



Mr Darcy's Quiet Strength

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Category: Historical

Description: From a very young age, Fitzwilliam Darcy has shown he has inherited all the good traits of both his excellent parents. He possesses a strong character, a sharp mind, and a dedication to his duties that is much admired by his family, friends, and acquaintances. Such qualities are, however, less apparent to strangers, so when he joins his friend Charles Bingley at his estate, Netherfield Park in Hertfordshire, the impression he makes is relatively poor.

After the Netherfield ball, Darcy leaves Hertfordshire, determined to put as much distance as possible between him and the young woman he admires against his will and even against his reason. It is a danger he has never had to face before and from which he must escape.

He is also firmly convinced that his friend will make a mistake if he proposes to Miss Jane Bennet, who seems not to return his affections. Therefore, he advises Bingley not to return to Netherfield and instead to spend the winter in London.

Before Christmas, Darcy's disposition is low enough to worry his sister and relatives. A series of coincidences, however, leads to a surprising encounter between his aunt, his sister, and Elizabeth Bennet, who is brought back into his life to disturb his barely acquired tranquillity.

Will he run away once again, or will he find the strength to open his heart and mind to the tumult of feelings that always come with the potential for ardent love? This question leaves the readers hopeful and optimistic about the romantic journey ahead.

This is a sweet, witty, and romantic novella set mostly in London in the months following the Netherfield ball. It is appropriate for readers of all ages.

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“I am glad you insisted on me joining you, Aunt,” Jane said as the three walked together through Hyde Park.

“And I am glad I succeeded, my darling,” Mrs Gardiner answered. “It gives me great joy to spend a little time with the two of you. I pray that my daughters will grow up to be just like you.”

“You have always been so kind to us, Aunt,” Elizabeth replied. “Not to mention that you spoil us with all sorts of gifts, just as you did today.”

“I celebrate my husband’s success by indulging myself occasionally in purchasing from the most fashionable shops in London,” Mrs Gardiner jested. “And I enjoy spoiling you since you never ask for anything. And you know how much your uncle loves you too.”

“We know. For that, we are forever grateful to you both. And I am particularly grateful for this walk,” Elizabeth joked. “Although I am very rarely in town, I have always had a partiality for Hyde Park. It is ridiculous, I know. But I have always felt drawn to it.”

“It is not ridiculous, Lizzy. Hyde Park is the perfect place for a passionate walker like you. I personally prefer a ride in the carriage, but today I wanted to indulge you. However, I cannot walk very far.”

“I thank you for taking my preference into consideration,” Elizabeth said with laughter.

“I wonder whether Grosvenor Street is far from here,” Jane interjected shyly.

“It is not. Are you looking for a certain number?”

“Twelve, I believe. But I do not wish to enter — only to see where it is,” Jane answered.

Elizabeth’s heart ached for her sister’s distress; Jane was still deeply hurt but obviously could not expunge Mr Bingley from her mind.

“We may take a stroll along Grosvenor Street if you wish,” Mrs Gardiner said. “It is a lovely street, with many handsome houses.”

“If you and Lizzy do not mind...” Jane whispered.

“I would like to see it too,” Elizabeth said energetically to support her sister. She had no interest in the street or handsome houses, and she cared little about Mr Bingley since he chose to leave Jane and never return. He was not enough of a man, and his affection must have been shallow. But such words would have only pained Jane more, so they would never be said.

They walked on at a slow pace, watching riders and carriages passing by; in the depths of winter, even though the weather was mild, there were very few other walkers.

“It is getting colder, and there are a few clouds accumulating,” Mrs Gardiner said as they made their way towards the gate. “May I suggest taking the carriage and driving along Grosvenor Street? We might not have time to stroll the full length of it.”

“As you wish, Aunt,” Jane replied with an apparent effort to conceal her disappointment.

They were crossing Park Lane when, out of nowhere, a carriage appeared, its horses moving at speed. Mrs Gardiner was still in the road, and Elizabeth — who had reached the other side — ran back to pull her aunt to safety. The coachman pulled the reins, and the horses rose up onto their hind legs, neighing.

“Oh dear, are you all well? Is anyone hurt?” A lady’s voice came from inside the carriage, and Elizabeth turned away from her shaking aunt to look at it. It was a large, elegant coach, and the lady inside, although only her head was visible, had an air about her that revealed she was of the highest echelons of society.

“We are not hurt,” Elizabeth answered, while Mrs Gardiner and Jane brushed off their gowns and caught their breath.

She expected the carriage to move away, so Elizabeth was surprised when the lady opened the door and even stepped down. Her elegance was now visible in all its splendour, yet the woman’s countenance seemed unexpectedly amiable. Through the window, the face of a young lady appeared, also looking worried.

“I apologise. I do not know what came over our horseman to ride at such a speed. We are in a hurry, but that is no excuse for endangering people around us,” she said in a sharp voice addressed to the servant. “Are you sure all is well?” she then insisted, this time looking at Mrs Gardiner.

“Thank you for your concern, Lady Matlock, but it is truly not needed. We are perfectly well.”

“Oh! Are we acquainted? I apologise...I cannot recollect...”

“Not exactly,” Mrs Gardiner answered. “I had the pleasure of first seeing your ladyship many years ago, in Derbyshire, when you visited Mr and Mrs Darcy.” The lady’s surprised glance matched Elizabeth’s astonishment and curiosity. She tried to

remember whether she had ever heard the name Matlock, but ‘Darcy’ was too well known to her.

“Then were you acquainted with the Darcy family? I still cannot remember you in any way.”

“Your ladyship is too kind to show such interest, but there is truly nothing to remember,” Mrs Gardiner said with a polite smile. “I grew up in Lambton. My father owned a shop there. We moved away more than twelve years ago, but I admired your ladyship from afar as a girl.”

“Oh, I see. But this is quite astonishing. To know that — of all the people in London — I almost hurt a lovely woman who grew up in Lambton! What a coincidence!”

“Well, of all the people in London, there are very few who walk in Hyde Park on a winter’s day,” Mrs Gardiner answered, and the lady laughed.

“True! Are you all on foot? May we take you somewhere? It is the least I can do.”

“Your ladyship is exceedingly kind and generous, we thank you. Our carriage is waiting close by. We have been strolling in the park because my niece here is very fond of walking. I and my other niece do not enjoy it so much, so we were hurrying to our carriage and missed seeing yours, which almost caused an accident.”

“Ah, I see. A young woman fond of walking. That is refreshing, indeed. I shall not detain you any longer. You must be tired after the exercise. May I have your name, if you do not mind?”

“Of course. I am Mrs Madeleine Gardiner. My father’s name was Mr Gilford Martin.”

All three bowed to the lady when a small voice sounded from inside the carriage.

“I know a Mr Peter Martin, who owns the inn in Lambton.”

“Peter Martin is my cousin,” Mrs Gardiner replied.

“I know Peter Martin too, quite well. This is another lovely coincidence,” Lady Matlock said. “Oh, this is my niece, Miss Georgiana Darcy.”

The young woman nodded her head in a silent greeting from the carriage, and Elizabeth felt Jane grasp her arm in a gesture of obvious distress.

“It is a true delight to make your acquaintance, Miss Darcy. Please allow me to tell you how much I admired your parents — along with everyone else in Lambton.”

“Thank you,” the girl replied in the same small voice.

“And these,” Mrs Gardiner continued, “are my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. Their father owns an estate in Hertfordshire, and they are visiting us in London at present.”

Lady Matlock nodded with a friendly expression. Elizabeth curtsied, watching Miss Darcy with the deepest interest. Also, out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Jane, who looked extremely pale and disturbed.

“Forgive me, did you say Hertfordshire?” Miss Darcy enquired. “Miss Bennet? Are you by any chance acquainted with a place called Netherfield...or Longbourn?”

Lady Matlock seemed puzzled, so the girl added, “I apologise for my boldness. My brother and his friend Mr Bingley returned from Hertfordshire recently, and I heard them mention the name Bennet.”

“Longbourn is our home,” Elizabeth answered. For some reason, she felt a strange and immediate friendliness towards the lady and the young woman. “If your brother is Mr Darcy and his friend is Mr Bingley, I am quite certain we are the Bennets they spoke of. Mr Bingley rented an estate three miles from ours.”

Lady Matlock’s eyes and lips opened in apparent bewilderment. She looked at Elizabeth in disbelief, then voiced her astonishment.

“Surely this cannot be? Truly? Not one but more coincidences! So you grew up in Lambton, and your nieces are acquainted with my nephew Darcy? And I almost hit you with my carriage! Several occurrences in a row, wholly unconnected. This could be a play or a novel, really!”

“Indeed, it is exceedingly strange. Almost a little bit frightening,” Elizabeth responded, keeping her smile.

“I agree! Well, well, wait until I tell my husband and my nephew. So young Bingley rented an estate, finally! I remember Darcy mentioned something, but I pay little attention to such dull men’s affairs.”

“It was an honour to meet you both and speak to you, Lady Matlock, Miss Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner said. “But I am afraid we must leave now. My children are at home with their governess, and they are waiting for me.”

“Of course, of course,” Lady Matlock said. “Mrs Gardiner, I live on Park Street, at number thirteen. If you happen to be in the neighbourhood and are in no hurry, come and have a cup of tea with me. And bring your lovely nieces, of course.”

The invitation left Mrs Gardiner stunned and speechless, and she needed to breathe deeply and compose herself before replying.

“Lady Matlock, I am truly honoured by your invitation. I confess I am not sure whether I would ever dare to take advantage of it, but I thank you nevertheless.”

“Nonsense. If I invited you, it is not a matter of daring or not, merely of having time for tea. And may I ask where you live, if you do not mind? I am just curious in case I should ever be in that part of town.”

“Of course I do not mind. Your interest flatters me. But we live quite far from here — in Gracechurch Street. Number twenty-two. My husband is a lawyer, and he has other business interests.”

“How lovely. Well then, we must leave too. I hope to meet you again, either by coincidence or by design,” Lady Matlock concluded before she returned to her carriage.

While the lady and Miss Darcy departed, the other three remained still, gazing after the carriage in silence.

“Well girls, that was certainly the biggest surprise I remember having in my life.”

“Quite shocking,” Elizabeth admitted. “Mr Darcy’s aunt and sister happening upon us in the street. I would never have imagined it, and certainly nobody would believe such a coincidence.”

“Let us hurry. We are already very late,” Mrs Gardiner said. As they walked the remaining distance to the Gardiners’ carriage, all three ladies were thoughtful and barely spoke at all. When they finally reached the conveyance, Mrs Gardiner was exhausted. She asked the coachman to drive along Grosvenor Street, as planned, and only then did the conversation resume.

“Lady Matlock is quite an elegant lady,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I have seen her a few

times in town before, at the opera or theatre, but I never spoke to her before today. I did not remember her being so amiable.”

“It was kind of her to be so worried about hurting some strangers who were in the middle of the road,” Elizabeth said. “But she must have been surprised by your mentioning the Darcys and Lambton, and her curiosity induced her friendly manners.”

“Probably. But I am still puzzled. And Miss Darcy — it was the first time I ever saw her. She looks very much like her mother.”

“Miss Darcy was very beautiful,” Jane whispered. “And she seemed amiable too, which is unusual for someone so rich and so accomplished. Miss Bingley spoke often of her many talents.”

Elizabeth felt the pain in her sister’s voice and understood the meaning behind her words. Jane had just met her supposed rival, and she felt immediately defeated. Mrs Gardiner, however, continued, blissfully unaware of her niece’s turmoil.

“Lady Anne Darcy was just like that. Very pretty, gentle, kind, and talented. She painted and played the pianoforte beautifully. Of course, I never saw or heard any of that for myself, only reports. Does Mr Darcy resemble his sister?”

“Dear Lord, no! One could hardly meet two more different people. From appearance to voice and manners, they are utterly the opposite! I wonder whether they are truly brother and sister. Mr Darcy is as proud, arrogant, and careless about the feelings of others as one can be. He would certainly not stop his carriage to see whom he had hurt.”

“You are too severe on him, dear Lizzy,” Jane interjected. “Mr Bingley always spoke highly of Mr Darcy and praised his generosity, kindness, and sense of honour.”

“I am sure Mr Darcy can be all that, if and when he chooses to be. Probably with his family and close friends. The rest of the world, however, and especially those who have lost his friendship, are not given the chance to witness those qualities.”

“You are indeed very severe on him, Lizzy. What puzzles me is that Miss Darcy said she heard him and Mr Bingley mention your name. I wonder under what circumstances. It must be something good — that is what her tone indicated.”

“Of Mr Bingley, I expect to say something nice about our family. But Mr Darcy was always my severest critic,” Elizabeth concluded.

“I do not know what to do about Lady Matlock’s invitation. Should I take it in earnest and just knock on her door next time we are in the neighbourhood?”

“I was under the impression she expected that and insisted upon it,” Elizabeth responded. “Why would she do that if not in goodwill?”

“That is Mr Bingley’s house,” Jane suddenly interjected, gazing out of the window with curiosity and the same disturbed countenance.

“Since his sister wrote to you to visit her, we may come one day, Jane. We may take that opportunity to greet Lady Matlock briefly. What do you think? Would you like that?”

“I would like that very much, Aunt. Would you, Lizzy?” Jane answered.

“I would rather walk around Hyde Park while you visit Miss Bingley and only join you to call on Lady Matlock,” Elizabeth said in all honesty. “Mr Bingley certainly took all the common sense and decency and left nothing for his sisters.”

“I would very much like to meet Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I

am curious about both of them.”

“Well, we can always hope for another accident!” Elizabeth laughed.

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Darcy put down the papers that he had already neglected for too long. He could hardly keep his mind on anything since he returned to London. His plan to forget Elizabeth by creating distance between them had failed, and his mind was filled with thoughts about her, just as had happened during his stay at Netherfield. His sleep was equally disturbed too, by dreams he refused to acknowledge, and the lack of rest made him anxious and annoyed all the time.

“Dear brother, you will not believe what happened!” Georgiana said joyfully as she entered the library. “Am I disturbing you?”

“You never disturb me. Surely you do not have to ask! Please come in and sit down. I am glad to see you in such an excellent disposition. I assume you enjoyed yourself with our aunt.”

“I did, but I must tell you something quite astonishing. A most entertaining coincidence.”

“Do tell,” Darcy said, pleased with his sister’s enthusiasm. He had rarely seen Georgiana so lively in recent years.

“Well, as our carriage drove down Park Lane, we almost hit some ladies, who were walking.”

“Oh...?”

“Yes! It gave us a fright, but fortunately, nothing bad happened. Our aunt stopped the carriage and went to speak to them. And, as it happened, one of the ladies had grown

up in Lambton and she knew Aunt Matlock. She was also well acquainted with our parents!”

“How lovely, indeed.”

“Oh, but there is much more. As our aunt spoke to her, the lady introduced us to her two nieces. Can you guess who they were?”

“I certainly cannot! But I am glad you are amused.”

“Well, I should keep you intrigued a little longer, but I cannot. Her nieces were Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. From Longbourn, Hertfordshire! The same Bennets you wrote to me about in your letters!”

The girl paused, evidently eager to witness his response, but Darcy was stunned, struggling for air. He prayed it was a joke — as unreasonable as such an expectation was.

“My aunt said it is quite impossible that, of all the people in London, we should happen upon someone who grew up near Pemberley and who is related to someone you are acquainted with! And yet, the impossible occurred!”

“The impossible occurred, indeed,” Darcy replied absently, distracted by his thoughts.

“Aunt Matlock was pleased with Mrs Gardiner, and she invited her for tea. I confess I am always happy to meet someone who has met our parents. I have so few memories of Mama that I wish to hear as much about her as possible.”

“I know, my dear,” Darcy said affectionately.

“I wonder whether you have met Mrs Gardiner? Probably not — she must be at least ten years older than you. Her name was Madeleine Martin. She is the cousin of Mr Martin, who owns the inn.”

“Is she?”

Georgiana’s lively voice contrasted with his disposition, which lowered with every moment.

He did not remember anyone with that name, but that did not even matter. Lady Matlock had invited Elizabeth’s aunt for tea. That must have been the aunt who lived near Cheapside — Miss Bingley had said so a while ago. What was she doing in Hyde Park? Surely Elizabeth had desired to take a walk — that was her pleasure. Of all the carriages in London and all the people in London, the fact that they had met was extraordinary.

“Yes, she is. Mr Martin and his family are good people. Mrs Reynolds always says so.”

“They are. That I can agree upon.”

“Brother, so they are the Bennet family you mentioned to me, are they not?”

“If they told you they live at Longbourn, Hertfordshire, then yes, they must be.”

“But, Brother, are you upset about something? Aunt Matlock said you would be amused, but I feel you are not entertained.”

“I am entertained, dearest. Only a little bit surprised, as you said.”

“Richard said he would come for dinner tonight,” Georgiana continued.

“Good. I shall finish my letters by then.”

Georgiana left and — as never before — Darcy felt relieved by her departure. He still struggled to understand the bewildering news and to estimate the sort of consequences that fortuitous meeting would have. How long would Elizabeth be in London? At least until after the New Year, certainly. Why else would she come to London during Christmastime if not to spend it with her relatives?

There should not be much danger of him meeting her, since they lived a significant distance apart; but coincidences could happen. And what if Mrs Gardiner accepted Lady Matlock’s invitation for tea? Would she take her nieces too? Would Georgiana meet them again?

And what about Miss Jane Bennet and Bingley? Bingley had been in a poor disposition lately, and he was still thinking of Hertfordshire — that was apparent. That simple encounter in the park could alter their lives dramatically.

Another thought that crossed his mind was related to Wickham. Elizabeth seemed to have been on friendly terms with the reprobate and trusted his claims. That was obvious from their harsh discussion at the Netherfield ball, the first and last time he had danced with her.

That scoundrel was in Meryton, at liberty to spread all sorts of falsehoods, and surely Elizabeth had trusted him even more as time passed. He panicked imagining that Elizabeth might meet Georgiana again and — in ignorance — mention something about Wickham. Georgiana’s distress was still vivid and tormented her enough without any further news about that villain.

Darcy could not settle his mind enough to write his letters — to Mrs Reynolds at Pemberley and to his solicitors. The Matlocks’ youngest son — Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam — arrived for dinner as promised, and they had a pleasant-enough

evening, though Darcy's thoughts returned to Elizabeth often.

"My mother told me about her unexpected meeting," the colonel suddenly said. "Was the Miss Bennet they encountered the one you told me that Bingley admired?"

Darcy choked on his drink, while Georgiana's expression revealed her curiosity.

"Yes, but this is not a subject for dinner conversation and certainly not in the presence of Georgiana and Mrs Annesley."

"I apologise, Darcy. I was not aware that there was an inappropriate story behind it."

Georgiana looked puzzled now, and Darcy could not end the conversation abruptly, leaving his sister with the wrong impression.

"There is nothing inappropriate. Bingley did admire Miss Jane Bennet, but he came to realise she did not return his feelings. It happens all the time, even in the most honourable families."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that," Georgiana replied. "Miss Bennet is the one with fair hair, is she not? She is very beautiful, and our aunt said she seemed to possess a sweet nature."

"She is beautiful, and yes, she probably does possess a sweet nature. I saw nothing wanting in her manners. It was probably not meant to be. Some things happen — others do not."

Even to himself, his voice sounded a little harsher than it should; the colonel did not enquire further, and Georgiana became more interested in her food. Then the conversation turned to the weather and Lady Matlock's forthcoming party.

Georgiana retired after dinner, claiming both she and Mrs Annesley were tired. The colonel did not seem in any hurry to leave, and Darcy offered him a drink and a cigar.

“So, now that we are alone, I hope you will trust me enough to tell me the truth about Miss Bennet.”

Darcy choked again, spilling some brandy on himself. “What do you mean?”

“The story of Bingley and Miss Bennet. When you returned, you told me that you saved Bingley from a disadvantageous marriage to a young woman about whom there were several objections. Now you claim Bingley realised that the lady — whom my mother and your sister just met — did not return his feelings. Which is true?”

“Both,” Darcy answered after a brief hesitation. “Bingley was so enchanted with Miss Bennet that he was blinded to the truth. She is exceedingly beautiful, and he is easily charmed, as we both know. He has been in love at least five times in the last two years.”

“And?”

“And the lady seemed to receive his admiration with pleasure, but her countenance was always serene. She smiled at him in the same way she smiled at everyone else. And the mother is truly insupportable. She has no respect for decorum but does have an obsession with marrying off her daughters, who have no dowry and no connections. Mrs Bennet presented a spectacle that was difficult to bear. And I am sure Miss Jane Bennet would have been somehow forced to accept Bingley, despite her lack of feelings for him.”

“Darcy, I must say you seem very much involved in this situation. May I ask why Bingley’s or Miss Bennet’s feelings are your concern?”

“Bingley is my friend, Richard. He is a good man and deserves to be happy. It was my duty to warn him against a marriage that would not be equal in any way.”

“But she is a gentleman’s daughter, and he is the son of a tradesman. She might not have a dowry or any useful connections, but he has the money she lacks. As for happiness — its meaning is different for each of us.”

“Yes, she is a gentleman’s daughter. It is not only that she lacks money and connections...there is more that I cannot clearly explain.”

“Is there?”

Darcy felt his cousin’s intense stare, scrutinising him with obvious puzzlement.

“Darcy, there is something that worries me and must be said, even if it will anger you.”

“Then say it and be done with this subject.”

“I have known you all your life, and as good as you are at concealing your feelings from people in general, you cannot hide much from me. You certainly have a peculiar interest in this story. I feel that you put great effort into convincing Bingley that this miss would not ensure his happiness in marriage. You seem as if you deliberately separated them, and that is strange. Could it be that you also admire this Miss Bennet and do not wish to allow Bingley to have her?”

The colonel ended with a voice filled with gravity, but Darcy breathed with relief at his cousin’s wrong guess.

“Oh, this is plain stupid, Richard. I have not the slightest interest in Miss Jane Bennet. It makes me laugh that you assumed I did.”

He sipped from his glass. “However, I might have put too much effort into presenting Bingley with my opinion on this matter. But I did it only in his best interest and after a thorough examination of Miss Bennet’s behaviour towards him. Especially at the Netherfield ball, when her mother spoke loudly about Bingley marrying her daughter and finding husbands for the other four sisters.”

“There are five sisters with no dowry? Poor Mrs Bennet! I am almost sympathetic to her.” The colonel laughed. “You are quite unfair on the lady. There are many mothers with fewer daughters and far more money who are still obsessed with finding them husbands.”

“I am glad you are entertained, Richard.”

“I confess I am. And relieved that my guess was wrong. Let us hope Bingley will fall in love with another pretty face soon and will forget Miss Bennet. That would prove you were right, and I know how much you like to be.”

Although accustomed to his cousin’s teasing, this time Darcy felt uncomfortable. He had told only half the truth, and if he was honest with himself, he had to admit he might have become too involved in the matter. If he had been right, he had no cause to repent. However, if he had misjudged Bingley’s feelings or Miss Jane Bennet’s, he would have to live with guilt and remorse.

“Oh, there is something you should know, Darcy. When my mother related her encounter with the Miss Bennets to me, I was surprised and amused, and I told her what I knew about Miss Bennet and Bingley. What you had previously told me, of course.”

“I wished you had not done that, Richard,” Darcy replied with irritation. “It was a private conversation we shared, not public knowledge.”

“I am sorry if I overstepped. But you never told me the matter required secrecy, and when we first discussed it, it seemed of little importance. I would not have revealed it to a stranger, but I found it amusing to add to the coincidences mother kept speaking of.”

“I do not find the situation amusing in any way. I hope no reports reach Miss Bennet or Bingley and offend or hurt either of them.”

“I hope we can both trust in my mother’s privacy and wisdom.”

“I do not wish discussions of this kind in the presence of Georgiana. She is still rather sensitive when it comes to relationships.”

“I understand. I am sure my mother is capable of acting with the proper delicacy.”

“I am only worried about minor indiscretions on your mother’s part. What surprises me is that I have trusted you with many secrets throughout our lives and you have never betrayed my confidence. What came over you to gossip about Bingley and Miss Bennet with your mother? I cannot understand it.”

“I accept the blame, Darcy, and I shall remedy it.”

After the colonel left and he retired to his bed-chamber, things became even worse for Darcy. He recollected all the instances on which he had based his estimation of Miss Bennet’s feelings, including his conversations with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.

A sense of panic ruined his rest; he began wondering whether it was possible that his own interest in Miss Bennet had been his main reason, after all.

The other Miss Bennet, from whom he had tried to run away. Could he have insisted

on taking Bingley away from Hertfordshire to avoid his marriage to Miss Jane Bennet because it would have placed Elizabeth Bennet in his close circle of friends? Could he have been so selfish as to toy with his friend's happiness because of his cowardice?

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Two more days passed without mention of the Bennet name, though Elizabeth's image was always present in Darcy's mind. Christmas was only a week away, and Georgiana was busy preparing the gifts for the servants for Boxing Day. Those for Pemberley had been sent the week before. It was a custom inherited from their parents: every year, on Boxing Day, the servants were given some monetary bonus together with a gift. Presents were offered to the tenants' children too, and the tradition was carried on each year.

On the third day after the fortuitous meeting, Darcy received a note from Miss Bingley that made him roll his eyes.

Mr Darcy,

We desperately need your help. It seems Jane Bennet is in London, and she has informed me she will come to visit today at noon. I cannot allow Charles to meet her and ruin our hard work. Therefore, I told my brother that you called yesterday asking for him and that you are expecting him today at twelve o'clock. I beg you to keep him busy for at least two hours. I intend to keep Miss Bennet's visit to under half an hour, but I need some additional time in any case.

I am counting on your support, as always.

C.B.

Those few words irritated Darcy exceedingly. Miss Bingley's audacity was outrageous, and he realised it was his previous actions that had induced that woman to believe they were partners in lies and deceptions.

His first response in anger was to reply and disagree with the scheme. However, that would probably only inspire the woman to conceive another lie.

Darcy was still convinced that marrying Miss Bennet would be a mistake for Bingley. That the young woman's feelings did not match his friend's. He would still strongly advise Bingley against such a step. But to create a web of deception behind his back was appalling and dishonourable, and Darcy could not be part of it.

He put the note aside, reflecting on how he would act further.

Later on, Darcy was surprised by an unexpected visit from his aunt Lady Matlock asking for Georgiana.

"I cannot stay long — I am just returning from the dressmaker. She finally finished my gowns for the New Year dinner party. Georgiana dearest, I received the pleasant news that Mrs Gardiner and her nieces will come and call on me today. Apparently, they have other business in the neighbourhood. I intend to keep them for at least a cup of tea and find out more about them. I have reason to believe I might gather some interesting details. Would you like to come?"

"Of course, if Fitzwilliam does not mind."

"Fitzwilliam might join us too if he is desirous of seeing the ladies. However, I have reason to believe he is not eager about such an encounter. Am I wrong, Nephew?"

"I have another engagement, but of course, I do not mind Georgiana visiting you at any time or for any reason, Aunt," Darcy answered with no little emotion. It was precisely what he feared. Furthermore, he understood his aunt's meaning and what sort of interesting details she hoped to discover. If only the colonel did not have such a big mouth.

Lady Matlock rested for a little while, but just as she was ready to leave, the door opened and Bingley entered. He stopped, bowed to the lady, and apologised for almost bumping into her.

“Mr Bingley — what a lovely surprise, sir! I have not seen you since the spring. How are you, young man? As handsome as ever!”

“Lady Matlock, I am honoured to see you! I am reasonably well.”

“I heard that you rented an estate. You must tell me one of these days how you like being a landlord.”

“Oh...I could not say...I only rented the place in September, and I am not sure whether I shall return there.”

“Really? Such a pity. I assume you were displeased with the property? Or with the neighbourhood?”

“No. Not at all...in fact, it was quite the opposite. But there were some circumstances that altered my plans.”

Bingley looked troubled, and Darcy wondered where his aunt would take the conversation. Surely, she could not simply inform Bingley about the Bennets' presence in town!

“How intriguing. Unfortunately, I cannot stay as I have an appointment. But I might ask you to come and have a little chat with me sometime soon. That is, if you do not have anything better to do than visit an old lady.”

“Oh no. I shall come at any time you wish. I would be honoured to talk to your ladyship. I just never assumed you would have any interest in discussing anything

with me.”

“I am always interested in you. You seem to be a worthy young man, and I know how much my nephew values your friendship, so your happiness is my concern. I hope you do not mind.”

“Oh no, not at all. Quite the opposite.”

“I am glad to hear that. Georgiana dear, I shall expect you in half an hour.”

The strange conversation left Bingley puzzled and speechless, and Darcy could not blame him. Lady Matlock had met him several times previously but had never spoken more than a few polite words to him.

Lady Matlock’s interest was upsetting for Darcy too; his aunt had the same tendency to intrude where it was not her business as Lady Catherine, only she usually did it with more consideration. But the intrusion remained, and the effects could be painful.

Georgiana stayed with them for a little while, talking to Bingley. Then, together with Mrs Annesley, she left for the Matlocks’ house, and only then could Darcy open a private conversation with his friend. However, he was still undecided about what could and what should be said in the delicate matter that affected them both. Even if he disagreed with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst’s machinations, Darcy did not feel comfortable revealing their plan either.

“Bingley, there is something important I must tell you.”

“Yes, Caroline said as much. What is it?”

“Your sister is not aware of this particular situation.”

“Should I be worried?”

“There is nothing to worry about, but it might be a little disquieting. A few days ago, my aunt and sister had a little accident in Hyde Park. Almost an accident. To cut a long story short, my aunt’s carriage almost hit three young women.”

“Oh? Really? I am very sorry to hear that. Was anyone hurt?”

“No...however, she discovered that the three ladies were Mrs Gardiner and her two nieces. Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Darcy watched Bingley attentively, noticing the same response he had when he first heard the story.

“Miss Bennet is in London?” Bingley managed to ask.

“Yes. And there is something else you should know.”

“But, wait...where is she staying? Is this her aunt from Gracechurch Street? Have you spoken to her?”

Bingley’s apparent nervousness caused Darcy anxiety. If he expected that his friend had forgotten Miss Bennet, he was clearly wrong.

“No, I have not spoken to her. My aunt and my sister did and discovered some details, including her address.”

“If she is in town, I must call on her, of course. It is only polite. Could you ask Lady Matlock for the address? The name was Gardiner?”

“My sister knows the address too. But Bingley, try to calm down a moment and speak

reasonably.”

“Yes, yes, I assume you disapprove of my intention to call on her.”

“My opinion matters little. I admit politeness alone requires you to call on her.”

“I shall! Tomorrow! In the meantime, please ask Miss Darcy about the address.”

“I shall...and...”

“Yes?”

Darcy hesitated to speak further, but regardless of how much he revealed, Bingley would find out the whole truth as soon as he visited the Gardiners. He had already abused his friend’s confidence enough, and he owed him more honesty.

“Bingley, before you came, my aunt told me that Mrs Gardiner and the Miss Bennets were expected to call on her imminently. Georgiana has also gone there to see them. Apparently, my aunt and my sister had a favourable first impression of them.”

“Miss Bennet is at Lady Matlock’s now?”

“I believe so.”

“I must go and greet her. I have not a moment to lose!”

“Bingley, wait! You cannot simply appear at the Matlocks’ residence, uninvited and in such a state of agitation! Calm down and try to be reasonable! You may ask Georgiana about her if you want, then you can call tomorrow at a reasonable time.”

“I shall not appear uninvited. But I can wait outside, can I not? I shall watch until

Miss Bennet comes out, then greet her and ask permission to call tomorrow. Surely that is reasonable.”

Darcy’s nervousness increased at the same time as his friend’s. He was not sure what was reasonable or not, considering the circumstances.

“Not entirely reasonable, Bingley. You will certainly surprise Miss Bennet with your sudden appearance. You may do so only if you are certain of her reception.”

Bingley’s countenance changed from agitation to worry.

“You believe she might not be pleased to see me? You are right, of course. What a fool I am! She might not wish to see me either today or tomorrow. She will surely be embarrassed if I disturb her visit to Lady Matlock. And her ladyship would never forgive me for making a scene in front of her house!”

“Bingley, you are very troubled, and you need to calm down before deciding how to proceed. You do not know whether Miss Bennet will be pleased or embarrassed to see you. I doubt she would make a scene, regardless, and my aunt would probably be more amused than upset to see you waiting in the street.”

“Then I shall go! I can claim I was there by accident. A mere coincidence, just as happened with Lady Matlock. Yes, that should work! I shall wait a little distance away, and when I see someone leave the house, I shall step closer!”

Bingley was already grabbing his coat and hat and was ready to go. Darcy found no arguments to calm him.

“I shall come with you, Bingley. Lady Matlock invited me to join them before you arrived, but I declined.”

“You declined? Why? So you could see me? I am truly grateful to you, Darcy. I know you never approved of Miss Bennet and her family, but I appreciate that you are supporting me.”

“You are too generous with your praise, Bingley. I should have supported you more and expressed my disapproval less. Come, let us go. I feel I owe it to you to make a fool of myself along with you.”

As they walked the short distance, Bingley chatted, but Darcy heard nothing.

His heart was racing at the thought that he would see Elizabeth too. He had suspected that she was aware of his admiration and welcomed it. Furthermore, he had reasons to believe that her feelings for him were not indifferent. The way she used to smile at him, to tease him, to argue with him — it was quite revealing. How would she respond to seeing him?

He had to act with the utmost precaution in order not to arouse hopes that would never be fulfilled. As much as he denied that pleasure to himself, he felt happy to be able to see her again.

Bingley stopped at the house next door to the Matlocks’ before Darcy realised they had arrived. Once there, they looked quite laughable, two men waiting in the cold without even knowing whether the subject of their interest had really visited Lady Matlock and whether they were still there.

They waited for a little while, and suddenly, the Matlocks’ door opened, and a servant came out, descended the steps, and called, “Mr Darcy? I thought it was you, sir! Are you waiting for Miss Darcy? Will you not come in, sir? It is very cold.”

“No...I am just waiting...” he replied, feeling foolish in front of the servant’s puzzlement.

“Shall I inform the master or the mistress that you are here?”

“No...I mean...” He hesitated, looking at Bingley and then at the servant. They were already acting like fools; he could at least avoid being the subject of servants’ gossip and laughter.

“My sister is still here? I know Lady Matlock had guests. Are they still here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then we shall enter,” Darcy decided, breathing deeply and moving towards the door, while his common sense and wisdom advised him against such an action.

Once inside, Bingley became hesitant and timid, following Darcy in silence. They should have left. When they entered the drawing room, the sound of voices suddenly ceased, and bewildered gazes turned towards them. Darcy dared to look at each lady in turn. Lady Matlock frowned, Georgiana smiled with delight, Elizabeth looked at him with apparent surprise, while Jane Bennet was pale, her eyes and lips wide in astonishment. On another chair was an unknown lady at whom Darcy barely glanced.

“Forgive me, Aunt, for disturbing you. I was talking to Bingley, and knowing Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were here, we took the liberty of coming to greet them briefly. We shall only stay for a moment.”

“Darcy, this is quite a surprise,” Lady Matlock replied. “And Mr Bingley! I certainly did not expect either of you. We are only ladies here. Your cousin and your uncle are at the club.”

“And there we shall go too. As I said, we only called in for a moment. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, I am delighted to see you.”

“We are pleased to see you too, sir,” Elizabeth answered, smiling. “And you, of course, Mr Bingley.”

“May I detain you a moment longer, to ask to be introduced to your aunt?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth responded.

The introduction was made and greetings and pleasantries exchanged. Bingley barely said a few words, and Jane Bennet none, so Darcy assumed the task of carrying on the conversation.

“Mrs Gardiner, before we leave, my friend Bingley would like to ask your permission to call on you tomorrow or on another day that is acceptable.”

“Yes, yes.” Bingley finally found his voice. “Darcy just told me you were here...I mean in London...and I would like to call on you if you do not mind...”

“We should be delighted, Mr Bingley,” Mrs Gardiner answered graciously. “And of course, it would be a great honour if you were to come too, Mr Darcy.”

It was Darcy’s turn to be wordless. He had not considered calling on the Gardiners, and now he tried to find a reason to refuse.

“I am sure Mr Darcy is a very busy man, and he certainly has no business in that part of town,” Elizabeth interjected.

He looked at her, and their eyes met briefly.

“I thank you, Mrs Gardiner. I am indeed very busy. I shall discuss it with Bingley and see whether I can join him. Regardless, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance and to see Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth again. Now please excuse us. It is time for

me and Bingley to leave and allow you ladies the pleasure of each other's company."

None of the ladies tried to persuade them otherwise, so minutes later they were back out in the cold.

"Darcy, I shall be forever grateful for what you have done," Bingley said with regained liveliness. "Miss Bennet looked so beautiful, though a little pale. And silent. Do you think she was displeased to see me? Her aunt did not seem to oppose me calling on them. How wonderful that we entered to speak to them! Now I can call tomorrow, and I know they will be expecting me!"

"Bingley, there were signs that you will have a pleasant call tomorrow. You just have to calm down a little. And to be less generous with your praise and gratitude, as I deserve none. Now let us go to the club — we both could use a drink."

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:05 am

After two hours spent at their club, in the company of the earl and his two sons, Colonel Fitzwilliam and the viscount, Darcy and Bingley each returned home. Bingley's enthusiasm remained high, and every time he had the chance to speak, he mentioned something in regard to Hertfordshire. Darcy felt the colonel's gaze upon him, and he knew the meaning of it. No, Bingley was certainly not likely to fall in love with another woman and to forget Miss Bennet soon.

When Darcy arrived home, Georgiana had not yet returned. Instead, the butler informed him that Lady Matlock had sent word that he was expected there, so he had little choice but to obey.

At the Matlock residence, his aunt, his sister, his uncle, and his cousins were all talking animatedly about the subject that brought him so much discomfort.

"Darcy! Come here, son!" Lady Matlock invited him. His aunt was in a dangerously high disposition, which could threaten the delicate threads of peace of mind he still had remaining.

"My dear boy, I called you here because there is something I must tell you immediately."

"Please do so, Aunt," he said, defeated, causing the lady to laugh.

"I have always admired your qualities, and I admit — and your uncle agrees — that there are many areas where you surpass gentlemen twice your age."

"Thank you..."

“However, when it comes to matters of the heart, you have extremely poor judgment! It shows that you do not have much experience and that you have practised very little — something that Catherine always insists on people doing.”

Everybody else laughed, and even Georgiana smiled shyly.

“I have only spent an hour with Miss Bennet,” Lady Matlock continued, “and five minutes with Mr Bingley, and it was enough to observe those two are in love with each other. It was so obvious that it is laughable that anyone would assume otherwise.”

“Your aunt is determined to see those two reunited,” the earl jested. “She has taken this on as a personal project, and there is nothing you can do to stop her.”

“I have no intention of stopping her,” Darcy answered in earnest. “And yes, I admit I was convinced that Miss Bennet did not return Bingley’s affection. It was an honest judgment made for his benefit. But we should not even speak of this. If I had not had the imprudence to tell Richard, who was eager to share it further—”

“So you blame Richard for telling me?” Lady Matlock enquired.

“I do, Aunt. Furthermore, I blame myself for talking about it in the first place. It is a personal matter of Bingley’s, and I do not like it that you all seem to be amused by it. I strongly believe we should not speak of it any longer, nor interfere in any way. Since Bingley and Miss Bennet have now met again, it should be entirely their decision and their affair.”

His serious statement caused Lady Matlock to frown, but Lord Matlock replied, “I fully agree with Darcy. We should leave them be to do as they please.”

“Mrs Gardiner is such a pleasant lady,” Georgiana interjected, changing the subject.

“I enjoyed talking to her exceedingly.”

“So did I,” Lady Matlock agreed. “She is surprisingly well educated, very fashionable, and speaks easily about various subjects, from the theatre and the opera to politics. And her nieces are pleasant girls too. I have to say, even though the eldest Miss Bennet is one of the most beautiful young women I have met, I quite favour Miss Elizabeth. She is clever, witty, spirited, and not afraid to express her opinion on any matter.”

“So do I,” Darcy replied absently, then his heart stopped at the stupidity of his own words. He quickly added, “I spent a few days at Netherfield in Miss Elizabeth’s company, and I agree with my aunt’s description of her.”

“Miss Elizabeth sounds like just my kind of lady!” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. “I prefer spirited young women. I must find a way to meet her.”

“Very few ladies are not your kind of lady, Richard.” Lady Matlock rolled her eyes. “You should decide on one and finally marry, as you are not so young any longer. Your father already had two children at your age. But Miss Elizabeth lacks something that is very important for you — money.”

“How unfortunate,” the colonel replied. Both he and Lady Matlock spoke in jest, which irritated Darcy.

“Darcy, there is something that intrigued me,” Lady Matlock continued. “I received the impression that Miss Elizabeth is not very fond of you. At some point, she mentioned that you were more enemies than friends and that you are her severest critic.”

“Yes, well...as you said, Miss Elizabeth has a tendency to tease and sometimes say things she does not truly believe.”

“So you are calling her a liar?”

“Not at all. Only a tease. You should not take her words in earnest.”

“I am not sure about that. She seemed very serious. She also mentioned your dislike of dancing, which is not a surprise to anyone in London and apparently in Derbyshire either.”

“Just to prove you wrong, I shall mention that I did dance with Miss Elizabeth at a ball Bingley hosted.”

“Did you? How lovely. I might have been wrong, then. However, even when she said it was unlikely that you would call on the Gardiners, there was a trace of irony in her voice. I only tell you all this because I was intrigued and amused. This is the first time I have seen a young woman who is not struggling to gain your attention and to flatter you.”

“Dear aunt, we both know that statement is an exaggeration,” Darcy replied, and the Matlocks laughed again.

“So, will you go with Bingley tomorrow?” the colonel asked. “If you do, I should like to go too. For no other reason than mere curiosity.”

“I probably will. Bingley needs some support,” Darcy replied. His answer surprised even himself; it was as if his mind had made a decision against his will. “However, please do not take offence, Cousin, but I believe it would be better if we are not too many at this particular call. I noticed Miss Bennet was quite distressed when she saw Bingley. Perhaps we should allow her a little time to compose herself. And you may call with Bingley the next time.”

“That is a sensible suggestion that I utterly support,” Lady Matlock agreed.

Once he returned home, Darcy had another agitated evening. The certainty that he would see Elizabeth again the next day was disquieting. Lady Matlock's claims about Elizabeth not liking him, even though he had dismissed them at first, troubled him. Not for a moment had he imagined Elizabeth's opinion of him could be anything other than good. What could have prompted her to say they were enemies?

It was amusing how Elizabeth had made a favourable impression on Lady Matlock too. Her character, her wit, and her mind were worthy of admiration by anyone honest enough to recognise worthiness. Of course, his aunt liked Elizabeth, but she would surely disapprove if she knew of Darcy's admiration for her. And she would surely oppose a possible connection with Elizabeth and her family. It was a matter that Darcy had reflected upon countless times. Elizabeth herself was everything he had ever wanted in a woman. She would certainly suit him as his wife. But her situation in life was an obstacle against her becoming Mrs Darcy. It was a position that required more than his admiration and affection; he had to consider his duty and his family's expectations. The lady he did marry, eventually, would certainly not bring him the joy that he felt at the thought of seeing Elizabeth again the next morning.

"Darcy, I am grateful to you for coming with me," Bingley said in the carriage. "I am nervous, and I know I shall behave like a fool. I cannot believe I shall see Miss Bennet again."

I cannot either, Darcy thought to himself. "Bingley, may I ask — did you tell your sisters about Miss Bennet?"

"I did not. Caroline really brings me to the edge of my patience whenever she hears about the Bennets. But what I find even stranger is that she disapproves of my affection for Miss Bennet but seems to dislike Miss Elizabeth even more, and I do not

know why!”

I do , Darcy thought, recollecting the evening when he had told Miss Bingley about Miss Elizabeth’s fine eyes. That had been another careless imprudence, just as it had been to tell the colonel about Bingley and Miss Bennet.

“There is something you should know, and I believe it is better you find out now, as I expect it will be mentioned during your visit and might anger you.”

“What is it?”

“Well...I have reason to believe that Miss Bennet and her aunt also visited your sisters yesterday, not just Lady Matlock.”

Bingley stared at him in disbelief, then frowned, blinking repeatedly.

“What do you mean? She was in my house? When?”

“As I said, I am not sure whether she was or not. But she might have been. I just wanted to warn you in case you hear about it. It is better to be shocked here in the carriage than in front of Miss Bennet and her relatives.”

“But...how is it possible that you know and I do not? Who told you? Caroline? Do you have a relationship with her?”

“Come now, Bingley, do not be ridiculous. The only reason I speak to your sister is you and our friendship. Were it not for that, I should never be in her company. I apologise for being so bluntly rude, but that is the truth.”

“Then how...?”

“She did inform me that Miss Bennet might call. I confess that, for a while, I was in agreement with your sisters — though for different reasons. I believed that Miss Bennet was not a good match for you. As you already know, I presumed that her feelings did not equal yours.”

“I do know that. And I know you agreed with Caroline and Louisa to keep me away from Netherfield!”

“I cannot deny that. However, I have realised my involvement was unnecessary and, although well meant, more harmful than useful. It was not for me to judge anyone’s feelings.”

“And now? What do you think?”

“I have no reason to change my previous estimation. But I shall refrain from expressing it. I am willing to support you in making your own decision, based on your judgment alone.”

“Thank you. I shall ask Miss Bennet whether she visited Caroline yesterday. If she did, my sister will hear from me. How dare she deceive me in my own house! She has treated me like a fool long enough. That will end today!”

“Bingley, try to compose yourself before we arrive in Gracechurch Street. I dare say it is in your best interest to make a good impression.”

“You are right, of course,” Bingley agreed, while Darcy admitted to himself that he too was concerned with making a good impression.

They reached their destination around noon; the house was a handsome building, placed on an elegant street with a small park across from it. It showed that, whatever business Mr Gardiner had, it was successful.

They were invited into a lovely drawing room, tastefully furnished. Mrs Gardiner waited with her husband and her two nieces. Darcy's first glance was directed towards Elizabeth, and he could see her surprise. She certainly had not expected to see him there. Was she pleased with his presence, or the opposite?

Pleasantries were exchanged and an introduction to Mr Gardiner performed, then their host invited them to sit.

Unlike the previous day, Bingley returned to his usual self, amiable and voluble, talking all the time. Mr and Mrs Gardiner proved to be excellent companions, with a great openness for conversation and knowledge in many areas, just as Lady Matlock had claimed. Elizabeth was mostly as he remembered her from Hertfordshire, and, although he did not speak to her directly, her nearness warmed Darcy until the heat inside him became disturbing.

They talked about Pemberley and Lambton, about Mr Gardiner's business, and they debated the extraordinary coincidence that had caused their paths to cross with Lady Matlock's.

Despite the fact that Elizabeth's company was delightfully tormenting, Darcy enjoyed his time more than he had expected.

"Mrs Gardiner, did you happen to visit my sisters yesterday?" Bingley suddenly enquired.

"Yes, we did. Jane wrote to your sister and informed her that we would come."

"Unfortunately, I was not aware of it, as I was not aware of your presence in town until yesterday, when Darcy told me," Bingley confessed, causing general astonishment.

“Your sisters told us you were busy with Mr Darcy and Miss Darcy, which caused your absence during our call,” Elizabeth answered. Darcy did not miss her sharp tone, nor Mrs Gardiner’s reproachful glance. Elizabeth’s statement irritated Darcy exceedingly. What did Miss Bingley mean by claiming Bingley was busy with his sister? Did she suggest there was some sort of arrangement between Bingley and Georgiana? Surely, she would not dare to intimate something so outrageous.

“Despite my close friendship with Bingley, we have only seen each other a few times since we returned from Hertfordshire,” Darcy answered. “As for my sister, she and Bingley have always been friends, but they rarely meet, as they share only a few interests.”

Bingley seemed to have missed the meaning of his sister’s words, but Jane Bennet’s expression of relief was obvious. From her, Darcy looked to Elizabeth, whose eyes wore a glimpse of something he had never seen before.

“I am sure it was some sort of misunderstanding,” Mrs Gardiner offered. “We are happy and honoured to have you both here, gentlemen.”

“And it is good that you have such an honest and loyal friend as Mr Darcy, who tells you the truth, Mr Bingley,” Elizabeth said. There was a smile in her eyes and on her lips, which confused Darcy. Was she being serious or teasing him again?

Boldly, and perhaps even improperly, he replied, “I am glad I have your approval, Miss Elizabeth, although you consider us to be more enemies than friends. This makes your opinion even more valuable.”

The answer evidently disconcerted Elizabeth, and she looked at him, puzzled. Then, Bingley asked a question, and the conversation took another turn. An hour later, the guests took their leave with mutual hopes to meet again but without any fixed plans.

Bingley chatted all the way back to Mayfair, expressing his delight in seeing Jane Bennet, his anger towards his sisters, and the confrontation he planned to have with them. Again, Darcy took his share of the blame; he admitted the short visit had given him enough reason to assume his estimation of Miss Bennet's feelings had been hasty and inaccurate. Bingley, however, seemed determined to quarrel with his sisters, and no argument seemed to calm him.

"I am considering hosting a dinner and inviting the Gardiners. And Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. I shall send both Caroline and Louisa away if they do not behave. Would you come, Darcy? And perhaps Miss Darcy too?"

No, I should not be close to Elizabeth again so soon, Darcy's reason screamed in his mind.

"If you wish it, I shall, Bingley. I would only ask that you take slower steps and consider the effect of your actions on yourself and Miss Bennet."

"I am considering everything very carefully, Darcy. So I shall count on you to come to dinner," Bingley said hastily, proving he had hardly listened to Darcy's advice.

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Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:05 am

Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley calling in Gracechurch Street was an event hard to believe even for Mr Gardiner, who was a pragmatic man and not easily impressed.

“My dear Jane, I am so glad to see you happy,” Mrs Gardiner said. “What a joy it has been to have Mr Bingley here. He seemed to be everything we expected, and his admiration for you cannot be denied!”

“Oh...I am not sure about that, Aunt. But I was happy to see him. At least I know he was not aware of my being in London and was not avoiding me on purpose.”

“I never trusted Miss Bingley’s words, and her claim about Mr Bingley being busy with Miss Darcy is as evil as it is ridiculous! Mr Darcy seemed quite angry when I mentioned it.”

“It is no wonder. Miss Darcy is still very young and certainly not in search of a suitor,” Mrs Gardiner added. “And Mr Bingley’s interest seems to lie in one direction only!”

Jane blushed, smiled, and said nothing else.

“I hope Mr Bingley will confront his sisters and rebuke them as they deserve. Which makes me admit that I was pleasantly surprised by Mr Darcy’s willingness to reveal the truth to his friend.”

“Mr Darcy has always been a loyal friend. Mr Bingley has said that often,” Jane whispered.

“Speaking of that, I am still bewildered. To take tea with Lady Matlock and have Mr Darcy calling at my house all in one week is something I would have never imagined,” Mrs Gardiner said.

“I cannot even argue with you, my dear,” Mr Gardiner said. “Even if Mr Bingley informed you he would call, I did not expect Mr Darcy.”

“Neither did I, my dear. What surprised me even more is that, while we all expected Mr Bingley to be amiable, Mr Darcy was the same, although Lizzy made us believe the opposite.”

“There is something distant and perhaps haughty in Mr Darcy, especially compared to Mr Bingley,” Mr Gardiner added. “However, I agree that his behaviour was beyond reproach, even though he had no reason to be friendly with us.”

“Lizzy dear, I cannot imagine why Mr Darcy made such a poor impression on you. Except that he refused to dance with you and that he disadvantaged your favourite, Mr Wickham.”

Mrs Gardiner’s irony touched Elizabeth, especially since she was equally puzzled by Mr Darcy’s improved manners. His behaviour was indeed beyond reproach; furthermore, he had apparently informed Mr Bingley about Jane’s presence in town and had come to support him on his call, which could have only one purpose: a reconnection with Jane.

“I am as surprised as you, Aunt. I have never seen Mr Darcy act as friendly as he did today.”

“You told Lady Matlock yesterday that you were more enemies than friends, Lizzy. And today, Mr Darcy repeated your words — with apparent displeasure.”

“I said nothing but the truth, based on what I saw every time I was in Mr Darcy’s company. He always looked at me to find fault. It made me most uncomfortable.”

“Well, something changed his mind.”

“Possibly, Aunt. However, as much as I appreciate his friendliness, it does not compensate for the cruelty he showed to his childhood friend Mr Wickham, and it certainly does not justify his disregard of his father’s dying wish.”

“And may I ask how you know all this, Lizzy?” Mr Gardiner enquired.

“Mr Wickham related it to me. I told my aunt the entire story.”

“Do you have any other details, besides Mr Wickham’s narration?”

“I do not, but it is enough for me. Mr Darcy may defend himself if he wishes to!”

“Have you asked Mr Darcy?” Mr Gardiner continued, puzzling Elizabeth.

“Asked him? How could I do that? Mr Darcy hardly spoke to me at all in Hertfordshire. There was no opportunity for me to discuss something so delicate with him.”

“How interesting. Then how did it happen that Mr Wickham found the opportunity to reveal something so delicate and so personal to a stranger he had only just met? He knew nothing about your true character. Why would he confide such an intimate matter to you? Both I and your father find this story highly unlikely.”

Mr Gardiner’s voice was light and his countenance relaxed, but his enquiries vexed Elizabeth. She had never taken the trouble to ask herself such questions, and being forced to answer them now made her feel uncomfortable.

“To me, the only important thing is Mr Darcy’s behaviour towards me and my family,” Mrs Gardiner said. “The Darcys are among the most illustrious families in Derbyshire, and I have never heard anything to question their honour.”

“And yet, Mr Darcy left Mr Wickham a living, which his son refused to give.”

“If there was a clear will, Mr Darcy would have been obliged to follow it. So there must be something more behind this refusal,” Mr Gardiner interjected.

“Besides,” Mrs Gardner concluded, “if there was some misunderstanding between Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham, it is entirely their business and wholly unconnected to us. Unless you, Lizzy, have some particular interest in Mr Wickham.”

“I have no other interest except compassion for a friend’s misfortunes.”

“I understand your reluctance in asking Mr Darcy, Lizzy. I would not do it either. But there is something else I can do,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I may write to my cousin in Lambton and ask whether he knows anything about Mr Wickham. He might know something of interest. In fact, I shall do that immediately.”

Elizabeth had no reason to oppose it. Her uncle and aunt’s arguments were common sense. Indeed, she had trusted Mr Wickham implicitly, from the first time they had spoken. And he had treated her with a confidence that was not justified since he knew nothing of her. She could well be a slanderer and betray the secret with no remorse. As she reflected on this, Elizabeth realised that Mr Wickham himself had ceased to keep the secret of his past dealings as soon as Mr Darcy left Hertfordshire. He had come to Longbourn and told his story, and half of Meryton as well as most of the officers were aware of it.

In the end, Elizabeth felt grateful for Mrs Gardiner’s idea. Finding out some information from Lambton might be the missing link to proving whether she had

misplaced her trust or not.

The day of Mr Bingley's visit seemed to bring Jane back to life, melting Elizabeth's heart. It was not clear yet what had happened that had kept Mr Bingley away from Jane for almost a month; however, during their reunion, his feelings were quite apparent.

Jane refused to admit more than a friendship with Mr Bingley, but Elizabeth knew it was due to her fear that she might hope too much — as had happened before. However, that changed the next day when they received an invitation for dinner from the gentleman. Mrs Gardiner read it out, and Jane seemed to forget to breathe as she listened.

"It says Mr Darcy and Miss Darcy will attend, as well as Colonel Fitzwilliam. He did not mention anything about his sisters. He asked whether tomorrow would be convenient for us."

"I believe so," Mr Gardiner responded. "Do you think the girls are feeling well enough to do without you for an entire evening?"

"I am sure they are. Neither has a fever any longer, and besides their governess, Janey and Thomas will be here all night. The children are as accustomed to them as they are to us. And they might enjoy it more because they are less likely to be disciplined."

"Then it is settled. I shall write to Mr Bingley and accept. I must say — since Lizzy and Jane arrived, there have been a succession of quite remarkable events," Mr Gardiner said.

"True, my dear. A few days ago, we were travelling down Grosvenor Street to catch a

glimpse of Mr Bingley's house, and now we are invited to dine there. And with Mr and Miss Darcy!"

"Your anticipation is so amusing," Elizabeth interjected. "I have never seen any of you so impressed by an invitation."

"You may tease us as much as you want, Lizzy. We are not just impressed," Mrs Gardiner responded, "we are also delighted and pleased with how things seem to have progressed."

Elizabeth could not argue with that. They had arrived in town with a heartbroken Jane, suffering from the loss and betrayal of the man to whom she had given her heart. Just a few days later, there she was, blooming with happiness. Whatever had led to such an outcome, she was grateful for it. And apparently, if Mr Darcy had played a part in Mr Bingley's separation from Jane, he had contributed to their reunion too.

After some intense preparation, the party from Gracechurch Street arrived at the Bingleys' residence in the late afternoon and were warmly welcomed by their host.

Mr Bingley came to the door to greet them, proving he expected them. In the drawing room were Mr and Miss Darcy with another gentleman, as well as Miss Bingley and the Hursts. The introductions were performed, and Colonel Fitzwilliam immediately became a favourite due to his amiable manners.

His was a little older than Mr Darcy and perhaps not so handsome, Elizabeth thought, but from his smile to his tone of voice, everything about him was likable.

"My mother has spoken so much about you since you met that I have looked forward to meeting you," the colonel said. "This dinner is the perfect opportunity."

The conversation developed easily, with the Bingley sisters contributing little to it. Mr Darcy was not particularly vocal either — as usual — but he seemed to enjoy the company and interjected from time to time.

The meal was served; the table was large enough to accommodate the whole party but not so large as to limit conversation, so anyone could easily speak to everyone.

“So, Miss Elizabeth, I understand you were the one who suggested the walk that took you in front of my mother’s coach,” the colonel said. “I am not sure I know many young ladies who favour walking over the comfort of a carriage.”

“Miss Eliza has some peculiar tastes,” Miss Bingley said. “She favours reading over playing cards even at parties, and her favourite activity is walking, regardless of the weather or the distance — even if it is over three miles! It can easily be said that she is a great reader and a great walker.”

“I am not sure whether your remark was meant as praise or criticism, Miss Bingley, so I shall accept both. I see no reason to apologise for my preferences,” Elizabeth replied. “As for the particular instance you refer to, I did walk three miles on a muddy road to see my sister who was ill at Netherfield.” Elizabeth felt annoyed already; and she still held a grudge against the two dishonest sisters.

“You certainly have no reason to apologise, Miss Bennet,” she heard Darcy interjecting. Surprised, she looked at him, and he continued, “I have always considered the improvement of one’s mind through extensive reading to be a quality in a man or a woman. And concern and loyalty towards a sister is certainly something admirable.”

His serious tone bewildered Elizabeth as much as his favourable words. She remembered his statement about improving one’s mind from one evening at Netherfield. And the mention of loyalty for a family member could have been a clear

hint at Miss Bingley's dishonesty, so she felt induced to support him.

"Thank you, Mr Darcy. We have not always been in agreement, but I daresay, in essentials we value similar things. With some exceptions, perhaps, regarding certain circumstances or certain people. But each of us have our moments of prejudice and misjudgement."

Mr Darcy stared at her, a frown between his eyes, in an apparent effort to understand her meaning. She was referring both to his involvement in Mr Bingley's departure as well to Mr Wickham's situation, but surely, he could not guess that.

"I cannot either agree or disagree with your statement, Miss Elizabeth, as I am not sure how well I comprehend it. I hope my statement was as clear as I intended it to be."

"My brother and I walk often when we are at Pemberley," Miss Darcy said.

"I have said it many times — Pemberley is probably the most beautiful place I have ever seen. However, one would probably need weeks to see it on foot," Mrs Gardiner said.

"That is true." Miss Darcy smiled.

"I remember your father often riding from Pemberley to Lambton. We, as children, always recognised him from afar. His posture was unmistakable. He always rode large, frightening horses. I remember Lady Anne also riding, but that was long ago."

"My mother was an excellent rider, but she was too weak for exercise in her last years," Mr Darcy answered. "My sister is an excellent rider too," he added with apparent pride.

“That is because I learnt from you when I was not even four,” the girl answered with an affectionate look at her brother.

“The truth is Georgiana is excellent at anything she attempts,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said, causing Miss Darcy to blush. “So is Darcy, except that he is not as kind as she is,” he jested. Mr Darcy smiled, but it looked a little forced.

“My sister Jane is a good rider too,” Elizabeth said. “I also learnt to ride, but for some reason, horses always intimidated me. I find that walking suits me best.”

“I am sure you would enjoy riding too, Miss Elizabeth, if you gave it a try,” Mr Darcy said with another smile that puzzled Elizabeth.

“I might, but my father has only two horses, and they are usually needed on the farm. So I have few chances to practise for my own amusement.”

“Having only two horses might be a great inconvenience,” Mrs Hurst uttered.

“It depends,” Elizabeth replied calmly, even though she noticed the hidden offence. “It seems walking is a good choice for me. Of all my walks — which have been quite numerous — the one in Hyde Park was certainly the most fortunate.”

“My mother said so too,” the colonel responded in the same light tone.

“I agree!” Mr Bingley interjected. “Without that meeting, I wonder when I would have discovered that Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were in town!” he added with a meaningful glare at his sisters.

“You have a lovely house here,” Mrs Gardiner declared in an obvious attempt to change the subject. “We were delighted to receive your invitation.”

“I am exceedingly happy to have you here, Mrs Gardiner. I am only sorry that I was not at home to greet you properly on your previous visit,” he said, and another glare at his sisters followed.

Elizabeth enjoyed her time exceedingly. She could not help being satisfied by Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst’s obvious discomfort, in opposition to Jane and Mr Bingley’s joy. She spoke extensively with the colonel and Miss Darcy, but Mr Darcy puzzled her. He looked at her intently — as he had done many times in the past — but there was something different in his countenance and in his eyes. His manners towards her relatives were friendly and unassuming, as she had never seen from him before. She also observed his tender concern for his sister, which revealed the affectionate bond between the two — and his amusing exchanges with his cousin, who did not hesitate to tease him at times.

With the disdain and grudge she held against him assuming he had separated Mr Bingley and Jane, Elizabeth found herself unsure of what to think of Mr Darcy’s true character. Everyone else seemed to have a favourable opinion of him, but she could not so easily forgive his selfish and cruel actions that had condemned Mr Wickham to poverty, even if Mr Darcy might have some reason of his own for his behaviour.

She felt more and more tempted to ask him about that story — an impulse she tried to dismiss.

The pleasant dinner party ended quite late, and it would have probably lasted longer if the guests had not had a long ride home.

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The movement of the carriage increased both Darcy's headache and his anxiety. Christmas was only two days away, and it was the last opportunity for visits to those who were not family.

"Darcy, I am so glad you agreed to come with me again! You are truly a good friend," Bingley said.

"Again, you praise me too generously. I hope my presence will not be an intrusion. We both know that you are expected with pleasure in Gracechurch Street, but I am just your companion."

"I disagree. Mr and Mrs Gardiner seemed thrilled each time they saw you. And even Miss Elizabeth did not look displeased. I am relieved your disagreements seem to be over."

"Do you think Miss Elizabeth was displeased to see me before?"

"When we were in Hertfordshire, you were not friends. You disapproved of the entire Bennet family."

"My manners were not appropriate most of the time. Now, I have a personal reason to visit the Gardiners again. I wish to speak to Miss Elizabeth about a delicate matter that I believe needs to be clarified. I hope she will agree to talk to me."

"She probably will, if not out of curiosity, then due to politeness. But I never imagined you would have a delicate matter to discuss with Miss Elizabeth."

“This particular matter has become urgent lately, after thorough reflection. She is in possession of some incorrect information that might lead her to make a wrong impression.”

“I see... I honestly cannot imagine what you are talking about, but I doubt you will tell me even if I enquire.”

“It is not a secret. The Bennets seem to appreciate George Wickham, who is welcomed by their family. He is a dishonourable man with an inclination towards deception, lies, and nefarious schemes, all for the purpose of gaining money. Even worse, he is not a man to be trusted near young women.”

Bingley looked at him, bewildered. “I would never have guessed Wickham would be the subject. I remember Miss Bennet asking me about him when he first came to Meryton, but I only told her that he had treated you with ingratitude. It is all I knew.”

“Wickham is not worth the breath used in talking about him. But he is very skilful at insinuating himself among honourable people and causing all sorts of problems.”

“The youngest Miss Bennets seemed charmed by the man, and their mother seemed to encourage them.”

“Yes, that is precisely my concern.”

Darcy had taken the bold — and perhaps improper — decision of talking to Elizabeth and her relatives about Wickham after the dinner at Bingley’s. The party had been pleasant, but there had been some small hints that had proved that Elizabeth still held Wickham in esteem. If Wickham caused her family problems, Elizabeth would never forgive him for not warning her.

That realisation had come late in the night, together with another one, much more

important and consequential to his present and future. Watching Elizabeth chatting so easily with his sister and his cousin, as she had done with his aunt, made him wonder why he had considered she was not suited to be the future Mrs Darcy. It was not only his admiration and overwhelming passion for her that caused him to question his previous opinion, but the fact that her worthiness was noticed by everyone with reasonable judgment. And her ability to fight anyone willing to attack her, as Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst did.

He had spent hours imagining Elizabeth at his side at Pemberley, bringing laughter and joy to a house that entirely lacked it. The more he thought about it, the more the image became clearer, less impossible. He knew such a decision would not be easily accepted though. Even Lady Matlock would oppose it and would surely consider Elizabeth's family and connections to be of lesser importance than her charm in such circumstances. And to Lady Matlock, Mrs Gardiner, the cousin of the innkeeper in Lambton, would not be as charming a connection of Mrs Darcy's as she was of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's.

And Lady Catherine de Bourgh would certainly cause a scandal if he chose the daughter of a small country gentleman over Anne.

All those points Darcy considered, then dismissed. He only hoped that Georgiana would not be disappointed and that his mother would approve of Elizabeth. He felt — with all his heart — that she was the woman who could complete him, the woman who would make him happy. Just as his mother had made him promise a long time ago. He was also convinced that Elizabeth might help Georgiana grow her confidence and find her own happiness later in life.

As his mind stopped fighting his heart, a strength grew inside him, ready to defeat the weakness of his previous doubts and overcome any obstacles. Any obstacles but one. Elizabeth's feelings for him, he now had his proof, were quite dissimilar to his, and her opinion of him was far from as high as he had assumed in those two months he

had spent at Netherfield.

For many weeks, he had fought against his feelings, his desire to have Elizabeth. Now, when he had decided such a fight was unnecessary, he must fight for Elizabeth's feelings. He must fight for what he had assumed he already had but had been utterly mistaken.

The first step was to talk to Elizabeth about Wickham and to trust her judgment in deciding where the truth lay.

"Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, you are most welcome," Mrs Gardiner said. The drawing room was empty, but soon, Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, and Mr Gardiner joined them.

The conversation began easily, as it did among friends. Darcy was anxious, thinking of how to broach the subject, watching the others in agitated silence. He noticed Elizabeth look at him a few times, probably noticing his restlessness. He understood that he could not simply ask for a private discussion with her, or even one with her uncle present. It would simply be impolite.

"Mr Darcy, may I offer you a drink," Mr Gardiner asked.

"Yes, thank you. No...I mean...forgive me, I do not wish to interrupt you. But when it is possible, I would like to talk about a particular matter...a very delicate one."

"Oh?"

Four pairs of eyes turned to look at him, puzzled.

"I would not have mentioned it if it were not absolutely necessary. It involves a

common acquaintance. Mr George Wickham.”

At that, Elizabeth’s countenance changed, and a frown appeared between her eyebrows. Mr and Mrs Gardiner looked at each other with confusion, then at him.

“Strangely, we were talking about the same subject the other day,” Mrs Gardiner replied.

“Were you? Are there any questions you have that I might answer? I am well aware that Wickham spread rumours about me in Hertfordshire, and I am quite certain they are based on a core truth surrounded by falsehoods. He has done the same many times in the last five years, everywhere he goes and to anyone willing to listen to him.”

“In the five years since your father died, I assume? When he expected to receive a living that was refused him?” Elizabeth enquired in an accusing voice.

He expected her reply, and it did not even vex him.

“Yes, after my father died, Mr Wickham was given one thousand pounds, and on that occasion, he informed me that the church was not his calling after all, and he preferred to study the law. For that, he requested and received another three thousand pounds.”

He paused, looking at Elizabeth, whose astonishment seemed complete.

“I assume Wickham did not mention that part,” he continued. “When the living became vacant, he came to claim it. I would have perhaps given it to him if he had shown any honour or morality in his actions before that moment. However, he in fact wasted the entire sum in activities I shall not mention, disregarding any sort of study or effort for his future.”

He paused again, sipping from his glass. There was much more to add to the story, but it was too painful to be discussed.

“That was not the end of his claims, though, as he continued to apply to me for other financial support. Some pleas were granted, many refused. So he usually employs his time seeking revenge for those refusals through false claims that hurt my reputation.”

“Oh dear! This is horrible!” Mrs Gardiner exclaimed.

“Of course, I am well aware that none of you have any reason to trust my words over Wickham’s, so I have brought some papers with me, signed by him, which prove some of our past dealings. You may study them.”

“That is not necessary, Mr Darcy. We do not doubt your words,” Mr Gardiner replied. “I have wondered about a man so willing to relate his misfortunes to strangers. Mr Wickham’s story was unconvincing to me, as well as to my brother Bennet. We assumed that the part about the living was true, but also that you had a reason for your actions. After all, it was nothing to you who acquired the living, and it could well be him as not, unless something serious prevented it.”

Elizabeth had become pale and silent and averted her eyes from Darcy.

“I shall leave the papers here in case Miss Elizabeth wishes to look at them,” he repeated.

“That will not be necessary, sir,” she answered. “I was certainly not clever enough to wonder about Mr Wickham’s story, as my uncle and my father were. If my uncle does not need proof, neither do I.”

Her voice was as altered as her expression. She was uncomfortable, pale, and restless. Eventually, she stood up and said, “Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, please excuse me, I do not

feel well. I might have a fever. Perhaps I have caught my cousins' cold. I beg your forgiveness. I must leave you now."

She left, and Darcy watched her walk away with a tightness in his chest. She seemed disappointed, and hurt, causing him distress and jealousy. Was she upset to learn the truth? Did she have romantic feelings for that scoundrel? Was she angry with Darcy for revealing the truth in front of her family?

"Mr Gardiner, since you mentioned Mr Bennet was reluctant to believe Wickham, I shall take the liberty of kindly suggesting you warn him not to consider that man a friend of the family's, especially of your young nieces'. He is simply not to be trusted. I apologise if my suggestion is presumptuous, but I sadly know the man better than I would like to."

"Your advice is greatly appreciated and will be considered, Mr Darcy, I assure you."

For the rest of the visit, Bingley and Miss Bennet, together with the Gardiners, continued the conversation, but Darcy could not gather himself enough to even feign a good disposition. He barely spoke at all, thinking of Elizabeth, fearing he had done more harm than good.

They finally left, and the entire drive back to Mayfair, Darcy's state only became worse and remained the same the entire evening and through the agitated night that followed.

After much reflection, at dawn, Darcy reached a moment when he ceased the struggle. He had done what he believed to be honest and needed. If Elizabeth felt harmed or offended by his gesture, there was nothing he could do. He could apologise for harming her, but not for speaking the truth.

With his mind and his body still exhausted, Darcy woke up and was preparing for

breakfast when a servant entered with a letter.

He looked at it and did not recognise the handwriting, so he opened it, intrigued. When he glanced at the signature, he began to read with his heart pounding.

Mr Darcy,

I am writing this letter with my uncle and aunt's permission. I could not wait any longer before I apologised for my response and sudden departure yesterday.

As you may have guessed, your confession affected me; I was equally astonished, upset, and especially mortified by my own foolishness and credulity.

My common sense should have warned me against someone who speaks openly about his past to a complete stranger. But either I do not have common sense, or something induced me not to use it.

I thank you for taking the trouble of telling us the truth. I appreciate your effort, and I am sorry for my ill judgment and for everything unfair I have said to you on this matter. This includes our discussion at the Netherfield ball, which probably gave you the chance to laugh at my silliness — and deservedly so.

I shall apologise in person, too, as soon as the opportunity arises.

Please know that my uncle wrote to my father last evening, as you advised him.

Best regards

E. Bennet

Darcy read the letter first with curiosity, then with emotion, and in the end with a

large smile on his face. A young lady writing to a single man was breaking the rules of decorum, yet she had deliberately done it for him.

Perhaps there was hope, after all.

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“Brother, Aunt asked me why we are not dining with them on Christmas Day,” Georgiana said.

“Would you like to go? I know I am poor company,” Darcy replied.

“You are teasing me now, Brother. I prefer your company to any other. And we have always had Christmas dinner at home.”

“Please think on it, my dear, and we shall do as you please. Do you have plans for today?”

“No...we shall decorate the house for Christmas — I believe the servants anticipate it as much as I.”

“Has Mrs Annesley left yet?”

“Yes. She will spend the next few days with her sister’s family and will return on the twenty-seventh. Did you have a pleasant time at the Gardiners’ yesterday? You looked tired last night.”

“I was a little tired, but I am well now. Yes, it was pleasant, as always. My dear, there is something of great importance that I wish to discuss with you. Something that a man of my age should not discuss with his young sister, but I trust you and value your opinion. In truth, your opinion is the only one that matters to me.”

“Oh...thank you for your trust, Brother! You are always so kind to me. What is it?”

“My dear, you might be surprised to hear this but...I admire Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Oh? Truly? I believed that might be the case since you wrote to me of her in your letters from Netherfield. But you mentioned nothing more once you returned.”

“You did not expect that, I am sure.”

“I did not, because I kept hearing that you two had so many disagreements...”

“We did, and most were my fault. When we first met, my behaviour towards her and her family was arrogant, even offensive.”

“I am sure it was not so bad...”

“It was. Our introduction was at an assembly in Meryton. Bingley insisted on me dancing with her, and I said she was tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me.”

Georgiana stared at him in such astonishment that Darcy laughed.

“Yes, and the worst part is that I believe she heard me...”

“Oh dear!”

“There were more other instances that induced her to have a very poor opinion of me, and deservedly so.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Is that why she said you were more enemies than friends?”

“Very likely...”

“But Brother, may I ask...you admire her in what way?”

He hesitated a moment, looking at his young sister who was still a child yet.

“I admire her in every way. She has a bright mind, is well educated, determined, spirited, has a strong character and a great sense of loyalty to those she loves. She is everything a woman should be.”

“Oh...I see...”

“What do you think?”

“Think?”

“Yes. What I mean is that I would like to pursue her. I would like to show her my admiration and try to gain her good opinion.”

“This is what I fear...do you know what her opinion of you is? Forgive me for asking that, but I have seen no sign of affection on her part...”

“You are very perceptive. Her opinion of me is rather low, though I was so arrogant that for a while I assumed the opposite. I shall try to improve that, and if I succeed, I might take a further step.”

“You mean...”

“My dear, I strongly believe that Miss Elizabeth could be perfectly suited to be my wife. I am sure she could be a loving sister to you and an excellent Mrs Darcy.”

“Oh...but...what if...?”

“What is it? Please speak your mind. I truly wish to have your honest opinion. Do you disagree that she has all these qualities?”

“I do not doubt that. In truth, I hardly know her, but I trust your judgment. My only concern is — what if she accepts your pursuit, even if her feelings are not the same as yours? You are an excellent man, and your situation in life is impressive to everyone, even those with fortune and connections... What if...? Even you said that Mrs Bennet is desperate to find good husbands for her daughters.”

“I understand your concern. It is fair and wise. I do not suspect either of the eldest Miss Bennets of being a fortune hunter. I was wrong when I judged Miss Jane Bennet, but Miss Elizabeth seems too obstinate to be convinced to do anything against her will. Besides, I promise I shall not make any hasty decisions. I shall take my time to get to know her and to allow her time to know me. I hope we shall form a friendship that will develop into something more.”

“That is very wise indeed.”

“My dear, I have shared my intentions with nobody else yet, not even Richard. I would like to keep the secret for a while.”

“I thank you for confiding in me, Brother. I pray that you will be very happy — as happy as you deserve. There is no better man than you, and I hope Miss Bennet will see that.”

Georgiana left, and for a while, Darcy was alone. He felt relieved after the conversation with his sister. At least she was warned and would know that her opinion mattered. Her concerns were also valid and proved that wisdom was not a matter of age.

During breakfast, he could see his sister was distracted and assumed he knew the

reason. After a while, she finally spoke.

“Brother, I was thinking...we both wish to know Miss Bennet as well as possible. What if we invite them all to dine with us on Christmas Day? We shall be alone, and I wonder if they have any other engagements.”

“Christmas Day? The day after tomorrow? My dear, the occasion is too important to send an invitation at such short notice. They must have plans, but if they do not, it must be quite an effort to travel from their home to ours. They cannot leave the children at home on such a day, and they have been ill recently, so they need to rest. As much as I would enjoy such a party, I am afraid it is not possible.”

“You are right, of course. How silly of me. I shall think of something else.”

The girl’s disappointment was similar to Darcy’s. Such an evening would have been wonderful if it were not impossible.

An hour later, Darcy was alone in his library when Bingley burst in. He looked agitated, with a large smile on his face.

“Darcy, look what I just received!”

“I see a letter. It must be something special to have put you in such an excellent mood.”

“It is from Mr Gardiner! Do you remember when he asked what plans I had for Christmas?”

“I do not. I was slightly distracted yesterday.”

“Yes, I noticed. So I said I had no particular plans. And he has just written to me to

invite me to join them for dinner the day after tomorrow! On Christmas Day! Surely there can be only one meaning behind this: that they consider me part of the family! And surely Miss Bennet cannot be a stranger to the invitation! They wish me to dine with them on a special evening! Can you believe it?"

"I can, and I agree with your assumption about the meaning behind it. Will you go? Your response will also indicate to them whether you wish to be part of the family."

"Of course I shall go! On my own. Without my sisters! And after that, I must find a moment alone with Miss Bennet. I am ready to make a decision since I have thought about it countless times. I see no reason to delay proposing! It is what I have wished and prayed for since the 26th of November, at the ball."

He paused, looking at Darcy, then continued.

"Do I have your blessing?"

"Do you need my blessing?"

"I do not, but I would like to have it."

"If you are certain of your decision, I heartily support you."

"I am glad to hear that! Oh, here is the letter. Mr Gardiner included you and Miss Darcy in the invitation, but he assumed you already have plans."

"Did he? May I see the letter?" Darcy asked, surprised, reading with curiosity.

"Indeed, the invitation is clear. Allow me a moment to speak to Georgiana. We do not have any particular plans, so we might attend after all," he said with a strange sense of joy. He overlooked the fact that he had already refused the invitation from the

Matlocks. It felt more exhilarating to dine in Gracechurch Street than in Park Lane.

The house was beautifully decorated, with holly, hawthorn, rosemary, a few Christmas roses, and even a few sprigs of mistletoe. The dinner table was rich and a little crowded, filled with so much joy and talking and laughter as Darcy did not remember experiencing in many years.

The Gardiners' children had been shy and intimidated at first, but they needed only a few minutes to become easy and outspoken. They seemed attached to their cousins, especially to Elizabeth. The boys tried to act in a manly way, copying their father.

Darcy was enchanted to see his sister very much at ease and trying to make conversation with Elizabeth. He was also delighted that — as she had promised in her letter — Elizabeth whispered an apology to him, then welcomed him with a smile he had not seen before.

As much as he feared to assume too much, he could not overlook the obvious change in Elizabeth's manners towards him. She was friendly, without doubt.

"I am truly grateful, and I thank the Lord for this lovely reunion," Mrs Gardiner said sometime later. "Who would believe that an almost accident in Hyde Park would lead to such a wonderful outcome?"

"I must say I am grateful to Darcy for telling me about your presence in town," Bingley added. "If not for him, I might have discovered the truth much later. I might have even left town, as I had several invitations to spend Christmas in the country."

"We are also grateful to Mr Darcy and must thank him," Elizabeth replied. Her voice was teasing, but the little smile on her lips and in her eyes was alluring.

“If we are to follow the same logical line, we should be grateful to Miss Elizabeth’s passion for walking, which led you to the near accident,” Darcy added, causing cheers of approval. Elizabeth was still looking at him, and he smiled at her.

“Mama always claimed nothing good would come from my wild habit of taking long walks. I am pleased that she was wrong,” Elizabeth joked.

After dinner, there was no separation, and — to Darcy’s astonishment — Georgiana mentioned she had seen a pianoforte in the corner and suggested some music. He could not remember another instance when his sister had offered to play, not even with their family. She always accepted any requests shyly but was reluctant to perform.

Bingley supported the request, and Mr and Mrs Gardiner thanked him.

“I wonder whether Miss Elizabeth or Miss Bennet could accompany me?” the girl suggested.

“Oh, my playing is quite poor,” Miss Bennet said. “But Lizzy performs beautifully. I am sure she would be delighted to play with you, Miss Darcy.”

“I would indeed be delighted to play with Miss Darcy — and ashamed,” Elizabeth said. “Your playing might be poor, Jane, but mine is not much better. And considering all the praise I have heard about Miss Darcy; I am sure she will be appalled to hear me.”

“That is certainly not the case,” Darcy interjected. “I have had the pleasure of hearing Miss Elizabeth play, and I was far from appalled. I shall not deny my sister’s proficiency, but it will certainly not reduce the charm of your playing, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Mr Darcy, your choice of words is truly commendable,” Elizabeth responded, laughing. “You somehow managed to admit I play rather ill without offending me. I see a clear improvement in your wording, sir.”

He knew what she meant and answered, “I am trying to improve, Miss Elizabeth. I am counting on you for an honest critical opinion.”

“Then you will have it, sir. Be warned.”

There was more laughter, and they exchanged a few glances, ignorant of the fact that Georgiana as well as the Gardiners were watching them with either interest or puzzlement. Georgiana and Elizabeth played and sang together, and just as Elizabeth had estimated, one performance was exquisite and perfect, the other one pleasant and charming. Both received warm applause and congratulations.

“Mr Gardiner, Mrs Gardiner, Georgiana and I were talking earlier today. We would be delighted if you would have dinner with us one day. You may bring the children too, but in such a case, we must make plans for you to stay overnight. We have plenty of rooms to accommodate you all.”

“Dinner would be wonderful, Mr Darcy. But to stay overnight — we would not dare. Besides, we do not wish to take the children out of the house at the moment, apart from some short walks in the nearest park,” Mrs Gardiner said.

“You may decide an evening, and we shall gladly attend,” Mr Gardiner added.

“Then, would December the 28th be convenient for you?” Darcy asked.

“Perfectly.”

The party ended late, close to midnight. The farewells were friendly, even

affectionate, and Bingley promised to call again after Boxing Day.

“Upon my word,” Bingley said in the carriage that took them home, “I cannot remember when I last had a more enjoyable Christmas dinner. Perhaps in my childhood.”

Georgiana nodded enthusiastically. “I agree. It was lovely, especially with the children’s company. So much laughter and joy! Did you have a pleasant time, Brother?”

“Exceedingly pleasant,” Darcy answered, and he knew he was smiling.

Boxing Day passed with much agitation in Darcy’s house. Georgiana loved the joy of giving, and Darcy was happy to see her completing that important and satisfying duty. He could not help thinking that perhaps next year, Elizabeth might help Georgiana with that particular responsibility. The more he thought of it, the more that image became clearer and less impossible.

His hopes had grown more as, during the dinner at the Gardiners’, he had noticed Georgiana’s small exchanges with Elizabeth, and afterwards, he had heard his sister favourably talking about her.

On the 27th of December, Colonel Fitzwilliam visited; he was surprised that they had dined at the Gardiners’ on Christmas Day.

“My mother will be disappointed when she hears it.”

“I hope she will understand. I shall explain it to her.”

“You will have to explain it to me, too, as I am confused why you would prefer some new acquaintances over us,” the colonel said mostly in jest.

“I believe Bingley is ready to propose to Miss Bennet. And our acquaintance is not so very new. Georgiana loves you all, and she has had countless opportunities to be with your family. She enjoys the company of the Gardiners and the Miss Bennets, and she has had limited chances to spend time with them thus far.”

“That, I understand.”

“We shall have a dinner party at our house tomorrow. You are welcome to join us, but it will be nothing formal. That is why I did not invite your parents. The dinner will be far below what they are accustomed to.”

“That makes sense. I shall gladly come.”

While talking to the colonel, Darcy felt guilty and distracted. He had trusted his cousin with everything, including Georgiana’s attempted elopement. He would like to share his admiration for Elizabeth with him too, but it was all so uncertain yet that he could not decide how much he might say. That same day, Darcy went to speak to the Matlocks about the dinner in Gracechurch Street and the dinner he was to host. His uncle and aunt deserved as much consideration.

“So, Mr Bingley is ready to find his felicity with Miss Bennet. Against your unwise advice and his sisters’ opposition.”

“Indeed. I have already admitted that my advice to Bingley was unwise and wrong.”

“Good. You know, I have thought about inviting Mr Bingley, the Gardiners, and their nieces to my New Year party. But they are five people, and places at the table are limited. Besides, I am not sure they would feel comfortable among strange people

outside their circle.”

“I have no opinion on the matter, Aunt. The decision is yours. I shall have a small dinner party, which you and Uncle are more than welcome to attend if you wish.”

“We might come. Save two seats for us.”

“I shall,” Darcy answered, slightly surprised by the acceptance.

That evening, Darcy received the visit of a thrilled, smiling, red-faced Bingley, bursting into his library.

“Darcy, you will never guess what I did. I went to Gracechurch Street and asked for a private moment with Jane — Miss Bennet! — and I proposed! I did it! And she accepted me! Can you imagine?”

“I can easily, but I did not expect it to happen so suddenly. You have my heartfelt congratulations, Bingley.”

“Thank you! I just came from there. All is done. Mr Gardiner and I wrote to Mr Bennet, asking for his consent. We should have his reply tomorrow. But Mrs Gardiner said I have no reason for concern. If you only knew how happy Jane was! And she looked beautiful! She cried with joy! I am the happiest man in the world!”

“I am very happy for you, Bingley. Have a seat, and I shall pour you a drink. So by tomorrow night, at dinner, you will likely be a betrothed man.”

“I shall! By the way, did you invite my sisters for dinner?”

“I did not. And if you do not mind, I intend not to. The Matlocks might attend, though.”

“I do not mind. It is your decision. Besides, they will be most displeased to hear about my engagement, so I expect them to be in a poor disposition tomorrow.”

“Then it would be better for them to be allowed some time alone,” Darcy concluded.

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Elizabeth gazed at her image in the mirror. She had chosen her best dress and arranged her hair with much care, her heart beating irregularly.

Jane — newly engaged — was the centre of attention, and she was exceedingly happy for her sister. However, she also felt a deep anxiety and distraction she could not explain.

In a very short amount of time, her feelings had suffered a confusing and astonishing change in regard to Mr Darcy. On the day of the accident with Lady Matlock, she was certain that Mr Bingley had left Jane due to the evil intervention of his sisters and Mr Darcy. She now had doubts that Mr Darcy was a cruel, arrogant man with no consideration for other's feelings, who had ruined Mr Wickham's life out of selfish jealousy.

One by one, all of the charges against him had fallen away. Mr Darcy had proved to be the one who helped Mr Bingley reunite with Jane, then he had described what had really happened with Mr Wickham. And all that time, he had shown nothing but amiability and friendliness to her relatives — and to her.

What troubled her exceedingly was the sensation that he treated her with special regard, for which she had no proof, just feelings. There were no words, no gestures to justify her imaginings; even more dangerous was the fact that she enjoyed those thoughts, that she found his company pleasant and was eager to see him again. Every time she saw him, her heart raced, and she feared she was suffering an infatuation that made her blind to reality. The notion that Mr Darcy might have feelings for her was absurd, of course. He was likely being amiable due to his friend's situation and probably because his sister and aunt seemed to like Mrs Gardiner. Her wisdom

advised her not to assume something that never could be, but the voice of wisdom was not always easy to follow.

“Lizzy, my dear, there is something that has troubled me for a while,” Mrs Gardiner said when they were ready to depart. “I cannot understand it, and neither can your uncle. Why is Mr Darcy so particularly attentive to us? Why has he called several times, had dinner with us twice, one on a special evening, and — even more shockingly — invited us to dinner at his home?”

“It is a little strange,” Elizabeth admitted, feeling her cheeks burning.

“I noticed your opinion of him has improved lately.”

“It has. All the reasons that led me to believe so ill of him are gone now. We are trying to be friends, especially now, after Jane’s engagement to Mr Bingley.”

“But still, his attention is far beyond a mere acquaintance, especially since he has not been friendly to your family before.”

“True...”

“I confess I have a suspicion that I hope to clarify tonight.”

“A suspicion?”

“Yes,” Mrs Gardiner said after a brief hesitation. “Lizzy, do you know or suspect any reason for Mr Darcy’s behaviour towards us?”

“I do not... I have asked myself too...but have found nothing plausible to explain his change of manners, except for our recent encounter with Miss Darcy and Lady Matlock.”

“What about something implausible?” Mrs Gardiner asked, scrutinising her.

“Nothing worthy of being discussed. May I ask about your suspicions?”

“Well, my dear, usually a gentleman who is single and in possession of a fortune only shows such attention when he admires a lady and wishes to gain her good opinion. In our case, however, Jane is engaged to his friend, and we were told he had such a poor opinion of you as you have of him. You certainly understand my puzzlement.”

“It is puzzling.”

“So, either he is secretly in love with Jane — which, from my observation, is as likely as he is in love with me — or the subject of his interest is you, and we have been misled in everything we previously believed about him.”

Elizabeth’s face coloured, and she bit her lip, trying to form a reply.

“I honestly cannot offer an answer to your puzzlement, Aunt.”

“Very well. However, please indulge me with a response. If you are the object of Mr Darcy’s interest and he is trying to gain your attention, what would your opinion be?”

Elizabeth breathed deeply.

“My opinion is that, since I have come to know him better, Mr Darcy is one of the best gentlemen one could find. He is also exceedingly rich, with an excellent situation in life, with responsibilities and expectations placed upon him, who would never consider a wife outside his circle. That is why, regardless of what interest he might have, I shall not allow myself hopes that can only hurt and disappoint.”

“Oh...I see... Well, my dear, I do not know how to reply to that. I am sorry for

ruining your disposition. I was selfish to introduce a subject that distressed you.”

“Do not worry, Aunt. All your questions I have already asked myself over the last few days,” Elizabeth said, attempting a smile.

During the entire ride through London, Elizabeth was thoughtful and silent. When they finally entered Darcy’s house, she was exceedingly disturbed. Her distraction increased when they were met by the master and Mr Bingley — who immediately stepped to his betrothed’s side. Mr Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm, which she took with surprise and emotion. She entered the house, looking around but barely seeing anything, too distracted by Mr Darcy’s presence. She had never been so close to him, and his nearness was disquieting in a way she had never felt before in the presence of any other man.

Lord and Lady Matlock, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Bingley were also present at dinner. Elizabeth knew too well that the invitation was a privilege that they could not have expected a fortnight ago. And again, the question of why persisted in her mind, yet all the explanations were frightening to admit.

Mrs Gardiner — as well as Lady Matlock — seemed to pay special attention to the situation. Surely Lady Matlock’s curiosity was at least as great as Mrs Gardiner’s. However, there was not much to observe.

Mr Darcy was a perfect host — amiable, considerate, entertaining the party with a friendly though restrained tone, in opposition to Mr Bingley’s exuberance and the colonel’s easy manners. No particular attention was shown to Elizabeth, except the fact that, again, Miss Darcy agreed to play and sing with her.

“Mr Bingley, now that you are engaged, what are your plans?” Lady Matlock enquired.

“My plans? I shall return to Hertfordshire probably in a week, to open Netherfield. And then it depends on Miss Bennet to choose a wedding day,” he said with an adoring glance at Jane, who blushed.

“How lovely. And you, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth? Will you stay in town long?”

“No. We shall return home three days after New Year,” Jane said.

“Ah, so in a week also?”

“Yes.”

“I shall escort Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth home,” Bingley added.

“Of course you will,” Lady Matlock said, smiling encouragingly at him. “Miss Bennet, next time you come to London, you will likely be Mrs Bingley. I insist on you visiting me again. With your aunt and sister, of course.”

“After my sister becomes Mrs Bingley, we shall not be together as much as we used to be,” Elizabeth replied with a smile of her own.

“Married or not, I shall always enjoy Miss Elizabeth’s company,” Bingley said. “I always did, even when we were barely acquainted and when Darcy always disagreed with her. It was quite entertaining to watch them arguing all the time. I believe they quarrelled even when they danced together at my ball.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warming and cast a glance at Mr Darcy, who seemed uneasy.

“There were some disagreements, but not arguing or quarrelling, merely discussions over differing opinions. The occasion to carry on a serious debate with a woman

willing to share and defend her opinion is very rare and quite refreshing.”

“They sound like quarrels to me, and I wonder how many times Miss Elizabeth defeated you,” the colonel interjected, laughing.

“Unfortunately, some of my disagreements with Mr Darcy were caused by my misjudgement of certain subjects. I am grateful and relieved that many of them have been resolved in the meanwhile.”

“You and my nephew seem to have had a quite tumultuous relationship, Miss Elizabeth,” Lady Matlock declared with a peculiar expression on her face.

“If we have, my share of the blame for it is certainly bigger,” Mr Darcy said. “As Miss Elizabeth stated, I am relieved that we have reached a better understanding since.”

The entire conversation was light, as appropriate for a dinner party, but Elizabeth did not miss the curious looks of her relatives — and his. Except for Jane and Mr Bingley, who only had eyes for each other.

After that particular conversation, there was some music provided by Georgiana and Elizabeth, then a little more conversation and drinks, and the party finally separated an hour before midnight.

Elizabeth left Darcy’s house with the same tightness in her stomach as when she had arrived. She was ashamed to admit it, but she felt a sense of deep loss leaving his house, and as soon as the carriage began to move, she wondered when she would see him again.

She slept little and poorly, fighting tiredness and thinking of him.

The following morning, immediately after breakfast, an express arrived from Longbourn. Mrs Bennet was so exceedingly happy about Jane's engagement that her nerves troubled her, and she begged her daughters to return home as soon as possible so that they could prepare for the wedding together.

The only one truly worried was Jane; Elizabeth and the Gardiners imagined that Mrs Bennet only wished her daughters to be there to share in her elation. However, nobody could deny the request, so a note was sent urgently to Mr Bingley, who immediately agreed to change his plans and escort them back home. So the very next morning, on the 30th of December, Elizabeth, Jane, and Mr Bingley left London, without seeing Mr Darcy again.

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The ride back to Netherfield, which he had left in a hurry two months ago, was difficult and disquieting.

Bingley had returned to his rented estate almost a month earlier, and since then, he had written regularly, which was quite unlike his former habits.

He was to marry Miss Jane Bennet in a fortnight, and since Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst were not with him, Darcy agreed to keep him company. Besides Bingley's plea, the reason that induced him to abandon his plans in town was his longing for Elizabeth.

The news that she had left in haste, two days after the dinner party, had affected him deeply. The hope he had nurtured of being with her had made her departure painful; he had missed her when he had left Netherfield, but her loss had been unbearable this time, now he had accepted his feelings and desires and seen them suddenly shattered.

The dinner party had been a turning point in his life from many points of view. It was Elizabeth's first visit to his house, which he had hoped was only the first step in her becoming a regular presence there. It was also an occasion that aroused Colonel Fitzwilliam, Lady Matlock, and Lord Matlock's curiosity. If his cousin's questions were posed privately, over a drink, his aunt and uncle had openly requested explanations for his apparent sudden partiality towards the Gardiners and their nieces. It was understandable, as they had all been under the impression that he disapproved of the Bennets and their relatives from Gracechurch Street. His arrogant behaviour had turned against him and required amends.

“I have already admitted several times that I was wrong in judging Bingley and Miss Bennet, as well as Miss Elizabeth and Mr and Mrs Gardiner,” Darcy had told his relatives. “I now recognise their worthiness and enjoy their company very much. There is nothing more to say.”

They were dissatisfied with his answer, but indeed there was nothing else to say. He would have willingly admitted his admiration for Elizabeth, but until he was certain of her feelings, there was no use in exposing her to the judgment and enquiries of his family. In Hertfordshire, it might be easier for him to find opportunities to speak to her in private. He was well aware of her pleasure in taking long walks, and he certainly could meet her on such an occasion.

Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, and the colonel were due to arrive at Netherfield a week later — a week prior to Bingley’s wedding. At the same time, Miss Bingley and the Hursts were expected, as well as the Gardiners. Georgiana had wished to visit Hertfordshire too, and he had agreed since the danger of a meeting with Wickham had now passed.

Wickham had left his regiment as suddenly as he had joined it after more news of his character became public. Apparently, Mrs Gardiner — being a clever lady — had gained her own information about the man from her relatives in Lambton. She had found out about Wickham’s seductions of young girls, his debts, and his creditors who were still chasing him — and Mrs Gardiner had immediately passed the information on to the Bennets. Mr Bennet had been so angry that, besides forbidding Wickham’s presence near his family — he had shared the knowledge with others in Meryton, including Colonel Forster. A confrontation had followed, which proved that Wickham had already run up many debts with his fellow officers and some with shops in Meryton. Consequently, Wickham had left, intending to leave the country. Of course, Wickham’s claimed intentions were rarely true; Darcy was well aware that, if Wickham truly wished to travel abroad, he would approach him and ask for money. Darcy would gladly purchase him a ticket on a ship bound for a far-off land, though he doubted Wickham could live honourably in a foreign country without

support, since he was not capable of doing that in a place where he had all the support he needed.

Darcy arrived in Meryton on a cold, cloudy afternoon; there were few people on the streets, so he saw no acquaintances and continued his journey. He reached Netherfield before dinner and was welcomed by an exuberant Bingley. Strangely enough, Netherfield gave Darcy a warm feeling of family — of home. The first thing he recollected was the time he had spent there with Elizabeth, both during her stay and at the ball. His interpretation of those recollections was now different — a more humble and more realistic one but still warm and thrilling.

The following day, after breakfast, Darcy visited Longbourn for the first time, calling on the family he had criticised and avoided so many times in the past.

He was received politely yet coldly, as he knew he deserved, by everyone except Miss Jane Bennet, who greeted him warmly. And except for Elizabeth, who looked at him with an expression of heartfelt delight, which was impossible to miss and which brought a glimmer of joy to her pretty eyes and a smile to her lips.

“Mr Darcy! What a pleasure to have you here, sir!”

“I am delighted to be here, Miss Elizabeth. Exceedingly delighted,” he admitted and noticed a trace of red on her cheeks.

“Miss Darcy is in good health, I hope? And the colonel? Lord and Lady Matlock?”

“Everyone is well, thank you. My sister and cousin will arrive next week. They look forward to being here too.”

“Oh! The colonel is the son of the earl? And your sister? Will they come here? I just realised you have never been here before, Mr Darcy!” Mrs Bennet interjected. Near her, Mr Bennet looked at him attentively.

“Yes, they will both come. And I may say they are eager to make your acquaintance.”

“Our acquaintance? How wonderful! We look forward to meeting them too. I knew Jane’s marriage would bring all sorts of illustrious people to our home. Lady Lucas will die of envy, I am sure. She was proud that her daughter Charlotte had married Mr Collins, but now my daughter is marrying Mr Bingley, and Mr Darcy’s sister and cousin will come to visit us! Nobody in Meryton can compete with that!”

Darcy was amused but noticed Elizabeth’s embarrassment. Behind his wife, Mr Bennet rolled his eyes.”

“Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, may I tempt you with a drink in the library?” the gentleman offered.

In the six days that followed, Darcy met Elizabeth daily, on various occasions. He and Bingley called at Longbourn, and he suggested Bingley propose a stroll in the garden, which only Miss Bennet and Elizabeth accepted. It was the first time he had the chance to talk to Elizabeth privately. He had intended to apologise for his past errors, but she spoke first.

“Mr Darcy, I have long desired to apologise for my unfair assumptions about you and Mr Wickham. I did so in my letter, but it needed to be done in person. I have no excuse for my foolishness. I believe I was blinded by prejudice and trusted a man who flattered me and my family and who made accusations against you, without asking for proof.”

“You, Miss Bennet, trusted a man who behaved kindly to you and your family, rather than one who was rude, arrogant, haughty, and ready to assume the worst. Nobody could blame you for such a choice. At least I do not. How could you suspect anything since I failed to reveal the truth for a long time?”

“Your former behaviour, whilst not amicable, was no excuse for me being a simpleton.”

“Not amicable is too kind a description of a man who offended you at an assembly and played an ungenerous role in separating his friend from your sister. It was not my duty to judge or to advise. I did it out of arrogance, and I was wrong — again.”

“We seem to have many things to apologise to each other for, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

“I do. You, not so much. It might take many more strolls to make amends for my errors.”

“Your actions since we met in London and your present visit are enough amends for any presumed wrong, Mr Darcy. I dare say there is no need to debate this subject further.” She paused a little, then she looked at him, and their eyes met. “However, I do agree that we need many more such strolls, just to talk. On any other subjects.”

His heart raced and melted. “There is nothing I would like more, Miss Bennet.”

That was their first agreement. Afterwards, every time Darcy and Bingley called, the four of them would take a stroll, and he walked with Elizabeth a few steps behind Miss Bennet and Bingley. They were in full view of the house, but still, they had the desired privacy, allowing them the opportunity to really talk — openly and honestly — and to come to know each other. Every single day, every single conversation strengthened Darcy’s conviction that Elizabeth was the one his mother spoke of. The one to complete him and make him happy. She was always present in his mind, and his heart was full of her.

Her pleasure in his company was also obvious — she even declared it several times. Every day they seemed more comfortable with each other.

After the Gardiners, Georgiana, Mrs Annesley, and the colonel arrived, the opportunities for private encounters came at Netherfield, where they all met often. There were two official dinners, with the extended families attending, in the Netherfield dining room. The meeting between Bingley's sisters and the Gardiners was amusing for both Darcy and Elizabeth, who shared it through meaningful glances.

As the wedding was approaching, Elizabeth and Miss Bennet would come to Netherfield and stay a few hours. Miss Bennet was busy with the housekeeper and the servants, while Elizabeth spent time with Georgiana and with Darcy, and he was happy to see the growing bond between the two women he so dearly loved.

One afternoon, while Miss Bennet and the Gardiners were engaged in conversation and Georgiana was resting, Darcy gathered the courage to ask Elizabeth to take a stroll in the gardens. Her changed countenance proved that she suspected the reason for his invitation, and the little shy smile that twisted her lips and the sparkle in her eyes were enough encouragement for him to proceed.

Once out of doors, a few minutes passed in silence, with stolen glances and only the sound of their steps breaking the silence; until he finally found the words to express the feelings that had thrilled and tortured him for months.

“Miss Bennet, I might be too hasty, or too arrogant in assuming you will accept what I have to say. I hope you will allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

He lost his voice and had to gulp a few times. Enough for her to stop and gaze at him.

“You are not too hasty and certainly not arrogant, Mr Darcy. I have hoped to hear such words for quite a long while now. Except for the word ardently. I confess I never expected to hear Mr Darcy using it,” she teased him, her voice and eyes tearful with emotions.

“I did not expect to hear myself using it. In fact, I never expected myself to feel it, until I met you, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. You must be warned that I shall use it quite often if you do me the honour of becoming my wife.”

“I would be honoured to, Mr Darcy. But even more, I would be happy and grateful. And I look forward to hearing that word used every day.”

The bliss was too deep to be voiced further. And they were in full view of the house, so there was no kiss, no embrace, no tender gesture that day, but that was fully compensated for as soon as their engagement was acknowledged and private walks were allowed with no restriction — even encouraged by Mrs Bennet.

Mr Bennet’s blessing was obtained the same afternoon, but, except for Georgiana and the colonel, the engagement was made public only after Bingley and Miss Bennet’s wedding.

Two more busy weeks — madness, as Mr Bennet called it — followed until, in the middle of February, Darcy and Elizabeth were married by licence in Longbourn Church.

There was much joy for some and much resentment for others about their wedding. Some supported it, others objected and refused to acknowledge it or responded with rage — like Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Others — like the Matlocks — needed some time to accept the idea that a fortuitous meeting in Hyde Park had brought more consequences than they had assumed at the beginning, and that the man who had been the least pleased by that meeting had benefited the most from it.

In the end, however, nobody and nothing altered the strength of Mr Darcy’s decision, nor the happiness his wife brought him from the day of his proposal to the day when he held her in his arms as the carriage took them to their London house — and on all

the days that followed.

Pemberley was their beloved home — as well as Georgiana's — and the place where their extended family often gathered. Among many other newly acquired skills, Mrs Elizabeth Darcy learnt to ride and drive a phaeton — activities that she came to enjoy as much as walking.

Mrs Darcy quickly assumed her responsibilities and made efforts to learn to accomplish them in the best possible way. She was kind and warm to others yet determined and confident.

Mr Darcy called his wife his joy, and she called him her quiet strength. Their characters and natures were different but completed each other. The world ardently was used and felt every day between them, just as they had promised on the day of Darcy's proposal.

When their first son was born two years into their marriage, both called him the perfect gift of their love.

Every time they all met, Lady Matlock still wondered how a simple ride in Hyde Park and an almost accident could have changed the lives of so many utterly and completely.

Darcy often claimed that he would have come to the same conclusion eventually. That, one way or another, he would have understood his officious involvement between Jane and Bingley and would have accepted his love for Elizabeth and proposed to her, regardless of anything else.

Still, he did not deny he was grateful that fate had intervened and hastened things and smoothed his path towards Elizabeth — towards happiness.

THE END