



Mrs. Gardiner: Matchmaker (The Pemberley Collection #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: What if Mrs. Gardiner uncovered Darcys secret letter to Elizabeth after Hunsford?

Thus begins Mrs. Matchmaker

When Mrs. Gardiner accidentally uncovers the letter Darcy wrote to her niece, she contrives to change their summer plans from touring the lakes to visiting Derbyshire, with the design that they might see Pemberley and somehow reunite Elizabeth with the man whose offer of marriage she regretfully refused.

The plan seems to work, as they run into Darcy on the grounds when they tour the estate. Mrs. Gardiner slows down her walk, giving them as much time as she can to allow them a moment to be reacquainted.

Will Darcy get a chance to prove hes a gentleman—or better yet, a chance to win Elizabeth back?

Read on to see how ODC gets their HEA in Hailey Jones's Pride Prejudice variation novella Mrs. Matchmaker

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Mrs. Gardiner pressed the visit to Pemberley for one reason, and one reason only: to reunite Lizzy with Mr. Darcy.

It all started months ago, after her niece returned from Kent, when she stayed with them on her return trip to Longbourn. Mrs. Gardiner had gone into Jane and Lizzy's chambers to drop off a book she knew Lizzy wanted to read, and that's when she saw it—the letter from Mr. Darcy.

Normally, she wasn't one to pry, but the page had fallen to the floor, and she could see the signature of who sent it—and she was shocked. So shocked that she picked it up, and after stepping out in the hall to determine she was alone, she moved back into the room quietly and read it. Mrs. Gardiner wasn't glad to have done such a thing, of course—violating her niece's privacy was no proud moment of hers.

But it explained a number of things—the first of which was Lizzy's melancholy upon her return from Kent.

It turned out that Lizzy and Mr. Darcy had an argument, and here in his letter, he was addressing her accusations and defending himself, justifying his actions. Mrs. Gardiner was saddened to learn of the manipulation of poor Mr. Bingley, but knowing how crude her sister-in-law Mrs. Bennet could be, and as hard to read as Jane really was, she couldn't really blame the man for coming to the wrong conclusions. It was an honest mistake that surely anyone might have made.

As for Mr. Wickham...Mrs. Gardiner always knew something was not right about that man, even if she humored Lizzy on that score in the past. What he nearly did with Mr. Darcy's young sister—why, it was horrible. She felt a surge of sympathy for the

poor man, trying to raise his sister in the wake of their parents both being gone.

But what struck her the most about such a letter, was its stealthy admission: Mr. Darcy had proposed marriage to her niece.

The line revealed it in his address about why he objected to the marriage of Jane and Mr. Bingley: "My objections to the marriage were not merely those, which I last night acknowledged to have required the utmost force of passion to put aside, in my own case"—in his own case? Goodness!

It didn't take long for Mrs. Gardiner to put two and two together—Lizzy refused the man's proposal, and presumably did so on the grounds of him meddling with Jane and Mr. Bingley, and his alleged poor treatment of Mr. Wickham.

Oh Lizzy, what a fool she's been—Mrs. Gardiner couldn't help but wonder what her poor niece must be feeling now, after learning the truth behind everything. If Lizzy's morose quietness since Hunsford was any clue, then Mrs. Gardiner would gamble that the girl's primary feelings were of regret and acute mortification. Mrs. Gardiner cringed to read Mr. Darcy's statements about the Bennets, yet she couldn't deny her husband's sister's want of propriety, and even Mr. Bennet's bad behavior, too, of lazily hiding away in his library and letting his estate dwindle to nothing, while his younger girls ran practically wild. She sighed.

What could be done for her niece?

She had heard about Lizzy's rejection of this Mr. Collins person from Mrs. Bennet all through Christmas—how would Mrs. Bennet react when she learned that Lizzy had rejected a man of ten times Mr. Collins's consequence? No wonder Lizzy was keeping mum about it—if her mother found out, she'd never hear the end of it for the rest of her days.

After Jane and Lizzy departed back to Hertfordshire with young Miss Maria Lucas, Mrs. Gardiner contemplated to herself if there was anything she could do. She noticed that Lizzy hadn't once uttered anything negative about Mr. Darcy since her return from Kent.

Could the girl have changed her opinion of the man?

There was one night, many weeks after Jane and Lizzy had departed, when an idea came into Mrs. Gardiner's mind.

"Dear," she said to her husband as he readied for bed, "You know, do you really think you're going to have enough time to visit the lake country this summer?"

He looked at her with some surprise. "Do you not want to visit the lakes?"

"Why, of course I do. But it seems you are spending more and more time at your office."

"That's because I must, if we are to be away for as long as we plan. Why do you ask?"

She smiled at him wistfully as he slid into bed next to her.

"I miss seeing you, is all," she said.

He kissed her. "Well, I miss seeing you too, my darling. But what is there to be done? If we are to be gone for most of the summer—"

"But that's just the thing. Maybe we can shorten the trip, and visit somewhere else instead."

He furrowed his brow. She went on, "Maybe we could visit Derbyshire?"

He looked at her and then laughed. "I see what this is. You want me home more, and you want to visit Lambton, is that it?"

She beamed, knowing he was already going to agree. "Of course. You know me so well, Mr. Gardiner."

"That I do, Mrs. Gardiner."

He agreed to the change, and he agreed to spend less time at the office. She showed him her appreciation in the best way a wife knows how when she is in her husband's bed, and as she lay there after, she smiled to herself.

Lizzy would get another chance with Mr. Darcy, Mrs. Gardiner would make sure of that.

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"He is the best landlord and the best master that ever lived," Mrs. Reynolds said to them as they continued on their tour, "Not like the wild young men nowadays, who think of nothing but themselves. There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name. Some people call him proud; but I am sure I never saw anything of it. To my fancy, it is only because he does not rattle away like other young men."

Elizabeth blanched at such an explanation for Darcy's somber mien, recalling how he once told her how he did not have the talent of conversing easily with people he had never met before, and she now realized perhaps it was true. Darcy was shy and uncomfortable in new places and situations, and he was not smooth or easy speaking like other young men—such as that vile Wickham, for example.

She cringed to think of how she had once been taken in by Wickham's lies, and as if her aunt were reading her mind, the lady leaned over to her and whispered, "This fine account of him is not quite consistent with his behavior to our poor friend."

Elizabeth looked at her aunt quizzically—the woman had some knowing spark in her eyes, and for a brief moment, Elizabeth suspected that somehow Mrs. Gardiner knew the truth.

But that was impossible.

"Perhaps we might be deceived," she answered tentatively.

Mrs. Gardiner raised an eyebrow with an almost teasing smile and said, "That is not likely; our authority was too good."

Elizabeth frowned briefly but let it go—she didn't have the time nor wherewithal to explain to her aunt the truth of the matter, that Wickham was a liar and had deceived them all when he was in Meryton.

They moved to the art gallery, where there were large portraits adorning the walls, and there was one which drew Elizabeth to it the most. It was Darcy's portrait—how fine he looked. But more particularly, there was a contentment in his expression, a slight smile which was pleasant to look at, and which, as she recalled with a mixture of shame and embarrassment for not realizing it for what it was earlier, was not unlike the expression she had often seen on his face when he looked at her. She gazed at his portrait for some time, and even came back to it a second time, thinking this would likely be the closest she would ever get to seeing the man himself again, a thought and realization which caused a small wave of sadness to overcome her.

She was relieved to finally venture outside and away from the painful reminders of how much she wronged the man with her prejudiced opinions against him. Hearing Mrs. Reynolds's praise of him, a woman who was not only an intelligent servant but who had also apparently known him since he was a little boy—her words did not fall lightly upon Elizabeth's ears.

Outside, she adored the grounds. The small river which flowed through the landscape and released into the grand lake beyond was pleasing to her; she admired how nature itself was untouched by Pemberley's grand presence here, as if the estate was in perfect harmony with its natural surroundings; she could accept that if Darcy were proud, this was certainly a place of which to feel so.

Suddenly, as if conjured by her very thoughts, there he was—Darcy himself, walking from the stables, directly toward her.

Elizabeth froze, unable to comprehend what he was doing here. He wasn't expected back until the next day. Mortified, she tried to turn away, but she failed to do so

before he looked up and saw her too. They made eye contact, and they both blushed furiously—he stumbled to a halt, staring, until he recovered himself and began to make his way toward her.

She was petrified, glued to the spot—oh, how she could die right now, in this very moment!

What must he think of her, to be here at Pemberley, after what happened between them in Kent?

"Miss Bennet," he said, coming near, bowing, "How—how do you do?"

"Mr. Darcy," she stammered back, her address equally as awkward as his, "I am well, thank you."

"May I ask after your family?"

She blushed as she was reminded of his letter's words about her family's many improprieties—

"They are very well, thank you."

"And you are—you are here, at Pemberley."

She opened her mouth, then closed it. He shook his head and asked after her family again. If Elizabeth hadn't been so mortified, she might have been amused at the evidence of his distraction, but she only answered him again, politely and even as awkwardly and distractedly as him. Then he seemed to realize that he had repeated himself. They stood there strangely, him shifting on his feet, her clasping her hands in front of her, and then he finally remembered himself and bowed, silently taking his leave.

Her breath finally escaped—she hadn't realized she was even holding it until he was walking away from her briskly, back to the estate. She stared after him, flabbergasted, amazed, horrified, and embarrassed. She turned on her heel and tried to walk quickly. They must leave— surely they should leave.

Why should they stay?

She thought of how to convince her aunt and uncle to depart at once. She knew they had watched her exchange with the master of the estate with some curiosity, but surely they could discern the level of discomfort shared between them. Surely, her anxiety and trepidation at being there, now that the master had returned, would be enough to convince her relatives they ought to cut their tour short and leave now.

"My, he is as handsome as his portrait," her aunt said as they came upon Elizabeth, "I saw you giving his likeness a good examination earlier, my dear. Now I can truly see why—he cuts a fine figure, I daresay."

If her aunt was trying to evoke an agreement from Elizabeth, she would not be satisfied this afternoon. No, Elizabeth was too mortified to stand there and comment on how handsome she found the man whose marriage proposal she once horribly refused. She ignored her aunt and turned to keep walking. They continued the trek outside, her aunt and uncle seemingly oblivious to her humiliation at being there, taking their sweet time, meandering on the path as if they had nowhere else to be—if only Elizabeth could get away, but there was clearly no way out any faster without alarming her relatives unnecessarily.

She remained fixated on Darcy. Where was he now? How did he feel about seeing her there? Did he absolutely despise her?

Or could he possibly still, after everything that had happened between them, find her to be very dear to him?

"Lizzy, what's on your mind?"

Her aunt's inquiry caught her in her reverie.

"What ever do you mean?"

"I mean, you seem heavily preoccupied."

Elizabeth forced out a light laugh as she shook her head. "I'm afraid my mind is quite empty, actually."

Her aunt frowned slightly, tilting her head at her. Elizabeth again had the uncanny feeling that her aunt knew something—but just as quickly as it came into her head, she dismissed such a notion. Nobody knew anything about her and Darcy except Jane, and even Jane didn't know the extent of what was in his letter, having omitted telling her about Darcy's part in pulling Bingley away from her last autumn.

Elizabeth sighed. If only things could have been different; if only Jane were with Bingley now, living at Netherfield, married, maybe even expecting a little babe. And then there was Darcy—Elizabeth cringed to acknowledge she would have still refused him, even if Bingley had married Jane. She had foolishly believed all of Wickham's lies about him, and she would have loudly refused Darcy's offer on those faulty grounds—on the fictitious story of the denied living.

Oh, what a fool she'd been!

They walked through the woods, taking a lovely path over the stream, and Elizabeth tried to calm her mind by focusing on the beauty of the surroundings—Pemberley was, indeed, a wondrous place, and if she hadn't been so mortified, she would have wanted to explore every winding path that the grounds offered. This proved a good distraction from her current anxieties, but just as she thought she was calm again, she

saw him once more—Darcy was coming for them, again, walking from the estate. Her heart raced, seeing him a second time, but she resolved to remain calm, to try and adopt the civility which he deserved, despite her embarrassment at having been caught here on his lands, uninvited.

He came toward her, and she smiled at him and said, "Mr. Darcy, I must admit, I very much admire the grounds of your home. The stream here is charming and delightful..."

She trailed off, blushing, now realizing how it might sound, such praise coming from her. Thankfully, he didn't seem to take her words in any other way than how she meant them, and he subtly nodded to her aunt, who was standing nearby.

"Might I be introduced to your friends?" he asked quietly.

"Of course," she answered, feeling silly for not having thought to do so already, "Mr. Darcy, it is a pleasure to introduce you to my aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, and my uncle, Mr. Gardiner, of Cheapside."

Elizabeth daringly mentioned their residence, a residual defiance in her, wondering how Darcy would fare against such knowledge—her aunt and uncle, the lowly tradespeople whom she certainly knew he had heard about from Bingley's snobbish sisters—but he surprised her. He didn't turn away and leave them abruptly upon such knowledge; instead he stayed and entreated them into conversation, especially her uncle.

They all began to walk, Darcy with her uncle, she with her aunt, and while Mr. Gardiner and Darcy spoke of fishing, Mrs. Gardiner took Elizabeth's arm and entreated her with her gaze. Elizabeth knew her aunt was wondering about Darcy's behavior, as abjectly different it was from what Elizabeth knew her aunt had learned to expect, all thanks to her negative reports of his character. Elizabeth felt

embarrassed that clearly she was wrong about Darcy, and she also wondered at it: surely he didn't act so differently because of her, did he?

Her reproofs at Hunsford surely couldn't have affected such a change in the man.

After walking a while in silence with her aunt, the woman suddenly exclaimed she was fatigued—odd, Elizabeth thought, because it didn't seem that Mrs. Gardiner was having any trouble walking, not to her anyway—and Elizabeth then found herself walking with Darcy.

What she could have to say to this man, she couldn't possibly know. He was a puzzle to her now, and she couldn't shake the uncanny feeling that she was beginning to very much regret refusing to marry him.

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Darcy's mouth was dry, opening but closing again as he walked alongside Elizabeth Bennet, here on the grounds of his childhood home, Pemberley.

Elizabeth was here— here , at Pemberley.

When he first saw her, he thought he was seeing an apparition, that he was suffering from some strange seizure of fatigue, perhaps exhaustion from the heat, which must have been so severe that he was, like a man dying of thirst lost in the desert, seeing a mirage, a hazy vision, something there yet not there, tantalizing him with its tangible nonexistence.

But no—Elizabeth Bennet, the glorious woman he once loved, the incredible woman who once refused him, the beautiful woman who once—or still?—hated him; she was really here, walking along one of the many garden paths. And then Darcy tried to speak to her, fumbling and acting strange—he even asked about her parents, twice , like a stupid fool—and then he turned and left abruptly, rudely and silently, without warning.

How was it that a gentleman of his standing, of his name, of his fortune—how was it that he was completely transformed into a melting puddle of a man, all because of the mere sight of this woman?

Darcy then had gone inside and changed, snapping himself out of his foolish bumbling. Had he forgotten who he was? He was Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley. This was his home, his grand estate, everything the work of his family for many generations, and he was proud to carry the mantle himself now.

So why must he be made into a bumbling fool?

He knew he was no fool.

So he dressed, and quickly—he was determined in his course of action: to see Elizabeth again, before she and her companions departed. He would show her the truth: that he was a gentleman, and a true gentleman, at that.

Her admonishments from April rang through his mind with the cacophony of a high-pitched, clanging bell— "had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner"— and he vowed never again to give her any grounds to thrust an accusation such as that into his heart. He was to be the best gentleman she'd ever known. He knew he could be, and now was his chance to prove it.

When we saw her again, he begged an introduction to her friends. Turns out, they were the ones out of Cheapside. Very well then—he would not think badly of them (and he truly couldn't, as they carried themselves in a most fashionable way, and were much more pleasant than others he knew, such as Bingley's abhorrent sisters). He spoke to her uncle of fishing, and he cordially invited him to come back and fish on Pemberley's ponds.

He meant it, too—anything to show Elizabeth he was serious about showing them civility.

And that is how he found himself where he was now: walking side by side with Elizabeth, his nervousness coming back full force. His mouth was dried out, and he felt himself clamming up once more. It had been so easy to speak to Mr. Gardiner, but looking at Elizabeth made his heart pang, and he almost felt an actual, literal aching in his chest. This was ridiculous, of course, he told himself. To feel actual, physical pain from love?

Nonsense—but wait—did he just think the word love?

No. Surely he was not—surely, she had banished all of those feelings out of him when she delivered that horribly disastrous blow to his ego last spring.

But as he looked at her, it became wildly clear that his heart was still hers, in every way.

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Elizabeth sensed Darcy's hesitation in speaking—and why shouldn't he be hesitant? Here she was, invading his privacy by coming to his home, wholly uninvited. She needed to apologize for the intrusion.

"Well, sir, your arrival has been most unexpected," she began slowly, looking down at the ground, "for your housekeeper informed us that you would certainly not be here till tomorrow; and indeed, before we left Bakewell, we understood that you were not immediately expected in the country."

"Yes, it is quite true I was not expected until tomorrow," he answered. She peeked a glance over at him and saw he was also looking down, his face was red with a deep blush, "but business with my steward occasioned me to arrive some hours earlier than the rest of the party with whom I was traveling."

He paused and then added, "They will join me early tomorrow, and among them are some who will claim an acquaintance with you—Mr. Bingley and his sisters."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. Mr. Bingley was coming here?

She'd not thought she would ever lay eyes upon the man again, not after he departed Netherfield last autumn and broke her dearest sister's heart. And then she blushed with embarrassment—the last time they both spoke of the man in question had been when she and Darcy argued at Hunsford. She stole a look at Darcy—he also looked embarrassed—he must have been remembering that horrible night, too.

He cleared his throat, however, and continued, "There is also one other person in the party who more particularly wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me, or do I

ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay at Lambton?"

Elizabeth gaped for only a small moment before she shut her mouth again and nodded. She couldn't believe Darcy would want to introduce her to his sister, not after all that happened between them. This was most unexpected—and yet, she found she desired to meet the young girl, the one who was so nearly stolen from Darcy by the likes of that horrid Wickham last year. The fact that Darcy would deign to introduce her to his sister spoke volumes—it suggested to her loudly that he held her in some esteem, even now, even after everything.

Even if she couldn't see how.

They remained silent, the sounds of birds and wind whistling through the trees occupying their ears between their languid steps on the gravel path below their feet. Elizabeth wanted to speak, but she felt like she couldn't. She stole another glance at her companion—how handsome he truly was. His features were strong, his chiseled jaw and his pleasant eyes, his thick, dark hair, and his healthy, tall gait—how on earth had she allowed herself to be so blind as to not admire this man outright?

All because of some rude mutterings in a crowded ballroom?

What would have happened if she had shown Darcy an iota of grace for his mistaken words—what would have happened if she hadn't retaliated in her childish way, bandying about to all who would listen his rude behavior, like a sullied juvenile? What would have happened if she had allowed herself a dance with the man at Lucas Lodge? Or at Netherfield, that time when Jane was recovering?

What would have happened if she had only freed herself from being held captive by her prejudice against him?

Their pace was much faster than her aunt and uncle's, as she looked behind and saw they were falling behind, almost as if Mrs. Gardiner was dragging her feet in the most unnecessary way. No, Elizabeth thought to herself, that was uncharitable. She knew if her aunt claimed fatigue, then she meant it.

Besides, it was not as if her aunt had any idea of her troubled and precarious relationship with the man beside her.

As they made it near the carriage, the silence between them was nearly palpable. Darcy stopped and turned toward her.

"Would you like to return inside and rest, while we wait on your family?" he asked.

Elizabeth smiled at him, and incredibly, the effect her look had on his was noticeable—he straightened up ever so slightly, smiling a little back, his expression now resembling the one he wore in his portrait. She was struck dumb by how handsomely he appeared just now, and she wondered at her effect on him and its meaning—

He couldn't he still love her, could he?

"No, no," she said to him, "I am not so tired as for all that. I am happy to remain out here while we wait."

Silence once more, that little smile on Darcy's face no longer there. Elizabeth shifted awkwardly. Oh, how desperately uncomfortable she felt in this moment. She peered out at her aunt and uncle—what could possibly be taking so long? She looked back at Darcy again, noticing he was watching her intently. His gaze seemed to envelop her, sending shivers down her spine, a very uncanny feeling to have. Her face heated into a light blush, and she wondered if he could see the effect he was having on her. After holding eye contact for just a brief moment longer, he pulled his eyes away and

walked a little in one direction, as if to stretch his legs, though they had just been walking so much. She clasped her hands together nervously, and she took a deep breath, attempting to calm her nerves.

Think, Lizzy, think. Speak to the man, for heaven's sake. Why are you mute?

"So, you have been traveling?" she heard Darcy suddenly say, and she was grateful to him for finding some such subject to speak upon. She replied and told him of all the sights they had seen throughout Derbyshire, visiting the peaks and other grand houses in the county. She kept her eyes on her aunt and uncle still, however, watching them move with the most dreadful, almost intentional slowness. If Elizabeth hadn't known better, she would almost say she thought she saw her aunt looking at them pointedly, just to turn her head away and slow down her walking even more. Goodness, how ridiculous this was getting. It was increasingly more and more awkward between her and Darcy, and her aunt was making things exceedingly worse by delaying!

Elizabeth shook her head to rid herself of such uncharitable, unfeeling thoughts about her beloved aunt. It wasn't Mrs. Gardiner's fault that things were terribly uncomfortable between her niece and the master of this great estate. Elizabeth willed herself to not think so unkindly toward her aunt.

She looked back at Darcy, their conversation waning. He was watching her again, but this time he pulled his eyes away with more haste, his face reddening intensely as he did so.

What was he thinking? It caused her to blush, too, when he suddenly glanced back and saw her looking at him. She averted her eyes, feeling like the greatest fool. She wondered again, self consciously, how it all must have appeared to him, her being here at his home, when just months ago she refused his offer of marriage.

If she hadn't, this would all be hers now.

And she might even be expecting a baby, too.

This thought certainly caused her to blush, but even more so, a strange pang ached through her heart, too. She hadn't even thought about children until this very moment, but realizing now that she would have born Darcy's children, the future heirs to this grand estate—it made her feel shaky, uneasy, wobbly on her feet.

She took a small step to right herself, but this only made the sudden onslaught of dizziness and nausea worse.

"Miss Bennet?"

It was the last thing she heard before seeing black.

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Darcy saw her looking pale, and within an instant he knew she was about to faint. He called her name as he rushed over to catch her in his arms.

She collapsed into them, her eyes shut. He heard a small shriek from down below on the path—her aunt—as he scooped Elizabeth into his arms and rushed her inside where it was cool, barking at the footmen to get the door and then to call for the apothecary, and fast. The hurried footmen opened the doors and removed the pillows from the settee in the nearest room, and Darcy quickly but gently laid her down.

Loud footsteps echoed in the foyer, and her family was in the room—

"What happened?" he heard Mr. Gardiner ask.

"Lizzy, oh Lizzy, is she alright?" Mrs. Gardiner cried.

Their frantic words of inquiry only echoed Darcy's thoughts: one moment, Elizabeth had been fine, the next moment, she fainted—he was astounded. The Elizabeth Bennet he knew was stout and hearty, always walking and finding no trouble in it. Surely fatigue did not do this—but what other explanation could there be?

His face paled when he backed away, letting Mrs. Gardiner take her niece's hand, as he wondered if she were truly ill. Had Elizabeth developed a sickly constitution recently? Had she been on this journey with her family on orders of a doctor?

The idea that anything could be wrong with Elizabeth, the idea that she could be ill and there be a danger to her life, sent the wild, worried thoughts of his mind careening in a million different directions. But in spite of the frazzled nature of his

current mindset, his appearance spoke otherwise: he was calm and collected, and it was in this manner he addressed Mr. Gardiner.

"Is Miss Bennet unwell?" he asked, and seeing Mr. Gardiner's confused frown, he added further, "She always had a strong constitution every time I knew her, in both Kent and Hertfordshire—I am just inquiring if there's been any change for the worse in her general health."

The man shook his head. "Oh, no, our Lizzy is as healthy as a horse, and always has been. I've never seen her faint, in my life."

The housekeeper arrived with smelling salts, and she said to Darcy as she passed, "The apothecary has been called for. He should arrive when he can."

She bent down near Elizabeth and used the smelling salts to help revive her. Elizabeth pulled through, opening her eyes and coughing a little, looking flushed as she whipped her head all around, as if trying to get her bearings.

"What happened?" she asked, "Where am I? Are we still at Pemberley?"

Then her eyes landed on Darcy, and he saw them widen in embarrassment before she looked away, back at her aunt.

"You fainted, darling," the woman said, rubbing her arm, "Lizzy, it's not like you to become so fatigued."

"Well, I—" Elizabeth started to say, but she shook her head. She looked at Mrs. Reynolds and said. "Thank you for helping me."

"Oh, my dear, you are not the first lady to need smelling salts. Pemberley grounds can be daunting, and it is so very hot outside at this time of year."

Darcy watched the exchange, relieved that she was looking more like herself, though still bewildered by it all in the first place. His protectiveness didn't want her to leave his sight, but he knew he had no right to feel such a way—

"Mr. Darcy caught you and prevented you from falling completely to the ground," Mrs. Gardiner said, now looking at him with a smile, "We are so very grateful to you, sir, for carrying her inside so quickly."

Darcy's face reddened in some mild embarrassment. He had been concerned with her safety so much that he didn't let his mind dwell on how incredibly light she was when he held her, how wonderfully she smelled, how easy it would have been to have carried her all the way up to their chambers in such a way. Indeed, back before his dreadful rejection in April, he had daydreamed about carrying Elizabeth's lithe body in his arms and across the threshold into Pemberley after they were married. He would have carried her all the way across the house to their chambers, and he would have laid her down in her bed, and then—

"You—you carried me, sir?"

Elizabeth looked alarmed, and she spoke so quietly he almost didn't hear her, except for Mrs. Gardiner's loud reply, "That he did. We are very grateful to the man for taking such care. Lizzy, you could have been injured had you fainted and fell to the ground."

Truthfully, Elizabeth looked as if she might faint even again, and Darcy resisted the urge to wince.

Was it really so revolting to know that he had touched her?

"We must leave at once," Elizabeth said quickly, moving her legs to come to a standing position, nearly knocking her aunt over.

"Now, Lizzy, slow down before you over exert yourself," her uncle said sternly, coming to stop her from getting up, "We are not leaving until the apothecary Mr. Darcy had his staff call for arrives. Sit back down. Don't be a fool."

Darcy was grateful for Mr. Gardiner's interference—how his heart lurched when Elizabeth started to make to leave. He didn't want her to go, not now, not yet. He was torn between asking them to stay and holding his tongue. He had no reason to offer lodgings. No, it would be most unusual, and he would be pushing in, too.

It was clear Elizabeth didn't want to be here.

He would let them get back to Lambton, but not until after the apothecary came and assessed Elizabeth, making sure she was well. If there was any hint of her being unwell, then he would offer Pemberley as a place to recuperate.

The apothecary finally arrived, after Elizabeth had sat back down and become practically mute. She didn't look at him nor did she speak to anyone, despite all of Mrs. Gardiner's prodding and praising of Darcy's swiftness in delivering Elizabeth to safety. If Darcy didn't know any better, he'd almost say this woman knew about them—but surely not.

Or at least, he hoped not.

How humiliating it would be for the woman to know of everything that had transpired between him and her niece.

The apothecary confirmed Elizabeth was well enough to leave, and it was clear that she couldn't get out of there faster. He watched her as she avoided his eye, as she blushed furiously, and as she glared at her aunt for trying to instigate conversation between the two of them. Without any further delay, they took their leave. Darcy made sure to hand Elizabeth in, and he could have sworn she physically jolted when

he first touched her—but she recovered, and he gracefully helped her in.

The carriage pulled away, and he watched them go until he could see them no more.

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Elizabeth was absolutely mortified at what happened at Pemberley, and she avoided discussing it with her aunt as well as she could. She couldn't get the imagining of Darcy carrying her out of her mind—how ridiculous!

First, she showed up uninvited at his home, and then, she fainted before him like some sort of pathetic damsel in distress. What must he think of her—why, it all very much looked like she might have contrived to faint before him, so he would be forced to carry her and be compromised! Of course, that was automatically disproved the moment no one made any demands—and truly, who would be as ridiculous as that, to suggest they marry over the event that he merely carried her inside?

It was a silly idea.

Elizabeth tossed and turned all night. She didn't understand why she fainted, but she did remember being momentarily overwhelmed by the thought of everything she had lost when she turned Darcy down that fateful day in April. Although he was kind and cordial to her at Pemberley, she couldn't quite find it within herself to begin to believe he still could love her.

What man would? She was no great beauty, and she had nothing to offer him but insolence, as she so dreadfully proved at Hunsford.

She lay awake, unable to sleep until the early sunlight began to peek through her windows, and she finally fell into some sort of exhausted dreamland. A dreamland of Pemberley and little beautiful children with Darcy's dark, midnight hair and his piercing eyes—

"Lizzy," he aunt gently prodded her with her hands, shaking her carefully, waking her up. "Lizzy, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I must wake you. Visitors—Mr. Darcy, and two others."

Elizabeth's eyes shot open. Of course; Darcy wanted to bring his sister to meet her—

"Oh, Aunt, I am a dreadful mess. How long can you delay them?"

"I can delay them a while, but try to hurry, dear."

Elizabeth nodded, and her aunt departed. She quickly dressed herself, having only modest traveling dresses, which needed little help from a maid. She glanced in the looking glass, and my, how tired she looked, with bags under her eyes, that dreadfully announced to the world her lack of any real meaningful sleep. Elizabeth let out an absurd laugh—if Darcy still admired her before, he'd be hard pressed to find any beauty in her appearance this morning—or this afternoon, rather, as she looked at the clock and saw it was after twelve. She took a deep breath and accepted her lackluster appearance.

She left the room and joined her uncle.

"Your aunt is visiting with them downstairs, I shall send for her."

Soon Mrs. Gardiner returned, followed by Mr. Darcy.

"Lizzy, Mr. Darcy has come to call," she said warmly, a light in her eyes as she addressed her niece. Elizabeth smiled weakly and then turned toward Darcy, who was bowing as he addressed her.

"I hope you have recovered from yesterday," he said.

"You'll have to forgive me," Elizabeth admitted with a light laugh, "for I did not have the easiest time falling asleep, for whatever reasons—and I'm afraid my aunt has had to wake me, even at this very late hour."

A look of worry flashed over Darcy's face just briefly as he said, "Do you believe you should see the apothecary again and make sure all is truly well?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Oh no, I'm sure I shall be fine."

She noticed Darcy looked uneasy for just a moment, but then he turned and addressed Mr. Gardiner, "Thank you for receiving me, sir. I'd like to bring up my sister, if that is permissible."

It was, and soon a tall, young girl came into the room. She was not exceedingly proud—only exceedingly shy. Elizabeth admired the careful way Darcy interacted with her, his familial love for his sister so apparent to everyone in the room. She spoke kindly to the girl, trying to bring her out of her shell—and heat rose upon her face when she realized that Darcy was watching her with that same contented smile he wore in his portrait.

What a fool she had been to have once believed his look of admiration was one of derision and disdain.

Soon she and Miss Darcy were interrupted, with Darcy saying, "Another caller comes who wishes to see you again, Miss Bennet—Mr. Bingley." And sure enough, the man came in. Elizabeth wanted to be angry with Bingley, but it was nigh impossible with how friendly he was and how gently he inquired about her sister. He even noted the duration of time they've spent away, down to the precise day.

Elizabeth was convinced—the man still loved Jane, even after all this time.

She turned her gaze toward Darcy as Bingley began speaking with her aunt and uncle and Miss Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy, I am honored you wish for me to know your sister," she said quietly to him, "As I am well aware of how strongly you wish to protect her."

This was a subtle allusion to the fact that, yes, she had read his letter. She wanted him to know, but didn't know how to say so. She wanted to tell him that she had read it and was fully transformed in her opinion of him—

"Indeed, I am always trying to protect my sister," he said, and she could have sworn he understood her meaning, "As you are with yours."

He was acknowledging his wrong towards Jane. She smiled at him, finally relaxing—it felt as if they understood one another, but soon this fact only served to increase her weariness, her own anxiety and regret at her folly.

What a simpleton she had been, not to see this man for who he truly was.

"I feel so silly for what happened yesterday," she said, stepping a little closer and speaking low, "What a fool I must have appeared, to have allowed myself to become so fatigued."

"I could never believe you to appear a fool, Miss Bennet," he said, in an equally low voice.

It was like they two were alone, as the others and their conversations began to fade into the background. His words made her feel something, as a blush crept up on her face, making her breath catch. A vaguely sensuous light passed between them, and she felt her heart begin to beat a little more fully.

"I have acted a fool around you in the past, however," she said, noticing that he was watching her intently, his gaze as soft as a caress, traveling over her face and settling in her eyes, sending a shiver down her spine.

"I don't believe so."

She looked at him questioningly, but then she daringly alluded to that fateful evening: "I was foolish in my treatment of you, sir."

Their eyes caught, something significant passing between them. He seemed to read her, to know her, to understand what it was she was speaking of. She held her breath, waiting to hear his reaction.

Would he dismiss the conversation?

Would he be angry to be reminded of such a humiliation?

Or would he accept her attempt at an apology?

"Miss Bennet," he said very quietly now, moving just a touch closer to her, which did not go unnoticed by her as she swallowed silently, "You did not treat me in any way I did not deserve."

Her heart jolted, her pulse pounded. "My reproofs were unfair, they were based on wrong, prejudiced assumptions."

His gaze remained fixed on her, burning in its intensity. "But you were principled in your objections to me."

Her heart fluttered wildly in her breast. "I was wrong."

His eyes held hers. "You were honorable."

There was a silence now between them, the low timbre of the others' conversations filling the chasm between them. Elizabeth could smell his scent, woodsy and masculine, and it was all she could do not to lean in and inhale him entirely. Her heart was pounding inside her chest, his words filling her with something she's never felt before.

She finally spoke again, recovering her voice which was momentarily lost.

"Honorable or not, I was still wrong," she said softly, "I judged you and was so terribly prejudiced against you. My behavior was—it was abominable."

He stood so close she could feel the heat from his body, and his eyes pierced hers with such strength that she broke eye contact, looking away. She noticed her aunt watching them—blushing, Elizabeth looked away from Mrs. Gardiner and took a step back from Darcy. The space between them now felt like an engulfing void—she wanted to speak more, but she knew not what to say.

Darcy's voice roused her.

"Miss Bennet, I—"

But it was too late—Bingley was upon them again, and Miss Darcy, too. Darcy stepped back to allow his sister to invite them to dinner that evening. Elizabeth glanced at him, who rewarded her with his subtle smile, and feeling her heart move, she looked back at the girl as she nodded yes with enthusiasm. Elizabeth wanted to dine with them tonight, wanted to see Darcy again.

Elizabeth needed to see Darcy again.

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Darcy could have cursed Bingley for his poor timing. He had almost been about to profess the truth to Elizabeth, as unconventional it might have been there in the Lambton Inn, but his friend disrupted the moment.

No matter—maybe Darcy could find the moment tonight before dinner. He was amazed that Elizabeth alluded to his letter, subtly indicating she read it in its entirety. He had worried about that—he had felt that his letter was written in a burst of angry justification, and he was concerned that his words were harsh and unfeeling, that they did more damage than good when he wrote them. But it seemed that this was not so—Elizabeth expressed true remorse at her misunderstanding of his character.

He meant it, however, when he told her that she was honorable, regardless of how wrong her understanding of him might have been. She had refused him on the grounds of her principles—and her principles dictated that she only marry a man she could respect: one who treated people fairly, one who didn't resort to seedy, underhanded interfering in other peoples' relationships. It wasn't her fault she was lied to by Wickham, and it wasn't her fault she didn't realize his true motivations behind his persuading Bingley out of returning to Hertfordshire.

Darcy sighed as he stood in his chambers that evening. He was annoyed by Miss Bingley's continuous commentary on the unexpected arrival of "Miss Eliza Bennet" as she always called her. He made a face—something told him Elizabeth didn't really like being called Eliza, and he had a feeling Miss Bingley very well knew it. He disliked her derision and open disdain for Elizabeth and her family.

"Are these the aunt and uncle who live in Cheapside?" she had teased maliciously earlier, "Oh, why, Louisa and I met the aunt. Such an unfashionable kind of woman,

but what else would you expect out of Cheapside?"

Darcy frowned and nearly told her off—frankly, the Gardiners were people of fashion, and he hadn't realized they were the aunt and uncle in trade until after he had been introduced—but then he thought better of it. There was no use in irritating Miss Bingley.

His valet finished dressing him, and he was soon venturing downstairs to await their guests, who would be arriving any minute. He fidgeted a little with his jacket, nervous to see Elizabeth again. Bingley eyed him with curiosity as they waited outside for signs of the Darcy carriage, which had been sent to pick up Elizabeth and her family.

"If mine eyes don't deceive me, Darcy," he said, "I would say you're nervous."

Darcy reddened but gave Bingley a look.

"I don't know what you mean."

"But I think you do. However, if you're so sensitive about it, I suppose I shouldn't pry."

Darcy shifted awkwardly, feeling Bingley's curious stare. Bingley, though, was never one to be quiet and not pry, so Darcy knew it was only a matter of time—

"Oh, I must know," the man said with some impatience, "Is there something between you and Miss Elizabeth?"

Darcy pursed his lips, remaining silent. Bingley kept on.

"You two were speaking so intimately earlier, and your attention to her is quite

marked, my friend. Surely, you would tell me if you had an attachment to her? I thought we were better friends than that..."

Darcy glanced at his friend, who was staring at him sharply, and then he sighed. He nodded a little, and Bingley smirked, waiting for him to speak. Darcy ignored his mocking look as he answered him.

"It's not so simple, but there is something between us."

"Explain it to me."

"I can't. The story is too complicated, and they'll be here any minute."

Bingley huffed. "Try. I am impatient to understand. How can you fancy Miss Elizabeth when you told me all those horrid things about Miss Bennet and her family and her poor connections? Wouldn't the same hold true for any of her other sisters? I am at a loss to understand why your situation is so different from mine—"

He cut off, because the carriage was arriving, and Darcy was thankful. He didn't want to have this conversation with Bingley. Not here, anyway. He glanced hesitantly at his friend, who looked irritable for a moment before putting on a friendly smile for their guests' sake, and then, to Darcy's displeasure, Bingley stepped forward and handed out Elizabeth!

Why, that—!

Bingley took Elizabeth's arm and walked her inside, leaving Darcy awkwardly in the lurch, and he waved the Gardiners ahead of him, trailing behind in the back.

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Elizabeth was surprised when it was Bingley and not Darcy who handed her out of the carriage, but she hoped that her expression remained calm and pleasant. She wondered if Bingley would monopolize all her attention this evening—she liked the fellow well enough, but she certainly didn't like the idea of that .

"Miss Bennet," Bingley said as they began walking up the grand Pemberley steps, "Darcy has revealed to me his attachment to you, and I daresay, you'll not find a better man than him—"

Darcy what?

Elizabeth's blood pounded in her veins, but not with outrage or indignation like she might have assumed. No, she felt a thrill shooting through her at the revelation that he told Bingley they were attached. If she had no feelings for the man, then this little stunt certainly would have worsened her impression of him, but now understanding that he is quite shy, and realizing she did feel something special for him, she welcomed such a way of learning his feelings for her. It was endearing, too—she knew Darcy was shy and reserved, so what a clever ruse, to utilize his more outgoing friend to pass along the message about how he still wishes to be with her.

"...and if you'll be so good as to tell me, do I have a chance? Have I blasted it all to smithereens?"

Elizabeth paled. She hadn't been listening to a word of what Bingley had been saying, so she scarcely even knew what he was talking about. She shook her head and asked, embarrassed, "I do apologize, Mr. Bingley—the fatigue seems to be affecting me—what did you say?"

He looked at her with pleading eyes and said, "I was asking about your sister. I wondered if I should have a chance to win her back if I return to Netherfield."

Elizabeth's heart leaped in her chest, feeling a burst of joy for her dearest sister. She beamed and answered, "Oh Jane, you mean? Mr. Bingley, do return to Netherfield. Return for my sister, and you shall not be disappointed."

He smiled grandly at hearing this, and as they made their way into the dining room, Elizabeth saw Darcy scowling. How she wanted to go to him and take away his frown, so she loosened herself from Bingley's arm.

"Forgive me, sir, but I must go and speak with Mr. Darcy."

"Of course—thank you, Miss Bennet!"

She made her way toward Darcy. He looked apprehensive, but she wasn't nervous about him anymore, now that she understood how he felt. She still couldn't believe he actually solicited Bingley to speak on his behalf like he had, but she couldn't regret it.

"Mr. Darcy, your friend has just told me everything," she said breathlessly with a smile as she reached him, "And you must know how very relieved I am."

She saw him furrowing his brow before asking, "Mr. Bingley?"

But suddenly Miss Bingley was upon them both.

"Miss Eliza," the disagreeable woman said, sneering at her slightly, "How unexpected to find you here at Pemberley. We heard about your fainting spell yesterday, and we all hoped you would recover. It's such a good thing Mr. Darcy was there to catch you when you fell."

Her words expressed kindness, but her tone, paired with how her narrowed, skeptical eyes and her thick sarcasm, proved otherwise. She watched as Darcy steeled Miss Bingley with a glare, causing the odious woman to leave them. Elizabeth fought back a laugh, and Darcy turned his eyes on her, slightly bemused.

"What's so amusing, Miss Bennet?"

"Just Miss Bingley, her usual antics."

"She forgets you are the daughter of a gentleman, and she is not."

Elizabeth bit her lip to stifle a grin, and Darcy added, his mouth twisting into a wry smile, "I think she's jealous of you."

There was something warm and enchanting in his quiet humor. They stood there in a shy yet smiling silence for a moment, before they both spoke over one another:

"Tell me, what did Bingley say—"

"I'm glad you haven't—"

They broke off and chuckled awkwardly, and Darcy gestured for her to go first.

"I was merely going to say, I'm relieved to know that you haven't held everything at Hunsford against me."

Darcy seemed to stiffen at the mention of it, an inexplicable look of withdrawal overcoming his face. Elizabeth furrowed her brow, biting her bottom lip in some uneasy confusion.

Why would he still be so uncomfortable, even now, if it were all behind them? But

before she could open her mouth and inquire, dinner was announced. Darcy offered her his arm, and she took it.

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Darcy was very confused about whatever it was Bingley must have said to Elizabeth—and more so, why did she bring up Hunsford? He was mortified enough that it had happened, but prior to now, even she seemed apprehensive of alluding to that horrid night.

What did she mean, to thank him for “not holding it against her?”

He had all these questions and more as he walked her into the dining room, and he couldn't deny the feeling of his heart pounding in his chest. How he liked being so near her, being in her presence—he nearly all but wanted to murder Bingley for taking her away from him earlier, but his irritation dissipated as soon she rewarded him with one of her happy, arch smiles.

They were seated, and he was grateful Georgiana decided to sit Elizabeth just to his right. She had wanted to meet Elizabeth ever since he had returned from Hertfordshire.

"Oh, Brother, I do like her, very much," she had said when they departed the Lambton Inn earlier that day, "I hope we shall see more of her while she is here."

"I hope we shall, too."

Georgiana paused a little before saying hesitantly, "Do you hold her in very high regard?"

Darcy reddened, but he cleared his throat and answered her honestly. "I do, but we have not always had an easy time of things...so I am hopeful to win her over."

Georgiana seemed surprised to hear this, and she nearly looked indignant as she asked, "Win her over? Does she not like you?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "It is not so much that she does not like me—it is that she does not know me."

Georgiana furrowed her brow. "How do you mean? I thought you knew each other well in Hertfordshire. Your letters indicated as such to me."

He felt embarrassed at the mention of his boyish letters, but he quickly decided that as much of the truth as he could reveal would be for the best: "The facts are, that I did not behave in the most gentlemanly manner towards Miss Bennet, so I'm afraid she's had the wrong impression of me for a long time."

Georgiana seemed to want to know more, but she remained quiet. He went on and said, "But I have since mended my ways, and we have cleared the air...a little. I think she is willing to overlook my past mistakes, if I can succeed in showing her who I truly am."

Georgiana nodded. She looked somber for a moment but then smiled and said, "I think she has already seen who you are and is in love with you, yet."

Darcy didn't have the stomach to entertain such an idyllic notion, and he said as much to his sister. But she pressed him.

"But I believe it—her aunt, Mrs. Gardiner, seemed very intent on giving you the space to speak so privately earlier. She said to me, 'I think my Lizzy is taken with your brother.' Do you know what else she said about her fainting spell? She said she thinks Miss Bennet had been taken ill—with love sickness."

Darcy couldn't deny this made him feel hopeful, but he steeled his features and shook

his head somberly. "I appreciate your optimism, Georgiana, and even Mrs. Gardiner's, but Miss Bennet cannot be so easily won. I shall have to prove myself to her."

And now here he was at dinner, and it seemed to be the opposite of what he believed—Elizabeth appeared, for all intents and purposes, completely won over. She smiled easily at him, she spoke pleasantly with him, she looked at him with such feeling, making him feel relaxed, peaceful, at ease.

What the devil did Bingley say to this woman?

He found he couldn't curse his friend any longer for occupying her before dinner—clearly, whatever he discussed with Elizabeth led to her behaving this way toward him. So different it was from when they met yesterday, how awkward and nervous she had seemed, especially after her fainting spell. But now—

"Miss Bennet, I was wondering," he started to say in a low voice, speaking softly under the louder conversations of everyone else at the table, but she cut him off with a slight wave of her delicate hand, leaning toward him.

"Please—you may call me by my Christian name," she said, blushing, with a warm smile. Darcy's heart did a flip in his chest—

"I, uh—" he stammered, then cleared his throat and said, "Elizabeth, yes. I was going to ask, what did Bingley say to you earlier? When you said he told you everything?"

She gave him a rather funny look but said, "He spoke of our attachment, of course."

He gaped at her in shock for a moment, and she laughed a little and added, "But you know that already—you put him up to it, and I'm glad you did. I was nervous to know what you might still think of me, mortified that you hated me after how poorly I

treated you—" and here she lowered her voice even more, while Darcy was dumbstruck, processing everything she was saying, "When I read your letter, I was so aggrieved, I despised myself for all of my misunderstandings, all my folly. I thought you'd never wish to see me again, and if you did, you'd certainly scorn me. So I am very relieved that is not the case. My feelings for you, sir, why—they have changed so much, have been transfigured completely since we saw one another in Kent—"

She broke off suddenly, blushing, and sheepishly looking around as if to make sure nobody had heard. Darcy was red in the face, too, no doubt, and he glanced up, thankfully seeing no one paying them any attention, with the exception of Mrs. Gardiner—who quickly turned and spoke to Bingley next to her.

"What can I call you?" he heard Elizabeth ask him quietly after a moment. He looked back at her and saw her smiling, still. Oh, how he had dreamed of such expressions from her lovely face, and to be the recipient, too. It was better than a dream—his heart was still pounding from everything she had just said, and he felt tongue tied as he considered all of it.

She loved him.

She all but said it, in so many words. Her feelings had changed, she said, wholly transfigured since April. Darcy could jump up and exclaim his joy from the rooftops. But instead, he answered her, warmly saying, "You can call me Darcy. Or William, perhaps."

She tried it out: "Darcy—I think I like Darcy."

He liked it, too.

They continued to eat their dinner in a contented, satisfied silence. He hadn't answered any of her earlier confession to him, but he planned to. He felt so relaxed,

so satisfied, because she seemed to understand him. She knew he was not a man of many words, especially not at the dinner table. He felt it was unrestrained and effortless between them now, and he felt like a king when he looked at her and realized she was to be his.

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Elizabeth felt like she was floating on air the rest of the dinner—she already felt as if she were mistress of this great house. The way Darcy paid her such attention, without a care for what anybody saw—and she realized with some pleasant surprise, that she didn't care who saw, either. She ignored Miss Bingley's jealous glares and even her aunt and uncle's knowing smiles (they seemed to understand what was happening, didn't they?), but one person whose reaction she didn't ignore was Miss Darcy.

The girl grabbed her arm the moment the ladies separated to the drawing room.

"Is it true?" she whispered excitedly, looking around and gently pulling Elizabeth further into the room, away from the others, "Mr. Bingley says that you and my brother have formed an attachment. Can it really be so?"

The smile on her face told Elizabeth that Darcy's sister was happy to know this, so she was pleased to nod yes, even if she was blushing in some embarrassment.

"Your brother and I have had an... unusual courtship, to be sure," she said slowly, her face flaming when she thought of all her misunderstandings and especially that horrid April night at Hunsford, "But I am happy to inform you, yes, we do have an understanding."

Darcy hadn't proposed, though, but she wasn't worried about that, knowing it would only be a matter of time. She still inwardly cringed with regret when she thought about how difficult it must have been for him the first time he proposed—how he must have worked up the nerve to even speak with her, let alone confess his admiration and propose for her to be his wife.

Elizabeth realized she desperately wanted to make it all up to him the second time around.

"You have no idea how pleased I am to hear it," Miss Darcy said with a smile, "When he first wrote about you last year, I was so certain he would come home announcing a betrothal, even then."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Truly?"

She blushed, wondering what he could have possibly had to say about her last autumn. She had been nothing but rude to the man then!

Miss Darcy nodded enthusiastically.

"Oh, yes," she said with a little laugh, "He's never written to me about any ladies at all before then. When he wrote about you in not one but three letters, I was convinced he was going to return home with a wife." She suddenly looked downcast and then said in a lowered voice, "But perhaps it is my own fault he was reticent about marrying..."

Elizabeth frowned, looking at Miss Darcy with some worry. She knew the poor girl must have been thinking about Ramsgate, but she didn't want to reveal to her—and mortify her—that she knew about what happened.

"My dear girl, are you well?" Elizabeth asked carefully, giving the girl a comforting smile.

Miss Darcy nodded and tried to smile. "I shall be well, do not you worry. Now—" here she raised her voice and looked at Mrs. Gardiner, "would you please play for us, Miss Bennet? Mrs. Gardiner has told us you are a pleasant performer. My brother thinks so, as well."

That last revelation made Elizabeth smile and blush once more—had he told Miss Darcy as much in one of his many letters?—and she readily went to the instrument to do as requested. Her aunt was beaming, she noticed, and she thought she saw a spark of some kind of knowing in her aunt's eye—she would have to talk to her later, having the uncanny feeling Mrs. Gardiner knew more about what was happening this night than she let on.

As Elizabeth played the pianoforte, she tried to focus on the music, but very soon, the men entered, and she looked up just as Darcy came into the room. Their eyes met, and she stumbled on the keys a little. Reddening furiously, she drew her eyes back down, to avoid being distracted by the object of her admiration—and finally, she completed the piece to happy applause. She stood and made to sit somewhere, and as Miss Darcy began to play, she felt the presence of that young girl's brother come and sit beside her. She was hyper aware of him now, and every time his gaze met hers, her heart turned over in response. Oh, how she wished for a moment alone with him, to speak with him—but sitting beside each other at this moment must satisfy her for now.

Pretty soon, Miss Darcy was finished, and there was much talking throughout the drawing room between the men and the women. Bingley, in particular, was very jocular and happily loud, occupying a rather large circle of the Gardiners, Miss Darcy, Mr. Hurst, and even his sisters, albeit reluctantly. This gave Elizabeth and Darcy a moment together, and he offered his arm so that they might move over to the window, away from everyone else. She happily complied, and soon they were gazing out over the dim lit garden through the window.

"Elizabeth," he finally said, breathing out her name in a reverent way, "Would you accompany me outside, into the garden for a moment?"

The garden was within view of the drawing room windows, so she knew there was nothing improper, especially if his plan was to propose. She smiled shyly and nodded,

granting her permission, and they slowly moved out onto the veranda just outside the doors. Then they walked slowly outside into the warm, late summer night, and when they made it near the large hedges, he stopped and turned toward her.

"Elizabeth, I have tormented myself for months since April—I have struggled and come to terms with what I thought might be your permanent disdain for me—"

Elizabeth winced, hating to hear how poorly she made him feel. She opened her mouth to interrupt but he stayed her with a gesture.

"Please, you did nothing wrong when we were in Hunsford. It was I who was in the wrong, arrogantly assuming you would accept me and belittling you in the act of proposing. I have spent many an hour recovering from my folly, accepting my loss—" here he broke off, seemingly choked with great emotion. Elizabeth's heart heaved in her chest, her blood beginning to pound, but he continued: "But then you appeared here, at Pemberley, and it was like a miracle: I was given a chance to show you I could still be a gentleman, even if I could not have you as a wife."

He paused, and Elizabeth couldn't help but break in and say, "Oh, Darcy—your letter, why, it changed everything. My mind was overturned almost upon the instant I read it, and then I reread it, over and over again. I almost have its entirety committed to memory from how often I perused it."

Now it was Darcy's turn to wince, and she shook her head.

"No, no, why do you look so?" she said with energy, "That letter changed everything—I am grateful you sought me out to give it to me."

Her energies seemed wasted against his granite stand, his hardened face.

"It was uncharitable," he said morosely, "Unkind. I wrote it in anger. It was a very

bitter letter, and badly done."

The shock of her defeat held her immobile, but only for a moment, because then she laughed. He looked stunned at her reaction, gazing at her with a curious frown. She silenced herself, but remained smiling, reaching up to caress his face—his frown fell, his body shuddering only an instant as she grazed his skin lightly, before pulling her hand away.

She said softly, "You ended with your letter by saying God Bless You— that was charity in itself, for I deserved no such salutations."

There was an intense feeling of electricity between them, and she blushed as added quietly, "And pray, if it was bitter, did you not have every reason to be?"

It was silent for a moment. Her whole being seemed to be filled with waiting, the prolonged anticipation almost unbearable, and as she saw the heartrending tenderness of his gaze, she wordlessly implored him with her own.

He finally took a deep breath as he reached for the hand she had momentarily touched his face with, and he uttered breathlessly, "Elizabeth, will you consent to be my wife? As I shall continuously endeavor to be a gentleman, the one you truly deserve?"

She nodded, silently, too overwhelmed with excitement and happiness to speak. Suddenly, he pulled her into his arms, and she was engulfed by him—his scent, his presence, his power—and she knew this was where she belonged.

Here, at Pemberley, in the arms of its master.

He held her for a long moment, what felt like forever, when they finally pulled apart and gazed into each other's eyes. She knew she loved him, she was overcome with the feelings of it. She was amazed it took her so long to finally see the man for whom he

truly was—but she knew she would never lose sight of him now that's she's found him.

"Elizabeth," he breathed, looking at her with some kind of expression she had rarely ever seen.

"Yes?"

He parted his lips, an agonizing pause on them before he finally whispered, "May I kiss you?"

She smiled and blushed, nodding slowly. Slowly, but surely, his lips found hers, and he was kissing her. It was a curious, slow sort of thing—Elizabeth had certainly never even been this close to a man, let alone kissed one—but it was over before long, leaving Elizabeth with a swell of feeling, wanting more.

As he locked her in his embrace for a moment longer, she closed her eyes and relished in it, never wanting him to release her.

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Darcy and Elizabeth returned to the drawing room and made the announcement: Elizabeth had accepted his hand of marriage. Many faces were happy and unsurprised—Bingley's sisters were disgruntled but quickly recovered, and Elizabeth's aunt and uncle came forth to give their congratulations.

Darcy was wary of them at first, not sure how much they knew about his tumultuous relationship with their favorite niece.

"Well, then, Lizzy, this is a lovely surprise," Mr. Gardiner said with a grin, "Your Mama will be pleased when we've brought you back to Longbourn a betrothed woman."

Darcy resisted grimacing at the thought of Mrs. Bennet's vulgar merriment at the match. He had witnessed her lack of propriety many a time, and at this moment, he was at a loss to see any familial resemblance between not just Elizabeth and her mother, but even Mr. Gardiner and his own sister.

He glanced at Elizabeth and saw she actually was grimacing, just for an instant anyway, before she turned toward Mrs. Gardiner and smiled.

"Well, Aunt, your insistence we visit Pemberley has changed my life," she said, shyly catching Darcy's eye, and then grabbing the woman's arm and veering away from them, out of earshot. He watched them as they walked away, wondering what they might be discussing, when Georgiana approached, throwing her arms around him, excited young thing she was.

"Georgiana—" he said in surprise, hugging her back hesitantly. She was not normally

one to give way to grand shows of affection, but as she pulled away, he saw how she was beaming at him, which made him smile back.

"I knew you loved her, Brother," she said gaily, and then, looking at Mr. Gardiner, who was still nearby, she pulled away and looked a little embarrassed as she said, "Forgive me, Mr. Gardiner."

"There's nothing to forgive, Miss Darcy—I am glad to see our Lizzy will be as cherished in her new family as she is by me and her aunt. Between you and me, Lizzy has always been our favorite Bennet girl."

Darcy listened for a spell as Georgiana spoke with Mr. Gardiner about the other Bennets, whom she seemed simultaneously excited and nervous to meet, when Bingley approached him, beaming at him in a congratulatory way.

"I shall return to Netherfield very soon, and you won't be the only lucky chap engaged to a Bennet daughter," he said happily, but then his face fell a little and he added, "I hope, anyway."

Darcy felt a pang of regret. "I owe you an apology. I might have been wrong when I—"

Bingley waved a hand. "It is all over with, and besides, Miss Elizabeth punished you long enough, I should say."

Darcy gaped. How did Bingley know about that?

He opened his mouth to ask, but Bingley's sisters and Mr. Hurst were upon them. Congratulations were freely given from Hurst and his wife, but Miss Bingley, as usual, was more underhanded in her compliments. Bingley shot his sister a glare, and the woman skulked away after a moment. Bingley looked back at him after Mrs.

Hurst followed her sister while her languid husband went to recline on the settee.

"I do apologize for her rudeness," he mumbled sheepishly, "She will be none too pleased when she learns of my plans to reopen Netherfield."

Darcy chuckled. "Perhaps it might be wise to send her to stay with your brother-in-law."

"Or our aunt in Yorkshire. Hurst will not like having Caroline in their household again."

They went on in this way, until Elizabeth finally returned to him, after what seemed an eternity—but it was soon time for the Gardiners to depart back to Lambton. Darcy sighed. He wished he could keep Elizabeth here. Knowing this was not an option, however, he escorted her and the Gardiners outside to the carriage that had been called.

As they walked, they were able to speak privately, albeit briefly.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" he asked hesitantly. He knew they originally had plans to leave soon in the coming days, but he wondered if those plans might change now. Granted, it didn't really matter—if they were to return to Hertfordshire, then he would simply pack up with Georgiana and follow them there—he wanted to have the banns read already.

"Of course you shall," she said with a smile, "And I am unsure now when we will return home. This announcement changes things, you know."

A knowing smile graced her lips, and how he suddenly wished to kiss her, but alas, he could not. Instead, he cleared his throat and answered her.

"I suppose I shall write to your father."

She nodded eagerly. "Please do, but bring your letter when you call tomorrow, so we can send ours together. I need to write to him too, you know. To explain things..."

Darcy chuckled. "You need to explain a simple betrothal?"

She blushed. "My father may not actually believe it, because I have not ever bandied your name in the most complimentary of terms..."

She trailed off, and though Darcy was momentarily mortified to wonder what all Elizabeth must have ever said about him in her father's presence, he found it amusing, so he laughed. She gave him a peculiar look.

"How odd to see you laugh!"

"Is it so odd to see a happy man laugh?"

She smiled at that and shrugged. "Well, I suppose when you put it that way, no."

They were outside now, nearly to the carriage.

"I shall call tomorrow, and I shall have my letter to your father in hand," he said, handing her in. She clung to his hand for just a mere moment before letting go.

"I shall count the hours," she answered softly.

So would he.

How he slept that night, Darcy did not know—but soon it was the following day, and eager he was to see her again. He had written his letter to Mr. Bennet, a solid request

for his favorite daughter's hand—Mr. Gardiner had told him that about Elizabeth—and he was anxious to send both his and Elizabeth's letters via express so they might know sooner rather than later whether they could marry. He gripped his letter as he stepped out of his curricule, which he had brought with the purpose of suggesting a ride through the country with Elizabeth this morning.

But the scene that awaited him as he entered their lodgings was not what he expected.

Elizabeth was alone, bent over a letter and crying furiously. Darcy was shocked—what had happened? He paled to think of a death in the family, of one of her parents, or—heaven forbid—her favorite sister Jane.

"Elizabeth," he said urgently, coming to her and kneeling beside her. "What has happened? Are you well? Let me get you some wine, you look like you've seen death."

He quickly called for a servant to bring up some wine, and then he returned to her, grasping her hands in his.

"Tell me at once, what news have you?" he asked, anxious to know. He hated to see her this way—in fact, he had never seen Elizabeth cry before. It was a horrid thing, making the ache in his heart pang hard and heavy, and then, for a moment, he felt murderous rage toward whoever might make her feel so upset, if there was a guilty culprit.

She sniffed, finally looking up at him, tears streaming on her pale, heart-shaped face, with unshed ones still trembling in her eyelids.

"I have just had a letter from Jane, with such dreadful news. It cannot be concealed from anyone. My youngest sister has left all her friends—has eloped—has thrown herself into the power of—of Mr. Wickham—"

Darcy felt an angry, horrid beast inside him rear its ugly head at the mention of that man's name.

“—they are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to—she is lost forever.”

Darcy's heart pounded, and the murderous rage he felt a moment ago only intensified with every sentence uttered. How dare he—!

"What I consider," she cried out, even more agitatedly, "that I might have prevented it! I, who knew what he was! Had I but explained some part of it only—"

Darcy couldn't listen, no, he just couldn't. It was horrid to him that Elizabeth blamed herself for such an event, when it was truly his fault that Wickham was able to prey upon the unsuspecting victims of Meryton. Had he only revealed to Colonel Forster the snake in his midst, instead of being so preoccupied with only protecting his family. Darcy felt ashamed.

He stood, releasing her hands and pacing the room while she spoke, asking a few questions about what was being done—apparently her father had tried to follow them to London and trace them out, to no avail—and Darcy was already concocting a plan to go to London himself when he heard Elizabeth say, "What must you think, to be tied to such a family, to such a scandal! Oh, Darcy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. If you wish to be released from our betrothal now, before many have heard—"

He whirled around and came to her, dropping to his knees before her once more and taking her delicate hands in his.

"Absolutely not," he said sternly, so sternly that she looked at him wide-eyed. He softened his tone and added, "Elizabeth, you are my betrothed now, and I will do

everything I can to take care of your family. I was lost in thought, not because of what you surmise—that I am scandalized—but because I have a plan. I shall join your father in London and help seek out Wickham and your sister."

Her jaw dropped as she gaped at him. He took his finger and gently closed her mouth with a slight smiling chuckle. She blushed and smiled too, though tears still glistened in her eyes as she gripped his hands tightly. He felt a surge of admiration course through him at the sight of her broken beauty, and within a moment, his lips were on hers, briefly, passionately—she opened her mouth and let him taste her—but then just as quickly, the kiss ceased, and he was standing, still holding her hands, but gently pulling her to her feet. The servant came in with the wine just then, eyes wide on them as she sat it down on the table and quickly departed. Darcy looked at it and then at Elizabeth.

"We have scandalized the maid servant," he said, holding back a smile, and she shook her head and laughed, though her face was still red and blotchy from crying. He wiped a lone teardrop from her cheek and then cradled her soft jawline with his strong hand, his thumb gently caressing her skin.

"I will find them," he murmured, as they were standing so close he was engulfed by her tantalizing scent, "I promise."

She gazed at him, her eyes begging for him, and they nearly kissed again, except for the sounds of her aunt and uncle coming up the stair. Darcy pulled away, dropping her hand and turning just as the door opened. The aunt and uncle were surprised, but not unwelcome, until they saw the distress on Elizabeth's face.

"Mr. Gardiner, may I have a word?" Darcy asked, and he exchanged a glance with Elizabeth, who passed the letter to her aunt. He took the man aside and apprised him of events, and they quickly came to an agreement on what to do.

Darcy knew he had to rescue the Bennets from ruin, and he would do everything in his power to do just that.

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Mrs. Gardiner watched the wedding between her least favorite niece and that man, Wickham, with some dissatisfaction. She never anticipated this Bennet girl marrying first, not by a long shot—that had always been reserved for Jane, one of her favorite nieces. Jane would have deserved to marry first, too, and she almost certainly would have, had Bingley not been persuaded against her so many months ago.

Mrs. Gardiner thought back to Derbyshire, when she revealed to Bingley what all had happened. The man had been surprised—

"Mr. Bingley, I have an impertinent question for you," she said to him as he stood in their Lambton Inn sitting room that day he came for a visit with Darcy and his sister. Bingley looked surprised but intrigued, and he and Mrs. Gardiner turned away from her husband and Miss Darcy. She cast a glance at Darcy and Lizzy over in the corner, speaking quietly to each other. Bingley had followed her gaze, his eyes landing on them.

"Did you know he is attached to her?" she asked quietly.

Bingley started. "He what?"

Mrs. Gardiner raised an eyebrow at him. He cleared his throat.

"Why, ah, no," he said politely, "I was not aware."

Mrs. Gardiner paused but then decided to say it: "You know, Mr. Darcy was wrong about Jane."

Bingley turned to stare at her, speechless. Mrs. Gardiner smiled pleasantly, as if her knowing of his intimate affairs were a perfectly normal occurrence.

"I know all about it, Mr. Bingley," she said calmly. Bingley's face reddened at the mention, but he looked at her, imploring her to say more. "He believed my eldest niece had no affection for you, but he was wrong. As he has since learned, when he proposed to Lizzy back in April and was refused because of it."

Now Bingley's eyes certainly looked to be bulging out of his skull. She glanced at the others to make sure they were not listening in. She smiled as she watched her husband readily engaging Miss Darcy. Mr. Gardiner was such an intelligent man. He had known his wife was up to something, but he knew better than to pry—he gave her a strange look the day before, when she suddenly found herself overly fatigued and walking painstakingly slow just after Darcy had arrived, but he questioned it not. He glanced over and looked at his wife just then in the Inn, seeing her and Bingley, and then merely continued to speak to Miss Darcy, occupying all her attention.

Mrs. Gardiner appreciated the man she loved—he knew how to cooperate, and not to ask prying questions.

She turned back to Bingley, who was still nearly sputtering over the revelation of Darcy's failed proposal. She leaned forward and said, "I propose you help them reunite—shall there be any more opportunities for our parties to be assembled together soon?"

Bingley finally recovered his ability to speak. "Miss Darcy is inviting you all to dine with us tonight, actually."

Mrs. Gardner nodded, satisfied. That would be perfect. She leaned in and said quietly, "Then I suggest you hand out Lizzy from the carriage tonight, ahead of Mr. Darcy—"

"Oh, but surely—"

"And you tell Lizzy that Mr. Darcy has told you all about his attachment to her."

He looked at her curiously. "But Darcy hasn't said a lick about it to me!"

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. "Look at him. Can you not see it?"

They turned their gaze toward Darcy, who quite indeed looked moonstruck with Elizabeth. Bingley looked back at her with a chuckle.

"But why should I lie to Miss Bennet?"

"We are merely helping your friend along, is all. If Lizzy knew for certain he liked her—which she will, once you suggest it to her—then she would be less nervous around him. Look—"

They watched Darcy and Lizzy again. There was a subtle nervousness between the both of them. But, there was also an eagerness there between them, too—each of them holding something back, resisting their feelings.

Bingley returned his gaze to Mrs. Gardiner with an amazed grin.

"You are a real matchmaker, aren't you?"

She smiled but didn't answer. Finally though, she tipped her head and said, "Ask Lizzy about Jane."

"Do what?"

"Ask Lizzy about whether you have a chance with my eldest niece. If anyone should

know, she will."

And things went swimmingly after that. Bingley practically stole Lizzy away from Darcy before dinner, and Mrs. Gardiner had to hold back a laugh at his surly expression when he watched them from afar. But it worked—Lizzy warmed up to Darcy right away, and everything else quickly fell into place. Mrs. Gardiner watched them oogling each other over dinner, and she even heard him call her by her Christian name. A betrothal was eminent, and sure enough, before the evening was over, they were engaged.

Mrs. Gardiner would have been satisfied to see Lizzy marry Darcy, even before Jane and Bingley. But no, that reckless Lydia and the scoundrel Wickham had to ruin things. Alas, their little sham of a wedding was nearly over with, and they could all put this dastardly episode behind them. She watched as Lydia batted her eyelashes at Wickham, who looked bored and stiff. She knew Darcy had paid him off, though her husband swore her to secrecy on that score. She was not surprised he did that, though. The young man went to great lengths to retrieve Lydia, to make sure this marriage took place without a hitch.

Mr. Bennet had given Darcy his consent, and even now, Bingley was in Hertfordshire, hopefully wooing Jane and winning her heart once more.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled.

Soon, everyone would be settled, and she would be a very satisfied matchmaker.

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Darcy and Elizabeth married in a lovely ceremony in Hertfordshire, with Bingley and Jane standing up with them both. Darcy didn't have the patience to wait for the banns to be read for Jane and Bingley, so Mrs. Bennet's dream of a big, fancy, double wedding was not brought to fruition. But this didn't bother either of these betrothed very much at all—they were each happy to have their own wedding day.

There was only one near-obstacle to the wedding of Darcy and Elizabeth: Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her unannounced arrival to Longbourn. She showed up ostentatiously, demanding that Elizabeth not marry her beloved nephew. Little did Lady Catherine realize, Darcy was already residing at Netherfield, and he rode up to Longbourn on horseback just in time to witness the fiasco—not only did he see how horrendously his aunt was behaving, he also saw how majestically Elizabeth refused to back down. He was in awe at seeing her stand up for herself and even more in love with her after he witnessed her declaring her unyielding love for him. Lady Catherine disappeared in a huff with nothing more than a scowl from Darcy, too enamored as he was with Elizabeth's grand proclamations of love to really feel too offended by the old woman.

Darcy and Elizabeth moved to Derbyshire and immediately began having children. Five daughters (five!) were born at Pemberley before Elizabeth finally birthed a son. Ten long years of having babies, just to be only a little more anxious each and every time, in hopes of siring an heir, when finally, at long last, young master Bennet Darcy arrived. To Elizabeth, all her babies looked the way she had dreamed: they all had Darcy's dark coloring and even his stunning, piercing eyes—but this babe, this strapping little baby boy, he had Elizabeth's eyes, or so Darcy told her.

"Bennet has your eyes, you know," he said fondly to his wife, rubbing his hand on

her pregnant belly (again) and kissing her temple chastely.

"My eyes?" she asked, playfully raising an eyebrow at him.

"Your fine eyes," he answered, kissing her again.

She turned her head, and the chaste kiss soon turned into something deeper, something intense and full of longing. Darcy could never get enough of this woman, no matter how many years they spent together. She was as beautiful as she'd ever been, and he particularly adored her when she was heavy with his child—it only made him desire her more.

As they kissed and began to cling to each other, they heard some of their older children:

"Oh, Mama, really?"

"They're kissing again—ew."

"Papa, stop that!"

The only children who didn't mind their frequent kisses were the younger ones, who toddled around their legs, stepping on their parents' feet in a bid for kisses and attention from Mama, too. Darcy chuckled as he picked up four-year-old Emma and six-year-old Anne, while Elizabeth scooped up little Bennet who was not yet two. The older three girls—Lizzy, Jane, and Georgie—at ages twelve, ten, and eight, thought they were too grown up for such things, and they ran away with one another, giggling loudly down the corridor. Elizabeth and Darcy shared a laugh with their younger three children, gazing at one another with nothing but affection in their eyes.

"I love you, Darcy," she said to him, leaning over to kiss him again.

"And I love you, Elizabeth."

The End