



Superior Connections

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Category: Historical

Description: We know little of Mr Bennet's past and how it happened that Longbourn became entailed on Mr Collins.

What if the past is suddenly revived and comes to make amends in the present? And what if the Bennets have superior connections who consider Mr Bingley not good enough for Jane and respond to Mr Darcy's pride and arrogance in a similar manner?

In the autumn of 1811, when Mr Bingley leases Netherfield, an elderly lady of consequence, with an impressive fortune, purchases Stoke Park. She is none other than Mr Bennet's aunt, who has been abroad for more than twenty years and, having no closer family, wishes to strengthen her connection to the Bennets. The lady becomes protective of the sisters and is especially fond of Jane and Elizabeth. When angry, she can be as proud, arrogant, and resentful as Mr Darcy — and even more offensive and rude than Mr Bingley's sisters.

Even before the lady's arrival, Elizabeth suffers a small accident, which gives Mr Darcy the opportunity to come to her aid and for them to know each other a little better, leading to her improving her ill opinion of him.

Jane and Mr Bingley's feelings for each other are the same, and Mr Wickham is also in the story, but the aunt is neither deceived nor impressed by his appearance of goodness.

However, pride and prejudice are not easily dismissed from the story. During the Netherfield ball, the lady, together with Elizabeth, happens to hear a mean discussion between Mr Bingley, his sisters, and Mr Darcy about Jane. Enraged, she confronts those culpable, demands explanations, and hurls harsh accusations. She plans to take the two eldest Bennet sisters to London, convinced that she can find good husbands for her great-nieces from among the most eligible gentlemen of the ton.

What will a proud man like Darcy do after he is severely scolded and deeply offended? How will he handle the danger of losing Elizabeth's good opinion and ruining Bingley's happiness?

Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, and his sisters return to London a month before the lady and the eldest Bennet sisters. But once in town, Jane

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Elizabeth let out a cry as the sharp pain surged through her leg. Her left foot — caught between two tree stumps — caused her to stumble, and she dropped her right knee to the cold ground just in time to avoid sprawling in the mud. Her success was only partial, as her gloves were now filthy, as well as half her dress. She crushed a few words between her lips that were highly improper for a young lady, while she tried to pull out her foot. How was it possible that she had been so careless? That path was familiar to her — she had taken dozens of strolls along it in the last year — yet she had taken a misstep and suffered a silly accident, just as she was in a hurry to return home and prepare for Lady Rosseford's arrival later that afternoon.

The two stumps had imprisoned her shoe as well as her foot. She turned her ankle this way and that but could not find the right position to free herself, so she sat down, disregarding the damage caused to her gown.

Fate was probably punishing her for disobeying her mother, she mused, taking off her gloves. She had left in the middle of a heated argument, blaming a headache and declaring a need for fresh air — which was partially true.

The prospect of her mother's wrath was not enough to ruin Elizabeth's pleasure in a long walk to Oakham Mount. Staying indoors was insupportable, especially after three rainy days spent in the house bearing Mr Collins's annoying attentions.

There was no doubt that their cousin had come to Hertfordshire to find a wife — as his patroness Lady Catherine had demanded — and he considered it a great favour to the Bennets to choose from among his cousins. In truth, his logic was flawless: marrying a daughter from the family whose home he would one day inherit seemed fair, even laudable. Except that none of the Bennet sisters held Mr Collins in any

regard, and Elizabeth, who seemed to be his choice, esteemed him even less than anyone else.

As vexed as she was to be Mr Collins's object of admiration, Elizabeth was also relieved. He had at first been interested in Jane, but her mother had mentioned that her eldest daughter was expected to become engaged soon, so his attention had turned to Elizabeth. Had it not, Jane would certainly have been overwhelmed by his ridiculous compliments, of which he was so proud.

However, Elizabeth feared the anticipated proposal from Mr Bingley might not come soon. His admiration for Jane was irrefutable, and Elizabeth had observed it during the time she had spent at Netherfield, nursing her sister when she had fallen ill while visiting the aforementioned gentleman's sisters. But also irrefutable was the fact that those sisters were trying their hardest to quash that admiration, helped in no small measure by Mr Bingley's friend Mr Darcy.

Elizabeth recollected Mr Darcy's disgust when he had spoken to her mother about country living and the four-and-twenty families that were considered good society in Meryton. He was arrogant and disdainful of everyone in the neighbourhood. He certainly believed anyone outside his circle of family and friends — especially those with lower connections — was not worthy of his consideration.

Of course, Mr Darcy's contempt towards them all was nothing compared to his cruel treatment of poor Mr Wickham. It was no wonder that the most disagreeable man was jealous of the most agreeable and amiable one and sought to ruin him.

No, that was not true. In fact, it was appalling, astounding, and unforgivable. Mr Darcy's pride and arrogance were well known, but his dishonourable refusal to comply with his father's wish and grant Mr Wickham a living was shockingly ungentlemanlike.

Eventually, she freed her foot, only to wince in pain. Her ankle was throbbing and had begun to swell, and a trace of blood had appeared on her stockings. She stood up and took a step, but her ankle would not support her. She sank to the floor again and leant against a tree, rubbing her sore joint and pondering her choices. She must find something for support and walk home, slowly and carefully, before her injury became worse.

“Miss Bennet? What are you doing here? Are you alone? Are you hurt?”

Mr Darcy’s voice startled and vexed Elizabeth. He was certainly the last man in the world she wished to see in her present circumstances; not that she would find his company desirable in any other situation.

She looked up at him on his enormous black steed. “Mr Darcy! Yes, I am alone. I am not hurt...I just...”

He dismounted next to her. “Are you certain? Can you walk?”

“I have hurt my ankle,” she finally admitted. “It is nothing serious.”

“Forgive my insistence, but it does look serious — and painful. And you are wet and dirty. You must be very cold. You look very ill, indeed.”

He sounded concerned, but his scrutiny irritated Elizabeth. He seemed determined to find as many flaws to criticise in her as possible.

“I imagine I must look very ill, and you are probably appalled. You did not favour my appearance even when it was at its best. I do not dare wonder what you think now.”

She heard her own voice, which was harsh and mocking, contrary to his worried enquiry.

“I am not sure what you mean, Miss Bennet, but I have noticed your tendency to say things you do not really believe,” he replied. “You need to go home immediately, and perhaps the apothecary should be sent for. Is that blood?” he asked, and she lowered her eyes, attempting to pull her skirts down over the injury and slipping her hands back into her sodden gloves.

“Yes. It is just a superficial scratch.”

“It is bleeding. Would you allow me to look at it? Perhaps bandage the wound?”

“Look at it?” she answered, dumbfounded, her cheeks heating. “At my ankle?”

“Yes...if you do not mind.”

“I do mind, sir! But I thank you for your concern — it is very kind of you. I must return home now.”

She stood again tentatively and took another step but stumbled and cried out as she did so, for her ankle had become more swollen and more painful.

“You cannot walk. I could go and fetch help, but it might take some time, and you are already freezing. Can you ride? You may take my horse and will be home soon.”

“You are very generous, but I cannot ride your horse. I never even ride my father’s, which I know quite well.”

“Then...would you wait here? I am afraid it might rain again. Or perhaps...”

“Yes?”

Unlike a few minutes ago, Elizabeth was ready to accept his help. She was cold and

wet, and her feet had become a heavy burden.

“I shall take you home on my horse,” he uttered. She stared at him, puzzled and doubtful; he looked serious in his offer as well as in his concern.

“Thank you, sir. That would be most kind but also a huge imposition on you.”

“You cannot be imposing, since I offered,” he replied. “Let us not waste more time.”

She nodded, feeling her stomach in her throat, and he took another step closer.

“You must not be afraid. My horse is very gentle and obedient.”

“It looks tall and intimidating,” she said, and he laughed.

“I promise he will not scare you. Can you put your uninjured foot here? Try to hold on to the saddle while I lift you up.”

“Oh...” she whispered, looking at the horse, then at him.

“Trust me, it is easier than it seems. I shall help — there is no danger.”

His voice had become warmer, and he grasped her arm, guiding her to follow his instructions. For a moment, Elizabeth thought that he looked as tall and intimidating as the horse, yet she did as he suggested. She felt his hands holding her waist and lifting her, then placing her in the saddle. She startled and grabbed the reins, but the horse remained calm and still.

“Are you comfortable, Miss Bennet?”

“Not at all, sir. But that is not your fault, and there is nothing to be done about it,” she

answered.

He laughed again and said, “It is surprising a young woman so brave and determined like you is scared of horses.”

“Each of us is scared of something, are we not?”

“True,” he admitted. “Let me place your leg in a more comfortable position,” he said.

With waves of cold and warmth, she felt his fingers upon her uninjured leg. The sensation of a man’s touch was distracting, something she had never felt before, and her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Your gloves are wet. Please take mine — they will be too large for you, but at least they will keep you warm.”

He removed his gloves, then hers, which he put into the pocket of his greatcoat. Then he helped her slim hands glide into his large gloves and smiled as her fingers seemed to be lost inside. She noticed his amusement and smiled too.

“Your ankle looks very bad,” he said, gently touching the injury. In her present position, her lower leg was completely exposed to his scrutiny. “Would you mind if I at least removed your boot? And I shall place my neckcloth over that spot that is bleeding.”

She was tempted to refuse, but his countenance showed such deep concern that she reluctantly agreed. His bare fingers touched her leg with soft, careful movements, causing her a mixture of pain and distressing, strange, overwhelming feelings.

When he removed her boot, she responded with a moan of relief. He put the boot into his pocket too, then untied his neckcloth while Elizabeth watched him in fascination.

Her eyes were instantly drawn to his exposed throat, which caused her cheeks to heat even more. He bandaged the wound over her stocking, and she moaned again.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little bit. Thank you, sir. You are very kind and considerate. Truly,” she said, genuinely grateful. Only at that moment did she realise the seriousness of the situation she found herself in, all due to a silly little accident. Without Mr Darcy’s help, she would have certainly been in great trouble.

“Let us hurry now,” he said, taking the reins. He walked ahead, and the horse followed him faithfully.

Despite the slow pace, being on a strange stallion, so high up, with no control over it — or even over her own feet — was disconcerting for Elizabeth.

However, soon enough, her discomfort was overcome by a peculiar sense of safety. She gently touched the horse’s mane, still grasping the pommel with her other hand. Mr Darcy’s large gloves made her movements awkward but protected and warmed her hands. The rest of her body felt imprisoned by cold, and her injured ankle felt heavier, more swollen, and more painful.

“I am very sorry for all the trouble, Mr Darcy,” she said. “I am grateful that you insisted on offering your support, despite my stubbornness.”

“It is no trouble for me, I assure you. But I admit you have been quite stubborn. If it was anyone else in your position, I would have probably just left and sent help.”

His voice sounded friendly, almost teasing, as had happened on a few occasions during her stay at Netherfield. His statement was puzzling, however, and its true meaning was confusing.

“Your choice to take a ride proved to be exceedingly fortunate for me but quite the opposite for you,” Elizabeth continued.

“Not really,” he answered briefly, puzzling her again. “Is Miss Bennet in good health? Did she fully recover after the cold?”

“Jane? Yes, she is in excellent health. It was just a trifling cold, as my mother said.”

“I am glad to hear that. But you should be prudent. I suspect you are in danger of catching a cold too. I hope you will not hesitate to send for the apothecary.”

“Thank you for your concern. I shall be prudent and ask my father to send someone for Mr Jones.”

“Good. That would be the best way of thanking me if you insist on doing so.”

“I do insist,” she said, and he glanced back at her.

“Sadly, this accident will prevent you from enjoying walks for quite a while. And probably the ball too. I know everybody is looking forward to it.”

“I am not too worried about the ball. I may come and just sit on a chair and watch. After all, I have been slighted by other men on previous occasions.”

She knew it was rude of her to attack him when he had just shown her so much kindness, but she realised her words too late.

He stopped, and so did his horse.

“Miss Bennet, I am mortified that you heard my rude remark at the assembly. I imagine how horrible it sounded, but it was not meant for you. I mean, I did respond

to Bingley's insistence that I dance with you, I cannot deny that, but I was in a poor state of mind, and my disposition was unfit for any party. Bingley insisted on me attending, then he insisted on me dancing."

He paused, obviously embarrassed, while she watched him, doubtful about his clumsy excuse.

He resumed walking, but this time he remained by her side, so they could glance at each other during the conversation.

"Surely you must have also heard that I called you tolerable, but at that moment I had hardly looked at you at all. Since then, I have had the chance to get to know you better, and I have nothing but regard and admiration for you. If my previous actions suggested otherwise, I apologise again."

His statement left her dumbfounded. He was only being polite, of course, but the effort of explaining himself to her, of justifying his actions and declaring regard and admiration for her, was unthinkable. Mr Darcy, of all people! All this, added to his current generous endeavour of helping her, was beyond belief.

"It is very kind of you to apologise, Mr Darcy, but let us establish once and for all it is not necessary. Your judgment of my appearance, and your desire, or lack of, to dance with me are your personal choices, and you are entitled to them. Each of us is entitled to our own opinions."

"True. I only hope my repulsive manners have not altered your opinion of me so much that it cannot be remedied."

"I am surprised that you even care about my opinion, Mr Darcy. And I am saying that in the friendliest way possible."

“I do care, Miss Bennet. And I am saying that in the friendliest way possible.”

She smiled at his repetition of her words.

“Mr Darcy, regardless of the past, considering your present kindness, I have the highest opinion of you.”

“One gesture should not be enough to sketch one’s character, Miss Bennet. However, there is a favour I dare ask of you.”

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“Certainly, Mr Darcy. What sort of favour do you need from me?”

“I have reason to believe that you will receive — or already have received — some information that will not paint me in a favourable light.”

He glanced at her again.

“I cannot feign ignorance to your meaning, Mr Darcy.”

“So he has already begun. He usually needs a few more days until he finds people willing to listen to him.”

The last sentence sounded offensive to Elizabeth, even though his tone and countenance remained calm and amiable.

“The favour I need, Miss Bennet, is for you to judge his assertions wisely, and to request proof to support his complaints. George Wickham has the ability to make friends easily and gain people’s trust. That usually changes once his true character is discovered.”

“He had the misfortune of losing your friendship in a way that might affect him for life,” she uttered. “You once said you might be resentful.”

“He did lose my friendship, not due to resentment but due to disappointment that he was offered so many chances and wasted all of them. My father was George Wickham’s godfather and loved him dearly. That was my inducement to overlook his many flaws and many of his actions for years. I even concealed the truth from my

father, so he died still holding Wickham in regard. I had to deal with him further until enough was enough.”

His words shook and confused Elizabeth; she searched for a proper reply, careful not to offend or anger him. After all, she was alone with him, a strange, proud, and arrogant man, far from her home, hurt, and depending on his help.

“I cannot be sure where the truth lies. I dare assume that Mr Wickham did not meet your expectations, and he is not perhaps successful enough for you to call him a friend. But...would it not have been easier for you to grant him the living your father wished him to have? And after that, you could have easily disregarded him for the rest of your life.”

“I could have — if he had showed any desire to study for the church or if his character suggested any inclination to be a clergyman. It was my duty to respect my father’s will but also to protect the people of that parish.”

Elizabeth was astounded. She refused to believe what Mr Darcy was implying regarding Mr Wickham and was eager for more details. But she noticed his discomposure and did not dare ask further.

“Miss Bennet, it would be ungentlemanlike of me to burden you further with my past dealings with Mr Wickham. If he happens to mention something about a living again, he should explain the conditions around it, what else he received, and whether he requested compensation instead of the named living. I trust you are not easily deceived and would not put your confidence in a man you hardly know — either me or him — without clear evidence.”

That statement concluded the subject, leaving Elizabeth speechless and thoughtful. She was cold, her ankle was painful, and the entire situation was too distressing for thorough consideration of what she had been told. Mr Darcy had implied there had

been financial compensation, about which Mr Wickham had said nothing. What irritated her the most was that, contrary to Mr Darcy's suggestion, she had asked for no proof, and she had trusted in Mr Wickham from the first moment they met.

She was also vexed that Mr Darcy had said 'he usually needs a few more days until he finds people willing to listen to him'. That meant Mr Wickham was wont to act in the same way, in similar situations, and she just happened to be one of those easily fooled. She felt offended by one of the men, but she was not sure which one yet.

"There is Longbourn," Mr Darcy said. "We are just in time, before the rain begins. Let us hurry."

She was tempted to walk the rest of the way, but that would have been ridiculous and would only aggravate her injury.

He stopped the horse in front of the house.

"Let me help you down. I shall carry you to the door."

"Oh...I am sorry to give you even more trouble. I think I can hop on one foot if I can hold your arm."

"Miss Bennet, it would be easier this way," he said, stretching out his hands to her. She slid down from the saddle right into his arms, holding her breath, supporting herself on her right foot. She lost her balance immediately, so she had to lean against him, feeling his breath on her cheek as well as catching his scent. She felt suddenly dizzy, and she quivered.

"Be careful of your ankle," he said, and to her utter astonishment, she felt herself lifted into the air. She immediately brought her arms around his neck for better support, her face disturbingly close to his.

Indeed, he only needed a few moments and a few steps to take them to the door, then he put her down, his arm still around her waist.

“Oh dear, I have ruined your coat,” she said. “And your gloves...and your neckcloth...”

“They should be your last concern,” he said with a smile pressed between his lips that revealed dimples in his cheeks. She quivered again, while he knocked at the door several times.

When it finally opened, Jane appeared, gasping in shock.

“Lizzy, what happened? Dear Lord, you are hurt!”

Behind her were Lydia, Kitty, and Mary, then Mrs Bennet, yelling. Jane hurried to fetch a chair so Elizabeth could sit.

“Oh, dear Lord, what happened to you? Where have you been? We have been so worried about you! You are dirty and wet!” Mrs Bennet cried, her handkerchief fluttering about her.

“Please calm down for a moment, Mama. I am sorry I gave you a fright. I went for a walk, and I trapped my foot between two tree stumps. I think I sprained my ankle. Fortunately, Mr Darcy happened upon me, and he was kind enough to assist me and bring me home. That is all.”

“That is all?” Mrs Bennet cried. “Oh dear, what shall I do with you, Lizzy? Lady Rosseford should arrive any minute! What shall I tell her if she sees you like this? And you have ruined Mr Darcy’s clothes!”

“Forgive me, madam,” Mr Darcy interjected, “Miss Elizabeth should be taken to her

room, and she should not put her foot down. The apothecary should be fetched immediately. The injury is bleeding and needs immediate care. She might have caught a cold too.”

“Yes, thank you, we shall do that,” Jane answered. “Mary, send Peter to fetch Mr Jones. Lydia, call Papa. We need help to carry Lizzy.”

Mr Bennet arrived, drawn by the loud voices, and startled, turning pale.

“I am well, Papa, do not worry,” Elizabeth said. “This is Mr Darcy. He found me and brought me home on his horse.”

“But how...why...what happened?”

“We must carry Lizzy upstairs, Papa. She cannot put her foot down,” Jane explained.

“Mrs Bennet, Mr Bennet,” Mr Darcy interjected again, “if you agree, I could carry Miss Elizabeth to her room. It is no trouble for me, and she needs to be in bed and changed as soon as possible.”

His proposal silenced everyone, and with her cheeks burning, Elizabeth watched her mother and father staring at the gentleman in disbelief.

Then, Mr Bennet looked at Elizabeth, then at Mr Darcy, and said, “Sir, I am honoured to make your acquaintance, though I am not sure how it happened. I never believed I would say this to any man, but I would be truly grateful if you would help us carry Lizzy to her chamber.”

“Certainly, sir,” Mr Darcy said. Then he looked at Elizabeth as if asking her permission before lifting her again, and she held onto his neck.

“This way, please,” Jane said, running ahead. Mr Darcy climbed the stairs two at a time, while the rest of the family followed him.

Jane opened the door and showed him which bed was Elizabeth’s, and he placed her on it. Mrs Bennet entered too, while the others remained in the hall.

Mr Darcy caught his breath for a moment, then gazed at Elizabeth, and their eyes locked. Elizabeth’s heart was racing and pounding so loudly that she was sure everybody could hear it.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” she whispered, pulling off his dirty gloves and handing them to him.

He pushed them into his pocket. “I am glad I could help. I mean, I am very sorry for the accident. I wish you a speedy and easy recovery, Miss Elizabeth.”

Then he bowed and left, while Jane closed the door.

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Darcy glanced at Elizabeth’s father and younger sisters, uncertain what to say. He was at Longbourn for the first time, he had just met the gentleman without even being properly introduced, he had carried Elizabeth in his arms — twice — and his dirty gloves and hers as well as her boot were still in his pocket. What could be said without breaching propriety even more and not sounding silly?

“Mr Darcy, I am speechless. How can I thank you enough for going to so much trouble, so much effort?” Mr Bennet mumbled.

“No thanks are necessary, Mr Bennet. Fortunately, I was in the right place at the right time to offer my assistance. Oh, here are Miss Elizabeth’s gloves and her boot,” he

said, handing them to Miss Mary.

She took them hesitantly and uttered, "I sent Peter to fetch Mr Jones."

"Good. Let us hope his report will indicate nothing to worry about."

"Mr Darcy, would you allow me to offer you at least a drink?" his host offered.

"I would be happy to accept, but some other time, Mr Bennet. I must change my clothes. Besides, I heard you are expecting a visitor. I wish you all the best."

"You too, Mr Darcy. I hope we shall have the chance to meet again soon. And thank you for bringing Lizzy home safely. Allow me to escort you to the door."

They walked together down the stairs; Darcy began to feel cold, and for a moment he was tempted to accept a glass of brandy to keep him warm while he rode back to Netherfield. But he was too dirty and too wet to even sit down. Furthermore, a voice startled him, and a man ran towards them. Darcy recollected he had seen him in Meryton with the Bennet sisters.

"My dear Mr Bennet, what happened? I heard voices. Did Lady Rosseford arrive?"

"No, Mr Collins. Elizabeth had a little accident, and Mr Darcy was kind enough to bring her home. Mr Darcy, this is my cousin Mr Collins."

Darcy nodded briefly and was about to leave when the man stopped him again.

"Could you by any chance be Mr Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire? The nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park?"

Darcy frowned, glanced at Mr Bennet — who seemed equally puzzled — then

answered, "I am."

"Mr Darcy, my name is William Collins, and I am the rector of Hunsford parish. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is my noble patroness and most generous protector."

"Is she? How fortunate for you. Now please excuse me. I must leave. I am in quite a hurry."

He hastened his steps, then turned to bid a final farewell to Mr Bennet. At that moment, the door was pushed open, and an elegant elderly lady, dressed most fashionably, entered, followed by two servants. With her eyebrow arched, she scrutinised each of them — no doubt appalled by his appearance.

Mr Bennet stepped forwards and said, obviously overjoyed, "Aunt! You are here, finally! What a pleasure to see you! You have hardly changed in almost twenty years."

"Thomas? My dear boy, I am so glad to see you!"

She then glanced at Darcy again, and Mr Bennet said, "Aunt, please allow me to introduce Mr Darcy. He is staying with his friend Mr Bingley at Netherfield. My second daughter Elizabeth suffered a small accident earlier, and Mr Darcy brought her home. It is a long story. We shall have time to discuss it over dinner. Mr Darcy, this is my aunt Lady Rosseford."

Darcy bowed to the lady, surprised that the Bennets had a noble relation and curious about her identity. The name Rosseford was completely unknown to him, and he wondered about never hearing it within London society.

"Lady Rosseford, I apologise for my appearance. I am delighted to make your acquaintance, and I am sorry I am not more properly dressed for the occasion."

“You look terrible, Mr Darcy. I mean your attire, as you are quite handsome. I look forward to hearing the story of why your clothes are in such a state.”

Darcy smiled. The lady appeared to be a peculiar — and dangerous — combination of his two aunts, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Lady Matlock. Whilst significantly older than both, she was equally elegant, impressive, and outspoken — and probably also arrogant and vain but with a delightful sense of humour.

“Are you by any chance related to the Darcys of Pemberley, or is it just a coincidence that you have the same name?”

“George Darcy was my father. Sadly, both my parents died several years ago.”

“Oh dear, I am so sorry to hear that. I visited Pemberley the year before I left England. Your parents were a lovely couple. I believe I met you too. You were very young but already as handsome as your father and grandfather. I think I see the resemblance despite the dirt on your face.”

“What an amazing coincidence, your ladyship,” Darcy replied, dumbstruck.

“Mr Darcy, are you certain you do not wish to stay and have a drink and continue this conversation?” Mr Bennet asked.

“You are very kind, sir, but now I am even more eager to leave immediately, considering my attire. I hope we shall meet again soon, when my appearance is more appropriate to being in your company.”

He bowed again, and this time he hurried out of the house. As he left, he saw another carriage approaching, and he assumed it was the apothecary.

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It had begun to rain, and the wind was freezing, so the ride back to Netherfield was exceedingly unpleasant for Darcy. When he entered, the butler cast a puzzled glance at him, and so did the few other servants he encountered on the way to his chamber. He pulled the bell, then began to remove his clothes while he waited for his valet.

Half an hour later, washed and changed, Darcy pondered whether he should talk to Bingley. It was hardly past noon, and the day had already been as eventful as an entire month. Thinking back, it was hard to believe it had actually happened.

Taking a ride after breakfast had seemed like a good idea to clear his mind and improve his disposition.

He had slept little and ill lately since Miss Elizabeth Bennet had invaded his heart and his mind. At first, he had been confused about his feelings, worried about his lack of control, and upset about his weakness. Then, it became certain that it was not a mere infatuation; he had fallen in love with her against his better judgment and against his will.

Of all the beautiful women he had met, the only one who had enchanted and captivated him was her — the daughter of an insignificant country gentleman. She was beautiful, of course, but there was much more to her than that — her uncommonly pretty eyes, her smile, her wit, her tendency to tease, her unaffected manners, her determination to express her opinion. Or perhaps she was simply the woman most suited to him; he had read and heard such things did happen, but he had always laughed at the notion.

That morning he had gone for a ride to forget about her, yet he had unexpectedly

encountered her. It frightened him to imagine what would have happened if he had not been there to help her. Her injury was likely not serious, but the consequences could have been terrible had she been alone.

Besides returning her to Longbourn safely, he had been given the chance to speak to her about Wickham and warn her about trusting him. He hoped she was as clever and wise as he assumed her to be and that she would listen to his advice.

But, beyond everything else, he had been given the chance to hold her in his arms, to carry her, to lay her down on her own bed; gestures which, considering the situation, were perfectly acceptable but whose recollections stirred his senses.

He was a man of the world and had been in the intimate company of women before. However, the sort of feelings that he experienced with Elizabeth, in her presence or only thinking of her, were new, worrisome, and overwhelming.

Until that day, he had never pondered whether his admiration for Elizabeth could lead to something more. Considering the differences between their situations in life, a bond of marriage seemed impossible, and he had no intention of trifling with her. His attraction was intended to remain a secret from everyone, including her. He assumed he would leave Hertfordshire soon and never see her again, except perhaps by chance.

However, while taking her home, engaging in conversation, and wishing to please her and to improve her opinion of him, he had apologised for his rudeness at the assembly and admitted his admiration for her. And then, he had taken her in his arms, and her hands had entwined around his neck, and everything had seemed different ever since.

He could still remember her breath on his cheek, her warmth, her scent; the smell of fresh air combined with rain and a little bit of dirt on her skin was the most

enchancing perfume. When he had removed her gloves and slipped her hands into his, his fingers had brushed over her bare palms. How was it possible that such a brief touch, which would go unnoticed in the case of any other woman, could be so alluring, so stirring?

“Sir, I shall take these clothes to be washed. May I bring you anything else?”

“That will be all. Wait — not the gloves. Give me the gloves.”

“But sir — they are the dirtiest.”

“Yes, I see that. Just put them on the mantelpiece to dry.”

“Very well, sir.”

The valet left, and Darcy poured himself a drink and returned to his musings. He would keep the gloves that Elizabeth had worn and which still carried the trace of her skin. Placing his hands inside would feel almost like holding hers.

Such thoughts angered him as he realised he was behaving like a schoolboy with his first love. In truth, she was his first love, but he was an old man who knew enough of the world to keep his composure and who had always prided himself on his self-control. How had he changed so deeply in such a short while?

He had come to Hertfordshire a month ago, to help Bingley with his new lease of Netherfield. It was the first property Bingley had been responsible for and a first step towards his goal of purchasing his own estate one day.

Darcy had agreed to provide his friend with advice, but he had also come to retreat to the country for a while and calm his own mind after the tormenting summer when Georgiana had almost fallen victim to George Wickham’s deceptions. He had taken

advantage of her good heart and charmed her to the point where she had agreed to elope with the scoundrel. If he had succeeded, it would have been Wickham's perfect revenge and the ruin of both Darcys' lives.

Thankfully, Georgiana had proved her strength of character, wisdom, and loyalty and had disclosed the elopement to him before it took place. Since then, Darcy had been blaming himself for not being cautious enough in protecting his sister as well as for hiring Mrs Younge, whose betrayal had been a great disappointment.

He had found his sister another companion in Mrs Annesley, who seemed to be helpful in the process of Georgiana's slow recovery. But the day when his sister's wound, caused by their father's godson, would heal was still far away. Just as far as the day when Darcy would be ready to forgive himself. And how could he do that when George Wickham had crossed paths with him again?

"Darcy? Forgive me, I did knock, but you did not hear me. May I come in?" Bingley asked from the doorway.

"Please do."

"I wondered where you have been all morning. Are you drinking? So early?"

"Just one drink. I need something to warm myself."

"What happened? I heard all your clothes are wet and dirty. Did you have an accident? Are you hurt?"

"Yes and no. I did not have an accident. Miss Elizabeth had one. She hurt her ankle while she was taking a stroll. I took her to Longbourn on my horse."

The brief narration left Bingley frowning.

“And? How is she? Is she injured?”

“She sprained and bruised her ankle. Hopefully it will heal soon and she will not catch a cold.”

“What a ride that must have been! I wish I had been with you. So, you went to Longbourn?”

“Yes. I was introduced to Mr Bennet, who seemed to be an agreeable gentleman.”

“He is. And the ladies?”

“Everybody was at home. Including that annoying cousin, Mr Collins. Is there anything particular you wish to ask, Bingley?”

“No...I shall call at Longbourn tomorrow and enquire after Miss Elizabeth. Will you join me?”

“I am not sure. Perhaps we should not impose — at least not both of us. Mr Collins is there, and an aunt has just arrived. I doubt they need more guests. Your presence would probably be more agreeable to them than mine.”

“I can see your disapproval every time you speak of the Bennets, Darcy. I am surprised to say so, but you seem very similar in opinion to my sisters.”

“I doubt that very much, Bingley. But I shall not deny that I disapprove of your infatuation with Miss Jane Bennet and your eagerness to reveal your admiration. Such behaviour, especially in a small town, will raise expectations that, when they are unfulfilled, might harm you, the lady, and her family.”

“Do you find my behaviour improper? Offensive?”

“Not at all, Bingley. Quite the opposite. You are nothing but amiable. But you cannot be ignorant of the expectations you are creating. And for a family with five daughters with little fortune and no connections, a marriage proposal from you would be their salvation. They must hope for and would do anything for it to happen.”

“Perhaps. But how is that any different from all the mothers who hope for a marriage proposal from you for their daughters? Just because they are part of the ton, while I and the Bennets are not, does not make it any better.”

“True. The difference is I do not fall in love with every pretty face I meet. And I do not let myself be deceived by a woman’s demure countenance.”

“This is highly offensive, Darcy! Both to me and Miss Bennet!”

“I apologise. That was certainly not my intention. Miss Bennet’s appearance and her manners are above reproach. In fact, they are probably better than those of most of the women we know.”

“Then why did you think she would deceive me?”

“Bingley, I should have chosen my words more carefully. After all, I do not know Miss Bennet so well as to guess her feelings and intentions. You are entitled to form your own opinion and to make your own decisions. You do not need to hear mine.”

“I do not need to, but I would like to hear it nevertheless.”

“If you make a decision and request my opinion, I shall offer it. Until then, my only advice is to be careful and to consider your feelings and wishes thoroughly.”

“I shall. But, Darcy, please remember that my situation cannot be compared with yours, so what you might find wanting in the Bennets might be of no consequence to

me.”

“I agree.”

“I am glad you are being reasonable. Caroline and Louisa are just annoying and upsetting!”

“As I said, I am only considering your best interests.”

“I know. I think I shall have a drink with you, after all.”

“Have you decided when you will leave for London?”

“Two days after the ball. I hope to complete my business there quickly and return within a week.”

“You will spend Christmas at Netherfield?”

“Of course. And you? Will you stay in London or travel to Pemberley?”

“Georgiana and I shall stay in town. It would be better for her to be with our relatives, attend some events, and meet other people rather than suffer solitude with me at Pemberley.”

“You know you are always welcome at Netherfield — both of you.”

“I know, and I thank you, but it is very unlikely we shall travel at all.”

As they continued to talk, Darcy’s valet returned, bringing him a note.

“From Longbourn, sir.”

Darcy opened it with surprise and curiosity.

Mr Darcy,

I would not have dared to write this, considering the brevity of our acquaintance, if not for Lady Rosseford's insistence.

Tomorrow evening, we are hosting a dinner for her, at Longbourn, and would be honoured if you would attend. Of course, Mr Bingley and his family are also invited and most welcome.

I would also like to inform you that Mr Jones expects Lizzy will make a quick recovery. For that, we thank you and are in your debt.

Regards,

T Bennet

Darcy glanced at Bingley over the piece of paper.

"It is an invitation from Mr Bennet for us all to dine at Longbourn tomorrow evening. I assume it was sent to me instead of you because he wished to thank me for helping Miss Elizabeth."

"Oh." Bingley's countenance brightened. "I hope you will accept. Mrs Bennet has mentioned a dinner invitation many times, and I would like to attend before I return to town."

"I cannot see how I could refuse it," Darcy said after a brief hesitation. "You should ask your sisters, then I shall send our reply."

“I shall go and ask them immediately, though I am sure I already know their answer.”

Bingley left, and Darcy looked at the note thoughtfully. He had deliberately not mentioned the presence of Lady Rosseford to Bingley, so he could not convey it to his sisters. If they knew, they might accept the invitation out of curiosity and would likely act with their usual pretension, ruining everyone’s disposition.

Lady Rosseford intrigued Darcy since she had mentioned visiting Pemberley. Her age, despite her handsomeness and elegance, must have been closer to his grandfather’s than to his father’s. Mr Bennet had called her ‘aunt’, and they apparently had not seen one another for twenty years, which, given the lady’s description, must have been around the same time she had said she visited Pemberley. It was a mystery that piqued his interest and supported his decision to accept the invitation. In truth, he would have gone in any case. With his forthcoming return to London, he might not see Elizabeth again soon, and spending an evening in her company, even in a house full of people, was a sweet, though small, compensation.

It was only a short while before Bingley brought back the anticipated answer from his sisters. Darcy wrote back thanking Mr Bennet for the invitation and accepting it on behalf of himself and Bingley since the rest of the family had other engagements.

“You know, Darcy, there is something that has puzzled me for a while. Caroline and Louisa disapprove of my admiration for Miss Bennet because of their ridiculous conviction that I might marry someone with a higher position in society, which might in turn lift them into the upper circles.”

“Very likely.”

“That is why Louisa married Hurst, who has his family name, a house in London — and nothing else. I am sorry to say such things about my brother. He is as good a man as he can be, but he does not excel at anything. And I am aware I do not either!”

“You are too hard on yourself. You are still very young and are striving to improve yourself. I see no similarity between the two of you. So, what is the puzzling part?”

“I wonder why Caroline is so opposed, almost resentful, to Miss Elizabeth? That lady is nothing to me, and she has done nothing wrong to either of us. Caroline was quite angry when she heard we shall both dine at Longbourn.”

“Young women rarely approve of other young women unrelated to them,” Darcy said.

He was quite sure he knew the real answer, but he would not share it with his friend. Miss Bingley’s resentment had begun on the evening when he had foolishly mentioned to her — of all people — his admiration for Miss Elizabeth’s fine eyes. He smiled, wondering what Miss Bingley would do if she knew the whole truth.

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“You are lucky, Miss Lizzy. The sprain looks ugly but actually is superficial. The bleeding has stopped — it was just a scratch. I have placed a poultice on your ankle and bandaged it tightly. You should stay in bed for the rest of today and keep your foot raised and still. It might be swollen and blue for a few days, and you will not be able to dance much at the ball, but it should be fully recovered soon.”

“What a relief, Mr Jones!” Jane said.

“Here is some medicine for a fever, in case it is needed tonight. And Miss Lizzy should drink a few cups of this tea to prevent any complications from a cold. One cup now and another later. She might feel sleepy after it, but resting for a few hours is just what she needs. Knowing Miss Lizzy as I do, I expect no problems — if she listens to my advice!”

“We shall do everything you said. That I can promise,” Jane replied, and Elizabeth nodded.

She was just pondering that she had made a similar promise to Mr Darcy when Lydia burst into the room and informed her that Lady Rosseford was downstairs and was asking after her.

“I shall return to examine you tomorrow,” Mr Jones said before taking his leave.

Jane helped Elizabeth drink the first cup of tea, then to find a comfortable position against the pillows.

“I thank the Lord that you were not as badly injured as you looked, Lizzy,” Jane said,

stroking her hair. “I was worried when you did not return — and so scared when I saw you!”

“I can imagine how awful I looked — covered in mud. Mr Darcy was probably appalled, especially since I ruined his clothes too, as well as his saddle. Oh, he bandaged my ankle with his neckcloth. Please be careful with it. It needs to be washed so I can return it in good condition.”

“I shall take care of it. Do not worry. Mr Darcy was exceedingly kind to you. He could have just fetched help, but he chose to bring you home instead. It really was very attentive of him. But I should have known. Mr Bingley told me that Mr Darcy is kind and generous and considerate, despite his appearance of pride and arrogance.”

“It is quite strange that a person’s appearance often does not match their true nature,” Elizabeth mused. “And yes, he was most kind and considerate to convey me home on his horse while he walked all the way. Especially considering that I refused his suggestion at first and declared I could return alone. He had to persuade me to accept.”

“My dear Lizzy, why did you do something so foolish?”

“Out of stubbornness, I assume. You know I have always disliked Mr Darcy’s disdainful manners. I know he disapproves of me and our entire family — in fact, the entire neighbourhood. And after Mr Wickham told me how cruelly Mr Darcy treated him, I wished to have nothing to do with such an unpleasant sort of man.”

“Lizzy, I do not doubt Mr Wickham’s story, but as I said before, he is a stranger to us, even more than Mr Darcy is. We know neither of them well enough to trust them.”

“You are right, as always. Mr Darcy suggested I should ask for evidence and request

more details before I believe Mr Wickham's tale."

"Mr Darcy sounds reasonable. And today, his behaviour did not show any disapproval of you or our family. Quite the opposite."

"I know. There is something peculiar about his change of manners."

"Or perhaps we judged him too harshly. But we have time to discuss this later. You should try to sleep, Lizzy."

"And you may go and greet Lady Rosseford. I know you are eager. I am too. Please convey to her my apologies for not being able to see her today."

"Very well, dearest," Jane said, placing a kiss on her cheek. "I shall return soon."

"There is no hurry. I feel like I shall sleep for a while."

Jane left, and Elizabeth pulled the sheets around herself, closing her eyes. The silence was most welcome, with only the sound of the fire burning steadily and the rain hitting the windowpanes. If not for Mr Darcy, she would probably still be struggling to make her way back to Longbourn.

She tried to sleep, but her mind and her senses were too restless. All sorts of details spun in her head — Mr Darcy's throat revealed from under his neckcloth, his fingers brushing over hers when he pulled off her gloves and put his on her hands. The sensation of his gloves, previously warmed by his hands was also distracting, as well as his touch on her ankle when he took off her boot and bandaged the injury.

As she had never before experienced such intimate gestures from a man — even though each of those gestures had been for her benefit, Elizabeth assumed her distressing response was understandable.

What troubled her the most was the recollection of being carried in Mr Darcy's arms — twice. She had never pictured herself in such a situation, with any man, not even with her future husband. That Mr Darcy had held her, had carried her from the carriage to the house and then upstairs, was simply inconceivable. And even more unbelievable was the fact he had offered and then insisted on doing it.

Would he have done so with any other woman he had found in similar distress? Very unlikely. Besides, he had already admitted that, if someone else had been in her position, he would have simply fetched help. If she added this to his confession of admiration, her turmoil was complete.

That Mr Darcy was a better man than she had judged him to be, she could accept. That Mr Wickham may prove to be less than she had believed, she could also accept.

But the notion that Mr Darcy held her in some special regard, which induced him to care for her, to protect her, and to hold her in his arms for no other reason than mere concern for her safety, was frightening to even consider. No, she could not allow her thoughts to wander down that path.

A man like Mr Darcy would hardly speak to anyone outside his circle of family and friends; he would certainly not bestow his admiration and affection upon someone so far beneath him. Why would she even think he might? It was absurd; it was impossible. It was preposterous! Mr Darcy could not have anything other than friendly feelings for her, and those were probably only due to Mr Bingley's admiration for Jane.

Maybe Mr Bingley did intend to propose to Jane, and Mr Darcy wished to make amends for his past rudeness towards the Bennets. Yes, that must be it. There could be no other explanation. And Mr Darcy's feelings, whatever they were, should not be Elizabeth's concern. She was grateful to him, and she would thank him again when they next met. And that was all.

Her reasoning struggled to overcome the random thoughts that tried to invade her mind and open the path for other speculations. She had little success, since, when she fell asleep a while later, it was with the feeling of being warm and safe and dreaming she was in Mr Darcy's arms.

She woke abruptly, feeling sweaty and flushed, and realised somebody was knocking on the door.

She invited them in, expecting her sisters or mother, and was shocked when Jane and her father entered together with a lady. Lady Rosseford, no doubt. Elizabeth immediately tried to rise for the guest, but her movements were clumsy.

"My dear, stay still. I just came for a moment to make your acquaintance," the lady said. "I know you are injured and must keep to your bed."

"Aunt, this is my second daughter, Elizabeth. Lizzy, this is my aunt, Lady Rosseford," Mr Bennet said.

"It is a pleasure and an honour to meet your ladyship," Elizabeth said.

"Likewise, my dear. But I hope you will not be so formal with me. Mr Collins almost killed me with his ceremonious manners."

Elizabeth laughed. "I dare say there is no chance of finding my manners similar to Mr Collins's."

"What a relief it is to hear that."

"Aunt, would you like to sit?" Mr Bennet enquired, placing a chair next to the bed.

"I would, if you are sure I am not bothering you, Elizabeth. Or is it Lizzy?"

“Whatever your ladyship prefers. And you are not bothering me at all. I am truly happy you are here.”

“Good.” The lady sat, and so did Mr Bennet and Jane, while Elizabeth gazed at Lady Rosseford with great interest. Her handsome features concealed her true age, and her fashionable clothes matched her natural elegance, all adding to her look of confidence and completing an impressive portrait.

“So, Lizzy, I hear you have had quite a day. I met Mr Darcy earlier. He looked deplorable, and I must know the details about how he ended up that way.”

“Are you acquainted with Mr Darcy?”

“No. I knew his parents and grandfather quite well, though. Excellent people and with a great sense of fashion, which the young Darcy does not seem to have inherited.”

The lady laughed, and the others smiled.

“I have known Mr Darcy for more than a month, and his appearance is always impeccable,” Elizabeth answered. “Too much so at times. I cannot amuse myself at his expense, since he willingly ruined his clothes for my comfort.”

“Well, that sounds intriguing and precisely what I am curious to find out.”

“I am curious too, Lizzy,” Mr Bennet said. “I think we have a little bit of time. Your mother is supervising dinner, your sisters are busy with the presents they have just received, and Mr Collins is writing to Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Who, by the way, happens to be Mr Darcy’s aunt.”

“I cannot think of all this now,” Lady Rosseford replied. “I need a few days to rest and clear my mind. But I can tell you young Collins is very much like his father.

Archibald Bennet — your second cousin, Thomas — changed his name to Archibald Collins to please his protector.”

“He did?” Elizabeth enquired. “I always wondered why, if he is related to Papa through the male line, he had a different name.”

“Archibald changed his name and inherited a sum of ten thousand pounds, which he lost in some disastrous investments. I cannot imagine why he believed he was clever enough for business.”

“Well, Mr Collins is very pleased with himself. I assume he inherited this unjustified confidence from his father,” Mr Bennet responded.

“So, Lizzy, I am waiting for your story,” the lady said. Elizabeth was half amused, half nervous. Her great-aunt seemed a real force, accustomed to having her way and eager for all her requests to be satisfied.

“In fact, the story is quite simple. I am afraid your ladyship will be disappointed. I went for a walk, as I have done most days since I was a child. I was careless and caught my foot between two tree stumps. I had to kneel in the mud to try to release it. I sustained a small scratch and sprained my ankle. Mr Darcy was out riding, and he found me. He was kind enough to bring me home on his horse, but while he was helping me, his clothes became muddied too. That is all.”

“Indeed, it is not as dramatic as I expected. Your mother and sisters told me all about Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy. I hope for an entertaining dinner tomorrow.”

“Dinner?” Elizabeth enquired, puzzled.

“Yes. Our aunt suggested inviting Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley to dinner tomorrow. They both accepted,” Mr Bennet explained.

Elizabeth was so surprised that she needed a moment to compose herself. The sudden warmth and nervousness that enveloped her were vexing and distressing.

“We hope you will be able to join us,” Mr Bennet said. “I asked Mr Jones, and he said we could bring you down and put a stool under the table to keep your foot elevated.”

“I hope so too.”

“Now we must leave you, Lizzy. We must prepare for dinner and allow my aunt to rest a little.”

“Of course. I am so grateful you came to see me,” Elizabeth repeated.

“It was a pleasure, my dear. I look forward to you healing, so we can spend more time together and know each other as a family. I am sorry I let twenty years pass.”

“You were abroad most of that time, Aunt,” Mr Bennet answered. “From Hertfordshire to Ireland or India, the distance is not convenient for frequent visits.”

“I cannot argue with that. But now I am here, and I shall certainly not leave the country again. I am counting on you girls to help me settle and make a comfortable home, both here and in London.”

“You have a house in London?” Jane enquired.

“I do. I recently sold my previous London home and purchased another overlooking Hyde Park.”

“There cannot be anything lovelier than a house close to Hyde Park,” Elizabeth said.

“Well then, you will certainly love this one. The view is wonderful, but most of the rooms need decorating. The existing servants have been kept on, and the housekeeper seems quite efficient. I am pleased with the progress and with the house itself. Your uncle found it and completed the transaction.”

Elizabeth looked at her father, who explained. “My brother Gardiner has been taking care of my aunt’s affairs in London for the last two years, since she decided to return home.”

“Did your ladyship say something about a second house? Here?” Jane enquired.

“Ah, yes. Did your father not tell you?”

“Not yet,” Mr Bennet responded. “I have learnt that secrets are rarely kept in our house, and by this time, the whole of Meryton would have known. But it is safe enough to tell Lizzy and Jane.”

“I have purchased Stoke Park,” Lady Rosseford said, much to the sisters’ amazement.

“Stoke Park?” Jane repeated.

“Yes. I wanted a house close to Longbourn, and your father recommended it to me.”

“The house is the most beautiful around here. And the park is impressive,” Elizabeth said.

“Excellent. I hear there is much work to be done on it, and it requires the employment of a whole household of servants. I am waiting for your uncle and aunt to arrive and help me to decide whether we can find the right people in the neighbourhood or whether we need to search farther afield.”

“How extraordinary!” Jane said. “I mean, this is happy news indeed.”

“I would hope so. As I said, I am counting on you girls to help me. But it might take a while, and until then, you will have to put up with me here, at Longbourn.”

“We are happy to have you here, Aunt,” Mr Bennet said. “I hope you will feel at home.”

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The family dined with Lady Rosseford, and Elizabeth ate in her room. Meeting her ladyship was the perfect end to a troublesome and tiring day.

Elizabeth had known about her father's aunt her entire life, and had heard many stories about her, but she had never met her. Her father kept up a regular correspondence with the lady, who was his father's younger sister; or as regular a correspondence as possible with someone living abroad.

From her father's stories, she knew the lady had eloped when she was nineteen and married an officer — Jeffrey Lambert — whom her father had rejected, which had caused a scandal in the family.

She had followed her husband to India, where they had lived for several years until the officer received news he had inherited a small estate in Derbyshire. They had then returned to England, but six years later, Mr Lambert had died tragically. His widow had spent the following years between Derbyshire and London. Around the age of forty-five, she had met the Earl of Rosseford, who was more than ten years her senior and had no close family. She had married him, and the couple had moved to Ireland, where she had lived for twenty years. The earl had died two years ago, and at that time, Mr Bennet had mentioned to his family for the first time that his aunt intended to move back to England. The Bennets being her only blood relatives, she had expressed her desire to meet them and build a close relationship with them.

When Mrs Bennet had first heard the news, she had been overjoyed. They all assumed the lady's wealth was similar to Mr Bennet's, but Mrs Bennet hoped for some better connections that someday might place her daughters in the way of young men in possession of a good fortune and in want of a wife.

Two weeks ago, Mr Bennet had informed them that Lady Rosseford would arrive in Hertfordshire before the end of November — and here she was, at the same time as Mr Collins. One pleasant and desired guest — the other not so much.

What was revealed during their earlier conversation was all new to Elizabeth. That the Gardiners were acquainted with the lady, that Mr Gardiner was in charge of her affairs — what affairs? — and that the lady could afford, with apparent ease, to purchase a house near Hyde Park as well as Stoke Park, hire a full household of servants, and decorate both houses was beyond their estimation. That her father had chosen to keep the secret was also unusual, but Elizabeth was accustomed to his peculiarities. Given her mother's likely response when she finally found out, her father's decision seemed logical.

Her thoughts moved from her aunt to Mr Darcy's expected presence at dinner the following evening. That was also surprising and made her anxious for unknown reasons. After all, she should be pleased by the opportunity to see him again and thank him under more comfortable circumstances. The fact that Lady Rosseford was acquainted with his family was an interesting coincidence but did not affect Elizabeth's relationship with that gentleman.

Curiously, of Mr Wickham, she did not think much. She was determined to ask him for more details about his story, but she was less affected than she expected by the potential result of her examination.

Jane came up to bed, bringing Elizabeth another cup of Mr Jones's tea.

"I adore our aunt," Jane declared. "She is a little bit frightening, though. She has a dangerous inclination to make sport of people. Like Papa, but even worse. Or better."

Elizabeth laughed. "I am sure I shall adore her too."

“Lizzy, Papa requested we not tell anyone about Stoke Park yet.”

“Very well. I believe it is Lady Rosseford’s prerogative to tell people when she wishes to.”

“You know, I think...she seems to be very rich. I mean — very .”

“It seems so. There are so many things we do not know yet. But it does not matter, after all. I hope she will like us and we shall like her, regardless of where she lives.”

“I do like her very much so far. Poor Mr Collins — he is not very successful at flattering her.” Jane chuckled.

“I can imagine. The only good thing about my accident is that I have been able to avoid Mr Collins.”

After the second cup of tea, Elizabeth’s eyelids became heavy, and she fell into a deep sleep. She woke up a few times during the night, sensing Jane’s hand pressing to her forehead to examine her for a fever, but sleep overcame her again instantly. Her dreams were agitated, with Mr Darcy in most of them, but when she woke in the morning, she could not remember anything clearly.

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The next day, immediately after breakfast, Mr Jones returned to examine her. He was pleased that there had been no fever overnight, nor other signs of illness. As for her ankle, the bleeding had stopped, the swelling was reduced, and only the skin was still bruised and dark.

While Mr Jones bandaged the injury again, Elizabeth quivered remembering that Mr Darcy had offered to ‘look at it’. She did not even allow herself to imagine what that

might mean. Taking off her stocking? How? Touching her bare skin? Brushing his fingers over it to clean and bandage it? Mr Jones was doing all that, and the notion that it could have been Mr Darcy instead was disturbing.

Regarding dinner, Mr Jones repeated his previous advice: Elizabeth could attend if she did not put weight on her foot until then, kept it raised during dinner, and returned to rest for the night shortly afterwards. Elizabeth felt relieved and anxious at the same time, knowing there was no obstacle to seeing Mr Darcy again.

She spent the first part of the day in bed, as promised, and at around four o'clock, Jane helped her prepare for the evening. When she was ready, she walked down the hall with infinite care, holding onto the wall and onto Jane. Her steps were nowhere near as painful as the previous day. At the top of the stairs, Tom and Peter were waiting to carry her down. They entwined their hands together as if making a chair, and she sat upon them, grasping their shoulders. Her sisters, her parents, Mr Collins, and Lady Rosseford were all watching.

"I am so sorry for giving everyone all this trouble," Elizabeth said as she was taken directly to the dining room.

She sat on an armchair placed in the middle of the table; Jane arranged a stool under the table and placed Elizabeth's foot on it.

"Thank you, dearest. And thank you, Tom and Peter. You may laugh at me as much as you want. I do not mind."

"We are not laughing, Miss Lizzy," Tom replied, while neither could conceal their amusement.

"Well, I knew this would happen one day," Mrs Bennet said. "Wandering about the fields, alone, regardless of the weather and the mud! You walk to Netherfield, you

walk to Oakham Mount — nobody else does such things! I am ashamed what Lady Rosseford will think of you. And of me, as your mother who has not raised you properly.”

“My dear Frances, I have the best opinion of you. You have raised five pretty and charming daughters. As for Lizzy — I cannot blame her. When I was younger, I enjoyed walking and riding. Accidents happen. Nobody could blame either of you for that.”

“Lady Catherine always insists that young women must act properly and cautiously in order to not endanger their health or their reputation,” Mr Collins intervened.

Lady Rosseford threw him a sharp glare, and Elizabeth realised the man had put himself in danger.

“Well, Lizzy has ruined both,” Mrs Bennet continued. “Mr Darcy must have been appalled to see you like that! He had already called you tolerable and did not want to dance with you when you looked your best. I hope he will not gossip about it, or else nobody will dance with you ever again.”

“Mr Darcy did what? When?” Lady Rosseford enquired, frowning.

“It is an old story,” Elizabeth explained. “It happened on his first evening in Meryton, at an assembly. Mr Darcy and I actually talked about it yesterday. He offered me an explanation and apologised for his behaviour, and I forgave him.”

“Well, if he thought you were tolerable, he seems to have poor taste in women,” the lady concluded.

“I am sure Mr Darcy is accustomed to the most beautiful young ladies in town, so his tastes are different from most people’s,” Mr Collins said.

The offence was so harsh that it was laughable, and Elizabeth smiled at her father.

“Mr Collins, do you ever realise what offensive things you say?” Lady Rosseford interjected. “Even your compliments are rude most of the time. What could you possibly mean? That Lizzy deserves to be called tolerable because she is not as pretty as the women Mr Darcy is accustomed to?”

The scolding, the harsh voice, and Lady Rosseford’s demanding expression made Mr Collins visibly panic. He stared at the lady, his eyes and mouth open.

“I am sorry if your ladyship—” he struggled to reply but was interrupted again.

“Do not be sorry, Mr Collins, just try not to do it again. We should mind our words even if we are family. Now let us sit. I shall take this chair here, next to Lizzy.”

Mr Collins sat too, looking upset and confused.

The conversation continued until the gentlemen from Netherfield arrived at the expected time. Polite greetings were exchanged, then Mr Bennet invited them to choose a chair at their convenience. Mr Bingley hesitated briefly, then sat next to Jane. Mr Darcy preferred the place to Mr Bennet’s right, and from there, he cast repeated glances at Elizabeth. She felt cold, then too warm, and when their eyes met, her cheeks were burning.

“So, Mr Bingley, it is lovely to meet you. I have heard many things about you,” Lady Rosseford said.

“And I am honoured to make your acquaintance, your ladyship. I was surprised and delighted when Darcy told me about your presence.”

“And Mr Darcy, you look much better, sir. And as handsome as I expected. Oh, do

not blush. All the men in your family have been handsome, and your mother was a beautiful woman, so I cannot give you credit for something you simply inherited.”

Mr Darcy blushed indeed, looking disconcerted. He glanced at Elizabeth, then sipped from his glass and cleared his throat. Elizabeth covered her mouth with her napkin to conceal her amusement. Lady Rosseford’s sense of humour seemed as dangerous as Jane had feared, and Mr Darcy was her second victim of the evening, following Mr Collins.

“I do not wish to take any credit, your ladyship,” Mr Darcy responded. “I take pride in and am grateful for everything I have inherited from my family. Including my appearance, whether it might be called handsome or not.”

“Ah, that is a good answer,” the lady responded.

“If you do not mind me saying so, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Bennet uttered, “when we first saw you, we all agreed you were very handsome. That is, until—” She stopped, minding her words, though everybody knew she meant his arrogant manners at the assembly.

“Mr Darcy,” Mr Bennet interjected, “it is not for me to judge a man’s looks, but I do appreciate generosity. For that, I am grateful to you. We all are.”

“May I ask how Miss Elizabeth is feeling? I can see she looks very well.”

“I feel very well, sir,” Elizabeth replied. “Mr Jones was very pleased with the last examination. I hope to be completely recovered very soon, and I have you to thank for that.”

Mr Darcy looked at her; their eyes met again and locked briefly, long enough for her to quiver again. He sipped from his glass, then said, “While I admit the subject made

me very uncomfortable, I would rather hear you talking about my handsome appearance than about thanks and gratitude for a gesture that any honourable man would have made.”

Elizabeth nodded, her cheeks on fire, wondering whether any gentleman would carry any injured woman in his arms.

Lady Rosseford laughed.

“Another excellent reply, Mr Darcy. More agreeable than a handsome gentleman is a clever, witty one. Of course, if he possesses both qualities, that is even better.”

“I dare say that can apply both to men and women,” Mr Darcy said. He spoke to her aunt, but for a moment, he glanced at Elizabeth, causing her puzzlement and more quivering.

“When she was at Netherfield, I enjoyed seeing Miss Elizabeth arguing with Darcy,” Mr Bingley said. “They could hardly agree on anything. I do not think I have ever seen another young lady argue with Darcy. Which is to Miss Elizabeth’s credit, of course!”

“This is precisely why I am worried about Lizzy,” Mrs Bennet said. “Quarrelling with Mr Darcy? Of course, most other young women do not do that because they know to show prudence and demureness. Only my daughter is stubborn and disobedient.”

“As much as I admire my cousin Elizabeth, I must agree with Mrs Bennet,” Mr Collins interjected. “Stubbornness and disobedience are undesirable traits of character. Especially for a clergyman, or for a clergyman’s wife. I know Lady Catherine de Bourgh shares my opinion.”

“To me,” Mr Darcy interjected, “wit and determination are excellent assets for any man or woman. I cannot agree that what is praised in a man can be objectionable in a woman.”

Again, he looked at Elizabeth, and again, she quivered and her cheeks warmed. Annoyed by her silly responses to everything Mr Darcy said or did, she hesitated to join the conversation.

“Mr Darcy, I cannot remember when I have last agreed so much with a man I barely know,” Lady Rosseford uttered. “Your judgment is flawless to me.”

Then the lady turned to Mr Collins.

“And Mr Collins, you are entitled to your opinion, and I agree that most men share it. I find nothing wrong in the traits you consider undesirable, but I expect any man would be wise enough to marry a woman who possesses qualities that are suited to him. For instance, it would be foolish for a clergyman to marry a woman — as pretty and charming as she might be — if she is unsuitable as a clergyman’s wife. Especially if she does not meet Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s standards. Would you not agree? I am sure you would never make such a mistake.”

Mr Collins looked dumbfounded, glancing at Mrs Bennet — who appeared disconcerted too but did not dare contradict the illustrious aunt. Elizabeth and her father exchanged amused glances but said nothing.

“Yes...certainly...I do agree... I mean — your ladyship is right, of course,” he finally mumbled.

“Good. I am very happy that we all agree on so many subjects tonight. And look, dinner is served. I am sure it will be as delicious as last evening,” the lady concluded.

As the meal progressed, the conversation touched on more neutral subjects. Lady Rosseford enquired about Netherfield, about each gentleman's sisters, about the ball, and about their plans afterwards. The atmosphere was pleasant, and the discussions unfolded slowly, with Mr Collins being almost completely silent and Mr Darcy more talkative than Elizabeth had ever seen him.

Elizabeth observed him carefully, admitting that his manners were improved not just towards Lady Rosseford but also towards her parents and even her sisters. He did not possess Mr Bingley's easy, amiable manners, but he was not his usual proud, arrogant self either. At times, Mr Darcy glanced at her, and although she was not completely composed, she felt more at ease with him.

By the time dinner was over and the gentlemen were preparing to leave, Elizabeth's ankle was beginning to ache. For a moment, she entertained the absurd thought that Mr Darcy would offer again to carry her. Of course, he did not even mention it, and when the time came, Tom and Peter helped her to her room.

That night, Elizabeth had many things to reflect upon. Mr Darcy's remarks about witty, determined women reminded her of other opinions she had heard from him at Netherfield — like those about accomplished women. As ridiculous as it seemed, she could not avoid wondering whether he had been talking about her.

There was one thing she did not have to worry about any longer: due to Lady Rosseford's intervention, Mr Collins would surely never propose to her. And that was a huge relief.

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“We had a pleasant time, did we not?” Bingley asked on their way back to Netherfield.

“We did.”

“Lady Rosseford is quite a woman! I did not know Mr Bennet had an aunt. Apparently, the Bennets have better connections than we believed.”

“I am not sure how well-connected Lady Rosseford is. I have never heard of her or of Lord Rosseford. But she is quite a force,” Darcy admitted with a smile. “She made sport at my expense the entire evening, but somehow it did not bother me.”

“Why would it bother you since half the time she spoke about how handsome you were?”

“Bingley, there is no need for you to mock me too.”

“I am not. You are a handsome man. Everyone says so. Including Mrs Bennet.” Bingley laughed. Darcy smiled again.

“Did you hear what she said to that Mr Collins?”

“That was quite a spectacle. But the man is a spectacle by himself.” Darcy felt a lump in his throat when he realised that the clergyman actually intended to propose to Elizabeth. There could have been no other reason for the conversation about a clergyman’s wife. The lady’s intervention left no doubt as to her opinion, but what Elizabeth and her parents thought of such a prospect, he could only assume. For

someone in their situation, such a proposal could be prudent and acceptable. But would Elizabeth consider it? Mrs Bennet was surely eager to see her eldest daughter married to Bingley and would do anything to make it happen. Might she also push Elizabeth towards a man like Collins?

“So, Darcy, what do you think of Miss Bennet?”

“Miss Jane Bennet?”

“Who else? Did you observe her, given what we discussed the other day?”

“She was as pretty and serene as always. I did not notice anything peculiar. We were at dinner with her family — she could not do or say anything to reveal her feelings for you.”

“True. And yes, she is exceedingly pretty. She is an angel, truly.”

Darcy said nothing, and the carriage stopped in front of Netherfield. To him, Miss Jane Bennet’s flawless beauty held little attraction compared with Elizabeth’s pretty face enhanced by wit, charming smiles, and sparkling eyes. She had looked flushed and nervous throughout the evening, and he had assumed it might be related to him. But was her unease caused by joy or displeasure? He even wondered who had carried her to dinner and back to her chamber. The sensation of having her in his arms was still vivid and alluring, and he continued to think of her during the night, which affected his sleep greatly.

“So how was dinner?” Miss Bingley asked in the morning. “Did Mrs Bennet allow anyone to speak, besides herself?”

“In fact, it was delightful. We had a pleasant time. Even Darcy agreed.”

“I am most surprised to hear that. But I was even more surprised to find out that Mr Darcy had quite an adventure two days ago when he heroically saved Eliza Bennet. Apparently, the entire neighbourhood speaks of it, but we were not informed,” she ended sharply.

“I assumed it would be of little consequence to you,” Darcy replied.

“Darcy told me ,” Bingley said. “There was no need to tell anyone else. Miss Elizabeth suffered an accident, and Darcy happened to find her and helped her to return home. Not much of a story there, Caroline.”

“It is interesting that Eliza suffered the accident precisely when Mr Darcy was passing by.”

“Actually, it was the other way round,” Darcy responded. “I happened to be riding where Miss Elizabeth is accustomed to walking. As Bingley mentioned, there is no story to be told. Now, please excuse me. I have several letters to write today.”

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Elizabeth’s ankle felt more swollen and painful in the morning, so after his examination, Mr Jones recommended complete bed rest for the day. Elizabeth did not attempt to oppose it, only asked Jane to bring her a book so she could read.

After breakfast, the rest of the family decided to visit Meryton. By taking Lady Rosseford’s large coach as well as the Bennets’ smaller one, they could all be comfortably accommodated, including Mr Collins, but Mr Bennet declined.

From her bed, Elizabeth watched them leave, then she began to read. Half an hour later, her father came to talk to her.

“It is good to have a little peace and quiet in the house, is it not, Lizzy?”

“It is. But you know I am not as much bothered by noise as you are, Papa.”

“I know. Mary is the only one who has inherited a little of that trait from me. So how are you feeling?”

“Very well, Papa. You have no reason to worry, truly.”

“Yes, Mr Jones told me the same. Dinner last night was very enjoyable.”

“It was. Though your aunt tormented both Mr Collins and Mr Darcy.”

“At least my cousin will not bother you with a marriage proposal now. Your mother is distressed about that, but she would rather lose a husband for you than say something against my aunt. That is the privilege of those who own a title.”

“Privileged or not, I am deeply grateful to her. Mama encouraged Mr Collins in his silly scheme of proposing to me, and it would have been a real scandal when I refused him.”

“Your mother rarely sees reason, but she does want the best for you all.”

“I know, Papa.”

“My aunt intends to take you all to London as soon as her home is habitable. Which might be after the new year.”

“All of us? That would be extraordinarily generous of her.”

“Yes, well...I am having a bit of a disagreement with her. But I am telling you this in

confidence, Lizzy. You must not even tell Jane.”

“Of course, Papa. What is it?”

“She wishes to gift you girls a dowry of four thousand pounds. Each!”

“What?” Elizabeth exclaimed. “This is impossible, Papa! Unacceptable!”

“I agree. Of course, your mother and sisters would be thrilled by such an idea. But I still hope to convince her to change her mind.”

“But Papa, why would she do that? Why waste her money on us?”

“Well, apparently, simply because she has it, she said. She is worried she is getting older and might end up dying alone. I feel she is trying to buy our affection in some way.”

“Papa, that is an awful thought. You must convince her that she is part of our family, and we — I can at least speak for Jane and myself — shall always treat her with care and affection. We do not need her money for that.”

“I already used that argument, with little success. I think she also feels guilty about our situation. She believes her father, my grandfather, decided to place the entailment on the male line because of her elopement. He was so angry with her that he disinherited her and declared women were not to be trusted with any assets. She lived in relative poverty for the first two years in India, and she declared she could not allow her only nieces to be exposed to such a risk.”

“This is complete madness, Papa. I do not even know what to say.”

“Me neither, my dear. This is why I told you. I have had all this on my mind and

nobody to talk to about it. I hope you understand why I asked for your secrecy.”

“I understand, Papa. If you will allow me, I shall speak to Lady Rosseford myself.”

“I shall mention to her that you might, but I doubt you will meet with any success. She cares about you enough to provide you with a generous dowry but not enough to listen to you.”

“You are probably right. Your aunt is an interesting lady, Papa.”

“She is. And I sense there are still many things I do not know about her. In this matter with your dowries, I am torn between relief and shame. I have not done much for my daughters, and I have been a neglectful landlord. For years, our expenses have exceeded Longbourn’s income, and I have wasted most of my savings. A dowry would ensure all your futures, of course. But I cannot expect my aunt to compensate for my weakness.”

“I agree, Papa.”

They spoke for a little while longer, then Mr Bennet returned to his library. Being alone, Elizabeth’s anxiety and amazement increased. Four thousand pounds was not much of a dowry when compared with that of Miss Bingley or, she suspected, Miss Darcy; but for the Bennet sisters, who had only ever expected one thousand pounds each from their mother, it was extraordinary. And the thought that someone would give away twenty thousand pounds to nieces who were virtually strangers was simply unbelievable.

Curled up in her bed, Elizabeth fell asleep and woke only when the sound of voices filled the house. The rest of the family had returned, and they brought news.

Jane was the first to come to see her, then Lydia and Kitty.

“Lizzy, we met Mr Wickham and Mr Denny!”

“You did?”

“Yes! And they came with us to Aunt Phillips’s house. And they said they will come to the ball, and I hope we shall dance with them!” said Kitty.

“Mr Wickham asked about you, Lizzy,” Lydia added. “He said he might call tomorrow, with Mr Denny.”

“I told them you may not be able to greet them,” Jane added gently. “They seem to take a genuine interest in your health, Lizzy.”

“That is very kind of them,” Elizabeth replied.

“And we went to Lucas Lodge too. Sir William and Lady Lucas were very impressed when they saw Lady Rosseford. And she asked us to call her Aunt Dorothea. Is that not nice, Lizzy? Oh, and she bought each of us a new bonnet and new gloves!”

Lydia and Kitty were restless and did not stop talking until they had related everything that had happened that day. Elizabeth listened and smiled, imagining what her younger sisters would do if they received a four-thousand-pound dowry.

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Following the apothecary’s advice brought Elizabeth the desired reward: by the following day, her ankle looked and felt almost well. She tried to walk on it, and while still uncomfortable, it hardly hurt at all. Mr Jones gave her permission to join the family for breakfast and dinner provided she rested in between.

“If things progress as I expect, you may go to the ball tomorrow night, but you will

need comfortable shoes, and you must not attempt to dance at all.”

“I would be pleased if I could just sit on a chair and watch the other dancers. I hope just to be able to join my family and friends.”

“I believe you will manage that, Miss Lizzy. However, you should talk to Mr Bingley, and if you feel any discomfort, you should go somewhere and raise your foot to rest it.”

“I am sure I could use the library. There is hardly ever anyone in there,” Elizabeth jested, but Mr Jones did not seem to understand the joke and simply shrugged.

Her sisters cheered seeing Elizabeth at breakfast, and the reunion pleased her too. Mr Collins nodded to her, remaining silent, distant, and obviously resentful.

“Sir William has invited me to spend the day at Lucas Lodge,” he said. “I shall leave soon, and I might not return until after dinner.”

“You are entitled to do whatever you please, Mr Collins,” Mr Bennet replied. “If you wish to stay all day at Lucas Lodge, do not allow us to ruin your pleasure.”

“Sir William seems to be a fine gentleman,” Lady Rosseford approved. “And I very much enjoyed Miss Charlotte Lucas’s company.”

“Charlotte has been my friend for fifteen years or more,” Elizabeth added. “I cannot praise her enough.”

“Yes, but she is not very pretty — everybody says so,” Mrs Bennet declared. “And she has no dowry either, whatever Lady Lucas might say. She has little chance of marrying, so she might remain a spinster.”

“Mama!” Elizabeth cried.

“There are bigger flaws in a young woman than to have no dowry,” Mr Bennet interjected. “A decent, wise man, with a reasonable income, in want of a wife, would appreciate Charlotte’s qualities enough to overlook her lack of dowry.”

“Sadly, decent, wise men are as scarce as decent, wise women,” Lady Rosseford uttered.

Mr Collins showed no emotion and expressed no opinion. After breakfast, he left, but the tranquillity did not last long; they were all gathered in the drawing room when Tom announced Mr Wickham and Mr Denny.

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The officers entered and were introduced to Mr Bennet, then drinks and refreshments were ordered.

“I hope we are not intruding,” Mr Wickham said. “We have been worried for Miss Elizabeth since we heard about the accident and wished to enquire after her health.”

“They are not intruding, are they, Mama?” Lydia replied with apparent joy.

“Indeed, you are not. Besides, you told us yesterday that you might call,” Mrs Bennet responded.

“I thank you for your concern,” Elizabeth said, “but I am well. It was a little accident, with no dire consequences. I was found and brought home quickly.” She watched Mr Wickham intently as she spoke. She tried to see beyond his handsome face and enchanting smile and pondered whether she might open the delicate subject of his dealings with Mr Darcy or not.

“What a relief to hear that,” Mr Wickham answered. “From the reports in Meryton, I was under the impression you were in mortal danger and Darcy saved your life. But then, it has always been his tendency to exaggerate his actions.”

Such an impertinent statement gave Elizabeth the opportunity she was waiting for. However, it was Lady Rosseford who spoke first.

“Since you know Mr Darcy’s habits, you must be well acquainted.”

“We are, your ladyship. In fact, I grew up at Pemberley. My late father was the late

Mr Darcy's steward, and that gentleman was my godfather. He loved me and supported me all my life. He was a true friend and one of the best men that ever breathed."

"He was your godfather? How wonderful. Mr George Darcy was an excellent man, indeed. Very much like his father."

"Was your ladyship acquainted with him?" Mr Wickham enquired with obvious alarm.

"Yes, with him and with his father."

"What a lovely coincidence. Perhaps we met at Pemberley and I have forgotten."

"If we did, you were too young to remember. I last visited twenty years ago."

"Ah. I am glad we agree on the worthiness of Mr George Darcy. Sadly, I cannot say the same about his son, despite some people's high opinion of him. He might be an excellent master and landlord — that I do not deny."

"Then what do you deny, Mr Wickham?" Lady Rosseford continued, keeping a light voice and an amiable smile.

"Darcy's behaviour towards me has been scandalous. More than the injustice done to me, it pains me that he disappointed the hopes and disgraced the memory of his father. In short, my godfather left me something to ensure me a comfortable life, which his son refused to grant."

"Something? An important sum of money, I assume?"

"A living. My godfather wished to provide for me amply and thought he had done so,

but two years after his death, when the living fell vacant, it was given elsewhere.”

“Oh dear, this is horrible!” Kitty cried. “You poor man!”

“But I wonder,” Elizabeth interjected, “considering your godfather’s affection and care for you, did he not leave you something for your immediate support? The living might not have fallen vacant for many years. Would a sum of money not have been more helpful?”

The question seemed to puzzle Mr Wickham, and he paused before answering.

“He did. He left me one thousand pounds.”

“And was that refused to you too?”

“No...that sum I received. But the church ought to have been my profession — I was brought up for it. As much as I enjoy my present situation and as delighted as I am with the society I am in, I was not intended for a military life. I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased a certain gentleman.”

As she listened to the man talking, Elizabeth fought with a disturbing sensation; she recognised many words in his speech from their last discussion, as if it were something rehearsed and repeated. With anxiety, she remembered Mr Darcy’s assertion that the man would spread such rumours everywhere, to anyone willing to listen.

“This sounds intriguing. I am most curious,” Lady Rosseford said. “How could Mr Darcy deny you something left in a will? Did you not seek legal help?”

“Well, it was a peculiar arrangement, and it was not put in writing, so I had no hopes

if I were to address it through the law. It was left at the discretion of the heir, but a man of honour could not have doubted the intention. Darcy chose to treat it merely as a conditional recommendation.”

“That is what I assumed. Conditions are usually attached to such arrangements. Did Mr Darcy declare you had not met them?”

“He did. He asserted that I had forfeited all claim to the living by extravagance, imprudence — in short, anything or nothing.”

“Well, such assertions cannot be called nothing, especially if they were used to deny what was lawfully yours,” Mr Bennet interjected. “Did you not request proof of what it was he accused you of?”

“I did. But Darcy has the habit of turning things to please himself. He has done so since we were at Cambridge, and he always finds something to criticize about me.”

“Mr Darcy seems to criticise everyone, all the time,” Lydia offered, and Mrs Bennet nodded in approval. Mr Wickham looked pleased with the support.

“And did he provide you with no compensation for the living?” Elizabeth continued.

“Well, he did offer some compensation...” Mr Wickham answered, looking hesitant and disconcerted.

“Monetary compensation, I imagine,” Elizabeth asked further, nervous to see the proof of what she had refused to admit before.

“Yes...but it was insufficient. The living became vacant two years ago, exactly as I was of an age to hold it. But it was given to another man, and I cannot blame myself for anything but speaking my opinion of him and to him too freely.”

“Lizzy argues with him all the time, and none of us like him!” Lydia declared.

“I do not understand, Mr Wickham,” Elizabeth persisted. “The compensation was offered to you before or after the living became vacant?”

He glanced around, his nervousness obvious, and the answer was delayed again.

“George Darcy sent you to Cambridge with his son?” Lady Rosseford enquired abruptly, changing the course of the conversation.

“Yes...yes he did,” Mr Wickham responded.

“That was extraordinarily generous of him. It must have been a significant expense,” Mr Bennet said.

“It was. As I said, he did love me like I was his own son. It pains me to speak ill of the son due to my affection and loyalty to the father.”

“Such feelings are to your credit, I am sure. Graduating from Cambridge is a great advantage for any gentleman. It is one few men — even those from good families — can afford. It must have enabled you to pursue any career of your choosing. How did you end up in the militia if you studied for the church?” Mr Bennet asked, and Elizabeth watched the officer’s face colouring.

“Well, I...it took me some time before I realised what my true calling was — what would suit me the best. I had to choose between the study of the law and the church, so my career was uncertain until recently.”

“And you ended up in the militia,” Lady Rosseford concluded. Elizabeth noticed the irony in the last statement, and Mr Wickham’s anxiety showed he was not ignorant of it either.

“Regardless, we are happy to have you here, Mr Wickham,” Mrs Bennet said with a large smile. “We hope a military career will suit you just as well as the uniform, for you surely look most dashing in it. You too, Mr Denny!”

Lydia and Kitty eagerly agreed with their mother’s statement, and Mr Bennet rolled his eyes.

“Thank you, madam,” Mr Denny answered enthusiastically, while Mr Wickham only bowed his head and attempted a smile.

“I am eagerly anticipating the ball,” Lydia added. “Mr Wickham, I know Lizzy was your favourite, but I do not think she will be able to dance, so you will have to dance with us instead.”

“Lydia!” Elizabeth cried, mortified.

“And you, Mr Denny, you must promise to dance at least one set with each of us!”

“I would not have it any other way, Miss Lydia,” the officer promised.

“I shall be delighted to dance with all of you,” Mr Wickham eventually said absently, his mind apparently engaged elsewhere.

The conversation about the ball continued until Mr Wickham suddenly remembered he had some previous engagement, and the officers took their farewells.

“Well, that certainly was the most entertaining and informative visit we have had in a long time,” Mr Bennet declared.

“Poor Mr Wickham. He is so amiable and handsome, and Mr Darcy was so mean to him!” Lydia replied.

“But otherwise, Mr Wickham would have been a clergyman, like Mr Collins,” Mary stated.

“What a horrible thing to say!” Kitty cried. “How can you even compare them?”

“They certainly cannot be compared,” Lady Rosseford said. “But if we did, we might be surprised by the result. Now excuse me, I shall go and rest for a little while. I feel tired.”

“You look a little flushed, Aunt,” Elizabeth said with worry. “Should we send for Mr Jones?”

“Absolutely not, my dear. I only need a little sleep.”

“Let me take you to your room, and I shall bring you some herbal tea, Aunt,” Jane offered. “Lizzy, you should go and rest too.”

Jane escorted her aunt while Mary and Kitty helped Elizabeth to her chamber, and once there, she lay down on the bed. Her ankle was a little swollen, but she mostly needed privacy to reflect upon the officers’ visit. So many details had been revealed by asking only a few questions — which she had not even considered doing before. Feeling ashamed, she realised that, during her first discussion with Mr Wickham, she had acted just like Lydia and Kitty: charmed, trusting, and gullible.

Mr Wickham’s story appeared differently in light of the new information. He had received one thousand pounds and some additional compensation that he had avoided specifying. His godfather had paid for him to attend Cambridge, but it was likely he had not spent much time on his studies. He had swung between the study of the law and the study of the church yet had ended up doing neither. He had said nothing about his own indecision and placed the entire blame on Mr Darcy.

The way they had addressed their enquiries showed Elizabeth that her father and Lady Rosseford also doubted Mr Wickham. As long as he was allowed to tell his story in his own way with his own well-prepared words, Mr Wickham sounded trustworthy. When he was questioned, his answers aroused suspicion.

From the little Mr Darcy had told her, there were many reasons for the living being denied. Now that she had done as he suggested, Elizabeth intended to open the subject with Mr Darcy again to discover the whole truth. Perhaps the ball would provide her with that opportunity since she could not dance and he loathed the activity so much. What else could they do but talk? After the ball, she might not have another chance before he returned to London. Once he left Hertfordshire, she might not see him again soon, if ever, and that thought caused her to feel a strange regret.

In the afternoon, Mr Jones came to examine Elizabeth again. The conclusion was good; he only recommended further rest but approved of Elizabeth's attendance at the ball. Elizabeth and Jane persuaded the apothecary to see Lady Rosseford too, but their aunt declared she was in excellent health. She accepted some herbs to increase her strength, but she rejected any other discussion of the matter.

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At Netherfield, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst repeatedly expressed their displeasure about the ball, and in every other sentence they had something to disapprove of regarding the Bennets. Darcy became exceedingly annoyed, wondering how long Bingley would bear his sisters' complaints. While he did not approve of Bingley's increasing obsession with Jane Bennet — the man had hardly spoken of anything else in recent days — he opposed the sisters' attempts to force his will and disregard his opinion.

In the afternoon, Bingley suggested a ride, and Darcy happily agreed. After more than an hour of exercise out of doors, Bingley proposed they call at Longbourn briefly, to enquire about Elizabeth's health. Although he knew it was only a pretext, Darcy was unable to forgo the pleasure of seeing her. He was still unsure whether she would attend the ball, and he might not see her again before he returned to London. After that, his plans were still not fixed. While he accepted the idea that Elizabeth could very well fill the position of Mrs Darcy and he gave more consideration to the possibility of pursuing her, he tried to remain prudent, to question and weigh his true feelings thoroughly, just as he had recommended to Bingley. That could be accomplished only by time and distance away from her to see whether his admiration and desires lasted. He knew with certainty he would leave Hertfordshire but was unsure whether he would return. His plans depended on Bingley too. His friend intended to return in a week and spend Christmas at Netherfield. If things progressed as Bingley's behaviour indicated, he might become engaged to Jane Bennet very soon. That would mean Elizabeth would be part of Bingley's family too, and their paths would cross often. How would Darcy be able to find any peace of mind?

The Bennets received them cordially; to his delight, Elizabeth was in the drawing room, and Mr Collins was absent.

The conversation began, and drinks were offered, but Darcy had a peculiar feeling of tension. He felt under scrutiny more than usual, and even Elizabeth looked distracted.

“Mr Darcy, you were the subject of our conversation earlier,” Lady Rosseford said. “Mr Wickham and Mr Denny visited us.”

“Ah...” Darcy replied, looking at Elizabeth. He had expected such a thing to occur.

“Mr Wickham is an entertaining fellow. He impressed my wife and younger daughters with tales of his suffering,” Mr Bennet added, and Darcy smiled. Mr Bennet and Lady Rosseford had certainly not been impressed — their countenances revealed as much.

“I asked Mr Wickham a few additional questions,” Elizabeth interjected. He looked at her, and their gazes met and locked briefly. “There were no satisfactory answers, but it is not our business to insist further. I would like to know more details, though.”

He understood her meaning and only nodded. Once again, her wit had prevailed, and she had remedied the error of trusting Wickham so easily.

“There are few things that annoy me more than a young, strong, healthy man whining about his suffering. Especially when he was offered advantages that are unattainable for most people,” Lady Rosseford concluded. “At least Mr Collins, as annoying as he might be, is grateful for Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s protection. He understands how fortunate he has been.”

“I could not agree more,” Mr Bennet uttered.

The younger Bennet sisters and their mother glanced at each other with obvious disapproval, but Darcy assumed they did not dare contradict their father and their aunt.

“Miss Bennet,” Bingley said, changing the subject, “I shall take this opportunity to ask you for the first set tomorrow at the ball. If you are not otherwise engaged.”

The unexpected request seemed to impress the eldest Miss Bennet. She blushed and smiled, but before she had time to respond, Mrs Bennet cried out, “Oh, how wonderful that you asked, Mr Bingley! And prudent too. Jane might have all her dances taken in no time! She would be happy to dance with you!”

“My dear Frances, why would we not allow Jane to answer?” Lady Rosseford kindly and smilingly scolded her. “Otherwise, Mr Bingley might believe she lacks the wit or desire to respond.”

Mrs Bennet appeared shocked, staring at the lady then glancing at Bingley — whose face was as red as Miss Bennet’s.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Mrs Bennet mumbled.

“I thank you for asking, Mr Bingley,” Miss Bennet finally replied. “I would be delighted to, of course.”

Bingley’s smile widened, Miss Bennet offered a small one, and the matter was sealed.

The little scene puzzled Darcy; undoubtedly, Miss Bennet was not indifferent to Bingley, but it was also obvious that her mother was the one pushing her towards him, perhaps quicker than she would prefer. If Bingley were to be hasty and proposed marriage due to a mere infatuation that might pass in a few months, and Mrs Bennet was ready to push her daughter to accept it, in less than a year, the Bingleys could already be a sad, miserable couple. Of course, it could be otherwise too. His expertise in matters of the heart was lacking — Darcy acknowledged that. It was exactly the reason why he intended — for him and for his friend — to do a proper exploration of the heart far away from Hertfordshire.

???

After the gentlemen's visit, Elizabeth and Jane were both in excellent dispositions, as Lady Rosseford remarked. During dinner, the conversation was centred on Mr Wickham, Mr Darcy, and Mr Bingley, each of the ladies supporting her favourite and Mr Bennet mostly watching and listening.

"Mr Collins has not returned yet. There is something very suspicious about his absence," Mrs Bennet said. "I fear your ladyship has scared him off."

"Scared him how?" Lady Rosseford asked. "My dear Frances, I know he admired Elizabeth and considered proposing to her, but that would have been ridiculous, truly! I am aware you intended to support this foolishness, but let us all agree it was a huge mistake."

Mrs Bennet turned pale, then her face coloured, and she almost choked on her food. Mr Bennet hid his smile behind his glass, and Elizabeth hid hers behind her napkin. Lady Rosseford was certainly not holding back her opinion.

"Considering Mr Collins will one day inherit Longbourn, I certainly supported his intention to marry one of my daughters. Otherwise, we might all be homeless when Mr Bennet is gone. And Mr Collins is not a bad man. He is nothing like Mr Bingley, but neither is Lizzy as beautiful as Jane, nor does she possess such a sweet nature."

"I cannot fault your reasoning, but I can safely say there is no immediate danger. Thomas is still a young man, and I am sure your daughters will all find good husbands in due time. Surely you could not believe Lizzy would ever marry Mr Collins! He might not be a bad man, and he is not unattractive, but she is ten times cleverer than him, and it is not her nature to obey a man she cannot respect. Am I right, Lizzy?"

“I am not sure how clever I am, but your ladyship is right about everything else. I would never have married Mr Collins.”

“Good for you. And girls, please call me Aunt Dorothea. Enough with this ladyship business — I am quite tired of it. And since we are speaking of marriage, I insist that you should choose wisely and accept the man who suits you best.”

“That is excellent advice, your...I mean Aunt,” Mrs Bennet replied. “But with so few connections and no dowry, and with their father’s estate entailed, they might never receive a good marriage proposal. How can they afford to choose?”

“That is certainly a legitimate concern,” Lady Rosseford admitted. “However, I hope it can be done. Jane deserves a man worthy of her beauty and sweetness— a man with a tender heart and much affection for her.”

“One like Mr Bingley!” Mrs Bennet immediately said.

“Yes, Mr Bingley seems like such a gentleman. But I believe their acquaintance is too brief to consider marriage yet. I am worried Jane’s feelings for him are mostly due to the fact that she has not met enough other men and cannot compare. I am telling you as someone who was acquainted with many gentlemen and misjudged some of them before I married the right ones.”

“To me, Mr Bingley is everything a gentleman should be,” Jane replied in a low voice. “I truly do not believe that meeting other men would change my opinion.”

“Perhaps, my dear. I shall not argue with you, as you know your heart better than I. I only hope his affection is as strong and genuine as yours and he deserves you. If not, I would surely hold him accountable,” the lady said in earnest, which panicked Jane and amused Elizabeth.

“And you, Lizzy.” Lady Rosseford turned to her. “You must find an honourable and respectable man but also one clever enough to challenge your mind too, so you can see him as your superior as much as your equal.”

“I could not ask for anything better, Aunt.” Elizabeth laughed. “But, as Mama said, it is unlikely such a man would have any interest in me, assuming I might stumble upon him one day.”

“And if he does, you will surely scare him off with your wild manners and your stubbornness,” Mrs Bennet said. “I am amazed Mr Darcy came to visit after he found you covered in mud in the woods, like a savage. I thought he would be too appalled to set foot at Longbourn again.”

Elizabeth blushed and drank some wine to conceal her unease.

“In fact, I think a man like Mr Darcy would be an excellent choice for you, Lizzy,” Lady Rosseford said, and Elizabeth choked on her wine.

“Dear aunt, please do not say that, not even as a joke! I am grateful to Mr Darcy for saving me, and I would like to be able to call him a friend. But I do not wish him to believe we might be spreading such rumours about him!”

“Besides, Mr Darcy hates Lizzy as much as she hates him,” Lydia interjected. “And he might be rich, but he is very unpleasant. I would never marry him.”

“I can safely say there is no danger of him proposing to you, Lydia.” Lady Rosseford smiled. “As for you, Lizzy, do not worry. I did not make the suggestion to be a gossip, and I did not mean Mr Darcy himself. I meant a man like him in character and in nature, which might be utterly different from yours but might also complete yours perfectly.”

“I very much like Mr Darcy, despite your general disapproval of his manners,” Mr Bennet interjected. “And despite the suffering that he may or may not have caused to your amiable Mr Wickham. But I agree with Lizzy that we should not mention his name in regard to marriage, not even as a joke. He is Mr Bingley’s friend, and we do not wish to upset anyone at Netherfield — do we?” he concluded with a meaningful look at his wife and younger daughters.

“I doubt anyone in their right mind would believe Mr Darcy has any interest in Lizzy, other than as a mere acquaintance,” Mrs Bennet replied. “As much as I would like to think otherwise, let us be honest — Mr Darcy is too high above any of our girls, including Jane. And a woman who enjoys wandering around in the dirt cannot be anything other than appalling to him. We would do better to speak of Mr Bingley, who is certainly everything a gentleman should be.”

“What about us, Aunt Dorothea?” Lydia asked. “Whom should we marry? I would like an officer in a red uniform who is very handsome! Just like Mr Wickham! Or Mr Denny — he would do too.”

Lady Rosseford laughed heartily.

“You, my dears, must grow up, improve yourselves, and only then think of marriage. You may wish for a handsome officer, Lydia, but you must learn not to trust anything a man tells you. I hope to be able to take you to London often in the next few years, so you can meet many people. But only after that should we consider suitors.”

The lady paused while Lydia and Kitty looked disappointed, and then she continued.

“Mary, it is good you are interested in improving yourself, but you must not allow study to steal your enjoyment of life. Let people see what a lovely young woman you are. Kitty and Lydia, you are pretty and joyful, and your manners are unrestrained, which is perfectly appropriate for girls your age but unacceptable for someone who

wishes to secure a good husband. You must trust me.”

“Of course we do, your ladyship. I mean Aunt Dorothea,” Mrs Bennet answered. “You girls cannot yet understand how fortunate you are to have such a superior connection!”

“I am fortunate to have found you while I can still enjoy life,” the lady said. “Now I am going to bed. I am still a little tired, and tomorrow, with the ball, I foresee an entertaining and agitated night.”

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Although dancing was prohibited — both by the apothecary and by her own discomfort — Elizabeth prepared for the ball with extra care. When she asked herself why, her cheeks heated immediately. That answer was prohibited too — especially after Lady Rosseford's statement about Mr Darcy suiting her. Such thoughts had arisen in her mind, but she had dismissed them. Once her ladyship voiced them aloud, Elizabeth felt like they could not be taken back. How could her aunt reach that conclusion without knowing about Elizabeth's conversation with Mr Darcy, without knowing his confession about admiring her, without knowing he had offered her more hints in regard to Mr Wickham than to anyone else?

If her ladyship had drawn that conclusion after only a few days of acquaintance with both of them and after seeing them in each other's company only twice, was there something obvious, something for anyone to see? Or was everything just a mere coincidence, a joke around the subject of marriage that Lady Rosseford had taken in jest and she was so silly as to take seriously? Even her mother — who was always eager to pair her daughters with any eligible man — declared Mr Darcy was high above them. Such a statement was certainly meant to discourage any unreasonable hopes. And still...

She put on a pair of comfortable boots, which she would usually wear on her long walks. They did not suit her elegant dress, but that did not matter to her and probably would not matter to others either, since all the guests were aware of her accident.

She took a few steps, and the lack of pain encouraged her to hope for a pleasant night, even spent on a chair. Would Mr Darcy dance? He had declared that he loathed such activity, but he would probably ask at least Mr Bingley's sisters, as politeness required. For a moment, she wondered whether he would have asked her to dance if

not for the accident. Then she quickly dismissed such a thought as it brought nothing but more distress.

She left the room arm in arm with Jane to join the rest of the family.

“My dear girls, you all look beautiful!” Lady Rosseford said. “I feel privileged to be in your company. And you look quite dashing, Mr Collins.”

The clergyman, surprised by the compliment, seemed confused; his face changed colour, and finally he bowed and mumbled a thank you.

“Girls, look at the dress Aunt Dorothea gave me,” Mrs Bennet said enthusiastically. “I have never worn anything so elegant and expensive!”

“You look beautiful, Mama,” Elizabeth said.

“Come, my dear, let us leave. I worry that you might be the prettiest and most fashionable lady at the ball,” Mr Bennet uttered.

“You are so silly, Mr Bennet,” she replied with a chuckle.

The Bennets’ arrival at Netherfield drew immediate attention due to Lady Rosseford. She had been introduced to a few people, but to most of them she was an intriguing stranger, so the curiosity was understandable.

Mr Bingley immediately arrived to greet them, then offered Jane his arm. Behind him was Mr Darcy, more restrained, offering Lady Rosseford his arm. The lady took it, and then he addressed Elizabeth. “Miss Elizabeth, I know you would usually not require my help, but perhaps you might need a little support tonight?”

“Thank you, sir. Indeed I would,” she answered. Her gloved hand grasped his arm,

and recollections returned to trouble her. She knew the feeling of his bare hands on hers, as well as the image of his exposed throat.

Before she could mind her words, she heard herself saying, “Mr Darcy, I am sorry that I forgot to bring your neckcloth. It has been washed and ironed.”

“There is no hurry, Miss Elizabeth. Hopefully there will be other opportunities.”

Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst welcomed them, asking whether the entire family had arrived. The comment was malicious, masked by an insincere smile as they embraced Jane. The introductions to Mr Collins and Lady Rosseford were performed, and the clergyman expressed his admiration for the elegant arrangements. Lady Rosseford exchanged the usual pleasantries, then walked on with the rest of the group.

Mr Bingley led them to the room that had been arranged for dancing, where Elizabeth and her aunt each took a chair and Jane and Mary stood near them. Mr and Mrs Bennet mingled with the guests, Lydia and Kitty ran to Mrs Forster, and Mr Collins joined Sir William. Those already acquainted with Lady Rosseford came to greet her — Mr Wickham and Mr Denny among them — while Mrs Bennet performed several other introductions, including to Colonel Forster, his wife, and a few other officers.

From her sitting position, Elizabeth had a wide view of the entire party. Her glances turned to Mr Darcy more than she wished them to, and more than once her eyes met his. He stood slightly apart, holding a glass. Mr Hurst was lying on a sofa with a drink, whilst Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst whispered to each other at a safe distance from everybody else. They were in complete opposition to their brother, who was in the midst of the party.

The music began, and Mr Bingley took Jane’s hand for the first set. All the other pairs lined up behind them, and Elizabeth noticed Mr Collins dancing with Charlotte, and Lydia and Kitty with two officers. Mr Wickham did not dance; neither did Mr

Darcy.

“Jane and Mr Bingley make a lovely pair,” Lady Rosseford whispered to Elizabeth. “She is exceedingly beautiful, and he looks utterly besotted.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied.

“And Mr Collins seems charmed by Miss Lucas. That young man is easily impressed, whether by Lady Catherine, by houses, by windows, or by young women.”

“I would be very sorry if Charlotte agrees to marry him for convenience,” Elizabeth said. “I have always trusted her judgment. I hope she will not disappoint me now.”

“Disappoint you? My dear Lizzy, what do you mean? Why would Miss Lucas consider your feelings when she decides her future?”

Her aunt’s voice was light, but the question was not, and it puzzled Elizabeth.

“I did not mean... It is just that I wish her to be happy, and I do not believe Mr Collins is the right man to make her so.”

“Miss Lucas might have been your friend since you were a young child, but her expectations of marital felicity might differ from yours. She might give Mr Collins more consideration than you have. She does not seem the sort of woman to be forced against her will, and she looks pleased to be dancing with your cousin.”

Elizabeth watched the pair and had to admit the lady was correct.

“Charlotte has no dowry either. She has a younger sister and two brothers, and Sir William has little to give them.”

“I assumed as much. If Miss Lucas is as clever as you said, she must be well aware of her assets and prospects. She has apparently succeeded in winning the admiration of a man capable of providing for her. There is nothing disappointing in that.”

Elizabeth looked at her friend again, uneasy with the notion.

“Aunt Dorothea, speaking of dowries, there is something I must talk to you about. Not now, not here, but soon.”

“Your father warned me you may wish to talk, but that particular subject is not open for debate. There are a few more details to be settled, and then we shall all speak of it.”

“But Aunt, this is not—”

“Lizzy dear, you should tell me — are you romantic?” Lady Rosseford asked, taking her by surprise. “Your father told me you like to read, so I assume you enjoy novels. Do you dream of the man you would like to marry?”

The enquiry was so blunt that Elizabeth felt her cheeks burning and averted her eyes, taking a moment before she responded.

“I suppose I might be called romantic. I would certainly prefer to marry for affection, for genuine love, as well as for the respect you mentioned. I would rather never marry than be tied for life to a man repulsive to me.”

“I agree, my dear. Marriage without affection might become a torment, especially in regard to the marriage bed,” the lady whispered, and Elizabeth stared at her in disbelief.

“Aunt!”

“Forgive me, I should not have mentioned it.” The lady laughed. “But I assumed someone who read as much as you do might know enough even about things she has never experienced.”

“Then what about Charlotte? Would her marriage not be a torment?” Elizabeth asked, disregarding the last statement.

“Not necessarily. Each woman needs a certain type of affection. What is repulsive to you might be quite the opposite for other women. I believe your friend knows very well what she is doing.”

The first set ended; people gathered in groups to chat, and the sound of their conversations filled the room.

Mr Bingley brought Jane to Elizabeth and her aunt, and he remained too. Sir William approached, congratulated Jane and her partner on their exquisite dancing, then exchanged a few words with Lady Rosseford.

Then the second set began, and this time Mr Wickham asked Mary King, while Mr Collins asked Jane. Charlotte came to sit with Elizabeth and Lady Rosseford, and they spoke for a little while.

Even though they were not dancing together, Mr Bingley and Jane exchanged repeated glances across the room. It was a sweet gesture easily noticed and subject to whispers, but no one was happier and more vocal about it than Mrs Bennet.

As pleased as she was watching her sister and her admirer, Elizabeth felt embarrassed by her mother’s lack of restraint in expressing her joy. She hoped that either her father or Lady Rosseford would temper her, but neither of them interjected.

“Mr Bingley’s sisters are annoyingly bitter,” the lady said to Elizabeth. “Look, even

Mr Darcy seems vexed. I wonder what they have to say to him that is making him frown.”

“Every time I have seen them they have been displeased by something. Miss Bingley particularly dislikes my company for reasons of her own. What bothers me the most is that they are deceiving Jane, feigning a friendship that is obviously not genuine.”

“If their brother proposes to your sister, they will certainly be miserable, which will be amusing to watch.”

“Unfortunately, Jane is so kind that she sees the best in everyone, and she trusts them.”

“I hope Jane is clever enough to see the truth, despite her sweet nature. If not, we must help her to open her eyes.”

“Mama speaks too loudly about Jane and Mr Bingley, and that certainly irritates his sisters. Would you not ask her to lower her voice a little, Aunt?”

“Why would I, my dear? I am quite entertained by those two shrews.”

Elizabeth tried to keep her composure, but she became more and more anxious. At the beginning of the fourth set, Lady Rosseford suddenly said, “Lizzy, I would like to rest for a moment. Can we go somewhere? I have a terrible headache.”

“Are you unwell, Aunt? Should I fetch help?”

“My dear, do not make a spectacle. Let us leave, discreetly, and rest somewhere with less noise. That is all I need.”

Elizabeth nodded, and they left the room. Their departure went unnoticed, as

everyone was engaged in dancing or conversation. With small steps, Elizabeth directed the lady to the library. Inside was darkness and silence, the only light coming from two candles and the fire.

“You should sit here, by the window, Aunt. Would you like to lie down for a while?”

“Yes, I would, thank you.”

“Here is a cushion. Let me arrange it for you. There. Should I close the curtains too?”

“Yes please. You should rest your foot too, Lizzy.”

A few minutes later, Lady Rosseford seemed to be asleep. Through the darkness, Elizabeth tried to look about, searching for a blanket or anything to cover her aunt. She found one on the chair where she had previously seen Mr Darcy sitting. She gently placed it over the lady, then she sat in the armchair by the fire, taking off her boot to rest her foot.

She was soon enveloped by peace and was almost asleep when she was startled by the sound of the door opening and voices arguing. The difference between the strong light in the hall and the darkness inside the library made it difficult for the new arrivals to observe them. Elizabeth was about to make her presence known when she recognised the voices of Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, and his sisters; and their quarrel, carried in low, angry voices, froze her to her chair.

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“What is it, Caroline? Can it not wait till morning? It is absurd to bring me here in the middle of the ball!”

“It cannot wait, Charles. Not a moment longer. It might be too late already!”

“Charles, I have heard a most alarming report. Are you engaged to Jane Bennet? Is it true?”

“Louisa, that is not alarming, it is ridiculous! Where did you hear such a report? I am certainly not engaged. If I were, I would have told you.”

“Where? I heard your ridiculous so-called mother-in-law bragging to her friends, with not even the decency to keep her voice down! And Jane Bennet has so little character that she obeys whatever her mother demands! Do you remember how she came to Netherfield on horseback, even though it was obvious it would rain?”

“I am not engaged. It is nothing but a silly rumour. And I shall not listen to another word against Jane Bennet! Now let us return to the party and discuss this tomorrow.”

“I heard Mrs Bennet too,” Mr Darcy interjected. “She said she expected them to be engaged by tomorrow, not that they already are.”

“Charles, even if it is just a rumour, it is dreadful and dangerous and entirely your fault! Your behaviour has been appalling! You have been chasing Jane Bennet around the room all night like a puppy! And she treats you like she treats everybody else — with a formal smile and a silly superiority under her feigned demureness. Can you not see that you are being fooled? It was the Bennets’ plan from the very beginning — to

lure you with Jane's pretty face and trap you! She is so annoying, smiling all the time. Even Mr Darcy agrees that she smiles too much," Miss Bingley said.

"If I may correct you, my remark about Miss Bennet was from the first time I met her, not recently. And I agree with Bingley — this is not a suitable time or place for such a conversation," Mr Darcy uttered.

"But Charles must immediately change his behaviour! He should avoid Jane Bennet for the rest of the evening and should certainly not dance another set with her."

"This is ridiculous, Caroline. I have already asked her for a second set. That cannot be changed."

"It must be changed! People already think there is more between you than there is. A second set will only confirm their expectations," Mrs Hurst insisted.

"And why on earth did Eliza Bennet come to the ball at all since she has supposedly injured her ankle? And you all foolishly believed her!" Miss Bingley continued. "And what about their aunt, who appeared from nowhere? Does anyone know who she is? She says she is a countess, but have you heard of her before, Mr Darcy? I never have. Who knows what sort of penniless so-called lady she is — if she truly has any title at all! They must have brought her here to impress Charles and to push him into proposing!"

"This is absurd! If I had seen you drinking, I would say you had overindulged, Caroline."

"Charles, this is not a joke and not absurd. We are talking about your life and ours. About your future and ours! You cannot tie yourself to a country girl with nothing to recommend her but a pretty face! Even Mr Darcy agrees with us!"

At this statement, Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat, and she held her breath.

"Does he?" Mr Bingley replied, anger apparent in his voice. "I am surprised to hear that. As far as I know, Darcy disagrees with everything you two say or do. What do you say, Darcy?" he asked.

"I say this conversation has gone too far, and it should end now. If needed, it might be continued tomorrow."

"But Mr Darcy, you agreed it would be a huge mistake for Charles to propose to Jane Bennet. And you were as appalled as we were about the Bennet family and even laughed about Eliza's reported beauty! But then, for some strange reason, you suddenly found her rather pretty and began to visit Longbourn. You cannot allow Charles to ruin his future just because you have been charmed by Eliza's fine eyes!" Miss Bingley cried.

Thrills of disbelief, puzzlement, and dread shook Elizabeth as she listened, and she glanced at the sofa through the darkness and wondered when Lady Rosseford would wake up.

"Miss Bingley, your sarcasm is not at all appreciated, and such rude statements are certainly not helpful. Bingley, I have already given you my opinion. I have been honest with you from the beginning and expressed my doubts. That is why I recommended you not propose in haste but go to London for a while and consider your feelings from a distance."

"Yes, you did, Darcy. Should I assume those concerns remain?"

"They do. I am still worried that your admiration might be fleeting since you have not known the lady long enough to form a deep attachment. We all know you have been in love before — at least three times in the last two years. And I am also worried that

Miss Bennet, induced by the need for a good marriage and the desire to secure your affection, might accept your admiration without necessarily returning it. That does not mean I have any objections to Miss Bennet as a person.”

“So, you actually believe I am a shallow, irresponsible man and Jane Bennet is a dishonest, deceptive woman, using her beauty to lure rich men into a marriage for her own comfort,” Mr Bingley said, his tone heavy with rage.

“That is not what I said, Bingley!”

“Then what did you say exactly, Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth heard Lady Rosseford’s voice, and she jumped to her feet. With only one boot on, she almost slipped, and she grabbed a chair to regain her balance.

“Lady Rosseford?” Mr Bingley enquired, stepping into the room, his voice now hesitant. “What are you doing here? Are you unwell?”

“My niece Elizabeth brought me here to rest for a while. I did not expect to witness such slander about my family, and yes, I am unwell because of it.”

Mr Bingley immediately lit more candles, and Elizabeth could see Lady Rosseford sitting on the sofa and both Bingley sisters as well as Mr Darcy standing by the door, their faces revealing their utter shock.

“You should have made your presence known, Eliza!” Miss Bingley said.

“You should have minded your words and your spitefulness, Miss Bingley!” Lady Rosseford cried. “Why would you ridiculously presume you are better than my niece Jane? She is more beautiful than you, she is a gentleman’s daughter, and she is sweet, gentle, and kind-hearted, which one could never say about you or your sister!”

“Lady Rosseford, how can you...?” Mrs Hurst cried.

“I wonder why you are so arrogant,” the lady continued, her voice growing angrier. “Neither your fortune nor your situation in life can grant you access to high society. And your character and behaviour are certainly not helpful.”

“We cannot be forced to listen to this,” Miss Bingley interjected. “Especially in our own house.”

“Nobody is forcing you to listen, but I shall have my say, regardless! Besides, you are not in your house but in one rented by your brother. You do not own it.”

This new insult caused more stupefaction, but still Lady Rosseford had not finished.

“You called the Bennets dreadful. What do you think others call you? Do you wish me to make arrangements so you will not be allowed in any respectable place in London? Do you believe the Bennets have no connections that please you? I shall take my nieces to places where you would not even be allowed to dust!”

The scolding had become so offensive that all the others seemed frozen in horror. Elizabeth tried to intervene, but her aunt was not to be stopped.

“And you, Mr Darcy, plotting with two women against your friend. Offending my relatives after they welcomed you into their home. What sort of a man does that? I trusted you, I liked you, but you are such a disappointment!”

“Lady Rosseford, please allow me—” Mr Darcy attempted to speak. Elizabeth looked at him and noticed his troubled countenance. Their eyes met, but this time he was the first to avert his.

“I shall allow you nothing, Mr Darcy. I have heard enough. You, young man, take

pride in your family's worth, but you still must prove yourself worthy of your good name. I have my own pride, which I will not allow to be subjugated by yours!"

"I am only asking for a chance to explain myself."

"Explain yourself, Mr Darcy? Was something I heard untrue?"

"Not entirely...but—"

"Then there is nothing to explain. You have your opinion, and I have mine. Your arrogance is no greater than mine, Mr Darcy."

"At least you should not blame Bingley for this discussion," Mr Darcy said.

"I do not blame him, but I believe you and his sisters may be correct. Mr Bingley, you seem a pleasant young man, but if you fall in love every other day and if you are not certain of my niece's feelings, you are certainly not ready to marry her. You may dance with her if you wish, but do not dare to propose to her. I shall not approve of her marrying you. Go to London, as Mr Darcy suggested. Meet other young women and be sure of your unsteady heart."

The lady stood and took a few steps forwards, then turned to the Bingley sisters again, her voice even colder and harsher, like a sharp blade.

"And you ladies may rest assured that none of my nieces are desperate to marry your brother. In fact, even yesterday I told Jane that I think she might find someone better."

Mr Bingley looked so desperate, so disturbed, that Elizabeth took great pity on him. She felt he did not deserve such harsh censure, but her aunt seemed to disagree.

“And one last thing, Mr Bingley. You should know Jane truly cares for you and believes you to be the best of men. But then again, that girl has such a sweet nature that she thinks well of anyone, including your sisters.”

A gasp of horror escaped from Miss Bingley’s lips, which Lady Rosseford disregarded.

“Come, Lizzy, let us return to the party. Do not worry, Mr Bingley, I shall not cause a scandal. I am tempted to take the entire family from here this very moment, but I shall not do that. I wish to avoid embarrassment and gossip. And I shall not reveal this conversation to any of the Bennets — especially not to sweet Jane. I could not pain her with your betrayal.”

“Lady Rosseford, please, just a moment,” Mr Bingley pleaded, while Elizabeth quickly slipped her foot back into her boot and tied it securely.

“You should return to your guests too, Mr Bingley. You may talk to Jane, you may dance with her as you planned, and then you should go to London. We shall too, and hopefully, each of you will find your perfect match.”

The lady took Elizabeth’s arm, and they walked together, then she turned one more time to the Bingley sisters.

“And Mrs Hurst, Miss Bingley, you should know your arrogance is simply ridiculous. You are nothing but average in every way — fortune, beauty, education. You declare a superiority over others that you certainly do not possess.”

With that, Elizabeth and her aunt stepped out into the hall and slowly returned to the rest of their family.

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The tables were already prepared for supper, and Jane had saved them two chairs. They sat while being questioned about their whereabouts.

“I was a little tired, and Lizzy took me to the library to rest. I am well now.”

“You do look a little pale, Aunt,” Jane insisted.

“Do not worry, my dear. I am well.”

A few minutes later, all three Bingleys returned, together with Mr Darcy. They took their seats, and the soup was served while the conversation resumed. Elizabeth noticed that her father was scrutinising her intently. She must have looked disconcerted, and he had certainly noticed.

Lady Rosseford regained her volubility sooner than Elizabeth, who kept glancing at Mr Bingley, his sisters, and Mr Darcy. The first looked miserable and pale, and his sisters kept a glacial distance from everyone, while the latter’s frown revealed little of his true feelings.

The quarrel she had unwittingly witnessed troubled Elizabeth to her core, though there were only a few things she did not expect. She knew Mr Bingley’s sisters’ opinions of her and their family, as well as their insincere friendliness to Jane. And she was also aware of Mr Darcy’s objections to their family and everyone else in Meryton. That circumstances had brought him to Longbourn and he had become better acquainted with her father and Lady Rosseford was likely not enough to gain his good opinion, which once lost was lost forever, as he had once admitted.

There were two things that perturbed Elizabeth more than anything. The first was the assertion that Mr Bingley fell in love — and apparently out of love — easily and often, which was a worrisome flaw in his character. And the second was that Miss Bingley knew of Mr Darcy finding her — Elizabeth — pretty and admiring her eyes. That was disquieting, even alarming, and she could not comprehend the meaning of it.

During supper, Lady Rosseford asked Mr Wickham a few questions in an amiable, almost friendly way, which surprised Elizabeth as much as it did the officer.

“You should come and visit again, Mr Wickham,” Lady Rosseford said. “We still have many things to discuss. But regardless of the subject of our conversation, your company is always pleasant.”

“I thank you, your ladyship. I shall certainly come!”

“Good. You and your fellow officers might come to dinner one evening. I expect there will be fewer guests to entertain in the coming weeks.”

The rest of the Bennets looked surprised about such an invitation, and Elizabeth noticed Mr Darcy’s expression darken and his frown deepen. She knew her ladyship had issued the invitation only to upset the man. Elizabeth found such a gesture deeply unfair but could not censure her aunt.

“What a wonderful idea, your ladyship!” Mrs Bennet cried. “A dinner with all the officers! But we must plan it carefully, as Longbourn’s dining room is not as big as I would wish it to be.”

Lady Rosseford looked about with a smile pressed between her lips and a mischievous expression on her face that worried Elizabeth.

“Well then, perhaps we should host the party at Stoke Park, as soon as the house is ready.”

Her reply caused some stupefaction in those who had heard, and Mr Bennet threw his aunt an intrigued gaze.

“But Lady Rosseford, Stoke Park is not in use,” Mrs Bennet explained, looking confused. “I hear it has been let, but we cannot go there.”

“Of course we can go, my dear,” the lady answered cheerfully. “Stoke Park has not been let but purchased. By me. I planned for it to be a surprise when it was ready. But I imagine this is as good a moment as any other.”

Even amidst the din of voices, silence and perplexed countenances followed that statement. Mrs Bennet was so shocked that she dropped her fork, which fell onto her plate with a loud clatter. She continued to stare at Lady Rosseford, blinking and gulping repeatedly. “You purchased Stoke Park?” she finally uttered.

“I did. I found it charming, and I decided to purchase it as I am determined to have a home in Hertfordshire. I do not change my wishes and plans easily,” she said with a quick yet meaningful glare at Mr Bingley, who looked anguished at the rebuke.

Lady Rosseford continued, imperturbable.

“I hope the house will be finished soon — just like my new house in London. Several rooms need decorating and furnishing, but hopefully, it will not take long. I look forward to hosting parties and balls there.”

She ended with the same smile and with a glance at Elizabeth, who threw back a disapproving look.

For the rest of the meal, the conversation was monopolised by Mrs Bennet and her younger daughters, all expressing their amazement and their joy — too loudly and quite improperly.

Lady Rosseford answered a few questions, seemingly very pleased with herself.

“Aunt Dorothea, I know you did that on purpose,” Elizabeth whispered at the first opportunity. “And while I understand your reasons, I cannot approve of your actions. Inviting Mr Wickham to dinner and then disclosing to the whole room something that should have been a family matter was improper and unfair to both Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy.”

“You are right, my dear,” the lady unexpectedly answered, shocking Elizabeth again. “It was absolutely improper and unfair, and of course I did it on purpose. I know you might be upset, but I hope you will forgive me. After all, I am your aunt, and they are nothing to you.”

Lady Rosseford closed any further debate on the subject, and Elizabeth found no arguments to continue it.

The rest of the evening passed rather awkwardly, with some people dancing and many others just gossiping. Mr Bingley cast repeated glances at Lady Rosseford as he timidly approached Jane several more times and then asked her for the last set. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst spent most of the time in a corner, talking privately and glaring at the lady. Mr Darcy stood in another corner, holding a glass that seemed to always be full. He spoke briefly to a few gentlemen but remained in solitary reflection. He looked as troubled as Elizabeth felt, and the temptation to talk to him was painfully strong, but she did not dare approach him, and neither did he attempt to approach her.

After the ball, as they waited for their carriages to convey them home, Mrs Bennet

and her youngest daughters were still overjoyed, and they chatted loudly. Mr Collins did not say much, Mr Bennet did not even attempt to say anything, and Elizabeth was too distracted to engage in conversation. As for Lady Rosseford, she did not need many words to express her contentment; it was quite obvious on her face.

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Darcy sipped some coffee, struggling to keep his eyes open. The sharp headache made the light too strong and even the smallest sound unbearable. He had not slept at all after the ball, and those three glasses of brandy he had shared with Bingley had not helped his present misery.

They had spoken for more than an hour; Bingley had been deeply distressed and had declared his happiness would be completely ruined without Jane Bennet. After the second drink, he had begun to reveal all sorts of small details, like the way he held Miss Bennet's hand, how her presence made him feel, the scent of her perfume — until Darcy felt mortified and guilty at the same time. He had no clear evidence to doubt his judgment, but he wished he had not interfered and had never discussed such a delicate matter concerning his friend with the man's sisters.

Things had taken a turn for the worse, and Bingley might have lost his chance with Miss Bennet, but Darcy had certainly lost any progress in his friendship with Elizabeth. He called it friendship because he was too weak and too cowardly to call it love — which it was.

While he was ready to bear his sorrow and to fight to remedy his errors, he blamed himself for the grief he had caused his friend. If Bingley was truly in love with Jane Bennet and she returned his feelings — as Lady Rosseford had declared — then two innocent people would suffer because of his arrogant intervention and Lady Rosseford's obvious pleasure in taking revenge.

The day after the ball was expected to be chaotic and tiresome, with all the preparations for their departure. But when remorse was added to the existing disorder, the day became truly unbearable — a sentiment that perfectly mirrored Darcy's own despondent state of mind.

Gathered around the breakfast table, Bingley, his sisters, and his brother-in-law did not look any better.

"I look forward to returning to London as soon as possible," Miss Bingley said.

Bingley looked up from his plate. "They why wait? Pack your bags and leave now. You will be in town by this evening."

"Charles! You cannot speak to your sister in such a way!" Mrs Hurst interjected, while Miss Bingley was silenced by the rude reply.

"Louisa, I can and I will speak however I please. Just as you two spoke and did as you pleased with no regard for my needs or wishes. All this will end today. You may stay or leave, but do not demand anything from me! We are not bound to each other, we do not have to travel together, and we can each mind our own business!"

In more than three years of friendship, Darcy had never seen Bingley half as angry; nor had he heard him speak to his sisters so impolitely.

Mrs Hurst put a hand on her brother's arm. "Charles, I can see you are upset—"

"I am not upset, Louisa," he interrupted her. "I am furious, appalled, and embarrassed. You made me look like a ridiculous fool! You disregarded my requests when I addressed them kindly and politely. Therefore, I shall use a completely different approach. And to be clear — I shall need privacy when I return to London, so I expect Caroline to stay with you and your husband this winter. If you wish to

come and visit, you should send a note the day prior.”

“Charles! Do not be ridiculous! Now you are acting like a fool!” Miss Bingley cried.

“Your opinion means little to me at this time. My decision has been made. I plan to host many parties this winter, and your presence is unwelcome.”

“Charles, are you out of your mind? You cannot throw Caroline out of the house!”

“Why should she spend more time living with her single brother than with her married sister? Your husband owns a house, and you enjoy Caroline’s company. She may very well stay with you until she marries.”

The sisters exchanged panicked glances, then looked at Darcy, as if asking for support, but he showed more interest in his plate.

“You are ready to split your family apart because of Eliza Bennet and her vulgar aunt?” Miss Bingley enquired. “That woman is the most horrible human being I have ever met.”

“Ah — and here we are again. You blame Elizabeth Bennet for anything and everything! This is ludicrous. And yes, Lady Rosseford is outspoken, and when angered, she can be rude and spiteful, but only a little bit more than you. The difference is that she owns a title and a house in London and has just purchased an estate larger than Netherfield. What a difference, indeed!”

“I have met many titled ladies, and none of them resemble that one!” Mrs Hurst declared.

“Well, who knows? None of those titled ladies expressed their opinions directly. You offended Lady Rosseford’s family, so she offended you.”

“You are impossible to talk to today,” Miss Bingley declared.

“I might be. But I shall not change my mind, so please make your travelling plans accordingly.”

“Mr Darcy, when do you plan to leave?” Miss Bingley asked.

“I am not certain yet,” he answered abruptly. “For now, I shall go for a ride. Alone, if nobody has any objections,” he said, glancing at Bingley.

“One who falls in love so often and easily should not be allowed to form any objections,” Bingley replied sarcastically. Darcy did not reply.

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Darcy rode around the land surrounding Netherfield for more than an hour. He held the reins loosely, giving his horse its head. As his torment calmed and his mind cleared, he decided on the next step. He would leave Hertfordshire the next morning; there was no point in him staying longer. But before then, there were things he needed to do, as unpleasant as they might be.

As if reading his mind, his horse took him close to the spot where he had found Elizabeth. He dismounted and walked around, smiling at the image of her pretty face, flushed and dirty. The sensation of holding her in his arms, of her arms around his neck, her scent, and her warmth were so vivid they had become impregnated on his own being. His regrets for what could have been were deep; if Bingley's feelings were anywhere near as strong as his, knowing he could have been engaged to the woman he loved and then losing her all of a sudden must be agonising.

With one last look about, Darcy jumped back into the saddle and pulled the reins to the right.

He had lost track of time when he arrived in front of Longbourn, and he hoped it was an appropriate hour for a call. He tied up his horse, then took a moment to compose himself before he knocked.

“Mr Darcy?”

Elizabeth's voice startled him, and his heart began to race.

“Miss Bennet.” He bowed, and they waited, facing each other.

“I was taking a turn in the garden,” she explained.

“I assume your ankle is better?”

“Very much so, thank you.”

“Miss Bennet, forgive me for intruding. I shall leave Netherfield tomorrow, and I hoped I might secure a few moments to talk to you and Lady Rosseford. I wish to do so not only for myself but also for Bingley, and probably your sister.”

“I am not... I shall ask Lady Rosseford. Would you like to come in? Yes, of course you would — you cannot wait here. My father is in the library. My mother and sisters are in the drawing room.”

She seemed as nervous as he was, rubbing her hands together.

“If it is not too much of an imposition, I would rather speak to your father while I wait.”

“Of course. I shall show you to the library.”

He nodded and followed her. He had so many things to tell her, but no words seemed appropriate.

Mr Bennet looked surprised but pleased to see him but became thoughtful when he revealed the reason for his visit.

“Papa, I am going to speak to Aunt Dorothea,” Elizabeth said.

“Is there any particular reason you wish to talk to my aunt? Can I not help you?” Mr Bennet enquired.

“No, sir. I have... There was a little incident last evening, and Lady Rosseford and Miss Elizabeth heard a certain conversation that I feel must be clarified before I return to London.”

“Ah. Very well, then,” he replied. “May I offer you a drink, Mr Darcy?”

“No, thank you, sir. I drank too much and slept too little last night.”

“I imagine we all did. So, you leave tomorrow? Together with Mr Bingley and his family?”

“Yes.”

“And will you return to Hertfordshire soon? Mr Bingley said he would only stay in London for a week.”

“I am not... I intend to spend Christmas with my sister in London. I am not aware of Bingley’s plans.”

It was not long before Elizabeth returned, and, to Darcy’s surprise and relief, Lady Rosseford accompanied her.

“Mr Darcy,” the lady said sternly.

“Your ladyship. I thank you for your time,” he replied, bowing to her with formal politeness.

“Well then, since you have things to discuss, I shall take my book elsewhere,” Mr Bennet uttered. “Unless my presence is needed.”

“I believe it would be better if I gave you a brief explanation of the whole story

later,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Brief stories are my favourites,” the gentleman declared.

After Mr Bennet had closed the door behind him, an awkward silence enveloped the other three. The ladies sat, and Darcy remained standing until Elizabeth invited him to sit too.

Lady Rosseford’s sharp and cold gaze pierced him, and her handsome face was set in a frown.

“Mr Darcy, it is quite a surprise to see you here. I did not expect a proud man like you to willingly engage in another discussion with me.”

“I might be proud and at times arrogant and presumptuous, but I hope I am not so vain as to allow my errors to hurt other people without trying to make amends.”

“I feel this might well describe both you and me,” the lady said. “Since you came all the way here, I shall listen to what you have to say.”

“I have come to apologise on behalf of myself and others involved in last night’s incident. But, most importantly, I wish to beg you not to punish Bingley for my or his sisters’ behaviour. His only fault was that his admiration induced him to act less prudently than he should have. He genuinely believes himself in love with Miss Bennet. Even if my doubts are valid, Bingley did not try to trifle with your niece, and he did not feign admiration and affection for his own gain. He was honest about what he believed he felt, and if he had proposed, he would have done it with an open heart, even if the consequences may have been less than desirable.”

Lady Rosseford looked thoughtful, and so did Elizabeth.

“So you are trying to excuse your attempt to separate your friend from my niece while protecting him from the shame of being weak, shallow, and undecided. You are a clever man, Mr Darcy, but not cleverer than me.”

“My actions have been foolish on more than one occasion, so I cannot pretend to be clever. And I certainly am not trying to compare myself with your ladyship. I shall accept any humiliation from you — considering your connection to my family — if that is the price of protecting my friend.”

“You are a loyal friend, Mr Darcy. I shall grant you that. And a considerate man. We are all grateful that you saved Elizabeth, and I wish you to tell me how I can repay you. But one noble act does not excuse the other hurtful ones. One requires compensation, which I am more than happy to pay. The others require condemnation.”

“You wish to pay me? For bringing Miss Elizabeth home?” Darcy repeated, hardly controlling his anger. “I do not believe I deserve such censure nor such offence.”

“Indeed you do not, sir!” Elizabeth interjected, her voice slightly raised. “And I am sure my aunt did not mean it and already regrets her words. I shall be forever indebted and grateful to you for helping me with so much kindness, even if I cannot easily forget the conversation I heard last night that was so hurtful to my family.”

“I understand that, Miss Elizabeth. I shall ask for that payment Lady Rosseford mentioned, though, in the form of a little more time to explain myself in regard to what you heard.”

“Very well,” Elizabeth said, while Lady Rosseford remained silent.

“Thank you. I shall not deny anything I told Bingley. Disguise of every sort has always been my abhorrence, and I take responsibility even when I am wrong. I do

believe Bingley was charmed by Miss Bennet — a woman who is exceedingly beautiful and possesses a nature as alluring as her manners. Most men would have fallen in love with her. My friend is young and easily impressed, and yes, I have seen him fall in love a few times before. Is his admiration and affection for Miss Bennet different? It might be, but I cannot be sure, and I fear he cannot be either, considering they have been acquainted for less than two months.”

He paused. Lady Rosseford said nothing, but Elizabeth replied, “I agree with you, sir. It is better to discover the strength of one’s feelings before becoming engaged, in order to avoid pain and sorrow.”

“Precisely. As for Miss Bennet, Lady Rosseford said her affection for Bingley is deep and genuine, and I have no reason to doubt it. But from afar, to someone who hardly knows Miss Bennet’s nature, her sentiments were not so obvious. So I was genuinely worried for my friend. A marriage in which one partner brings more affection than the other, or there is no true affection on either side, cannot be anything other than objectionable.”

“Again, I agree with you, Mr Darcy. I believe we should have the same concerns regarding Jane.”

“Thank you. One last thing. I shall not deny that more than once I disapproved of breaches of decorum I witnessed from Mrs Bennet and the youngest Miss Bennets. I disapproved of their manners just as they disapproved of mine. I have accepted their criticism and their ill opinion of me, and I apologise if my opinion offended them. However, I stand by my judgment.”

“That is a fair statement,” Lady Rosseford finally replied. “So, Mr Darcy, Elizabeth agrees with you on two important aspects. And, if I accept that Jane has strong feelings for Mr Bingley, we should consider her well-being as much as you have considered your friend’s. What do you expect us to do now regarding this matter? We

cannot pretend nothing happened and cannot accept the risk of a marriage that might hurt one or both of them.”

“But we cannot forbid it either,” Elizabeth interjected decidedly. “Mr Bingley is leaving for London soon, and we shall also go there after Christmas. I suggest Lady Rosseford offers Mr Bingley the chance to call on us in January if he wishes to. There is a whole month before then for him to search his heart and determine his wishes.”

“I agree,” Lady Rosseford said. “Once in town, you and Jane will also meet new people, and she will have the opportunity to compare Mr Bingley with other gentlemen and to understand her own feelings and desires. If their affection is genuine, it will last and will end in an engagement. If not — as Elizabeth said — it is best to know before any understanding is reached.”

Darcy was surprised by the unexpected resolution of a situation that had seemed insurmountable.

“Thank you,” he simply said. “I am sure Bingley will call to take his farewell, and he would be happy to know you will welcome his visit in London.”

“Then it is done. I shall go and rest now,” Lady Rosseford said. “You are a persuasive man, Mr Darcy. And clever. I stand by that statement. I only have one question. Something you have not clarified and I am curious about.”

He frowned, unable to imagine what she was referring to.

“What could your ladyship possibly mean?”

“Miss Bingley said something about you disapproving of Elizabeth’s beauty, which is no secret to any of us, having heard about your remark at the assembly. But what about the part about you finding Elizabeth pretty and being charmed by her eyes? Do

you know anything about that, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth turned crimson, her embarrassment obvious, and even Darcy’s cheeks warmed slightly. The lady was waiting; she seemed unsatisfied with how much she had humiliated him already and was looking for new ways to heighten his embarrassment.

He, however, sensed the opportunity and grasped it. If he was to be further humiliated, at least he would make sure Elizabeth knew the truth before they separated.

“I shall explain it, if Miss Elizabeth will allow me to. I do not wish to make her uneasy.”

“Well, sir, I cannot be more embarrassed than I already am, so please explain and be done with it. If it is not too uncomfortable for you, of course,” Elizabeth answered. The tightness in his heart eased as he noted a trace of teasing in her reply.

“Very well. As I said, I never denied my actions or my words. Miss Bingley referred to a situation that occurred a few weeks ago, at a party at Lucas Lodge, which we all attended.”

“I remember it,” Elizabeth said.

“I was talking to Sir William and told him about my dislike of dancing, but somehow, I ended up asking Miss Elizabeth to stand up with me, and she rejected me. I would say she even mocked me with her refusal. I was amused by her answer and was reflecting upon it when Miss Bingley came upon me and enquired about the subject of my reverie. She assumed I was uncomfortable with the company and the party itself, so I indulged her and explained I was thinking of how lovely a pair of fine eyes on the face of a lovely and witty lady could be. That was all.”

He ended his narration looking at Elizabeth, whose cheeks were brightened by a wave of redness, and her eyes — pretty and sparkling — were staring at him, surprised and doubtful; her lips were parted slightly, and she seemed to have forgotten to breathe.

He smiled, then turned to Lady Rosseford, whose shocked expression amused him. It was the first time she had seemed lost for words, and his satisfaction was not insignificant.

“Is there anything else I might clarify for your ladyship?”

“No...nothing else.”

“Lady Rosseford, one more thing. Please be advised that George Wickham, as charming and friendly as he might appear, should not be allowed unsupervised near young women, especially those who happen to have wealthy relatives.”

He could see the lady’s eyebrows frowning and Elizabeth’s face turning pale.

“Do not worry, Mr Darcy. At my age, I am not easily impressed by charming manners.”

“I am sure you are not. It is not your ladyship I am concerned about but Miss Lydia and Miss Catherine and others of similar age.”

“I understand your advice and will take it into consideration.”

“Then allow me to thank you again before I leave for offering me the chance to explain myself. Bingley and I shall call tomorrow for a proper farewell. That is if we are not intruding.”

“We shall be happy to see you and Mr Bingley tomorrow, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth

answered.

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In the days after the Netherfield ball, there was no peace and quiet at Longbourn. The disclosure of Lady Rosseford's wealth had shocked Mrs Bennet and her younger daughters, and the news that she had also purchased Stoke Park had astounded them. Mrs Bennet tried to find out more details about the lady's worth from Mr Bennet, but the gentleman feigned ignorance. As much as she wished to, Mrs Bennet did not dare to ask the lady herself.

Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley came to take their farewells before their journey to London — a departure that caused great distress to both Jane and Mrs Bennet. They had both expected a marriage proposal, which now seemed delayed indefinitely, and while the former carried her sorrow with her usual grace, the latter spent every moment whining about their bad luck. Mr Bingley did not confirm his return to Netherfield for Christmas but expressed his hope of seeing them again soon, either in Hertfordshire or in London, which to the majority of the family was puzzling and disquieting at the same time.

Lady Rosseford's plan to take Elizabeth and Jane to town was some compensation for the disappointment caused by Mr Bingley — but not enough.

Being the only ones with full knowledge of Mr Bingley's sudden change of plans, and spending quite an amount of time talking about it, a bond was created between Lady Rosseford and Elizabeth that was stronger than the ones the lady had forged with the other Bennet sisters. Although Elizabeth was the niece who disagreed with her the most, Lady Rosseford seemed to appreciate her determination and obstinance. The only subject Elizabeth did not dare broach with her aunt was the one she was most interested in: Mr Darcy. His generous intervention on behalf of Mr Bingley, his humble acceptance of his errors and faulty manners, and — most astounding and

disquieting — his declared admiration for Elizabeth and her fine eyes was bewildering.

Lady Rosseford was highly amused by the story, but to Elizabeth, it was puzzling. The scene he had described had taken place at Lucas Lodge, even before Jane fell ill at Netherfield. How was it possible that Mr Darcy had spoken of her fine eyes so long ago? And to Caroline Bingley, of all people? It was no wonder Miss Bingley — who had probably taken Mr Darcy's remark in earnest — held so much resentment towards her. But had Mr Darcy's remark been serious, or was it just a simple joke? If that were the case, why would he even tell them about it?

Mr Darcy was certainly not a man easy to know, nor one willing to reveal his true character and wishing to please. And those were precisely the reasons why his actions bore greater significance.

Four days after the ball, Mr Collins returned to Kent, which should have been a relief for the Bennets were it not for a most alarming report brought by Sir William and Lady Lucas: before he had departed, Mr Collins had proposed to Charlotte, and she had accepted him. With Jane not engaged yet and Charlotte on the road to becoming the mistress of Longbourn, things could not be worse for Mrs Bennet. But a week later, with the arrival of the Gardiners, things improved for the better so much that Mrs Bennet's nerves almost failed her.

One evening at dinner, after the Gardiner children had gone to bed, Lady Rosseford said with solemnity, "There is something I have been trying to resolve for a while, and finally your uncle has given me the answer I sought. I want you to each have something from me that will not become the property of your husbands once you marry. Something you may hold and keep and do whatever you please with."

The whole family — except for Mr Bennet and Elizabeth — listened in silent fascination.

“I intend to give each of you the sum of four thousand pounds. The money will be in your names, but your father and your uncle Gardiner will manage it until you are twenty-one years old. Your uncle will invest the money, and you will receive an annual interest from it, which you may use for your expenses or invest further.”

“Four thousand pounds? Each?” Mrs Bennet eventually cried. “Each girl? Dear Lady Rosseford, this is beyond generous! This is beyond all my prayers! Beyond belief! Dear Lord, what will become of us? Am I dreaming? I must be!”

“Dear Frances, such emotion cannot be good for your nerves,” the lady said with a smile.

“Oh, dear God! We are rich!” Lydia cried too. “Now I can marry anyone I want! I am rich! Richer than Maria Lucas and Charlotte Lucas and everyone in Meryton! Except Mary King, who has a dowry of ten thousand pounds, but she is not so pretty!”

“Lydia, behave yourself!” Mr Bennet demanded in apparently low spirits. “You are not rich, and you cannot marry whomever you want. Our aunt has done you a great favour, and I expect you to appreciate this opportunity and to try to educate yourself. You too, Kitty. Hopefully, by the time it is your turn to join Aunt Dorothea in London, you will not make fools of yourselves and will not embarrass her.”

Lydia glanced at her mother, but she did not receive the usual approving look.

“I wish for you to be happy, girls, and in order for you to be so, I agree with your father,” Lady Rosseford said. “And, my dear Frances, since you were so upset about Mr Collins’s engagement and feared for your future, Stoke Park can be your home for as long as you wish, either during my lifetime or after my death.”

Never in her life had Mrs Bennet been so overwhelmed by emotion. She covered her mouth with her palm while tears fell down her cheeks. Lady Rosseford and Mrs

Gardiner were tearful too, while Lydia cried out again, “Stoke Park? We shall live at Stoke Park? Truly? It is the biggest house in all of Meryton! Maybe in all of Hertfordshire! Oh dear, I shall die of happiness!”

“I hope it has a large library,” Mary whispered.

“Your aunt Gardiner will help me hire some servants. You may go tomorrow with your father and uncle and visit the house, and I shall be happy to hear your suggestions if you wish to change anything.”

The news exceeded everyone’s expectations, and even Elizabeth — who had known about all of it — was affected. To be able to witness so much happiness offered to her family was truly overwhelming. From her chair, Lady Rosseford was watching the scene with apparent composure. When she saw Elizabeth’s smile, she smiled back.

The news from Longbourn spread to Meryton in the following days, and the Bennets’ good fortune was the subject of gossip on everyone’s lips; Mr Bingley’s departure and his failure to propose to Jane lost its importance by comparison. Mr Wickham and Mr Denny called again, but even Lydia was too occupied with her new happiness to show much interest in the officers.

Concerned by Mr Darcy’s repeated warnings about Mr Wickham, Elizabeth spoke to her father, pleading with him to be careful with Lydia and Kitty, especially after she and Jane had left. Mr Bennet listened and promised vigilance, but Elizabeth feared he did not take the matter as seriously as he should. Mr Wickham, however, showed less interest in the Bennet family, and rumours suggested that he had been charmed by Miss Mary King. Elizabeth insisted that her father warn Miss King’s uncle, but Mr Bennet refused to involve himself.

The good fortune of her family made Mrs Bennet generous enough to accept Mr Collins’s engagement to Charlotte Lucas and even congratulate Sir William and Lady

Lucas with a semblance of politeness. However, since the Lucases continued to brag about it, Mrs Bennet did not fail to mention that, when he had first arrived at Longbourn, Mr Collins had intended to pursue Elizabeth, but she had rejected his attentions.

Elizabeth found the strength to congratulate her friend at the first opportunity, though her heart was heavy. However, Charlotte seemed so content, so eager to wed and to move to her new home, that Elizabeth had to admit Lady Rosseford was right on that subject too.

“Dear Eliza, you must promise you will come to visit me in Kent,” Charlotte said. “Papa and Maria will come in March. You must come with them.”

“Charlotte, I cannot promise that, as much as I would like to. We shall go to London after Christmas, and from that moment on, my plans must align with Lady Rosseford’s. I expect her to need us all the time, at least in the next few months. But I promise to write every week, and I hope you will answer me if you are not too busy with Lady Catherine.”

“I know you disapprove of my choice, Eliza, but I am sure I shall find the happiness I seek.”

“I wish you all the best, Charlotte,” Elizabeth said, embracing her friend.

By mid-December, the servants were all in place at Stoke Park, and several men from the neighbourhood had been employed to help with repairs, furnishing, and cleaning to bring the house to life.

Two days before Christmas, Lady Rosseford felt tired and was kept to her bed with a headache. She refused any particular assistance but simply wished to rest. Despite her opposition, Elizabeth stayed with her and watched her sleep. It was the third time she

had known the lady to be unwell in their short acquaintance, and she felt worried. The most urgent thing that needed to be done in London was to choose a well-regarded physician to take the lady under his care. Perhaps Mr Darcy knew a good doctor to recommend to them.

As much as she wished to deny it, all sorts of little things made her think of that gentleman. She realised she had forgotten to return his neckcloth. She had placed the cleaned garment in her reticule and — much to her own mortification — she would sometimes take it out and simply hold it, to feel it in her hands. As time passed, instead of forgetting about him, his image and the recollections of the moments they had spent together became more vivid, and the sensations more intoxicating and more distracting.

It was the first time she had missed a man and felt longing — and the seeds of jealousy began to take root. He had requested permission for Bingley to call on them in London but had not asked on his own behalf. He had made no promise nor mentioned any future plans, so he might easily forget her; that is, if he had ever thought of her as more than a mere acquaintance.

Jane's spirits had suffered dreadfully when Mr Bingley left, and Elizabeth continued to try to comfort her, as did the rest of the family. Elizabeth's distress was no less painful, but she did not confess it to anyone, and there was nobody to comfort her.

The forthcoming journey to London was anticipated with eagerness and anxiety by both of the eldest Bennet sisters. Each hoped to see a certain gentleman, and both secretly feared the reunion would cause great disappointment.

Christmas was a joyful time at Longbourn with so many of their family members gathered together, but during the last week of the year, Jane received a letter from Caroline Bingley that made her cry. She handed it to Elizabeth, who was shocked and appalled to read some of the lines.

I have no news to share about my brother as I am currently living with Louisa and her husband, and we have not seen much of Charles following some disagreements. It seems country life did not suit him, and since arriving in town, he has spent his time attending and hosting parties, which Louisa and I never attend as we find them inappropriate for honourable young women.

I doubt he will return to Netherfield in the near future, and Louisa and I have no plans to do so either. Therefore, we can only hope we shall meet in London.

There was more, but Elizabeth had read enough. She tried to conceal her unease, as Jane was watching her with tears rolling down her cheeks.

She was tempted to dismiss the information as malicious and untrue; however, a trace of doubt arose in her mind. Mr Bingley had been encouraged to meet other women, to search his heart and examine his desires, comparing Jane with others. Had he taken such a suggestion seriously? Was he truly indulging himself in dishonourable company? Had he already forgotten Jane? Was his heart so shallow and his mind so immature? And was Mr Darcy aware of all this? Perhaps joining his young friend at those parties?

Under Jane's scrutiny, Elizabeth tried to form a reasoned opinion.

"Dearest, you know too well that Miss Bingley would say or do anything to prevent her brother marrying you. I believe they have quarrelled, and she is living with the Hursts now. But as for the rest, I would suggest waiting until we are in London and observing Mr Bingley's behaviour for yourself."

"Please do not tell anyone else about that part of the letter, Lizzy. I do not wish anyone to blame Mr Bingley without clear evidence. And if it is true, if he has forgotten about me, I shall be less ashamed if no one else knows."

“Of course, dearest. You may always depend on my secrecy.”

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Darcy finished his drink, listening to his cousins Colonel Fitzwilliam and the viscount. They were at their club while Georgiana was taking tea with Mrs Annesley and Lady Matlock. He had been in town for more than a month, and the distress he had experienced during his stay at Netherfield had only heightened since. He tried to conceal his anxiety, to avoid worrying Georgiana, but he did not always succeed. He had dined with Bingley several times, and his friend had spoken mostly of Hertfordshire and the Bennets — which was not helpful for his peace of mind at all.

Surprisingly, even Lord and Lady Matlock had mentioned that a certain Lady Rosseford — whom nobody had heard from in twenty years — had returned to London and purchased the house of the late Lord Lincroft. When Darcy confessed that he had met Lady Rosseford, he was asked countless questions by his relatives, once again bringing up the subject he wished to avoid.

At Netherfield, he had slept badly, tormented by Elizabeth's presence and his attraction to her. In London, the attraction remained — it had even grown stronger — and her absence continued to disturb his rest.

He was uncertain of all his actions regarding her, including his confession of the story about her fine eyes. At that moment, he had wished for her to know about his admiration but had not considered carefully enough how it might affect her. She had been kind enough to take his side and agree with him during his confrontation with Lady Rosseford; her friendship and gratitude to him were obvious, but as to whether there was more than that or might be one day, he had not the smallest hint to feed his lost confidence.

He planned to call on Lady Rosseford when she arrived in town and to introduce

Georgiana to her and her nieces. The lady's connection with their family was as enchanting to Georgiana as it had been to him, but he needed to compose himself and regain control over his mind and his body and to avoid suffocating Elizabeth with his presence. She had already declared she was eager to meet new people — new gentlemen — and he would not impose himself on her. After the first visit, he would return only when and if he was invited.

“I saw Bingley last night — did I mention it?” the colonel said. “He was at Lord Ashford's party. I dare say Hertfordshire did not suit him — he looked quite ill.”

“More likely he looked ill because he is not in Hertfordshire any longer,” Darcy said. And so do I, he added to himself.

“You do not look particularly well either,” the colonel replied as if guessing his thoughts. “Bingley has at least been seen in society, but you have been more reclusive than ever. It is rude to refuse every invitation you receive and stay at home every day and every evening.”

“I have some business to finish. I do not intend to stay in the house all the time.”

“I hope not. Mother believes you have lost weight and look pale, so she assumes you are sleeping poorly or have some illness that requires treatment.”

“I am sorry my aunt worries for me — it is certainly not necessary. I am perfectly well.”

“You may say that, but she will not believe it. And I must agree with her,” the colonel said.

“Then I shall repeat it until you both believe me, Cousin.”

“Prove it by attending the Twelfth Night party at Lady Jersey’s next week. You cannot refuse. Georgiana might wish to go to Almack’s one day, and Lady Jersey has a good memory.”

“Very well — I shall.” Darcy decided to indulge his cousin and end the annoying speculations.

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After a long day on the road with four impatient children and frequent stops on the way, it was nearly dark when the Gardiner and Rosseford carriages finally arrived in London. As they drove along Park Lane, Elizabeth and Jane looked through the window of their great-aunt’s coach, in which they were travelling with Lady Rosseford and Mr and Mrs Gardiner, the children and their governess following in the equipage behind. Neither of them admitted it, but both hoped to catch a glimpse of something or someone of interest.

“Is Grosvenor Street far away?” Jane eventually enquired timidly.

“Not far — just a few minutes away by carriage. This is Mayfair — the most fashionable area of London. And there is Hyde Park, Elizabeth’s favourite place for walking,” Mr Gardiner explained as Elizabeth and Jane gazed about in awe. It was dusk, and all along the road and in front of each house were torches, creating a beautiful display of light.

“And there, across from one of the park’s entrances, is Lady Rosseford’s house.”

Elizabeth and Jane gasped in surprise and admiration. Mrs Gardiner smiled. “I understand you, girls. I had precisely the same response when I saw it for the first time. And the second time, and the third.”

“Edward did a wonderful job of finding this jewel,” Lady Rosseford said. “Now let us enter. I look forward to seeing it cleaned and properly arranged. And to taste the food — it is the first formal dinner cooked by Benson.”

“I hope you will approve of her, your ladyship,” Mrs Gardiner said. “I sampled a few of her dishes before I recommended her.”

Before they had left Longbourn, Lady Rosseford had insisted that, upon their arrival, they would all stay at her house, have dinner together, and the Gardiners would go home the next day.

The carriages pulled up in front of the house, and the children spilled out of their equipage, their governess following them. The youngest two ran to their mother, complaining of tiredness and hunger. Then the door opened, and footmen hurried out to help them. The housekeeper, a lady of around fifty years, welcomed them formally. Behind her, perfectly lined up, stood the rest of the servants.

“How lovely to see you all, Mrs Birks,” Lady Rosseford addressed the housekeeper with a friendly smile. “These are my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You certainly know Mr and Mrs Gardiner, and these are their children. We are all very tired and hungry now, but tomorrow I shall be happy to talk to each of you. Please know that I expect honesty, loyalty, and hard work. Other than that, any problem any of you have, we shall find a solution to it.”

Deep bows and whispers of thanks were given in response, then Mrs Birks called several maids, assigning one to each of them, and the rest returned to their work.

“Miss Bennet, this is Janey, your maid, and this is Sarah, Miss Elizabeth’s. I assigned them to you and trained them in their main tasks, but if you are displeased with their service, we can replace them.”

“I am sure we shall be exceedingly pleased,” Elizabeth said, and Jane nodded. Both girls were young, probably not even twenty, and they looked very nervous.

“Take my nieces to their chambers and the Gardiners to the guest rooms assigned to them,” Lady Rosseford ordered.

“Your chambers are all prepared, your ladyship.”

“Excellent. Now let us all refresh ourselves, rest a little, and meet again for dinner in an hour.”

Two maids and Mrs Birks accompanied Lady Rosseford, while Elizabeth and Jane followed their maids, still in awe of the magnificent house.

Entering ‘her room’, Elizabeth gasped in admiration again. It was very spacious — at least twice as big as her chamber at Longbourn — with elegant furniture and carpets and an adjoining room where she spotted a large bathtub. But none of those things impressed her nearly as much as the large windows that provided a magnificent view of Hyde Park — a flawless picture that took her breath away.

Sarah was unpacking her gowns, and she offered her some information that Elizabeth did not hear, standing as she was in front of the window with the curtains wide open, watching the people, riders, and carriages below, all mingling under the light of the torches.

“This is so beautiful!” she whispered. “Sarah, is my sister’s room close to this one?”

“Yes, miss. It is next door. May I fetch you anything?”

“No, no, all is well. I shall just admire the town a little more, then I shall need a little help to prepare for dinner.”

“Yes, miss. We should pull some of the curtains closed when you wish to change,” the maid said shyly, and Elizabeth laughed.

“You are right. Thank you for reminding me.”

She gazed out for a moment longer, and her heart skipped a beat, then began to race wildly. In front of the house, among other passersby, was a man standing, looking at the house. She thought she recognised Mr Darcy; moreover, she felt it was him, even though such an assumption was ridiculous. The man lifted his head and looked up for only a moment, but the street was darker than her room, and she could not distinguish his face. And then he walked away, and Elizabeth followed him with her eyes until she lost sight of him.

It took a while for Elizabeth to wash, change, and for the maid to arrange her hair, but her heart still had not settled by the time she was ready. The mere thought that the man she had seen could have been Mr Darcy — as improbable and silly as the idea was — and he could have been waiting for her arrival was thrilling and distressing. His neckcloth was still in her reticule, and she blushed only thinking of it.

“Should I put a few more pins in your hair, miss?” Sarah asked, and only then did Elizabeth glance in the mirror.

“No, Sarah. It looks perfect, thank you.”

“You are most welcome, miss.”

Elizabeth hurried to knock on Jane’s door, and together they went downstairs.

“I did not imagine such a house, Lizzy!”

“Neither did I. But the view! Did you see the view? I look forward to seeing it

tomorrow in the daylight. I think I might walk in Hyde Park before breakfast.”

“Lizzy, you would not dare,” Jane said reproachfully. “This is not Longbourn. You cannot go by yourself, in a strange place, where there might be danger around every corner! London parks are not safe for young women alone. Aunt Gardiner has told us so many times!”

“Do not worry, Jane, I was joking. I shall certainly not go alone, but I will have my stroll tomorrow, as long as my ankle allows me to.”

The dining room, formally and elegantly decorated, was larger than that at Netherfield. The children were allowed to join them, and even with nine people, not even half the table was occupied.

“Aunt, my room is beautiful,” Elizabeth said. “The view is magnificent. I cannot thank you enough for it.”

“I am glad you like it, my dear,” Lady Rosseford replied, and everyone — including the children — praised something about the house.

As soon as the meal was served, Lady Rosseford, and everyone else, approved of the cook.

Immediately after dinner, the children were taken to their room for the night.

Afterwards, the lady turned the conversation towards serious issues.

“Tomorrow we shall take a tour of the house and see what the improvements look like. Then we must begin sending out cards. After an absence of twenty years, I do not have many acquaintances left in London. We shall attend a few charity events — Edward made several donations in my name prior to Christmas. Charity is the first

step into society. Then we must procure seats in a box at the theatre and opera. Edward, please be so kind as to find someone who can arrange that with as little trouble as possible. We need seats for all of us — including you.”

“We go to the theatre or the opera every time we are in town,” Elizabeth said. “Uncle always manages to purchase tickets.”

“Yes, Lizzy, but Lady Rosseford expects better seats, not the ones we are used to,” Mr Gardiner replied. “Most of the boxes are already taken for the Season, your ladyship, but I am sure we shall find something to please you.”

“I depend on you, as always,” the lady said. “The next step for you girls is parties — both to host them and attend them — and then entertaining the connections resulting from them. And we must go shopping. Madeleine, would you be so kind as to join us? We all need new gowns. We must find a good dressmaker. Everything must be carefully planned. In February, hopefully, we shall have a party here.”

“It all sounds so complicated,” Jane whispered.

“Actually, it is,” Mrs Gardiner agreed. “As strange as it may sound, it is more difficult to enjoy London from Mayfair than from Gracechurch Street. Expectations are higher, as well as criticism. Nobody cares about me and your uncle, but all eyes will be on you as Lady Rosseford’s nieces.”

“But is this necessary?” Jane continued. “Dear aunt, I am deeply grateful for everything you wish to do and have already done for us, but can we not just stay with you, help you with what you need, and enjoy our time together? All these plans, all these purchases...”

“My dear, I know it might be a little overwhelming, but you will get used to it,” Lady Rosseford said.

As the dinner progressed, so did Lady Rosseford's story.

"I was younger, not as clever, and had less experience than you, girls, when I had to adapt to the life of an officer's wife, travelling for months across the seas, then living in India, forced to survive on a small income and with debts to pay. My first husband, Jeffrey Lambert, God rest his soul, was the sweetest and kindest man that ever breathed. His health was his only weakness, and military life did not suit him. Then I suddenly found myself as a gentleman's wife, when Jeffrey inherited the estate in Derbyshire. It was small but satisfactory and enough to improve our lives. I had to earn my place in Derbyshire society, where the Darcys were a great support to my husband, then in the lower circles of London society. There were very few people of consequence who desired our acquaintance, but we were patient and took one step after another. And then, when things were somehow settled, I found myself a widow, in charge of the Derbyshire estate, with tenants and servants depending on me."

"Oh...I am so sorry, Aunt. I have been selfish and ungrateful," Jane whispered.

"Do not apologise, my dear. I only wished to tell you how well I understand you."

"Dear aunt, what happened to the Derbyshire estate? Was it sold?"

"No. It is called Greenwood Park. My second husband, Lord Rosseford, helped me to find a diligent steward — Mr Curtis — who managed it quite successfully for ten years, then passed the responsibility to his son. The Curtis family lives at the property to this day. The tenants are content, the servants are content, and the house is well taken care of. I have no intention of evicting them as long as things remain satisfactory."

“Indeed, why ruin a successful arrangement?” Mr Gardiner agreed.

“You are cleverer and stronger than me, Aunt,” Jane said. “Lizzy is much more like you. I could not have handled so much responsibility alone. Lizzy can do anything.”

Elizabeth laughed and embraced her; Lady Rosseford smiled. “My darling, one cannot be sure what one is capable of until one is forced to actually do it. You need to trust yourself more and to acknowledge your worth. This is why parties and connections will be helpful.”

“Aunt, forgive me for asking, but did Lord Rosseford have no family? Was there nobody to claim his fortune?” Elizabeth enquired.

“Sadly, the Lord granted me no living children, with neither of my husbands. Jeffrey had two brothers and two nephews, with whom I correspond and have met once since I returned. Each of them received their fair share of the family fortune when Jeffrey inherited his estate.”

“How fortunate he left it to you and it was not entailed,” Elizabeth said.

“True. Unfortunately my father was incredibly angry when he found out I intended to marry Jeffrey, so after he refused and I eloped, he declared I — and all women — were not worthy of anything. Hence the entailment on Longbourn. It is my fault that you are in danger of being homeless when Thomas dies. I have been planning for at least ten years to purchase an estate for you in Hertfordshire, but only now have I achieved it.”

“Dear aunt,” Elizabeth answered, “I heartily disagree with the blame you take upon yourself. You cannot — and need not — remedy something that was someone else’s fault.”

“It is my desire to do it, Lizzy. I have only a few years to live, and I have no children. What should I do with all this money? I shall give some to charity, but why not protect my family too? I would never have purchased this house or Stoke Park if I did not wish you all to benefit from them. At my age, I do not need a house with twenty rooms when I can hardly use two.”

“I pray you have many more years to live, Aunt,” Jane whispered tearfully.

Lady Rosseford patted her hand. “So, to end my story, Lord Rosseford had no immediate family either, only some distant relatives. He was a prudent and methodical man — he had everything written, settled, and sealed. One of his nephews inherited the earldom and the estate that goes with the title, but what I own now is my lawful wealth, from the income on Greenwood Park, from the yearly interest on my savings, and from other affairs I helped Lord Rosseford with in Ireland.”

“What an extraordinary woman you are, Aunt. And what an extraordinary life you must have lived,” Elizabeth said.

“It might have been extraordinary, but it was certainly not easy. I just knew how to adapt to it. And when I needed help and support, I returned to be reunited with you, my only blood family,” she concluded with an affectionate and tender yet sad smile.

“So, Jane, my dear, do not worry. London society is not much different from that of Meryton. It is larger, with more annoying people, but the rules are mostly the same.”

The evening came to an end rather early, as tiredness defeated Lady Rosseford. On their first night in London, Elizabeth and Jane spent another hour together, talking about the lady’s new revelations. There was so much to accept and to understand, and the changes to their lives proved to be more significant than they had foreseen — though they did not necessarily welcome all of them.

The exhausting day helped Elizabeth sleep well that night, and she woke up in the morning earlier than the others and full of energy. She dressed herself but remained in her room for a while, watching London slowly awakening. There was mist over Hyde Park, but she hoped the sun would show its face at some time during the day.

Eventually, she lost her patience and went downstairs, exploring the rooms and admiring the library, which immediately brought back memories of Mr Darcy.

Mr Gardiner was the next to come down, and they enjoyed some coffee and conversation before the rest of the family joined them for a late breakfast.

Lady Rosseford arrived last, looking pale again, with dark circles around her eyes, which worried Elizabeth exceedingly. Before anything else, a good doctor needed to be found, and Elizabeth was determined to accomplish it that very day.

They had not even finished breakfast when the butler brought in a card and announced Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy.

“Please send them in,” Lady Rosseford said after a brief moment of stupefaction.

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The two gentlemen entered, Mr Darcy looking as serious and Mr Bingley less joyful than usual. Seeing the family at the table, they immediately stopped.

“Lady Rosseford,” Mr Darcy said, “we apologise for this impromptu visit at such an improper hour. We heard you had arrived and just wished to present our greetings. We shall leave you now.”

“Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, do sit down. Why would you leave so soon? We woke up a little bit late, but you are more than welcome to join us.”

The two gentlemen hesitated a moment, glancing at each other, then Mr Darcy sat, and Mr Bingley did likewise.

“I am the one who should apologise,” Mr Bingley said. “Darcy insisted we should wait another hour at least, but I disregarded his advice.”

“Do not worry, Mr Bingley. There are times when impatience is better than prudence. Have you had breakfast? Please enjoy anything you wish from the table.”

“We have eaten already, your ladyship,” Mr Darcy said. “Your company alone is a pleasure.”

Elizabeth felt her heart pounding and wondered whether the others could hear it. Jane looked so distressed that she kept her eyes on her plate.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Mr and Mrs Gardiner and their children. Mr Gardiner is Mrs Bennet’s brother, and they have been of invaluable help to me since I returned to England,” Lady Rosseford said. “By the by, Mr Darcy, Mrs Gardiner grew up in Lambton, quite close to Pemberley.”

From that moment, with such an agreeable subject of common interest, the conversation flowed, despite Elizabeth and Jane’s lack of participation.

“This is a beautiful house, Lady Rosseford. I am pleased you purchased it and it will finally receive the attention it deserves. I was just saying as much to my aunt Lady Matlock.”

“Ah, Lady Matlock is one of those whose acquaintance I would like to make. Does she live nearby?”

“Yes, just a few houses down from here.”

“How lovely. And you, gentlemen, do you live far away?”

“My house is about a ten- or fifteen-minute walk away,” Mr Bingley said. “But Darcy’s is on this street too. Only ten houses away, I believe.”

The lady nodded. “And do your sisters live with you, Mr Bingley?”

“No...Caroline used to, but at present, she is staying with my sister Louisa and her husband.”

At this, Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who looked angry, while their aunt continued her enquiries.

“I see. Mr Darcy, I hope you found your sister in good health?”

“Yes, thank you. In fact, if I am not asking too much, Lady Rosseford, I was wondering... It is not my intention to trouble you often with my presence. I imagine you are very busy. But would you allow me to introduce my sister, Georgiana, to you? And to Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, and Mr and Mrs Gardiner, of course.”

Elizabeth held her breath again, and her eyes finally locked with his for an instant.

“I am sure I speak for everyone when I say we would be absolutely delighted,” Lady Rosseford replied, and everyone nodded in approval. “In fact, since we are all here and you live so close, you should have brought her with you.”

“Oh, I did not want to bother you. I knew we were already intruding and—”

“Nonsense. You may bring her at any time, even now. There are very few people I would like to meet more than Miss Darcy.”

“You are very kind,” he answered, apparently surprised by her statement. “Should I go and fetch her now?”

“If you wish — and if Miss Darcy is willing to come, of course. I thought it would be nice since Mr and Mrs Gardiner will go home later today.”

“Oh...very well, then,” he said, standing up, still looking slightly confused. He glanced at Mr Bingley, who appeared equally puzzled.

“If you wish, you may stay with us until he returns, Mr Bingley,” Lady Rosseford suggested.

Once that was settled, one gentleman left, and the other remained. Without his friend, Mr Bingley looked slightly lost and uncomfortable — very different from his demeanour in Hertfordshire.

“Miss Darcy is one of the most accomplished ladies I have ever met. And she is only fifteen,” Mr Bingley said, trying to resume the conversation and clearly unaware of Jane’s anxiety.

“Mr Darcy speaks very highly of her, and so did your sisters, as far as I remember,” Elizabeth replied. “I understand they are intimate friends.”

“Who? My sisters and Miss Darcy? Oh, not really. They are older than her and do not have much in common. And she is not yet out, of course. We see her but rarely when we are in London.”

“Then I must have misunderstood.”

“I am sure my sisters said as much, but they have a tendency to exaggerate. We spent the last three summers at Pemberley at Darcy’s invitation, and they...”

“Yes?” Lady Rosseford enquired.

“My sisters tend to assume more than there is.”

“Have you completed the business that brought you back to London, Mr Bingley?”
Lady Rosseford asked. “Are your plans settled?”

“Yes,” he said, his face changing colour. “But I have no plans. I shall just be here for the time being...I mean in London.”

“Well then, hopefully we shall meet again on occasion. Perhaps at some parties.”

“Yes...I hope so,” he said.

Elizabeth knew her aunt had not finished tormenting the poor gentleman, but the more uneasy he looked and the more unusually he acted, the more distressed her sister became. Mr Bingley repeatedly glanced at Jane; she hardly looked at him at all, both trapped in their own deep turmoil.

They had liked each other from the beginning; their acquaintance had been smooth, comfortable, and pleasant from the first day they had met at the assembly — until the ball.

And while Mr Bingley was aware of the reason for such a dramatic change, Jane was an innocent and ignorant victim, and Elizabeth’s heart ached for her.

Having finished their breakfast, the party moved to a parlour, and fortunately for both Mr Bingley and Jane, Mr Darcy soon returned with his sister, and the formidable presentation took place.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:06 am

Although she had always enjoyed meeting new people and being in company, either with acquaintances or with strangers, Elizabeth felt particularly nervous. Mr Darcy had called on the first morning of their arrival in town and was eager to introduce his sister. Could she — Elizabeth — be the reason for his haste? Could it have some particular significance? She tried to act appropriately and not allow hopes and speculations to burden a pleasant call.

The girl was holding her brother's arm tightly when they entered, and the warm welcome was not enough to put even the trace of a smile on her face. She curtsied elegantly and expressed her pleasure but did not say much more. Elizabeth looked at her with particular interest. She was young and tall, her features hardly resembling her brother's at all, but her restrained behaviour was similar to Mr Darcy's. Her guarded manners could easily have been construed as pride, but her blue eyes revealed a timidity that Elizabeth did not fail to observe. She was equally concerned about Mr Darcy's sister as her own, for Jane looked even more distracted.

"Come, sit here, on the sofa. And you too, Mr Darcy. My dear Miss Darcy, you are so pretty!" Lady Rosseford said. "Very much like your mother. She was one of the most admired ladies in London. I remember her very well, though more than twenty years have passed since I last saw her."

"Oh...I thank you for your kindness. In truth, I do not dare compare myself to my mother," the girl whispered.

"I absolutely support Lady Rosseford's statement," Mrs Gardiner interjected. "I had the pleasure of seeing Lady Anne more recently. I believe you must have been three or four years old."

“Did you?” the girl asked, her face finally brighter. “My brother mentioned you may have known my parents.”

“Yes. My father owned a small shop in Lambton, and your parents used to come in quite often. We left Derbyshire ten years ago.”

“How fortunate I am! I am so happy when I meet someone who knew my mother,” the girl confessed. “I was very young when she died, and I do not remember her.”

“I can imagine how painful that must have been for you,” Lady Rosseford said. “A child may grieve the death of a parent almost as much as a mother grieves the loss of a child.”

For a moment there was complete silence, and all eyes turned to the lady. She cleared her throat and changed her tone to a joyful one.

“We may feel sorrow for the past while enjoying the present. I dare say this is a fortunate meeting for all of us.”

“For me, it is an honour and a privilege to be introduced to Mr and Miss Darcy,” Mrs Gardiner declared.

“It is a pleasure for us too,” Mr Darcy said.

“Life is full of coincidences,” Lady Rosseford admitted. “Now that we have been introduced, we can meet and speak of Derbyshire and the Darcys as much as we like. I must confess that, although I have travelled the world, I have never seen a place more beautiful than Pemberley.”

“I shall accept your compliment, your ladyship, as we take great pride in our home. The place is happily situated, but many generations of Darcys have put care, work,

and heart into it,” Mr Darcy said in a trembling voice.

“I am sure that is true.”

Slowly and timidly, the subject of Derbyshire helped to dissipate the tension and eased the conversation. Lady Rosseford and Mrs Gardiner touched Miss Darcy’s heart easily, and she became comfortable in their company. Her blue eyes became more serene, and as a shy smile touched her lips, her features became even more handsome.

Mr Darcy watched his sister with affection and pride — his countenance revealing his sentiments clearly. At times, he glanced at Elizabeth, and their eyes met and locked on occasion. Jane, however, remained silent and distracted, and Mr Bingley seemed completely disconcerted.

“I cannot believe we have stayed so long,” Mr Darcy suddenly said. “I hope we have not ruined your plans for the day.”

“Not at all. I cannot remember when I last had such a pleasant morning. We had no other engagements today, only Elizabeth intended to take a walk in Hyde Park.”

“I am happy to postpone it for such a delightful meeting,” Elizabeth said.

“Is your ankle completely healed, Miss Elizabeth?” Mr Darcy asked.

“Yes, very much so,” Elizabeth replied, her cheeks heating as the mere question brought back thrilling memories.

“I am glad to hear it. Forgive me for interfering, but I would suggest always taking a carriage to Hyde Park, even if the distance from here seems short. The park is very large, and you may easily get lost or walk farther than intended. Besides, a servant

and another companion should be with you all the time.”

He spoke so seriously that Elizabeth smiled. “Thank you, sir. I shall certainly not be as reckless in Mayfair as I am in Meryton.”

“Oh, I did not mean to imply... I took the liberty of offering some suggestions as my sister is very fond of walking or riding in the park. When I am not with her, she always takes her companion, Mrs Annesley, and a servant.”

“How lovely to hear that. Miss Darcy, whenever you need a companion for your walks, please send me a note. I shall never refuse,” Elizabeth declared joyfully.

As soon as she had said it, she realised her request could have been too much. But Miss Darcy looked at her brother, then said, “I shall certainly do that, Miss Elizabeth. If you wish, we may plan to go tomorrow at noon. I can come and fetch you in my carriage. And Miss Bennet is welcome too, of course.”

“That would be wonderful,” Elizabeth said, glancing at Mr Darcy while her heart raced again.

“You may go tomorrow. We have no other plans,” Lady Rosseford said. “But I still need to find a reputable dressmaker, then we can begin to make our purchases.”

“My aunt Lady Matlock goes to Madame Claudette. She is said to be excellent,” Miss Darcy offered. “I cannot be certain, though. I only go there occasionally, with my aunt.”

“Madame Claudette? I shall keep her in mind and add her to my other recommendations. Madeleine and I shall visit several shops in the next few days, then choose. I hope my nieces will join me, but I fear Elizabeth would forsake me for a walk in the park.”

“That is unfair, dear aunt,” Elizabeth said, laughing. “Unfair but not untrue.”

“In her defence, Lizzy has always been the same,” Mr Gardiner interjected. “Since she was fifteen, her favourite places in London have been Hyde Park and the theatre.”

“That is true. I still believe they are the greatest attractions of London. I was heartbroken when Drury Lane was destroyed by fire! Hopefully it will reopen next year. I am curious about Covent Garden, though. I have not had a chance to attend since it was rebuilt.”

“I have not attended a play or opera in London in almost twenty years,” Lady Rosseford replied. “But we shall have plenty of opportunities from now on.”

“My brother and I love the theatre and opera too,” Miss Darcy said. “Shall we see you there?”

“We are not sure yet,” Lady Rosseford responded. “I have asked Mr Gardiner to procure us a box.”

Mr Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, then at his sister, and finally at the lady.

“Until you find something to please you, I would be delighted to invite you all to use my box. My uncle and I share one at Covent Garden, but the Matlocks rarely attend, especially in winter. And even if they do come, it is large enough for all of us to be comfortable.”

“What a generous offer, Mr Darcy. If it is no trouble for you or your relatives, we shall gladly accept it for now,” Lady Rosseford said. Elizabeth felt both eager and anxious, and a wave of warmth spread inside her. It was hard to believe that on their first morning in London, Mr Darcy had completely reconciled with Lady Rosseford, and their families were already making plans together. It simply felt too good to be

true.

“I would like to come to the theatre too if you do not mind,” Mr Bingley finally interjected.

“Of course, Mr Bingley. At least we do not mind — hopefully neither will Mr Darcy,” Lady Rosseford said.

“Bingley, you are always welcome. You do not need a special invitation. However, I am afraid I cannot include your sisters. There will be no room for additional people,” Mr Darcy replied. Mr Bingley nodded, and Lady Rosseford smiled, looking very pleased.

Mr Bingley, Mr Darcy, and Miss Darcy stayed for almost two hours — much longer than anyone would have expected for a first call. Once the guests had left, the family discussed the visit with much enthusiasm. Mrs Gardiner, still carrying the recollections of a child fascinated by the Darcys of Pemberley, could hardly believe she had been part of such an illustrious yet friendly encounter.

An hour or so later, the Gardiners left, and Jane retired to her room with a headache. Lady Rosseford wished to rest too, and Elizabeth accompanied her to her apartment, taking a seat by the bed to speak to her for a moment.

“What a lovely day we have had, Lizzy. And how easily we found a box to use,” Lady Rosseford said.

“Mr Darcy was exceedingly generous,” Elizabeth agreed. “I wonder whether his relatives will approve.”

“Why would they not, my dear? I shall try to meet Lady Matlock in the coming days, but I have no concerns. Hosting us in his box will certainly not taint Mr Darcy’s

reputation,” the lady said with a hint of sarcasm.

“Aunt, I do have a concern about something more important. Mr Bingley acted very strangely today — as if he is not himself any longer. He was eager to call on us, so I suspect his interest in Jane is not lost, but his amiability certainly is. His behaviour hurt Jane, whose feelings I believe are still strong. Something must be done.”

“What can be done? You cannot tell Jane about the incident at the ball. Mr Bingley is here, they have met, and they will meet again in different places and circumstances. I shall not intervene if he decides to take the next step. Today, he only came here and was silent for hours. Fortunately, Mr Darcy seemed keen to please me in order to support his friend. He might fear I wish to find someone better for Jane.”

“I shall try to calm Jane, but I feel most uncomfortable about this situation. Now please rest. You look tired. Oh, and Aunt?”

“Yes, Lizzy?”

“There is something else more important to be done before finding a dressmaker. We must immediately find an excellent physician, hopefully one who lives nearby, and employ his services.”

“Do not be silly, Lizzy. Who needs a doctor?”

“I do, Aunt. I need to be sure that I can fetch help whenever I need it. I shall ask Mr Darcy for a recommendation. Either he or his relatives must know someone.”

“Do not take advantage of his generosity, Lizzy.”

“I certainly shall not, but I would rather apply to him for a doctor than for a box at the theatre. Now please rest.”

Before Elizabeth left the room, Lady Rosseford seemed to already be asleep. Elizabeth asked a maid to watch her, then she hurried off in search of Jane. She needed a long time and many arguments before she convinced her sister that she had no reason to be jealous of Miss Darcy — who was still a child yet — and that Mr Bingley's haste in calling before breakfast could only have one explanation.

“But Lizzy, it seems Miss Bingley was telling the truth about not living with him any longer.”

“It is possible that for the first time, Caroline Bingley was actually honest with you. But even if she was also honest about Mr Bingley attending many parties, it is clear he had not forgotten about you. Otherwise, how could he know the day we would arrive, and why would he be so desirous to see you?”

“But he acted so strangely, Lizzy.”

“So did you, my dear. Perhaps Mr Bingley's admiration for you was too easily accepted and returned in Hertfordshire. Perhaps he must learn to court you properly, and you should enjoy being courted — by him as well as by other gentlemen of consequence.”

Eventually, Jane was comfortable enough to sleep, and Elizabeth went to her own room.

It had been an unexpectedly lovely day — but also exhausting. She had found no time, and no composure, to consider Mr Darcy's actions until she was alone and resting in her bed.

Lady Rosseford had assumed that Mr Darcy was attempting to gain her forgiveness, both for himself and for his friend, completely disregarding the fact that the gentleman might have other interests. Or could her ladyship be right and Elizabeth

wrong? The visit at such an early hour, the introduction of his sister, his encouragement for Elizabeth to spend time with Miss Darcy, his offer of his box for the entire family — could all those be mere signs of consideration towards Lady Rosseford, or perhaps just friendship? Should she dare to allow herself to assume more? Hope for more?

Amongst so much speculation, one thing was clear beyond a doubt: Mr Darcy's desire to be around her. She took out his neckcloth and squeezed it in her hand, then brushed it over her face. A wave of heat spread inside her body, and she closed her eyes, allowing herself to dwell on the recollection of being held in his arms.

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Despite her visible tiredness, late in the afternoon, Lady Rosseford kept her promise and met each of the servants. Elizabeth and Jane were with her, as well as the housekeeper. The lady asked for details about each person's duties in the house, about their families, and about their living conditions. Talking to so many people, even if only for a few minutes each, took a while, but the lady would not stop until she had seen everyone. Only then was dinner finally served.

"My dears, you must keep in mind one thing. Never disregard the promises you make, especially to those in your employ. There are few things more important than a servant's loyalty. Perhaps your husband's loyalty, but that is not always necessary," she concluded with a laugh.

The next morning, after breakfast, Mr and Mrs Gardiner returned to Lady Rosseford's house, as planned, and Miss Darcy and her companion, Mrs Annesley, came to fetch Elizabeth for a carriage ride in Hyde Park. At Elizabeth's insistence, Jane reluctantly agreed to accompany them.

Inside the carriage, Miss Darcy met them with a large smile.

"Would you like to first take a tour of the park? And then we may stop wherever you like, for a walk, perhaps."

"That would be lovely, thank you," Elizabeth answered.

"My brother suggested it. He said he might meet us in the park later if he completes his business in time. I hope you do not mind."

“No, not at all,” Elizabeth replied, her cheeks warming. Last night, Mr Darcy had again been present in her dreams, and the sweet recollections gave her thrills and shivers.

The carriage drove around the park, and, although Elizabeth had seen it many times, either in her aunt’s carriage or on foot, the scenery seemed to be particularly beautiful, more so than she had noticed before. It might have been the park itself, or the notion that she was with Mr Darcy’s sister and he was expected to join them soon.

After a while, they stopped for a walk along the Serpentine, then sat on a bench for a while, enjoying the cold yet sunny weather. Miss Darcy was greeted by several people, whom she responded to with restrained politeness.

It was not long before Mr Darcy appeared, together with Mr Bingley. With no little emotion, Elizabeth assumed that planning that meeting was the Darcys’ little scheme. How else could Mr Darcy have known precisely where they would be?

They exchanged greetings, and the gentlemen sat with the ladies for a little while, then they all resumed the stroll, and there was not much talking for a while. Then Mr Bingley offered Jane his arm, and she reluctantly took it. Elizabeth stole a glance at Mr Darcy, and both smiled.

“How is Lady Rosseford today?”

“She is well, thank you, Mr Darcy. But I am glad you enquired, for there is something of great importance that I wish to ask you.”

“Of course, Miss Elizabeth. What would that be?”

“Do you happen to know a doctor — a physician whose services we could employ?”

“A doctor? Is someone ill?” he asked with concern.

“No...I do not think so. But I have noticed Lady Rosseford is pale and tired at times. And I think she needs some extra care, though she disagrees. I wish to be cautious and prepared in case she needs assistance.”

“We have Dr Miller,” Miss Darcy immediately replied.

“Indeed,” Mr Darcy added. “Dr Miller has been taking care of our family for more than fifteen years. He possesses extensive knowledge and experience.”

“Would you be so kind as to mention us to him? Perhaps he could visit us soon?”

“Certainly. He lives in Grosvenor Street, so distance would not be a problem. I shall write to him today.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. Your help has been invaluable to me — to us — so many times. I cannot thank you enough.”

“Please do not mention it, Miss Elizabeth. I am pleased to be at your service.”

Time passed, and no one seemed willing to end the walk until Mrs Annesley mentioned she was tired. Mr Darcy looked at his pocket watch, and they realised they had been out for almost three hours.

“Miss Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, may I offer a cup of tea? At my house?” Miss Darcy asked.

“We would be delighted, Miss Darcy, but not today,” Elizabeth answered with genuine regret. “I am sure Lady Rosseford is waiting for us. But we would be pleased to see you again soon, either at your house or ours.”

“Thank you.”

“Miss Elizabeth, I spoke to my cousins, Lord Matlock’s sons, earlier. We mentioned attending the theatre together, and they were curious to meet you and your aunt. I wonder whether Lady Rosseford would mind if Lady Matlock sent her a note? Perhaps they could meet.”

“I am sure Lady Rosseford would be delighted,” Elizabeth answered.

When Miss Darcy’s carriage left them in front of their aunt’s house, Jane’s smile was larger and brighter than it had been for a while.

“I hope you enjoyed yourself, my dear,” Elizabeth said.

“Very much so...”

“Did Mr Bingley act less strangely than yesterday? You certainly did, from what I noticed.”

“Yes...he...Lizzy, I believe he is intimidated by Aunt Dorothea. I cannot think of another reason. Yesterday he barely looked at me and hardly spoke to me, and today he offered me his arm.”

“Aunt Dorothea is an impressive lady — even frightening at times — we both know that. I am content you have found an explanation, and hopefully you will not be jealous of Miss Darcy again.”

“No, I have been silly... Miss Bingley told me how accomplished Miss Darcy was, and she led me to believe they had plans that she and Mr Bingley...you know... And when I saw her yesterday, she was everything a young lady should be. I would not be surprised if Mr Bingley admired her.”

“You are everything a young lady should be too, Jane. I am not a bit surprised that Mr Bingley admired you from the very beginning.”

“Dearest Lizzy, you are always so kind to me.”

“I love you dearly, so I must be, even when you are silly.” Elizabeth laughed, embracing her sister.

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In the following days, things progressed rapidly.

Mr Darcy was loyal to his promise; a note from Dr Miller arrived for Elizabeth, and, despite Lady Rosseford’s strong opposition, the physician visited them the next morning. He examined the lady, left her some herbs for her weakness, and instructed Elizabeth to observe her closely and send for him at the smallest sign of illness.

Then, Miss Darcy accepted an invitation for tea, and she brought Lady Matlock with her. The introductions were performed, and an important step in Lady Rosseford’s plan was made.

Although she had not decided upon one particular dressmaker, Lady Rosseford visited several shops in the area and purchased several gowns for Elizabeth and Jane — so many that it made the sisters uncomfortable. But Lady Rosseford was not to be contradicted in anything.

After Lady Matlock’s visit, more cards were received, and more visitors introduced themselves to Lady Rosseford and her nieces.

“Have no doubt, girls, they are coming out of curiosity, nothing else. As I mentioned, I have donated some important sums of money to charities, and the prospect of more

donations usually stimulates people's interest and amiability.”

Little did the lady know that her nieces' only interest was in two gentlemen who had not visited again yet. Elizabeth and Jane accompanied Miss Darcy on another ride in Hyde Park, but Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley did not join them.

Elizabeth worried and wondered. Mr Darcy had been so kind and generous, then suddenly he preferred not to see her again. Lady Matlock's and Miss Darcy's visits proved he encouraged the connection between the families, but why he would keep his distance was difficult to understand.

As Mr Bingley was missing too, Jane had the same questions and concerns, to which Elizabeth had no answers.

Fortunately, the night at the theatre was approaching, and the prospect of their reunion was a small compensation for the gentlemen's absence. Their presence at that event was confirmed, as Mr Darcy wrote to Lady Rosseford, offering to convey her and her nieces in his carriage, for convenience. He mentioned that his sister, Mrs Annesley, and Mr Bingley would be attending the performance too, as well as the Matlocks and the Gardiners.

Lady Rosseford accepted, and the matter was settled, much to Elizabeth and Jane's contentment. Therefore, the day was awaited with much eagerness. Elizabeth spent some time choosing one of her new gowns, though all were exceedingly beautiful. Eventually, she selected the one that was best suited to her complexion — as her maid Sarah timidly suggested.

Sarah needed more than an hour to arrange Elizabeth's hair to the satisfaction of them both, then finally Elizabeth put on her gloves and moved her things — including Mr Darcy's neckcloth — into a new reticule that perfectly matched her dress.

“You look beautiful, Miss Elizabeth,” Sarah said.

“And I have you to thank for that,” Elizabeth answered, smiling at the girl.

She went downstairs, where Lady Rosseford and Jane were waiting.

“My dears, you both look beautiful. Beyond my expectations. I cannot wait to appear in public with you. And I have something to complement your appearance. Come here.”

On the table were two black velvet boxes.

“I believe these are appropriate for tonight,” the lady said. “I suggest the rubies for Lizzy and the sapphires for Jane. But you may swap if you prefer.”

They looked at their aunt, incredulous and hesitant.

“Come now, open them. The carriage will be here at any moment.”

Inside the boxes were two sets of jewels, with necklaces, earrings, and bracelets of exquisite beauty.

The sisters helped each other to put them on while her ladyship watched.

“Dear aunt, you should not—” Elizabeth attempted to speak, but Lady Rosseford interrupted her.

“Yes, I should, Lizzy. This is perfect. Just as I wanted. Now let us go — I believe Mr Darcy’s carriage has arrived.”

Indeed, two vehicles were waiting, and Mr Darcy stepped from one while Mr Bingley

descended from the other. Elizabeth dared to look at Mr Darcy, who gazed at her with a dark stare that warmed her despite the cold. It was decided that Jane and Lady Rosseford would travel with Mr Bingley, while Elizabeth would join Mr and Miss Darcy and the latter's companion. As she placed her hand in his to climb in, Elizabeth felt Mr Darcy's fingers lingering upon hers for a moment longer than they should have, and she shivered.

As Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley were sitting together on one seat, Elizabeth sat opposite them, and Mr Darcy sat next to her. The gentleman's proximity was pleasant but also slightly intimidating, and she hoped the others would not notice her nervousness. The conversation began timidly, with compliments and pleasantries exchanged, but the ride was short, and they soon found themselves in front of the theatre.

Two gentlemen approached their carriage, and Mr Darcy introduced his cousins — Colonel Fitzwilliam and the viscount — who escorted them inside. In the lobby they met the Gardiners, then Lord and Lady Matlock.

Their large group, with Lady Rosseford in the middle of it, attracted many curious glances as they made their way up the stairs, but upon arriving in the box. Elizabeth sighed with delight; the position was ideal for a perfect view over the stage, and it was large enough to accommodate everybody comfortably.

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There were three rows of chairs in the box, and the ladies were invited to sit at the front. Elizabeth took the chair at the end of the row, and she was acutely aware of Mr Darcy taking the seat just behind her.

Being in Covent Garden for the first time since it re-opened, Elizabeth was enraptured. By the time the play began, they were all deep in enjoyable conversation. Colonel Fitzwilliam took an instant liking to Elizabeth, and she readily enjoyed his friendly manners.

The beginning of the performance invited them all to cease their discussion and turn to the stage.

“Miss Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, do you have glasses? I have a spare if you need it,” Miss Darcy offered.

“Yes, we have, thank you,” Elizabeth replied, smiling at the girl. The music began, the audience was paying attention to the stage, and Elizabeth opened her new reticule, searching for the glass. Slightly nervous, her fingers became clumsy, and she dropped the reticule and its contents. She bent down, trying to retrieve it without causing a scene, but her breath caught when her fingers entwined with Mr Darcy’s and she felt his breath at the nape of her neck. He too was trying to pick up the reticule, and he succeeded.

He held the few objects, trying to place them in Elizabeth’s hand. Already troubled by the innocent gestures that had so strong an effect upon her, a sudden sense of deep mortification and freezing panic enveloped Elizabeth, while her cheeks, ears, and neck felt like they were burning. In his palm was her handkerchief, the opera glass,

and his neckcloth. He clearly recognised it instantly and looked at Elizabeth with an intense and intrigued gaze. She dared meet his eyes for only a moment. What could she tell him, especially there, in the theatre, crowded with people, with her family and his around? With trembling fingers, she tried to place everything back inside the reticule, but his hand gently stayed her.

“Allow me,” he whispered. Then he put the handkerchief and neckcloth inside, placed the glass in her hand, and tied the reticule, giving it to her.

She took it, finally whispering, “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he said, his voice so low that she mostly read the words on his lips rather than heard them.

The exchange was short, and it was likely nobody noticed anything unusual. A woman had dropped something, and a gentleman had picked it up for her — a most common occurrence.

Mr Darcy resumed his place, and the play began, but Elizabeth heard only her heart pounding. She felt mortified, foolish, ridiculous; he must believe that she had lost her mind and stolen his neckcloth and carried it with her. Perhaps she could pretend she had brought it to the theatre to return it to him. It would still be ridiculous to give the neckcloth back that evening, but perhaps she would appear less laughable in his eyes.

Her fingers were still unsteady and could hardly hold the opera glass. She felt dizzy when she sensed him moving again, his head lowering to hers and his voice whispering, “I never washed the gloves. I cleaned and dried them on the outside only. Inside, they are still warm.”

That was all. A few mere words; a few simple sentences with no apparent meaning. Then he sat back properly, and she heard him whispering something to the colonel.

Elizabeth's lips were dry, her heart raced, and a thrill ran down her spine, while she felt the room was too warm and she could hardly breathe. There could be no doubts and no misunderstandings. He had seen the neckcloth and understood the significance and wished to put her at ease with his own confession.

Elizabeth did not remember much about the rest of the evening. There were a few pauses between the acts, people mingled to stretch their legs, and a few other people were introduced to Lady Rosseford, to her, and to Jane, but she remembered no faces and no names. Mr Darcy did not speak to her again, except for a few brief comments about the play. His gaze rested upon her quite often, though, and she hoped she understood the meaning of the little smile pressed between his lips.

Mr Bingley spent most of the time with Jane, but she was also the centre of attention for the colonel, the viscount, and other gentlemen. Jane was glowing, wearing a little blush on her cheeks and a timid smile on her lips. Mr Bingley looked pale and miserable, and Elizabeth would have felt pity for him if she was not certain that Jane's heart was still his. A little bit of jealousy should be a good test of one's feelings, Elizabeth thought.

Her opinion changed soon when two young ladies and their mother entered the box and spoke to the Matlocks as well as to Mr Darcy. The discussion was about a certain ball at Lady Jersey's that had apparently taken place a little while ago, and they were teasing Mr Darcy about owing them a few dances. They were handsome, fashionable, and playful, competing for Mr Darcy's attention. Elizabeth had never felt jealous until that evening, and the taste of it was quite bitter. And she suddenly felt sorry for poor Mr Bingley.

Elizabeth was rather relieved when the evening ended. If not for her turmoil, she would have probably enjoyed herself much more. As it was, she hardly remembered the performance and promised herself she would see the play again one day.

Their leave-taking was cordial but brief, as it was late and cold. Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley helped the ladies out of the carriage and into Lady Rosseford's house, and Elizabeth found a moment to say, "Mr Darcy, thank you for helping me with my reticule."

"It was my pleasure, Miss Elizabeth. Truly my pleasure," he repeated, his dark gaze proving the truth of his words.

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A sleepless night could be exceedingly pleasant, Darcy thought. After the evening at the theatre, Georgiana and Mrs Annesley had retired, but Bingley had remained, and they had shared some drinks and opinions. Bingley kept talking about Jane Bennet's beauty, which Darcy agreed with while his mind was only filled with Elizabeth's image. She was always beautiful, especially when her face was streaked with mud, but that evening she had been particularly alluring — so much so that he had felt dizzy the moment she entered the carriage. She had sat next to him, and while there had been a slight distance between them, the motion of the vehicle had made their bodies move close enough to brush against each other at times. He had felt her nervousness and hoped it was because of him.

Since her arrival in London, he had tried not to impose his presence on her too much and had encouraged Bingley to do the same, yet he had delighted in seeing the bond between Georgiana and Elizabeth growing without his direct involvement.

He had allowed Elizabeth time to meet other people without his interference. However, unlike in the past, he had accepted several invitations to parties that he would usually have avoided, simply because he knew Elizabeth would attend. Seeing her in the midst of the people — including all the other young ladies — he had known for years, Darcy had begun to understand his attraction for her: to him, she was simply different. There was a certain light in her sparkling eyes and in her

smiles, a certain charm in her open manners that singled her out to him. She might not be the image of the perfect lady to some people, but to him, she was his perfect match. If only she felt the same.

Lady Rosseford seemed to have followed her plan diligently and had introduced her nieces in some of the most exclusive houses of the ton. She was obviously wasting a significant amount of money on that purpose, and he wondered whether it was worth it. The only visible result was that Bingley suffered from jealousy and did not dare open his heart to Miss Jane Bennet, while the lady looked happier in his presence than surrounded by the most eligible men in London.

That evening, at the theatre, Darcy had received his answer, revealed by the little reticule dropped on the carpet. Elizabeth had kept his neckcloth that he had used to bandage her ankle all that time ago. Furthermore, she kept it in her reticule. That little piece of fabric was the best proof he could have discovered of her feelings, which seemed to be stronger than he could have hoped for.

He supposed she could have brought the neckcloth in order to return it to him, but if that were the case, she would not have been so nervous and clearly mortified. Furthermore, his last doubts had vanished when he had gathered the courage to tell her about the gloves and had witnessed her response.

He had to find a way to speak to her as soon as possible. He had already wasted enough time. After Bingley left, Darcy went to bed, but he spent most of the night thinking of a way to catch a few moments alone with Elizabeth; and somehow, in every set of circumstances he imagined, she always ended up in his arms, her lips captured by his and her bare hands resting in his palms. He could see and feel those little scenes in every fibre of his body, and it was no wonder he did not find a moment's rest.

Therefore, he rose at dawn to read some letters and to write several others. Around

breakfast time, Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared, requesting coffee and food.

“What happened to you, Darcy? You look as tired as I am, and I am quite sure you did not go on to a party after last night’s theatre performance.”

“I did not, but I slept little. Nothing to worry yourself about.”

“So, what an evening it was! Lady Rosseford is quite a woman. She seems like a dangerous combination of Mother and Lady Catherine.”

Darcy laughed. “That was exactly my description when I first met her.”

“Her nieces are charming. Even last night at the party, all the men that had met them agreed about that. Most of the women did not, as you may expect.”

“I hope Lady Rosseford and her nieces were not your main subject of conversation.”

“Well, they were talked about a considerable amount. Very few new people enter our circle, so curiosity about them is only human. And some of us — including myself — were quite taken with the two Miss Bennets.”

Darcy said nothing.

“Mama likes Lady Rosseford very much. She said she reminds her of her own mother.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

“And speaking of ladies, Lady Catherine asked Father about our visit to Kent this spring. She also mentioned something about your intention to name a date for marrying Anne.”

“She wrote to me too — I have just replied. I am not certain of my plans for this spring, but I am absolutely certain I have no intention of marrying Anne. Anne knows that — she has known it for years. Only Lady Catherine refuses to acknowledge reality. I refuse to discuss this subject further.”

“You know, Darcy,” the colonel asked hesitantly, “I was wondering... Anne and I have always been good friends. What would you say if I pursued her? I am very fond of her, and she is very fond of me, which is more than most arranged marriages can boast.”

Darcy gazed at his cousin intently. “You do not need my approval to pursue Anne, Cousin. She is your relative as much as mine, and I know you are fond of each other. But I want you to ponder carefully before you begin. Courting a woman might mean little to you, but it would certainly mean a lot to Anne. I trust you not to break her heart.”

“I am not a merciless rascal, Darcy.”

“As I said, I trust you. But you must be warned that Lady Catherine will be furious. She will not accept any other way but her own.”

“Lady Catherine is always furious. She must learn she cannot always have her way.”

Darcy smiled. “Lady Rosseford has the same tendency — to only have her own way.”

“If we are to be honest, Darcy, you are no stranger to it either. At least that is the way you used to be. I have had few chances to verify it lately. You seem somehow changed since you returned from Hertfordshire. Even my mother has noticed it.”

“I am somehow changed,” he admitted with another smile to himself.

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A nother full month passed in London, with several detailed letters being sent to Longbourn to satisfy the curiosity of both Mr and Mrs Bennet. Elizabeth and Jane met Miss Darcy a few more times for their usual ride in the park; Mr Bingley was often their escort — a role that seemed to please him and Jane exceedingly.

Elizabeth and Jane also had tea with Miss Darcy at Mr Darcy's house. It was a turning point in their friendship, which caused Elizabeth equal pleasure and anxiety. Mr Darcy was not at home, but he arrived at some point with Mr Bingley. It was the first time Miss Darcy had played the pianoforte for them, and the day when Elizabeth, Jane, and Georgiana Darcy decided to call each other by their given names. It was also the day when Elizabeth found out that Mr Darcy could play the pianoforte too — and was quite proficient at it.

Lady Rosseford introduced them more and more to society. They attended two private parties, each hosted by one of Almack's patronesses. At each of them, the Matlocks and Mr Darcy were among the guests but not Mr Bingley, whose situation in life did not qualify him for such gatherings.

Even though she rarely — if ever — spoke to Mr Darcy at such parties, Elizabeth enjoyed his company even from afar. He did not seem comfortable engaging in small talk, nor did he seem to enjoy the ladies' attentions, and Elizabeth wondered why he came at all. Could it be for her? If so, was he content to just be around her from a distance? Would he speak to her about his feelings and his intentions soon?

When his actions were examined closely, he had said and done nothing to betray any particular feeling, any sort of admiration or affection. Yes, from the day of her accident, there had been a few words, a few sweet gestures, an attempt at a confession

— all made to her privately. But to the rest of the world — including Jane, Lady Rosseford, or even the Gardiners — there had been no sign to indicate Mr Darcy's special interest in her. Therefore, Elizabeth's heart, filled with an attachment that grew deeper every day, was also burdened by uncertainties.

Another week passed, with more visits, more shopping, and one more party, but also with news that warmed Elizabeth's heart: Mr Darcy was hosting a dinner party at his house. He called it a small family dinner, and among the guests, which included the Matlocks, would be Mr Bingley, his sisters, and the Gardiners.

But before that dinner party, Elizabeth's fears for her aunt were unfortunately validated. After a busy day, with several calls, Jane and Lady Rosseford both declared they were tired and wished to sleep. However, the lady's pallor and her obvious weakness concerned Elizabeth enough to call Dr Miller, who arrived within half an hour. The examination seemed to take forever, and the conclusions added even more to Elizabeth's worry.

“Miss Bennet, the truth is we know too little of medicine to diagnose what we cannot see. Lady Rosseford seems strong and healthy enough, but you must know that at her age, a seizure might happen at any time. All I can recommend is to avoid effort, distress, and fatigue and to be sure she takes the herbs I gave you at least twice a day.”

Elizabeth nodded, and the doctor continued, “Very well. Also, here are some spices brought from India, which have been used there for centuries and are apparently efficient at keeping the body and mind young and healthy. I would suggest she take them too, at least until the summer.”

“Of course.”

“Please ensure someone is supervising her all the time. And pay attention if she

shows any sign of fever. I shall visit her again tomorrow.”

The doctor left, leaving Elizabeth feeling worried and helpless, fearing the worst without being able to do much to avoid it. She went to the kitchen to prepare the medicine with her own hands, following the doctor’s instructions precisely, then took it to the lady’s room. Surprisingly, she was awake, sitting up in bed with her back supported by pillows. A maid was with her but left when Elizabeth entered.

“You are very stubborn, Lizzy. I told you I do not need the doctor.”

“You certainly do need him, Aunt. And he will come to examine you regularly. I shall not have it any other way.”

Elizabeth sat on the bed and held the lady’s hands in hers.

“Dear aunt, we must talk very seriously. We cannot go any further before we agree on certain things. But first, you should drink this. It contains some herbs and some spices from India, Dr Miller said. You will have two cups a day. I shall prepare them myself.”

The lady smiled and gently caressed Elizabeth’s hands.

“Lizzy dear, you must understand that, even if I drink ten cups of anything the doctor prescribes, things will not improve for me. I am almost seventy years old. I have had a long and full life, which few can hope for. It should be enough. I shall not be young again, regardless.”

“Dear aunt, I do not expect you to be young again, only to feel as well as you can for as long as possible. We have just found you, and we cannot lose you so soon. Besides, you are healthy and strong, the doctor said. You just need more rest, to make less effort, and to suffer less distress.”

“Lizzy, there are things we must discuss. I have made a will — a very clear one — so nobody can dispute it. Your uncle has taken it to two solicitors to be sure there are no legal issues with it. The entire family will benefit from my assets, but you will be my main heiress.”

The lady’s voice was now soft and gentle, just like her tender caresses, and Elizabeth’s eyes burned with tears.

“Aunt, I do not wish to talk about your will or about your wealth but about your health. That is all that matters to me. And I must insist that we have paid enough visits, made enough purchases, and been to enough parties. We may attend Mr Darcy’s dinner party if you wish to because it is very close and does not involve much effort. But no other formal engagements.”

“Very well. Perhaps we should take a rest until the Season begins. We must ask your uncle to visit, as we have things to discuss. There are some other properties, besides Stoke Park and this house, some money invested, several sets of jewels — you must know of everything. Jane may join us, of course. I trust her as much as I trust you. She just...she does not have your strength and your determination, just as she said. Nor does your father have it — he admitted as much to me. He suggested I should name you my heir, not him.”

“Dear aunt, if this makes you feel more at peace, we shall do as you wish. But first, you will rest for a few days. We must think of a form of polite refusal for the rest of the invitations, until spring.”

“Do as you wish, my dear. Now I would like to sleep for a little bit if you do not mind.”

“Let me arrange your pillows to make you more comfortable. Please rest now. I shall stay here with you for a little longer.”

Lady Rosseford closed her eyes, still holding Elizabeth's hand.

"You know, Lizzy, God gave me three children, but He took all of them to Him before they were even born. Two boys and a girl. I never had the chance to hold them in my arms, but I have missed each of them, every day. I am so grateful that I have found you and your sisters to fill the emptiness in my soul before it is too late..."

The confession, made in a weak voice, broke Elizabeth's heart, and she lost the fight with her tears. She caressed the lady's hands gently, then kissed them with affection and gratitude while Lady Rosseford sighed and fell asleep. Elizabeth remained at her side, watching her peacefully rest until she woke up, once more in good spirits and full of energy.

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The news that they would take a long pause from any formal events brought a large smile of relief to Jane's face. On the following day, Lady Rosseford had agreed to accompany Elizabeth, Jane, and Georgiana on another ride in the park, which pleased the girls more than any party. They were waiting for dinner to be served when the servant announced Mr Darcy, and the gentleman entered with an alarmed countenance.

"Forgive me. I am afraid I have the bad habit of calling at the most inappropriate hours."

"There is no need to apologise, sir," Elizabeth said. "Please come in. Has something happened?"

"I just saw Dr Miller, and he told me Lady Rosseford has been unwell. I came to enquire after your health, your ladyship."

“How kind of you, Mr Darcy. Your care is much appreciated. I have been tired recently, but Elizabeth decided to disturb the good doctor. All is well, as you can see. Please stay and dine with us.”

He hesitated briefly, then replied, “I shall stay for only a moment. Georgiana is waiting for me. I am glad the doctor was not needed, but I approve that Miss Elizabeth called him.”

“In fact, it was needed and very useful,” Elizabeth answered. “Dr Miller recommended more rest and less effort, so we have decided to take a long pause from any formal events. No parties, no balls, no shopping. What we have done so far is more than enough.”

“I see...”

“But we shall attend your dinner party,” she continued, and his expression brightened.

“I am glad to hear that, and again, I approve of your decision. Health is all that matters — anything else may wait.”

“Apparently, I am unable to impose my will any longer,” Lady Rosseford interjected.

“Not where your health is concerned, Aunt,” Elizabeth declared. “You know, Mr Darcy, I have come to understand your dislike of parties.”

“You have? I am surprised to hear that but also pleased,” he replied, smiling.

“I do not mean to be rude, but I cannot understand how people can do it all the time. So much bustle, so many shallow conversations, so many insincere smiles, and so much fascination with fashion and gossip. I really hope my impression is wrong and

that all those people, with such excellent situations in life, with the means to educate themselves and help others, are employing their time with more meaningful activities than what I have seen.”

“Some of them are indeed, but most of them not really.”

“That is sad, truly. Sad and tiresome. At least some of the ladies are involved with charities. That is worth the effort.”

“I told you, girls, London society is no different from that of Meryton, only larger and more annoying,” Lady Rosseford concluded.

“Your ladyship is absolutely right,” Mr Darcy said, smiling and looking at Elizabeth again. “I am embarrassed that, for a while, I believed the opposite.”

“That was at the beginning of our acquaintance, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth answered. “Fortunately, many things, including our mutual opinions, have changed since then.”

Mr Darcy bowed to her in approval, and then dinner was announced, so he took his leave. In three days’ time, they were all expected to finally have dinner together.

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The ride in the park was different since Lady Rosseford joined them, so they walked very little and spent most of the time in the carriage. It was a bright winter's day, and Elizabeth was delighted to see her aunt enjoying herself with no concerns. However, less than an hour later, the lady seemed tired and wished to return home, but she insisted that the girls continue their ride.

Such lovely weather was not to be wasted, so after taking Lady Rosseford home, the three of them returned to the park and strolled along the Serpentine, then stopped at their usual place for a rest, where they had the pleasure of meeting Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy, who had just completed their business. They walked together for a little while, chatting, admiring the scenery, and talking about the forthcoming dinner.

To her amazement, Elizabeth heard Mr Darcy whispering her name. "Miss Elizabeth, I was wondering... There is something of great importance that I would like to talk to you about. I have been waiting for the right moment since before the Netherfield ball, but I have not found it. Would you be so kind as to offer me a few minutes of your time?"

She looked at him, surprised and breathless, without daring to guess what was obvious.

"Now?"

"No...privately."

"Oh..." she whispered, with increasing joy and anxiety.

“I mean, we could take a few steps away from the others and talk...but there are things that cannot be said in the park.”

“I understand. So...will you come to our house? We can find a place to speak alone.”

“Or you could come to my house. I am sure Georgiana would like to have some tea after this long walk.”

“I would like that too,” she whispered, overwhelmed with emotion.

“Thank you... Miss Elizabeth, I hope you can guess the reason for my application.”

“I believe I can...” she replied, casting a look at him. “In truth, I have been a little confused that you have chosen to speak so little to me in the last month.”

“It was not a choice but a struggle with my own desires. I feared my presence might ruin your pleasure in making new acquaintances. You surely remember that Lady Rosseford told me very clearly of her plan for you and Miss Bennet. I thought you needed time to rejoice in the superiority of your connections.”

“I am amazed that people give so much importance to connections and so little to a person’s true character. I do not believe that anything could change me in essentials. Just as I hope that you, Mr Darcy, in essentials are the same kind and generous man, even when your manners are horribly proud and arrogant.”

“Regarding you, I am certain that is the case. As for me — I hope I have changed in those areas that needed improvement.”

“There is something I must ask, even though we are in the park...”

“Of course.” He turned to her, waiting.

“You told us about talking to Miss Bingley about my fine eyes,” she said, blushing. “Did that happen at Lucas Lodge? So long ago?”

“Yes,” he immediately replied with an open smile. “Almost at the beginning of our acquaintance. I soon discovered the superiority of your character and your mind, but at that time I was too concerned about the inferiority of your connections.”

“I see. That matter was resolved when Lady Rosseford entered our lives. But you should know, Mr Darcy, expensive gowns and jewels notwithstanding, I shall always be myself, with a few qualities and many faults. I enjoy balls and parties as much in Meryton as in London, and I am happier with my uncle and aunt Gardiner than with most titled people I have met recently.”

“I know that. And it is your most valuable quality, Miss Elizabeth. One that I discovered on the day of the accident before I met Lady Rosseford. It was not her appearance that changed my mind but my own understanding of what is truly important.”

The weight of the last sentence touched Elizabeth’s heart deeply, and it began to race. She did not doubt his words, nor his tender gaze that enveloped her.

“Brother, is everything well?” Georgiana enquired, approaching them.

“Yes, very much so,” he answered. “Perhaps we should return home. It has been a long walk, and it is very cold. Would you offer Miss Elizabeth and Miss Bennet a cup of tea?”

“Yes, of course. I would like that very much.”

“Excellent. When we arrive home, I shall steal Miss Elizabeth for a little while as there is a private matter we must discuss.”

“Of course,” Georgiana replied with obvious confusion.

Elizabeth had been in Mr Darcy’s house several times before, but her feet were trembling when she stepped through the door this time. There were no surprises, no doubts left after their conversation in the park, and she should be happy, but she was more disquieted. He immediately invited her into the library and offered her a chair; then, instead of talking, he only looked at her, paced the room, and looked at her again. And she laughed.

“This is an unfortunate beginning to this last part of our conversation, Mr Darcy.”

He laughed too, clearly nervous. “I have repeated so many times in my mind what I wish to say to you, but now words are spinning in my head. The only clear thing is how ardently I love and admire you and how much I desire...how much I hope that you will agree to be my wife.”

“My thoughts are not much clearer, sir. I have been waiting to hear such words since that evening at the theatre, and I feared they might never come.”

He sat next to her, holding her hands in his. “Do you still have the neckcloth?”

She blushed and indicated her reticule. He slowly stood again, went to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out the gloves. She laughed, wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes.

“We are two ridiculous fools, are we not?” she asked.

“There is nothing I would like more than to be a fool for you — and with you, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he answered, retaking his seat next to her.

She took off her gloves, then gently touched his face with trembling fingers. He

turned his head, and his lips rested in her palm.

“Since the day I carried you in my arms, I have dreamt about doing it again every day and every night,” he said. Then slowly, gently, allowing her time to object, he closed his arms around her. Her hands shyly encircled his neck, but this time their faces were close, their lips almost touching as they spoke.

“I have dreamt about you holding me in your arms too many times to even count,” she replied, a moment before his lips finally captured hers. But before the first kiss of her life had truly begun, he pulled away.

“I do not believe I have asked you to be my wife yet, Elizabeth. Or if I have, you have not answered.”

“You would have had your answer if you had not stopped, Mr Darcy,” she teased him. “I am not certain whether you asked, but I shall say yes nevertheless.”

The expression of heartfelt delight on his face warmed her heart almost as much as the heat of his embrace, which became even tighter. And if her words were not enough, he took his answer directly from her lips, timid at first then growing more daring, turning the sweet tenderness into ardent love.

It was a while before they finally left the library and returned to the others, who met them with enquiring glances. However, nothing was disclosed yet, as they still needed to speak to Lady Rosseford and then write to Mr Bennet — both actions that Mr Darcy wanted to complete that day.

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An hour later, Elizabeth and Jane returned home, escorted by Mr Darcy. While Jane went directly to her chamber, the others remained in the drawing room.

“It seems you had a lovely time,” Lady Rosseford said.

“We did, Aunt,” Elizabeth replied. “Very much so. And there is something very important we must tell you.”

She paused, looking at Mr Darcy, who cleared his throat.

“Well?” the lady asked impatiently.

“Lady Rosseford, it is my great pleasure to inform you that earlier today I asked Miss Elizabeth for her hand in marriage, and she granted it to me. I have come to plead for your acceptance and your blessing before I write to Mr Bennet.”

He spoke with such solemnity that Elizabeth could not suppress a smile. Lady Rosseford gazed at him with a stern countenance, blinking a few times.

“What do you mean?” she finally asked.

“What do I mean? Miss Elizabeth and I are engaged to be married as soon as we have your and her parents’ blessing.”

“You are engaged? But why? What happened?” she asked further, seemingly dumbfounded.

Elizabeth laughed heartily at her utter disbelief.

“Nothing happened, dear aunt. We have been in love for some time, but apparently Mr Darcy needed a while before he finally proposed. I feared he might never do so.”

“What are you talking about, Lizzy? You cannot be in love with Mr Darcy! I know how much you disliked him, and I know he did not find you tolerable enough to even

dance with!”

Elizabeth continued to laugh, while Mr Darcy looked disconcerted.

“You know nothing of the matter, dear aunt! That is all in the past and must be forgotten. In such cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable. This is the last time I shall ever remember it myself.”

“But how? When? I never noticed anything of the kind!” the lady continued.

“You did notice Mr Darcy’s attentions and even mentioned them to me,” Elizabeth answered. “You just misinterpreted them. You assumed he was making an effort to please you, in order that you might forgive that painful incident at the Netherfield ball.”

“Oh...” the lady whispered, glancing from one to the other. “So I have been a fool all this time?”

“No more than I was a fool when I misinterpreted Bingley and Miss Bennet’s feelings for each other. Three months have passed since then, and I am now certain that Bingley’s affection is not shallow, and he knew his heart better than I thought.”

“Apparently, neither of us is as clever or perceptive as we prided ourselves on being, Mr Darcy.”

“I realised that about myself a while ago,” he answered. “I would not dare express an opinion about your ladyship.”

“A very wise answer, Mr Darcy. You seem to have mastered wise answers almost as thoroughly as Mr Collins has mastered silly compliments.” The lady laughed. Then she shook her head, repeating, “Well, well, well... This is quite a surprise. A shock, I

would say. Of course I give you my blessing, though it is not even my duty to do so. You know, Mr Darcy, I told Elizabeth long ago that you would be precisely the sort of man best suited to her. But she rejected such a notion.”

“I rejected it because I did not believe it possible,” Elizabeth answered. “But I agreed with it from the moment Mr Darcy carried me in his arms back to my room,” she concluded with a teasing smile at the gentleman.

“A perfectly sound reason,” the lady said with good humour. “I need a glass of port to calm my nerves. Just imagine your father’s response and your mother’s nerves at hearing such news.”

Elizabeth offered her a little bit of port, and while sipping it, the lady said, “You should not write to your father yet. Allow me another day to talk to Jane and then to Mr Bingley. Who knows? We might share two engagements and one big shock in a single letter.”

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This time, Lady Rosseford’s cleverness and perceptiveness did not fail her. Mr Bingley needed only a little encouragement for a marriage proposal that Jane accepted with an open heart and tearful smile. Therefore, Lady Rosseford wrote to Mr Bennet, concluding as follows:

I have taken so much trouble bringing Elizabeth and Jane to London to find them excellent husbands, best suited to them, when I could have very well stayed in Hertfordshire and rested with the same happy outcome.

I attach to this letter some spices recommended by an excellent doctor. I am sure Fanny’s nerves will greatly benefit from them. You may try a cup or two yourself.

Your loving aunt and daughters.

Mr Bennet's letter containing both his amazement and his blessing arrived the next day, and by the time the long-planned dinner party took place that evening, Mr Darcy had also informed his own relatives about his engagement. The Matlocks were as stunned as Lady Rosseford, and their approval came reluctantly, though Darcy neither needed nor requested it. Georgiana was beyond joyous with happiness, and her opinion was the only one that mattered to Darcy.

The dinner ended up more formal and more significant than had been planned as it became an engagement party for both couples. And it definitely proved to be the worst dinner ever for Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, who received the news before the first course was served, completely ruining their appetite for that evening and many more to come.

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A fortnight after the announcement of their engagement, Elizabeth and Jane, together with their betrothed and Lady Rosseford, returned to Meryton.

By that time, Mrs Bennet had recovered from what she called a 'shockingly happy blessing', and she greeted the two gentlemen with reasonable composure. If in the case of Mr Bingley she had harboured some hopes that he might return one day, the notion that Mr Darcy would become her son-in-law was a difficult one for her sensitive nerves to comprehend.

The people of Meryton had barely recovered from the unbelievable news that the Bennets had an exceedingly rich aunt when they were hit by the reports of the double engagement. The Bennets were declared the luckiest people that ever breathed in that neighbourhood.

Two important things had happened in Hertfordshire during Elizabeth's stay in London. First, Mr George Wickham had requested a transfer to a regiment in the North, for reasons and with means that remained unclear. The transfer had been approved, and the officer had left Meryton at the end of January; many ladies regretted him, and many shop owners revealed he had left significant debts, which had later been paid by someone else. When Elizabeth questioned Mr Darcy on the subject, he answered there was no use in talking about things that were already done.

Also, Charlotte Lucas had married Mr Collins in January and moved to Kent, and while she hoped her friend had found peace in her new home, Elizabeth feared her cousin and his wife might become a target for Lady Catherine de Bourgh's rage.

Lady Catherine had been so angry about her favourite nephew's engagement that she

had sent one vicious letter to him and one more, slightly tempered, to Lady Rosseford.

Mr Darcy had ripped up his letter and refused to share it with Elizabeth, very likely due to its malicious content.

In the one sent to Elizabeth's aunt, Lady Catherine had applied to Lady Rosseford's honour to forbid the marriage, declaring Mr Darcy was engaged to her daughter. Lady Rosseford confronted Mr Darcy and, once she discovered the truth, she wrote back:

Lady Catherine, I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, but my nephew Mr Collins, who worships you, has told me all about your extraordinary qualities as well as about the more than sixty windows at Rosings; therefore I feel like I know you. This is why, being of your mother's age, I shall kindly advise you to cease making a fool of yourself and stop exposing your lovely daughter to ridicule.

You should be content to have the endless veneration of my nephew, and I shall be pleased to have your nephew married to my niece. It should be a situation to the advantage of all.

Be careful not to upset your daughter and other nephews, or you might end up alone one day. Mr Collins might not live near you forever.

Elizabeth believed the letter was too harsh, but Mr Darcy applauded it; hence it was sent.

In March, Stoke Park was completely finished. Lady Rosseford found it too large for her alone, so all five Bennet sisters took their own rooms there, and they split their time between that house and Longbourn.

Being a large estate, Mr Darcy took it upon himself to hire a steward for her ladyship and to assist in the dealings with the tenants to ensure a fair contract on both sides. Mr Bennet and Mr Bingley both assisted Mr Darcy in this, but neither of them possessed the skills or interest for such tasks. In contrast, Elizabeth showed great interest in anything her betrothed was doing, and they spent a large amount of time in the library, where he taught her about his business and she learnt most diligently.

In the first week of April, Longbourn Church hosted the wedding of Miss Elizabeth Bennet to Mr Darcy and of Miss Jane Bennet to Mr Bingley, in the presence of their families and friends. Stoke Park was put to good use, as all the guests were invited back there after the wedding for a celebratory breakfast. The guests from London were also accommodated there, including Lord and Lady Matlock, the viscount and his wife, Miss Georgiana Darcy, Mrs Annesley, the Gardiners, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was recently engaged to Miss Anne de Bourgh.

At Netherfield, Mr Bingley's sisters eventually decided to make peace with their brother and new sister. Rejoicing in their felicity, Jane and Mr Bingley accepted the offer of peace, but Lady Rosseford refused to meet the women until the wedding day.

At Lady Rosseford's invitation, Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley agreed to remain at Stoke Park for a fortnight.

On the contrary, Mr Darcy dismissed any suggestion of staying in Hertfordshire longer and insisted on taking his wife to London after their vows had been exchanged. His vehement refusal to remain might have upset Lady Rosseford if she had not known enough about the impatience of a gentleman who married for love.

Therefore, around noon, after a warm farewell, Mr and Mrs Darcy entered their carriage and separated themselves from the rest of the world. The first thing Mr Darcy did was to take his wife in his arms, the place where she fitted perfectly.

Before passion drove them towards another sort of activity, Elizabeth asked her husband, whose lips were already searching hers,

“My love, there is something very important that I have wished to ask you for a long time but kept forgetting.”

“You know I am always happy to answer you, my beloved.”

“On the evening we arrived in London with Lady Rosseford, we went immediately to our rooms. From my window, I admired the view over Hyde Park, and down on the street, among all those people—”

“You saw me?” he interrupted her, gently caressing her face.

She smiled, her soul bursting with love. “So it was you! I thought it was only my desire and my imagination.”

“I knew you would arrive that evening, and I walked up and down the street for a while. I saw you enter the house, then, after some time, I saw you at the window.” His arms pulled her closer to his chest, and she put her head on his shoulder.

“There is something else that I have been thinking about for a long time...something I actually regret,” she continued, and he frowned.

“The day of the accident...you offered to bandage my injury, and I refused you. I only agreed that you could place your neckcloth over my stocking.”

“So you did.” He smiled, his lips tantalising her face.

“As shocking as it might sound, I regretted not allowing you to take off my boot and stocking. I always wondered about the feel of your touch on my skin.”

His lips found hers as he replied, “You are a little minx, Mrs Darcy. You wish to torture me, knowing I must wait a few more hours until I am alone with you in our apartment, in our bed... But you should know by now how my touch on your skin feels.”

“I do know...very much so...which is why I confessed my regret. For waiting so long,” she whispered back.

“I see... I shall try to make you forget any regrets once we are home. And I promise that, by tomorrow, there will be nothing left for you to wonder about regarding my touches, my caresses, my kisses. You will know all about them.”

His lips captured hers again, and she could not answer him — nor did she wish to. She had no doubt that he would keep his promise.

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Since she had appeared back in London out of nowhere, Lady Dorothea Rosseford had become one of the best-known ladies of the ton. She had created quite a storm when she first introduced herself into society in the winter of 1812, especially after her niece Elizabeth Bennet succeeded where many other young heiresses had failed: at securing the affection and hand in marriage of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. Many rumours and much malicious gossip was aroused when the two married, as most people were shocked by Mr Darcy's choice of a wife.

After the Season began, Mrs Darcy, together with her husband and Lady Rosseford, appeared again in certain circles, supported by Lady Matlock. To many, Mrs Elizabeth Darcy looked different from Miss Elizabeth Bennet, in ways they could not explain.

In the summer, the Darcys moved to Pemberley, and Lady Rosseford joined them.

In the first year of her marriage, Mrs Darcy and her aunt built a school for boys and one for girls in Derbyshire, where any child without means was welcome to attend. Mrs Darcy and Lady Rosseford also supported a hospital that provided medical care to the poor.

By the second year of their marriage, the Darcys were blessed with an heir — a son who won not only his parents' hearts but also that of Lady Rosseford, who became his godmother.

Lady Rosseford happily abandoned all her responsibilities, allowing Elizabeth and Mr Darcy to manage her entire fortune in such a way that all the Bennet girls would fully benefit from it.

With no stress, no worry, and no effort, Lady Rosseford fully enjoyed life, and her health was kept under good regulation.

The Darcys remained at Pemberley while their son was still in the cradle. Georgiana and Lady Rosseford were with them all the time, but Pemberley also became a place of reunion for their families. Mr and Mrs Bennet with their younger daughters, Mr Bingley and Jane with their daughter and son, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Anne with their son, the Gardiners and their children, the Matlocks — occasionally. Even Charlotte and Mr Collins with their two sons visited Pemberley once — an excellent occasion for Mr Collins to compare Pemberley to Rosings and to count the windows. Elizabeth was pleased to see Charlotte quite happy, loved by her children and husband.

Mr Bingley's sisters, with their husbands, were also invited to Pemberley one year. They stayed for a fortnight then never returned. Lady Rosseford declared the two bitter women could not bear so much happiness around them.

Georgiana, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia formed a sisterly bond, and they were dependable helpers to Elizabeth in every endeavour. They were all out in society and the subject of admiration for many young gentlemen, but all of them chose to wait for the perfect match, as Lady Rosseford often advised them.

In the third year, Mr and Mrs Darcy, together with their son, Georgiana, and Lady Rosseford, returned to London, and this time, every house was open to them. Mrs Darcy was introduced at St James's and invited to attend balls at Almack's, which pleased Lady Rosseford and gave Mrs Bennet a new opportunity to boast of her superiority to her friends in Meryton.

The second Darcy child, a beautiful girl, was born in the fifth year of their marriage, and Lady Rosseford was still healthy and strong enough to hold her. The lady loved all the children in the family, and they loved her in return. Their pure love and joy — or perhaps Dr Miller's herbs and spices — kept her strong and healthy.

Lady Rosseford's biggest accomplishment, though, the one in which she took the greatest pride, was being right in guessing what sort of men were suited to Elizabeth and Jane.

She conveniently forgot about that one particular evening at a certain ball, when she had been about to rip apart both Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley and his sisters. About that, nobody was aware except those who had been present that night in the Netherfield library. What everyone could see was the obvious bond of affection and felicity that united the two couples.

Mr and Mrs Bingley were not so much observed by London society, but Mr and Mrs Darcy were under scrutiny every time they were in public. But as much as some people wished to find fault with them, after five years it became a truth universally acknowledged that Mr and Mrs Darcy were a fine couple and quite well suited to each other.