at Netherfield Park had been an object of fond anticipation for her. A ball was always vastly pleasant, but the Netherfield ball could be expected to provide particular sources of enjoyment. Beyond the elegance of the event itself, Elizabeth had every intention of dancing at least two sets with Mr Wickham. On their last meeting, he had half-asked and been half-promised that she would. If Elizabeth had only known what trouble the evening was to bring! Had she had even the smallest inkling, she would have been perfectly happy to stand a wallflower, watching from the sidelines as her sisters and friends had the pleasure of dancing.

The grand old house had many improvements made upon it since Mr Bingley had taken over the lease. Caroline Bingley acted as her brother's hostess, and while Elizabeth could not claim to admire her as a friend or neighbour, she was clearly no mean hostess. Upon joining her brother at Netherfield, she had lost no time in transforming the estate. The dusty rooms had been cleaned and the old furniture replaced with the finest pieces and paintings from their London home. Elizabeth had never seen Netherfield Park look so fashionable.

She was glad to see the house come to life again, as it had been in the bygone days of which her parents had often spoken. In decorating for the ball, Miss Bingley had outdone herself. Arrangements of hothouse flowers brightened the corners of the rooms, and constellations of candles lit the space almost as brilliantly by daylight. The musicians were capital, and if half of the neighbourhood gossip was true, the late supper would be among the finest ever served in Hertfordshire. Everything ought to have been in the most promising way for enjoyment.

Yet as Elizabeth wove through the gathered company, her heart sank. One thing was missing. Where was Mr Wickham?

Jane caught her sister's eye from the far side of the room and made a small beckoning gesture. Elizabeth crossed the room to join her without delay.

“ My dear Lizzy. I am afraid Mr Wickham is not here,” Jane said quietly. “It is a shame, for I know you had wished to dance with him.”

“ Not here? But that cannot be!” Elizabeth said. Despite her surprise, she was careful to keep her voice low. It would not do to let anyone else know of her disappointment. “ Is there not some mistake? He said he would be here. Perhaps you have missed him. I shall look a little longer, I think.” Elizabeth turned away to continue her search, but Jane took hold of her arm and gently pulled her aside.

“ No, Lizzy. I heard it just now, from — ” Jane quickly fell silent upon seeing Mr Collins approach them with a broad grin and an awkward bow.

“ My dear cousin Elizabeth, how lovely you look tonight. Very nearly as fine as the daughter of my noble patroness, Miss Anne de Bourgh, I might even say! May I have the pleasure of the next dance?” he asked.

Elizabeth glanced at her sister. If only Jane could think of what she could not — a way to escape their cousin. “ Ah, Mr Collins,” Elizabeth stalled. “ I did not think you danced.”

“Why, of course, cousin! I could not be remiss in seeking out the pleasure of dancing with you. And though I do not wish to brag, I daresay you shall find me quite light of foot, indeed.”

And to that, there was nothing she could do but extend her hand and allow him to

lead her to the dance floor.

Mr Collins did indeed dance. That much could not be denied. If, however, Elizabeth had depended on finding in him the lightness of foot of which he had boasted before leading her out to the dance floor, she would have been badly disappointed. It took all her efforts not to crack a smile at his face, which he had twisted into such an expression of concentration that she could not help but think them comical.

Mr Collins did not seem to share her reservations. “ You dance beautifully, cousin. I do not think anyone will think me too forward in saying so.”

Elizabeth reminded herself that she must not roll her eyes, as it would have been the height of rudeness, and tried to calm the giggle rising in her throat. “ Thank you, Mr Collins. You are too kind, I am sure,” Elizabeth replied, hoping that he would come to his senses. It was, perhaps, too much to hope for. It sometimes seemed that Mr Collins had no sense at all.

If her dance with Mr Collins could not be expected to supply any enjoyment in conversation, it did at least give Elizabeth the opportunity to look about the room. Surely it was not impossible that Mr Wickham might yet surprise them all and finally make an appearance. She could not help but wonder what Jane had been about to tell her.

One explanation came readily to mind — the very natural reluctance to meet Mr Darcy, after how cruelly and unfeelingly that gentleman had dealt with Mr Wickham. She would not be surprised if he had stayed away, given the painful history between them. Even so, understanding could not do away her disappointment. Yet another reason to dislike Mr Darcy — and she had no lack of them.

Elizabeth soon found she had more to worry about than the absent Mr Wickham. Her cousin was incorrigible in his attempts to flirt with her throughout the dance sets,

which seemed to drag on for eternity. Every time they came together on the dance floor to perform a turn, he got very close to her, his head coming to her shoulder, and attempted to look longingly into her eyes. She shot Jane an embarrassed plea for help, but of course, her sister could not do a thing about it. When at last she could curtsy to Mr Collins and leave him standing on the dance floor in a most awkward position, with his back slightly slumped and his knees bent, her relief was profound.

Elizabeth quickly found a solitary place in which to hide for a moment so she might regain her bearings. She leaned close to the glass-paned window and relished the coolness pouring from it. The chill night was a welcome contrast to the overcrowded and sweltering Netherfield. She pressed her forehead against the glass and was glad of the shock against her warm skin. Mr Collins, of all men! Why had she been forced to suffer the first set with her insufferable cousin? She gazed longingly out the window, hoping she might see Mr Wickham walking up to the house — late, and not absent for the entire evening, as Jane seemed to think he would be.

“ Miss Elizabeth? Are you well?”

Elizabeth swung around, coming face to face with Mr Darcy. After allowing herself a moment of surprise, she composed herself as best she could. She curtsied, and he gave a slight bow at the waist, as propriety demanded. Her heart hammered in her chest, and she wished there might be a way to rid herself of the proud gentleman as quickly as possible. “ Yes, I am well, Mr Darcy. Thank you. I was only a little warm.” She gave a weak smile, hoping the answer would satisfy him, so he would turn away and leave her in peace.

Her hopes were soon disappointed. He did not move. Did not seem to blink as he stared at her. Elizabeth looked this way and that, wondering what other answer he might be looking for from her.

He licked his lips. Elizabeth thought it a strange gesture, for Mr Darcy always seemed

the soul of discretion, never one to display his emotions — if he had any — and certainly not what he might be thinking. “ I wondered if I might ask you for the honour of the next dance, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked, his words tumbling over one another.

Her heart froze. And so did her tongue. Mr Darcy, asking her to dance? But he had called her tolerable at best, and certainly not handsome enough to tempt him.

Before she could fully formulate a reply, she heard the words soaring out of her mouth. “ You may,” she said coolly.

He bowed and swung around to head back down the hall before she could say anything else. Elizabeth would not have known what to say. She leaned against the wall, horrified at what she had just agreed to. What in heaven ’ s name was wrong with her? She disliked him heartily, she had even promised her mother never to dance with him, and now she would have to do exactly that. What on earth had he intended by it?

Elizabeth gave herself a few more moments to breathe, then made her way to the grand salon where the dancing was taking place. Mr Darcy was waiting for her, it seemed, watching her from across the room as the last dance set was being finished. Why did he glare at her so? If he disliked her so much, why had he asked her to dance? She looked away, choosing to ignore the judgement implied by his stern looks. He did not approve of her or her family, of course — he had made that perfectly clear. Lydia and Kitty were too wild, her mother was too uncouth, and their father allowed it all. But the worst of all was that he seemed to think Jane was not good enough for his friend, Mr Bingley. When Jane and Mr Bingley were speaking, his displeased expression made it impossible to doubt his opinion of the match. No doubt he was trying to devise any means possible to keep them apart.

The present dance had scarcely begun, and there would be some time yet before

Elizabeth need meet her partner. With sudden alarm, she saw Mr Collins wading through the crowd toward her, his expression horribly determined. Elizabeth shuddered. She ducked out of sight and quickly wove through the crowded parlour to lose him, where hopefully she could evade his insufferable attentions. Mr Collins seemed bent on flirting with her, and she did not have the strength to cope with his babble.

She shook her head, as though trying to cast the thought of Mr Collins far away. Her mother would have fallen over in a dead faint if she learned how Elizabeth was working to avoid her cousin. Because he was the heir to the entailed Longbourn estate, Mrs Bennet would be delighted to see one of her daughters married to Mr Collins — and never mind that he was utterly lacking in good sense. In Mrs Bennet's eyes, the benefit of keeping Longbourn outweighed everything.

Elizabeth vowed to herself that she would never make such a bargain. Not even if she were starving or on the verge of ruin would she consider taking him. She could never marry for convenience. No, the man she married must be a man of sense and judgement, and Mr Collins lacked both entirely.

Was she a fool to hope for more still? To wish, more than anything, to marry for love?

That, at any rate, was a question for the future, and in the present, she would have to hurry to avoid her odious cousin. Elizabeth went out into the hall, keeping Mr Collins in her sights. If she wished to escape dancing with him again, she would have to keep ahead of his next move. As Elizabeth reached the end of the hall, she saw a small side-room, open to the corridor. Elizabeth smiled — she recognised the nook from prior visits, and it was perfect. As she recalled, it had a capital view over the lawn, and better still for her purposes, the walls were angled, allowing anyone standing there to shield themselves from view. It would be an ideal hiding place, at least when escaping from someone as unobservant as Mr Collins.

Elizabeth was almost at the point of stepping into the nook when she saw Miss Bingley rapidly walking down the corridor towards her. Though pausing to greet her might allow Mr Collins to catch up to her, Elizabeth felt that civility demanded that she offer her hostess at least that much courtesy. Accordingly, she offered Miss Bingley a smile and a quick bow.

To her astonishment, Miss Bingley did not return the gesture. She barely inclined her head as she walked by without stopping to exchange even the most rudimentary pleasantries. More shocking still, Elizabeth did not think her expression could be described as anything but a sneer. As she stepped into the little window nook, Elizabeth resolved to forget the slight. She could not be much hurt by such an affront, for it only confirmed her opinion of Caroline Bingley. The woman liked to think herself above her company in Meryton, but any hostess of real taste and elegance would never have offered such a slight to a guest under her roof.

“ There you are!” Elizabeth turned as Charlotte Lucas came to join her. Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, Charlotte’s keen eyes had found her out, and she could not regret it. Her dear friend was exactly the understanding companion she would have chosen. “ Whatever are you doing tucked into this shadowy corner?” Charlotte linked her arm with Elizabeth ’ s and settled in to listen. “ I know you would never show it nor admit it, but you have been looking forward to the ball nearly as much as Lydia.”

Elizabeth nodded, giving a short laugh. “ I have been brought down a peg or two, Charlotte,” she sighed. She leaned her head against Charlotte ’ s shoulder.

Poor Charlotte — already twenty-seven and still unwed. She would have been snapped up long ago, if only the gentlemen of Meryton could see Charlotte’s true worth. She was intelligent, kind, and sensible. Elizabeth could not have wished for a more devoted friend — and any gentleman that had the sense to propose to her would gain a most able and loving wife. But Charlotte was undeniably plain, her dowry

small, and such defects seemed to outweigh her virtues in the eyes of Meryton's eligible bachelors.

“What on earth do you mean?” Charlotte asked. “Why do you look so annoyed, my friend? I know you are much happier on the dance floor than anywhere else. How is it that no one has asked you to dance?”

“Someone has asked. Indeed, two gentlemen that I would rather not speak to or be around for the rest of my time here on earth. And yet they are the only gentlemen that have gained my hand for the dancing this evening.”

“Oh?” Charlotte said.

“First, I danced with my cousin, Mr Collins.”

“Do you really find him so disagreeable?” Charlotte asked with a tilt of her head.

Elizabeth sighed. “I assure you, I do. Have you ever met a man with less sense, Charlotte? I know I should be grateful never to hear about the Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her many wondrous chimney pieces again. And I most particularly would be grateful never to have my feet stepped on a dozen times over the course of a single country dance again.”

“I cannot blame you there,” Charlotte agreed, “but who, then, is the second gentleman?”

“None other, I am afraid, than Mr Darcy!”

“You will find Mr Darcy a most excellent partner, I assure you, Lizzy.”

“Oh, Charlotte, do not wish such a misfortune on me! I do not wish to dance with

him. But as you can no doubt see, I have no choice. If I were to have refused him, it might damage Jane ' s chances with Mr Bingley, since he does not seem to bat an eye without Mr Darcy ' s approval. And you know I would not ruin Jane ' s future happiness for a quarter hour of discomfort for myself.”

“ I think you are being sorely unfair to Mr Darcy. I have been in company with him several times over the last few weeks, and he is a most genteel man, full of good breeding and compassion. Most men in this town would not lower themselves to speak to a spinster like me, but Mr Darcy treats me with respect and kindness. Why do you not give him a chance? He is, after all, even more wealthy than Jane ' s Mr Bingley.” Thankfully, Charlotte had the good sense and breeding to lower her voice, preventing their conversation from being overheard. Elizabeth was grateful that she had not said it loudly enough for everyone to hear, as her father — by the accident of his fading hearing, or her mother — out of an accidental disregard of social etiquette — might have done.

“ I do not care a jot about his wealth, Charlotte,” Elizabeth retorted. “ You should know by now that I could never marry a man simply because of his large estate or many shares in the Funds.” Elizabeth hesitated for a moment. At last, she went on. Charlotte was very nearly her dearest friend, second only to Jane. Who better to understand her heart? “ I must be hopelessly in love with the man I wed, or I shall not wed at all.”

Charlotte shook her head and gave a short laugh. “ You are a hopeless romantic, Lizzy. For your sake, I only hope you may do so. I do not think that I will have so free a choice. But truly, you should not dismiss Mr Darcy so easily. It would be a brilliant match.”

“Oh, Charlotte, I do not think Mr Darcy means to present any attentions to me beyond simple courtesy. Nor do I wish them. After tonight, I do not think we shall speak much. He is likely to return to Pemberley soon, thank goodness, and hopefully

we shall not be forced to suffer his presence but on rare occasions, after Jane and Mr Bingley are married, as we hope they will be.”

Elizabeth had hardly finished speaking before a servant approached and gave a quick curtsy. She extended her hand, in it, a small folded piece of paper. “ A message for you, miss,” she explained.

Elizabeth took the note and frowned, glancing at Charlotte. “ Thank you.”

The girl left, and she turned to open the note. She turned it so Charlotte could read it as well. “ Miss Elizabeth, please come to the library as soon as is convenient for you. We must discuss a matter of grave importance.”

It was simply signed, “ Mrs X”.

Charlotte took the note and read it more closely. “ Who is this Mrs X?” she asked.

“ I haven ’ t the faintest idea. But whoever she is, her handwriting is atrocious.” Indeed, the scribbled hand was almost illegible. Elizabeth bit her lower lip. Whoever she was, Elizabeth could not very well refuse to appear. The urgency of the message could not have been clearer. And if it concerned Jane and Mr Bingley, she would feel as if she had let her sister down. What if the mysterious Mrs X knew something that might secure her happiness, or worse still, knew of a reason they must not wed? Elizabeth did not much like the idea of going to a mysterious meeting with a woman she did not know. Then again, she knew her curiosity would not let her rest until she had found out what the person wanted.

“ Do you think I ought to go, Charlotte?” Elizabeth asked. “This Mrs X seems to have something important to tell me, and yet I would not wish to do anything imprudent.”

“ I see no harm in it, Lizzy. The library is not far from the ballroom. There will likely

be people nearby. And since the writer is a woman, I see no reason not to meet with her.”

“ You are right.” Elizabeth said, reading the note again. Her curiosity was piqued, and the only way to satisfy it would be to go to this clandestine meeting. She refolded the note and put it inside her reticule with her dance card. “ I shall go now, and see what this Mrs X wants before my dreaded dance with Mr Darcy. Perhaps she will have some good news to share with me.”

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Little as he cared for such amusements under most circumstances, Darcy could not deny that he had been looking forward to the Netherfield ball. All that good sense and prudence could do had proved insufficient to cure him of his strange fascination with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

She had no fortune, no connections, no established position in society — none of the characteristics he had always assumed would be essential qualifications for his future bride. Yet Elizabeth had other qualities he was rapidly coming to find indispensable. Wit and good humour, character and judgement, a playfulness utterly without malice — it was these qualities that were rapidly coming to shape all his visions of future happiness. Then, too, there were her dark, sparkling eyes, so remarkably expressive, the delicate bow of her lips, her graceful figure. Though a beauty not, perhaps, quite in step with the current fashion, he could not consider her as anything less than lovely.

Still, he had not been prepared for how radiant she looked this night. Of course, Elizabeth was always beautiful in her simple, unassuming elegance. This evening, however, perhaps she looked a little too radiant. Even in the first moments since Elizabeth had walked in with her family, Darcy noticed with displeasure that her odious cousin seemed bent on making a fool of himself.

Mr Collins had been following her around like a hound on the hunt, refusing to leave her be, when she was so obviously averse to his attentions. Anger welled up inside him. With difficulty, Darcy pushed it down. It was a feeling too much akin to jealousy, and that was obviously absurd.

That was certainly the only reason he had given in and asked Elizabeth to dance — to

give her some much-needed time away from the insipid man. Indeed, after the dance, he would offer to let her remain with him and his party, dissuading any further attempts by Mr Collins at flirtation.

A nagging voice told Darcy that protecting Elizabeth was not quite his only motivation, but he firmly repressed it. If asking her for a dance was too much aligned with his own wishes and too little with the better impulses of his willpower, it was still more than justified in offering her the protection that any lady was owed from an importunate gentleman.

And if Darcy had returned to the ballroom early in anticipation of their dance, so that Elizabeth would not have to wait even a moment before being claimed for it, he was only being a courteous partner. For the moment, he could not see her anywhere.

Looking out over the crowd had a second benefit, for it allowed him to avoid Miss Bingley's reproachful gaze. She had hinted rather baldly for a dance and had not been best pleased upon being informed that his next was reserved for Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Bingley hardly seemed to notice his sister's discomfiture, for he was too engaged in watching Miss Jane Bennet's every move. No doubt he was engaged to her for the next. She had been asked for her first dance set before she had even had a chance to enter the grand salon upon her arrival. Bingley would have done so if he had not been standing at the front of the house greeting the plethora of guests that seemed to come from all over the county. Miss Bingley had insisted on making the event the height of the season for Hertfordshire — an event that the neighbourhood would be talking about for years to come. Bingley had allowed her to do whatever she thought best for most of the arrangements, but when it came to the people she had wanted to exclude, he had put his foot down. Miss Bingley had wanted to extend invitations to only the most select families in the neighbourhood, excluding many who might have reasonably expected to attend. Bingley would not stand for it, and Darcy was glad. His friend would have a far better time in the neighbourhood if he did not allow his sister to stir up strife and division.

“She is an angel, is she not?” Bingley breathed, addressing no one in particular. He shook his head as though he could hardly believe her perfection.

“Whatever do you mean, Charles?” Miss Bingley asked. Darcy frowned to hear how condescendingly she spoke to her brother. The woman even finished the question with a sneer of disapproval, for she knew perfectly well that he was referring to Jane Bennet.

Loath as Darcy was to find himself in agreement with Caroline Bingley, he could not help but share her unease at how quickly Bingley seemed to be falling for the girl. There was nothing to object to in Jane Bennet’s person or in her manners. It was true what was said of her: she was the beauty of the county and had a sweet, unassuming spirit to go with it. Her family, however, was a very different matter. Darcy hardly knew who was guilty of more impropriety — her wild younger sisters, or her mother.

Worse still, Bingley seemed to be falling for her faster than she was for him. She was a very difficult young woman to read, so shy and quiet. And if Bingley proposed, she would surely accept, however much or little she felt for him. A woman with so few prospects would be a fool to refuse so advantageous a match. And that would leave Bingley, who of all men desired a marriage of true affection, with a wife who cared more for his money than for his love, and without even a dowry or desirable connections to show for it.

He did not like to meddle in matters of the heart. But if things continued to progress as they were, he might not have a choice.

From the far end of the grand salon, Darcy watched in dismay as the two youngest Bennet girls came across the room nearly at a run, shrieking with laughter as they were chased by several of the officers. He had rarely seen a more vulgar display. From the way she winced and looked away from her sisters, Jane Bennet seemed to agree, but Mrs Bennet looked fondly on and did nothing.

“What a very interesting family they are,” Miss Bingley purred. “I would not be surprised if they released a piglet into the house during the course of the evening.” He turned to give her a warning look, but she seemed busy in reviewing her dance card and did not choose to meet his gaze.

“We must hope it is not so,” he replied coolly. Darcy lapsed into silence, watching as Mr Collins once again scanned the room, found it to be empty of his cousin, and went out. A moment later, Elizabeth could be seen walking in the opposite direction down the corridor, weaving this way and that to get away from him.

It was too much for Darcy. Their dance set could not come soon enough, but there were still several passes left of the current dance set, and Miss Bingley would likely hang about until he was forced to extricate himself.

“How do you like my new slippers, Mr Darcy? I took your advice and traded out the bows for a lace trim.” She lifted the hem of her skirt ever so slightly, allowing her foot to peek out from underneath the dress. He did not recall giving any such advice. Then again, Miss Bingley talked so incessantly that he sometimes found himself nodding to her instead of attending properly, especially if he was trying to get through his correspondence.

“They are very nice,” he replied absently.

“Have you secured yourself a lady for the next dance set? It seems a pity that you should be alone, even though I know your views on the subject —”

“Yes, I have asked Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” Darcy said curtly. Mr Collins was closing in, though he did not seem to realise it. Miss Elizabeth would be cornered if she continued down the hall in her current direction, unless she escaped up the stairs where the guests were not allowed to go.

“ Ahh, I see. Well, where is the lucky young lady? She will miss it if she has not returned in a few moments. Shall I step in in her stead if she does not appear in time?”

He did not have a chance to answer, thankfully, for a servant caught his eye and waved to him. He excused himself and hurried toward the archway and was handed a note by the footman. “ What is this?” he asked, perplexed. Everyone who would want to speak to him would have only had to come and search him out. Unless something dreadful had happened that Bingley did not want to draw attention to.

“ I was only asked to deliver the note, Mr Darcy. I apologise, I do not know what it is about.”

“ Very well. Thank you,” Darcy said, dismissing the footman. He unfolded the note as he went out into the hall where it was less crowded, wishing he had not lost sight of Elizabeth. Had Mr Collins succeeded in tracking her down? Elizabeth was very clever, he knew. At any rate, he would soon go in search of her to lead her to the dance floor for their set.

When he opened the note, he was surprised by how terrible the handwriting was. It looked like a child just out of leading strings had penned it.

???

Dear Mr Darcy,

Please join me in the library at your earliest convenience. It is a matter of great importance.

Mr Hurst

???

Darcy was dumbfounded. Mr Hurst, the eldest Bingley sister ' s husband, had never felt the need to send him a note of such urgency. Indeed, they had never had occasion to write at all. The only time they ever spoke was when Mr Bingley saw fit to invite his eldest sister and husband to visit at the same time Darcy was visiting. And he was a sour fellow, indeed. “ How very odd,” he mumbled to himself. It must be dire indeed if Mr Hurst felt the need to send him a note and ask for a private meeting.

He headed to the library, which lay in the opposite direction of the grand salon. The further he went, the less crowded the halls became, until there was not a soul to be seen.

The library at Netherfield was a grand affair — or at least, it had been in bygone days. The shelves had been neglected for some time, and he knew that Bingley would rather be outside riding or shooting than staying in to read a good book. If he married well, perhaps that might change. Bingley was such a pleasant fellow that he would certainly read to please his wife, if she asked it of him. But if Jane Bennet were to be the woman, he was far from certain that she would care whether her husband ever opened a book.

He frowned at the disturbing thoughts rushing through his mind. Darcy was far from convinced that the depth of Miss Bennet's feelings matched Bingley ' s. And Caroline Bingley was against the match entirely. Little as he trusted the woman's judgement on most matters, it must be hoped that she at least had her brother's best interests in mind.

As Darcy walked through the shelves, he ran a hand over the spines of books on one of the middle shelves, wondering if Elizabeth had read any of them when she had stayed at Netherfield to help care for her sister a few weeks prior. Whenever she had come downstairs to join the company, she always seemed to have a book in hand. He

let a small smile crease his lips, wondering if Elizabeth would enjoy exploring the library at Pemberley. Perhaps she would love it as much as he did.

When he looked up, Darcy nearly exclaimed in his surprise. There, across the sitting area, was Elizabeth herself! Was he seeing things, or had his thoughts conjured her? His heart picked up its pace. Darcy ducked into the shadows, wondering what in the world could have brought Elizabeth into the library at the precise moment he had also entered. Was she hiding from Mr Collins? Perhaps not, for she looked confused, as if she was waiting for someone. He waited a moment longer, watching her. Darcy could have watched her forever, but it was hardly mannerly to do so. What was she doing here?

He ought to speak to her, to be sure she was well. Accordingly, Darcy wove around the seating area and began walking through the shelves toward Elizabeth. She looked up and saw him when he was only a few feet from her.

“Mr Darcy — ” she said in surprise. But she was unable to finish her thought. When he had almost reached her, Darcy tripped, pitching violently forward. Elizabeth’s eyes went wide, and she tried to back up a step, but it all happened much too fast. He knew he could not catch himself in time, and his horror was complete as he rammed into Elizabeth, falling for what seemed like ages to the floor.

Darcy was afraid he would crush her, or she would smack her skull on the bookshelf, or even on the hardwood floor. Just before they landed, however, he wrapped an arm around her waist and the other to brace up her head. He landed hard on his elbows. Shocks of pain laced up his arm and into his shoulders, and he could not suppress a grunt of pain with the force of their fall.

Elizabeth yelped as they landed, then groaned, her hand flying to the back of her temple. She closed her eyes, and he sucked in a breath of horror at the thought that he might have injured her. The pain in his elbows was nothing compared to the surprised

of being pressed against her in such an intimate embrace. The situation was hardly romantic. Surely, he had nearly crushed her with his clumsiness. But her closeness was doing things to him he knew he should not feel.

When she opened her eyes, he finally found his tongue. “Are you all right, Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy said. He stopped, looking deeply into her eyes. From this vantage, he could not help but think again how beautiful she was.

“I believe so,” she whispered. Her chest heaved with every breath, and the feel of her palms on his chest made his heart race all the more. “I am well. Only a little surprised,” she replied.

“I cannot express how embarrassed I am,” Darcy said hoarsely. “Indeed, I am very sorry.”

That was not quite true. Embarrassed, he certainly was, but he could not be entirely sorry. At least, not about holding her in his arms, near enough to kiss. Elizabeth was more beautiful than ever. Loose tendrils of her hair lay loose around her face, and he tucked one of them behind her ear.

But that was a liberty he should not have allowed himself to take. Darcy quickly drew back his hand. He must make sure she was not injured. All other concerns paled in comparison. He studied her eyes — those large brown eyes that had so bewitched him from the first moment he had arrived in Meryton. “Are you hurt?” he asked again, tenderly. Utterly forgetting himself in the love and concern that filled his heart, he brushed his fingertips down her jawline, and stopped at her mouth, tempted to run his fingers over them as well. And not only that. He longed to know what her lips tasted like...

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It must surely be a dream. Or a night terror, more like it. But as she opened her eyes, Elizabeth was all too aware that this was no dream, but horrible reality. Here she was, laying on the floor of the Netherfield library, with Mr Darcy of all men on top of her.

She had never been this close to a man before. It was altogether scandalous and terrible. And yet...and yet...was there not something rather wonderful about it, all at the same time? She quickly chastised herself for the thought. No proper young woman thought of such things, things like the sensations travelling through her, filling her whole body with warmth as he had touched her cheek. When his eyes had travelled to her lips, she had almost thought that he might kiss her.

“Miss Elizabeth, you must let me know if I have hurt you. Are you well?” He asked it again of her, since she had forgotten to answer. Indeed, she had forgotten to breathe. She blinked slowly. For the first time, she allowed herself to really look at him. His face was handsome, to be sure, just as Charlotte had said. Being this close to him, Elizabeth could hardly deny it now. He had a strong, square-cut jaw and hazel eyes that reminded her of a misty forest. And his lips —

No. She could not think of them. She was already experiencing too many conflicting, confusing emotions as it was.

“I am well,” she said. His chest was pressing against hers, but that was not what was making it difficult to breathe. His closeness was cutting off her air supply, sending a heady mix of emotions all over her. But though it had been only moments, it had felt like they had been laying prone here for an eternity. It was highly improper, even though it had been an accident. “I suppose you should get off of me now?”

Mr Darcy blinked, as though astonished at his position. "I am terribly sorry," he said huskily, quickly hauling himself to a sitting position. "Here, now. Let me help you." He offered her his hand, and she took it, still rather shaken.

But when Elizabeth attempted to sit up, she suddenly felt dizzy, her eyes going wide as she tried to keep the darkness from overtaking her. He knelt beside her, embracing her to keep her from falling. "Careful. Take it slowly," he coaxed.

She looked into his eyes, their faces just inches apart. Did his eyes move down to study her lips? No, she must be imagining things. This was Mr Darcy, surely the last man to be interested in her.

"Elizabeth —" he whispered. There was so much contained in that one word, her name. And oddly enough, it had never sounded like that on anyone's lips. Her heart fluttered.

Before she could say a word, there was a rush of people who stood at the doorway. Elizabeth's heart sank as she saw easily a dozen of her friends and neighbours gaping at her, covering their mouths with their hands. Though they had done nothing improper, she could easily imagine what their position looked like: utterly indefensible.

Mrs Stratland, a notorious busybody, pushed her way through the crowd, exclaiming, "We heard a crash! What in the world has happened?!" Her tone held a mixture of excitement and concern. But when she reached the front and saw their prone position, she gasped and started whispering to one of the other ladies.

"Look away, Mrs Stratland," a gentleman said, and place his arm under hers to help her turn. Elizabeth caught Mrs Stratland looking over her shoulder at the shocking scene, giving a small smile in Elizabeth's direction. Her cheeks grew warm as Mr Darcy helped her to a standing position. She smoothed her skirts, then looked at him

to see if he knew what they ought to do. They had done nothing wrong, but unfortunately, it looked anything but innocent.

“ Oh, my goodness! My poor nerves! You are ruined, Lizzy!! Utterly ruined!” The crowd parted for Mrs Bennet, fanning herself and looking as though she might really faint, rather than only pretending, as she was apt to do. She wailed loudly, leaning heavily against Lydia and Kitty for support. Lydia snickered in her hand, and Kitty followed her example, as she always did. Never before had Elizabeth so fervently wished to disappear. What had caused everyone to come rushing into the library at that moment? Had she blacked out for a moment? Everyone said they had come because they had heard a crash, but had it really been so loud that it could alert people all the way down the corridor that something was afoot?

“ This must be a misunderstanding,” Caroline Bingley said hurriedly, her face ashen pale. “Mr Darcy is our guest — he would not do such a thing...” She trailed off into silence.

Somewhere in the back of the crowd, a gentleman snorted and muttered, “A likely story. Anyone can see what is going on here.” Elizabeth winced to hear a coarse chuckle, as though in agreement. Strange times indeed, when Caroline Bingley came to her defence — or perhaps not so strange, since it was Mr Darcy’s honour that she was defending. Miss Bingley had already shown herself to be a most devoted partisan for the gentleman.

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy. He had remained silent in the face of all the accusations. It was a worthy thing to keep one’s composure in a situation like this. Even so, she wished he would say something.

Mr Darcy seemed to have eyes only for her. Several more people had pressed into the room, but they all parted so her father could come to the front. “ What is the meaning of this?” her father asked.

“ Your daughter has gone and ruined herself! And with none other than Mr Darcy!” Her mother wailed.

Elizabeth ’ s shame only deepened. She did not like Mr Darcy, but that did not mean she wanted to be rude to his face. “ Mama!” she hissed. “ It was only an accident.” The excuse sounded weak in her own ears. She could only imagine what their audience was thinking. No doubt the most vicious gossip would come out of this night.

Mr Darcy cleared his throat, drawing everyone’s attention. He waited until there was silence, every eye in the room fixed on him. “Though I assure you that our situation is the purest accident, and Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s actions are above reproach, it is true that I have compromised her.” He turned to her, his eyes full of concern and genuine sorrow. “ We must now consider ourselves to be engaged.”

Miss Bingley’s face fell, and she looked as if she was about to protest. She bit back a response, disappointment filling her face. For Elizabeth, it was a small triumph. She had watched as Miss Bingley had shamelessly flirted with Mr Darcy, trying every trick in the book to get her to notice her. And here she was, suddenly engaged to the man Miss Bingley had wanted.

Only Elizabeth didn’t want him. She would gladly give him up, if only she could.

Many in the crowd gasped, and Elizabeth realised that for some, this was even better than going to the London theatre. But this was no play. This was their lives and she would not be tied to a man for the rest of her life because of a silly mistake. “ I do not think an engagement will be necessary. It was an accident,” she protested. “We have done nothing wrong.” She moved to where her father and mother were standing — her father looking as grim as she had ever seen him and her mother wringing her hands and crying in hysterics.

“ It is true, we have not acted in any way amiss. I tripped and fell. It is that simple.” He looked at each of the people standing around, watching them. It must have been terrible for him, to have so many eyes fixed eagerly on him, avidly collecting gossip. Miss Bingley had said as much when Jane had been convalescing at Netherfield. Mr Darcy was not to be teased, nor laughed at. And many in the crowd were no doubt laughing behind their hands, giggling at her misfortunes. They had no idea the cost to Mr Darcy’s pride, nor her own.

Mr Darcy came to stand beside her, their shoulders almost brushing. He looked down at her and gave an encouraging nod. “ Again, I say that Miss Elizabeth has done nothing for which she need be ashamed. But I know how the world works. And I will not leave you unprotected.”

Elizabeth could stand no more. The thought of dancing with Mr Darcy had been one thing. One half-hour was something she could contend with for the sake of propriety. But to spend her life with him? The idea was unbearable.

“ Papa, please. You must believe us —” she protested, but he silenced her with a severe look.

“ Quiet, Lizzy,” he whispered. He looked at Mr Darcy, giving him the most serious stare she had ever seen from him. “ You will come to Longbourn to discuss the betrothal tomorrow.”

Her father took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. He led her away, back to the ballroom. But she could not stand the eyes boring into her soul. Did everyone know? It seemed the news had spread from the twenty or so people that had been witness to their compromising position, like a wildfire overtaking a forest. If Mr Darcy did not marry her, she could never show her face in the village again, nor anywhere else in England, for that matter.

She had heard of young ladies running away to America to ‘ disappear ’ . But that was something she could not even consider. What of her family and friends? And she had done nothing wrong! How unfair that she would be forced to marry a man she loathed!

Jane came over to her as soon as they appeared in the foyer. “ My dear, Lizzy, what on earth...” She let her words trail off, and hugging her, started to lead her to the front door. Of course, there was no way they could stay. She would be the talk of the town, and would not continue to show her face when no good would come of it.

Lydia pouted violently at leaving the ball. Kitty began to cry as they went to retrieve their wraps, and their mother made a great show of being about to faint. Mary looked violently disapproving, and Mr Bennet’s mouth was still set in a sour, grim line.

Elizabeth hung her head. Out of all his daughters, it was worst of all that she had so disappointed him. All her life, she had been her father’s favourite. Indeed, he had never tried to disguise it. But now, how far she had fallen!

“ It will be well, Lizzy. You will see,” Jane said as they settled into their seat in the carriage. Mary sat beside them, and Lydia and Kitty squeezed in beside their mother. Their father climbed up beside the driver, and they set off toward home. Jane took her hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

“ You are wrong, Jane. Elizabeth has ruined all of you. All of you!” Mrs Bennet wailed. “ Mark my words, Mr Darcy made a good show of wanting to protect you in front of everyone. He felt guilty, that is all. But I will be surprised if he even comes to call on your father in the morning.”

“ Mr Darcy did nothing wrong,” Elizabeth said dully. She was unsure why she felt so vehemently that she needed to defend him. But even with all of Mr Darcy ’ s flaws, she knew he had not acted with intent. It had only been a terrible accident.

“ Mama, Mr Darcy is an honourable gentleman. He will do right by Lizzy,” Jane said.

“ Everyone, let us be quiet for the duration of the ride home,” her father said, turning slightly to make sure they had heard him. Elizabeth wished she could melt into the carriage seat and slowly fade away. How was it that her evening had begun with so much promise and had ended in such disaster?

Thankfully, the younger girls obeyed Mr Bennet. Even their mother lapsed into silence. They were as silent as the grave until arriving at Longbourn. Elizabeth and Jane were the first to climb down from the carriage and head into the house. She mumbled a “ good night” to her family before she hurried up the stairs with Jane and entered their bedroom. Once the door was closed, Elizabeth felt the last remnants of her strength drain away. She went to the bed and burst into sobs, her shoulder racked by the force of her emotions.

“ Oh, my dear Lizzy!” Jane said in dismay. She had closed the door, but she opened it again, called for the maid, and asked her to bring up a pot of tea and two cups. She closed the door again, just as Lydia and Kitty were bounding up the stairs. Jane stayed by the door and waited, listening until the girls had passed by and were settled in their room.

Elizabeth wiped her nose with a handkerchief, but the tears would not stop flowing. “ Oh, Jane, it is terrible. What am I to do?”

Jane came over and sat on the edge of the bed, drawing Elizabeth there as well. “ Tell me everything that happened.”

Elizabeth did as she asked, and after the story was done, Jane hugged her for so long that she was sure she was going to fall asleep in her arms. “ He said he would marry you?” Jane asked.

“ Yes. But I do not want that. You know how I feel about him — ” Elizabeth stopped, an unfamiliar tug gripping at her heart. Suddenly, she remembered the feel of her hands on his muscular chest. And the way he had looked so deeply into her eyes. It was altogether too confusing to discuss with her sister. She could not make it take any kind of sensible form, even in her own thoughts.

Elizabeth and Jane took a moment to change out of their gowns and into their nightdresses. Soon, the tea arrived, and Jane served her a cup. If the steaming liquid did little to calm her nerves, it was at least soothing to her stomach, which had been in knots since the fateful incident. Jane poured herself a cup and rejoined her on the edge of the bed. Elizabeth tucked her feet up under her and sipped slowly on her tea. Jane waited, sipping in silence as well until Elizabeth was ready to talk.

She sighed heavily before she started in. “ Is my life over, Jane? I cannot help but think that this is the end of me, all my dreams for the future. How can it all be gone in the space of a few hours?”

“ Mr Darcy is not an unkind man. And he is very well off. Surely life with him will not be as bad as you fear.”

“ That is not the point. Indeed, his affluence is not wholly a benefit. It is because of his wealth that he thinks he can look down on others and treat them as if they are less valuable than himself. Mr Darcy is not only proud and cold, but thoroughly dull as well. I cannot think how awful it will be to face him tomorrow.”

“ Perhaps there is no need for you to face him in the morning. Papa can handle things, surely?” Jane finished her tea and set the cup aside. Elizabeth finished hers as well and handed the empty cup to Jane. Wishing she could curl up and disappear, Elizabeth brought her bare feet up onto the bed and wrapped her arms around her knees. But simply disappearing was not as easy as all that.

“ I must do something, Jane. There must be a way to prove our innocence. I cannot live with a man like Mr Darcy as my husband for the rest of my life. I cannot!” Elizabeth felt the tears welling once more, but blinked them back. No more tears, for tears could solve nothing.

Her resolution was badly tested by Jane’s gently sympathy, which came dangerously close to unlocking the flood. Saying little, Jane helped her get under the covers and tucked her in as though she were a child. She placed a hand on Elizabeth ’ s shoulder. “ It will be well, Lizzy,” she whispered. “I am certain of it.” With that, she climbed into the far side of the bed and blew out the candle.

Long after Jane’s breathing had evened out into sleep, Elizabeth lay awake, thinking over the strange turn the night had taken. If only Mr Wickham had been there. If only he had asked her to dance as he said he would. At the time the note had been delivered, surely they would have been dancing together, laughing and talking without a care in the world.

Her mind swirled around the events of the night. Mr Darcy had been so aloof and judgemental before their fateful meeting. Why had he come to the library? Had he followed her there? And who was the Mrs X of the note? It seemed past all understanding.

Even given Mr Darcy’s presence in the library, why had he fallen? He was not normally a clumsy man, and the floor of the library was smooth and even, without so much as a seam between floorboards to trip over. And why had everyone come into the library so quickly, in time to see them compromised? The more she thought things through, the more Elizabeth felt certain that something was wrong. Their ill luck did not seem like an accident. Absurd as it sounded, it felt intentional. She did not think it was merely her displeasure at the outcome that had her believing someone was behind the whole incident. But who — and why?

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“ I cannot believe this has happened! In my brother ’ s house, and at his very first ball. It is an outrage!” Caroline Bingley hissed as they went back into the grand salon. “ I would gamble everything I have that she planned the whole thing to get her clutches into you.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. No doubt Miss Bingley’s rather cynical outlook was shaped by her own aims. He suspected it was a prudent sense of caution, not morals, that had kept Miss Bingley from making an attempt of the kind herself. “ It is a sin to gamble,” Darcy replied coolly. “In any case, Miss Elizabeth Bennet did nothing of the kind. As I said before, it was an accident.”

“ How do you know she did not plan to catch you out? True, the fall might have been an accident, but what was Miss Elizabeth Bennet doing in the library alone?” Caroline ’ s face twisted into a scowl that was remarkably unbecoming, not to mention rather less than ladylike. “ It is not fair that you should have to lower yourself and your standards to come to her aid. It was her fault that she put herself in such an improper position in the first place.”

“ She was browsing the bookshelves. What could be a more harmless pursuit?” Darcy argued. It was not typically his habit to answer anyone back. But Miss Bingley ’ s attitude irked him. He would not allow her to besmirch Elizabeth ’ s character without coming to her aid.

Miss Bingley stopped as they reached the far end of the ballroom. “ You make it sound as though you are happy about the arrangement.” She looked out over the crowd. When he said nothing against the sentiment, she snapped her head up, levelling a piercing gaze at him. “ Are you?”

Darcy was not about to admit anything of his true feelings to her. “ Of course not. I would never wish to take part in such a spectacle.”

“ Then you plan to fight it? What will you say to Mr Bennet to release you from that ridiculous promise?”

Darcy turned slowly, his face grim. “ I will not. I meant every word of what I said. Tomorrow, I will go and officially ask for Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s hand.”

Miss Bingley ’ s scowl turned even more ugly, but she said not another word to him. Her true colours had been shown, and it was as though she knew it. She simply turned and walked away. Darcy could not regret her absence. It was a relief to be left alone with his thoughts.

After such an event, the ball could hardly proceed as normal. All anyone could talk about was the compromise and the engagement. The final touch to the evening’s absurdities was given by Mr Collins, who, having been wandering around the halls looking for Elizabeth, had missed the Bennet’s carriage. In the end, he had departed nearly an hour after the incident ensued, with the Lucases. Lady Lucas told him of the events that had left him stranded at Netherfield, and Charlotte Lucas had arranged for him to join their carriage. Mr Collins was most shocked and refused to look at Darcy as he departed the mansion. Apparently, there must be a silver lining to even the most threatening clouds, if such a disastrous evening could at least free him of the man’s obsequious attentions.

Caroline Bingley had been teasing and angry by turns all evening. Her attempt to take him to task after Elizabeth and her family had departed only hardened his resolve. Nor would Bingley would hear of anyone speaking against Elizabeth or any of the Bennet family. Darcy could not help but smile at seeing his friend’s determination. Bingley was sometimes too easy-going, too persuadable. It spoke well for his future happiness that he knew when to hold firm. He even corrected Miss Bingley sharply

when she tried to bring the subject up again.

When the Netherfield party gathered together after the last guests had departed, all looked shaken by the evening's events. Miss Bingley was undoubtedly furious, though she had little reason to be. Darcy shook his head. He had thought well of her, once, if never well enough to justify her too-obvious hopes. That was all over now. Her callousness had forever shifted his estimation of her character. He suspected there would always be a coolness between them. From then on, he resolved not to be alone with Miss Bingley. What had happened was an accident, but even so, he would not leave Elizabeth with protection. The promise he had made in the library would become his solemn vow.

With a final, desperate look, Miss Bingley turned to him. "I do not understand why you should have to punish yourself when you did nothing wrong," she said, sounding half frustrated and half pleading.

"Leave him be, Caroline," Bingley had snapped. "Come with me to the study, Darcy." They had stayed there for the rest of the night, drinking through Bingley's best bottle of smuggled French brandy. Though it could not have been how Bingley wished to end the first ball in his new house, Darcy could not bring himself to reject his friend's kindness. He did not think he could bear to see anyone else, and still less to be left alone with his thoughts.

"Perhaps we ought to speak of it," Bingley said at last. "Though I hardly know whether I am expected to scold you or commiserate with you."

"Both, perhaps, or neither," Darcy allowed.

"I must confess, my friend, that I suspected you had feelings for Miss Elizabeth Bennet. But I did not realise that you had been so run away with your feelings that anything like this could happen," Bingley said as they sat beside the hearth, sipping

the mellow brandy.

Darcy sat bolt upright. “I did nothing of the sort. Surely you cannot think that I would deliberately attack any woman’s virtue. I was lured to the library.”

“ Whatever do you mean by that? You do not think that Miss Elizabeth Bennet had anything to do with it?” Bingley asked.

“ I said nothing of the kind,” Darcy replied heatedly. “Like everyone else, you must have heard her say she does not wish to marry me. What reason could she have?”

Bingley eyed him dubiously. “You know very well, Darcy. Fortune and consequences such as yours might make a young lady lose her judgement. She might have figured that you would need some convincing , shall we say?” Bingley took another sip, then replaced his glass on the side table. “ I do not mean to be so callous, Darcy. You know I care deeply about your welfare. But what am I to think? It looked very bad.”

“ You saw it?” Darcy asked.

“ I did. Someone yelled that there had been an accident in the library and I came as soon as I could. I would never have been able to forgive myself if someone had lost their life, or been dangerously injured during a party I was hosting.”

“ It was not your fault,” Darcy said. “ And no one was seriously hurt — at least, not physically.” He could still remember the expression in Elizabeth ’ s eyes. She looked horrified when he had announced their engagement. He had been trying to do the right thing by her, even though they both knew the truth: that nothing untoward had happened between them. Convincing everyone else — that was what might prove impossible.

“ I know. But then whose fault was it? You say you were lured to the library, but

how?” Bingley asked.

“ I was given a note by one of the footmen, calling me to the library. I thought it strange that Hurst would send a note instead of coming to speak with me himself. When I got to the bookshelf in front of Miss Elizabeth Bennet, something strange happened. One moment I was walking towards her, and then the next, I seemed to trip over thin air, and I was falling.”

Bingley shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “ It is a puzzle, to be sure. Perhaps it is just as you said — an accident.”

Darcy nodded, though he was not convinced. It did not explain why Mr Hurst had written the note and then seemed to disappear for the rest of the evening. That must would suggest his guilt in the matter, if it were not so utterly impossible for him to have any motive. That might be an explanation, of sorts — perhaps Mr Hurst was not the author of the note at all.

But all that was merely wool-gathering. “ Perhaps,” Darcy agreed. It was most disquieting to imagine that anyone might have hatched such a plan against him, might have intended to constrain his choices in such a way.

At the thought, guilt rose in his chest. His intentions had been nothing like forcing a compromise, but he could not deny that he had intended to influence his friend’s choices. The manipulation suddenly seemed much less justifiable.

Darcy straightened up in his chair. “ Bingley, there is something I need to tell you.”

“ Oh? What is that?” Bingley asked.

“ Your — ” he stopped. He did not want to cause a rift between Miss Bingley and her brother. But it was she who had first asked him to separate Mr Bingley and Miss

Bennet. “ I know you are attracted to Miss Bennet. Yes?”

Bingley smirked. “ I think it is safe to say that I am more than attracted to her. Really, Darcy, she is the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld. And not only in her person, but in the sweetness of her character. I really can not think of a woman more suited to be my future wife.” Bingley quieted as he said the last words as if he had not meant to say them aloud. His cheeks even took on a slight blush.

It only made Darcy feel worse about what he had been planning to do. “ I have a confession, my friend. I hope you will not be too angry with me.”

Bingley ’ s face fell. “ What is it, Darcy? You know you are my dearest and closest friend. Surely there is nothing you have done that is so terrible — ”

“ It is not something I have done. It is something that I was about to do.” Darcy took a long, steadying breath. “ I was planning to separate you and Miss Bennet.”

He let that sink in for a moment, and while Bingley worked himself into a frenzy, he tried to think of a way to keep Miss Bingley ’ s name out of the excuse. “ How could you do this to me? I love her, Darcy!”

“ I know. And I could see your attachment to her growing. However, I did not think that Miss Bennet ’ s attachment toward you was the same. I did not want to see you fall in love with her, only to find that she did not feel the same way about you. You are a catch of no uncommon degree for a young woman with so small a dowry. She would have been a fool to say no to you, even if your feelings were not shared. Indeed, I doubt her mother would allow her to do so. The risk was simply too great.”

“ That should be for me to decide!” Bingley said. He rose from his chair and paced, his face gone pale with anger. “ You had no right to interfere.”

“ No, indeed I did not. It was very wrong of me to think of it. In my defence, I can say only that I have not yet interfered. Nor do I have any intention of doing so after tonight.”

“ You have changed your mind?” Bingley asked. “ Why?”

Darcy coughed. “To own the truth, it seems rather absurd for me to prevent you from marrying a Bennet sister you love when I have just promised to marry another.” That left the question of his feelings for Elizabeth unspoken, but Darcy would not have known how to represent them. She intrigued him, fascinated him. He respected her intelligence and her refinement, particularly when she had been shown such badly wrong behaviour by her parents. He was less horrified by the idea of marrying her than he ought to have been. He ought to have been frantic to find any means of escape, and instead, Darcy very much feared that his feelings could be called nothing so much as eager. But what that added up to, he hardly knew.

At last, Bingley’s anger seemed to run its course. He breathed out a long sigh and sat back down. “ Well, I suppose I must forgive you. After all, not only did you give up your plan, you admitted what you were about to do. I suppose my family had a great deal to do with this scheme, hmm?”

Darcy could not deny it. Unfortunately, Miss Bingley had never tried to disguise her dislike of the Bennet family. He had assumed she simply wished her brother to make a more ambitious match. But could it be more? She seemed surprisingly vehement against Elizabeth — as though she had known of his growing infatuation even before he had.

“ I cannot deny it. The idea was not initially my own.” Darcy sighed, stood, and began pacing back and forth in front of the blazing hearth. “ I must confess, I am sorry for how things played out this evening.” He looked into the fire, resting a hand on the mantle. “ It was not how I imagined it.”

He had dreamed of Elizabeth — he could not deny it. Not only of kissing those lovely lips, but of taking her to Pemberley, making her known to Georgiana. It had seemed nothing more than a dream. However magnificent Elizabeth would be as his wife and the mistress of Pemberley, he thought he must hold out against the temptation to ask for her hand. His family would not wish him to marry a woman without fortune or connections, no matter how sparkling her wit or how beautiful her eyes.

Now, it seemed, the choice was no longer his. Their destinies were tied together. However much Darcy would have preferred a more dignified and less shocking courtship, the result was at least acceptable. If nothing else, he could give over his attempts to forget her.

“ I am sure you and Miss Elizabeth will be very happy together. Indeed, perhaps Miss Bennet and I will also soon be happily married. It is a pity you have stolen my thunder, Darcy. If all went well, I was planning to ask the young lady to be my wife within the next few weeks — before I was due to return to Town for a brief visit to look over Father ’ s holdings.”

Darcy gave a soft chuckle. “ Ahh, I see. You wanted to ensure she was yours before you left the county?”

“ Most certainly. And I am not ashamed to deny it. She is the most beautiful creature I have ever beheld!”

“ Yes, you ’ ve said that,” Darcy teased.

Bingley got up and joined him before the hearth. “ I am glad you have seen the error of your ways, my friend.” He clapped Darcy on the back, looking into the flames as well.

Darcy looked at him in surprise. “ Error? What error?”

“ Surely you have not forgotten? Our first night here in Netherfield, or rather, the first night out in society? At the Meryton assembly, you told me that Miss Elizabeth was not beautiful enough to tempt you. Obviously, she is possessed of other charms.” He raised his brows, but said nothing else as he sipped his drink.

Darcy looked away, frowning deeply. He remembered now. He had spoken clumsily in the heat of the moment, overwhelmed by all the curious eyes and whisperings throughout the room. There had been many eager mothers who, upon seeing Bingley enter the grand assembly, had thought to marry off their daughters to a man with five thousand a year. When they had found out that Darcy was worth twice that much, they had quickly changed their focus to him, particularly when it had become clear to all that Bingley ’ s attention was given to the enchanting Miss Bennet. And who could blame him?

He had all but forgotten ever speaking slightly of Elizabeth. Since uttering the flippant words in confidence to his friend, he had come to find her a spirited, intelligent, and quick-witted young woman. Not to mention rather intoxicatingly lovely. “ Please never utter that outside this room. I am ashamed I ever said the words.”

Bingley ’ s head shot up in surprise. “ Really? I do not think I have ever heard you apologise.”

Darcy scoffed but was not offended. “ I do not speak half as much as I listen, therefore my words rarely come back to haunt me.”

Bingley looked at him askance. “In this case, Darcy, I am very much afraid they might. A number of people overheard you. I rather suspect the lady herself was among them.”

Darcy grimaced. “Ah. You have a point. Indeed, perhaps I ought to apologise.”

“Excellent, see that you do,” Bingley said, grinning broadly. “It is not so bad, my friend. I am quite accustomed to speaking out of turn, I am afraid. Like the old adage, ‘Listen first, speak later.’ Wise words, and I wish I could live by them better in the heat of the moment. But, especially when I am faced with a pretty girl, my thoughts come out faster than my tongue can wag, and they all seem to get jumbled up on the way out.”

“ Well, it seems that Miss Bennet has not noticed,” Darcy remarked. “On the contrary, I think you are doing remarkably well.”

He put down his drink and turned away from the hearth. The night was already well advanced, and Darcy suspected that sleep would elude him even once abed. But if he was to be fresh and alert for his appointment with Mr Bennet, he needed to at least try.

Bingley put down his glass for a footman to collect. He walked out with Darcy, placing his hand on his shoulder. “ It will not be so terrible, Darcy. I predict a brood of children for you in the next few years, and a very happy, witty wife — which is what you have always said you wanted.”

To his own surprise, Darcy felt a smile breaking out on his face at the thought. “I suppose I did.” Hideously embarrassing as the events of the evening had been, he could not deny his bone-deep satisfaction at the thought of claiming Elizabeth as his wife.

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Elizabeth woke early the next morning, dry-eyed and unsettled. When she had finally fallen into a light sleep, the confusion and anxiety of her mind had been too great for much rest. Even now, as she prepared to go downstairs to join her family at the breakfast table, her stomach twisted in knots. If she could stomach even a few bites of dry toast, it would be a miracle.

Dressing was accomplished with little time and great indifference. When the maid had received her thanks and departed, Elizabeth looked at herself in the mirror, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. Sighing heavily, she smoothed the skirt of her cotton day-dress and pinched her cheeks to give them some colour.

Elizabeth grimaced at the results. After the many tears she had shed the night before, the added colour in her cheeks only emphasised the redness around her eyes.

“ I give over,” she mumbled, and made her way downstairs. After all, it mattered little what anyone thought of her appearance. Elizabeth was far more anxious to see how her family would receive her now that they thought the worst of her. Her mother’s reaction the night before had not been promising. There seemed little reason to hope that Mrs Bennet would believe in her innocence now.

Everyone was already in the dining room when she arrived, and the room quieted as she entered. Elizabeth stopped in the door’s archway, sucking in a nervous breath. “ Good morning, everyone.”

She hated the slight quaver she could not keep out of her voice. With an effort, Elizabeth kept her head up, refusing to look as if she were ashamed. She sat down in her usual spot beside Jane and poured herself some tea.

“ Well, my dear, I trust you slept well?” her mother asked, giving her a beaming smile from the foot of the table. “ We will need to start making preparations immediately if we are to get everything accomplished for the wedding in a timely manner. One does not want to let these things go on too long, you know.”

All the quiet chatter ceased, and every eye turned to Mrs Bennet. Elizabeth could think of no words for several moments, blinking slowly while she tried to understand what had just happened. “ I beg your pardon?” Elizabeth asked. She was glad that she had not taken a sip of her tea yet, for she might have spit it out, so great was her shock. Poor Mr Collins would have been the unlucky recipient of the mishap, too.

“ Did you sleep well?” Her mother asked again, raising her voice as though Elizabeth were hard of hearing. Mrs Bennet kept on eating as if nothing at all was the matter with what she had asked. “ You know, we cannot begin making preparations too soon. I am sure Mr Darcy will not want to have a long engagement. It would be well for all involved to hold the wedding as soon as a license can be obtained.”

Elizabeth and Jane exchanged a dumbfounded look. “ Well, no, Mama. As a matter of fact, I did not sleep a wink.” She glanced around, feeling her father ’ s disapproval from across the table. “ I thought you were angry with me, Mama.”

“ Angry? Why ever would I be angry? You have secured your future with a gentleman who is twice as rich as Mr Bingley, and paved the way for your sisters, I might add. I would not be surprised if Mr Bingley spoke for Jane within a fortnight!” Mrs Bennet leaned forward, raising a glass of watered wine into the air as if to toast the assembled company, and took a long draw. She beamed at Elizabeth ’ s father at the other end of the table, then looked around, suddenly realizing that no one was sharing in her gleeful celebration. “ Whatever is the matter with everyone? We are celebrating!”

Elizabeth wanted to crawl under the table and disappear. “ I did not secure my future,

Mama. Can you not see that Mr Darcy did the only thing he could do to save his reputation — and mine? Had he not done so, all my sisters might have suffered from my disgrace. We all would have been ruined.” Elizabeth hated hearing the words of her guilt coming out of her own mouth, but it was true. “ I did none of that intentionally, but that is how the entire county will see it. The gossip will be cruel, I have no doubt of it.”

Jane reached over and took Elizabeth ’ s hand. She was grateful that she had at least one ally at the table.

“ How can you say so, Lizzy? Mr Darcy is an influential member of society. I am sure with the right kind of leverage,

he can make any unpleasantness go away,” Mrs Bennet fussed.

“Well, I do not know about the rest of you,” Lydia cut in brightly, “but I do not know why Lizzy would want to catch Mr Darcy. He is such a dull old man — so arrogant and aloof. I am sure I could never marry a man like him. I should die of boredom!” Lydia took a large bite of a freshly buttered piece of bread and ate with gusto.

Elizabeth was too shocked to say anything by way of a rebuke. Thankfully, she did not have to. For once, Mr Bennet troubled himself to check his youngest daughter. “ Lydia Bennet. I do not want to hear that kind of talk come out of your mouth ever again. Mr Darcy is a gentleman, and he is about to be a part of this family. I suggest you bridle your loose tongue, or I shall see you banished to your room until you can do so.”

Elizabeth wanted to applaud her father, for he had never disciplined her younger sisters so seriously. Lydia ’ s lip quivered, and she sat back in silence. Hopefully, to think about what she had said, though perhaps that was too much to hope for.

As he heard one shocking phrase after another, Mr Collins had gone violently red in the face. At last, his composure seemed entirely overcome. He leaned forward to begin his tirade. “ I, for one, am shocked at the goings-on of the past evening. I thought I had come amongst the bosom of my family, amongst my respectable, gently bred cousins. Last night, I learned I had been sorely deceived.” Mr Collins glanced in Lydia ’ s direction. “ But what I have just heard said of the noble Mr Darcy is the last straw — absolutely the last straw. Mr Darcy is a gentleman, the nephew of my esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. I would thank you not to speak of him in such a callous manner.”

Elizabeth wanted to burst out laughing. One moment, he was appalled by the situation and the next, he was trying to defend one of the presumed guilty parties. His spinelessness truly knew no bounds.

Mr Collins wiped his mouth with his linen napkin and rose from his chair, the legs squeaking against the wooden floor. “ As a man of the cloth, I must say that I have never been amongst people who were so tainted by sin. I am most shocked by your actions, Miss Elizabeth. After making my sentiments known, you have gone and — ” he glanced at Lydia and Kitty. “ Well, I will not describe what I was told last night after you all departed. But it was a most alarming report indeed. That being said, I feel I cannot remain in this household any longer, for it appears to be a veritable repository of vice. It is with a heavy heart that I must inform you, Mr Bennet, that I will be leaving immediately and with great haste.”

He placed his napkin on the table, walked to the arched doorway, gave a slight, awkward bow, and exited the room.

A moment of silence ensued, in which Elizabeth ’ s mind raced. What would her mother say to her now? She was all too aware of her mother ’ s hopes that Mr Collins might speak for one of the five Bennet sisters. At least now none of them would have to suffer his attentions any longer.

Her father turned to Lydia with a severe look in his eyes, then cracked a smile. “ Well done, Lydia. I must congratulate you on getting him to leave. I thought he would never go!” He chuckled softly and opened his newspaper, scanning the columns with renewed vigour.

Everyone burst into laughter, and a sense of relief overtook Elizabeth. At least with Mr Collins gone, they might have some sense of peace at home, without suffering his constant inanities.

Though her family was in high spirits for the rest of breakfast, Elizabeth could not share their elation. She ate as much as she could. Thanks to the roiling of her stomach, that was precious little. Though they had been relieved of Mr Collins’s

annoying presence, there was still the question of her engagement and pending marriage to a man who had only proposed to her out of obligation.

When Elizabeth and Jane finished and were leaving the table, Jane pulled her aside and gestured for her to follow. Instead of following her mother and sisters to the parlour, they snuck down the hall and entered the still room, where the family’s store of dried plants and medicines were kept. Jane closed the door and locked it as an extra precaution. If any of the servants came to the door, they would think their mother was taking stock of the inventory stored there.

“ Are you well, Lizzy? Only I know that Lydia ’ s outburst must have upset you. And our mother! — well. I suppose I should not criticise. No doubt Mama is trying to make the best of it. Even so, you must have been hurt to hear her speak so.” Jane tucked a stray lock of hair behind Elizabeth ’ s ear and looked at her in deep concern. Dear Jane, always thinking of others before herself.

“ I cannot know how I am, Jane. Everything is happening so fast — ” she blurted, wrapping her arms around her middle as though to keep herself from flying into

pieces. “ How many others think I orchestrated the events of last night to trap a wealthy husband?” She lamented that anyone would say such things about the travesty of the evening prior. But she had to be prepared for the snickers and whispers, the knowledge that people might well ostracise her for what they thought she had done. “ I cannot bear it!”

“ It will not be all that bad, will it? Mr Darcy is a worthy gentleman. I was quite surprised, and pleased, that he spoke for you so quickly. You could have ended up with a man less honourable than he, to be sure. And I am starting to think that we may have misjudged him. Even faced with a roomful of people — and we all know how he detests being the centre of attention — he stood his ground. It took great strength of will and character to do so.”

Jane ’ s attempt at encouragement did little to lift the burden pressing on Elizabeth ’ s chest. The room seemed to close in on her, making it difficult to draw breath. She took a few moments to collect herself, realizing that, in all this, Jane had never once thought of herself. Yet surely she could hardly help but worry about how the events of the ball might affect her standing in Mr Bingley ’ s eyes. For who would ever want to be connected with a woman whose sister had made such a debacle of her reputation and that of her family?

“ Thank you, Jane. You have always been so good to me. Better than I deserve.” Elizabeth gave her hand a light squeeze. Tears stung her eyes, and she tried to hold them back. “ I am only sorry that I may have ruined your chances with Mr Bingley.”

Jane waved her off. “ I am sure Mr Bingley will stand with Mr Darcy. And if he said he did nothing untoward, as you also have stated, then Mr Bingley will believe him.” She gave no further encouragement, nor did she delve into matters of the heart, giving her no clue where her affections lay. However, Elizabeth did not overlook the worried look that passed through her sister ’ s eyes. Her sister was shy, and thus barely showed her true feelings.

“ Do you love him, Jane?” Elizabeth asked. She did not like to pry, especially after the last gentleman who had seemed infatuated with her sister. He had been a poet of sorts and wrote many pretty verses praising her beauty, elegance, and charm. He praised her so much that their mother had been ready to order fabric for Jane’s wedding ensemble and trousseau. But no offer ever came, and Jane had never spoken of him with a hint of fondness or regret.

Perhaps it was not entirely surprising that Jane worked so hard to conceal her emotions. Their mother had given them a contrary example all their lives. No wonder that elegant, modest Jane might go too far and shut herself off from her emotions entirely.

But she couldn’t hide everything she felt. The instant Elizabeth had asked her the question, a slight blush had touched her cheeks. Jane shifted nervously on the little stool she had taken when they had entered the still room. “ How can you ask such a thing, Lizzy?” Jane was not one to speak of such things. But the blush and her sister ’ s refusal to answer, or even look at her, told the whole story.

“ I would never do anything to hurt you,” Elizabeth said, taking both of Jane ’ s hands and squeezing them. “ If I must enter into an engagement with Mr Darcy in order to see the way smoothed for you and Mr Bingley, then I will gladly do so.” She looked tenderly into her older sister’s eyes. She was without guile, the sweetest person and truest friend. “ At least one of us should be happy.”

“ Oh, Lizzy, I cannot bear to hear you speak so!” Jane leaned forward and embraced her tightly.

“ It is just as well.” Elizabeth said with her best attempt at levity. “ I am always reading about damsels in distress. The women in loveless marriages always seem to have the most adventures.”

“ You jest, I know. But I hate to think that you will spend your days in misery. Surely being married to Mr Darcy cannot be as bad as you think it will be? After all, has anyone else caught your fancy?” Jane had cunningly turned the focus back onto Elizabeth. But she was not through yet.

Elizabeth shrugged. “ I do not know. Perhaps Mr Collins has a cousin...”

Jane laughed despite herself and let go of Elizabeth. “ Oh, Lizzy, you are wicked sometimes!” She leaned away, looking up at the cupboards and sighing heavily. “ I only wish there was a way to make everyone else believe what I already know to be true. You and Mr Darcy did nothing wrong. It was an accidental fall, nothing more.”

An idea suddenly sparked in Elizabeth ’ s mind. A small smile played at the corners of her mouth, and Jane sat up straighter, giving her a concerned look. “ Whatever are you smiling about?”

“ Nothing. You have just given me the most brilliant idea, that is all,” Elizabeth said. “ Indeed, this could change everything!” For the first time since she and Mr Darcy had fallen to the library floor, she felt hope swell in her chest. If such a plan could only work, she might clear both of their names and keep herself from being sacrificed on the Altar of Convenient Marriages.

“ What is it?” Jane asked. “ I haven ’ t said anything remotely brilliant.”

“Just a moment, Jane. Let me organise my thoughts. You have given me the most remarkable idea.” Now that she had a direction in which to focus her energies, her exhaustion seemed to vanish, and Elizabeth paced rapidly back and forth on the still room floor, her footsteps echoing with steady thuds. After a few moments without an answer, Jane excused herself to allow her time to think. Elizabeth barely noticed her departure. If she could convince Mr Darcy and her father that her idea would work, it might very well be the difference between a lifetime of misery as the next Mrs Darcy,

and a chance at freedom and future happiness.

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At breakfast the morning after the Netherfield ball, Darcy did his best to act as if nothing at all untoward had happened. True to his expectations, he had not slept well. Yet it was not, perhaps, for the reason most would have assumed. He was sorry that Elizabeth ' s reputation might be brought into question for any length of time. But he could not claim he was entirely sorry they were to wed. Elizabeth had captured his attention over the last weeks, and he had felt his heart tugged nearer to affection than he had ever been with another woman in his life. Could this be the beginnings of a true attachment? He could not be sure, but evidently, they were about to find out if they could make a good match as a married couple, or if they were doomed to go through life merely tolerating each other.

As breakfast was coming to a close, Darcy wiped his mouth and cleared his throat. Everyone leaned forward to hear what he was going to say, including Mr and Mrs Hurst, who had, no doubt, been trying to suppress their many questions throughout the meal. “ I will go to Longbourn after breakfast is over, to speak with Mr Bennet,” he announced.

Mr Bingley shot him an encouraging smile from the head of the table and held his teacup aloft as if to toast him. “ I wish you the best of luck, my old friend. Indeed, would you like someone to come along with you, for moral support and all that rot?” he asked. Bingley seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself, Darcy thought sourly. His friend might have had a little more compassion for him. “ Do press for a short engagement. I hear long ones are such awful affairs. It would be better to see you and Miss Elizabeth settled at Pemberley before the year is out.”

“ I plan to have the banns read as soon as the parson can be informed,” Darcy replied. “ Or if Mr Bennet insists, I suppose I may procure a special license.”

“ We shall start making preparations in the meantime,” Bingley said, beaming at him.

“ You cannot be serious, Mr Darcy,” Caroline Bingley said, looking down her nose at her brother. “ I thought you had been overtaken by a sense of misplaced duty last night, and would repent of it in the morning. Surely you are going to Longbourn to talk some sense into Mr Bennet? He must know that none of this is your doing. You ought to be able to buy him off easily, for it is Miss Elizabeth Bennet who ought to be ashamed.”

Bingley sprang to his feet before Darcy could say a word. “ Caroline, I told you last night that I did not want to hear another word against Miss Elizabeth Bennet! If you cannot speak kindly about my friend’s fiancée, I will have to ask you to leave Netherfield post haste.” Bingley ’ s face grew red, the colour climbing into his cheeks at a most alarming rate. While Darcy appreciated the sentiment, it was necessary to make his own intentions clear.

“ I do not think that will be necessary,” Darcy interrupted. Miss Bingley turned to him, her face pale with shock. “I have no intention of buying anyone off, as you so callously suggest, Miss Bingley. I am not a man who shirks his responsibilities. The fact you could even suggest a thing shows that you really do not know me at all.” He rose from his chair. Miss Bingley looked stricken, realizing her mistake. But there was nothing she could do to make it right now. Darcy had seen her for what she was. Though he had long known they would not suit each other, he had respected Miss Bingley’s education and accomplishments, had thought that her sense of propriety was all that anyone might wish it to be. No more. In matters of true honour, she seemed to have no principles at all.

“ I bid you all good morning,” Darcy said abruptly. He bowed and left the table without looking back.

Bingley followed him out into the foyer, catching up to him before he left the house.

“ I cannot apologise enough for my sister, Darcy. She is a spoilt child!” he exclaimed.
“ If you wish it, I will send her back to London immediately.”

Darcy thought for a moment. “ I doubt we shall speak very often, even if she is to stay. Do not think you need to banish her for my sake. It is not I who will find myself uncomfortable in this part of the world.” If he were telling the truth, he suspected Miss Bingley would ask to leave of her own accord. Maybe then Bingley could get to know the elder Miss Bennet without impediments. “ Though perhaps it would be for the best. I fear your sister feels herself rather too free to interfere with your choice of a partner in life. I am ashamed, now, to think how much I was the same. If Miss Bennet is your choice, I do not doubt that your suit will prosper. You are a good man, Bingley. Any woman would be proud and honoured to have your favour.”

At such a compliment, Bingley could do nothing but chuckle and proclaim himself obliged and undeserving. Looking rather embarrassed, he clapped a hand on Darcy ’ s shoulder. “ You had better go before you are missed and they set the hounds on you. It would not do to be late for your appointment with your future father-in-law,” he remarked.

“ No, that it would not.” Despite the gravity of the situation, Darcy found himself chuckling as he headed out the door. Had anyone told him only a few days ago with what light spirits he would go towards making the arrangements for a match he had not freely chosen, he would not have believed them. But for all the practical concerns against Elizabeth Bennet, at least as a member of a rather unruly family, he could not view the prospect of having her as his wife with any dislike.

It was a great relief to be out of doors in the fresh air. Birds flew overhead in ragged arrowheads, making their way south to the Continent for the winter. The air was mild with the sun shining through fluffy clouds, and his spirits rose as he felt the sun shining on his face at intervals as he walked across the field and farm toward the Longbourn estate.

Though practicality would have had him ride, Darcy found he badly needed a little time to think. He was glad the weather would allow him a good, long walk to Longbourn before his meeting with Mr Bennet. Thoughts swirled in his mind, even after all the time he had had through the night to think matters through. It was like being stuck on a spinner's wheel, constantly going round and round but never arriving anywhere. Something was amiss, but he was not sure what. It was maddening not being able to put his finger on exactly what was wrong.

Miss Bingley ' s comments at breakfast had done nothing to calm him. The nerve of the woman, suggesting that he would try to bribe Mr Bennet into letting him out of the engagement! Miss Bingley had damaged herself in his good opinion with her behaviour that morning, and he had not the slightest intention of changing his mind.

Suddenly, his thoughts jumped to his sister, Georgiana. He would have to write to her that afternoon to inform her of what had happened, or at least the details that were most relevant. It would not do to upset her delicate sensibilities or damage her innocence. However, she would have to be told as soon as possible. And, he supposed, he would have to send for her quickly if she were to be there in time for a wedding. Selfishly, he was glad that she would need to come. It would be a great relief to draw comfort from her calming presence. Besides, Georgiana had been too long in solitude, locked away in Pemberley like a cloistered nun.

At that thought, sadness overcame him. His incident with Elizabeth had been accidental. Georgiana ' s incident of last summer had not. On the contrary, she had been vilely deceived, and by a man who ought to have been a trusted family friend.

Darcy pushed the disturbing thoughts away and vowed to focus on the task ahead. He would have to affirm his willingness to marry Elizabeth. Nothing else could save his reputation from becoming a little smudged, and hers from suffering fatal damage. Innocent as he knew himself to be, Darcy could not bear to think of leaving her unprotected. It was too obvious what would follow — public disgrace and the utter

impossibility of marrying creditably. The shame might even comprehend her sisters, destroying the family's happiness at a stroke. And all this for an accident that was more his fault than hers. He had fallen on top of her, after all.

Still, Darcy dreaded meeting the complaisance and half-hidden triumph with which Mr Bennet would surely greet him. Surely he could never have imagined giving his daughter away to a man with ten thousand a year. What was an unfortunate accident to Darcy would surely be manna from heaven to Mr Bennet. And to meet such a look, such poorly suppressed smiles with tolerable politeness, while forced into an offer highly injurious to his pride — it was almost more than he could bear. It would have been more than he could bear, if not for what Elizabeth would suffer otherwise.

When he had reached the halfway point, bypassing Meryton, Darcy turned his thoughts towards what he might say when faced with his future father-in-law, as Bingley had named him. Courtesy surely required him to admit his own part in the affair, but he did not intend to let the older man have everything his own way.

When he arrived at the house, the housekeeper quickly ushered him into Mr Bennet ' s library. The younger girls followed them down the corridor at a distance, and he could hear them whispering and giggling to themselves as they went. It was rather unnerving, but he did his best to keep his composure.

“ Come in,” Mr Bennet said, his tone difficult to decipher. The room was in stark contrast to the Netherfield and Pemberley libraries. All around them were spread piles of books, taken down from shelves and never replaced. There were various species of plants in pots standing in window sills and sitting on shelves where the books ought to be. Even more curious were the many velvet-covered boards, covered with the pinned specimens of innumerable unfortunate insects that had happened into Mr Bennet ' s clutches.

Darcy bowed, a little undone by the scene before him. He took a steadying breath,

then stepped forward to meet his future father-in-law. “ Thank you for seeing me this morning, Mr Bennet,” he said.

With a shock, Darcy saw that Mr Bennet hardly looked triumphant. Quite the contrary. He was sober to the point of being grim. Mr Bennet shook hands with him, then motioned for Darcy to be seated in a hardback chair across from the well-used plush chair on the far side of the desk. It took no particular perception to recognize it as being his favourite. After what must have been years of sitting, the chair had formed to Mr Bennet ’ s shape. It could not have fit him more precisely if it had been tailored for him.

“ I am glad to see you are a man of your word, Mr Darcy. I did not doubt it, but my wife has been badgering me all morning, asking if you would really come.” Mr Bennet made his fingers into a steeple and rested his chin on the point. “ I suppose there is no need to draw out our meeting with pleasantries, hmm? I want to hear it from your perspective, Mr Darcy. What happened last night?”

Darcy looked at him in surprise. From Mr Bennet’s perspective, the details were surely immaterial. The damage was done, and all that mattered was whether he would take the man’s daughter, and under what conditions. Yet he could not regret being asked for his view of the matter. The older gentleman evidently had a regard for the facts, and that was something always worthy of respect.

“Your daughter and I did not intend to meet in the library, Mr Bennet,” Darcy said after a moment’s thought. “I received a note from Mr Hurst, asking me to speak to him. Miss Elizabeth and I met there by chance, and as I stepped forward to speak to her, I am afraid I became unaccountably clumsy. I tripped and fell with great force, knocking Miss Elizabeth Bennet over as well. It was this, and not any reason that could reflect on our virtue, that led to us being discovered in so unsuitable a position.” Darcy stopped there. Surely honesty could not require that he give the details of what he had been feeling as he had accidentally pinned Elizabeth beneath

him on the library floor. Nor would her father wish to hear such things.

Mr Bennet nodded rather grimly. "I do not doubt you, sir. I know my daughter too well to do so. Yet though you are the victims of an unfortunate mistake, it does not fix the essential problem of my daughter's reputation. You two will have to marry, or my Lizzy will have to leave this place in shame. And I could not bear to send her away."

Darcy nodded. "I am sure I will understand, when I have a daughter of my own, someday." It was strange to think that this man would be the grandfather of his children. An ache tugged at his heartstrings at the thought that his own mother and father would never meet his children. His mother would have been a superb grandmother. Of course, she would have also fainted to learn about the events that had transpired the night before.

Unaware of the softness of his thoughts, Mr Bennet looked at him sharply. "You will marry her, then? Neighbourhood gossip being what it is, I am sure you must know I can offer you nothing that would tempt a man of your fortune and consequence. Nothing, that is, beyond Elizabeth herself — and I cannot expect you to estimate the value of that gift as I do."

"It is my duty to marry her," Darcy replied. "As for the settlements, we may discuss them at your leisure. I am aware that your daughter's dowry is not large. It is not a matter of concern to me."

For the first time since their conversation began, Mr Bennet looked at him with something of a softer expression. "You will truly be her partner in life, then, Mr Darcy? You will treat her as she ought to be treated, and will not look on her with resentment later?"

"I will do my best to care for your daughter, Mr Bennet," he promised. He dared not

share how his feelings were softening toward her. He sensed that she was nearly as upset about this match as Miss Bingley, if for a different reason.

“ I know you will. You have already shown considerable strength of character in being willing to do the right thing by my Lizzy. May I be candid, Mr Darcy?” Mr Bennet leaned forward, pushing himself out of his chair. He paced back and forth in front of the window. At Darcy ’ s nod, he stopped and pinned him with a severe stare. “ I did not think there would ever be a man worthy of my Lizzy. But it seems I am overruled by fate.”

“ I will try to be worthy of her, sir,” Darcy replied.

Mr Bennet cocked his head to the side. “ Well, I am sure you shall.” He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but kept it to himself.

Darcy studied the floor for a moment. Despite the flaws Darcy had seen in his sense of propriety, Mr Bennet had merits he would not have anticipated. Much as they might disagree on questions of propriety and how one ought to direct young women under one’s guardianship, Darcy found himself liking the man.

A knock sounded on the door before Darcy could make any more promises; a small mercy. Mr Bennet went to the door, opening it wide and admitting none other than Elizabeth herself. Darcy stood immediately, feeling his heartbeat quicken at the sight of her.

Miss Bingley would have paled in comparison, had they been standing beside each other at that moment. Miss Bingley always dressed in the latest fashions: silks, furs, and expensive jewellery. But even in a simple day dress, Elizabeth outshone her effortlessly. Her simple navy blue dress brought out the healthy glow of her complexion. She wore no jewellery and had pulled back her wavy brunette hair into an unassuming chignon at the nape of her neck.

To Darcy, she was nothing less than a vision.

“ Good morning, Miss Elizabeth,” he said.

“ Good morning, Mr Darcy,” she responded coldly.

He did his best not to be offended. Who could blame her for being upset, as she so obviously was?

She let out a breath, then looked down at the floor for several seconds before she met his gaze again. Clasp ing her hands in front of her, she began. “ I must thank you for rescuing me last night, particularly in view of the consequences my younger sisters would have suffered if you had not stepped in as you did.”

Darcy nearly said, “ It was my pleasure,” but stopped himself just in time. He did not think it would have been very well received. “ I only did what any other man would have done,” he replied.

She seemed to find that unlikely, but forbore to comment. Elizabeth took a steady ing breath, glancing at her father, and went on. “ However, this situation must be just as odious to you as it is for me, as I know how much you dislike me.”

Darcy could have fallen over right there. He frowned. Dislike her? What could have possessed her to arrive at such a conclusion? “ Miss Elizabeth — ” he began, but she held up a hand for silence.

“ Please allow me to finish what I was saying,” Elizabeth insisted, though her tone was gentle. “ As I know you dislike me and only proposed an engagement to save our reputations, I should like to propose a compromise.”

Mr Bennet gave a short laugh. “ Really, my dear,” he said sarcastically, glancing at

Darcy. “Are you not compromised enough already?”

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Elizabeth tried to stifle her hurt at her father's acerbic comment. She ought to have known that he would treat the situation with his usual dry wit. It had been too much to hope for that he would consider how painful the situation was to her feelings. Indeed, he had a right to be angry with her, though she had not acted with intent.

Mr Darcy, too, seemed to look at Mr Bennet with surprise. But of course, pride was the most dominant part of his character, and he would not choose to have any situation in which he was so closely concerned treated with levity.

"Please, Father, hear what I have to say," Elizabeth pressed on. "I wonder if I may have a solution to our problem."

Mr Darcy shot her a quick glance, looking still more surprised by her calm statement than by her father's joke. Elizabeth gathered her courage and her composure, trying to remind herself that the fate of her future happiness rested on convincing them to try her plan.

"I understand you have been discussing my future. Is it not only fair that I have a say in the matter?" Taking a steadying breath, she went on, her head held high. "I wish to propose a compromise of a different kind," Elizabeth said, aiming the comment at her father. She looked pleadingly at Mr Darcy, reminding herself that he was both as much a victim of the mishap as herself, and deeply deserving of her gratitude for issuing an offer of marriage — however little she wished to actually accept the offer. He could not have wished it. Surely he would wish for an escape as much as she did.

"Do you not find the entire sequence of events odd?" Elizabeth asked them both. "For example, why did Mr Darcy fall so violently? And why did I receive a note

summoning me to the library?" She gave them both a moment to consider. " I have been thinking about it all night, and I do not believe it was an accident that we were in the library together and that we were discovered. I think someone has been the architect of all our misfortune."

Her father looked as if he might fall over in a dead faint, and that was a difficult thing to achieve, for he was not easily flustered. " You received a note to go to the library? From whom? I want to see it immediately!"

Elizabeth pulled her note from her reticule and gave it to her father. When she had at last suspected the significance of the note, she had thanked the heavens she had not thrown it away.

"This is significant indeed," Mr Darcy remarked intently. "You see, I too received a note asking me to go to the library."

Elizabeth gasped in shock. "You too, Mr Darcy?"

He nodded and seemed about to speak, but Mr Bennet gestured for silence as he perused the note. Elizabeth waited impatiently as her father read, her heart beating faster every time Mr Darcy looked at her. And he seemed to be watching her every move.

" Who is this Mrs X?" her father demanded. He walked over to his desk on the other side of the library and smoothed the note out.

" I do not have the faintest idea, Papa. Perhaps I ought to have been more suspicious, but it did not occur to me at the time. When I arrived in the library, I decided to browse the shelves as I waited for this Mrs X to appear. The next moment I knew something strange was afoot was when —" The look in Mr Darcy ' s eyes retold the story. Suddenly, she remembered the feeling of laying in his arms, pinned under him.

Elizabeth blinked, but the memory of how he had looked into her eyes with such concern, how he had embraced her so tenderly, left her heart beating more quickly than she wished to admit.

Elizabeth quickly shook the disturbing thoughts away. Such thoughts were not enough to build a life on — not when he had no regard for her, and would surely come to regret a forced proposal. No matter how gallantly he had acted the night before, she must stick to her convictions.

Still, an inkling of doubt played at the back of her mind as they gazed into each other's eyes. Was he also reliving that moment? Elizabeth could not forget how tenderly he had tucked her hair behind her ear and ran his fingers down her cheek.

“ Elizabeth?” her father pressed. She tore her eyes from Mr Darcy's and shook her head, feeling lost for a moment.

“ Ah, yes, Papa? Where was I?”

“ You knew something was afoot when — ” her father prompted.

“ Yes, I knew something was not right when Mr Darcy tripped so violently. He is not a clumsy man, not in the least. We all stumble from time to time, of course, but why such a very violent fall, and why at precisely that moment?” Oddly, Mr Darcy looked rather flattered at her simple statement that he was rather graceful, which anyone who had observed him at close range could see to be true.

He cleared his throat. “ I will not say that I am never clumsy. But it was very odd to me as well that I should have tripped like that. And even then, there was not much of a crash, yet a crowd of people said that a loud noise had brought them to the library.”

“ No, you are a very graceful faller,” Elizabeth agreed. She felt her cheeks flush at the

ridiculous compliment. How absurd of her! “ That is to say, I do not remember hearing any great crash.”

“ Neither did I. What about you, Mr Bennet? What brought you to the library? Did you hear anything strange, or did someone alert you to what had happened?” Mr Darcy turned to her father to include him in the conversation. Elizabeth startled. As they had been speaking, she had almost forgotten he was standing there.

“ I did not hear the crash, but I was alerted that there had been an incident in the library. I believe Kitty was the one who came to retrieve me from the grand salon, along with Mrs Bennet.” Her father put his hand on his chin and rubbed it, as he often did when he was deep in thought. “ You say you also received a note, Mr Darcy? Do you have it on your person?” he asked.

“ Yes, I do.” Mr Darcy retrieved the note from his waistcoat pocket and brought it out, smoothing it on the desk as Mr Bennet had done with her note. The three of them leaned in and compared the notes.

“ They look very similar, do they not?” Elizabeth asked. Her heart lifted, hoping that Mr Darcy had recognised the handwriting. If they could track down who had written the notes and lured them to the library, then they might be able to prove their innocence in front of the whole community and save themselves from having to submit to this unwanted marriage. “ I thought it strange that the penmanship was so untidy. Did you notice that as well?”

“ Yes, I did, rather. I have never received a note from Mr Hurst — there has been no occasion for him to write to me.” Mr Darcy straightened, sighing. “ Indeed, I thought it very odd that Mr Hurst would write me a note at all. Why would he not simply inform me he had something to discuss? But I suppose that at the time, I thought he wished to arrange for greater privacy. Now, I believe it was not from him, but from some unknown person.”

“ It is a conundrum,” her father said. He walked away from the desk and began pacing in the few spare feet of the wood floor that could be seen. Everything else was crowded pell-mell around the walls. It was the one room in the house that her father refused to let her mother touch, and had therefore descended into a happy bit of chaos. “ Can either of you think of who would want to subject you to this kind of scandal? Mr Darcy, being a more prevalent face in society, could you have made any enemies that might wish to cause you embarrassment?”

Mr Darcy shook his head. “ I cannot think of anyone,” he said. “ Believe me when I say, sir, I did not sleep last night for replaying the incident in my mind. I hope I can assure you once more that I would never willingly put your daughter’s reputation in jeopardy.”

The look in his eyes sent shivers up her spine. She could not pretend to herself that it had been caused by fear. It was a new awareness of him, perhaps — an awareness that Mr Darcy had a kind of honour she could not help but respect. He had made it clear he would sacrifice his own wants to protect her. Something twisted inside her. Elizabeth could not help but wonder if she had misjudged him.

She hardened her heart against the idea. It would be folly to allow Mr Darcy to control the situation. His unquestioning choice of the solution society would accept, no matter what it would mean for both their happiness, was proof enough of that. “ I can think of no one, either. I hope I have no such enemies,” Elizabeth remarked. At least, none that made sense. Miss Bingley had made no secret of her dislike, but she of all people was quite above suspicion. Miss Bingley would never have orchestrated an incident that quite literally pushed Elizabeth into the arms of the man she herself so obviously wished to marry.

“ So, what is it you are proposing, my dear?” her father asked after a long pause. “ I cannot allow Mr Darcy to recant his promise of marriage simply because you were both asked to the library by some unknown person. In the eyes of the community, you

are both guilty of a grave misstep indeed.” His eyes were filled with compassion, and she knew it gave him great pain to be so candid with her. “ Of course, I hope you both know that I do not judge you as the rest of the world might. If you say that it was an accident, I believe you.”

Elizabeth let out a relieved sigh. “ Thank you, Papa,” she said, leaned close, and kissed him on the cheek. However, his trust in her did nothing to absolve them in the eyes of the world — he was right on that point. She straightened and walked a few paces away so she could face them both. “ What I propose is this: that we work together to find the culprit and prove our innocence. If we succeed promptly, then there will be no need for us to marry and we can dissolve the engagement. It is a compromise of another kind, as I said earlier, between total ruin and a marriage that neither of us wants.”

A flash of some unknown emotion crossed Mr Darcy’s face as she finished. He paused for a moment before speaking, almost as though he had needed to collect himself. “ I agree that something is very wrong with the whole situation. What I cannot say for certain is how we could find this person, whoever they might be, and prove that what happened was indeed an accident.”

He waited for her to answer. All the while, she could see a battle going on behind his eyes. Was he disappointed that she wanted to call off the engagement? Surely not. He disliked her as much as she disliked him.

“ I really think we must try. If you agree, we can start with the notes. Perhaps we could talk with the servants that were enlisted to deliver them? They might give us a description of the person, or people, who asked them to bring us the summons.”

Elizabeth looked to her father for approval of the plan, but he was shaking his head. Her heart sank. After all, if he decreed they were still obligated to marry, then there would be nothing she could do. Even running away was impossible, for Elizabeth

could not consider any solution that would leave her sisters vulnerable to her disgrace. “ Will you at least let us try to find out what really happened last night, Papa?”

He thought for a moment, looking between the two of them. “ I will allow it,” he said. “ But I think you will still need to enter into an engagement, at least until we find out if there was foul play or not. That way, your reputation will not suffer beyond repair, Lizzy. What think you, Mr Darcy? What my daughter proposes would allow you to satisfy honour and protect your own reputation — though, of course, we all know that the consequences would not be nearly so dire as for my Lizzy — without such sacrifice as you were on the point of accepting. Do you agree?”

“ I do, Mr Bennet.” Mr Darcy said. He studied the floor for a moment, then looked up at her again. His piercing gaze made butterflies dance in her stomach. “ I will do my part to keep Miss Elizabeth Bennet ’ s name from being dragged through the mud.”

“ Very well, then. I give my blessing to the match, Mr Darcy — and I thank you. You may announce your engagement whenever you see fit. I think it would be best that our master of coercion, whoever they might be, thinks that their plan has succeeded. That should give you sufficient cover to pursue your little investigation.” Her father shook hands with Mr Darcy, and the deed was done. Elizabeth smiled wryly at the deal being struck. She rather suspected she knew how a prize mare being sold at auction must feel.

“ Thank you, Papa,” Elizabeth said, and turned to go. Stopping short, she glanced at Mr Darcy. “ And thank you as well,” she whispered.

He stopped her before she opened the door. “ Would you like to return to Netherfield with me, Miss Elizabeth? Or perhaps come tomorrow, so we may look over the scene of the crime, so to speak, and perhaps conduct some interviews with the staff who were present at the ball?” He glanced at Elizabeth ’ s father. “ Of course, with your

father ' s permission.”

“ Yes, of course she shall have my permission,” Mr Bennet agreed promptly. “After all, you have agreed to take Elizabeth. And if my daughter’s plan fails, she will be your wife in a month or so. She need not ask my permission for things any longer, but yours.” Mr Bennet took up his newspaper and opened it with a snapping gesture, a mischievous smile on his lips. He pretended to read, though it was obvious his attention remained on them.

The thought that her plan might fail made her want to flee the room and never return. How could her father be drawing any sort of amusement from the situation? “ Perhaps tomorrow afternoon would be more appropriate? I must confess I am still reeling from the events of last night.”

“ Yes, of course, I understand. Shall I have my carriage call for you at noon?”

“ That will not be necessary. Papa, may I use the carriage tomorrow? If you do not mind, Mr Darcy, I should like to bring Jane with me.” Taking her father’s carriage would have two benefits; it would allow her to escape accepting yet another favour from Mr Darcy, and it would make it much easier to persuade Jane to come along. That would give her a chance to see Mr Bingley, and would provide her with some moral support besides. Elizabeth looked curiously at Mr Darcy, wondering if he would object to Jane’s presence. Just as she wished to give Jane and Mr Bingley the opportunity to converse, if they wished, Mr Darcy might well want to keep them apart.

“ As you wish,” Mr Darcy replied calmly, and stood aside to allow her father to give his permission for the use of their carriage. Thankfully, Mr Bennet had no objections to the plan. They finished putting together the particulars of the next day ’ s activities and turned to leave her father in peace.

Mr Bennet rose from his chair as they finished, walking them both to the library door. “ If you find anything at Netherfield, notify me at once and we can take the proof to my good friend, Constable Rathers. He is a most apt student of the law and a very perceptive man.”

Mr Darcy thanked her father, and he opened the door for them. Outside, they found her mother, Lydia, and Kitty hanging about, trying to look as if they had simply been passing by. Lydia and Kitty beamed up at Mr Darcy, admiring the detail of his handsome navy blue coat and no doubt abusing it as ugly in comparison with a red one. “ Is it all settled then, Lizzy?” Lydia asked excitedly.

“ Yes, Lizzy, tell us,” Kitty urged.

“A moment please, girls,” Elizabeth said repressively. She shot them a warning look over her shoulder as she walked Mr Darcy to the door and said a polite goodbye. She made sure the door was well closed and Mr Darcy was a few paces away before turning to them and replying. “ Yes, I am afraid it is settled.”

“ Oh Lizzy, do not be ridiculous! You know you are the luckiest of women. Mr Darcy may be dull, but even so, to be the first one engaged! I wish I were engaged,” Lydia exclaimed. She linked arms with Kitty and began whispering about what it would be like to fall in love and get married.

Elizabeth could only sigh. She parted with her younger sisters and went out into the garden to find some solitude. Wrapped in a heavy woollen shawl, she walked about in the chill air among the dead and dying foliage. Her life felt like the barren landscape stretching before her. The grasses that had been so full and green earlier that year were now dull and brown or had been harvested and tilled, leaving behind clumps of brown earth.

She stood on one side of a low rock wall that had been constructed at the back of the

Longbourn estate, with the fallow fields stretching out before her. As she gazed at them, she reminded herself that spring would come again, and things would grow once more. Perhaps her life would be like that, if only she could work hard enough to find the person who had tried to destroy her future.

A moment later, Jane came up beside her and nodded, staying silent as she too gazed out over the grey landscape. Elizabeth linked arms with her sister and leaned her head on her shoulder. “ Dear Jane, you always know when someone needs a bolstering hand, don ’ t you?”

“ Well, I cannot say I always know, but with you — most of the time I can tell when you are in despair. Did the meeting with Mr Darcy not go well?”

Elizabeth leaned up and motioned to the little wooden ladder that was spread over the rock wall. They climbed over and began traversing the fields, walking arm in arm as they had so often done on happier days.

“ No, the meeting did not end badly. Indeed, it went too well, I think,” she said sadly. She bit her lower lip, wondering if it would be wise to share their plan to clear their names with Jane. She was without guile and would have a difficult time pretending that the engagement between her and Mr Darcy was genuine if she knew it was for show. At least for the time being, it would be kinder to say nothing.

“ You are displeased about the arrangement, I know. But did you not find Mr Darcy to be a gentleman above reproach? He acted valiantly yesterday. Surely you can agree on that?”

“ Valiant? Yes, I suppose so,” Elizabeth said. It was not the word she would have chosen, and yet...her thoughts turned unbidden to the moments they had been locked in an even more inappropriate embrace. She was glad that no one had seen them as they had lain prone on the floor. At least when everyone had rushed into the room,

she had been sitting, and Mr Darcy had only been kneeling very close to her, cupping her cheek. Her heart raced at the mere thought of it again, and she silently chastised herself for allowing her thoughts to turn in that direction again. She had to admit Mr Darcy had shown himself to be truly self-sacrificing and honourable over the past twenty-four hours.

But even to Jane, Elizabeth could not admit the most shocking part of that night. For that one moment, as he had held her so tenderly in his concern, she had almost thought Mr Darcy wished to kiss her. More than that. For a moment, she had seen in him a man she might have wished to kiss.

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The next day, Darcy found it difficult to settle down to any occupation. He shook his head ruefully at himself. It was not like him. He could usually count on his powers of concentration, no matter his surroundings. Today, however, his thoughts seemed to stray continuously to the visit the two eldest Bennet sisters would pay that day — and the investigations that he and Elizabeth would begin under cover of that visit. Inviting his fiancée and her sister to tea would do very well to throw the others off the scent — especially the nosey Miss Bingley. Since his engagement to Elizabeth, she had been more sharp-tongued than ever. A good thing that it was not within her power to limit who he invited to Netherfield. Darcy would never have to worry about Bingley when it came to inviting guests of his own, and that went doubly for Miss Bennet. His friend had been all for the idea, stating that it would be wonderful for Darcy to get to know his soon-to-be bride a little better before the wedding was to take place. If he had more personal reasons for his enthusiasm, he chose not to mention them in front of his sister.

Understandably so. Caroline Bingley was less than enthusiastic. “ Really, I cannot believe we are obliged to entertain today. Are we not still recovering from the ball?”

To judge by her upright posture as she sat on the drawing room sofa, anyone would have thought Miss Bingley in the peak of health and strength. For his part, Darcy felt no wish for a delay. His heart beat wildly with anticipation. Odd, that. He had always seen himself as a serious man. Who could have guessed that he would so greatly enjoy dabbling in intrigue? Perhaps it was the personal connection that made it so intriguing. He felt a strange thrill, knowing that he and Elizabeth would be working closely together.

Admittedly, Darcy had chosen to be somewhat less than open with his fiancée. He

had little hope they could prove the situation had been orchestrated. While Elizabeth seemed sanguine in her hopes that their reputations could be saved, Darcy thought it a vain hope.

That did not mean the effort would be wasted. If someone had acted so villainously against them, Darcy wanted to know who. And if their efforts came to nothing, he would have at least learned more about his betrothed. Elizabeth was rapidly becoming a fascination for him. She was so determined, so forthright, and yet she expressed the characteristics with true feminine delicacy. The very essence of her nature seemed to be sweetness, her smile made his heart beat faster, and —

“ Are you well, Mr Darcy? You have been pacing about like a nervous cat,” Miss Bingley observed. “ Shall we tell the ladies that you are not receiving visitors, after all?”

“ No!” Darcy said a little too quickly. He took a deep breath and glanced at Bingley, who gave a short laugh. “ No, I am well, Miss Bingley. Do not worry about me.”

Bingley walked over to his sister ’ s side and offered her his arm. She took it hesitantly, not being much given to sisterly shows of affection. “ Yes, do not fret about Darcy. He is a man of impeccable composure, is he not?” Bingley winked at Darcy but kept his sister from seeing the gesture.

Thankfully, the Bennets’ coach was then pulling up to the front of the house. Miss Bingley rolled her eyes heavenward, let go of her brother ’ s arm, and walked to the window. “ Hmm,” she said thoughtfully, but did not reveal the insults that were sure to be bouncing around her head. Darcy was grateful for her forbearance, though aware it was likely only momentary. Miss Bingley did not seem to have anything nice to say about the Bennets lately. Indeed, nor had she since their first meeting.

The door soon opened and the three of them stood together to greet the sisters as they

were announced by the butler.

“ How good of you to come, ladies. We are delighted to have you. Please,” Mr Bingley greeted them first, then waved to Darcy and Miss Bingley. Darcy bowed, and Miss Bingley gave a slight dip by way of a curtsy.

“ It was so good of you to invite us,” Miss Bennet said. Darcy noticed the brightness of her smile at Bingley with pleasure for his friend’s sake. That was not the smile of an indifferent woman. “ I was sure you would need a few days at least to recuperate from the ball.”

“ Yes, so was I,” Miss Bingley replied, dryly.

Darcy stepped forward and offered Elizabeth his arm. “ How are you this afternoon, Miss Elizabeth?”

“ I am well, thank you.” Darcy frowned in concern. Despite the reassuring words, she did not seem quite herself. Elizabeth seemed a bit aloof. Or was it that she was nervous, too?

Miss Bingley waved them to follow and led them all into the parlour. She turned slightly to speak with Elizabeth over her shoulder.

“ It is a wonder you did not opt for your long walk, Miss Elizabeth. I half expected you to arrive with mud caked to the soles of your boots, as you have been wont to do in the past.” Darcy stiffened, astonished and angry that she would dare to insult his fiancée to her face, but Elizabeth did not show any signs that the comment had offended her.

On the contrary, Elizabeth was smiling sweetly. “ Oh, to be sure, so I would have done, Miss Bingley. However, I believe that Mr Darcy and I have a good deal to

discuss regarding our upcoming nuptials.” At the reminder, Miss Bingley ’ s face fell. She said nothing more while everyone else was settled. Miss Bennet and Mr Bingley shared the settee, and he and Miss Elizabeth sat across from them in two chairs, while Miss Bingley had to sit kitty-corner to the rest of them, dull and silent.

Miss Bingley seemed aware that she had lost the battle and was well on the way to losing the war, for tea was a tolerably polite affair. She seemed content to sit aloof and judge the company. Darcy felt heartily that as long as she would do so in silence, she might judge them as much as she liked. The rest of them had a wonderful time talking about the weather, the upcoming Christmas festivities, and any number of subjects ranging from politics to how their families were faring.

“ Do you like children, Miss Elizabeth? You have mentioned your cousins several times. Are you very close to them?” Darcy asked.

“ I do. It is a pity we do not have the pleasure of seeing them more often, but then my aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Gardiner, make their home in London.”

“ Do you never visit London, then, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” Miss Bingley asked with highly suspect civility. To judge by her tone, Elizabeth might have been a country bumpkin who would faint if she ever saw the great metropolis.

“ My aunt and uncle have been good enough to host me in London several times, but I never see them so much as I would like. I am sure my mother would love the prospect of visiting London. But my father does not care for Town.” Elizabeth folded her hands demurely in her lap. “ During the summer months, our young cousins come to visit for several weeks at a time, for their health.”

Miss Bingley gave a short, mocking laugh. “ Ah, yes, if the vapours in Town do not kill them, let the tedium of country life bore them to death.”

Elizabeth frowned but said nothing more. Darcy was surprised at Miss Bingley's venom. She had always prided herself on presenting a well-bred, genteel lady. No evidence of that good breeding could be seen now. She was acting like a jealous cat, baring teeth and claws.

There was no need to continue subjecting Elizabeth to such unpleasantness. They had spoken with the others long enough for civility, and by the looks of things, Bingley would be entirely capable of amusing Miss Bennet without them. He stood and offered Elizabeth his hand. "Shall we begin?" he asked.

For a moment, Elizabeth looked stricken. He thought furiously, trying to imagine what might have put such a look on her face —

"Begin?" Miss Bingley asked.

He had forgotten that they had to hide their mission from the others. "I, ah, well... That is —" Darcy fumbled.

"What Mr Darcy means to say is that we had agreed to start going over the ins and outs of how he should like Pemberley to be run, once we are married," Elizabeth cut in smoothly. "He had a splendid idea to take me on a tour of Netherfield, since it is a large house, and discuss how it compares to Pemberley." She glanced at her sister. "It is, after all, going to be my home shortly. I want to be as prepared as possible when I arrive there as its new mistress."

Darcy let out a sigh of relief. "Yes, that is it precisely," he agreed. It was hardly a surprise to be given fresh evidence of Elizabeth's quick wit, but he found himself surprised and pleased at how well they worked together.

Miss Bingley shot Elizabeth an annoyed look as she rose and took his hand. He eyed his fiancée with some curiosity, waiting for her response. He had never seen anything

of incivility or arrogance in Elizabeth, but after Miss Bingley's behaviour towards her, he would not have begrudged her a private glimmer of triumph.

Elizabeth's smile in return was merely polite. She seemed to have no interest in crossing swords with Miss Bingley, a choice for which he commended her. He could not help but think how exquisite she was. She had been gracious while Miss Bingley had been petty. And her ready wit was never absent.

Darcy could not deceive himself. From the brilliancy of her eyes and her warm smile to her elegant, pleasing figure, he found Elizabeth's person every bit as entrancing as her character. Though he might have wished for a wife of greater fortune and better connections, there was nothing to object to about Elizabeth herself.

He glanced over at her as they walked. Perhaps that was not quite accurate. If there was anything he could change about her, it would be the coldness he had so often felt aimed at himself. Or at least, to know what he had done to cause her such offense. But that was on his own shoulders. At least if Bingley was correct, he well knew what he had done to displease her.

"Miss Elizabeth, I think I owe you an apology," Darcy said suddenly, surprising even himself.

Elizabeth looked nonplussed. "You have already apologised for falling on me, Mr Darcy. In any case, I know it was not your intention."

"I had no intention of apologising for that," Darcy began, before realising that his words were rather less than gentlemanly. "Excuse me, I fear I am expressing myself rather badly. I meant to say that I am sorry for my uncouth, untrue remark at the Meryton assembly the night we first met. Am I mistaken in believing that you heard me?"

“You are not mistaken, sir,” Elizabeth said quietly.

“Please believe me, I regret it most sincerely. I ought not to have said any such thing about a lady. It was very badly done of me indeed.” And he had since learned that Elizabeth was indeed handsome enough to tempt him, but to say such a thing to her when there was even the most minute chance that their engagement could be temporary would be more ungentlemanly still.

“I accept your apology,” Elizabeth said simply, “and I thank you for offering it.” She offered him a friendly smile, but was that a hint of sadness he saw in her eyes? Surely she could not think his opinion unchanged. To judge by Elizabeth’s eagerness to escape the engagement, it would not matter to her if it was.

Such thoughts could lead nowhere constructive. He would do better to keep his mind on their task. “I thought we might begin in the ballroom,” Darcy said, leading her through the long, well-lit hall. The sunshine coming in through the glass-paned windows gave him hope that they might have a chance of finding some evidence before the rain fell again.

When Elizabeth merely nodded, he looked over at her and asked, “How is your family bearing up under the ordeal? I am sure it was a shock to all of them?”

“Indeed, it was. My father is doing well, under the circumstances. He is grateful that you did not choose to leave me stranded — without protection. In his eyes, you can do no wrong,” Elizabeth said. Darcy had not been fishing for a compliment, but it made him feel a little better that he was in good standing with her father.

“And the rest of your family?”

Elizabeth sighed, flashing a sad smile at him, and looking at him with those big brown eyes. He almost felt he might lose himself in their depths. “My youngest

sisters think it is all very romantic. And Mary, well, she has said little on the subject. I believe she is ashamed of me.” She gave a shallow shrug. “ My mother is delighted to be rid of me, I think. Or at least, to have me finally engaged so she can move on to the next of her unmarried daughters.”

Darcy chuckled. “Yes, I rather thought that was a particular preoccupation of hers.” It was no secret that Mrs Bennet was obsessed with getting her daughters married off. He could almost suspect her of orchestrating the compromise herself...

Darcy abruptly stopped walking, surprised by his thoughts. It was an ugly thought to have of his future mother-in-law. Elizabeth halted as well, giving him a concerned look. “ Are you well, Mr Darcy?”

“ Yes, of course. I was only thinking,” he replied. He tried to give a smile in return to put her at ease. “ If someone did set us up, what would be their motive? Why go through an elaborate charade to force us into an engagement?”

She only shook her head. “I have been trying and trying to think of an answer, but everything fails me. I have no enemies — certainly no one who dislikes me enough to ruin my entire family, as would surely have been the case had you not saved me by announcing our engagement. And if our unseen enemy wished to harm you, forcing you to either ruin or marry me seems like a rather odd punishment. I cannot seem to find a solution.”

Darcy could only agree. Yet as they walked through the ballroom and out into the hall toward the study, he could not shake the feeling of unease rising in his stomach. There was one person who seemed delighted by the outcome of the events — Mrs Bennet.

Surely she could not be responsible. It would take a desperate woman to put her daughter through the ordeal Elizabeth was experiencing. First, it had brought

Elizabeth no little embarrassment. Far worse, there was the risk that Darcy would not have offered for her. If Mrs Bennet was indeed to blame, she had risked all five of her daughters for the chance of marrying off one. Darcy shook his head. No, Mrs Bennet was not a sensible woman, but surely she would not do such a thing.

“ I received my note at approximately the same time as you, I assume?” Elizabeth inquired. “Since we arrived in the library around the same time, that seems a logical conclusion.” Elizabeth walked through the study, looking at the desk. It had been cleared of all papers by Mr Bingley ’ s steward. Even so, she touched nothing. Likely she intended to respect Bingley ’ s privacy, not knowing how little he would have cared.

“ I am not sure of the timeline. I was in the ballroom when I received my note.”

“ And I, in one of the side rooms.”

“ What were you doing in the side room?”

Elizabeth gave a sheepish smile. “ My friend Miss Lucas and I were taking a respite.” She stopped. “ Well, that might not be exactly accurate. I was avoiding Mr Collins, if I am being wholly truthful.”

Darcy relished her openness with him. Surely, it deserved his openness in return. “ I had noticed you were not pleased to be dancing with him.”

She halted as they went back into the hall and started toward the library. “ You were watching me?”

Darcy grimaced. How easily he misspoke when Elizabeth was concerned. “ I would not say it like that, exactly.”

“ Then how would you describe it?” Elizabeth did not seem annoyed, only curious, even a little amused.

“ Perhaps I would describe it as watching over you?” he replied.

“ Ah, I see,” Elizabeth said. “ Well, I am beholden to you yet again, it would seem.” She wrung her hands. “ I did not wish to be rude that evening. But I was growing increasingly desperate to discourage Mr Collins.”

“ Well, now that we are engaged, you will no longer need to worry.”

“ Indeed,” Elizabeth said with a mischievous smile. “ The morning after the ball, he announced he could not stay under the same roof as someone as loose as I.”

Darcy took immediate offense. “ He did not,” he said in disbelief.

“ He did. However, do not be upset on my account. I think it was a relief for all of us when he departed. I wish him well, of course, but I shall be glad to wish him well from a greater distance. From Hertfordshire to Kent will do nicely.”

Opening the door to the library, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “ Shall we stand in the places we were when we first noticed each other?” he suggested.

“ Yes, let’s,” Elizabeth agreed readily, and moved to the shelf she had been perusing that night. Darcy watched her go. She was just as lovely among the shelves in the daylight streaming through the windows as she had been bathed in the soft glow of the candlelight on the night of the ball. “ Is this correct?” Elizabeth asked, abruptly bringing him back to the present.

Darcy shook his head to chase away the distracting thoughts of how very beautiful she looked. “ Yes, I believe so. And I was here when I noticed you. I thought to come

over and ensure you were well. You looked as if something had upset you.”

He said this as he walked the same path he had that night, looking carefully at their surroundings.

“ I was a little nervous,” Elizabeth commented. “I was unsure of whether I ought to trust this ‘Mrs X’. With good reason, as we now know.”

Darcy replayed the whole incident in his mind. “ I wonder if something tripped me? I would not say I am above stumbling. However, the ground is even here — no steps, no carpets. I —” Darcy stopped next to the bookshelf directly in front of Elizabeth. Light glinted off something that appeared to be metal. He knelt to inspect it. “ A hook!”

Elizabeth came to his side and knelt as well. “ What? A hook? I never noticed it before.”

“ And in the dark, I never would have,” Darcy agreed. “ Look at the corner of the shelf.” He pointed out the spot, then ran his finger over the indent. “ It looks like a wire of some kind has dug into the wood.”

Elizabeth gasped. “ Do you think someone set up a wire to trip you?”

“ It seems possible,” Darcy replied. He pulled the hook out of the wood and secreted it away in his pocket. “ I want to keep this for evidence. Obviously, whoever planned this took the wire, but forgot the hook in their haste.”

He straightened and placed a hand under Elizabeth ’ s elbow to steady her as she did the same. “ Well, at least it is something. But not enough to clear our names, I do not think,” she said, disappointed.

Darcy nodded, disappointed by her disappointment. “ Look. There is a side door just there. Shall we take a look outside and see if there are any more clues that might be helpful?”

“ Yes, that is a good idea,” she said softly. She walked over to the door and he opened it for her. They walked along the little path leading from the library out to one of the Roman follies. There was nothing of interest until they rounded a corner, and he saw an imprint in the mud under one of the bushes near the house.

“ There. What is that?” Darcy asked. He led her over to the imprint, and they both studied it. “ It looks like a boot print.”

“ Ah, yes, I see it,” Elizabeth said.

“It is not conclusive evidence,” Darcy began, “but I find it rather interesting. Someone could have planned our little mishap, then waited in the dark recesses of the library while we were trying to explain to everyone. Once the excitement died down, they could have taken the wire and left by the side door.”

“ It is possible,” Elizabeth said, worry still lining her face. “ However, it proves nothing. We will have to find more substantial evidence if we are to clear our names. Indeed, we cannot even know who would want to do this.”

Darcy thought again of the ugly suspicion that had crossed his mind — of Mrs Bennet, scheming and bribing servants to make her daughter a brilliant match.

Looking at Elizabeth’s lovely face, he could not bring himself to speak of it. What daughter could believe such a thing of her mother? Instead, he agreed. “You are quite right. And not only do we not know who would do such a thing, we do not even know why.”

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Some days later, Elizabeth sat at the breakfast table with her family, listening more than joining in with the chattering. Jane nudged her gently with her elbow, saving her just in time from impeding the maid who had come to put a platter of fresh fruit on the table. Elizabeth would have sent the whole thing clattering to the floor if not for Jane ' s timely intervention.

“ What is the matter with you, Lizzy? You have been yawning the whole time we have been at table. It is very bad manners, I do say,” her mother chided.

“ Forgive me, Mama. I did not sleep well,” Elizabeth explained. Her father sent her a worried glance, but she quickly shrugged it away. “ I shall rest before dinner this evening.”

“ Well, I believe a walk to Meryton is in order,” Lydia cut in. “ It is a beautiful morning, and I dare say there will be no rain since there has been a downpour the last few days.” Lydia took a large bite of her toast, but she did not let this stop her from speaking. “ We can take a little excursion to look for supplies for Lizzy ' s trousseau.”

Elizabeth nearly swallowed the pit of the plum she had been eating. “ My trousseau?” she asked.

“ Yes, of course! What a splendid idea!” Mrs Bennet piped up. “ I am sorry I cannot go. I am engaged to visit Mrs Long, but all of you girls should go and help your sister pick out the finest fabric for her wedding gown. I am sure Mr Darcy will send to London for anything else that is needed at the Pemberley estate for Elizabeth to do her duty as the next mistress.”

Elizabeth ' s cheeks burned, and she found she could not stomach another bite. Her middle seemed to have turned into a great roiling pit, like the churning sea at the centre of a winter storm.

“ I think it is a splendid idea as well. That is, if you are not too exhausted, Lizzy?” Mr Bennet father put in.

She could well imagine her father would relish some peace and quiet around the house. “ No, I am not too tired. Thank you, Papa.”

In truth, she had been avoiding going into town with her sisters since the scandalous affair at the Netherfield ball. Yet it could not be put off forever. She would need to reenter society at some time. It would be awkward at first to see how people viewed her now that her reputation had been sullied, but there was simply no choice.

She sat back and nibbled at her food and tried to hide her yawning. Elizabeth had no wish to draw her mother's censure yet again. Her talk with Mr Darcy and what they had discovered in the library and outside the side door had caused her to spend several sleepless nights. Even the evidence they had found — the hook and the boot print — would do little good unless they could find out who was responsible. It was only a matter of assuaging her curiosity that she would want to know why. What gain would come from someone forcing her to wed Mr Darcy was beyond her.

When breakfast was at an end, the girls got their things together, put on their bonnets and cloaks, and headed out for Meryton. It was, indeed, a fine morning. And once she was out of the house, Elizabeth felt her spirits lift. She had not been out of doors since visiting Netherfield. No doubt that had contributed to her worsening mood and anxiety. Elizabeth took a deep breath, exhilarated by the cool, crisp air filling her lungs and the slight chill in the air. Birds were flying overhead, disappearing to places unknown. If only she could be like those birds and fly away, leaving all her troubles like little specks far below her on the ground.

“ We shall look for the most sumptuous fabric for your wedding gown, Lizzy,” Lydia said, linking arms with Elizabeth as they walked. “ I think a nice soft blue would do very well. Or even a bright yellow?”

“ No, not yellow,” Elizabeth said. “ I like the idea of wearing blue on my wedding day,” she added.

“ I would think a more subdued colour would be the order of the day. A wedding should be entered into with all gravity and decorum.” Mary chimed in with her usual severity. “ I would think a dove grey, or even sensible black, would be more fitting. Besides, Mr Darcy does not strike me as one who would like his future wife to flaunt herself.”

“ Nonsense,” Lydia argued, waving their sister off in total disregard. “ One cannot wear mourning colours for their own wedding. What would people think?”

“ One does not always have to care so much about what others think, Lydia, but only what is right,” Jane said from the back of the group. “ I would think that Mr Darcy ’ s opinion would be the only one that Lizzy should consider.”

Elizabeth ’ s heart raced as her sisters discussed her future. Perhaps mourning colours would be more appropriate, given how she felt. But it would not do to punish Mr Darcy for the accident. He was, after all, being very gentlemanly about the whole situation. Though she doubted he would care one way or the other whether she wore yellow, grey, or any other colour.

Lydia pulled her aside, allowing the rest of the sisters to pass by, with Kitty trailing behind to listen in. “ Blue becomes you, Lizzy. And the emerald green dress you have is very pretty, although I am sure we can find something a little richer for your special day.”

“ I agree,” Kitty put in. “ Mr Darcy will not mind, I do not think. Indeed, likely he will purchase you a whole roomful of new gowns when you are his wife.”

Elizabeth caught Jane ’ s eye and shook her head. All their younger sisters seemed to care about were pretty dresses, rich husbands, and being entertained. They did not seem to spare a thought for being suited to one’s partner in life.

The girls rushed ahead when they got close to the shops in Meryton. Elizabeth and Jane stayed near the back of the group, watching as the girls flitted from shop to shop. First, they went to the milliners to look at the newest bonnets, then to the dressmaker’s shop to pick out a bolt for Elizabeth ’ s gown. She allowed it since she did not yet see a way she could avoid her marriage to Mr Darcy. However, she did not allow them to choose the most expensive cloth, but opted for a simple cotton in a pretty shade of emerald green, as Kitty suggested.

When they had made all of their purchases, they started back toward home. Dark grey clouds were billowing in the distance. They would have just enough time to make it home before the drizzle started, Elizabeth thought.

“ You are so lucky, Lizzy. I wish I had found a rich husband to fall all over me,” Lydia breathed with a dreamy, far-off look.

“Lydia!” Jane said in shock.

Elizabeth bit her tongue to avoid replying as angrily as she would have liked to. “Lydia, do not say such things,” she reprimanded her. “If you can, do not even think them, but at least do not speak so loosely when anyone might hear you.”

Even as she spoke, Elizabeth saw a cluster of militiamen gathered at the edge of town. Upon seeing Mr Wickham among them, a confusing mixture of emotions rushed through her. Once, she would have been simply glad to see him, but even an

engagement of practicality deserved proper respect. She could not speak so freely with him as she had once done. Having such excellent manners as he did, he must feel the same. Surely there could not help but be an awkwardness and a coldness between them. The other gentlemen were his brother officers, out for a stroll during the few hours they had off during the week. Elizabeth recognised Captain Benny, a particular favourite of Kitty and Lydia, but knew none of the others.

“Ladies! How fortunate we have run into you this fine day! Shall we see you back to Longbourn?” one of them asked. Though Elizabeth did not recognise the man, Lydia and Kitty seemed to know him well and answered with a friendliness amounting almost to familiarity. It was more than a little concerning. After the hideous embarrassment of the Netherfield Ball, their family had no room for any missteps. If their father did not check his younger daughters, especially Lydia, they would go down in Meryton’s history as the silliest and most determined flirts that had ever made their family ridiculous.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Wickham said as he fell into stride beside her. “How good it is to see you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Elizabeth replied, but kept her tone formal. “It has been some time since we have seen you.”

“I was called away on a mission for one of my superiors. I hear that Meryton has had its share of excitement while I have been away. Or rather, Netherfield, to be more precise.” He gave her a curious grin, his smile wide. “Is it really true that you and Mr Darcy are engaged?”

“It is,” Elizabeth agreed, with no little disappointment. How strange to remember that she had hoped Mr Wickham might ask her to dance at the Netherfield Ball. It had only been less than a fortnight before, yet her life had changed completely.

He continued to smile at her, but his expression felt rather odd. Was there not something almost flirtatious about it? He leaned closer as they walked, lowering his voice. “ How do you feel about the match? I thought, after what we had discussed before, that it would have been entirely odious to you.”

Elizabeth grew even more uncomfortable. “ Really, Mr Wickham, I do not believe this subject is one that is entirely appropriate for us to discuss.” She had been trying to get back to life as normal, but even so, people looked at her differently. Even when they had been in town at the shops, people had looked at her with sideways glances. “ What happened was an unfortunate mistake. Nothing more. And I should like to leave it at that, if you please.”

“ Of course. Of course!” Mr Wickham said. “ It is a pity there is not someone else who might step in and save you from such an unfortunate situation. Surely, Mr Darcy is not the sort of man you want to be saddled with for the rest of your days.”

Elizabeth was angry at his persistence. “ And who else ’ s responsibility would it be, if not Mr Darcy ’ s?”

Mr Wickham stopped on the dirt road. After a moment, she turned to face him. The rest of their party continued on as if they had forgotten all about the pair. “ I would think any man would count it an honour to be your husband.”

The way he looked at her set her stomach to fluttering with butterflies again, even as it had the night of the ball, when she had thought about Mr Wickham asking her to dance. But this was not at all appropriate. Why was he seeming to flirt with her when he knew she was engaged to another man?

Elizabeth frowned but said nothing. She was too flustered to say anything that she would not regret later. She hurried to catch up with her sisters and the other officers, linking her arm with Jane ’ s for safety. Mr Wickham did eventually catch up with

them as well, but Elizabeth barely looked in his direction.

What was he thinking? And what kind of man was he? When she had been single, he had seemed to have some interest in her, but had remained silent. Now that she was engaged, he had shed his silence and was trying to tell her something that she did not want to hear. Perfidious man! Or were all of the male half of the species this way?

“Are you well?” Jane whispered as they neared Longbourn. “You have been quiet the whole way home.”

Thankfully, Mr Wickham had gone on ahead, leaving her and Jane to bring up the rear of the group. “I am troubled, Jane. But I would rather not discuss it here. Mr Wickham confuses me.”

Jane frowned slightly. “Really? I cannot imagine Mr Wickham doing or saying anything to upset you. He is such an amiable man. And he seems to hold you in such high regard.” Thankfully, she had been careful to lower her voice, so the others would not overhear.

“Too high,” Elizabeth murmured. “I cannot be certain, but it seemed almost as though Mr Wickham was trying to flirt with me. He spoke very familiarly.”

“Surely not!” Jane said. “You are betrothed to another. No man would act with such impropriety.”

Elizabeth said nothing to this. Jane was a little too apt to trust everybody, and to think the best of them — even those that did not deserve it. Once, Elizabeth would have said that Mr Wickham was the most deserving of men. She wished she might think so still. And yet his tone had been too markedly flirtatious to ignore. Elizabeth knew she had not imagined it.

“ Look how attentive he is to Lydia and Kitty,” Jane asked, pointing ahead to where Mr Wickham had come between the girls and offered each of them an arm as they had to traverse a small rivulet that cut across their path.

Elizabeth watched the group with some concern. Lydia and Kitty were giggling, and Mary walked along quietly as the rest had a rip-roaring time. The officers seemed wholly smitten with the younger Bennet girls, but Elizabeth wondered what their motives were. Few of the officers could afford to marry a wife with so small a dowry. It was all too likely they were bent on nothing more than flirtation, and Kitty and Lydia lacked the judgement to know when to stop. The situation was dangerous indeed.

Elizabeth hated to be so distrusting of people, but then again, if she did not watch out for her family, it seemed that no one would. Her father was too engrossed in his books and his collections of various flora and fauna, while her mother was too eager when any gentleman came to call. Indeed, she would have jumped at the chance to have Mr Collins as a son-in-law, no matter how miserable it would have been to be his wife.

“ You say that I do not worry enough, Lizzy,” Jane said, intruding on her private thoughts. “ But perhaps you worry too much sometimes. Mr Wickham is not the sort of man who would toy with a woman ’ s emotions. We have gotten to know him too well for any of us to think that of him.”

Elizabeth again held her tongue. Did they know him? How well could a person truly know another? She had thought that she knew Mr Darcy, but his actions had shown her she had been wrong in her judgements against him. He had stood up and said he would protect her, no matter the consequences to himself. Never in a thousand years would she have guessed him to be so generous, so selfless, so ready to sacrifice all pride for what he felt was right.

When they reached the gate, they said their goodbyes to the officers, and they moved off down the road, heading back toward town and the barracks that had been set up outside Meryton. Mr Wickham waited at the gate until Elizabeth was about to walk through.

“ I hope I did not cause you undo offense, Miss Elizabeth. I only meant to offer some comfort in the very difficult situation in which you find yourself.”

Elizabeth nodded. “ I will not pretend to be ignorant of what you mean, Mr Wickham. However, I would prefer not to dwell on things that cannot be changed.” It was a half-truth. Her escape from her unwanted marriage with Mr Darcy was all that occupied her thoughts. But it was not something she would willingly discuss with Mr Wickham. “ I bid you good day.”

Elizabeth bowed and was about to walk through the gate when Mr Wickham stepped in front of her path. “ Please, Miss Elizabeth.” He captured her hand and raised it to his lips before she could think of pulling it away. Heat immediately rushed into her cheeks. She knew he would misunderstand her angry flush for flirtatious embarrassment. “ I want to help you if I can. Just think about it, if you please. It would give me the greatest pleasure to be of service to you.”

She tore her hand away and clasped her hands tightly in front of her. “ Thank you, Mr Wickham, but I am not in need of any service you might provide. Good day,” she said curtly and turned. As she did, she caught sight of someone coming up the road from the opposite direction. Her heart nearly stopped its wild beating when she saw who it was. Mr Darcy strode toward them, his face utterly furious.

Elizabeth drew in a deep, shuddering breath. To judge by the rage on Mr Darcy’s brow, she might get her wish and escape an unwanted marriage, after all.

Yet such a wish would leave her unprotected. And not only her, but the whole Bennet

family.

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Earlier that day

“ You shall never guess what my sister and I observed in Meryton this afternoon,” Caroline Bingley announced, her tone carefully arch as she joined Darcy and Bingley in the formal drawing room.

Though Darcy chose not to reply, Bingley could hardly do the same. “What was it, Caroline?”

“The Bennet herd walked by with a slew of officers in tow,” Miss Bingley said, likening them to sheep, no doubt. Easily led. Easily distracted . Darcy did not care for her tone, but tried to ignore her dig.

Miss Bingley sat down with a huff, careful to keep her back straight. Only the most elegant slander would do for Miss Bingley. Choosing not to see her brother’s frown, she went on with mock concern. “ They are not very selective in the company they keep, I must say. I should be quite ashamed to be always walking here and there with a great pack of militiamen.”

“ Perhaps they are grateful to the officers for their service, as we all ought to be,” Bingley replied. “After all, Caroline, someone must put on the red coat and defend England, and I am sure I should not like to.”

“The very idea of it, Charles! You have something better to do. You might as well suggest that Mr Darcy fight in the militia. How absurd!”

Darcy looked up from his letter-writing. “You are quite right that I have no intention

of joining a militia, Miss Bingley,” he said dryly. “But I do not look on that as the result of great merit on my part. Perhaps you are not aware that my cousin is a colonel in the Regulars — and Colonel Fitzwilliam is the younger son of the Earl of Matlock.”

It was evident that Miss Bingley had not known, or at least had forgotten. She went paper-white at the rebuke. Bingley wore a broad grin. Clearly, he had no mind to resent his friend chastising his sister, at least when the criticism was so well deserved.

Darcy turned away and went back to his letter. Yet he found it rather hard going. He could not seem to keep his attention on what he was writing. Other thoughts would intrude. He had been going mad with curiosity at how Elizabeth was getting on after their discovery in the library a few days prior. The rain had kept them all housebound over the course of the last few days. He was eager to continue on with their investigation. Perhaps making a visit to Longbourn would set the investigation in motion once more.

Even his distraction could not make the chore of writing last forever. After a few minutes, he finished his letter, blotted it, and folded it to seal later. “I think I will take a turn about the yard,” Darcy said abruptly.

Bingley stood up. “I shall join you with a good will, if you would like the company.”

Darcy shook his head with alacrity. “No — I thank you, no. Bingley, you know I would welcome you as a companion any other time, but I feel myself much in need of a little time alone to think.” Bingley good-naturedly gave way at once and waved his friend out the door. Darcy’s blood hammered in his head as he slipped out the side library door and headed across the green toward Longbourn. He felt like a moth being attracted by a flame, and all the while never caring that he was being drawn. Elizabeth was like an intoxicating force that sent his head to spinning. Of course, he had tried to keep her from capturing his thoughts every moment of the day. But even

necessary letters of business — even letters to Georgiana — seemed to call his thoughts back to her. Write to his solicitor, and he thought of the matters to be arranged, if she did indeed become his wife. Think of Georgiana, and he could not help but reflect on the joy he would have in introducing Elizabeth to his little sister.

Darcy stepped over the low hedge and came out onto the road. After an interlude of walking steadily, he recognised a large oak as one that stood only a little way from Longbourn — he was nearly there, and passing by the turn that led to Meryton. He saw a large party walking ahead of him and could hear their laughter echoing over the fields and down the lane. Upon recognising several of the party, Darcy grimaced and set a brisk pace to catch up to them. There were several officers with the Bennet sisters, no doubt gentlemen they had met in town. Miss Lydia Bennet seemed to attract the militia everywhere she went.

They stopped when they reached the Longbourn estate, and Darcy could see them all saying their farewells. All but one of the officers moved away down the road, and the Bennet sisters began to file through the gate.

Darcy's breath caught in his throat. He could clearly recognise Elizabeth now. She had been waylaid by one of the soldiers. Jealousy instantly rose inside him. The man's back was turned slightly toward Darcy, but he could see he was getting much too close to Elizabeth. And from the look on her face, she was not entirely at ease.

To his shock and amazement, the man bent and kissed Elizabeth's hand. And he had not even tried to hide the gesture! A second later, with Darcy only a few paces away, the man turned.

Wickham! Darcy's heart surged with anger. Wickham's actions towards Georgiana had already brought Darcy to the depths of anger and contempt. When faced with the man again, only to see him flirting with his fiancée —

It was more than Darcy could bear.

Only once in his life had Darcy been so angry — when he had visited Georgiana in Ramsgate and discovered that he was only just in time to save her from throwing her life away. He had intended to ignore Wickham's presence in Meryton. But to see Wickham fondling Elizabeth's hand was beyond the limit. He strode toward the pair.

“Wickham!” he bellowed, startling the man.

Wickham turned on his heel, looking as surprised as Elizabeth. “Darcy,” he said coldly. “I did not know you were there.”

“Indeed. I am sure you would not have been kissing another man's betrothed if you had known. Or is your honour so corrupted that you would feel no shame?” Darcy's chest heaved with every breath, his hands shaking. He clenched them tightly at his sides to keep from striking him.

“It is not untoward to kiss a lady's hand,” Wickham said, narrowing his eyes. “If the lady took offense, I will apologise.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth, seething in silence. She clasped her hands in front of her, her knuckles white. She looked between the two of them for a moment, an angry blush creeping up her cheeks. “I think it best you go, Mr Wickham. Good day,” she said curtly. With angry satisfaction, Darcy noted she omitted even the slightest bow.

Wickham thankfully took the hint. He bowed once more to Elizabeth, but not to Darcy, and went on his way.

“Did he harm you?” Darcy forced himself to ask.

“Mr Darcy!” Elizabeth said, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “No — Mr

Wickham is only a little over-gallant.”

“ I will not apologise for running him off. He is a dangerous man, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said.

She raised her chin in defiance. Or was it wounded pride? “ I did not know we had an appointment today.” Her words were clipped, her tone angry. But if nothing untoward had happened between the pair, why was she so defensive?

“ We did not,” he snapped. She turned to go through the gate, but he stepped up beside her and closed it. Their faces were inches apart, and he could see her shock, as well as something more. Darcy frowned, but the expression disappeared before he could identify it, clouded by animosity.

“ Is there something I can do, Mr Darcy? Or do you plan to keep me out here all afternoon?” she asked.

Darcy was too upset to think through his response. How had she been alive this long without seeing what Wickham was about? “Is it your practice to go about with men not your betrothed? Indeed, to allow them to kiss your hand?”

The words were no sooner out that he regretted them. Darcy knew he should not have said it, but anger made him betray himself.

“ Of course not,” she said, clearly offended. “ Mr Wickham and some of the other officers saw my sisters and I home from Meryton. If you had been here a moment earlier, you would have seen that I pulled my hand away. And we were not alone, but in plain view of anyone who might pass along on the lane, as you yourself did.”

Darcy knew he had to keep his emotions under control. An emotion he had not had to contend with for a long while was rising up in his soul. Jealousy. It did not help that

the man who had brought up those jealous feelings when he was a boy was the same man who seemed to be flirting with his fiancée. “Forgive me if my eyes deceive me,” he said. He looked toward the house and saw that every one of Elizabeth’s family, save her father, was watching them from the parlour window, no doubt coming up with all sorts of ideas for what they might be discussing. “Perhaps we may find someplace we can speak in private?” he suggested.

Elizabeth followed his gaze and gave a curt nod. She stomped through the gate, then turned to the right down a little worn dirt path toward a small wilderness at the side of the house. Once they had gained some privacy from her family’s curiosity, Darcy spoke. “I must confess, Miss Elizabeth, I am shocked at your conduct this afternoon. Here I am, come to see my soon-to-be wife, only to find her flirting with another man!”

“I was not flirting,” Elizabeth said heatedly. “Nor did I allow him to kiss my hand. He simply took it without permission and brought it to his lips before I could disengage it. I assure you, Mr Darcy, I did not encourage him. For better or for worse, we are engaged. I am not the sort of woman who would flirt with one man when I am betrothed to another.”

Darcy huffed. “You make it seem like you have been in this sort of situation before.” He paused as a hideous idea came to mind. Perhaps she had. Perhaps there was more reason than he knew for Mrs Bennet to so urgently desire her daughter’s marriage. What if her family had orchestrated the whole thing to entrap him in a marriage he had never intended? He took a step back as if he had been struck in the jaw by a champion boxer.

“What is it, Mr Darcy?” she asked. A twinge of concern was coupled with the annoyance in her tone.

Darcy stepped closer until their faces were inches apart. “Perhaps it was your mother

who planned the accident in the library,” he said, his voice viciously cold. She gasped, but he did not give her the chance to say anything. “ It is you and your parents have the most to gain from this marriage, is that not so? Your mother has made no secret of her intentions. What would not she have done to — what was her phrase? — ah, yes. To ‘throw the girls into the paths of other rich men.’”

“ How dare you!” Elizabeth gasped. For a moment, Darcy thought she might slap him, but she held herself back. There was much more she seemed eager to say, but did not. “ I will not dignify that accusation with a defence. Good day, Mr Darcy.” She brushed past him and stomped away toward the house. He heard the side door slam, hard enough he was half surprised that the house did not come crumbling down to the foundation.

Darcy raked a hand through his hair, angry with himself for allowing his emotions to get out of control. He strode out of the little woods, bypassed the house, and went straight out onto the lane. He had come to speak with Elizabeth because he missed her. Now, he wished he had not come at all.

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“ How was your walk?” Bingley asked upon his return. His friend’s face immediately fell when he saw the mood Darcy was in. “ My dear fellow, what has happened?”

“ I went to see the Bennets,” Darcy explained, hoping that would be the end of it.

“ The Bennets? Why did you not tell me? I would have gone with you.” Bingley sprang from his chair, no doubt peeved at having missed a chance to marvel at the divine Jane Bennet.

Darcy had tried to calm down on his way back to the house, but he could not forget the sight of Wickham bowing over Elizabeth ’ s hand, his lips touching her skin... He

would have liked to beat the man bloody.

“ It was not a good time,” Darcy mumbled, trying to keep the anger out of his voice.

“ Ah, I see. Well, I am sure they will be available for visitors later this afternoon. Shall we ready ourselves and go around to pay a call during tea time? I am sure your fiancée will be happy to see you,” Mr Bingley teased. He rose from his chair, eager to go and get ready, especially if it meant he could see Miss Bennet.

“ No, they were in the company of some officers from Meryton. Today would not be a good day,” Darcy replied, clenching his teeth. “ I only came in to tell you I will not be down for dinner, I think. I have a mass of letters to write and I fear I have a headache coming on,” Darcy said. He hated to lie to his friend, but it would be better if he had some time to untangle his thoughts and feelings. He would be better for it in the morning.

Bingley got up and came toward him. “ Are you sure? Shall I call for the doctor? I would hate for you to be coming down with something.”

“ Not at all. I shall be all right. I will feel better if I can get some of this work done. Please give my apologies to Miss Bingley,” he mumbled. Darcy excused himself in a hurry and went up to his guest room, closing the door firmly behind him. He called for his valet, Jameson, changed his clothes, which were distinctly muddy about the cuffs after his long walk, and instructed him he would have a tray brought up for his dinner. He would not be disturbed for the rest of the evening.

Jameson bowed after he had helped him change, and with the clothes slung over his arm, exited the room.

It was ages before dinner would be served, not that Darcy could bring himself to care. He was unsure if he could be bothered to eat, even when his tray was brought up. He

was too angry to think of food. How had he allowed his conversation with Elizabeth to get so badly out of hand? Fear of what Wickham might convince her to do, desperate as she was to be let out of the engagement, was almost overwhelming.

Darcy sighed. He had done a terrible job of expressing his emotions. If he had only explained why he had reacted the way he had, perhaps she would have understood.

After a second 's hesitation, he went to his writing desk, resolving to put pen to paper. Perhaps if he could write to her, explaining everything, she would be more likely to understand.

But where to begin?

My dear Miss Elizabeth...

Perhaps that was too familiar, especially after the way he had accused her mother of being involved in trying to entrap him. He pulled out a fresh piece of paper and began again.

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Miss Elizabeth,

I cannot recant the accusations that were so disgusting to you. Please know that they were not brought forward to offend, but in the pursuit of the truth.

I will, however, endeavour to clear up the misunderstanding for which I believe myself to be responsible: that which concerns Mr Wickham.

You will likely have seen the cool demeanour in which I am accustomed to dealing with Mr Wickham on our rare meetings. Likely, he has already told you we grew up

together. His father was steward to mine, and my father took a liking to Mr Wickham almost instantly. He thus enjoyed a place of privilege in my father ' s household, being treated almost as a second son. However, as he grew older, Mr Wickham ' s darker side began to be revealed. I will not bore you, nor disturb you, with the details of Mr Wickham ' s many transgressions against my father — who was much too forgiving — nor those against me. I prefer to let things lie in the past rather than dredging them up.

Of two matters, however, it is necessary to speak. Before my father died, he promised Mr Wickham a valuable family living, for he hoped that Mr Wickham would join the church. I could not be sorry that Mr Wickham was never ordained, for I had long since become convinced that he ought not to be a clergyman. When my father did pass, Mr Wickham expressed his resolution of never joining the church and demanded instead the sum of three thousand pounds, which was granted. He squandered it within a year.

When he came back to me to demand more money, I refused. We had not seen him for some time after that until he suddenly re-entered our lives under the most unhappy circumstances.

Darcy stopped for a moment, wiping his brow. He wrote feverishly, allowing the words to flow freely out of his pent-up frustration.

He then turned his eyes on my sister Georgiana. After leaving school, she had gone to Ramsgate with a paid companion, in whose character I was most unhappily deceived. It was only in the nick of time that I discovered his plot to elope with Georgiana. I was able to stop them before she threw her life away, but not before he was able to throw her into guilt and remorse of the most painful kind. His object was, of course, her fortune. Of the natural care that a man ought to feel for a young woman he knew as a child, a woman scarcely out of the years of childhood, he seemed to think not at all.

Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth, but when I saw him with you this afternoon, it was as if I relived the past. Seeing him with you brought up all the times he had come to Pemberley to visit my sister. I had been uneasy about him coming back into our lives and wished to think he had turned over a new leaf. But it was not to be.

Now you know why I can never trust him. He is incapable of change, and to think that he would try to weasel his way into your heart is unbearable, especially when I have come to the realisation of how deep my feelings are for you...

Darcy left off writing, surprised by what had come out of him. Surely he could not go on. Did he dare write the words, “ I love you”? To lay himself open in front of a woman who now seemed to loath him was surely folly of the most acute kind. He could not very well send the letter now.

In a moment of sudden decision, Darcy crumpled the letter into a tight ball. He rose and tossed it into the fire, watching until it burned to ash. If he would have destroyed the knowledge of his feelings as easily, the temptation might have been too much to resist. The sudden knowledge was nearly as disturbing as finding Wickham and Elizabeth together at the gate.

He was falling in love with her, perhaps had been for a long while without realising it. But to admit that when his heart had been afflicted with the acutest of pain — the thought of losing her to Wickham — no. That he could not do.

Darcy uttered a long sigh, wishing he could turn his back on Meryton and leave all his troubling feelings behind for the peace and comfort of Pemberley. That simple life was over now. No matter how he wished he could have it back.

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Elizabeth went straight to her room without acknowledging her mother or answering the many questions peppered at her by her sisters. For a moment, all she could hear was her footsteps on the stairs and the blood pounding in her ears. She held back a sob, tears blurring her eyes.

Once in her room, she slammed the door and locked it, pacing for a few moments. She bit her lower lip, running the conversation over and over in her mind. Mr Darcy had no right to accuse her family of orchestrating the events that had brought them together.

Or did he?

She halted, taking several deep breaths and going to the window seat. She looked out, spotting Mr Darcy walking across the fields on his return to Netherfield. He even walked angrily, or so it seemed to her.

Guilt overwhelmed her. Had she been unfair? After all, he had stumbled upon her and Mr Wickham outside the gate, and he had kissed her hand, although she had not invited the gesture. But what was Mr Darcy to think coming upon such a scene? It was true that she and her family had the most to gain from the marriage. She would never have hoped to make such a match. And upon unbiased consideration, she had to admit that her mother – if not her father – could have gone to such lengths as setting her and Mr Darcy up in the library. To secure a man with ten thousand pounds a year, Mrs Bennet would be capable of doing anything, and not considering the consequences until it was too late.

It made her stomach turn just thinking about the possibility that her mother had

planned the whole ordeal. She sat down with a huff, turning her back against the wall to hold her weight. She could no longer see Mr Darcy, hidden by the tree branches now that he was so far away. Elizabeth bent and took off her boots, then pulled her feet up under her on the window seat. She wanted to curl up and disappear for the rest of her days. If her mother had orchestrated the whole thing, she would never be able to face Mr Darcy again.

Her mind lurched as she continued to replay their fight through her mind. Even through it all, Mr Darcy had never threatened to break off their betrothal. What did it mean? Surely, if it could be proved that her parents had anything to do with that fateful night, he would not want to continue with the engagement. But he had not threatened her. He had fought nobly and had not used fear to cow her. How many other men would have resorted to such means?

Elizabeth sat back, chewing on her fingernail in her nervousness. She could not help but respect and admire such restraint. For better and for worse, Elizabeth could not help thinking that Mr Darcy was unlike any man she had ever met.

There was still the dilemma of her mother's possible involvement in the plot. If she had anything to do with it, she could not very well hold Mr Darcy to the engagement. Honour would demand that she release him from his promise, no matter the consequences. Her heart sank. It would be the right thing to do, and yet, she knew the ruin that would await her and her family. She would likely never marry, and her sisters would be fortunate indeed to find husbands, tied to a desolate sister such as she. Could she do it to them? They all had such high hopes, especially Jane with Mr Bingley.

She stood, still chewing on the nail. She turned to look out the window toward Netherfield. No, she could not ruin her sisters, not without trying to make things right. She would have to humble herself and go to Mr Darcy. Elizabeth was unsure if her mother had done anything to aid in the plot, but she would have to find out.

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The next days passed in agony. Elizabeth knew what she should do if she were to make things right between her and Mr Darcy. But for the life of her, she could not muster her courage. It was a blessing that the rains returned, and she could not get to Netherfield. Her mother had tried to pester her into taking the coach, nagging that “One should not leave one ’ s fiancé alone for too long. He will forget his honour and break off the engagement if you are not attentive to him, Lizzy dear.”

Her mother ’ s advice did little to allay her anxiety. She wanted Mr Darcy to break the engagement, and yet she did not. Elizabeth felt as if she were caught in an impossible dilemma.

When the skies cleared on the afternoon of the second day, she took the opportunity to take some fresh air and try to clear her head. She made it out the back door and was nearly across the yard when she heard her name being called. “ Wait! Lizzy!”

Jane stood on the back stoop, tying a bonnet over her hair. Elizabeth smiled and waited for her to gingerly make her way over the boards that the servants had set out to aid in traversing the mud pit that was the yard. Jane was breathless by the time she made it to Elizabeth on the other side. They stood under the brick archway that led into the yard from the dirt lane beyond. “ Where are you going?”

“ Out for a walk. Why, where are you going?” Elizabeth asked. She started walking, knowing that she ought to call for the carriage and go to Netherfield. But no matter how deeply Elizabeth felt she had to go and see Mr Darcy, she simply was not ready.

“ I am going wherever you are going,” Jane said. She linked arms with Elizabeth and said nothing more as they started down the lonely country lane. Elizabeth let out a sigh, looking up at the sky. Bare tree branches obscured her view of the wispy white clouds, the sun pouring through in patches over her face.

“ You are not yourself, Lizzy. What has been troubling you the last few days?” Jane asked gently.

Elizabeth had been very quiet about the fight. Indeed, her mother had asked her to explain several times after she had finally come out of their room the day they had fought, but she would reveal nothing. It hurt too much to say aloud what Mr Darcy really thought of her parents. Elizabeth hated to think that Mr Darcy had been right, but he was. Her mother was wholly obsessed with marrying off all her daughters, making sure they found protection and provision for their future lives. Elizabeth could not disagree with the goal. Only the fact that the means her mother used were not always sensible, or strictly within the bounds of propriety.

“ I have made a mess of things with Mr Darcy, I ’ m afraid,” Elizabeth finally responded. She sighed. It felt odd to say anything aloud — both a relief and a transgression. Practically, at least, there was nothing to fear. She knew that anything she said to Jane would be kept in the strictest confidence.

“ Whatever do you mean?” Jane asked. “ Surely not! You must be mistaken—”

“ I am not mistaken,” Elizabeth interrupted. “ We fought the day he came to call. He saw me with Mr Wickham, and although I did nothing to encourage him, Mr Darcy took it as an affront.”

Jane was thoughtful for a moment. “ I am sure there is a way to mend things. He is an understanding man. And I am sure he was only jealous at seeing you with another man.”

“ But I wasn ’ t with another man!” Elizabeth burst out. She immediately felt sorry for it. It was the same thing she had done with Mr Darcy — speak purely from emotion, without considering the listener. Why did her temper seem to escape her grip where Mr Darcy was concerned? “ Forgive my defensiveness, but I am not

someone who would flirt with a man — or allow a man to flirt with me — when I am engaged to another man. It is simply disgusting to me.”

“ I know it is. And I was not accusing you,” Jane said. “ I only meant to point out where Mr Darcy ’ s upset might be coming from.”

“ He was more than upset. He was furious,” Elizabeth went on. And for good reason. “ If I tell you the whole of what happened, I must have your word that you will not say anything to another soul.”

“ You know I hate gossip, Lizzy,” Jane said simply.

“ I know. It is just too awful to have to repeat.” It was even worse that she had come to the same conclusions as Mr Darcy. “ He believes that Mama might have had something to do with the compromise that occurred on the night of the ball.”

Elizabeth let it sink in and could see that Jane was wrestling with her own shock and anger — or some other emotion akin to anger. Elizabeth had never seen her sister angry. She sometimes wondered if Jane was capable of the emotion. “ You cannot be serious,” Jane said at last. “ Surely, you heard him incorrectly. He is a man of honour. To think that Mama would wilfully put you and him into such a position. And for what?”

“ To gain an advantageous marriage for me,” Elizabeth replied dully, “and the chance of meeting rich husbands for all my sisters.” She shook her head. “ I must confess, it has been weighing on my mind as a possibility for the last couple of days. It is horrible to think such things about our mother, but I cannot force a man into marriage when I have even the slightest doubt.”

Jane halted on the lane, looking as shocked as Elizabeth had ever seen her. “ Please, Lizzy. You do not actually think that Mama would have anything to do with such a

vile plan? I cannot bear to think it.”

“ Neither could I, when Mr Darcy first presented it.” Elizabeth turned and continued walking. Jane soon caught up with her, but gone was the familial closeness. She kept a few inches distance between them instead of linking arms again. “ It pains me to think about it, too. But I cannot rule it out, either. Mama has been desperate to get us all married off from the time you were thirteen. People sometimes stoop to lunacy when they are desperate.”

Jane thought for another long moment. She sighed, shaking her head as if it might dislodge the disturbing notion from her mind. “ I suppose that is true. But what is to be done?”

Elizabeth was at a loss as far as that was concerned. “ I have been trying to figure that out for the last two days. I cannot ignore Mr Darcy ’ s concern, but I have been so angry and confused about the whole ordeal. I really think I must go and see him about it. Do not you?”

She almost hoped her sister would disagree, but Jane gave a small nod. “ I agree. Whether or not Mama was involved, you cannot have this between you and your future husband.”

“ If we marry, I do not want this between us either. It is not a love match, to be sure. But I also recognise that to keep hold of such anger and uncertainty would be to set us both up for misery later on.” Elizabeth was the one who linked arms with her sister this time. She felt she needed the tie to reality as her mind swirled with future worries.

“ You have no tender feelings for Mr Darcy, then?” Jane asked. “ I had thought I had started to see at least a little softening toward him since that night at the ball. His actions were very gallant.”

Elizabeth hated to admit it, but she was unsure if she was ready to unleash the whole of what she had been wrestling with. “ I confess, he was gallant. It touched me deeply that he would give up all hope of future happiness with someone else to come to my aid. But I cannot say anything more than that of what I feel.”

“ Well, there is time, of course,” Jane replied.

The two sisters walked in silence for a moment before Elizabeth seized on an easier topic — for herself, at least, if not for Jane. A little mischievously, she asked, “Has Mr Bingley given any hint about his feelings might be toward you?”

Jane ’ s cheeks instantly turned pink. “ Not in so many words, no. I do not want to seem too eager, Lizzy.”

“ No one would ever accuse you of being too eager, sister. You are the soul of discretion.” Elizabeth glanced back, judging how far they had come. Though she would have liked to go farther, Jane was not much of a walker. She would be exhausted by the end if they did not turn back. “Shall we begin on the way home?”

“Yes, I should like that,” Jane said gratefully. A cloud shadow passed over them, making the sisters shiver despite their thick pelisses. Without the sun to warm them, the air was chill.

“ I think Mr Bingley likes you very much,” Elizabeth went on. “ However, it worries me that he might not see how much you like him in return. He is young and spirited, but I think even men need to know that the woman they are interested in is interested in them in return.”

“ How can you be sure, Lizzy? You know I have never been good at reading the emotions and thoughts of others. You are the perceptive one. Do you really think he likes me?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth could not help but laugh. “ Jane, if he were any more in love with you, he would be in danger of making himself have an apoplectic spell.”

“ Oh. goodness, I do not want him to die for love of me,” Jane said, half frightened and half laughing. Even so, Elizabeth could see that her sister was not convinced. How could she not see her own beauty? She was so quick to point out the good qualities of others, never seeing any wrong in anyone else. Yet when it came to her own virtues, she was blind.

Elizabeth halted on the side of the lane and took both of Jane ’ s hands. “ I wish you could see what I do, dear Jane. What we all see. You are kind and compassionate. You are the most beautiful woman in the county, and I am not only parroting the words of our mother.” They both laughed, and Jane looked away. “ You are everything a man could ever want — beautiful of soul and heart and being. Trust that, dear one. Mr Bingley would be a fool if he did not see it. And an even greater one if he does not propose within a fortnight.”

“ A fortnight!” Jane exclaimed, holding a hand over her heart. “ I would not want to rush him.”

“ Why ever not?” Elizabeth asked. “ You are not forcing his hand.”

“ Well, neither did you,” Jane argued.

Elizabeth shrugged. “ Well, I am convinced someone did. And until I know the truth, I would rather not get too set that the wedding will have to go forward.”

“ Are you still so opposed to it?” Jane asked. “ I would think you would be happy at the thought of leaving Meryton. You have always been such an adventurous soul.”

“ Not at the expense of ruining a man ’ s life.”

“ But you would not ruin his life. Just as you say I never see my worth, neither do you see yours. You are beautiful, Lizzy, in heart and mind and being, as well. And you have the courage to speak your mind, while I am as frightened as a mouse.” She gave a small smile. “ I know a younger sister is supposed to look up to their older sister. But more often than not, I see myself looking up to you.”

Jane grew quiet, and Elizabeth ’ s eyes pricked with tears. It was one of the more revealing speeches Jane had ever made. “ Do you really mean it?” she asked.

“ Yes, I do,” Jane said steadily. “ And I am proud of how you have borne all of this. I am not sure if I would have been able to show my face ever again, if such a thing had happened to me.”

No one would want to attack Jane. She was too good. Whereas someone had thought that Elizabeth could endure all the sideways glances, the ruined reputation, and the marriage to a man she detested. Well, to a man she had detested, until recently. She could not say she was entirely happy with him at the moment, given their fight. But she felt the loathing slipping into something she told herself was cool, distant respect.

“ Do not worry about me. I know everything will be well, no matter what happens. Even if I am forced to marry Mr Darcy, I will have the pleasure and comfort of your company at Pemberley, surely. He would not deny me that. Unless, of course, you are settling into Netherfield yourself.” Elizabeth smiled innocently and was pleased to see her sister’s blush deepen once more.

She stopped as they came to the gate at Longbourn and took her sister’s hands again, pressing them in earnest. “ I do so wish for you to be happy, Jane. Of all the people in the world, you deserve it most.”

Jane hugged her. “ As do you, Lizzy. I mean that with all my heart.” She leaned back and touched Elizabeth ’ s cheek. “ You will know what the right step to take is with

regard to making amends with Mr Darcy. You have always been one who did what was right.”

“ But what if I do the right thing and I still make a mess of everything?” Elizabeth hung her head. “ The worst that can happen is not that I will never be able to marry, but that you and the rest of the girls will be left destitute. I cannot do that to you all.”

“ Do not worry about things you cannot change, Lizzy,” Jane said. “ We will be all right. For now, you have to trust what your heart is telling you.” She let her hand fall to her side and walked through the gate, leaving Elizabeth alone.

She looked down the lane toward Netherfield. She knew what she must do. It was only that she did not want to let go of her pride and do it.

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Several days passed, but Darcy ' s mood had not improved. He could not seem to get the fight with Elizabeth out of his head. It was his fault, he knew. After much time to think and ponder over the events that had led up to the squabble, he could not help but conclude that he had overreacted to Wickham ' s kiss, leading to the subsequent heated argument. Had he been wrong to say such things to Elizabeth about her parents? Though the suspicion had been tormenting him, perhaps it was only nonsense. Surely Mrs Bennet would not do such a thing only to trap a worthy husband for her daughter.

Doubt plagued him. Worthy? He hardly felt worthy now. The whole fight had started because of him, and yet, he could not bring himself to go to her after what he had done. What she must think of him!

Darcy paced back and forth in the billiards room, wishing that something could be done. He had put them both in a most horrific position. They were tied together by desperation, and she must hate him for it.

What must their marriage be like because of his actions? He would never dream of ending the engagement. Though he was annoyed by Elizabeth's blindness to her parents' faults, he would remain steadfast to his promise to protect her. He would not leave her ruined and destitute. But there was still the question of bringing her into his life and home. Perhaps he could leave her alone as much as possible. He had the means to set her up comfortably in a townhouse if she wished, while he could retreat to Pemberley.

His heart ached at the very thought. The thought of being married to Elizabeth, yet not being able to touch her or even be near her, was utterly unbearable. It was proof

that her hold on him was growing ever stronger. No, he had to make things right between them, if only to get back to the fragile, tepid cordiality they had shared until their argument. Even that slight chill was better than outright hatred.

A knock sounded on the door, drawing him out of his reverie. “Enter!” he called. A footman promptly did so.

“Forgive the intrusion, sir, but Miss Elizabeth Bennet is here to see you. Are you at home to visitors?” he asked.

Darcy straightened, smoothing down his jacket. He had donned his simplest outfit that day, wanting to be comfortable, as he was not in the mood to have visitors. “I am always home to Miss Elizabeth,” he said. “Show her into the library. And send up my valet.” Darcy hurried out of the room and up the stairs to his guest room. He had never been one to put on airs, but he found he wanted to look his best for his fiancée.

His valet soon arrived and helped him to change into a black suit of clothes with a freshly starched cravat. As he stood in front of the full-length mirror, he suddenly wondered if he was being ridiculous. If Elizabeth had set her mind to hate him, then his appearance would do nothing to change that. Logic seemed to have entirely abandoned him. Was this what happened when one fell in love?

Pushing the thought aside, Darcy thanked his valet for helping him get ready so quickly. He started out of the room, but on his way to the library, he met with Bingley. His friend looked him up and down, then raised his brows in approval. “What is this? Are you going out, my friend? I thought you had said you meant to spend the day inside.”

“I am not going out, but to meet my guest in the library,” Darcy replied, clearing his throat. His cravat half-choked him with its tight hold. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet has

come to call.”

This information caused Mr Bingley ’ s brows to rise even further, this time in excitement. “ Well, I will come with you. I am sure she ’ s brought Miss Jane Bennet with her. What a lovely surprise.”

They began walking down the hall toward the library. Darcy could not help wishing that his friend had not seen him. He did not want to be rude. After all, it was Bingley ’ s house and Darcy was only a guest. But he had a feeling that this conversation would not prove to be a pleasant one. “ Perhaps it would be best if I met her alone, for a little while, at least.”

“ Ah, yes, well, Miss Bennet and I can take a little stroll out in the garden outside the library. You and Miss Elizabeth can watch over us to make sure that nothing untoward takes place.” Bingley gave a contented sigh. “ At least for my ends, it is fortunate indeed that you are engaged to her sister.”

Darcy nodded. For however long that might be. Had Elizabeth come to ask him for a release from their engagement? He could not imagine her doing so when it would mean the ruin of her and her sisters. Yet who was he to say? He had been wrong about so many things when it came to the Bennet family.

When they entered the library, Elizabeth was scanning a book on the shelf nearest a window. She had turned herself so the light fell on her back and illuminated the pages. Darcy felt his heart twist at the lovely picture she presented. It was all too easy to imagine her by the great windows of the library at Pemberley, equally absorbed in his collection.

“ Good afternoon, Miss Elizabeth,” he said as he came through the arched doorway. Though he had deliberately spoken to avoid startling her, Elizabeth seemed startled all the same, nearly whipping around at the sound of his voice. And was there not

something a little forced in her smile?

Mr Bingley came forward and greeted her, looking around the aisles for Miss Bennet. “ How good of you to come, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Darcy has been moping about ever since he came home without being able to see you the other day.”

Elizabeth shot him a curious glance, but Darcy only shook his head. “ Indeed? I did not know I had such a hold on his emotions.”

Bingley gave a good-natured chuckle. “ You have the strongest of holds on him, I assure you. I would have lured him into my carriage and taken him to Longbourn to see you if you hadn ’ t come today,” Bingley teased. “Elsewise, I don’t think I could have borne another day of moping.”

For an instant, Darcy half regretted keeping the reason he had stayed away from his friend. Little as he would have enjoyed explaining the quarrel to Bingley, this was becoming unbearable. He cast a guilty look in Elizabeth ’ s direction. She returned it with more equanimity, even friendliness, than he could have hoped. Was it possible she appreciated his discretion? Elizabeth ought to have known that matters between them would stay just that — between the two of them.

“ I see. Well, we were unavoidably detained with some unexpected visitors the other day,” Elizabeth said. She eyed Darcy warily, then turned her attention to Mr Bingley, who was still looking for the elusive Miss Bennet. “ I am afraid I came alone this afternoon. I hope you do not mind.”

Despite an obvious effort, Bingley could not entirely conceal his disappointment. “ Ah, I see. Well, of course, you are always welcome, Miss Elizabeth.” He glanced at Darcy, who gave a slight nod toward the door. “ Well then, I shall leave the two of you to discuss your nuptials in peace. I only wanted to say hello. Please convey my greetings to your family.”

“ I will be sure to do so, Mr Bingley. Thank you.”

Bingley walked out of the room without half the smiles he had upon entering it. Elizabeth gave a knowing smile. “ Poor Mr Bingley. I know I am a disappointment.”

“ I cannot conceal that he would have relished it, had your sister accompanied you,” Darcy replied. “ Surely there can no longer be any doubt of his interest. Bingley was never one for concealing his true feelings — not beyond that which is required of any courteous person in society, I mean. People in London view it as very common to hide their thoughts behind a mask. But I find it very refreshing about my friend.”

“ It is commendable, to be sure,” she replied. “ And I know he thinks well of Jane. I can only hope that...” She halted, looking down at her hands. Elizabeth startled a little, as though she had only then realised that she still held the book in one hand. She fumbled and nearly dropped it. Darcy found himself smiling. It was rather unlike her to be so uncertain. Did he hope too much in seeing it as a sign that she, too, cared about the relations between them?

At last, Elizabeth found the book’s place on the shelf, returned it, and turned her full attention to him. She came away from the bookshelves to stand in the sitting area with him, wringing her hands. “ Thank you for seeing me today.” She gave a self-deprecating laugh. “ If I am being entirely honest, I was unsure if you would allow me into the house.”

“ I would never keep you out. Indeed, I am glad you have come,” Darcy replied. It was his turn to feel embarrassed now. And he could not help but wonder what had brought her. “ I had considered writing to you, but thought to leave you in peace for a little while.”

She simply nodded. “ I am sorry it has taken me this long to come. I had many thoughts and feelings to sort through.” Elizabeth refused to look at him. Indeed, she

looked in every direction but in his eyes. What could it mean?

His heart all but stopped. Had she come to ask for a release from their engagement? It ought to be a relief to imagine it, but it was not. His heart would suffer under such a reversal, as much for his own sake as out of concern for her.

But his feelings were no reason to be less than courteous. Darcy told himself that he must recover his self-command. If it was only an outward appearance, while his heart remained utterly shaken, that would be enough. “ Shall we go to the drawing room? I can order some tea.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment, no doubt relieved for the respite, so she might gather her thoughts. He could do with a respite as well, before they began any serious discussion. “ Yes, thank you,” she replied.

Darcy offered her his arm, which she took stiffly, out of duty, no doubt. At least he would have a few moments to calm his nerves and clear his mind for what lay ahead. If she broke the engagement, he hardly knew what he would do. All courtesy would demand that he agree.

Yet if he did so, it would mean letting the woman he loved destroy herself.

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Once in the drawing room, Elizabeth sat down and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. She tried to calm her mind and nerves while Mr Darcy rang for tea. He soon settled himself on the settee opposite her. She shifted, unsure how to begin. “ Once again, I want to thank you for agreeing to listen to me,” she began, not knowing what else to say.

“ Miss Elizabeth, I will not lie to you. I was upset after our conversation the other day. But I am not one to lock people out. I am glad you have come,” Mr Darcy said. “ I would much rather have everything out in the open, rather than have things fester.” He had seemed so imposing when they had been standing in the library. But now he seemed just as nervous as she was.

She took a steadying breath, studying her hands as she gathered her courage and went on to say what she had come to say. “ Mr Darcy, I wanted to come and apologise to you.” She paused to see his reaction. It was very different from what she had expected. Indeed, she had imagined seeing a smug smile cross his face when she apologised.

Instead, Mr Darcy looked utterly astounded. “ You did?”

She swallowed hard. “ Yes, I did — I have — ” She stopped, feeling like she was lurching back and forth in a coach hitched to a runaway team. She closed her eyes and tried to refocus on what she wanted to say. “ That is, I hope you will forgive me for my outburst in the garden that day. I was upset when you accused my parents of planning the incident.”

“ Miss Elizabeth, I — ”

She held up a hand to stop him. He did not rush forward, but waited patiently for her to begin again. “ Please, allow me to finish.” He nodded and motioned for her to continue. “ However,” she halted, taking a moment to collect herself before going on, “ I have been thinking over the last few days, and I can see that perhaps you were right. I hate to say it — even to think it. But I cannot deny the truth. It is not impossible. My mother might do even so horrible a thing, if it meant that one of her daughters could be well taken care of.” The words tasted like gall in her mouth. But once they were out, Elizabeth felt a weight lift off her shoulders. She hated to admit that her mother could have been a part of the incident, but now the worst had been said. She could look at her fears honestly, rather than hiding from the possibility and being consumed by what-ifs.

Mr Darcy looked as if he might fall off the settee. He sat back, thinking for a moment. “ I see.”

Elizabeth hurried on. “ That is not to say that I believe it is true — quite the contrary. However, I will acknowledge that it is a possibility.” Ever since Elizabeth could first remember, her mother ’ s sole focus had been to find worthy husbands for her five daughters, and to have them married as quickly as possible. It must have been a disappointment for her mother to have all five of her daughters still single, with Jane reaching the ripe age of twenty-two. In Mrs Bennet’s frantic concern, she might well believe her two eldest to be on the verge of becoming old maids.

“ Of course, we cannot jump to conclusions,” Mr Darcy replied. He still seemed too shocked for words.

Elizabeth could not blame him. She had been so utterly vicious the other day. “ I do not suppose you can forgive me,” she stated. When he said nothing to the contrary, she felt her heart sink. Elizabeth stood and smoothed down her skirt, having rarely felt so uncomfortable in all her life. She knew he was the quiet sort, but this was unbearable. “ Well, that is all I came to say — ” She meant to flee as fast as her legs

could carry her, but she did not get far.

“ No, please do not go yet, Miss Elizabeth.” Mr Darcy stood, taking her hand and closing the distance between them. Her heart hammered all the more wildly in her chest. “ I know it took much for you to come here and say that today. And I thank you.”

Elizabeth nodded. She felt a sense of relief that she had done her part. But there was more. Even still, Mr Darcy had not demanded to be released from the engagement, as she had thought he surely would after how she had behaved.

She went and sat back down, her fingers slipping out of his grasp. For a moment, she felt a sense of loss, still sensing the tingle where his fingers had touched hers. “ The question now is, how we can find out the truth? I know my mother. Even though I cannot deny she could have been involved, she is not so shameless as to be proud of it.”

Mr Darcy cleared his throat. “ I must confess, I am surprised by your willingness to pursue the matter. Would not asking these questions make things very difficult at home for you?”

She was touched that he would be worried about her comfort at home. “ I have to know the truth, Mr Darcy. If my mother had anything to do with this, then I cannot in good faith ask you to go forward with the wedding. It would be a degradation of the lowest form. To intentionally blackmail a man into marriage —” She shook her head. “ I could not abide by it.”

Mr Darcy looked at her in a way she had never seen before. “ I respect that, really, I do. However, I can see no reason for you to ruin your life. I will go forward with the wedding, even if your mother did have something to do with it.”

It was Elizabeth ' s turn to be astounded. “ I confess, I cannot understand that. In essence, a crime would have been committed against you, sir. How could you go forward if we found out that my mother had intended all along to coerce you into the match?”

Her chest heaved with every breath as Mr Darcy took his time in answering. She found she was unsure if she wanted to hear the answer, but longed to know it at the same time. He broke eye contact with her, studying his hands for a moment. “ I will not leave you unprotected,” he said. Elizabeth gulped. Why did it seem to mean so much? He had said words to that effect several times since the incident had occurred. Yet now the words held such fervour that she wondered if there was something more to his feelings than societal duty and demands. Could he love her?

No, it was too much to fathom. And did she even want his love? No, surely not. Yet though Elizabeth had not yet forgotten his ungentlemanly insults at the Meryton assembly, she had found there was much to admire in Mr Darcy since then. When she heard him speak so contemptuously, she would never have thought the same man would willingly sacrifice so much for her. Nor could she ever have imagined the proud Mr Darcy apologising for the insult. Yet it would be terrible to enter into marriage with a husband who saw it as a sacrifice.

Elizabeth kept her voice even with an effort. “ Do you really think that is a reason to marry someone, simply to protect them?”

Mr Darcy shrugged. “ People have married for less, I suppose.”

“ Yes. But that is not the kind of marriage I want, Mr Darcy. I do not want to force you into marrying someone you so obviously do not trust.” Elizabeth sighed. “Nor, of course, someone you might have been tricked into compromising.”

Mr Darcy stood and walked a few paces away, his back turned to her. Elizabeth

waited a moment, wondering if she had said too much. But she could not very well have him enter into a marriage that he would regret for the rest of his life. She stood as well, meaning to go. “ I will leave you, Mr Darcy. I only wanted to come and apologise for my behaviour, and to say that I will try to find a way to learn the truth — even if I must go to my mother and confront her outright.”

Mr Darcy swung around. “ Please, stay a moment longer.” He took a steadying breath, again closing the distance between them. “I was wrong to speak harshly when last we met. If there was any misconduct, it was Wickham’s, not yours. Of that, I have not the slightest doubt.”

Elizabeth looked at him in surprise. “You are generous. I assure you, I did not encourage his attentions. But I am sure that it was an unpleasant scene for you to come upon, all the same.”

“That does not make it your fault, nor your responsibility,” he said steadily. “What occurred is entirely of a piece with Wickham’s general behavior. I only hope that you can forgive me for ever acting as though I thought otherwise.”

“ Of course,” Elizabeth whispered. “ But —”

They stood there for several moments, as motionless as if under a spell, gazing intently into each other ’ s eyes. And then his gaze travelled down to her lips, and she grew even more nervous. She gave a short laugh. “ I forgive you. And I thank you,” she replied, her throat raspy and dry. “ Now, I suppose we should refocus our energy to convincing the rest of the community to forgive us as well.” Mr Darcy smiled at her dry wit, and Elizabeth found herself suddenly noticing how close they were. For a moment, she thought he would kiss her. Elizabeth felt her heart pounding. If he did...she did not know what she would do.

Then he let go of her hand and motioned for her to retake her seat.

“ Please, I should like to find a way we can find out the truth of your mother’s innocence in the matter,” Mr Darcy said.

Tea arrived a moment later, and their conversation halted as the maid poured the tea, and then left them alone once more. Elizabeth sipped her tea, thankful for a respite from the tension that had pervaded the room.

Mr Darcy took a sip and then set his cup aside. “ How shall we prove she had nothing to do with it?” he asked.

She was grateful for the way he phrased his question, as if he already thought her mother was innocent. “ I think the only way will be to ask my mother directly.”

“ Do you think she would confess? I cannot imagine her wanting to do such a thing when she has gone through all of this trouble, if indeed, she had anything to do with it.”

“ I think she might confess, even by accident, if the conditions were right,” Elizabeth mused. “ But how could you trust me to report it accurately?”

He studied her for a moment, his eyes piercingly serious in their fervour. “ I have no doubt that you would tell the truth. I was quite in earnest when I said that I have no reason to suspect you of dishonour. Indeed, all of your actions thus far have been quite the reverse.” Mr Darcy took up his teacup and saucer and sipped, all the while watching her over the rim.

Elizabeth hardly knew what to say. After all they had been through the last fortnight, he still held her in such high regard? It was almost too good to be true. She was flustered just thinking about it. But as she did not think she could bear to address it directly, she returned to the point at hand. “I think we need to create a situation that will put my mother at ease. Let us imagine she is indeed involved. If we convince her

she has already won, she might then think it safe to confess her actions to me. Though I am not quite sure how to give her the necessary confidence.”

Mr Darcy thought for a moment. “ I could go to London, allegedly for the purpose of obtaining a special license. I believe I overheard your mother saying that she would like to have the distinction of having a daughter wed by special license. Would that be suitable?”

Elizabeth nodded. “ Yes, that would work. She would think she had won.”

Mr Darcy took another sip of tea, turning pensive. “ Do you really believe she has done anything?”

She hated to even think it. “ I think not. No — I must not say that. I can only say that I hope not. It is possible. Perhaps it is even probable. Who else would want us to end up together? We have not thought of a single other suspect. I cannot think of anyone else who would imagine that they were helping me by such an action, nor anyone who would wish to hurt me. And why would an enemy of yours do such a thing? It does not make sense.” Elizabeth shook her head and sighed. “ While you are gone to London, I shall try to make my mother confess.”

“ And you are sure you want to go through with it? If your mother is innocent, she will surely be terribly hurt by your suspicions.”

Elizabeth gave a sad smile. It was not that she and her mother were particularly close as it was. Not as she was with her father, that is. She loved her mother, though. “ I will try to be as delicate as possible. But I must know the truth, Mr Darcy.”

Their planning done, Elizabeth found herself increasingly weary. The intensity of their conversation had taken its toll, and she felt badly in need of a little time alone. It was not long before she made her excuses and said that she would go, excuses so

gracefully received that she suspected Mr Darcy was not much less in need of a little relaxation.

Yet the encounter had gone better than Elizabeth could have imagined. She had not been certain that Mr Darcy would even receive her. The idea of receiving so handsome an apology had been entirely out of the question.

“ Shall I see you home in the carriage?” Mr Darcy asked as they walked toward the foyer.

Elizabeth shook her head. “ No, that will not be necessary. I walked here, and I should like some time to think on my way back. You know how fond I am of a good walk.”

“ Yes, I am aware. I suppose you shall have many long walks when we are settled at Pemberley,” Mr Darcy said. There was a tenderness in his voice, almost as if he were looking forward to such an eventuality.

“ Well, good day, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said, dipping into a curtsy. Her voice sounded too bright in her ears, but he did not seem to notice.

“ Good day, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy whispered, offering her his hand.

She was unsure what he meant to do, but placed her small one in his large hand all the same. Warmth immediately flooded her cheeks at his touch. To her surprise, he bowed and kissed her hand. He lingered for a moment longer than was necessary, sending shivers up her arm and down her back. When he straightened, his eyes had darkened. She hardly knew how to interpret the look in his eyes. Her heart beat so wildly that she was sure he could hear it. “ Thank you for coming,” he rumbled.

Elizabeth could hardly find her tongue. “ Ah, yes, of course. Thank you for listening

to me,” she replied, barely above a whisper. She knew she should not be scandalized. He was, after all, her fiancé. When they were married, he would have the freedom to do much more than kiss her hand.

She swallowed hard and started toward the open door, past the butler, and out onto the front steps. She looked over her shoulder to see Mr Darcy standing on the front stoop, watching her departure. Did her eyes deceive her, or did he look almost sad to see her go?

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It was a strange end to three days of painful worry. As she made her way home that afternoon, she was relieved that Mr Darcy had received her apology with such grace. Indeed, he had not made her feel as if he were lording it over her, or that he even wanted to break things off with her. Quite on the contrary. They were still bound together. And she could not say she was entirely sorry for it.

When Elizabeth arrived at the archway leading into the yard at the rear of Longbourn, Jane was there to greet her. “How did it go with Mr Darcy?”

“Surprisingly well,” Elizabeth said.

“And?” Jane pressed her.

“He wants to find out for sure that Mama had nothing to do with the plot. Now, I only have to find a way to make Mama tell me the truth.” Elizabeth’s brows drew into a frown. “Do you think me very wicked for trying to catch her out?”

Jane had to think for a moment. “I would not say wicked. But even if she confesses, what good will it do, Lizzy? Your reputation will still be in jeopardy in the eyes of the community — perhaps more so — if people find out that Mama had anything to

do with the incident.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said, feeling as though the words scraped her throat. “You are right, Jane. It would not help — it would make everything far worse. But I cannot do otherwise. I cannot entrap Mr Darcy with a lie.”

Jane bit her lower lip, looking rather sorry, before at last nodding. Elizabeth could well understand her sister’s hesitation. If their mother was guilty, it could cost all five sisters — everything. Yet Jane was too honourable to deny that they must find out the truth. She led the way into the house and up the stairs to their room. Once inside the safety of the bedroom, Jane made her sit on the edge of the bed and tell her everything about her conversation with Mr Darcy.

Elizabeth obliged her, then sighed as she came to the end. “I do not understand him, Jane. He is unlike any man I have ever known — or heard of.”

“I agree. He has shown himself to be above board in every way. And he said nothing about ending the engagement?”

“No, nothing at all.” Elizabeth remembered how he had looked sad to see her go. And she found she had also been sad at her departure. The more time she spent around him, the more drawn to him she felt. It was a confusing feeling, to say the least.

Elizabeth shook her head and changed the subject. “Mr Bingley came in and said hello before I spoke with Mr Darcy. He wanted me to send along his greetings to the family, but I think he was especially disappointed that you did not join me.” She smiled at her sister. “He seems very much in love with you, Jane.”

Jane only looked away. “I am glad that things went well with Mr Darcy,” she said, effectively changing the subject. “If it is true that Mama hatched the plot, do you

really think you would go through with breaking the engagement? He is so gentlemanly and honourable. And I think you have come to feel something for him over the last few weeks. Am I wrong?" she asked softly.

Elizabeth could not hide how flustered she felt at the question. She stammered for a moment, then looked Jane in the eyes, forcing herself to not look away, as a coward would do. "I respect him," Elizabeth said. "I think there have been many marriages built on less." To her own ears, it sounded little different from what Mr Darcy had said in the drawing room that afternoon. "But it will not be up to me, Jane. Surely so proud a man as Mr Darcy could not go through with our marriage in such a case, even if he thinks otherwise now. It would be more than he could bear. If Mama is guilty, he will be the one to end it."

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:46 am

Darcy saw no point in delay. Once the plans to induce Mrs Bennet to tell the truth were established, he set out for London within a week. A brief delay had been required, for the Bingleys had accepted his invitation to join him in Town, and had some outstanding obligations to fulfil. He was unsurprised by their acceptance. Caroline Bingley would wish to be anywhere he was, and little inclined as Bingley was to leave the environs of Miss Bennet, he seemed to think it his duty to go with his friend.

Once arrived, Caroline Bingley seemed to think she had made a good bargain, for both the Bingleys had been included in this evening's invitation in his aunt and uncle's London townhouse. Darcy sometimes forgot that the Earl and Countess of Matlock were considered a coveted invitation in London circles, but the first glimpse of glittering ambition in Miss Bingley's eyes had quickly reminded him. Thankfully, she was well down the table from him. The Bingley siblings had been seated beside each other, opposite Colonel Fitzwilliam and Cousin Harriett.

If Miss Bingley's social ambition had been unpleasant to witness, it at least had the effect of improving her manners. Though, Darcy thought, she had seemed in better spirits since leaving Netherfield. Gone were her touches of ill-humour, and she joined in the conversation with the rest of the company without any unpleasant barbs. Likely, she saw this as an opportunity to raise herself in Darcy's sights, now that he was not in Elizabeth's reach.

But if Caroline Bingley hoped that distance would provide forgetfulness, she was doomed to disappointment. He found his mind frequently wandering to Elizabeth. What was she doing now? How was she faring with her plan to bring her mother's actions to light, if indeed, there were any actions to bring to light?

“Darcy, what on earth are you thinking about?” the Countess asked. “You have been staring away blankly at the wall for at least a quarter of an hour.” His aunt laughed. “I should not like to think that we are boring you.”

Darcy snapped back to reality, wishing his aunt had handled his inattention more discretely, without airing it before all the company. Indeed, they had all turned their attention on him, curious as to what he had been thinking, no doubt. “Forgive me, Aunt. I would never want to give the impression that I was bored. I was only lost in thought.”

“Thinking about his pretty fiancée, no doubt,” the Earl interjected with a mischievous grin. “Tell us, Darcy, is she as scintillating as Mr Bingley has told us?”

Darcy’s mouth grew dry as everyone continued to stare, including Miss Bingley. To judge by the sour look on her face, her ill humour had returned with the first mention of Elizabeth.

He sighed briefly. Darcy wished his engagement had not been brought up. But now that it had, he could not refuse to speak of his fiancée. That would hardly give the right idea. “Indeed, she is. I have never known a woman with such amiable wit, or such sparkling eyes.”

Though he had thought Miss Bingley could not have looked more displeased, it seemed he had been wrong.

“How suddenly it all came about! But we are happy for you, Darcy, my dear boy. I cannot say the same for my sister, sadly. Although I am not sure if Lady Catherine has heard of the engagement yet. Unless you have written to her?” his aunt asked.

“I have not broken the news to her yet,” Darcy admitted. Indeed, he was quite hesitant to do so, for he knew she would be sorely disappointed. Perhaps he had

better wait until the wedding was over and there was no recourse before alerting Aunt Catherine to the news. Given her temperament and need for control, it was all too likely that she would try to stop the affair.

And he found he did not want anyone to stop the wedding from going forward. The more time he spent with Elizabeth, the more he was convinced she would be an excellent partner for his future life. She had shown him she did not lack in any area that really counted. She was not perfect, by any means, but he had been beyond impressed that she had humbled herself and come to apologise to him — in person — and that she had not been willing to go forward with the engagement until they knew whether her mother had anything to do with the plot to compromise them.

“Is she of good family?” His aunt went on. “Of course, we can only assume that she is, if you have chosen her. I only mean, do we know of them?”

“Her father is a country gentleman,” Darcy began. “She has four sisters, one elder, and three younger. More importantly, Miss Elizabeth Bennet is well-read, witty, and attentive to the feelings of others. I believe she will make a fine wife.” Darcy caught his breath, surprised that he had said so much. He had only intended to turn the subject before talk of the scandal could arise, but he found he meant every word of his speech. Thankfully, word of the compromise had not seemed to reach London. With luck, no one need know that their marriage had a rather scandalous inception, one that many of his family would have urged him to escape.

Well, Darcy did not want to escape.

“She must be quite something, if you feel the need to obtain a special license,” his aunt said, raising her glass as if to toast him. “My dear nephew, I never thought to see you so impatient. It must be love!”

Darcy could hardly speak for the rest of the dinner. Miss Bingley, too, kept her mouth

shut, which he counted a blessing. Bingley had more than enough words for the three of them, and he kept the conversation light and jovial for the rest of the evening.

When it was time to go home, his aunt and uncle saw them to the door. “ We are having a ball in a few days’ time. We hope you will all join us,” his uncle said as he bowed to say their farewells.

“ How kind,” Mr Bingley said. “We should be delighted to attend.”

Darcy answered in the affirmative as well before entering his carriage. It was a relief when the coach stopped at the Bingley townhouse and they disembarked, leaving him to carry on alone. He was in a pensive mood, trying to sort out his true feelings toward his fiancée. Was it love, as his aunt had exclaimed at the dinner table? Surely not. He had always prided himself on knowing his own mind. But lately, he seemed to be in a jumble, with his heart taking over his head. It was an entirely new sensation, and one Darcy did not think he much cared for.

He would do best to put the matter entirely from his mind, to clear his head. Darcy resolved to spend the next day on matters of business. In any case, he ought to go by the jeweller’s. It was time to check in on the piece he was having made for Georgiana’s next birthday. If all had gone well, it should be complete, or nearly so.

The next day started out promisingly. The shopkeeper greeted him warmly and brought out the locket that he had designed especially for Georgiana, completed perfectly on schedule. He had hoped it would bring her some joy. Darcy had had a miniature of their mother done by one of his friends in Town, and it would go inside the locket, for his sister to keep near her heart always. Georgiana had not known their mother, poor girl. But he had tried his best to keep her memory alive by telling stories of the beautiful, gentle-spirited woman who had loved them with all her heart.

“ Does it please you, sir?” the jeweller asked. “ See the filigree on the back here?” He

turned the piece over and showed the delicate design of flowers and leaves that curled up around the edges of the locket.

“It is exquisite,” Darcy replied with a smile. “My sister will love it.”

“Very good, sir. Well, if there is nothing else, I will package this for you,” he said. He put the locket right side up, set it in the velvet-covered box, and started wrapping the package in brown paper.

Darcy walked around the shop as he waited. Suddenly, an emerald necklace caught his eye. The central emerald was a large, rectangle cut stone, a perfect gem that soaked up the morning sunlight and sent in dancing back in a thousand flashes of light.

It would be perfect for Elizabeth.

Darcy stopped, leaning down to take a closer look. The gems gleamed in the sunlight pouring through the large glass windows, making the light sparkle and dance. Impressive as it was, it was not gaudy, but had a simple, unassuming beauty — just like his fiancée. He was being foolish, of course. The best present he could give Elizabeth was her reputation, and her freedom.

“I’ll take this piece as well,” Darcy said abruptly, wondering what on earth he was doing.

The shopkeeper finished with the package for his sister, then came over as Darcy pointed out the piece. “Ah, a wonderful choice, Mr Darcy. Your sister certainly is a lucky young lady,” he said. Darcy did not correct the man, already feeling childish for allowing his impulses to take over. With luck, Elizabeth would never be his wife. Elizabeth certainly seemed to hope as much. If her mother did confess to setting them up, he was sure she would insist on breaking the engagement.

His heart sank. Darcy went over to the counter and paid for his purchases. If their engagement was ended, either by the demands of honour or the end of the necessity, he supposed he could always keep it for his future wife, whoever that might be.

But as he walked out of the shop, he knew deep down that he could never give it to anyone but Elizabeth.

Once back at the townhouse, he unwrapped the package and set out the small velvet box which the jeweller had used to protect Elizabeth ' s gift. He sat back in the little sitting area of his suite of rooms, staring at the glistening piece against the dark, soft fabric.

Was he a fool? If Elizabeth had her way, they would never even get to the altar, much less be faced with the task of trying to make a go of their marriage. Heartsick, he rose and closed the box, wrapping it clumsily back up in the brown paper. Only time would tell if they were forced to be together. And the more he thought of it, the more he felt that such a fate would be anything but unwelcome.

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On the night of the ball, Darcy, Bingley, and Caroline arrived at his aunt and uncle ' s mansion early. Darcy found a secluded spot as the other guests began to arrive. Now that he was engaged, he would no longer be pursued by every matchmaking mama desperate to have him dance with her daughter. He might stay off the dance floor entirely, if he wished. It was a relief, to be sure. But he found himself wishing that Elizabeth was with him, so he might whisk her out to the dancefloor and hold her in his arms...

“ Tis quite the event, would not you say, Darcy?” Bingley asked, looking about the room. “ Though I would venture to say that while there are many lovely young ladies here, I see none quite so lovely as we had at the Netherfield ball.” Bingley sighed

heavily, and Darcy knew he was thinking of Jane Bennet.

He smiled. “What are you waiting for, Bingley? If you are in love with Miss Bennet, then by all means, marry the girl.”

Bingley’s smile widened. “Am I so obvious?”

Darcy laughed. “Painfully so, my good fellow.”

“I would have proposed to her already, if I could only be certain that her feelings matched mine. Sometimes, I find it difficult to tell what she would think of the match.”

“I confess, I have wondered the same. However, I think some people are more reserved than others. Miss Elizabeth Bennet has told me as much about Miss Bennet. Perhaps the best course of action is to be a bit bold and ask her?” Darcy knew that if Caroline Bingley had heard him make such a speech, she would come apart at the seams. It was not difficult to ascertain her feelings toward the match, nor those of Mr and Mrs Hurst, who seemed to only be concerned with how much money one had, rather than the contents of people’s hearts.

Bingley hung his head. “My family is not convinced it would be a good idea. But how can I go on ignoring how I feel? I love her, Darcy.” Bingley’s smile only grew. “I love her!” he said again, a little louder this time. Several of the other guests turned to look at him in surprise, but Bingley hardly noticed. “I would count it an honour to be your brother-in-law.”

“Technically, we would not be brothers-in-law, but I am grateful for the sentiment,” Darcy replied with a smile. He already saw Bingley as a brother. And if he married Jane Bennet, they would be forever connected through marriages to the sisters. Or at least, he hoped he would.

Sadness suddenly overwhelmed him, worrying over what Elizabeth would find out when she confronted her mother. Indeed, perhaps she already had done, and the matter was already settled. He was eager to return to Netherfield the following day and find out what had transpired.

A few minutes later, Bingley went to ask a lady to dance, one who had been stuck as a wallflower for the first dance set. Miss Bingley found him when her dance set had ended, and stood back, silently judging the rest of the company, no doubt. She turned to him with a brittle smile. “ You look well, Mr Darcy. I am sure you are glad to be back in London, among your own people, are you not?”

Darcy raised a brow but did not want to reveal too much of his true feelings. “ It has been good to see my aunt and uncle.” He looked around the room at all the smiling faces, but could not get another night out of his mind, the night he and Elizabeth’s destinies had suddenly become intertwined. His heartbeat quickened as he thought of them being alone in the library, suddenly locked in an accidental embrace...

But it was hardly an appropriate subject to consider in public. He would do better to think of his future wife’s more substantial virtues. Elizabeth had handled everything with grace and poise, even though it had been the furthest thing from her own wishes.

Miss Bingley did not seem to notice his distraction. “ I must say, are not private balls much more enjoyable than public ones?” She giggled coquettishly and shook her head. “ At least, private London balls. I do not think I will ever get over the Netherfield ball. I have never seen such shockingly countrified manners.” She folded her hands in front of her, seeming very proud of the stab she had taken at Meryton society. “ It is a relief not to be packed in so, as we were at the Meryton assembly. I was fearful of fainting, with so many bodies pressed together. It made the heat unbearable,” Miss Bingley said. “ Are you not dancing, Mr Darcy? I assure you, it is not as hot and uncomfortable as the assembly. I would be more than happy to oblige if you do not have another partner in mind.”

Miss Bingley's fishing was so obvious as to be embarrassing, but he was not inclined to oblige her. "No, thank you, Miss Bingley. I am not dancing this evening," he said dully.

Her face fell, and she turned inward once more, watching the rest of the company in disappointed silence. Darcy could not regret it. Quite the contrary. If anything, he regretted the attention he had once paid her, and which had allowed Miss Bingley to hope. What he had intended only as a tribute of courtesy to a dear friend's sister, she had interpreted as she wished.

Darcy knew better now. Never again would he be so incautious as to encourage her, even if his engagement with Elizabeth ended. Miss Bingley's behaviour had shown that she was not and never would be the kind of woman he wanted to spend his life with.

The ball seemed dull and insipid without Elizabeth's wit to brighten the event. He had no fault to find with his aunt's arrangements, of course. As always, the ball was perfectly elegant and correct. If there was a change from past events, it was only in him.

It was a relief when Miss Bingley found a few people in her acquaintance speak to, and at last left him in peace. But his respite could not last forever. Busy as the Earl and Countess were with their duties as hosts, they nonetheless found time to interrogate their nephew.

"We are so pleased for you, Darcy. We should very much like to meet this fiancée of yours," the Countess said. "Will we have a chance to meet her before the wedding?"

"I am not sure of that. We plan to be married within the next few weeks," Darcy replied. "But we will come through London on the way to our wedding trip."

“ Well, we will be sure to plan a dinner and introduce her to all of your London friends. Tell us, how did you propose? We have not heard any of the particulars.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “ It was on a whim, really,” he said, leaving out the whole truth. At least his hopes had been confirmed. The news had not reached London, and they could go on with their lives without the shadow of scandal following them — whether they were together or not. The thought of not being with Elizabeth was strangely disquieting. It was silly, perhaps, but he missed her. And he had only been with her a handful of days before. What would it be like to be parted from her forever? To hear, perhaps from Bingley, that she had married someone else?

For her good, he would give her up, if that was what she really wanted. If they could only clear their names.

Darcy straightened his spine, resolving that it would be so. He would have to find a solution. There must be a way to protect Elizabeth — even if protecting her meant granting her freedom. For the woman he loved, he would defy even his own heart.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:46 am

Elizabeth knocked on the door of her mother's bedchamber, her heart pounding with every moment that went by as she waited in the corridor. Mr Darcy had departed four days ago, and she knew he would soon be returning. If her mother was to confess to any involvement in the plot to force Mr Darcy into an engagement with her, there was no better time than the present to get her confession.

“Enter!” her mother finally called. Elizabeth took a deep breath and resolved to get to the point as quickly as possible. She had stalled long enough, but not knowing the truth had made sleep elusive and her appetite dwindle until everyone in the family, even her father, had noticed that something was not quite right with the usually cheerful Lizzy.

Elizabeth opened the door, peeking around the jamb as she went. Her mother sat before her vanity as the maid arranged her curls under a freshly starched white cap. “Ah, Lizzy. What is it, darling? Are you feeling any better?”

Elizabeth eyed the maid, suddenly frozen and wishing she had planned what she might say to get her mother alone. “I am well, thank you.” She paused for a moment. “Mama, I wonder if we might discuss — ” She froze again. How could she get her mother alone without resorting to false pretences?

Mrs Bennet swung around on the stool. Strangely, there was a look of understanding on her face. “Ah. I see. I know what you are here for, my dear girl. Out,” she said flatly, waving the maid toward the door and clicking her tongue as she got up and all but chased the young girl out. “We cannot discuss things of great import in front of the servants, you know. They all like to wag their tongues and spin the rumour mill.” Her mother closed the door with a loud bang and turned to face her. “You must be

cautious of that when you are married.”

Elizabeth could not begin to understand what her mother was talking about. “Mama?”

Her mother waved her over to the vanity stool, just as she had shooed the maid away. “The servants, Lizzy! You will have to establish your role at Pemberley with care when you go there, coming to it as its new mistress. And your job will be even more delicate at Pemberley than what you might find in many houses. It is such a grand estate. There is a certain familial tenderness that we display with our servants here at Longbourn. However, Pemberley is not just a crumbling country house —”

“Mama,” Elizabeth interrupted, knowing that her mother might go off for hours on such a tangent. She might lose her opportunity altogether if she did not steer her toward the subject she had come to discuss.

“Ah, yes, but you are not here to discuss the servants, I think?” Her mother gave her a knowing look as she paced amongst the rather cluttered furnishings of the room. Elizabeth watched her mother step around an armchair and stop short in front of an inlaid table full of decorative figurines, her anxiety rising as she looked over the chaotic pell-mell strewn all about. She was unsure how her mother could think in such crowded circumstances. Not that the room was dirty, but her mother had an affinity for collecting little articles that might be of use down the road. It made for a very cluttered existence very different from any Elizabeth would wish to lead, especially when she was mistress of her own home.

“I know what you have come to ask me, and it is nothing to be ashamed of, my dear,” her mother said when Elizabeth did not answer straight away. No doubt, she mistook her silence for nervousness or embarrassment. “The intimacy between a man and a woman on their wedding night, or the marriage debt as some call it, is one that is sanctioned by the Church and the Lord — ”

For a moment, Elizabeth thought she might faint from horror at the misunderstanding. “Mama, please. I did not come to discuss that,” she said hurriedly, rising from the vanity stool as though it might help her escape the conversation.

Her mother frowned in confusion. “Then what is it, my dear? You have not been yourself of late. I thought at first that you were pining for Mr Darcy, knowing that he has gone away to London on business. However, you may comfort yourself that it is not meant to be a long journey. Really, my dear, how silly you are! Do not you know that he has gone to procure a special license for you? And I am sure he will return before another week has passed.”

Sooner than that, Elizabeth mused. And she would never say what she had come to say if her mother would not allow her to get a word in edge-wise. Perhaps the best way would be to simply blurt it out and deal with the fallout when it came. She took a steadying breath, hating to think of the damage she would inflict on her mother, but knowing that it had to be done.

“Mama, I have come to ask you about the incident in the library at the Netherfield Ball. Mr Darcy and I feel that something is not adding up, and that someone actually contrived to have us meet there, and staged the fall which brought us to the point of engagement.” She licked her lips as her mother settled on the chest at the foot of her bed, shocked, if the look on her face was any indication. Elizabeth took a deep breath, knowing she could no longer postpone the inevitable. “What I have come to ask is if you had anything to do with that incident, Mama.”

“What are you saying, Lizzy?” Mrs Bennet asked, her voice trembling. “I cannot think what you mean.”

“Mama, please forgive me for being so blunt, but I must know. All my life and future happiness may depend on the answer. What I am asking is, did you bear some responsibility for what happened that night? Did you plan to have Mr Darcy and I

caught in a compromising position?” Elizabeth asked again in the plainest terms. She cringed at the sound of her own voice, at how harsh and cold it must have sounded to her mother.

Mrs Bennet stood, her eyes wide with confusion. Elizabeth bit her lip. Was there not some guilt in her expression, too? The idea was too horrible to believe.

At last, her mother spoke. “I must confess that once you and Mr Darcy had been engaged, I thought how very fortunate we were to have such a rich gentleman as a part of our family. But I am surprised at you, Lizzy! To think that I could arrange for a scandal of that magnitude to befall my own daughter — ” She looked away and started picking at the ribbons on her stays. “It would have been much too risky. Too risky, indeed, for me to have had any involvement in.”

Elizabeth looked away. She did not wish her mother to see the expression in her eyes at hearing so ugly a compromise described not in terms of honour and dishonour, right and wrong, but of risk. She had already hurt her mother too much, and had no wish to do more. Elizabeth only wished she could have been more shocked at hearing her mother say such things. As it was, she was in very great danger of feeling more relief at Mrs Bennet’s innocence than dismay at her reasoning.

Mrs Bennet stood, pacing nervously. After a long moment, she stopped and turned back to her daughter. “Oh, Lizzy. I will not lie to you and say that I am not pleased with the outcome. I think Mr Darcy has acted in a very gentleman-like manner by asking for your hand and standing by you.”

“I cannot disagree,” Elizabeth replied. “Let us be very clear, Mama. Once and for all, tell me. You truly had nothing to do with what happened in the library at Netherfield that night?” She watched her mother’s face closely. Mrs Bennet was not a liar, nor as ashamed of what had happened as Elizabeth would wish her to be. Surely she would not withhold the truth.

“Of course not,” Mrs Bennet said with a flip of her wrist. “As I said, I am not sorry that the incident occurred. But it does not mean that I planned it.” She turned and pinned Elizabeth with a serious stare. “Since we are being so candid, I suppose I shall ask you whether you willingly met Mr Darcy in the library. He is a very handsome man, after all. Quite handsome enough to turn a girl’s head.”

“No, Mama. How could you even think it?” Elizabeth asked in shock. “I was as surprised as Mr Darcy when he suddenly fell on top of me.” Elizabeth was certain that her cheeks were violently red.

Her mother softened and took her hands. “My dear, what is done is done. Whether the situation was planned or an accident, there is nothing that can release you from this engagement that would not result in your reputation being forever ruined. And not only that — your sisters would also pay the price.”

Elizabeth nodded. Her mother’s sincerity was altogether convincing. She had never been a good liar, nor one who could conceal her true feelings. If she had had anything to do with planning the incident, Elizabeth would have seen right through her. Indeed, her mother was so pleased with the match that she probably would not have even tried to hide her involvement if she had been a party to the events that had led to Elizabeth’s compromise and subsequent engagement to Mr Darcy.

“Now, if you are satisfied, I will tell you of the things that a married woman needs to know.” Her mother drew her over to the bed and had her sit on the edge, so that she might stand and face Elizabeth. She took both of Elizabeth’s hands and squeezed them. Elizabeth steeled herself. She was not sure she was ready to hear all that went into being a wife, but she suspected her mother could not be put off.

Still, she would at least try. “Mama, please — ”

“Shush, now. This is important,” Mrs Bennet said. She released her hands and began

to pace. “Now, when you come into your new role as mistress of Pemberley, it is important to know that the Rieslings Warehouse in London is simply the best place to order furniture. I have it on good authority from Mrs Gardiner that they are the best in transporting items of such a nature. I am sure Mr Darcy has the house well-furnished, of course, but you never know when you may have an occasion to redecorate. Then there is the matter of how to properly arrange a fine dinner. You must insist that your housekeeper orders from only the best butcher. I shall have none of this nonsense about spreading one’s custom around — ”

Elizabeth let out a relieved sigh. Thankfully, her mother spent the rest of the hour discussing how to run a household efficiently and eventually circled back to the importance of having a firm hold on the servants. And so Elizabeth listened carefully, relieved that she would not have to endure her mother’s take on marital relations.

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Later that evening, about an hour before the sun was due to set, Elizabeth walked in the pasture at the rear of the Longbourn property. Learning that her mother had had nothing to do with the compromise had lifted a heavy weight off of her heart. Yet in terms of finding out who was responsible, it must be regarded as a serious setback. Indeed, it put them right back where they had started.

Elizabeth found herself strangely restless. Stranger still was the reason. Odd as it was, she found herself much less distraught by the fact that, for the time being, she and Mr Darcy must stay engaged than the fact that she could not see him immediately and discuss her mother’s innocence. Strange indeed. Elizabeth could not entirely account for it, but somehow, Mr Darcy’s presence had become a comforting balm. Perhaps that was even more of a shock than all the rest. Her heart was changing toward him, as she had never thought it could.

Could she have been wrong all this time? By everything that he had shown in both

word and deed, he was not the proud, austere man she had thought him to be. And in light of these facts, might he be an excellent partner, just as others had always told her?

Elizabeth looked up as she came to the small retaining wall, faced with yet another wall of grey clouds on the horizon. But she was hesitant to turn back. There was so much inside her that needed to be untangled. And to do so at home, where things were always in an uproar, seemed impossible.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and looked out toward the horizon once more. She smiled to find that the clouds were not the only thing in view. Coming across the pasture was none other than Charlotte Lucas. Her friend waved happily in greeting, and Elizabeth released a sigh of relief. She climbed over the sheep's gate and started toward Charlotte. They met in the middle of the pasture and linked arms.

"I did not know you were coming to see me," Charlotte said. Elizabeth looked at her, surprised and pleased. To judge by Charlotte's expression, she must have received excellent news. Elizabeth could not remember the last time her friend had looked so very satisfied with the world.

"I had not meant to go anywhere in particular, if truth be told. However, I am exceedingly glad to see you." Elizabeth already felt some of the strain fading from her heart. "I have missed you, my friend. Since the incident at Netherfield, we have scarcely laid eyes on each other."

"Indeed, I have missed you as well. How are things going with the wedding preparations?" she asked softly. Charlotte had always been able to read her moods. While the two friends did not always agree, Elizabeth loved her dearly as she would a sister.

"They are coming along, I suppose," Elizabeth replied. Oh, how she wished she could

pour out her soul to Charlotte! It was such a burden having to keep the investigation that she and Mr Darcy were engaged in a secret! “But tell me your news. I wish to discuss something other than gloomy wedding details.”

Charlotte gave her an understanding smile, then took a steadying breath. “Well, that is actually what I have come to speak with you about.”

Elizabeth’s heart immediately clenched. If there was more bad news, she was unsure she could bear it. Surely it must not be too terrible, or Charlotte would not have looked so contented. “What has happened? Please, tell me quickly,” Elizabeth pressed her. She stopped in the middle of the field, turning Charlotte to face her so she could see every emotion playing over her face.

Charlotte took a steadying breath, then delved in. “My father received a letter the other day. From Mr Collins,” she said, barely above a whisper.

Elizabeth blinked. “Mr Collins?” It was difficult to see how a letter from Mr Collins could have such significance. “And what did he say?”

Charlotte clasped her hands in front of her, nervously shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “He says that he is glad to be returned home. Lady Catherine is most magnanimous, and has ordered further improvements to his cottage.”

Elizabeth raised a brow. There was more. Much more. Charlotte knew Elizabeth did not care for Mr Collins. He was a silly, empty-headed man who deferred to his patroness as if she were a saint. Yet Charlotte was relaying minute details of the man. There must be a reason. “And?”

Charlotte let out a worried sigh. “He has also said that news of the compromise has reached her ears, and Lady Catherine is livid. She has threatened to come to Meryton and put a stop to the engagement by any means necessary.”

Elizabeth nodded. They began walking again, arm in arm. Elizabeth was grateful for the movement. She could not stay still after that kind of news. “I suppose it is because of our position in society?” she prodded. Though her father was a gentleman, he had nowhere near the fortune that Mr Darcy possessed. Nor could he boast similarly exalted connections. Had she not heard somewhere that Mr Darcy’s uncle was an earl? Elizabeth was proud of her uncle for his gentlemanly manner, excellent sense, and loving care of his wife and family, but no one could claim that Mr Gardiner was the social equal of an earl.

“I believe that is a small part,” Charlotte went on as gently as she could. “However, I believe that there is another reason. Indeed, I am quite certain of it. According to Mr Collins, Anne de Bourgh, Lady Catherine’s daughter, has been promised to Mr Darcy since their infancy. They are cousins, you know.”

Elizabeth sucked in a quick breath. “I did not know,” she replied. Even more curious was why Mr Darcy had not mentioned it? If he were indeed engaged to someone else, he surely would not have spoken for her. Or had he thought that the urgency of the situation outweighed any promises made beforehand? “I confess, I am quite stunned.”

Charlotte rubbed her arm and tried to comfort her. “I am sure it will not amount to a thing. Lady Catherine will surely see there is nothing to be done about it now, not if she wants her nephew’s reputation to remain intact.”

Elizabeth grimaced. “I do not think that is so. You and I both know that the harm to Mr Darcy’s reputation would be far less than to my own. He is a very wealthy man, and society would soon forget the offence.”

As Charlotte could hardly deny it, she said nothing. They walked on for quite some time before Elizabeth spoke again. “Is that all that Mr Collins had to say? I do not wish to offend, but it did not seem that you and Mr Collins had many occasions to speak when he visited.”

Charlotte's cheeks instantly filled with colour. "We did not — not particularly. But he knows you and I are good friends. When he was here, he made a point of asking me about you, what pleased you, your interests. Things of that nature. And...when he wrote to my father, he also spoke to him of me."

Elizabeth sensed there was something more her friend was leaving out. She stopped short and would not move until Charlotte turned back to face her.

Elizabeth sucked in a quick breath. She could think of only one thing that might put such an odd mixture of shame and satisfaction on Charlotte's face. "Has Mr Collins proposed marriage to you? In a letter to your father, no less?"

Charlotte looked as if Elizabeth had smacked her across the face. However, her face soon fell, and Elizabeth knew the truth of it. Her friend straightened her spine and nodded once. "He has."

"And that is the real reason you came to see me?" Elizabeth went on. Her heart was in a turmoil.

"Yes," she answered again. A pause ensued, the silence so deafening it made Elizabeth's ears ring. "Will you not congratulate me, my dearest friend?"

Elizabeth was too taken aback for several moments to answer. "Mr Collins? You are engaged to him?"

"I have written my answer and my father sent it to him on this morning's post. It's not official, of course, but yes, I have accepted him."

Elizabeth let out a frustrated sigh. "You cannot be serious!" She threw her hands up in the air. "He is utterly ridiculous!"

“Hush,” Charlotte snapped. “Mr Collins is perfectly respectable. He is the leader of a parish, with a good living and a suitable house. And he is respected in the community.” She furrowed her brow. “I do not see any reason I shouldn’t be as happy with him as any other.”

“He is a preening peacock, Charlotte.”

“I do not have the luxury of marrying for affection, Lizzy. Indeed, very few of us do. I am twenty-seven years old, with no money or prospects. Already, I am a burden to my parents.” She halted, wiping at the tears that had begun to stream down her cheeks.

Guilt washed over Elizabeth, such as she had never felt before. “Charlotte — ”

Her friend held up her hand, staying her words. Charlotte sighed heavily, then looked up at Elizabeth with such anguish of spirit that she wished the ground would swallow her. Never in a hundred years would she ever wish to bring her friend pain. But unwittingly, that is exactly what she had done.

“I’m afraid, Lizzy,” Charlotte admitted softly. “Not all of us are as pretty or as spirited as you. Some of us must compromise.”

“But what of your heart, Charlotte? Surely you deserve the chance for true love? For true happiness?” Elizabeth pleaded softly. She could not bear not to make the attempt. If the truth was told, she did not think Mr Collins was even half worthy of Charlotte Lucas.

Charlotte set her jaw and narrowed her eyes in determination. “The heart is a luxury.” She backed away, shaking her head. “You know my situation. So don’t you judge me, Lizzy. Don’t you dare judge me!”

Charlotte turned and hurried across the field, back the way she had come. Elizabeth felt too downcast to move from the spot. She stayed where she was, watching her dear friend grow smaller and smaller.

It would seem there was no end to the messes she could make of her life.

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Darcy had never thought he would be so pleased to be at Netherfield, but as he came downstairs to join the others for breakfast, he found it was so. It had been a brief trip to London, for which he was thankful. Now that he was back in Meryton, he was eager to hear what Elizabeth had found out from her mother. He sat next to Bingley, gratefully noting the absence of Miss Bingley at the breakfast table. She had opted to stay in town with Mr and Mrs Hurst, and while Darcy had no intention of saying as much to his friend, he was heartily glad. Her absence would afford him some much-appreciated peace while he was a guest at Netherfield.

“You seem in glum spirits, Darcy. Whatever is the matter?” Bingley asked as Darcy sat down at the small round mahogany table. “You ought to look cheerful — as much as you ever do, that is. The sun is shining, and you have returned to be near your love.”

“She is not my love,” Darcy said, more forcefully than he had intended. He grimaced. Not that he was opposed to Elizabeth in any way. Quite the contrary. He was beginning to find her superior to any other woman he had ever known. Only — it remained all too clear that she did not feel the same about him. However much he might want her to be his love, it seemed impossible that she would ever see him in that light.

Darcy schooled his face to neutrality. “Nothing is amiss,” he said. “It was simply a long journey. Forgive my harshness, old friend.”

“There is nothing to forgive. Have some breakfast, and things will look better, I assure you,” Bingley said.

The two friends settled into a scrumptious breakfast, though Darcy found himself unable to eat most of it. Worry over what Elizabeth had found spoiled any appetite he might have had. And concern over whether Wickham had tried to come calling again had kept him up nights while he had been away. He knew how perfidious the man could be. Of course, he was charming, and that only made matters worse. His charm made it all too easy for others to give him credit for a good character — credit that was sadly more than his due. He could only hope that, if the man visited his betrothed, she would have the good sense to see through his mask.

“Well, what are your plans for the day? I assume you have a mountain of letters to answer, since you have been gallivanting around London, hmm?” Bingley asked, taking a sip of his tea.

“I thought to ride to Longbourn this afternoon. I am eager —” Darcy began. He stopped abruptly and cleared his throat. “I am to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Ahh, of course, you are eager. I will say I am not displeased that you and Miss Elizabeth have ended up together. She is an exceptional person — so witty and spirited, exactly what you need, my friend. She will be a good match for you.” Bingley winked at Darcy.

Darcy only nodded. “Well, I shall be off then,” he said. He folded his linen napkin and placed it beside his plate. “I may be gone for a good part of the day. You can expect me for dinner.”

“And if you do not come, I shall take it upon myself to come and rescue you,” Bingley teased.

“You only want an excuse to come and see Miss Bennet,” Darcy shot back.

“Right you are!” Bingley replied. “She is the most bewitching creature.”

Though he could not bring himself to admit it aloud, Darcy was beginning to feel the same way about Elizabeth. He went out of the dining room, retrieved his coat and hat, and took a horse from the stables. Darcy mounted up and made his way to the lane that ran from the front of Netherfield and wound its way through the countryside to Longbourn. The fresh air did him good, helping to clear his head after all the bustle and stench of London. It was difficult to pinpoint how he felt about finding out the answers Elizabeth had been searching for while he had been away. Strangely, it might almost be a relief if Mrs Bennet were guilty. At least then they would have their answer. Yet the consequences of such a result would be terrible. If Elizabeth found out that her mother had had anything to do with such a deplorable business, she would be stricken with guilt and shame. She would likely insist on ending their engagement, cost her what it may. Indeed, Darcy could not relish the thought of being connected by marriage to a woman who would do such a thing to find her daughter a husband, no matter how greatly he had come to admire that daughter.

After leaving his horse at Longbourn's stables, Darcy strode across the lawn to the main entrance. He saw several faces pressed against the glass. Darcy could clearly hear the loud announcement that "Lizzy's betrothed has come!" and a great pounding of feet as everyone made their way to the parlour to receive him. Though the display showed a sad lack of propriety and grace, it certainly was not wanting in family feeling or enthusiasm. Darcy found a smile spreading over his face. Lizzy's betrothed — a wonderful phrase. It filled him with joy and pride at the thought that Elizabeth belonged to him — for however long that might be.

The door opened before he had even cleared the porch's landing. "Mr Darcy! How good of you to come calling after your long journey. Do come in! Come in!" Mrs Bennet greeted him warmly and ushered him into the parlour, where a lavish tea was being set. "We have been expecting you. I told the cook to spare no expense when you came. And here you are!"

Darcy hardly knew whether to smile or frown. There was that same lack of propriety

— did not Mrs Bennet know she ought to have her housekeeper open the door and usher him in? — and yet such a pleasing friendliness and warmth that he could not entirely condemn it. Mr Bennet took a moment to shake his hand and welcome him back from his journey. Afterward, he excused himself and hurried away to cloister himself in his study, leaving Darcy to visit with the women over tea.

“Does not my Lizzy look well, Mr Darcy? I daresay the betrothal has brought out the colour in her cheeks,” Mrs Bennet said. She put her arm around Elizabeth’s waist. Elizabeth stood at the front of the room to greet him, staged there, no doubt, by her mother, while the rest of the Bennet sisters occupied the back of the room. Mr Darcy could not say he was disappointed, for Elizabeth was the picture of loveliness and grace. She was dressed in a soft blue that brought out the darkness of her eyes and hair. For a moment, he was almost unable to breathe.

“She looks very well indeed, Mrs Bennet. My betrothed is a credit to you, I am sure. How do you do, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Quite well, thank you,” she answered. A knowing look passed between them, and for a moment, all was silent.

The rest of the sisters offered their greetings a moment later, breaking the spell, and they were all seated around the hearth. Mrs Bennet hardly waited until everyone was settled before jumping into conversation. “It has been very dull around here since you went away, Mr Darcy. We have all been on pins and needles waiting for your return. Tell us, have you received the special license?”

Darcy looked up in surprise and caught Elizabeth’s gaze. She gave him an apologetic smile, then set her teacup aside. “Mama, perhaps you might let poor Mr Darcy catch his breath before questioning him,” she suggested gently.

But Mrs Bennet would have none of it. “Oh, do not be ridiculous, my dear! Of

course, Mr Darcy does not object to my inquiring about such an important point! I shall have you know I am vastly proud that I shall have a daughter married by special license. One does not experience such a distinction every day!"

Darcy had to think fast. Of course, Mrs Bennet thought he had gone to London to procure a special license. And much as he hated deception, it would be advantageous that she might continue to think so.

"Everything will be in order when it is required, I assure you, madam," Darcy replied. His answer seemed to satisfy her, and she was soon off on another subject.

Elizabeth lowered her eyes to her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. She seemed relieved that he had not set her mother straight. Now, more than ever, he was eager to find out what she had learned of her mother's involvement in the plot to bring them together. Throughout the rest of the tea, Darcy wondered if he really would need to procure a special license from the church. If they could not clear their names, a speedy marriage might be wise. There was one relief — at least it need not be conducted as though there had been an indiscretion too great to wait for the banns to be read.

"I hope the journey was not too uncomfortable for you, Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth asked. She had a strange look in her eyes. Could it have been caused by something she discovered while he was gone, something she feared to tell him? Darcy looked deeply into her eyes and wondered again why he had bought her the necklace.

Unbidden, his eyes travelled down her face to her throat, lingering on the spot where the beautiful jewellery piece should rest, if he ever had the chance to give it to her. His throat suddenly went dry. He knew he should not want such a thing, but he so longed to see it grace her elegant throat.

"Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

He looked up sharply and was glad to see that they were not the subject of everyone's attention. Her sisters and mother had moved on to discussing the particulars of the wedding breakfast to be held after he and Elizabeth had said their vows.

"It was not as great an inconvenience as you might suppose. I am used to making the journey to London from Pemberley, which is a far longer distance." Darcy lowered his voice. "But I thank you for your concern."

Elizabeth's cheeks flamed to life with a pretty shade of pink. He longed to speak with her in private, not only to hear what she had found in her investigation, but for the pleasure of her company.

That desire, at least, might easily be satisfied at the cost of a little patience. When tea was over, he suggested a walk outside. Elizabeth seemed to follow his thoughts without effort. She retrieved a shawl and led him out to the little wilderness beside the house. A little uneasily, Darcy noticed it was the same place where they had had their previous falling out. He hoped this encounter would be nothing like the last.

She waited for a few moments, both of them walking in silence until they were confident they were clear of any listening ears. "I am glad to see you returned safely, Mr Darcy," Elizabeth began. "Though I am afraid you may see your trip as a wasted endeavour, when you hear what I have to tell."

Darcy's heart clenched with fearful anticipation. "I assume you had the opportunity to speak to your mother on the subject?" he prompted. He clasped his hands behind his back, but as they came to a small stream, he offered her his arm and helped her over the little rivulet. When they were safely on the other side, strolling through the grass, he did not let her go.

He was pleased that she seemed content to keep her hand in the crook of his arm. "I did. I questioned her about having any involvement in the plot to coerce you into

speaking for my hand, but my mother denies it completely. And after pressing her on the subject, I believe her.” Elizabeth halted on the little worn path through the browning grass and looked up at him. “My mother may be many things, Mr Darcy, but she is not a liar. In the end, we are right back where we started. I am sorry you wasted a trip to London to be so disappointed.”

Darcy breathed a sigh of relief. “Far from it. I am not disappointed, Miss Elizabeth. In truth, I am glad to hear that your mother had nothing to do with the matter.”

He looked out over the fields, feeling the release of tension sweep through him. The wind howled around them, whipping the branches of the nearby trees into a frenzy. He looked over at Elizabeth, who did not seem bothered in the slightest by the elements. She was very fond of walking, after all, and no doubt had gone for a brisk walk in weather much worse than this. The wind had disarrayed her coiffure, giving her a somewhat wild, untamed air. It was wholly attractive to him, which was a surprise. Elizabeth was nothing like the woman he had always imagined he would end up married to, and yet everything he never knew he needed.

“I must confess that I am surprised at your reaction, Mr Darcy.”

“Oh? In what way?” he asked.

“I had not expected you to be so easily satisfied,” Elizabeth admitted. “You seem to have accepted this conclusion merely on my saying I believe it to be so. I rather thought you would require more proof that what I say is true.”

He looked over at her in surprise. She seemed so small at that moment, so vulnerable. And yet she had resolved to settle the subject thoroughly. It occurred to him that in other circumstances, he might well have demanded to take part in the conversation himself, to try to catch out Mrs Bennet in his own hearing. Certainly he would not have accepted such a conclusion from Caroline Bingley — not if marriage to him was

on the line. But if Elizabeth gave him her word, that was enough for him. Darcy could not imagine her acting dishonestly, whatever the stakes.

“I trust in your character, Miss Elizabeth. If you say that your mother is innocent, then that is good enough for me,” he replied.

Elizabeth smiled at him, and he thought how very lovely she was. He wished she had been by his side at his aunt and uncle’s soiree. It would have made the evening wholly different, would have brought the dance to life.

She licked her lips as if trying to work out something to say. Did she realise how she drove him to distraction anytime she did that? “I thank you for your confidence, Mr Darcy. In both my character and my judgement. But that still leaves us back where we left off. Who would have the most to gain from seeing us married? I cannot understand it.”

They walked on for some time, enjoying the cool breeze and the winter sunshine. “I do not know, Miss Elizabeth. I confess I still believe, and please do not take this the wrong way, but your parents and family had the most to gain from this alliance.”

“No offense is taken, Mr Darcy. I agree. Yet I am confident in my mother’s innocence, and no one else in my family would have thought of arranging a compromise. My father is not so heedless, and certainly none of my sisters would consider such a thing,” Elizabeth said. She sighed. “I am very sorry, Mr Darcy. Though I had no intention of standing idly by while you are trapped into marrying me, the plan is not going quite as I had hoped. I cannot seem to think of what to do next.”

Darcy said nothing for a long moment. He was beginning to think that he would not be too upset at being trapped, as she put it. Indeed, he had started to look forward to the day they would say their vows. Yet her feelings were all too clear. Though

Elizabeth kindly phrased her hesitations as wishing to grant him his freedom, she surely meant that she desired her own. Delay would, perhaps, be for the best. If investigating who had tried to trick them would give him more time to show his worthiness to Elizabeth, then he would welcome it.

Elizabeth stopped when they came to a towering oak tree at the edge of the Longbourn property. The house was still visible, giving an air of respectability to their walk. Anyone who looked from the windows would be able to see them, though the distance was great enough to allow them to speak freely. “Miss Elizabeth, you seem to be in distress. Is there something that is bothering you?”

She looked up at him, her dark eyes sending thrills through him. He was not sure how she did it with one simple look. But his heart burned within him. “There is something, and I am afraid to say it. It is a matter that has caused some upset before.”

“And what is that, pray tell?” Darcy asked.

“Mr Wickham,” Miss Elizabeth said. She looked away and paced underneath the bare tree branches. She wrung her hands, as if even mentioning the man’s name caused her pain. “I know you think I encouraged him that day on the road, but I did not.”

Darcy closed the distance between them. “I do not think that. Not anymore. Please forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. When I saw him with you, kissing your hand, it brought back every foul memory I have had to endure at his hands. I was rash and foolish, but I acted out of worry for you, that he was trying to work the same kind of ill upon you.” He took her hand. “Your hands are cold,” he whispered.

She gasped softly, nodding. “I thank you for your concern,” she replied. He held her hand for a long moment. It was a luxury that he ought not to allow himself, if the engagement were to be dissolved, and yet Darcy could not bring himself to let go. After a moment, Elizabeth seemed to remember herself. She drew her hands away

and wrapped them in the folds of her shawl. “Mr Darcy, though I hate to say it, I was wrong. At first, I believed Mr Wickham to be a man of amiable temper and upright character. However, if he would attempt to flirt with another man’s wife, I must conclude that my first impressions of him were entirely mistaken.”

Darcy warmed to hear her call herself his wife. Perhaps it was time to share the details of what had happened between Mr Wickham and Georgiana — the whole truth. Yet could he truly hope to be believed?

He could not think of that now. Mr Wickham had nearly ruined Georgiana. It seemed all too likely that he would gladly do the same to Elizabeth if he could. And yet...

Thunder rolled overhead, and they looked up in unison. Dark, grey clouds had moved in while they had been talking, and the wind had picked up in preparation for the coming rain. “Perhaps we should continue this discussion inside?” he suggested.

“Yes. We can go into the east parlour. We will not be disturbed there,” Elizabeth said. She took his arm when he offered it, and they walked back to the house in easy silence. Darcy rolled his shoulders to loosen them, his decision made. No matter how Elizabeth interpreted his motives for telling her of the scandal between Wickham and Georgiana, the truth could not wait.

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Elizabeth led Mr Darcy back into Longbourn with a mixture of relief and unease. The relief was for escaping the rising storm — the unease, for what Mr Darcy was about to say next. His expression clearly showed that the conversation would not be an easy one. The east parlour was warm and cosy compared with the drizzle of rain that started to fall as they reached the house. The fire crackled cheerily, chasing some of her anxiety away. She was grateful they had come in, for just as they had entered, the sky cracked with thunder, and the clouds let forth their bounty, sending rain thundering down in earnest. Elizabeth sat down near the hearth and called for another pot of tea to be brought.

“Is all well? I am sorry your walk was cut short by the rain, Lizzy,” Mrs Bennet asked as she poked her head into the parlour. “Thank goodness you had the sense to come back in time. Will you not rejoin the rest of us?”

“No, Mama. Thank you. Mr Darcy and I have some things to discuss.” Elizabeth folded her hands demurely in her lap.

“Oh, of course. I suppose there is nothing amiss with that, since you are engaged now. I shall send Cook in with the fresh pot of tea shortly.” Her mother gave her a concerned, albeit curious, look and then left the room.

“We shouldn’t be disturbed any further. I apologise for my mother. I know it may seem that she is a busybody, but she is only concerned for our welfare.” Elizabeth looked out the window and wished that they had been able to continue their walk. She sensed that whatever Mr Darcy had to reveal about Mr Wickham, it would not be pleasant, and he would not want listening ears to overhear.

“I shall try to convey the matter with as much tact as is possible. But I will warn you, the things I am about to tell you will shock you, even disgust you. However, I do not speak of them to besmirch an innocent man. I will not try to sway you. I will tell you the facts, and you can decide for yourself if my treatment of Mr Wickham is just.”

Elizabeth nodded her consent, then steeled herself for something very grave indeed. “I will do my best to listen without bias.”

Mr Darcy seemed to be relieved. After a deep breath, he began his tale. “Mr Wickham grew up almost in my own household. Indeed, it would not be too much to say that my father doted on him. The elder Mr Wickham was my father’s steward, and my father took a liking to the son almost as soon as they had been introduced. He could not have been more than five or six years old at the time.”

Elizabeth could not help the shock that surely was apparent on her face. “You grew up with Mr Wickham?”

“Indeed. I see that is a surprise to you, and I can understand it, given the cold greetings you have seen pass between us on the rare occasions when we meet.”

“I am indeed surprised,” Elizabeth agreed. “But please, go on. I said I would not interrupt, and already I have.”

“Do not fret about that,” Mr Darcy went on. “My father paid for his schooling and even sent him to Cambridge. When Mr Wickham came of age, my father promised him a living on the estate — a nearby parish — that would have done very well for a respectable young man, had he wished to go into the church.” Mr Darcy sighed and was about to go on when a knock announcing the fresh pot of tea was ready. Elizabeth hurried to the door, took the small tray from the maid, and closed the door again. She set the tray down and nodded for him to continue as she poured.

“My father had hoped that Mr Wickham would join the church, take holy orders, and settle down at the parish on the estate. However, I never felt that Mr Wickham was destined for the church, and knew from his character that it would not be a good fit for him. He is too wild — ” Mr Darcy again looked away. “Forgive me. I have promised to give no opinions, only the facts.”

Elizabeth could not help but admire his hesitation to speak ill of Mr Wickham, where obviously there was a history of hurt and resentment between them.

Mr Darcy went on. “His father passed away, and my own soon after. When my father was gone, Mr Wickham quickly came to me and demanded the value of the living, instead of taking holy orders. I gave it to him, thinking it a reasonable solution, as I was confident that Mr Wickham ought not to be a clergyman. It amounted to three thousand pounds.”

Elizabeth gasped inwardly at such a sum. Mr Darcy had certainly been generous.

“He went away almost immediately. I did not see him again until a year later, only to learn that he had squandered the whole of it. In fact, Mr Wickham had come back only to demand more. He stated he wanted to study the law. But I did not believe him. Had Mr Wickham truly intended to study the law, three thousand pounds would have been an ample provision.” Mr Darcy hesitated, his eyes filled with such pain that Elizabeth wished she could reach out and offer some semblance of comfort. But their engagement was no more than a technicality. It would be foolish to attempt it. “I refused him. He left in a rage, and we did not see him again for several years.”

Elizabeth shook her head in disgust. “After such intemperate greed and ingratitude, I can only imagine that his absence was a relief.”

Mr Darcy shrugged slightly. “As I said, we heard nothing from him, until there was a very painful incident last year.” He hesitated again, and Elizabeth felt she could do

nothing but sit on the edge of her seat, waiting in suspense. Her stomach roiled with every possible horrible scenario.

Yet nothing could have prepared her for the truth.

“He attempted to elope with my sister, Georgiana, when she was just sixteen. There was not the slightest chance that his affection was sincere, for he waited until he could see her away from her family, with only a hired companion to watch over her...a hired companion who, I later learned, had forged all her references and was a confederate of Wickham himself. He intended to have Georgiana’s dowry, and he was willing to ruin an innocent girl who fondly remembered him from her childhood to do it. If I had not happened to surprise Georgiana with a visit on the eve of the intended elopement, it would have succeeded.”

Elizabeth felt faint with horror. How Mr Wickham could have treated Miss Darcy so deplorably, and still had the gall to show his face in the country, was beyond her. “I cannot believe it,” she breathed.

“It is all true,” Mr Darcy said. “I have tried to shield my sister from anyone knowing of the scandal — or what would have been a scandal and surely would have meant the ruination of her good name. She is a very innocent girl, Miss Elizabeth, and had acted in the purest trust and confidence. This incident has all but taken the life out of her. She used to be so full of spirit and joy, and now she is a shell of her former self.”

“I am so sorry, Mr Darcy. I did not mean to say I did not believe your side of the story, only that I cannot bring myself to terms with Mr Wickham treating your sister in such a way. The man ought to be strung up by his toes!”

Mr Darcy smiled rather grimly. “Believe me, I wanted to. Then again, the whole matter would have had to have been aired publicly, and I could not bring myself to do that to Georgiana. It was essential to her reputation and future happiness that the

matter be kept as quiet as possible. I hope you will not judge Georgiana too harshly. She was only sixteen at the time, so trusting of humanity. This experience has taught her the hard way that one cannot always trust what one sees on the outside. That is why I said earlier that charm is deceiving.”

“I would never judge Miss Darcy for something that was not her doing. She was deceived, just as you said.” Indeed, judgement towards Miss Darcy had been far from Elizabeth’s thoughts, which were consumed with anger that Mr Wickham had almost succeeded in ruining Miss Darcy’s life, and that he was still on the loose to do so to other unsuspecting women. Indeed, if she had not ended up engaged to Mr Darcy, she herself might have fallen prey to his charms. Elizabeth could not claim to have seen through Mr Wickham’s facade — at least, not at first.

“Thank you for saying so. I should very much like to introduce you to Georgiana on day,” Mr Darcy said. “She needs a female friend who would be a beneficial influence on her — perhaps assist her in leaving behind the sorrow that oppresses her.”

“She took it very hard then, as can only be imagined?” Elizabeth asked softly. And to have no mother with which to speak of such things. Surely, Georgiana would not have confided everything to her brother. There were some things that only a woman could understand.

Mr Darcy nodded solemnly. “She was crushed. For weeks after I brought her home, she barely left her bed, let alone the comfort and safety of her room. The doctors were so worried that they wanted to bleed her, but I would not allow it.” He shook his head at the memories no doubt filling his mind. “Foolish as it was, my sister loved Mr Wickham with her whole soul. There might have been a happier end to this story, if only Mr Wickham’s heart were genuine. If he had truly loved Georgiana, she might have been the making of him. Perhaps she could have helped him remember the lad he had been all those years ago. I know I paint a grim picture of him, but we were friends, once. When we were boys, there was much good to be said of him. I believe

his father's death changed him.”

“Of course. It is rare that children start out as depraved as they grow up to be.”

Mr Darcy sighed again and changed the subject. “At any rate, I hope you and Georgiana will become close once we are married. She badly needs a friend.”

Elizabeth raised a brow. It was uncertain whether the wedding would go forward, though it was hardly the time to point that out. If it did, she would be glad to take Miss Darcy under her wing and help bring her out of her misery, if she could. “I would be deeply honoured to meet your sister. From what you have told me, I am sure we would be fast friends.”

Mr Darcy's face brightened a bit. “I am sure of it. Georgiana is shy at first, but when she gets to know people, she has a warm and caring heart.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Will she come to Meryton soon? I am sure she misses you terribly.”

“Yes, she will travel here for the wedding — if there is to be a wedding,” he said softly.

Elizabeth took up her teacup and sipped for a moment. The steaming tea travelled down her throat and brought warmth back to her bones. She had not realised how chilled she had grown since they had been sitting in the parlour. Even with the fire burning, the cold seeped in through the glass windowpanes. She scooted closer to the fire, and Mr Darcy did the same. “That is the question, isn't it? What are we going to do, Mr Darcy? If we cannot prove our innocence, I suppose we shall have to go through with the wedding.”

To her surprise, the idea was becoming less and less appalling to her. The more she

got to know Mr Darcy, the more she came to admire his character, his intelligence. Once, it had been her most fervent belief that he was not a man of good temper or warm heart, but deeper knowledge had shown her it could not be so. It was not a man of bad temper who had so readily forgiven her for their misunderstanding over Mr Wickham, and so readily apologised for his part in it. It was not a cold-hearted man who spoke so warmly and lovingly of his little sister. Perhaps it would not be so bad after all to be Mrs Darcy.

“I will not leave you unprotected. I promised you that from the very beginning, and I am a man of my word, Miss Elizabeth.” Mr Darcy pinned her with his piercing gaze, and she felt the swirl of butterflies when he did not look away. “Even if this is not the kind of marriage either of us had pictured.”

Elizabeth let out a long breath. “No. Indeed, it is not.”

“I suppose I am not the sort of man you wanted to end up with,” Mr Darcy said. His voice was surprisingly gentle. “What had you imagined?”

The very great intimacy of the question caught Elizabeth off guard. She blinked, setting aside her cup. “I am not sure. I suppose I always dreamed of a husband with whom I could share my innermost thoughts without judgement. Someone I could count on as a true friend. After all, marriage is for life. One’s partner should be someone they share a friendship with, not only a household and children. I always wanted to know that I could share an openness with my future husband.”

“I agree.” Mr Darcy said with a slight smile.

“And what of you? I suppose you always dreamed of a blonde beauty?”

“Why do you say that?” Mr Darcy asked.

“No reason,” Elizabeth said. “I suppose I have always seen men falling over themselves for the fairer beauties, rather than the dark and mysterious. But perhaps it is only my limited experience, having seen little of the world.”

Mr Darcy sighed, thinking for a moment. “I do not think I have any great preference for the colour of a wife’s hair. The specifics of a woman’s appearance have never been as important to me as someone who showed genuine intelligence. After all, beauty fades, but the mind — the soul of a person — that is what will last. Though, if I am being honest, I must say I have always preferred dark eyes to light ones.”

He surprised a slight laugh out of Elizabeth. “That is fortunate, as my eyes are dark.”

“Indeed it is,” Mr Darcy agreed. He thought for a moment. “I suppose I always imagined marrying a woman who was a profound reader, and being able to discuss things that truly mattered in the world.”

Elizabeth smiled at this. Though she would not lay claim to being a profound reader, she did enjoy reading. “Well, it is fortunate for you I am fond of literature. Sadly, I fall short in the profundity of the books I enjoy, but perhaps you might guide my taste and recommend the works you consider most worthy. At least, I shall endeavour to read more.”

“And I shall endeavour to be more open,” Mr Darcy replied.

Elizabeth looked at him in surprise. She had not intended to propose a kind of quid pro quo, nor indeed to express a criticism. But he had listened to her, truly listened to her, and perceived where he fell short of her ideal. It spoke well of him that he would so readily acknowledge the deficit and try to correct it.

Mr Darcy gave a self-deprecating laugh. He looked embarrassed. With a little thrill, Elizabeth realised he had never shown his feelings so openly before in all the time of

their acquaintance. “Miss Elizabeth, I wonder if I might broach something with you that has long been on my mind?” he asked.

Elizabeth shifted, turning slightly toward him to show he had her full attention. “But of course, Mr Darcy. What is it?”

“Well, I am curious to know what you think of Miss Bennet’s feelings toward Mr Bingley. I confess, I have watched them closely since coming to Meryton, and I am convinced that my friend admires her very much. However, I am unsure if her affection is equal to his.”

Elizabeth was only too glad to express an opinion on the matter. Mr Darcy’s openness deserved a return, and if he intended to bring her opinion back to his friend, Jane could only benefit. “It is only natural that you would doubt Jane’s affection for him. Reserve, coupled to a general good cheer, is the very essence of her character. I know that my sister may seem indifferent. But I assure you that is not the case. She is only shy, and rightly cautious in expressing the depth of her feelings. Society is not kind to a woman who says too much of what she feels. In confidence between us, I will go so far as to express my belief that she is well on her way to falling in love with him.”

“You are sure?” Mr Darcy asked. “I am glad I asked, Miss Elizabeth. Doubtless it will not come as a surprise to you that Miss Bingley has voiced concerns of the same nature as I have just done. However, I know that not everyone can be expected to be a fool in love. I admire your sister for showing such fortitude and grace whenever we have been in company.”

“I suppose we are all fools in love, in one way or another,” Elizabeth replied. It was no surprise that Miss Bingley had voiced concerns over the match. However, she suspected it was not for the reason Mr Darcy had indicated. She was sure that the family would want the only son and heir of the Bingley fortune to marry well above

his current station. But what was status when one was in love?

“Yes, I suppose. Well, I shall ask Bingley to invite your whole family up to Netherfield. It is time we all got to know each other better, I think.”

His offer surprised Elizabeth. “It is good of you to do. It will give a chance for Jane to enjoy the pleasure of Mr Bingley’s company. She will be very well pleased,” Elizabeth smiled.

“If Miss Bennet is pleased by the invitation, I am glad of it,” Mr Darcy said, “but I must confess this was far from my intention. Rather, I shall suggest the meeting so that I might enjoy the pleasure of your company.”

Elizabeth instantly felt the heat rush into her cheeks. She had never thought of Mr Darcy as a flirtatious man. But his steady gaze and wicked smile made her wonder if he was trying his hand at it. She was struck by how handsome he truly was.

In a sense, perhaps, it was a shame. Mr Darcy had everything — an attractive person, great superiority of mind, wealth, connections. She felt for him. It would be unfortunate if they were forced to marry, for society at large would surely see it as a pity that he had wasted himself on a simple country gentlewoman with nothing more than a tolerably pretty face and a little wit to recommend her.

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The invitation was duly sent and quickly accepted, though to several of those concerned, time passed rather slowly until the day the meeting was to take place. On that evening, Bingley could be found pacing in front of the hearth in the parlour. “They are late,” he said in dismay. “I do hope the rain will not have made the lane impassable.”

Darcy chuckled under his breath. “I daresay there is nothing that could not be overcome with such a short distance for the Bennet family to travel. Indeed, you could send the footmen out to construct a bridge if it were necessary.”

“Could I? I suppose I could!” Bingley’s face brightened.

“Though I do not imagine it will be required,” Darcy added.

“Charles, do calm yourself,” Miss Bingley said, rolling her eyes.

The only dampener on the evening would be Miss Bingley’s presence. She had returned from London with the Hursts the day prior, only to find that the whole house was in the throes of preparations. Miss Bingley had not been pleased to learn of the dinner to be given for the Bennets. By that time, however, the invitation had been sent and accepted long since, so there was little she could do but complain.

Darcy had been looking forward to the party since he last saw Elizabeth. Yet anticipation was not unmixed with trepidation. He could not help but wonder what sort of impropriety the younger Bennet sisters, and even Elizabeth’s parents, might subject them to that evening.

Darcy concealed a sigh behind his hand, not wishing the others to comment on it. Whatever would be, would be. He was determined to overlook anything short of real misconduct if it meant he could be near Elizabeth.

Their host was much more sanguine. Indeed, he seemed not to have the slightest of apprehensions. Of course, Bingley had barely noticed anything that had been amiss at the Netherfield Ball, besides the incident that had brought Darcy and Elizabeth together.

“I do not understand why you have to hold a party on the second night I am home. It was a very strenuous journey, and I could do with some rest,” Miss Bingley whined.

“By all means, sister, if you are tired, you need not stay. Go to bed and rest, and you will be better in the morning for it.” Bingley pinned his sister with a fierce stare. “I will convey your apologies to the Bennets and I am sure they will understand your absence.”

Miss Bingley’s mouth thinned into a knife-sharp line. “I did not say I was too tired to attend.”

“Delightful! Then I am sure you will be your usual charming self for our guests this evening, and assist me to make them welcome, as a hostess should,” Mr Bingley said.

Darcy had to bite his lower lip to keep from smiling. Bingley had often been steered by his elder sisters, but he could see in the last few weeks and months that he was growing tired of their needling. He was coming into his own as the man of the house, and Darcy was glad of it.

The butler entered through the open door and bowed just as Bingley was overruling his sister. “The Bennets have arrived, sir,” he said.

“Ah, very good. We shall come out and greet them,” Bingley said. “Darcy?”

Darcy did not have to be asked twice. He followed his friend out to the foyer and stood beside him as the Bennet family was welcomed into the house.

“Mr Bennet. Mrs Bennet. How good of you to grace us with your presence this evening,” Mr Bingley said. He shook Mr Bennet’s hand warmly, and Darcy was glad to see that the elder gentleman seemed to be much more at his ease than he had at the Netherfield Ball. Perhaps they were alike in that way. If Mr Bennet, too, detested large crowds, Darcy could hardly blame him. He could only hope this evening would prove less eventful.

“It is an honour to be invited. Thank you, sir,” Mrs Bennet said, her voice friendly and respectful, if rather high and grating. She gave a short laugh. “You are very kind.”

“Please, do come in,” Bingley said. After a veritable army of footmen stepped forward and took their cloaks, the guests filed into the parlour. Darcy waited for Elizabeth and offered her his arm.

“You look well this evening,” Darcy commented. And indeed she did. His betrothed was a picture of loveliness, dressed in a simple green gown with a cream silk ribbon tied about the high waist.

“You flatter me, Mr Darcy. Strange, I thought you were above such notions,” she teased. “Ah well, I will allow it.”

“Is not a fiancé entitled to a little flattery?” Darcy asked, matching her playful mood.

“I suppose you are,” she replied under her breath. She lifted her gaze to his and for a moment, he could not draw breath. She was overwhelmingly beautiful in her simple

elegance. He had been entranced by her loveliness on the night of the Netherfield Ball. But this evening, she seemed to shine with an unassuming inner light that made him want her all the more.

“Darcy?” Bingley said, clearing his throat as he stood at the door of the parlour. “Will you and your lovely fiancée join us?”

Darcy shook his head to clear it, gave a short laugh, and led Elizabeth into the parlour. He led her around to a seat on the settee, then stood beside her as the conversation got underway while they waited for dinner to be announced.

“Thank you for inviting us here tonight,” Miss Lydia said, her hands clasped demurely in front of her.

“Yes, thank you,” Miss Kitty chimed in. He looked at them in surprise. Both girls had spoken with simple courtesy and elegance, far from the silly, giggling manner that Darcy had come to expect. It would not have been too much to say that both the younger Miss Bennets sounded downright poised and controlled. Of course, they were still all smiles, but with a gentility that had been lacking in past encounters.

“It is my pleasure,” Mr Bingley said with a broad smile. “Good friends are always welcome at my home.”

“Has the shooting been good of late, Mr Bingley?” Mrs Bennet asked, and the conversation soon turned to that of hunting and all things to do with outdoor sport. Mr Bingley was all too eager to oblige her by answering questions about one of his favourite pastimes. All the while, Miss Bennet hung on his every word, seeming to lean in any time that he spoke. Darcy wondered why he had not seen it before. No doubt her more subtle tells had been overshadowed by her sister’s behaviour, and even that of her mother. Thankfully, the youngest Miss Bennets had found some measure of restraint.

When dinner was announced, Darcy took Elizabeth aside. “If you will forgive me for commenting on the matter, I should like to say that your youngest sisters are very well-behaved this evening, I must say. Their manners are strikingly improved.”

Elizabeth smiled mischievously. “Yes, I am afraid I had a bit to do with that.”

“Oh? How so?” he asked, intrigued.

“I told them they would not be allowed to visit me in London after we are married if they do anything to embarrass me.”

Darcy could not help but chuckle. “And that is all that was needed to bring them to heel?” he asked.

“I instructed them a little in what I considered to be good behaviour, and what would be better avoided, but no more than that. My sisters are most eager to experience all that London has to offer,” she whispered. “I hope you do not mind — ”

“Not in the slightest,” Darcy interrupted her. “Quite the contrary. I am very pleased to see such a beneficial change. You have arranged matters marvellously, and to the benefit of your sisters as well as others.” Darcy hardly knew how to compliment Elizabeth’s cleverness and skill in handling her sisters. She had effected a remarkable change. While some might call it underhanded, the results spoke for themselves. Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia would be the better for it if they could rein in their overexuberance, even to a small degree.

Darcy was seated between Miss Mary and Miss Kitty at the dinner table. He could not help but cast longing glances at his fiancée across the table, but he knew it would do him well to get to know the rest of his soon-to-be relations better.

“You are a great proponent of the pianoforte, I think, Miss Mary?” Darcy asked. “I

have heard you play several times—first at the Netherfield Ball and on various occasions when I have come to call at Longbourn.”

Miss Mary’s face brightened immediately. “I do love to play, Mr Darcy. I would not say I am a great scholar of the art, but I am trying.”

“Music is a worthy endeavour. My sister Georgiana is also a great lover of music. Tell me, would you be willing to recommend some pieces that I might purchase for her when I am next in London? Being cloistered away at Pemberley is a frustration to her at times, for she practices and perfects a piece almost as soon as I bring it home. And I confess, I am no musician. I would be very grateful if you could steer me toward some recommendations that a young lady would enjoy.”

Miss Mary’s eyes shone. “I would be honoured to give some suggestions, Mr Darcy.” Her smile was more brilliant than he had ever seen it, and for the first time, he could see some resemblance between her and Elizabeth. “Tell me, does your sister ever play two-handed pieces?”

“I am sorry to say she has likely never had the opportunity. But when she arrives for the wedding, I am sure she would be most eager to try a two-handed piece with you, if you will ask her. My sister is sometimes rather retiring among new acquaintances, but when it comes to music, she would be most happy to oblige.”

Miss Mary turned to her father, telling him the good news. When Darcy looked across the table, he saw Elizabeth watching him. She mouthed a silent “thank you” and gave him a stunning smile. His heart lurched, and Darcy wondered if he really could be falling in love with his fiancée.

Miss Mary returned her attention to him a moment later, and she spoke so animatedly throughout the rest of the dinner, asking questions of him and Georgiana, of the estate and their upbringing, that she seemed almost a different person. Without the sour

expression and ill-timed remarks that had previously characterised her society, Miss Mary was a very pleasant dining companion. Perhaps all she had needed to bloom was to be paid a bit more attention.

When dinner came to an end, Miss Bingley called for the ladies to join her in the parlour. Darcy and Bingley exchanged a quick glance. Wordlessly, the two friends agreed to take their after-dinner drinks rather quickly and rejoin the ladies as quickly as possible — before Miss Bingley could do too much damage.

Yet the surprises of the evening were not done. As the ladies were walking out, Miss Mary joined Miss Bingley at the door. “Would you grace us with a song or two on the pianoforte, Miss Bingley? I hear that you study with an Italian master in London.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow. Here was an improvement indeed. Instead of Miss Mary going straight to the instrument to showcase her skills, she deferred to another. And while Darcy had no particular interest in hearing Miss Bingley on the pianoforte, perhaps Elizabeth might follow her. He hoped it would be so. While Elizabeth might not be a true proficient, she had a natural musicality and expressiveness he had heard equalled only in Georgiana. The short time before they might join the ladies would surely feel long.

Nor was there much satisfaction to be had in their companions, for Mr Hurst had begun an interminable monologue on the superiority of a ragout over a plain dish. Mr Bennet was listening to him and encouraging him with a crooked smile that amply showed his enjoyment in the absurdity, but Darcy had no wish to join the conversation. Thankfully, Mr Hurst’s loud lecture would at least give him the chance to speak without being overheard by the others. He turned instead to Bingley. “The evening is going well, don’t you agree?”

Bingley gave him a broad grin. “I do indeed. And do you not notice a change in the younger miss Bennets? Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty are much improved from the last

time they graced this house with their presence.” Bingley took a sip of his port and set it aside.

“I agree,” Darcy said with a nod. He ought to have known that Bingley would have noticed the improvement. His friend chose not to comment on other’s flaws, but he was not oblivious. “And Miss Mary’s disposition seems much improved as well.”

“Indeed. She talked pleasantly through the whole of the meal, no mention of Mr Fordyce’s sermons at all.” Bingley gave a short laugh. “It is night and day to how she was before. I wonder what could be the cause of such a happy shift?”

Darcy preferred not to speak of the threat Elizabeth had enacted. He could only hope that once he and Elizabeth were married, Mr Bennet would guide the younger girls with a firm hand. As to Mary...

“She seemed happy to be spoken to and acknowledged,” Darcy remarked. Could it really have been so easy? “I suppose Miss Mary Bennet is sometimes a little overlooked. It cannot be easy to be the middle child of five daughters.”

“There is something to what you say,” Bingley acknowledged, raising his glass.

“Each of the other girls possesses distinguishing qualities. Miss Bennet is known as the beauty of the county. Miss Elizabeth has a quick wit and charming sense of humour. Miss Lydia is always gay and lively, as is Miss Kitty. But what does Miss Mary have? She seems to be quite neglected, due to her more serious and thoughtful personality.”

Bingley nodded, looking thoughtful. “Poor girl. It cannot be easy, having so large a family. Not to mention such beautiful older sisters.”

At that thought, both gentlemen glanced up at the clock on the mantle to see how

many minutes had transpired. Only three.

They would have to wait at least ten to satisfy social etiquette. Darcy cleared his throat and prepared to sacrifice himself on the alter of social duty. “There is something to what you say, Mr Hurst, but do you not find that ragout can begin to feel rather heavy, if it is served too often?”

Mr Hurst snorted in dismissal. “By no means, sir, by no means. You do not do justice to your fine French cooks at Pemberley when you say so. And if made with truffles, they are all the better. I once had a ragout at my club...” Mr Hurst went on for some time about the merits of a sufficiently rich ragout, but Darcy could no longer bring himself to listen. Judging by the gleam of amusement in Mr Bennet’s eyes, at least someone was enjoying the lecture.

As the minute hand ticked over, Bingley tossed back the last of his drink, while Darcy set his down half-full. They went out to rejoin the ladies and saw that Miss Bingley was at the pianoforte. Miss Mary was dutifully listening and watching nearby, no doubt following her hands as they danced over the keys. For all Miss Bingley’s faults, no one could claim lack of skill as a performer was one of them.

As soon as Darcy came through, Elizabeth hurried to meet him. She placed a hand on his arm, ever so lightly. The gesture sent a thrill through his entire body as she leaned close and spoke in an undertone too low to be overheard. “I wanted to thank you for being so attentive to my sister during dinner.”

He smiled and tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. “I was very glad of the chance to get to know her better. To be honest, I was surprised by how pleasant I found our conversation.”

Elizabeth beamed at him, then looked over her shoulder to where her sister sat. “It is quite remarkable. It makes me think that she only needed to be acknowledged, to

have her dreams and aspirations listened to.” She turned again to him, her eyes filled with gratitude. And perhaps something more... “I think you, Mr Darcy.”

“You are most welcome,” Darcy replied. He would traverse the Earth for her if only he could see that look in her eyes always.

When Darcy recalled Elizabeth was not the only person in the room, he looked up and saw that they were being watched by Elizabeth’s parents, as well as Miss Lydia. He reluctantly led her over to the hearth, and they settled on the settee beside each other to engage in the conversation.

“Well, Mr Darcy. Have you and Lizzy set a day for the grand affair?” Mrs Bennet asked when they had been seated.

Darcy looked at Elizabeth, but instead of seeing hesitation in her eyes, he saw only uncertainty. “Well —”

“It would not do to put it off too long, you know. Already it has been a few weeks since you became engaged,” Mrs Bennet said sweetly. “I have never believed in long engagements. Did you know Lizzy has picked out the material for her gown? It is already under construction.”

This came as a surprise to him. He looked over at his betrothed to see if it were true. Elizabeth’s cheeks were flushed, and she had turned away in embarrassment.

It was true, then. “I had not been informed, no. But I am pleased to hear of it.”

“Of course, it is not as fine as anything that could have been procured in London,” Mrs Bennet went on. “But if the wedding is to happen soon, I did not think it wise to travel to Town for the material.”

Darcy cleared his throat. "I believe that anything Miss Elizabeth wears will be most becoming." It would be more accurate to say he was almost indifferent to what she would wear on their wedding day. As long as Elizabeth was pleased, it would be well enough. Beautiful and elegant as she was, it was not her appearance that took his breath away. It was her spirited nature, her quick wit and refined mind that had drawn him over their acquaintance. And it was her fortitude in the current crisis, the integrity and grace with which she carried herself, that had endeared her to him all the more.

Still, he could not claim to be entirely immune to her loveliness. There were those very fine dark eyes, for example. She could not help but relay what she was feeling through every look. Elizabeth glanced up at him then, meeting his gaze with an unwavering resolve. The corners of her mouth turned up into a small smile at the compliment he had paid her. "I hope you will be pleased," she replied, lowering her voice as the others moved on to another subject, seeming to forget all about him and Elizabeth.

And that was just as well for Darcy, for he felt that he and Elizabeth were the only two people on earth for a moment. It was difficult to resist the urge to lean forward and touch his lips to hers, shocking as it would have been. He found he could not take his eyes from studying her smile.

"A winter wedding has always been my aim," Bingley said of a sudden. "To be married while the frost is on the trees, blanketing everything in the purest white — it is the perfect time." He gave a meaningful glance in Jane Bennet's direction.

"I quite agree," Mrs Bennet said. "What say you Mr Darcy? The frost will last for at least a few more weeks."

Darcy cleared his throat. "I would not wish to share a date before I have discussed it with Elizabeth. I am sure you understand, Mrs Bennet."

“But of course,” Mrs Bennet replied. She looked at her daughter and raised an eyebrow, no doubt alluding to the importance of haste in choosing the day. “As you have a special license, there is no need to worry about having the banns read. But I am sure you will not keep us in suspense for too long, hmm?” No doubt she thought Darcy might change his mind. But Darcy had no intention of doing any such thing. He would only release Elizabeth from the engagement if she asked it of him.

And even then, I would try to dissuade her. Darcy shook his head at his own foolishness and resolved to stop wool-gathering. With an effort, he turned the conversation to works of literature. When Elizabeth and Miss Mary seconded his attempt, the change of topic was soon established, and the conversation continued pleasantly.

When it was time for the Bennets to depart, he walked Elizabeth out to the carriage, handing her in instead of allowing the coachman to assist her. “It was a wonderful evening, Miss Elizabeth.”

“It was indeed. Thank you for arranging it, Mr Darcy,” she smiled.

He let go of her hand reluctantly, standing back to watch the rest of them climb into the crowded carriage and drive away. He flexed his hand, relishing the feel of the tingles running up and down his arm. That simple touch of their hands made him long for so much more.

He could only wonder if she was still averse to the idea of becoming his wife. When the incident had first occurred, there could have been no mistaking her disappointment — even horror — at becoming Mrs Darcy. But tonight — tonight, Elizabeth had seemed quite different. Was he a fool to hope that she might be softening to the idea? Toward him? No matter how they had begun this adventure, they had come to understand each other very well. If his feelings had transformed from fascination to love, might not hers have changed from dislike to esteem?

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“Well, you seem to be in a happy daze, Lizzy. What has put you in such a frame of mind?” Jane asked as she stood up from the breakfast table and came around the other side to join her. The rest of the family had gone their separate ways to prepare for the various tasks and appointments they had for the day. Elizabeth’s cheeks filled with heat at being found out. Of course, Jane knew her better than anyone else in the world. She should have known her sister would confront her about her happy mood sooner or later. Indeed, even a loud bout of squabbling between Lydia and Kitty at breakfast had not been able to remove the smile from her face.

Yet Elizabeth was loath to explain her happiness, even to herself. “Whatever do you mean?” Elizabeth asked, linking arms with her sister as they headed out of the dining room.

“You know very well. Do you realise you have not stopped smiling since you came into breakfast? I cannot help but wonder what could account for such behaviour.” Jane gave her a sly smile, or at least, as sly as one so good could offer. “What is it?”

Elizabeth was unsure how to answer. She tried to keep a straight face. “Have I been smiling the whole time? I did not think so.” She could not conceal her joy, however. She laughed, and Jane soon joined her as they started up the stairs toward their room.

“Then stop smiling,” Jane challenged her.

Elizabeth halted on the stairs, facing her sister. She tried, but she could not manage it. “I cannot!” she said gleefully. “I do not know what has come over me. Perhaps it is the sunshine.”

Jane raised a brow and glanced out the small window cut into the stairwell. "It is as grey as charcoal out there."

"Well, the sun was shining earlier," Elizabeth argued.

Jane was silent for a moment while they climbed the stairs. Once they were in their room and the door was closed, she pinned Elizabeth with a mock-serious stare. "Come now, tell me everything. Ever since the little party at Netherfield, you have been happier than usual." She settled down on the edge of the bed to listen while Elizabeth paced in front of her.

She raised her hands and gave another quick laugh. "I do not know. You are right in that there is nothing special to account for it. I am simply happy." She turned and retrieved a cloak. The butterflies swirling in her stomach gave her little desire to sit about the house doing needlework all day. "Let us go into Meryton."

"Meryton? But it will rain!" Jane protested.

Elizabeth went to the window seat and leaned on the well-used cushion to look up at the sky. "It will not last long, even if it does rain. Come along, we could both use some fresh air and a brisk walk."

Jane sighed. "Very well," she replied. "I believe Mama had a message for the butcher, in any case. I shall deliver it while we are there." She retrieved her cloak and bonnet, and they were soon out the door, walking toward town.

They walked in companionable silence for most of the way, giving Elizabeth time to think about why she was in such good spirits. She supposed that the dinner party had gone so much more smoothly than she had expected. She had feared her family might subject them to another bout of impropriety, and so she had given Lydia and Kitty their warning. The results had been beyond her expectations. Kitty and Lydia were

behaving themselves so much better that even her father had commented on it. The day after the party, Elizabeth had hinted to her father that a little guidance was needed to bring the girls to heel. She did not want to see their spirits broken, only guided toward a more positive outcome. And as their behaviour at Netherfield showed their potential for improvement, so the squabble this morning showed the need of it.

Better still, Mr Darcy had been so attentive to Mary and the rest of her family. There was so much more to him than she would have thought even a month ago. She smiled to herself and linked arms with Jane as they walked the last hundred yards into town. “I am glad that Mr Darcy arranged for the dinner party. I suppose I am so happy because it went so well. Do you not think it went well?”

“I do. It was lovely to spend some time with the Bingleys and Mr Darcy, away from the crowds. I hope we shall have the occasion to meet again.” Jane sighed contentedly and looked up at the sky. The wind had picked up, but instead of bringing the rain, had pushed the gloomy clouds away towards the horizon.

“You do like Mr Bingley a good deal, do you not?” Elizabeth asked.

Jane started, then looked away as if she had been caught — like a child who had snuck into the larder. Her mouth twisted this way and that as she tried to work out what to say. “I think he is an upstanding gentleman, yes. He is well-mannered and sensible —”

“Yes, we know all of that. But do you like him?”

Jane stopped in the middle of the lane, growing more confused by the moment. “I esteem him highly. That is to say, I am appreciative of his friendship.”

“Esteem! Appreciative!” Elizabeth took her hand and tucked it into the crook of her arm. “There is nothing sinful about admitting feelings for the man. Everyone else can

clearly see that he is in love with you. And I think, if you did some honest soul-searching, you would find that your feelings are growing as well.”

Jane shook her head, but not in argument. “You are right, of course. I somehow feel that if I allow myself to hope, it will be crushed. Mr Bingley is too far above me.”

“That is not true. Indeed, while it would be an excellent match with regard to fortune, one might say that your position in society is higher. He is the son of a merchant, after all, while you are a gentlewoman. More importantly, you are a good woman, Jane. He would be fortunate indeed to have you as his wife.” Elizabeth squeezed her hand.

Jane shook her head. “I thank you, but if he cares for me, why has he given no indication of it? It is most likely that he feels only friendship for me, nothing more.”

“That is not true, Jane. You do not give yourself anywhere near enough credit.” Elizabeth was unsure if she should disclose the conversation she had had with Mr Darcy. “I know you do not wish to seem prideful or conceited. No one who really knows you would ever accuse you of such things. But perhaps showing a bit more of how you feel will give him the encouragement he needs to speak?” she suggested.

Jane only shook her head, and out of compassion for her embarrassment, Elizabeth dropped the subject. They entered town and went to the market street, where Jane stepped in to the butcher shop to deliver their mother’s message. Elizabeth made her way slowly towards the milliner’s shop, happy to stop and speak with friends and acquaintances as she passed.

But Elizabeth’s contentment could not last. She was still half a street’s length away from the milliners when she was set upon by someone she had neither expected nor wanted to see.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet, how fortuitous that we have bumped into one another,” Mr Wickham said with a wide grin. Far from making him look charming, it reminded Elizabeth of a predator on the prowl.

“Mr Wickham,” Elizabeth said coldly, with the slightest nod she could give.

She continued walking, but Mr Wickham followed, falling into step with her. Though he might have intended the gesture as friendly, she was far from feeling anything akin to warmth for the man, especially after learning what he had tried to do to Georgiana Darcy.

“It seems like an eternity since we last met. I am sorry if I caused you any trouble with Mr Darcy the other day outside your gate. He is a very disagreeable man.” Mr Wickham clasped his hands behind his back and shook his head solemnly, though his features did not entirely seem to match his words. Quite the contrary. If Elizabeth were any judge, Mr Wickham seemed to welcome the chance to paint Mr Darcy in so dark a light.

Mr Wickham did not seem to notice her scepticism. He offered her a charming smile before going on. “I was sad that we did not see you at the assembly a few nights ago. I had hoped to trouble you for a dance.”

Insufferable man. Elizabeth gritted her teeth from barking every foul thing she thought of him right there in the middle of the bustling street. She took a deep breath and turned away. “We were invited to Netherfield for a small family party on the night of the assembly,” Elizabeth explained. She bowed and started to walk away. “Good day, Mr Wickham.”

Mr Wickham clicked his tongue in disapproval and followed right on her heels. “It is a pity — no, a shame — that you were forced to accept an engagement to Mr Darcy. I fear he might lock you up at Pemberley, as he has done with his poor sister. Really,

the man is intolerable.” He fell into step beside her. “But perhaps there is a way to rescue you from such a fate.”

“I do not see how that is possible, sir,” Elizabeth replied coolly. Did she even want to be rescued? Though Elizabeth would never choose to discuss her doubts with Mr Wickham, she was growing increasingly unsure.

“It is a pity. I imagine you looked utterly ravishing the night of the Netherfield Ball. Perhaps Mr Darcy could not help himself. As I am sure no self-respecting, warm-blooded gentleman could.” His eyes held a wicked glow, as if he were coming in for the kill.

Elizabeth drew in a quick breath. Surely he would do nothing untoward in so public a place. And yet...something about Mr Wickham’s persistence left her feeling distinctly uneasy. She wished she had not left Jane’s side. It would not do to make a rash reply. Thankfully, she was nearly at the milliner’s shop. Elizabeth hurried the last few steps, though Mr Wickham followed her inside. She turned her back on him and shot an annoyed glance at Mrs Greene, the shopkeeper. Thankfully, Mrs Greene was a matron of great good sense, and far from mealy-mouthed. She gave Elizabeth a concerned look and stepped closer in case Elizabeth might need assistance in extricating herself from her unwanted follower.

Unfortunately, it seemed all too likely that such help might be required. Mr Wickham simply would not seem to take the hint that Elizabeth did not wish to speak to him. He leaned closer, watching over her shoulder as she picked up a bonnet without seeing it.

Mr Wickham cleared his throat and attempted another charming smile. “We seem to keep missing each other at the dances, I am afraid. It is a pity you had to dance the first set with Mr Collins at the Netherfield ball. What has happened to him? I have not seen him around the village since.” She hated the sensation that his eyes were

roving over her person, studying each curve. She straightened and turned toward him.

“My cousin is gone. He left some weeks ago,” Elizabeth said briefly. Though the response had been reflexive, the least she could offer an acquaintance, her breath caught in her throat as the full meaning of Mr Wickham’s remark struck her.

How could Mr Wickham have known she had danced the first set with Mr Collins?

Unless, of course, he had been there?

She deftly shook her head and turned away once more, pretending to busy herself looking at the array of caps and bonnets on the shelf before her. Surely no one had spoken of her dance with Mr Collins, for everyone had been too enthralled with the compromise that had taken place in the library with Mr Darcy. They would not have thought to speak of such an uninteresting detail as who she had danced with before the infamous incident.

She glanced at Mr Wickham, trying to remain composed. “Mr Collins has returned to Kent, Mr Wickham. I am afraid he is not likely to return,” Elizabeth said. It was essential to say something, though she hardly knew what. She must do her best to conceal any surprise.

He gave her a wolfish smile. “Perhaps that is for the best, Miss Bennet. I should not wish for him to importune you by demanding any more dances from so fair a lady.” Odd indeed, that he would pursue the subject. Elizabeth glanced at Mr Wickham’s face, attempting to conceal any special interest. Was there not something duplicitous in his expression? The only way he could have known she had danced with Mr Collins was if he had been in attendance. But why would he have concealed himself throughout the evening? He had said he would be there when she had asked him. He had said that if Mr Darcy wished to avoid his company, it was he who would have to go. However, he had shown his true cowardly colours when he had not shown up at

the ball that night. Or so Elizabeth had thought.

Elizabeth's agitation was too great to conceal entirely. Mrs Greene must have perceived some of it, for she stepped forward. "Can I offer you any assistance, Miss Bennet?" she asked. The older woman raised her brows, making it clear that she was offering more than to bring another bonnet or show her a wider choice of ribbons. Elizabeth could only guess that she was asking if she needed to call the constable.

Elizabeth shook her head slightly. "No, I thank you, Mrs Greene. I shall look at this lovely bonnet a little longer." And question Mr Wickham a little longer — but that, she could not say to the kindly Mrs Greene. Elizabeth quickly turned back to Mr Wickham. "Surely you agree, Mr Wickham, that it would have been rude to refuse Mr Collins? He is, after all, a close relation and had been a visitor in our house."

Mr Wickham shrugged, then showed his most brilliant smile. "I suppose you are correct. You are too magnanimous, Miss Elizabeth Bennet." He leaned in closer and spoke in an intimate undertone. "If I had been there, I do not think I would have been able to share you with anyone."

Elizabeth could not help herself. She flinched away, dropping the bonnet in her hands. Mrs Greene swooped in and picked it up, giving her a look that mingled reproach and concern.

"Forgive me," Elizabeth said, her voice a little uneven. "That was terribly careless of me, Mrs Greene. I should not wish to treat so pretty a bonnet with disrespect."

"Not to worry, Miss Elizabeth. It has not come to any harm," Mrs Greene said readily.

"I thank you, that is very kind," Elizabeth replied. Now that she took a moment to notice her surroundings, she saw several pairs of eyes watching her. And several

more hands covering people's mouths as they whispered. No doubt the rumours were flying. What was Miss Elizabeth Bennet doing talking so intimately to a man who was not her fiancé?

Panic began to settle in. She had to extricate herself from the situation before her reputation suffered even more, before Mr Darcy found out. Surely he would not believe her innocent in Mr Wickham's games a second time. "If you will excuse me, Mr Wickham, I have some shopping to do."

"Allow me to accompany you. I have missed our walks, and I should very much like to renew our acquaintance." Mr Wickham gave her a little bow. "I should be honoured to be at your service, in fact. Honoured, and quite delighted."

Elizabeth drew in a deep, even breath. "I thank you, Mr Wickham, but I must decline," she said firmly. "Good day, sir." She curtsied, making it very clear that their conversation was at an end.

Even Mr Wickham could not ignore so direct a dismissal. "Ah, yes, I see." He bowed slightly and tried to take her hand. Elizabeth quickly clasped it behind her back. He straightened, giving his most charming smile. "Good day, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again soon."

Elizabeth watched him leave, then turned and exchanged a knowing glance with Mrs Greene.

The older woman shook her head. "He is very charming, but I cannot like such persistence," the older woman said.

"Nor I," Elizabeth said. "Thank you for being so attentive." She knew the woman would know what she meant. Gathering up the ribbons she had meant to purchase, Elizabeth paid Mrs Greene and swiftly left the shop, her heart pounding. She must

find Jane as quickly as possible and get home. It frustrated her to no end to realise that she was no longer safe to walk in her beloved village alone, without the threat of being harassed by Mr Wickham. The sooner the militia moved on, the better for them all.

Yet Mr Wickham's odious presence had not flustered her half so much as his words. She replayed the conversation over and over again, wondering if she could have misinterpreted what his words meant. But what other meaning could she take from them? It was not impossible that someone might have spoken of her first dance with Mr Collins, and yet Elizabeth found it distinctly unlikely. Yet if he had not been told of it by someone present, Mr Wickham had lied about being at the ball.

And not only lied, but deliberately concealed his presence.

She quickened her step, eager to find Jane and return home as quickly as possible. The mud from the rain that morning had made the street nearly impossible to traverse without slipping. She looked down for a moment, delicately lifting her skirt's hem to keep it from the mud.

In her haste, she nearly ran unseeing into a broad, masculine chest, only just stopping in time.

Elizabeth gasped in astonishment. "Forgive me, sir. I did not mean — " She stumbled back in her haste, half blinded by embarrassment.

The muddy street was almost her undoing. As Elizabeth stepped back, her foot nearly slid out from under her. The man put a hand on her elbow to steady her and keep her from falling in the nick of time. "Miss Elizabeth? Are you well?" he asked.

She knew that voice. Her head snapped up, and she was face to face with none other than Mr Darcy! Elizabeth drew in a quick breath. Had he seen her with Mr Wickham

again?

But there was no sign of anger on his features. “Oh, Mr Darcy!” she exclaimed. “I am so glad you are here.”

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Darcy frowned upon seeing Elizabeth's distraught expression. Normally so cheerful and self-possessed, she seemed almost at the point of fainting. He offered her his arm, and they walked some paces away from the nearest passer-by to gain a little privacy. When Darcy felt confident that they had escaped any listening ears, he could wait no longer to express his concern. "Are you well, Miss Elizabeth? Do you need to sit down?"

"No, thank you. I am perfectly well." Elizabeth said. Darcy looked at her in concern. Was there not the slightest tremble in her voice? "I have just had a most unpleasant encounter with Mr Wickham."

For a moment, Darcy was afraid his anger was too great to control. It took an effort to speak gently. "He dared to accost you in the public street?" he asked. Though any number of threats against Wickham crowded his tongue, Darcy kept them back. He did not wish to frighten her. "Where is he?"

Elizabeth placed a gentle hand on his arm. "He did not touch me. It was what he revealed as he spoke to me that has affected me so." She looked around the bustling street, concern etching her face. "Will you take me home?" she asked.

A strong protectiveness overwhelmed him, coupled to pride that she would trust him enough to ask it of him. He tucked her hand safely in the crook of his arm, and they set off. At the edge of town, Elizabeth suddenly stopped short. "How foolish of me! I cannot leave. Not yet. I came to town with Jane! I had almost forgotten, with everything that happened with Mr Wickham," she said despairingly.

"Let us find her," Darcy said. "Miss Bennet can walk home with us if she likes. And

if she has other errands to run, we will send a carriage for her. Mine, if your father's is not available."

Miss Elizabeth nodded. Her face had turned deathly pale, and he worried all the more about what Mr Wickham had wrought. But he could not press her while there were so many people about.

They soon found Miss Bennet at the apothecary, buying supplies for the stillroom. She immediately left her purchases and came outside when Darcy told her of the situation. Outside the shop door, Miss Bennet spoke with Elizabeth in hushed tones for a moment before it was decided that she would accompany them home. Once out of the village and on the country lane, Miss Bennet trailed several paces behind them. Though she explained herself by saying she wished to walk more slowly, it was evident she intended to give them the chance to speak privately. Darcy would have liked to thank her for it, though he said nothing. Acknowledging the courtesy would only have embarrassed them all.

"Are you able to share what happened, Miss Elizabeth?" Darcy prompted gently. He did not want to cause her any more upset than she had already endured. However, he also knew Wickham and how slippery he could be. If he had done anything to harm Elizabeth, Wickham would soon find himself in a world of trouble.

"I am," Elizabeth replied. She still clung to his arm, and he was grateful once again that her trust in him had grown since they had first become betrothed. "As I am sure you ascertained, I was walking in the town. I had no real intention of purchasing anything, but I thought I would go to the milliner's shop. Derbyshire is so much colder than Hertfordshire, I shall need a warmer bonnet if — well. In any case, I was on my way there when Mr Wickham came up beside me and started a conversation. Believe me, I did not encourage him."

"I can well believe that, Miss Elizabeth."

“I certainly hope so. I do not want you to think that I want anything to do with the man, not after what you told me he did to poor Miss Darcy!” She was growing angry now, and the shaking of her hands dwindled as it gave her strength. “Though I tried to extricate myself from him, my coldness did not seem to repulse him. I went into the milliner’s shop as I had intended, but he followed me there.” She shook her head. “I am ashamed and disgusted to say that I believe he tried to flirt with me. And then he said something very odd.”

“And what was that?” Darcy asked. With an effort, he kept his voice calm and even. Though if Mr Wickham had been before him at that moment, even the knowledge that violence was brutish and ungentlemanly could not have kept him from striking the man.

“He said he was sorry that I had been forced to dance the first dance with Mr Collins the night of the Netherfield ball. I went over it again and again in my mind. There is little chance that anyone would have mentioned that detail. Gossip has been entirely consumed with the compromise between you and I. In comparison to such a thing, who would mention or even remember that I had opened the night dancing with my cousin? The only way he would have known such a thing is if he himself were in attendance at the ball.”

Darcy took several moments to let this news sink in. It must have seemed like ages to Elizabeth, but she kept her peace. “I see. It presents a mystery, does it not?” he asked. He did not recall ever seeing Mr Wickham that night. Indeed, it had been a relief not to see him, since a blanket invitation had been sent to the whole of the militia stationed near Meryton. It was certainly possible that he could have snuck into the party and remained out of sight. Darcy could very well have missed him, especially if he had slipped into the ball after he and the Bingleys had joined their guests in the ballroom. But why?

“It is possible that he was there, after all. But it begs the question, why would he hide

away when he would have been such a sought-after partner for the ladies?" Darcy mused. "He has ingratiated himself with several of Meryton's leading families, I believe."

"That is true. However, that is not what came to mind first, Mr Darcy. I wonder: could it have been Mr Wickham who laid the trap for us in the library? What other reason would there be for him to conceal that he had come to the Netherfield ball?" She shook her head again as if she, too, were trying to make sense of it all. "I know it sounds far-fetched, but I can think of no other explanation for Mr Wickham's actions."

Darcy nodded, murmuring in agreement as he thought on it more. "I can see where you would think that. It is easy to believe he would try to plan something so underhanded and cruel. However, I cannot seem to think of a motive." Darcy stopped and took Elizabeth's hands in his. Behind them, Miss Bennet stopped walking to maintain the distance between them, allowing them what little privacy they might have. "I cannot see why he would want you to become engaged to me. From what I have seen, he seemed quite taken with you. Surely it would be more likely that he would have wished to marry you himself."

"That, I can readily explain. I have no dowry worth speaking of, Mr Darcy, which I am sure my father has already told you. Surely Mr Wickham could not afford to marry a woman with a mere thousand pounds. And yet it is stranger still that he might wish to make you marry me. Why? He certainly would not do it to ensure our happiness, and there seems to be no financial gain in the equation for him." Elizabeth looked away, turned, and glanced in Miss Bennet's direction. She gave her sister a smile and a nod, and Darcy could feel some of the tension leech out of Elizabeth as she returned her sister's smile. He again tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and they continued down the lane. "All I know is that he seems bent on convincing me to break off our engagement. Perhaps he wants to use that to his advantage somehow?"

Darcy hummed thoughtfully under his breath. "I cannot see how it would help Mr Wickham if you were to break off the engagement."

"Mr Wickham may be the only one who knows that. Perhaps we should go to my father and see if there might be a way that we can catch Mr Wickham out. We will need proof if we are to clear our names, and the man in question is the only one who might be able to supply us with that." Elizabeth walked on. The spring had returned to her step, and he was glad of it.

Darcy heartily agreed. "Yes, we will speak with him as soon as we get to Longbourn. I am sure we can come up with a plan to find out the truth once and for all."

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Upon being told of her encounter with Mr Wickham, Mr Bennet remained silent for a long moment. Elizabeth held her breath, torn between anticipation and fear that her father might not think Mr Wickham's comments as significant as she did.

At last, Mr Bennet spoke. "I cannot but agree, Lizzy. It is odd indeed that Mr Wickham would have known of such a detail, had he not been there himself. And you, Mr Darcy? You know the man better than any of us. What think you, sir?"

Mr Darcy shook his head. "I hardly know what to say, Mr Bennet. Miss Elizabeth's view of the comment is likely correct. I cannot think that anyone would comment on her dancing with Mr Collins to Wickham — not when they might comment on our mishap instead. And yet I cannot seem to fix on a motive for Wickham. He hates me, that much is true. But even in his hatred, I have never known him to do anything that would not benefit himself. How could he benefit from my marrying Miss Elizabeth?"

"True, true," Mr Bennet murmured, stroking his chin. "Indeed, my family stands to gain most from the marriage. You are a very generous man, Mr Darcy, not to look upon us with suspicion." With that, he sent Mr Darcy a wickedly sharp glance that made Elizabeth greatly fear her father had not been as ignorant of their suspicions as she had hoped.

Mr Darcy coughed in embarrassment. "Sir, I will not attempt to deceive you. I did once entertain such thoughts, but I am confident now that the responsibility lies elsewhere."

Her father raised an eyebrow. "Oh, are you, Mr Darcy?" he said, leaning forward. "If I may be so bold, I beg you to elucidate on how we were eliminated from your

suspicious. A man must know his prospective son-in-law, after all.”

“Father, you ask too much of Mr Darcy —” Elizabeth began, flushing with embarrassment, when Mr Darcy laid a hand on hers.

“No, I shall answer,” he murmured. “Miss Elizabeth, I cannot begrudge your father for wishing to test me a little.” Turning to Mr Bennet, Mr Darcy spoke evenly and without hesitation. “I had no suspicion of yourself, sir. The plot, if a plot there was, held too much risk for Miss Elizabeth. After all, you could not have been certain that I would offer for her. Estimable as she is, you could not have forced me to marry her if I declined. Mrs Bennet, however — forgive me. I do not wish to speak offensively of your wife. But if you will allow me to remark on it, Mrs Bennet has not made a secret of her desperate wish for her daughters to marry as soon as possible, and I have observed that her temper is not always even, nor her understanding advanced. At one time, I felt it possible that she might have taken even so great a risk to obtain an advantageous marriage for her daughter.”

“I will forgive you for your accurate description of my wife, Mr Darcy, if you will tell me why you ceased to suspect her.”

Mr Darcy looked to Elizabeth. When she gave him a small nod of permission, he explained. “I went to London to ensure that Mrs Bennet would be entirely confident that the plan had succeeded, if a plan there was. Your daughter then questioned her. Thankfully, Miss Elizabeth became entirely confident of your wife’s innocence.”

“You relieve my mind greatly,” Mr Bennet said in sarcastic accents that did not entirely disguise his very real relief. “But one problem remains, sir.”

“Yes, Mr Bennet?” Mr Darcy inquired.

“That is Elizabeth herself. How did you determine my daughter was not complicit in

her own compromise?”

Elizabeth looked at her father, appalled that he would even speak such a suspicion, but Mr Darcy was already answering.

“I never considered it, sir. Miss Elizabeth would not do such a thing. From the beginning of our acquaintance, I have been as convinced of her respect for propriety and honour as of her bright spirit and lively wit. She is the very soul of honesty.”

In that moment, Elizabeth could not have spoken if her life had depended on it. She had never heard so clear a declaration of great esteem, of appreciation, of the true friendship between two minds and hearts.

In that moment, she knew she loved Mr Darcy, body and soul.

But she could hardly speak of such things before her father, who was already answering with his own approbation. “Very good, sir. I am glad to hear that you truly appreciate my daughter, Mr Darcy, for we have not yet arranged for you to be free of her. Let us consider a different case. We have established that Mr Wickham does not seem to benefit from your marrying my Lizzy. What, then, if you did not marry her? What might have happened then?”

“I would have been ruined, of course,” Elizabeth began. “If Mr Wickham wanted revenge against me, or against our family, it might have done very well, for all my sisters would have shared in the disgrace. Our lives would have been pitiable indeed.”

Mr Darcy shook his head. “That cannot be it. If Wickham would not take revenge against me unless it benefited him, then surely not against you.”

“Yes, I agree,” Elizabeth said. “I do not think he bears me any ill-will. I might rather describe it as an unwanted degree of warmth, and one quite free from real caring or

respect.”

Suddenly, Mr Darcy was looking at her intently. “Perhaps that is it.”

“You will have to elaborate, Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet said dryly.

“Wickham desires Miss Elizabeth — please forgive the coarseness of the sentiment, I feel it is inherent to an accurate description — though without the real care and consideration that would allow us to refer to it as friendship, let alone love. What, then, if I had seemed to compromise Miss Elizabeth, and had not offered for her? I would have suffered condemnation from all the most worthy of my connections. While it would have been nothing to what Miss Elizabeth and your family would have suffered, I assure you I would have found it most painful. There is a dreadful similarity — excuse me.”

Mr Darcy fell silent, and Elizabeth knew he must be thinking of his sister, and what Mr Wickham had attempted to do to her. As her father was looking at Mr Darcy with rather too much perception, Elizabeth quickly jumped in.

“Father, I believe Mr Darcy has got wind of something. Let us imagine that he and I did not become engaged after the Netherfield ball. I would have been disgraced, and we would have all been desperate. What if Mr Wickham came to you then and offered to marry me, publicly stating his confidence in my virtue? It seems likely that you would have agreed, even if he demanded a sum far beyond my dowry to do it.”

“I would have,” Mr Bennet said grimly. “I would have given all I had, even mortgaged Longbourn to the hilt to do it, if I might have thereby saved my daughters.”

A heavy silence fell over the room, the result of three people each lost in their own unpleasant thoughts. At last, Mr Darcy spoke. “It is only too plausible. The scheme

exactly fits with what I know of Mr Wickham. A reliance on his own charm — a total disregard for the wishes of others, and the consequences that might fall on an innocent — a chance of profit, without even the clarity and certainty any rational man would demand in a simple matter of business — all of it is exactly like the man I have been grieved to know.”

“Then I think we may well have our explanation, but we do not have proof,” Elizabeth said quietly. “Without it, we are no more forwarder than ever.”

“Perhaps we might get some,” Mr Bennet mused. “Now, I have hardly spoken with Mr Wickham, but the few instances of our being in company together, coupled with what you both have told me, have given me the impression that he is a veritable peacock of a man, ready to believe himself deserving of everything and anything and the superior of all he meets.”

“It is no bad description, sir,” Mr Darcy said dryly.

“Would he be ready, then, to think that his plan might still succeed? If I were to ask him to visit him, perhaps under the pretence of being concerned about Mr Darcy’s character, might I convince him to incriminate himself?”

“I do not think it impossible,” Mr Darcy said cautiously. “Hatred of myself might render Wickham less cautious, and more likely to misstep. But it could be tricky, sir, very tricky indeed. And would it truly gain us what we seek? Even if you could lead Wickham into confessing, would it not simply be his word against your own? The attempt to correct the record might cause a greater scandal than letting it stand.”

“I do not mean to have Wickham tried in the court of public opinion, but in a court of law,” Mr Bennet declared. “My good friend Constable Rathers will help us with that. You see the closet doors just there?”

Mr Darcy nodded, looking rather confused, but Elizabeth exclaimed, “Father! You mean to have Constable Rathers overhear his confession?”

“I do, indeed. Would that not solve everything? With an impartial witness, the purity of your reputation would be secured. And I rather suspect that when Wickham is in the hands of the law, he will not soon leave them again.”

“To deceive a man into thinking he is speaking privately is not honourable,” Mr Darcy began, “but if Wickham is guilty, it is a far greater sin. If you believe you can succeed, Mr Bennet, I think the plan is a good one.”

“I shall try,” Mr Bennet said. “I daresay I do not wish my favourite daughter compelled to marry any more than you wish to be forced to marry her, sir.”

Elizabeth had rarely liked her father’s wit less, but she could hardly protest. Mr Darcy, however, shook his head. “Hardly forced, sir. I could not be forced into such a thing, when I did not feel it to be right. And I am sure Miss Elizabeth and I shall do well together, if we do wed. I will feel no regrets.”

Mr Bennet nodded approvingly. Elizabeth only wished she could believe him as sincere as her father seemed to, but that was too much to hope. Mr Darcy had already shown himself to be generosity itself. He would wish to spare her feelings, to give her hope, if he could.

“Well, Mr Darcy, perhaps you will wish to overhear our conversation as well. If all else fails, you may reveal yourself. The shock might force Wickham into confessing.”

“I shall, sir, thank you.”

“And I as well,” Elizabeth said suddenly. She had not known that she would speak until she did, but having expressed the intent, she had no doubt of it being correct.

She, who was more concerned in what passed than anyone, could not be left out of it. “I must hear the truth of it from his own lips.”

Her father was already shaking his head. “I do not think it wise, Lizzy. Such a scheme is no place for a lady.”

“I do not think it would place my reputation at risk,” Elizabeth argued. “Not only a few paces away from you, my dear father, and with my fiancé by my side. Surely there is no risk there that I do not already undergo.”

“No, Lizzy, I suppose you are right, but even so, I cannot approve it. You will do very well to stay in your room. I assure you we will tell you all the next day.”

“The next day! Really, Father —”

“Pray forgive me for the interruption,” Mr Darcy said firmly. “I believe Miss Elizabeth is right, Mr Bennet. She is as concerned in this as I, and with as much right to witness the outcome. For the moment, she is half yours, as your daughter, and half mine, as my future wife. I ask that you allow me to anticipate the discretion that will become mine, if we do wed, and say that Miss Elizabeth ought to be allowed to join us.”

Mr Bennet quickly gave way, mumbling a few words of surprised acquiescence, but Elizabeth felt herself far more shocked than her father showed himself to be. Mr Darcy had spoken not of an indulgence to a stubborn woman, but of the consideration owed to a true partner.

It was more than she had dreamt of. And as they hammered out the last details of consulting Mr Rather, of determining the day on which the trap ought to be set and how Mr Wickham ought to be summoned into it, when they would go into the hiding place and how reveal their presence, if at all, Elizabeth could not help but feel that

even her desire for the truth could not make her wish for a dissolution of their engagement.

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“What is the matter with you, Lizzy? You’ve been fidgeting all throughout dinner. And you have not touched a bite of your food,” her mother scolded. “Really, if you are to be a wife, you must understand that wasted food is a great evil. You will find yourself in ruin if your children treat your table like this someday.”

Elizabeth looked up at her mother and tried to take a bite. But her stomach was in too much turmoil to force even a small portion down her throat. She chewed slowly and swallowed with difficulty. “Forgive me, Mama. I am not feeling very well this evening.” After all, it was not a lie, Elizabeth thought. Her stomach was queasy and her pulse racing. She was only refraining from telling her mother that her indisposition was not due to any illness, but to the knowledge of the trap that was about to unfold for Mr Wickham later that evening.

It would be a momentous night indeed. If they could not make Mr Wickham confess, they would surely have no other choice but to go forward with the wedding.

Would that be so bad? Elizabeth had come to feel anything but reluctant about marrying Mr Darcy. On the contrary, if she could only believe that he viewed the possibility of their union with as much longing as she did, she would gladly marry him, compromise or no. In that light, Elizabeth thought uneasily, perhaps she ought to hope for their failure, for success would certainly mean an end to the idea that they ought to marry. How could she possibly admit that she no longer wanted to be vindicated and released?

“You are not feeling well, Lizzy? Oh, my dear girl, and when you are so soon to be wed! You must have some of my smelling salts, and we shall call Doctor Roberts, and —”

“There is no need, Mama, thank you. I am only nervous. I am sure it will soon pass.”

“But Lizzy —”

“Let her be. She has much to occupy her thoughts this evening,” her father said. All his family looked at him in surprise. It was a rare thing for him to speak at the dinner table unless he had something important to discuss. Usually, he allowed the girls to speak while he listened in silence, interspersed with sarcastic comments.

Her mother looked at her father sharply. “Indeed? Has something happened to put the engagement in jeopardy?” She only paused for a moment before looking at Elizabeth. “Tell me at once!”

Mr Bennet answered first. “There is nothing you need worry yourself about, Mrs Bennet.” He took a bite of his food and chewed very slowly. Elizabeth knew well it would drive her mother to distraction. “After dinner, I will see Elizabeth in the library alone. And I will not have any of you listening outside the door. Is that quite clear?” he ordered.

Thankfully, her younger sisters had the good sense not to whisper behind their hands, but Elizabeth could see that they were nearly drowning in curiosity.

Their curiosity would have to wait. Once dinner was finished, and rather more quietly than usual, her father sent her mother and younger sisters off to the parlour to engage in a game of cards or to read by the hearth. Jane was the only one allowed to follow them a short way down the corridor toward the library. “Is everything well, Lizzy?” Jane asked softly. “I would hate to think that you were in trouble in some way.”

“I am well,” Elizabeth assured her. “I cannot speak of anything at the moment, but know that hopefully, if all goes as Papa plans, I will be vindicated this night.”

Jane squeezed her hand. "Be careful, Lizzy," she whispered. She left Elizabeth and her father alone, joining the rest of the family in the parlour. Elizabeth turned to her father, and they went to the library to carry out the plan that had been conceived only a few days prior.

Her father opened the door for her and came through behind her, closing it tightly. He waited to see if there would be any sounds of footsteps outside the door, but he need not have worried. Mr Bennet so rarely gave ultimatums that on the rare occasions he gave an order, the rest of the family dared not disobey him. "Are you prepared for what this night may bring, Lizzy?" her father asked. He lit several more candles from the one that had been left burning while they had sat down to dinner. "The course of this evening could drastically alter your future. Are you aware of that?"

Elizabeth clasped her hands in front of her. "I am," she replied. "I am not afraid of marriage to Mr Darcy — not anymore. But I would rather have my conscience clear, free to marry for affection instead of being forced by circumstance. I am sure he would feel the same," she said softly. Over the course of their acquaintance, her emotions had been in turmoil. Somehow, almost beyond her perception, she had begun to feel a certain respect for him, a confidence in his honour and care for others. Then respect had turned to confidence in him, confidence to friendship, and friendship to love. Elizabeth was ashamed now of how rashly she had judged Mr Darcy at first. And all over an insult, overheard by accident!

"Ah, here is Mr Darcy and the constable," Mr Bennet said, breaking into her thoughts. "I told them to knock at the back window. I shall go to the servant's entrance and let them in." Her father opened the door and disappeared a moment later. It had seemed only prudent for them to come to the servant's entrance to avoid alerting the rest of the family that something was afoot. It would be best for them to remain unaware of their plans until everything was brought to light.

Elizabeth wrung her hands as she waited for the gentlemen to join her in the study.

She took several deep, steadying breaths to slow her speeding pulse. If all went well, they would learn the truth of Mr Wickham's guilt or innocence that night.

Yet it was not only that that made Elizabeth's heart beat faster. The thought of seeing Mr Darcy again left her strangely nervous. She had not seen him since they had parted ways at the gate to Longbourn, after meeting with her father in this very study.

Since the day, in fact, when she had first realised that she truly loved him.

With an effort, Elizabeth took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm. She told herself there was no reason to feel nervous. Surely nothing had changed between them.

Somehow, she could not quite bring herself to believe it.

When Mr Darcy appeared in the doorway, her heart nearly stopped. He was such a handsome figure of a man, but his calm, steady gaze instantly put her at ease. Or at least, as much at ease as she could feel at a moment like this.

The man who followed Mr Darcy was a barrel-chested and rather fatherly figure, with kind blue eyes and a balding pate. Elizabeth knew Constable Rathers of old. He had long been a good friend of her father's, and one who always had a friendly word for Mr Bennet's daughters.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Elizabeth said, bowing to each of them in turn. "It is a pleasure to see you both."

Both men returned her bow. Constable Rathers gave her a cheerful greeting at once, but Mr Darcy hesitated a moment before coming to her. "Good evening, Miss Elizabeth. I trust you are well?" he asked.

That was a rather difficult question. “I am as well as can be expected under the circumstances,” Elizabeth said at last. “I hardly know what to say. I had looked forward to discovering the truth with great eagerness, but now...”

She placed her hand in his, and he brought it to his lips, kissing her knuckles ever so gently. “I will be right here, Miss Elizabeth,” he whispered. She could hardly breathe. “Mr Wickham will not be allowed to hurt you any further.”

She nodded, and he released her hand. Elizabeth chided herself for being so absurd as to mourn its loss, but the separation was only momentary. Mr Darcy offered her his arm, and they joined her father and the constable to go over the plan one last time before Mr Wickham arrived. When all was settled, they sat down in her father’s comfortable and well-used chairs to wait.

Elizabeth tried not to let her nervousness show as they waited for Mr Wickham. The first stage of the plan had succeeded even beyond their hopes. When her father had invited Mr Wickham to come to Longbourn under the ruse of asking after Mr Darcy’s character, he had jumped at the chance. No doubt he was eager to sully Mr Darcy’s reputation with half-truths and outright lies.

“Are you well?” Mr Darcy leaned over and whispered to her as her father spoke with Constable Rathers. As Mr Bennet had expected, the constable had quickly agreed to help them with their plan. He would make a fine notable witness, should Mr Wickham confess to being the one who had planned and executed the compromise that had brought her and Mr Darcy together.

Elizabeth turned to Mr Darcy. The concern etched on his face touched her deeply. “You need not stay if you are unwell,” he added. “I am sure that Constable Rathers and I can handle things from here.”

She shook her head. She was not about to slink off and hide in her bedchamber while

Mr Darcy and Constable Rathers had all the excitement. Besides, she wanted to hear for herself whether Mr Wickham had been the instigator of all their troubles. “No, Mr Darcy, but I thank you. I am quite well. Only I am a little jittery with all the waiting.”

Even though the first suspicion of Mr Wickham had been hers, Elizabeth could hardly believe that he could be responsible for so ugly a plot. He had acted as her friend since coming to Meryton. To suspect that he had used her to further his own ends made her sick to her stomach. She was ashamed of herself. If Mr Darcy had not come to the library the night of the Netherfield Ball, she might have fallen more deeply under Mr Wickham’s spell and been lost forever, just as Georgiana had almost succumbed.

“I am impressed by your fortitude in all of this, Miss Elizabeth. Hopefully, if all goes as planned this evening, our reputations will be restored.” Mr Darcy gave her a strange look. Was that not a flash of pain in his eyes? But why? “You will be free.”

Elizabeth nodded. She had no time to give any other answer, for the footman knocked on the library door and alerted them that Mr Wickham had been seen coming up the lane.

“Positions,” her father whispered. Immediately, Elizabeth, Mr Darcy, and Constable Rathers headed for the closet on the other end of the library. It was a tight squeeze, but they would have the advantage of being close enough to hear all that was said. Having left the doors open a crack, it was even possible to see part of the room. With luck, Mr Wickham would be none the wiser that three witnesses were concealed behind it, ready to hear the truth of what had happened.

They concealed themselves just in time. A moment later, another knock sounded on the door and Mr Wickham was announced. Elizabeth watched from the darkness, her shoulder just brushing Mr Darcy’s. She craned her neck to the left and saw Mr Wickham enter the room, his step confident and graceful. Elizabeth stifled a snort.

The man could not have looked more arrogant if he had tried. What nerve! She took a deep breath to calm her anger. With a little luck, all would be put right this night. And if he would not confess, then she would be no worse off than she was already.

But there was no more time for wool-gathering. Her father was speaking to Mr Wickham.

“Mr Wickham, thank you for coming to see me on such short notice. I apologise for the lateness of the hour, but I am sure you can see that discretion is of the utmost importance.” Mr Bennet played his role perfectly, setting Mr Wickham at ease. Elizabeth watched in no little surprise. Her father had no patience for diplomacy, but it seemed that his quick wit and sense of humour made him admirably suited to intrigue.

“I am honoured that you asked me to come, Mr Bennet. Indeed, you are wise. A father ought to find out as much as he can about the character of the man his daughter is going to marry.” Mr Wickham spoke with a solemnity bordering on the sanctimonious. No doubt it would give him great pleasure to slander Mr Darcy to her father. She clenched her hands, wanting nothing more than to strike out at Mr Wickham — the snake!

Mr Bennet nodded solemnly. “The situation has been deeply distressing. I am forced to be grateful that Mr Darcy did the right thing and offered for my daughter. There is little I can do to stop the marriage from going forward. It would ruin poor Elizabeth. After such a scandal, she must marry, and quickly.”

“Quite, sir,” Mr Wickham said with a serious nod, sitting down across from Mr Bennet. Elizabeth could not like the gleam in his eyes.

Mr Bennet cleared his throat. “But I must confess, and I ask you to keep this to yourself, that I am uneasy. I find myself uncertain of Mr Darcy’s character. If he is

truly unworthy, I would move heaven and earth to save my daughter. You may be in a position to give me very important information, Mr Wickham. Can I trust Mr Darcy with my daughter's well-being, with her happiness?"

Mr Wickham was a schemer indeed, Elizabeth thought indignantly. He even made a decent pretence of thinking over what Mr Bennet had said, stroking his chin as though deciding how much he ought to say. Her father was playing the game exactly right. He was gaining Mr Wickham's confidence, convincing him to put down his guard. Now, if only Mr Wickham would take the bait.

Mr Wickham sat down across from her father. "Oh, my dear sir, I only wish you could. How it pains me to speak ill of anyone bearing the name of Darcy! But I cannot do otherwise. My respect for yourself, and my concern, my — admiration — for your daughter all make it an imperative. I should be gravely afraid for any woman in the power of Mr Darcy. To support his pride or even his convenience, he could be guilty of terrible cruelty." Mr Wickham leaned back, making himself comfortable. "You are right to be concerned, my dear sir."

"I thank you for your honesty, sir," Mr Bennet said. Elizabeth had no difficulty in recognising the slight tremor in her father's voice as being borne of anger, but Mr Wickham likely thought it only concern. He went on without delay. "But what painful honesty is this! I would do anything to save my daughter, and yet I fear there is nothing I can do. Even if he is such a man, they must marry. It would be the ruination not only of Elizabeth, but of all my daughters if she does not marry."

Mr Bennet stopped there. With luck, Mr Wickham would take his silence for despair, and not recognise it for what it was — baiting the hook.

The men were silent for a long moment, drawing out the tension until Elizabeth half-thought she would scream.

Then a small smile flitted across Mr Wickham's face, almost too quickly to be seen, before being replaced by a carefully grave expression. "My dear Mr Bennet, I cannot bear this for so fine a family, so admirable a lady as Miss Elizabeth. Is there not some other way?"

Mr Bennet shook his head. "I can think of none."

"And yet — yes — I believe I have an idea. Indeed, this might solve everything. What if I were to marry Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth met Mr Darcy's eyes. His expression of grim satisfaction exactly mirrored her own feelings. Like a greedy trout, Mr Wickham was taking the bait.

Mr Bennet was too skilled an angler to attempt reeling him in all at once. "You, sir? No, it cannot be. After such a scandal, you would forever be distrusting her. It would be no less a misery than marriage to Mr Darcy. Why, I would spend every farthing in my possession to secure a worthy husband for my Lizzy, I would even mortgage Longbourn itself, but I do not see that it is possible for you to be tolerably happy with her."

"No, sir, I assure you," Mr Wickham said eagerly. "I have never believed that Miss Elizabeth was a willing party to this compromise. There is some mistake, I am sure."

"That is very generous of you, Mr Wickham," her father said gravely, "but it cannot be so. How could it be that you, alone of all our acquaintances, would so readily believe in her honour? Why, my daughter went to the library, after all. It cannot be justified."

"No, not at all, sir. She was sent a note, after all — I cannot say that is any reflection on Miss Elizabeth's virtue."

“That is very interesting, Mr Wickham,” Mr Bennet said quietly. “Very interesting indeed, because there is no one in the world who knows that my daughter was lured to the library with a false note beyond those present at the meeting, myself — and the one who sent the note.”

Mr Wickham froze for only a moment before his natural composure reasserted itself. His voice was only a little strained when he spoke. “Ah — it was only a figure of speech, Mr Bennet. I merely assumed that Miss Bennet must have been brought to the library in some way, as she would not have followed Mr Darcy there.”

“Very good, Mr Wickham, but it will not serve,” Mr Bennet said ironically. “I know of your guilt, sir. A groomsman saw you lurking near Netherfield only the next day, likely to remove the trip wire you left behind!”

Elizabeth’s breath caught in her throat. What on earth was her father doing? They had no such witness among the servants, or the whole mystery would have been a very different thing. Mr Wickham had only to deny it, and their whole plan would fall like a house of cards.

But Mr Bennet was not allowing Mr Wickham time to recover his composure, or to think of a prudent answer. He went on in a low voice that shook with fury. “Confess, sir! You are the architect behind all this grief, and I shall have the matter out! How can you defend yourself, when young Whittaker saw you slink by that morning!”

“He certainly did not!” Mr Wickham snapped in a fury. “Your man Whittaker is a liar, that much I’ll swear, for I was not such a fool as to return to the library after that night!”

Mr Wickham instantly realised his mistake, but it was too late. All Mr Bennet’s put-on rage had vanished, to be replaced by satisfaction and icy contempt.

“No, Mr Wickham, he did not,” Mr Bennet said softly, “for indeed, there is no Whittaker at Netherfield Park. I made up the report so that you might condemn yourself out of your own mouth. As you have now done.”

Mr Wickham sneered at him, his cordial mask in tatters. “I will admit you have tricked me, Mr Bennet. I hope it was worth it. You have put me on my guard now, sir, and I assure you that no one will ever believe you in such a case. Mr Darcy has agreed to marry your daughter, sir. You ought to be grateful, for I assure you, I never thought he would. Take that as your victory, and leave me be, for you certainly can do nothing against me.”

“I believe you will find you are mistaken,” Mr Bennet said mildly. “Constable, Mr Darcy, Lizzy, perhaps you might come out now.”

They followed the suggestion with alacrity. Mr Darcy kept himself between Elizabeth and Mr Wickham, mindful even now of his promise to protect her.

With grim satisfaction, Elizabeth thought it was not likely that he would need to act on that promise. Mr Wickham looked as if he might fall over in a dead faint. His mouth worked as he backed away toward the door. “What is this?” he demanded. His path was blocked, for the constable had stepped in front of it to ensure he could not escape. “Turn and face your accusers, sir,” Constable Rathers snarled.

Mr Wickham straightened, lifting his chin in defiance. “I have nothing more to say. You, Mr Bennet, have acted most underhandedly in luring me here tonight. It is most ungentlemanly to ambush me like this!”

“It is most ungentlemanly to ruin my daughter’s reputation without a second thought. You will answer for that, sir. I will see to it you do,” Mr Bennet growled. In all her life, she had never seen her father like this.

Mr Wickham glanced at Elizabeth, then pinned Mr Darcy with an unswerving stare. “I should have known you would stoop to something like this. Tell me, how is dear Georgiana? Still locked away for her little indiscretion?”

No doubt Mr Wickham had meant to draw Mr Darcy into a fight by alluding to the events that had taken place at Ramsgate. He was to be disappointed, for Mr Darcy merely turned to him with a look of profound contempt. “My sister’s well-being is none of your concern.” He turned to the constable. “There is another matter at hand that is much more in need of our attention, is there not?”

Her father stepped forward, clearing his throat. “Yes, there is. Mr Wickham, you are well and truly caught. Now, it would benefit you to tell us why you arranged the compromise between my daughter and Mr Darcy.”

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Wickham sneered, even though he could not help but realise he was caught. Indeed, Darcy knew not how he thought to get himself out of this mess. He would answer to his superiors, and then likely be court-martialled. He would have nothing but a sullied name, and might even serve time in military prison. “Speak, Wickham. Let us have done with it,” Darcy said, barely able to keep his tone even.

“I do not answer to you,” Wickham spat. “But I will tell Mr Bennet. I see no reason to keep you all in the dark. It was a good plan, if not for Darcy’s meddling.”

“Why did you do it?” Mr Bennet asked. This time, Darcy could tell Elizabeth’s father was losing patience. He had handled the trap with such grace and smoothness until the point Wickham had been caught. Now his face was beet red, making him look like a piece of iron laid to the smelting fires, glowing hot under the pressure of the intense heat.

Mr Wickham raised his chin. “I will tell you. But then you must promise to let me go,” he said. “I have done nothing worth incarceration, as you well know.”

The constable stepped forward and placed a warning hand on Wickham’s shoulder. “That remains to be seen.”

Wickham’s features lost a bit of their haughtiness. The constable made him sit back down in the plush chair he had occupied during his conversation with Mr Bennet. “Very well. The idea for the compromise was borne out of my enmity for Darcy and my appreciation for Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Elizabeth’s shock and fury were too great to keep her silence. “Mr Wickham, what on

earth can you mean by that? You cannot have any genuine appreciation for me if you have tried to commit such harm against me.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I had a plan,” Mr Wickham said earnestly, giving her his most soulful look. “You and I had such great enjoyment in each other’s society, and yet neither of us had enough money to wed. Everything would have worked out well, if not for Darcy’s interference.”

“It would not have worked out well for me,” Elizabeth said quietly. “Even disgrace would have been better than marriage to a man capable of such a plot.”

In that moment, Darcy was so proud of her, he felt a smile break out on his face despite all the grimness of the scene. Upon hearing her rebuke, Wickham had looked half shocked, half crestfallen. It was like the man to think that he might still charm her, even after everything he had done. Now Wickham knew better, and he did not appear to enjoy the knowledge.

“And why involve Mr Darcy?” Mr Bennet asked.

“Because I have long thought Darcy ought to be taken down a peg, if you must know. But since there was no bodily harm done to either of them, there is no way you can hold me.”

No one argued with him, and he went on. “I was sure that Darcy would not stoop to marry Miss Elizabeth.” He smirked in Elizabeth’s direction. “As charming and pretty as she is, she has no money or standing to speak of. I thought it sure he would do whatever it took to extricate himself from the scandal and return to Pemberley.”

“Mr Darcy would never do such a thing as leave a young woman to fend for herself,” Elizabeth snapped. She placed a hand on Darcy’s arm, and while the gesture warmed every fibre of his being, he was surprised by it, especially that she would do so in

front of the constable. Of course, the three of them had just spent the better part of a half-hour crammed in a closet with each other.

“You always think yourself so high and mighty. I wanted to teach you a lesson, Darcy,” Wickham sneered. “I wanted to see if you would live up to the supposed honour you always lectured others about, myself included. You cannot know how sick to death I was of listening to your speeches when we were young men.”

Elizabeth gave a short laugh. “You are angry that Mr Darcy has proven to be everything he says he is?” She let go of his arm and folded her arms over her chest. She glanced up at him, and his heart warmed at the respect in her eyes. “Indeed, Mr Darcy never talks about himself. He simply lives what he believes.”

Darcy’s mouth went dry just looking at her. At that moment, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, or would ever see again — her character every bit as lovely as her face.

“It should have worked. But you had to go and ruin everything, just as you always did when we were boys. It would have been great fun to show everyone that you have feet of clay, just as the rest of us do.” Mr Wickham leaned back in the chair, seeming wholly unbothered by the mess he had caused. “It was quite simple, really. I planned the scandal that was to have shown you as the louse I know you to be. When Miss Elizabeth was ruined, and without recourse, I was to have come to Mr Bennet and offered to speak for Miss Elizabeth — to save her, and to keep the rest of the girls from sharing in her disgrace.” Wickham paused, looking Elizabeth up and down. “For a price, of course.”

Darcy took Elizabeth’s hand and tucked it safely into the crook of his arm. He felt her tense, no doubt caused by the anger building inside her, as he was sure it was, for it was growing inside of him with every passing second that they allowed Wickham to speak.

“And what made you believe I would stoop to being parted with my daughter for the likes of you?” Mr Bennet asked.

Wickham smiled an ugly smile. “Oh, you would have, Mr Bennet, I have no doubt of that.”

“Explain yourself, sir,” Mr Bennet growled.

“Go on, then,” Constable Rathers added. “And choose your words wisely, Mr Wickham. You are in the presence of a lady.”

“But that is just the thing, is it not? She is not a lady. She has no title, no money, no connections.” Mr Wickham argued. He sneered at Darcy. “Your mother would be horrified that you are about to marry a young woman of such low connections. And your father! Hah! I daresay he has been rolling over in his grave.”

Darcy growled in fury. “I warn you, Wickham. Keep a civil tongue in your head, or you will regret this night.”

“There is nothing you can do to me, Darcy.” Mr Wickham spat. “You are not the lord of this county, as you pretend to be in Derbyshire. As for marrying Miss Elizabeth, Mr Bennet himself said he would have given anything to save her, even mortgaging Longbourn itself. Any loving father would when faced with the prospect of having — not only one unmarriageable daughter — but five, for the scandal would have ruined all of their chances. When I presented that very harsh reality to Mr Bennet, he would have begged me to marry Miss Elizabeth. And I would have agreed — for a price, as I said before.”

“Thank Heaven that it did not come to pass,” Mr Bennet said, grimly shaking his head. “I can only hope that I would not have agreed to such a scheme. I have never known a man whom I must hold in such contempt. Even having Mr Collins as a son-

in-law would have been a blessing in comparison.”

“I do not care if you dislike me, sir. The trouble is, you are beginning to think like Darcy — that your honour has no bounds. Well, I tell you, honour is not absolute. You would have given in, and I would have married Miss Elizabeth. What other choice would she have had?”

Elizabeth let out a sigh, and Darcy realised he might need to prepare for the very real possibility that she would faint. “Wickham, you’ve been warned once. Do not cross the line again,” he growled.

Wickham only shot him an amused half-smile, the one that had infuriated him as a boy, for it meant that Wickham was about to get into mischief, and he did not care who he hurt in the process. “But I am only just beginning. You see, I know that Mr Bennet is not a man of great means. However, in order to save his precious daughter’s ruined reputation, he would have done whatever it took to come up with a suitable dowry to bribe me. And we would have lived very comfortably, I assure you, Miss Elizabeth.” He shot a mockingly longing look in Elizabeth’s direction, settling back into his chair to await the horror of those who had heard the tale.

“You are very much mistaken if you think I would have allowed my daughter to marry you, Mr Wickham. I am a simple country gentleman, but I still have my integrity, unlike you.”

Wickham sat up of a sudden, causing Darcy to tense in preparation for a fight, should one present itself. “You would have allowed her name to be dragged through the mire? Perhaps sentencing her to a life of spinsterhood and drudgery? What could she have done? Gone to London to find work? You would have had to send her away, to at least pick up the pieces of her sister’s shattered reputations, and thus slave away to find even the lowest of the low who would take them to wife.” Wickham smiled again, that evil smile that turned Darcy’s blood to a vengeful fire. “There is only one

profession I know of that would have been available to Miss Elizabeth. I am sure I would have been happy to give her some business.” Wickham leered at her, and she gasped in shock.

Darcy saw red the instant the words were out of Wickham’s mouth, and if it had not been for Elizabeth’s hand on his arm, he would have flown into a rage and killed the man with his bare hands right then and there. “Take that back, or I shall kill you where you stand, Wickham,” Darcy said, his voice low and menacing. Wickham had raised himself out of the chair in alarm, and Darcy could see the fear in his bloodshot eyes.

“Now, now, there is no need to turn to violence. I think we have all heard enough, have we not, Mr Bennet?” Constable Rathers asked. Darcy backed down, but only slightly. He was sure the last thing the constable wanted was to be called out to attend the aftermath of a duel the following morning. No policemen wished to clean up a corpse. Normally, Darcy would not have considered flouting the law, but after what he had just heard, the temptation was almost irresistible.

“Yes, we certainly have heard enough,” Mr Bennet agreed with Constable Rathers. “Take him away.”

Wickham looked as if he might fight the irons that Constable Rathers introduced, but Darcy took a menacing step forward. Wickham might have been able to fight off the older constable, but he would not have been able to fight three men to one, even if Mr Bennet was in his fifties. “Very well. I shall ride out this little scenario you have planned, Darcy. I shall be exonerated in the morning by my superiors at the fort.”

Constable Rathers clapped the irons on his wrists and was starting to move toward the door when Miss Elizabeth suddenly stepped forward. “Wait!” she said pleadingly. Darcy frowned. Was she upset that Mr Wickham was being led away to the local jail?

Wickham leered at her again, looking her up and down. “I do apologise that things did not work out between us, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I assure you, Mr Wickham, you are utterly mistaken if you think I have any regrets that you are being taken away to jail where you belong. You are also mistaken in believing that I would ever be so lost to morality as to stoop to the sort of profession you were so depraved as to elude to before a lady.” As quick as a flash, she brought her hand up and slapped him across the face, startling all of them. “And you are mistaken that I would ever do anything at all with you.”

Mr Wickham blinked slowly, then looked up at Darcy. He had to keep himself from breaking out in a grin at the blow that Elizabeth had dealt, both physically and emotionally. Indeed, the physical effect was already showing in the angry red welt that Elizabeth’s delicate hand had raised across Mr Wickham’s right cheek.

“Get him out of my sight,” Mr Bennet said, waving his hand in a disgusted, dismissive gesture. Mr Wickham said not another word as Constable Rathers gruffly pushed him out of the study doors and down the darkened hallway toward the back entrance.

All was silent for several seconds. Elizabeth was nursing her hand, which must have been tingling with the force with which she had slapped Mr Wickham’s face. She gave a sheepish grin in her father’s direction, massaging her palm. “I am sorry, Papa. That was hardly ladylike —”

Her father held up a hand to stay her words. “There is no need. On the contrary, my dear, I believe I am rather proud of you.” His eyes twinkled as he looked at Mr Darcy. “I say, good show.”

Darcy could not help but smile then, too. “Are you well?” he asked. At the last moment, Darcy stopped himself from reaching out. Did he still have the right to take

her hand? “I am sorry you had to hear that.”

“It was what we set out to do, was it not?” Elizabeth asked.

“Indeed, you are quite right,” Mr Bennet said. “You are free, the both of you. You have proven your innocence in the compromise. With Mr Rathers and myself as witnesses to Mr Wickham’s guilt, you can now dissolve the engagement without fear of any backlash whatsoever.” Mr Bennet eyed them both curiously for a moment. The silence lengthened. “Unless you do not wish it?”

Darcy said not a word, wondering what Elizabeth’s answer would be. He held his breath, waiting for what seemed like an eternity for her to speak. Elizabeth looked at him, her brown eyes filled with emotion. “I — ” she halted, then went on. “I suppose you are right, Papa.” She let out a soft sigh. “It is such a relief to have that over.”

His heart clenched in his chest. For a moment, Darcy couldn’t breathe. How could he go on without her, now that he knew he loved her? “Indeed,” he said, clearing his throat and trying to keep the emotion at bay. He did not want to lose her. But how could he say so when she had worked so diligently to clear her name so she would not have to go through the marriage? He hung his head. “Congratulations, Miss Elizabeth. You have done it.”

Elizabeth’s eyes flickered with an emotion he could not identify. He would have said she looked hurt, but that was absurd. It was his heart that had just been crushed. “We have done it,” she corrected.

It gave Darcy little comfort to hear that. Fool that he was, he had brought this pain upon himself. He did not want to dissolve the engagement. But if Elizabeth’s feelings for him had not changed, there was nothing else to be done.

Mr Bennet reached out a hand. Darcy took it. “I want to thank you for acting so

gallantly these many weeks. My Lizzy would have been lost if not for your noble handling of the whole situation. I cannot thank you enough for everything you have done for her, and in protecting our family,” he said.

Darcy shook heartily with him, all the while feeling as if his heart were shattering into a thousand pieces. With an effort, he schooled his face to neutrality. It would not do to create further awkwardness for Elizabeth. She had already suffered enough, all because of his old enemy. A less noble woman might have despised him for it.

But if Elizabeth did not despise him, neither did she love him. It was all too clear that she was relieved she would no longer have to be tied to him forever.

With an effort, he forced himself to speak. “I did only what was expected of me, I assure you, Mr Bennet,” he managed to choke out.

“No, indeed. You did far and above what anyone else would have done, Mr Darcy. It is true what Mr Wickham said about me: I am a simple country gentleman. But if there is anything I can do to repay your kindness, please let me know how I can do it.”

Darcy wanted nothing more than to flee the room. Flee Longbourn. But how could he? This might be the last time he ever saw Elizabeth. And he knew he would never look upon another woman with the same force of emotion or devotion he felt for her.

Elizabeth turned to him, looking hesitant. “Thank you, Mr Darcy, for everything. My father is right. We can never repay your kindness. But if we can try in some way —”

“There is no need,” he said more harshly than he intended. “I will leave you now to share the news with your family.”

Elizabeth looked stricken, following him to the door. “You won’t stay, Mr Darcy? At

least share a glass of port with my father, and come to say hello to my sisters — ”

“No, thank you,” he replied, having difficulty now in keeping his emotions in check. It was unmanly of him, he knew, but he could feel a large lump forming in his throat. To be so close to her, and yet feel the gulf widening between them, was agony. “I do not wish to intrude on your family or yourself any more than I already have. Good night, Miss Elizabeth.” He quickly turned and bowed to her father. “Mr Bennet.”

He hurried out of the room and went out the back way, as the constable had done a few minutes before. The stable was only a few paces away. Thankfully, he had instructed the stable boy to leave his horse saddled. Darcy mounted up and rode away into the darkness, his heart as black and hopeless as the dreary night.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:46 am

Elizabeth stood blankly in the study, her arms hanging limp at her sides. It was a small satisfaction that she could project the image of a serene young woman. On the inside, her world was crashing down around her.

He was gone! Gone. How could he be gone? She had got used to the idea that Mr Darcy would always be by her side. Or rather, that she would be at his side until death did they part. Why had he gone so quickly? She was a fool for thinking that he actually cared for her. No, it had all been duty and responsibility — not love.

“Are you well, my dear?” her father asked.

Her head snapped up, and she gasped at the surprise of hearing another person’s voice while she was dealing with the very private emotions of having been cast aside. In reality, this is what she had wanted. Wasn’t it?

Yes, she had wanted her freedom. Now, after coming to know Mr Darcy on a deeper level, she knew she would never love another as she loved him. “Yes, Papa. I am well,” she choked. “I am only over-tired,” she replied. She placed a hand on her forehead. “In all honesty, this evening has been a shock to my nerves. Will you make my excuses to the rest of the family?” she asked.

Her father cocked his head to the side, watching her closely for a moment. “You are relieved at how things have worked out, are you not, my dear?” he asked. “You said as much — ”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth said quickly. She sniffed back the tears welling in her eyes, threatening to spill over in anguish. “Of course, I am relieved that the truth has

been revealed.” But she was not relieved at the end of her engagement to Mr Darcy. She had come to care deeply for Mr Darcy. And now, it was all too apparent that he did not want her — had never wanted her. She had been a burden to him that he felt obligated to bear. Nothing more. He had all but run out of the study when her father had announced that they were free to dissolve their engagement.

“Forgive me, Papa, but I must lie down,” Elizabeth said. And indeed, she must. She felt as if all the energy was seeping out of her body, leaving as a hollow shell of the woman she had been only moments before. How could a man have such an effect on her? Of course, she had always read about such love in novels, had hoped for such an overpowering love for herself. Had she really believed it was possible? No, she was sure now that she had not thought a love like that really existed.

Elizabeth climbed the stairs as quickly as her legs would carry her. That was slow indeed. It felt as if she were moving through water, her legs weighted down by sorrow. When she reached the room she shared with Jane, she closed the door, hoping that Jane would stay below stairs long enough for her to shed every pent-up tear inside her. She went immediately to the bed and fell face-down, tears pouring out of her like a burst dam. Why had she allowed herself to care for him? Why had she let her guard down?

More importantly, why had she ever suggested that they try to prove their innocence? If she had kept her peace, she and Mr Darcy would have likely been married by now, or very shortly would have been celebrating their nuptials. Now she would never know the joy of being his wife.

Late that night, Jane came back to their room, carefully tiptoeing as she readied herself for bed. Elizabeth had changed into her nightgown long before and had curled up in the blankets, trying to seek some sort of solace from her misery. The familiar scent of lavender on the sheets did little to calm the desperation she felt. Elizabeth had spent the hours since she had excused herself from her father’s study in silent

misery, wondering if there was some way she could take back the folly of denying her own heart. How long had it been since any dislike of him had fled, had been replaced first by friendship and trust, and ultimately by love? And yet she had said nothing. She had not been willing to risk her heart — no. The truth was much worse than that.

She had been unwilling to risk her pride, and it had cost her everything.

“Lizzy, dearest? Lizzy?” Jane called softly as she went behind the screen. “Are you asleep?” she asked.

For a moment, Elizabeth thought to pretend sleep. But that was not only cowardly, but foolish as well. Jane would surely find her out. She put the coverlet down and peeked out. “No, I am not asleep,” she said.

“You and Papa were in the study for a long while. Is everything well?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth sat up slightly, propping her weight on her elbow. “Yes, all is well.” She sighed. “You shall know soon enough, I suppose, as will the rest of the county. Mr Wickham was the culprit behind the compromise between Mr Darcy and I.”

Jane came out from the screen, even though she had not finished buttoning her nightdress. It was a rare occurrence for her to be seen by anyone in such a state of undress, even though she and Jane were the closest of sisters. “Mr Wickham? Whatever do you mean?”

Elizabeth recounted the story Mr Wickham had told, leaving out his horrible suggestion that she would have had to go to London to become a woman of the night. Jane would have been far too scandalised by even the notion of such a thing. “Father was incredible. He lulled Mr Wickham into over-confidence and tricked him into saying more than he ought. It was not as difficult as I had feared, in fact. I think Mr

Wickham might even be strangely proud of his scheme. He certainly seems to think there will be no consequences for the role he has played. However, I hope his superiors throw the book at him,” she said crisply.

“I should think so,” Jane said, her voice low with horror. “I have never imagined such evil. How horrible, Lizzy! I always knew that you were innocent, but I did not imagine such an explanation.”

“Nor I,” Elizabeth replied. “Mr Wickham’s scheme was more horrible than I could have imagined.”

Jane sighed. “Thank goodness it has all come out well. All our friends and neighbours will know that you were not to blame. Now you need not marry Mr Darcy, after all.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said with forced calm. “Indeed, you are right. Now there is no need for us to wed.”

“You do not seem happy that you are not bound to Mr Darcy anymore.”

Elizabeth put on a smile. “Indeed? I am relieved,” she lied. “It is what I set out to do, and I have done it. Now things can return to the way they were before Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy appeared in our quiet little hamlet.”

Jane nodded, but there was sadness in her eyes. “Well, as long as you are happy, then I shall be happy for you.” She pulled her nightgown over her head and climbed between the sheets. Jane blew out the candle on her side of the room, settling into the coverlet with a contented sigh. “What will you do, Lizzy, now that you are free?”

Elizabeth smiled shakily, and she was glad her sister could not see it. “I will go on living as I always have. As long as I have you, I do not require anything else in this world.”

It was not entirely a lie. Elizabeth loved her sister dearly — all of her sisters. But with Mr Darcy, she had allowed a part of her heart to open that she had not experienced before. With him, she had known a different kind of love.

She turned onto her side, facing the opposite direction from Jane. From the other side of the bed, she could feel Jane relax as her breathing slowed to a steady cadence, and she fell into a peaceful slumber.

Elizabeth would not know sleep that night. She could not help but wonder how long it would take for her heart to stop bleeding, for her mind to stop obsessing over the agony of her lost happiness. How long before she forgot the pain of losing Mr Darcy and could move on? Bitterly, she suspected that as long as she lived, her heart would never be the same.

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The following day, Elizabeth rose early. It hardly mattered, she thought dully. She might as well be awake and dressed as awake and laying in her bed. She had cried silently for a good portion of the early morning hours, all while Jane slept in the bed beside her. Her quiet tears had wet the sides of her face, trickling down into her ears and neck until her pillow was half-soaked. The night seemed as though it would last forever. But in the morning, the sun did rise, bright and traitorous. Should not everything be as grey and hopeless as her future?

That was foolishness speaking, of course. Elizabeth told herself that she ought to be happy, ought to be relieved. She had said as much last night — she was relieved that the truth had won out.

And Mr Darcy, in turn, had been relieved that he would not have to keep his word and marry her after all.

Though Elizabeth told herself she ought to have expected it, she had not. It had seemed as though things had changed between them — as though his feelings had warmed as much as hers. Learning that she was wrong was a pain too difficult to bear.

But bear it, she must.

Elizabeth went down to breakfast feeling crabby and on edge. She had no patience with Lydia and Kitty's excited chatter, nor Mary's playing, nor her mother's lectures that they all must find husbands as soon as possible. Elizabeth took the seat closest to her father and sat down heavily. He raised a brow as if to ask if she was all right. She nodded briefly, wishing she might be spared the ordeal of speech.

"Lizzy?" Mr Bennet asked quietly.

"I am well, Papa," she whispered, if only to avoid having to excuse herself on account of more tears. "Or at least, I will be."

"That is not the same thing," he said gently.

Elizabeth shrugged as the maid appeared, carrying a tray of tea things. "It will have to do, for now."

She studied her tea with the focus of a soothsayer looking for answers in the patterns of the tea leaves. But there was no clear direction laid out for her. Should she hold her peace and suffer on in silence? Should she try to go to Mr Darcy and plead her case?

No. That was impossible. Not only her pride forbid it, but the rules of propriety as well. Now that she and Mr Darcy were no longer engaged, the strict rules of etiquette once again applied. She would not be allowed to speak with him in relative privacy. The firm boundaries of decorum would again put a wall between them. Indeed, would

he even remain in Meryton, now that he was free? She would not be surprised if he raced back to Pemberley and never showed his face in Meryton again. After all, his time in Hertfordshire had surely brought him nothing but inconvenience and dismay.

“Well, Lizzy, the great day approaches! Your wedding shall be a fine event, to be sure. How are you, my girl?” her mother asked. She at once took a bite of her toast, then went on as if she had not asked a question that required more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. “I say, it is most pleasing to me to know that my daughter will be married in her home parish. I would have liked to travel to Pemberley’s parish, but I understand that time is of the essence.”

Elizabeth glanced at her father, pleading for him not to break the news to her mother while they were in the same room. She could not endure the fit of nerves that would likely take her mother to her bed for the next few days.

“It is coming along, Mama,” was all Elizabeth had the stomach to say. She silently pleaded with Jane not to say anything about the broken engagement. Jane kept her mouth shut, for which Elizabeth was grateful. It felt like there was a large hole in her chest where her heart had been the day before.

With breakfast over, the girls retired to the parlour, some sewing, some reading, and Mary plunking away on the piano. Elizabeth thought grimly that it sometimes seemed as though a lady’s life was filled with one busy nothing or another, broken up only by the rare occasions of light amusement and gaiety that being out in society afforded. How she wished for Mr Bingley to throw another ball at Netherfield. If only she and Mr Darcy had a chance to begin again —

Elizabeth’s thoughts were interrupted when the maid knocked on the door and her mother called for her to enter. “Forgive me, ma’am, but there is a gentleman who has come to call.” The maid glanced at Elizabeth, and her heart instantly began to hammer. Could it be Mr Darcy?

She instantly sat up straighter, her mind in a whirl of activity. If it was Mr Darcy, there was only one reason he would be there. Could he really have come to suggest they continue in the engagement? She took a deep, steadying breath and rose from the well-used settee.

“Now, girls, be on your best behaviour,” their mother instructed, as if they were still girls being trained on how to entertain gentleman callers. Perhaps she needed the reminder after all, Elizabeth thought dismally. The state of her nerves was such that Elizabeth found herself running her hands down her skirt, then clasping her hands in front of her so she would not be tempted to wring them, nor pick at her nails nervously.

The minutes between the announcement and the maid showing the gentleman into the parlour seemed like an eternity. At last, Mr Bingley appeared in the doorway, smiling yet serious. He was quite alone. “Good morning, all of you. Mrs Bennet,” he began. He cleared his throat, turning his hat in hand for several moments. He seemed about to say something else, but her mother interrupted.

“It is so good of you to come for a visit, Mr Bingley.” Her mother moved to the side as if looking for someone else. “Is Mr Darcy not with you today?”

“No, he is not. He had some business to attend to,” Mr Bingley replied. He glanced at Jane, who met his gaze for only a moment before looking away, blushing and smiling at once. He took a deep breath, then plunged ahead once more. “I wonder, Mrs Bennet, if I might have an audience with Miss Jane Bennet? A private audience, that is?” he asked.

Elizabeth’s mother looked as if she might fall over in a dead faint. “Everybody out. Now,” she commanded. She turned, then took Jane’s hands and kissed them. “Not you, of course, my dear.” her mother ushered the younger girls out first, shooing them down the hall. “You may take all the time that is required, Mr Bingley. It is so good

to see you,” she said. “Lizzy? Come along, my dear.” She waved Elizabeth out, while Jane looked at her with eyes wider than she had ever seen them, looking half-elated, half terrified.

She gave her sister an encouraging nod, then followed her mother out of the room. While the rest of her sisters and mother listened at the door, Elizabeth leaned against the corridor wall, waiting for the much-anticipated announcement that Mr Bingley would soon become her first brother-in-law.

As the minutes passed, she found she could not stay still and listen to her sister’s excited whisperings. Surely Mr Bingley and her sister would tell them the good news when they were ready. She walked down the hallway, out toward the foyer. Elizabeth looked out over the fields and farms, toward Netherfield Park. Mr Darcy had not come with Mr Bingley. Perhaps she had been foolish to hope. Had he already departed Meryton for his home in Derbyshire?

A quarter of an hour passed before the door suddenly opened and Elizabeth could hear her mother’s triumphant voice. “Oh, Mr Bennet! Lizzy! Do come!” she called. Elizabeth smiled and returned to the parlour, where Jane was crying happy tears and Mr Bingley beamed at them all. In the face of such a joyful sight, it was easy to give her warmest congratulations.

“Ah, I thought it would never happen!” Mrs Bennet sighed happily. “Did you think it would ever happen, Mr Bennet?” she asked, turning to her husband.

“I had every faith that our Jane would make a match worthy of her sweet and generous spirit,” her father said. He leaned in and kissed Jane on the cheek. “I am very happy,” he said.

Elizabeth went over to Mr Bingley and smiled, doing her best to keep her tears locked inside until she could be alone. “I am so happy for the both of you,” she said. “Jane

— ” she said, but could not go on. To her horror, Elizabeth found that all her attempts at composure were not enough. If she were forced to speak another word aloud, she would certainly burst into tears.

Jane pressed her hand. “I know,” she whispered.

There was truly no blessing greater than being understood by those one loved most. Elizabeth embraced her sister with all her heart, grateful beyond measure for the chance to regain her composure.

With the benefit of a moment without speaking, she found it again. “I could not be more delighted for both of you,” Elizabeth said warmly, taking both of their hands. “Mr Bingley, though I cannot claim to be an impartial judge, I say you are truly gaining a treasure this day. You will take good care of her?” Upon looking at his honest, good-natured face, Elizabeth felt a little better. She must not be selfish. She must think of this moment not as losing a sister, but as gaining a brother.

“Upon my life, I vow it,” Mr Bingley said.

The words carried such conviction that Elizabeth had not the slightest doubt of his sincerity. Jane would have a splendid husband, indeed.

Yet she could not help but wonder how much of this would have been possible had Mr Darcy not played a hand in it. Had he encouraged Mr Bingley to come and propose? She might never know.

Even the delight of seeing her beloved sister so happy could not entirely ease Elizabeth’s heart. She stayed only long enough so as not to offend, or let any of the rest of her family know that she was in mourning. She then hurried out of the room, retrieved a shawl, and went outside to walk among the browning foliage. Elizabeth found a semblance of solace in her grey surroundings, feeling she was in good

company. The cheerless trees and misting rain seemed a fitting accompaniment to her thoughts.

Was it not possible that she and Mr Darcy might have been just as happy together? Slowly, so slowly she had not realised it at first, he had gained all her heart. It seemed that he did not feel the same, and yet what might have been possible if she had only been honest with herself?

Perhaps there was nothing to be done, and Mr Darcy would always have been delighted to be freed from the engagement, but she did not believe it. If only she had seen him for what he truly was in time, affection might have grown between them equally. He might have come to love her, as she did him. He might even now be by her side.

But now, of course, it was too late.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:46 am

After sending Mr Bingley off on his romantic errand, Darcy did not remain in Netherfield House for long. It was essential to tie up any last ends that needed his attention before he departed for Pemberley. He was at once eager and reluctant to go. The first thing weighing on his mind before he exited the Meryton scene was to ensure Wickham answered for his crimes. He must not be allowed to slip away from responsibility as he had so easily done in years past. And so, on that dreary winter day, he made his way to the county prison.

Motivated equally by the inclement weather and his own weariness, Darcy took the coach. He had not slept well the night before, and he suspected it would be some time before he did again. Elizabeth did not want him. He had known it was a possibility that he might not win her heart by the time they proved their innocence. And yet he had begun to hope...

When that hope had been crushed the evening before, he had known he could not simply sit about feeling sorry for himself. If he was to recover his spirits, he would have to keep himself busy at all costs. He would return to Pemberley and seek the solace of his sister's unchanging affection for her big brother. He would try to forget.

But how could he forget the woman who had become a part of his heart and soul?

"Can I help you, sir?" a constable asked as he entered the brick-and-mortar building. Iron bars covered the glass-paned windows, of which there were few. No doubt to keep those incarcerated from getting any ideas of escape. The overall effect was impressive, even foreboding — exactly right for a man who had showed himself to be as unremittently depraved as Wickham.

Darcy pulled himself out of his private musings and back to the present. “Yes, I hope so,” he replied. “I am here to speak with Constable Rathers. It concerns a case involving a Mr George Wickham.”

The constable raised a brow. “Chap they brought in late last night?”

“Yes,” Darcy said, wondering if something had happened to make them release the louse already. “Is he still here?”

“To be sure, sir. Not about to let that one out of our sights. I heard a little of what happened with the — gentleman, I suppose I shall call him — last night. Constable Rathers is here as we speak,” the man said. “I’ll tell him you’re here.”

Darcy only had to wait for a few minutes before he was shown to a dim, colourless room, its only furnishings a table and two wooden chairs. Constable Rathers bowed and offered him a seat across the table. “I am surprised to see you here this early, Mr Darcy. Is all well at Netherfield?”

“To the best of my knowledge. I came to ensure that Wickham does not escape justice this time. As I am sure you can guess, he has had a wild past, and answered for none of it.”

“Well, there is one thing you can do to help us ensure he answers for his actions. You can file a charge against him,” Constable Rathers said.

“What would the charge be? I should like to keep Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s name out of the scandal as much as possible.”

Constable Rathers thought for a moment. “I suppose assault might do. He did attack you after all, if not in any particularly deadly fashion. It is a charge we could pursue without having to bring Miss Elizabeth into it —”

A knock sounded, and Constable Rather looked up at the door, looking rather peeved at the interruption. "Come!" he called brusquely.

The constable that had greeted Darcy in the foyer pulled Rathers aside and spoke low, though not low enough to escape Darcy's hearing. "There is someone who says they urgently need to speak with you in confidence. It is about the Wickham case."

It took all Darcy's self-control to avoid demanding an explanation without delay. He listened intently.

"It cannot wait?" Constable Rathers asked. "I am speaking with Mr Darcy about that same case now."

"I do not think you will want to put this person off, sir. He says it is urgent."

"Please go, Constable Rathers," Darcy said quickly. "I have no objection to waiting, not when the delay may bring forth valuable information."

Constable Rathers nodded. "We can only hope. In that case, please excuse me, Mr Darcy. I will do my best to make it short. Please wait here."

Though he could have no regrets in sending Constable Rathers off for an interview that might be of material importance, Darcy was not ecstatic about being left alone with his thoughts. He had already spent much too much time pining over Elizabeth. It was foolish, idle, for nothing could change the painful truth that she did not want him. He had tried, and he had failed. Her relief at the chance to dissolve their engagement made it all too clear. She did not love him, and that was the end of it.

Yet his thoughts still wandered to her. Darcy could not help but wonder what she was about at that moment. It was late morning. Perhaps she was in her parlour, sewing something, or reading to her sisters. She had a very expressive way of reading that

pulled her listeners in. Darcy had often daydreamed of what it might be like for them to spend the evenings together in the informal drawing room at Pemberley, listening spellbound as Elizabeth read aloud. Georgiana would have gained a wealth of knowledge and insight from her would-be sister-in-law. Now, they would never know what joys could have awaited them. Georgiana would continue to pine in loneliness and silence for the wrongs Wickham had done her.

Darcy took a deep breath, strengthening his resolve. He must not allow himself to forget why his interview with Constable Rathers was so important. Though Elizabeth was safe, he must ensure that Wickham could not hurt any other unsuspecting young ladies.

The door opened again after a quarter of an hour, and Constable Rathers poked his head around the frame. “Mr Darcy? I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Will you come with me?”

“Has something happened?” he asked, his wariness growing at the look on the constable’s face. Darcy rose from the chair, going around the desk to the door. “Has Wickham escaped?”

“No, there is no way he could have escaped, I assure you of that, Mr Darcy.” Constable Rathers said. “I have just had a very interesting conversation. If I am not mistaken, you will wish to learn what my visitor has come to impart. Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” Darcy said. He followed Constable Rathers to another room, which looked more like a study than the cheerless room in which he had waited. “Mr Darcy, may I present Colonel Forster? I believe you may have been introduced in Meryton. He is the commander of Mr Wickham’s regiment.”

Darcy did recognise the man. While he was about ten years his senior, and his hair

showed the first touches of grey, he was a powerfully built man with the upright spine of a long military career. They had been at the Meryton assembly, and had greeted each other at the Netherfield ball, among other events.

All other concerned faded before the fire in the Colonel's eyes. Darcy drew in a quick breath, wondering what he was about to learn, for good or ill. "Colonel Forster. A pleasure to see you again," he said cautiously.

"I am afraid I do not bring pleasant news, Mr Darcy," Colonel Forster replied.

"Please, let us all sit down, and we can discuss the matter," Constable Rathers suggested. When they were all settled, he went on. "The Colonel has come from the barracks to bring us some news that I think you should hear." Rathers nodded to the Colonel. "Tell him what you just told me."

Colonel Forster sighed heavily, shifting his weight in the chair and causing it to creak loudly. "First, please allow me to apologise for the crime committed against you. And against Miss Elizabeth Bennet, naturally. I had no idea a member of my regiment would stoop so low as to —" He halted, shaking his head. "Well, it has come as a shock to us all. However, I thank you for unmasking him. He was certainly a charming fellow, and would have climbed the ranks quickly, I imagine."

"Would have?" Darcy asked. "I assume you plan to court-martial him after the events of last night were revealed?"

"More than, sir. Indeed, the court-martial has already begun, and I am positive he will be found guilty."

Darcy swallowed hard. It was essential to keep Elizabeth's name from coming out in any inquiry, or worse, landing in the papers. "I should like to ensure that the matter involving Miss Elizabeth Bennet and myself is kept as quiet as possible, for both our

sakes. While events have proved that we have nothing to be ashamed of, neither should I like to be the subject of public speculation and idle gossip. I am sure Constable Rathers already informed you that our engagement has been broken, since we now know it was Mr Wickham who orchestrated the entire ordeal?”

“Yes, I have been informed,” Colonel Forster replied. “I do not think the matter of the compromise will come into play whatsoever. You see, Wickham is guilty of much more than causing a local scandal.” Colonel Forster leaned forward. “After his arrest last evening, we searched his tent and found military plans, private letters stolen from my office, and other tidbits of information that he should not know, nor have in his possession.”

Darcy raised a brow. It was not altogether unsurprising that Wickham would have stolen information, if he thought it might confer some advantage. But for what purpose? “Continue,” he said with a nod.

“The signs were all too clear. It cannot be doubted that he was in contact with the French. He had been planning to sell the information after he deserted.” Colonel Forster leaned back and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief as if it was all too much for him. “This news may come as a shock even after Mr Wickham’s recent actions, given that, as I understand, you have known him for many years. He is to be hanged as a spy.”

Colonel Forster was right that it was a shock. Darcy slumped back in his chair and allowed the news to sink in. “Hanged?” His father would have been heartbroken. When Wickham was a young boy, he had loved him like another son. Even as he grew to manhood, and Darcy found the signs of his selfishness and callous disregard for others growing all too clear, his father had refused to see Wickham as anything but the charming lad he had once been.

Had the late Mr Darcy known that lad would be executed in disgrace one day, he

would have wept.

“I am sorry,” Colonel Forster said.

Darcy shook his head. “I am not saddened for myself, as you may suppose. Of course, I would not wish the noose on anyone. But I cannot claim that he deserves mercy. He has done wrong too gravely, and too often. It was not for lack of opportunities to return to the right path in life that he has come to this.” Darcy stood and began to pace. He could have seen Wickham locked up where he could hurt no one else without regret. But he had not wished him dead, save for in the first moments of untamed fury after he had insulted Elizabeth’s honour. He had hoped to put the whole ordeal behind them after they were married. Wickham would not have been able to hurt them then. But to have the death sentence?

“I must confess, I am saddened for the boy he used to be, for the friend I used to know. Before the world so cruelly changed him.” Darcy sighed heavily. It was a shame Wickham had allowed his choices to lead him down a dark path.

Colonel Forster stood, as did Rathers. “I am sorry it’s come to this. He could have been a fine soldier, but he always seemed discontented with his lot.”

“He wanted your position, I suppose?” Darcy asked.

Colonel Forster cocked his head to the side in thought. “Perhaps for a little while he had his sights on my position. But no, I think the person he envied most, the person he wanted to be, was you.” He extended his hand, and they shook. “I think he would have done well to mimic you, Mr Darcy. Brief as our acquaintance has been, I have learned much of your character from what Constable Rathers has told me of this affair. Wickham would have done well to learn from you, rather than merely envy you.”

Darcy blinked. Wickham had always fought against the goad, but he had never imagined it was jealousy of himself. His position as the son of a wealthy father, perhaps, but nothing more than that. Wickham had cared little for honour.

No matter the reasons for Wickham's downfall, he would no longer be a threat to any of them. And that was a relief. "Thank you for coming to tell me in person, Colonel. And do keep me apprised of the situation."

"I will, thank you, Mr Darcy."

Darcy left the prison, climbed into his carriage, and started the journey back to Netherfield. He would have to go on to Longbourn and tell Elizabeth the news —

But no, he could not — must not. He must remember that there was nothing between them now. She had been so relieved the night before to see it ended. He leaned back in the seat, watching the frigid landscape pass by. Frost covered everything in a thin sheen of white. His breath came out in wisps of mist, but he did not reach for the furs. He was too downhearted to worry about his own comfort.

He would have to send a note to Mr Bennet, alerting him to the turn of events in Wickham's case. Once again, he thought of the monumental consequences Wickham would now endure. Wickham had always been fixated on gaining his own fortune, had even gone so far as to try to dislodge Darcy from his father's affections.

Those had been sad days, both for the discomfort of enduring Wickham's stratagems, and for the transparent fact of their failure. The elder Mr Darcy had loved Wickham, of course, but his affection for his son and heir had never wavered. Many, many times, Darcy had wished his father might address the flaws in Wickham, but he had never needed to fear for his own place. Wickham's own father had played a role in planting that misconception in his son, Darcy presumed. The elder Mr Wickham, as he remembered him, had been a hard, unforgiving man toward his son. Wickham had

never been able to please his father. No doubt that early grief had played a role in turning him into the grasping, lecherous man he had become.

Darcy shook his head and looked out the window again. It was time to put the past behind him. Wickham, miserable soul that he was, had brought this upon himself, and there seemed little Darcy could do to save him, even if he had wanted to. Guilt momentarily washed over him. Would his father have wished him to do more? When they were young, he had charged him to protect Wickham, to treat him like a member of their own family. Yet surely, his father would not have held him to that silent promise of protection if he had known what a scoundrel he had turned out to be. No, it was not for him to interfere in the military's way of executing justice. Still, the thought of Wickham hanging for his crimes made his stomach turn.

Sorrow filled him, seeping into his bones. After he wrote to Mr Bennet to tell him of what happened, there would be nothing left to stay for. Bingley was due to propose to Miss Jane Bennet, Wickham would never be able to hurt anyone again, and even if the Bennet sisters were forced to leave Longbourn, Bingley would see to their comfort. The girls would find worthy husbands, would have the luxury of selecting their future partners in life based on mutual esteem, rather than necessity. It made his heart ache to think of Elizabeth falling in love with someone else. But she would have a chance at happiness this way, at least. That would have to be enough comfort for him.

When Darcy arrived at Netherfield, he went straight up to his set of rooms, bypassing the parlour. For once, he had no wish to speak with Bingley, dear friend though he was. He was eager to dispose of the obligation to inform Mr Bennet of Wickham's fate. The sooner that task was done, the sooner he would be free to leave Meryton.

It was not only out of missing Georgiana that he wished to leave as quickly as possible. He longed to see his sister, it was true, but it was almost an equal object to avoid any painful and humiliating interviews with Elizabeth. It was clear she did not

want him now. Indeed, she had said she was relieved that they would not be forced to marry. He went to the writing desk and stared at the blank page for a long while. Usually, he was quite efficient at writing letters. Then again, this was not a letter of business, written to issue instructions. It was only the second time he had written to tell of someone's imminent death — and the first had been his father's death, a more natural if equally tragic end. To write of an impending execution was something else entirely. It made the hair on his neck and arms stand on end, as though he were the one holding the hangman's noose at the ready.

Shaking his head, he wrote a hurried note, trying not to take too much time to go over the details. He was confident that Mr Bennet would relay the information as gently as possible. It hurt that he could not write directly to Elizabeth or go to see her, as he would have preferred. But it would be better this way. He would not have to see the sparkle in her dark eyes and be reminded of the painful aching in his heart. He could almost wish that Bingley were not going to marry her older sister, if he had not come to be utterly convinced of the suitability of the match. To have his best friend married to Elizabeth's beloved sister would be difficult. He would have to see her. One day, he would surely have to see her love another, choose another. And he would have to bear it — somehow.

Bingley was due to propose to Miss Bennet within the next few days, Darcy thought dully. Perhaps he had even already done so. They had discussed the matter at length over a glass of port, and he was certain that Bingley was eager to speak for the young lady.

He would have to stay away from Bingley and his new wife for a time, once they had wed. Elizabeth would surely visit them, and it would be far too painful to see her.

Too painful to know she did not love him, when he would never love another as he loved her.

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Elizabeth paused before the cracked door of her father's study. She ought to simply knock. He had sent Hill to find her, after all. And if the door was open, there was no need to draw back from interrupting him. When her father was preserving and pinning insects to a board, or cataloguing plant species he had gathered and pressed from around the Longbourn property or wood, he sometimes resented any interruptions to his concentration. Yet such could not be the case when he had asked her to come.

But this was all foolishness, borne of her own dread over what he might say to her. Elizabeth sighed and knocked on the doorframe.

"Enter!" her father called from inside the study.

"You wanted to see me, Papa?" Elizabeth asked. She closed the door behind her when her father waved his hand in that direction. "Has something happened?"

She sat down across from him. Mr Bennet sat at his desk, which was another anomaly. He usually liked to read or even study his species boards, where he had pinned various flora or fauna, comfortably seated in his plush chair near the tall windows overlooking the garden.

"Yes, something has. Or at least, it will happen soon." Her father wore a solemn expression — no, he looked almost haunted. Elizabeth's heart began to hammer in her chest. Had something dreadful befallen Mr Darcy? Or Uncle Gardiner in London? Or even the Bingley family?

"Tell me quickly, Papa. I cannot bear the suspense," Elizabeth said. Though they

were no longer betrothed, she could not imagine the world without Mr Darcy, even if he would belong to another someday. “Is it Mr Darcy?”

Her father looked at her speculatively. Elizabeth did her best to meet his gaze with equanimity. “It is true he has written to me, but the contents of his letter do not concern himself.” He cleared his throat and began to read.

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Dear Mr Bennet,

I have been to the county prison where Mr Wickham is being held. While there, I met Colonel Forster, who was good enough to inform me of some news of a most serious nature. It appears Mr Wickham was engaged in spying on his superiors in the regiment. He is to be hanged as a traitor for selling secrets to the French. The only good news that has possibly come out of this is that the scandal will not have to be dragged into the public eye. He will not be able to hurt Miss Elizabeth again, and we may all return to life as usual before the compromise was carried out. Colonel Forster has assured me of his ability and intention to clear our names without causing greater scandal. I have given him my approbation and thanks; I hope that this course of action meets with your approval.

I remain dutifully yours,

Mr Darcy.

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Elizabeth had not realised she had been holding her breath until her father finished reading, refolded the letter, and set it aside. Feeling the weight of her father’s gaze, she looked away, studying her hands instead. Such relief, yet mingled with such

horror — Elizabeth could not have imagined feeling such wildly disparate emotions. “My goodness! Hanged?” she breathed. “I confess, I had wished to see him imprisoned for what he has done. But hanged?” She shook her head. She could feel no joy in the fact that Mr Wickham’s end should be so gruesome.

And should she not feel ashamed that, upon being informed that a man was about to die in disgrace, she could not seem to stop wondering why Mr Darcy had not come to tell them in person?

“It is perfectly normal to be upset. Especially considering the cordiality you once felt for the man. Dare I even say affection?” her father asked gently.

Elizabeth stood and began to pace. “It is true that I thought very well of him at one time. But he showed his true colours some time ago. It has been weeks now since I have viewed Mr Wickham with distrust and dislike.” She bit the nail on her little finger. “But why did Mr Darcy not come himself to speak with us? Or indeed, why did he write to you instead of me?”

Her father rose slowly from his chair in testimony to his aging bones. He joined her on the other side of the desk, where the faint winter light trailed through the open curtains, and placed his hands on her shoulders. “It would have been inappropriate for him to write directly to you now, Lizzy, since there is no longer an understanding between the two of you.”

The reminder cut to the quick. Elizabeth turned away to collect herself before her tears could well up. “Yes, of course. That is true.” She breathed out slowly and evenly, doing her best to keep the emotions at bay. “Well, I thank you for telling me about Mr Wickham. May I be excused?”

She turned and saw the sadness seeping into her father’s eyes. “Of course, dear Lizzy.”

She gave a tight-lipped smile and hurried from the room. Elizabeth was about to turn up the stairwell and seek solace in her rooms, but when she heard excited chatter floating down to her from above, she reasoned her sisters were already above stairs. And the last thing she needed at that moment was to explain the pain and confusion they were sure to read on her face. She turned instead down the corridor, retrieved a shawl from the hook, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Elizabeth hurried out the back servant's entrance and out across the fields. The wind howled around her, loosing her chestnut waves from the simple bun at the nape of her neck, and whipping it around her face.

She barely noticed. The pain emanating from her heart seemed to consume all her attention. Mr Darcy did not care for her — likely had never cared for her. He had only been playing his part, doing his duty to protect her, nothing more. How he must be relieved to be rid of her! Mr Wickham had been right. It had been out of character for Mr Darcy to stand by her — a young woman with no connections, and barely a dowry to speak of, at least compared to his vast estate. Why should he lower himself, if honour did not require it of him?

In light of his behaviour that afternoon, there was little doubt that he never wanted to see her again. And just when she knew she was in love with him. Her whole heart ached to be near him, to see his smile, which was only flawed in being much too rare. The right wife could correct that flaw, if he let her.

And how much might he have taught her! Elizabeth had come to rely on him in ways that she would never have imagined: his calm resolve, his gentleness, and the supposed longing she had thought matched hers whenever they looked at each other. They had made a good team throughout the whole crisis of the compromise, each complementing the other's skills.

Shivering, Elizabeth wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders. It was not really

adequate to the weather. The thin material was for keeping warm inside of the house when the night grew chilly, not for traipsing about the countryside with rain on the horizon.

All the same, Elizabeth would not turn back until she had got control of herself. The pain she felt was enough to make her wish she had never tried to find out the truth about who was behind the scandal. If she had only let matters rest, she and Mr Darcy would be fast approaching their wedding day. Was it folly to think she could have made him happy? That, given time and chance, he might have come to love her as deeply as she did him?

Elizabeth stopped when she came to the low wall that separated the small field surrounding the Longbourn Estate and the pasturelands beyond. The landscape was bare and lonely without the sheep herds roaming about, as they did in summer. With storms brewing, there would be no roaming that day. It mimicked how she felt on the inside, wandering about alone, with no direction.

“You stupid woman,” she whispered to herself. Why had she taken so long to realise what an exemplary man Mr Darcy was? She was convinced now that no other man of her acquaintance could equal him. And it was not for his wealth or many fine carriages and houses, his standing in society. Her heart was tied to his now with a kind of kindred knowing that she had never felt with another, besides Jane, perhaps. But even then, it was different. Mr Darcy was like herself, wishing to understand the truth of others. For all Jane’s intelligence, she could not do the same, for she viewed everyone through the lens of her own wishes — to only see and expect the good.

Elizabeth shook her head after several minutes. No matter her longing for him, the truth was always better than a lie. It was a sad reality, but there was at least the comfort of Mr Wickham no longer being able to hurt anyone else with his scheming and lies. And Mr Darcy would not have to worry about the man’s grasping for wealth and his attempts at petty vengeance.

She would simply have to go on without Mr Darcy. Elizabeth turned and started back toward the house as the first rain droplets made contact with the barren earth. She would have to find a way to forget him and move on, even if it seemed impossible.

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“You look lovely,” Elizabeth said. She kept a smile on her face, though with an effort. Several days had passed since the letter from Mr Darcy explaining that they would never have to lay eyes on Mr Wickham again. In that time, Mr Bingley had been to the house to call on Jane every day. Preparations for the wedding were going quickly, and Elizabeth had even given her the dress that she would have worn for her own wedding, to adjust and change as she pleased. “I say, the colour looks much better on you than it would have on me.”

“Nonsense,” Jane said, looking at her with a concerned frown. She paused, stepping off the little pedestal that Elizabeth had had her standing on so she could bring down the hem. Jane was a good two inches taller than Elizabeth, but thankfully, there was enough fabric in the hem to lengthen it suitably. Jane took her hands and made her rise. She gave them a gentle squeeze. “Are you sure you do not mind me wearing this dress? It was meant for your wedding. It seems sacrilegious somehow.”

“Now you are the one talking nonsense,” Elizabeth said with a short laugh. “I wanted to give it to you. Who knows how long I may have to collect a trousseau, or what kind of wedding dress I might want, when I finally have occasion to wear one? This way, you will not have the expense of buying more fabric for your wedding gown. Not that Mr Bingley could not afford it.”

“Economies still need to be taken. Just because he is rich does not mean we can give ourselves to excess. Papa says that a man stays rich by watching his spending carefully.”

Elizabeth urged her to stand still so she could finish pinning the hem. “You will look ravishing in this colour, though. And with a little overlay of Spanish lace, you will look like the queen I am convinced you were born to be.”

“Your flattery is too sweet, Lizzy. I would have married Mr Bingley even if he had only a competency, rather than a fortune. You know it was not his wealth that attracted my heart to him.”

“Ah, but it certainly did not hurt. I think Mama is the happiest of all,” Elizabeth went on, giving a little teasing warmth to her tone. It distracted her from the pain that still lay coiled around her heart. Mr Darcy would be leaving soon, she had heard from Mr Bingley. He was making preparations to return to Pemberley as quickly as possible, and she doubted they would see him again after the wedding for some time. Likely, their paths would cross one day. After all, she would always be Jane’s sister, and he, Mr Bingley’s closest friend. She would have to see him and know he did not care for her.

Elizabeth hung her head and swiped at the tear that streamed down her cheek. She quickly covered it up by grabbing a pin from the little wrist strap on her left arm and pinned the last section. “There, now how does that look to you?” Elizabeth asked, moving out of the way of the full-length mirror so Jane could see.

Jane smiled, and it was enough to make Elizabeth smile as well. “It is perfect,” she whispered. She smoothed her hands over the dark emerald fabric. “I do not think it needs the lace. I like it just as it is.”

“Surely you must have something to add a bit of flair. Mr Bingley is a very fine gentleman, after all. And I will be prodigiously annoyed if Miss Bingley dresses more finely than you at your own wedding,” Elizabeth said, smiling impishly. She helped Jane down and hugged her from behind, looking over her shoulder as they both stared at her in the mirror. “I shall miss you terribly when you go.”

Jane turned around and hugged her tightly. "Oh, Lizzy, we shall not be far from here. At least, not for some time. The lease is not up on Netherfield Park for several months yet." She brushed a hand down her cheek, then tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ears. Elizabeth could hardly hold back the tears at her sister's gentle gesture. "I shall miss you, too, Lizzy. Who shall I have my late night chats with?"

Elizabeth laughed at this. "With your new husband, I expect. You shall not need me anymore." She put the needles and pins away in the sewing box, turning her back on Jane to collect her emotions. "And when you have children, I shall be the spinster aunt who comes and makes a nuisance of herself every few weeks, but I shall be their favourite, I assure you." She turned back around with a smile that was much too bright. "I will spoil them with sweets and make sure that they never go to bed on time when they are in my care."

Jane smiled, but there was still concern shining in her eyes. "What makes you think you will be a spinster, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth hung her head, picking at her nails. Her mouth quivered, even as she tried to keep her smile intact. "I have no need of a husband. I shall find a way to support myself so I will not be a burden to Mama and Papa."

Jane closed the distance between them. "I do not think it is that you feel no desire to be married. I think you believe that no man will be able to measure up to Mr Darcy in your estimation." She paused, waiting for Elizabeth to look up at her. "You love him."

It was not a question, but a statement. Elizabeth bit her lower lip, and the tears began to fall. "I never said I loved him."

"You did not have to," Jane replied, wiping away Elizabeth's tears. "I can see it clearly written on your face. Why did you not tell him of your feelings, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth had to walk away, feeling the press of emotion roiling in her chest, making it difficult to breathe. “How could I? He seemed so relieved to be rid of me the night we found out Mr Wickham had been behind the compromise. I have nothing to offer him.”

“You have an intelligent mind and winning spirit, Lizzy. I could not help but see the admiration, even love, shining in his eyes every time he looked at you. Truly, I think he could hardly take his eyes off you.”

Elizabeth shook her head. It was cruel to hope, for she knew it would only end in disappointment. “It is too late. Mr Darcy has made it clear he no longer wishes to be seen with me. He will marry a woman who is more befitting of his station now, someone who will do a far better job than I ever could have in running his household.” And giving him children. That was another thing that made her heart ache. Perhaps she would have children of her own one day, but they would not be his. There would be no son with his stubborn chin and charming smile, no daughter with his thick dark hair...

Jane joined her at the window, looking out at the storm that had been blowing the rain sideways against the house for the last hour. “Oh Jane, I’ve been so blind...”

Her sister wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Elizabeth was glad that she offered no words of comfort. What more was to be said? Mr Darcy was lost to her. Only time could heal that wound.

“Where are you going?”

Darcy looked up as Bingley entered his guest room. There could be no denying the charge, for Darcy had been standing over the trunk that his valet had so carefully packed, adding some books and removing others. Likely ruining Jameson’s hard work, Darcy was forced to admit to himself. His valet was always annoyed, though too discrete to say so openly, when his highly efficient packing was disarrayed. Darcy looked away, feeling guilty. “I am preparing to depart for Pemberley this evening.”

“Tonight? Surely not!” Bingley said. He joined him at the trunk, where he had been meddling with the packed books. Bingley started removing them from the trunk and replacing them on the desk. “You must come to the assembly with us. It is the first public event that Jane and I will have attended since the engagement.”

Darcy let out a sad sigh. “I cannot,” he said lamely. “I have already called for the carriage.”

“Well, simply tell your coachman he will be taking you to Meryton, instead of Derbyshire.” Bingley continued taking things out of his trunks and replacing them on the desk for the valet to put away. “What were you thinking of, leaving for such a trip at night? I need you, my friend. How can I go through this evening without you by my side?”

Darcy hated to let down a friend. Yet it would be torture to see Elizabeth, knowing that she could never be his. What could be done? Surely, his friendship with Bingley was more important than his own discomfort. He sighed heavily, laying aside the books he had been holding, as well as his letter-writing implements. “Very well. I

shall stay until tomorrow. But then I really must depart for Pemberley, especially if Georgiana and I are to return in time for your wedding.” He gave a weak smile, wishing things could have been different.

“Good!” Bingley said, slapping him good-naturedly on the shoulder. “I am glad you changed your mind. But of course I understand. I want you and Miss Darcy to be present for the wedding. Indeed, I do not think I could stand up on my wedding day without you as my witness.”

Darcy looked at his hands. He had hoped that Bingley would stand up with him at the altar on his wedding day. Now, he was unsure if he would ever find someone with whom he could pledge his life and troth. Another woman, however exemplary, would not be his Elizabeth. “I will be proud to stand up with you on that day, my friend.”

Bingley’s face fell, no doubt seeing the sadness in Darcy’s visage. “I am sorry things did not work out between you and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You seemed as if you were coming to an understanding, there at the end.”

“It was what she wanted,” Darcy shrugged, trying to downplay the hurt radiating through his heart. “She was relieved that the mystery had been solved and our names were cleared. It was only right to let her out of an engagement that she never wanted.”

Bingley cocked his head, looking at him sideways for several moments. “I am surprised. It seems to me that Miss Elizabeth was a good match for you — both in spirit and in mind. You are similar in many ways, but she would have challenged you in others, just as you would have done for her. And you worked so well together. I would even venture as far as to say she seemed to have a genuine affection for you. Are you sure she wanted to call off the engagement? Could it be that she was only relieved that the trap had worked and Wickham was caught?”

Darcy could not bring himself to seriously consider it. Hope was simply too painful. “It is better this way, Bingley. Believe me. Miss Elizabeth will be free to find someone she can truly esteem. It would never have worked to go through with a marriage that had been forced like this.”

“I am not so sure. Say what you will of Wickham, and certainly his actions were beneath contempt, taking such a pitiful revenge on you and trying to extort Mr Bennet. He is a louse and a scoundrel, and I will not gloat over someone so soon destined for eternity, but I will say this: perhaps you have reason to be grateful to Wickham for one thing — that he brought you and Miss Elizabeth together.”

Darcy hardly knew what to say. He simply nodded and put a hand on his friend’s shoulder, ushering him toward the door of his room. “Well, I suppose I should ready myself for this evening, then, if we are to go to the assembly?”

“Yes, indeed. I do not think you will be disappointed that I have pressed you to stay. Perhaps there will be another pretty young lady who catches your eye.”

The suggestion could hardly be serious. The more Darcy thought of the future, the more bleak it looked without Elizabeth.

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The music and dancing were already in full swing when Darcy arrived with Bingley and his relations. Miss Bingley had remained taciturn since the dinner party with the Bennet’s. He was unsure whether she was turning over a new leaf or if she was simply biding her time for the next insult she could hurl at the family, but it was a welcome change either way. Her brother was certain to reprimand her again if she stepped out of line, as he had had to do at the family dinner party. Darcy was proud that his young friend had stepped into his role as head of the family that night, and he hoped he would continue in that frame of mind. The Bingley family would need a

leader, and he was sure that Charles Bingley would be exactly the right firm hand to guide the family into further prosperity and happiness.

Thankfully, he had chosen his wife wisely, selecting a woman who was not only beautiful, but kind, compassionate, and gentle. They would lead their community with grace and generosity. Darcy watched Bingley as he claimed his bride-to-be's hand, and they made their way to the dancefloor arm in arm. Because of their recent engagement, the master of the ceremonies asked them to lead the next dance, and Darcy stood back watching, proud and happy for his friend. He had promised himself not to dwell on the presence of his once-fiancée. It would be too painful, surely, to see her dancing with other men.

He could not stop himself from glancing over after they had come into the large room. Elizabeth stood at the far end of the room with her sisters, looking as beautiful as he had ever seen her. Her cheeks were touched with pink, but he did not think it was for excitement or joy, but perhaps the crowdedness and heat of the room. She gave a slight smile every once in a while, but the smile did not touch her eyes. He knew her well enough to know the difference between a genuine smile and one put on for the benefit of others.

Lady Lucas joined him as soon as the dance set was finished, fanning herself vigorously. "My dear Mr Darcy, I hope you are well after the news we've heard?"

Darcy tried to play off his surprise. "Madame?"

"Mr Wickham!" she whispered, taking on a conspiratorial air. "We heard the news only yesterday. I cannot believe we had a spy for the French in our midst — and he was in the militia! It is abominable!" She took a sip of her punch and held her fan over her considerable bosom. "When I think that I had him in my home for supper, I am appalled at myself."

“You did not know, my lady,” Darcy replied. He braced himself for talk of the compromise between him and Elizabeth.

Lady Lucas leaned closer. “I have also heard whispers that you and Miss Elizabeth Bennet have broken your engagement? Is that true?”

“It is,” he replied. “Now that our innocence has been proven, the need for the engagement has been removed.” He could not help looking in Elizabeth’s direction. At that exact moment, she looked his way as well. Their eyes met, and he saw the same pain and sadness mirrored in her eyes — dare he even say regret? But regret for what? Did she suspect how deeply she had hurt him? Could it even be regret at having called off their wedding? That seemed too much to hope, and yet he could not stop himself from wishing it might be so.

“It is a shame. You would have made such a lovely couple,” Lady Lucas sighed. “To think that Mr Wickham could stoop so low as to arrange the incident between the two of you! I tell you, I shall never trust a militiaman again for as long as I live!”

“Not all militiamen are blackguards, my lady. Mr Wickham was a sadly selfish man. He was determined to please himself, no matter who he hurt in the process.” Darcy tore his gaze from Elizabeth’s, his heart beating wildly against his ribcage. Could he really walk away from this opportunity to speak with her one last time? He was leaving in the morning. Perhaps Bingley was right. He needed to know for certain that Elizabeth did not love him. He turned his attention to Lady Lucas for a moment, hoping to put a quick end to the conversation. “I am sorry for the end Mr Wickham faces. But I am glad that he will not wreak havoc in anyone else’s lives again.”

“Well said, Mr Darcy. Even now, you show the excellence of your character in saying so,” Lady Lucas replied. “Everyone I have spoken with has praised your exemplary behaviour through this whole ordeal. Well, both you and Miss Elizabeth, really. It is a pity that Mr Wickham forced such an awful experience on you both,

plotting to destroy your good name. But you have come out on top, I daresay.”

“Indeed?” Darcy asked. It was strange to think that the people who had viewed them with suspicion only a few days before now seemed to see them as heroes.

“Yes, indeed. Everyone sees now that you and Miss Elizabeth are innocent, as you claimed from the very beginning. How wonderful that you are now free to live your lives in full confidence of your reputations being set to rights!”

Darcy glanced again at Elizabeth. He did not want to live free from her. He wanted her by his side, through every good time and bad time, through sickness and health — through everything that life might bring. It would mean nothing if he didn’t have her by his side. Even the restoration of his reputation and the relief that Wickham could never target his family again was not enough to overcome his sense of loss. Without her, it was futile. Rather than deaden his feelings for her, coming to the assembly had only confirmed them. He wanted her more than ever.

“Mr Darcy? Are you quite well?” Lady Lucas asked, intruding on his thoughts.

He turned to her sharply, tearing his gaze from Elizabeth for a moment. “Yes, quite well,” he murmured. He hung his head, still battling within himself. What was to be done? “Will you excuse me for a moment, Lady Lucas? I fear I need a breath of fresh air.”

“Ah, yes, of course. That would be most beneficial.” She linked her hand through his, misunderstanding his bid for privacy. They walked outside together and took a turn around the balcony of the assembly rooms. “My eldest daughter is soon to be married. Have you happened to hear of it?”

Darcy shook his head. “I had not had the pleasure of hearing the news. My most sincere congratulations.”

“Thank you. Charlotte is to marry Mr Collins, who has a living in Kent with a charming rectory. It is a pleasant little place, called Hunsford Cottage, just a little way from Rosings Park, the estate of his noble patroness.”

“I am well acquainted with Rosings, ma’am, for Mr Collins’s patron, Lady Catherine, is my aunt,” Darcy informed her. He only hoped that Miss Lucas would be happy in the union, for Darcy’s impressions of Mr Collins were far from favourable. Did Miss Lucas know he had shamelessly pursued Elizabeth during his visit, despite the clearest indications of her disinterest? If he was not mistaken, Mr Collins had left after the compromise, and had vowed never to speak to the family again.

Still, nothing could be gained from sharing his doubts with the lady’s mother. “In any case, Lady Lucas, let me offer my congratulations on the match. I wish her very well and happy.”

“Yes, she is getting settled nicely, from what she has written. Such a pleasant woman your aunt is! Truly, Mr Collins cannot say enough good of her.”

Darcy held back a smile. “I am glad to hear it.” Privately, he suspected Miss Lucas would have to exercise a great deal of diplomacy to offer equal praise. Lady Catherine’s society was not always agreeable, particularly for those she perceived as being beneath her.

“I believe Lady Catherine has plans to make several improvements to the cottage in the coming months, now that Mr Collins has a wife to support.” Lady Lucas held tighter to his arm as they came to a set of stairs and walked down them into the maze of gardens outside the meeting house. “I am glad to see her settled. I was beginning to worry she would never find someone to marry her.”

Mr Collins had certainly got the better end of that deal, Darcy thought as they walked. Of course, he would never say it aloud. He was happy that Charlotte Lucas

had found her place in the world. Elizabeth had spoken more than once of her dear friend and confidant. “She will make him a fine wife, and he shall be a better man for having her affections.”

Lady Lucas beamed from ear to ear at the praise. They walked on for several more minutes until Lady Lucas became too chilled from the winter air. He walked her back to the assembly. He scanned the room from the balcony doorway, every part of his being longing for a glimpse of Elizabeth. She still stood at the far end of the room, looking as miserable as he felt.

There was no denying it now. Darcy knew down to his bones that he had to try once more. If he declared himself and she rejected him, she would never have to see his face again. But if Elizabeth could love him as he did her, it would be the greatest triumph of his life. He must make the attempt. If he did not try, he would never forgive himself.

Earlier that day

Elizabeth could not seem to settle. She spent the afternoon picking up her book and setting it down again, restlessly moving from the drawing room to her bedchamber and from her bedchamber to the second parlour. She dreaded the coming evening and the Meryton assembly, and yet it could not come quickly enough.

If nothing else, she might at least hope to see herself vindicated in the eyes of her neighbours. There was little chance of any greater satisfaction. That Mr Darcy was leaving Meryton had been reported by too many reliable sources. Mrs Long had taken great pride in knowing it, and had hoped to outdo Mrs Bennet, but in this she had been disappointed, for they had already learned of it through a groom at Netherfield stables, who told Cook. There had been much activity around the packing of Mr Darcy's trunks, and the preparations for the carriage.

Elizabeth had nearly pleaded a headache and stayed home from the event. She hardly knew whether it would be worse to have Mr Darcy present or absent. To see him would be painful, too painful. But not to see him one last time before a separation of uncertain length, knowing that he might be married when she saw him next — it was impossible.

When she had heard that Mr Darcy would not be in attendance, Elizabeth could take cold comfort in learning which was greater, her hopes or her fears. Her heart was sick with a bitter longing. Just when she knew she loved Mr Darcy, everything was over between them forever. There would be no wedding, and she wondered if she would ever find a man with whom she could share the same kindred belonging she had felt in his company.

Having given up all hope and all dread of meeting him, Elizabeth nearly fell over from shock upon seeing Mr Darcy enter the assembly rooms with Mr Bingley and his relations. Miss Bingley looked like she had been brought down several pegs since the first night of her introduction to Meryton society. How much had changed since that night! Elizabeth blushed to remember how confident she had been in her assessments of the party. In Miss Bingley, perhaps, she had not greatly erred, but Elizabeth could not look back on how unfairly she had judged Mr Darcy without abhorrence. She had seen his assurance and taken it for arrogance; she had judged him for his reticence and a few ill-spoken words and overlooked a sense of honour and responsibility that could only inspire admiration.

Elizabeth would have liked to tell him so, just once. He ought to know how very greatly he was esteemed. But as that could only have humiliated them both, she held her tongue.

Never had an assembly seemed to go so slowly. Elizabeth could not stop herself from finding fault with everything — the musicians tuneless, the partners few, and the conversations dull. Mr Darcy was there, their eyes met, and yet he would not speak to her. As a rebuke, it must be clear enough.

Yet if there had not been a secret weight on her heart, Elizabeth might have found the assembly highly rewarding. Suddenly, she seemed to have gone from a near-pariah in Meryton to an honoured neighbour and fully vindicated friend.

Sir Lucas was first among those who offered her mingled congratulations and apologies. “Well, Miss Elizabeth, what a relief it is to have all that business over with! And to think what Mr Wickham might have told the French, if Mr Darcy had not stopped him! It does not bear thinking of.”

“No, indeed, Sir Lucas,” Elizabeth agreed pleasantly, and declined to point out that she herself might have been said to have done more in accomplishing the

apprehension of Mr Wickham. After all, it was she who first suspected him. “Mr Wickham is a scoundrel. His behaviour hardly bears description.”

“Indeed not! Well, you must excuse me, Miss Elizabeth, for I ought to congratulate Mr Darcy, the hero of the hour! Did you know he is to leave soon? Now that the engagement is dissolved, perhaps you have not heard as much of his plans.”

“I thank you, Sir Lucas, I was aware of his going.”

“Capital, capital!” Sir Lucas exclaimed, and with that, he was off.

Elizabeth could not help watching the encounter from across the room. Her curiosity was simply too great. To judge by his expression, Mr Darcy was as nonplussed by Sir Lucas’s enthusiasm as she was.

And so it went with all their neighbours. Elizabeth had not realised that in clearing her name, she would have turned herself into a kind of local hero, but so it seemed to go. Of course, that was largely because of Mr Wickham’s treachery, for everyone liked to hear of a traitor being thwarted in his treasonous intentions. At least everyone seemed firmly convinced of her innocence. Whatever it had cost her in hours of confusion and heartache, at least the name of Bennet was safe once more.

Yet all that was nothing if Mr Darcy would not speak to her. To ask her to dance might have been too much to expect. After all, she well knew he did not much care for dancing. But surely it would not have been too much to expect for him to speak to her one last time.

Ought she to speak to him? Elizabeth considered the question uneasily. Was it love or respect that made her think she ought to, and was it cowardice or propriety that made her think it better left undone?

At last, Elizabeth decided she would keep her distance. If she said anything at all, she was very much afraid that she would say too much.

Upon arriving home late from the assembly, she went straight to her room, changed into her nightgown, and climbed under the coverlet. Deliberately, she closed her eyes, wishing that she might simply stop thinking for a time.

But the thoughts would not stay away.

He did not want her. If he had, he would have come to her at the assembly, would have asked her to dance. Instead, he had only looked at her in silence. Surely it would be folly to think there was anything in those looks that mirrored her own longing.

Jane slipped between the covers about a half hour after Elizabeth had gone to bed. She had kept the candle burning, propping up the blankets so she could see her face — just as they had done when they were children. “Are you well, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth wrestled with whether to tell her the truth or keep her feelings to herself. It ought to be an evening of triumph for Jane. Nothing should ruin that. “I am glad you and Mr Bingley could celebrate your engagement with so many friends and well-wishers.”

Jane watched her for several seconds, giving her a tender, understanding smile. “That is not what I asked.”

Elizabeth lowered her voice, wrapping her arms around her waist as if the gesture could stop her from drifting away. “I may not be well at this moment, but I will be.” She offered a tight-lipped smile. “I must confess, seeing Mr Darcy at the assembly was difficult. But I suppose now we know we can meet as common and indifferent acquaintances.”

Jane raised a brow. “I think you are in danger of making him fall as madly in love with you as ever.”

Her sister’s bold delivery caught her off-guard just as much as the contents of the statement. Jane rarely voiced her real thoughts and opinions. “Oh?” Elizabeth asked, hating the tremble in her voice. How was it even worse to feel a spark of hope than to think that all hope was lost?

“You cannot think he doesn’t care for you. Surely you did not miss the look on his face when he saw you this evening. He is in just as much misery as you are.”

“It is too painful to hope,” Elizabeth said raggedly. “I do not think that can be. Why would he not speak to me then — why has he not come to see me? Please, Jane, do not mention him again. I cannot bear it — ” With an effort, Elizabeth regained her control. “Dear Jane, I do not think I can say any more about it. I have made an utter mess of everything.”

“No,” Jane said with surprising firmness. “How can you say so? You have found out the truth, Lizzy, and you stopped Mr Wickham from hurting more people. It must be painful to be congratulated when your heart is breaking — I can see that it is. But do not think that you didn’t do the right thing, simply because it is painful.”

For a moment, Elizabeth could hardly breathe. Jane’s words seemed to ring through her, clearing away all her confusion, if not her grief. Elizabeth had always known that her sister’s integrity was beyond question, that her heart was kindness itself, but to have such a proof of her wisdom was stunning.

Jane’s clear-sightedness deserved a return. “Thank you,” Elizabeth said at last. “I believe I had somewhat lost sight of that. Whatever comes of it, we did the right thing. I did the right thing. And I would rather lose Mr Darcy with the truth than keep him with a lie.”

“I know,” Jane said softly, “and I love you.”

Elizabeth hardly knew whether the sound she made then was a chuckle, or a sob. “I love you, too.”

With that, Jane nodded and blew out the candle. It was not long before her breathing evened out into sleep. Elizabeth stared into the shadowy corners of the room. Jane had given her something precious — a kind of acceptance, and a degree of peace. And if that could not undo the pain in her heart, if Elizabeth still cried silent tears before she at last went to sleep, it was at least something.

The morning dawned cool and grey. Even having gained a little solace, Elizabeth could not bring herself to join the rest of the family for breakfast. “Tell them I did not sleep very well. Mama will understand,” she told Jane when she was ready to go down. “I will stay here and read a little.

Jane gave her an understanding look. “Of course, Lizzy.”

Unhurriedly, Elizabeth rose and put on her dressing gown. She was at the point of settling into her favourite spot at the window seat and opening her book when Lydia burst through the door without even so much as a knock. “Lizzy! Wake up!”

Elizabeth sat up straight, slightly annoyed that her sister had barged in on her moment of solitude. “I am awake.”

“Get dressed! Get ready this instant!” Lydia exclaimed, breathless from running up the stairs. She started rummaging through the dresses hanging on the screen and chose a dark green one that looked particularly pleasing with Elizabeth’s complexion. “This one.” She tossed it at Elizabeth, who only looked at her in puzzlement, unmoving.

“What is the matter?” Elizabeth asked. “I told Jane to alert the family that I would not be down to breakfast.”

“Mr Darcy is here to see you!” Lydia burst forth. “You cannot refuse him. He is your fiancé!”

“Former fiancé. We are not engaged anymore,” Elizabeth corrected. Even so, her heart began to beat wildly at the thought of Mr Darcy being so near. She stood up and put her book aside, pacing in front of the mirror. “Why has he come?”

“He did not say. But he has come to call, and so early, too! Is that not enough?” Lydia bustled around the room, much as their mother was prone to do. “Hurry! You do not want to keep him waiting, do you?”

Elizabeth stood frozen in indecision for a moment. Had he come to say goodbye to the family? She could think of no other reason he would be there so early in the day. Perhaps he had simply stopped on his way out of town? But no, Netherfield was directly on the high road. Longbourn was quite out of the way, if he had wanted to take the quickest path. Elizabeth snatched up the dress that she had left on the window seat and went behind the curtain, her feet carrying her where her heart longed to go. She must see him, if only this one last time.

“Fix your hair. I shall tell Mama that you will come down directly,” Lydia said after she had helped Elizabeth climb into her stays and gown. Elizabeth nodded, sitting down at the vanity to do something with her hair. Since time was of the essence, she made a simple bun at the nape of her neck. She looked in the glass, painfully aware of the shadows under her eyes, testament to her sleepless night. But it would have to do. Elizabeth took a deep breath, staring at her reflection. Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him. Did he still think so? And was she wrong to believe that he had come to see so much more in her over the course of their ill-fated engagement?

Her heart pounded in her chest as she walked downstairs, taking them two at a time at first, then slowing as she came to the last few steps. She heard voices travelling from the parlour. Elizabeth smoothed down her day dress and headed toward the drawing room, growing more nervous with every step.

When she entered the drawing room, everyone fell silent for moment. Her mother jumped up from her seat and joined her at the door. “Look, Lizzy, who has come to see us. Mr Darcy, you are so kind to think of us.”

Mr Darcy rose, and for a moment, she wondered if she would remember to breathe. They exchanged bows, and Elizabeth felt a shock run through her as their eyes met. She was reminded of the night before, when he had left the company for a few minutes to stroll outside with Lady Lucas in the moonlight. How she had longed to be the one on his arm!

“How do you do, Mr Darcy?” she asked softly.

“I am well,” he replied. “And you, Miss Elizabeth?”

Her throat went dry at the sound of her name on his lips. “Yes, I am well,” she replied, not knowing what else to say. Certainly the truth was impossible. It was a joy and a torment, being in the same room with him. So close, and yet so far away.

“Mrs Bennet,” Mr Darcy said, his voice quiet but determined. “May I have the privilege of speaking with Miss Elizabeth?” She held her breath. “In private?”

Mrs Bennet stepped forward, bustling about to herd the rest of the girls out of the room. “By all means, Mr Darcy! Girls, to the second parlour with you. Shoo!” she whispered. She turned and kissed Elizabeth on the cheek. “Besides you, my dear, of course.” She turned back around and curtsied to Mr Darcy. “We are so glad to have you back under our humble roof, Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth hardly knew what to feel, let alone what to think. There was usually only one reason a gentleman asked a lady to speak in private. Yet she dared not let her hopes rise. She did not think she could bear to have them dashed.

Mrs Bennet, at least, had no doubt of his intentions. Her behaviour had made that quite clear. Her mother had been crestfallen since the news that Mr Darcy and she had broken the engagement. Now, it might seem as if she were getting her wish that their understanding be reinstated. Or at least, that is how her mother had treated Mr Darcy. Elizabeth was glad that her mother had not voiced any of her earlier opinions of the gentleman, when she had thought he had gone back on his word. The tongue-lashing had been severe and painful for Elizabeth to hear.

“Mr Darcy?” she asked, forcing herself to return to the present. “I thought you were leaving Meryton today.”

He swallowed, an awkward silence stretching between them. Then he started to close the distance between them, each step closer making her heart skip a beat. He held his hat in his hands, twisting the brim round and round. “I had planned to leave, yes.”

“But?” Elizabeth asked expectantly.

“But I could not go. After seeing you last night at the assembly, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life if I left without telling you how I truly feel.”

Elizabeth’s head swam. That, surely, could mean only one thing. She placed a hand on the settee to steady herself, feeling as if she were teetering on the edge of a cliff. A wonderful, beautiful, awe-inspiring cliff. If she stepped off into the unknown, where love was often a mystery, there would be no turning back. “And how is that?” she asked, barely above a whisper for the air that seemed denied to her by her traitorous lungs.

Mr Darcy set his hat aside and stepped closer until they were only inches apart. “I have wrestled long and hard with this, Miss Elizabeth. I know that when we first met, there was no end to the misunderstandings between us. However, I hope that I have been clear about my intentions. I never would have broken our engagement if I had not felt that you wished it. Yet I do not mean to importune you. Indeed, one word from you will send me away this instant, and you will never have to see me again.”

He paused, but Elizabeth said nothing, only looking deeply into his piercing green eyes. He took a deep breath and went on. “If your feelings have changed, as I once suspected they had, I would tell you that you have bewitched me, body and soul. I have come to not only respect and cherish your friendship, but to love you. More than you can know,” he murmured. “When I saw you at the assembly last night, I knew I could not leave — not without trying to win your affections. I had intended to keep silent, thinking that you were relieved to be released from our engagement. But I thought I saw in your eyes the same regret I felt so deeply at being separated from you.”

Elizabeth could hardly contain her relief. He took her hand, making her heart race all the more. “You did. Oh, Mr Darcy, indeed you were not wrong. Please, go on.”

He hung his head, studying their intertwined fingers for a moment. Then he knelt and looked up at her expectantly. “Elizabeth, would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

In her relief and joy, Elizabeth could hardly stop herself from crying out. She covered her mouth with one hand, trying to keep the sobs at bay. He waited patiently, grasping her hand. “Yes. Yes, I will,” she whispered. When he rose, she went into his arms hesitantly, not wanting to be forward, but then readily as she saw the joy and approval in his eyes. “I am sorry I was so dense, so unyielding before. I had formed an opinion of you based on my hurt feelings. But I have come to see that you are a man unlike any other I have ever known.” She looked up at him, wishing she could

express all she felt. Her mind seemed to be racing too fast for the words to form. He traced a finger down her cheeks and she closed her eyes, relishing the intimate gesture. “I was such a fool. Once I thought rather well of Mr Wickham, only to find him an unprincipled scoundrel who would have ruined me without a qualm, and a traitor to boot. I am beholden to you for the way you handled the compromise.”

“No,” Mr Darcy murmured. “I could not have done otherwise. And even then, before I truly knew what you are to me, I did not view the engagement with any dislike. I believe it was rather an excuse to do what I already desired, but had not yet found the wisdom to act on.”

Elizabeth laughed a little shakily. “In that case, I suppose I owe Mr Wickham a debt of gratitude. If he had not devised the scandal between us, I might have continued in my misapprehensions of your character. And Mr Wickham’s, too. Perhaps I would never have seen him for what he truly is.”

He shook his head. “I think not. You would have seen through him sooner or later. And as to any misunderstanding of myself, surely I was equally to blame. I shall never forgive myself for how rudely I spoke of you on the first night of our acquaintance. You would be entirely justified in resenting it.”

“No, I think not. In the end, it was only stubborn pride. I allowed my resentment of an insult hardly even deserving the name to come between us, to stop me from seeing your true worth,” Elizabeth said. She looked up at him, resting her hands on his chest. “I will never make that mistake again.” She took a sharp breath, then met his gaze without wavering. “I love you, too. But there is one more thing we must speak of — the night you walked out of my father’s study when we had successfully exposed Mr Wickham.” She ran her fingers through his hair. “Is there not one more misunderstanding to be resolved? I think I understood it only too late. Let me tell you here and now that I was not relieved to be free to end our engagement. I was relieved that Mr Wickham had been caught, and that he could not hurt anyone anymore.”

Mr Darcy nodded. "I know that now. I am sorry I walked out that night without taking the time to understand your heart, but I was so heartbroken. And I would never have it said that I pressed my attentions on anyone."

"No one who truly knew you would think that," Elizabeth said with a smile. "You are a man of honour and character. I could not think of any other man with whom I should wish to spend my life."

"Elizabeth — " he whispered, leaning closer. For a moment, she thought he might kiss her. At the last moment, he stopped, his lips hovering just before touching hers. "Elizabeth, we are engaged, are we not? You have agreed to be my wife?"

"With all my heart," she breathed.

"Then — I should very much like to kiss you."

"Please," Elizabeth whispered, and in the next moment, his lips met hers, his arms tightening about her body. After a long moment, he pulled away, looking deeply into her eyes. A wave of feelings crested over her, leaving her shaken, feeling at once confused and overcome with delight.

"Elizabeth, my love, you are exquisite," Mr Darcy whispered. She could not account for what she heard in his tone. There was love there, and she delighted to hear it, but it was coupled to something that sounded very much like awe. "Your glorious eyes — I believe it was these dark, sparkling eyes that first enchanted me." He trailed light kisses over her jaw, her neck. Elizabeth's eyes widened. It was the first glimpse of what might be between a man and wife — something rather more than a simple meeting of lips.

With a rather regretful smile, Mr Darcy stepped away. He kept his hand on her shoulder, and for that, Elizabeth was grateful. She rather thought she might have

fallen down without that stabilising touch.

“That must be all, until we are wed,” Mr Darcy said. “Though perhaps, given sufficient time and privacy, you might allow me another such kiss.”

Elizabeth’s heart hammered in her chest. “I should like that. Very much,” she said, her voice hardly above a whisper. With an effort, she composed herself. “Shall we announce the good news to my family?” she asked.

“Yes. Well, yes, I suppose there is only one formality left to dispose of. I shall have to ask your father’s permission again.” They shared a laugh, but she saw no reason to stand upon ceremony. She went to the door and called her family back in, asking for someone to go for her father this time. When everyone was assembled, she and Mr Darcy faced them and he told them the news.

“I have asked Miss Elizabeth if she would be my wife, once again, and with your permission, sir, she has accepted.”

The drawing room erupted with congratulations. Elizabeth’s father was the first to join them and extended his hand for Mr Darcy to shake on it. “I heartily give my consent, even more readily than I did before.”

“Oh, I thought it would never happen!” her mother exclaimed. “I thought all was lost after she let you get away the last time.” Elizabeth tried not to roll her eyes at her mother’s antics, but Mr Darcy only smiled patiently. “There is no need to delay, is there? You must marry at once!”

“Do not fret, Mama. I shall never let him go,” Elizabeth said.

He beamed at her, offering her his arm, which she gladly accepted. “Only this time, no one will have to feel that they are forcing the other into an unwanted marriage.”

“No, indeed,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “It is true love that joins us, for all it may have started in a compromise.”

“And what a fortunate compromise it was!” Lydia said with a giggle.

Everyone joined in with her laughter. Elizabeth and Mr Darcy turned to face each other as everyone else began discussing the upcoming weddings. Without bothering to inquire into the opinions of the parties most concerned, Mrs Bennet and Lydia began discussing how lovely it would be for Elizabeth and Jane to be married on the same day, and had rapidly moved on to whether Mr Bingley ought to purchase a special license.

Elizabeth could not bring herself to attend to them. She was simply glad to have her love standing there with her, never to be parted from him again. She smiled up at her betrothed. “Yes, it was a fortunate compromise, indeed.”

With that, Mr Darcy cupped her cheek, and leaned in close. Elizabeth closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his lips against hers.

Twenty Years Later

Elizabeth Darcy sat in the best drawing room of Pemberley, looking out through the broad windows as her children walked in the sunlit garden. A smile crossed her lips. At nineteen years old, her eldest was on the verge of manhood. Henry had grown into a serious man, much like his father in many respects. He would be a good steward of his father's holdings when the time came—hopefully many years in the future.

Her daughter, now sixteen, was the picture of loveliness. Amelia had inherited Elizabeth's spirit and was the spitting image of her aunt Georgiana at sixteen, with flowing curls and bright blue eyes.

And then there was James, their youngest. At thirteen, he was so spirited, he sometimes rather reminded Elizabeth of Lydia. Thankfully, high spirits were not nearly so vexatious when a parent was prepared to guide and discipline their child. He would take a commission, perhaps, like his beloved Uncle Fitzwilliam. Even as Elizabeth watched, James shouted and leaped at his brother, playfully knocking him down. She smiled as the boys began tussling in the grass, as they had often done during their boyhood. Henry was sometimes rather solemn, just like his father, but not too solemn to enjoy a bout of wrestling with his younger brother.

Elizabeth sighed contentedly and turned back to her book. The years had been kind to her, indeed. Perhaps even kinder than she deserved, Elizabeth thought, but she intended to take her good fortune and be grateful for it.

Elizabeth had not yet forgotten the events of twenty years before — nor was she likely to. After many a loud debate, Mrs Bennet and Lydia had to brook

disappointment on the topic of the double wedding. After all, Mr Darcy had not really procured a special license during his trip to London, and neither he nor she had any objection to waiting for the banns to be read. In the end, they were married just a week after Jane and Mr Bingley.

Then Mr Darcy had brought her home to Pemberley, and Elizabeth had learned that her husband's estate was no less worthy of her adoration than his character and his person. The wooded grounds took her breath away, no less than the glorious house itself, and best of all was the respect and liking with which Mr Darcy was viewed by all about him. Elizabeth did not think she had ever seen a landholder so esteemed by his tenants, nor a master so praised by his servants. If she had not already learned a better understanding of Mr Darcy's character, her first meeting with his dear housekeeper, an intelligent and able woman who had known him since boyhood, would have corrected all her old injustices to him.

In her sister-in-law, too, Elizabeth was even better pleased than she had hoped to be. It had seemed not impossible that Georgiana might see her as an intruder, taking over duties as mistress of Pemberley that had formerly belonged to her. In Georgiana, however, Elizabeth found a very shy and unassuming girl, not jealous of her place, and very willing to love and to be loved. Hardly a week had passed after their meeting before they had become fast friends.

The two sisters-in-law were kindred spirits in many ways, and each found inspiration for self-improvement in the friendship, as well as companionship. With delicate, hesitant courtesy, Georgiana pushed Elizabeth to improve her skills as a pianist, and with less diffidence but great good humour, Elizabeth helped her sister-in-law to overcome her lingering tendency to low spirits. Within a few short months, Elizabeth felt Georgiana was well and truly one of her sisters. The time of silent brooding over Mr Wickham slowly ebbed away, and her sister-in-law's vibrant and cheerful personality returned, much to Mr Darcy's joy.

Mr Wickham was not mourned — certainly not at Pemberley, and likely not

anywhere in England. There had been a letter a few weeks after Elizabeth and Darcy's wedding, telling them in no uncertain terms that Mr Wickham had received his just desserts. After much deliberation and consulting with Elizabeth, Mr Darcy chose not to inform Georgiana of his fate. Even after all she had suffered at his hands, her tender heart would have grieved for the boy who had grown up at Pemberley, unable to see the traitor and scoundrel he had become. She had suffered enough at Mr Wickham's hand, and he had feared that bringing it back up would only bring on unnecessary distress.

Thankfully, there was much to distract the little family as Elizabeth and Darcy prepared for their wedding trip. Georgiana would stay with her aunt for a time before travelling on to Longbourn for the rest of the time Elizabeth and Darcy were gone. After the wedding, Georgiana and Mary had become fast friends as well, and would spend their time together playing the pianoforte to their heart's content.

A smile tugged at the corners of Elizabeth's mouth as she thought back on that cheerful time. She and Mr Darcy had their disagreements, to be sure, but they always came back to their undying love for one another.

After their return from the wedding trip, nearly six months after their wedding, Elizabeth found out that she was with child. Over the next several years, they welcomed their three children into the world, saw Georgiana married, and rejoiced when Jane and Mr Bingley moved to an estate in Derbyshire, only ten miles away from Pemberley. Jane and Mr Bingley had five daughters in the space of eight years, much to Mrs Bennet's chagrin. Jane herself did not seem to mind. On the contrary, she was often heard remarking on how fortunate her daughters were — after all, they need not contend with an entail! Much to Elizabeth's satisfaction, all Jane's new neighbours seemed to esteem her as she deserved. It was a happy neighbourhood indeed, with such a pair to give all about them an example of what wedded happiness ought to be, for Jane and Mr Bingley had been blissfully happy together since their wedding. They seemed to only grow more in love with each other as the years passed.

Elizabeth felt the same for Mr Darcy. Though she had thought she could never love him more than she had on their wedding day, she found that every year, their love not only deepened, it expanded as they overcame life's challenges. These did come from time to time, for wealth could not protect them from every difficult circumstance in life. Indeed, she had nearly perished during Amelia's birth, but by a miracle, she and the baby had survived. Darcy had stayed by her side, despite those who would have kept him from the birthing chamber, holding her hand and speaking of the future. He had kept her calm, given her hope. Sometimes, Elizabeth even felt he had saved her life.

Those had been dark days. For some time, Elizabeth's letters to Longbourn could not be entirely honest, or at least not entirely open. Mrs Bennet's complaints of her poor nerves were not entirely imaginary, and Elizabeth would not risk bringing on a fit of apoplexy. Yet there, too, however, there had been an improvement. In the years since she and Jane — and then the rest of her sisters — had married, her mother's nervous disorders had lessened significantly. Without the pressure of worry over her daughters ending in poverty, Mrs Bennet could finally be at her ease. It was not only her mother who benefited from the change. As Mr Bennet was wont to say, dryly, but with real feeling, he positively relished the quiet that had come to Longbourn.

Lydia and Kitty had continued their good behaviour, even after Elizabeth and Darcy were married. And as she had promised, Elizabeth rewarded them by giving each a London season the year they turned nineteen. Kitty married a sea captain, nearly fifteen years her senior, but a good, level-headed man. They had three sons now below the age of ten, with another child on the way, and had settled not far from Longbourn after her husband's retirement from the navy.

Lydia had chosen a military man as well. Hers had been a whirlwind romance, but thankfully, she had listened not only to her father's words of wisdom concerning choosing a partner in life, but to Elizabeth and Jane as well. The man she had married was a few years older than she, but just as spirited and daring. Lydia and her husband, James Borough, had travelled all over the world before coming home to settle near

London. They had never been ones to forgo excitement and adventure, and this London could provide in plenty. They had two young daughters, and Elizabeth relished the holidays when the whole family came to Pemberley.

And then there was Mary. She had foregone the same offer to have a London season, professing the desire to stay quietly at home in Longbourn and practise the pianoforte. Elizabeth laughed quietly to herself, thinking how surprised Mary had been to fall in love with the new tenant of Netherfield. Sir Browning was an intelligent man, quiet and deeply religious. He was exactly calculated to tempt Mary into matrimony, and to everyone's satisfaction, he had the sense to see in Elizabeth's serious-minded, scholarly sister the treasure she really was. To judge by Mary's last letter, she was happy indeed.

"Are you daydreaming again, love?" Darcy asked as he joined her in the parlour.

"I am," Elizabeth admitted. She smiled up at him as he leaned over the back of the settee and kissed her. "I was watching the children, and thinking how very fortunate I am." She looked out the window again and saw that the boys had ceased their horseplay and were walking with their sister between them, laughing about some joke James had told, no doubt. He was always making them laugh.

He took her hand, squeezing it lightly. "I could not agree more. As you may recall, I have sometimes been called proud —" he grinned wickedly at having called forth Elizabeth's laugh "— and when it comes to Henry, Amelia, and James, I cannot defend myself against such an accusation. Were I any more proud of them, I might burst with it."

Elizabeth stood and joined him at the window. A subtle sadness came over her, watching them all together and knowing that soon, they would fly the nest and find their own way in life. A tear slipped down her cheek, and she wiped it away before Darcy could see it. However, she had not been quick enough. He turned her into his chest and wrapped his arms around her. "What is it, Elizabeth?" he asked.

She could not help but smile at the depth of love in his voice. On her beloved husband's lips, her first name sounded sweet indeed. "I am sad to think that we will be alone in this house one day. The children will soon be gone, and I cannot help but wonder if I have done enough for them as their mother to prepare them to take on the world."

Darcy ran a finger down her cheek, then tucked a stray tendril of brunette hair behind her ear. Her brunette waves were showcasing more and more grey as of late. But she was not afraid of time marching on. To grow old was an honour and a privilege, one that she would not fear as long as they were together. "You have been the best of mothers to them. They will be just fine when they spread their wings and fly," he comforted her. He leaned down and kissed her, long and passionately.

"You spoil me," Elizabeth said. She placed her hands on his chest and gently pushed herself away. "Come and sit down. Georgiana has sent you a letter and I am eager to hear her latest news."

"Just a moment," Darcy said. "Are you sure you are well? I have not seen you so down since after James was born."

Elizabeth took his hand. "That was only a case of mild melancholia. But this is different. I am happy that our children have grown up to be such fine young people. I am only a little sad that they will not always be with us."

"It will not be so very different from having the boys away at school. I hope we may expect to have all the children visit often, even when they begin their lives with their own families." Darcy followed her gaze as she watched the children. "And Amelia is only sixteen. She has a few years yet before it will be time for her London season."

"Yes, but Henry — " Elizabeth's voice broke. "It is not that I am not proud, so please do not take it thus. I am only grieving the changes that will soon come to our little family. They are good changes, of course. I am only sad things cannot stay the same

forever.”

“That is the nature of being a parent, I suppose. You raise them so they no longer need you.”

Elizabeth wiped at a tear. “Yes, I suppose it is. I can comfort myself with the fact that we will soon have grandchildren toddling around here. Pemberley will be alive with the sounds of baby’s coos and little feet.”

“What a delightful thought,” Darcy said, sighing as he wrapped his arms around her middle and rested his cheek against hers. “You will be a wonderful grandmother.”

They watched the children for a moment longer before Elizabeth remembered the letter from Georgiana. “Oh, goodness! I almost forgot. Georgiana’s letter. Come, let’s read it.”

She took his hand, and they went back to the sitting area. “What has she to say?” Elizabeth asked, eager to hear from her heart’s sister.

Darcy cleared his throat and had to retrieve his spectacles, as increasing age was beginning to catch up with his eyes. Elizabeth smiled, thinking that he was developing a very distinguished greying at the temples as of late. She reached up and stroked his hair, smiling as he broke the seal and opened the letter.

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Dearest Brother and Sister,

I hope this letter finds you well. Jonathan and I are settling into the lodgings of our new post here in Constantinople. Little Fitzwilliam sends along his regards and asks if you still keep his pony safe at the Pemberley stables. He longs to see you all and ride in the woods with you, Aunt Lizzy. Henrietta, Elizabette, and Eloise also send

their love.

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Darcy looked up and scrunched up his nose. “How can Eloise send her love? She is but a year old.”

“Hush, if Georgiana says she sends her love, then she sends her love.” Elizabeth ran a finger over his creased brow. “You know that when we meet her, she will not be able to help but falling in love with her doting uncle.”

He captured her hand and kissed her palm. “And she will have you wrapped around her little finger as well.”

“Of course. What kind of aunt would I be if I did not allow such liberties?” Elizabeth smiled. Over the years, she had been true to her word to Jane and had spoilt all her little nieces and nephews. They had the means to lavish gifts on their kin, after all, and they did so with gusto. “Go on,” she urged gently.

Darcy nodded and continued reading.

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Elizabeth, you and my brother will be happy to know that when we come for Christmas, there will be a new addition to the family. Jonathan is hoping for another boy to even out our current brood of darling girls.

Our prayers and thoughts are always with you, dear family.

With love,

Georgiana

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Elizabeth covered her mouth and gave a little squeal of delight. “Oh, how wonderful!”

“What is so wonderful?” Amelia asked as she entered the parlour for tea. The boys trailed along behind her.

“We’ve had a letter from Aunt Georgiana. There is going to be another baby when they come for Christmas,” Elizabeth announced. “Come and sit down and tell me what you all have been up to this fine spring day.”

“Mama, we’ve been talking about going to London. Do you think we might go this winter?” Amelia asked, barely able to keep her excitement contained.

Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged curious glances. “You’re not due to have your London season for a few years, Amelia.”

“No, not for me. But Cousin Alice is having hers. And it would be such fun to be there when she comes out. Do not you agree, Papa?” Amelia got up and went to her father, wrapping her arms around his neck as she had done from the time she was a little girl.

Elizabeth gave him a stern look, but he could never hold firm when it came to Amelia’s pleadings. “My dear, you are young yet. I would not be in a hurry — ”

“Oh, Papa, I am not in a hurry to marry or grow up. I only want to be there when Alice comes out. It will be such fun, and I have never seen what a season is like. And what better way to prepare myself?” Amelia sat down between Elizabeth and Darcy, and Elizabeth brushed her palm over her daughter’s beautiful curls. Her daughter was very close to Jane’s eldest, and it would be important for them to see Alice safely out into society. She looked to her husband, who gave a deft nod, leaving the decision to

her.

A slow smile crept onto her face. “Very well, we shall discuss it.”

Amelia jumped up with a squeal and hugged Elizabeth. “Oh, thank you, Mama!”

“I did not say yes. I said we would discuss it,” Elizabeth warned her daughter, though she thought wryly that she might as well have saved her breath. It was impossible to deny Amelia anything, dear as she was. Thankfully, the indulgence was not likely to be a dangerous one. Amelia had a level head, and they need not worry that she would get caught up in any mischief.

In later years, Elizabeth would come to call that winter in London something close to fate. Near the end of the season, Amelia was introduced to a dear friend of their Bingley relations, the son of one of Mr Bingley’s contacts. Mr Charles Mansfield was a dashing and brilliant young merchant, and as sensible and upright of character as any parent could wish. Young as Amelia was, the two had soon fallen head over heels in love. Three years later, they were married in the parish church on the Pemberley estate. Henry also found himself a bride among one of their neighbours to the east of Pemberley. And soon after, James also followed suit. By the time a decade had passed, all of their children had found love rather calmly and sensibly, through the introductions of friends and neighbours.

The Darcys could only be glad that it was so. Happy as they were together, many long years could not entirely erase the memory of Mr Wickham’s schemes and how close they had come to losing each other forever. If their children could find their partners in life through more conventional means, that was surely all to the good. Like all parents, they would much rather their children go through life smoothly and happily, without such painful complications.

Yet Elizabeth could regret none of the pain and confusion she had suffered as a victim of Mr Wickham’s schemes. Quite contrary to Mr Wickham’s intentions, they

had shown her the real Mr Darcy: a man with human flaws, to be sure, but a man of character and fortitude, wit and compassion. The man she loved with all her heart.

And, as Elizabeth thought many times over the years, nothing could be more fortunate than that.

THE END