



How to Marry an Accomplished Lady (Sweet Possibilities #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: The course of true love never did run smooth. Sometimes, it must circumvent ridiculous relations and troublesome former friends.

Having come to the realization that Miss Elizabeth Bennet is the perfect lady for him, Fitzwilliam Darcy sets a plan to eventually secure her hand in marriage.

Elizabeth is amenable to his proposal, and so begins a courtship that is more of a formality than something which is actually needed to determine if the two lovers wish to pledge forever to each other.

Unfortunately, not everyone is as agreeable that the wedding should take place, and they do their best to cast shadows and present stumbling blocks.

If you like stories about two people, who are devoted to each other, rising above the calculated tactics designed to drive a wedge between them, then, you'll enjoy this light-hearted tale about how Darcy and Elizabeth navigate the somewhat turbulent waters of life and love.

How to Marry an Accomplished Lady is the fifth installment in Leenie Browns Sweet Possibilities collection of Darcy and Elizabeth variations, where Jane Austens Pride and Prejudice meets Hallmark-style romance that is overflowing with sweet romantic possibilities.

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As he folded and sealed his letter, Fitzwilliam Darcy imagined his cousin's look of utter disbelief upon receiving a personal invitation to a ball from him, and not just the host of the ball, and chuckled.

Darcy was not known for his love of dancing or large social gatherings.

So to be asked to bring Georgiana and come to a ball by him would be something Richard would never, ever, expect.

Of course, the mention of a lady – a future Mrs. Darcy – whom he wished for the colonel to meet would add another layer of incredulity to torment his cousin.

Indeed, the combination might actually render the fellow speechless, which was not an easy feat to accomplish.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was rarely without something to say.

Darcy nearly wished he could be in the room to view his missive's reception.

He glanced at the clock on the mantel in the library, grabbed his hat and walking stick from where they lay on the carpet next to him at the writing desk, and rose from his place.

“Are you about ready?” Charles Bingley called from the door. “Our ladies will be down soon.” He fiddled with a button on his coat. The man was perfectly incapable of standing still for even a moment. He was a lively sort of fellow, which was precisely the opposite of how Darcy was.

Darcy liked to do things slowly and with well-thought-out purpose. Bingley tended to seize the moment and then attempt to batter it into whatever shape he needed it to be. They were odd friends. One reserved. The other exuberant. But they normally worked well together.

However, there had been a few moments recently during which it had seemed their differences might tear their friendship apart.

Thankfully, it had been overcome by an adjustment in Darcy's way of thinking.

It was a modification which had been sorely needed, and which had led to both his willingly writing the personal invitation to Richard, which he currently held in his hand, and his being anxious to be at the foot of Netherfield's grand staircase to greet Miss Elizabeth when she descended with her sister.

To think that he had only days ago disapproved of her! The change in how he viewed things was something of a miracle – one worked, in a most clumsy fashion, by his exuberant friend.

He motioned to a footman who was standing near the door. "This needs to be sent to Colonel Fitzwilliam straightaway."

"Yes, sir."

The footman took the envelope and left the room via the servant's entrance at almost exactly the same moment that Darcy, finally, made his way into the corridor to stand with Bingley and watch the stairs for the appearance of Miss Bennet and her sister, Elizabeth.

"You were right." Darcy straightened his sleeves and glanced at Bingley, who seemed to be somewhere other than at Netherfield. He bumped him with his shoulder.

“Are you not going to ask me about what you were correct?”

“I must apologize. I was lost in my thoughts about how a return to health in this circumstance is bittersweet; however, now that you have my full attention, you may praise my genius as it deserves.”

Darcy chuckled. Genius indeed! A stroke of good fortune was more what it was. “I will not go so far as to call it genius,” he said, “though I will admit it is perhaps the most astute you have ever been.” He pulled at the front of his jacket and then checked his watch.

“Miss Elizabeth is precisely the best sort of accomplished lady. I grant that I have not witnessed all the particulars of her accomplishments, for we have not called on any tenants nor have we had the opportunity to go over an account book or arrange furniture and pick paint.

“But be that as it may, I have observed and been quite delighted with her keen mind and caring heart.

She has forgiven me for my atrocious behaviour; she fairly dotes on Miss Bennet; and our discussions about many things have been lively and proven that on many items of great importance, we are agreed.

“For all those reasons, I intend to speak to her father to make my position as a hopeful match for his daughter known.” Or he would if Elizabeth said she was agreeable to him doing so.

He looked behind them, and then up the stairs. Waiting to begin a task once a plan had been decided upon was excessively challenging. At present, he could sympathize with Bingley’s fidgety ways.

“You should also know that I am determined to be successful.” He had even said as much to his cousin in his letter.

“And I will do whatever you may need me to do to ensure your success with Miss Bennet. She is as you proclaimed her last night, quite lovely and perfectly designed to be Mrs. Bingley. Add to that, my happiness would not be complete without yours being just as happy.”

“Does this mean, then, that you understand why I had to conspire with Hurst regarding you and Miss Elizabeth?” Bingley asked.

Darcy nodded. “I think I do.” He said nothing else, for who could continue a discussion about Bingley’s skills as a matchmaker when the heavenly creature who had been unceremoniously plopped into his path by his not-quite-a-genius friend was descending the stairs and smiling just for him.

The whole of Netherfield could catch fire around him, and still, Darcy was not sure that his mind would register anything but the twinkle in Elizabeth’s eyes as they danced with some bit of humour she and her sister had just shared.

My! Her cleverness was as honed as Richard’s was.

It was going to be quite the treat to watch his Elizabeth exchange witticisms with the colonel.

“Are you certain you feel well enough to endure the carriage ride home?” Bingley said to Miss Bennet as their ladies gained the landing at the foot of the grand staircase.

Miss Bennet had been quite severely ill for a few days, but one would not know it to look at her now – if one were inclined to scrutinize her appearance today, which

Darcy was not inclined to do.

He would much rather focus his attention on her younger sister.

Darcy extended his hand to Elizabeth, and she took it. Hopefully, she would soon take it and keep it for always.

“I am quite sure that no ill will befall me from the excursion.” Miss Bennet replied.

“But perhaps we should take one more walk around the garden to ensure that you are well, and tomorrow you can return home.”

Darcy smiled at Bingley’s suggestion. The chap was besotted – nearly as much as he was – and therefore, Darcy could not fault the man for his attempt to keep the object of his affection under his roof.

“And tomorrow, you will say the same thing, just as you have for the past two days.” Miss Bennet placed her hand in Bingley’s.

“If it helps you bear our parting, I shall miss being here,” she added.

“You have been a most gracious host. I dare say that I have never rested quite so well, while sick, as I did here.”

“That,” Miss Elizabeth inserted, “is because Mama was not here to worry over you at every cough.”

“And I dare say that you had something to do with it,” Darcy whispered to Elizabeth as Jane laughed at her sister’s comment. He knew that she had been quite worried about her sister – likely at every cough – but she did not flutter and fuss. It was not her nature.

Elizabeth arched her left eyebrow as her lips tipped into a mischievous smirk. “Perhaps, but I think it was Mama’s absence and Mr. Bingley’s presence that was the true balm.”

“It would be quite the thing if we could always be in company such as we are now,” Bingley said.

Miss Bennet’s cheeks grew rosy. “I would like that very much.”

“Good for her,” Elizabeth whispered just loudly enough that Darcy could hear it.

Only yesterday, they had discussed how Miss Bennet tended to be reserved to a fault when it came to stating what she wanted.

Darcy squeezed Elizabeth’s hand and simply smiled and nodded his agreement when she turned her eyes towards him. He simply could not wait to have his sister meet her, which was why he had requested that the colonel bring Georgiana with him.

A quarter of an hour later, after enduring a discussion about the fellow who was taking Darcy’s place in the affections of Miss Bingley, and bearing the barbs that were cast at him and Elizabeth for their part in Miss Bingley’s affections requiring a new gentleman upon which to fall, Darcy was finally ensconced in Bingley’s carriage, sitting most properly, if also annoyingly, next to his friend while their ladies sat across from them.

“I shall be glad when Caroline is married,” Bingley muttered with a shake of his head.

“I think we all feel that way about our sisters at times.” Miss Bennet was, as ever, the voice of calm reason.

“Not Darcy,” Bingley said with a chuckle.

“His sister is not yet old enough for Mr. Darcy to worry about her in that way.” Elizabeth gave Bingley a censorious look that was of no effect at all since she was struggling to keep from smiling as she did so.

“That is true,” Darcy said, “but even when she is old enough, I am certain I will be sad to be parted from her. Or at least, a trifle more sorrowful than my friend will be when his youngest sister is wed.”

Miss Elizabeth laughed, and her sister smiled.

They were as opposite to each other as he and Bingley were – and yet, or maybe because of it, they were well-matched as friends.

He would have to write to his steward and ask if there were any estates available to let or purchase near Pemberley.

Elizabeth needed her sister near her, and Bingley seemed no more attached to Netherfield than he did to anywhere else he had ever been.

“No truer words have been spoken,” Bingley quipped. “Miss Darcy is a sweet young lady. A bit on the reserved side like her brother, but not nearly so cantankerous.”

Darcy shook his head. “It is little wonder that I become cross when my dearest friends are you and my cousin.”

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“Did you write to him?” Elizabeth asked eagerly. He had shared many stories about himself and Richard as children with her over the past few days.

“I did,” he assured her, “and the missive is on its way to him as we speak. I asked that he bring my sister with him.”

“Oh, dear,” Miss Elizabeth pulled the corner of her lower lip between her teeth as a look of concern furrowed her brow.

“Should I not have?” Darcy asked. Had she not assured him yesterday that she was eager to meet his sister? Had something changed on that front?

“Do you not remember how my younger sisters offered to buoy her spirits?” she asked in reply.

He nodded. He remembered that conversation quite well, for that was the day on which a surprising source – Mrs. Bennet – had made him reconsider his definition of what an accomplished lady truly should be. “I am certain no ill will befall Georgiana from the experience.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I do hate to be the less agreeable one of the two of us, but I am not entirely certain that you are correct in that.”

Darcy knew that Elizabeth’s youngest sisters tended to be silly, but Georgiana would not be without support to remind her of how she should behave.

“You must remember,” he argued, “that I will be here, you will be here, my cousin

will be here, and Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet will be here. Therefore, I feel I can say with great confidence that all will be well.”

“I agree with Mr. Darcy,” Miss Bennet inserted.

“How can you say so when you know how trying our sisters can be?”

“Have you considered that, perhaps, Miss Darcy will present an example for them to follow?” Miss Bennet’s tone as she presented her argument was all that was cheerful.

Elizabeth’s response was to roll her eyes and shake her head.

To Darcy, watching this dispute between sisters was much more pleasant than any of the disagreements Bingley’s sisters had ever had in his presence.

Then, again, even those had been crafted and staged in such a way as to attempt to draw him along as a possible match for Caroline.

Here, however, there was no pretense. This was just two sisters debating with no thought for anything other than the resolution of the disagreement.

“Darcy can always lock his sister in her room, if need be,” Bingley suggested with a laugh. “But truly, she has weathered a friendship with my sisters; therefore, I think that Georgiana will survive two more trying sisters with aplomb.”

“I would love nothing better than to be proven wrong in my assessment,” Elizabeth said. “However, if I am, instead, proven right, do not be disgruntled when I remind you of this conversation.”

Darcy chuckled. “Does she always point out when she is proven right, Miss Bennet?”

“I wish I could say she does not. However, that would be a lie.” A playful smile graced Miss Bennet’s face. It was a comfort to know that she was capable of teasing and being teased. It would stand her in good stead when it came to dealing with Bingley.

“It would be very poor of me not to see to your proper education by refusing to point out your error, dear sister,” Elizabeth defended playfully with a laugh.

“Fear not, sister mine, my education in such things is not lacking. However, yours may be.”

If he had not seen it with his own eyes, Darcy would not have thought it possible for Miss Bennet to look so sly as she turned her full attention to her sister. There certainly was more to her than he had first assumed.

“Yes, so you have said.” A faint blush stained Elizabeth’s cheeks.

Darcy found it to be a most intriguing response, and he would dearly love to know the story behind the exchange.

“Darcy plans to speak to your father, Miss Elizabeth, and I would like to put my petition forward at the same time, if that is acceptable to you, Miss Bennet? Ow!” Bingley rubbed his arm – the one Darcy had just soundly thwacked with his elbow. “Was I not supposed to mention that?”

“No, you were not.” Darcy shook his head in exasperation. This was not how he had planned to present himself to Elizabeth.

“Then,” Miss Bennet said, “we shall pretend that we did not hear a thing.” She smiled sweetly while a twinkle of amusement danced in her eyes. It was an expression which was very reminiscent of her younger sister.

“I will perpetrate no such ruse –” Elizabeth began.

“I had hoped to ask you, before we entered Longbourn, if it would be acceptable to you for me to do so,” Darcy inserted over top of whatever Elizabeth was attempting to say.

“I know when we canvassed this topic yesterday, it had been as a future possibility, but I find I do not wish to wait.” He blew out a breath.

The rhythm of his heart matched the beat of his horse’s hooves on the ground when racing through a field.

“If you will allow me to speak...” She fluttered her lashes and waited for him to give a nod of his head.

She was smiling. That was a good thing, was it not?

“As I was saying,” she continued, “I will perpetrate no such ruse, sir, for I do not wish to forget this moment.”

A crease formed between his eyes. Why would she want to remember this moment?

“It would be a sad thing indeed to forget the eagerness of a gentleman to secure my hand, would it not be?” she explained.

“Especially, when I have come to admire him greatly and when his eagerness matches my own.” She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug.

“Is it not a dizzyingly curious feeling how rapidly one’s opinion can be swayed and firmly set in a completely opposite direction? ”

He felt the same way. How quickly had he moved from disapproving of not only her, but also her whole family, to wishing to tie himself to both her and, by extension, her relations?

Dizzying was the perfect word for the rapidity of the change, and yet, it was not an unpleasant sort of dizzying feeling.

In reality, it was rather thrilling. “Then, you do not mind if I speak with your father?”

“Not at all.”

“It is not too soon?”

“Do not talk yourself out of it,” Bingley grumbled.

“I am not talking myself out of anything. I am only making certain that Miss Elizabeth does not feel pressured to answer positively because I was forced to present my plans in a public fashion.” He gave his friend a withering glare.

Not that such an expression ever did much good where Bingley was concerned.

Still, his annoyance needed to be made known.

“I assure you that it is not too soon for either of you to speak to our father,” Miss Bennet inserted. Her eyes were fixed on her tightly folded hands.

Bingley leaned forward and covered her hands with one of his. “Then, I will join my friend.”

“And I will be twice as happy as I now am,” Miss Elizabeth added.

Darcy held her gaze and allowed his own happiness to show in his expression as the carriage slowed before turning into Longbourn's drive.

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Jane tapped softly on the door to their mother's bedchamber while Elizabeth waited just behind her.

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley had been escorted to their father's study, while Mary had explained to Jane and Elizabeth that their mother was suffering from a fit of nerves.

Apparently, there was to be a guest arriving at Longbourn today.

One who was the source of many of their mother's fears – the heir to the estate – a Mr. Collins, who was their cousin in some fashion.

“Mama, Lizzy and I have returned and brought Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy with us,” Jane said when their mother's maid had opened the door. “They are currently speaking with our father, but Mary has requested that tea be brought to the drawing room for after their interview with Papa.”

Their mother sat up on the chaise lounge on which she liked to recline when feeling overwhelmed with some little bit of anxiety. “Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy came with you, you say?”

Jane sat down next to their mother on one side, while Elizabeth took the other.

“And they are both speaking to Papa,” Elizabeth said.

“Both?” Her mother's eyebrows rose high over wide eyes. “For any particular reason?”

“Yes, Mama,” Jane said. “It seems you may have two daughters wed before too long.”

Their mother looked like she might need to have another lie down at that information. Excitement mingled with confusion in her little gasps and short “oh’s” as her attention shifted from Jane to Elizabeth and back.

“It seems that our strange Lizzy is just the sort of lady that Mr. Darcy prefers,” Jane said.

Their mother blinked. “But he said that horrid thing about her.”

“Yes, he did, and he is properly sorrowful for having done so. In fact, he has asked for and been granted forgiveness,” Jane said. “Apparently, he is not so stupid as you proclaimed him to be in the carriage on the way home from the assembly.”

“And, he is also not so severe and cold as we may have thought,” Elizabeth added. “Indeed, he can be very agreeable. It is just that he is reserved and proper.”

“Huh.” Their mother seemed to be lost for words.

“His cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and his sister have been invited to join him at Netherfield for the ball,” Elizabeth continued. “I do not know, however, if his sister will be allowed to attend since she is not out yet.”

“But is she not Lydia’s age?” Mrs. Bennet asked in surprise.

“She is.”

“And she is not out?”

“No, she is not.”

“Hmmm. How very strange, but I suppose that is how they do things in Mr. Darcy’s circles.

It is far easier for a man of means to provide for an unwed sister or daughter than it is a man of moderate to little means.

” Mrs. Bennet rose from her place and straightened her gown.

It appeared that her fit of nerves was over.

“What do you know about this Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Yes, indeed, she had moved from overwhelmed with worry to likely conjuring some marriage plot.

“He is just one year older than Mr. Darcy, and he is the second son of the Earl of Matlock.” Elizabeth knew that such information would only add fuel to her mother’s matchmaking fire, but it would also guarantee that all thoughts of fanning herself and calling for her salts would be pushed completely out of her mind.

As expected, the information arrested their mother’s attention, and all activity stopped for a full half-minute before she slowly turned towards Elizabeth.

“The second son of an earl and a colonel?” She blew out a breath.

“Mary might not be too young for him, I suppose, and red is a very good colour on her.”

“Mama,” Jane said, “Mary will not be wearing a scarlet coat even if she catches his

eye.”

Mrs. Bennet waved the comment away. “She will have to stand next to him in the portrait for the long gallery at Matlock, so it is good if the artist does not have to alter her complexion to match the colonel’s uniform.

Oh!” she cried in delight. “Just imagine the visitors of the house being led past my daughter’s portrait as they tour the grand home.

” She clapped her hands. “Well, it seems there is much to do. We may be saved after all if Lizzy can secure Mr. Darcy as she seems determined to do, and if Mary can make a favourable impression on the colonel. Do you know what type of lady he prefers?”

“I would imagine one with a fortune.” There was a note of caution in Jane’s reply. “He is a second son who is used to living in luxury and likely will need his wife to bring a fine purse with her to put into his coffers.”

Again, their mother waved the words away as if they were a pesky fly trying to take a taste of her tea.

“I am certain he has a fortune of his own, and if it is even barely modest, a pretty face and pleasant manner can present a temptation to any man.” Her brow furrowed.

“Do you think we can convince Mary to wear a bit of lace and allow my maid to do her hair in a softer style? I do think I could spare her service for such a purpose.”

Their mother was the only lady in the house to have a maid assigned to her and her alone. The rest of them helped each other and shared one maid between them. Mary preferred to see to her own preparations each day. The result was a very plain and simple presentation.

“I shall be very sad to leave this home when the time comes,” she said as she left her room.

“But it shall be much more bearable if I have the homes of such wealthy daughters to visit.” She turned towards her two eldest daughters as they reached the top of the stairs.

“And with such connections as you three shall have, Lydia and Kitty will surely marry just as well, if not better.”

And with that, their mother hastily descended the stairs and entered the drawing room.

“At least she is no longer melancholy,” Elizabeth whispered.

Jane laughed. “Indeed. Though I do not even know him, I rather pity the colonel.”

Their mother scurried out of the drawing room to the foot of the staircase just as Jane and Elizabeth had reached it.

“Do you know if the colonel is handsome?” she asked Elizabeth in a whisper that was incapable of concealing anything.

“Sadly no, I do not,” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Darcy did not say, and I did not ask. I thought it would be a very poor way to encourage his admiration.”

“Oh... well... yes, to be sure.” She sighed as if thoroughly disappointed. “I suppose I will just have to discover that on my own.”

“Or you could wait until the colonel arrives,” Elizabeth suggested. Not that it was a suggestion her mother would heed.

“Oh, do not be foolish, Lizzy,” Mrs. Bennet scolded. “Now, hurry. You want to be in your places when the gentlemen join us.”

With a shake of her head and a sigh, Elizabeth followed her mother into the drawing room and took a seat near Mary that left enough room for Mr. Darcy to sit with her and Mr. Bingley to sit with Jane.

“Mama seems to be doing much better,” Mary said. “I take it she found your news about Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley reviving to her spirit?”

“That, and she has settled upon a matchmaking scheme, though I do not think it has been thought out completely.”

“A scheme? For whom?”

Elizabeth smiled at Mary. She knew her sister was not going to like this news.

“No! Me?” She looked perfectly horrified.

Elizabeth nodded. “Mr. Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, has been invited to Mr. Bingley’s ball, and you are Mama’s next daughter to see attached to someone.

Therefore, you may find yourself compelled to wear some embellishments on your dresses and style your hair in a more alluring fashion.

” As suspected, Mary’s response was to shake her head and heave a heavy sigh.

“I do not want to marry a man for whom I must appear to be something that I am not.”

“We have not met him yet,” Elizabeth cajoled. “Perhaps he will prefer simply dressed

and styled ladies, and Mama will find she does not need to alter you at all.”

“I will not be altered,” Mary said firmly.

Elizabeth laughed. “While I am sure that is true, you know Mama will try.” Their mother considered a refusal as the beginning of discourse, not the end of it. “You may as well strengthen yourself for the battle.”

Again, Mary sighed heavily.

“And I will warn Mr. Darcy about the scheme if Mama does not do that herself when she inquires about the handsomeness of the colonel.”

Mary covered her face with her hands. “Why? Why must our mother be as she is?”

“Because if she were not, she likely would not have married our father, and we would not have each other for sisters.”

This was met by a huff. “While that makes sense – and I despise that it does – it does not make me complacent to what is.”

“She has decided already that you are to have your portrait painted, standing next to the colonel in his uniform – because red is becoming on you – and that the painting will hang in the portrait gallery at Matlock.” Their aunt had told them tales about how lovely that stately home was. She had toured it once as a girl.

Mary blinked. “Why at Matlock?”

“Because the colonel’s father is the earl.”

Mary’s eyes grew wide. “Has Mama lost control of all her faculties? Me? Married to

the son of an earl?" She shook her head. "As if that was even close to possible."

Elizabeth chuckled. "You are worthy of the greatest and noblest of men, my dear sister."

"I am not. I am cross far more than I should be. I take pride in my accomplishments. I try to stand forward ahead of all my sisters because my pride is so fragile. My tongue is sharp. My manners are harsh at times. And those are just the beginning of my shortcomings."

"If they are shortcomings, and I am not saying they are, what hinders you from amending them?"

"You may as well ask what hinders Dottie from pulling the carriage."

Dottie was a mule. A sweet but excessively mulish mule.

Elizabeth chuckled. "I do believe if Dottie took it into her head to move the carriage, she would, so your argument only proves that you must desire the change."

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Mary's eyes narrowed as she glared at her sister.

"You know, do you not," Jane said, "that we love you dearly and believe you are capable of doing whatever you wish to do? Indeed, of all of us, you are the most determined to see a plan accomplished even when the task seems doomed to fail."

"You see things too sweetly," Mary retorted but then smiled. "And now, since your gentlemen are here, we must change the subject – which troubles me not a jot."

She was correct. There at the door were Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley following their father into the room.

"Mrs. Bennet," Mr. Bennet said, "it is with great pleasure that I am able to present two possible future sons to you, but nothing has been determined completely other than I am agreeable to calling them sons. The truth of the matter lies with our daughters."

"Oh, well, none of my daughters is so foolish as to refuse gentlemen such as yourselves." She offered her hand first to Mr. Bingley and then to Mr. Darcy before turning to her eldest daughters. "You are not so foolish, are you?" She looked pointedly at Elizabeth.

"I am not, Mama," she assured her.

"That is excellent to know. Now, Lizzy and Jane have mentioned that your cousin and sister will be joining us for Mr. Bingley's ball."

“Yes, they will be,” Mr. Darcy replied. “I may even allow Georgiana to attend, though she will only be allowed to dance with me and the colonel – my cousin.”

“It will be so good to have another gentleman to add to our numbers,” their mother said.

“We do seem to have more ladies than gentlemen in Hertfordshire – but then, I am certain Mr. Bingley has done his best to invite an equal number of each to his ball so that none are left standing unless they wish it.”

Elizabeth sighed. It was as if whatever thought popped into their mother’s head had to come out of her mouth.

“Oh, I have not counted,” Mr. Bingley said, “but I am sure my sisters will see to it that we are not too lopsided in either direction.”

Mrs. Bennet returned to her seat. “I am relieved to hear it.” She straightened her skirts as Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy took places next to Jane and Elizabeth. “Now, I am certain it is too forward by half, but tell me, is your cousin the colonel married?”

“No, he is not.”

“And is he attached to any lady in particular? As I said, we are sadly wanting in gentlemen in Hertfordshire.”

Elizabeth groaned silently. That was too forward by more than half!

Darcy shook his head. “No, he is not married. In his words, he is married to his profession.”

“And will he keep his profession for his whole life?”

“I do not know, but I would assume he will retire at some point to take up his estate.”

“Oh! Is it a large estate?”

Elizabeth clamped her teeth firmly together to keep her tongue from being free to speak.

“Not overly so. I would say it is about the size of Longbourn or perhaps just a bit smaller.”

“Does it provide a good living?”

“It would not be allowed to provide a poor one,” Mr. Darcy answered. “My uncle is a man of action and expects a return on all that he does.”

“Do you mean your uncle the earl?”

As if her mother did not know that, and Elizabeth’s tongue would not remain silent any longer. “Yes, Mama. Colonel Fitzwilliam is Lord Matlock’s second son.”

“And if he is unattached with a good income in his future, there must only be one more thing to know about the good colonel,” Mr. Bennet said with a laugh.

Not her father, too! Was all her family determined to make Mr. Darcy question his decision to court her?

“He is not so handsome as Darcy, nor as tall, but he is not wanting overly much in either area,” Bingley said with a grin. “So which of you will be wanting to dance with the colonel first?” He swept the room with a look.

“Why, Miss Darcy, of course!” Lydia cried.

“If she is only allowed to dance with her brother and cousin, and since her brother will be dancing with Lizzy first, it only stands to reason that she will stand up with her cousin.” She turned to Mr. Darcy.

“If it is acceptable to you, Kitty and I would be happy to stand up with her. I am certain I can disappoint at least one gentleman for your sister’s sake. ”

“That is very kind of you, Miss Lydia. I will ask her if she would like that and inform you of her answer.”

Lydia scooted back in her chair and looked exceptionally pleased with herself.

“And after the colonel has danced with Miss Darcy, who will be next?”

“Bingley,” Mr. Darcy grumbled.

“Oh, Lizzy, of course,” Lydia answered once again. “She may be his cousin eventually.”

“And so will you be,” Mr. Bingley countered.

Lydia sighed. “Is he dreadfully old?” she asked in a whisper.

“Lydia!” Elizabeth chided as she felt her cheeks grow warm at her sister’s impropriety. “He is only a year older than Mr. Darcy.” Her youngest sister did not look delighted by this news.

“Then, I suppose I shall take a turn dancing with him after Lizzy, Jane, Mary, and Kitty have. It seems only proper that my older sisters dance first.”

In other words, the poor colonel had already been relegated to the too old for a lady

such as Lydia list. Her youngest sister had some very particular qualifications for desirable dance partners, and being older, rather than younger put a fellow towards the bottom of her list. She dared to peek at Mr. Darcy, whose attention was fully on Lydia.

“I will inform him that he may dance with whomever he wishes to dance with before asking you, Miss Lydia, but I will tell you that he is an excellent partner, even if he is on the older side of things.” He smiled softly as he spoke, and Elizabeth’s heart grew a little more attached to him as he did.

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For the second time in less than half a day, Darcy stood next to Bingley in Longbourn's entrance hall. Earlier, after their discussion with Mr. Bennet about his daughters, they had only stayed a respectable amount of time, although both had desired to throw propriety to the wind and stay all day.

Fortunately, before they had even left Mr. Bennet's study, the man had made it easier for them to keep to a proper length of time for a call by suggesting that they join his family for dinner.

Apparently, he was concerned about how his wife was going to receive the heir to the estate, who was to arrive that afternoon.

To her, this guest was a mere stranger who would one day claim her home.

In truth, Darcy felt sorry for the lady. An entail on an estate often put females in precarious situations once their husbands died. He did not, and would not, blame her for not wishing to welcome the fellow.

"I assume that drone we hear must be that Collins fellow about whom Mr. Bennet spoke," Bingley whispered as Mr. Hill deposited their outerwear into the arms of a waiting footman.

A low rumbling masculine voice could indeed be heard emanating from the drawing room.

Mr. Bennet had had nothing good to say about Mr. Collins.

Though he himself had never met Collins, Mr. Bennet had known the man's father, and if the son was anything like the father, he would not be the brightest nor the pleasantest of fellows.

"He sounds like a right old bore," Bingley added in another whisper which was slightly louder than before.

"That he is, sir," Longbourn's butler whispered in reply. "Not that I tell tales unless I have been instructed to do so."

"And have you been instructed to tell us that a guest of the house is a bore?" The thought was shocking to Darcy, but then, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were not typical of the landed gentry. At least, none of his acquaintance.

"Perhaps those were not the exact instructions, sir," Mr. Hill answered, "but a bore is close enough to what was related to me to say." He tipped his head indicating that the footman should hurry on his way with Darcy and Bingley's things.

"I was told to warn you that Mr. Collins is as Mr. Bennet feared – insufferably dull both in interesting topics of discussion and intellect." The man smiled.

"However, I was not to tell you any of that until you had been parted from your hats and coats and the carriage was no longer in front of the house."

Bingley chuckled. "I do suppose that makes it harder for us to escape."

"Though not impossible," Darcy added with a shake of his head and a wry smile. His uncle would be quite delighted to hear about this bit of scheming on Mr. Bennet's part. Darcy could certainly see where Elizabeth had gotten her keen mind.

"Do you wish to escape, sir?" Mr. Hill inquired. Darcy's face must have given away

his surprise at the inquiry for the butler hastened to add, "I can have your things and the carriage retrieved."

"No." The word seemed to erupt from his mouth as it was said with a great deal of force.

He cleared his throat softly, regained control of his emotions, and proceeded to explain himself in a much more measured fashion, "What I mean to say is that I wish to see Miss Elizabeth no matter the trying people I will have to endure to do so."

"I am happy to hear it," the butler said as he led them the short distance to the drawing room.

Darcy had extensive experience in tolerating painfully trying people, since, every spring, he sat at his aunt's table and in her drawing rooms, and his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, was excruciatingly difficult unless getting precisely what she demanded.

And, because each spring, at least once during his stay, he stressed to her that he was not going to marry her daughter, he had become accustomed to bearing a great deal of displeasure.

His refusal and subsequent failure to meet his duty to the family as she saw it was more than she could countenance each and every time, and yet, she would not desist from her demands.

Perhaps that was why he had been able to put up with Bingley's sisters for so long. Surely between his training at Rosings and his time spent with Caroline and Louisa, he would be able to reach the end of the evening without losing his temper and saying something he should not.

Mr. Hill paused at the drawing room door and looked at Darcy. "I quite dislike it when Miss Lizzy is disappointed." The skin near the man's eyes crinkled as he smiled softly, disclosing to all that Elizabeth was a favourite of his.

Darcy gave him a nod of acknowledgment. He would not hold the admission against Mr. Hill, for he, himself, also found that Elizabeth was his favourite Bennet. And he wanted both her and her family to continue to find him to their liking. Indeed, he wished for their opinion of him to grow.

With that goal in mind, Darcy leaned towards Bingley and whispered, "Please do not provoke me tonight," as Mr. Hill stepped into the room to announce them.

"If I do, it will not be purposefully done," Bingley assured him.

And that, Darcy knew, was the best for which he could hope from his friend.

It was not an excuse to dismiss a lack of effort.

Bingley could be a trial at times, but he was a man of his word.

No folly would befall Darcy by design. "Try to keep from coming to my defense too quickly if the need arises." That was where the danger usually lay.

Bingley would take it upon himself to promote Darcy or move him to better himself and, from time to time, created something of a disaster in the attempt.

As Darcy stepped inside the drawing room, the first person he saw was Mr. Collins.

The fellow was not small or well-tailored.

He was plainly dressed in a drab brown suit.

His face, as well as his person, was full and soft, and his hair, though Darcy knew him to be a young man, was already receding and growing thin.

“Mr. Darcy, I am delighted to meet you,” Mr. Collins said with a bow before a formal introduction could be made.

“Do I know you?” Darcy attempted to keep the annoyance he felt at the man’s forward approach from colouring his words.

“Oh, my, no!” Mr. Collins cried. “But I have heard a great deal about you from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, my esteemed patroness.” This was accompanied by a second bow.

“You have heard of me from my aunt?” Mr. Bennet had mentioned that Collins was a parson, but he had not mentioned that the living he held was the one at Hunsford.

The man’s head bobbed up and down with great rapidity. “She is a very kind woman with much praise for you.”

“Kind? Lady Catherine?” Darcy chuckled. “I believe you are the first to describe her to me in such a fashion.” It seemed best to let Mr. Collins know from the beginning of their association that a connection to his aunt did not raise him in Darcy’s esteem.

Mr. Collins opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again without saying a word.

“It is very good to see you again, Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Bennet said. “May I introduce you to our guest?”

“I think you must since he seems to know who I am, and I have yet to make his acquaintance.”

Her eyes grew wide but sparkled in amusement.

“So it would seem,” she said before gesturing to Mr. Collins.

“Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, this is my husband’s heir and cousin, Mr. Collins.

He has come to visit for a time. Mr. Collins, these are Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley.

Mr. Bingley has just let Netherfield, which is but three miles from here, and Mr. Darcy is his particular friend.

” She turned immediately from Collins and looked at Mr. Bingley.

“I trust your sisters and Mr. Hurst are well.”

“Oh, very.”

“Excellent. And the preparations for your ball? Are they going well?” She glanced towards her daughters.

“You will sit with Jane, of course, and Mr. Darcy, there is a seat near Elizabeth. Mr. Collins, you will need to move down one. Mary, you may come sit with me.” With these instructions given, she turned back to Bingley with an expectant look.

“I have not heard a word of complaint about any issues, so I will assume that all is as it should be.”

She clucked her tongue. “You really should check on things. It is not easy to plan a soiree. Details can be missed.” She motioned for them to be seated and took her own place as she continued speaking.

“I am certain I worry for nothing. Your sisters have planned fetes before, but this is a new area and a new home. Many things can be done the same way, but there will be those which cannot be.”

“I bow to your expertise,” Bingley replied.

“I have little knowledge about what goes into planning a ball whether here or in town. However, I am eager to learn, and I think you have pointed out a flaw in my thinking, for my sisters may need oversight since Netherfield, after all, is, as you say, my new home, which will be presented to my new neighbours, and I would like to make a good first impression.”

“Are you having a ball?” Mr. Collins seemed to have found his tongue once again.

“I most certainly am, and if you are staying until next week, you will have to join us.”

“He is here for a month.” Miss Lydia did not sound the least bit pleased by that fact.

“Then, I will inform Caroline and Louisa to add his name to the guest list. I hope you have your dancing shoes with you, Mr. Collins.”

“I do not own a pair of dancing shoes,” the man answered, “but I have shoes that are equal to the challenge. I know it does not look like it, but I am quite light on my feet. In fact, I have been told that any lady would be fortunate to be my partner, for her slippers would not be ruined by wayward steps on my part.”

“I am confident there will be many there who will be delighted to dance with you,” Mrs. Bennet said.

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“I do hope that my cousins will favor me with a dance.” He smiled at Elizabeth, next to whom he had positioned himself in the rearranging that Mrs. Bennet had insisted upon.

Darcy stood and extended his hand to Elizabeth. “It seems awkward that I am seated between you and your sister. You should sit near Miss Bennet.” She obliged him and allowed him to move her from where she was to where he had been sitting.

Then, he took the seat she had vacated, putting himself between her and Mr. Collins. As if any gentleman was going to sit next to his Elizabeth and smile at her when he was here to prevent such a thing! She mouthed a thank you to him when he looked her direction.

Just beyond her, he could see his friend looking excessively amused. But he did not care, for he knew that Bingley would have done the same thing to keep Miss Bennet free from Mr. Collins’s advances – even if that advance was only a smile.

“I think it would be best to find your partners from the other guests,” Mrs. Bennet said. “At least to start. I am certain all who are in attendance would think you the most agreeable person if you began with those who are not of your immediate acquaintance. Do you not think so, Mr. Bingley?”

“Absolutely! What say you, Darcy?”

“I think it is an excellent suggestion. I did not do so when I first arrived and attended an assembly in Meryton, and it did nothing to endear me to the area. In fact, I am fortunate to have been granted a second chance to change the opinions of some.”

Here, he favoured Elizabeth with a small smile.

“Is that so?” Mr. Collins’s furry eyebrows were raised high.

“I do suppose it sounds like a wise bit of advice, but my patroness, your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has given me advice as well, and I am not certain I can follow both her advice and yours at the same time. Though, I do suppose, as is often the case, which one realizes well after the moment has passed, that I might not be thinking as clearly about it as I should be.” He wagged his head from side to side as if trying to decide something.

“I suppose I shall take it to the Good Lord in the morning and allow him to sort it out in my mind.” His brow furrowed.

“However, it does seem to me that peacemaking should come before merriment and promotion of self, so perhaps I already know that answer, and I shall dance the first with one of my cousins and then, I can see to the neighbours.” Again, he smiled in the direction of Elizabeth.

“Miss Elizabeth already has a partner for the first set, as does Miss Bennet,” Darcy said to him as he took Elizabeth’s hand in his own. “And I would imagine that Bingley and I will switch partners for the second set and then, there is my cousin who will want to dance with Miss Elizabeth.”

The man’s mouth was agape.

“I have been informed that dinner is ready,” Mr. Bennet said as he entered the room.

“I apologize for not being able to offer port before we dine as is my custom, but I had to see to a matter.” He directed this to Darcy and Bingley.

“However, I assure you that there will be port both during and after our meal.” He motioned toward the door.

“My wife’s brother has connections to some very fine vintners, so we are seldom without an excellent bottle of some sort of wine to enjoy.

” He had taken his wife’s hand. “My dear, are there instructions for how we are to go in?”

Mrs. Bennet brightened as if arranging a procession into dinner was a most exciting task.

Yes, thought Darcy, Elizabeth was correct in telling him that her mother excelled at hosting parties of any sort.

“It seems only natural,” she said to her husband, “that Mr. Collins should follow you and me, and then, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley with Elizabeth and Jane and the other girls can follow behind.”

“But I am of low standing...” Mr. Collins began.

“You are my husband’s heir,” Mrs. Bennet inserted firmly, “and therefore, I insist that you follow him and me, unless Mr. Darcy is offended by the arrangement?”

“Not at all,” Darcy assured her. “It is your home, and I find your reasoning to be all that is good.”

Mrs. Bennet smiled. “Please keep Elizabeth at your side so that you can converse easily.” She nodded to Bingley as if to say the same to him about Miss Bennet.

“Shall we then?” Mr. Bennet asked.

“It seems improper...” Mr. Collins pressed his lips together when Mr. Bennet gave him a withering glare.

“I will not have you say such things about my wife or Mr. Darcy.”

“But I said nothing...”

“You implied that their decision was unsuitable, which casts their characters into question.”

“I did not mean to imply a want in character,” Mr. Collins protested. “I was merely pointing out a possible error, and even those of impeccable character do make mistakes.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “No mistake has been made. Now, if you wish to eat with us, you will follow behind myself and before Mr. Darcy.” And with that, he quit the room.

Mr. Collins shook his head and shrugged before following as if he was resigning himself to doing something he did not wish to do.

“He is dreadful,” Miss Lydia whispered.

Miss Kitty nodded her agreement vigorously.

“And I am actually delighted to be part of Mama’s matchmaking scheme just so that I am not thrust in his direction,” Mary said as they all left the drawing room to go to dinner.

So, it was true. Mrs. Bennet was planning to present Miss Mary to his cousin.

He had thought that was what was afoot earlier today, and after having met Mr.

Collins, Darcy was determined to make sure that Richard pretended to be amiable to the scheme just to keep Miss Mary from being forced to entertain him.

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A bout mid-morning the following day, Elizabeth looked up and down the street, desperately hoping to see Mr. Darcy riding to her rescue. If it were not for the fact that she felt very much in need of a rescue, she would have laughed at her dramatic thoughts.

However, as it was, she would like nothing better than to be swept up onto Mr. Darcy's horse before racing away with him to... somewhere. Anywhere. She really didn't care where it was as long as it was away from Mr. Collins.

She would even be happy to be returned to Netherfield and be forced to endure the slights and barbs of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. At least they canvassed topics of some interest and did not do so in an incessant flow of pompous nothings.

There would be moments of silence with Mr. Bingley's sisters as they shared looks and smiles over what they considered to be their own cleverness.

There were no pauses with Mr. Collins, nor was there any cleverness, whether it be only perceived or genuine.

"Oh!" Lydia cried. "There. Just passing the haberdasher's shop. Do you see him?" She clapped her hands in delight and pulled Kitty forward toward the street. "We should intercept them, should we not, Jane?"

Jane paused a moment to look in the direction Lydia had indicated. "Do you mean Mr. Denny and his friend?"

"Yes, yes, of whom else would I be speaking?"

“I was hoping it would be Mr. Bingley,” Jane replied.

“Oh. Well. Yes. I do suppose that would be a hope for you, but it is not for me,” Lydia said.

“Does not Mr. Denny look divine in his regimentals? I am certain none of the other soldiers in Meryton look half so handsome as he. Though, if his friend were to be wearing a scarlet coat instead of that blue one, he would perhaps be more handsome than Mr. Denny.”

“Oh, not to me,” Kitty inserted. “I like Mr. Denny’s eyes.”

“If we were to cross, we might be able to compare his eyes with those of his handsome friend,” Lydia said.

“I see no harm in crossing.” Elizabeth leant her support to the plan, for it would bring them into conversation with someone other than Mr. Collins, and she had to admit that she was excessively curious about who Mr. Denny’s friend was.

“But we told Mr. Bingley we would be near this shop,” Jane protested.

“And we will be,” Lydia assured her. “We will only be directly across from here. I am perfectly certain that Mr. Bingley can see us on that side of the street from this side.”

“Meeting gentlemen on the street.” Mr. Collins clucked his tongue and shook his head. “It is not what I would call proper.”

There were a great many things that that man did not deem as proper. How many improvements had he suggested to his cousins both on their walk to town and interspersed in conversation at this shop or that?

Fripperies, as an example, were extravagances that indulged base desires and contravened his idea of how money should be spent.

A gown was just as useful without lace as it was with, and if it already had lace and that lace had not been eaten by moths or ruined by carelessness or some other accident, then no new lace was needed. It was a poor use of funds. They could be put to better use if placed in the tithe box.

Since this was an excursion to town for the very purpose of purchasing adornments for their ball gowns, his blathering about how unnecessary they were had been enough of a provocation to cause Mary – Elizabeth’s sister who was as uninterested in adornments of any kind as a lady could possibly be – to purchase three ribbons and two lengths of lace.

And apparently, Mary was still feeling rather put out, for, at Mr. Collins’s current reprimand, she stepped forward, took each of her younger sisters by the hand, and began to cross the street.

Not, however, before saying, “You do not greet friends when in town? How odd! And rather unfriendly of you. I would think a man holding your position would be more welcoming to friends and strangers.”

Elizabeth giggled softly at Mary’s words as she and Jane hastily followed their younger sisters, while Mr. Collins trailed behind them, pontificating on the willfulness of the younger generation.

As if he were a full generation older than Lydia, Kitty, or Mary!

He was only ten years older than Lydia, and Lydia was the youngest of their lot.

Mama would not have to worry about Mary being singled out by Mr. Collins as a

possible wife after this trip to town. Indeed, Elizabeth was nearly certain that Mr. Collins would never consider offering for any of her sisters.

Unless, of course, he was the sort of gentleman who wished to congratulate himself on marrying an exuberant or defiant young lady and forming her into what he considered to be a proper wife.

She shuddered at the thought, because she could perfectly imagine that a fellow with as high an opinion of himself, as Mr. Collins seemed to possess, would wish to attempt just such a feat.

“Mr. Denny!” Lydia cried as they gained the pavement on the opposite side of High Street. “You have returned from London. Was it a good trip?”

“It most certainly was,” Mr. Denny replied after bowing a greeting to them all. “I acquired all I needed and even returned with a new member for our regiment.” He looked to Jane. “May I introduce him to you?”

“It should be a father’s –” Mr. Collins began to say from behind Jane and Elizabeth, but Jane paid him no mind and said a pleasant yes over the top of his words.

“This,” Mr. Denny said with a wave towards his friend, “is Mr. George Wickham. We have known each other for a few years now, and I have just finally convinced him to join me in serving His Majesty, as it is about time he took up an honourable profession.” Both men chuckled at this taunt.

“Wickham, these lovely ladies are the Bennets. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary, Miss Kitty, and Miss Lydia.” He motioned to each sister as he said their name, and as they had been taught to do since they were capable of standing on their own two feet, each Bennet lady dipped a shallow curtsy in greeting.

“This is our cousin, Mr. Collins,” Jane offered when Mr. Wickham had finished expressing his delight in meeting them. From the pleasure that shone in his expression, he seemed to be a fellow who enjoyed meeting new people.

“Mr. Collins,” Mr. Wickham offered a bow, “are you from the area?”

“No, not at all,” Mr. Collins answered curtly. “I will be one day, but for now, I hold the living at Hunsford, which is in Kent.”

Mr. Wickham looked quite surprised by this information. “Hunsford, you say?”

“Yes.” The fact that Mr. Collins’s answer was only one word was rather shocking to Elizabeth.

“I had not heard that it had come open.” Mr. Wickham smiled easily, as if everyone in his current group of acquaintances were old friends. “At one time, I, too, was destined for the church until the opportunity was snatched from me. How is Lady Catherine?”

“Do you know her?” Delight suffused Mr. Collins’s face.

“Not personally, no. But I have heard of her since I was a young child through a friend of my father.”

“Ah! She is a wonderful woman. Quite generous and condescending. I have actually come to visit my cousins at her request.”

To Elizabeth, it appeared as if he was about to say more, and had it not been for the approach of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, he might have. However, as it was, their arrival forestalled him, if only for a moment.

“Mr. Darcy!” he cried in delight. “We have just met someone who knows your aunt.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes moved from Elizabeth to Mr. Wickham and the smile he had given her fell away as his features hardened and his face grew red.

Mr. Wickham, on the other hand, seemed to pale, and the ease which he had exuded earlier fled.

That the two men knew each other was apparent to anyone who was paying attention – which left out Mr. Collins, for he continued to ramble on.

“I did not think,” that man trundled on, “that I would meet two people in Hertfordshire who are familiar with my esteemed patroness. I am happy to have done so however, and I am sure she will be delighted to hear her name is known beyond her home.”

“Did you find all the things which you were hoping to find?” Mr. Bingley asked as he moved his horse slightly ahead of Mr. Darcy’s and in front of Mr. Wickham.

“Oh, yes!” Lydia cried. “We shall be elegantly attired for your ball.”

“I am happy to hear it.” He spared a look for Mr. Denny and Mr. Wickham. “I believe an invitation has been sent to Colonel Forster for members of the regiment. Are you part of that group, Mr. Wickham?”

Elizabeth’s eyes grew wide. It appeared that both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy knew Mr. Wickham.

“He is indeed,” Mr. Denny replied.

“Well, then, perhaps we shall see you at the ball.” There was a touch of something

not quite Mr. Bingley-like in Mr. Bingley's tone.

"My cousin plans to attend." The stoney look that had settled onto Darcy's face upon seeing Mr. Wickham remained firmly in place and coloured Mr. Darcy's words with a coldness equal to the harshness of the expression. "My sister will be with him."

"And we are all eager to meet her," Lydia effused. "Kitty and I, in particular. Though, I suppose Lizzy is nearly as eager."

Mr. Wickham's gaze moved to Lydia before resting on Elizabeth. "Is that so?" he asked as a smile tipped one side of his lips into a sly half smile.

"Oh, yes. I would not say it if it were not true. Kitty and I love making new friends, do we not, Kitty?"

"We most certainly do," Kitty answered.

Mr. Darcy dismounted his horse and extended a hand to Elizabeth. "Are you ready to be escorted home?"

Mr. Wickham chuckled softly. "I had not thought it possible for Darcy to find a lady willing to have him."

"Shall I extend your greetings to Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Mr. Darcy asked. "Perhaps once you are settled, you can send me a message about where you are lodging so that he can call on you at his leisure."

"I would not wish to bother the colonel, but if your sister would like to visit..." Mr. Wickham's voice trailed off, and pleasant was no longer a word that Elizabeth would use for him, for there seemed to be some hidden meaning designed to harm or anger Mr. Darcy in the unfinished comment.

“Oh, she will not be calling on anyone,” Lydia inserted, “except maybe us. She is not out, you know. It is not what I would expect, but it is how it is. However, since Kitty and I are not gentlemen, I do think that we will be allowed to call on her and have her call on us.”

“I would be happy to have my sister call on you, with either or both myself and the colonel as chaperones,” Mr. Darcy said.

Lydia waved his words away with a laugh. “It is we who shall have to be yours and Lizzy’s chaperone, I should think.”

Bingley laughed along with Lydia. “Miss Bennet and I may also need your services.” He had joined Darcy in dismounting and was now holding his horse’s reins and had Jane’s hand on his arm.

“If everyone has acquired everything that is needed, may I suggest we head towards Longbourn? I, for one, would love a cup of tea.”

“I am afraid we cannot go to Longbourn directly,” Jane replied. “We must first stop at my aunt’s house, as she is expecting us to join her for tea before we walk home.”

“And Kitty and I already told her before we stepped foot in a shop that you and Mr. Darcy would be joining us.” Lydia looked expectantly at Mr. Bingley as if waiting to be praised for a job well done, and she was not to be disappointed.

“As long as tea is involved that is excellent news,” Mr. Bingley said. “Do you suppose we can have tea at your aunt’s house and again at Longbourn?”

Kitty giggled as Mr. Darcy whispered, “He does love tea and biscuits,” to Elizabeth.

“I would be surprised if we did not have tea in both places,” Mary assured Mr.

Bingley as she once again took her younger sisters by the hand and began walking towards the edge of Meryton that was closest to Longbourn.

“But we have not taken our leave,” Lydia protested.

Mary released her hand. “Then, walk with Mr. Collins if you wish.”

Lydia lifted a hand and waved to Mr. Denny. “I am so happy to know that you have returned safely,” she said before scampering to catch Mary’s arm.

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“Welcome. Welcome,” Mrs. Philips said as she glanced at the doorway to her sitting room before turning to close the window, through which she had called a happy good morning to her nieces as they approached her house, and also through which she been given an introduction to their companions as they stood in the front garden.

Apparently, it did not bother her in the least that all her neighbours knew exactly who was calling.

“Do come in, gentlemen, and have a seat. I was quite delighted to hear that you would be joining us for tea.”

Darcy and Bingley made their way into a cosy drawing room that was neatly decorated and welcoming. Mrs. Philips’s exuberant greeting declared her to indeed be Mrs. Bennet’s sister, for they were very alike in enjoying company.

“Tea will be ready in just a few minutes. I called for it as soon as I saw you turn this direction.” She looked out the window, peering out it to her right, then, tilting her head to look in the same direction but at a slightly different angle.

It seemed to Darcy that she was just as distractible as her sister, but with the benefit of a better vantage point from which to view all that was happening in Meryton, for the window through which she looked appeared to have a better than acceptable view of High Street.

“Did you invite Mr. Denny and that handsome friend of his to join us?” she asked Miss Lydia.

“No, because Mary hurried me away before I could.” This was accompanied by a stern glare and a scowl directed at Miss Mary.

Miss Lydia might be unhappy about not having Wickham and his friend join them for tea, but Darcy was not. It was far better that Miss Lydia suffer a bit of frustration at the hands of her sister than be tangled up in some scheme of Wickham’s which would leave her with far more lasting scars.

Mrs. Philips sighed loudly as if utterly disappointed. “In that case, I suppose that I will have to meet whomever he is on another day.”

“His name is Mr. Wickham,” Miss Lydia informed her aunt.

And not worth your notice, Darcy added to himself. How was Georgiana going to survive having that cad so close when she arrived at Netherfield?

“Oh, that seems to be a good name,” Mrs. Philips said. “Do you suppose Mr. Wickham would like to attend a dinner and card party?”

Would he? Oh, Darcy knew he would. Wickham was adept at being the center of attention at any party he attended, and he absolutely delighted in any opportunity he was given to tempt fate by placing wagers — whether he could afford to place them or not. And usually, he could not.

How many times had Darcy seen to the reconciliation of his debts to keep him from becoming a bloodied mess when they were at school and Wickham had left one debt too many unpaid to particular people? The number was at least as many times as Darcy had fingers on one hand.

All the people of Meryton, but most especially the Bennets and all those dear to them, did not deserve to be treated to the mischief of George Wickham. But how did he

relay this information without giving Wickham a reason to share secrets about his sister?

Surely, Richard would see Wickham pay for the indiscretion of speaking freely about what happened in Ramsgate, but that would not expunge the stories from the minds of the people who had heard them.

Nor would it paint Darcy in a good light.

Wickham had always been good at twisting things so that he appeared to be either the hero or the victim of a story.

He was never at fault – not completely. It was always someone else who had taken advantage of him and created his misfortune.

“Mr. Wickham adores card games,” Mr. Bingley inserted into Miss Lydia and her aunt’s conversation.

He shared a knowing look with Darcy. Bingley knew of what he spoke, for he had known Wickham for many years. He had played a game or two with the blackguard and never been paid what was owing him. He also knew about how the man had treated Georgiana.

“However,” Bingley continued, “I would advise that you play without any wagers if he is to attend.”

Mrs. Philips gasped and then, whispered, “Is he a gambler?”

“He does like to test his good fortune,” Bingley answered.

“However, his supply of good fortune is somewhat lacking and his promptness in

paying his debts is even more wanting.” Bingley looked to his right and his left and then lowered his voice.

“Not that I would tell just anyone that, but since you are Miss Bennet’s aunt, I thought it was appropriate. ”

Darcy relaxed into his chair. The warning bell had been sounded, and he had not been the one required to do it. He would have to thank Bingley for that later.

Mrs. Philips was silent for a moment as she stood near the door to the sitting room.

“I will have Cook make some small biscuits, and we can use those like we used to do when the girls were little. It really is great fun to play that way.” She poked her head out the sitting room door. “Ah, the tea is here.”

A moment later, a maid entered with the tea tray.

“You must tell me all about yourselves.” Mrs. Philips shifted her attention from Darcy to the teacup she was filling and then gave a quick look toward her nieces. “Jane or Elizabeth, would one of you be so kind as to help me?”

“I will, Aunt.”

Miss Elizabeth rose and began to prepare the cups of tea.

A touch of sweetness and a bit of milk for him.

Nothing at all for Bingley. Only milk for her eldest sister and so on.

Each one, it seemed, was prepared just how the person would like it.

At least, he knew for certain that both his and Bingley's were.

He nodded his thanks as he took a sip of his tea.

"I understand you have an estate in Derbyshire that is quite valuable." Mrs. Philips had returned to the topic of conversation she had selected before she had begun pouring.

You are correct. I do have a large estate in Derbyshire. Pemberley is the name."

"That is a grand sounding name."

"It has been in the family for many generations."

"Oh, how lovely! And has it always been in the Darcy name or have there been others who tended it before who were called something else? My husband, you see, has explained to me some of how things can shift for one reason or another." Here, she glanced at Mr. Collins.

Darcy rested his cup on his saucer and smiled, imagining that her thoughts were with her sister's plight and Mr. Collins's role in the unfortunate circumstances, which, sadly, were not very unusual.

"We have been fortunate," he said, "to be blessed with at least one male heir in each generation up until now. However, there is no fear of my wife, when I marry, or my sister, should I die before I marry and have children, being left without a home. My grandfather made certain that all the particulars were secured in his will before he died. It was just around the time that a bout of illness struck Derbyshire. He only had one son, but he had a wife and three daughters. Therefore, when my father became ill – even though, as it turned out, it was only slightly worse than trifling – my grandfather immediately called his solicitor and made certain that Pemberley would

not have to be given to a distant relation merely because there were no males to inherit.”

“I should not say it, I suppose.” Mrs. Philips offered him a plate of sweets from which to pick a tasty morsel.

“But, in my opinion, that is how it should always be.” Again, her eyes flicked to Mr. Collins, who had surprisingly been rather quiet until this moment, when he made a small sound of disagreement.

“I think you have the right of it,” Darcy said while looking intently at Mr. Collins. “Had it not been for my uncle having been of a similar mind, my aunt, Lady Catherine, and cousin Anne might have found themselves at the mercy of a relation when Sir Lewis left them.”

If he had hoped that a comment like that might forestall whatever nonsense his aunt’s parson might spout, he was to be disappointed.

“While I am certain that it has been a blessing and most fortunate,” the man began, “I cannot deem it as the way things should be. There is an order to creation that has been set in place by God Himself. We mortals do not always follow it, but God is forgiving and the receiver of the property that has been dispensed of, against the preordained example, may indeed find it a blessing and not a curse since they are not the transgressor.”

“Transgressor?” The word seemed to leap from Miss Mary’s lips. “Transgressor, indeed! I do think you have a very strange way of reading scripture.”

“Mary,” Elizabeth whispered in a cautionary tone. Not that her next youngest sister seemed willing to heed the warning.

Mary glanced quickly at Elizabeth before continuing, with no little amount of sharpness to her words.

“It is the transgression of a man if he does not see to the provision for his family,” she said.

“Even if it is not very much, he must do it. The transgression comes when he tosses his wife and daughters to the side without a means of support. Have you forgotten how the scriptures are riddled with commands to see to the care of the widow and orphan?”

Mr. Collins lifted his chin and looked down his nose at his cousin. “Have you read them?”

“I most certainly have.”

“All of them?”

Mary scowled. “Nearly.”

Mr. Collins shook his head. “Be that as it may, my dear cousin, one must realize that reading does not equate to understanding.”

“Are you truly saying that Miss Mary is lacking understanding?” Darcy asked in shock.

“I am not saying that directly, but...”

“Then you are a fool!” Darcy interrupted his attempted explanation, causing the man's eyes to grow wide in surprise.

“From everything that I have seen of Miss Mary since arriving in Hertfordshire, which, I will remind you, was much earlier than your arrival, I would deem her to be a lady of sense and capable of understanding what she reads, or in the case that she does not, I am certain she is in possession of the ability to seek out help.” He looked to Elizabeth.

“I am not wrong in this assessment, am I?”

“No, not at all,” she replied. “Our education might not be what some would deem classical, but I assure you that it has not been wanting. At least, not very.”

Darcy smiled at her and then, turned his attention back to Mr. Collins. “It is faulty thinking such as you possess, sir, that often leads to women being placed in tenuous situations. Does Lady Catherine know that you hold females in such low esteem?”

“I do not hold them in low esteem. I hold them where they were placed.” He lifted his hand high in the air.

“God.” He lowered it a bit. “Man.” He lowered it some more.

“Woman.” He once again lifted his chin. “When anyone deems to lift another from their place to one that is higher, then they transgress. A male should be found to inherit.”

Darcy only just kept himself from rolling his eyes at the man’s ignorance and pomposity. “You are wrong.”

“There is a story,” Miss Kitty said. Her forehead was furrowed deep with thought.

“I will have to ask Papa where it is, but I remember him reading it from the Bible to me when I was about ten and had asked about what inheritance meant. It had five

daughters in it.” She smiled at her sisters.

“I remember it because that was just like us.” She turned to Darcy.

“They inherited their father’s land because God said they should.

I am sorry that I do not remember more than that. ”

“Do you know which story that is, Mr. Collins?” Bingley asked.

Finally, the arrogant parson looked unsure of himself as he muttered that he did not. At least, he did not claim that his cousin had made it up.

“Are you sure it was from the Bible?”

Darcy groaned. The man was going to insinuate that his cousin was not being truthful! This fellow was as bad as Wickham for casting shadow on anyone who did not agree with him.

“Oh, yes,” Kitty cried. “I know what the Bible looks like.”

“But you did not read it for yourself, did you?” Mr. Collins asked.

“No, Papa asked Lydia to read it because she was not paying attention. He often did that,” she explained to Darcy.

“That is a very good way to do things,” Darcy assured her.

“Was Miss Lydia a good reader?” Mr. Collins was still pursuing his quest to prove himself superior, was he?

“It matters not!” Darcy barked. “Mr. Bennet is perfectly capable of assisting his daughter to read if she struggles. I find it, sir, to be insupportable that you continue down this line of thought designed to humiliate your cousins and, by extension, cast aspersions on all members of their sex, as well as my grandfather and Lady Catherine’s husband.

I am not certain how you came to hold your current living, but I am not altogether convinced that you should continue to hold it.

A warning will be written to my aunt that your understanding of some matters might not be as they should be. ”

“I say! It is not so dire as that!” Mr. Collins cried. “I am certain that I have the right of it.”

“And I am certain you do not.”

Bingley stood and turned to Mrs. Philips.

“I must apologize for leaving so soon after arriving, but we are expected at Longbourn. It has been lovely to meet you, madame, and your hospitality is superior. I look forward to dining with you, playing cards, and eating all the biscuits that are forfeited to me.” He extended a hand to Miss Bennet, who took it and rose, signalling that the rest of their party should also rise.

“May Kitty and I stay longer?” Lydia asked her eldest sister. “So that we can help plan the party?”

“Do not stay too long,” Miss Bennet replied. “Mama will worry if you do.”

“I will stay, too,” Mary said.

“But you do not like planning parties,” Lydia protested.

“Today, I do,” Mary snapped before sending Mr. Collins a withering glare.

“I will keep them an hour and then send them on their way,” Mrs. Philips assured Miss Bennet. “Thank you for your company,” she said to one and all, “and your support, sir, of the gentler sex.” She dipped her head in a grateful bow to Darcy.

“It has been a pleasure, madame.” And with those parting words, he and Miss Elizabeth, along with her sister and Bingley and, unfortunately, Mr. Collins, departed for Longbourn.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:50 am

“We will follow you.” Mr. Darcy glared imperiously at Mr. Collins as he gave the directive once their whole party was gathered on the road in front of the Philips’s house.

If such a look had been leveled at her, Elizabeth was afraid she might actually cower a bit.

Well, that is, she would if she had not come to know Mr. Darcy so well.

At present, she merely hoped the expression would quell her obnoxious cousin into obedience.

Unfortunately, however, Mr. Collins seemed as recalcitrant about accepting a directive without argument as Lydia did.

The man merely blinked at Mr. Darcy’s authoritative mien and protested. “But you will need a chaperone, will you not?”

Mr. Darcy’s glare did not soften as he answered. “I have Mr. Bingley and Miss Elizabeth has Miss Bennet.”

Mr. Collins shook his head. “That will not do, for I saw the way my fair cousin loses sight of anything other than Mr. Bingley this past half hour.” He gave Darcy an appraising look.

“And you do not seem at all like what my patroness believes you are.” He smiled at Elizabeth.

“Perhaps it is better for us to walk together and for Mr. Darcy to accompany his friend and your sister. That would solve the problem.”

Anger prickled the hairs at the nape of Elizabeth’s neck, and she felt Mr. Darcy’s arm tighten under her hand, indicating that she was not alone in her displeasure. “I do not see how that is better.”

“Come, come, my dear cousin,” he said as he hurried along behind them when they began to walk. “If you apply a little thought, I am sure you can see how things need to be.”

If she applied a little thought! Of all the degrading things for him to say!

Mr. Darcy drew to a stop. “You will either walk ahead of us or behind. I will not travel with you. Indeed, I do not wish to be associated with you at all. I do not know what you believe me to be, and while I find your impudence in implying that my character is wanting to be vexing at best and grounds for an early morning meeting at worse, that is nothing compared to your continued disregard for your cousins. Miss Elizabeth is among the most brilliant females of my acquaintance. Therefore, if she says that she does not see how your plan is better, it is because your plan – Is. NOT. Better!”

His words were spoken crisply and with force. One did not need to wonder if he was excessively angry or not. Though the volume of his voice did not rise at all, it still reverberated with fury.

Mr. Collins pulled himself to his full height and his chin to much higher than it would naturally be.

Then, looking down his nose at Mr. Darcy, he steepled his hands in front of his chest and said, “I have not said anything to Mr. Bennet yet, because I wished to see how

you were planning to play out this little stratagem of yours, but you force my hand, sir. I shall not keep your secret any longer.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed as Mr. Darcy fairly shouted the word stratagem in question. Ostensibly, he did not know about what her cousin was speaking either.

“There is nothing else to call it. A man who is engaged to one lady and is paying court to another is performing some trick – and a dastardly one, at that!”

“Of all the stupid things I have heard!” Mr. Bingley cried as he stepped between Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy.

“And I assure you with sisters such as mine, I have heard a great number of stupid things. However, what you have just said far exceeds them in senselessness.” He advanced a step on Mr. Collins, causing him to take a step backward.

“Darcy is a man of honour. He would never play with any lady’s heart. ”

“Then he has bamboozled you as well! I assure you that I have it on good authority that he is to be married next spring. I have already been enlisted to perform the ceremony.”

“And precisely who is he supposed to marry?” Bingley once again took a step forward, causing Mr. Collins to step backwards, and deftly creating space between his friend and the fool.

“Why, his cousin, of course.”

“And were you shown any marriage articles?” Mr. Bingley asked. “Was there a betrothal arrangement produced in your presence to verify these claims?”

“No.”

“That is because a document of that nature does not exist,” Mr. Darcy said with a shake of his head.

“I will not speak to you further on this matter. Whatever my aunt has told you is not true. I am not betrothed to her daughter.” He expelled a great huff of a breath.

“And both Miss Elizabeth and her father have been informed of my aunt’s desires and have been assured that they are not, and never have been, my desires.

I assure you, sir, that I am perpetrating no ruse! ”

Mr. Collins’s jaw twitched as he eyed Darcy. For a long moment they all stood in silence before Mr. Collins gave a nod of his head as if resigning his position on the matter. However, Elizabeth very much doubted that he had done more than make a show of quitting the field.

Mr. Bingley took another step forward, moving Mr. Collins back yet again.

“We do not need a chaperone. Most especially, we do not need one who is so easily blinded to the truth that is in front of him. You may continue to walk towards Longbourn five minutes after we have resumed our walk. You have a watch, do you not?”

Mr. Collins nodded.

“May I see it?” Mr. Bingley took out his own watch and compared it to the one Mr. Collins held. “Your watch is a minute behind mine. You will not resume your journey until the hour hand has passed the four by one click.”

“This is very high handed,” Mr. Collins grumbled.

“I will not argue that,” Mr. Bingley said with a chuckle.

“But you have proven it to be necessary, and I do this for your own good. Had you only said things that were demeaning about Darcy, this would not be required. However, you have spoken derogatorily about someone he loves, and I know from experience that doing something so foolish has deepened whatever small divide there may have been between you after your exchange in Mrs. Philips’s sitting room.

Therefore, I must warn you, both on my friend’s behalf and my own, that you should take care to treat your cousins – all of them – better than you have been, or measures will need to be taken.

I am not opposed to standing as Darcy’s second. ”

He turned to Jane and held out his hand. “Shall we, my dear?”

Once Jane had taken his hand, he looked once more at Mr. Collins. “Five minutes. Not a moment sooner.”

While Elizabeth was impressed by the tight bond between Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy and the thought of both of them defending her honour and that of her sisters, she was not so overwhelmed by those pleasant thoughts as to not be worried about how Mr. Darcy’s displeasure might play out.

She squeezed his arm, which still lay as solid as a rock beneath her fingers.

It was enough of a movement to cause his eyes to shift to hers.

She smiled at him, and he returned the expression, though it did not seem to be more

than a reflexive response.

Oh, dear! This was not good. Was he reconsidering his attachment to her family? She would not blame him if he was.

“We shall never have to see him again after this visit,” Elizabeth said softly as they walked alongside Jane and Mr. Bingley.

“Never,” Jane repeated. “Not after we tell our father how he spoke about Mary and Elizabeth. Mama might forgive a slight of one of her daughters’ beauty.”

Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy’s lips twitch in amusement.

“However,” Jane continued, “Papa’s displeasure, once riled, is much more of a burning bush.”

Mr. Darcy’s brow furrowed at the comment.

“Always burning yet never consumed,” Elizabeth explained. “It is fortunate that his temper is not easily provoked. I believe it is only Mr. Collins’s father who has ever pushed him to such a level that resulted in breaking off with him completely.”

“Until today,” Jane said. “You know as well as I do that had Papa heard any of what was said to Mary at our aunt’s home or to you just now, Mr. Collins would be removed from Longbourn immediately and sent on his way.

The only thing that might keep our father from ousting the man is knowing that Mama would likely bear the brunt of the retaliation for his actions.”

“Never.” Mr. Darcy’s voice and features were firm. “Your mother will be well-provided for. She will not be left to the mercy of that fool.”

A sigh of relief escaped from Elizabeth of its own accord. "Does that mean that you still intend to marry me in the future?"

He looked startled. "Why would you think otherwise?"

"You said you did not want to be associated with Mr. Collins."

"I also do not wish to be associated with Lady Catherine most days, but still, I visit her once a year and see to the things of which she has very little understanding." He chuckled and shook his head.

"Wishing not to be associated with someone is not the same as not being associated with them. It just simply is not always possible. That being said, however, if my aunt were to speak poorly of you, as your cousin did just now, she would likely never receive a visit from me again. Indeed, I think it is beyond time to see to the hiring of someone to do the things I have done for her."

"You would break off your relationship with your aunt on my account?" That was unexpected.

He nodded. "If she spoke poorly about you, yes." He straightened his arm, causing her hand to drop to his hand.

Then, with a glance over his shoulder at Mr. Collins, he lifted her fingers to his lips and kissed her gloved knuckles.

"I love you. I meant it when I said it before, and it will always be true."

"I say!" came a call from the parson who was some distance behind them.

Mr. Darcy simply chuckled and kissed her knuckles again.

“I would not have taken you for a man who taunts another, sir.” Elizabeth was happy for this new bit of revelation into Mr. Darcy’s character.

She knew that he could withstand teasing from those about whom he cared, but she had not thought that he was the sort of fellow to provoke anger from someone he did not count as a friend.

“He rarely is,” Mr. Bingley assured her.

“I am sure it is not a credit to my account at all,” Mr. Darcy began, “but that man drives me to want to do a great many things that are not noble. Taunting seemed to be the best option.”

“You did mention calling him out. The colonel would be impressed.” Mr. Bingley looked at Elizabeth. “It is usually Colonel Fitzwilliam who threatens morning meetings on Darcy’s behalf.”

“Is his temper so quick? Should we be worried for Mary?”

Mr. Darcy laughed. “No. Richard barks more than he bites.” He continued chuckling.

“However, he has a high standard for honour and tends to point out when that standard has not been met by offering to clear up the situation at dawn.” He blew out a breath.

“To my knowledge, there has only ever been one time when he was abjectly serious about keeping the appointment.”

“And Darcy and I would have stood as his seconds.”

Mr. Bingley’s comment was met with a nod from Mr. Darcy.

“It must have been something rather dreadful,” Jane said.

“It was.” Mr. Bingley cast a glance at Mr. Darcy who, once again, nodded.

“The fellow to provoke such a response was Mr. Wickham,” Mr. Bingley continued.

“Indeed?” Elizabeth cried. “Was it related to his penchant for playing cards?”

“No, but it was a play to win ill-gotten gain.” Mr. Bingley shared a pointed look with his friend.

“You likely noticed how Mr. Wickham and I greeted one another.”

“I did. Did he do something to harm you?” To Elizabeth’s horror, Mr. Darcy replied for a third time with a nod.

“He attempted to steal my sister from me.”

Both Elizabeth and Jane gasped. There really could be no other response to such a shocking statement.

“He played at being in love with her and had persuaded her to elope with him. Providentially, I arrived before the scheme could be carried out.” He shook his head. “She was devastated to discover that all he loved about her was her money. That is why she has been melancholy as of late.”

The comments and expressions from the earlier meeting between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham made perfect sense to Elizabeth now, and it presented her with a new concern.

“Miss Darcy should not come to Netherfield,” she said, putting her worry into words.

“I am afraid it is too late to stop her arrival,” Mr. Darcy countered. “I had a message this morning from Richard that he was arriving tonight.”

“Oh, dear!” Jane cried. “Whatever shall we do?”

“There is nothing to do. Wickham will not try anything with my cousin in attendance; therefore, Georgiana will be safe. I know that I cannot hide her away from the world forever, no matter how much I wish to do just that. I will not have her kept captive by him. Instead, I will surround her with new friends and a future sister.” He blew out a breath. “She will be safe.”

This final comment was spoken softly, and Elizabeth was not sure if he was saying that to reassure her and Jane, or if he was saying it to himself. Most likely, both. And she would do her part to make it so.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 10:50 am

Darcy heard the carriage, which he knew carried his cousin and sister, clattering up the drive and drawing to a stop in front of Netherfield, as he sat in the drawing room with a book in his lap and his eyes closed.

What a day it had been! His nerves were positively frayed. What with, first, Wickham appearing, and then, Mr. Collins spouting his foolishness.

Miss Bennet had not been wrong in her assessment of her father's reaction to hearing how Mr. Collins had talked about his daughters.

In truth, it had only been the knowledge that he might cause trouble for the Bennet ladies which had kept Mr. Bennet from demanding that the man depart from Longbourn immediately.

As it was, Mr. Collins had been told in very clear language that he was not a welcome guest, but a guest none-the-less, which gave him time, Mr. Bennet had said, to repair the damage he had done.

It had also been made abundantly clear that Collins was not to even consider making an offer for any of Mr. Bennet's daughters.

Darcy chuckled softly to himself as he wondered how glad Miss Mary would be to hear that. She had not yet returned home before the decree had been made, but he imagined that her relief would be great once she did return, and the news was relayed to her.

Just down the corridor, the front door opened, interrupting his thoughts.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Darcy to see Mr. Darcy,” he heard his cousin say.

There was some shuffling in the room, but it was not enough to make Darcy lift his head from where it rested against the wing of the chair in which he sat. No, he would continue to perpetrate his ruse of sleep until he heard his cousin and sister being announced.

To be clear, he did not continue to pretend because of a lack of eagerness to see Georgiana or Richard. His reason was that he had just had enough of trying individuals for the day, and therefore, he did not wish to be addressed in any fashion by either of Bingley’s sisters.

“My, your brother must be growing very old, Georgie, for he has fallen asleep just like Great Aunt Mathilda does in the late afternoon once her tea has been had.”

Darcy shook his head and opened his eyes. “I am not sleeping. I am –”

“Resting my eyes,” Richard finished the protest in a high, feeble voice just as their great aunt would do.

Darcy lay his book to the side and rose from his chair. “Truly, I was not sleeping.” He sighed as he saw a grinning Bingley standing behind Richard. “But I suppose you were told that I was?”

Bingley’s head bobbed up and down as his smile grew.

Richard laughed. “Indeed, we were.”

“We were also told that you were not truly sleeping. Mr. Bingley is, after all, an honest sort of gentleman.” Georgiana crossed the room and walked straight into Darcy’s open arms. “I am very glad to see you.”

“Not half as glad as I am to see you.”

“Why was Mr. Darcy pretending to be asleep?” Louisa Hurst asked.

“Likely for the same reason I do,” Mr. Hurst answered. “His ears were tired of listening to you and your sister.”

“You pretend to be asleep when you no longer wish to listen to me?” Louisa cried in affronted surprise.

“My father does the same to my mother and sister,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. “It is much easier to feign sleep than to fabricate an excuse to quit the room – especially when he does not wish to leave his dearest’s side.”

“Oh, well, I suppose that is rather lovely, then, is it not, Caroline?” Louisa asked.

“I am not sure it is.”

Miss Bingley had been far less agreeable ever since it had been made known to her that Darcy was enamoured with Elizabeth and her hopes were well and truly gone. Not even the promise of a willing suitor in possession of a title could completely draw her out of her moroseness.

“I think it is sweet,” Georgiana said. “However, I also think it would be better to just say that one’s ears are tired.”

If Darcy had thought that either Louisa or Caroline would have ceased talking to him if he had said something so direct, he might have said it. However, he knew how Bingley’s sisters could be. They often ignored what was said to them if they did not wish to hear it.

“I suppose that is the best,” Darcy agreed. “But sometimes, it is not the most effective.” He squeezed her tightly in a second embrace. “Was your trip good?”

“It was delightful. Richard can be very entertaining, you know.”

Darcy did know that. “And how did our cousin amuse you during the drive?”

“He snored quite loudly for thirty minutes with only two pauses to snort and shift positions.”

“I did not!”

“I assure you that you did,” Georgiana replied. “And then, he read to me as he often does.”

Her bright smile was something that Darcy had missed. It had been chased away by Wickham at Ramsgate, so it was comforting to see that her good humour was returning. Hopefully, it would remain on the mend when she heard that the miscreant was only a few miles away.

“May I see both of you to your rooms?” he asked. “I have much to tell you.”

“I should say you do!” Richard draped an arm across Darcy’s shoulder. “Your letter was... interesting. Mother was certain I might need Aunt Matty’s salts from my response to reading it. Therefore, I feel it is incumbent on you to tell me forthwith about this lady who has captured your heart.”

“Oh, yes, please do!” Georgiana cried.

“What do you know about a lady who has captured my heart?” Darcy knew the answer to that, but he simply could not pass up the opportunity to tease his sister. He

had not felt as if he could be so playful with her since before the dreadful events of the past summer.

“I let her read the missive,” Richard answered. “It seemed only right for her to know that she might have a sister awaiting her here.”

Louisa huffed. “Charles can make sure you get to the correct rooms.” She waved a hand dismissively. “Caroline needs to finish adding this lace to her dress for the ball. Mr. Warren is attending, you know.”

“No, I did not know, but I am happy to hear it. Has he made an offer?” Richard inquired as Darcy and Georgiana moved toward the corridor.

“Not yet, but we are hopeful,” Caroline replied.

“Then, allow me to offer my sincerest congratulations and wish you Godspeed in your quest.” He bowed.

“However, my dressmaking skills are dreadfully wanting, so if you will excuse me, I will go rid myself of my travelling clothes in favour of something more suitable for dining. We will be dining soon, will we not?”

Bingley snorted in laughter. Richard was known for his love of food.

“It is yet an hour before we must get ready for dinner.” There was a note of only just contained laughter in Bingley's tone. “I will see that some refreshment is brought above stairs for you to enjoy as you and your cousins discuss news.”

“You are joining us as well, are you not?” Darcy asked.

“I would not miss it for any inducement.”

“Unless, of course, the inducement is the arrival of your angel – Darcy told me that he is not alone in having fallen for the charms of a Bennet lady.” Richard walked beside Bingley as they followed Darcy and Georgiana to the grand staircase.

“Ah, but she will not be arriving. I have already seen her today, so there is no need for her to call on me. Not that I would not welcome a visit, of course, but she knows you were supposed to arrive and would not wish to detract from all the attention you deserve to receive.”

Richard’s laughter echoed off the walls. “Am I due a great deal of attention?”

“Miss Bennet would likely say that you are,” Bingley answered. “She has a heart of gold, and I am sure her kindness would extend to even you.”

Richard clapped him on the back. “I have missed having you and Darcy around to make sport of me and to whom I can return the favour in kind.”

Darcy had to agree that having Richard here with him and Bingley did feel like a set had been completed. It always felt thus when the three of them were in company. He truly had no better friends than these.

“There is a sitting area in both rooms,” Bingley said as they approached the two rooms next to Darcy’s, which would be Georgiana’s and Richard’s during their stay.

“Since I do not have a maid or man seeing to my things,” Darcy inserted, “we will gather in my room. I am just the next door down from you,” he added to Georgiana.

“I am to be surrounded by guards, am I?”

Darcy chuckled. “Yes, for you are most precious.” This earned him a hug before his sister disappeared into her room.

“Do not be long in joining us,” he said to Richard. “Not all the news is pleasant.”

Richard’s head tipped. “Is that so?”

“Sadly, yes,” Bingley replied. “Wickham is in Meryton.”

A rumbling, growling sound emanated from Richard.

“He has joined the militia, though he had not yet gotten his uniform when we saw him this morning,” Bingley continued as he and Darcy followed Richard into his room.

“He has joined the militia? Him? The fellow who seems to think there are no rules that apply to him? That could be a fun bit of entertainment to watch.” He waved his man away.

“You can see to my things later. I only need to change out of these travelling clothes so that they can be brushed out.” He sat down and began working on removing his boots.

“Do you need assistance with your cravat?” his man asked.

“I will not be wearing it until it is time to dine, so just return then. I am sure you have your things to put away. For just this time, you may tend to your things before mine.”

“The blue breeches and coat, sir?”

“Yes, yes, those would be perfect, but again, I will not need the coat for an hour.”

“Yes, sir. I will return in one hour.” The man took the suit from the open trunk and placed it, with the coat, cravat, stockings, and shirt on the bed near Richard before

ducking out of the room.

“He forgot my slippers,” Richard grumbled as he began removing his clothes.

“I will get them for you,” Darcy offered. “You should know that Wickham mentioned Georgie when we saw him.”

“He what?”

“It was only a passing comment,” Darcy continued in a tone that he hoped would keep his cousin from dashing off to do Wickham harm before the whole of the tale could be explained. “And the meaning of it was hidden to all but Bingley and me.”

“And Darcy made sure to inform him that you were planning to visit,” Bingley added. “I do think all will be as well as can be when dealing with a fellow like Wickham, since he knows you are here. However, it is best to be prepared for trouble.”

And Wickham was trouble. They all knew it. He had been so all his life. He laughed at honour and scoffed at decorum.

That being said, he did not shun either completely. He retained just enough of each to construct a convincing facade of charm and elegance.

Had his ability to place a winning wager ever been as abundant as his ability to play a part, he would likely be the wealthiest man in England by now.

“Unfortunately, Wickham is not the only bit of unpleasantness,” Darcy said as he placed Richard’s shoes near his feet.

The man was not slow in dressing, for he was nearly finished in the time it took to fetch his footwear. Of course, he would need a minute or two to straighten the clothes

he had discarded in a heap on the bed before they could move to Darcy's room to meet with Georgiana.

"Our aunt has a new parson," Darcy continued. "He happens to be a distant cousin to the Bennets and the daftest fool I have ever had the misfortune of meeting. Your assistance will be needed where he is concerned."

"Indeed?" The question was filled with curiosity.

"He has been told not to even consider making an offer for one of Mr. Bennet's daughters, but he is not astute."

Richard held up a hand. "No. Absolutely not!"

"I have not even finished my request," Darcy protested.

"Unless you were going to ask me to dispatch the fellow, the answer is no."

"You would leave innocent ladies unprotected, would you?" Bingley inserted, earning him a glower.

"They have a father for that purpose, as well as you and Darcy."

"But Miss Mary –" Darcy attempted again to make his request, only to be cut off.

"No," Richard repeated. "I do not wish to play with fire." He gave Darcy a pointed look. "You know what happened when my brother tried to avoid my mother's attempts to match him. He ended up married to the lady who was helping him avoid Mother!"

"And happily so," Darcy protested. "I do not think I have seen a better match." He

hurried behind his cousin, who was already at the door.

“No. I am not going to do it.”

“Would it help persuade you to consider the plan if I told you that she is not keen to be matched with you?” Bingley asked as they traversed the short distance from Richard’s room to Darcy’s.

Richard drew to a stop. “She is not interested in me?” He shook his head. “She has not even met me.”

“And you have not met her,” Bingley countered.

“He has a point,” Darcy agreed. “How can you refuse her without meeting her?”

“She has refused me without so much as a how do you do . I do not see why I need to give her any more attention than she has given me.”

“Who does Richard not want to meet?” Georgiana asked as she joined them.

“Miss Mary Bennet,” Bingley said. “She is a lovely girl in a plain and outspoken sort of fashion.”

“How can she be both lovely and plain?” Richard asked as they entered Darcy’s room.

“I think the only bit of lace she owns is the one she purchased today to spite her cousin.” Elizabeth had told Darcy about Mary’s extreme dislike for Mr. Collins.

“So then, the plain part is only in regard to her wardrobe?” For a fellow who was not interested in being matched, Richard sure was curious about the lady with whom he

did not wish to be paired.

“No, not completely,” Bingley took a seat in Darcy’s sitting room. “She pales in comparison to Miss Bennet, but she is not wanting in handsomeness. She just does not have great heaps of it.”

“The beauty of a lady’s face is not as important as the beauty of her heart,” Georgiana said. “Now, if we could speak about Miss Mary’s heart, I think that would be better. I assume it is not plain?”

Darcy chuckled. “You are correct, of course. I think that Miss Mary’s heart hold some beauty, though I have not known her long enough to discover it.”

“We would not want to damage that beauty by playing with her affections.” Georgiana gave each of them a look that would make the sternest governess proud.

“We would never do that!” Bingley cried. “We were merely suggesting a mutual arrangement where Richard and Miss Mary spent time together so that she would not have to be put upon by Mr. Collins.”

“Does Miss Mary know about this, then?”

“No, not yet,” Bingley answered. “We thought it best to present the idea to Richard first.”

“But Richard is not amenable to the scheme,” Richard said. “So, we will mark this discussion as concluded, and you can begin the next by telling us about Miss Mary’s sister who is likely to become my cousin.”

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Elizabeth rubbed the back of her neck and then tipped her head from side to side.

While she adored the lace that she had purchased to refashion her ball gown from how it had been at the assembly to how she wanted to present herself at Netherfield, being bent over it and making neat and tiny stitches to attach it to her dress was not her favourite thing to do.

Rain tapped against the window. It was the same tune that had kept Elizabeth company while stitching or reading for three days now.

She certainly hoped the clouds would clear tomorrow so that travelling to Mr. Bingley's ball would be easier.

As it was, she and her sisters would need to exercise caution when entering and exiting the carriage, or their hems would be covered in mud.

The right side of her mouth tipped up into a wry smile as she looked out the window. Who would have thought that, in so short a time, she would be eager to attend a ball just so she could dance with Mr. Darcy?

As her father would say, love did strange things to otherwise sensible minds.

"We should maybe build an ark," Mary said, breaking into Elizabeth's thoughts and causing her to laugh.

"I fear you may be correct. If the weather continues as it has been for many more days, I will help you build it, but for now, I think, or at least, I hope, we will not be

washed away completely. How is your dress coming along?"

"I finished it." Mary held up the upper portion to show Elizabeth. There was a delicate piece of lace stitched into the bodice where she would normally tuck a fichu.

"Do you think it will draw too much attention?" she asked.

"I mean, it is not really so different from how I usually wear things, but it is attached, and therefore, seems to be placed just for effect." She pulled her lower lip between her teeth while the expression in her eyes begged for reassurance.

"I think it looks lovely," Jane said. "And you will not have to worry about it shifting when you dance."

"I do not know why you insist on covering yourself up as you do," Lydia inserted. "I get so warm when dancing. I am sure I would need a cup of punch after every set if I dressed as you do."

Mary's dress had longer sleeves than most ball gowns. That was how she preferred them, and her décolletage was always covered. Always. Her collarbones were as much as she would allow to be revealed by a neckline on any dress unless, of course, she was only in company with her sisters.

"I just do not like being looked at that way," Mary muttered.

"You should get used to it, for it is the only way to get a husband," Lydia said. "You must make yourself desirable."

"And baring one's body is the only way to do that?" Mary returned.

"Not the whole thing!" Lydia cried. "Just a hint here and there."

Mary scowled and shook her head. “I would rather be desired for myself and not my looks. That is the best I can hope for at any rate, since I am the least pretty among us.”

“I do not see you that way,” Kitty said.

“You do not?” Lydia’s question was suffused with disbelief. “She is not so lovely as Jane.”

Elizabeth was surprised that there was not an “or me” added to the statement. Lydia was not backwards in putting herself forward in any area where she thought she excelled.

Kitty seemed to be undaunted by her younger sister’s comments, and after a moment of looking through her basket of trims, held up four ribbons. “Which is prettiest?”

“Oh, the red one!” Lydia answered to nobody’s astonishment, for they all knew that red was one of her favourite colours. And it suited her – not just because it complimented her colouring, but also because it was bold, just as she was.

“I think the green one is prettiest,” Jane said.

Jane’s preference for green also made sense, since it was a happy colour that promised good things and pleasant summer days ahead when it first appeared each spring.

It was also a colour that did not run and hide completely when the depths of winter with its dark shadows appeared.

It was bright and full of promise as well as sturdy and strong.

Again, that seemed fitting to Jane's personality.

"I like the purple." It was regal and enchanting. Elizabeth was not sure what that said about her.

"And I prefer the blue," Kitty said with a shrug. "They are all pretty, and yet, not one of them is preferred by all of us. And if I were to wear the red ribbon with the wrong dress, it would not look as pretty as it does with the right dress. It is the same with people."

Elizabeth pressed her lips together to close her mouth, which had dropped open the tiniest bit at Kitty's words. She had not thought that her second youngest sister possessed such deep thoughts.

"I have been thinking," Kitty whispered, "that I would love to be as tall and dignified as Miss Darcy. She carries herself as I imagine a princess might. I know; it is silly."

"It is not silly," Jane said. "She is very graceful."

"And she seems quite well accomplished," Mary said with a sigh. "I am sure she plays the piano much better than I do, and I was hoping to play the piece I have been practising at the ball." She shook her head. "Now, I will not, for I am sure I would look like quite the fool if I did."

"Is it only Miss Darcy who you fear looking bad in front of?" Lydia teased.

Mary's cheeks grew rosy. "Perhaps not, but I am nearly certain she is the only one who could outshine me on the piano." Mary was technically good when it came to playing. Rarely did she hit a wrong note, but she managed to infuse emotion into a piece even less often.

“Perhaps Miss Bingley could,” Lydia replied. “Do you fear looking unaccomplished in front of her? She is not a new addition to our acquaintances, so I dare say you do not. Therefore, I think the real reason you will not perform is because of the colonel.”

Miss Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam had accompanied Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley when they had called the day after Aunt Philips’s dinner party.

Mr. Darcy had not attended that party, choosing, instead, to spend a quiet evening at home with his relations.

Therefore, the day after the party had been when he had introduced his sister and cousin to them.

Had the party been a day later, he had assured Elizabeth that he would have attended, and she had assured him that he was missed but that she could not fault him for not wishing to spend an evening with Mr. Wickham and Mr. Collins – especially when one of the two had caused damage to his sister’s heart.

Of course, she had not said that last part out loud.

“Admit it!” Lydia taunted while wearing an excessively large grin. “You like the colonel.”

If ever a sister loved to torment another sister, it was Lydia, and the sister she seemed to love to poke and prod at was Mary.

“Why should I not like him?” Mary protested. “He is...” She paused for just a moment to select the correct words. “He is so sure of himself.”

He was that.

While he was not so tall and handsome as his cousin, his carriage made up for the small shortfall, for he carried himself as someone who demanded to be admired and given respect.

That, of course, was no more than should be expected.

After all, he was a colonel and the son of an earl, and truth be told, it was not all that much different from how Mr. Darcy carried himself, though the colonel did seem to be more at ease with his position, and that comfort flowed from him in pleasant and easy conversation.

“It is not that you should not like him,” Lydia retorted. “It is that you never like anyone.”

“Or maybe it is just that she never reveals that she likes anyone,” Kitty amended before Mary could respond. “It is not wrong to be guarded, and I think that Miss Darcy would be circumspect about such a thing.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Miss Darcy is just a young lady like you.”

She wanted her sisters to be friends with Miss Darcy and perhaps learn some refinement from her, but she did not want them to lift Miss Darcy to some level in their thinking that would surely end with everyone being disappointed and likely hurt if a misstep should happen.

“No, she is not!” Kitty cried. “She has been to school and has Mrs. Annesley to teach her. Add to that the fact that she dines and resides regularly with a countess, and I do not see how you can say she is anything like me.”

“I wonder what she will wear to the ball?” Lydia said.

“It is too bad that she will not be allowed to dance much. Although, and I know I should not say it, but, if she were allowed to dance, I might not have as many partners. She is at least as pretty as me and quite wealthy. That being said, she could be as freckled as Miss King and still command an audience because of her wealth alone.”

Leave it to Lydia to be the first to calculate the competition a new arrival posed to gaining dance partners. She was their mother’s daughter, through and through.

“But if you take away the fine dresses and enormous dowry, you are left with a young lady who wants to find friendship and love just like we do,” Jane inserted. “One must not compare oneself to others when calculating one’s worth. Your true value comes from within, not without.”

Lydia snorted. “Tell that to Mama. I am sure if we had thirty thousand as a dowry, we would be sought after more than we already are.” She lifted a shoulder and let it drop. “That is why I must use what I have to catch a husband. And Mary should, too.”

Jane, who was sitting nearest to Lydia, put down her work and grasped Lydia’s hands.

“What you have, my dear sister, is a precious heart that should not be given away to just anyone who is tempted by your physical beauty. You are as valuable as any lady with a fortune to their name. I have always thought it true of all of us and have always held myself to such a standard. In fact, I would not allow Mr. Bingley to call on me now if I did not fully love him and know that he returns my affection. It would not matter to me that he is wealthy. I swear it.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “I dare say it was not your heart that captured his attention at the assembly. We all know it was your beauty that snared him, and your heart merely keeps him.”

“I am not sure I agree,” Elizabeth inserted, “for I do not think that Jane would be as captivatingly beautiful as she is if her heart were less good. You can see her kindness in her smile and eyes. I am certain that she could have been wearing any old day dress and still been the most gorgeous creature in attendance.”

“Lizzy, really!” Jane cried.

“It is true,” Kitty said. “Your beauty cannot be hidden.”

“And mine needs all the help it can get,” Mary muttered as she studied her gown. “So, I guess that means a bit of lace in a place that seems to be drawing attention is needed.” Her nose scrunched up before she huffed. “How do I attach some lace to my personality?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Your personality does not need lace to make it attractive. However, perhaps the edges and corners could use a touch of softening now and then. But I adore how strongly you hold to your beliefs. I dare say I have never seen you waver.” And that likely explained why the colonel had caught Mary’s eye.

He was the embodiment of confidence and decision.

“Does that mean that I am not without hope?” Mary asked.

“No, you are not.”

It seemed, perhaps, that the colonel had done more than captured Mary’s eye.

Maybe she should mention it to Mr. Darcy and discover if there was any hope of Mary’s affections being returned.

Not that Elizabeth ever wanted it to happen, but Jane, Lydia, Kitty – they could

weather a disappointment.

Mary, for all her blustering and sermonizing, might not be able to come through such a thing as well as her sisters would.

It would likely cement forever in Mary's mind that compared to her sisters, she was truly the least worthy of love.

"I can say nice things about you to the colonel when he dances with me." Lydia's eyes sparkled with amusement.

"No! I do not want to be pushed at any gentleman." Mary's glare was dangerously serious. However, they all knew that the effect would be lost on Lydia, for that girl often laughed in the face of danger.

"Well then, my dear sister, you should have been born to a different mother," Jane said, causing them all to laugh.

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Outside Netherfield, torches and lanterns lit the driveway and entrance.

Inside, hearths were laid with logs and candles and lamps of all sorts gave a bright and welcoming glow to the rooms that would be visited by Bingley's neighbours tonight.

All was ready and spectacularly so. Carriages would soon start to arrive, and the festivities of the night would begin in earnest.

Darcy stood at the window in the well-lit drawing room, watching the far end of the driveway.

It had been four days since he had seen Elizabeth, and he was finding that to be four days too many.

How long did a fellow have to wait to secure the lady who had captured his heart.

Surely, he could propose now and marry her before Christmas, could he not?

Beside him, Richard chuckled softly. "Are you actually eager for a soiree to begin?" The question was posed softly so that none, but Darcy, would hear him.

"Strangely, yes." Would he be as impatient if it had not been for those four days of rain? Most likely. How had he ever thought that he could live a lifetime without Elizabeth when mere hours and days of separation left him feeling fidgety and as if something was missing?

“Mother would be shocked.”

“I am sure she would be, since I astonish myself.” He turned toward the door to the room as it opened and felt a catch in his chest. Georgiana was looking more and more like their mother each day, and there was no denying that she was just about ready to make her grand entrance to society.

For dressed as she was, she was the very image of a debutante of high standing. “She is beautiful, is she not?”

“Exceptionally, so,” Richard answered. “Mother often comments on how she looks like your mother.”

“I was just thinking that very thing.” He sighed. “Must we truly present her to society soon?”

Richard shook his head as if he agreed with not presenting Georgiana just yet, but, in contradiction to his actions, said, “Yes, we must. She is nearly ready for the challenge – likely more ready than most debs due to her most recent unplanned and disagreeable lesson from a certain blackguard.”

“Speaking of which...” Darcy let the rest of his thoughts hang suspended in the space between them and expressed them only in the arch of one eyebrow.

“I will not draw blood at a ball,” Richard answered. “Bingley made me swear it on the Bible in his study just minutes ago.”

“That does not mean you will not cause trouble, for blackening an eye or rendering a man insensible is not the same as drawing blood.” Darcy’s one arched eyebrow remained lifted, but his cousin pointedly ignored it as he smirked and straightened his coat – which did not need straightening.

It was a sure sign that Richard had already considered trouncing Wickham without a drop of blood being shed.

“Shall I procure Bingley’s Bible so that we can guarantee ourselves an evening without violence? ”

“Who is going to be violent?” Georgiana asked as she joined them near the window. “Surely, it is not my best loved cousin in all the world?” She fluttered her lashes at Richard.

“Is Cousin Anne attending?” Richard’s comment earned him a huff.

“My reputation,” Georgiana scolded, “may depend upon you claiming the title of my best loved cousin in all the world, especially since the title is rightfully yours.”

Richard drew a deep breath and then extended a hand to Georgiana, who took it.

After which, with a bow, he said, “I am at your service and shall not, as much as it is in my power to do, allow any harm to befall you or your reputation. But please know that it shall take a great deal of effort on my part to not damage the fellow who so justly deserves it after the way he treated you.”

When Richard had released her hand, she cupped his cheek with it. “You shall ever be my champion.”

“Not ever. Just until you have found a suitor to take my place,” Richard replied.

“Will I ever be allowed to look for one?” She peeked at her brother.

“Eventually, but not tonight.” He kissed his sister’s cheek. “You, my dear, look lovely and very grown up. I am afraid you will have to disappoint many gentlemen

tonight when refusing their request for a dance.”

“That is very sweet of you to say.” She glanced at the window as a carriage could be heard on the driveway. “Do you really think Mr. Wickham will be here tonight?”

“Is there a chance to make your brother squirm?” Richard’s tone was dark.

“So ... then ... he will be?”

“I would be surprised if he were not in attendance,” Darcy agreed. “Stay close to me or Richard, or the Bennets or even Miss Bingley.” He knew that none of the people whom he listed would let Wickham get too close to Georgiana.

He had worried about Miss Lydia, but Elizabeth had assured him – four days ago – that while her youngest sister found Wickham handsome, she had refused to flirt with him at her aunt’s party.

Apparently, a soldier was a fine catch, unless he was a known gambler.

Miss Lydia liked the finer things in life and had no desire to end up tied to a penniless man, no matter how attractive he was.

“If you feel a need to retreat to your room,” Richard said, “find me, and I will escort you, since I do believe this is one soiree your brother will not wish to be taken away from.” He chuckled. “Mother would be in her glory to see him so, do you not think?”

“I most certainly do. How long has she been attempting to match him with someone?”

“Since I was twenty,” Darcy replied.

“That is a dreadfully long time,” Georgiana teased.

Darcy laughed. “I suppose it is to one so young as you.” He spared only a quick look for her as he replied, since the carriage which was standing before Netherfield’s door was the one for which he had been waiting.

Elizabeth was here.

“Come,” Darcy said. “We must greet people.”

Richard’s chuckle was not so soft as it had been. “I cannot believe the change in you,” he said as he and Georgiana followed Darcy from the room. “Love must do strange things to a fellow.”

“Strange, but wonderful,” Darcy said with a glance over his shoulder. “You should try it.”

“Oh, then your mother’s joy would be complete,” Georgiana agreed. “I dare say she has been trying to match you for even longer than she has my brother, since you are older than he.”

“I am only a year older than him – no, not even a year. A mere nine months. I would not say that it is that much longer that I have had to endure Mother.”

“Will you dance with Miss Mary?” Georgiana kept her voice low as they joined Bingley in the receiving line.

“Yes, I will, but only for your brother’s sake. Not for any other reason.”

Darcy chuckled at the stern glare with which Richard favoured Georgiana.

“I left Mother at home for a reason,” Richard grumbled.

“And I am her favourite niece for a reason,” Georgiana replied.

“And that reason is that your mother is not Aunt Catherine,” Richard retorted. “I will allow no other explanation.”

“That is not the only explanation, whether you allow it or not. There is also the fact that we are both eager to see you happily settled. I shall write to her later about all the ladies you charmed. Indeed, I will take notes while I am watching all the dancing so that I do not forget a detail.”

“You will do nothing of the sort!” Richard cried.

“I most certainly will, because she expressly requested that I do.”

“When?”

“Before we departed town. About the same time that Fitzwilliam’s invitation arrived.”

Richard huffed. “I will have enough trouble keeping myself from bloodying a blackguard. Please, do not provoke me with matchmaking.”

“As long as you dance with Miss Mary, I will not.”

“I already said I would.”

“Good.”

“I think I must speak with Mrs. Annesley when we return to town,” Richard

muttered. "You are becoming far too pert."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Darcy said. "I like that she is returning to how she was."

"That is only because she is not pushing you toward any ladies."

"Then find one to attach yourself to, as I have done."

A small growling sound rumbled from Richard, causing Georgiana to giggle just as the Bennets were being presented.

Darcy drew a deep breath as a sense of rightness enveloped him.

"You look lovely tonight," he said upon finally being able to greet Elizabeth. "How many dances am I allowed?"

"Just the two which have already been promised," Elizabeth answered.

"That is quite the misfortune, for I would be content to dance every one of them with you."

"And he is not fond of dancing," Richard interjected.

Elizabeth laughed. "Of that, I am aware. I first met him at a ball, and he danced with no one but Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, even though there were several young ladies without a partner."

Richard chuckled. "I am not surprised. He truly is not fond of making conversation with people he has just met."

“Well, I, for one, am shocked that he was not more noble,” Georgiana said.

Elizabeth took Georgiana’s hand. “I think he would have been more at ease had he not had a very precious someone on his heart.”

“I am not so sure of that,” Richard said. “He has been known to be rude to avoid things that make him uneasy before.” He grinned broadly. “Usually when I have pushed him beyond his bounds.”

“Or when Bingley has,” Darcy added. “Now, must we continue to speak about this? I am resolved to be all that a gentleman should be at this ball and plan to dance every set, even if they cannot all be with Miss Elizabeth.”

“Every set?” Mrs. Bennet’s eyes were wide. “You will not dance every set with him, Elizabeth. It just is not done.” She turned her attention back to Mr. Darcy. “Two will suffice. Three may be acceptable if you desire to push the bounds of propriety.”

“Do not fear, madame. Your daughter has already scolded me for asking for more sets than I should.” That should let Mrs. Bennet know that Elizabeth was not to be worried about.

“Elizabeth!” Her mother did not seem pleased.

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“He did not mean scold as you are thinking, Mama.”

Darcy swallowed. This was not how his comments were supposed to have been received. His intent was to make things better for Elizabeth. Not worse.

“No, I did not mean anything negative by the choice of word. I only meant to assure you that your daughter is all that is proper and good.”

Mrs. Bennet’s replying smile caused her eyes to twinkle. “I will allow you to believe that, but I do know my daughter.” This last part was said with a wink and met with a “Mama, really!” from that daughter. Mrs. Bennet’s laugh was light and musical, much like her daughter’s was.

“I am pleased to finally be able to return some of the torment that has been my lot these twenty years.”

“Mama!” Elizabeth shook her head but did not look utterly put out, which caused Darcy to suspect that there was some truth – maybe even a great deal of it – in Mrs. Bennet’s words.

“Intelligent females are not without their challenges,” Mr. Bennet said.

“It is good to see you again, Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Miss Darcy. I guarantee you have not been forgotten, for your names have been mentioned many times during our forced confinement due to the rain.” He turned to Georgiana.

“My youngest daughters are eager to spend the evening with you – that is, when they

are not dancing with a few lucky fellows.”

“I have promised myself to only dance half the dances with gentlemen,” Miss Lydia said. “And the rest of the evening I shall be at your service to dance or chat or do whatever it is one does when one is not dancing at a ball.”

“Mr. Bingley has a room set out for cards, but I do not play for money,” Georgiana said, “so it will have to only be for tallies on a piece of paper.”

“That sounds lovely,” Miss Kitty said. “I would like to hear all about what it is like to have a companion like Mrs. Annesley.”

Georgiana looked at Darcy. “Is it acceptable if we retire to the drawing room?”

“I will go with you,” Richard said. “That way, your brother and Miss Elizabeth can take a stroll around the rooms unfettered by care.”

“And this is why he is a colonel,” Mr. Bennet said to his youngest daughter. “You have to be very good at making plans to be one, you know.”

Miss Lydia huffed. “Of course, he does. For if he was tragically deplorable at making a good plan, the battle would be lost before it began. Is that not right, Mary?”

“I would have to agree that your reasoning does make sense,” Mary answered.

“Mary is very sensible,” Miss Lydia whispered to Richard, and if looks were daggers, those would have been the only words the youngster would be allowed to utter for the rest of her life, for her sister’s glare would have been her end.

To Darcy, it seemed that Georgiana was not the only one with matchmaking ideas for Richard and Miss Mary. It also appeared that Miss Mary was just as reluctant to be a

participant as Richard was.

“It is good that some women are sensible,” Richard replied.

“She is also very clever and can formulate excellent plans, but she does not care to hear about fashion, so if we begin speaking about that, do you think you could perhaps discuss the best way to execute a plan with her?” Miss Lydia asked.

Richard looked befuddled and cast a wary look at Darcy. “I suppose I could, but only if Miss Mary wishes to discuss such a topic. Does she have a plan that needs to be carried out and is not sure how to do it?”

“Oh! I do not know,” Miss Lydia answered. “I thought you could imagine a plan and debate the best way to see it to success.”

Richard nodded as he followed Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty, who had each claimed one of Georgiana’s arms. “I see,” he said.

“Richard,” Georgiana said with a tip of her hat towards Miss Mary.

“Ah yes, I seem to have forgotten my manners in the figuring out of plans and stratagems,” he said as he offered his arm to Miss Mary.

“Thank you, but I am capable of walking unassisted,” Miss Mary said.

“Mary!” Miss Lydia cried.

Miss Mary’s sigh could be heard from where Darcy stood with Miss Elizabeth, but she put her hand on Richard’s arm.

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “I fear your cousin may be in for a trying evening. Lydia is a

lot like her mother, and Mrs. Bennet is an excellent planner when it comes to seeing her daughters matched.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now, where is the card room so that I can avoid the dancing?”

“Two doors down on the left. The library is just across the hall if it is needed.”

“See, now, this is why I think you will be my favourite son-in-law. Mr. Bingley is amiable, but you understand what a man, such as I, truly needs.” Chuckling to himself, he left them.

Mrs. Bennet was near Miss Bennet, who, of course, was standing near Bingley, and that left Darcy and Elizabeth relatively alone.

“Where is your cousin?” he asked.

“Papa sent the carriage back for him. That way we do not have to hear anything from him for at least another half hour or more.”

“I take it that your father is still not pleased with him.”

“No, not at all.”

“Do you wish to take a walk?” It would be better to converse away from the guests who were entering.

“I do. I adore seeing all the preparations before they are spoiled in anyway by the busyness of the evening.”

“Then, allow me to see that your desire is fulfilled.” He held his arm out to her, and once she tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow, they set off to admire the work that Miss Bingley and Netherfield’s staff had put into the evening’s soiree.

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Before Mr. Darcy could do more than step towards the ballroom with Elizabeth, a gust of foul wind entered Netherfield. Elizabeth snapped her mouth closed as she took in the sight of the unpleasantness. How had Mr. Collins arrived so soon? The carriage had only just left Netherfield!

“Mr. Collins!” Elizabeth’s mother cried. “Your boots will make a horrible mess of the floors.”

She was not wrong. Though his boots did look as if they had been somewhat cleaned before entering, they still carried a fair bit of mud.

"Have you been prancing through the puddles?" she added.

A scene was about to be made. Elizabeth knew it to her very core.

“I do not prance, madame.” Mr. Collins motioned to a footman.

“I require a chair be brought hither and some help in removing these boots. I have my clean shoes here.” He lifted a small bag as he returned to the conversation with Mrs. Bennet.

“I thought it a terrible waste of time and energy for the carriage to travel to Longbourn to get me.” He continued to talk as a chair was moved nearer the door.

“So I took it upon myself to walk. I am not unused to the exercise. I am actually quite good at it. Lady Catherine often comments on how quickly I can traverse the distance from the parsonage to Rosings.”

He sat down, stuck both feet straight out in front of him, and motioned to the footman to remove his boots.

“Rest assured, Mr. Bingley, I shall still be able to dance every set. I may not appear to be so, but I am very fond of activity. One must balance one’s time spent in studying with other pursuits, you see. I do love to garden.”

Here he looked toward the door as one foot was freed from a boot and the footman moved to attend to the other.

“I would venture to guess, Mr. Bingley, that your garden is spectacular when in bloom. All good gardens of fine houses are. I have heard tell of Mr. Darcy’s fine garden at Pemberley.

Miss de Bourgh showed me a sketch of it.

I think she had hoped it would be hers.” He sighed.

“But... hopes and dreams...” Again, he sighed, and this time added a shake of his head to illustrate his clear disappointment.

Once the second boot was removed, he wiggled his toes before lowering his legs and slipping his feet into his shoes.

Elizabeth felt Darcy’s arm tense under her fingers as Mr. Wickham and three other officers entered.

“Dashed wishes are terribly hard to bear with any sort of equanimity,” Mr. Collins said as he stood and adjusted his clothing while the footman hurried away with his boots and coat.

“You must indeed be a parson, for you most certainly speak the truth.” Mr. Wickham looked directly at Mr. Darcy as he said it. Though he wore a smile, there was no mistaking the challenging look in his eyes.

“We should likely take that turn of the rooms,” Elizabeth said.

There was nothing further that she needed to witness here – no matter what her curiosity said.

It was much more imperative that Mr. Darcy be extracted from this scene than her curiosity be assuaged.

“Perhaps we should start with the drawing room.” It might be best to warn the Colonel and Miss Darcy that Mr. Wickham had indeed arrived.

“Yes, that might be best,” Mr. Darcy murmured as he turned toward the drawing room.

“I have had my own hopes crushed, you know,” Elizabeth could hear Mr. Wickham saying.

His friends laughed. “It has mostly been of your own doing,” one of them said.

“He would not mention your sister, would he?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Not if he knows what is best for his longevity,” Darcy muttered. “However, he will make sure he places jibes when and where he is given opportunity to do so. Only those who are privy to the details of the things to which he is alluding will understand his full meaning.”

“I had thought I might be a parson at one point.” This was said in a rather loud voice

by Mr. Wickham.

“Oh, indeed! How delightful,” Mr. Collins said. “We positively must have a discussion about the profession. I find I am in want of someone with whom to converse about the holier things in life. Perhaps during one of the dances over a friendly game of cards – no wagers, of course. I do not gamble.”

Mr. Darcy chuckled. “I believe that Mr. Wickham will be repenting for that comment soon enough,” he said in a hushed tone.

Elizabeth had to smile at the thought of Mr. Collins droning on and on about his profession to a gentleman who only missed the money that a living as a clergyman would afford him. “Perhaps,” she whispered, “we could lock them in a room together if things become dire?”

Mr. Darcy’s chuckle grew louder.

“First, he was eager for the evening to begin, and now, he is laughing and enjoying himself at a ball.” Colonel Fitzwilliam slapped a hand against his chest as if overcome with surprise. “What has become of your brother, Georgie?”

Miss Darcy giggled. “He has fallen in love,” she replied in a whisper, causing Elizabeth’s cheeks to warm.

“I suppose there is no hope for him, then.” The smile the colonel wore spoke to how happy he was that his cousin was in love.

“I am quite surprised he has a hope of securing my sister,” Lydia inserted. “She did not even like him until recently.”

“So I have heard,” the colonel said. “I fear my cousin is more charming than I have

ever given him credit for being.”

“Actually, he is not,” Mr. Darcy said. “It was Mr. Bingley who rescued me from myself. If I had been left to my own devices, I would currently be a grouchy old fool, holed away in his study in London, having lost my dearest friend and the lady I love.”

What he said did not appear to be shocking to anyone in their group.

Elizabeth knew all about how Mr. Darcy had tried to dissuade Mr. Bingley from forming an attachment with Jane, and it seemed that, at least, a portion of the story about how things had resolved themselves during her stay at Netherfield, when Jane was ill, had been shared with everyone else in the group.

He motioned to an empty settee in the conversational grouping of chairs. “Shall we sit for a while?”

“I would like that.” Elizabeth took her place on the piece of furniture, and then, Mr. Darcy sat down next to her.

“Mr. Wickham has arrived.”

“And you are still smiling?” Colonel Fitzwilliam looked from Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth. “You are a greater magician than I had thought. How did you do it?”

“Do what?” Elizabeth asked.

“You said something, and he laughed when you entered the room.” The colonel’s brow was furrowed. “But you must have just seen Wickham before that.” He shook his head. “The two do not go together.” He blew out a breath.

“It is because he has the lady he loves on his arm,” Lydia answered before anyone

else could.

“Perhaps we can find one for you, so that you will not need to deepen that wrinkle between your eyes. A little crease looks distinguished and thoughtful, but if it is too deep, everyone will think you are a gentleman who paces his study over the smallest of concerns.”

Mr. Darcy chuckled once again. “Yes, Richard, perhaps we could find you a lady.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam scowled. “I do not need a wife. I have a profession.”

“Yes, and no man has ever had both a profession and a wife,” Mr. Darcy retorted.

“That is not what I mean,” the colonel grumbled.

Elizabeth sighed. They had left one tenuous situation in the entry hall only to enter another. If things continued as they were, tonight was going to be a most trying soiree.

“To answer your question, Colonel. I merely suggested that we lock Mr. Wickham and Mr. Collins in a room together if things became too difficult, and it instantly lifted Mr. Darcy’s mood.”

Mary gasped and covered her mouth to hide her laughter.

“Oh, may we?” Lydia cried. “I can watch for Mr. Collins from the window.” She moved to rise.

“No, we may not,” Elizabeth answered. “And there is no need to watch for Mr. Collins, for he has only just arrived – mere moments before Mr. Wickham.”

“Already?” Mary asked in shock. “How?”

“Apparently, he walked.” Elizabeth leaned forward. “And did not take care to avoid the puddles, for his boots were in rather poor condition upon arrival. In fact, he had just had them removed so that he could put on his shoes when Mr. Wickham and his friends entered.”

She glanced at Mr. Darcy and then turned her eyes toward the colonel. “Twice, during the short time when we were in the entry way with Mr. Wickham, he managed to say something designed to provoke your cousin. Thankfully, Mr. Collins only said one provocative thing.”

There truly was no way this ball was going to pass without a bit of trouble.

She could feel it. It was as destined to happen as the sun was to rise in the morning.

Perhaps the idea of locking Mr. Collins in a room with Mr. Wickham was not a bad one.

If only it would not draw too much attention to two men who seemed to crave everyone’s eyes and ears being turned their direction, it might be worth serious consideration.

“We must ignore them,” she suggested. “Both of them. As much as we are able. If neither has an audience, then, they will be deprived of that which they most wish to have.”

“That is not a thought without merit, but I am not sure it will bring the desired outcome.” The colonel drummed his fingers on his knees as his right foot tapped softly.

“Wickham will do what he must to gain attention. He always has since he was a boy. We will just have to endure the evening as best we can.”

“I would rather avoid both of them,” Mary said.

The colonel chuckled. “That would be ideal. Not possible, but ideal.”

One of Mary’s eyebrows arched. “You think it is impossible?”

“Without a doubt,” the colonel assured her.

Mary shrugged. “Perhaps you are correct, but then, again, perhaps you are not.”

The comment made Elizabeth press her lips together to keep from smiling too widely.

Mary rarely backed down from a challenge.

If any of her sisters were more stubborn than she herself was, it was her next youngest sister.

Not even Lydia could hold out as long as Mary could.

Indeed, it was likely Lydia who had helped her hone her tenacious temperament, for Lydia was constantly attempting to provoke her.

“If they were locked in a room –”

“No.” Elizabeth interrupted Lydia’s comment. “Forget that I ever said that.”

“But it would work to –”

“No,” Elizabeth repeated. “Do not cause a scene. Please.”

Lydia crossed her arms and huffed. “I do not want to dance with either of them.”

“Then, do not dance with them,” Mary said. “Feign a need to refresh yourself or fix a slipper or some such thing.”

Lydia gasped. “Pretend an untruth?”

“Do not look at me like that,” Mary replied. “It would not be the first time you have done so.”

“But it is the first time I have heard you suggest that she should,” Kitty inserted.

“In the face of desperate times, I believe a little pretense might not be so bad as it is at other times, and it will ensure that Mr. Collins will not wish to have you as his wife if he knows that you are given to being untruthful.”

“I still cannot believe you are suggesting such a thing,” Kitty said.

Mary just shrugged. “Mr. Collins annoys me. I am sure I will need to repent for my deeds and attitudes later, but at present, I do not feel convicted to do so.” She held Kitty’s gaze.

Again, Elizabeth felt herself sigh. Tonight was certainly going to be entertaining if it did not turn out to be disastrous. “Oh, dear,” she muttered to herself at that realization.

“Do not worry; all will be well,” Mr. Darcy said as he took her hand. “Shall we continue our walk? You have not yet seen all the decorations.”

“I suppose we should.”

“Richard will make sure no one gets locked in any rooms or prevaricates beyond sparing a gentleman a refused dance. Will you not?”

“Most certainly,” the colonel agreed.

“And Georgie,” Mr. Darcy continued, “you will attempt to make sure our cousin does not cause a scene?”

“I do not need a nursemaid,” Richard cried.

“I will do what I can,” Miss Darcy answered. “And I am not a nursemaid. I am your dearest cousin who wishes to see you enjoy the evening without being bothered by the likes of Mr. Wickham. They do not get along,” she explained to Kitty, Mary, and Lydia. “They never really have.”

“Indeed, we have not,” Richard agreed. He tipped his head toward the door. “Go ahead. Enjoy yourselves without fear. The four of us will not cause either of you any embarrassment unless it absolutely cannot be avoided.”

“That is not very reassuring,” Elizabeth said as she and Mr. Darcy left the group.

“I agree. It is not. However, it is the best that we can expect.”

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Several hours later, music swirled through the ballroom while couples wove their way through the steps of a dance.

From the edge of the room, Darcy watched his sister stand up with Elizabeth's sisters as he enjoyed a cup of flip.

Somehow, Wickham had managed to insert himself into his sister's group only moments before the dancing commenced.

Richard, with Elizabeth as his partner, had followed suit and now, the two of them – Richard and Wickham – were passing each other as they crossed the line from one side to the other.

It was not completed, however, without a pause and exchange in the middle of the pass.

“You do not have to watch them all night.” Bingley had come to stand next to Darcy.

Maybe not. But it certainly did feel as if he needed to watch Wickham any time that the blackguard came close to his sister.

“Hurst and I can take turns with you,” Bingley added.

Darcy glanced to his right. Mr. Hurst was standing next to Bingley.

Hurst's was a friendship that Darcy had never particularly sought.

Nor had he ever expected it to blossom on its own as it had.

There was very little that they had in common, except for Bingley, but then, not much else was needed because Bingley knew how to glue relationships together. Even odd ones.

“I say, it has been a good ball,” Bingley’s brother-in-law commented.

“Caroline seems happy and well on her way to being settled, and we have not lacked for entertainment. That Collins fellow seems to think all the ladies here are looking to marry him simply because he is your aunt’s parson.

He has even presented himself to Caroline as an option.

” He chuckled. “Can you imagine that union?”

Caroline a parson’s wife?

“No, I cannot,” Darcy replied. Most especially if that parson was Mr. Collins. “In fact, I am not sure I can, in good conscience, consider any lady who is here as a possible match for him.” Darcy shook his head at the thought.

“Nor can I,” Bingley agreed.

“Thankfully, he has avoided me most of the night,” Darcy said.

If only Elizabeth had been so fortunate, but sadly, she had been required to dance with Mr. Collins, and throughout the entire set, he had indirectly, but most clearly, lectured her on the evil of coming between a man and woman who were meant to be together.

However, it seemed that his instruction only applied to supposed betrothals and not ladies and gents who were well nigh to being betrothed in reality.

For if it had applied to real couples and not those dreamt about by Darcy's aunt, Mr. Collins would not have said a disapproving word to Elizabeth.

"I heard he caused you a bit of trouble there a few days back," Hurst said.

Darcy looked at Bingley, who just shrugged and smiled. He was guilty of loose lips was what that gesture meant. However, the fact did not bother Darcy overly much, since it was likely best that Hurst knew precisely how trying tonight was going to be.

"It is a pity that Longbourn must have such an heir," Hurst continued.

"No truer words have been spoken," Darcy agreed.

"For my part, I am hoping that my aunt will be so utterly displeased about my marrying someone other than her daughter that she will ban me from visiting Rosings and, therefore, limit my chances of ever having to see the man." He took a sip of his beverage.

"To that point, you should secure Miss Elizabeth's hand soon," Hurst advised.

"Once the betrothal is officially set, your position will be firmer. That should keep anyone, including your aunt, from attempting anything too nefarious to prevent a betrothal from being entered into." He chuckled softly.

"After all, I would hate to see Bingley's and my work be for naught. "

"Your work will not be for naught no matter what trouble arises between now and when I am betrothed." Maybe tomorrow would be a good day to change his status

with Elizabeth. First, he had to survive tonight.

A low growl bubbled up as he saw Wickham take Georgiana's hand in the dance and whisper something to her. As it happened, he was not the only one to see the exchange, for Richard immediately broke formation and yanked the fellow away from Georgie almost before he was done whispering.

"She is not out," followed by, "My apologies, ladies," could be heard above the music. And with that, Richard escorted Wickham from the dance floor and toward the hall.

Bingley darted across the room in pursuit, while Darcy, with some effort, held his ground. Richard and Bingley could deal with whatever Wickham attempted. He needed to be here for his sister's sake. Of course, he was not alone in seeing to her either. She was well surrounded by guardians.

His eyes sought out one of those protectors – Elizabeth. She smiled at him reassuringly before engaging in conversation with Wickham's former dance partner and found her way back into the dance with the rest of the ladies in her group as the poor girl's partner for the remainder of the set.

While Elizabeth looked all that was calm, her new partner looked a bit worse for what she had just experienced, for as the dance progressed, her head turned several times toward the doorway through which Richard and Wickham had departed.

Another low growl rumbled in Darcy's chest. That scoundrel could not even attend a soiree without leaving some gentle heart untouched!

"If I had my time back," he muttered. If he had not hired Mrs. Younge. If he had refused to allow Georgiana to go to Ramsgate ahead of him. Then all of this would not be happening.

“We all think that at one time or another,” Hurst said.

“I suppose we do,” Darcy agreed.

“And I dare say the older we get,” Hurst continued, “the more those words ring true. So, if you will excuse me, I think I am going to go find my wife and talk her into dancing a second set with me so that I will not have to think about missing the opportunity.”

He turned away and then, turned back. “It is my opinion that tonight would be an excellent time to make an offer.” He held Darcy’s gaze for a moment before smiling.

“Indeed, I am hopeful another offer will be made before the music ends for the night.” And then, he was on his way around the edge of the room to where his wife stood with her sister and Mr. Warren.

Tonight? Make his offer tonight? It was not an unworthy idea.

Darcy would give it some thought. It sure would help his heart rest a great deal easier if he knew that Elizabeth was promised to be his.

But a rushed proposal? That did not seem to be the best way to do things.

No, tonight would not do. Tomorrow would be soon enough to have things settled.

The music for the current set of dances drew to a close, and Darcy breathed a sigh of relief.

Georgiana was to dance the next set with him, and then, he had heard that she and Elizabeth’s sisters were going to retire to her room to look at a book of fashion for a while before returning, so that she could dance the final set with Richard.

That is, she would dance with him if he returned.

“Ah, the second most beautiful lady at the ball,” Darcy said to his sister as she approached him.

Georgiana giggled. “Thank you. I am very happy to be second to Miss Elizabeth.” She put her hand in his. “It was Miss Elizabeth to whom you were comparing me, was it not?”

“There is no one else who could outshine you, my dear,” Darcy assured his sister, causing her to sigh.

“I have missed my doting brother,” she said with a smile.

“And I have missed your ready smile.” He tipped his head and looked at her closely. She seemed completely unaffected by whatever had transpired on the dance floor. “Are you well?”

“Surprisingly, yes. I truly cannot believe how much less trying it was to be near him than I had imagined it would be.” She squeezed her brother’s arm tightly. “Thank you for saving me from myself.”

“Yourself?” he repeated in surprise as his brow furrowed. He had saved her from the dastardly plans of a rogue, from a future of misery. Not herself.

She nodded. “It is quite obvious to me now that I was merely infatuated with the idea of being loved, for how could my heart so easily dance with him – though he was not my partner – if I had truly loved him?”

When stated in such a way, Darcy could understand why she thanked him for saving her from herself. Apparently, his little sister had learned much from her entanglement

with Wickham, and her words spoke to her being well-recovered from the event. But was she?

As they were waiting to begin the next set, Darcy led her along the edge of the room on the end where there were few people to hear them converse. “Are you truly well?”

“I am,” she assured him. “I will not lie and say that there was no flutter or pinch of my heart. It is never easy to come second to another lady or my own dowry. The exception to that, of course, is to be found second in beauty by my brother, for he has lost his heart to a lovely lady, whom I will greet with open arms and all my love on the day she becomes my sister.”

She leaned a bit closer to him. “When will you ask her? I know your betrothal is a foregone conclusion, but I simply cannot wait to be able to say that Miss Elizabeth is my future sister.”

“I was thinking that I would ask her tomorrow. I would wait longer, but her cousin...” He let his words trail off and ended the thought with a shake of his head.

“He is quite unique, is he not?”

“That is one way to describe him,” Darcy agreed.

“A polite way,” Georgiana whispered and then laughed softly along with him.

His eyes roamed the room. Couples were beginning to take the floor. Captain Denny had secured Elizabeth for this dance, and Darcy wanted to be in that group.

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Any fellow who was any sort of friend of Wickham was to be watched carefully. Darcy knew how easily a gentleman of reasonable character and with a love for a bit of frivolity could get pulled along by Wickham's good humor and charming tongue.

It would not be the first time he had seen such a thing happen. Wickham drew others to him as easily as the manure pile outside Pemberley's stables drew flies, and his fragrant stench only appeared when one got close enough to see him without his charming mask in place.

How Darcy wished his father would have been able to see Wickham as he truly was. But he had not. Pemberley's coffers were too precious to Wickham for him to let his facade crack for even a moment in the presence of Darcy's father.

If the man had been more intelligent than he was – and he was not without capabilities, especially when it came to scheming – Wickham would not have let Darcy see behind the mask either.

For it was the candidness of Wickham in Darcy's presence that had revealed to him all he needed to know to be happy to give the man money instead of a living.

That knowledge of the man's deplorable, yet hidden, character had also been the fortitude he needed to refuse him anything further when he returned and tried to claim that which he had previously refused.

Georgiana had gotten a peek at Wickham's true nature when Darcy had arrived in Ramsgate and interfered with the cad's plans to secure Georgiana's dowry over an anvil in Gretna Green.

“Are you truly well?” he asked again as they began to move toward the group of dancers with Elizabeth in it.

“I am.” She slid her hand down his arm to his hand. “Please try to think about Miss Elizabeth and not me. I am and will be well. I have friends to help me, you know.”

“And I am happy for it.” Sending for her to join him at Netherfield had been an excellent decision. The younger Bennet sisters seemed very solicitous of her well-being.

“And if needed,” Georgiana said lightly, “I am sure I could call on a particular parson to champion my cause.”

When Darcy looked at her in surprise, her lips were pressed together firmly while amusement sparkled in her eyes. He chuckled at her obvious teasing. “I would rather that you find someone else to call on if needed.”

Then, he turned to the gentleman next to him. “Denny, is it?”

“It is.”

“Darcy,” Darcy said by way of introduction. Not that he had not met the man before.

“Yes, yes, I remember.”

“How long have you and Wickham been friends?” Darcy asked.

“Not as long as you have been his acquaintance.”

“No, I would expect not. His father was my father’s steward and friend, and Wickham was my father’s godson.”

The man next to him blinked as if he had not expected Darcy to admit to the relationship. Darcy motioned to his sister. "This is my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy. She is not yet out, so if you would, please keep any conversation between you during the dance to things of a mundane nature."

Again, the man blinked as if startled. "Of course."

Darcy straightened his jacket. "I assume whatever Wickham said to her was a bit too familiar." He smiled at Denny. "And please do take care of your partner for me. I would hate to see any ill befall her, as she is quite special to me."

Elizabeth's head dipped and her cheeks took on a pleasant rosy hue.

"Of course," Denny repeated. Then, he bowed to Georgiana and offered a very proper greeting. "I have heard stories," he whispered to Darcy.

"I have no doubt that you have," Darcy replied. "Whether those stories can be trusted is the real question."

"Yes... well..." the man stammered as the music started. "What I have heard and what I have observed tonight leave me in a quandary about that, for they are very differing accounts."

Darcy took his sister's hand as they turned to go down the line. "As my cousin, the colonel, always says, the enemy may not always appear to be who you think he is."

"Our cousin is very wise, is he not?" Georgiana said.

"It is a lesson hard learned," he replied.

"For us all," his sister agreed. "I will be well, dear brother. Please do not drag any

other gentlemen from the room during this dance.”

“I will not, unless it becomes necessary.”

She parted from him to continue the dance but not without a whispered thank you.

How was it that his little sister was becoming such a confident lady?

Her heart had been trampled, and yet, she stood tall with her chin lifted in a setting where the man who had done the trampling was present.

He had seen her take note of Wickham and Richard returning to the ballroom.

It was impressive, and it did his heart a world of good to see her spirit returning to what it had been before.

Her companion had something to do with that, and likely Richard’s mother had also had a hand in it.

She was surrounded by ladies of worth, and soon, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, if things went as expected, she would be well on her way to having a sister to add to her intimate circle of ladies to guide her.

As he turned as required by the dance, Darcy’s eyes fell on Wickham. The man was watching him and, though he smiled as he spoke to those around him, his observation of Darcy was not done with any sort of admiration. Indeed, it was done much like Darcy had been doing during the previous set.

Darcy would have to search out his cousin as soon as this set was done to discover what trouble could be expected. He blew out a breath. The end of this ball and tomorrow could not come soon enough.

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Elizabeth counted the chimes from the clock in the entrance hall as it marked the hour.

Midnight.

She breathed a sigh of relief. They would be going home soon. In fact, several neighbours had already started on their way to their houses.

There was only one set of dances left, and they would begin soon.

“Are you engaged for this set?”

Elizabeth turned from her observation of the night sky through the window at the far end of Netherfield’s ballroom, to find Mr. Wickham looking hopefully expectant of a favorable reply.

Until now, she had successfully managed to avoid him.

It had taken some effort to do, but alas, her distraction in counting down the hour and the weariness of her feet and body had been her undoing.

“I am not, but I had hoped to watch the last rounds of cards be played.”

And dancing with him was not an activity which held any hope of swaying her from doing as she wished.

“A beautiful lady such as yourself should not sit out a dance. Do you often find

yourself without a partner? For I simply cannot imagine that being true.” He stepped closer to her, as if he were a familiar acquaintance rather than what he was – a person of only new and short association.

Elizabeth wanted to take a step away from him, but she refrained from showing her dislike of the man by holding her ground. “On occasion, we all find ourselves without partners.”

“Will you be mine for the final set of the night?”

“I would prefer not to be.” She smiled as she said it so that it would not sound as harsh as it could. “Do not think that my last set has not been claimed because I was hoping for someone to ask me. I assure you that I grow weary of dancing.”

“Are you certain that you will not be prevailed upon to change your mind?” One eyebrow arched over what she assumed he thought was a teasing and charming expression. And perhaps it was, if one did not know Mr. Wickham’s true character.

“I am afraid that I am most resolved on this matter,” she replied.

His eyes swept her from head to toe and back.

“Such a pity. I had hoped to discover what sort of lady finally snared Old Dour and Dutiful Darcy.” He extended his arm to her.

“Will you at least allow me the pleasure of escorting you to the card room? It is a small consolation for the disappointment of not being allowed the privilege of dancing with you.”

With a silent sigh, Elizabeth rested her hand lightly on his arm.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “How did you do it? How did you snare my old friend? I assure you that there will be many a lady who will want to know your secret so that they can be as successful as you have been.”

Old friend, indeed! Former friend was more like it, and that, coupled with the insinuation that she had somehow schemed her way into Mr. Darcy’s heart, set her teeth on edge.

However, for the sake of not causing a scene in the final moments of an otherwise enjoyable evening, she swallowed her annoyance and answered as lightly as she could.

“I believe you must ask Mr. Darcy, for I am certain I cannot tell you what was in his mind or how his heart became engaged.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you used no allurements?” His tone was one of utter disbelief. “There was no scheming to sit near him? No fluttering of lashes? No ducking your head demurely and peeking up at him?”

The comment and image it conjured drew a completely natural laugh from Elizabeth. Her, trying to behave like Lydia to capture Mr. Darcy’s attention? It was ridiculous, and anyone who knew her knew that such behaviour was as far from her character as being serious and a lover of books was to Lydia.

“Oh, dear, no!” she cried. “I am not a flirt, Mr. Wickham, and it never even entered my mind to capture Mr. Darcy. Indeed, I was surprised by his petition to call on me.”

“Is that so?”

“Upon my word, it is.”

“Huh.” He sounded absolutely befuddled. “Well...” He seemed almost lost for words. “Then, I suppose that is where the others have gone wrong. They have appeared eager to gain Old Dour and Dutiful’s attention. Perhaps they should have ignored him?”

“Again, Mr. Wickham, I do not know the answer to that. You will have to ask Mr. Darcy, and I would appreciate it very much if you would refrain from your familiar and rather unbecoming name for him while you are talking to me.”

“My apologies. I meant no disrespect,” he assured her.

“Did you not?” She highly doubted that.

“We are, as you have likely noticed, not the closest of friends,” he said, “but that is a recent thing due in part to his father favouring me enough to include me in his will.”

“So I have heard.” They had reached the card room three exchanges ago, and though she no longer held his arm, she had not stepped away from him since it seemed their conversation was not at an end.

“Has he told you all?” The pleasantness of Mr. Wickham’s tone faltered.

Elizabeth smiled and allowed her lashes to flutter. “I would need to know what you meant by all in order to answer that question, would I not?”

His countenance fell from lively to irritated. “And that is not something,” he said, “which I can share with you, so your tactics to extort secrets from me will not work.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I am not attempting to extort secrets. I am being logical and, in truth, refraining from trying to discover things I do not know. You see, Mr. Wickham, if I say that Mr. Darcy has told me all, meaning all that you know of the relationship between you and his family, but then, you divulge some bit of a story

that I have not heard and am not supposed to know, what will be the result of that? I may, in turn, ask about the veracity of your comments, and how will Mr. Darcy or his cousin respond? Would that put me in a precarious position? Or you? Perhaps both.”

His lips tipped into a crooked and somewhat calculating smile.

“Ah. I see what it is that snared Old... Darcy,” he corrected when her left eyebrow arched.

“The man has always been a fool for a pretty lady with a clever mind. Not that you find many of those. Most ladies hide their intellect so as to not be labelled a bluestocking.”

“I am not most ladies, Mr. Wickham. I have never been, and I most certainly never shall be. Indeed, for me, the title of bluestocking has always been something for which to strive, not something to shun. It is a fact that has driven my mother to distraction and pleased my father quite well. Now, if you will excuse me, I would like to see how my sisters are getting on with their game.” She dipped a curtsy and moved to leave him. However, his hand stayed her.

“Am I to gather then that you trust him?” The question was posed in such a serious fashion that it caught Elizabeth off guard and caused her to blink.

“Do you mean Mr. Darcy?” she asked to clarify about whom Mr. Wickham was speaking.

He gave one nod.

“Then, yes, I do,” she answered.

Mr. Wickham held her gaze. “We all have our secrets. It would do you well to

remember that.” And with those final words, he took his leave of her.

A prickle of something disconcerting raced up her arm from where his hand had held it, and she gave it a little shake to get rid of the feeling.

Mr. Darcy was honourable. He was not hiding secrets from her as Mr. Wickham implied.

It was a ploy on Mr. Wickham's part, was it not? Something merely said to cast doubt and place a wedge between her and Mr. Darcy? She blew out a breath. That is all it was. A desperate and unhappy man's way to cause harm to the one he considered his oppressor.

“Are you... well?” Mary asked cautiously when Elizabeth approached the table where Mary, Kitty, Lydia, and Georgiana were playing Lottery Tickets. A sizeable stack of sweetmeat biscuits stood beside Mary's left hand.

“Have you won all these?” Elizabeth plucked a biscuit off the top of Mary's pile. Her sister gasped and covered her pile with her hand that was not holding her cards.

“I have, and I will thank you not to eat my winnings.” She shook her head and huffed as if completely displeased.

“However, since you have had to spend time with,” she leaned forward and whispered, “the cad,” then she sat back up, “I suppose I can part with one piece of gold to calm your nerves.” She chuckled.

Elizabeth looked around the group at the table. Each of them looked excessively amused. “The cad?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Mr. W,” Lydia hissed in answer. “It is the name we have given him. A code, if you

will.” She looked excessively pleased with herself. “So... are you well?” Her gaze flicked from Elizabeth to Mary and back. “Not that I know exactly why it was asked, but you have not answered.”

Elizabeth nodded and sat down. “I am tired from dancing, but otherwise I believe I am well.”

“That is good, is it not, Mary?” Lydia asked.

“Quite.”

“But...” Lydia prompted.

Mary sighed. “But nothing.”

“Why did you ask her if she was well? One does not just ask randomly about the state of another’s wellbeing. There must have been something to provoke it.” Lydia glared at Mary.

“Have you been arguing all night? Or have you saved these sorts of exchanges for when I am present?” Elizabeth asked.

“They have argued a few times, but not as much as you might expect,” Kitty answered.

“Is arguing something that happens frequently?” Georgiana asked.

“For me and Mary? Yes,” Lydia answered. “But not without reason. We happen to view the world differently, and we each believe our way of viewing it to be the best.”

That was an excessively accurate way of summarizing the conflict that lay between

Lydia and Mary, but it surprised Elizabeth that it had been Lydia who had stated it.

“Now,” Lydia continued, “will you please tell me why you asked Elizabeth if she was well?”

“I would like to know the answer to that myself,” Elizabeth admitted.

“Did you not see her expression when the cad said whatever and took his leave of her?” Mary asked incredulously.

“I was not watching her talk to him,” Lydia admitted. “I saw them enter.” She smiled at someone behind Elizabeth before continuing. “But he is not a gentleman with whom I care to flirt or dance, so I returned to the game.”

A hand rested on Elizabeth’s shoulder, alerting her to Mr. Darcy’s presence a moment before he spoke. “Are you well?”

“That seems to be the question of the hour,” Georgiana answered.

“I saw you with Wickham and –” he stopped short of finishing his thought and looked at his sister. “Was someone else concerned about Miss Elizabeth?” Apparently, his sister’s reply had finally registered. “Should I find Richard?”

“No! I am well, truly.” Elizabeth drew a breath. “What Mary saw in my expression as Mr. Wickham and I parted ways was nothing more than an attempt to reason out what his words meant.”

“That will most certainly need some explanation, but wait a moment before you begin.” Mr. Darcy stepped away from their table long enough to procure a chair. Then, he sat down next to her. “What did he say?”

“He asked me if I trusted you, and I, of course, said yes. But then, he presented me with what seemed to be a cryptic message by saying that everyone has secrets and I would do well to remember that.” Elizabeth lifted a shoulder and let it fall.

“It was the gravity of his expression and tone which startled me, I think.”

“A bit of well-played artifice,” Mary muttered.

“Oh, indeed!” Elizabeth agreed. “And I will scold myself thoroughly later for even giving it a moment’s pause.”

Mary shook her head. “I think the pause was warranted.”

“You do?” Darcy asked.

“I do.” Mary discarded the cards which were in her hand and picked up a biscuit.

“If there is no reason to distrust Mr. Darcy – and we all agree that there is not – then, my guess is that he is signalling hoped-for trouble – not that I expect he realizes he is doing so. He seems a trifle impulsive to me. Calculatingly so, but still impulsive. As if his ideas are planned but not fully.” She bit into her biscuit.

“That is just my take on him from a bit of observation, so it might be hastily done and far from true.”

“It is a worthy observation,” Darcy said. “And astutely made.”

“I would not say it was astute, for I was aided by stories I have heard about him,” Mary refuted. “It was not terribly difficult to deduce from there.”

“If that is how you wish to think about it.” There was a hint of amusement in Mr.

Darcy's tone. "I will not push you to accept praise that you do not wish to acknowledge. I understand the feeling. As does my sister."

"I most certainly do understand," Georgiana agreed.

"I would not deflect praise," Lydia inserted. "Which just proves once again how different Mary and I are."

Mr. Darcy gave Elizabeth a questioning look.

"That is part of why she and Mary argue," Elizabeth whispered.

"Ah," was his only reply. "Will you walk with me before you have to leave?"

Oh, how she wanted to, but... "I told Mr. Wickham that I was too tired to dance and would not like to be thought of as a liar."

"I will not ask you to dance," he said as he stood.

"Please?" He held out his hand. The look in his eyes was not demanding at all, and yet, from it, she knew that he would be sorely disappointed if she were to refuse him.

Therefore, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to draw her to her feet.

"We will find a quiet corner in the drawing room," he whispered as she tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. "You may rest there, and no one will be able to question your integrity."

"My feet will be forever grateful, sir."

"Just your feet?" His tone was teasing.

She shook her head in reply. “The rest of me will be equally as thankful. However, my feet will sigh with delight the most.”

And with a shared laugh, they went in search of that quiet corner in the drawing room.

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The next afternoon, Darcy entered Mr. Bennet's study and took a seat in front of the man's desk.

Today, he would make good on the promise he had made to himself last night to secure his happy future with Elizabeth before anything could separate him from it.

Hurst was right. It needed to be done sooner rather than later.

He was certain his mind would not rest easy until Elizabeth was officially Mrs. Darcy, but to have a formal agreement with her would lessen his fretting over what Wickham or Mr. Collins or someone else would do.

He exchanged pleasantries with Elizabeth's father as he made himself comfortable.

"Are you here for a discussion about estate matters, or have you had enough of courting my daughter?" Mr. Bennet's lips were tipped into an amused smirk.

"I would not mind having a debate about some estate related item," Darcy replied.

"However, that is not my reason for being in here rather than in the drawing room with Miss Elizabeth. And no, I am not done with courting your daughter. In fact, I find that I would like to court her for the rest of my life as my wife."

Mr. Bennet chuckled. "That sounds very pretty, which surprises me that it is you and not Mr. Bingley who is sitting here saying it." He sighed. "But then, love has a peculiar effect on a man when it latches onto him."

Darcy smiled and shook his head at just how turned around love had caused him to be. He had found himself willing to do and say things that he would have scoffed at before meeting and falling in love with Elizabeth.

“I will not argue with you on that,” he said, “but I cannot take credit for the sentiment. My uncle has always stated that he would court my aunt forever, for his love would never lessen and only grow deeper with time.” He lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“It seemed ridiculous to me as a young man, and I suppose if I were to analyze it logically now, it still would. However, I believe I understand what he meant, for how does one put what one feels about the lady, whom one loves above anything else, into words?”

“I would suggest poetry.” Mr. Bennet tapped a drawer on his desk. “And then keep it under lock and key unless, of course, you prove to be as good as Byron or Shakespeare. Then you might want to publish it and earn a few pence.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed. Did Mr. Bennet write poetry? “Do you keep your poetry in a locked drawer?” he asked.

He could not picture the man sitting in front of him as the sort of gentleman who wrote flowery things about his wife.

But then, his uncle did not appear, upon first glance, to be the type of fellow to openly declare his love for his wife either.

Be that as it may, upon being counted among Lord Matlock’s acquaintances for any length of time would prove to a person just how wrong that first impression was.

Again, Mr. Bennet chuckled. “I find I have no answer to that question. At least not

one I wish to give,” he admitted. “So, tell me. What can I do for you today? I already gave you permission to marry Elizabeth when you petitioned me little more than a week ago.”

Darcy drew a deep breath. “I know, and I am still grateful for that. I...um...” He shrugged with both shoulders this time instead of just one. Why was he here? “I...um...” He shook his head. Turned around and at sixes and sevens was his constant state lately.

“I do not know why I need to tell you of my decision before I officially present my offer to your daughter, for I fear neither your rejection nor hers. Therefore, I am not here because I wish to have you support my suit to her on my behalf.” He blew out a breath.

How did he explain this? “I suppose I am here for what is likely a selfish reason, because I value your good opinion, and I believe that is why I must tell you that I intend to secure your daughter’s hand today. ”

Once again, he could not help shaking his head at his mind’s befuddled state.

At any other time in his life, he had known precisely why he wished for an interview with a gentleman, and now look at him!

Sitting here attempting to sort out why his heart and feet had directed him to Mr. Bennet’s study.

“I am also likely here because I know how close your relationship is with Miss Elizabeth, and having a sister who has been left to my care and who means the world to me, I have some knowledge about what exactly I am asking of you when I leave Hertfordshire with Miss Elizabeth as my wife.”

Mr. Bennet's replying nod and smile spoke of his knowing the struggle to which Darcy referred. "I appreciate your concern for me," he said. "Parting with any of my daughters will be difficult. But I know that my Lizzy's departure will be the hardest."

There was one more reason which had likely been part of his purpose for meeting with Elizabeth's father before seeking her out.

"I suppose also," Darcy said, "that I wanted to reassure you that I will care for your daughter as well as the good Lord and my finances allow. To that end, I have sent instructions just today to my solicitor to draw up the papers I will need. I expect they will be here before the close of the month for your approval. But beyond loving her until the day I die and seeing to her care both before and after my death..."

He paused to swallow and hoped that he could present this next part clearly and without offending.

"I would like to offer my protection to your wife and remaining daughters should anything happen to you – whether that is in a timely fashion or an untimely one, such as was the case with my own father. I know that when I marry, I will not just be marrying your daughter. I will be joining my family to yours."

He sighed heavily. "Even if that means being related to Mr. Collins." He could not keep the grimace from his face at the thought. "I am not without my share of trying relations, but your cousin does excel at being..."

"Obnoxious," Mr. Bennet said, completing Darcy's statement.

"That would be a fitting word," Darcy agreed.

Mr. Bennet held Darcy's gaze. "I do have things in place to care for my wife and any unwed daughters upon my demise." His tone was a trifle cool.

“I did not mean to suggest that you did not, sir.” Darcy rubbed his hands in circles on his knees. He had known this part of what he wanted to stress to Mr. Bennet when it came to marriage articles held the potential to be received poorly.

“It is just that last night,” he continued, “when I should have been sleeping, I was pondering the things that Mr. Collins said at Mrs. Philips’s house last week, and I wanted to lend my support to whatever you have in place, for I do not trust him.”

Mr. Bennet’s head bobbed up and down slowly, and he wore a pensive expression that pursed his lips. “That makes two of us. His father was not known to be a man of his word unless it benefited him to be so. I rather think the son takes after the father in this case.”

He propped his elbows on his desk, rested his chin on his clasped hands, and gave a more assured nod of his head that ended a moment of silence.

“I will gladly accept your offer of assistance in my place for my wife and daughters when I can no longer give it. My wife’s brothers will, of course, also be available to assist, but I am no fool.

I know that your connections and wealth surpass theirs.

” His lips tipped up on one side into a crooked smile.

“That being said, I have one condition that I would like to make part of this agreement.”

“Of course,” Darcy said.

“There is a locked drawer on my right.” He once again tapped the same drawer he had tapped earlier when suggesting Darcy put his feelings into poetry.

“I will make note in my papers that you are to be the only one who opens it and removes its contents. Whether you consign what you find there to the flames or give it to the person who inspired it, I will leave to you.”

Darcy felt the weight of the honour conferred on him. “You would allow me to read what you have written?”

“If, indeed, I have written anything.” Mr. Bennet’s eyes danced with merriment. “And if I have, I figure I will be far too dead to be mortified should you laugh.”

Darcy chuckled at that. “I suppose that is true.”

“I also know you will not publish it or share it beyond your wife and mine.” Mr. Bennet pushed up from his chair.

“That is as much morbid talk as I can tolerate, so to change the subject to more hopeful things, shall I announce to one and all that you would like a private interview with Lizzy, or do you wish to be less conspicuous?”

“The latter.” Darcy answered quickly, causing Mr. Bennet to laugh. “I am not dead enough yet to not be mortified,” he added, which only caused his future father-in-law to laugh even harder.

Mr. Bennet opened the door to the study. “I shall see what I can do to assist you in finding a quiet moment if one is not easily found.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now, do you think you can get Mr. Bingley to come to the point as quickly as you have? It would do my heart a great deal of good to know that two of my daughters are settled and out of the reach of a certain parson.”

“You have only to say the word, sir, and I will never approve a petition from him,” Darcy whispered. “Actually, no, you do not need to say anything. He shall never gain approval from me. Of course, this is only if something were to happen to you.”

“As frequently as you have said that,” Mr. Bennet said, “I begin to wonder if I should be worried that you have a plan.”

“A plan? To do you harm?” Darcy could not contain his incredulity at the suggestion.

“Oh, do not fear, Mr. Darcy, I know you have no motive to wish me gone. I was merely making a macabre topic into a jest. It is a fault I own that talking about my demise makes me uneasy, and to relieve the discomfort, I tend to turn to teasing.”

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“That is understandable,” Darcy assured him. “I, myself, do not find it a topic about which I wish to think too often, but when I do, my thoughts often turn to those left behind.”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “The same is true for me, as well, and then, I wish I had more to leave them.”

“Even my father thought that.” Darcy remembered how his father had presented his illness to him all those years ago. It was one of only two times when he had ever seen such desperation in his father’s expression. The other time had been when his mother had died.

“As I have pondered my father’s words to me about how much more he wished to have been able to do,” he said to Mr. Bennet, “I have come to understand that it was not earthly possessions that he feared he had not given me. I believe it was the shortened number of years of being my father and sharing his love with me and my future family which troubled him the most.” Darcy drew and released a breath.

“It was just that he saw wealth as being how he could leave his love with me. I cannot speak for all of your daughters, sir, but from what Miss Elizabeth has said, I know that she has not lacked being loved.”

Mr. Bennet stood in front of the drawing room door, blocking their entrance and the door from being opened.

“Your poetry will be far better than anything I may or may not have written,” he muttered.

“If you continue with your sentimental bent, Mr. Darcy, I shall find myself searching for my handkerchief and pretending that a bit of dust caused me an issue. And then, some poor maid will have to reclean what she has already cleaned should my wife hear my excuse.” He smiled.

“But I greatly appreciate your words. They are a balm to this father’s soul.

” He put a hand on the door handle but did not open it until he had said one thing further.

“Remember to be as you are now when you are a father.”

“I will do my best, sir,” he promised as the door was opened.

“Shall we leave the room, or would you like to take Elizabeth for a walk?” Mrs. Bennet asked on the heels of her welcome to Darcy.

“Perhaps a walk would be best,” he answered. This was not how things were supposed to go, but then, it might be best if he completed the most important task first, no matter how much attention it drew to him.

“Do you need a chaperone?” Richard’s tone was teasing.

“That is up to her father.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “It might not be a bad thing to have the colonel and Mary accompany you.” He winked surreptitiously at Darcy as Miss Mary gasped and Richard’s eyes narrowed. “However, it is not necessary.”

“Perhaps Jane and Mr. Bingley could walk with Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth?” Mrs. Bennet suggested.

Darcy would wager that the lady was hoping that in so arranging things there would be two betrothals to announce and not just one.

The thought made him smile despite his discomfort.

“I find no reason to forego the suggestion if it is acceptable to my friend and your daughters,” he replied, earning him a broad smile from Elizabeth’s mother.

“Jane, go with Lizzy and get your things,” Mrs. Bennet instructed.

Apparently, neither Bingley nor Miss Bennet needed to be consulted on the issue.

Darcy caught Richard’s eyes and tipped his head toward Georgiana.

Richard nodded. It was not as if Darcy truly needed to ask if he could leave Georgiana’s care to his cousin, but she was his sister and that made it seem as if he did.

“We will have tea when you return.” Mrs. Bennet’s delight coloured her tone.

“It is a cool day. I am certain you will want a warm cup of tea to chase away the chill when you return, for the sun will not stay as high as it is for much longer. Indeed, the darkness settles much faster these days, but so it must, if we wish to enjoy Christmas as we do. All the festivities are so much more enjoyable when lit by a fire and candles, are they not?”

“I had not thought about it, but it seems so,” Darcy answered.

“But weddings are better in the spring,” she added softly.

“I will remember that,” he assured her.

“It should not be done,” Mr. Collins had finally lost the battle he had been obviously waging since Darcy’s arrival in the room. Not even that one finger pressed to his lips could keep his thoughts contained.

“Not have a wedding? How absurd,” Miss Mary said and then looked at her father with wide eyes that said she had not intended for her comments to be anything more than a thought.

“I believe you have the right of it,” her father replied with a smile. “Mr. Collins, we have spoken about this. Your opinion about how things should be is neither correct nor welcome.”

The man lifted his chin and one eyebrow, but he said nothing. Instead, that one finger was once again pressing on his lips. However, it was still not a strong enough defense. “My patroness...” He pressed that finger against his lips again as he shook his head.

“My aunt will learn to live with disappointment, and if my cousin has been led to believe her mother’s lies, then, unfortunately, she will suffer as well.

But it cannot and will not be helped by me,” Darcy assured him.

“I am and always have been free to choose my own wife, and I choose Miss Elizabeth if she will have me.”

“If?” Lydia said with a snort of laughter.

“Yes, if. I will not presume to know her reply,” Darcy said. “However, I do hope I know what it will be,” he added with a smile for Lydia that caused her to giggle.

“I am certain you will not be disappointed,” Elizabeth said from behind Darcy.

“Did you hear me?” he asked her.

“I did, and I must say I am happy to be your choice, but, perhaps, we could take a walk anyway and you can explain how you came to your decision and whatever else that needs to be said can be said privately.” Her cheeks were quite flushed.

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “I do think that is best.” He gave Darcy’s shoulder a pat before leaving him at the doorway with Elizabeth and going to take the seat that Bingley had vacated. “You are welcome to double our joy, Mr. Bingley,” he said in a whisper that was intended to be heard by all.

“Yes... Well...” Bingley muttered. “Darcy and I had discussed that on our drive from Netherfield.”

“And you did not tell me?” Mr. Bennet directed this question to Darcy.

“It was not mine to tell,” Darcy replied.

“No, I suppose it was not, but still...” He let the thought fade into the room without being uttered. Instead, he smiled and winked as he said, “Be off with you and do what must be done.”

Darcy gave a nod, and taking Elizabeth’s hand, led her to Longbourn’s door, which Mr. Hill opened just as a carriage could be seen entering the driveway.

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The carriage that Elizabeth had seen upon exiting the house with Mr. Darcy fairly flew up the driveway. Who drove their carriage in such a fashion on a private lane? She was certain she had never seen such a thing before.

“Are you expecting visitors?” Mr. Darcy asked her as they headed toward the garden.

“I was not told of any, and my mother is not one to keep that sort of news to herself.” She looked over her shoulder at the carriage, which had now come to a stop in front of Longbourn. “It looks to be a rather expensive equipage.”

At this, Darcy turned toward the front of the house, and Elizabeth saw his eyes close and his jaw clench.

“Do you know who it is?”

He nodded and blew out a breath. “Has your cousin sent any letters to his patroness?”

Elizabeth’s eyes grew wide as she looked between Darcy and the carriage, where steps were being hastily put in place. “Is that your aunt’s carriage?”

Again, he nodded. “Did you see any letters being posted?”

She shook her head. “But it may have been done when I was not around to notice it.” She pressed her hand more firmly against Darcy’s arm. “We will weather this.”

He smiled when he looked at her, but his eyes still held worry. “Say you will marry me.” There was a pleading tone to his voice. “Before you meet my aunt, say you will

marry me.”

“Do you think that I will be put off by an unreasonable relation?” She had not thought he had so little faith in her resolve to be his wife. And did he not already know that she was capable of tolerating relations of the annoying sort? Not even after meeting Mr. Collins?

“No, no, that is not it,” he assured her.

“I just need things settled in a rather permanent fashion before I confront her. I know this is not how you deserve to be asked, nor is it the best place to come to an understanding, but...” He blew out another breath and looked excessively troubled.

“She will attempt to enforce that fictitious betrothal between my cousin Anne and me. She is a trying and demanding woman of little sense.”

Elizabeth smiled softly at him, attempting with the gesture to calm his obvious anxiety.

“Yes, I will marry you. I would like nothing better. You may think of this as my formal promise.” She motioned to Jane and Bingley who were just at the edge of the garden, waiting to see what would become of the carriage.

Jane, with Bingley close behind her, immediately came to join Elizabeth.

“That carriage belongs to Mr. Darcy’s aunt, and I have just given Mr. Darcy my word that I would be his wife. Can you both stand as witnesses to this?”

“Do you need a witness?” Mr. Bingley asked in surprise.

“This is Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” Darcy said with a pointed look at his friend.

“Elizabeth is wise to make the request.”

“We have no papers, and my father has not yet announced anything,” Elizabeth added.

“Unhand that woman,” her ladyship cried as she exited her carriage. “You will come to me directly. I have need of you, Darcy.”

“We should all take a turn of the garden,” Bingley muttered, drawing a chuckle from Darcy.

“I would take you up on that idea if it would not make matters worse and put Elizabeth’s family in the path of the storm,” he said before looking down at her. “I will go to her as she demands, but I will not unhand you, unless you wish it.”

“I am not afraid of a little trouble,” Elizabeth replied with a smile.

“This will be a great deal more than a little trouble,” Darcy cautioned. “It will be quite ugly.”

“I will still stand with you,” she assured him with no little amount of firmness, though her nerves were fluttering.

“Unhand that adventurer at once.” Lady Catherine turned toward Darcy rather than the house. “You are not free to marry,” she continued as she stomped her way towards him at precisely the same time that he and Elizabeth walked towards her.

“Unhand him.” Darcy’s aunt had now turned her attention to Elizabeth. “I do not know at what you are playing, but you will not steal my daughter’s betrothed.”

“I am not betrothed to Anne,” Darcy said.

Lady Catherine stopped walking and smiled like a cat about to devour an unfortunate mouse.

“Yes, you are, and I will make you pay if you breach your promise.” She tapped some envelopes she held against her hand.

“Your father and mother would be excessively disappointed to see you playing court to the likes of this...” She waved her hand in a circular fashion in Elizabeth’s direction as if searching for an insult that was appropriately scathing.

“I say, Lady Catherine!” Richard called as he trotted towards them. “I did not expect to see you until spring. You are in luck, though, for not just Darcy and I are here, but Georgiana is in the sitting room.”

Lady Catherine’s attention was turned from Darcy and Elizabeth for a moment, but only a moment.

“I have no intention of entering a house with such a small garden, and I would think that you should know better than to have Georgiana associating with people who possess such an apparent lack of understanding in regards to proper refinement.”

“Aunt,” Richard’s tone was stern. “What would my father say to hear that you were standing in public berating his nephew?”

This caused Lady Catherine to pause. “I would not need to do this in public if he would unhand that woman and join me in my carriage.”

“I will do neither,” Darcy replied.

“You see,” Lady Catherine waved a hand at Darcy as she talked to Richard. “This is why I must conduct my business in a reprehensible fashion, standing on a driveway

that is neither grand enough nor long enough to present a house properly.”

Richard crossed his arms over his chest. “Very well, then. Out with it. What is your protest? Be quick so that we can get to the end of this matter before the Fitzwilliam name is truly damaged by your outrageous behaviour.”

Lady Catherine lifted her chin and glared at Elizabeth. “Darcy is in breach of promise if he does not marry Anne as he agreed to do before his father died.” One eyebrow arched as if to tell Elizabeth that this was her doing.

“I am not —” Darcy began, but Richard held up a hand to cut off his words.

“And do you have proof of this?” Richard asked. “For just today, Darcy has entered into a betrothal with one of the ladies of this house.”

“It will have to be undone, because I have his signature on this.” Lady Catherine held up one of the envelopes. “And this —” She held up the other envelope. “—is the license with which he will marry Anne once we travel to Matlock House.”

Elizabeth could not have kept her lips from parting and her eyes from growing wide at the comments if she had been trying to do so. Had Darcy’s aunt truly brought a license with her? How was that even possible?

“What precisely do you have my signature on that makes you think I would willingly marry your daughter?”

Lady Catherine smiled as broadly as one might expect a lady of her standing to do, which is to say, her lips curled upwards. “A betrothal agreement.”

Her reply was only three small words, but to Elizabeth, they landed upon her as if they were boulders of a substantial size.

“What agreement?” Darcy sounded both incredulous and angry. “I have signed no agreement.”

“You may say that all you wish, but I found this in the study at Rosings, hidden behind the account books you always peruse when you come in the spring,” Lady Catherine explained. “And it bears your signature.”

“What? How?” Mr. Darcy seemed to be utterly confused, and his bewilderment was a balm to Elizabeth’s nerves, which had taken flight.

“Let me see it.” Richard held out his hand to his aunt.

“I have never seen any document hidden behind the books at Rosings, and you know I spend most of my time there with Darcy as he goes over things. Indeed,” he continued as he took the letter from his aunt, “hiding a document behind an account book would be a poor place to hide it, since your steward should be adding numbers and items to the ledgers. He is doing his job, is he not? You have not allowed him to draw a salary and do no work, have you?”

Lady Catherine huffed. “I most certainly would never allow such a thing.”

“Then, how was this just now discovered?” Richard demanded as he opened the envelope he had been handed.

“I see no way that this letter could remain hidden year after year without your steward finding it. It seems rather conveniently timed.” He gave his aunt a pointed look before unfolding the document.

Elizabeth watched his eyebrows rise as he perused the document.

“Have you ever seen this?” he asked as he came to stand next to his cousin and held

the document so that both of them could see it.

Elizabeth leaned into Darcy's arm so that she could peek at what they were reading.

"It looks like your signature," Richard said softly.

"But I have never seen this!" Darcy plucked the paper from Richard's hands. "I am fully unaware of this."

"It bears your signature and that of your father," Lady Catherine said. "I would remove my hand from his arm if I were you," she said to Elizabeth. "It is not becoming of one of your station to be fawning over a gentleman who belongs to another."

"My station?" Elizabeth repeated. "I am sorry to say I do not understand what you mean by that, my lady. You say it as if being the daughter of a gentleman is something to be spurned."

"I will give you that your father is a gentleman, but what of your mother?"

"She is his wife," Elizabeth answered, "and as I am certain you are aware, your ladyship, she joined him in his standing when she took his last name in front of a parson at a time long since past."

"But she is from trade."

"On that you are correct, my lady. My mother's father was a solicitor, but she is not a tradesman's wife."

"Her lineage stains her," Lady Catherine protested. "It is likely her influence which has taught you to be grasping and cunning enough to attempt to reach beyond where

you should for a husband. You are just following her example, after all.”

“I dare say she is not!” Bingley cried. “She is a gentleman’s daughter, and Darcy is a gentleman. They are of the same standing.”

“Do you know who my brother is, young man?” Lady Catherine asked.

“I do, but that is your brother and Darcy’s uncle. His title does not determine how society classifies Darcy. He is a gentleman – one with a noble family tree and ancient roots, but he is still just a gentleman.”

“With a great deal of money, of which I am sure this –” Again, Lady Catherine seemed lost for an appropriate slur to cast. “– this... female is fully aware!”

Bingley laughed. “She did not pursue Darcy. He pursued her. You will have to try again. Miss Elizabeth is no fortune hunter.”

“This cannot be real,” Mr. Darcy muttered. “I never signed this.” He tipped the paper one way and then the other, scrutinizing the signature as he did.

“It could be forged,” Richard said. “But does it matter?”

Mr. Darcy’s head bobbed up and down. “How much do you demand?” he asked his aunt.

“What do you mean how much do I demand?” she replied.

“How much do you wish me to give you for this piece of kindling for my fire?” He smiled at Elizabeth. “I will not give you up,” he assured her.

“You cannot be serious!” Lady Catherine cried. “You must marry Anne. A

Fitzwilliam does not break his promise.”

“I am a Darcy.”

“Your father was honourable!”

“He was, and so am I. According to this piece of paper, which I have never before seen but which appears to bear my name, I must break one of two promises. For you see, this says I am promised to Anne, but my words and my heart belong to, and have been accepted by, Elizabeth. My heart is worth more than any amount of money that you demand. I will not give up the lady I love no matter how loudly you shout about a previous arrangement. Now, state your demands, my lady, and I will send word to have the money delivered to Rosings.”

“But what will become of Anne? Will you truly leave her shunned?”

To Elizabeth, Lady Catherine appeared to be beside herself with indignation.

“How, pray tell, will she find a husband as a spurned woman? Spurned at the hands of her own cousin! Your family deserves better than this!”

“It cannot be helped,” was Mr. Darcy’s only reply, which did little to dampen his aunt’s fury.

She snatched the document from Darcy, leaving a corner of the paper in his hand. “We will see what my brother has to say about this. He will see things put to right.” She lifted her chin. “I take no leave of any of you. I send no regards to anyone.” Then, she stomped towards her carriage.

It was only then, when the carriage door was opened, that Elizabeth noticed a young woman sitting next to an older woman inside the vehicle.

“Is that your cousin?” she whispered to Mr. Darcy.

He nodded.

“And she heard all of this?”

“I am sure she did, but it cannot be helped.” He turned toward her. “I will not give you up. I cannot.” He pulled her close. “And I will let everyone know that you are mine and I am yours and that nothing shall ever part us – if you will let me.” His gaze had shifted to her lips.

She knew what he was asking, and with her heart beating loudly, she smiled and said, “I am yours. Forever,” only moments before he kissed her.

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By breakfast time the following morning, Darcy had received an express from his uncle.

“What does Father have to say?” Richard asked as he slathered sweet butter on his toast.

There was no one present who did not know that Lady Catherine had arrived yesterday and stirred up trouble; therefore, Darcy unfolded the letter and began to read aloud. “Your aunt, my sister, is here. She is, as you know, unhappy, but then, when is she not?”

Richard chuckled as Darcy continued reading.

“I am to scold you most severely for having the audacity to fall in love with, and I quote, ‘some nobody from an estate that is far too small to produce anything good.’”

Darcy shook his head and blew out a breath before taking a sip of his tea. “It seems,” he said to Richard, “that our aunt truly does not want me to ever visit her again.”

Richard inclined his head in acceptance of the comment as he said, “She should know that disparaging those whom you count as dear is the surest way to not meet with success when hoping to sway you.” His gaze moved from Darcy to Bingley’s sisters, who had stopped whatever conversation they were having when Darcy had started reading.

Both Louisa and Caroline had been, more or less, agreeable to how things stood with Darcy not being available as an option for Caroline’s future, but Richard’s warning

was likely wise anyway.

“There are a great many things that Aunt Catherine should know, but does not,” Darcy agreed and then turned his attention back to the missive.

“I will not lie, Darcy. This document that she has in her possession looks damning. We will, of course, need to deal with it, but I have been made perfectly aware that you are not in favour of holding to the agreement as written.” Darcy huffed in disgust. “Because I did not sign it!” he replied to his uncle’s letter.

“It is odd, is it not, that she found that document at such a fortuitous time?”

It was not the first or even sixth time that Richard had said something similar since yesterday afternoon. And Darcy knew that it would not be the final time it would be said until they solved the mystery of how that document had lain undetected in plain sight for so many years.

“Indeed, it does,” Darcy agreed as he scanned the rest of the letter, which was only a line or two.

“Your father will be here in time for dinner. I am to advise my host that he and his wife will require accommodations, and I am to present Elizabeth to him before he sits to eat. If I wish to invite her father and family to dine with him, it would be welcome, but he has deferred that decision to me.”

Bingley clapped his hands. “That is excellent news. Send an invitation to Longbourn right away. I will see that the cook knows to prepare for a dinner party.”

“A dinner party?” Caroline cried. “One cannot just decide in the morning to have a party in the evening. The preparations for such a soiree can be extensive!”

“It is as if our brother has never seen how much work goes into such a thing,” Louisa agreed. “It is enough that we will have to prepare for guests.” She favoured her brother with a withering look before turning to Darcy. “Did my lord say if his sister was to be in his party?”

Darcy shook his head. “He did not.”

Louisa’s eyebrows rose. “I suppose we shall just have to prepare in case she is.” She turned to Caroline. “This is why gentlemen should not be in charge of arrangements. They so often forget things which are of great importance.”

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Hurst said drolly from behind his cup of coffee. “We men are such forgetful creatures. It is a wonder we survive when left alone.”

While Richard chuckled softly at Hurst’s words, Darcy knew that Louisa was correct. They should prepare as if they were going to be hosting the full Fitzwilliam family, minus the viscount, that is.

“If Lady Catherine does accompany Lord Matlock, she will have my cousin Anne with her,” he said. “It is best to prepare for four guests from town with their servants, and eight from Longbourn for dinner.” He gave a nod to Bingley, who scampered from the room to find his cook.

“I will extend the invitation to the Bennets and their guest in person just as soon as your brother is available to accompany me,” he continued, looking first to Louisa and then Caroline.

“May I join you when you go to Longbourn?” Georgiana asked.

Darcy smiled for the first time since he had awoken. “I would be delighted to have you go with me. After all, I could not with a clear conscience deny you such a

pleasure.”

At this, Louisa snorted, and then, after being glared at by her husband, she coughed. “Pardon me,” she said. “There must be some dust in the air.”

“Ah, yes,” Richard said with a small chuckle, “dust in the air can be quite unsettling to the system.” He rose from his place. “I think I shall prepare myself to accompany you, Darcy. Do not leave without me.”

“I will make sure he remembers.” Georgiana cast a teasing look in her brother’s direction.

“And I will be glad for the reminder,” he replied. “There is a good bit on my mind at present.” He finished his tea and upon returning his cup to the table asked, “Are you finished?”

Georgiana shook her head. “I will be soon, but please, do not feel as if you have to wait for me.”

“Are you certain?” He was not sure if leaving his sister with Caroline and Louisa was the best thing to do.

Hurst cleared his throat, catching Darcy’s attention.

When Darcy made eye contact with the fellow, Hurst gave a small nod of his head and then tilted it toward the door.

Darcy gave a nod of his own in acceptance of the offer to see that Georgiana was treated well in his absence and only then, left the room.

“If Collins did not send any letters to Aunt Catherine,” Richard whispered when

Darcy entered the hall, “how did she know that you were calling on someone?”

“I do not know.” But Darcy had to admit that it was a good question. “I thought you had gone to prepare to make a call?”

“I have. It is just that I needed to speak to you before I did, and I did not wish to talk about this in front of the others,” Richard explained as he fell into step with Darcy and began to ascend the grand staircase.

“You realize, of course, that there is only one other person who would be interested in seeing that supposed betrothal of yours enforced, for there is only one other person who knows about it.”

Darcy’s brow furrowed. “Do you mean one of Bingley’s sisters?” They were catty and conniving at times, but he could not see either of them causing a stir like this, for it would do nothing to create an opportunity for Caroline to shift her attentions from Mr. Warren back to Darcy.

“No, no, not them. They seem quite happy with how things were left between Mr. Warren and Miss Bingley after the ball. There is someone else. A thoroughly rotten scoundrel who would do anything to see your name tarnished and your happiness destroyed.”

The comment brought Darcy’s movement to a stop. “Wickham?” The thought was startling but not without merit.

Richard nodded slowly. “He knows the details better than anyone other than you, me, and my father, and as Miss Mary mentioned yesterday while we were discussing the possibility of the papers being falsified, it would need to be someone with at least a little knowledge of how legal papers were crafted. I had not thought that Wickham attended even one lecture on the law or completed enough of his schooling to have

learned anything, but his father..."

"Who, being an attorney before he was Pemberley's steward, was well versed in drawing up documents for my father," Darcy concluded. "And Wickham likely saw enough to learn what was needed should he ever need it."

"Precisely," Richard said. "I would not be surprised to discover that the man can sign a paper with your name or that of your father. He is good at playing a part. Why would he not also be good at pretending while holding a pen?"

Darcy blew out a breath. There seemed to be no getting rid of the pestilence which was George Wickham. But why would he do something like this? It made little sense. There was no sum of money to be gained.

"What does he get from the arrangement?" he asked, putting his misgivings into words.

Richard shrugged. "Perhaps he hoped to separate you from Miss Elizabeth before you were betrothed? Or perhaps he thought you would be duty bound to commit to an arrangement that would see you miserable for the remainder of your days?"

Those did seem like reasonable motivations, but Wickham had always been about gaining money and position above all else.

"There is no monetary gain for him in it," Darcy protested.

"At least, none that we can see," Richard amended.

His cousin had a point. It was best not to cast aside the idea because a trail to ill-gotten gain was not obvious. Wickham's motivation could purely be to cause misery.

“Perhaps he thinks that if you are miserable, then, you might be more inclined to be generous to him,” Richard suggested.

“That makes no sense. If anyone knows that I am less agreeable when miserable, than I am when in a good humour, it is George Wickham.”

“I suppose that is true,” Richard agreed, “but he fancies himself a charmer of one and all, and it might be your wife on whom he hopes to ply his wiles.”

To Darcy, that sounded just like something Wickham might try. Not that it was an idea which would work, of course. “He has never been known to win very often when playing a game of chance, has he?”

“No, he has not. Chance and skill are not his friends,” Richard answered.

“I believe I might have to disagree with that somewhat,” Darcy said. “For he seemed to win often enough when it came to my father.” Darcy’s hand rested on the doorknob of the door to his bed chamber as a thought struck him. “Do you suppose he has done this before?”

“Falsifying documents?” Richard asked for clarification.

Darcy nodded.

Richard shrugged. “There is a chance I suppose.”

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That was a disturbing thought. How many items in the documents at Pemberley might be altered from what they should be? It was not something Darcy truly wished to think about, but it needed to be considered at some point. Just not at this particular time.

Right now, he needed to make a call and extend an invitation. Perhaps by this evening, his present and future life would be settled enough that he would not even care to discover what sorts of mischief George Wickham had played at over the years while at Pemberley.

And thankfully, Darcy's wish was not to be denied.

"Then, it is settled," Lord Matlock said several hours later, as a glass of port was being poured for him and the ladies would have, on most occasions, left the table after a successful dinner.

Though, at present, none had either risen or departed from the room.

Darcy knew that this was due to Lady Matlock having not yet received a nod from her husband that he had completed his position in presiding over their gathering.

"I find nothing untoward in the story I have been told about how you came to your current betrothal to Miss Elizabeth," his uncle continued.

"And I am a staunch supporter of marrying where affection is found if it is at all possible. Therefore, if you are certain that you wish to pay whatever your aunt Catherine demands..."

“Yes, I am certain,” Darcy assured him.

“Then, as I said, it is settled. I suspect that you may be put upon to host your cousin for a season and pay the bills for whatever is needed to see her married – aside from her dowry, of course, which is already set. In order to do my full duty, I must caution you that it will not be inexpensive, since I can also see my sister making ludicrous demands for items that are not needed.” Lord Matlock blew out a breath.

“She is excessively good at venting her spleen far longer than anyone I have ever met.”

Darcy swallowed. He knew that by crossing his aunt in this fashion, he was going to have to bear a great deal of displeasure. However, it could not, and would not, be avoided.

“I will not allow Lady Catherine to treat anyone, but me, with contempt. I would rather be taken to court and the whole affair be aired in the papers than to be expected to bear her slighting any member of my present or future family.”

At this, Lord Matlock smiled. “I told her as much before I left London, and I will support you in your decision to cut her off and not honour this new agreement if she becomes a greater trial than we expect her to be.”

“I will help you with Anne,” Lady Matlock offered. “That way, if you prefer, you can wait to marry until we have seen your cousin settled. That would keep your betrothed safe from your aunt’s barbs and our family name out of the papers.”

Richard guffawed at that. “And how long do you think it will take to find Anne a husband?”

“Your cousin is an heiress,” his mother replied. “And with a bit of attention from my

maid and my modiste, she will look the part as well as any lady ever could. She is not without beauty. It is just hidden.”

“I would rather not wait.” Darcy could feel the heat that such an admission created, rising up his neck to his ears.

It would likely be written clearly across his face in a moment.

“Unless, of course, Anne can marry before spring, for that is when I had hoped my wedding would take place.” He blew out a breath and cast a quick glance at Elizabeth.

“Although, I have not discussed the particulars about that with Miss Elizabeth and her family at this point. I just thought you should be aware of my desires.”

His aunt chuckled softly. “I am happy to hear it, and I am willing to attempt to marry Anne off before then. However, I will not hold you to a promise that you must marry after she does.” She turned to her husband.

“Do you think Lady Catherine would be opposed to us renting her something small, but stately, for the season?”

“If it is small, she will protest, but that cannot be helped,” Darcy interjected. “For I will not spend more on Anne than I would on my own sister.”

“Well said, Darcy,” Lord Matlock said. “You may choose whatever address you see fit, my lady.” He turned to Elizabeth’s father.

“Now, Mr. Bennet, I believe we will forego tradition and retire to the drawing room with the ladies, for you look to me to be a gentleman who might enjoy playing a game of chess. You have one, do you not, Bingley?”

“I will see that it is set up,” Bingley assured him.

“And I would be happy to discuss whatever is on your mind while we shuffle pieces around the board,” Mr. Bennet said.

Lord Matlock smiled and rose, indicating that it was time to adjourn to the drawing room.

“Please do not feel you have to hurry from here to there just because I am eager to play a game of chess and get to know Darcy’s future father-in-law. Informality is no offense to me.”

He looked at Darcy. “I expect you to remain here for a few minutes with Miss Elizabeth, as it would be best if we have some details regarding your wedding sorted out before I return to town tomorrow to face your aunt.”

That did seem like a good idea, and Darcy was more than happy to spend time with Elizabeth alone rather than in company.

“Your uncle does like arranging things, does he not?” Elizabeth asked once the others had left the dining room.

“He most certainly does, but for the most part, he is reasonable about it.” He held out his hand to her. “I am certain that the servants would prefer for us to have our discussion in the library so that they can clean up in here.”

“I do like libraries,” Elizabeth said as he wrapped her arm around his.

Slowly, they made their way from the dining room and towards the library.

“Is it really all settled?” she asked. “Will there be any further complications to our

agreement?”

“If Lord Matlock has made a decision, there is not much which will shift it,” Darcy assured her. “An act of parliament, perhaps. Anything else is unlikely to touch it.”

“Is he stubborn, then?”

“Excessively so,” Darcy answered, “but only after he has heard a matter and weighed the options, which is unlike Aunt Catherine, who makes a decision based solely on what she wishes to see done.”

“Then ... I suppose we have no option but to plan to be married in May.”

“In May?” Darcy said in surprise. That was the exact month on which he had placed his hopes, since it was amongst the most enjoyable months of the year in his opinion.

“It is a favourite month of mine.”

“It is one of mine as well,” Darcy admitted. “I have long thought that May would be perfect for a wedding.”

“Since that is settled,” Elizabeth said as she leaned closer to his side as they walked, “does this mean we should join the others in the drawing room?”

Darcy laughed. “Are you so anxious to be rid of me? For, if you are not, I am certain that we can find something else to discuss – or do – in the library. Surely, someone will come find us if we do not return by the time they think we should have.”

“Is that so?” Elizabeth’s tone was light and teasing. “I did not think you were the sort of gentleman to push the bounds of propriety in such a fashion.”

“I am not, which,” he said with a smirk as they entered the library, “is why I intend to kiss you before we discuss anything else, for it is only proper.”

Elizabeth giggled. “After yesterday’s display on the driveway, I am not entirely sure my father would agree.”

Yes, there had been a bit of grumbling to be borne about that kiss once they had re-entered Longbourn yesterday afternoon.

“I am not opposed to a Christmas wedding even if it is over an anvil,” he told her with a chuckle. He was referring, of course, to Elizabeth’s father’s muttered comment about flying to Gretna Green and being done with the whole matter.

“Not that I would ever,” he continued, “unless forced, deny either your father the opportunity to give you to me in front of a parson or your mother the joy of planning a wedding breakfast. But, be that as it may, it must be made known to one and all that I will marry you, Elizabeth Bennet, even if propriety must be cast aside to do so, for my heart demands it.”

“It is a fortunate thing then, Mr. Darcy, that my heart is in one accord with yours.”

And with those words of promise to one another being said, Darcy sealed them with a kiss that spoke of the happy future which would soon be his ever-present and steadfast joy.

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On a sunny Saturday morning in mid-May, Darcy finally found himself preparing to be driven to the church where he would join himself forever to a family of whom, upon first meeting, he had not approved.

He chuckled as he straightened his jacket and surveyed the tie of his cravat.

What a change had overtaken him since his arrival in Hertfordshire.

The gentleman who peered back at him in the mirror looked very much like the man who had entered this room for the first time back in October of last year.

However, though it was a close reflection, it was not an exact one, because the man he saw today wore his lips in a slight upturn, rather than a scowl. And he did so far more often than not.

He was happy and at rest. Not that his circumstances were all serenity and peace.

Had he not just two days ago sent a letter to his Aunt Catherine informing her that the wedding was going to take place and that if she did not welcome his wife to her estate, she could expect to never entertain him again at Rosings, either?

It was a message which would likely not be met with any sort of delight, for it was not the answer she expected to receive to the olive branch she had extended to him.

And what was that olive branch? It was a sickly one which could never have borne any fruit, for it was a missive, or was it better stated as a directive?

Which stated that he was to be welcomed in her home, but it would be best if his wife confined her visits to Kent to the parsonage where Mr. and Mrs. Collins resided.

This suggestion, she assured him, was merely based on the fact that the former Miss Lucas, who was now Mrs. Collins, was Elizabeth's dear friend.

It did not matter what her explanation for such a proposal was or was not – and Darcy was confident that her justification was not as she said it was.

Meeting her demands was an utter impossibility.

He would not be parted from his wife for any reason, nor would he subject her to living under the same roof as that buffoonish cousin of hers!

Collins would likely find it his duty to lecture Elizabeth on her duties to her elevated station or some such ridiculous topic about which he was completely ignorant.

Darcy's door opened, interrupting his thoughts about his trying current and soon-to-be relations.

Bingley poked his head around the door and then stepped inside the room. "Are you ready?" his friend asked.

"Ready for what?" Darcy replied with smile. "To take a turn of the garden for one final time as a gentleman with two legs which are free from the shackles of marriage?"

Bingley chuckled.

"Or perhaps you mean am I ready to enter the carriage which will take me to the place where I must surrender my life to the parson's noose?"

Bingley laughed outright at that one.

“Or, do you mean, and I do believe this is the most likely, am I ready to exchange my troth for the most precious possession that could ever be bestowed upon a man?” He took up his hat. “The answer to all three is yes, but my view of the situation is the last.”

“It was not so long ago that you thought the first two were the better descriptors for marriage,” Bingley said as he followed Darcy from the room. “Indeed, it was only mere months ago that you would have instructed both me and you very differently about the ladies we are about to marry.”

What an idiot he had been! Thankfully, he was not the sort of idiot to never be moved from his position when proven wrong. That role he would leave to his soon-to-be distant cousin Mr. Collins, for he did fill it to perfection.

“Yes, Bingley,” he said, “I was a fool. I have admitted to it many times.”

And he would never say otherwise, for to have lost Elizabeth to such faulty thinking as he had possessed those months ago would have been a tragedy without remedy. There was not another lady like her in all the world, nor one he could love more. He was most assuredly certain of that fact.

“Are we not all fools in love?” Georgiana said as they joined her at the top of the staircase.

“Lady Matlock has asked me to inform you, Fitzwilliam, that she and our uncle will follow behind our carriage in theirs, but it will be about five minutes before we are allowed to begin the processional to the church.”

She leaned into his side. “My things are all ready to leave with our aunt and uncle this

afternoon. Thank you for letting me join you here for so long.”

She looked around Darcy to Bingley. “My gratitude is to both of you. I have so enjoyed getting to know my new sisters.”

Over the course of the past several months, Georgiana had become quite good friends with all the Bennet sisters, and Darcy was happy to see that, instead of the youngest Bennets influencing his sister’s behaviour, they had been influenced by her.

There was still room for improvement, especially where Miss Lydia was concerned, but even she had risen to new heights of decorum so that she could be thought of as a lady of refinement.

Darcy nearly chuckled out loud when the thought that he looked forward to seeing how she improved over time crossed his mind.

“It has been a pleasure to host you,” Bingley assured Georgiana.

She tipped her head in acceptance of his compliment. “I also must thank you, Mr. Bingley, for forcing my brother to discover his heart.”

“My heart was not missing,” Darcy grumbled. Though he had to admit that it had been sadly misdirected.

“It was frozen,” Bingley taunted. “Locked away behind an icy shell.”

Darcy rolled his eyes and sighed. He was never going to hear the end of how Bingley had helped him find his wife. “I am happy for the results no matter how you wish to think of your help,” he said to his friend.

“And I am just as happy as you,” Bingley agreed as he motioned toward the door.

“Shall we enter our carriages?”

“I am ready to ride at my brother’s side for the final time.” Georgiana was smiling, but her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Darcy’s brow furrowed. The thought that his marrying caused his sister sadness pierced his heart. “Are you well? I am sure there will be times when you will ride beside me in the future.”

She laughed. “I am perfectly well. Indeed, I am so happy that my delight threatens to spill out of me.” She brushed at the corner of one eye.

“I could not wish for my place as your foremost responsibility to be given to anyone who is more worthy and welcome to take it. I love Elizabeth nearly as much as you, and I am certain she will let me ride next to you when it is my turn to stand before the parson.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “That is not something about which I wish to think – not even on a day as wonderful as this one.”

“Ah, but it will not be long before you must,” Bingley said. “Just call on me if you need help. As you know, both my sisters are now married. And seemingly happily so. It is quite surprising and not at all a bad thing.”

Darcy chuckled. “I think my parting with Georgiana will be less of a relief than your parting with Caroline ever could have been.”

Bingley shrugged. “I suppose you are right.”

“I know that I am right,” Darcy replied before helping his sister into his carriage.

“And I will have you know that I am nearly to the point of being able to face the inevitable parting between my sister and me with almost equal parts anticipation and dread.” He looked at Georgiana.

“Whether anticipation will ever outshine the dread depends solely upon the gentleman who captures your heart. He must be worthy of it.”

“He will be,” she assured him as he climbed into the carriage and took his seat next to her.

Then, taking up his hand she added, “I have had, and continue to have, the best example of what a worthy gentleman is. In you. I did not always know it, but I do now. And watching you with Elizabeth has taught me a great deal about what love should look like. It is far more than just a passing fancy and a fluttering heart. It is stalwart and steady – even when Aunt Catherine is being ridiculous.”

“What you have said is true; however—” Darcy lowered his voice to a whisper. “There is still a great deal of fluttering of the heart,” he added, causing his sister to giggle softly as she admitted that she was happy to hear it.

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“Oh, for the love of all that is good!” Darcy cried twenty minutes later as his carriage drew to a stop in front of the church. “What is he doing here?” He asked as he exited his carriage and looked from Wickham to his cousin, who stood beside the man.

Richard poked Wickham with his elbow.

Wickham scowled and huffed. “I have come to extend my warmest wishes to you on your happy future.”

Richard folded his arms. “And?” he prompted with a smirk.

“If I value my life, which I do,” Wickham cast a hasty look in Richard’s direction, “I must apologize for informing your aunt of your relationship with Miss Elizabeth.”

“And,” Richard said once again.

“And I must admit that the documents in her possession were the result of a scheme of mine.” He grimaced as Richard jabbed him with his elbow. “I signed it, but I did not write it. May I go now, Colonel? I have done all that you have asked.”

Richard gave a nod of his head. “You are dismissed, Lieutenant, but remember our agreement.”

Wickham struggled to hold his tongue. It could be clearly seen in the set of his jaw. He touched his hat, gave a tip of his head, and was gone at a rather rapid pace.

“And what agreement do you have with that blackguard?” Darcy asked as he turned to offer his hand to help his sister alight from the carriage.

“It is of little importance, but it holds promise to remedy a situation or two. You do not need to know about it now. Today, you must only think pleasant thoughts, for it is the happiest day of your life until you have children – at least, that is how my mother has always referred to her wedding day.”

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Darcy's eyes narrowed. Richard looked far too happy for having been in Wickham's company. "In all my life, I have never seen you this content to have been anywhere near Wickham. It makes me worry."

Richard clapped him on the shoulder. "There is nothing to worry about. I have gotten the better of the fellow once and for all, unless he suddenly becomes more stupid than he has ever been before. However, I do think that would take a terrific blow to the head. Forgery is not something a magistrate would view leniently, now, is it?" He patted his breast which made a crinkling sound.

His eyes twinkled. "Did you know that Wickham thinks his luck with cards is better than it actually is?"

"I think everyone knows that upon playing with him once," Darcy answered. "I assume your agreement is in writing?"

"Something like that," Richard said. "Shall we enter, or do you wish for Father and my brother to go first?"

"We must wait," Darcy replied.

Bingley nodded as he added, "Lord Matlock gave us specific instructions."

Richard chuckled. "He does like to order and arrange things. It is too bad he was not a second son. He would make a fine commander."

As they stood waiting for Lord and Lady Matlock, along with the viscount and his

lady, to join them, an unexpected but familiar carriage drew along side where Darcy's carriage stood.

Darcy sighed. "Can I not marry Elizabeth without dealing with every troublesome person before doing so?"

Bingley chuckled. "Caroline has already arrived, and she and Louisa are unlikely to cause any sort of stir, so I believe the answer to your question is no."

Darcy leveled a hard stare at his friend.

"Nephew," Lady Catherine said as she approached Darcy, "I have not come to your wedding, nor will I attend your breakfast. However, I am here to make known your dishonourable nature to the parson."

Richard caught her by the arm before she could take more than a step further towards the church. "I believe Father would like you and our cousin Anne to sit with him and my brother."

She pulled her arm away from Richard with a quick jerk. "I am not here to watch the man who jilted my daughter marry another."

"He has paid you handsomely for the privilege to break the forged agreement that you found," Richard countered.

"It was not forged," Lady Catherine cried. "I am not a criminal."

"No, you are not, but others could be. I have proof that the papers you found were not as they appear."

Lady Catherine blanched. "Do you, indeed?"

Richard nodded. "I do, but it is not something we need to make public knowledge. Anne has had a wonderful season in town. I hear tell that she has had several gentlemen show marked interest in her. It would be best if we just let things lie as they are rather than stirring up controversy and causing her chances to be tarnished. Mother seems to think we will be attending another wedding in the near future."

Lady Catherine lifted her chin. "My daughter is a prize."

"Yes, indeed." Richard patted his breast again and winked at Darcy. "She is so much of a prize that some would wish to better their chances of securing her in any way possible."

Darcy's brow furrowed. Had Wickham been attempting to somehow worm his way into a marriage with Anne?

Richard shook his head and said a soft, "Not him," as if he knew what Darcy was thinking. "Someone willing to pay for a couple of signatures," he added.

Ah, that explained it somewhat, and he looked forward to hearing the full tale surrounding that.

"Excellent, excellent," Lord Matlock said as he joined the assembled lot near the door to the church.

"The Bennets are just behind me. So, we must order ourselves appropriately and enter before the bride arrives." He clapped his hands before rubbing them together and adding.

"My, you look lovely today, Anne. I hope you will be taking notes on this wedding so you will be ready to plan your own. Who is at the top of the list as my new nephew?"

Darcy turned away from the discussion to watch Elizabeth and Jane walking arm in arm ahead of their father and mother and behind their younger sisters. She was beautiful.

As he watched her, she turned her attention to him and smiled. Soon. In less than an hour. She would be his wife. A skitter of excitement fluttered his heart.

“I will escort Georgie so you can take your place with Bingley,” Richard said.

And so, Darcy gave Georgiana a kiss and placed her hand on Richard’s arm before stepping into line behind his sister and cousin, and next to Bingley.

“Are you ready to marry your accomplished lady?” Bingley asked in a teasing tone.

Darcy turned to look at his Elizabeth once more. “I have never been more ready for anything, my friend,” he replied. “Thank you for helping me find her.”

As Bingley muttered his reply about being a genius, the doors of the church were opened, and the processional of relations and lovers began.

Upon reaching the front of the church, Darcy knew that the people seated behind him carried the very real potential to provide future aggravation for him. The botheration and consternation they presented was almost assuredly guaranteed.

But, be that as it may, as Elizabeth placed her hand in his, peace, far deeper and stronger than Darcy had ever experienced, settled into his very soul. His heart had found its home.

And all it had taken was an unwished-for trip to Hertfordshire, a friend who had insisted on dancing – and then, meddling – and a willingness to allow his heart to guide him through choppy waters to the shore of what promised to be a excessively

happy future.

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Georgiana Darcy peered out her bedroom window to see who had come to call and was causing the flurry of activity in the halls.

Her eyes grew wide as she saw her brother step down from his travelling coach and give some directives to a footman — likely about his trunk or possibly requesting tea.

Those were the things he most often thought of first when arriving home from a trip.

Her brows furrowed, and her lips pinched into a displeased pucker.

Her brother was not supposed to be here in town.

He was supposed to be in Hertfordshire with Mr. Bingley, learning how to be something other than unpleasant.

Honestly! It was her heart that had been broken by that cad Wickham, not his!

Hers was mending, but his? She shook her head.

If only she could do something to prove to him that, though she had been hurt — and grievously so — her heart was no longer affected.

In fact, she had recently begun to think that it had never actually been touched at all.

She had not been in love with Wickham. She was nearly convinced of that fact.

She had been in love with the idea of being loved, adored, and cherished by a

handsome man.

That she had not been and feared she might never be was what still caused a pinching pain in her heart.

Her companion, Mrs. Annesley, assured her it was a foolish notion to judge every gentleman by the actions of one, but it seemed prudent to Georgiana to be cautious, just in case.

She had been too trusting. No one could tell her otherwise.

However, just because she needed to learn a lesson in prudence, did not mean her brother needed to continue to suffer.

He had done precisely as he should. Her pain was not his doing.

The fact that he still tormented himself with guilt was what made it nearly impossible for her to lay her own, well-deserved, shame aside.

She had spoken in confidence about such things to Mr. Bingley before he and her brother had departed for Netherfield, Mr. Bingley's new estate.

He had promised he would do his best to see her brother engaged in activities that would bring him distraction if not pleasure.

She had been so hopeful that Mr. Bingley had been successful, for Fitzwilliam's letters had been light in tone, sharing stories of the various people he had met and wishing he was free of the attentions of one particular person, Caroline Bingley.

Added to that, yesterday, Mr. Bingley had called to inform her that her brother had done the most unusual thing by dancing with a Miss Elizabeth — the same Miss Elizabeth that had featured in more than one of Fitzwilliam's missives.

Why he was home when things had seemed so promising, she was uncertain. She grabbed a wrap for her shoulders and slipped her feet into her slippers.

“Your brother has returned,” Mrs. Annesley said as Georgiana met her in the corridor.

“I saw his carriage,” Georgiana replied. “It is very unexpected.”

“It is,” Mrs. Annesley agreed. “Do you wish for me to attend you?”

Georgiana shook her head.

Mrs. Annesley glanced down the stairs. “You will tell me how he is, will you not?” There was a note of worry in her whispered question.

As far as Georgiana was concerned, hiring Mrs. Annesley to be her companion was the best gift Fitzwilliam had ever given her.

Mrs. Annesley’s heart was far softer than her angular features and austere manner of dress suggested.

She was also aware of far more than the spectacles that perched on her nose while she read and stitched might indicate.

“Of course, I will,” Georgiana assured her.

A twinkle shone in the lady’s eye. “Then be quick.”

Georgiana giggled as she descended the stairs.

Mrs. Annesley was quiet and reserved, as was proper for one in her position, but she was also curious and lively when she and Georgiana were alone.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Georgiana stopped and waited patiently as her brother removed his outerwear and apologized to Mr. Wright, his butler, for the unexpected change in plans.

Seeing her, he greeted her first with a smile and then, open arms, which she ran into without a second's pause.

"I have missed you," he murmured against her hair before releasing her.

"You did not return on my account, did you?" Georgiana wrapped her arm around his.

"May I not wish to see my sister?"

His avoidance of her question was not a good sign. Such a tactic always meant he did not wish to discuss his reasons for something.

"You may wish to see her, but you should not do so at the expense of breaking your word to a friend." She felt his arm flinch. "Mr. Bingley called on me yesterday. He seemed eager to return to Hertfordshire." Again, his arm flinched.

"He may return anytime he wishes."

Her brows drew together. Her brother's tone was so flat, so uncaring — so very unlike him. "I assume Miss Bingley and the Hursts accompanied you back to town?"

"They did."

She lifted a brow and gave him an assessing look. "You know Mr. Bingley will never persuade Caroline away from town so close to the season. It was a struggle to get her to go with him at Michaelmas."

He shrugged? The only response she was going to receive to such a comment was a shrug?

“He will be disappointed,” Georgiana said softly.

“That cannot be helped.”

Georgiana’s heart sank at Darcy’s words.

Mr. Bingley had been so eager to return to Netherfield and a particular lady.

In fact, he had mentioned taking his mother’s fede ring with him when he returned.

Not returning would do more than disappoint Mr. Bingley; it would likely break his heart and the heart of the lady he had left behind.

“Now, as delighted as I am to see you,” her brother continued, “I am desirous of a long soak in a hot tub of water.” He gave her a tight smile. “To wash away the chatter of Miss Bingley.”

He had not remembered to ask her if she was well.

That was also odd. For the last several months, he had asked her that question at least three times a day and always upon returning from a time away.

She released his arm but only to allow her hand to slide down and grasp his.

“Fitzwilliam?” She waited until he looked up at her instead of at their joined hands before continuing. “Are you well?”

His eyes left hers and looked down the hall toward his room as he nodded. “I will be,” he said as he lifted her hand and kissed her fingers. “I will be.”

Georgiana pulled her lip between her teeth as she watched him walk down the hall to his room.

His shoulders were not as square as they normally were, and he ran his hand through his hair which was something he only did when thoroughly overwhelmed by a situation.

He was not well. Something was most certainly wrong.

Georgiana gasped as a reason for her brother's melancholy came to mind.

Unwilling to entertain the troubling thought for hours before she spoke to her brother again, she hurried down the hall and knocked firmly on his door.

Then she waited. There was some shuffling in the room, but none that sounded as if a person were approaching the door, so she knocked again.

This time she rapped so loudly that she was positive at least one knuckle would bear a bruise from the action.

However, her sore knuckles had produced the desired effect since her brother, minus his coat and cravat, opened his door.

"She has not trapped you, has she?" Georgiana demanded.

Her brother's brows drew together in question. "I beg your pardon?"

"Caroline Bingley. She has not finally succeeded in trapping you into marriage while her brother was gone, has she?" Georgiana's heart raced with trepidation.

Caroline Bingley was not the sort of lady she wished to have as a sister, nor did she think her brother would ever be happy married to such a person.

Caroline was not horrid, but she was not gentle or lively or particularly witty.

She was just not the sort of lady Georgiana knew her brother needed for a wife.

Thankfully, shock suffused her brother's face as he blurted an emphatic no.

"You are not marrying her?" Georgiana asked again just to be certain of his answer.

"No, Georgie, I am not marrying anyone." The light in his eyes faded as he said it.

In spite of her concern for the sadness in his tone and expression, Georgiana smiled at him. "One day you will," she said hopefully.

"Perhaps one day," he replied without so much as a hint of conviction that it was true.

Oh, he was in a deplorable state of mind, and Georgiana was quite certain she knew why.

"Was there anything else?" he asked as he turned to close his door.

Georgiana shook her head. "Not at the moment."

"Then, I shall see you at dinner."

Georgiana stared at his closed door. "Perhaps, nothing," she muttered. "You will marry one day, and you will be happy," she declared to the door, "even if I must see to it myself."