



A Love Worth Waiting For

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: When a gentleman such as Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy finds himself captivated against his will by a young lady with sparkling eyes, a sharp wit, and lovely manners, he loses his ability to see the situation clearly.

At first, he tries to distance himself from her, but meeting Elizabeth Bennet again at Rosings Park causes him to fail in this endeavour.

Misinterpreting her signals and misunderstanding her words and intentions, he becomes entangled in his own thoughts, his feelings fighting against his reason, until he rashly declares his admiration and love, his attraction stronger even than his pride.

Her refusal brings him back to reality, proving the errors of his judgment and showing that his arrogance and pride have blinded him to the truth.

Consumed by resentment, disappointment, and anger, he is prepared to leave her again — once and for all — but a twist of fate brings him into Elizabeth's company on the night of the failed proposal and forces him to reconsider his actions and to make amends for his past errors.

A man with good principles — though at times applied in a selfish manner — Mr Darcy makes sure that those who belong together are reunited and those who deserve it suffer proper punishment.

But will he be able to win the most important victory while pursuing a lasting love worth fighting for —and worth waiting for?

A Love Worth Waiting For is another romantic, low-angst novella by Lyr Newton, a tale that will keep readers engaged until the heartwarming happily ever after.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Never had Rosings felt so far from the parsonage; nor had Darcy's knees ever felt so weak or his heart pounded so wildly.

His head was spinning, while Elizabeth's voice sounded again and again — angry, sharp, accusatory. Less than half an hour earlier, he had been hurrying in the opposite direction — to the parsonage, to talk to Elizabeth, to open his heart to her and to offer her his hand in marriage, his heart, his life. He had expected nothing but immediate acceptance and gratitude. Instead, he had received rejection, accusations, hate, and contempt.

For months he had struggled to conceal his feelings for her, being certain that she had guessed his admiration and welcomed it. For as long as he had been convinced, she could not be his choice of wife, he had distanced himself from her to avoid raising any expectations. Then she had happened to be staying with her friend, the former Miss Charlotte Lucas, at the same time he was visiting Rosings, and that coincidence seemed to be a fated sign. Against his judgment, his reason, his concerns, he had listened to the voice of his heart and proposed to her, anticipating a sweet burst of joy, a delightful engagement, and a happy marriage. How could he have been so wrong, so foolish? How could he have misjudged her feelings so utterly and completely? How could he have mistaken the contempt in her eyes for admiration? How could he have judged as teasing something that was just mockery?

He finally reached Rosings and hurried up to his room, while Lady Catherine called out to him. Once inside, he locked the door and demanded his valet inform everybody that he was unwell and would not attend dinner. He was not in the mood for either food or company, but he needed a drink, so he filled a glass with brandy while sinking into an armchair. He felt angry and disappointed with Elizabeth for offending

him, but mostly for trusting Wickham.

That she was furious with him for separating Bingley from her sister, he could understand. But he had done it out of kindness for his friend, and he did not regret it.

However, to believe Wickham's lies and to accuse him of disregarding his father's dying wish and condemning his childhood companion to poverty — that was outrageous! Perhaps she was no different from all the silly women who had allowed themselves to be deceived by Wickham, after all. Perhaps he had been wrong to admire her and to assume there was more to her than there really was.

Now all was lost, all was gone. He had made a mistake that he would always regret, but fortunately, once he left Kent, he would never see Elizabeth again and would bury that painful memory.

After he emptied his glass, Darcy rang for a servant, requested some food, then filled another glass.

As soon as the servant returned, he ate a little and drank a lot, his anger overwhelming him. His hunger was sated, but instead of calming him, the brandy only increased his restlessness, and the details of his confrontation with Elizabeth returned, vivid, clear, and hurtful.

‘ Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner... ’ she had thrown at him, just before she had called him the last man in the world she could ever be prevailed on to marry. The last — as in the worst man in the world. That was her opinion of him. Like a simpleton, he had considered himself the only man in the world worthy of her affection. How ridiculous was he?

He heard footsteps, and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam entered after knocking a few times.

“Darcy, where have you been? Lady Catherine asked you to join us for a game of cards.” He paused a moment, then continued, “What happened? Are you unwell? Upon my word, you look very ill!”

“I am not unwell, only a headache. Nothing a rest cannot fix.”

“You have always been a poor liar, Darcy. And you rarely have a headache unless something particular causes it.”

“Or perhaps I rarely mention my headaches to you, Cousin, unless you ask particular questions.”

“Ah, you are obviously in a bad mood. My concern clearly irritates you, so I shall not insist further.”

“I apologise. Your concern is appreciated, but indeed I have a headache and am in a bad mood.”

“Then I shall allow you to sleep, and hopefully you will feel better in the morning. Shall we leave the day after tomorrow, as discussed?”

“Yes.”

“Speaking of headaches, Lady Catherine was displeased that Miss Bennet declared she had one too, which prevented her from visiting, and she was even more displeased that you did not join us for dinner for the same reason.”

“Lady Catherine’s displeasure is not my main concern,” Darcy said, and the colonel laughed.

“I am sure of that. I just mentioned it because the reason for both your absences is

very much alike. I was surprised since Miss Bennet seemed quite well when I met her earlier today.”

“You saw her earlier?”

“Yes,” the colonel answered. “She was taking a walk, and I kept her company. We had a lovely conversation too.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. We had a very pleasant and lively conversation. We even talked about you.”

“About me?” Darcy repeated.

“Yes. I emphasised your generosity and loyalty, and I illustrated it by mentioning how you protected your friend from an imprudent marriage. I fear Miss Bennet did not seem quite as impressed by that as I expected.”

The colonel was obviously joking, but Darcy frowned.

“You did what? Why? What exactly did you tell her?”

“Darcy, calm down! It was nothing but a light-hearted conversation. Why are you so agitated?”

“I am not agitated,” Darcy answered, immediately checking himself. “I simply wonder about you choosing to share with Miss Bennet a subject I mentioned as being private.”

“I revealed nothing particular as I did not know any details myself. It was as general as a conversation can be, and it was a very brief one since Miss Bennet desired to

return to the parsonage shortly afterwards. You have no reason to be upset.”

“I am not.”

“Of course you are. Darcy, your behaviour in regard to Miss Bennet puzzles me. Sometimes you seem to approve of her. At other times you object to everything about her.”

“This time I object to you, not to Miss Bennet, Cousin. But let us end this discussion now. My headache has taken a turn for the worse, and I need to sleep.”

“So I assume a game of cards is out of the question?”

“Absolutely. Tell Lady Catherine I shall see you all tomorrow at breakfast.”

The colonel hesitated, attempted to say something further, then only nodded and left.

Alone, Darcy’s turmoil increased as he had discovered at least one reason for Elizabeth’s rage — the confirmation, from the colonel, of how he had separated Bingley from Jane Bennet. Whilst he could not fault himself for acting for Bingley’s benefit, Darcy could understand Elizabeth’s anger. A marriage between her eldest sister and a rich man like Bingley would certainly solve all the Bennets’ problems. But then, if marriage to a rich man was all the family needed, why had she rejected his marriage proposal? His fortune and situation were far better than Bingley’s. Of course, he would not have allowed the entire Bennet family to disrupt his life, but he would have provided them the means to live in comfort. Obviously, Elizabeth’s contempt for him was stronger than her concern for her family, and that could only have been brought about by her affection for Wickham. And if her affection for that idiot was so strong, she was certainly not worthy of Darcy’s admiration.

The storm of feelings and thoughts, fuelled by plenty of brandy, fed Darcy’s anger

and restlessness, and the voices of his relatives, issuing from downstairs, only annoyed him further.

Eventually, silence fell over Rosings Park, and he opened the window widely. The night was warm, yet cloudy, with no stars in the sky.

He lay on the bed and attempted to sleep, with no success; his thoughts roamed out of the open window, towards the parsonage, wondering about Elizabeth. He would return to London in two days' time and likely never see her again, but he would surely find no peace knowing how poor her opinion of him was. She must know the truth — if only to realise how unfair she had been to him and perhaps to regret her accusations and rejection.

Led by bitterness and resentment, he stood up, paced the room, then pulled out a piece of paper, sat at the table, and began to write as if he were talking to her directly.

Be not alarmed, madam, on receiving this letter...

He kept writing, filling two pages; his hand, guided by hurt pride, was as quick as his tumult, and he wondered whether he had chosen the right words. He paused and pondered whether he should mention Wickham's attempt to elope with Georgiana, and he finally decided that it must be revealed in order to draw her an accurate image of that wretch. To his disclosure he added a request for her discretion. As angry as he was with her, he did not doubt she would protect Georgiana's secret. When it was done, he sealed the letter and put it in his pocket. He was uncertain what to do with it and how to give it to her, but he wished to hide it from any prying eyes.

Then he lay down on the bed again, but only for a short time. Restless, he resumed pacing the chamber until suddenly he put his coat on and left the room without even considering where he was going. Once out of doors, he walked through the gardens, then out of the gate into the park; then he stopped, looking about until his eyes

became accustomed to the darkness. Behind him, the light from Rosings' torches was fading.

He kept walking, without any goal or destination, just to cool his mind and in the hope that the exercise would exhaust him enough to fall asleep. Against his will, he looked towards the parsonage, the place where his hopes had all broken into pieces a few hours earlier. The building was dark and silent, as it should be in the middle of the night. And why would it not be? The Collinses had no reason to be up, and Elizabeth was certainly sleeping soundly, pleased she had been offered the opportunity to offend and accuse him.

He hastened his pace, regretting he had not taken his horse; a long ride in the dark could have been good medicine. The walk was rather efficient too since his mind had cleared of the brandy, but that did not bring him tranquillity — quite the opposite.

He recollected very clearly his quarrel with Elizabeth — his foolish proposal and her hurtful rejection — and anger grew inside him again. A clap of thunder interrupted his musings, and he decided to return. Being caught in the rain was all he needed to complete the worst day of his life. A soft breeze was blowing through the trees, but a different and stronger sound drew his attention.

“Is someone there? Show yourself!” he demanded a few times. Since there was no answer, he stepped towards the sound, and he heard footsteps moving in the opposite direction.

“Is someone there?” he repeated, undecided whether he should pursue whoever it was or simply disregard them.

“It is I, Mr Darcy. I shall return to the parsonage in a moment,” he heard Elizabeth's soft voice answer, which weakened his knees and gave him shivers.

“Miss Bennet? What on earth are you doing out at this hour? Are you alone?” he asked. Against his better judgment, his feet took him closer to her. In the dark, he could barely distinguish her face.

“I could ask the same of you, Mr Darcy,” she replied boldly.

“Not quite. I am in the grounds of my aunt’s estate. And I am a man.”

“I was not aware that I was not allowed to walk in the park. If this is the case, I have broken the rules several times, as you are well aware.”

“Of course you are allowed to walk in the park, Miss Bennet. Your taunt is not appreciated as my question was born from genuine concern. You may walk whenever you want, wherever you want, and with whoever pleases you.”

“I fail to understand your meaning, Mr Darcy. Your taunt is not appreciated either.”

“I have no expectation that you might appreciate anything I say, Miss Bennet. I shall leave you now before this conversation takes a turn for the worse.” He took a few steps, then turned and suddenly said, with no time to mind his words, “If it is not too much trouble, perhaps you would be interested in reading this letter. If not, you may throw it in the fire.”

She took the letter with obvious surprise, staring at him as he turned again and walked away.

“Mr Darcy, what letter is this? What is it about?” she called after him.

He stopped. “Nothing more than an explanation of my actions that repelled and disgusted you so deeply. I believe it would be fair of you to find out the truth, if you are interested in it.”

“An explanation? Can you not tell me? If there is something to explain, and a truth to be discovered, should we not discuss it?”

“I dare say we have spoken enough for one day, Miss Bennet. Perhaps even for a whole lifetime.”

“Perhaps. But if there is something that needs to be said, why hide behind letters? Are you afraid to be confronted for whatever you have chosen to explain?”

“Are you afraid to read and discover how wrong you have been, Miss Bennet? And perhaps how unwise — I am tempted to say foolish — you were to trust a scoundrel like Wickham, whose main purpose is to deceive silly, naïve people?”

“Offending someone is the easiest way to justify injustice, Mr Darcy!”

“I second that, Miss Bennet, and it certainly applies to you.”

“You are being rude, sir!”

“You already called my manners ungentlemanlike — calling me rude adds little to your previous offences.”

“If I offended you, it might have been for good reason, Mr Darcy.”

“You offended me because you were charmed by Wickham into believing his lies. I certainly trusted your judgment too much. I never imagined you might be one of the women so easily enamoured by that scoundrel.”

“How dare you!” she replied, her voice now suffocated by apparent anger. “I am certainly not enamoured by anyone! Your actions against Mr Wickham are nothing compared to the pain and grief you caused my sister and probably your friend too, if

Mr Bingley is half the man I believed him to be.”

“As I have already told you, I acted for my friend’s benefit. You will find the full explanation in the letter if you care to read it.”

“I shall read it. Not out of consideration for you but for my own peace of mind. I do wish to be fair and to read what you have to say. Whether I shall trust your words is another matter.”

“A wise woman would recognise the truth even if it went against her feelings. If you need further clarification, you may apply to your friend Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“I would rather not involve the colonel in this private and unpleasant matter. I shall read the letter, and if I need further clarification, I expect to receive it from you. I shall be here tomorrow after breakfast.”

Her statement surprised and disconcerted him. Why would she want to meet him again? Was the torture they had already endured not enough for both of them?

“Be it as you wish, Miss Bennet. I shall be here tomorrow morning too.”

“I appreciate your generosity,” she said, and he wondered whether she was mocking him.

“I shall leave you now. It is completely inappropriate for us to be together alone in the middle of the night. If someone saw us, they would consider it a scandalous situation, and God forbid, we might be forced to marry. I am quite certain both of us loathe such a notion.”

She seemed stunned by his remark, and he departed in a hurry.

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“Darcy, you must tell me why you did not join us for dinner,” Lady Catherine demanded, and every loud word cut Darcy’s temples. The headache had continued through the night and threatened to last all day too.

“It is nothing more than what I am sure Richard already told you, Aunt. I had a headache, nothing more.”

“I find it very annoying when a trifling headache disturbs my plans.”

“I am sure you do, Aunt. And I would not want to upset any of your plans, but headaches are difficult to control,” Darcy replied.

“I am also annoyed that you are leaving so soon, Darcy! You could at least stay a few more days! Are you disturbed by the Collinses’ presence?”

“Not at all, I assure you.”

“To be honest,” the colonel interjected, “Mrs Collins and her friend Miss Bennet are quite delightful.”

“You always exaggerate your praise, Fitzwilliam,” Lady Catherine answered with apparent displeasure. “Miss Bennet is anything but delightful. She is impolite, outspoken, ill-mannered, and I may find more objections to add to my list before she finally leaves.”

Darcy chose not to contribute to that discussion, so he gave all his attention to his plate.

“And she is quite reckless. She lacks wisdom and responsibility,” the lady continued.

“I would say such a description is too harsh, Aunt,” Darcy finally added.

“Not at all. Let me tell you in complete confidence — and I expect absolute secrecy from you! — what she has done. Mr Collins proposed to her out of generosity, knowing he would inherit Longbourn one day. I myself advised him to propose to one of his cousins and to take care of the family after Mr Bennet dies. And that country girl dared to refuse him! Can you imagine? She has no dowry, no connections, and she might not receive another marriage proposal ever again. And still she rejected an honourable man and a most comfortable life. What woman does that?”

Darcy felt cold shivers down his spine while he struggled to keep his composure. So she had rejected Mr Collins too? Well, he was in shameful company, and probably worth less than the clergyman to her since she had declared he was the last man in the world she could be prevailed on to marry.

“Dear aunt, I must disagree with you!” the colonel said. “I would rather praise Miss Bennet than criticise her for having the strength to choose her own happiness over material advantages. She and Mr Collins would be completely unsuited to each other, and she would have probably been miserable for the rest of her life.”

“Miserable? Are you out of your mind, Fitzwilliam? Is the present Mrs Collins miserable? She has a comfortable home, a good income, a respectful and well-mannered husband, and she has my regular company and guidance. What more could she expect?”

“Mrs Collins does not seem miserable at all, quite the opposite. But she is not Miss Bennet,” Darcy said. “So their expectations in marriage must be completely different.”

“A country girl with such a poor situation in life like Miss Bennet should not expect more than she is worthy of!” Lady Catherine declared with apparent irritation.

“Worthiness is measured differently by different people,” Darcy uttered. “And I agree with Richard — Mrs Collins is a good match for Mr Collins.”

“Indeed, she is. I certainly approve of her much more than Miss Bennet!”

“So Miss Bennet’s refusal seems to have been a blessing for everyone involved,” the colonel concluded.

Fortunately for Darcy’s state of mind, the subject of Elizabeth ended there. He was still tormented by thoughts of her, but at least he did not have to discuss her with others.

After breakfast, Darcy withdrew to the library, declaring he needed time to study some papers related to the estate before his departure. That sort of activity was tedious to his aunt and cousins, so he expected no company. In the library, the papers were his last concern; instead, he struggled with deciding how to proceed. He had promised Elizabeth he would be there to answer her questions, but was there any use in a meeting that would bring him more distress? Did he truly care whether she believed his explanations or not? If she did not trust his words, was she even worthy of more effort on his part?

Eventually, his pride overcame his reluctance. He had promised to be there, and he was a man of his word, even to those who did not deserve so much consideration. He left the house through a side door, and only when he was halfway to the gate did he wonder whether she would keep her word and be there herself. With every step he felt more restless; his attempts to maintain his self-control failed almost entirely.

He spotted her from a distance, and his heart began to race. It was the same thrill he

had experienced the day before, when he had gone to propose to her. Back then, he had expected the meeting with her would bring him joy, but now he knew there would be more anxiety and probably another quarrel.

“Miss Bennet, good morning,” he greeted her, his heart still pounding. He cast a quick look over his shoulder, wondering whether the trees offered them enough privacy to not be seen from either Rosings or the parsonage.

“Good morning, sir,” she replied. She looked pale, and there were dark circles around her eyes — probably signs of a sleepless night.

“I have come, as promised, to answer your questions. I cannot stay long, though.”

“Thank you. Yes, neither can I — Charlotte might call me at any time.”

“And my aunt,” he added, trying to keep his eyes away from her.

“Then let us waste no time. I was wrong, and I wish to apologise for my unjust words. I did not sleep a wink last night, trying to understand what you wrote and deciding whether I believed it or not. I am grateful for your confidence in relating to me such painful details about yourself...and your sister. You may trust in my secrecy. I shall not reveal your private affairs to any living soul.”

“If I doubted your secrecy, I would not have written the letter, Miss Bennet. I would be relieved if you trusted my words, not so much for myself but for your own safety. And I encourage you to reveal what I said about my financial dealings with Wickham. I have written proof and the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam if it is required. Nobody should trust Wickham, and it was my fault that I did not expose him earlier.”

“You should know I was never ‘enamoured’ by Mr Wickham as you suggested. Not

by far. But I did find his company exceedingly pleasant, and I pitied him for his misfortunes. Of course, I now realise I foolishly wasted my trust and sympathy. Mr Wickham will not hear another kind word from me.”

Anger animated her, and her eyes were brightened by her agitated speech.

“But you were wrong too, Mr Darcy! Very wrong, and your actions might have ruined the happiness of two good, kind-hearted people. I cannot be sure about Mr Bingley, but Jane...I know there is no woman to equal her in generosity, gentleness, and loyalty. Her heart was touched, and she will not easily forget Mr Bingley.”

She paused for a moment to catch her breath. He said nothing.

“That your observations were far from the truth and you misjudged her guarded manners speaks of your flaws of character, not hers. You might have acted for the benefit of your friend, but he will surely not find another woman with as many excellent qualities as Jane who will genuinely love him. She cannot be blamed for not displaying her affection publicly. You should have known better, Mr Darcy. After all, your actions were of such a nature that nobody ever guessed your true feelings and intentions either. You and Jane both concealed your sentiments, except she did so due to her nature, while you did it on purpose.”

Her countenance revealed her sorrow, and he could see that the sparkle in her eyes was caused by tears that she was holding in check. His resentment turned into grief and remorse — and shame. Yes, he should have known better and not assumed what he could not observe. Or perhaps he had been too busy searching for a reason to leave Netherfield because he was in danger himself, not Bingley.

“I cannot argue with you, Miss Bennet, in regard to your sister. You must be right, so I am certainly wrong. I never pretended my character was flawless.”

“You should not be content to only admit your errors, Mr Darcy. It is not just about your refusal to dance with merely tolerable women, which you are absolutely entitled to. You are a powerful man, with much influence over so many people, including your friends. Your errors might cause long-lasting harm, and your misjudgement might have terrible consequences. I am sorry if you are offended, but this is the truth, and you must hear it!”

Her emotions seemed to overwhelm her — and him. Speechless, he needed a moment longer to comprehend the meaning of her statement.

“I hope I have the strength to not be offended by the truth, Miss Bennet. For this, you should not apologise,” he finally managed to reply. “You are correct — admitting my errors is nothing without applying an appropriate remedy. Is there anything else you wish to ask me? I am afraid I must return to Rosings.”

“No...” she whispered. “I spoke my heart. I have no further questions.”

“Then I shall leave you. I wish you all the best, Miss Bennet,” he said, bowing to her. Then he turned and left, rather abruptly. Being near her, watching her torment for which he was to blame and not being able to comfort her was too painful. He felt weakened under the burden of a guilt he clearly understood. And he had just learnt that she had heard him call her tolerable at the assembly. What remedy could exist for so many wrongs?

His pace increased as he approached Rosings, and his torment grew stronger. His letter had had the desired effect in regard to Wickham but was surely insufficient to justify his involvement in separating Bingley and Jane Bennet.

By the time he entered the house and climbed the stairs towards his chamber, he realised another letter was needed to address what the first one had lacked. Even if he returned to London the next day, the express would arrive a day earlier, and that

might be important. He threw his coat on the bed, pulled out another sheet of paper, and wrote:

Bingley,

There is something of the greatest importance you should know. I shall arrive in London the day after you receive this letter, but I have decided to send it nevertheless. You will have time to read it, and once I am home, we might discuss its contents at length...

The letter was not as long as the one he had written to Elizabeth, but it was filled with concerns about Bingley's response when reading it. Darcy had not discussed Miss Bennet with his friend since they left Netherfield, so he was unaware whether Bingley still had lasting feelings for the lady. How would the letter affect him? It was difficult to anticipate, especially for someone whose judgment was so often wrong. He finished the letter, sealed it, and sent it by express in great haste.

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The following day, Darcy left Rosings Park with the colonel. At his cousin's suggestion, he paid a visit to the parsonage first to take his leave. He spoke little and said nothing at all to Elizabeth, instead watching the colonel carry the entire conversation.

Elizabeth was much quieter than usual, but she did smile at the colonel. At him, she barely threw a few glances.

“Will you stay in Kent for long, Miss Bennet?” his cousin asked.

“No. I plan to leave in less than a fortnight.”

“Will you go directly to Longbourn?”

“Probably not. I intend to stay in London for a few days, then return home with my sister Jane.”

“If you approve of it, I would like to call on you during your stay in London,” the colonel said. “I would be delighted to meet your sister.”

Elizabeth cast a quick look at Darcy before answering, “I am sure my sister would be honoured to make your acquaintance, Colonel. My uncle lives in Gracechurch Street, number eight.”

“I admit I am not familiar with that part of London, but I shall be pleased to explore more of it.”

“Your intention is very kind, Colonel. If you do not visit us, I shall assume you have been too busy.”

“I am never too busy to do things I enjoy. Only Darcy is too busy with his duties, and he overlooks his own wishes.” The colonel laughed.

Darcy was ready to reply, but Elizabeth spoke first.

“I am sure Mr Darcy would find the necessary time if he truly wished to do something. Any man would,” she said, casting another quick glance at him.

“I do find time for things I truly wish to do, but on certain occasions, that has been to my detriment. Lately, I have learnt that I would do better to fulfil my duties than indulge my wishes.”

He observed Elizabeth’s change of expression, proving she understood his meaning.

“I cannot agree with you, Darcy,” the colonel said with a laugh. “I have never regretted following my wishes, even if at times it was wrong to do so.”

“Apparently, you are more fortunate than I am, Cousin,” Darcy uttered. “But as lovely as this conversation is, we must end it, as we should return to Rosings. It is rather late, and we have a long journey to London.”

Elizabeth, Mrs Collins, and Miss Lucas expressed their best wishes, while Mr Collins offered to accompany them back to the manor.

While he had never liked the clergyman, Darcy had always tried to maintain a civil relationship with him. But since he had found out that the tedious man had dared to propose to Elizabeth, Darcy could not stand him and avoided talking to him entirely.

“There is no need for you to take so much trouble, Mr Collins. I am sure you have more important things to employ your time,” he said.

“Not at all, Mr Darcy! Nothing is more important than to express my best wishes to you and to pay my daily visit to her ladyship,” the man replied. Darcy fought the temptation to roll his eyes and glanced at Elizabeth instead. To his amazement, she rolled her own eyes with a little smile towards him. He had seen her smiling numerous times before, but that particular little smile looked different, and Darcy wondered about it long after he left the parsonage and throughout the entire journey back to London.

After a lovely dinner with Georgiana and Mrs Annesley, her companion, Darcy spent a little more time in conversation with his sister, then he withdrew to his chamber. Georgiana assumed he was tired, and he did not contradict her. In fact, he was exhausted, not from the travelling but from all his turmoil over Elizabeth and the lack of sleep following his failed proposal.

He decided to call on Bingley the next morning and see whether he had read the letter, then discuss it.

His valet helped him to change for the night and filled him another drink, then said, “Sir, there is a note for you here on your desk.”

“Is there? I did not even notice it. What note? From whom?”

“It is from a Mrs Crawford. Apparently she has called twice this week, looking for you. I do not know who she is, and she did not disclose her business.”

“I am not acquainted with any Mrs Crawford. Do you know what she looked like?”

“I was told she was between thirty and forty years of age. Clean clothes but nothing fashionable.”

“Let me read the note,” Darcy requested, puzzled.

On the small piece of paper was written:

Mr Darcy,

I apologise for applying to you, but I am desperate, and I cannot find help anywhere else. It is a matter of life and death for a young mother of sixteen and her infant, and your mercy may be their only salvation.

I pray you will forgive me for bothering you with a matter almost wholly unconnected with you and that your kindness, about which I have heard so much, might induce you to listen to me if only for a moment. Since I understand you are expected to return home soon, I shall call every morning, praying to the Lord for the miracle of finally meeting you.

Your humble servant,

Jane Crawford

Puzzled and bewildered, Darcy stared at the note, then at his valet.

“What on earth is this?”

“I know nothing else about it, sir. Apparently, the lady seemed upset and would not answer any further questions.”

Darcy rubbed his temples. He could not imagine what that woman might want from

him, except perhaps money since she mentioned a child and a young mother. But why did she ask him particularly? Perhaps she had asked many other people too? Could she be a swindler? Would she dare enter his house and attempt to deceive him?

“Porter, I might not be home tomorrow morning either. If she calls again, tell her I am aware of her request and am willing to provide help if she presents me with proof of her honesty. Ask for her direction.”

“Very well, sir.”

A knock on the door surprised them; it was certainly not a time for visits or conversation, so Darcy assumed it was his sister and she had something important to tell him. Porter opened the door, and there stood Bingley, waiting with a troubled expression and his clothes in some disorder.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, Darcy. I happened to be passing and saw the knocker was up. I hear you have just returned. I talked your man here into letting me come up.” He gestured to a harried-looking footman behind him, whom Darcy dismissed with a nod.

“Do not worry, it is no disturbance. Come in, Bingley. Porter, that will be all until morning,” he said. “Bingley, would you like a drink?”

“No, I already had a few after dinner...but on second thoughts, yes, I would like one more.”

“I assume you read my letter,” Darcy said, handing his friend a glass and gesturing for him to take a seat.

“I did. What does it mean, Darcy?”

“Was I not clear enough? I have reason to believe I was wrong in my estimation of Miss Bennet’s feelings for you. And I thought you should know that she has been in town since January and is still here.”

“But...how do you know?”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet was in Kent, visiting her friend the former Charlotte Lucas, who has since married Mr Collins.”

“Has she? So?” Bingley enquired impatiently.

“I had a heated conversation with Miss Elizabeth, and, among other things, the particular subject of you and Miss Bennet was discussed.”

“And what did she say?”

“Well, she said I was selfish, ungentlemanlike, and completely wrong in presuming Miss Bennet had no feelings for you. She said many other words, which I shall not repeat.”

“But...are you absolutely sure?”

“I am not. I am only relating what Miss Elizabeth told me. She must know her sister’s mind better than I do. Besides, if you are interested, you may ask Miss Bennet directly.”

“Miss Elizabeth told you her sister is in town?”

“Yes,” Darcy replied, hesitating for another moment. “But, in all honesty, I already knew that. Miss Bennet visited your sisters, and they returned the call.”

Bingley looked completely dumbfounded.

“Miss Bennet was in my house?”

“Yes.”

“When did this happen? My sisters told you but did not tell me? What is happening, Darcy? Are you a better friend to Caroline and Louisa than you are to me?” Bingley asked, his voice rising with anger.

“I deserve your ire, Bingley. I was not honest with you because I believed it would be better for you not to see Miss Bennet again. I was wrong and presumptuous. As for your sisters, I cannot speak on their behalf. You should ask them yourself.”

“Oh, I shall, you may count on that,” Bingley said, emptying his drink in one gulp. “I shall ask them for Miss Bennet’s address, and I shall go and apologise.”

“I have the address, if you want it,” Darcy offered, and Bingley’s eyes widened.

“Of course I want it!”

“She is staying with her uncle and aunt in Gracechurch Street, at number eight.”

“Well then...thank you...” Bingley said, rising and refilling his glass without even asking permission. He then remained standing, staring down at Darcy. “I am very upset with you, Darcy. I expected no less than complete honesty from you. I am stunned that you plotted with Caroline and Louisa to keep secrets from me. I thought you did not even like them!”

“It is not a matter of liking them or not, since they are your sisters. I admit my behaviour was dishonourable, even if my intentions were good. You have every

reason to be upset with me. Miss Elizabeth was, and probably Miss Bennet will be too, and rightfully so.”

“Well, Miss Bennet will be upset with me too. Probably even more. Since my sisters visited her and I did not, she might assume I did not wish to see her. If I call on her tomorrow, she might be angry with me. She might not even want to receive me!”

“I have no knowledge of what your reception might be, Bingley. You will have to see for yourself when you call.”

Bingley did not reply; he only took a few agitated steps about the room and sipped from his glass.

“Would you care to come with me, Darcy? You owe me as much!”

“I do owe you, Bingley. Yes, I shall, if you want me to.”

His friend’s face brightened immediately.

“Good. I cannot believe this is happening. I have struggled all this time... I believed your assertion that Miss Bennet did not return my feelings. I mean, why would she? She is so beautiful, so kind, with such a sweet nature — and she is a gentleman’s daughter. I might have some money — all from trade, I might add — but there is not much to recommend me. I am neither particularly clever nor well educated. I am sure Miss Bennet can easily find a better match than me.”

“You are too hard on yourself, Bingley — and too modest.”

“That should compensate for my sisters, who are too fastidious and uppish, without any particular grounds for being so. I still cannot believe you agreed with them, Darcy!”

“Keeping such a secret from you reveals a clear flaw in my character, as Miss Elizabeth pointed out. I have no other choice but to remedy my wrongs.”

“You will begin tomorrow — no, in fact, you began when you wrote me that letter. I was quite shocked when I received it. I shall leave you now. You must be very tired. Shall I come and fetch you tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, you may join us for breakfast. Georgiana will be happy to see you.”

“Excellent! I would much prefer to breakfast with your sister than with mine! Good night, Darcy.”

Once his friend left, Darcy felt relieved that he would not lose Bingley’s friendship. As upset as he was, Bingley’s response had not been as strong as Darcy had expected and deserved. As for himself, he was not so ready to forgive his own actions. The truth was, regardless of his reasons, he had plotted with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. He had every reason to feel ashamed and guilty.

Accompanying his friend to visit Miss Bennet was something Darcy had not planned, but he could not refuse Bingley, who was in desperate need of support and reassurance. As Elizabeth had told him, it was not enough for him to admit his errors; he needed to correct them too.

First thing in the morning, Darcy rang for his valet.

“I might be gone for the entire day. If the woman returns, you know what to ask her. Furthermore, find out whether the young mother and child she mentioned are ill. If they are and I am not at home, send someone to Dr Taylor and ask him, on my behalf, to visit them. I would like you to go with him too, so you can report the details on my

return.”

“Of course, sir.”

“I have thought about this all night, but I cannot imagine who this Mrs Crawford might be. Regardless, if there is a mother and child in real danger, I shall not be indifferent to it. I trust you will be diligent in discovering the truth.”

“Of course. I shall do as you requested, sir.”

Half an hour later, Bingley arrived, early for breakfast, impatient and anxious.

“I quarrelled with Caroline last night. I forced her to admit she deliberately concealed Miss Bennet’s presence in town from me. And then she dared to forbid me to visit Miss Bennet today! Can you imagine that? She forbade me! I was so angry that I demanded she move to the Hursts’ house immediately. I do not want to see her at present.”

“You are the master of your house, Bingley, and you decide who is welcome in it.”

“Caroline is absurd, I tell you! But I do not want to think any more about her now. I am trying to calm myself before we go to Gracechurch Street. I hope Miss Bennet will be at home.”

“You must calm down, indeed, Bingley, or you will scare Miss Bennet. She will certainly be surprised by your visit, so you must mind your manners.”

“I know. That is why I asked you to join me. Shall we leave after breakfast?”

“Yes, you must eat something and have some coffee. Or perhaps a herbal tea would be more appropriate for your nerves.”

“You may mock me, Darcy, but you might be right. I shall ask for some herbal tea, just to be sure.”

Bingley’s restlessness was further proof of his feelings for the lady and another reason for Darcy’s guilt. As Elizabeth had said, he might have ruined his friend’s happiness. Their reception in Gracechurch Street would indicate whether he could repair the damage or if all hope was lost.

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Their appearance at the Gardiners' door caused an obvious shock. They presented their names to the footman, who informed his mistress, and soon Mrs Gardiner arrived with Miss Jane Bennet behind her.

Even without the knowledge from Elizabeth, Darcy immediately recognised his error. At seeing Bingley, Miss Bennet seemed unable to remain steady on her feet. She turned white, then crimson, and her lips and hands trembled, even when she clasped them together. Bingley was no better; he was pale, mumbling, gazing at Miss Bennet, whose eyes avoided meeting his. Such a strong response could only be caused by sorrow and deep, lasting feelings.

“Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, I must say this is the greatest surprise I have experienced in many years,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I shall send a servant to inform Mr Gardiner. He is at his warehouse, but he would surely wish to welcome you into our home.”

“I hope we are not intruding,” Darcy said, while Bingley was just staring at Miss Bennet.

“No, not at all! It is a pleasure and an honour to have you here. It is just that we never imagined it could happen.”

“We are delighted to be here too, Mrs Gardiner. We should have sent a note first, but it was a rather impromptu decision. My friend Bingley just discovered yesterday that Miss Bennet has been in town all these months, and he wanted to call immediately.”

Jane Bennet stared at them, holding her breath, blinking a few times, and biting her lips.

“Darcy informed me about Miss Bennet’s presence in London,” Bingley finally spoke, “and I could not lose another moment without coming to greet you. I mean, you all...”

“How strange,” Mrs Gardiner replied. “Please, come in, let us go to the drawing room. I shall order some refreshments while we wait for my husband to return.”

They entered and each took a seat. Mrs Gardiner spoke with a maid for a moment, then returned to the guests.

“It is strange that Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst did not mention Jane’s presence here to you,” Mrs Gardiner said. “We called on them a long time ago, and they returned the visit.”

“I just became aware of these details yesterday, when Darcy returned from Kent,” Bingley said. “I hope you believe me when I say that, had I known earlier, I should have called on you a long time ago.”

“Better late than never, Mr Bingley. I am glad the misunderstanding was clarified,” Mrs Gardiner replied in a calm voice.

“Lizzy is in Kent too,” Miss Bennet whispered, as if trying to change the subject. “She mentioned meeting you there, Mr Darcy, and your cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“Yes...it was a fortunate coincidence that we happened to be visiting my aunt at the same time,” Darcy answered, wondering whether the others noticed the tremble of his voice. “Lady Catherine is my late mother’s sister.”

“I had the pleasure of knowing Lady Anne, as well as your father, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner said, puzzling him exceedingly.

“Did you? How delightful. May I ask how?”

“I lived in Lambton until I was twelve, then we moved to London.”

“Lambton? But that is only five miles from Pemberley!” he said.

“Indeed. I have many fond memories of Derbyshire, and Pemberley is still the most beautiful place I have ever seen in the whole of England,” the lady concluded enthusiastically.

“I cannot thank you enough for your kind words, Mrs Gardiner. How wonderful to meet someone who knew my parents. What a lovely coincidence!”

“You do not need to thank me, Mr Darcy. It is wonderful to simply have you here.”

As they were speaking, Mr Gardiner entered, welcoming them joyfully. He seemed surprised too, looking at the guests with curiosity. Knowing Mrs Bennet was his sister, Darcy expected to notice some similarities in manners, but there were none. Mr Gardiner soon proved himself to be a clever, educated man, well-mannered and amiable. His wife was handsome, elegant in appearance and behaviour, and they made a truly pleasant couple. Although he had come only to support Bingley, Darcy did not regret his decision. However, he could not help wondering what Elizabeth would think about his presence at the Gardiners’ and what they would have to say if they knew about his proposal.

The visit lasted another hour after Mr Gardiner joined them. By the end of it, Jane Bennet seemed to have recovered some composure, and Bingley more closely resembled his usual self. As for himself, Darcy was pleased that he had met the Gardiners, but there were many things that prevented him from enjoying his time in their house.

“We hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again soon, gentlemen,” Mrs Gardiner said as they rose to leave.

“My cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam has expressed a desire to call on Miss Elizabeth when she arrives in London.”

“We would like that very much, sir, and I am sure Lizzy would too. If you have no other more important engagements, we would be honoured to see you again as well.”

“Darcy is very busy, but I have no fixed engagements in the near future,” Bingley replied with apparent uneasiness. “If it is agreeable to you, I might call again in a few days...”

Jane Bennet’s cheeks coloured, and a little smile finally lit up her face.

“Mr Bingley, please know you are welcome at any time. Nothing would be more agreeable to us than to see you again soon,” Mr Gardiner assured him.

“Thank you, that is very kind of you,” Bingley said, his face glowing with joy as he gazed at Miss Bennet. She was still quiet and timid, but though her joy was not so obvious, it was impossible to miss.

On their way home, Bingley spoke animatedly, mostly about Miss Bennet, asked questions but did not wait for answers, wondering when he could call again without it being too soon.

“I hope Miss Bennet was not upset with me. She looked so surprised and confused to see me. I wonder what Caroline and Louisa told her.”

“Bingley, I dare say Miss Bennet was delighted to see you, even if she appeared quiet and restrained. Hopefully, on your next visit, she will be more open to conversation.”

“I must thank you, Darcy! Without you, I might not have seen Miss Bennet again.”

“I do not deserve your thanks, Bingley. Without me, you might not have left Netherfield at all, so I have done more damage than good.”

“Perhaps. But I thank you nevertheless,” Bingley insisted, then continued to speak about Jane Bennet until the carriage stopped in front of Darcy’s house.

Darcy greeted Georgiana, then asked after his valet.

“Brother, Porter is not at home. He said he had some business to attend to on your behalf.”

“He does. I was not certain whether he had returned or not.”

“Brother, may I ask how your visit was?”

“Exceedingly pleasant, actually. More so than I expected. Can you believe Mrs Gardiner grew up in Lambton and remembered our parents?”

“Truly? How lovely! Do tell me everything, Brother!”

Darcy indulged his sister and related the visit with all the details; he was not a good narrator as every other word reminded him of Elizabeth. Besides, he wondered about Porter, curious to hear his report about the mysterious Mrs Crawford.

Eventually, Georgiana went to practise the pianoforte, and Darcy retired to his chamber. Another hour passed before Porter returned; it was already late in the afternoon.

“Well?” Darcy enquired directly.

“It is a sad tale, sir. Mrs Crawford has two daughters. The eldest, who is barely sixteen, gave birth to a baby boy. They are both ill. I fetched the doctor, and he examined them and gave them some medicine. He will visit them again tomorrow.”

“So, did you find out who they are?”

“They would not tell me, sir. Mrs Crawford said she will only disclose that to you. She cried most of the time, and she kept thanking you for helping them.”

“Do they live far from here? I would like to visit them.”

“Far enough, sir. Maybe three miles, I would say. And the house is...they barely have a roof over their heads.”

“Porter, did you take them some food? A young mother needs nourishment to recover.”

“I did not, sir.”

“Then please rest a little, then ask Mrs Gibbs to prepare a large basket with meat, fruit, bread, and some cheese and take it to them. Take the carriage, of course. And tell them I shall visit them tomorrow morning.”

“Very well, sir. I do not need to rest. I shall go immediately, if you do not need my services.”

“Not at all. We shall talk again later, when you return.”

The valet left, and all sorts of thoughts and worries troubled Darcy again. Thoughts of

the young mother and her infant gave him shivers as he imagined Georgiana might have been in the same situation if she had eloped with that scoundrel Wickham. Who could this Mrs Crawford be? He had to find out the next day; he was too impatient to wait any longer. Whoever they were, their need for help was desperate, and he could not disregard them.

Elizabeth had called him arrogant and disdainful of the feelings of others. Was he truly so, or had resentment and anger induced her to exaggerate his flaws? How could he stop thinking of her or judging himself through her eyes?

In regard to Jane Bennet and Bingley, Elizabeth's accusations were just, based on his observation and estimation during the visit to the Gardiners'. Beyond a doubt, both of them had been miserable after the separation, and their feelings had survived all obstacles. Hopefully, their reunion was the first step in correcting his error.

One more thing needed to be resolved: Wickham. The more he thought about it, the more decided he was that he should not allow that wretch to deceive and hurt any more people. Apparently, with Elizabeth, Wickham had found little success as his deception had no consequences. But others would certainly not be so fortunate.

Darcy began to prepare for dinner, despite not being hungry. Besides Georgiana and Mrs Annesley, Bingley and the colonel were expected to attend. He was not particularly in the mood to entertain, but he could not cancel the engagement either.

He was ready to go downstairs when Porter returned.

“Well? How was it?”

“Very sad, sir. The woman's happiness when she saw the basket of food was hard to watch. I believe the food helped them even more than the doctor.”

“Good. We shall go together in the morning. You may rest now, Porter. I shall manage without your services tonight.”

“I do not need rest. I am not tired at all. I shall help you prepare for the night, as always.”

“As you wish. Then go to the kitchen now and have some dinner yourself.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Porter?”

“You are an excellent man, sir. People say that with good reason.”

“Thank you, Porter. Of course, you are partial to me, but I appreciate it nevertheless,” he said with a smile. Then he went down to join his sister and friends for dinner.

After breakfast, Darcy informed Georgiana that he had some business to attend to and would likely not return until dinner. Then he and Porter left.

Darcy was curious and somehow anxious to meet Mrs Crawford and her family. He looked out of the carriage window, recognising the area they were travelling towards.

“We should be there shortly, sir.”

They stopped after a ride of no longer than half an hour. It was not a house but a building in a shocking state, revealing the poor living conditions. Children’s cries could be heard from many windows. Porter knocked on a door, and it opened. The woman behind it was a stranger to Darcy, which puzzled him even more.

“Mr Darcy? Thank you, Lord!” she whispered tearfully.

“Mrs Crawford, I assume? Have we met before, ma’am?”

“No, sir. Please, do come in,” she invited them. Inside, Darcy was stunned by a heavy smell, though the room looked as clean as such a place allowed.

“How are your daughter and grandson? I understand they are ill?”

“They are better, I think, sir. My daughter ate a little last night, and she fed the baby. The fever has gone down, I think. The doctor said he would visit again today.”

“Good. Now, Mrs Crawford, before we go any further, you must tell me why you searched for me. I mean, it is obvious you need help, but how do you know me?”

The woman looked about, hesitating.

“You may speak in the presence of Porter, ma’am. I have no secrets from him.”

“My cousin, Martha Rollins, lives in Lambton, Mr Darcy,” she eventually said. “We visited her last year. That is where we met Mr Wickham.”

“Wickham?” Darcy repeated with a pain in his chest. “Do you know Wickham?”

“Yes, sir...he is the father of my grandson, and he is the cause of our tragedy.”

Tears fell down her face, and she sat for a moment, then stood up again in front of Darcy.

“We met Mr Wickham last April, on our way to Lambton, at an inn where we stopped,” the woman continued. “He told us he grew up at Pemberley and that your

father was his godfather. He was so polite and charming that even I liked him. We were travelling by post, but he offered to take me and my daughters the rest of the way to Lambton in his carriage, which of course we gladly accepted. We arrived in Lambton, and we did not see him again for a while. But a month later, when we were due to return to London, he offered to convey us in his carriage again. He said he would spend the summer in Ramsgate, and I was sure that was the end of our dealings with him.”

The woman paused before she continued. “However, in the autumn, my daughter fell ill, and only then did we discover she was with child. I did not even know when and how it had happened, but she told me — and I believe her — that she had never known any other man but Mr Wickham. I have been trying to find him ever since. I wrote to my cousin Martha, but nobody knew anything about him. Martha told me our only hope was you. She insisted I should apply to you and ask whether you knew where to find Mr Wickham. He must know he has a son. He must take responsibility for it. My daughter has been ill since she gave birth, and the boy is not well. I fear they both might die! I have wasted my meagre savings on doctors. I have nothing left. I do not know what to do,” Mrs Crawford said, apologising for the tears that overwhelmed her.

“Mrs Crawford, you did well by looking for me,” Darcy said, hardly controlling the tumult of emotions. So Wickham had been in Derbyshire last April. How was that possible? Had he plotted then with Mrs Younge to deceive Georgiana? That was very likely, indeed. His head was spinning, and he could not think properly. He finally looked about and, on impulse, said, “Mrs Crawford, Wickham is a wretch who does not deserve to be a father. I shall find him and hold him responsible. But until then, you cannot remain here. You and your daughters and your grandson will be moved into my house. The servants’ quarters are large, and there are several spare rooms. My housekeeper will take care of everything, and you will be provided with everything you need.”

Mrs Crawford stared at him in disbelief, without even wiping her tears.

“If you agree to this plan, of course,” Darcy added, and the woman nodded. Then she suddenly took his hand and tried to kiss it in gratitude.

“Mrs Crawford, for heaven’s sake, do not do that. There is no need, really. I must leave now, but Porter will return very soon with a maid to help you all move. Take only things you value. Everything else will be provided.”

With that, he bowed and left the house, taking a moment to breathe in front of it and calm his rage. Lives were continuing to be destroyed by Wickham because Darcy had not exposed the scoundrel. It was time for drastic measures.

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Still shaken after discovering the dreadful truth, Darcy called for his housekeeper, ordering two rooms to be prepared in the servants' quarters, with appropriate accommodation for a young mother and an infant who were both ill.

"I trust you to do everything necessary in this difficult situation, with no concern for expense," Darcy uttered, and the good housekeeper nodded. "The family is in a dire situation, and I take full responsibility for them."

"Of course, sir. Do you think a wet nurse will be needed?"

"A wet nurse? Yes, probably. I know little about these matters, so I trust your decision. Porter will assist you with anything you need."

"Very well, sir," the housekeeper said before she left.

Darcy's mind was still in a perturbed state, and he had little control over it. There was someone else he must inform before the family moved in, someone who would be deeply hurt. He invited Georgiana to the library, struggling to prepare for what was sure to be a difficult, painful conversation.

"Brother, what has happened? The entire household is agitated," his sister asked with concern.

"Please take a seat, my dear. Yes, something has happened, and I do not know how to tell you as I fear you will be hurt by it."

"How to tell me? What do you mean? Just tell me, Brother! It hurts me more to not

know!”

“Dearest, I have given orders to move a Mrs Crawford, her two daughters, and her grandson into the house — into the servants’ quarters. One of the daughters is only sixteen and has just given birth to a child. She and the infant are very ill.”

“Oh...” Georgiana replied, obviously surprised. “That is a wonderful gesture and so generous of you, Brother. But why did you assume I would be hurt by your decision? Surely you did not believe I would oppose it?”

“No, not at all. I know your kind heart would help anyone in need. The problem is... The young mother is... Apparently the father of the infant is Wickham,” he said in a low voice, watching his sister carefully.

Georgiana seemed to be holding her breath, her eyes wide open, staring at him. Her face was white as if all the blood had been drained from it.

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

“As sure as I can be. Apparently, they are related to Mrs Martha Rollins, from Lambton. Do you remember her?”

“Of course!”

“Mrs Crawford and her daughters visited her last April. They travelled by post part of the way but met Wickham on the road, and he conveyed them to their destination in his carriage, then brought them back to London a month later. Did you know Wickham was in Derbyshire last April?”

“Yes...I did not meet him, but Mrs Younge mentioned it to me. She said he would like to see me but would not dare to come to Pemberley because of you.”

“You did not tell me.”

“I did not want to upset you. Please forgive me! I never imagined that things would turn out as they did — that I would meet George in Ramsgate and...”

“Dearest, please do not cry,” Darcy said gently, pained by her sorrow. “There is no need to apologise. As you said, you could not guess his future actions.”

“I should have been more prudent, Brother.”

“So should I have been. I was wrong in selecting Mrs Younge as your companion, and I was wrong in not punishing Wickham. There is something else you should know. Wickham has been in Hertfordshire since last November. He joined a militia regiment stationed in Meryton.”

“Why did you not tell me?” she whispered with apparent torment.

“I did not want to upset you,” he replied, smiling tenderly. “And I was wrong. I left Hertfordshire, allowing Wickham the liberty to spread lies about me, to insinuate himself with innocent and honourable people in Meryton, and probably to take advantage of them.”

“You always take the blame upon yourself, Brother, even when it does not belong there.”

“You are too kind and therefore blind to my flaws, dearest. I have been wrong many times and in many ways, and I did not even realise it until I was forced to look in the mirror of my soul and see the truth. I was forced to face my errors and to admit them. And now I am trying to make amends wherever possible.”

“That mirror must have been broken, Brother. You are truly the best of men —

everybody who knows you admits that.”

“Not quite everybody.” He smiled bitterly.

“What do you mean? Who is so foolish as to not see the obvious, Brother?”

“Let us not speak of that now, dearest. Porter will return with the family soon, and I want to talk to Mrs Crawford as soon as they are settled. Would you like to join the conversation? I imagine it might be painful, but you are free to decide.”

“Yes, I would like to hear what Mrs Crawford has to say. I only wish to add one more thing. People who do not see your worthiness are not worth your attention.”

“Sometimes, dearest, it is worth waiting for someone who has the wisdom to see you in a different light from others and who dares to reveal your faults. This is something I have only recently learnt.”

“I do not understand your meaning, Brother, but I shall not insist on you telling me more than you want to.”

“There is nothing more to tell at this moment, Georgiana. When there is, I promise you will be the first to know.”

The discussion, as difficult as it had been, had gone better than Darcy had expected. He was pleased to note Georgiana’s obvious growth in judgment and her self-confidence in expressing her opinion. He wondered whether his sister and Elizabeth would enjoy each other’s company. He believed so, and surely Georgiana would benefit from Elizabeth’s friendship. If Bingley and Miss Bennet were reunited, he would cross paths with Elizabeth rather often. She might even become friends with Georgiana — a prospect equally frightening and desirable.

Since the day of his failed proposal, Darcy had refused to ponder his intentions in regard to Elizabeth. His wishes meant nothing since they were so different from hers. Was he still angry with her? Was he still carrying a grudge against her for refusing him? No; he was certain that was not the case. Not from the moment they had met to discuss the letter. At that time, he had also noticed a slight change in her behaviour towards him, but he had lost all confidence in judging her and assuming anything.

He quickly put aside such speculations since they could bring him nothing but pain and disappointment. If he and Elizabeth were to be in each other's company ever again, the best he could hope for was a polite friendship.

In the afternoon, the family — Mrs Crawford, her thirteen-year-old daughter Libby, her sixteen-year-old daughter Janey, and the latter's son of two months old — arrived, and Dr Taylor called to examine the mother and child.

"I was quite surprised to hear you had brought them here, Mr Darcy," Dr Taylor said later over a glass of brandy. "It was a generous gesture and certainly increased their chances of survival. May I ask whether you were previously acquainted with them?"

"No, I was not. However, their situation was caused by one of my acquaintances, and I could not be indifferent to their ordeal."

"You are exceedingly generous, Mr Darcy. Very few gentlemen of your standing would bring sick strangers under their roof."

"There were enough free rooms here. Besides, as I said, I feel responsible for them. Will they survive?"

"The mother is very young and probably had to bear a complicated birth. The child is

weak. I have not much hope that he will survive.”

“I trust you will do everything you can to save them, Doctor.”

“I certainly shall, sir, but I suggest you pray, as a miracle is required.”

A whole week passed before Janey and her son showed the first signs of improvement. The mother became well enough to feed her baby, and with some help from a wet nurse, the child grew stronger too. Dr Taylor was still reluctant to proclaim good news, but the changes for the better were obvious. Georgiana visited them daily, if only briefly, while Mrs Crawford requested that she and Libby be allowed to work in the kitchen to repay the master’s kindness.

Darcy’s main concern was finding the appropriate punishment for Wickham. He confided in Colonel Fitzwilliam, who insisted upon throwing the scoundrel in prison immediately, regardless of the scandal that might arise.

Bingley had more pleasant ways of employing his time, as he called on Miss Bennet and the Gardiners every other day and even dined there once.

“Darcy, there is something important I must tell you,” Bingley said one day. “Jane...I mean Miss Bennet insists I should deliver the message immediately.”

“What message, Bingley?”

“This one,” his friend replied, handing him a letter.

“What is this?” Darcy enquired, alarmed by a strange feeling.

“A letter, of course. From Miss Elizabeth — for you. She put it inside a letter for Jane, and I was asked to deliver it. Do not worry, Mr and Mrs Gardiner know about it, and they have no objections to you receiving it.”

Darcy took the piece of paper carefully, as if it might burn him. He held it a moment, staring at it. Elizabeth had written to him? Why would she do that after almost a fortnight? The gesture was not entirely proper, and her uncle and aunt were entitled to open and read it. What could be in it that was worth taking the risk?

“Well? Are you not going to read it? If you wish to reply, I could take your answer to Gracechurch Street tomorrow.”

“Are you visiting again? So often?”

“Yes... Why would I not since they assured me I was welcome? Today I invited Miss Bennet for a stroll in the park. There is a small but lovely one close to them.”

“I cannot fault your reasoning, Bingley.”

“Darcy, I was thinking...Miss Elizabeth will arrive in London in four days, and they will both return to Longbourn in about a week. I believe I shall escort them home...and I would like to reopen Netherfield.” Bingley spoke with some hesitation, watching Darcy as if waiting for his approval.

“I trust you will make the right decision, Bingley, for the present and for the future.”

“Are you not opposed to the idea?”

“I have no right and no reason to oppose it.”

“Excellent...I am glad to hear it. Now read your letter. There cannot be anything

important or private in it. In fact, I wonder why Miss Elizabeth would write to you at all since she does not like you much.”

Annoyed by his friend’s innocent remarks, Darcy opened the letter. His eyes ran over it, curious and anxious at the same time.

Mr Darcy,

My sister Jane’s recent letters, filled with joy and happiness, give me reason to believe I owe you gratitude and apologies, and until I have the chance to express them in person, I have taken the liberty of writing them down. They are genuine and heartfelt, and I pray you will accept them.

Many things need to be discussed and clarified on my part, but I would not dare presume you wish to, nor abuse your time. I would be thankful for the opportunity for one more conversation, but I certainly understand if you find it inappropriate. The decision is entirely yours.

E. Bennet

Darcy folded the letter and placed it in his pocket. It was easy to understand its contents: Elizabeth had discovered that he had reunited Bingley with her sister and wished to make amends for her harsh accusations. However, he did not desire her gratitude, nor her good opinion altered by her sister’s happiness. His will and reason told him to avoid the danger of any private conversation with Elizabeth. The past should remain behind them and the dreadful failed proposal buried deep.

He glanced at the letter again, then said, “Please ask Miss Bennet to inform Miss Elizabeth that I shall be delighted to meet her again when she arrives in London. As we discussed, I shall call with my cousin Richard.”

“Good. And you should know that I plan to host a dinner party the day after Miss Elizabeth’s arrival. Her family will all attend, and hopefully you, Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, and the colonel.”

“I see. Well, I... That is five days from now... I am not certain of my plans yet, but I shall speak to Georgiana and Richard.”

“Come, Darcy, I am counting on your presence! I am sure Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth will be delighted to meet your sister. My sisters will probably not attend. I still have to decide whether I shall invite them or not, considering their outrageous betrayal.”

“If you insist, we cannot refuse you, Bingley,” Darcy finally agreed. He felt still anxious and troubled, but Bingley was so overjoyed that he hardly noticed anything unrelated to Miss Bennet.

After his friend left, Darcy pulled out the letter and read it again and again, each time discovering new meanings behind the words. In the end, he concluded that if Elizabeth wanted to speak to him, he would certainly not suspend any pleasure of hers.

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Sitting in the Gardiners' drawing room and watching his companions, Darcy wondered how anyone could feel so much joy and so much sorrow at the same time.

Elizabeth had just arrived from Kent, and he, together with the colonel and Bingley, had come to call on her. Knowing he would see Elizabeth soon, having time to become accustomed to that notion, Darcy had hoped he would be able to control his emotions. But he was wrong. Chills running down his spine, his heart pounding, and a lump in his throat were only a few of the symptoms that indicated his feelings for her remained equally strong. After all, it had been less than three weeks. He had failed to forget her in three months, after he left Hertfordshire; by comparison, three weeks meant nothing.

Elizabeth was talking to the colonel and Bingley, so he had plenty of time to observe her. She seemed somehow changed; her colour was heightened — probably from her long walks — and her eyes, as she glanced at him repeatedly, carried a different sort of sparkle, just as the little smile that twisted her lips was different from before.

“I am exceedingly pleased to see you again, Miss Elizabeth,” the colonel said.

“And I you, Colonel. What a lovely surprise to see you and Mr Darcy in my uncle's house. And Mr Bingley, of course,” she added, then laughed while casting another look at Darcy.

“I fear Miss Bennet and Mr and Mrs Gardiner are already tired of seeing me in their house, as I am here every other day,” Bingley replied joyfully.

“Oh, not at all, sir!” Miss Bennet quickly answered, blushing.

“Not at all, sir,” Mrs Gardiner repeated. “Your visits are a delight to all of us — including the children.”

“I am glad to hear that. And relieved! You may bring the children too — to dinner, I mean. It would be lovely to have them.”

“Thank you, sir, but no,” Mrs Gardiner responded. “It would be far too late at night for them. They will stay at home with their nursemaid.”

“I am looking forward to this dinner with immense pleasure,” Bingley said. “Darcy and the colonel will be there too. And Miss Darcy with her companion.”

Elizabeth looked at Darcy again, her expression one of surprise.

“It will be wonderful to finally meet Miss Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I still cannot believe the master of Pemberley has visited my house twice,” she added.

Darcy smiled. “It is a pleasure to be in your company, ma’am. And my sister greatly anticipates meeting you, Miss Bennet, and Miss Elizabeth. I am glad to have the opportunity to introduce you.”

“Miss Darcy is truly the best sister a man could hope for. Sadly, not all of us are equally fortunate,” Bingley said.

“That, I cannot argue with,” Darcy replied. “May I ask when Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth will return to Longbourn?”

“In about a week,” Bingley responded. “I shall escort them on the journey. I have already agreed it with Mr Gardiner.”

“Actually, they have expressed a desire to stay in town a week longer, so it will be a

fortnight,” Mrs Gardiner interjected. “Elizabeth said she would like to spend a little more time in London, and we are happy to have her.”

Darcy looked at Elizabeth and met her gaze for a moment. She averted her eyes quickly, then looked back at him. He understood but did not dare believe it.

“I am glad to hear that,” he said briefly. Could she want to stay because of him? If so, what could she possibly intend?

The colonel sighed. “Unfortunately, I shall leave town at the end of this week and only return at the end of the month. But I hope there will be other opportunities to meet again soon.”

“I am sure there will be,” Bingley quickly said. Miss Bennet blushed, and Elizabeth smiled. “I shall re-open Netherfield, so you are welcome to visit at any time, Colonel,” Bingley added. “I hope Darcy will come and enjoy the society more this time.”

“If only Mr Darcy would smile a bit more, I am sure the society would like him very much,” Elizabeth suddenly interjected. “But, in truth, I prefer a man who smiles rarely to one who smiles all the time with the main purpose of charming people into trusting him, only to deceive them later.”

“Are you speaking of me?” Bingley asked, and Elizabeth turned pale, looking panicked.

“Dear Lord, of course not! Why would you assume that?”

“Do not worry, Bingley. Your constant smile can be annoying at times, but your kind and generous heart and honourable character are beyond a doubt to everyone who knows you. I have absolute confidence that you could never deceive anyone on

purpose,” Darcy declared, trying to comfort his friend in a light tone.

“Indeed, Mr Bingley. I have the highest opinion of you — and of your smiles,” Elizabeth added, her own smile wide and warm.

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. And, Darcy, if we are to speak about being kind and generous, you should be the main subject.” He turned to the ladies. “Do you know that Darcy has taken a woman with two daughters and an infant grandson into his house because they are starved and ill?”

At that, all eyes turned to him, and Darcy felt a lump in his throat.

“Bingley, this is not an appropriate subject of conversation for the ladies,” he answered, slightly embarrassed. However, the others’ curiosity was apparent, so he continued. “This woman, her daughters, and her grandson were in a dire situation caused by someone I know. Since he refused to take responsibility, I assumed it myself. It was a wrong that had to be remedied.”

“That is exceedingly generous of you, Mr Darcy,” Mr Gardiner said. “Unfortunately, people like you cannot fix everything that others ruin or break.”

“True, but I shall at least try, especially when the damage is caused by someone I know and should have stopped.” At that, he looked at Elizabeth, whose face was pale and distressed. “I hope that my intervention was in time and they will heal.”

“If someone caused such damage, they should suffer appropriate punishment,” Elizabeth uttered. “Generosity and kindness should not apply to people with no character, no honour, and no decency.”

“I am glad we are in agreement, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy answered.

“How could we not be, Mr Darcy. I said once that one should admit one’s own errors and make amends for them. That was meant for everybody, including, or especially, myself.”

“I am glad you are in agreement since you two used to disagree on almost everything,” Bingley said. Darcy smiled, and so did Elizabeth, and shortly after, the visit ended.

Darcy’s feelings were still conflicted after the visit, but they had changed significantly. Those few bits of conversation with Elizabeth had been enjoyable, tormenting, and revealing. As much as he doubted his judgment, her attempts to show her change of mind and her desire to spend more time in his company were beyond a doubt. What her purpose and wishes were remained a mystery. But at least she seemed not to despise him any longer.

Being in her company was not easy, but the reward was worth the effort. He would see her again at Bingley’s dinner, and perhaps he could invite the Gardiners and their nieces to visit him too. What his purpose and wishes were, he did not dare admit either — it was too soon and too painful for that.

Progress in his other endeavour proceeded well too. The men he had hired had succeeded in finding many of Wickham’s creditors, and with the information he had collected, Darcy could have the reprobate sent to debtors’ prison at any time. However, he first wrote to the scoundrel in Meryton, demanding a private meeting at Mrs Younge’s establishment to discuss the matter at length. Colonel Fitzwilliam opposed such an act of charity and demanded to attend the meeting with Darcy.

Two days before the dinner at Bingley’s house, Darcy was out at his club. When he returned, he was stunned to discover that Georgiana and Mrs Annesley had gone for a

walk with Bingley, two young ladies, and an older one.

Shocked and bewildered, Darcy's first instinct was to go and search for them, but he refrained from such an impulsive action. They might be anywhere, and chasing about town after them was silly. Therefore, he chose to wait at home, speculating and gazing through the window until he finally spotted the group: Bingley, Mrs Gardiner and her two nieces, Mrs Annesley, and his sister. He hurried out to greet them, trying to overlook Elizabeth's crimson cheeks.

"Brother, I am so happy you have returned. Mr Bingley was so kind as to invite me to join his party for a walk. We went to Hyde Park — it is beautiful at this time of year."

"I am pleased to see you looking so joyful, Georgiana," he replied. "Mrs Gardiner, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth — it is a pleasure to see you again. Would you like to come in for a moment?" As he spoke, he glanced at Elizabeth, but it was Mrs Gardiner who answered.

"We would be honoured, Mr Darcy, but it is impossible. We must return home — it is already late, and the children are waiting."

"I understand, of course."

"Brother, could we go to the theatre next week?" Georgiana asked suddenly. "There is a play we would all like to see."

Such a request from Georgiana was rare, and it took Darcy by surprise. "Of course, what a lovely idea! I shall make the necessary arrangements," he said, glancing at Elizabeth.

"Thank you, sir," she whispered.

“No need to thank me for something that gives me great pleasure, Miss Elizabeth. I love theatre too, and I am pleased to have such enjoyable company.”

With that, the group separated. Darcy entered the house with Georgiana, who continued to speak cheerfully.

“Brother, it was such a lovely walk, though tiring.” She laughed. “Poor Mrs Annesley and Mrs Gardiner stopped halfway and waited for us on a bench.”

“I am glad you enjoyed it, dearest.”

“Oh, I did. I have to tell you a secret. Miss Elizabeth and I walked together most of the time, and Mr Bingley remained behind with Miss Bennet. I suspect we might hear some news soon.”

“Really?” He smiled, enchanted by her joy.

“Oh yes. I hope so. They are such a beautiful couple!”

“So you spent most of the time with Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes, I remember you mentioned her in a few letters from Netherfield, and now I understand why. She is different from most young ladies. I mean, there is nothing false about her. I felt comfortable in her company.”

“I am glad to hear that. Truly glad.”

“And Mrs Gardiner is so kind. She spoke so highly of Mama and Papa and of Pemberley. Do you know she has never visited the house? I mean — inside?”

“I did not know that.”

“She said I look very much like Mama, but I know I am not as beautiful as she was.”

“Yes you are. Mrs Gardiner is right. Dearest, I shall say it again — I am truly content to see you so happy. I hope to never see pain in your eyes again.”

Georgiana frowned.

“The pain is still there, but the shame is even stronger. I was a fool, and I shall never forgive myself for that. But today I am happy, indeed. Do you have any news about George, Brother?”

“I do,” he said after a brief hesitation. “Georgiana, I intend to send him to debtors’ prison for a while. He needs to experience an ordeal such as that to understand the gravity of his actions. I hope you understand my reason.”

“I trust you will do what is right, Brother. It is fair that he should suffer the consequences of his actions since so many others do. Now, please excuse me, I am going to see Janey. She asked me what she should name the boy. I shall think about it. If he recovers, I would like to take him as my protégé, if you do not oppose it.”

“I trust you will do what is right, dearest,” he said, repeating her earlier statement. “You have my support in anything you decide.”

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The small, dark room smelt like cheap cigars and brandy. From outside it, voices and laughter — vulgar, loud, and probably drunk — seeped into the sordid chamber. All three men — Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Wickham — were facing each other, and Mrs Younge waited a short distance away.

“Darcy, I cannot understand why you summoned me here. And why do you care about my debts? Last July, you asked me to never come near you or Georgiana again. I have not broken that agreement. I have no debts to you, and the rest of my business is not your business, so to speak. We have nothing to discuss.”

“Your miserable affairs are mine too because I have been forced to pay out on your behalf. You have not approached Georgiana again, but you did spread all sorts of miserable lies in Meryton.”

“You cannot blame me because the people of Meryton did not like you, Darcy! Regardless of what I told them about you, by the time I arrived there, everybody hated you already,” Wickham said with a leer. “You cannot deny that people have always liked me more than you. Even your father.”

The insolent grin and the mention of his father pushed Darcy over the edge. His fist connected with Wickham’s face before he even realised what was happening. He heard the cry and the sound of Wickham hitting the floor, turning over a small table and chairs as he fell.

From the ground, Wickham gazed up at him in disbelief. “What the hell did you do that for? Have you lost your mind?”

“Quite the opposite, Wickham,” the colonel interjected. “Darcy finally understands there is only one way to treat you. He should have done that a long time ago.”

“But why? What have I done?” Wickham asked, trying to stand up and rubbing his chin.

“What have you done?” the colonel bellowed. “If I had known beforehand how you two plotted to deceive Georgiana, I would have shot you in the knees. Twice! Both of you. And then watched you cry and try to crawl away.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, I assure you—” Mrs Younge mumbled in a whining voice.

“You assure me of what? With what money did you buy this building? With Darcy’s money, I am sure! He trusted you with Georgiana’s well-being, and you almost had her ruined. Do not dare to open your mouth to me ever again. You are lucky that Darcy is a man of honour. If it were up to me, you would have both been dead long ago.”

“Richard, do not waste your time with these low-life creatures. Wickham, here is my offer to you. You will leave England and never return. I have purchased you a ticket to New South Wales. I shall include a reasonable cabin during the journey and two thousand pounds for your expenses once you get there, so you can begin a new life. If you want to waste it on cards, that is your choice — you will end up starving or be killed. I shall take care of all the business regarding your resignation from the militia, and I shall pay your creditors.”

“Pay them? Why would you pay them if I am to leave the country?”

“Why would I pay your debts? Because you owe these people! You cheated all those honest men! You were my father’s godson, and I cannot allow your lack of honour to besmirch my father’s name by association. Do you know how many creditors you

have? Do you know how many young girls you seduced and how many of them you left with child?"

"This is an exaggeration, Darcy. You cannot expect me to remember every shop girl that warmed my bed or every idiot I played cards with!"

"You are so disgusting, Wickham, that I feel nauseous just listening to you. I have had enough of this. My offer is open until tomorrow evening, when a few of my men will come to convey you to the ship. On the deck, someone else will be waiting for you and will hand you the money and the ticket and wait to ensure you have left."

"This is absurd! You cannot force me to leave the country!"

"Indeed, I cannot. The decision is yours. If you choose otherwise, beginning the day after tomorrow, you will be hunted, confined, and thrown in prison until your debts are paid, which might take forever."

"But how can you expect me to leave all of a sudden? Alone. What if I want to bring a friend?"

"Surely you would not dare to try to extort more money from me, would you? After all, I could follow my cousin's suggestion instead."

"It is not about extortion! But you have to be reasonable, Darcy!"

"I have to be reasonable? Are you out of your mind?" Darcy roared. "I purchased you a second-class cabin, which is more than you deserve! I should have let you sleep on the deck! If you wish to take a friend, you can pay for them from the amount you will be given. And no, I shall not allow you to take a female friend with you, as I expect you to seduce her, maybe have a child with her, then abandon her as soon as you arrive at your destination."

“What if I want to take a male friend? I am not sure who would want to go...but to be alone in a savage country...”

“What do you want, Wickham? A chaperon? A governess to hold your hand? You expect me to provide you with company?” Darcy asked sarcastically.

“What if I want to go with him?” Mrs Younge suddenly, surprisingly, enquired.

“You? Why would you want to leave? What about this business of yours?”

“Business is not going well. And there are certain circumstances that I would rather not face any longer. There is not much for me in London. I could not find any other employment without recommendations. Nobody will ever hire me for any respectable job.”

“And neither should they!” Darcy exclaimed. “You cannot be trusted around respectable people any more than Wickham!”

“That is why I want to leave. I could pack my luggage by tomorrow.”

“Well,” Darcy replied after a brief hesitation, “if you two wish to share the cabin, I could not care less. As a sign of ultimate benevolence, if you both appear at the ship tomorrow night, my man will purchase another ticket for you and will give you three hundred pounds for expenses. I would rather pay the money and be sure neither of you will be a burden to me any longer.”

“Upon my word, that is the most generous gift, which they do not deserve. It would be cheaper if you just threw Wickham in debtors’ prison and had him transported if he did not pay his debts. It would not cost you a penny,” the colonel interjected.

“I could, but the idea of having to deal with that pathetic excuse for a man for months

is repugnant. I would rather pay to get this annoyance out of my life. To remove his accomplice too would be a special bonus.”

Darcy looked at the two people who had caused such distress in his life and spoke.

“Tomorrow evening. My last offer. Take it or suffer the consequences.”

With that, Darcy and the colonel left and hurried to their carriage, which immediately began to move. A mere glance about was enough to explain why Mrs Younge wanted to leave too; that sort of business, in that sort of place, with those sorts of people could only go bad. Darcy took off his gloves and rubbed the back of his hand.

“I hope his face hurts more than my fist,” he said.

“I am certain it does. Darcy, I hope you are aware that Wickham might disappear.”

“I doubt it. I hired a few men to watch him. If he attempts to run, he will be held. Then he will be sent directly to prison.”

“Good. I see you have considered all this thoroughly,” the colonel said.

“I have. I was deeply affected by the story of Janey and her child. It could have been Georgiana, you know.”

“I do know, Darcy. It crossed my mind too.”

“Of all his deceptions, the seduction of young, innocent girls is the worst, as it ruins their lives. I have heard he is now pursuing a Miss Mary King from Meryton, who has recently inherited ten thousand pounds. He was right, you know — people always fall for his lies, always like him, always trust him. I cannot imagine why. Even my father trusted him so much that he would not heed my warnings.”

“I cannot tell you why. To me, that man is nothing. You were probably right to waste some money and get rid of him immediately. I cannot even imagine how much you will have to pay his creditors.”

“The total will probably be close to ten thousand pounds,” Darcy said, and the colonel gasped in shock.

“Ten thousand pounds? That is at least ten times more than his pathetic life is worth.”

“Probably, but my sanity, my peace of mind — and that of some people who are very dear to me — is worth much more. It is all decided.”

The carriage continued onwards, entering more familiar streets.

“Darcy, there is something I must ask. That friend you said you saved from an imprudent marriage — the one I mentioned to Miss Elizabeth — was it Bingley? Was it him and Miss Bennet?”

“Yes,” Darcy answered briefly.

“Dear Lord, what a stupid fool I have been! Of course Miss Elizabeth understood the truth immediately. I should apologise to her...and to you!”

“Richard, please never mention this story again. Miss Elizabeth and I have clarified the situation. She knows what I did, and she knows I am trying to remedy my errors. There is nothing more for you to add.”

“Then I have to say — I cannot understand what objections you had to Miss Bennet. She is an exceptional beauty and a gentleman’s daughter. Indeed, she is more than Bingley could hope for, even though he has money. Besides, you seem to be on friendly terms with the family, including with Miss Elizabeth. What was the

problem?”

“The problem was my stupid arrogance,” Darcy replied briefly.

“Ah...” the colonel said. “About that, I need no more details. Shall we meet tomorrow night, at Bingley’s?”

“Yes, as we planned. Hopefully by then we shall have news about Wickham too.”

Despite Bingley’s initial resolution, his sisters and brother-in-law attended the dinner party. When Darcy entered, they were talking to Jane Bennet. Unlike other times, neither of the Bingley sisters attempted to catch his attention, but both greeted Georgiana cordially.

The dinner table was arranged according to the master’s preference, so that on Bingley’s right was Miss Bennet and on his left Mr Gardiner. Darcy sat somewhere in the middle, opposite Elizabeth and close enough for a little bit of conversation. Georgiana was next to him, then Mrs Annesley and Mrs Gardiner; the colonel sat between Elizabeth and Miss Bingley.

Darcy’s attention was mostly on Elizabeth, and several times his eyes caught hers. She was certainly not indifferent to him, but the nature of her interest was unclear. She was talking to the colonel, and for a moment, Darcy felt the bite of jealousy, as unreasonable as such a feeling was.

He picked up his glass and sipped from it, barely suppressing a moan; his hand was still hurting, even worse than the previous day. He rubbed it to relieve the pain and noticed Elizabeth’s intense stare. She was looking at his hand with a little frown and an enquiring expression on her face. He attempted a smile, but her frown increased,

then her eyebrow arched in a challenging, silent question.

“It is nothing. Just an unpleasant, annoying accident,” he explained, hoping nobody else would notice.

“I hope it is more annoying than painful,” she replied, her smile matching his.

“It is, I assure you,” he replied.

The first course was about to be served when Bingley requested everyone’s attention.

“Thank you all for being here. I am happy to be surrounded by family and friends. Before we enjoy our dinner, I wish to make an important announcement. I shall be brief and direct. Miss Jane Bennet has accepted my proposal of marriage, and we shall wed as soon as her father gives his blessing.”

Darcy immediately glanced at Elizabeth, and her serene expression proved she already knew. She smiled, then inclined her head slightly in a gesture of thanks.

Bingley took Miss Bennet’s hand and brought it to his lips, while the sound of a fork dropping onto a plate broke the silence.

“You are engaged? How? When did that happen? Why was it so sudden?” Miss Bingley asked, her face red, her breathing irregular.

“I proposed a few days ago, when we walked in the park,” Bingley answered with perfect composure. “It is not sudden at all. I should have proposed in November, had I not been a fool. And I should certainly have proposed sooner if you, Caroline, had not concealed Jane’s presence in town from me,” he continued, his voice growing loud and harsh.

Miss Bingley seemed tempted to reply, then suddenly she stood up and spoke.

“Please excuse me. I have a sudden headache and have lost my appetite. Please proceed without me.” Then she left the table and the room. Mrs Hurst remained for another moment, then excused herself too and followed her sister. Mr Hurst asked for another drink and began to eat as if nothing had happened.

From around the table, congratulations were offered, joyful and genuine.

“Congratulations, Bingley, you are truly a fortunate man,” Darcy said. “I wish nothing more than to see you as happy as you deserve — and now I am sure you will be. Miss Bennet, please accept my best wishes. All those who know and appreciate Bingley will admit that he could not find anyone more perfectly suited to him.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. Please know I am as grateful as Mr Bingley for your help in reuniting us. We both know we owe our present felicity to your involvement.”

“Not at all, I assure you, Miss Bennet. I have done little, and it is not worth mentioning. Let us speak of nothing else but your happy engagement,” Darcy said. He glanced at Elizabeth again, and his eyes met hers and locked briefly, while the tumult of joyful voices increased around them. The rest of the evening progressed in the same way. When dinner was almost over, a servant entered and slipped Darcy a note. He took it, looked at it briefly, then put it in his pocket. Once again, he noticed Elizabeth’s curious gaze on him.

“Good news, Darcy?” Colonel Fitzwilliam enquired.

“Yes,” he answered. “Indeed, this evening is filled with good news — I could not hope for anything better.” The discussion ended there as everyone left the table and moved to the drawing room. There was no separation, as the gentlemen preferred to remain with the ladies. The conversation was animated, and Darcy was happy to see

Georgiana in the midst of it.

While he enjoyed his brandy, observing his companions, Darcy was astonished to see Elizabeth walking towards him.

“May I join you?” she asked, and, bewildered, he moved a little, inviting her to sit.

For a moment, there was only silence, as if she wished to say something but did not dare.

“I wish to thank you...” she began. “And to apologise.”

“Please do not,” he answered. “It is not needed, and I do not deserve either. Let us not mention any of it again. It is an evening of good news only.”

They were talking in low voices so they would not be overheard. Luckily, everyone was too busy with the happy couple to observe them.

“Did you receive more good news, other than that of the happy engagement?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes. An urgent and distressing matter that has long needed concluding has finally been resolved.”

“About Mr Wickham?” she whispered. “Was he the one responsible for the family you took into your care?”

“You are very perceptive, Miss Elizabeth. Yes, about him.”

“He is a man with no scruples and no morals. He deserves to be punished.”

“We must not worry about him any longer. He has accepted an advantageous offer to move abroad. He will likely not return to England soon, if ever.”

Elizabeth looked at him intently until he gazed at her, and their eyes met again.

“An evening with only good news, indeed, Mr Darcy,” she said. Then she returned to her sister and Georgiana, while Darcy remained in place, enjoying his drink and the view: his sister and Elizabeth, close to each other, sharing smiles, engaged in conversation about the theatre and walking in the park.

At that very moment, he clearly understood his desires in regard to Elizabeth: despite their past, despite the dreadful failed proposal, despite her calling him the last man in the world, despite her refusal, he wanted her. Only her! He was ready to make any effort, to try the impossible, to pursue her for as long as necessary. He knew that she was worth any endeavour — that she was worth waiting for.

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Elizabeth and her sister remained in London another week after the announcement of the engagement. As expected, Bingley spent every day with his betrothed, and Elizabeth was their chaperon. As a delightful surprise to Darcy, Georgiana was often invited to join their party, whether they were taking long walks in Hyde Park or shopping.

Despite his resolution to pursue Elizabeth, Darcy found enough self-control to be patient, to observe her, and to be certain of her approval before taking any further steps.

Since her sister was to marry Bingley and she was befriending Georgiana, Darcy became even more cautious. As much as he hoped to win Elizabeth's good opinion and her heart one day, he despised the idea that she was receiving his attentions out of gratitude. Therefore, he did not impose his presence on her, and he was rarely in her company.

Besides, he was busy settling the disaster Wickham had left behind after he boarded the ship to New South Wales. Furthermore, Mrs Younge's building was seized by creditors, and several families who had been residing there, barely surviving, were in danger of being thrown out on the street. Darcy ended up buying the place, for a sum much smaller than he had expected, and was in search of someone to manage the business, to clean it up, and to take care of it. The further he progressed, the more problems were revealed: so many creditors, so many complaints, so much misery that he asked his solicitors to hire help to conclude the sordid affair. He revealed to Georgiana the details of Wickham's departure, and she seemed distressed but rather relieved and asked for no further explanation.

His only comfort was that Elizabeth and her sister, together with Bingley, accepted invitations to have tea with Georgiana twice. The first time they visited, Darcy joined their group and spent a couple of hours with them. From that day on, Elizabeth's slow change of heart became even more visible to Darcy. They did not speak much but glanced at each other often, and her smiles to him were wider and brighter every time. On her second visit to his home, several small gestures spoke about her feelings more eloquently than any speech. She took a cup of tea from his hand, and their fingers touched briefly. She sat by his side on the sofa, and he helped her climb into her carriage, her fingers lingering in his for a moment too long.

The night at the theatre came with both nervousness and anticipation for Darcy. He owned a box, together with the Fitzwilliams, but it was rarely full. On that particular evening, Lord and Lady Matlock, as well as their eldest son, attended too. They were polite and restrained in the company, but they congratulated Bingley and Miss Bennet on their engagement and asked Elizabeth whether she had enjoyed her time in Kent. For the rest of the evening, everyone paid attention to the stage and only spoke briefly during the interval.

To Darcy, the evening provided more reasons for delight and hope. Elizabeth was sitting next to Georgiana, on the front row of chairs, while he sat just behind them. She said or did nothing special, but her hand brushed over his foot as she reached back to retrieve her fallen shawl, she accepted the opera glass he offered, and she glanced back at him while talking to his sister. To others, all those would seem small, meaningless gestures; to him, they meant the world.

After the spectacle had finished, each party returned home. It was a beautiful, serene night, perfect for a walk, but Darcy did not dare suggest it.

In the carriage with Georgiana and Bingley, he was silent and thoughtful. Elizabeth was to leave in three days, and he was not sure when he would see her again.

“Brother, shall we travel to Netherfield for the wedding?”

“Of course you will!” Bingley replied. “I mean, I hope you will. It would mean a lot to me and to Jane.”

“I really like Jane,” Georgiana said. “And Elizabeth... Their bond is so loving, so supportive. As much as I love my brother, I would dearly love to have a sister too.”

“Well, it depends on the sisters,” Bingley said. “Some are more loving and supportive than others. Hopefully, Darcy will marry someone more like Jane and Elizabeth, so you can have the sister you desire. Although I believe Elizabeth’s outspoken and daring nature would suit Darcy better. He would be too frightening for a wife as sweet and gentle as my Jane.”

“Oh, come now, Mr Bingley. My brother is not frightening!” Georgiana argued.

“Yes, Bingley, of course we shall be at Netherfield for your wedding,” Darcy finally replied. “I was thinking... You used to spend a month every summer at Pemberley with your sisters. Perhaps you would care to come this year too, with your wife? Of course, you may bring your sisters too — and hers.”

“Oh, that would be truly wonderful!” Georgiana exclaimed.

“That is very generous of you, Darcy. I shall talk to Jane, but I am sure she will like the idea as much as I do. However, just to be clear, how many sisters can we bring? All of mine and Jane’s?”

Darcy laughed. “Well, I assume Miss Elizabeth will come since she is so close to her elder sister and to Georgiana. As for the others, you may invite the entire Bennet family, if you wish. And your own sisters, of course. There are enough spare rooms at Pemberley. As soon as you settle the plan with your future wife, I shall convey the

invitation to Mr and Mrs Gardiner too.”

“Oh, Brother, that would be lovely!” Georgiana replied.

“Then it is settled. I assume you will marry in about a month, so there will be plenty of time for you to arrange to bring your party to Pemberley at the end of July, as always.”

“That sounds like a perfect arrangement to me, Darcy.”

While his sister and friend were enthusiastic, Darcy reflected in silence. The notion of having Elizabeth at Pemberley — even as a friend, as a guest — was something he had stopped dreaming about after she had rejected his proposal. Would she agree to come? If not for him, at least for her relatives and for Georgiana.

The next day, Darcy had several meetings with his solicitors, so he was out of the house most of the time. He had little opportunity to think of Elizabeth until nightfall, when he was again invaded by thoughts that chased all chance of sleep away. He would see her again the next day when he and Georgiana called to say goodbye. What should he say to her? What would he ask her?

The night passed slowly, and the morning found him restless and tired. At breakfast, he ate little and hardly listened to his sister, and he had only calmed down a little when Bingley finally arrived to take them to Gracechurch Street.

As they reached their destination, Darcy’s nervousness returned, and it increased further when they entered the house. He glanced about for Elizabeth, and his heart began to race when his eyes met hers.

They all gathered in the drawing room, all friendly and familiar. Mrs Gardiner suggested showing Georgiana the house and introducing the children, while Mr

Gardiner offered the gentlemen something to drink.

“Mr Darcy, may I have a moment of your time?” Elizabeth suddenly asked.

“Of course,” he answered, puzzled and slightly anxious.

She led him to a sofa in a corner of the room, some distance from the others.

“Mr Darcy, there is something I wish to tell you before you hear it from someone else, and it might offend you.” Her voice was serious and timid. “Mr Bingley told us about your generous invitation to spend a month at Pemberley. As wonderful as it might sound, I cannot accept it. I shall find a reason to decline, so nobody will suspect my true motive.”

A pain in his chest took his breath away for a moment.

“And may I ask what is your true motive?”

“You may ask, but I am sure you know it already, sir. I have no right to be a guest in your house. I do not deserve your amiability after I treated you so horribly and offended you so dreadfully. I would be ashamed to admire Pemberley’s beauty, which everybody speaks so highly of, after I abused its master so abominably.”

“Or, perhaps you loathe the notion of being my guest, considering the abhorrent manner in which I addressed you that day at the parsonage and your ill opinion of me. Perhaps you consider me the last man in the world whose house you would like to visit. If this is your true motive, I can easily understand it and will accept your decision.”

“That is not my true motive, Mr Darcy. It is not my poor opinion that induces me to refuse your invitation — quite the opposite. If I thought less of you and felt less

ashamed of myself, I would readily accept it.”

Darcy breathed deeply, looked ahead, then gazed at Elizabeth again.

“Miss Elizabeth, this is neither the time nor the place for such a conversation. But I can assure you that my invitation was heartfelt, and if your reluctance is due to your own guilt, I find it unjustified. That day at the parsonage, your words were harsh, but most of them were true, and a misunderstanding induced the rest. Nothing you said or did would diminish my pleasure in having you as my guest.”

He paused for a moment, taking another deep breath.

“A few weeks ago, I hoped your presence at Pemberley would mean much more, but now I understand I was wrong to presume too much. Your presence there would be most welcome, but the decision is yours. I shall not insist upon this invitation, as I fear you might feel forced to accept it against your will.”

“Thank you, sir,” she replied with a sigh and in a trembling voice. “My heart induces me to accept, but my conscience opposes it. If you truly wish me to be there, your will might be more convincing than mine and overcome my reluctance.”

“There is nothing I wish more, Miss Elizabeth. And please do not be alarmed that I might open a subject that once upset you so deeply...”

“I am not alarmed, sir. In truth, I cannot imagine a gentleman such as you would ever discuss that particular subject again after my refusal, as much as I regret it.”

She paused, and he looked at her, bewildered. “Miss Elizabeth, I would gladly open that particular subject at any time, if you would be willing to discuss it. Your refusal was hurtful, but my proposal must have been the same, and your regrets cannot be deeper than mine!”

Her eyes were now sparkling and revealed disbelief, wonder, and the trace of tears.

“Mr Darcy, please be assured that, if you can find a better place and time, I would be more than happy to discuss any subject with you. Especially a past misunderstanding that requires clarification.”

She offered him a warm, reassuring smile, causing his heart to beat even faster. He needed a moment to regain some composure, then he added, “Georgiana and I shall be at Netherfield a week before your sister’s wedding.”

“We shall eagerly await your arrival, Mr Darcy,” she replied.

With that unexpected, heartwarming understanding between them, they joined the rest of the party, engaging in conversation. They chose to sit next to each other, on the same sofa where Georgiana was sitting. Even though their bodies did not touch, Darcy could feel Elizabeth’s warmth, and her nearness made him dizzy.

He still wondered whether he had understood her correctly, whether she had truly granted him permission to talk about a marriage proposal, and whether she had truly admitted regretting her refusal.

His doubts vanished when the time for farewells arrived. After he wished the sisters a safe and comfortable trip back home, Elizabeth said, “We hope to see you and Georgiana in Hertfordshire very soon, Mr Darcy. I greatly anticipate continuing our conversation at an appropriate time.”

“So do I, Miss Elizabeth. Please convey my best wishes to your sisters and parents. I shall be glad to call at Longbourn as soon as I am able.”

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Driven by his heart's desire and longing, Darcy travelled to Hertfordshire with Georgiana in the middle of May, a fortnight before the wedding. Colonel Fitzwilliam and his brother, the viscount, were expected a week later, together with the Gardiners.

They arrived at Netherfield in the afternoon, and immediately Bingley took them to Longbourn. While waiting in front of the door, feeling as nervous as a schoolboy, Darcy realised he had never been to the house before, nor had he taken the trouble to at least speak to Mr Bennet.

Their impromptu arrival surprised the family, and they were received with polite yet reluctant civility. To Darcy, the only thing that mattered was Elizabeth's slight blush and the smile that brightened her face and her eyes.

Very soon, it became obvious that the Bennets' distant politeness was caused by him, not by Georgiana. His sister, timid at first, was gently engaged in conversation by Elizabeth and Jane; then Mrs Bennet declared her exceedingly pretty but too thin and ordered refreshments. Surrounded by young women of her own age, Georgiana slowly overcame her usual restraint. From his sister's side, Elizabeth gazed at him, her look warm and reassuring.

"Mr Darcy, what a lovely surprise that you called on us so soon after your arrival," Mr Bennet said.

"Thank you, sir. I am delighted to be here, though I should apologise for our unannounced visit."

"Not at all. You are most welcome. I trust you will indulge me with a conversation

that does not include lace, gowns, reticules, or shoes.”

“I shall certainly do my best, sir,” he answered, suddenly realising whom Elizabeth had inherited her the sense of humour from.

“Then let us go to the library. It will be quieter and more peaceful. We should leave Mr Bingley with the ladies, though. He is always impatient when he is separated from Jane.”

Darcy nodded, and the two of them entered the library, closing the door. The room was small but neat and comfortable. Mr Bennet poured each of them a drink, and they sat.

“It is a pleasure to finally speak to you, Mr Darcy. I cannot remember whether we spoke when you were last at Netherfield.”

“Probably not. That was my fault, and I cannot apologise enough.”

“No need. My brother and sister Gardiner speak highly of you.”

“I am flattered to hear that.”

“And Mr Bingley praises you at least ten times a day.”

“Bingley is a loyal friend,” Darcy said.

“Elizabeth speaks highly of you too, which is rather astonishing. I know the two of you have never been friends.”

Darcy cleared his throat, shocked by the direct approach.

“I had the good fortune to see Miss Elizabeth several times in the last few months, and I tried to improve her opinion of me.”

“Well, I dare say you succeeded. Your opinion of our family must have improved too since you took the trouble to call on us the moment you arrived at Netherfield. Such attentions cannot be meaningless from a gentleman like you.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “Mr Bennet, during my previous stay at Netherfield, my judgment was at fault and my opinion altered by pride and arrogance. I apologise if my manners caused harm or offended you. Since then, I hope I have learnt my lesson.”

“It is refreshing — and very rare — to hear a man apologise, especially when he is not forced to do so. Let us drink to men with strong character and honour,” Mr Bennet suggested.

Darcy did so, but his host continued. “Rumour has it that we have you to thank for ridding us of that scoundrel Wickham. He had debts to every shop owner in Meryton, and word is that you paid them.”

“Rumours are like the wind, Mr Bennet. Let them blow themselves away. Debts of honour must be paid. You have an excellent brandy, sir,” he added, changing the subject.

“Would you like another glass?” Mr Bennet offered.

“Yes please.”

“I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again during your stay at Netherfield, Mr Darcy.”

“You certainly will if it depends on me, Mr Bennet.”

On each of the following three days, the Netherfield party called at Longbourn; while Georgiana enjoyed conversing and playing the pianoforte with the Bennet sisters, Darcy spent most of his time with Mr Bennet.

On the fourth day, the lovely warm weather enticed them out of doors for a stroll.

The groups quickly formed, with Bingley and his betrothed arm in arm and the younger girls ahead of them. At first, Darcy walked by himself, then Elizabeth adjusted her pace to walk by his side.

After a few moments of silence, he asked, “Could this be the proper time and place to continue our conversation?”

“I doubt we could find a better one,” Elizabeth replied.

“Should we talk about regrets of the past?” he whispered. “Or about the present and perhaps the future?”

“My philosophy is to remember the past only as it gives you pleasure. I find no pleasure in my past errors or my foolishness.”

“That philosophy is very convenient to me, Miss Elizabeth, but I cannot so easily dismiss my past mistakes.”

“From my part, you have remedied most of them, Mr Darcy. Perhaps you blame yourself too much. In regard to our relationship, my share of the blame is at least as great as yours.”

“Miss Elizabeth, there is something I must ask you. When we last spoke in London, you mentioned that you regretted your refusal. Is that true?”

Her expression changed immediately.

“Forgive me if my question was improper. One word from you will silence me forever on this subject.”

“I do not wish you to be silent, Mr Darcy. Quite the opposite. I did not regret refusing your marriage proposal, merely the manner in which I did it,” she said, and he felt his heart stop. “At that time, my feelings for you were far from what they should have been. If I had accepted you then, it would have been for the wrong reasons. The strength of your affection, which you confessed to me that day, deserved to be cherished and returned. Instead, I was spiteful, prejudiced, and bitter.”

They continued to walk in silence, as if neither knew how to continue.

“You keep referring to the past, Miss Elizabeth. So I must ask about the present. You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are what they were in April, please just let me know. If you are not certain of them, I am willing to be patient. I know it would be worth waiting for as long as necessary.”

Elizabeth stopped, and he did the same. She turned to face him, then said, her voice trembling and her eyes smiling, “I greatly anticipate going to Pemberley, Mr Darcy. Either as your guest, your friend, or something more...”

He continued to stare at her, incredulous and lost for words, overwhelmed by emotions he had never felt before.

He gently took her hands in his, waiting for a sign of opposition that did not come. They were in full view of their sisters and the entire house, but neither of them cared.

“Miss Elizabeth, is this...? Have you just answered my question before I have asked it? Is this an acceptance of the marriage proposal that I have not dared repeat?”

“It is, Mr Darcy. Now you may either be pleased with my unladylike behaviour or despise me forever.” Their eyes were locked, and she continued smiling, her cheeks red and her eyes tearful, while he brought her hands to his lips and pressed a kiss on each.

“Then let me ask this, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. Would you like to receive your family and friends at Pemberley as its mistress?”

She nodded, and a tear fell down her face. Then she released one of her hands, caressed his cheek, and lifted herself onto her toes to press a short, gentle kiss on his lips.

He held his breath, his body and heart overwhelmed by the blissful heat growing inside him. And then a choir of cries of joy burst from the garden as well as from the house, Mrs Bennet’s voice mixing with her daughters’. Elizabeth laughed while tears ran freely down her cheeks, and Darcy kissed her hands again.

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Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy married Miss Elizabeth Bennet at the end of June, and the pair moved to Pemberley after spending only a few days in London. Georgiana and Mrs Annesley remained in town, allowing the happy couple the privacy they deserved.

Miss Darcy travelled to Pemberley a month later, together with Mrs Annesley, Mr and Mrs Charles Bingley, the Gardiners, and the whole Bennet family, as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam, his brother the viscount, and the latter's wife.

In another carriage, Mrs Crawford, with Libby and Janey — now fully recovered — holding her son Tommy, travelled to Pemberley as well. Georgiana had agreed to be Tommy's godmother, and she had become exceedingly attached to the family. Mr Darcy had offered them a cottage with a small garden and the chance to work at Pemberley while being close to their relatives in Lambton.

From that year onwards, it became a tradition for the whole family to reunite at Pemberley in the summer as well as at Christmas. The tradition lasted even after Elizabeth and Jane each gave birth to healthy, beautiful baby boys.

Lord and Lady Matlock needed two years before they were willing to fully accept Darcy's marriage and join the party; their change of heart happened only after Darcy's heir was born.

The Bingley sisters managed to obtain their brother and sister's forgiveness after a while, but for three years, they did not receive another invitation to Pemberley.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh refused to see Darcy or meet his wife. She blamed Mr Collins for not being capable of forcing Elizabeth to marry him and saving Darcy

from that disaster. Mr Bennet found great pleasure in torturing his cousin, so he wrote him regular letters filled with details about Pemberley and his son-in-law Mr Darcy.

While always happy to share their good fortune with their family and friends, Elizabeth and Darcy needed only each other — and the little bundle of joy grown from their love — to enjoy the felicity they had dreamt of, and it was certainly worth waiting and fighting for.

The End