



The Cheapside Runners (Pride and Prejudice Variations #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: Fitzwilliam Darcy owes a debt to the most unexpected of men—a tradesman from Cheapside who rescued his sister from certain ruin. When Mr. Gardiner of the Cheapside Runners intervenes to stop George Wickhams scheme, Darcy must confront his own prejudices and failings. His attempts to repay the debt lead to a humbling encounter that forces him to question everything he thought he knew about proper behavior and true gentility.

As Darcy resolves to improve himself, he encounters a puzzling young woman in Hertfordshire who, despite her apparent intelligence and charm, seems determined never to exchange a single word with him. Could there be a connection between this mysterious lady and the man from Cheapside who set him on his path to self-improvement?

A tale of unexpected connections, reluctant growth, and the challenge of becoming worthy of love.

Total Pages (Source): 31

1. A Man of Trade

A/N: The Bow Street Runners, established in 1749 by magistrate Henry Fielding, were London's first professional police force. Initially, just six men operating from Bow Street Magistrate's Court, they investigated serious crimes, pursued highwaymen, and executed warrants throughout England. They were paid per arrest and through government stipends.

By 1800, they had expanded into a more organised force with both uniformed patrol officers ("Bow Street Patrols") and plain-clothes investigators. They gained respect for solving high-profile cases and developed forensic techniques. However, they remained relatively small—never more than 70 officers—and focused mainly on serious crimes rather than routine policing.

Prior to 1812, notable successes included breaking up major criminal gangs and establishing a mounted patrol to combat highway robbery around London.

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"Mr Darcy, I have a gentleman to see you on what he says is important business," Albert Soams, the butler at Darcy house in London, said in his usual grave tone while holding out a salver with a single card on it.

A glance told Fitzwilliam Darcy that it was a business card, rather than the more usual personal calling card. From this, he deduced that his butler was just being polite in use of the word gentleman, as the visitor was clearly a tradesman. That said, he expected his visitor to be gentleman-like in his appearance or Soams would have said

something entirely different. He decided he may as well see what the man was about. He was stuck in London in the summer, which was more than a little disagreeable with the heat and the smoke, but his business required it for another fortnight.

Further perusal told him something out of the ordinary was occurring. He had never heard of the particular firm, but the name suggested the business should probably be dispatched sooner than later.

“Cheapside Runners... quite a name for a business. Have you ever heard of them, Soams?”

“No sir. The name seems reminiscent of the Bow Street Runners, and the services listed suggest as much, but I can surmise little else.”

“Let us see what this Mr... ah... Gardiner has to say.”

It seemed obvious the man was trying to capitalise on the Runner’s reputation, and equally likely he was engaged in something to do with crime, but nothing else could be surmised.

Soams left and escorted a man of middling years into the study. He did, in fact, look gentlemanly, though his appearance seemed more business calculation than preference. The man looked like he could be jovial or serious as the occasion demanded, which seemed a useful trait for someone in his line of work. He was perhaps a decade Darcy’s senior, though still trim and strong looking, as if his profession had some physical demands or he went to the effort to keep himself in good condition. That said, Darcy was a very wealthy gentleman who need not even lift his own teacup if he chose, and yet he still was strong enough to help out in the fields with the harvest, box at Gentleman Jack’s, or fence at Angelos for hours at a time—so not much could be implied reliably from his appearance, save the fact that he was obviously not an indolent sluggard.

“Mr Darcy, I appreciate you seeing me without notice,” Mr Gardiner asserted respectfully, though to Darcy’s keen ear, it seemed to be simple politeness more than any feeling they were unequal in any way.

“Mr Gardiner, it is my privilege,” he said because it was the right thing to say, little though he believed the sentiments.

They both bowed, and Darcy added, “May I offer refreshments?”

“I have heard worse ideas.”

Darcy nodded to Soams, and the gentlemen took two seats with a table between them. Soams always called for hot water when a guest arrived, so he had no trouble bringing a tea tray and serving immediately.

“How may I be of assistance,” Darcy said once all the social niceties were finished.

Gardiner set his teacup down. “I presume you have some inkling of the nature of my business from my card. We do certain types of confidential investigations... what amounts to policing of a sort. That said, our business is of quite a different nature than our more famous namesake.”

“All right,” Darcy said, since nothing the man had said thus far was of any more than an introduction.

Gardiner took another sip of tea and continued, “Despite the similarities in our names, my operation is completely different. We specialise in particular areas, including some that might not strictly speaking be crimes per se, but they fall into the purview of what we consider punishable actions. We work entirely privately, and we specialise in one particular area—which I will expand on presently.”

“Very well, I get the gist of it,” Darcy said, not particularly interested thus far but willing to hear him out. “How does this apply to me?”

“We come to the crux of the matter. I particularly wish to speak to you about your father’s godson, one George Wickham.”

“What about him?” Darcy growled angrily, somewhat regretting hearing the man out.

“I have a question about him. You see sir, he has come to our notice. Our business involves the protection of certain people, mostly young ladies, and I am supported by fees from guardians and the like. Whilst we are about our business, we occasionally run afoul of people who, while not specifically targeted at our clients, still present a general threat. In such cases, we prefer to act first and ask questions later. My specific question to you is as follows—do you have any particular reason to protect Mr George Wickham from the consequences of his actions?”

“What can you possibly mean? Are you trying to extract something from me to protect my father’s ill-chosen godson? If so, you have hit on a dry well. I am finished cleaning up that man’s messes,” he said, breathing hard and angry as he could be.

His companion did not bat an eye. “Shall I take that as no , then?”

“Absolutely. What has the miscreant done now and what are you planning to do about it?” Darcy asked, against his better judgement.

“Let us just say he found a sudden burst of patriotism. The navy presses thousands of men into service every year. I supply a few of them, and absent your intervention, this Mr Wickham will ship out within the month. My men are holding him in our gaol, but if they hear nothing within the week they will proceed.”

“You will have no objection from me,” Darcy said emphatically, though he was not

entirely certain how he felt about his childhood friend's fate.

"Agreed. I am glad we got that out of the way. Some might argue that your father created the menace, but I am not inclined to criticise a man for honourably upholding his duty to a trusted employee."

Darcy was astonished Mr Gardiner knew so much, but assumed any investigator worth his salt should not have that much difficulty getting the story, especially with Wickham available to give his version which was generally about half true.

"I appreciate your forbearance," he replied, with something of a haughty attitude.

"The man had an accomplice, though I am loathe to apply similar treatment to her. A woman obviously cannot be pressed, but there are equally harsh measures that could be applied if necessary. She was in on his plan, but it is hard to say how much she was motivated by malice and how much by plain stupidity. I am holding her and will decide how to handle her later."

"That seems more than I really need to know," Darcy said in some confusion. "What was their crime, and how does it apply to me?"

Gardiner blew out a breath before continuing.

"The man no doubt deserved his fate for any number of crimes, such that I would be comfortable with any punishment from transportation to the rope. That said, the particular offence that caught my attention was an action involving my speciality. You see, our primary activity consists of protecting young ladies, often of high-status, from the depredations of rogues and fortune hunters. We mostly protect them from compromises, assaults, and of course, elopements. We interrupted an elopement in progress. He was not preying on one of our clients, but we got wind of it anyway and stepped in."

“Stepped in... why? Is this a way to get more business?” Darcy growled.

“Of course not! Most guardians would be quite happy to engage us retroactively after we saved their charges, but it would be a lessening of the honour of my triumph very sadly. Madness lies down that path, for obvious reasons. I would be little better than a common blackmailer. Who is to say I did not engineer the situation just so I could swoop in and play the hero. No sir, it would not do,”

Darcy sat stunned at the statement. “Just to clarify, you assert that the woman’s guardian owes you nothing?”

“ Exactly! Not only will I demand no payment, but I would not accept it if freely offered. I consider it my basic duty as a family man. Unfortunately, scoundrels are common as rats, so I shall never lack for customers. We cannot fix the world, but we should at least fix the problems that are right in front of us. If a guardian wants to engage me later for another matter, that is perfectly acceptable, but for the original action, nothing is owed.”

“An admirable system,” Darcy replied, feeling sheepishly guilty about his suspicions, though it appeared to him that Mr Gardiner was not the least bit surprised by his supposition. In that man’s business, he may well have a conversation just like that once a fortnight.

Darcy was just beginning to congratulate himself on his forbearance when a disturbing thought occurred to him.

He asked nervously, “Can you tell me who his intended victim was?”

“I can tell you she is an heiress, but fifteen years old, with a reported dowry of ? 30,000. Absent my men’s intervention, they would have left Ramsgate tomorrow. As it is, your sister is very curious about why her erstwhile suitor disappeared abruptly,

and her companion soon followed.”

Darcy jumped up and yelled, “Why did you not lead with that? Why all the tiptoeing around the subject?”

Gardiner just let him vent his spleen as experience told him was best. He took a minute to grab another biscuit from the drinks tray, then even poured himself another cup of tea and gestured to Darcy to ask if he wanted some.

He finally said, “Be easy, sir. Miss Darcy is perfectly safe. I have taken the liberty of ensuring she is unmolested, and she has been given a convincing story about her companions. You should go to her soon, but do not kill yourself getting there. A day or two will make no difference.”

Darcy realised the man was acting sensibly and felt slightly bad about his outburst—though it would be many days before he got over the worst of the shock and worked out that Mr Gardiner had presented the information in the only manner that would allow him to listen to anything beyond the danger to his sister.

He finally calmed down enough to ask, ‘What liberties have you taken, exactly?’

“We investigated the housekeeper at your lodgings, and she seems reliable. She is unaware of what transpired and not a part of the scheme, as the companion was careful and rather sneaky in her machinations. I temporarily engaged a lady I can personally vouch for who seeks employment as a companion to look in on your sister. Mrs Annesley is reliable, and she will look in on the young lady each day, though I obviously could not actually engage her. I also have a couple of men watching the house in case Wickham had accomplices. We are holding Mrs Younge in slightly better accommodations than Mr Wickham and will leave her to your discretion. She was part of the scheme, but I do not know why or how she became involved. It is possible this Wickham fellow held something over her and blackmailed or threatened



her for compliance, though it is equally likely they were paramours.”

Darcy leaned back in his chair, too stunned to speak.

He finally started feeling guilty for the cloud of suspicion he had for a man who in no way deserved it.

“Mr Gardiner, I can freely admit you have saved my life—or at least my sister’s, which amounts to the same thing. I am in your debt.”

“As I said, no debt is owed. I am here simply to finish the action and reunite you with your ward. I will say that Mrs Annesley might do for your sister, but that is for you to decide. If you do not employ her, I will find her another charge.”

“May I assume that is not a particular challenge for a man with your connexions?”

“You may.”

“I still feel I owe you something, sir.”

“I have explained my reasons against that.”

“There must be something I can do,” Darcy insisted, his brain not quite able to comprehend a man who wanted nothing from him.

Gardiner sat back and thought about it a minute. “If you insist, there is a small favour you could do—though it is a favour, mind you—not an obligation. You might even enjoy it in the end.”

“Name it!” Darcy stated emphatically.

Gardiner seemed to think about it a few minutes and finally replied.

“Fetch your sister. That should take a week or so. When you return, I have a couple of nieces staying with me. One of them has become a bit too cynical for her own good. If you could bring a friend to my residence in Cheapside for dinner and spend a pleasant evening politely enjoying company with my nieces, I would be much obliged.”

Darcy tried not to show dismay at the request, but as a gentleman, not to mention a man who owed an enormous debt, he had little recourse. “It will be my pleasure,” he asserted, though he suspected he was not particularly convincing, specially to a man as discerning as Mr Gardiner.

“Let us say the last Thursday of the month,” Gardiner replied with a smile.

He then stood and offered his hand, suggesting, “Do not be too hard on your sister. She is young and inexperienced but call on me if you need additional assistance with her. We offer both protection and education services that may be of use.”

“I thank you,” Darcy said, doubly happy that his sister had been saved, but far less enamoured with the idea that her saviour seemed inclined to throw his nieces in the path of rich men... as usual.

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### 2. A Polite Dinner

As requested, Darcy appeared at Gracechurch Street at the designated hour. He was feeling uncomfortable and somewhat put out with the fact that Mr Gardiner was perhaps not quite as generous as he liked to pretend. It seemed the man was simply extracting his price in a different currency.

There was little doubt that being able to claim a connexion with the Darcys of Pemberley would do his nieces some good in whatever local society they occupied, even in the nearly inevitable scenario where he never saw them again. His good friend Bingley's sisters had been trading on such a thin acquaintance for years, and there was no reason to believe the nieces of a tradesman in Cheapside would be any less ambitious.

The assertion that one niece was becoming too cynical sounded like every other excuse any gentleman had used to throw daughters, sisters, nieces (and even occasionally wives) in his path. Enduring it was just his penance for being born a Darcy, and he girded his loins to endure a tedious dinner just like every other tedious dinner in the company of marriageable women he had endured as far back as he could remember. The best he could think of the evening ahead was that almost anything, up to and including transportation, would be an improvement over another evening in the company of his sister, who was not taking her rescue at all well.

As was his wont, Darcy felt the need to bring someone more comfortable among strangers to help ease the burden. He always wondered why some men were so much easier in company than others. His Fitzwilliam cousins generally asserted he just did not take the trouble to practise, while his father suggested that it was not all that

surprising to find a man awkward in company exactly like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had been.

With his need for someone to ease the conversation and watch his back, he had at first tried his friend Bingley. He was the sort of man who could be dropped on his head anywhere from central London to an African village, and he would have a dozen friends before the evening was up. He could charm the birds from the trees or the fish from the streams—though his success at charming his sister into good behaviour was somewhat suspect. Unfortunately, his friend was toying with the idea of leasing an estate to ease his way into land ownership, and he was thus engaged in looking at several properties in Kent (maybe—with his friend's writing, it could just as well be Kashmir).

Darcy fell back on his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. The man shared guardianship of Georgiana, but he spent most of his time in his military duties, so his impact on his young cousin was minimal. The colonel had been organising training in the north for the past month, so he was not yet acquainted with what happened in Ramsgate. Darcy planned to bring it up the next day, after they dispatched the tradesman and his nieces. It was obviously not something to be committed to paper, nor a subject that could be adequately discussed in an hour.

Unfortunately, the colonel's arrival was delayed such that they only managed to meet at the last moment in the lane outside the Gardiner residence on Gracechurch Street.

The colonel stepped down from his horse, handed it off to a groom, and gave his typical greeting.

“Darcy, good to see you. Care to explain the urgency, and why exactly we are meeting in Cheapside of all places when the brandy is almost certainly better in your study?”

“No doubt true, but needs must,” Darcy replied laconically. “We have good reason to be here.”

“Might you enlighten me? Cheapside is close to the last place in the world I would expect to encounter the Master of Pemberley.”

“True... too true. I will explain in detail later. For the moment, you must comprehend that the owner of this home did both of us a rather large favour. In recompense, he asked me to bring another gentleman and spend a polite evening in company with his nieces—whom I assume are marriageable, as usual. He gave the rather weak excuse that one of them is getting too cynical for his taste, and he wants to show her polite conversation with refined gentlemen, but—”

“But you have doubts?”

“Of course I do,” Darcy averred, looking around carefully to ensure they were alone. “We have both been through this experience far too many times to count, so I hardly think a bit of scepticism to be unwarranted. We are probably to spend an uncomfortable evening among some insipid so-called ladies, who depend on their uncle to bring men to the table. To be candid, I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. However, the debt is owed, and I shall do my duty.”

The colonel was not surprised by the outburst, and while not exactly pleased with it, he was at least understanding. “Sounds to me like you are being overly fastidious. For all you know, the future Mrs Darcy is standing in the drawing room as we speak, just waiting to meet you—presuming a tradesman has a drawing room. At the very least, nothing guarantees they will not be entirely charming.”

Darcy laughed awkwardly. “You sound like Bingley. I would happily bet a year’s income the future Mrs Darcy will not be some niece of a Cheapside tradesman. We

owe an evening of politeness, so let us gird our loins to get through it. Pretend they are Lady Catherine and Anne.”

“ Good lord, you are in a mood! I hope you can wipe that sour expression from your face before we enter. I presume the uncle asked for amiable company—though why he picked you for the task is quite beyond me.”

“Had you endured my last fortnight, you would be in a mood too, but I can be as polite as the next man when the situation calls for it. Let us just get our penance over and done with.”

They turned and walked the twenty yards to the front door and banged the knocker.

There was a delay of several minutes, which both men assumed meant a lack of servants. Neither had any idea if a home in Cheapside would even have a butler or the door was simply handled by the nearest maid. It was not the sort of knowledge the son or nephew of an earl was likely to possess.

At long last, the door opened, and much to Darcy’s surprise, he found himself facing the master of the house. The man’s face was entirely inscrutable, though it was the type of inscrutability with a hard edge to it.

Darcy introduced everyone in the usual way, though doing so with both men still standing on the porch did not seem quite right. If Mr Gardiner wanted polite company, the least he could do was invite them in.

Gardiner spoke calmly, though Darcy got the idea that he spoke that way regardless of the situation, since he did not appear to be a man easily rattled. He had not batted an eye about pressing Wickham into the navy, after all.

“Gentlemen, I apologise for the late notice, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I

shall need to cancel tonight's dinner. You need not trouble yourselves to return. Your favour, such as it was, shall be considered paid."

Darcy was stunned, while the colonel was simply confused.

"I do not understand," the colonel opined, while Darcy struggled for something sensible to say, or in lieu of that, anything at all.

Gardiner continued, "Mr Darcy was attending as a personal favour, but it is no longer required."

"Might you explain why, sir," Darcy asked in confusion. "If there is a problem, we would happily return at a more auspicious time."

Gardiner stared in an unnerving fashion, though Darcy was beginning to get a sinking feeling of dread.

"I admit, it is a rather unusual situation. Ten minutes ago, my nieces were dressed to the nines, looking pretty, and prepared to hunt bear with a penknife. They were sitting by the front window enjoying the evening breeze, happy as a pair of larks. Two minutes ago, they abruptly became... ah... indisposed... and said they could not possibly attend dinner, blaming their absence on some vague female problems that were obviously beyond my understanding. Why they were also beyond my wife's understanding is beyond me, but there you have it. No dinner tonight, and I would not dream of dragging such fine gentlemen as yourselves such a distance a second time."

Darcy groaned quietly, while the colonel laughed a bit. "Ah, hoisted by your own petard, eh Darcy?"

"I do not get your meaning," Gardiner replied.

Darcy suspected he knew his meaning precisely and in detail and was just twisting the knife. “I suspect your nieces overheard some comments I made to my cousin. It was a private conversation, but if overheard, I doubt the discourse would be well received.”

“Private conversation, eh?” Gardiner asked pointedly. “By private , I assume you were in your carriage, or your home, or in some other sealed room, or the deep woods. You would not , for example, carry on a private conversation on a public street twenty yards from a house holding a lady with exceptional hearing!”

Darcy looked completely chagrined. He had not been called to task for quite some time, and truth be told, he was not enjoying the experience—though to be fair, he doubted the niece enjoyed his conversation very much either.

“I am at fault for the situation, sir. I spoke out of turn, and not in a gentlemanlike manner. I was entirely in the wrong. I owe your nieces an apology at the very least. Do you suppose you might arrange for me to apologise at their convenience?”

Gardiner stared at him disconcertingly for quite some time. Darcy knew it was a tactic to make him nervous and did not much like comprehending that the man had a look that was every bit as effective as Eaton’s headmaster.

“When you mature, Mr Darcy, if you do , you will eventually realise that not everything can be solved with an apology. Shipbuilders have an old joke about how tight to make a bolt. ‘Tighten it ‘til it breaks than back off half a turn.’ That is how many men live their lives. Behave poorly until they are called to account, then slightly correct with an apology.”

Gardiner paused to ensure their rapt attention.

“In my line of work, many many actions have consequences that are life-altering and



irreversible. Most men think a pretty apology will get them out of their self-inflicted wounds. Society has placed us in a position of power and authority to the point where we expect others to accept our weak excuses for our poor behaviour— particularly the women in our lives. Unfortunately, such easy forgiveness does nothing to improve our characters, so most continue giving offence all our lives, since any mistakes seem to be easily correctable.”

He stared hard at Darcy in particular. “My nieces have too much self-respect to accept a pretence of contrition.”

“It is not pretence!” Darcy stated emphatically.

“Unless you can convince me that whatever you said somehow came out of your mouth different than it appeared in your head, then I beg to differ.”

The colonel had been watching the exchange with a great deal of amusement, and decided to weigh in.

“He has you there, cousin. In my line of work, you cannot undo a bullet or bayonet—regardless of how you subsequently feel about the appropriateness of the shot. Some bells cannot be unrung, and some words cannot be unsaid.”

Darcy sighed. “I agree in the basic premise, but it allows very little room for self-correction or growth if one cannot make amends.”

Gardiner chuckled. “I doubt very much that your thinking process will be dramatically different a month hence based on whether or not you apologise to my nieces. If you wish to behave in a more gentleman like manner, buck up and take responsibility for your own attitudes. Try to change what happens inside your head rather than belatedly trying to fix the damage when it escapes. You missed this chance to do better, but the next opportunity will not be long in coming. If you wish

to make amends, I suggest you do so pre-emptively with the next young lady you are planning to disparage. If you find young ladies too much of a challenge, practise on your servants, or tradesmen, or relatives, or street urchins. Kindness is not as complicated as you seem to think.”

The colonel twisted the knife. “I admit I am not the best example to follow, but you could certainly pick a better muse than Lady Catherine.”

Darcy did not like that assertion in the least, but it seemed the die was cast so he would have to take his lumps. He wondered if he would return hat in hand to Cheapside a month hence, and if he would be sent packing a second time. He supposed time would tell, but there seemed little to be done immediately.

“I accept your censure, Mr Gardiner. It is well-earned. Do you suppose I might be able to make amends later?”

Gardiner gave him the same disconcerting stare long enough to make him fidget again. “In addition to being cynical, as I previously mentioned, my niece is rather stubborn. For the most part, her good opinion, once lost is lost forever. I suggest you return to your own affairs, which probably require your attention. She was fine an hour ago, and she will be fine an hour hence.”

“How can I make amends?”

“As I said, there is no need. Her temper is not entirely implacable, and she was not made for ill humour. She will have entirely forgotten you within the week, if not the hour.”

“All the same, I should like to try, if I am allowed. I owe her.”

Gardiner stared a bit more, and finally said, “Have you a shilling on you?”

In great confusion, Darcy reached into his vest to extract one and handed it over.

Gardiner took the coin with a smug look.

“I actually have two nieces with me—a sweet one and a cynical one. Fortunately, the sweet one did not hear anything, and the cynical one will not enlighten her. That niece bet me no first-circle gentleman could speak politely for the space of a dinner in Cheapside with an eligible lady. I do not like to lose, so I stacked the deck by bringing a man who might be more amenable, out of obligation if nothing else. As it turns out, she wins. This will cover the bet, and I believe we may consider our transaction complete. You need not trouble yourself further. I wish you a good evening, gentlemen.”

With that, Gardiner retreated to the house after a rather hasty leave taking, abandoning two discomfited men who had no choice but to return home and get on with serious discussion (and serious drinking).

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The rest of the evening was consumed with the rather disagreeable tasks of telling his cousin how he came to know Mr Gardiner, and just how close their ward came to absolute ruin.

Once that subject had been beaten to death, including the obligatory fantasies of how they might have dispatched the villain personally had they caught him (despite the fact that either man could have dealt with him at their leisure any time in the previous decade), they moved on to how the intervening fortnight between Mr Gardiner’s gallant rescue and the disastrous dinner invitation.

That period had been a nightmare of reconciliation, conciliation, and contradiction between brother and sister. The young girl could not settle on whether she was

distraught because she had lost the love of her life, and her brother just could not understand because he had no heart; or distraught because she had been so stupid and worthless as to ignore all of her training and education sufficiently to throw her life away on a mere steward's boy (and a scoundrel to boot). She was in love with the charming rogue one minute and hoping him to the devil the next. She was at times perfectly aware that she was feeling two contradictory sources of distress simultaneously; and at other times she went through both sequentially. She vacillated between despondency and burning anger.

When she got tired of vilifying her own feelings and felt up to some good old-fashioned blame, she vacillated between chastising herself for her own stupidity and naiveté; and chastising her brother for failing to warn her about rogues, cads, and scoundrels—and, not to put too fine a point on it— hiring the worst companion in the history of companions. Truthfully, Darcy preferred the latter but received more of the former.

Darcy had his own contradictory thoughts as well. He vacillated between chastising himself over his own failure to properly vet Mrs Younge, his failure to properly warn his sister about how to be careful—and, not to put too fine a point on it—his utter failure to bring George Wickham to heel years earlier, leaving the job up to some tradesman who had never once laid eyes on the man.

After a certain amount of brandy, he even lamented his father for the spectacular lapse of judgement in leaving his daughter in the hands of two bachelors, a situation not much better than being raised by wolves. He even occasionally lamented his father's complete inability to see the evil in his godson.

Mrs Annesley was just the sort of woman who seemed like she should be able to sort the matter out, given enough time. Darcy had her investigated more thoroughly than he ever had Mrs Younge and offered the position. He ruefully thought he could have saved himself a good deal of trouble by simply engaging Mr Gardiner to choose a

companion in the first place, since that was his particular area of expertise.

The fortnight had eventually passed, but when it finally came time to sober up and pay his debt to Mr Gardiner, he managed to stuff that up spectacularly.

On the positive side, the cousins did manage to definitively prove they could drink expensive brandy and become maudlin with the best of them. Their valet and batman were less impressed.

The next month offered up more of the same, and Mrs Annesley finally told him he needed to leave his sister to her care for a bit, as his hovering was not helping matters.

As it turned out, Bingley had finally settled on an estate to lease, in Hertfordshire or Herefordshire, or at least somewhere in England that had at least an even chance of starting with 'h.'

By Michaelmas, Darcy had resolved the communication difficulties and, was ready to help his friend learn to be a gentleman in the wilds of Hertfordshire.

Darcy occasionally had twinges of conscience after the incident in Cheapside about whether he was the best example of a gentleman, but he could at least teach his friend how to run an estate.

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3. A Country Assembly

“Do you think we will be safe here, Mr Darcy?” Miss Bingley asked as she took Darcy’s arm outside the assembly hall.

Darcy looked at the offending arm and, as had happened several times in the past couple of months, asked himself, ‘What would Gardiner do?’ He gently removed her arm and replied more softly than his annoyance at her presumption tempted him to.

“This is a country assembly, twenty miles from London, Miss Bingley. It will be indistinguishable from such a gathering in Lambton, or any other county outside the big cities for that matter. This society is different from London, but not inferior.”

She tittered, which annoyed him, and then spoke, which annoyed him even more. “Oh, you are so droll, sir. I doubt you have ever attended any such thing.”

He had to ruefully admit she was correct, much to his chagrin. There was no way he would share that particular failing with his companion, but he was belatedly determined to be more sociable with his neighbours when he returned to Derbyshire. Perhaps, like Bingley, he could practise in Meryton.

His reflections of the past few months about his own conduct and mistakes had left him feeling less confident in his own character. Mr Gardiner’s gentle chastisement had its effect, though it would be presumptuous to assume it was the man’s intent. As he endured the vicissitudes of his sister’s recovery from the debacle in Ramsgate, he had also endured his own.

Darcy understood he had been personally responsible for Georgiana's education, companion, itinerary, and every other aspect of her life for more than five years, and yet she required rescue from an unknown. To add insult to injury, he had been responsible for his own behaviour since he came off leading strings, and his evening in Cheapside showed he was as deficient as his sister. It was galling, but he at last decided he needed to become a better man himself. Railing at Mr Gardiner for his own failings was unjust and counterproductive.

A week after the dinner engagement debacle, he had returned hat in hand to Gracechurch Street to apologise to the nieces, only to be told his niece returned to their father's estate, somewhere north of London.

The knowledge that he had insulted daughters of a gentleman did not make his words any more or less abhorrent, and it should not have given him any more guilt, but old habits die hard, and it did. Though the reproofs were delivered with the gentlest touch, they were gradually having an effect. He had conversed for most of an hour with Mr Gardiner, and the man's advice seemed entirely sound.

His self-appointed tasks for his visit to Hertfordshire were to make himself practise being more sociable, and to work out a better way of dealing with Miss Caroline Bingley. She had entertained the idea that she could attract an offer from him and gone after it with all the subtlety of a badger. Darcy had ignored her for years, but he thought it might be time to disabuse her once and for all. He had no idea (and no particular desire to know) if she had avoided proposals from other men, but she was not getting any younger and her ambitions in his directions would obviously never bear fruit.

"Miss Bingley, forgive my presumption, but may I ask a somewhat forward question? Feel free to decline if it makes you uncomfortable."

"You can ask any question you like, Mr Darcy," she replied in a blatantly flirty

manner which doubly annoyed him.

“I have no idea of your matrimonial ambitions,” he began, feeling the sting of the white lie but believing the subterfuge necessary if he wanted to keep some vague semblance of propriety. “Is it your intention to marry a landed gentleman?”

The way her face pinched, as if she just sucked a lemon, before smoothing her countenance would have been comical if he were in an insulting mood, but it just made him feel sad.

“Of course I intend to marry a gentleman. That was my father’s life’s goal.”

Not wanting to dig too far in, Darcy spoke emphatically, “ THIS is how gentlemen live. If you marry an estate owner, you will spend far more than half of your life in a town just like this one. There are, of course, gentlemen in the law, clergy, or army who live in town—but estate owners invariably need to see to their estates, or at least the good ones do. This is probably the best chance you will ever have to learn if that life is for you. I suggest you take advantage of it. You might be far happier with a gentleman who resides in town. He would likely be a second or third son, but entirely suitable for your father’s ambitions.”

They had been speaking softly while walking, which was hardly fair, but it at least let him say his piece without allowing her to say things she could not retract.

He leaned forward and whispered to Bingley that he should escort his sister into the hall, then followed behind.

Despite his advice to Miss Bingley, and his self-appointed desire to improve his manner, he expected the evening to be trying. His dress, income, marital status, lack of potential in-laws, relative handsomeness, and every other superficial aspect of his life would be picked over like a dog with a bone.

He hated it all, but that was the price of consequence, and he resolved to perform up to Mr Gardiner's standards, if at all possible.

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Darcy generally hated assemblies and balls and ordinarily would have simply tried his best to hide out until the miserable chore was over. That said, his performance in Cheapside left him thinking he needed to work out a way to do better . He could not happily dance with half the women in the room like Bingley, nor make a dive for the refreshments table and card room like Hurst—but he could do something better than his usual stalking around the hall with a frown on his face. To be honest, he could at the very least offer up better manners than Bingley's sisters. He was slightly uneasy about his abrupt lecture to Miss Bingley and had no idea if what he said was too much or too little.

As a means to get started, he went along with Bingley to be introduced to the principal families, while his sisters scurried off into a corner like he might have done before Cheapside.

In this fashion he was properly introduced to the Lucases, Gouldings, Longs, Harringtons, and four of the five Bennet sisters. The matron seemed like a reincarnation of his aunt, Lady Catherine, while the eldest Miss Bennet immediately caught Bingley's attention, as expected.

Mrs Bennet seemed vexed by one daughter who had apparently made herself scarce, though after enduring the introduction, Darcy thought that with a mother like that he could not blame her. With five daughters out at once, she was hardly deficient in potential dance partners, and complaining about having one missing was hardly the best way to recommend herself to a stranger.

Bingley, naturally engaged the eldest Miss Bennet for the second set, having engaged

Miss Lucas for the first

“I love a country dance, and if Miss Bennet is not engaged for the next set, might I request it.”

“I am not engaged, sir,” the young lady replied with a demure smile.

Darcy thought her answer slightly ambiguous, but Bingley was happy, Mrs Bennet was ecstatic, and Darcy was resigned that Bingley would act as he always did.

“And you, Mr Darcy, do you like to dance as well?” she asked with what he considered excessive enthusiasm—though the nephew of Lady Catherine had little right to be too fastidious.

Darcy suspected he saw avarice in her eyes, the same as any other ambitious mother. Like his friend who gravitated to the prettiest woman in the room like a bee to the brightest flower, Darcy was also a creature of habit who usually ran for cover when matchmakers sharpened their knives. He was tempted to give a curt answer and run for the walls, as was his usual habit, but the spectre of Gardiner intruded to moderate his response.

“I beg your pardon madam, but I do not dance as much as my friend,” then he even softened it a bit by added, “...nobody does,” and even tried to follow that up with something better than a frown but not quite a grin, let alone the chuckle that might be called for. “I must dance with the ladies of my own party, of course, and then I like to become acquainted with the room before I consider others, but I shall oblige in time, once introductions are complete.”

The lady seemed like the sort who might well have been affronted by his standard response of mumbling and walking away (not that he would have cared), but this answer seemed to leave her at least mollified.

He bowed and continued following Sir William around the room until he had become acquainted with most of the principal families (still without any dances secured), and he ran out of excuses.

Since he missed the first and second sets, he solicited Mrs Hurst for the next, and finally Miss Bingley. Her reactions to the assembly were as predictable as her brother's, and not that much different than his would have been a month earlier. Darcy somewhat despaired that his little lecture upon entering the hall had not the slightest impact on her. Worse yet, it may have cemented in her mind that most gentlemen spent their time at their estates, but Darcy was different.

He had a couple interesting discussions with a few of the men but had not worked his way up to an actual unknown female, though his conscience was telling him to get on with it.

It appeared his conscience lacked sufficient alacrity for his host, because Mr Bingley came from the dance for a few minutes to press his friend to join it.

"Come, Darcy," said he, "I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had much better dance."

"Yes, Bingley, I see the necessity," he sighed. "I admit I have avoided dancing with people I am not well-acquainted with, but I suppose I cannot claim that nobody can be introduced in a ballroom."

"Certainly not!" Bingley announced with a laugh.

"I have been working my way up to it," Darcy admitted. "I notice you have been dancing with the handsomest woman in the room, as usual."

"Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters

sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you.”

Still procrastinating, and not at all certain he wanted to expose himself more to Mrs Bennet, Darcy asked, “Which do you mean?” and turning round he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye.

He returned his focus to Bingley. “Is she the absent Bennet sister? I recall there were five in total. She is certainly handsome enough to tempt any man.”

“Yes, she was missing, but I am certain Miss Bennet can make an introd...” he said, then looked slightly confused as his eyes wandered over in Elizabeth’s direction.

Darcy saw his confusion and turned to join him.

Bingley said, “Well, I suppose the tides wait for no man. She seems to have scarpered. Mayhap she had urgent business elsewhere. I wonder if she heard us discussing her.”

Darcy thought a bit before replying. “I do not think we said anything objectionable.”

“When has that ever concerned you?” Bingley asked insouciantly.

Darcy laughed a bit. “I am trying to turn over a new leaf. There is no point wasting the evening. I suppose I must fend for myself. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I am capable of soliciting a dance, so I shall proceed directly. ”

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Miss Janet Goulding turned out to be a good dancer and an engaging conversationist,

which once again proved Mr Gardiner's wisdom. She told him several useful things about the neighbourhood, offered to perform any necessary introductions, did not show unseemly interest in his income or status, and he found himself glad to know her.

She pointed out the missing Bennet daughter on the side of the room and offered to introduce her, to which Darcy replied he would be happy for it when it was convenient.

They tried a few forays into some less tedious topics such as literature and music, which again gave his partner a chance to recommend Miss Elizabeth, who was by far the best educated woman in the county. Miss Goulding was not particularly interested in such things, and made no bones about it, nor did she seem put out by his tepid interest in their acquaintance.

Darcy found occasional references to Miss Elizabeth from other ladies slightly disconcerting. He was accustomed to ladies who went to great lengths to recommend themselves over anyone else, and many, like Miss Bingley, were willing to go to great lengths to tear down a rival, but a few of his partners seemed genuinely interested in fostering any and all relationships in the community. She recommended Miss Long as the most enthusiastic about equestrian affairs, and Miss Mary Bennet as the most accomplished on the pianoforte.

At the end of the dance, he had to admit Miss Elizabeth Bennet sounded the most intriguing, and wished to meet her, though not with any great urgency. He saw her several times over the course of the evening and noticed she had a bright and joyful countenance, a light and pleasing figure, an enchanting laugh, and a ready way in conversation. Chance, however, never placed her any closer than a couple dozen yards, so he never even heard her speak.

Having broken out of his usual reserve by dancing with Miss Goulding, he found it

easy enough to fill the remaining dances with good partners. It was not the best night of his life, but it was far from the worst, and a far pleasanter way to spend an evening than expected.

4. A Brandy a Day

“Well, Bingley, it seems unfortunate your angel cannot fly. That would have been a considerable improvement over visiting on horseback in the rain,” Darcy said over brandy in Bingley’s study at Netherfield, a bastion of peace in a noisy house.

To some, the statement may have sounded mean-spirited or petulant, and before he met Mr Gardiner, he might well have said worse and meant it. In this case, though, Bingley could readily detect that it was more wistful than censorious.

“Aye, there’s the rub. I wonder if this was a matchmaking scheme.”

“It probably was, but it does not change much. Keep in mind that Longbourn is unlikely to have dedicated carriage horses. Those they keep are almost certainly shared with the home farm, and even occasionally with the tenants. At this time of year, they are often needed in the fields. Miss Bennet may not have realised it was likely to rain. She does seem like the optimistic sort.”

Bingley gave that some thought. “In that case, I would call it a modestly bad judgement call. I should hate to be called to account for my own stupidity, so perhaps the benefit of the doubt is in order.”

Darcy chuckled. “She is presently being called to account by a fever, so I believe she may consider her debt paid. That said, it is equally likely the ride was a scheme to throw her into your company more. It would not stretch credulity to believe she expected the rain to keep her overnight but not stuck in bed with a cold.”

Bingley frowned, but it did make a certain amount of sense. “If that be the case, I suppose we will never know who the instigator was. I can well imagine Mrs Bennet demanding it, and Miss Bennet acting as an obedient daughter, regardless of her opinion. Either way, ‘tis hardly a capital crime.”

“I suppose time will tell. How do you get on with the rest of the family. With the amount of attention you pay to the eldest—which I recommend you moderate slightly—you should be taking their measure just in case things progress to a closer alliance.”

“You do not oppose a closer alliance on principle?” Bingley asked in some surprise.

“It is not my business. It is hardly as if they would be making an alliance with me. I will point out they do not seem to be dowered very well, and the manners of much of the family—especially Mrs Bennet—seem a bit lacking, but to be honest, anybody with your sisters can handle a noisy mother-in-law. She is the daughter of a gentleman and presumably knows how to keep house in a country estate. She appears to be pretty and kind, so what would you have to complain about?”

Bingley boomed out in laughter, while Darcy joined with somewhat less exuberance. “I like this more amiable Darcy.”

“We shall see. What think you of the rest of the sisters?”

Bingley gave it a bit of thought. “The two youngest are silly flirts who should not be out in society—but, as you pointed out, a man with my sisters has little room to complain. Miss Mary is a bit odd, but certainly harmless.”

“Agreed.”

“Miss Elizabeth is a whole different kettle of fish.”

“How so?”

“She interrogated me!” Bingley stated emphatically. “Oh, she was polite, and she was subtle, and she never veered outside the bounds of propriety, but at this point she knows everything there is to know about me, and I know very little about her—aside from the obvious fact that she is pretty, clever and kind, which anybody of any sense at all can tell. I imagine even you caught that much.”

“Interesting! I should point out that you are not exactly the hardest man to interrogate in the world, so she would hardly qualify as a French spy.”

“True... too true... but I have never had such a skilful interview in my life. I was impressed.”

“Interesting,” Darcy replied.

Bingley asked nonchalantly, “Did she subject you to the same, or are you exempt because you are not romancing her sister?”

“Not exactly,” Darcy replied pensively.

“What has she said to you, if I may be so bold as to ask?”

“It’s the oddest thing,” Darcy replied, still trying to work it all out.

“I am on pins and needles. What has she said, exactly?”

“Nothing!”

“What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

“Exactly what I said. Nothing! She has not said a single word directly to me. A month into the acquaintance, I do not believe we have even been introduced, and it has been long enough that it would be awkward at this point.”

“How in the world has that come about? Did you frighten her off at the assembly?”

“I was, as you rather shockingly observed, on my best behaviour that night. I cannot see how I could possibly have offended her.”

“Did you try to get an introduction. Miss Mary is a stickler for propriety, and if Miss Elizabeth is the same, then it is your responsibility to ask for the introduction, so she would not dare approach you.”

“Thank you for explaining the basics of propriety,” Darcy said, but gave a good-sized chuckle and took another sip of brandy for good measure.

“I am quite in suspense. What happened?”

Darcy leaned back for the story.

“As you noticed, she disappeared about the time you suggested I dance with her. It was not a problem, as she was far from the only lady in want of a partner. ”

“You know my opinion on the subject.”

“I noticed her the rest of the night. If nothing else, she was certainly not begging for an introduction and a dance... far from it. I noticed she is quite attractive, with a light and pleasing figure, an enchanting laugh, and an easy way with everybody. As you so aptly observed, there were a sizeable number of very pretty ladies at the assembly, so she did not stand out too much. I wanted to get to know her, but not with any urgency. Though I paid attention, I could not be rude to my partners, so I never quite

got close enough to pull it all together, nor did I neglect my actual dance partners.”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy... chasing a lady... the world has run amok!” Bingley burst out with a hearty laugh.

“Hardly! At any rate, the next time I noticed her was at Lucas Lodge. I spent some time hanging about the edge of her conversations, trying to not be too obnoxious about it. I found her discussions interesting and intelligent, but I felt awkward about asking for an introduction or just joining in, if you can believe that.”

“I can well believe it. You rarely have to put yourself out.”

“I got more and more curious,” Darcy admitted sheepishly. “I was beginning to get the idea that she was avoiding me, though as you suggested in your interrogation, she was quite subtle about it. She had a knack for disappearing right when I was working up my nerve to speak to her.”

“Sounds frustrating.”

“It was. After she played, which I enjoyed very much, Sir William ambushed her and presented her hand to me as a dance partner. You can just imagine the man.” He deepened his voice until it boomed. “My dear Miss Eliza, why are you not dancing? Mr Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner. You cannot refuse to dance, I am sure when so much beauty is before you.” ‘

He sighed. “He took her hand and presented it towards me. I was still a bit shocked, so it took me a moment to get my wits about me. Before I could echo the request, she turned to Sir William and answered him! I appreciate your efforts Sir William, but I am not dancing tonight.”

Bingley stared in consternation for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“She curtsied and walked away without another word. I spent the next five minutes trying to decide if she was being shy, generous, or rude.”

“It is certainly peculiar.”

“And now she is here, in this house, and still has not said a word to me. I am beginning to be apprehensive. Mayhap she has some prior acquaintance, though I cannot imagine what it is.”

“If she had, there would be little she could do save avoid you, presuming she only knows you by reputation.”

The men thought about it a bit, and finally Bingley offered, “Well, she cannot avoid you forever. She will not stay in her sister’s room the whole time. Basic politeness demands she spend at least a few minutes in the drawing room. I suppose we shall see what we shall see.”

“That we will, Bingley... that we will.”

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The question was answered at half past six when Miss Elizabeth appeared for dinner. Darcy took that to mean Miss Bennet was nowhere near death’s door, but then had to wonder what Mr Gardiner would think of such an uncharitable thought. He resolved to be distantly polite and see what the lady did for the moment.

Bingley was all concern for Miss Bennet’s health, as anybody would expect. To his civil inquiries, Miss Elizabeth simply related that her sister was by no means better.

The Bingley sisters, on hearing this, repeated three or four times how much they were grieved, how shocking it was to have a bad cold, and how excessively they disliked

being ill themselves; and then thought no more of the matter: and their indifference towards Jane when not immediately before them was about as expected.

Darcy had no idea what Miss Elizabeth thought of the sisters, but if she had more sense than a donkey, she ought to dislike them on principle.

The dinner did not advance his chances to speak to her in the slightest. She arrived in the drawing room at the last possible moment, though whether that was by happenstance or design was impossible to determine. She had not specifically avoided him, but they were only in the room a minute or two before Bingley led her to the dining room, where Miss Bingley had placed her as far from Darcy as possible. There, she seemed to endure Hurst after making a few attempts to speak to him.

Darcy could not pay any real attention to the lady of his fascination, because the bane of his existence still had not absorbed the obvious fact that she was of no interest to him. He spent the long and tedious meal hearing on dits of people in town about whom he did not care in the least.

After dinner, Miss Elizabeth returned to her sister, and that was the end of it for a time.

The Bingley sisters carried on for quite some time about the Bennet sisters' dowries... and their manners... and Miss Elizabeth's shocking three-mile walk... and the mud on her petticoats... and her blowsy hair... and her conceited independence... and the obvious problem that they had an uncle who was an attorney and another who was a tradesman in Cheapside, apparently in the mistaken belief that an uncle in trade was somehow worse than a father in trade.

"If they had uncles enough to fill all Cheapside," cried Bingley, "it would not make them one jot less agreeable."

“But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world,” replied Darcy, mainly because he wanted to end the discussion with the less said about Cheapside the better.

As far as Bingley’s sisters were concerned, Darcy wanted them unaware that he even knew where Cheapside was, let alone had recently engaged with a man whose business should never even be mentioned in polite company (not that politeness was the order of the day in the Bingley parlour). His sister’s reputation required a certain amount of discretion, so any discussion of that part of town was best avoided entirely or shut down as quickly as possible.

### 5. The Card Despiser

Later in the evening, they were playing at loo when Miss Elizabeth appeared. Once again, she entered the room and paid him not the slightest attention. She glanced at the table, then picked up a book to pass her time in the parlour.

Bingley and Hurst begged her to join them, but she politely declined.

Miss Bingley tried her best to be snide, implying that either Miss Elizabeth was a bluestocking who read constantly and had no pleasure in anything else, or that she was too poor to afford the table stakes. Miss Elizabeth just batted her comments away like an annoying fly, but Miss Bingley had the bit in her teeth and turned a general comment about reading versus other pursuits into a long paean to Darcy's library in Pemberley.

Darcy paid strict attention to Miss Elizabeth with that discussion, but she gave no more reaction to that than to anything else. All he knew for certain was that she must not have found the company all that congenial, since she had not laughed or smiled for a much longer time than when he observed her in her natural element.

Miss Bingley seemed to have a burr in her blanket, or perhaps she was remembering that Darcy had commented on Miss Elizabeth's fine eyes at Lucas Lodge, but either way she just wanted to keep pushing and prodding.

“Miss Elizabeth, you said you are not a great reader, and you have pleasure in many things. Why not cards?”

“I did not say I do not play cards,” she replied with thinly disguised annoyance. “I said I was content with my book.”

Darcy had been paying little attention to his own cards, and gave even more to the conversation, which was frankly more interesting.

After a bit of back and forth between the two, Miss Bingley finally asked in a tone of poisoned honey, “We could play for pence, if you prefer.”

The intended slight was not particularly subtle, even though it was disguised as concern for the comfort of her guest and her purse.

Darcy watched Miss Elizabeth like a hawk, wondering if she was going to lose her temper. It seemed unlikely, but one could always hope.

Nobody seemed willing to dive into the middle of a cat fight, and Miss Elizabeth stared her adversary down for what seemed quite a long time, though it was probably only a few moments.

She finally replied. “I am happy to play cards if you insist, but any team game seems unfair since you have all known each other for years, and I have no notion of your relative skills. If you are so desperate for me to play, I shall oblige you. The game is Brag [1] . I shall play until I need to return to Jane.”

With that, she jumped up from the sofa, walked out into the corridor for a moment, then returned and dropped five guineas on the table, which she obviously had secreted in a pocket somewhere since she had no reticule.

Everyone stared in shock, and she asked nonchalantly, “If that is too rich for your blood, I suppose we could use Miss Bingley’s idea of pence, though I do not have anything that small.”



Darcy shook his head and wondered. They had been playing high, but not five guineas high. He did occasionally play for that and more, and he knew men who gambled away entire estates and fortunes—but it was a remarkably high bet for a simple country house. Apparently, Miss Elizabeth did have a temper, and she was throwing down the gauntlet. Those stakes were enormous in their current situation, probably one to three month's allowance for the lady. Darcy doubted Hurst could afford to lose very many games at that level—not that the man would think himself in the slightest danger from a woman .

The rest of the party sat down while Hurst shuffled, and they started the vastly more interesting game. Play commenced for a few minutes, before conversation resumed unevenly.

Miss Bingley was constitutionally incapable of silence, so she made a few comments about Darcy's sister. He did not want to discuss her for obvious reasons, so he gave one-word answers, none of which impeded Miss Bingley in the least.

“How I long to see her again! I never met with anybody who delighted me so much. Such a countenance, such manners! And so extremely accomplished for her age! Her performance on the pianoforte is exquisite.”

Darcy grumbled at the topic but obviously had to keep such mutterings to himself.

“It is amazing to me,” said Bingley, “how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are.”

“All young ladies accomplished! My dear Charles, what do you mean?”

“Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very

accomplished.”

Darcy thought it might be better to concentrate on such accomplishments as refraining from eloping with scoundrels. He could not say that, of course, not to mention the fact that play was continuing, and he was not doing particularly well.

In the end, he alluded to only knowing half a dozen truly accomplished women, hoping that would shut the discussion down. No such luck.

Miss Elizabeth seemed to take particular delight in goading Miss Bingley, though she was still studiously avoiding Darcy as far as he could tell.

“ You must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman, ” she threw out nonchalantly as she laid down three of a kind and claimed the pot.

Everyone stared a bit at that, though why they did not expect a simple country girl to win occasionally was a mystery.

Miss Bingley took the bait readily. “No one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.”

“All this she must possess,” added Darcy, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”

He had no idea why he said that, or even if he cared at all about the discussion. He mostly was poking the bear—trying to goad Miss Elizabeth into answering him directly.

The deal had come to Miss Elizabeth, who shuffled and dealt skilfully. Of course, every young lady had some skill with cards, so the ability to shuffle well meant little. Darcy waited anxiously to see if Miss Elizabeth would have anything to add to the discussion, and if so, if she would respond to Caroline, himself, or the table at large.

She glanced around the table and seemed ready to let the subject drop (wisely), but Bingley was not quite ready to let it go. “What think you, Miss Elizabeth?”

“About what?”

“Accomplishments.”

She shrugged a bit. “I have no horse in that race, as I dispute the premise,” then she raised her bet.

Much to everyone’s surprise, Hurst weighed in. “Does that mean you have no opinion, or you possess a different idea of what is required to be accomplished?”

Everyone stared at him in shock, and Darcy wondered if the discussion were finally interesting enough to bring the indolent man to life, his barging in was a way to distract the others so he could fleece them with the cards, or perhaps Hurst just enjoyed goading Miss Elizabeth to further annoy his sister-in-law. The last theory had much to recommend it, and Darcy thought Hurst would happily pay more than five Guinea’s to vex Caroline.

“I do,” Miss Elizabeth said, apparently in the mood to make them drag it out of her as play continued, though nobody was paying very rapt attention to the cards.

“Care to elaborate?” Hurst replied.

“I doubt anybody would find it interesting.”

“I most certainly would!” Bingley replied emphatically as he made his own play.

Elizabeth looked around the table and sighed in apparent resignation, seeming for all the world to think it the duller subject imaginable.

“Those things you mention are little more than husband hunting bait . For the most part, they are worthless once you snare the poor man. For myself, I have always thought it smarter to worry about the last fifty.”

All play stopped for a minute, but Miss Elizabeth moved it along by making another play and then goading Miss Bingley to make her own rather poor play when she paused.

Bingley finally asked, “The last fifty?”

“Yes—the last fifty. Miss Bingley’s list of accomplishments is useful in certain times and places, such as a London ballroom, for a season or two—perhaps three if a lady is particularly unattractive or unlucky,” she said, with a glance at Caroline who was on at least her fourth season. “If such an accomplished lady manages to catch the gentleman, then she spends the next fifty years being the mistress of an estate. I simply prefer to worry about those fifty years more than the few brief seasons of courtship, which are ephemeral in the grand scheme of things.”

Darcy rather expected howls of outrage, but instead they had dead silence. Naturally, he was not about to break it, but Miss Elizabeth helpfully said, “Your turn, Mr Bingley.”

As if Hurst’s intervention were not unusual enough, his wife entered the fray with a question that was uncharacteristically devoid of anything her own sister might think. “Might you elaborate?”

Elizabeth looked around the table, sighed, and finally said, "If I must."

"We should appreciate it," Bingley encouraged.

She threw down another good hand and collected another pot, then continued.

"I could walk upstairs right now, awaken my sister from her sickbed, and say, 'Jane, we will have a dozen people for dinner tomorrow. What do we do.' Off the top of her head, she would know what we have in the pantry, what we can get from the home farm, the shops, and neighbouring estates. Naturally, she would consider the season, our budget, and the status of the entire house. Within the hour, she would have orders for all that needs to be done. The second hour, she would have learnt about the new guests, worked out a seating arrangement, and found out if guest rooms needed to be aired, which guests should be close or separated, and so forth. She would do this without a second thought."

She stopped to see if anyone wanted to contradict her, but then since nobody had anything to say, she goaded Mr Hurst into taking his turn. She had been distracting the table with her talk while simultaneously goading the continuation of play all along.

"When they arrived, she would arrange the table such that everyone was as comfortable as they could be. She would actively encourage conversation during the meal, so everyone gets a chance to speak. It is harder than it sounds, as every table has a few people who never say a word without being forced, and a few others who never shut up about their own narrow concerns."

Darcy thought she showed remarkable restraint by not looking at himself and Miss Bingley with that statement.

"That is just one skill of dozens, but it is an example of why I find your list of

accomplishments suspect. I could also list such things as how to hire, fire, and discipline servants. How and when to visit tenants and ensure their wellbeing. What to do when a tenant's baby is born, someone dies, sickness strikes, and all the other difficulties of life. Then, of course there are remedies, how to treat the sick, cleaning schedules, and so forth... not to mention the hundreds of topics related to child rearing."

She paused momentarily to examine her cards and make her play before continuing.

"Naturally, there are also the basics for the mistress of any house—city or country, gentry or trade. Their first responsibility is ensuring that all guests are safe and comfortable, that nobody speaks disparagingly about anyone else, nobody feels unwelcome... everyone is addressed correctly... you know, the fundamentals! "

That time she did stare hard at Miss Bingley, and it became obvious she was not only aware of the less than subtle hints the woman made in her presence, but probably what was said behind her back. Darcy knew many of the servants were local, and reporting what was said to the other locals in the house would not be at all unusual.

Caroline was turning beet red, and may well have said something untoward, but Hurst broke in. "Your turn, Caroline. Perhaps you can play while you think on your response."

That lady turned a gimlet eye on her brother-in-law but at least played her hand, though not all that carefully.

Darcy decided to get into the conversation to see if Miss Elizabeth would respond directly. "I applaud your reasoning, Miss Elizabeth, and have only to be chagrined by mine. It is a well thought out argument that I will give some considerable thought to."

Having thrown the gauntlet to the point where she could not quite continue ignoring

him, he made his play with slightly less care than was probably wise.

Miss Elizabeth looked directly at him, for the first time. She let the moment stretch out, then delayed a response by laying down her cards and collecting the pile of coins.

“Based on my definition, I know perhaps thirty to fifty truly accomplished women,” she replied nonchalantly, then turned back to the table and stood up.

“I thank you for the enlightening evening, but I must return to my sister,” she replied, and picked up at least twenty guineas, leaving most at the table staring in a combination of amazement at her good luck at cards, and consternation at their own meagre remaining piles.

She curtseyed and walked out the door, leaving the men thoroughly nonplussed, at least one of the women seething while waiting to vent her spleen, and everyone far shorter of funds than they had been an hour earlier. By Darcy’s estimation, the lady had probably made six months’ allowance in a half-hour.

“Elizabeth Bennet,” said Miss Bingley, when the door was closed on her, “is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But, in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art.”

Darcy could not even work out what the woman meant. Did she think Miss Elizabeth’s list was somehow an excuse for a lady not working on Miss Bingley’s list? Did she think Miss Elizabeth valuing the last fifty years more than the first three somehow constituted undervaluing ladies? Did she even comprehend that Miss Elizabeth was showing how little respect she had for Miss Bingley’s lauded accomplishments. He could not make any sense of it. He suspected that Miss Elizabeth thought her response a good chance to try to highlight her own superiority.

Darcy was having none of it.

“Undoubtedly,” replied Darcy, to whom this remark was chiefly addressed, “there is a meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable.”

Naturally, he did not say that men’s behaviour was, on average, far more despicable, especially in the case of men like Wickham.

Bingley laughed heartily. He was rather impressed with how Miss Elizabeth had fleeced the lot of them with a few well-chosen words and clever card play. He knew they could afford the loss of money far easier than some could live with the shame of having been so easily bested, verbally, monetarily, and in the argument about accomplishments.

The main thing Bingley got out of the discussion was that Darcy thought Miss Elizabeth’s description of an accomplished woman had merit, and Miss Elizabeth used her own sister as her example of such an accomplished woman.

Looking around, he saw that Caroline would never even understand what had happened, and Darcy would likely deny it—but it certainly made his position better. It would be hard for Caroline or Darcy to object to Miss Bennet, should he decide to proceed.

Speaking of Caroline, she looked like she was about to start another diatribe, but she was interrupted by the opening of the door.

Miss Elizabeth poked her head in, and said, “Oh, I almost forgot! If you prefer Miss Bingley’s definition, I know around five and twenty truly accomplished women. Perhaps fifteen by Mr Darcy’s standard,” then she gave a wave and was gone.



Her departure was met with a booming laugh from Hurst, along with some mumbling about cheek of the devil. Bingley and Darcy joined in, and even Mrs Hurst tittered a bit, while Miss Bingley continued fuming.

### 6. Breakfast of Champions

Breakfast found Darcy assessing his wins and losses of the previous evening.

In the win column, he had goaded Miss Elizabeth into replying to something he said. She had not spoken directly to him, of course, but it was marginally better than nothing. He was still mystified about what he had done to get in her brown books, but solving the mystery seemed a worthwhile use of his time. It was not as if he was all that busy.

In the admittedly more substantial losses column, he had done even worse than Hurst and Miss Bingley. The distraction and novelty of playing cards with the young lady, along with a rather foolish presumption about her skills, had left his five guineas entirely gone. The rest of the residents were considerably lighter in the purse as well, and he wondered about it. Her skill at both cards and distraction were worthy of a chess-master, and he had to wonder where and how she learnt. Longbourn seemed an unlikely training ground, unless her father was far cleverer than he appeared.

The lady did not appear for breakfast, but since it was only the second day of the elder Miss Bennet's stay, the fact that she remained above stairs was hardly surprising—even discounting the fact that half of Netherfield's residents were subtly hostile at best.

Miss Bingley naturally made the opening salvo. “Well, that was quite a show last night. It is difficult to fathom such a vulgar display.”

Darcy and Bingley frowned at the slightly ruder than usual statement, both wishing

the other would say something. The reply came from an unexpected source.

“Yes, I daresay you outdid even yourself, Caroline,” Hurst said in a moment suspended between slicing his ham and taking some coffee. “Your acknowledgment of your own vulgarity shows a substantially improved level of self-awareness! It seems Miss Elizabeth’s lessons about the basic duties of a hostess are already having an effect. Your father might have been better off sending you to her for a week than all the years in that seminary.”

The room was shocked into silence for a minute, then Caroline snapped angrily, “What can you possibly mean?”

Hurst made a great show of slicing another piece of ham, “You speak of manners as if your behaviour is proper, while hers is not. Anybody with eyes and ears can see the converse is true. You are shockingly rude most of the time, and we all just put up with it because... well, to be honest, I do not know why.”

“I will not be disparaged in my own house,” Caroline snapped.

“My house,” Bingley finally contributed. “You have to admit Miss Elizabeth does an excellent job of instruction. We have been here a month, and I doubt you even have a vague idea of who our tenants are, and the fact that you cannot refrain from insulting my guests in my house says quite a bit. Why, you cannot even manage to address her properly, and as she so correctly pointed out, it is a rather rudimentary skill.”

Caroline tossed down her serviette. “I will not sit here and listen to this, nor will I be lectured to by some country mushroom!”

She stormed away from the table in high dudgeon, while the rest of the party resumed their meal in a more congenial atmosphere, though Hurst could not quite resist the temptation for one last dig. “Case in point.”

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Miss Bingley's exit was followed a minute or two later by the entrance of Miss Elizabeth, leaving most at the table wondering if she heard the discussion, and if so, what she thought about it. Given the abrasiveness of Miss Bingley's voice, Darcy suspected the dogs probably heard it in the kennels, but a lady would be unlikely to comment.

She spoke brightly, "I apologise for my tardiness. Jane's fever increased over the night, so I could not get away earlier. I hope you are all having a lovely day."

With that, she went to the sideboard for her meal and returned to sit next to Mrs Hurst on the opposite end but the same side as Darcy.

"Is there anything I can do for your sister's comfort," Bingley asked nervously. "I shall be happy to call for Mr Jones again or my physician from town."

"Neither are necessary," she replied placatingly. "This seems more a minor setback than a relapse. Let us see how she does the rest of the day."

With that, she tucked in, so the table resumed their discussion of generalities, with the attitude being easier than in the presence of Miss Bingley, but slightly tenser than before Miss Elizabeth arrived.

Darcy decided to try again. "Miss Elizabeth, I found your description of an accomplished woman... interesting, despite its apparent contentiousness on certain fronts."

"I hope I did not distress anyone, as that was not my intention," she said with a smile, though she still said it more generally to the table than to Darcy specifically.

Hurst laughed. “I suspect your intention was to distract us from our cards.”

“If that be the case, I should hardly be the one to admit it. I assure you any dispute was unintentionally done.”

Darcy doubted the veracity of that statement, and it left him wondering about Miss Elizabeth’s strategy (if she had one). If her elder sister was forming an attachment to Bingley, the obvious and smart play would be to keep her head down and not cause trouble. Given how thoroughly she ignored him without giving offence, he did not doubt she could ignore everyone else in the house just as easily. She seemed clever enough to comprehend that cleaning out the Netherfield residents while subtly lecturing them on deportment was unlikely to advance her elder sister’s suit, so why did she do it? Even though she appeared to join in a fit of pique, Darcy’s instinct told him that was more of a deliberate strategy than succumbing to temper.

Putting Miss Bingley in her place, regardless of how gently and politely it was done, was also a strategy not likely to improve Miss Bennet’s chances of—how had she put it?—catching the poor man. If she cared about her sister, why sabotage her? It made no sense. It seemed possible, though unlikely, that she was testing Bingley somehow, but he did not see how it could be.

It was all very confusing, but he supposed he did not know everything. Mrs Bennet was as big a matchmaker as he had ever seen, but with five daughters she could not afford to be lax, so he did not necessarily hold it against her (as long as she did her machinations out of his hearing, and against someone else).

While Darcy had been ruminating, Bingley was acting more Bingley than usual. “I cannot believe any such ill intent!”

Hurst laughed, apparently having the time of his life. “Who says distracting us to fleece us is ill intent? I say that is just ordinary gambling, and those who cannot keep

their wits about them have no business bringing their stakes to the table.”

Bingley laughed. “Regardless, it was jolly good fun—that is all I have to say.”

Mrs Hurst had thus far said little, but never quite worked her way up to an opinion.

“What do you think, Mrs Hurst?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

She stuttered a bit before answering. “If your intent was to distract us, I should say your pile of guineas at the end proved the strategy a success. If your intent was to enlighten us... well, I do believe at least some of us have something new to think about.”

“I could not agree more,” Bingley replied jovially. “I had not thought of half those items, but they do make a good deal of sense. Pray forgive me if I overstep, but do all of your sisters ascribe to your thinking?”

Everyone was silent as Elizabeth buttered a scone slowly and pensively. “We do, for the most part. Our mother has not mastered all of those skills, but she does well enough. Jane, Mary, and I are au fait with the concept, though Jane is the best of us. My two youngest sisters are... very young.”

Darcy read the last to mean young, silly, and not likely to ever meet either definition of accomplished but said nothing for obvious reasons.

He wondered if he was thinking about her strategy all wrong. For all he knew, the entire evening had been designed just to set her up to tell Bingley that her sister was the best of them. Of course, it was equally likely that she had no strategy at all and was just doing whatever seemed right in the moment.

He finally decided to try once again to engage her. “I find your definition of the

requirements for the wife of a gentleman farmer to be very sensible. I am a bit surprised at the sheer number of women you know who meet both definitions, though.”

He attempted to keep scepticism out of his voice but was mostly unsuccessful.

She looked at him like an entomologist examining a particularly interesting insect and finally answered evenly. “Do you doubt the numbers?”

“Not in the least. I am just surprised, given the size of this neighbourhood.”

“Ah... you presume I never leave Meryton?”

Darcy shook his head, “I presume nothing. I am simply trying to understand.”

She shrugged. “Jane and I spend time with relatives in town, myself more than her. Some of both types of accomplished women are in Hertfordshire, some are in London, and I occasionally travel with my relatives and have met a number of people. My numbers were neither exact nor definitive... just who I could remember off the top of my head.”

Everyone else at the table looked at her in confusion, as she was implying her circle of acquaintance was considerably larger than anyone expected. Perhaps she was not such a country mushroom after all.

She had finished her scone by then. “My mother loves to boast that we dine with four and twenty families. It makes sense that at least some of them would match either definition. London has well over one million inhabitants, so if you can only find a half-dozen accomplished women, you really should get out more.”

She stood to leave, but as was becoming her custom, she turned just before she

exited.

“I probably should mention that, using Miss Bingley’s definition of an accomplished lady, at least five from my list are orphans or natural daughters raised in a girls’ school.”

Then she left with a slight laugh, leaving the rest shaking their heads.

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The gentlemen spent most of the day shooting. They managed to bag some grouse and woodcock, much to their approval.

Hurst cared little for anything save food, drink, cards, and sport. Between the exciting contest with Miss Elizabeth the previous evening and a good day of shooting, he was as content as he ever was.

Bingley was happy to have something to distract him from worrying over Miss Bennet, which was doing nobody any good.

Darcy was ambivalent. He enjoyed hunting, but thought he might have preferred hunting for conversation with Miss Elizabeth. On the other hand, getting her attention while avoiding the other female members of the household sounded like more trouble than it was worth; particularly when it seemed obvious the Bennet sisters would be there for several more days at least, and several weeks if Mrs Bennet had any say in the matter.

Darcy’s cheerful mood lasted right up to the moment they rode into the forecourt at Netherfield, where he spotted a crested coach in front of the house, at which time he cursed a bit under his breath, then a bit louder just to vent his spleen.



Bingley and Hurst looked over quizzically, so Darcy answered the implied question, with a nod toward the carriage.

“My cousin Andrew... Viscount Fitzwilliam. The only reason he is not my least-favourite relative is because my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is worse.”

“What is wrong with him?”

“He is overbearing, rude, flirtatious, and as his presence clearly indicates, presumptuous.”

“Caroline will have kittens over the idea of a viscount in the house, so I think I may have to put up with him.”

“I suppose,” Darcy said in rather poor humour.

He wondered what Miss Elizabeth would make of his cousin. Darcy knew she could apply a satirical wit when she felt like it, though he had yet to play the part of her victim, since that would require her to speak to him. He supposed time would tell.

“Let us see what he is about,” Bingley said rather energetically, and pushed his horse forward.

They arrived a few minutes later to find the viscount already ensconced in the parlour with a glass of Bingley’s finest brandy in hand, and Miss Bingley fawning over him much like she typically did with Darcy.

“Darcy, old man! Good to see you,” his cousin boomed, then jumped from the chair, spilling a bit of his brandy in the process, and strode over to greet him with far too much enthusiasm and too little decorum for Darcy’s taste.

“Andrew, may I make introductions?” Darcy asked with a frown, just barely refraining from asking what the devil he was doing there, and how soon he could leave.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Darcy made the introductions in the usual manner, then sat back to see what his cousin was about. He did not have to wait long.

“Bingley, I do hope I am not imposing. I could use lodging for a few days... no more than a week, my word on that.”

“Why?” Darcy asked emphatically. He was not the least bit enthusiastic about having his cousin visit, and was hoping to curtail him, though with dusk long past and full dark fast approaching, he doubted he would succeed.

“Bit of a disagreement with a fellow in town. Just want a few days for tempers to cool,” the viscount replied blithely.

Darcy was nearly certain the ‘argument’ was probably related to gambling losses, and the ‘tempers to cool’ amounted to his father telling him to rusticate somewhere until he managed to pay off some of his debts of honour (as usual).

“You are very welcome, my lord,” Caroline purred far too quickly, and with entirely too much enthusiasm.

Darcy gritted his teeth at the display until he realised having another target for Miss Bingley’s approbation for a few days might just be worth the aggravation of his cousin’s company.

Bingley echoed his welcome, not that anyone who knew him would expect any

different, so Darcy sighed to acknowledge that the die was cast.

Miss Bingley prepared to lead him to his room personally when Miss Elizabeth entered, having just returned from a walk in the garden.

Darcy wondered how she would react to meeting a viscount. He knew that her mother and younger sisters would go on for a quarter-hour in raptures, but Miss Elizabeth barely even acknowledged him , so her reactions were harder to predict.

Darcy gave her a bow. “Miss Elizabeth, may I present my cousin, Viscount Fitzwilliam?”

He was slightly surprised when her face took on a hard look, and she simply replied, “You may,” with even less enthusiasm than usual.

Slightly taken aback, Darcy nevertheless performed the introductions in the usual way.

His cousin reacted as he usually did upon introduction to a beautiful woman.

“Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to meet you. Had I known such beauty existed in Hertfordshire, I should have visited Bingley sooner.”

He reached for Elizabeth’s hand, but she was already curtsying and half-turned to leave. “I thank you, sir,” she said with a tone of voice that did not sound particularly thankful at all. She continued, “I must take my leave, as I am caring for my ill sister. Good evening.”

With that, she curtsied to the rest of the room at large and disappeared like a ghost, as seemed to be her custom.

Darcy was slightly confused by the exchange while his cousin seemed befuddled. Neither man was accustomed to being so thoroughly ignored, particularly by an insignificant country miss. Darcy had become used to it and was beginning to relish the challenge. The viscount looked as if nobody short of royalty had ever treated him with such indifference.

“What an enchanting creature,” the viscount finally said, which set Miss Bingley to grinding her teeth in annoyance.

“She is a lady , cousin! Mind your manners!” Darcy whispered emphatically after pulling his cousin aside.

The viscount was known as a rather brazen flirt. Having him trying to make love to Miss Elizabeth was definitely not something Darcy cared to witness. He doubted the lady would much care for it either, but of course, that was pure speculation. For all he knew, she might be acting as an advanced scout for Mrs Bennet’s matchmaking ambitions, and a viscount would be quite the catch.

Miss Bingley finally dragged the man away as he still had not cleaned the dust from the road, and it was nearly time to dress for dinner.

### 7. The Noble Guest

Dinner was a raucous affair with Bingley and the viscount at the table competing with Miss Bingley's usual ceaseless chatter.

Darcy quite enjoyed the fact that his cousin became the object of his hostess' attentions, so he supposed that was something positive. The viscount just seemed to accept her fawning as the natural course of things and even managed to drag Hurst into a lively conversation about cards. That was hardly surprising as the two men shared at least one vice and a rather high level of indolence.

He was disappointed by Miss Elizabeth's absence, though having to endure his cousin flirting with the lady would have been torture, so it was probably for the best. It was worrisome that she had sent a note that her sister's fever had slightly increased, so she took a tray in her chamber.

Darcy wondered if that were true. She had not seemed all that impressed with his cousin, and Miss Bennet made an awfully convenient excuse if she wanted to avoid him for at least an evening. The one thing he had noticed was that Miss Elizabeth did not seem the slightest bit overawed with wealth or status.

The separation of the sexes went about as Darcy expected. He could not avoid speaking with his cousin entirely, but the two men had said just about all they had to say to each other a decade earlier. They were vastly different men with quite different ideas of how to live their lives. Darcy thought his cousin was entirely too indolent, too unreliable, too flirty, and too much of a coxcomb; while the viscount thought Darcy was a stick in the mud.

After the obligatory catching up with those aspects of their lives that neither cared in the least about, Darcy was desperate for an escape. He wanted to write his sister a letter, though he was not exactly looking forward to the process, since he really did not know what to say. Georgiana was still extremely unsettled about Ramsgate, so Darcy thought he might regale her with tales of the Bennet sisters in the hope it might break her out of it. Nothing else had.

Even with that ambition, since Miss Elizabeth had not joined them for dinner, none of the men were in a particular hurry to end the separation of sexes. The accomplishment of writing to his sister was not worth the annoyance of the Bingley sisters' company, so dragging out the separation seemed the ideal solution.

Hurst apparently thought similarly, so he suggested showing his new hunting rifle to the viscount, an activity Darcy considered dull as ditchwater. He liked to shoot, but as long as he had the best gun his gamekeeper suggested, he knew all he needed. Long experience taught him that men like Hurst and his cousin could drone on endlessly about rifle bores, powder horns, rifling patterns, ignition systems, cleaning regimens... it just went on and on and on, worse than Miss Bingley's endless recitation of on dits from London. He had once seen two men nearly come to blows over which polish to use on their gunstocks.

With that in mind, he suggested he and Bingley remain in place for a half-hour to give the other two men time to purge themselves. Bingley was as jovial as any man, but his system was quite simple. Every time Darcy got a new gun, Bingley got an identical one, and he was done with the subject. In effect, he was also dependent on the Pemberley gamekeeper.

Once they were blissfully alone, Darcy idly wondered, "Did you notice Miss Elizabeth's reaction to my cousin?"

"Yes. She did not seem all that pleased with the acquaintance, though compared to

Caroline, I am not certain anyone could compete.”

Darcy grunted, not willing to agree with the obviously true statement.

“I wonder if Miss Bennet was actually sicker, or Miss Elizabeth was using her for an excuse to avoid the company. I would give it about even odds either way.”

“I should have to agree,” Bingley said, then refilled their glasses.

Both men startled slightly guiltily when the door opened abruptly. Miss Elizabeth stepped in quietly and closed the door.

Darcy thought the lady was pushing her luck slightly with regard to propriety, but since it was two gentlemen of good repute in a public dining room, he supposed it was acceptable. Such things generally made him slightly nervous, but he had been in similar situations with Miss Bingley many times.

Both men stood to greet her and exchanged all the usual bows and such.

“Gentlemen, I hate to disturb you, but I hope to ask a favour,” she said without preamble.

“I am at your disposal, madam,” Bingley replied enthusiastically to nobody’s surprise.

She took a deep breath, and for the first time in their acquaintance, looked more than slightly discomposed, but only for a moment as her countenance hardened.

“My sister and I will be leaving at first light. I wonder if we could impose on you for the use of your carriage. If that is not convenient, I will fetch my father’s,” she said without an ounce of inflexion.

“Leave! Impossible!” Bingley burst out before he could think all the way through his response.

Elizabeth responded with similar forthrightness. “Jane has a cold, not a gunshot wound. She will be fine, and we have imposed on your hospitality long enough.”

“But... but... but...” Bingley continued babbling, apparently completely adrift in the conversation.

Miss Elizabeth continued relentlessly. “I obviously do not insist on the carriage, sir. I only wish to ascertain what time I need to get up so I can arrange matters appropriately.”

Darcy rather incredulously replied, “You could not possibly fetch the carriage before first light.”

She sighed with an expression indicating that only politeness prevented her from pinching the bridge of her nose or smacking her head at his stupidity (or perhaps his head).

“Hardly! It is but three miles. I walked here in an hour two days ago, and I can perfectly well walk back. In fact, the roads have considerably dried since then. It would hardly be the first time I awoke at five, and I already asked the stable about the loan of a lantern. All will be well.”

Bingley was still sputtering, but finally said, “You are more than welcome to my carriage, of course. You need but ask. I am loathe to have your sister risk her health, but I suppose you know best.”

“I thank you, sir. That will be most advantageous. I should be obliged if you called for it at seven,” she said, then curtsied as if the conversation was over.



“A moment,” Bingley spat out in some desperation. “Pray, might you explain the urgency?”

She stared back and forth between the men unnervingly for some time.

She finally said, “I...”

Darcy could see her working her way up to prevaricating in a way they could not counter, so he decided to forestall her.

“Naturally, we cannot demand an explanation, but if I might ask politely—”

“I have reasons that I prefer to remain unspoken.”

“If there is something wrong in my house, I should like the opportunity to correct it. I know Caroline can be a trial, but I did not take you for one to be intimidated by the likes of her.”

Elizabeth snorted rather indecorously and let out a good-sized laugh. “No, I have no difficulties with your sister. She is not special!”

Darcy tried another tack. “Your precipitous departure will be noticed, and it may cause talk. If there is something wrong in this house, we would like to know what it is. If we can impose on you to speak candidly, we will give our word to keep it private and give you no censure.”

She stared them down for a bit longer and finally sighed in resignation.

“We will leave, because I will not allow any of my sisters or friends to reside in the same house as Viscount Fitzwilliam for even a day. The only reason we are still here is because it was nearly dark when I met him.”

Both men startled in shock and stared in consternation.

Darcy asked with a bit of temper, "Of what do you accuse my cousin?"

"I make no accusations whatsoever," she snapped, finally seeming to show her own temper for the first time in his presence. "I only state our need to reside elsewhere."

Bingley asked, "If there is something worrisome about my guest, I should like to know. Why are you not worried about my sister?"

"I said..." she replied heatedly, in a voice suggesting her level of annoyance was increasing rapidly, "...that I would not allow my friends or sisters to reside in the same house. Your sister is neither."

"What do you mean?"

"She has done naught but insult and belittle me, my family, my home, my friends, and my neighbourhood since the moment she stepped into the assembly. Perhaps you recall 'She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild.'"

She stared hard at both men as if daring them, to contradict her, then continued, "That was hardly the first or last slight to me particularly, and I doubt my friends appreciate being called country mushrooms by some upstart parvenu. In short, she is neither friend, nor relative, nor my responsibility."

Bingley had a frown fit for a gorgon, but since his sisters had said those things, and both he and Darcy had heard them, and neither man had done anything about it many times, he had to concede. "You make a fair point, madam."

"I wish I could say your sister is shockingly rude, but I have endured far worse and

expect to do so in future. I cannot honestly say my mother, or two youngest sisters, are noticeably better, though I doubt Miss Bingley would appreciate the comparison. I could endure your sister for days or weeks without strain, but the viscount is another matter entirely.”

Darcy walked closer very carefully. “I know my cousin is a bit of a flirt, but...”

“He is most definitely not a flirt, sir!” she snapped angrily, having finally endured enough of their recalcitrance. “He is a seducer, pure and simple!”

“How do you know?” he asked, though he was not entirely sure he wanted to hear the answer, since it sounded like his cousin could be another Wickham.

She stared at him disconcertingly for some time, and finally said, “I told you I spend time in town. His reputation is well known among his victim class, though I doubt his peers, or his family are aware. He likes to keep his... ah... indiscretions... private.”

She stared a bit more to see if he said anything, but fortunately, he had enough sense to hold his tongue.

She finally held out her hands palm up. “I once held one of his natural daughters in these hands right here. I know of whence I speak.”

Bingley shook his head violently, and snapped, “I shall eject him this very minute.”

Darcy struggled for anything to say.

Elizabeth had no such qualms, so she shrugged. “You may do as you will. I have taken steps. All I require is your carriage at seven, and I shall never speak of the matter.”

Darcy asked, "Is there anything else we should know?"

Elizabeth looked distinctly uncomfortable, then finally sighed. "I took the liberty of moving Jane and myself. I recommend you refrain from telling Miss Bingley, as have I."

Both stared at her, clearly having a tough time believing it.

"Are you suggesting he might accost one of you tonight?" Bingley squeaked.

"Do you really want an answer?"

"I do," Darcy said, and then had to stand his ground when she stared him down for a minute.

"I would appreciate your forbearance, Miss Elizabeth," Bingley begged. "It pains me to think I might have a snake in my midst, and aside from that, Caroline is neither your sister nor your responsibility, but she is mine! "

Elizabeth paused a moment and stared in a way that left Darcy believing she was considering whether Bingley was worthy of her sister or not. It seemed an odd notion for a family as desperate for husbands as the Bennets, but then again, in many cases, no husband was better than a bad one. One thing was certain. Miss Elizabeth was vastly different from her mother.

Miss Elizabeth finally explained, "You need to understand the concept of unbalanced risks. Shall I explain?"

Both men nodded.

"The world is a cruel place for women. What you consider flirting , could lead to a

man's inconvenience, or embarrassment—but a woman's loss of reputation, acquisition of an unwanted child, ruination of her family, or even death. The viscount has ruined more than one woman's life, and yet here he is, welcomed in this house by one and all. Even should you make his poor character public, he will still be welcomed at every club, ball, and party in London. It will not hurt his reputation in the least.”

Both men had enough sense not to reply.

“Women have to be extremely careful... all day, every day... and every night, for that matter. Men are allowed dozens or hundreds of ‘mistakes,’ while we are not allowed even one. I will not waste Jane's chances at a good life on your worthless cousin.”

Darcy was very much reminded of Mr Gardiner's words about mistakes being irreversible and had to admit that he was correct. The unambiguous fact was that Georgiana was essentially in hiding, while absent Gardiner's intervention, Wickham would still be a free man. Darcy had to be honest with himself. Even if he had rescued his sister personally, he doubted he would have brought the rogue to heel.

“How about your chances?” he asked softly.

“The viscount would find me a hard nut to crack. I am not my sister! ”

Both men startled, and wondered what she meant, so Bingley asked, “Are you quite certain?”

“About his past behaviour—absolutely. About his potential behaviour here and now... tonight? Who can say? I cannot predict his actions, but I can calculate the odds and take steps to prevent the potential outcomes from affecting me and mine. If nothing else, last night should at least demonstrate that I understand probability, and

men are far simpler than cards.”

Darcy took his life in his own hands. “Is there anything you can suggest Bingley or I should do? Something more proactive than waiting until tomorrow and tossing him out based on gossip.”

She frowned over his choice of words but had to admit that from his point of view, gossip was indeed her source.

“In science, you cannot prove a negative thesis. If you see one black swan, you can conclude black swans are possible. However, before you have seen one, you cannot know definitively if they are impossible, or you have just not seen one.”

“Agreed,” Darcy said.

She sighed resignedly. “Are you certain you want my suggestion? It cannot be unsaid.”

“I do.”

“If you want to improve your chance of finding a black swan, use black swan bait.”

“Meaning?”

“When the viscount returns, talk up my beauty, such as it is, and then mention that Jane is about five times prettier. That is just a statement of fact, so I doubt you will have any qualms about the assertion. Then lament the fact that we have little or no connexions or dowry, imply we have a weak protector, and gripe forlornly about the fact we will leave in the morning. Take him back to the ladies and allow Miss Bingley to assassinate our characters for an hour. Then sleep in my bed, with the connecting door to Jane’s room open.”

Darcy and Bingley stared at her in stupefaction. The plan was devious and unlikely to succeed, unless the viscount was lost to all sense of honour, propriety, and self-preservation.

She continued. "I cannot guarantee a black swan. In fact, I would not even give it even odds, but if you find yourself having a conversation with your cousin in the middle of the night, you will know certain things beyond the slightest doubt. If you do not, ask your man of business to investigate him. His proclivities are not exactly a state secret, and the investigation will not even take a week."

Bingley asked, "What about Caroline?"

"What about her?"

"Is she safe?"

"Pray, do your own thinking, Mr Bingley," she said in mild exasperation. "You could move her and occupy her bed, but then she would know and that would be... less than ideal. She does not seem a woman who can keep a secret, particularly if she thinks she can use it to her advantage. If you worry, station a reliable footman down the hall to watch her door, but I would not recommend informing her. To be honest, I doubt she would care all that much if he did compromise her, as she likely feels between you and Mr Darcy you could force his hand. I have a feeling she would cut off her own arm for a title if it came right down to it."

Both men were shocked at her forthright and even somewhat vulgar assertions and were full of questions, but they heard Hurst and the viscount returning, so Elizabeth quickly curtsied and hurried out the door.

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Darcy and Bingley waited in the front hall at seven for the ladies. Both ladies curtsied. Miss Bennet seemed shocked, and Miss Elizabeth looked resigned at the good-sized plaster on the side of Darcy's head.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow questioningly, but did not bother asking directly.

"Miss Bennet... Miss Elizabeth... well met," Bingley replied with less than his usual enthusiasm, though it was anybody's guess whether that was caused by the disagreeableness of having his angel leave early, having an unrepentant rake in his house, or something as simple as having to get up at the crack of dawn when he preferred the crack of noon.

Darcy greeted them quietly. "Miss Elizabeth... a word, if you would be so kind?"

They stepped away a few paces, allowing Bingley and Jane to have a quiet conversation that Elizabeth was happy to miss.

"I owe you a great debt, madam."

"Has it anything to do with that plaster?"

He sighed dejectedly. "That plaster is the cost of my education, I suppose. I did as you suggested. My cousin may not be quite so charming any more with a broken nose and missing tooth. I will be taking him to town this morning and intend to have a long discussion with his father about his habits. Something must be done."

Elizabeth sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, then finally pointed to a spot on the opposite wall.

"Do you see that stone that is redder than those surrounding it?"

He looked quizzically, then nodded in confusion.

“It is the appropriate height. When we leave, I suggest you beat your head against it for a quarter-hour and then go about your life. It will hurt about the same amount as speaking to the earl and have the same effect. Nothing short of breakfast for one will change the viscount’s habits.”

Darcy startled, but did not have the nerve to ask her to elaborate, or even to explain how a country miss knew a somewhat vulgar slang term for a duel. In practice, it did not matter if speaking to his uncle would achieve anything or not anyway. It was what had to be done, so he would do it.

“Since we have breached propriety a dozen times, may I ask you a question you may not like.”

“ You may ask questions which I shall not choose to answer . ”

“What made you take such a dislike to me in the beginning? We have been in company a month, but you studiously avoided me almost from the first moment of our acquaintance. Last night was the very first time you spoke directly to me. Where did I go wrong?”

She stared at him for some time. “You make an incorrect assumption, sir. You share a common failing with the rest of us. We all like to think the world revolves around us, when in fact, it does not.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I have never disliked you and still do not. I have been indifferent to you. That is something else entirely.”

“How so?” he asked confusedly.

“They say love and hate are two sides of the same coin. I believe like and dislike are similar, just with a smaller denomination. I apologise if this offends you, but I have never found anything about you to excite any such feeling.”

“And yet, you did seem to avoid me.”

“I avoid many people. You are no more special than Miss Bingley.”

He grunted but found himself at an impasse. He was not certain he had ever had to deal with complete indifference, though for all he knew, a great many people might be indifferent to him, and he just never noticed.

“Well, for what it is worth, I quite like you, and hope to one day excite some sort of feeling, one way or the other.”

“Your cousin’s tooth is worth something I suppose, so perhaps you have something to recommend you.”

“Time will tell. For the moment, whether you see me with approbation, disdain, or indifference; simply know that I am in your debt.”

“No sir! I acted entirely on my own interests without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me . If you benefited, it is just the luck of the draw.”

“The debt need not be acknowledged to be real, madam.”

She stared at him a moment and let it stretch.

“There is no debt! You owe me nothing. In fact!” she replied emphatically, then dug around in her reticule and eventually handed him a coin, then continued, “Here is your shilling back. Now we are even! ”

With that, she curtsied then quickly gathered Jane to head to the carriage, leaving the man staring in open-mouthed confusion.

Naturally, that only gave them a brief reprieve, as the gentlemen insisted on handing the ladies in, and the ladies accepted with various levels of elation, relief, and reluctance.

Both men stood staring at the back of the retreating carriage until it moved out of sight, while Darcy was overwhelmed with one overriding thought.

Mr Gardiner was going to laugh his head off.

8. All the Comforts

Jane was difficult to drag out of bed at dawn at the best of times, and doubly so when she still had a frightful cold, but Elizabeth's stubbornness prevailed. She could have easily waited until a more propitious time or even waited for misters Darcy or Bingley to act against the reprobate; but once she set her course, she liked to stick with it. One had to be prepared to adapt to conditions on the ground at a moment's notice, but second-guessing every move when nothing had changed was the route to madness.

The ladies had actually only moved four doors down the corridor, but that was sufficient to ensure comfort and security. Jane had been mystified by both the abrupt move and the early departure, but Elizabeth decided to wait until her illness was over before she enlightened her. She loved Jane dearly, but her sister would willingly have gone through the world without believing that so much wickedness existed in the whole race of mankind, as was here collected in one individual.

Elizabeth had always thought the practise of keeping young ladies ignorant of the evils of the world to be counterproductive and exceedingly stupid; especially given what she learnt at her uncle's house in London. When general societal foolishness was combined with parents, with Mr Gardiner as a relative, the Bennet parents' lax attitude became thoroughly inexplicable.

She had long since given up trying to comprehend it. She had come to an uneasy accommodation with her father some years earlier. She spent more than half her time in London. In exchange for her father allowing her to mostly take control of her own life at an early age, she agreed to mostly keep her nose out of raising her sisters. The

bargain meant she had to bite her tongue dozens of times each day. She was, however, not at all convinced her father was keeping his end of the deal. It had been an uneasy truce for some time, but she was starting to think she might have to break it. Jane's complete and utter ignorance of the evils of the world, combined with the shocking lack of propriety in her two younger sisters was likely to cause a crisis eventually, and Elizabeth thought she would just as soon avoid it.

She did not know if and when she would enlighten Jane about the viscount, let alone what she had heard about Mr Bingley and his many 'angels' or just let the scene play out. Jane was the eldest, so presumably she could think for herself, though Elizabeth found her naïveté disturbing.

Elizabeth had heard about Mr Bingley's propensity to fall in and out of love with some regularity from her Uncle Gardiner and the results were ambiguous. They could not quite tag him as a rake, and none of his former angels seemed overly distressed about losing his attentions, nor was there any real indication he acted dishonourably (though imprudently perhaps).

In at least a couple of cases, the lady dissuaded the relationship. Perhaps they learnt about his connexions to trade, or more likely they became acquainted with his sisters. Elizabeth thought that any lady who abandoned the man over his sisters showed good sense, but that did not mean she advocated the same for Jane. They were not exactly fishing in a well-stocked stream in Meryton, and if Mr Bingley's sisters did not bother Jane, what business was it of Elizabeth's? After all, replacing Mrs Bennet with Miss Bingley would hardly be any change at all for Jane.

All in all, Elizabeth trod a narrow path. She knew far more than most about the evils of the world and felt duty-bound to intervene, if necessary, but she did not wish to take up the occupation of nursemaid or governess for her own siblings—particularly against her parents' vigorous objections. It was all most vexing.

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Fortunately for Elizabeth, Jane fell asleep on her shoulder almost instantly when they started moving, and remained so throughout the journey, exactly in accordance with her plans.

Elizabeth had not chosen to leave Netherfield at first light due to any real concern about her safety with the viscount in the house. She could easily have kept her sister away from the man for a few more hours, or days if it came right down to it. She was hardly a babe in the woods.

She did not choose the time based on misters Darcy and Bingley's comfort, since she had little concern on that front. They were grown men. She would not say she was testing Mr Bingley per se, but knowing how he behaved in uncomfortable situations could be useful, and to be honest, if he was to be frightened off by the Bennet family (including the most forceful sister), it was best done soon.

She did not even organise herself so the viscount would know his game was up and he had been bested—though she had a certain satisfaction about his broken nose and missing teeth.

Any or all of those could have affected her plans, but they did not. She actually chose that time so Jane would be home, in bed, and plied with broth and willow bark tea before Mrs Bennet became aware of their presence. She would not ordinarily have protected Jane from her mother's wrath, partly because most of said wrath would be directed at Elizabeth regardless of Jane's presence or absence. She mostly wanted to spare her because she was still quite ill with the cold acquired through Mrs Bennet's matchmaking stupidity. She was ill enough that, absent the viscount's presence, she probably would have left her at Netherfield for a few more days.

Elizabeth ruminated on those thoughts as they travelled by Meryton. She almost

woke up Jane when she laughed heartily at one thought that came to mind. It seemed she and Mr Darcy were entirely even, both monetarily after the return of his shilling, but also in their general situations. She was still an ordinary tradesman's niece, and he was still a typical first-circle dandy.

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Elizabeth's arrival at Longbourn went about as predicted. The long-suffering Mrs Hill helped her get Jane into bed and arranged to have everything required for her care before anyone else was awake in the house (except for all the servants, of course).

Once Jane had been plied with the curatives of dubious efficacy, Elizabeth still had time for a walk in the garden, but she kept it short. She even managed to have a cup of tea and plate of ham and eggs half consumed before the inevitable reckoning commenced.

"Lizzy, what are you doing here?" Mrs Bennet asked in a loud and peevish voice. "I just knew allowing you to walk to Netherfield would turn out badly. You have no compassion for my poor nerves, and I really do not know who will keep you when your father is gone. If you have no concern for your own future, you could at least consider your poor mother and sisters!"

"I repeat, for perhaps the thousandth time mother," Elizabeth replied in thinly disguised annoyance. "Your future is perfectly secure. Your brother has ensured you would not starve in the hedgerows if our father fell over dead as a herring five minutes from now. We are not desperate."

"Not desperate? NOT DESPERATE! When you have five daughters to marry off, then you will be entitled to an opinion about the appropriate levels of desperation. You had three eligible men at your disposal—one a viscount—and you conceded the field with nary a backward glance. I do not understand you."

“As hard as it is for you to believe, our presence was doing more harm than good. I will agree that Mr Bingley seems as promising as any new suitor can be, but imposing on his hospitality on such a weak excuse as a cold that was an obvious matchmaking ploy is hardly the way to bring him to the point. I know how these men think, and I can assure you that leaving was the right thing to do. Mr Bingley’s pursuit of Jane, insofar as it even exists, was helped, not harmed by our exit. I can assure you of that!”

“I have no idea what your father and uncle have been teaching you, Elizabeth. Simple arithmetic says that with three eligible men in the house, you want more exposure—not less. Even if you disdain all men, how are we to visit if you abandon the house?”

Elizabeth’s exasperation increased apace. Nothing could induce her to tell the biggest gossip in Meryton exactly why she left, for a number of reasons. First and foremost, there were a hundred ways gossiping about the viscount’s proclivities could recoil on them. Her lecture about unbalanced risks was in full force. The viscount could do almost as much damage to their reputations by claiming compromise as he could with an actual one. Even all that aside, what was the point of baiting the bull? Mr Bingley seemed a nice, malleable sort of man. His sisters and Mr Darcy were not! Why hand them a rope to hang us with?

“Uncle Gardiner has been teaching me about how the world works, Mama. I can assure you, in no uncertain terms, that neither Mr Darcy nor the viscount will even consider taking a wife from this neighbourhood. We are chalk and cheese. It is beyond the realm of possibility.”

“Oh, what do you know?” Mrs Bennet lamented angrily.

“Pray, allow me to finish, and I would hope you find yourself in greater charity with my decisions.”

She stared hard at her mother, something she rarely did, but she wanted to get this particular tirade over with if at all possible.

When Mrs Bennet finally nodded resignedly, she continued.

“As I said, Mr Darcy and Viscount Fitzwilliam cannot help your cause, but they can most certainly hurt it . I will agree that Mr Bingley looks somewhat promising... certainly as promising as any eligible man we are likely to find in this neighbourhood. I can confidently assert that Jane’s leaving at this time helped her cause far more than it hurt. Trust me on this one.”

“I disagree, Lizzy. You know not of what you speak.”

“I know exactly of what I speak, Mama,” she replied vaguely, once again frustrated that she could not explained why she was so confident.

To be honest, she would give Jane about even odds of getting Mr Bingley to the point at best. He did not seem all that stalwart, and it was obvious his sisters disdained the match and would oppose it with great vigour. Jane might think they were her friends, but Elizabeth knew better. Just getting her and Jane out of the sisters’ sight early probably did more for their cause than anything else.

Mrs Bennet grunted and finally turned to her breakfast, not because she had said all she had to say, but because the deed was done. She well knew Lizzy did what she wanted and never listened to her mother; and to be honest, she was hungry.

After that, the day passed relatively peacefully for Longbourn. Mrs Bennet continued to lament the failure of her brilliant plan through the malfeasance of her recalcitrant daughter on an hourly basis.

Elizabeth would have found the whole thing tedious beyond belief, had not some

relief appeared around midafternoon in the form of their Aunt Philips, who carried the news that a militia company had arrived to quarter in Meryton. That set the cat among the pigeons, and for the next four days, almost nothing was spoken of except officers.

Between the two youngest sisters' raptures, Mrs Bennet's wholehearted concurrence, including fond remembrances of Colonel Miller's time in her youth, her aunt's inclination to join in vigorously, and Mary's hearty (though often nonsensical) objections—hardly any other subject was spoken of, aside from the obvious attractions of Netherfield.

Elizabeth thought the only good things about the situation were that it allowed her mother to cease browbeating her about abandoning Netherfield, and having more dancing partners would be helpful. On the other hand, she knew any militia company would have any number of rogues, and she worried about the safety of her sillier sisters.

Lydia and Kitty just had to walk into Meryton every day to canvass everything they could learn about the officers, where they stayed, where and when they worshipped (if at all), who their wives were (for the few who had them), and a seemingly endless catalogue of on dits , rumours, and suppositions.

After listening one morning to their effusions on this subject, Mr Bennet coolly observed: "From all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country. I have suspected it for some time, but I am now convinced."

Catherine was disconcerted, and made no answer; but Lydia, with perfect indifference, continued to express her admiration of Captain Carter and her hope of seeing him in the course of the day, as he was going the next morning to London.

“I am astonished, my dear,” said Mrs Bennet, “that you should be so ready to think your own children silly. If I wished to think slightly of anybody’s children, it should not be of my own, however.”

“If my children are silly, I must hope to be always sensible of it.”

Elizabeth listened to this discussion for several minutes with growing horror. She had been away from Longbourn for more than six months before the Netherfield party arrived, and she was alarmed by what she was seeing.

That exchange encapsulated all that was wrong with her family. Her two sisters were in fact two of the silliest girls in the country. Elizabeth’s ever-present concern turned to alarm. With the advent of the militia, Lydia was well on her way to bringing shame upon her family. Elizabeth could clearly see the path they were on, especially when Lydia expounded on the ridiculous idea of being the first married, and Kitty followed wherever she led.

The conversation clearly demonstrated that her father, as usual, knew they were silly, and was not willing to do anything about it; while her mother did not actually see anything wrong with their behaviour, though she would obviously pitch a fit if Lizzy or Jane acted that way.

It was frustrating no end. Lydia and Kitty: silly, vain, and idle; working their way toward disaster. Mr Bennet: worldly, educated, aware ; but wholly unwilling to do anything to correct the matter. Mrs Bennet: not much better than Lydia, if at all. Jane and Mary: painfully oblivious and naïve.

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The Bingley party, with the obvious exceptions of Mr Darcy and the viscount, called three days after their return to check on Jane. The resulting calamity made Elizabeth

wonder that they did not pack their bags for London straightaway.

Lydia, in a manner vulgar even by her standards, after a furious and impolite bout of giggling and whispering, browbeat the poor man into holding a ball. It was slightly amusing watching Miss Bingley's countenance become severe even by her standards, while Mr Bingley, bless his heart, did not even seem to notice the shocking improprieties. He agreed to hold the ball as soon as Jane was up to it with good cheer. Of course, given how his sisters behaved, the man probably did not find the Longbourn parlour all that unusual.

Elizabeth wondered if she had been dropped into the family by fairies, since she did not fit in at all. All she saw was one disaster after another, and she was the only Bennet that was even aware, let alone concerned.

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By the next day, things had finally settled down to the usual level of chaos, so naturally the patriarch decided to stir things up by way of a visit from the dreaded heir, to commence at four o'clock that very day. Of course, he softened the blow with the absolutely polite and calming observation: "It is from my cousin, Mr Collins, who, when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases."

Elizabeth just shook her head in bewilderment at the ridiculousness of her parents. By his own admission, her father kept the secret for a fortnight just to increase his own amusement. As expected, her mother threw a fit, as if preparing the house for one guest over the course of a day should be a challenge. She remembered her example of Jane happily accommodating a dozen with nary a raised eyebrow, and whilst it was a slight exaggeration, it was not as bad as one might expect. A half-dozen certainly would not be a strain, so why was her mother fussing about one?

She sighed, listened to the ridiculous man's letter, and her parents' reaction.

Elizabeth was chiefly struck by his extraordinary deference for Lady Catherine, and his kind intention of christening, marrying, and burying his parishioners whenever it were required. Why he boasted that a clergyman did the usual work for that profession was a mystery, and she was struck by the inconsistencies she heard.

“He must be an oddity, I think,” said she. “I cannot make him out.—There is something very pompous in his.—And what can he mean by apologising for being next in the entail?—We cannot suppose he would help it if he could.—Could he be a sensible man, sir?”

“No, my dear, I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him.”

There was the rub. Her father was anxious to sharpen his wit at her cousin’s expense, while her mother found just one more thing to excite her nerves. She hated to admit it, but Mrs Bennet, for all her silliness, was actually interested in securing her daughters’ futures—though, in this case, Elizabeth suspected she was more concerned with her own. Mr Bennet, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly unconcerned with anything save his own comfort and amusement.

It seemed they were due for some weeks of utter mayhem. She began to wonder how soon she could return to London and lamented that it could not be before four so she could avoid Mr Collins’ visit entirely. She was mildly curious about the heir but had a premonition he would be more trouble than his amusement was worth.

She was slightly curious to see Jane’s courtship proceed (if it did). She thought she might enjoy Mr Bingley’s ball (if it happened). She was mildly curious about whether Mr Darcy would return (and how many new lumps he might have on his head). She felt duty bound to see how badly her sisters behaved with the soldiers (with inordinately low expectations). She was mildly curious about her cousin’s olive

branch (if he extended it).

As much as she might like to leave, she thought she should delay until after the ball—but was of the firm opinion that wild horses could not hold her back afterward.

9. The Dreaded Cousin

Mr Collins turned out to be all the Bennet parents dreamed of and their daughters dreaded. Mr Bennet found the man far sillier than even he had anticipated, much to his pleasure. Mrs Bennet found the man's olive branch to be in earnest, and he was not the least bit subtle about what he meant by it. The daughters found him unbelievably tedious.

Mr Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been, but little assisted by education or society; the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father; and though he belonged to one of the universities, he had merely kept the necessary terms, without forming at it any useful acquaintance. The subjection in which his father had brought him up had given him originally great humility of manner; but it was now a good deal counteracted by the self-conceit of a weak head, living in retirement, and the consequential feelings of early and unexpected prosperity.

Mr Bennet loved the combination of pomposity and servility, as well as the silly nothings the man spouted almost constantly. He managed to spout his balderdash quite often, primarily because the man never shut up. He could drone on and on about his parsonage, Rosings, and his noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, almost without breath.

In fact, he maundered about that lady and her rather ignorant sounding advice so often over dinner that Elizabeth wrote to her uncle to ask him to investigate the grand dame that very night—expecting an answer within the week. She also wrote what happened with the viscount, as she told him about everything important that impacted

her life—particularly things of a nature that he could use in his business.

Mrs Bennet enjoyed the fact that the man planned to take one of her daughters off her hands, ideally one of the most troublesome ones.

Elizabeth thought nothing of the man's obvious matrimonial ambitions, particularly when anyone with the slightest bit of sense— even Mrs Bennet — would nominate Mary for the task, and Elizabeth strongly suspected her sister would have no objections. That conviction only lasted the course of a day or so, after which his behaviour became even less subtle.

It now first struck her, that she was selected from among her sisters as worthy of being mistress of Hunsford Parsonage, and of assisting to form a quadrille table at Rosings, in the absence of more eligible visitors.

All doubts about his intentions were removed by a fraught conversation with Mrs Bennet.

“Lizzy, Mr Collins is paying you particular attention, and you would do well to reciprocate—in fact, I insist on it. Just imagine, you could be the mistress of this house on your father's decease, and we would all remain comfortably ensconced in Longbourn. I commend to your notice the general agreeableness of his situation, his connexions with Lady Catherine, and his parsonage sounds fine... exceptionally fine, indeed.”

“I am surprised he did not fix on Jane like every other red-blooded man.”

“Oh, he did, but I advised him that she is already being courted, and we expect an offer quite soon.”

“That was entirely premature, Mama!” she snapped. “I advise you in the strongest

possible terms not to spread such rumours. There are very few things more likely to drive Mr Bingley away from Jane than aggressive matchmaking.”

“Oh, what do you know?”

“More than you, apparently,” Elizabeth snapped. “Do not forget that I do not spend all my time here among the four and twenty families. My time in London has taught me quite a lot, and I can assure you that I know far more about the Mr Bingleys of the world than you ever will.”

“Stuff and nonsense! You know not of what you speak. Mark my words, Jane will be engaged by Christmas.”

Elizabeth was astonished by such wilful intransigence but thought herself unlikely to change her mother at this late stage of her life.

“Be that as it may, I agree that Jane should be excluded from his attentions, not because of Mr Bingley, but because she would not be suited to that life. She is not tough enough. That said, you really should point him to Mary. She enjoys her Fordyce and her Bible above all things. She has always aspired to become a clergyman’s wife, and I doubt she would be overly distressed by Lady Catherine’s interference in her business. Why you would pass over the most religious lady in the house when looking for a clergyman’s wife is beyond my comprehension.”

“Mary is far too plain to risk our future on! Besides that, she knows almost nothing about keeping house. Even though I would be here to guide her after your father’s demise, Mr Collins has shown not the slightest interest in her, while he has clearly demonstrated a great deal in you. It will be such a comfort to have you in charge of the estate in my old age, and you know as well as anyone that at least some of your sisters are likely to remain unwed. Mary and Kitty will be a trial, and I doubt there is another man in all of England who would be willing to tolerate your impertinence.”

There it was in plain unvarnished English. Mrs Bennet was after her own comfort, not that of her daughters, and getting rid of Elizabeth once and for all was an idea she could look on with great enthusiasm.

“You seem to be missing one crucial point, Mother. I will not accept him, and you cannot make me!”

Mrs Bennet’s ire rose to nearly unprecedented heights. “You most certainly will. I have raised you for twenty years, and you will do what you must for the good of this family.”

“Aunt Gardiner has been far more of an influence than you, but that is neither here nor there. Do you honestly believe someone who spends her time with Uncle Gardiner is going to go along with such a scheme?”

“I have no idea why your father allows you so much time there.”

“Perhaps not, but you rejoice in my absence, so you cannot turn it into a complaint now. All of that is getting off the main point. I will not marry Mr Collins. I have told you before that neither you nor your unwed daughters will ever starve in the hedgerows. Uncle Gardiner will see to you and steps have already been taken.”

“Yes, perhaps he might see me settled in some hovel with one maid of all work, but he will not see me living in the style to which I am accustomed.”

“And why should he? You have had a quarter-century to save and prepare for that inevitable day, and yet both you and Papa have done nothing . You will not live in a hovel. You will live as well as Aunt Philips, and probably better, which to be frank, is more than you deserve.”

“Live like an attorney’s wife!” she screeched. “After being a leading matron of the

area for decades! Never!”

Elizabeth sighed in frustration. If her mother’s attitude had not been clear for years, she was certainly forthright about it now. It seemed obvious that, with Elizabeth still six months from her majority and still ostensibly under her father’s control, Mrs Bennet thought she could force the issue. The plain and unpalatable fact was that, if Elizabeth did not have her Uncle Gardiner, her parents might have been able to pull it off. That said, she did have her uncle, and she could name twenty places she could easily hide for six months, with or without her uncle’s help.

Elizabeth decided it was high time to play her strongest card.

“I will dismantle your premises one at a time in due course, but before I do, will you give me leave to give you the one argument you might be able to comprehend?”

“Go ahead. Get it over with,” the matron said with ill-disguised impatience.

“Let us just suppose you convince me to accept Mr Collins, or more likely force me against my will. What in the world makes you think I would allow you to live with me after that? ”

She gave her mother a hard stare that she knew was extraordinarily intimidating, that she rarely used with anyone she knew, and saw her gulp in consternation.

“You would not!”

“I would! You would be gone from this house with naught but the clothes on your back before I left Hunsford, and you would never cross the threshold again.”

Mrs Bennet gaped like a fish for a moment, and Elizabeth decided she had won her point well enough. Moving the man’s attentions to Mary was not her problem, since

she was not the one silly enough to point him at Elizabeth in the first place.

“Mark my words, madam! Move his attentions to Mary, or I will dissuade him myself. I will not marry him—not now, not ever,” she said just as she exited the parlour.

Elizabeth considered the problem of Mr Collins solved and did not particularly care if she had simply traded Mary for herself in the fire. She felt slightly guilty about not asking Mary how she felt about the clergyman, but once again, that was Mary’s problem to solve. She was eighteen years old, perfectly old enough to think for herself, and she could decline the odious man as well as Elizabeth could. Besides that, if he did move his attention to Mary, Elizabeth knew perfectly well she would have plenty of time to coach her sister about how to handle the problem.

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With the issue of the odious cousin more or less solved, it seemed time to move on to others.

The day after her conversation with Mrs Bennet, Mr Bennet encouraged all the daughters to take Mr Collins and go somewhere else. He had about had his fill of the clergyman and just wanted some peace and quiet.

Mr Collins made it obvious that Mrs Bennet had not spoken with him, so Elizabeth sighed and decided to put up with his attentions for two more days. If that did not work, she thought she could talk to her father, but she had no more expectation of success with that endeavour than she expected Mr Darcy to succeed with the earl.

When they reached Meryton, she became rather alarmed by how much her sisters’ behaviour had deteriorated.

Elizabeth had been in London for more than six months the previous summer and returned to find Lydia out at barely fifteen. Her sister was not the least bit ready to be in society. In Elizabeth's opinion, she was not even ready to be out of the nursery. That said, her parents never paid much attention to outside opinions, and she had quit trying to give hers some time earlier.

Lydia's behaviour, and Kitty's by extension because she copied Lydia, was in a word abhorrent. It was generally terrible at home, but Elizabeth was well able to ignore that, a skill that came in useful with the Miss Bingleys of the world. She had only been to the one assembly with Lydia, and while she had been a bit wild, it had at least been somewhere near the bounds of propriety—if she squinted enough.

The advent of the militia had removed all restraint. Over the course of a week, her two sisters descended into a level of silliness that was sufficient even for her father.

Elizabeth became quite alarmed by their flirting, which was blatant and ongoing. Both girls (she could not think of them as ladies) were showing a level of décolletage that would be barely acceptable in a London ballroom in the evening, where such excesses were ordinary, but even Miss Bingley would not stoop to such a display in a day-dress.

The men reacted as men would be expected to. It was easy for Elizabeth to pick out the troublemakers among the officers, but it was not much of a challenge, since anyone who even spoke to a fifteen-year-old was suspect by definition.

Between the annoyance of her sisters, and that of Mr Collins, she was about ready to tear her hair out by the time they met Mr Bingley walking his horse into town.

Elizabeth was about an inch from forcefully warning Captain Denny away from Lydia because it was obvious he was a rakehell and make no mistake about it. She tried patiently explaining that to Lydia and Kitty, but once again, she was beating her

head against a wall worse than Mr Darcy with the earl.

Mr Bingley greeted the group amiably and Jane warmly, which Elizabeth took to be a modestly good sign. She still had qualms about the man's resolution based on his history with angels and his poor handling of his sisters—but she was willing to extend him the benefit of the doubt. He was not bad enough to warn Jane off, but not good enough to recommend him either. It was not as if it were her decision anyway. Jane would just have to muddle through on her own.

He mentioned he was just on his way to Longbourn to check on Jane's health. The fact that she was obviously well enough to walk a mile to Meryton was not sufficient comfort for him, so he offered to walk them home.

During the walk, he managed to quietly tell Elizabeth that Mr Darcy departed with the viscount in tow a few hours after she left with Jane, but he expected to return for the ball, which he was apparently ready to schedule.

Why Mr Bingley thought Elizabeth cared in the least whether Mr Darcy would return or not was a mystery, but she supposed it was better to know than not. On occasion, though, she experienced some slight curiosity about Mr Darcy. He had handled her rather blatant snubbing of his person relatively well. He had overcome his natural tendency to support men in general and his relatives in particular with far less intransigence than she expected. Aside from his first slight, which happened sight unseen, he had been entirely polite. She supposed he might be worth speaking to. He had even said he liked her quite a lot, which she took to mean he liked any lady who did not chase after him with a pitchfork, but even such weak sauce was... interesting. She supposed Mr Bingley might have the right of it. She was mildly curious to see what the Derbyshire gentleman had to say for himself.

The next several days went by with visits from the officers, visits to Meryton to hunt for the officers, endless talk of officers, and even dinner with the officers.

Elizabeth could readily tell that some in the militia were no doubt honourable men who just liked to eat better at the Bennet table than the officers' mess, as the difference in both quality and quantity was substantial. Those men put up with the flirting of the younger Bennet sisters as the price of the meal. Elizabeth thought they were getting the poor end of the bargain, but since she had never dined in the officer's mess, she could not be certain.

She could equally determine that some of the men, and Captain Denny in particular, were flirting with a specific goal in mind. While her parents kept Kitty and Lydia entirely ignorant, which was stupid but typical of English society, Elizabeth was not. She recognised them for what they were and made her best effort to warn Lydia and Kitty whilst remaining just barely within the bounds her father had set.

Her results were not auspicious, and she was still engaged in that fool's errand right up to the day of the Netherfield ball.

### 10. Dancing Slippers

Elizabeth entered the ballroom with some trepidation, but happy that she had sent to London for two of her uncle's men to keep an eye on her youngest sisters. Her instructions were simple. They were to prevent utter disaster, but otherwise let things play out as they would. Her objective was to ensure her sisters at least did not ruin the family with scandal, but she had no plans whatsoever to attempt to moderate their behaviour beyond that.

She was frankly getting tired of being the only adult in the family and thought it might finally be time to lance the boil. She expected the evenings events to set her course.

In an uncharacteristic bit of inattention, she had allowed Mr Collins to manoeuvre her into the first two dances. She had chastised her mother every day for the past week over her failure to act as she suggested, but they were at an impasse, as neither lady would bend. Elizabeth even began to worry slightly about the possibility of a compromise attempt, so determined to be on her guard.

The first two dances were dances of mortification. Mr Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was ecstasy.

She sat out the second set while Mr Collins abused poor Mary's toes, and discreetly spoke to Nathaniel, the more senior of Mr Gardiner's men. He told her the not entirely shocking news that her two younger sisters were flirting outrageously with



the officers and making entirely too many trips to the punch table. From this, mortification seemed likely—as expected.

She had just turned away from Nathaniel when she was unexpectedly approached by Mr Darcy, who had been absent for the opening set.

“Good evening, Miss Elizabeth,” he said with a polite bow.

She curtseyed. “Good evening, Mr Darcy.”

He surprised her with a rather impertinent grin. “I do believe that is our very first ordinary interaction.”

She laughed lightly. “I suppose so.”

“Does this mean I am restored to your good graces?” he asked pensively.

“As you well know, you were never truly in my bad graces. I can assure you that, if you were, you would know!”

“After our first... ah... encounter on Gracechurch Street, if I was not in your brown books, I well should have been.”

“Nay, that encounter earned me both a shilling and the right to—”

She frowned at what she was about to utter before continuing softly, “Well, never mind.”

He became pensive as well. “You mean it allowed you the privilege of maintaining your well-earned cynicism.”

“It sounds like I should limit your access to my uncle.”

“Perhaps. It is to my chagrin that I proved your cynicism justified in that instance. I hope my manner has been sufficiently improved by your uncle’s tutelage to redeem at least a tiny portion of my sex.”

She laughed heartily. “Just how much time have you spent with my uncle?”

He looked slightly sheepish. “Several hours... the first about a week after the abandoned dinner engagement. I wanted to apologise, but Mr Gardiner said his niece had gone back home to the country.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Uncle is full of nuance. He said ‘niece’ in the singular form. Jane returned to Longbourn, but I was still there.”

“I suppose he did not consider me sufficiently reformed.”

“It is hard to say. I suppose you could ask him, and if you are very lucky, he might even answer.”

“Have I redeemed myself sufficiently to request a set?”

She laughed. “That is a clever way to ask for a set without making me sit out the night if I decline.”

Darcy looked slightly chagrined. “Your uncle suggested it.”

She laughed heartily. “I believe my cynical streak is still intact, though I never thought I would have to include my uncle in my brown books.”

“Perhaps, and yet you have not answered my question.”

“Yes, you may have a set,” she said. “That is assuming you will dance with other ladies. I do not like being singled out.”

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Dare I hope for the supper set?”

She paused for quite a while, calculating the implications, and finally handed him her dance card. “You may.”

Darcy looked like a boy getting a double dose of sweetmeats as he filled in the set, then with a bow, he said, “I had best get on with my other dances.”

A few minutes later, she saw him engage Janet Goulding, who had been his first partner in the neighbourhood. Janet was an excellent choice, as she had a good-sized inheritance, and she disdained the very idea of marriage. Elizabeth had no opinion why that was true, but it was a well-established fact. She was very active in a local orphanage and a school for the poor in nearby Hatfield. She, of course, had a companion for respectability, and the two of them seemed like the kind of ladies who could eschew matrimony until the end of time.

Elizabeth chose not to think about the fact that she could easily list all of his partners in order from that first assembly. She always kept her friends close and her enemies closer and wondered what Mr Darcy would become in the fullness of time. He would certainly never be a matrimonial partner, but he just might be able to be a friend. She was ambiguous about whether that was good, bad, or indifferent.

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After the departure of Mr Darcy, and the end of Mary’s purgatory with Mr Collins, Elizabeth saw the opportunity to resolve one of her open problems. She pulled Mary rather bodily over to join Charlotte Lucas.

“Mary, have you noticed Mr Collins has been paying me an inordinate amount of attention?”

Mary laughed. “I could tell you that even without seeing or hearing the man, simply by observing your seething.”

“I told Mama I would not marry him.”

Charlotte asked, “Are you certain that is wise, Lizzy? I can tell you the life of a twenty-seven-year-old spinster is nothing to aspire to.”

Elizabeth had taken her secretive nature to such extremes that Charlotte had no idea of her status. She felt slightly guilty about that, but only a little.

“I have an adequate situation in town, Charlotte. I am in no way desperate.”

“I envy you, then Eliza.”

Elizabeth did not really want to spend more time on her own situation, so she simply nodded and continued.

“Mary, pay attention as this is important! I suggested Mama should redirect his attentions to you, since you seem much more the parson’s wife than I, but she has steadfastly refused. Now I ask you. You have known him a week, so are you interested? Mr Collins, to be sure, is neither sensible nor agreeable; his society is irksome, and his attachment to any of us after a week must be imaginary. That said, he does have a good living. I will not tell you how I know, but I am certain he does not drink or have any vicious propensities aside from his need to talk endlessly. His reverence to Lady Catherine de Bourgh is troublesome, and I believe she is an interfering busybody, but none of us have much room to criticise her, given our parents. He will eventually be master of Longbourn, which will make his wife a

principal matron in the area. I assume begetting children with him will be unpleasant, but not much worse than other men. So, I ask you this!"

She looked back and forth between both ladies. "Are either of you interested in becoming Mrs Collins, with all that entails?"

She waited patiently for both companions to contemplate the question.

Mary was the first to speak. "I have heard you tell Mama we will not actually starve in the hedgerows when Papa dies. Is that true? If so, just how far from the hedgerows will we be? Should I consider Mr Collins just to secure a future for my sisters?"

Elizabeth was happy to see her sister thinking for herself for once. She wondered if perhaps there could be two intelligent women in the house, and she had just never noticed.

"I will not be so very explicit, but you would live at least as well as Aunt Philips, but not as well as Aunt Gardiner."

Mary thought a while more and finally said, "I prefer to take my chances. I am only eighteen. I still have time, and I believe once we eventually beat Mama's resistance down, Uncle Gardiner could find me a decent tradesman for a husband inside of a year."

"A month, more likely," Elizabeth grumbled, then turned to Charlotte.

That lady had been very politely giving Mary first choice but was ready to speak.

"I will take him, and I will do so gladly. I still have two younger sisters, so asking your uncle to find me a tradesman would nearly kill my father, since he has so recently become landed. I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a

comfortable home; and considering Mr Collins' character, connexion, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state."

Elizabeth had no real opinion about the proposed union. When she was younger, she had been quite stubborn and overly wed to her first impressions. She could imagine her younger self rejecting Mr Collins' overtures, then thinking it impossible for anyone to choose differently. Life in Cheapside had taught her to be more reflective and more tolerant of other people's characters and situations, which were often different, but not necessarily wrong.

With a laugh, Elizabeth asked, "Very well! Shall we accomplish it the easy way or the subtle way?"

"What is the easy way?" Mary asked with real enthusiasm, which quite surprised Elizabeth. She could see equal eagerness in Charlotte.

She pointed across the ballroom, and the other ladies joined her in watching Mr Collins introduce himself to Mr Darcy. Elizabeth noticed that gentleman's face becoming sterner and sterner as time went on, but then he saw her observing him with a smirk on her face. He either decided he needed to behave more politely to gain her favour, or just found amusement in the situation, as he gradually became far friendlier to the clergyman than he really deserved.

"You seem to be a Darcy Charmer," Mary said incongruously, which left both Charlotte and Elizabeth descending into a fit of giggles.

Elizabeth shrugged. "As you can see, Mr Collins has lately learnt that Mr Darcy is the nephew of his esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh . The easy way, though not the least bit subtle or decorous, would be to ask Mr Darcy to simply tell Mr Collins to move his affections to Charlotte. He would treat it as an order from Lady

Catherine, and the deed would be done.”

Charlotte and Mary stared in confusion, wonder, or consternation, and Mary stated emphatically, “You cannot be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

She turned to Charlotte. “Have you changed your mind.”

“Not in the least. You assert you have a man that requires female instruction, and you think that a bad thing?” she asked with a laugh.

It had never occurred to Elizabeth that someone might actually want a malleable husband. She thought she might need to put that thought aside for use later when thinking about Jane and Mr Bingley. Insomuch as she wanted a man at all, she wanted a full-grown one who had a mind of his own like her uncle—at least, if she could find one who was not impervious to change or suggestion. It seemed a fine line, and thus far, she had never met a single man who was steadfast, reasonable, and available.

She finally replied, “Let us try the hard way. I am to dance the supper set with Mr Darcy. If necessary, I can ask him then but let us try subtlety first.”

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The subtle way turned out to not be all that hard. All Elizabeth had to do was take her two friends to a spot where they could gossip within hearing of Mr Collins. She spent some time discussing how little she would approve Lady Catherine’s interference in her affairs and then spent an equal amount of effort saying how unlikely that outcome was.

Mary helpfully queried her about Mr Collins' particular attentions, but Elizabeth simply said she had noticed no such thing. He may have spoken slightly more to her than others, but she thought he was just being polite. She bit her tongue as she expounded on how she found him an eligible man, but not one to her taste. She twisted the knife by speaking about how much she enjoyed staying with her tradesman relatives in Cheapside, and even how she might well find a husband there. She even did it a bit brown by openly wondering how Lady Catherine would appreciate a clergyman's wife with ties to trade, conveniently omitting that Charlotte's father had been in trade a few years earlier. What Lady Catherine did not know would not vex her.

Charlotte played her part with aplomb, countering every argument Elizabeth made, agreeing with Mary on the right points, and generally making it known that she envied Elizabeth the attentions she had received thus far, even if they were not marked enough to raise expectations.

Long before Mr Darcy came for the supper set, Mr Collins had asked Charlotte for the same, and Elizabeth considered the problem entirely solved—aside from the fit her mother was likely to throw when she became aware of who would displace her as mistress of Longbourn. Charlotte would have the parson trussed up and at the church before the poor man knew what hit him, and he would be all the better for it.

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Mr Darcy appeared right on time, and Elizabeth noticed her neighbours' sly looks at her being stood up with him. She suspected enough of the neighbours had learnt that they spent a couple of days in the house together but had never danced. That was the sort of thing the gossiping matrons (and men) liked to discuss to death. She did not think it particularly noteworthy, but small towns had to work with what they had.

At first, she did not say much, partially because she was accustomed to being silent

around him, and partly because she was watching her two younger sisters in consternation. Their behaviour was even worse than she had expected, and at about the point that Elizabeth suspected that alone would be sufficient to dissuade Mr Bingley from Jane. She thought that if she were an eligible gentleman, it would certainly dissuade her.

They had been some minutes at the dance, and she noticed that not only did he dance very well, but they danced very well together. She had danced with a sizeable number of men who were skilled at the steps, but not in seamlessly interacting with their partners. Mr Darcy had learnt the subtle art of treating the couple as a unit and adjusting to their quirks, and she very much appreciated it.

After some minutes, Darcy said, “Come, Miss Elizabeth. We must have some conversation. A very little will do.”

“Do you talk by rule, then, while you are dancing?” she asked curiously, having never paid the slightest attention to whether he spoke with his other dance partners or not.

“Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together; and yet for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged, as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.”

“Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?” she asked good-naturedly. “If the latter, I suppose you have ample justification.”

“Both, for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb.”

She laughed gaily, and his booming laughter joined it shortly. Most of her neighbours were surprised, but she did not pay much attention to that. Given how noisy the matrons were in their corner, a little laughter could not be all that amiss.

She shook her finger at him like a disapproving tutor. "I suspect you are punishing me for my silence of the first month."

"I would not have it so," he said, then looked at her pensively. "Do you know that, absent your uncle's intervention, it probably would have been me who ignored you the first month. I was quite eaten up with pride."

"I hope he was not too hard on you."

"In some ways he was not hard enough, but he does seem to know just the right amount of chastisement required to obtain the desired result."

Elizabeth laughed a bit, then became pensive, "I can assure you that I could speak at great length on the efficacy of his chastisement, as I have made a detailed study of it."

The first dance of the set ended, which was probably for the best as that was a subject Elizabeth thought it would be better to say less than more.

The second dance of the set proceeded very pleasantly. Just as an experiment, they tried speaking of the things that passed for standard dancing fare at a ball, but abandoned the effort within minutes, and had a much more agreeable discussion about current events in the capital and the ongoing (and seemingly endless) war on the continent.

By the end, Elizabeth was quite in charity with Mr Darcy, though still quite peevish with her mother.

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When they sat down to supper, therefore, she considered it a most unlucky perverseness which placed them within one of each other; and deeply was she vexed to find that her mother was talking to that one person (Lady Lucas) freely, openly, and of nothing else but her expectation that Jane would soon be married to Mr Bingley. It was an animating subject, and Mrs Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue while enumerating the advantages of the match. His being such a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them, were the first points of self-gratulation; and then it was such a comfort to think how fond the two sisters were of Jane, and to be certain that they must desire the connexion as much as she could do. It was, moreover, such a promising thing for her younger daughters, as Jane's marrying so greatly must throw them in the way of other rich men.

In vain did Elizabeth endeavour to check the rapidity of her mother's words or persuade her to describe her felicity in a less audible whisper.

She was rather limited in what she could say and how emphatically she could say it with Mr Darcy sitting next to her, and she was similarly limited in her discussions with him, because they could not avoid the matron's effusions.

Kitty and Lydia, naturally, could not allow the few minutes of pleasant conversation they might have enjoyed. They had obviously made at least a half-dozen trips to the punch table. Elizabeth excused herself from Mr Darcy for a minute and begged her father to do something about it, not because she expected him to, but she wanted to exhaust all efforts before she did something desperate.

Poor Mary did not have the sense to limit herself to one song on the pianoforte and then had to endure the further humiliation of her father's chastisement. Elizabeth felt bad that she had not helped her sister in that regard. It was too late for that evening, but she started giving serious consideration to bringing Mary to London. Her father's

prohibition against interfering with her sisters had always prevented the others from visiting, except for some brief stays with Jane once a year, but perhaps it was time to be more aggressive.

Mr Collins tried to make some sort of long-winded speech. Elizabeth tried to ignore it by speaking more pleasantly with Mr Darcy, but by then, his face had become stony, his countenance when observing her family looked grim, and she had to sigh in resignation. She had hoped, rather than believed she might be able to make a friend of the man. Now, she would be unsurprised if he left the county in the morning and dragged Mr Bingley with him.

On the other hand, she thought if Jane lost Mr Bingley because of her family, there was plenty of blame to go around. Jane spent far more time at Longbourn than Elizabeth, and had the full backing of the matriarch, and yet in all that time she had made little effort to curtail her younger sisters.

Elizabeth knew for certain that if she had been born the beautiful one that was supposed to save her mother from the hedgerows, she would have been able to work her mother into curtailing Lydia and Kitty. As it was, Jane made no real effort at all. In addition to that, if Mr Bingley could be dissuaded from Jane by someone else's opinion, no matter how well or poorly founded, then he would be weak husband material anyway.

Elizabeth knew she would be gone herself within the week, so it would have negligible effect on her if the party departed, but she did feel bad for Jane.

By the end of the evening, she had endured enough. To Elizabeth it appeared that, had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit or finer success.

As the coup de grace , Mrs Bennet manoeuvred to have their carriage last and even kept the Netherfield party a quarter-hour after everyone else departed. Elizabeth thought the strategy of annoying people had little to recommend it, but it seemed her mother's favourite (or only) tactic, so there was that.

One of her uncle's men had to carry Lydia to the carriage, and a maid had to steady Kitty. Elizabeth surreptitiously handed each man a guinea of extra pay and suggested they raise a pint to their health at their leisure. She especially enjoyed the fact that the Guinea in question had come from the Netherfield party.

The men briefly outlined their activities for the night and rather enjoyed the idea that Captains Denny and Sanderson would wake up well after noon with a powerful headache from a surfeit of laudanum. It had been a necessary step to protect her sisters, and she did not feel bad about it. She would not have felt bad if they threw the soldiers down a well, for that matter. She had seen worse.

She spoke briefly to Mr Darcy and thanked him for the dance with little hope they would ever share another. It was unfortunate, really, but just the way things were.

He indicated he had to return to town to deal with some family matters, and Elizabeth wished him Godspeed. She did not mention that she would be in town soon, but imagined if he called on her uncle again, she might or might not see him, but she would certainly not invite his attention. She had enough problems already.

She was uncertain how much disappointment she should feel for the end of the acquaintance. He had become at least an interesting person in her life, and she would rue the loss of a friendship that likely would never have been anyway.

### 11. The Blue Devils

The next morning demonstrated every possible meaning of the term ‘blue devils’ for the residents of Longbourn. Its most common definition was the pain, horror, and regret that came as the inevitable result of over-imbibing. Unlike Denny and Sanderson, none of the Longbourn residents had been double dosed with both alcohol and laudanum (to Elizabeth’s knowledge, anyway), but at least some of them had certainly had their fill of drink. Mrs Bennet and her two younger daughters were sullen, loud, shrill, tetchy, and generally unpleasant. They felt terrible and that apparently compelled them to make everyone else suffer along with them. Even the patriarch had sampled a bit more spirits than was wise, but at least he managed to suffer mostly in silence.

Of course, Elizabeth, Jane, and Mary felt fine, but that did not allow them to avoid enduring the lamentations.

Mr Collins was blissfully quiet at breakfast, not that even he would have been able to slide a word in edgewise between the whingeing of the overset parts of the table. He left immediately after breakfast and returned after dinner engaged to Charlotte Lucas. That naturally stirred up the hornet’s nest and triggered the second definition of blue devils: extreme melancholy. The wailing, lamentations, and gnashing of teeth were so long and loud that Elizabeth tried to hide in her room for several hours, though that did not do much to assuage Mrs Bennet’s fury. She threatened to ban Elizabeth from Longbourn forever, but since her majority was coming up in a few months, and she planned to leave for London within the week, that threat had no real power.

Elizabeth spent the bulk of the day (when she was not enduring her mother’s

harangues), trying to get to know Mary better. She found her sister was not quite such a zealot as her habits suggested. She was probably mostly shy and just trying to be noticed in a very loud family. Elizabeth could not condemn her for that, since she spent half her time in London to avoid Longbourn, but wished she could steer Mary away from Reverend Fordyce. The man was an idiot, who wrote long, boring, nonsensical sermons about how women should behave—when he had never married or fathered children, and in fact had no women at all in his life except a long-suffering sister. According to that reverend, nearly everything Elizabeth did was wrong, and she hoped she could wean Mary off his drivel. She considered her sister's rejection of Mr Collins to be the start of a possible reformation, but she had a long way to go.

That said, Mrs Bennet's assertion that Mary knew nothing about running a house was truer than not. Mary would not be among Elizabeth's list of accomplished women, by either definition. That said, by the end of the day she decided that Mary was not so set in her ways as to be beyond amendment.

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On the morning of the second day after the ball, the chickens all came home to roost, and the bill for the Bennet family's poor behaviour came due.

Jane received a note from Caroline Bingley indicating the entire Netherfield party had gone to town and would likely remain there for the winter, and in fact, might not return at all. The note was mostly fiction, since Miss Bingley made at least two claims that were pure fantasy.

The first claim was that Jane was her dear friend, and the only thing she would miss in that county. She even twisted that lie a bit by asking Jane to engage in correspondence, but Elizabeth could see through that with the greatest of ease. It seemed obvious Miss Bingley looked on the idea of associating her family with the

Bennets with abhorrence—and to be honest, after the ball, Elizabeth could not really blame her. As far as anyone at Netherfield knew, any man foolish enough to marry Jane Bennet was more than likely to end up housing the rest of the family as well, even assuming neither Kitty nor Lydia shamed them, which was not a bet Elizabeth would take.

The second spurious claim was that Mr Bingley was to court Miss Darcy. Miss Bingley must have assumed Elizabeth knew nothing about the Darcys, since the only interaction she had witnessed was one dance and one card game. That might even have been true if she always lived at Longbourn. As it was, she knew far more than she ever wanted to about the wayward heiress. She supposed it was possible Mr Darcy was fed up with Miss Darcy's intransigence after the elopement attempt the previous summer and wanted to marry her off, but she doubted it very much. She strongly suspected that was just wishful thinking on Miss Bingley's part, since she naturally knew nothing about the debacle in Ramsgate. Miss Bingley might hope one wedding led to another, but Elizabeth thought that was just plain silly.

Jane however, poor naïve Jane, took the letter at face value. Jane had always been Elizabeth's favourite sister, but with Elizabeth spending only half her time in Longbourn, they had lost the close relationship they'd enjoyed as children. Mr Bennet had prohibited her from enlightening her sisters about the uglier aspects of the world, despite repeated requests, and Elizabeth obeyed, to the family's detriment.

Mrs Bennet made it clear that she had now endured six calamities in a row, all at Elizabeth's feet. She took a good hour to work through the list: the early exit from Netherfield, the complete lack of effort to capture the viscount, the same for Mr Darcy, the rejection of Mr Collins, the future ascension of Charlotte Lucas, and finally the last nail in the coffin—Mr Bingley's defection. Compared to her assertions about how ill-used she was, and how much of a bane Elizabeth was on her existence, and the miserable life she was set to endure—Elizabeth eventually became nostalgic for dinner at the Netherfield ball. At least there, the endless spasms and fluttering

were aimed at someone else.

By the end of the day, Elizabeth was fed up, and she decided to take the bull by the horns.

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Breakfast the next day was where she decided to get on with it. She had at first determined to simply accost her father in his study, but she ultimately concluded that effort was unlikely to succeed. She knew well she would need to use the lure and the lash to gain any hope of success.

When breakfast was near done, she banged her teacup to get everyone's attention—a manoeuvre that would gain her about a quarter of a minute at best and stood to speak.

“I have been listening to endless lamentations for two days, the main purpose of which has been to either just vent your spleens or cast blame on me , and I have had enough. I ask... nay, demand that you heed my words. I will give you the problems that drove your suitors away and will continue to drive them away in some detail—then I will offer a solution.”

“I will not sit here and listen to this drivel!” Mrs Bennet said and threw down her serviette as if it were a gauntlet.

“Before you storm away in high dudgeon, Mama, I suggest in the strongest terms you at least make yourself aware of what you are walking away from!”

The two stared back and forth, but Elizabeth had stared down misters Darcy and Bingley, and they were hardly the most frightening men she had ever dealt with. Her mother's ire did not particularly impress her. For Mrs Bennet's part, she found she did not like the hard as nails look her daughter had no-doubt learnt from her brother.

To be honest, it frightened her just a bit, so she sat down with poor grace.

“Very well! You will make me suffer your opinion regardless, so we may as well get it over with.”

Elizabeth sighed in frustration, both at her mother’s inability to listen to one thing and then became even angrier when she saw her father smirking at the altercation as if it were the best entertainment he had seen in years (which might have been true).

Elizabeth stared at her sisters to ensure no interruptions, a trick that might get her another minute.

“Do you remember a few days ago when I told you for the thousandth time that you would not starve in the hedgerows... that your brother would not allow it, and that arrangements have already been made?”

Mrs Bennet seemed prepared to contradict her, but Elizabeth simply stared her down once more until she nodded resignedly.

“I will not explain why I can say this now, but the quality of your eventual situation after the demise of our father is not set in stone. You will not be left to starve, but you may be left to get by on the interest from your portion. That would allow you to live somewhat worse than Aunt Philips, particularly if you still have unwed daughters, but it hardly counts as starving. On the other hand, if you acquiesce to my suggestion today, then you might reside in comfort somewhere between Aunt Philips and Aunt Gardiner. It is entirely up to you which you get, but you have to decide NOW! ”

They stared back and forth a few more times, but just before Mrs Bennet might have agreed or not, Mr Bennet weighed in.

“I am still the head of this household, Elizabeth, and I take exception to this line of

discussion. We had an agreement!”

Everyone at the table snapped to attention, as none of them actually understood the agreement, or had even heard of it.

Elizabeth took it all in stride. “Yes, Father, we had an agreement, but you have not kept your end of the bargain.”

There it was, out on the table and just waiting for his retaliation, which was not long in coming.

“The agreement was that I allow you to do as you will in London for six months of the year, and you do not interfere with how I educate my other daughters. You have exceeded your six months each of the past three years, so what makes you think you can change the terms at this late date? I could just as well assert you have not kept up your end.”

Elizabeth knew he was just trying to get a rise out of her, so she did not take the bait.

“The agreement was that you would educate your daughters as you saw fit. You have not done so.”

“I dispute that, and even so, the crucial phrase in that agreement was, ‘as I see fit .’”

“Once again, I dispute that. The key word is ‘educate ,’ and in that respect, you have not lifted a finger since I left at fifteen.”

Mr Bennet started to pound the table, but Elizabeth held her hand and barely managed to stop him.

“There is little to be gained by arguing the point. I will be gone tomorrow, and I have

no plans to return. I will reach my majority during the next six months, and I will not return to Longbourn. As a very basic sign of respect, will you at least allow me to have my say. In exchange, I will say that when we leave this table, this family can accept or reject my proposed bargain, but either way, I shall never bring it up again.”

Everyone stared at her in shock. Nobody, not even Elizabeth, had ever challenged the patriarch in such a way at his own table, mostly because such challenges rarely ended well. The man mostly ignored them, but he could be vindictive when the mood struck. They were also stunned at Elizabeth’s assertion that she would never return. Such a thought had not occurred to a single person in the house.

Mr Bennet thought about it for some time, and finally asked, “Are you saying your influence on your uncle is such that you can convince him to reward or punish your mother at your whim?”

Elizabeth bit back the first retort that came to mind and did not like the taste of gristle that appeared on her tongue. The fifth thought did not go down much better, but she finally got her temper under control.

“I see you share a trait with Mrs Bennet. You like to see every statement in the worst possible light and wish to blame me for the world’s ills. I will not dignify your assertion with an answer at this point. I will promise you a detailed answer in a fortnight, if you will but listen to my assessment and subsequent proposal.”

Everyone, even the supposedly educated patriarch, took far too long in Elizabeth’s opinion to grasp the essence of a simple statement. She ascribed it to indolence of thought but supposed it did not matter.

Mr Bennet finally said, “All right, we will hear you out.”

The fact that he made it sound like listening to her for once in their lives was the

greatest concession made her want to grind her teeth, but she had no time for such petty responses.

“Very well, but before we begin, allow me to set the rules of this engagement. At the end of this, I will offer everyone at this table something they want very much, but only if you listen to me all the way through without arguing at every point. Have I your agreement?”

She stared at each member of the table disconcertingly until everyone nodded once. She noticed most of the members took it about how she would expect. Mr Bennet was enjoying the spectacle. Mrs Bennet was sullen. Jane was serene and agreeable. Kitty and Lydia would have left entirely if they had not been convinced the promise of a reward was worth a few minutes of Lizzy’s endless droning.

Mary was interesting. She met her gaze steadily, and somehow did not seem to be overly surprised by the exchange. She of course agreed immediately, but she gave Elizabeth a look of respect that she very much appreciated.

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Remember, no interruptions! The reason Mr Bingley left, and the next poor man will also leave, and the next probably will never approach anyone in this family in the first place—is the abhorrent behaviour of its members.”

It took a good five minutes of shouting, counter-shouting, and mayhem to get the table calm enough to let her continue. She finally bellowed in a manner she had learnt from a militia training officer.

**“ENOUGH! YOU AGREED I COULD FINISH!”**

They finally settled, and Elizabeth began.

“The worst are Lydia and Kitty. You are both brazen flirts. Do you know the officers

have an ongoing betting book about who will lift your skirts first?”

The table was stunned both at the assertion and the vulgarity of her language, but Elizabeth continued relentlessly.

“Denny and Sanderson are rakehells of the first order. They spent half the evening betting about whether it could be accomplished without force before the end of the ball—though they would consider anything short of bludgeoning you with a club to be ‘without force.’ The only reason one of you is not compromised right now, is that I brought two of Uncle Gardiner’s men, and they drugged the two men into insensibility. That said, they are both still here, and just as eager to win the bet.”

For the first time, she thought she might just have gotten through to her sister, but it was not to last.

“YOU LIE!” Lydia screamed, to exactly nobody’s surprise. “You are just jealous because they do not pay you any attention and you will die an old maid.”

Elizabeth spoke gently. “They do not pay me any attention because I do not allow it. Think about it, Lydia. These men make so little money that nobody short of a colonel can afford a wife at all, and even Mrs Forster does not live even as well as Aunt Philips, which Mother has just emphatically stated was unacceptable. What could you gain by marrying a man who is poor as a rat? Besides that, I can assure you there is not a single man in that shire who has marriage in mind, but there are other things flirting can lead to that they are entirely prepared for.”

The discussion followed that vein for another quarter-hour, and Elizabeth eventually listed every single mortifying action that she or the Gardiner men had observed at the ball, including her mother’s relentless boasting about the ‘capture’ of Mr Bingley.

She stared her mother down. “I can assure you that Mr Darcy nearly broke a tooth

over that display. Think about it, madam. You hounded me to try to get his attention. He decided he liked me well enough to dance the supper set, and I can assure you that Mr Darcy dancing the supper set with an unmarried woman is nearly unprecedented. He was quite in charity with me until he heard your vulgar display at supper. After that, Papa's cruelty to Mary over the pianoforte, and the ongoing vulgarity of Kitty and Lydia, he barely spoke another word to me, and left Netherfield after breakfast, never to return."

Elizabeth could see her mother making and rejecting one argument after another, as the conclusions were so obvious that even she could see the futility of argument.

Elizabeth continued for another quarter-hour, not even sparing her father her critiques.

Lydia tried to turn it back on her and blame things on Elizabeth, but she was prepared. She picked up three propriety manuals that they all were supposed to have absorbed.

"Tell me where I erred, and if you think you can name something, find in one of these books where you can justify it."

Mary chimed in for the first time. "You may as well give up, Lydia. The closest Lizzy came to breaking a single rule of propriety was having a conversation with me in a place where someone else overheard... hardly a hanging offence."

The discussion followed for a quarter-hour more until Elizabeth was simply tired of it. Everyone wanted to dispute every fact.

Eventually, Elizabeth exhausted her patience and slapped her hand on the table.

"ENOUGH! Here was my thought at the end of the ball: ' had my family made an

agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit or finer success.' This morning's discussion has simply confirmed that thesis. NOW!" she bellowed.

She continued more softly. "Do you want to hear my proposal? Are you the least bit curious about the reward available should you accept it, and the likely consequences if you do not?"

Everyone stared, and Mary once again stepped into the breach. "I, for one, would like to hear what Elizabeth has to say. What harm can it do? And she did say the reward would be substantial."

There was considerable grumbling but eventually everyone agreed to hear her out.

Elizabeth sighed. "Few, if any of you, know that Uncle Gardiner is in the business of protecting wealthy young women from rakes and fortune hunters. As part of that business, he offers a course... a sort of school... that can teach young ladies how to protect themselves. The world is a harsh place, and it behoves all of you to know how to navigate it safely."

She looked around the table and saw that everyone was staring at her as if she had gone daft. She was especially saddened to see both of her parents looking more confused than anything. They, at least, had all the opportunity in the world, not to mention the responsibility, to know about the Cheapside Runners; but they obviously just thought he was in trade, and did not give the form of his trade another thought.

Elizabeth had been trying to convince her father to send them to the course for years, but he would not listen to a single word about her time in London, regardless of how much she begged him to do so. They probably did not even know her uncle's income was more than treble Longbourn's.



“Here is my proposal, which has my uncle’s approval. I would like to take my sisters to this course, which you are being offered free of charge. Once you agree, you must finish. The course takes a fortnight. If you pass the course, which means do exactly as you are instructed for a fortnight, then you will receive an extra six-month’s allowance, and one new London ballgown each. You will also attend two entertainments in London, such as a play or a ball.”

Elizabeth could see that all of her sisters were at least thinking about it (for once), but Mrs Bennet unerringly went to the heart of the matter, at least as far as she was concerned.

“You said we would all have a reward. What is in it for me?”

“Do you mean aside from having daughters who just might attract reasonable suitors rather than ruining the family?” Elizabeth asked earnestly, hoping she might break through her parents’ intransigence.

“Do not double-talk me with your clever witticisms. There is not a whit wrong with my daughters. Why should I trade two lively girls who know how to attract a man’s attention for two more Marys?”

Mary flinched slightly but said nothing.

Elizabeth said, “Circle back to the beginning of this discussion, Mama. Papa is a dozen years older than you. Chances are good that you outlive him by a decade or two, and that is not even counting any unmarried daughters. You have been living one rabbit hole away from destitution for a quarter-century and have not saved a farthing. You will depend on your family’s charity, and I can assure you that having all of your daughters pass this course is the price of that charity.”

At that point, all the logical arguments had been laid out, but the battle was hardly

over. She now had to fight decades of stubbornness and the simple fact that nobody liked to lose an argument.

In the end, Elizabeth had to rely on her father, and even then, she had to use bribery as the lure. She also had a lash handy in case the lure failed, but she hoped it would be unnecessary.

“Father, if you agree with this, you will get a fortnight of blessed peace and quiet, and the course will leave the house much more peaceful even after your daughters return. You could even send Mama to stay with Aunt Gardiner during the course. After that, I give you my solemn promise that you will never hear another word on this subject for the rest of your life.”

She left unsaid that the promise was easy to keep because she would distance herself entirely from the family if they kept their present course toward ruin, likely even going as far as taking the Gardiner surname before Bennet was tainted—an action she was seriously considering, especially since she often used it already.

Eventually both parents agreed to the scheme, so Elizabeth struck while the iron was hot.

“We shall leave just after breakfast. I expect everyone at the table promptly at nine. Pack just one day dress, one evening gown, and smallclothes. The rest of your clothing is provided as part of the course. Be ready!”

### 12. Breakfast of Students

Breakfast found the Bennet ladies stuck somewhere between excitement, trepidation, and anticipation.

Mary alone thought they could actually use the education and regretted it had not happened sooner. She could care less about a new gown or attending yet another ball where she would be ignored; but it had become clear over the previous weeks that there was a great deal Elizabeth did not tell the family about what happened in London. She was excited to try to peel off a layer of the onion, having never gone anywhere or done anything of note in her life.

Jane was thoroughly convinced she had done nothing the least bit wrong, but she would go along as she always did. After all, she had been the one in the firing line all her life: Jane the eldest... Jane the serene... Jane the polite... Jane the pleasant... Jane whose beauty would save them from the hedgerows... Jane the only one who could calm their mother's or younger sisters' animal spirits.

Jane thought it was all well and good for Elizabeth to condemn the family, but since she hied off to London at the first opportunity after she came out and returned less than half the time, she had little right to criticise that which she had not endured.

Jane was unaware of Elizabeth's arguments with her father over the years so she saw her sister's interference as officious, but she would do her part and be done. With the abandonment of the Netherfield party, it was not as if she had anything better to do.

Lydia and Kitty were thoroughly disappointed they would miss a fortnight of the

officers' company, but with a new ballgown and six months' pin money, they thought they could well afford to humour Lizzy. It was not as if their sister was going to succeed in reforming them when the condemnation of every other stick in the mud busybody in Meryton had failed. They just wanted to get the silly chore over with, as both of them had spent the evening making extensive lists of the ribbons, lace, and embellishments they planned to purchase with the proceeds, not to mention they might attract a handsome beau in one of the London excursions.

Elizabeth was the last to the table, and her sisters were somewhat startled when she placed a paper in front of each, an ink pot and pen in the centre, and a bible beside it.

“You will each read this pledge aloud with your hand on the Bible, then sign it. This is your agreement to give this course your absolute best effort. For a fortnight, you will do exactly as instructed without question or complaint. You will not be placed in any danger if you follow instructions, but you will be placed in some uncomfortable but necessary situations.”

They all looked around in confusion, and when Lydia spoke up to object, Elizabeth said, “No arguments, Lydia. You made an agreement yesterday. If you cannot keep your solemn word for a fortnight, how can you possibly imagine you are ready to pledge your life to a man ‘til death us do part? You have often said you want to be the first married, but you baulk at a fortnight's hard work. Make up your mind!”

The rest grumbled, but each eventually made the oath and signed the paper, mostly because nobody was willing to be the only one to miss the reward. None saw it as a bribe, though it could hardly be considered anything else.

Jane asked, “What is this about anonymity, Lizzy?”

“You will not be the only ones taking the course. As you all know, ladies' reputations are somewhat brittle. You will do things that you would not like to be known in

general society,” she replied, then looked around and held a hand up to Mary who was about to interrupt. “These things will not be dishonourable or dangerous, but some will be embarrassing or might make you uncomfortable. You keep your names secret to prevent gossip. That is all.”

They still looked confused, but Elizabeth let it go for the moment.

An hour later, they all gathered in the drive, where they found not only the Bennet coach but a second rather smart looking carriage as well. Each had a middle-aged matron present.

Elizabeth said, “This is Mrs Stockwell. She will chaperone you to London. Mrs Whitcomb will escort me in the other coach. We have three more students to pick up in Hertfordshire. Remember... for the next fortnight, no names.”

With that, she walked over to the other carriage while Mrs Stockwell herded the Bennets into their own and left for London.

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The Bennet sisters arrived at a house somewhere in London a few hours later to find that Elizabeth had already arrived. They had no idea how that worked. They had to bait the horses while perhaps Elizabeth got fresh, or possibly their horses were old and tired while the Gardiner’s were young and healthy.

They entered and were allowed to refresh themselves briefly, then they were shown to a small dining room where they were slightly surprised to find Elizabeth with Maria Lucas, the Weatherby sisters, Alicia and Jasmine, and an unknown young lady about Kitty’s age.

“Your first class starts very early tomorrow. You will not be changing for dinner. Eat

now—there is just one course, then off to bed. You will be provided with clothing in the morning, and your instruction will begin.”

“Will you take the course?” Kitty asked.

“Can you imagine I have not done so already? Or that I would subject you to something I would not do myself?”

“Well... I suppose not.”

“Be easy. If you give the course your full attention and best effort, you will emerge the other side a better person with a more prosperous future than you can presently imagine. If you hang onto your present attitudes and only pretend to do the work, you will suffer for your indolence. It is not complicated.”

They all startled slightly when a large pot of what looked like stew was placed on the table with a stack of bowls and spoons by a maid who left without a word.

Elizabeth looked at Jane. “You are the eldest, so you should serve. This house does not have a plethora of servants.”

That statement confused all the ladies, as it seemed quite a decent house from what they had seen so far, but all questions were ignored.

Once they were done, Elizabeth and a maid led the ladies up to the second floor and down a long corridor.

When they arrived at their sleeping quarters, they observed them with a look of horror and confusion. The windowless rooms were eight feet on a side at best, with beds stacked one on top of another. A room smaller than their mothers’ closets was to hold at least four people. There was one chair in the middle of the room, which was

apparently to be shared, but no dressing stand, no mirror, no... anything.

“This is your bedchamber for the time being. Do not ask why that is so. It is part of the course, and the reasoning will become clear over time. Change into your nightclothes and get into bed. Lights out in a half-hour.”

She enforced the point by leaving them one candle per room with only a half-hour’s wax left.

“Where are our trunks?” Jane asked.

“Clothing will be provided in the morning.”

After that, she assigned beds to the ladies, taking particular care to separate Lydia from Kitty, and Jane from Mary. That left the other ladies mixed with Longbourn ladies, but the entire class was stuffed into two rooms.

None were thrilled, but each room had an elder sister who told them to quit complaining and get to bed.

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None of the ladies were thrilled to be awoken at the crack of dawn by a servant beating a pot with a wooden spoon, but it certainly was effective. The woman never introduced herself, but one look was enough to convince each lady that she was not someone to be messed about.

There was one chamber pot in each room, and a plain, dowdy dress hung on each bed, along with a plain cotton shift, short stays, and some sturdy looking boots. It looked like lower servant’s clothing at best. It was clearly not livery or anything that would be worn in the house of a gentleman. It was the kind of practical dress you

might see on a milkmaid or laundress. None of the ladies liked it in the least, but since the servant who woke them looked like she would enjoy dragging them out by their ears, they dressed expeditiously.

As they shuffled out of the room, the servant pointed to each girl in turn and assigned them the duty of taking out the chamber pots, one lady for each day. Lydia was the first in her room, and the servant gave her a look indicating she would be quite happy to turn the child over her knee if she complained. She acquiesced with poor grace and found herself with Maria Lucas performing the disagreeable chore for the first time in their lives.

They entered a room with a rather rough table that looked worse than the servant's tables at any of their homes. They found a pot of thin looking gruel and two loaves of bread. Two girls were tasked with distributing the food fairly, and everyone was cautioned that there was no hogging, no sharing, no talking, no arguing, no making faces, no noise, and most importantly, no complaining.

They ate quickly, were offered one more chance to refresh, and entered another parlour.

The room was stark beyond belief, and they wondered if instruction was always supposed to occur in dingy, dank, quarters. Most thought the affectation silly. They had briefly met all their classmates at the previous evening's meal, so they all turned to meet the woman who appeared to be their instructor.

Their governess, or tutor, or gaoler was dressed for the outdoors, all in severe black, right down to a deep black, severe looking bonnet that covered most of her hair, leaving only raven black bangs covering her forehead and falling partway down her back.

Her face was slightly dark, as if she either spent a lot of time in the sun, or perhaps



she was Spanish or Italian. The foreign effect was enhanced by a pair of large, gorgeous, blood red coral earrings with gold filigree. Those would have stood out in their own, but when contrasted with the severity of her attire, you could hardly look away. The contrast was further enhanced by subtle rouge on her cheeks. Her brows were dark and striking, as were her lashes.

By contrast, her expression was foreboding. She stomped into the room with an almost mannish gait, wearing what appeared to be walking or working boots. If not for the earrings, and the faint touch of rouge, one might have taken her for a rogue rather than any sort of governess. She wore leather gloves that looked thin and supple on the one hand, but rugged on the other. They were slightly discoloured as if she had stolen a gentleman's riding gloves a decade earlier and never took them off.

She topped Lydia by half an inch, and since Lydia was the tallest of the sisters, the lady (if she even was a lady) was the tallest and fiercest woman any of them had ever seen. She topped it off by being noticeably wider in girth than any of them, even Alicia Weatherby, who had never seen a dessert she was unwilling to sample.

Aside from the obvious quality of her earrings, the subtle rouge, and the hint that her eyes were too dark to be entirely natural, the woman looked like she spent her life as a washerwoman or milkmaid but decided young ladies were easier to abuse than cows.

The governess spoke in a low, throaty, threatening, almost masculine voice, with a noticeable accent that went along with her Mediterranean appearance, though none of the students could tell a Spanish accent from Italian, and half of them would not even recognise French.

“I am your tutor, Mrs Black. For the next fortnight, my word is law! Your guardians have paid handsomely for your attendance, and all of you have signed a pledge to do your best. I expect nothing less—in fact, I expect your utmost,” she stated

emphatically, then stared the, down threateningly.

“If, at any time, you refuse to cooperate, or even not to do your best in my opinion, you can quit. However, be aware that you are committed for the full fortnight. If you leave the course, you will be placed in a room half the size of the one you slept in and remain there on bread and water until the course is over. At that time, you will be quietly returned to your guardian, bound and gagged if necessary, and you will deal with whatever consequences your guardian chooses to impose. Is that understood?”

Everyone nodded in shocked half-agreement. Mary thought the only consequence for the Bennet ladies for failure would be to miss out on the bribes, but suspected some of the other ladies might have been threatened with the lash in addition to being enticed by the lure. It even seemed possible some of them might be motivated entirely by fear, as not everyone bribed their children (or sisters) into complaisance. She supposed she would never know.

She, of course, agreed wholeheartedly with the strictures, but she could not help but wonder how long it would take her dunderheaded sisters to realise how thin was the ice they were skating on. Mrs Black seemed like the sort of woman who had lots of punishments available at need, and little compunction about dishing them out.

The woman continued relentlessly. “Remember you are anonymous for exceptionally good reasons, even among yourselves. For the next fortnight, you are Miss Green,” she said, pointing to Lydia. Then she continued around the group, “Miss Yellow, Miss Red, Miss Blue, Miss White Miss Violet—” and continued around the circle. A servant pinned a small ribbon on each collar, just enough to help them keep track of their aliases, but not noticeable enough to raise eyebrows.

Mrs Black had been giving more and more instructions, while reiterating the fact that they pledged to give it their all—probably for the Lydias of the world, where no amount of repetition was sufficient.

### 13. The Lesson Plan

After the stern lecture, Mrs Black led the ladies into the lane to find two dilapidated looking carriages with piebald nags attached. She divided the ladies and set off. Mary was in another carriage from their tutor, which gave her a good chance to observe Miss White, though she was not likely to talk to her, as conversation was discouraged.

Miss White was an interesting looking girl, probably about Lydia or Kitty's age. She was womanly and fairly handsome, but seemed to vacillate between nervousness, boredom, and what looked like annoyance. She seemed even more distressed by their choice of clothing, and sneered at the quality of the coach, so Mary guessed she was higher born than the Bennets. Perhaps, she was one whose guardian actually paid the big fee. She thought it might be interesting to throw her in a room with Lydia and see who emerged alive after a day.

Her companions were Miss Blue (Jane), Miss Violet (Alicia Weatherby), and Miss Yellow (Kitty), but they kept their knowledge of each other to themselves. Mary supposed she might get to know the younger Miss Alicia better when they returned home. She did not have all that many friends, and one more would not be amiss. They would certainly have something in common after this.

They travelled for what seemed like hours, but since nobody was allowed a watch, she had no way of knowing.

Toward the end of the journey, she noticed they were entering an area full of soldiers. Their uniforms looked slightly different from the militia's in Meryton, at least for the

tiny bit of attention Mary had paid the men. She did not know if that meant these were regulars, or just a different company.

They debarked into what seemed like the most crowded town any of them had ever seen. Without moving a muscle, one could see houses, stables, ale houses, tents, stores, washerwomen, cooking fires, blacksmiths, soldiers, chimney sweeps, drunks, vagrants, children, dogs, merchants, carts, beggars, officers, enlisted, horses, and some women whose business they did not wish to know about.

Mrs Black led them off into the melee at a brisk pace. Mary was slightly frightened when two rough looking men followed them until she worked out that they were probably her own guards.

They continued along for about a half mile, brushing close and even bumping into all sorts of people that they had never known even existed, let alone expected to encounter. Mary suspected she had walked by more people in that half mile than existed in the whole town of Meryton by at least double.

They were triply horrified when dirty beggar children darted in quick as lightning, grasping for the reticules they did not carry, and begging with open hands for alms they also lacked. She supposed that explained their dress, at least partially. Even her worst morning dress might have gotten her robbed, and she suspected Miss White's worst might get her killed.

Occasionally, one of the urchins would get a bit too fresh and Mrs Black would cuff him on the side of the head, which most of the other ladies found somewhere between frightening and impressive. The woman moved like lightning but seemed to deliver just the precise amount of force necessary, leaving most of the ladies wondering if her former occupation might have been a barmaid in a tavern at a navy port. She certainly had the build and reflexes for it.

Eventually, they arrived at a nondescript, wooden house, well past a decade overdue for paint, and Mrs Black led them in directly after knocking a few times.

They entered a crowded little room that seemed to be something like a sitting room except there was a cook stove in the back... or at least, most of the ladies presumed it was, having never seen one. There were two or three children running around the room, and another in a cradle, not a shoe between the lot, and one who just stared unnervingly at the ladies. They were all encouraged to stack themselves like cordwood in the door, as the parlour had nowhere near enough room to house all, or even half of them, in anything even vaguely approaching comfort.

Mrs Black made the introductions. "Mrs Mason, well met."

"Mrs Black, you are very welcome," the haggard looking woman said.

Mary thought the woman's appearance must be the result of decades of hard living, as she looked the sort of tired that no amount of rest could improve. Her hands and face were far more wrinkled than Mrs Bennet's, but she spoke calmly and forcefully. The children mostly seemed to have enough sense to not annoy her when she had guests, but the room looked as tired as the lady did. The matron shooed all but the baby out the door to make a tiny bit of room, but she obviously could not offer seats to any of her visitors because there were but two chairs in the room.

"I suppose your little flock would like my story," she asked.

"If you would be so kind," Mrs Black intoned.

The woman started her tale, and the ladies listened intently. They had promised their best effort, and besides that, none of them had the vaguest idea where they were, how to get back to civilisation, or more importantly, how short Mrs Black's temper was.

Mary was amused that Miss Bingley thought Meryton was a savage wilderness, but that lady probably did not even know places like this existed in the whole world, let alone a few miles from her oh-so-fashionable Mayfair townhouse.

Mrs Mason was a good storyteller—Mary would give her that. She looked old and tired, but she could turn a phrase far better than her condition in life suggested, which made Mary wonder about her background. She was certainly literate, and spoke like a gentlewoman, but there was no evidence of even a Bible in the house, let alone any literature.

“As you can see,” she continued, “I am quite well situated now that my Jacob has made colonel. We did not live anywhere near this flush before his promotion.”

The way she said it with a flourish, Mary wondered if that was just showmanship, or she was actually proud of her accommodations.

“I see most of you look down on my abode, and I cannot rightly blame you for it; but I can assure you that delivering a child in the mud in a tent in the rain is nothing to aspire to. This is luxury!”

They all gasped in horror, though Mary wondered if she was being truthful. The lesson Mrs Black was imparting seemed clear enough to get through to even Lydia, though it never paid to underestimate her sister’s wilful intransigence.

Over a quarter-hour, the matron told the story of her life. She fell in love with a dashing lieutenant at fifteen, was caught in a compromising position, and made to marry. She had not the slightest objection to being married to her handsome beau at the time, but that was just because she knew nothing about anything, having never been educated in the harsher side of the world.

She then gave a brief accounting of the years leading up to her present agreeable

situation in life. Two children had died, though nobody could say for certain if they might have lived if they could afford an apothecary. Her story of delivering a baby in a tent in the rain was true, and to make matters worse, that tent was in Portugal, the midwife spoke not a word of English, and her husband was fighting a hundred miles away.

The baby started crying in the middle of the story, so Mrs Mason picked her up, unlaced her dress, and started feeding the child without the slightest hint of remorse or embarrassment. She relented and covered herself with a blanket after half of the students looked like they might faint, but Mary was nearly certain she did that just for her own amusement. The small smirk on Mrs Black's face confirmed the thesis.

A half-hour later they exited, and Mrs Black ushered them into a small alleyway where she could speak without being overheard.

Mrs Black's accent became more pronounced when she was speaking emphatically, and Mary wondered if she would ever learn where the woman hailed from, since it was clearly not England.

"That is lesson one. She is incredibly lucky, but you can see how she lives. She was raised in similar circumstances to most of you, but you can see what her choices led to. Who wants to guess how old she is?"

Miss Green guessed thirty-five, and every other lady made a guess between thirty-five and forty.

"She is twenty-six," Mrs Black stated, then continued relentlessly, "She married at fifteen, had her first stillbirth at sixteen, lost one child at around two years of age, has moved house thirty or forty times, some of those homes being tents, and barely keeps her children fed. I pay her to let you gawk. She feeds her family for several months on less than most of you spend on ribbons in a quarter."

The lesson was stark and seemed clear enough, though whether it was enough to bludgeon some sense into her younger sisters, Mary had no way of knowing.

Jane was appalled, but really did not know whether she was more appalled that the woman lived like that, or that she had been forced to witness it. The poor were far easier to understand in the abstract than when they were feeding a baby right in front of you, hoping it would survive to run around his hovel shoeless until it grew into... what, exactly?

The poor woman was less than Charlotte's age and practically worn out... all because of a poor choice she made at Lydia's age.

Miss White was appalled and frightened but was still having trouble seeing how that applied to her situation.

Miss Green wondered if she was seeing Mrs Forster in a decade, and it gave her something to think about.

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The next stop was the home of a lieutenant, similar to what could be expected for a militia officer, and they began to see why Mrs Mason felt like bragging about her situation. A house the size of Colonel Mason's contained three families, and all looked like they were on the ragged edge of starvation. Two more worn out wives told comparable stories. They came to it from different places, though similar, which seemed to be the point of the exercise.

One had eloped with an officer by choice, thinking it quite a lark. One had simply been incautious with her flirting and found herself in a dire situation. The third had done nothing particularly wrong but was forced against her will. All were in even more dismal situations than Mrs Mason, and all worked hard at jobs outside the home

to keep them fed while one wife tried her best to keep all the children out of trouble as much as possible. It was brutal, and that did not even count the very real possibility of becoming widowed. Considering they were in the regulars, that possibility was not the least bit abstract.

It was heartbreaking, and the amount Mrs Black gave them would feed all three families for months, but it would run out soon after they moved on with the regiment.

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They paused in a small open spot near a fountain that might even have worked sometime in the sixteenth century. A couple of ragged beggars saw Mrs Black signal, and they brought a couple loaves of stale bread that was at least a day old, and probably more like a week.

One boy had a wooden board and a knife, and he carefully cut one slice of bread for each lady and handed it to them with a bow. Then he poured some less than pristine ale from a pail into a single large flagon and suggested they share it around.

Mrs Black said, “That boy would kill to have a whole slice of bread for himself for lunch every day, and you may have noticed how careful he was with the crumbs. We shall not embarrass him by watching him eat your leavings. Eat up. It is the last you will have before supper.”

The lesson may have stuck, or not, but nobody had the strength to argue with her.

As they left, Mary looked around for the two rough men she assumed were her guards and saw nothing. She wondered what it meant, but suspected they were just being unobtrusive.

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They had walked a few hundred yards bunched up like scared sheep when a large, fat, rough-looking man sauntered up to Miss White, and spoke loudly in a heavily accented, lower-class cant.

“Oy, love, fancy a bit o’ sport? What’s the damage for a roll in the hay?”

Miss White’s face changed colour to match her name and backed up, only to be blocked by her companions. The man kept pressing forward and even reached out to pinch her cheek.

Mrs Black spoke angrily, all traces of her foreign accent replaced with a lower-class cant exactly matching the reprobate’s, in a threatening, grating, tone.

“Oy, shove off, cully! She ain’t fer the likes o’ you. She ain’t in the game. Best leg it ’fore I learns ye some manners!”

“Ain’t no doxy in the ken till she’s played her hand,” he said blithely, apparently not the least bit worried, despite being surrounded by dozens of people, probably because most seemed intent on minding their own business.

Mary looked around desperately for the two guards and almost missed when the man screamed like a banshee. She looked over to see him on his knees, begging and blubbing for the madam to take pity on his poor old soul and let him go.

With complete nonchalance, Mrs Black waved her charges over, all traces of the cant gone from her voice, so she once again sounded slightly foreign.

“I am afraid this... hombre...” she said and punctuated it by making him scream another time. “...has disrupted my careful instruction schedule. You should not learn about thumb locks until the second week, but I may as well show you now, since he volunteered so nicely. Look carefully at how I have his thumb, and how I bend it

back like so—”

She demonstrated by bending it back a few times, each of which made the ruffian scream and Miss Green giggle, until she got a good stare down from the instructor and remembered how she had cuffed the orphans upside the head and had a large grown man screaming on his knees.

For a couple minutes, she did what could hardly be considered anything short of torture to the man while patiently instructing her charges about how to make it hurt without breaking it before she finally released him and sent him running.

She turned back to her charges and spoke calmly and emphatically.

“That man committed no punishable crime, according to our legal system. However, if he were a gentleman of any means or status, I would have by defending myself. Keep that in mind. He could assault each of you in turn, and the magistrate would not lift a finger. You must learn to protect yourselves. The first step is not putting yourself in a position where you need to defend your own person. However, as you so clearly see, you cannot always be so lucky, so you should be prepared to do what is necessary... but ideally with less fuss. I could have broken his thumb with just a bit more pressure, wounded or killed him with my knife, or broken his arm with little more effort or risk to myself. Any of those would be messy and likely to result in a charge I would just as soon avoid; but I would not hesitate if the situation called for it, and neither should you. Now, follow me.”

All her charges stared in shocked silence, but eventually Miss Violet took off to catch up with their teacher who had outpaced them by a dozen yards, and the rest followed at a run.

At that very moment, Mary gasped in even more shock as the scales fell from her eyes, and she noticed her tutor was none other than her long-lost sister. The disguise

was brilliant , and she doubted anyone short of a sister would be able to pierce it. That said, once she was aware of the subterfuge, the pieces came together and made sense. She noticed the thick soles and heels on her boots, as well as the fact that her dress did not move quite correctly. That made sense. Elizabeth was unlikely to have gained a stone overnight, so she was obviously padded. The earrings were like the red cape Spaniards apparently waved at bulls, something that drew the eye and distracted, as were the dark and slightly unnatural looking eyebrows. She wondered how she simulated the colour and wrinkles in her skin to make herself look older, because she could easily pass for anywhere from thirty to forty. The accent would just require practise, and the hair could be a wig or some sort of dye on her naturally dark tresses.

She wondered when any of the others from Meryton would work it out, if ever. She wondered at the purpose of the ruse, but assumed Elizabeth had even more reason to maintain her anonymity than they did, since this was clearly not her maiden voyage on the choppy waters of instructing dunderheads. Simple logic suggested that if a fortnight had some risk to reputations, months or years just compounded the hazard.

She did not even want to think where or when her innocent looking sister had learnt servant's cant or thumb locks.

Later in the evening, Mary worked out that this must be an unusual class and thought to ask Lizzy about it when it was over. After all, there could not be all that many families with four daughters to instruct, nor did she think it likely there were usually so many from one town; and of course, Elizabeth could only train her own sisters once, though Mary was sceptical that once would be enough for Lydia or Kitty.

She remembered that Lizzy said the course was for wealthy ladies, so guessed Uncle Gardiner must be gifting it to other women in Meryton who he considered vulnerable to the militia, as they were not the least bit wealthy. She did notice that the attendees had all been consistently kind to Lizzy over the years, even though she was at Longbourn less than half the time.

She decided she had a great deal to discuss with her sister, and even hoped Elizabeth might somehow offer her an escape from Longbourn. That would obviously require her to give the cause double her best effort.

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The afternoon was spent in similar pursuits, though not all with soldiers' wives or bad situations. In London, you could go from the grandest mansion to the meanest hovel without leaving an area half the size of Longbourn, so it was easy enough to see a wide variety in a few hours if planned carefully. Mr Darcy's London house was closer to Cheapside than Netherfield was to Longbourn.

They saw wives of tradesmen, merchants, blacksmiths, shopkeepers, and a few others. It was not all gloom and doom. Many of the situations were comfortable—different from what they were accustomed to, but suitable enough.

It eventually sank in that Mrs Black was showing them a range of possibilities. In fact, some of the wives were gentlewomen who had deliberately chosen that route, sometimes because there was a dearth of marriageable gentlemen, where the lesson for Meryton ladies was not the least bit subtle. A few were even love matches, or cases where a lady could find better comfort in trade than gentry. Aside from the supposed loss of consequence, a banker's wife lived far better than any but the wealthiest wives of gentlemen. Mrs Black very helpfully pointed out that if you took their status as the daughter of a gentleman and added a shilling, you could buy one meal. She even introduced them to a seventy-year-old wife of a bookseller who was happy as she could be after fifty years of marriage. It had taken her over a year to convince her father to allow the marriage, thus proving that occasionally, even a duke could be worked by a beloved daughter.

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The very last stop of the day seemed like it would be the worst, because even the indomitable Mrs Black looked discomposd by what was in front of them.

“Be very quiet and respectful here,” she cautioned, as if they had not been doing that all day. Even Lydia had been subdued after the first visits to officers’ wives.

They entered a tiny little room in a nondescript hovel, and the smell drove half the ladies back into the street to cast up their accounts into the gutter.

They gathered at the side of a bed to observe a listless woman who looked at least a hundred years old, who barely managed to wave her hand at Mrs Black, though she made no effort at all to get up.

“Ah, Mrs Black. I wondered if I would see you again in this life.”

“Mrs Stacy,” she replied quietly. “I told you I would return.”

“Another week would have been too late, child,” she replied seemingly casually, then coughed outrageously.

“How are you?” Mrs Black asked.

“My trials are nearly over, as you can see.”

“Do you care to speak to my charges?”

“You know the story as well as I.”

Mrs Black sighed. “Another victim of unfortunate choices.”

“Not unfortunate!” she stated emphatically. “Bad choices! Stupid Choices! Do not

mince my words!” Then she coughed ferociously again.

“Yes, bad choices. This is Mrs Stacy. She fell in love with the handsome and charismatic Captain Stacy and eloped. Unfortunately, she did not realise the best way to become charming and charismatic is like any other accomplishment—you practise . Captain Stacy practised a great deal, before and after marriage.”

“Aye, that he did... that he did. Brought me the pox, too. He is dead of course, and nobody rues his loss, especially me.”

All the charges were looking decidedly green.

“Her family disowned her,” Mrs Black said quietly. “Her father took her shame as an excuse to gamble her dowry away.”

“Aye, that he did. Right handsome dowry it was, too. He is dead as well, and good riddance.”

Mrs Black continued in almost a whisper. “Has the madness started?”

“It has,” she said, then her hand reached out to grab Mrs Black’s, which startled her companions no end.

“Hush, ladies. Be easy. It does not pass that way,” Mrs Black said softly.

Mrs Stacy said, “I am ready, child. Might you say some words as you promised?”

“You are certain?”

“I am.”

Mrs Black sighed, and a tear rolled down her cheek unnoticed. “I wish I could do more. Should I get a priest?”

“I have had enough attention from men for one lifetime, thank you very much.”

They clasped hands a moment longer, and Mrs Black spoke in a raspy whisper.

“Miss Red, our hostess does not have long to live. Might you have a prayer for her? From the Bible, mind you, not your usual.”

“Of course, Mrs Black,” she said, and then taking her at her word, she fell to her knees beside the sickbed, took both of the sick woman’s hands, and quietly spoke from Psalm 23 and 2 Timothy with tears rolling down her face.

“Bless you, child. Bless you. You have done me a great kindness. Now go! Mark my words and listen to Mrs Black if you do not wish to repeat my mistakes.”

They all shuffled out of the house after giving a very respectful curtsy, mostly because they had no idea what to do. They gathered back near the fountain a quarter-hour later, with most still with tears in their eyes that they had to wipe with their sleeves, since they lacked handkerchiefs.

Mrs Black said, “She told me some time ago that if she could save just one of my charges from a similar fate, she could meet her maker with a glad heart. Who knows, perhaps it will be one of you.”

Mary thought she showed admirable restraint in not looking at Kitty or Lydia, though for all she knew, Miss White or Miss Violet could have been at just as much risk.

Miss White asked, “Will you see her again?”

Mrs Black looked pensive for a moment then finally shook her head.

“I doubt it. As I mentioned, I pay these poor souls to allow us to learn from their fates. It is a Devil’s bargain—their dignity for food and medicine. Mrs Stacy has survived on my pay alone for the past year, but she is using greater and greater doses of Laudanum. I will be very surprised if she survives the night.”

“Suicide is a sin!” Mary stated in horror.

Mrs Black looked at her critically. “So is judgement , according to Mathew and James! It is neither your place nor mine to judge, Miss Red.”

Mary gulped, not at all certain she agreed, but powerless to argue, especially since she knew what the Bible said as well as Mrs Black did.

Mrs Black let her stew on that for a minute or two, forcing her to at least acknowledge the ambiguities of life, then finally took pity on her as the rest of her charges held their breaths.

“She will not commit suicide, if that helps your conscience. She is in agony you cannot comprehend, and she has been suffering longer and harder than you can imagine. She has had a full bottle of Laudanum on her table at all times. She could have deliberately and painlessly taken her own life in less than five minutes at any time in the last year. She has refrained, for her own reasons, but everyone has their limits. She has paid her price and will stand for judgement head held high. Can any of you say you would do the same in her place? Can you honestly say the present course of your lives are likely to allow you to go to your reward in peace some years hence? If you died tomorrow, would you be satisfied you had lived the best life you could?”

Mary at first thought she was splitting hairs, but then decided Lizzy was right. It was not her place to judge, and what would it accomplish anyway? She at long last

realised that there was a fine line between taking enough Laudanum to ease your pain and enough to kill you, and she decided that refraining from judgement was the very least required of her.

It would be some time before she came to the startling realisation that she had been devouring Fordyce and the Bible for years and had yet to learn the essence of compassion—which, by all rights, should have been the very first lesson.

An extremely subdued group returned to their lodgings. They did not complain in the least to get the same stew they had endured the night before, nor did they complain about the size or quality of their bedchambers.

It was probably not enough to reform the worst of them, but it was a start.

14. Friends and Relatives

“Darce, may we perchance be granted entrance to this fine den of masculine sanctuary?”

“Bingley... Richard... You may as well come in. This dog hole should be safe enough. I doubt any of us could muster any attention from a woman worthy of being pleased anyway.”

With that, the three friends entered the study in the Darcy townhouse. He had not seen Bingley since the Netherfield ball a week earlier, and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, since he left for Hertfordshire two months earlier.

They entered, exchanged greetings, took a few glasses of port for fortification, and sat down to discuss the ways of the world, such as it was.

“Bingley, I understood you to be about three-quarters leg-shackled off in the country. Do you still plan to return?” the colonel quipped.

“That remains to be seen,” Bingley replied somewhat glumly. “I have become... concerned... about what I saw there. I have not given up, but I am... cautious... thoughtful.”

“A thoughtful Bingley must defy some fundamental law of nature.”

“Perhaps, but I suppose sufficient exposure to your contemplative cousin was likely to rub off sooner or later. We all have our weaknesses.”

“You seem a bit morose about all this introspection. Was this angel more persistent than the earlier ones? Or is your head just sore from having to work for once?”

They all chuckled, but Bingley did not deign to reply to the last part.

“No, not persistent, per se, but she was the first one I could imagine settling down with. I may even have given it due consideration if not for—”

The pause became pregnant as the other men had no idea how to deal with a pensive Bingley.

“If not for?” the colonel helpfully supplied, then kicked his boot to jar his tongue loose.

“If not for... well... several things, really. The first is that my sister swears on everything holy that Miss Bennet does not hold me in any particular regard; that she is naught but a fortune hunter. She claims women know these things, and she is also privy to private conversations. I returned to town after the ball for a fortnight, and Caroline closed up the house. I have yet to decide what to do.”

The colonel grunted at a level that was indecorous for a gentleman, but perfectly ordinary for a soldier. “I see your sister is not satisfied with running your life but has elevated her game to running your thinking as well. No wonder your head hurts.”

He waited for the reaction and was disappointed when all he got was a sigh and a shrug. He expected fisticuffs after a remark like that (even though he thought he was just stating the obvious) but got nothing—much to his chagrin.

Bingley continued with uncharacteristic seriousness. “Not exactly, but she does make a point. I am rarely certain what a woman thinks. I suspect the same is true of most men. That said, Caroline has her own agenda, so I do not necessarily trust her

implicitly.”

“Very wise, but keep in mind that women have far less freedom of expression. If she chased you with a quarter the intensity you usually chase them with, she would be considered fast.”

“Agreed, but I do not think that precludes her at least giving me a hint. There was plenty of opportunity. At any rate, I decided to give it a think for a few weeks. Miss Bennet’s next younger sister, Miss Elizabeth, made a keen observation when we were discussing ladies’ accomplishments.”

Darcy laughed. “She made it whilst taking fifteen guineas off our hands in a half-hour. She bilked us like a Covent Garden sharper. It was impressive.”

The colonel laughed heartily and wondered if he might find such a woman somewhere. Then he wondered how in the world a country miss could afford those stakes, and that led him to wonder if she could afford a broken-down old colonel for a husband.

Bingley continued, “Miss Elizabeth insists accomplishments are ephemeral, and mostly worthless. They are only useful for a season or two, then obsolete for the next fifty years. She had a clever turn of phrase—called them husband bait, I think. It put me to thinking I ought to take the long view. Considering the matter for a few weeks cannot hurt in the grand scheme of things.”

Darcy weighed in. “I applaud both Miss Elizabeth’s thinking, and you taking up the yoke—but why use your sister as the excuse? If you want to abandon Miss Bennet, abandon her. The ball alone gave sufficient reasons without leaning on your sister’s rather suspect opinion. If you want to proceed with her, write to Mrs Nichols and reopen the house. If you want to think about it, write to her father that you are delayed but expect to return. At the very least, you owe it to your staff to make

certain any servants were properly paid off and the house properly closed if you are not to return.”

“Oh ho! This I have to hear,” the colonel chuckled. “Now I know not what I am more anxious about—Bingley’s explanation, or what in the world has you sticking your nose in. Mayhap Bingley was not the only one interested in Hertfordshire?”

“I admit that I have an interest in Hertfordshire, though not of the matrimonial variety, which I will expound on presently... but let us not confuse poor Bingley with too many topics at once.”

Bingley laughed, returning a bit to something approaching his customary humour.

“I was becoming quite enamoured with Miss Bennet, but blood and thunder, did you notice her family at the ball?”

Darcy ground his teeth. “That I did! I had finally gotten more or less into Miss Elizabeth’s good books, or at least out of her bad books. I danced the supper set and dined with her, but—”

“OH HO!” the colonel bellowed before he could even finish. “You danced the supper set? Voluntarily? ”

“Yes, well—”

“This I must hear!”

“I would be done by now if you had not interrupted.”

“Carry on, good sir. Pray, carry on. I am all ears.”

“We are not finished with Bingley yet.”

“I believe I can keep track,” Bingley said. “Besides that, they are sisters, so the two stories are related. Might as well give the colonel the whole picture.”

The colonel laughed while Darcy sighed. “You just want me to shoulder the load.”

“And who better?” Bingley said, mostly back to his normal mood, which may or may not have been helped by his second or third glass of port.

Darcy looked pensive while the colonel said, “So... the Misses Bennet?”

“It all started at the assembly, at least I thought so for the first month.”

Bingley sat up curiously, “Do tell! If you know more, it is news to me.”

Darcy wondered how much to actually tell his friend. The man was trustworthy, but every person who knew about Georgiana was one more person who could slip at an inopportune time, and his sister becoming aware would be a calamity beyond measure, so discretion should be the order of the day.

“It was a country assembly, probably much like any other when there is new blood for the matchmakers. Naturally, Bingley went to the handsomest woman in the room . The eldest Miss Bennet is not exactly to my taste, but she is handsome by any measure.”

“And you stalked around the edges like a prowler.”

“Not quite. You remember Mr Gardiner?”

The colonel’s interest was piqued as he poured one more glass. “He of the insipid-

fortune-hunting Cheapside nieces?”

“Exactly,” Darcy said while Bingley’s ears perked up like a hunting dog. He had never heard a peep about any of that.

Darcy told a sanitised version of the Cheapside story, omitting the inconvenient fact that he was there because the man rescued his sister, from an ill-thought-out elopement. Instead, he focused on his own faux pas. Fortunately, Bingley was too fascinated with the story to question such minor details as why he might agree to meet such nieces in the first place.

“Believe it or not, I returned hat in hand a week later to apologise, but Mr Gardiner said his niece had returned to the country. I spoke to him for an hour or more and he gave some excellent advice. I decided to listen, for once in my life, and try to be a better man. Naturally, that meant I should dance with the ladies. After all, they outnumbered the men by a noticeable margin, and it is the duty of a gentleman.”

The colonel jumped up out of his seat and put his hand on Darcy’s forehead before sitting back down. “No fever... must be madness.”

Darcy chuckled but allowed him his amusement.

“I was unaware you even knew how to hold your hat in your hand, Darcy.”

“One must start somewhere.”

The colonel shrugged, more aware than Bingley about the reason for his cousin’s reformation but unwilling to discuss it in present company.

“Bingley proposed I dance with the next younger sister, a prettyish lady of about twenty. I had no objection to the scheme, but she disappeared before I could ask, so I

chose another.”

“Right civilised of you,” Bingley quipped, then he laughed a bit and took up the story.

“Miss Elizabeth spent weeks mostly shunning Darcy for reasons known only to her. She was smooth, clever, subtle, and well-mannered about it, but by the time her sister got caught in the rain coming to dinner at Netherfield a month later, they had not even been introduced, nor had she spoken a single word to him. She even declined a dance without speaking to him.”

“That is unprecedented! Like waving red meat in front of a hungry wolf.”

“Do not be crude,” Darcy snapped, which surprised the colonel, who examined his cousin intently. He had never gotten tetchy about a woman before, so his reaction was interesting.

“Go on.”

“Miss Bingley, in a fit of even worse than usual manners, implied Miss Elizabeth avoided playing cards with us because she could not afford the stakes, whilst Hurst implied that she lacked the skill or temperament.”

“Hardly any great stroke of cognition when she was a country miss, and Hurst is little more than a professional gambler.”

“True, I suppose. She claimed satisfaction with her book, but they could just not let it go. She eventually seemed to lose her temper and snapped that if we were going to whinge all night, she may as well play. She called for Brag with five guineas as table stakes.”

The colonel whistled in admiration, since he had as good of an idea of how much a country miss was likely to have for allowance as anyone. Nobody but a suicidal madwoman or heiress wagered with months' worth of allowance, ergo the woman must have more of the ready than would be expected.

Bingley laughed heartily. "She then proceeded to educate Caroline on what an accomplished woman was, whilst converting her five guineas to over twenty in less than an hour. I ended the night with a single guinea out of five."

"One more than I had," Darcy grumbled.

The colonel whistled in admiration again. "I would pay good money to see that."

Darcy continued, "You can just imagine how that got my attention. She did all that while still avoiding saying anything directly to me. I did make some progress though. If I asked a question, she would deign to reply to the whole table if she felt like it."

"More like if she found it useful for her card play," Bingley quipped. "We were like lambs to the slaughter."

"So how did she go from refusing to speak to you to the supper dance?" the colonel asked enthusiastically.

Darcy frowned till his teeth hurt.

"Your brother happened!"

"MY brOTHER!" the colonel bellowed, as was his custom when the viscount was mentioned. "What has that scapegrace done now?"

He had not spoken a word to his brother in over five years and had not had a good

opinion of the blackguard for at least a decade.

His tirade was interrupted by a knock on the door, and the timely arrival of Soams with a tea cart.

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Darcy always marvelled at his butler's sixth sense. The man had a knack for knowing when a group of men should have some sustenance, requested or not. He sometimes speculated the man's hearing was simply good enough to hear glass clinking and detect when the ratio of spirits to food was likely to lead to disagreeable tasks for butler and valet, or he had some other sensibility. That said, he could just as well have determined that three men in a room for an hour were almost certainly up to no good, and they should probably be interrupted.

Either way, the intervention was timely. The men tucked into a simple cold meal of bread, meat, cheese, lemonade, and strong coffee. They deferred all serious discussion as they ate, so had to fall back on the age-old male conversational gambits of boasting and exaggerating.

Eventually, the meal came to a close, so they reluctantly continued.

"All right," the colonel finally said. "What has Andrew done this time?"

With that, Darcy spent the next ten minutes describing the confrontations, first with Miss Elizabeth and thence with the viscount, along with the entirely pointless effort he had made with the earl to rein his cousin in.

The colonel asked, "How could you not know Andrew was a rogue?"

"I suppose I never really thought about it. I have spoken maybe a hundred words to

him in the last decade. I mostly ignore him, and he rarely if ever comes into my presence. I nearly came to blows with him my last year at Cambridge over his attempt to weasel me out of enough money to pay some gambling debts, and I have steadfastly ignored him ever since.”

Bingley said, “Even if you did not know specifically that he was a seducer of the worst order, you must have suspected it.”

“I had the mistaken belief that since his father and brother were honourable, he would at least keep himself within reasonable limits. It turns out I was misinformed.”

The colonel asked the operative question. “Had you known, would you have done anything different? You have known Wickham’s proclivities for years, and you not only allowed him to continue, but even cleaned up his messes.”

Darcy sighed. “I suppose I did. I wonder how much responsibility I hold for the damage he did to the world.”

“Did he ever force anyone?”

“If I knew he had, he would have been in debtor’s prison years ago. He is a seducer, but he never had to stoop quite so low.”

Fitzwilliam said, “We all know dozens of such men, but I do not know what we are supposed to do about it. We cannot fix the entire race of mankind.”

“No, but I suppose we have some responsibility for those close to us. I admit that I have probably done more than many men of our class to help the victims, but less than is possible... perhaps, even less than is reasonable.”

“You could beggar your estate, and it would be a drop in the ocean,” Fitzwilliam

asserted.

While Darcy thought about that a minute, Bingley made a surprising observation.

“I wonder if that applies to the women in our lives.”

“What do you mean?” Darcy asked. Like most, he assumed most evil in the world was perpetuated by men, a not unnatural surmise.

“Caroline likes to gossip, and I know she has made life miserable for more than one woman she considered her rival. Should I be calling her to account, or trying to undo her damage?”

They thought about it a minute, and finally Darcy said, “I suppose you should call her to account, though how you might go about it is a mystery to me. I cannot even control my sister who is not yet out.”

“I control her purse strings.”

“Keep in mind that she can just as easily aim her sharp tongue at you, or someone important to you,” Darcy warned.

Fitzwilliam said, “Who is to say she has not already done so? It would be the work of a moment to shatter Miss Bennet’s hopes and dreams... if she had any in the first place.”

Bingley looked startled.

Darcy said, “If she did, it is probably correctable if you are still interested in her. If so, just follow one of my earlier suggestions.”

“Either one would raise expectations. If I am not prepared to satisfy them, I could do more harm than good.”

“If you want to live a risk-free life, you could sit around this room until the end of time—or until Soams gets tired of your stink,” the colonel bellowed with great laughter.

They all went along with it and decided to defer the discussion of what they owed to the world in reparations for the evils of their sex until another time.

The colonel moved back to a topic they could productively discuss.

“You were telling me about Miss Elizabeth and my brother.”

“Oh yes,” Bingley said enthusiastically. “Talk about confronting the tiger. When she was introduced to the viscount, she got over her Darcy-shunning policy in a trice.”

“Tell me about it?”

Darcy said, “Keeping in mind she had yet to say a word to me, when she was introduced to Andrew, she made the barest greeting then made herself scarce. Then she accosted Bingley and I in the dining room during the separation and told us without preamble she and her sister would leave at dawn, with or without our help.”

Bingley laughed, “Darcy challenged her about the practicality of that plan, and she basically said that getting up at five to walk three miles home in the dark to get her father’s coach was well within her capabilities and would be preferable to staying in my house. You could have knocked me over with a feather.”

Darcy laughed. “This is a bit out of sequence, but the next morning I asked her why she had taken such a dislike to me, and she said she never had. She was entirely

indifferent!”

“Zooks, I bet that hurt!” The colonel laughed.

“I suppose it did sting, but it was refreshing in a way. After being chased for a decade, being thoroughly ignored has much to recommend it.”

“HA! But, back to the feather knocking.”

Bingley continued, “We had to drag it out of her for obvious reasons, but she eventually told us she knew all about your brother. She had, in fact, held one of his natural daughters in her own hands.”

“Gutsy move, if you ask me,” the colonel replied with respect.

“Just the start. She said she would protect her family and friends but could care less about Caroline because she was neither. Tore the hide off her pretensions, which I bet my sister would have been unhappy to hear.”

“She gave us a lecture on unbalanced risks. We will have to speak at length about that later,” he added, with a look indicating there was more to be said on the subject vis-à-vis their ward.

Bingley continued, “Then she told us how to set a trap for the scoundrel.”

“Damme. Sounds like either my kind of woman or someone I should hide from. No wonder you took a fancy to her, Darcy.”

“Yes... not that complicated when you get right down to it.”

“So that is how he ended up with a lost tooth and broken nose.”

“Yes. The missing tooth was probably swept up from the floor of Miss Elizabeth’s bedchamber the next morning.”

“You were in her bedchamber? Are you suicidal?” the colonel asked worriedly.

“She obviously was not there. She had already moved herself and her sister... without telling Caroline.” Bingley laughed.

“Did the maids know that?” the colonel reiterated.

“Be easy, colonel,” Bingley soothed. “We were cautious and ensured no gossip ensued. Miss Elizabeth took care of her sister, but we thought we should show we could at least follow her lead without stuffing it up. All is well.”

Darcy continued, “The next morning after explaining her complete indifference to me, she suggested I just beat my head against a rock instead of speaking with your father. Said it would hurt about the same and accomplish just as much.”

“Even I know that!”

“I did to, but the die was cast by then. It was my duty to try.”

“Worth a try,” the colonel said. “I am still a bit unclear about how that led to a supper dance. The path is not very clear.”

Darcy chuckled. “Just before she left, she gave me my shilling back and said we were even.”

It took a minute for it to sink in, but then the colonel laughed hard enough to spill his drink. Fortunately, it was on a hardwood floor that had already seen gallons of port in the past, and would no doubt see more in the future, so it was not a calamity.



Bingley asked in confusion, “What shilling was that?”

The colonel took pity on him. “The elder Bennet sisters were the so-called insipid tradesman’s nieces from Cheapside,” he said before he continued laughing with Darcy.

Bingley joined in a minute later. “That explains a great deal.”

### 15. The Story in Their Eyes

“Pay close attention to the officer on the corner with the blondish hair?” Mrs Black said on the fourth day of their course.

“You mean the very handsome one?” Miss Green asked energetically.

“Handsome is as handsome does. Watch him carefully.”

The ladies were standing about in a first-floor room above a heavily trafficked market square loaded with officers. The students had been sceptical that they could learn anything from one floor above the street, forty yards away, looking through lace curtains, but Mrs Black was not to be argued with. The group had decamped to a smaller town outside London for the day’s observations, and the environs were little different from Meryton.

Mrs Black had slightly softened her look by moving from unrelenting black to dark blue but was still just as strict and intimidating.

Mary joined the group in their observations, though she allowed most of the other ladies to take the front row. She did not think anyone else had worked out Elizabeth’s secret yet, nor had she let her sister know she was on to her scheme.

A minute later, the officer in question sauntered out of the corner, and engaged a couple of ladies who seemed to be running an errand or looking at the shops, though they could just as well have been officer hunting. The men engaged with them, and both ladies had the happy looks of someone who enjoyed the attentions.

Mrs Black said, “Always be suspicious of coincidence. Those two men were stalking their prey in that corner. Notice their posture. In the corner they were hunched over, laughing amongst themselves, and rather slovenly. As soon as they headed for the ladies, they smartened their uniforms, stood up straight, pushed their chests out, and put smiles on their faces. Do not be fooled—that smile is a wolf’s grin.”

“How can that be?” Miss Green asked. She was always the most sceptical, and the least likely to accept Mrs Black’s instruction, but she was at least listening without argument, which was an improvement over the previous days.

“It is a ploy as old as time. People love happenstance. It sounds romantic, so enforced coincidence makes the meeting seem more like fate. Also, there is nothing more unattractive than someone just wandering around flirting. They want to appear as busy men grudgingly pulled away from important business by the pleasure of your company, which they just do not have the strength to resist. As for the posture, you cannot determine if a strong posture means anything unless you see the man in several situations. All of you know men who have that posture all the time, particularly high-status gentlemen, or senior officers. Most of them learnt a strong posture with the help of a cane at school. If they have an upright, even stiff manner, it means almost nothing in isolation. If they only have that posture when they are with ladies and under observation, then it becomes highly suspect.”

“What if you just met them?”

“You reserve judgement. There are a dozen things about a man’s countenance that can give you clues to their character, but there are very few that are definitive . Your task is to put the clues together. For example, pay particular attention to the smile and his eyes. Even from this far, you can tell something, and from up close the clues will smack you in the face if you know what to look for.”

“Go on,” Miss Red asked, mostly to keep Miss Green from derailing the discussion.

“Romantic books and poetry make much about the eyes. Window to the soul... smile did not reach his eyes... eyes met across a crowded room... lowered her gaze in modesty... his eyes darkened with emotion... a furtive glance betrayed his unease... eyes shone with unshed tears... eyes locked in unspoken understanding... a fleeting glance, quickly averted... his eyes betrayed what his lips would not say. You get my meaning?”

Everyone nodded, at least acknowledging that the expressions existed, though not necessarily agreeing. Some agreed from knowledge, but those who had not ever read a book clear through agreed mostly because it was ill-advised to get on Mrs Black’s bad side.

“They all have some grain of truth, but— this is important —most of those can be faked, at least partially.”

“What do you mean,” Miss Blue asked, indicating probably that she was finally showing some real curiosity, much to Mary’s approval.

Jane had mostly gone along with her same old serene expression through the first days of training, but finally seemed to be getting the idea there was something worthwhile to learn.

Mrs Black pulled them away from the window and separated them into two groups facing each other in lines.

“I want you to take turns making each other laugh. Start with Miss Green... you seem like someone who can be silly when the occasion calls for it. You can do anything you like, but I want a good belly-laugh in the other group. Each of you should watch the other group like a hawk, particularly the eyes. Start now.”

Lydia made a horrendous face that at least got some in the other group laughing gaily,

then Miss Violet replied by mimicking something Mrs Black had said in the lower-class cant. After five minutes, each of the groups had been in quite good spirits for a time, and it was becoming easier to generate mirth.

“Now, do you notice that when someone laughs or smiles naturally, their eyes crinkle a bit. That is difficult or impossible to fake. In fact, genuinely happy people usually have crow’s feet or laugh lines around their eyes when they get older.”

The charges nodded, though mostly reluctantly.

“Miss Blue, I shall require your assistance. You have a beautiful face and uniformly serene and smiling countenance, I would like you to smile as you usually do, and the rest of you should look carefully at her face.”

Jane felt supremely uncomfortable with the discussion, and beyond annoyed at being singled out, but she felt uncomfortable in any company with her mother present, so she reacted the way she always did.

“Notice that Miss Blue is perfectly gorgeous, and smiles very prettily, but her eyes do not crinkle. When she was laughing at Miss Green’s most recent silliness, her eyes lit up like the sunshine, as they will any time that she is genuinely happy or amused. I doubt either feeling is present right now. In fact, I would bet more on something between mild annoyance and murderous rage—though you hide it very well.”

The rest of the ladies giggled, not really knowing if Mrs Black was being serious or teasing.

“I do not criticise Miss Blue’s countenance or the way she lives her life. We all adopt a mask to get through society, and I can probably find similar strategies for each of you. I just wanted you to see the effect.”

She led them back to the window, where the blondish officer was still plying his trade.

“From this distance, you cannot tell for certain if his smiles are genuine, but I doubt it very much. Also pay attention to how much time he spends looking in the ladies’ eyes. He does that deliberately because it makes him seem interested. You know from the books— he could barely tear his eyes off her . That is his way of signalling that he is more than a little interested, but it is all manufactured. I will give you ten to one he is interested in a piece of her , but he is most certainly not interested in all of her. Look how close he stands. It fosters a feeling of intimacy, and makes ‘accidental’ touches more likely, though he will supplement those with deliberate accidental touches if necessary.”

The ladies all sat thinking while continuing to watch the encounter, and several other similar ones they could easily see from their vantage point. Some of them had spent considerable time in similar encounters and were belatedly becoming uncomfortable with their observations—especially the part where a man might want a piece of her . They mostly had no idea what exactly that meant, but it certainly sounded bad.

“Do not discount the ladies and their countenances. More aggressive mothers teach their offspring to bat their eyelashes, but I can tell you that most men think that just means you have a bug in your eye. It never works to make a man genuinely appreciate you, and in fact, it is more likely to backfire. It signals the man that you are available for flirtation, but do not really know what you are about. The same can be said for overly revealing styles, flaunting around swinging your hips, and other similarly flirtatious tricks. Such tricks will be mostly ignored by honourable men but picked up easily by scoundrels.”

Miss Green stood up tall and looked like she was ready to argue, but Mrs Black just stared her back down.

“A more subtle or devious lady might learn to give subtle glances, the same as a man would. Eye contact is different between men and women, but the amount and type of eye-to-eye contact tells a story, and seducers learn how to take advantage of the language of the eyes.”

“Does that mean what you see in the eyes is wrong?” Miss Violet asked pensively.

“Not necessarily. We all speak with our eyes, and when you find the right man, the eyes will say a good deal. For genuine emotion, we cannot help it. For a particularly shy man, it may be the only way he really can communicate at first—but you have to be aware of the charlatans. Before you listen to what a man’s eyes say, you should be aware of what his posture says, what his character says, what he says by how he treats those below him. May I assume none of you would take up with a man who beats a dog?”

The gasp was enough to confirm the thesis.

“How about a man who beats a servant?”

The reaction was not quite as abrupt, since many gently born people were taught that servants were less , and that sometimes they had to be beat because they would cheat you otherwise.

“I am disappointed to see your reaction was not as strong, but you should be more concerned for the servant than the dog. Neither can really fight back without consequence. Remember this rule—and remember it well. Any man who beats a dog, a servant, or a street urchin will just as likely beat his wife.”

They all sat staring at her in stunned silence. She had shown them a few women who had been beaten on the second day of the course, and she had taken them through a pauper’s grave and described some of those she knew personally who now rested

there. It had been as stark as the visit to the woman dying of pox.

Mrs Black saw that she was overwhelming her charges, as expected, so she moved onto lighter fare.

“Now, look at that group there... the one with the red-haired man and the brunette lady.”

They all moved their attentions away.

“Look at his posture... his countenance... his eyes. He slouches more than when he was just walking alone, and he looks at his feet more often than his companion. He answers reluctantly but looks at his companion when he speaks. He moves his gaze from her face to her feet without dwelling overlong on her décolletage. He is probably shy. He may very well be a good man, and I would take him over Mister Blondish any day, but that can be faked too . You have to be careful in your attentions. My hackles raise like an angry dog at Mr Blondish, but I would give Mr Redhead a second look if I were interested.”

“How do you fix his attention if you have to study him for a twelve month before you know anything?” Miss Blue asked.

“An excellent question. You take it slowly. The carpenters say, ‘measure twice, cut once.’ That is not a bad motto to live by. For example, I bet you could name several men who singled you out within minutes of meeting you, Miss Blue. They entered a ballroom, went unerringly to the prettiest girl in the room like a bee to a flower, and commenced flirting immediately?”

Her normal serene countenance turned hard. She ground her teeth and swallowed several replies before she answered, “I could.”



“And I suppose at least one of them continued his attentions relentlessly, over days or weeks?”

“Yes,” she bit out angrily.

“Sad to say, but such men are more often than not rather inconstant. You might have been one more conquest in a long line, or perhaps he was dissuaded by factors other than yourself.”

Before Jane could react angrily, Elizabeth held up her hand for silence.

“That said, I cannot pronounce such judgement on him. Perhaps he had met a lot of angels in the past but might have finally found true love with you. Perhaps he is inconstant and not to be trusted. Perhaps you hide your feelings so well he could not tell if you were similarly interested. Women are taught to hide our feelings, which is counterproductive and stupid, but required by our society. Whilst it is fine for a man to attach himself to you like a yipping dog at your heels, the same behaviour from you would label you fast, a light skirt, or a fortune hunter. It is a fine line.”

Jane ground her teeth in frustration.

“Can you tell me, Miss Blue, what any of those men really thought about you with any confidence, after what we have learnt these days? Can you honestly say you learnt anything from his countenance and actions? Were any of these erstwhile suitors Mr Blondish, Mr Shy, or something else? Did any of them ask questions and really listen to your answers, treating you like a rational human being rather than a caricature of a beautiful and agreeable woman?”

She finally shook her head.

“I know it seems a sorry business. It is difficult, though not hopeless. Perhaps he is

the fish that got away, or perhaps you just need to set your hook better. We shall discuss that at the end.”

“What do you mean?” Miss Violet asked.

“The first ten days of your fortnight is spent in general training, as we have been doing. The last four, I will be working with you individually and trying to see if any of your fish can be brought back to the line—presuming they are worth catching in the first place.”

They all nodded, mostly in confusion. Some had never had a single beau in the first place, while some had let one or more get away. Time would tell if any of them ever caught anything worth keeping.

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After another two hours of watching soldiers and other men interact with the women of the town, with Mrs Black narrating what she could see, and what she could not possibly know, they all found themselves quite peckish.

They were a good two hours from their lodgings, so Mrs Black took them to a tea shop across the road. The fact that a table was already reserved and a waiter greeted her by name was not the least bit suspicious.

The ladies tried not to stare at the poor waiter, whose face had the worst scar any of them had ever seen. He looked like a wax statue that had melted. He let them stare without flinching, then left to fetch their order.

“I have been telling you about the bad men of the world, so allow me to redress the balance lest you decide to become spinsters for life,” Mrs Black said with a chuckle.

None of her charges had ever wondered what happened to Mr Black, or if he ever existed in the first place. The term ‘Mrs’ was slightly ambiguous in English society. It most often meant a woman was married, but it was also common when she took a senior position. For example, most housekeepers were ‘Mrs’ regardless of their marital status. Most governesses did not go to that extreme, but a senior governess, or the head of a school might. Mrs Black seemed to be the head of this school so that fit. Naturally, that did not count for all the women who had a baby on the wrong side of the blanket and just called themselves Mrs to pretend they were widows—an act nobody with any sense blamed them for.

“That waiter is Mr Gabriel Sinclair. He got that horrific burn rescuing a child from a burning building. Actually, he got the burn on the fourth trip. Who do you suppose the victims were? Take a guess.”

Everyone guessed some variation of sister, friend, niece, or acquaintance.

“They were trapped in a burning orphanage. He had no connexion to them whatsoever, save he was outside a burning building, and they were in. See the woman behind the counter?”

They all tried to look surreptitiously and saw a woman with the good looks of Jane. She obviously did not dress as well, but it was the kind of pure beauty that would attract nearly any man of her station she wanted.

“That is the fortunate woman who loves him. I doubt she spends much time worrying about his burned face when she knows his heart.”

About half of the ladies doubted the claim, suspecting it was simply romantic nonsense, but did not have the fortitude to argue with their tutor.

“Miss White,” she asked, making the young heiress jump. “How many children do

you suppose are under the patronage of your guardian? By that, I mean orphans, natural children, widows... that sort of thing?"

She looked like a startled animal, but finally stuttered, "I have no idea."

Mrs Black shrugged. "I do not know either, though I suspect if you ask him, you will find a number in the dozens or hundreds. Now, let us presume I have the right of it."

She stared until Miss White finally gave her full attention.

"Let us suppose it is hundreds when he could in fact afford thousands if he wanted to beggar his estate. If he did so, would that make him a better man, or just a foolish one?"

"Nobody can do everything!" Miss White replied emphatically.

"That is right. Each man does what he can and hopes it is enough. Suppose the number was half of what his father did, or double. Would that change anything? Anybody?"

Nobody had a clear idea, but Mary finally said, "So long as he is doing what he can and his father did what he could, I doubt we should judge them."

"Exactly. If his father were generous and he cut off the funding, he would be a bad man. If his father was miserly and he just barely did his duty, he would be a modestly good man. If he did all he could reasonably be expected to do, he would be a good sort of man."

"What does all this mean?"

"It means that it is not all gloom and doom, and you have to look at the world in a

balanced way. Someone in my line of work could quite easily become jaded and cynical enough to hate all men, because I have to prepare so many ladies to avoid the worst of them. That way leads more to misery than happiness. On the other hand, some of you were on the road to ruin because you were not cynical or cautious enough, and you considered a handsome countenance and pretty manners a sign of good character. There has to be a balance. You will not have to look over your shoulder your whole life, but at this stage, caution is warranted. You should hope to live with your husband for decades, and young ladies seldom have the vaguest idea what that is like. I should think a few weeks or months of caution, or even years, is warranted to prevent being miserable the rest of your life. There are good men to go along with the scoundrels—you just have to find them and recognise them when you do.”

“And attract them,” Miss Violet added.

“Well, there is that,” Mrs Black replied with a chuckle. “We shall cover a bit of that in the second week, but that is not the primary focus of this course.”

Their tea and sandwiches arrived. “I thank you, Mr Sinclair. I hope you might give our compliments to Mrs Sinclair.”

“She will be happy to hear it, as always, Mrs Black.”

Once he left, she pointed out the window to all the people in the street.

“When you have learnt what I have to teach you, then you will look on the world closer to what it is than what you want it to be or fear it could be. We all have our biases and overcoming them is the work of a lifetime. I hope to reduce yours somewhat. That said, look around. At any given time, some of them will be very good men and some will be very bad—but the vast majority are perfectly ordinary. If you wish to marry, you need to find one good man while avoiding some dozens of

bad ones. It is far from hopeless.”

“What if you are expected to marry within your class, and good men are rare as hen’s teeth in your society?” Miss Yellow asked.

Mrs Black looked at her for a moment. “What would you think of a man who fished in the same stream for years but caught nothing?”

“Not a very good sportsman,” Miss Green replied petulantly.

“Or not really trying,” Miss Violet added.

“Or too fastidious,” Miss Burgundy said.

After a moment or two, Miss Red said, “He needs a different stream or better technique.”

“Exactly,” Mrs Black replied emphatically. “Every one of you has a huge benefit over the vast majority of women, who rarely venture more than a few miles from their birthplace. However much you may be discouraged, there is no law of nature that says you need remain in your own environs. Your very presence here shows your ability to travel. If your stream is not very well stocked, perhaps it is time for a different stream. London has over a million inhabitants, which seems like it offers far more possibilities than the couple dozen families most of you have in your neighbourhood, and that does not even count the men your fathers went to school with and their associates.”

“Or a different sport,” Miss White added pensively.

“Or different bait.” Miss Yellow chuckled.

With that, Mrs Black herded her charges to the carriages, and they returned to their tiny little rooms, which they mostly no longer minded.

16. Friends and Enemies

The following morning found the ladies being awakened by a maid lightly shaking them. It was a considerable improvement over the pot and spoon method, so they all jumped to with alacrity. None could rightly say if their character had been improved, or they were just being pragmatic towards how they might be awoken over subsequent days.

They found their dowdy dresses of the previous days replaced with dressing gowns. The maid told them to cover themselves quickly and follow.

They eventually arrived at a room that looked like pure luxury compared to what they called cells (outside of Mrs Black's hearing, of course). In fact, the room was modestly larger and better arranged than most of their mothers' chambers. The room had an open door to another room of comparable size, though decorated with a more masculine motif.

Mrs Black entered a moment later and began in her usual forthright manner.

"Today, we shall speak about friends and enemies. Admittedly, most of the course thus far has concentrated on enemies, primarily in the form of bad men. Today we will discuss friends... or will we?"

"What does that mean?" Miss Burgundy asked cautiously. She was a somewhat timid girl who said barely a word the first few days, but some gentle prodding from Mrs Black (and less gentle from Miss Green) encouraged her, so she was starting to attempt a word or two here and there.

“I mean we have been in general company but overwhelmingly observing and discussing men . Today, we will enter the world of women. You may think they are your natural allies, and for most of your life, they will be. However, at your current stage, some will be friends, some will be enemies, some will be competitors, some will be indifferent or irrelevant, and some will be snakes in the grass. Unless you plan to live a quiet life, in a remote wilderness, free of society, you will need to learn to deal with them.”

She let them chew on that for a minute.

“There is nothing wrong with choosing a quiet life away from society,” she began, and looked sternly at a few of the girls who looked ready to argue. “That said, the crucial word there was choose . If you choose to live a life outside society, I will not criticise you. However, if you end up there because you are afraid or lazy, then I would feel remiss in my duties. I cannot make everyone as bold as Miss Green, nor can I make Miss Green as thoughtful as Miss Red, or as well read as Miss Amber—but as in all things, I hope to teach you balance .”

They all nodded thoughtfully, which was unprecedented for Miss Green.

“Today, we enter the ultimate bastion of dog-eat-dog cutthroater— the modiste shop . I only hope we escape mostly unscarred.”

That one was too much for Miss Green and Miss Yellow, who danced around a bit, but did so at least at a level not likely to produce a megrim, so everyone was satisfied. The rest tried to decide if they could laugh with Mrs Black’s witticisms but then gave up and just smiled.

“Your trunks are in the dressing rooms. I expect you all dressed and ready for breakfast in an hour. Miss White has never experienced the dubious pleasure of having a sister help her dress. Miss Blue, might you oblige?”

“Of course.”

She then split the ladies between the master’s and mistress’s suites such that each Bennet sister was with a non-sister, and split the more troublesome pairs, such as Lydia and Kitty.

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The idea that the dank parlour from their first lesson was just a trick to frighten them was born out when they saw a proper light breakfast, then two carriages to take them shopping. Both were sharp, well-appointed coaches pulled by first-rate horseflesh. The drivers were dressed in immaculate livery, as were the footmen who had not even existed in the old coaches.

An hour later they approached a large shop on Russel Street, which made sense as nine ladies would burst many establishments at the seams.

Mrs Black ushered them inside and introduced them to Madam Lisette, a woman of around forty who looked possibly French and entirely professional. She explained that they would be measured and fitted in groups of four while the rest stayed hidden behind a curtain with Mrs Black.

Those being fitted were not to speak, only listen. In fact, all of her charges were prohibited from speaking anything beyond introductions whilst in the shop, and with a hard look at her two youngest charges, she emphasised that gossiping would be frowned upon at a level they could not comprehend.

With that, she sent four out to be measured while she kept the others back for instruction. It meant a great deal of repetition, but since the entire course was the same, it did not signify.

“Clothing tells a lot about a person, but as with many things, it tells a great many truths and an equal number of lies. Ideally, you should like to distinguish the former from the latter. For example, we can buy a gown in this store for ten guineas that is nearly indistinguishable from one I would buy on Bond Street for thirty, where the crucial part is nearly . The Bond Street gown may have slightly better materials or workmanship, but not three times better. Someone pays thirty guineas on Bond Street because they can! Overpaying is the point. It makes your spending conspicuous to those who know about such things, hoping they will assume you can afford it. You will see that in women so wealthy the difference between ten and thirty guineas is irrelevant, but also women trying to climb the social ladder, who might beggar themselves to appear like the former so they might marry into it.”

“I think I can find one example of that,” Miss White asserted, then blushed a bit as if the others might be aware of who she was thinking of. She would have blushed even more if she knew Mrs Black knew exactly who she meant and agreed wholeheartedly.”

“I can as well,” said a blushing Miss Blue, which seemed a good sign to her tutor. Perhaps, Jane was becoming less naïve, or at least less oblivious.

“I can name you dozens, but then you have to ask yourself what you think of such a woman,” Mrs Black asserted. “Is she trying her honest best to aspire to a better sphere? Anyone who is not already royalty is certainly entitled to do so, and nobody has a right to judge them, presuming they act with integrity. Is she so desperate to climb the ladder that she will stoop to any measure to gain it? For example, one such climber might pretend to befriend a woman when her ultimate goal is to attach herself to her brother or attach a richer woman to hers. Some such might even stoop to underhanded means, such as lying, tearing down her rivals, starting malicious gossip, or managing her relatives’ relationships.”

The last made both Miss Blue and Miss White flinch as intended, but the tutor

continued without pause.

“Alternatively, a woman could be perfectly innocent and just splurging for once in her life, trying to make herself pretty for her beau, or just trying to give herself a fair chance in the marriage mart. Much like posture and expressions, you have to dig deeper and look at more than one aspect of her character to find the truth... or as close as you can come to it.”

She looked to her charges to see how they reacted before continuing earnestly, if a bit wistfully, “First impressions are dangerous beasts that should not be relied upon. It took me some hard lessons to learn that.”

Miss White asked somewhat timidly, “You mentioned ladies who subtly try to befriend you to get access to a relation. What if they are not the least bit subtle?”

“Then you must take steps to avoid them and cut them out of your life entirely if possible. Such people will never do you any good, unless of course they offer you some particular advantage sufficient to put up with their annoyances. You should never tolerate them due to excessive civility or timidity, or even because they have other relations important to your family. You only have so many hours to live on this earth. While you may have to tolerate your guardian’s or husband’s friends, do not do so without a fight, and be very aware which snakes you let into your bed. Try to throw the worst of them out before they bite you.”

Miss White and Miss Blue looked thoughtful, which was probably useful—especially when Mrs Black told the group she would cover ways to cut such dead weight out of their lives in the second week of their training, probably on the same day she taught them to bring a man to his knees with a thumb lock.

The first group of four had mixed in with other ladies, and the hidden group could hear quite a lot of conversation. The time of day had been deliberately chosen to

maximise the gossip, and Mrs Black walked her charges through listening to what they said and really thinking about it.

Did the tale even make sense? Many did not pass a simple sniff test. Was what they heard from a credible source? What was the purpose of sharing the story? Who gained or lost from the gossip spreading? Was what they heard a cautionary tale they should pay attention to, someone being stabbed in the back and stepped over, or something else? How important was the gossip— to you ? The latest fashion trend might be marginally useful—the latest scandal amongst people you do not know, much less so. Why should someone waste their time and reputation listening to or repeating gossip about people not important to them? Which people had ongoing rivalries? Were two women competing for one gentleman's attention, and if so, how much did that tell you to watch your back around them? What behaviours were becoming more or less acceptable? For example, was the waltz now acceptable in polite society, and if so, who could dance it without raising eyebrows? Were country manners becoming more like city manners or the converse? What laws were being discussed in parliament that might affect the price of crops or otherwise affect their livelihoods?

In this way she taught them how to critically listen to what was said or omitted, discard probable mistakes, lies, omissions, exaggerations, slander, distortions, speculation, betrayal, or any of the other dozen ways gossip could do harm. To be fair, she also said it could be informative, cautionary, moral (very occasionally), entertaining, insightful, or amusing.

She also worked her way back to costs, since in the area of finance most ladies were even more ignorant than they were about men. She mentioned the thirty-guinea gown from Bond Street, became ten in their current locale, but might be three in Cheapside. At that point, the gown would be substantially lower quality, but you could get three for the same price, and it would be perfectly good enough for most society.

She went into how to dress to fit your society and explained why wearing a Bond Street silk gown to a country assembly would just make you look ridiculous, which was not necessarily an iron-clad rule, but it was amusing to watch the light of recognition enter the eyes of her charges. She said wearing a rustic country ballgown to a first-circle ball would be the exact same thing in reverse.

A few hours later they had luncheon, then swapped groups so Mrs Black could repeat the lesson, and a few hours later they gratefully went back to their lodgings.

Those ladies who had lived quiet lives without a great deal of female company were astounded by how much talk had assaulted their ears in just a few hours, and how confusing it all was. Those who had lived their lives surrounded by gossip were chagrined to learn how extraordinarily little of it was worthy of their attention, and how much of it was playing with fire.

They had been industrious, thoughtful, insightful, and well-behaved all day, so they were given the handsomest reward imaginable—a dinner much like Mrs Bennet served every day.

Mrs Black used the dinner to summarise what they should have learnt that day.

“Remember this rule: Words matter. Words can be a weapon, but they can also be a shield. Words can offer comfort or pain. They can help or hurt. It is not only words you speak that can affect you. For example, simply listening to spiteful gossip because you are too polite to say anything or leave gives the gossiper more power.”

Surprisingly, Lydia said, “What you say makes sense. I suppose with your ideas about balance, we need to ensure we have both kinds in our arsenal.”

“That is correct, Miss Green. Remember that words you say can hurt you just as surely as they can hurt others. In fact, the mere act of hurting someone else harms

you, even if they do not retaliate, because it makes you a lesser person.”

The ladies nodded, so Mrs Black continued, “Miss Amber, can you work out other pairs.”

It took a minute for her to come up with, “A blessing or a curse?”

“Very good. Miss Violet?”

“A guide or a trap?”

Mrs Black encouraged them, and the discussion was livelier and more intelligent than it might have been a few days earlier. They continued energetically through several other opposing pairs.

The evening finally came to a close when Jane suggested, “A mirror or a mask.”

That one had everyone thinking for several moments.

Mrs Black finally said, “I think that one is perfect food for thought, so let us retire.”

### 17. Balancing the Scales

Darcy looked up from the book he was pretending to read by the fire as his cousin entered the study. He had sent a note around to see if the colonel could make it but had not expected such a fast response.

“Richard, good to see you!” he said in greeting. “Tea? Brandy? Food?”

“Luncheon would not be amiss.”

Soams had followed the colonel in, so he turned immediately to see to it. They spent the next half-hour catching up on what little had happened in their lives since the last discussion with Bingley—starting with their recoveries from the blue devils, naturally.

They finally finished, so Darcy got to business.

“I asked you here to see if you care to participate in a rather disagreeable task.”

“When you put it like that, how can I resist? When do we start?”

Darcy chuckled with the small humour of the reply along with its utter predictability.

“When I dragged your ne’er-do-well brother to your father, I was thoroughly dissatisfied with both of them. As I suspect you know, your father thinks he is just sowing his wild oats, as is his right and privilege, and so on and so forth ad nauseum.”



The colonel grunted. “They say you reap what you sow. I would not be entirely surprised to find him floating down the Thames one day... but as they say, that is not my battle to fight.”

“Nor is it mine, but I did decide to do some pittance about it. I ah... encouraged him to give me the name of as many of his paramours as he could manage. Either he is a better liar than I expected, or the number is lower than I feared.”

“One is too many, but I suspect you are right. Gambling and drink are his primary vices.”

“At any rate, I set a discreet and reputable investigator to the task of finding the women. I thought I should at least ensure they are not starving in the gutter, and his offspring are not in the workhouse.”

“I would not be entirely surprised to find some of both the women and children in pauper’s graves.”

Darcy sighed. “He chose his victims carefully. He apparently would find it beneath him to bed a doxy or servant girl, and he apparently sated most of his appetites dallying with married women.”

“Not unheard of in the ton. Not everyone is as fastidious as you.”

Darcy shrugged indifferently. “My investigator found three. One is but five miles from here, so I thought to visit her.”

“And you think two Fitzwilliams are just the thing?”

“You have a better idea?”

“Send your man of business with hat in one hand and a hefty purse in the other.”

“I will not make another man shoulder my responsibility.”

“HAH! You have it bad, cousin. I hope this Miss Bennet is worth it.”

“I am not doing this to impress Miss Bennet. Mr Gardiner, maybe, but not her. I feel it is my duty.”

The colonel just chuckled. “Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better.”

Darcy grumbled a bit, but there seemed little point in beating the subject to death, so they let it rest. Both men changed into their older hunting clothes. They were the closest thing to how Mr Gardiner dressed they could muster on short notice. Appearing in uniform or the first stare of fashion hardly seemed ideal for making a decent first impression.

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Two hours later, the cousins looked out the carriage windows at Fleet Street, watching the bustling trade that epitomised far more of England’s prosperity than the first circles liked to believe. In a half mile they passed a plethora of printers, bookstores, attorney’s offices, businesses, clerks, servants, maids, taverns, newspaper boys, and general mayhem. It was as different from where they spent their time as could be, and yet, many thought it was more the future of England than the landowners.

When the carriage stopped at the Copper Kettle Coffeehouse, Darcy let out a hoot of laughter.

“What is so funny?” The colonel laughed.

Darcy continued chuckling. “I have been a hundred yards from here, just up the lane at John Murray’s Bookshop or the Albemarle Coffeehouse dozens of times... some quite recently.”

“Happenstance, I suppose. I would not get too excited at the coincidence. Based on Netherfield, I would not be overly surprised to find one of his offspring at Pemberley, and Matlock seems all but certain.”

Darcy grumbled but could not deny the assertion. They exited, girded their loins for battle, and entered the most ordinary coffeehouse in the world. It had the usual notice boards, newspapers, chalkboards with specials, a counter full of pastries, a few urns of coffee and tea, and a fireplace.

They arrived at three, which typically had a lull in business and were lucky to encounter only two occupied tables.

Behind the counter, they were encouraged to see a rather gruff looking man of about thirty who matched the description of the man they were looking for but equally dismayed to find a woman standing too close to be an employee. She was young, pretty, and she reminded Darcy very much of Jane Bennet.

The men had not thought the plan through very well. Darcy had hoped to approach the husband as seemed right and proper, and either avoid the wife, or at least allow her husband to soften the blow. The die was cast though, so after a glance at the colonel, he decided to just charge in, mostly because subtlety was not really his strong suit.

“Pardon me. We seek Mr Turner.”

“You have found him. State your business,” the man replied with a slightly gravelly voice.

“The business is of a rather personal nature. We would be happy to return at a convenient time,” Darcy replied, mentally kicking himself for not arranging the meeting in advance.

“Good a time as any. I’ve a small office just back here,” he said pointing to a door behind the counter.

The man stood from a stool, while the pretty woman handed him a crutch that had been unobtrusively leaning against the wall, and casually said, “My wife, Mrs Turner. She will accompany us, as she is involved in all my personal business.”

Darcy and Fitzwilliam had hoped to get off easy on the discussion through her absence, but with a shrug, both decided it was probably for the best anyway. Best to just rip the plaster off and get on with things.

As they entered the rather small office, Turner sat on another stool while Mrs Turner stood beside him. “Noticed you gents did not introduce yourselves. Whatever unpleasantness you have, let us get it over with.”

Darcy said, “I will beg your indulgence for just a couple of minutes. You will most likely wish to throw us out of your café on our ears as is obviously your right when we introduce ourselves, but I will humbly beg you to hear us out.”

Fitzwilliam added, “We give our word it will be to your benefit.”

Mr Turner turned his eye on Fitzwilliam and stared him down for a few seconds. “I was Sergeant Turner until I got invalided out a few years back. I can smell an officer from ten paces. As comrades in arms, I will give you five minutes.”

“We cannot ask for more,” Fitzwilliam said, then looked to Darcy, since this was his project, after all.

Darcy took a fortifying breath.

“I am Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, and this is my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. We represent the honourable side of the Fitzwilliam family.”

Mrs Turner shrank back slightly while Mr Turner stood up abruptly enough that they could tell he hurt his leg in the process, though he tried his best not to show it.

The colonel said, “Steady on, Sergeant. We mean you no harm and wish only to help.”

“I want no help from the likes of you!”

“That is your right,” Darcy said placatingly. “If you ask us to leave, you have our word we will do so, and the subject will be closed forever. I do ask five minutes of your time, if you would oblige.”

Mrs Turner spoke soothingly to her husband, indicating she was either more complacent or more practical.

“The Fitzwilliams have already done all the harm they are likely to do, Stanley. Let us not tar the whole family with the same brush.”

The colonel chuckled to try to reduce the tension. “You could tar most of the men in the family without being wrong, Mrs Turner. I do appreciate you hearing us out.” He left unsaid that he was just assuming she would calm her husband down.

Mrs Stanley helped her husband back to the stool, and while his face could still carve granite, he nodded to Darcy to continue.

“I recently learnt about my cousin’s... ah... proclivities. I have no excuse for why I failed to do so years earlier. I rarely speak to him, but I also did not go looking, much to my shame.”

“You cannot possibly be shocked by his behaviour,” Mr Turner snapped.

“I am not shocked, just saddened. I, of course, know that much of the ton acts very much as he does. I do not, as a rule, associate with such men. I knew my cousin was a gambler and that he dallied with certain classes of women who are willing or even eager for such attentions, but I had no idea of his actions with innocents.”

“Weak excuse, if you ask me.”

Fitzwilliam said, “Come Sergeant, we are men of the world. That leg is a fighting injury if I have ever seen one. You know how things work, so you cannot have been flabbergasted yourself.”

Turner shrugged to concede the point. Everyone knew he had probably had his share of dalliances in his time in the army, and it may not be the best time to start throwing stones, given that they all lived in glass houses.

Mrs Turner seemed to have a practical bent, so she turned the discussion back to the topic at hand. Darcy had no idea if she was being practical, or if she was only tired of watching a bunch of roosters crow at each other.

“We could debate this all day, but you must have a reason to come all this way.”

She said it with a bit of an impertinent tone that reminded Darcy of another Bennet lady, which did not hurt her cause at all.

“It is my understanding...” began the colonel. “...that you are presently raising my

niece. Is that correct?"

The couple looked to each other, but Mr Turner finally nodded. "We are! We obviously do not expect any Fitzwilliam to acknowledge her, but she does carry your blood."

"I will most certainly acknowledge her," the colonel said emphatically. "I am not my brother!"

"We both will," Darcy added.

The Sergeant shrugged. "Your private acknowledgement will do her little good and may do her harm if she starts getting lofty ideas when she is older. Your public acknowledgement would more likely bring the ire of the earl down on our heads, so I see little point in it."

Darcy stepped in. "Hence, the purpose of this call. I will acknowledge her to any level you feel comfortable with, but I had a more tangible benefit in mind."

"Such as?" Mrs Turner asked. She did not sound grasping, but no sensible mother would turn away anything that might benefit her children.

Darcy sighed. "Money cannot solve all the world's problems, Mrs Turner, but it can ease some of them. She will grow, and you will have to decide how you want her to do so. I have no say in that matter, but with my help you may have avenues opened that are presently closed. Do you want her to be educated? If so, at her present class or a higher one? Do you want her to marry up, and if so, would she want it? Should she have a governess? A school? A better dowry? Connections to the gentry, even if public acknowledgement might do more harm than good?"

The lady had been staring at him hard enough to make him flinch, and he was certain

she was absorbing every nuance of his offer.

She finally asked, "Are you offering this, Mr Darcy?"

"I am. She is my cousin, and niece to this man, who is closer to me than any brother. I cannot fix everything, but I can help."

Mr Turner finally asked, "What do you expect in return?"

"Nothing," Darcy said.

The colonel added, "We expect nothing, but I would like to humbly request we be allowed to know her as she grows."

The couple looked back and forth and finally nodded.

"I cannot promise if or when you might see her, but we shall accept your help for the others. We can discuss more as time goes by. We presently do not plan to enlighten her as to her parentage, and that seems unlikely to change."

The colonel said, "I understand your reasoning, and it all makes perfect sense. Perhaps, we need not know her per se. When she grows a bit older, perhaps you can simply arrange to have her here when we coincidentally stop by for coffee."

"That seems reasonable," Mrs Turner said quickly enough that Darcy suspected she wanted to keep her husband from reacting without thinking it through.

Darcy said, "That seems a reasonable way to begin. If all goes well, perhaps we could be engaged in some sort of business, or we could be distant relatives. There is plenty of time to work that out later."

Darcy thought things had gone well thus far, so he reached into his pocket for a bank draught he had already written out.

“I took the liberty of making an advance of ?500. You may use it as you choose, for your daughter, any other children you may have, or whatever you like. If you run out, here is my card. You need but ask.”

“That seems... overly generous, Mr Darcy,” Turner stated. “Might you have some ulterior motive?”

“A man ought not try to judge his own motives, Sergeant. Honour or guilt are sufficient to explain my actions, so I shall leave it at that.”

“Once you have worked out your motives, sir, you might tell me her name,” Mrs Turner observed with a level of impertinence that definitely reminded Darcy of someone.

The colonel burst out laughing and slapping his thighs and was joined by the others, even including Darcy.

“You have the right of it, Mrs Turner. I told him he has it bad.”

“We shall see,” was all Darcy was willing to say.

“I am curious,” the colonel added. “You seem to be well-situated here. Would I be too nosy if I asked how you went from the disagreeable state my brother left you in, to this?”

The levity went out of the room, for which the colonel was sorry, but he wanted answers more than comfort. They could always laugh, but they might not ever get a good chance to ask the question, as it was not a topic any of them ever wanted to

discuss again.

Mrs Turner looked to her husband and waited for him to nod. Darcy thought it was more a nod of agreement than one of permission but considered his knowledge of women inadequate to say it with any certainty.

“My father cast me out, mostly. I have two sisters so I could not necessarily blame him, and he at least paid the fees for the home and left me a bit to live on after. He even said I might return if I gave up the babe, but I would as soon give up an arm.”

“No one can blame you.”

“There you are wrong, Colonel. A considerable number of people can and have blamed me.”

“Pray continue,” Darcy suggested.

“Someone found me in a group home for women in my condition. They are on a mission to find husbands for as many of us as could be managed. Invalided soldiers were an easy target, as there are hundreds arriving every day, but that brought its own problems. Many are unable to even function, and most are penniless, or they would not have been fighting in the first place... no offence, Colonel.”

“None taken.”

She continued, “As I said, almost none are flush enough to take on a pregnant wife and raise another man’s child.”

“That was my situation,” Mr Turner added. “Our rescuers are not made of money, but they had enough to loan us the purchase of this coffeehouse. It is a kindness since we did not earn it, but we will pay it back over ten years, so it is not quite charity. Our

benefactor will not get rich off our backs, but they will not lose much either. The coffee house plus the small dowry her father left us is sufficient to live well enough.”

“You have a pretty and intelligent wife, and hardly anybody shooting at you... sounds like Paradise,” the colonel quipped.

“I am all astonishment,” Darcy said. “It seems such a simple system. I wonder if I might do the same. To be honest, I give considerable funds to charities, but doing something like that never occurred to me. I mostly just throw money at the problem.”

“Can you tell us the name of the man who helped you?” the colonel asked. “If my cousin is champing at the bit to spend his money, we may as well strike while the iron is hot.”

The couple once again looked at each other, as if discussing whether to trust them with something that might bring trouble to someone else.

Mrs Turner finally answered, “We hesitate, gentlemen, because it is not a man, though it is entirely possible and even likely there is a man providing the funds for the endeavour. It is a young lady, and you know what they say about ladies’ reputations—”

“That I do, Mrs Turner. You may tell us or not. If you do, we will use the utmost discretion in meeting her. We may even ask you to act as intermediary if you are willing.”

“Oh, I am willing,” she said. “I am more than willing. She saved my life. Miss Gardiner is an angel.”

The colonel was slightly startled by the admission, though not shocked because it seemed like the sort of thing that would go right along with Mr Gardiner’s business.

A more cynical man might even look at it as a business opportunity.

Darcy was slightly more shocked. “By any chance, is she the daughter of Mr Gardiner of Gracechurch Street in Cheapside?”

“Why yes, do you know him?”

Darcy chuckled at the twists of fate.

“I do. In fact, I had recent business with him and ate at his house a month ago. I quite like the eldest Miss Gardiner, though I find it difficult to believe she is your benefactor, being all of twelve years old.”

The colonel was starting to put two and two together and chuckled while slapping Darcy on the back. “Got it bad, old man... Got it bad.”

Mrs Turner just looked confused.

Darcy sought to clarify. “Might Miss Gardiner be about twenty, average height, brown hair and eyes.”

“I suppose she would be about twenty now,” Mrs Turner asserted.

“Now?” the cousins asked in confusion.

“Yes of course. My daughter Betsy is three now. Miss Gardiner confessed she was but sixteen at the time.”

Darcy sat stunned for a moment with different things that had been said coming into focus. He had always thought he knew but a tenth part of Miss Elizabeth’s situation at best, but a hundredth part now seemed more likely. He thought he would need time to

think about it and ask Gardiner a few discreet questions, but he most certainly did not want to break Miss Elizabeth's anonymity.

"I think I understand," he said. "That Miss Gardiner is, I believe, his niece."

"I suppose that makes sense," Mr Turner added while his wife just nodded.

They were interrupted by a young boy who had been watching the shop informing them that business was picking up.

The Turners thanked them for their generosity and even arranged for both men to meet the child and have luncheon after church on Sunday.

Back in the coach, they had a good laugh. They both were somewhat happy with the way things had gone. The colonel knew more than he had at the start of the day. Darcy did as well, but he also had a great deal of speculation.

He knew of two of his cousin's other victims, but neither was anywhere close, so he thought it was time for a conversation with Mr Gardiner... or possibly even a trip to Hertfordshire, with or without Bingley, who was still dithering.

18. Next Line of Defence

“I will not ask your word as I did with your pledge of anonymity,” Mrs Black began pensively, “but I will strongly advise against sharing what you learn over the next two days with any man except your future husband . The more women you share these secrets with the better, and you should of course instruct your daughters early—but it is usually best if the men in your life remain blissfully ignorant, even your guardians. Most of them would not understand, and it is not an argument worth having.”

The starkness of the warning left the ladies stunned. After their trip to the modiste, they mostly thought they were well on the way to being done with the more disagreeable parts of their training. Some even hoped they were not that far from the promised ball.

Such hopes died that morning when they awoke to find gowns so dowdy they longed for those from the first day, though they did at least get a hearty breakfast. Their gowns were labourer’s or servants’ clothing, and not from a very prosperous house at that. They were thick and scratchy to the point where it felt like they were dragging around a sack of flour (not that any of them had ever done such a thing).

The starkness of that warning brought them to understand they were likely to have an unpleasant day at best.

They were standing in a room the size of a ballroom, but it was far from elegant. They could not determine if it was part of a barn, a factory, a warehouse, or just a building so awkwardly situated that nobody could work out a good use for it.

Mrs Black seemed even more stern and unflinching than usual.

Mary was paying rapt attention, while watching her sisters and friends to see if anyone had worked out their instructor's identity yet. She seriously doubted it.

"I will echo Mrs Black's suggestion," said a man of about fifty, who stepped out of the shadows.

"Sir Walter, well met. Ladies, this is Sir Walter Gibson. He owns this building and would like to say a few words."

She did not bother introducing the ladies. Since they were all anonymous it hardly seemed necessary.

He cleared his throat and spoke in a strong booming voice.

"Mrs Black has the right of it. We hope beyond measure that you never need to use what you learn here—but learn you must. My daughter was killed a few hundred yards away on a night that seemed like any other. She was young and pretty like all of you. She was polite, she learnt the rules of propriety, she practised them, but she was set upon by the vilest sort of man who wished to take that which was not given."

The ladies were stunned. The story was not exactly unheard of, but none had ever met anyone who even claimed to know such a victim, let alone a father of one.

"Had she taken Mrs Black's course, she would be alive and well today. I would be bouncing my grandchildren on my knee. Instead, I have a steady diet of regret. Listen, and listen well."

Then he bowed to the ladies, then to Mrs Black, and departed.

“It is unlikely any of you individually will need what you learn here, but I can guarantee with absolute certainty that at least one of my students has already had to defend herself, and she will not be the last. If any of you are so unfortunate, you had best be prepared.”

Miss Amber could not quite resist asking, “Is that not unladylike and unchristian?”

“Let us take those one at a time,” Mrs Black said, then turned her attention to the group.

“Which is more ladylike—you, at this very moment, in that dowdy excuse for a maid’s gown... a corpse, rotting in the ground... a girl of sixteen screaming in pain as she tries to deliver an unwanted child... or perhaps, a corpse who had recently tried to deliver an unwanted child but bled to death?”

They all stood stunned. Their upbringing had strongly encouraged them to pretend such things just did not happen in their neighbourhood. Perhaps in other places, and to other people, but not to them!

“I can assure you that I have personally seen all of those and more; and they are not pretty. I can also assure you that every one of those girls did not think it would happen to them—that such misfortunes were for others .”

Mary had her mouth hanging open, but she could see the point. She still thought that such things were unlikely in Meryton, but then again, if it did happen, the families would do their best to cover it up—not to mention that the town was infested with militia. Had Lizzy not said she had to intervene on Lydia’s behalf at the Netherfield ball? Would she already be aware of such an example without her sister’s help?

“How about the latter?” she asked timidly.

“You mean unchristian, Miss Red? Do you honestly think your God made you just to be sport for a man?”

It abruptly struck Mary that was exactly what Reverend Fordyce seemed to think. He disguised his contempt, but it was clear as day for those who looked closely enough.

“I belatedly understand your point, Mrs Black, but it would help if you could justify it with scripture.”

She did not enjoy being stared down by her thoroughly intimidating sister one bit, but thought that if she was afraid of Lizzy, what hope did she have against a scoundrel.

“I get some flavour of that question every time, so you are not ploughing new ground. I shall oblige you, but keep in mind that most of the religious texts were also written by men.”

Mary wondered if her sister liked men at all. The thought had never occurred to her, and she became even more anxious to understand what happened to the sweet and impertinent girl she remembered from the schoolroom, before she hied off to London right after she came out.

“I shall leave it to you to look up the words yourself, just as I encourage everyone to do their own thinking, but there are specific instructions in both Luke and Exodus justifying self-defence, even when lethal. Thomas Aquinas and John Wesley both suggest violence and even death for self-defence is perfectly acceptable. I suppose none of you are interested, but the Jewish Talmud and the Muslim Koran have similar passages. If you prefer non-religious views, I recommend John Locke, William Blackstone, or Thomas Hobbes. If you have had your fill of men’s opinions, Mary Wollstonecraft has a great deal to say, all of it sensible, but you definitely may want to omit that part to your guardians.”

The last bit of levity left the ladies laughing, though it was a tense sort of laugh. They had not even begun the training, and they were already uncomfortable.

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Mrs Black led them over to a wooden stand with a padded box of some sort attached between two posts.

“Which of you thinks they are the strongest?” she asked nonchalantly.

The students all looked back and forth for a moment until Miss Green volunteered, as her teacher knew she would.

“Oh!” said Lydia stoutly, “I am not afraid; for though I am the youngest, I’m the tallest.”

“I can see that. Come along then.”

They walked over to the frame and Mrs Black helped her charge place her hand in a large, padded leather glove with linen lining.

“This is padded with horsehair. It will mostly protect your hand, though I do not recommend testing it on a rock.”

Lydia was excitedly trying out the glove by hitting her own hand.

Mrs Black said, “All right, here is the first rule. What have I been teaching you this past week... Miss Blue?”

Jane looked flummoxed a minute, but eventually guessed, “How to avoid these situations?”

“ EXACTLY! That is your first line of defence... Rule Number 1... Do not do stupid things! ”

“But Sir Walter said his daughter did nothing wrong.”

“Agreed, and that is why you are learning to defend yourselves, but the best way to win a fight is to avoid it in the first place. We are now to the place where rule number one has failed.”

They all nodded.

“Rule Number Two: Run from danger if you can. If you find yourself in an untenable situation, run fast and do not hesitate.”

“When would you run?” Miss Violet asked.

“At the first whiff of danger. Suppose you are approached on an isolated balcony at a ball. Do not tell a man to leave. Do not engage him at all. Just leave! The blackguard almost certainly will not expect it, so you can be back inside among people before he even gets his wits about him. Naturally, you would want to get someone else to help you clip his wings against future attacks, but you will at least be safe for the moment.”

The ladies nodded, and Mary said, “That obviously will not work if you are alone, far away from people.”

“Unfortunately, yes, which is when we come to the next rule. Most men can outrun you and outfight you, so you have to outfox them.”

She turned back to her device.

“See the padded box there, Miss Green. I want you to break it.”

Lydia looked at the board gleefully, walked over, wound up her arm, and gave it a good punch. She was mightily disappointed when her hand bounced off with no effect aside from hurting more than she expected. It was not broken, but it did not feel perfect either.

“That will do if your assailant is a five-year-old girl,” Mrs Black said somewhat sneeringly.

Lydia, who should have been accustomed to being ridiculed but was not, let out a scream and hit it again... only to be disappointed a second time.

“Again!”

Twice more she tried, with ever increasing levels of frustration.

“It cannot be done!” she finally snapped.

“Anyone else?” Mrs Black asked casually.

Nobody was particularly enthusiastic, but both Kitty and each of the Weatherbys took shots and failed, while the rest abstained.

Once they had all given up in frustration, Mrs Black stood facing them.

“This exercise teaches two lessons. The first...” she said casually, then fast as lightning, she bashed the target with her elbow. The box exploded in a cloud of chalk dust that had them all coughing and sneezing for a confused moment. They were startled for a time, so she let them settle down.

“As I was saying, the first is that if you are in a dangerous situation, do not mess about. Rule Number Three: Strike fast, strike hard, no mercy. ”

They all gasped. In their sheltered lives, no lady ever spoke so vulgarly, let alone standing on the wreckage of something she had just smashed to pieces without batting an eye.

Mrs Black continued as if she had not just shocked them to the bone.

“Rule Four: All rules are off! They say all is fair in love and war—and this is war. If the first three rules failed you, it is dog eat dog, and your entire objective is to win... win decisively... win definitively. I asked Miss Green to break the target, so she assumed that I meant her to do it with fists, the way gentlemen are taught. Let me ask this, Miss Green. Did it even occur to you to try anything else, or were you lulled into the convention implied by the gloves?”

“No,” she admitted, sullenly.

“Do not be cast down, young lady. It was an unfair test. One lady in a few dozen would succeed, though most servants would have no real difficulty. Your elbow is stronger and tougher than your hands. You should never use a closed fist if you can avoid it. Do it as a last resort if you must but be prepared to pay the price of broken fingers. That said—”

She had been slowly walking towards another target identical to the first when she spun around quickly and smashed that with a single blow of her ungloved hand.

The dust cleared moments later, but the women were still coughing.

“Most of the time, the palm of the hand is a far better weapon than the fist, but nobody teaches that. I admit that Miss Green was at a disadvantage with the glove,

but I assure you I could put it on and smash a third one just like she was trying without difficulty. The secret is you have to commit to the attack and put your whole body into it. We think we can just stand rigidly and let our arms and fists take care of it. Either that, or we flinch at the last moment because we know it will hurt. You have to override both your squeamishness and your own natural self-protectiveness.”

Everyone just stared, still coughing from the chalk dust. Mary assumed the shock of the dust was probably the point, since it clearly had no real practical value.

Mrs Black looked at them intently, then abruptly said, “Miss Violet, what did both Miss Green and I overlook?”

The young lady looked flummoxed for a moment, looked around in confusion, then finally let out a laugh. “There is a good size stick laying on the ground.”

“Exactly! Elbows, palms, fists, fingers, knees, heels—all of these you will learn to use, and all are always available; but none are a match for a club. There is a fine line between strike fast and strike hard . Sometimes a weapon will be handy, and you will have time to grab it. You should not count on such luck, but do not turn your nose up at any weapon you see, and when you strike, strike hard. Do not mess about.”

They all looked thoughtful, so she let them stew over that a bit.

She signalled Jane over, and she came reluctantly.

“You will not leave this room until you can do what I just did with either elbow, either palm, or either knee. Now... let us assume you just did that, and your assailant is on the ground. What do you do?”

“Run!”

“Are you certain?”

“What do you mean? That is rule number two. What else is there?”

“You have the advantage, and you will give it up willingly? For nothing? You will allow a man who outweighs you by a stone or two, possibly armed, definitely enraged, wearing trousers; to chase after you in a dress, just to satisfy your squeamishness?”

Jane looked green. “What would you have me do?”

“Never give up an advantage voluntarily. Never-never-ever. If you have the man on the ground, you need to ensure—”

Like lightning again, she lifted her boot and stomped down on a stick the size of a man’s leg laying unnoticed on the floor, producing a terrifying sounding crunch.

“If you are desperate enough to fight back, finish what you started , whatever it takes. Unless he is unconscious or dead, you have lost the advantage of surprise. You have to end the fight using any means necessary. Anyone who attacks you forfeits the right to a so-called fair fight or mercy. Depending on whether that was the man’s leg or chest, and how hard I stomped, I just disabled or killed him. I am now safe—at least from him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Women are allowed to defend themselves, but we are not guaranteed to win in a court of law. If you kill him, you may face justice from the magistrate or the courts. You might even be hanged if you are caught. If it is you or him, then you must survive, and run if you must—but whatever you plan to do, make it fast and definitive.”

They all looked horrified, but Mrs Black was having none of it.

The two rough-looking men Mary had seen the first day entered through a large door they had not noticed, dragging two handcarts with a few dozen new targets.

“Allow yourselves the supreme pleasure of smashing all of these targets to pieces. You know you want to!” Mrs Black said with an uncharacteristic laugh.

She then had the men start setting up the targets, and she started giving them instructions on how, when, and where to strike, and with what parts of their bodies. They all got a lesson in how strong the elbow and heel were, though both were still somewhat vulnerable. They all got a lesson in putting their whole body into the punch if required.

They worked up to luncheon smashing the targets with both palms and both elbows until the ladies felt quite mannish.

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Luncheon was cold meat, cheese, bread, a bit of fruit, and water. They ate standing up with the two men like field hands. Nobody tried to pry into Mrs Black’s motivations for having the men present. They were both big, hulking, threatening-looking ogres, and most of the ladies eventually assumed that was their purpose—she wanted them to learn not to be intimidated.

After luncheon, things got distinctly uncomfortable.

They first discussed the parts of their bodies that made the best weapons, the parts of their attacker’s bodies that were the most vulnerable, and a dozen ways to connect the former with the latter.

Nearly any man could be entirely disabled with a palm to the solar plexus if you were facing them, or an elbow if you were facing away. A heel stomp on the top of the foot would practically cripple any man for life if you were wearing boots but would still hurt like the devil even in dancing slippers.

A palm to the nose or chin might be effective, but only if you could not get at the solar plexus.

Their mortification was complete when they learnt about knee kicks to the groin (never foot), especially when one of the men described in some detail how much it hurt in language that put even Mrs Black to the blush.

Of course, there were other obvious tactics that were seldom used but quite effective.

Anyone who had ever had their hair yanked out could attest to the unpleasantness, and though it took more skill than any of them were likely to have, gouging out the eyes with your fingers had much to recommend it if you were serious about permanently disabling him.

An open-fingered jab at the windpipe could be disabling or fatal, and even a closed fist would do the job in a pinch. Anyone striking the heavily boned chin when the weak and vulnerable neck was available was a fool.

Of course, one needed room to fight or run, so they went into how to break out of grips when a man grabbed their wrist, their arms, their waist, their leg, or the other ways to break a grip if they grappled you from front or back.

Mrs Black even showed them the thumb lock she used on the miscreant the first day. She told them any finger was vulnerable to being bent over backward, but if they did it, not to mess about. Just break it—no showing off as she had done. And, of course, if you were going to do that, it was essential to follow it up with a crippling blow.

Even biting was acceptable if it came right down to it, but she said if they were that desperate, to emulate a bear more than a lady. Bite hard and try to tear a chunk off.

As if things were not already uncomfortable beyond belief, they got even worse.

Mrs Black put on a padded chest plate, a stiff collar, and padded greaves on her wrists—then spent quite some time grabbing, tossing, and throwing the ladies around until they learnt to fight back. There were going to be some sprains, sores, cuts, and bruises the next day, but they were learning.

Once they had that part down, they were distressed even more to see the men wearing the same gear, and much to their consternation, they found themselves repeating the exercise with a man who looked more like an ogre than anything else.

They continued long into the evening until everyone was drooping and dragging, though curiously enervated to learn that they could defend themselves if they really had to. They all still believed that they never would have to do anything so disagreeable, and for the vast majority of them, that would be true.

Just before she sent them to bed, she said, “I think you see why I recommended against telling your guardians about that part.”

“I will never tell another soul as long as I live,” Miss Burgundy said emphatically, and all readily agreed.

“Good night, ladies. You have done well today,” Mrs Black said kindly, and they all fell into their beds in exhaustion.

19. The Dutch Uncle

As the men left the Turner's coffeehouse, the colonel observed, "Well, that went better than we had any right to expect."

"You are somehow surprised that if we throw money around, they would be willing to catch it?" Darcy quipped half-seriously.

"When you put it like that, I have no idea what we were worried about."

They continued on in pensive silence for a time, and the colonel asked, "You say you have found more?"

"Yes, two more. One is apparently in Lambton of all places, and not in any immediate distress. The other is in a small market town in Bedfordshire. I will probably visit the local and then decide about the other."

"You are committed to this course, then?"

"I am. The expense is barely noticeable. During the child's lifetime she will hardly cost any more than my boots, and far less than my horseflesh."

"Ah, the vagaries of rich and poor."

"Yes," Darcy added, not feeling much like stirring that particular pot.

It did seem unfair that he and Bingley received the vast bulk of their father's wealth

and responsibilities, while daughters and younger sons got by on scraps. It was the way of the world, but there was presently not much he could do about it. He strongly encouraged his cousin to take as much advantage of his wealth as his pride allowed, but there were limits. He was happy to see the Turners were considerably less stubborn than his cousin, who had turned down several offers of assistance. It was no surprise that Mrs Turner was of a practical bent, but Mr Turner was a military man, and you just never knew how much pride and hubris drove their thinking.

Fitzwilliam asked, "On another subject, how is Georgiana doing? And while we are at it, where is she? "

Darcy chuckled grimly. "One question more or less answers the other."

"Can you get any more confusing?"

"Confusing? Me? I could hardly compete with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, so why bother?"

"Was that intended to be an answer? If so, it is woefully short of the mark."

Darcy sighed. "Georgiana has tested Mrs Annesley's patience to the limit. I do have great faith in that lady's abilities under ordinary circumstances, but whatever was happening in our ward's mind was beyond her abilities. She made a suggestion, and I took her up on it."

"Can you be more specific?"

"Certainly. I sent her to Gardiner's course."

"YOU WHAT?" the colonel bellowed. He followed that by sitting back in his seat, because he did not actually have any idea what that entailed.

“My apologies that I did not consult you, but I was at the end of my tether.”

“What exactly is this course?”

“Gardiner said I just had to trust him. They have trained hundreds of girls, but they all remain anonymous. She must participate for a fortnight, during which she has effectively dropped off the edge of the world. We cannot speak to them, write to them, or even know where they are, precisely.”

The colonel whistled. “Putting a lot of faith in a man you barely know.”

“He has already saved her once, he passed up three good opportunities to extract funds from me, and we have spoken for hours. I do trust him. That said, the course is not exactly free.”

“Do tell! How much did it set you back?”

Darcy chuckled. “Gardiner says he charges what a man can reasonably afford. For some guardians, it is free or ten pounds. For me, it was a thousand pounds.”

“THOUSAND!” The colonel gasped.

Darcy laughed heartily, even though his initial reaction had been nearly identical, especially since Gardiner was in a joking mood and told him the price while he was drinking some excellent brandy.

“Gardiner made a good point... actually two. The first is that, unless I am the dumbest investor ever born, I probably make at least five percent return on my investments.”

“I imagine you do better than that.”

“I do. He very reasonably pointed out that the return on Georgiana’s dowry alone, just in the time since her rescue, made me more than that. From that standpoint, the course is free—or even profitable . In fact, he could reasonably charge even more, because if he can keep her from doing anything stupid, I can expect to gain double or treble that amount just by keeping her single for another year or two. I make money on it every year, while the amount of the dowry remains constant.”

The colonel whistled long and low. “I am impressed with his reasoning. I suspect his income is far greater than his address suggests.”

“Most likely. Had we entered his home that first night you would have thought yourself on Park Street. That said, he only keeps a small portion of that fee. The course is overseen by a woman named Mrs Black. She invented it, developed the curriculum, and teaches it. He says the course is of the nature that she takes considerable reputational risk managing it, and she is entitled to charge what it is worth. That is the reason for the huge differential between what a modest man pays and a wealthy one.”

“The man sounds like a radical, though someone in my position should take note.”

Just at that moment, Darcy got an excellent idea as if struck by lightning. At least one of his objectives in life had foundered on men’s pride, both his and others. He suspected Miss Elizabeth would more likely call it pig-headed stubbornness, and he could not necessarily argue. He thought he may as well seize the moment.

“Speaking of that, the discussion made me think of something that seems obvious in retrospect.”

“Do tell?”

“You bear half the responsibility for Georgiana but are not compensated. Basic

fairness suggests you should get at least half the benefit from her dowry, or all, since it is her money, not mine.”

“Is this yet another scheme to throw money at someone you feel is in need without injuring his pride?”

“Not really, but would it be so terrible if it were? I have yet to see a first son complain that he did not earn his father’s largess.”

The colonel turned pensive, so Darcy continued his assault.

“You know I am right. If you got an inheritance from a distant uncle, you would take it without a second thought.”

“I suppose so. Does it matter if I accept gracefully, reluctantly, or not at all?”

“The bit is in my teeth.”

The colonel boomed out in laughter. “I shall say it again, Darcy. You have it bad.”

Darcy did not have the heart to argue the point, especially since he was not at all convinced the colonel was mistaken.

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“Gentlemen, welcome,” Gardiner said jovially the next evening when the men came to dinner. “Alas, I have not a single niece for your company today, but I suppose you can make do with my wife and daughters.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you at last, Mr and Mrs Gardiner,” the colonel replied with matching humour.

The Gardiner children were allowed to visit with the company as long as they were well behaved, and Fitzwilliam had to laugh that the eldest Miss Gardiner was, as his cousin had mentioned, around twelve. Still, he found the child precocious, and as he may have expected, intelligent and well-read. He wondered how much of that might be because of the phantom elder Miss Gardiner.

The dinner they sat down to was pleasant. Darcy had not managed to spend much time with Mrs Gardiner in his previous visits, so he was pleasantly surprised to find her hailing from Lambton. She was a decade older, and they ran in different circles, but they still had enough connexions in common to pleasantly discuss the happenings about the neighbourhood. Darcy wondered if his cousin's second victim was from Lambton, but he was not about to bring it up. Perhaps, he might do so with Mr Gardiner, but he certainly was not comfortable enough to do it with the lady of the house.

After dinner, they separated the sexes for the remainder of the afternoon as Mrs Gardiner had things to do with the children and the governess, and she suspected they had some tedious business to discuss anyway.

When the men got down to business, Darcy began. "I told my cousin about your course, and our ward's participation in it."

The colonel weighed in. "That is actually a damn-fine idea, if you ask me Mr Gardiner."

"Just Gardiner will do, gentlemen."

They nodded, and offered the same privilege, then Fitzwilliam continued. "It seems rather basic when you get right down to it."

"How so?" Gardiner asked.



“When most men think about protecting our charges, we all seem to do the same things. Surround them with footmen, governesses, and companions—then just hope one of them teaches them how to avoid doing stupid things. It makes no sense when you step back and think about it.”

“Like going into battle without training your men, I suppose,” Gardiner replied.

Darcy added, “Yes, I am finding much about this business gives me much to think about, and things to change. Many of the things that are just handed down from father to son without question now seem obsolete at best.”

“It is always best to question things,” Gardiner said. “You cannot question everything, and even if you decide some system has little to recommend it, you cannot change the entire world nor the whole race of man. You need to be strategic about it.”

“Any idea how the ladies are doing in the course?” the colonel asked.

“Do you think I would tell you if I did?”

“Cannot hurt to try,” Fitzwilliam replied with a laugh. “But, no I do not. You do not strike me as a man who blows about with the wind.”

“In that, I hope you are correct.”

“Can you tell me about how the school came about?” Fitzwilliam asked, quite interested in the strategy portion of it.

“I can tell you my part only. As you may surmise, I employ women and men to protect my charges. They all have to be somewhat clever about remaining unnoticed. Mrs Black is particularly good at taking the appearance of a servant, milkmaid,

governess, companion, lady, or whatever she needs to be.”

“She sounds formidable.”

“That she is, Colonel. That she is. One day, she said her job would be much easier if her charges would do slightly fewer bone-stupid things. I asked her to elaborate, and she did. Like you, I had thought about it in the traditional way, and she made me reexamine the business. My epiphany came some years before yours, but from the same source.”

“Remarkable,” Darcy said. “Do you suppose we could meet her?”

“I will put it to her, but she is a very private person, so do not hold your breath. She has yet to willingly meet a single guardian.”

“Pity,” Fitzwilliam replied.

Darcy agreed, but nodded and let it go—for the moment.

Gardiner continued, “She started out just giving each new client a bit of good sense and then expanded the curriculum from a few hours to a fortnight. I periodically interview her graduates to ensure they seem satisfied, and I have followed up with those that graduated years ago. I am more than happy with the results, and it most certainly helps my business.”

The men took a few sips to absorb the discussion.

Gardiner said, “She would be embarrassed I mentioned this, so you should keep it under your hat, but she was instrumental in rescuing your ward. She was in Ramsgate working with another client and noticed a disturbing pattern. I do not believe she knew who she rescued, but she certainly pegged that Wickham fellow for the

scoundrel he is.”

“I hear he is manning the King’s Navy these days,” Fitzwilliam quipped.

“More likely feeding the King’s Fish, but perhaps he is tougher than he looks,” Gardiner replied with a laugh.

They ended the night an hour later, not much better informed, but certainly better brandied, and doubly curious about the redoubtable Mrs Black.

### 20. Five Coins

Mrs Black's students awoke the next morning to find they had been moved from the dungeon to ordinary looking bed chambers. They had been so tired after the training they fell into bed without even noticing. Also present were their own trunks, with their own day dresses, pressed and hanging in the closet. They were sharing two to a room, but compared to their previous accommodations, it seemed like a palace.

They had a good breakfast with Mrs Black presiding over the head of the table, directing conversation subtly. She made certain the shyer ladies, such as Miss Amber, had their share of conversation, and more boisterous ladies, such as Miss Green did not hog. She did it with some subtlety that impressed the Bennet daughters, although the elder two suspected it was mostly because their youngest sister was deathly afraid of their tutor. They would be astonished if the change lasted upon return to Longbourn, but it was at least a start.

Once they were finished, they all went into a good-sized drawing room, and sat down in a comfortable setting, as if awaiting callers.

Mrs Black began, "Now that Brutality Day is finished... it is time for some fun: Deportment Day! " The groans were loud and universal, with even Jane pitching in, but Mrs Black seemed unimpressed.

"Most of you have at least a vague idea about how to behave properly. Most ladies obtain some haphazard rules of thumb from siblings, aunts, mothers, or governesses. Some of you may have read the books on manners, but they are so dull they make sermons seem exciting. Am I correct?"

There was a certain amount of grumbling, but eventually they all agreed that their path to what passed for ladylike behaviour had been acquired as suggested.

“I might also speculate that your compliance with the rules of good breeding have been... uneven...” then she let the pause hang for a moment. “...is that not correct, Misses Yellow and Green.”

Kitty and Lydia both jumped at being singled out, but at least they had briefly acquired the sense to keep their mouths shut occasionally.

“I hope what you learnt these past days would at least show you some of the errors of your ways,” Mrs Black blithely continued. “For example, Miss Violet, in practical terms , disregarding the rules of ladylike behaviour entirely, what is wrong with flirting with officers?”

Maria thought about it for a bit, and finally timidly suggested, “The best you could hope for is marriage to a man who is poor as a rat. More likely he just wants to lift your skirts.”

It said something about the experience thus far that nobody batted an eye at either the vulgarity of the expression or the underlying assertion, even though the young lady would have been unable to say such a thing at gunpoint a week earlier.

“Miss Yellow, continuing our practical bent, what else besides dishonourable behaviour might encourage a soldier to be friendly, flattering, or even flirtatious, to ladies like you?”

Kitty sputtered a minute and looked toward Lydia.

“If I wanted Miss Green’s opinion, I would have asked her. You need to escape her shadow sooner or later. Sooner would be better.”

Mary looked thoughtfully at Mrs Black and the rest of the ladies to see if anyone had worked out her identity yet and concluded they had not. While Kitty was thinking, Mary wondered why she alone of the sisters had worked it out, and after only a few hours at that. She thought Jane should have been the first, but since Elizabeth started spending so much time in London, Jane had moved most of her attentions to Charlotte Lucas. Kitty and Lydia seldom paid any attention to anything not right in front of their faces, so they would never work it out. The other ladies just did not know Elizabeth all that well. Of course, considering Mrs Black looked and sounded like a cross between a Spaniard and a Viking, it took quite a stretch to associate her with the meek and polite woman everyone thought they knew. Mary hoped to one day learn about how impertinent little Lizzy Bennet became the indomitable Mrs Black.

While Mary ruminated, Kitty was thinking furiously. She finally said, “They must get something out of it. Something worth the trouble.”

“Exactly!” Mrs Black said with a smile that made Miss Yellow glow with happiness. That also gave Mary something to think about. Was just a tiny bit of approval all her sister needed to escape the younger and stronger sibling? Could any of the three elder sisters have rescued Kitty from Lydia at any time in the past few years had they made the effort, or would their mother have sabotaged it all?

“Can you guess what that might be?” Mary ventured, just to get in on the conversation. She was surprisingly happy to receive a nod of approval from Mrs Black.

Miss Yellow thought a minute. “Better food and drink, I suppose?”

“Miss Red?”

Mary thought a minute. “I have never eaten in the officer’s mess, but I cannot

imagine it competes, given what we saw the first day. My mother sets a fine table if nothing else.”

“ Very good, ladies! I would say there are probably other similar things, but that is a good way to think. If they are kind or flirtatious to the ladies of one house, they might be invited to others. There may even be other benefits that are slightly selfish, but not necessarily evil. It is an indisputable fact that eating at any of your estates is a vast improvement.”

Kitty said, “I suppose that makes sense.”

Mrs Black continued, “People do things for their own reasons, though they are not always obvious. With everyone you deal with, it always pays to think about their motives. It helps to understand and even predict their actions.”

More nods ensued.

“Having said that, what am I likely to say next... Miss Blue?”

Jane startled, but finally suggested, “Balance?”

“Elaborate.”

Jane thought some more. “If you pay no attention at all to other people’s motives, you can easily be beguiled and hoodwinked. If you obsess all day about it, will spend your whole life fretting until you have a nervous disposition. It seems like punishing yourself for others’ infractions.”

“Very good words to live by.”

“I can certainly see how they can be useful,” Jane replied.

“How so?”

Mary found the discussion fascinating, though they had yet to touch on the topic of the day.

“I lived most of my life assuming the best about people.” Jane began pensively. “I mostly ignore that which makes me uncomfortable. People have taken advantage of my good nature more than once.”

“Miss Amber?”

The move away from the Bennet family startled the two nieces, but she was ready.

“I suspect I was much like Miss Blue, though to a lesser extent. I did not always believe the best of people, but I had a tough time thinking the worst. I will be more cautious in future. I also now have a much better idea of what I want in a husband.”

“Excellent—especially that last point! As ladies, we are trained to stand around looking pretty if we can, or amiable, or wealthy, or accomplished, or whatever we think is our best asset. We are supposed to wait patiently for a man to notice us, and hope he has enough sense to know what he wants, and the gumption to go after it. All this passive waiting around is indecisive and weak.”

They all gasped, but by then they were at least accustomed to unconventional ideas. For most of them, any husband seemed the best they could hope for, but could Mrs Black be right? Could they somehow shape their destiny, at least a little?

“It is unfortunate, but in our society, we are expected to walk a fine line. Too demure and we are cold, too enthusiastic and we are mercenary or fast, but that does not mean we are powerless. That is what we will learn today.”



“How?” Jane asked plaintively.

“By achieving balance... by thinking strategically and acting tactically. It is unfortunate that society, courtship, friendships have to be thought out carefully, but it only seems confusing because you are unaccustomed to the idea. If you learn the skills, they will become second nature over time. If you return home and do nothing, you will at least know how to defend yourself, and if you decide to be more thoughtful, you will at least have some idea of how to go about it.”

They all seemed nearly overwhelmed, and they had been at it for some time, so Mrs Black suggested a break for a half-hour and some tea.

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“Now on to the topic at hand. We will speak about manners, propriety, and deportment, but in a thoughtful way... mostly because memorising rules is the worst way to learn—not to mention unbelievably tedious.”

“Why do we have to learn a lot of stuffy old rules?” Lydia asked petulantly.

“You do not,” Mrs Black replied calmly.

For a moment, several of the ladies looked relieved, but then a cloud of doubt descended, and they wondered what trick she had up her sleeve. They had no doubt there was one.

“I suppose you may as well put us out of our misery,” Mary said.

“I said you do not need to learn these rules. You could easily forget the lessons from yesterday, or the lessons about how to read the intentions of those around us, or anything else I have to teach you. You can forget the entire lot and take your chances.

I have already been paid, and your guardians cannot claw that back, even if you learn nothing.”

They all stared at the hard look she was giving them. “Do not feel you are special , Miss Green. There is a Miss Green in every class. Some learn and succeed in life. Some do not learn and take their chances. That is your right, but if you want a good chance to live a comfortable life, I urge you to knuckle down and learn it. It is far simpler than you can imagine. ”

She stared around threateningly, then relented a bit and softened up. She picked up a small stack of coins from a side table and continued, “I will teach you everything you need to know about deportment and manners, and I will do it with just five coins.”

All the ladies were thoroughly confused, but at least they were paying attention.

Miss Amber finally asked, “How?”

Mrs Black took that as general agreement that they would try, which was all she hoped for at this stage of the game.

“How many of you have heard the old phrase, love and hate are two sides of the same coin ?”

Most raised their hand timidly.

“Anyone care to guess what it means?”

Jane surprised Elizabeth by being the first to answer. “I suppose they are opposites but related.”

“How so?”

“They are both some sort of... passion, I suppose.”

“That is correct. They are the extreme ends of another similar coin, like versus dislike. We will use these other five coins to learn what you need to know about manners.”

“That seems overly simplistic,” Miss Violet added.

“I do not mean that there are only five rules. Far from it. Depending on the level of society you eventually occupy, there may be hundreds in the end—but they all derive from these five coins. Shall we begin?”

They all nodded, far more enthusiastic than they had been a few minutes earlier.

“Miss Amber... while this will seem self-serving, let us just for the moment remain entirely in practical terms. What is the practical benefit of being kind? Disregard morality, religion, manners, customs... everything. Only practical terms. ”

“Kind to who?”

“Anybody... friends, relatives, strangers, you name it.”

She thought a minute and finally replied timidly, “Because they are more likely to be kind in return.”

“Very good, Miss Violet. Do the same for being mean.”

That one did not take long at all. “They will be mean back.”

“Very good. Now expand on that.”

“They might be meaner than you... or more powerful... or more vindictive.”

“Exactly. They say the whisper of misfortune is louder than the trumpet of joy. Bad tidings travel much faster and farther than good ones, so being unkind, or mean, is more likely to harm you than not. After our lessons on gossip at the modiste, that much should be clear.”

She paused a moment, then opened a box that was sitting unobtrusively on the table by her chair, and pulled out a stack of coins, one for each lady.

They all looked the coin over and noticed that each side was engraved with a word pair, indicating they supposed one principle: Kindness/Reciprocation vs Unkindness/Retaliation.

“This coin suggests you make your disposition lean towards kindness. In other words, try to make kindness your natural habit, and others will most likely reciprocate. Make meanness your natural habit, and others will naturally retaliate. Remember the golden rule, which most think is Christian, but nearly every ancient culture has some flavour of it: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. ”

They all looked thoughtful except for Jane, who looked slightly smug.

Mrs Black said, “Remember this, and remember it well. I said to make it your normal habit, not your only habit. Not everybody is your friend. Bullies see kindness as weakness. Not everybody follows the same rules. You should try being kind, but if that fails—”

She stared around the room until Jane finally answered timidly. “Flip over the coin.”

“Exactly. Kindness is a type of strength, but not the only kind. As you know by now, you must defend yourself from physical attacks. Verbal attacks are no less

troublesome, and you must guard yourself from them as zealously as you defend your person.”

“Is this coming back to balance,” Miss Violet asked.

“It very much is.”

Mary ventured, “You said there are five coins, but hundreds of rules of propriety. Are you saying many rules will belong to one of the coins.”

“Most of them will,” she replied. “Miss Red, I suspect you have many of the rules in your head. Can you list some specific rules from those tedious books that might well be summarised with this coin?”

Mary thought a moment, and finally offered, “Do not speak ill of others, especially in public or mixed company; or Avoid interrupting someone while they are speaking.”

Kitty surprised everyone by contributing, “Offer assistance where appropriate, especially to those of lesser fortune or standing.”

The rest chimed in with many, such as Show patience with those who may breach etiquette due to ignorance, not malice; Do not gloat over one’s supposed superiority.”

Mrs Black laughed. “Enough! You get the idea. Let us have luncheon.”

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The afternoon went much smoother. While a considerable number of rules fit under Understand and respect the social structures (in a balanced manner, of course), once they had a structure to tie their understanding instead of a lot of arbitrary rules, it all made a sort of sense. There may be more rules to learn for some than others, but the

basic ideas were clear enough. Mrs Black went through the rules for how to manage guests in the home, all of which mostly fit under the kindness coin. Managing conversation at the dinner table was the same. Putting upstart-social-climbing-parvenus or people who insulted you in their place might be a useful skill from the other side of the coin. Mrs Black did not look directly at Jane in that case, but the message was clear enough.

Naturally some might have to learn more rules than others. Knowing how to introduce the wife of an earl to a duke was not a skill most of them were likely to require, but should it ever come up, even though such things were almost entirely arbitrary, they could be learnt if they could be tied to a coin.

The coin for Exercise Restraint and Self-Control was fairly obvious given what they had learnt on Brutality Day and from observing the wolves hunting the lambs the first couple of days.

In similar ways, they dispatched coins for modesty and conduct, reputations and impropriety, and the like.

At the end of the day, much to everyone's surprise, they took two of the driest, dustiest deportment manuals off a shelf and went through them. They learnt that a lot of the rules were quite good, and all of the good ones could be tied to one of their coins. They also found a fair number that were capricious, idiotic, or nonsensical. Mrs Black suggested they could disregard them, but to do so with full awareness.

As the final nail in the coffin, they took Fordyce's Sermons and tore it to pieces. Hardly anything in the book fit any of the coins, and even Mary was tempted to throw it in the fire.

### 21. Dancing Ghosts

The ladies were allowed to sleep in late the next day and had a leisurely breakfast.

Once they were in the drawing room, Mrs Black said, “Today we shall have calling hours. To be fair, I should warn you that most of your callers are actors of a sort—not the type that will appear on stage, but men and women under my employ who will attempt to teach you something. Some will be kind and welcoming. Some will be gossiping harridans. Some will be snakes in the grass. We shall learn to deal with them.”

Everybody grumbled a bit which Mrs Black allowed to continue for a few minutes before she intervened.

“Oh, my goodness, I almost forgot! This is an elective day. We were supposed to have a vote on the day’s activities, but I completely forgot. I suppose better late than never?”

“It would be only right,” Miss Red said, though as she looked at the hope in the other students’ eyes for something more interesting, she thought there was another joke afoot.

“Let us have a show of hands for everyone who prefers to return to the barn for more practice smashing boxes and breaking holds from my ogres.”

The groans that met that pronouncement made the vote rather superfluous, so accepting callers was to be the tedious order of the day. It would be several hours

before most of them worked out that many of their days were spent just like that, and they had never been overly bothered before.

The lessons in deportment, etiquette, and studying what people said and did not say went well, and three hours later they were somewhat tired when over luncheon, Mrs Black debriefed them on what they had heard, learnt, and said. She had several suggestions, but on the whole, the students had done well enough.

Miss Darcy would obviously need more training before tackling London society, but she had acquired just barely enough sense to listen to what Mrs Annesley had to say. The Weatherby sisters and Maria Lucas were still a bit timid for Mrs Black's taste, but she judged they would be fine. The Bennet sisters would return to Meryton, or possibly Gracechurch Street, with sufficient skills to handle the society much better than what they had previously learnt. At the very least, she no longer worried any of them would ruin the family.

She suspected Mrs Bennet was in for a rude awakening, and was about half-sorry she would miss it (well, quarter-sorry at least).

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After luncheon, the ladies returned to the drawing room, and it seemed a refresher on deportment might be in order based on the squeals they let out when they discovered the new ball gowns were hanging on portable display racks, along with a few seamstresses for final fitting.

Mrs Black let them enjoy the moment and rejoice over the gowns for a while, then finally got down to business.

“As you all no doubt remember, as part of the course you will attend two London events. Miss Burgundy, given the lessons of the modiste, what would you suppose

that means?”

Jasmine Weatherby did not especially like being called upon, but she was better at answering than she had been a week earlier when she found herself with Maria Lucas in the too terrified to speak club. Brutality day had beat much of her reticence out, so she gave the question a serious think.

“The lesson of the day was: Words matter , so I imagine you will tell us that ‘attend’ does not mean exactly what we assume it will.”

Mrs Black rather uncharacteristically laughed. “Very good, young lady. I have to tell you that only about half of the first ladies I call upon at this stage of the class come up with the answer.”

Most of the ladies were buoyed by this more amiable seeming Mrs Black, but then they wondered what trick she was likely to have up her sleeve—for one seemed nearly inevitable.

“Miss Violet, might you speculate?”

Maria did not like being called on any more than Jasmine did. “I suppose we shall attend a ball or the theatre, but not as the usual participants?” she guessed timidly.

“Correct. We all think of attending a ball as enjoying dancing, a bit of flirting, perhaps even love in the air. That said, keep in mind that chaperones, fathers, uncles, and servants attend balls.”

“So, you tricked us?” Miss Green sneered petulantly.

“Not necessarily. On our last night we shall attend a play at the theatre, in a box , and I shall not speak a word unless spoken to, unless of course one of you misbehaves.

Think of it as a bit of a final exam. For tonight, though, we will attend a ball and take lessons.”

Everyone looked either crestfallen, sullen, or both; but Mrs Black continued. “Think about it. Out of eight ladies, only three are even old enough to be out in London society. Most of you are out in your local communities, but that is an entirely different kettle of fish, and some of you probably should not have even been out there. In addition, imagine how much consternation you would experience if eight unwed ladies were abruptly added to a ball. This will give you a chance to examine the shark-infested waters of the ton without getting eaten.”

“Will we at least get to wear our new gowns?” Miss Green asked.

“Of course! I am not an ogre. Think about how much fun you will have. You can see all the fashions of the first circles and report back home. You can learn a few more things that might save your bacon one day. You can observe the vast difference in the quality of the music and the average skill of the dancers. I believe you will find the evening enchanting, if you allow yourselves to enjoy it.”

They all agreed with various levels of enthusiasm or grumbling. They at least understood that there was little point in arguing with Mrs Black.

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The preparations for the ball turned out to be all they could possibly hope for. Mrs Black once again split them up, so no sisters were paired, and suggested they all do each other’s hair, which was a novel experience for some. She had two maids, so they were not entirely on their own, but they mostly fended for themselves. Some, like Miss Blue, and to some people’s surprise, Miss Yellow, turned out to be highly skilled and in high demand. Mrs Black even got into the spirit of it a bit by fixing up Miss Blue’s hair, much to everyone’s surprise.

They arrived at the home of the Earl of Wrexham in good time and quite enjoyed the experience of simply waiting in line and seeing all the attendees. They mostly decided that Mrs Black was not quite such an ogre, especially when she made a few quite impertinent whispered comments about some of the feathers and similar accoutrements of the more ridiculous attendees. Some apparently had more money than taste.

They were allowed to go through the receiving line, and even met the earl and countess, which was a bit of a thrill all on its own. Most wondered just how many important people Mrs Black knew, and how she knew them. They all eventually concluded that their daughters had probably survived the school mostly intact.

Instructing them to be discreet, she led them through the ballroom, and into a door that was mostly hidden along a back wall. They found what appeared to be servants' stairs which led up to a balcony above the ballroom. The edge was covered with a gauzy curtain that allowed them to see clearly, but since there was no lighting in the balcony itself, they were not visible from the ballroom. It was quite a clever arrangement.

The musicians started warming up, and Mrs Black continued what she had begun so many days earlier watching soldiers on the street.

“These are the cream of London society, but in essence they are little different from you. They have the money and status to think very well of themselves, but on average, they are no cleverer, or kinder, or more intelligent than you are. They are mostly better educated, but that is because they are wealthy, not because they are inherently superior.”

She omitted the fact that one of the students was vastly wealthy, and that her history suggested she was very-well educated, but still no more sensible than Lydia. She hoped the poor girl had turned the corner though. Miss Darcy's experience in

Ramsgate had put her in a mental box of her own making, and as far as Mrs Black was concerned, nothing beat being thrown around like a rag doll by an ogre to shake someone out of their doldrums.

“Here you will see the same thing you will see at any marriage mart—and there is very little point in pretending this is anything other than a market. Most of the unwed people here want to find a partner to spend their lives with. They all have some idea in their heads of what they want that partner to be. Some prefer pretty over clever, or the converse. Some need money, some are so rich they do not care, and some are so rich they need even more money because anything less would be an insult to their pride.”

They all nodded, though most of their attention was on the attendees.

Mrs Black said, “Here is another little rule of thumb for you. The typical man is quite average. ”

“Is that not a tautology?” Miss Red asked (naturally).

“What does that mean?” Miss Green asked, showing perhaps the first spark of curiosity Mary could remember.

“Circular reasoning. You say the same thing twice in different words. It is a logical fallacy, though sometimes useful for making a point or making something easy to remember, which is I presume, Mrs Black’s purpose.”

“Very good, Miss Red, and good for you in expanding your curiosity, Miss Green. You should remember that you were almost certainly born just as clever as any of your sisters, and if you are less educated than they are, it is something you can correct.”

Lydia was less impressed by that statement but at least nodded in acknowledgment.

“What I mean, is that if you take any group of men, perhaps a tenth of them are the best of men, and a tenth are the worst. The bottom tenth can ruin your life in minutes, which is why we have been studying them so intently this fortnight. The best of men are rare by definition and probably out of reach or actually undesirable for most of us.”

She glanced to ensure everyone’s rapt attention.

“Most of you will need to marry to live well, and most of you probably want to. There is nothing wrong with that. Since most of us are fairly average, we will find our husbands among the average. Some will be bold, some shy, some will be leaders, some followers. Tonight, I will try to teach you some of the subtle ways you can guess about a man’s character based on his deportment and demeanour, but I caution you not to read too much into it. For example, I know one of you has a guardian who gives offense as a first impression, but I suspect he is more shy than arrogant and is probably a good enough man underneath. Do not let your first impressions lead you astray. While you will end up with an average sort of man, it is better to have one on the high side of average than low.”

They all gave that advice some thought for a minute, and Mrs Black added, “Just to be certain, while rough manners do not mark someone as bad, neither do happy manners mark a man as good. The worst snakes practice amiability, manners, and flirtation to a fine degree. They use them as bait, so be careful you do not fall into their trap. Often, the most amiable seeming men are among the worst, but do not tar genuinely amiable men with the same brush.”

“How do we avoid it?” Miss Blue asked, and Elizabeth suspected she was remembering saying, “He is just what a young man ought to be—sensible, good-humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! So much ease, with such

perfect good breeding!"

Elizabeth did not really have an opinion on Mr Bingley, and would not for another week or two, but she was happy to see her elder sister at least trying to escape their mother's shadow and circumstances.

"Time and observation. You can learn a lot about a man with how he acts over time. Pay more attention to how he treats others than how he treats you. A man who is cruel to servants or animals cannot be a good man. I would also be sceptical about anyone who allows bad things to happen around him that he could dissuade. Talk to him."

"That seems sensible," Jane said pensively, belatedly realising that Mr Bingley utterly failed that last test.

"In the end," Mrs Black sighed resignedly, "you may need to fall back on another rule: Maybe means no . For myself, I would rather pass up the chance for a good man to avoid a bad one. There is always another good man in your future if you look hard enough, but once you are trapped with a bad one, it is all over. I know that sounds pessimistic and cynical, so take it with a grain of salt."

The ladies were slightly downcast by that, so Mrs Black brightened and said, "Good lord, is that woman colourblind?"

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The next hour went by pleasantly with Mrs Black pointing out ladies and gentlemen, describing how she interpreted their actions, and suggesting things she might do if she met them. She pointed out just how difficult it was for a shy man to ask a lady he was interested in to dance, then suggested several specific ways a woman might detect his interest if she were paying attention and subtly encourage him without

being a flirt.

Conversely, she gave a few tricks for evading dancing with men they wanted to avoid without having to sit out the rest of the evening. There were a number of excuses one should keep handy, but she said that, in the end, if a truly disagreeable man asked, and they even suspected ill intent, to just stand firm and refuse. Better to miss a night of dancing than to encourage a rake.

Mrs Black's ogres rather uncharacteristically brought in some tea and sat with the ladies for a half-hour making entirely pleasant and witty conversation. One was an expert on Shakespeare and challenged Mary's understanding to the limit, while the other loved horses and spoke animatedly with half the ladies the whole time. It was obviously another lesson .

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After tea, they resumed their observations at the railing, and Mrs Black was considering taking Jane and Mary down for the space of a dance, when she suddenly stood up straight and demonstrated the breadth of her language.

"Blood and thunder, what the infernal blazes is that blighted scoundrel doing here?" she snapped in the first sign of clear agitation, or in fact, anything short of complete serenity, that any of the ladies had ever seen. Even had her tone not been alarming, nobody had ever heard a lady say so many curse words in a row before.

She stared a moment, and finally said, "Zounds... He is planning to compromise her!"

With that, she turned and moved across to the door with astonishing speed, even for her, speaking over her shoulder. "You are in charge, Miss Blue. Do not leave this balcony for anything short of a fire."

With that, she was gone and the door closed, so the ladies turned excitedly around to try to work out who the scoundrel was. They stared intently at the groups for some time, but nobody could quite make out who was trying to compromise whom.

In such a short time that she must have run breakneck down the stairs, they found Mrs Black entering the ballroom. She was dressed in a ballgown that matched the elegance of the settings, and her raven-black hair was tied up in an Apollo knot with ringlets that everyone (even Jane) envied more than a little.

She fit right in as if she were born to the first circles—aside from the fact that she was moving through the crowd like a horse at full gallop. How she avoided knocking anyone over was a mystery to everyone. It became clear she was headed for the far side of the ballroom, where they could barely see the dancers, let alone ascertain their intents.

They all gasped when she paused briefly beside a tall gentleman standing by the side, spoke what could not have been more than a half-dozen words to him, and dragged him into the dance with about as much subtlety as she used to toss her charges around the barn on Brutality Day.

Miss White and Miss Blue both gasped in shock, “Good Lord, that is—” but they both paused politely without finishing the sentence. They both realized they were about to break one of Mrs Black’s rules, so they shrugged and turned back to the railing.

A couple minutes later, they startled again as another dancer fell to the floor rather hard and lay on the ground gasping like a beached fish.

They could not hear anything when Mrs Black knelt down beside the man in apparent sympathy, looking more like a very concerned nurse than anything else. After she spoke to the poor fellow a bit, she stood abruptly, spoke to the man she had dragged



into the melee less than three minutes earlier, and then disappeared entirely, leaving the tall man staring daggers at the man on the floor.

It was all quite mysterious, but when Mrs Black pulled a young lady from the dance and marched her over to an older man who seemed likely to be her guardian, they suspected they had seen the whole story.

The injured man was still moaning with what little breath he could muster and clutching his chest.

Miss Red said, “I would bet a month’s allowance that we just saw a practical demonstration of a palm on the solar plexus.”

“His foot does not look all that good either,” Miss Blue added.

They watched in wonder, their mind full of questions.

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Fitzwilliam Darcy was rather uncharacteristically enjoying an evening at a ball, though whether it was for his own advancement or to please Mr Gardiner was not entirely certain.

He had spent most of his adult life feeling like a hunted animal, and he tried to avoid balls when he could, and hide out on the walls when he could not. Gardiner had turned that on his head, by suggesting any hunted animal would be better off finding a safe den to hide in than running from the hounds.

With that change in his perceptions, he had started a new tactic. He despised the term ‘wallflower’ since he had effectively been one most of his life, and they did not make a special derogatory word for him (though many probably did have lots of other

words to say). He preferred to think of them as overlooked ladies . There were always a dozen or two who were overlooked for one reason or another (or no reason at all), so he just danced with them. None of them took it as a sign of anything other than politeness, and he found that, on average, they were better conversationalists than the husband-hunters.

He had just finished his third dance of the evening with Miss Alexandra Whitting, a cousin of one of his friends from Cambridge, and was sitting out one set, giving due consideration to whether he should supplement the evening with some of the earl's famously lethal punch.

His ruminations were interrupted when a striking woman with raven-black hair, gorgeous olive skin, dark eyes, and a Spanish accent stopped and said a few words.

“Sir, I need your help, and I need it now ! Follow my lead!”

He was just about to give her a good chastisement, and probably would have, had she left him full control of his options. Unfortunately, she gave him the option to either go along or measure his length on the floor, because she took his arm and dragged him into the dance. He briefly worried it was an elaborate compromise attempt, but he somehow doubted it, since it would be a suicidal attempt at best.

For the next minute, he found himself being led through the dance, which was slightly unnerving, but also somewhat thrilling. The lady seemed more intent on other dancers than him, so he had the chance to examine her closely, and he liked what he saw very much.

She seemed tall, though careful examination showed her to be of average height, so he assumed there was something complicated about her gown that fooled the eye into thinking she was taller. He was not bothered by that, since men did the same sort of thing routinely (or worse). She had raven-black hair and olive skin. Since she spoke

with what sounded like a Spanish or Italian accent (which was very attractive in its own right), he supposed she was of Mediterranean descent.

He was just admiring her face and figure, along with the way she danced, when a nearby man tripped over his own feet and went down like a falling tree. It was all quite confusing since his mystery lady was close to the bumbling fool and just barely managed to jump out of his way. It reminded him of the Bennet's idiotic cousin at the Netherfield ball, although to be fair, at least the parson managed to stay on his feet.

The man who had fallen seemed to be even clumsier than he at first appeared because he was curled up in a ball, apparently unable to breathe properly. His mystery woman leaned down and spoke soothingly to the clumsy fool for a moment or two, then abruptly stood, returned, and spoke emphatically.

"Mr Darcy," she began, which left him wondering how she knew him. "I happen to know that man on the floor is a Navy deserter named George Wickham. Desertion in time of war is a hanging offense. Can I trust you to see he gets returned to active service in a more... ah... reliable regiment... or faces the appropriate punishment. He is a vile man, and he should not be allowed back into society... ever!"

He stood stunned, and stared at his arch-nemesis, whom he had believe gone from his life forever.

"You may count on me, Miss...?" he asked.

She gave him what felt very much like a measuring look, as if deciding if he was up to the task. It seemed clear from the way Wickham was writhing around on the floor that she had hurt him somehow. He was impressed.

"Thank you," she said, apparently ignoring his perhaps too- subtle request for her name.

“He has been the bane of my existence for some years. I have a cousin who is a colonel. He will do his duty to king and country.”

“I believe you. I must away,” she said emphatically.

“Might I beg an introduction, or at least your name, Miss? You know mine, and fair is fair.”

She hesitated a moment, then said, “Mrs Duff,” then moved away with unnerving though subtle speed to speak momentarily to a young debutant in a light pink ballgown.

After speaking for perhaps half a minute, the young lady excused herself from her partner, who was more fascinated with Wickham’s plight than his dance partner anyway. The pair then walked quickly but discreetly over to a man who looked old enough to be an uncle or grandfather.

Darcy surmised he was probably her guardian or chaperone, and not quite up to protecting her from the Wickhams of the world.

His cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared, so he was briefly distracted by telling him of Wickham’s presence and his promise to take care of the rogue. Fitzwilliam got an evil grin on his face, and since he had been somewhat disappointed by Mr Gardiner’s quick action, he grabbed a couple of junior officers. Once they had their orders, the men dragged the still struggling Wickham, who had cast up his accounts on the floor, and Fitzwilliam returned to his cousin.

“Say, Darcy, who was that virago? That was some smooth work. Palm in the solar plexus if I am not mistaken. Wickham is lucky she did not kill him.”

“I just met her and exchanged a few words.”

“Did any of those words include a name... a Miss?”

“Unfortunately for you, it is Mrs,” Darcy began, but then burst out laughing as a stray thought struck him.

“What is so funny? It is not as if I want to marry her. I do not think I could sleep at night after an argument with a woman like that. I take my life in my own hands often enough with the army.”

Darcy laughed a bit more, which annoyed the colonel no end—which just increased Darcy’s mirth.

“She did introduce herself eventually, and I would have some words with her so I must away.”

“What is so blasted funny?”

“Her name is Mrs Duff.”

The colonel scratched his head. “And that is funny how?”

“Unless I am mistaken, it is the anglicised version of the Gaelic Dubh?”

“I still fail to understand.”

“It means Black,” Darcy replied in booming laughter, then left his cousin laughing along with him as he went over to speak to the young lady and her guardian.

Darcy approached Wickham’s intended victim, quickly introduced himself, and got down to business.

“Is that card she handed you for the Cheapside Runners?”

“It is,” he said uncertainly. “What of it?”

“I just wish to assure you in the strongest possible terms that contacting them would be in your best interest. They have done me a very good turn.”

He handed the man his card. “Call on me or send round a note and we can speak in some detail. I must away.”

He had just seen the elusive Mrs Duff, who he assumed was the redoubtable Mrs Black, enter a servant’s door at the back of the ballroom, and he headed along to join her.

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When the action seemed mostly over, with a couple of officers dragging away the man they assumed was Mrs Black’s miscreant, and her dance partner going over to speak to the lady who seemed likely to be the intended victim, they stepped back from the edge.

Jane said, “I believe we came within an inch of breaking Mrs Black’s anonymity taboo.”

Georgiana said, “I apologise for that.”

Mary said, “I doubt very much we are intended to keep it forever anyway. I strongly suspect Mrs Black will relax the restriction, at least among us, before long.”

“Why do you think that?” Miss Amber asked curiously.

“Because this particular group is different. Whatever she normally does, I think some of the rules will be relaxed for us.”

“Are you suggesting we introduce ourselves?” Miss White asked.

“Not really, but I doubt it would be—”

“Miss Red is correct,” Mrs Black said emphatically, having slipped in the door without anybody noticing.

“In what way?” Miss Amber asked.

“Several ways, actually. First off, I almost always relax the restriction among the students on the last few days, though my prohibition against telling outsiders without permission remains. By then, I know if you can be trusted or not, and the anonymity has already served its purpose. Everything I do is for a reason, including that.”

“That seems sensible,” Miss Blue replied. “I suppose that is like moving us from the dungeons to proper bed chambers?”

“Yes, among other things.”

Jane continued, “Making someone fail with the targets as well?”

“Everything.”

Miss White asked the operative question. “What other reason applies to this particular group?”

“Because this group is unique, and never to be repeated. Most of you already know what is unique about it, so let us just get on with it. I presume I need not make any of

you swear on the Bible again?"

There were a lot of head shakes, and Miss White asked, "What is unique about it?"

"The biggest thing is that everyone else already knows each other, Miss White. They are all from the same town, and in fact, half of the class are sisters."

To the surprised look of the young heiress, she continued. "Allow me to introduce Miss Darcy, formerly Miss White. Miss Darcy, starting on our left allow me to introduce the Misses Alicia and Jasmine Weatherby, Maria Lucas, then the Bennet sisters, Jane, Mary, Lydia, and Kitty."

"What about Miss Elizabeth?" Georgiana asked. "I am thrilled to meet all of you, but I am particularly keen to meet her."

Mary asked, "What do you know about her?"

"My brother wrote about all of you from Netherfield, but we spoke more about her than anyone else."

Mary looked a bit suspiciously at Mrs Black, but she remained unflinching as she answered Georgiana.

"She spends most of her time in town, so she took the course years ago, Miss Darcy. You will meet her later tonight."

Mary had been looking at Georgiana, and snapped her head back to Elizabeth, to find her not paying the slightest attention.

A knock on the door interrupted, and Mrs Black took a card from one of the ogres.



She whispered with him for a few minutes, and asked, “Miss Darcy. Is your brother absolutely trustworthy?”

“Yes! The best man I know! More trustworthy than me,” she replied somewhat morosely.

“None of that, young lady. You will have a clean slate after this course. I would hope that past mistakes can be relegated to the past, and any of you who were untrustworthy before will emerge with a more honourable bent after this fortnight.”

Mary smirked that she said that without looking at Lydia or Kitty.

Mrs Black said, “Tonight’s excitement has really put a spoke in the wheel of this class. That and the unusual relationship between most of you leads me to think I should reveal somewhat more than I ordinarily do. Need I be concerned about anyone spreading tales out of turn?”

Everyone emphatically assured her of their trustworthy nature.

Lydia even added, “If you spoke with Lizzy, I doubt you have a good opinion of mine or Kitty’s trustworthiness, but I promise on my life, we will respect your privacy.”

Mrs Black looked around at her charges for a few minutes, and then said, “Very well. I suppose rules are to be broken occasionally. We will want Miss Elizabeth in the discussion, and since I dragged Mr Darcy into this imbroglio, I suppose he may as well know. He is standing on the other side of this door, and I suspect his curiosity might lead him to do something typical for a man.”

“Is ‘typical for a man’ your synonym for ‘foolish’?” Mary asked impertinently, which earned her a laugh and shaken finger from Mrs Black.

She just turned to the ogre and whispered some instructions, then turned back to her charges.

“We will need Mr Darcy and Miss Elizabeth for this, and I have other business to attend first. Miss Bennet, can you get this rabble back to the house and fed? I will fetch the other parties and meet you back in the drawing room at precisely ten.”

“Of course, Mrs Black,” Jane replied.

They returned to the entrance, where they found the two carriages they’d arrived in, and a very smart looking chaise with room only for one. While Jane ushered the ladies into the other two, Mrs Black took the chaise and left without looking back.

### 22. Fifth Impressions

Jane noticed that dinner was a nice simple meal with all the signs of having been made on short notice by a qualified cook. She made the assessment automatically and without thought, but then she wondered if she was doing her job as the eldest sister. She could recognize, based on the meal and a hundred other indications, that this was an efficient house, but she knew for certain Lydia and Kitty would have no hope of working that out and had no idea about Mary. Was she deficient in her duties to her sisters?

Mrs Bennet had always considered her most beautiful daughter as her best chance at salvation from the hedgerows. Before she became quite so nervous about the entail, she had made a real effort to train Jane. Conversely, her mother had found her second child little more than a trial, starting with the disappointment that she was not the son she was expecting, then continuing with the fact that she was an energetic and curious child, and culminating with her abandonment of the field not long after she came out for reasons nobody knew.

Jane had the sinking realisation that Mrs Bennet had expended all the maternal instruction she possessed on herself, and made no real effort with the three youngest, blithely and unwisely assuming Jane would save them all.

It was a disconcerting realisation. Coupled with the discussion a few days earlier about the fisherman casting the same old bait into the same old stream even though he never caught anything, she had the sinking feeling that she had not done anywhere near what she should. Was she entirely dependent on a Mr Bingley to save her? For that matter, did she even want a man who allowed his sisters to abuse everyone

around them?

Those thoughts consumed her for much of the meal, even though she automatically kept reasonable conversation going without any effort. At the end of the meal, that made her feel even worse, because she was certain that, with the possible exception of Elizabeth, who she had never seen tested, Jane was the only sister who could boast such skills.

Since the cat was out of the bag regarding Miss Darcy, and the rest of the ladies were freed from the prohibition of speaking to each other or even acknowledging they knew one another, there was a great deal to speak about. Mrs Black had been running them ragged with something happening from morning to night the entire time, so there was a great deal of pent-up discussion to be enjoyed.

Jane was somewhat astonished to learn that, even without severe chastisement, Kitty's and Lydia's manners had improved considerably. Gone was the giggling, whispering, and all the other thing she had found annoying just about since the dawn of time. She wondered if their characters had been changed, or if they were only on their best behaviour and would revert. She suspected the answer to that would depend on how much exposure they had to their mother over the next year or two. She tried to disapprove of herself for making such an uncharitable assessment, but in the end, she did not have it in her. Facts were facts.

Miss Darcy had earlier exhibited fairly wide mood swings, but she had settled down to a level of shyness somewhere between Kitty and Jane, and a level of haughtiness about half of what it probably had been. Jane guessed she was about Kitty's age and confirmed it with a question. She wondered if any of the younger girls could be friends amongst themselves. It certainly seemed possible between all the Meryton ladies, as there was nothing like being tossed around by ogres together to forge a sense of camaraderie. As for Miss Darcy, perhaps if her brother returned to Netherfield they might meet occasionally, but she doubted very much that their social

circles would overlap much in the future.

When the single large course was finished, and the maid produced both Lemmon Posset and Whim-Wham for dessert, even though they were not even expected for dinner for several hours, if at all—she knew that she was in the midst of a well-run house.

They refreshed themselves and appeared in the drawing room a quarter-hour early and just chatted quietly. Jane spent most of the time talking to Mary, and got the impression Mary knew something she was not telling but had no idea what it was.

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The ladies all looked up excitedly when Elizabeth entered beside Mr Darcy.

Georgiana excitedly exclaimed, “Brother!” and ran across to give him a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Ladies, I apologise for interrupting your course. I hope am not disrupting Mrs Black’s schedule too terribly.”

“I believe it was already in some distress,” Miss Elizabeth said. “Considering that this course tries to teach ladies how to be safe in a hostile world, I hardly think seeing her guardian a few days early will cripple Miss Darcy.”

The ladies all sat down again with Jane moving aside to allow Darcy to sit beside his sister.

Darcy asked, “Speaking of Mrs Black, I am anxious to properly meet her.”

“I am dying to find out who she smote on the dance floor. I assume he deserved it,”

Lydia said excitedly.

Darcy looked nervous, and Elizabeth said, “He is a scoundrel of the worst sort and a deserter from the Navy. That is all any of you need to know.”

Jane asked, “That still begs the question of where Mrs Black is.”

Mary laughed a bit, which just made the rest of the ladies eye her suspiciously.

“You find the situation amusing, Miss Red,” Elizabeth said with her own quiet chuckle.

“Hilarious.”

“Do not think your keen observation that first day went unnoticed.”

Mary just smiled, but Jane said, “Might you explain to those of us who are less astute than Mary?”

Elizabeth chuckled again, then fast as lightning, Mrs Black jumped up from her chair, stood tall, and scolded Mr Darcy in a voice reminiscent of a more attractive Lady Catherine. “Mr Darcy, you should not sit there among so many single ladies. Better you sit over here.”

The abrupt change in her countenance, demeanour, voice, and even accent astonished the ladies. Everyone except Mary just sat stunned for a moment, while Darcy found himself halfway across the room by reflex before he even registered what happened, then he stopped cold and stared.

The tableau was broken a moment later when Darcy boomed out in laughter, joined immediately by Mary, and gradually the rest.

Once everyone was laughing because they found the whole situation funny, ridiculous, confusing, or all three—Darcy bowed and smiled. “It is the greatest pleasure to greet you again Mrs Duff.”

“Who is Mrs Duff?” Lydia asked, having finally recovered the power of speech.

Darcy looked over at the young girl, rather startled that her entire demeanour and voice had changed since he last saw her, but then he supposed he ought not be surprised that a course he was willing to pay a thousand pounds for actually worked.

He looked to Elizabeth, who just shrugged and nodded, so he answered.

“As you can imagine, I am not accustomed to being dragged into a dance like a trout on a line, though I did find the exercise most helpful in the end. When Mrs Duff introduced herself, it took me a minute to work it out.”

Mary said, “Very clever.”

“What is clever?” Jasmine Weatherby asked.

“Anglicised Gaelic, I think?” Mary asked questioningly. When she got a nod from Elizabeth, she said, “Dubh means Black.”

They all laughed, but it was up to Jane to ask the burning question. “How in the world do you pull it off, Lizzy? And I suppose the more interesting question is—why?”

“Ah, well, those are two entirely different questions. I am not certain I wish to answer the latter, so suppose I attend the former?”

She looked around to find everyone staring in anticipation, so she finally began.

“Mary worked it out the very first day. Care to tell the group how you did it?”

Mary thought hard for a minute. “I do not think I am any cleverer than the rest of you. In the end, I suspect it was happenstance. I happened to look at Mrs Black from a particular angle as she did something that reminded me of Lizzy at a young age and the scales fell from my eyes. Once I saw through the disguise it was easier, but still harder to think of Mrs Black as Elizabeth than you might think.”

Elizabeth nodded. “That is expected. I can tell you the answer to the how has already been taught in your lessons, starting with the second day observing the soldiers, continuing with the gossip at the modiste, and even Miss Green’s difficulties with the chalk boxes. Who wants to speculate?”

She looked around. It seemed nobody wanted to go first, but she just waited them out as if she had all night (which she actually did).

Finally, Jane ventured, “We see what we want to see... or... what we expect to see.”

“Correct! The disguise has been the work of years, so the initial bit of confusion took some effort. I warned you about how dangerous first impressions are. At a ball you meet one man with happy manners who dances every dance, and another who sullenly stalks the edges all night. What do you know about their character?”

Jane frowned grimly. “Very little, if anything.”

“Correct, but my experience says about eight in ten would consider the first man the superior based on first impressions alone. In subsequent meetings, he would get the benefit of the doubt, while the sullen man is guilty until proven innocent. The first man is Captain Blondish from our second day.”

“That makes sense,” Jane said while Mary nodded.

“I can walk anywhere I want wearing a servant’s dress, but none of you could safely, because I took the time to master how servants walk, talk, and act. People will see the dress and continue to see what they expect. If you did so, most would not notice, but some would think there was something just a bit off, and they would be those you least want to pierce the disguise. I work hard to make their first impression so strong they never question it again.”

“Is that why you can speak in servant’s cant with an accent one could cut with a knife?” Kitty asked.

“Yes... that took some practice and instruction... the less said about that the better. What else did I do, Mary?”

“You wore thick soled boots to make yourself taller than me that first day, but they were gone by Brutality Day,” Lydia added.

“Brutality Day?” Darcy asked in some concern.

“Not your business, Brother,” Georgiana replied quickly, which left everyone chuckling.

Elizabeth said, “There are some things you are better off not knowing, Mr Darcy.”

“I shall take your word for it.”

“Always good advice. Pray continue, Mary.”

“I suspect the boots serve two purposes. They made you taller and your gate more—”

Elizabeth laughed. “You can say it: mannish ... deliberately so.”

“I think the rest was just actor’s or conjurer’s tricks to mislead the eye. You put something in your hair and skin to darken it, then added rouge to highlight the colour, the same for your eyebrows, and if I am not mistaken, you used kohl or something on your eyes to make them more striking. Of course, those giant red earrings were the coup de grace . One could hardly look away.”

Everyone laughed.

Alicia added, “With the accent, walk, and severe manners, the illusion was complete.”

“Yes. But also keep in mind that I stayed away from those who knew me best until I had your minds thoroughly engaged in the instruction.”

“It is astonishing!” Jane said.

“Not really,” Elizabeth replied pensively. “It is just practice, and I have done far worse.”

They all gulped at that, but she did not elaborate.

“Is this your course, Lizzy?” Kitty asked timidly.

“It is. Do you remember me telling Mrs Bennet that she would not starve in the Hedgerows when her husband died?”

Everyone noticed the complete lack of ‘Mama’ or ‘Papa’ in her speech, and several of them wondered how long it had been absent when they were not directly in front of her.

“I do,” Lydia replied calmly and demurely. “You also said her not starving depended

on us completing this course.”

“That is correct, but I confess I may have stretched the truth just a tiny bit.”

“How so?”

She stared her down, and finally said, “I was desperate to save you two from your upbringing. Many would condemn your behaviour at the ball and before that with the officers... correct Mr Darcy?”

He gulped but answered honestly. “Their path was not auspicious, and I admit that my thinking was as you suggest.”

Elizabeth turned to her sisters. “I am going to save you part of the harangue you were due the last day by explaining it right now. Your behaviour is the combination of your selfishness and your upbringing . You do not deserve all the blame, but you were both headed toward disaster, and you will never make anything of yourselves unless you shoulder your part of the responsibility. Whatever your parents did or did not teach, you had Jane, Mary, and Charlotte for examples.”

The two looked chagrined but thoughtful, so Elizabeth let them stew in it for a while.

“Out of curiosity,” Mary asked, “what would you have done if we had not agreed.”

Elizabeth looked back and forth among the whole group. “What is said in this room stays in this room!” She stared down each participant, including Mr Darcy, until she had universal agreement. “I reach my majority soon, so I will never return to Longbourn or be Elizabeth Bennet again. Except for the few months when Jane visited, I have been Miss Gardiner of Gracechurch Street for nearly five years.”

The Bennet ladies looked stunned by the revelation, but Mary eventually added, “Or

Mrs Black?”

Releasing a chuckle, Elizabeth answered, “Yes. You asked how I manage the subterfuge. I set my own course years ago, but I have put up fences around myself and my aliases to protect the rest of you. I have been Mrs Black so long I can put her on with less effort than most of you spent preparing for the Netherfield ball.”

They all gasped, so she continued. “As Mr Darcy learnt, I was Mrs Duff, but I have also been Mrs Blanche, Miss Celeste, Miss Rosso, Mrs Braun... you get the idea.”

“Why so many?”

Elizabeth thought a minute. “Each name is a suit of armour... an identity with looks and behaviours that go with it. Why do you think I can so casually instruct you on what the men around you are thinking? I have studied this extensively... for years. I recognize their lies and techniques because they are babes in the woods compared to me.”

“What are those other women, if I might ask?” Amber inquired.

“What they need to be. Maid, governess, companion, milkmaid, lady, countess... I have been each at one time or another.”

They all stared in stunned silence.

Kitty asked, “You said Mama would not starve, and Papa asked if you had that much power over Uncle Gardiner. I doubt he was within a league of the truth.”

Elizabeth turned her attention to her sister. “That is a clever observation, Kitty. I hope you keep it up.”

“I will try, but if I return to Longbourn it will be hard.”

“Most worthwhile things in life are. Do you think inventing Mrs Black from whole cloth was easy? Do you think it is fun to disguise myself as a servant or companion to protect an heiress?”

Apparently not to be intimidated, Kitty ventured, “Are those things so hard you cannot answer a simple question,” which left Elizabeth laughing.

“Our uncle has no respect for our parents... none at all. If your father died, he would send his men to set up a house and move the family, but he would not lift a finger beyond what they could afford with the interest from Mrs Bennet’s portion. That is, as I said, enough to live slightly worse than Mrs Phillips, but hardly starving in the hedgerows.”

“So... if Uncle Gardiner will not lift a shilling?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Now you know the secret. This course... this school... this curriculum... this house—they are mine. The obscene amount of money I charged Mr Darcy to beat some sense into Miss Darcy is mine. My business and the Cheapside Runners are mutually supportive. I help his business, and he feeds me clients, but the school is all me.”

Everyone stared at her in confused wonder, and Lydia finally asked, “Are you telling us you are wealthy, Lizzy?”

“That is a vulgar question, Lydia. I shall just say that whether our mother lives well or poorly after our father’s demise depends entirely on my mood at the time.”

“What about us?”

“What about you? I have been begging our father to let you come to this course for years. The three of you are not old enough to marry, and you will have to stand up to your mother when you return. You will probably be married before your father dies, but assuming your behaviour is as I expect, you will always be welcome in my home, as are you all,” she said, including Maria and the Weatherbys. “After all, as I told you this morning, I am not an ogre! ”

Mary laughed. “You do not need to be, since you keep two on staff.”

Darcy looked pensive at that, but let it go.

They had been talking for some time, so Elizabeth suggested they call for some tea and take a break.

23. Hows and Whys

A quarter-hour later, they were returning to the parlour in small groups, chatting excitedly, when Mr Darcy stepped up to Elizabeth and said, “Miss Rainbow, would I be asking too much to have a private word?”

Elizabeth laughed gaily. “Very clever... I just might use that.”

“Feel free,” he replied with a smile.

“Is the word about your sister? If so, you are premature.”

“Not about her... not at this time anyway.”

She pointed to another doorway. “I admit the rules of propriety do not necessarily apply when I am out and about my business, but they do in this house. I will leave the door open.”

He nodded and offered his arm, which she took after only a slight hesitation. He briefly wondered if that was because she was not comfortable with him, or she was just unaccustomed to having gentlemen in the house.

“Your parley, sir,” she said neutrally when they were far enough from the door to prevent eavesdropping.

He shuffled a bit before he could begin.

“I am uncertain this is the best time, but I wish to say something before you decide what to reveal over the rest of the evening, just in case my request has any bearing.”

“I see. I usually think that once a decision has been made, there is little profit in messing about. If you have something to say, I will listen,” she replied, with her curiosity aroused.

“I would like to court you,” he blithely replied.

She stared at him a bit, not quite comprehending the words.

“Might you repeat that?”

“I would like to court you. If that is insufficiently specific, I am asking your permission to call on you and spend enough time together to see if we find each other suitable for marriage.”

She stared for a couple of minutes, starting and stopping her reply several times before she got it out.

“I congratulate you, sir. I like to think I can read men like a book with very large type, and I habitually examine every interaction for hidden meaning—but you have caught me flatfooted.”

“Does that happen often?”

“A couple times a year, I imagine.”

Darcy chuckled, glad that the tension and fear of being dismissed out of hand was dissipating.

They stared a minute, then she finally asked, “Why?”

“For the usual reasons, I imagine.”

“You do not do things for the usual reasons, and very few usual reasons would apply to someone like me anyway. Once again, I ask you why? ”

He blew out a breath, and chuckled. “My cousin and Georgiana’s other guardian, Colonel Fitzwilliam, has taken to saying—and I quote, ‘ you have it bad, cousin’, for the previous fortnight.”

She laughed, though it seemed clear she was still somewhat nervous. “It would be sufficient if you wished to court the colonel.”

He chuckled again but then became serious. “I want to court you because you fascinate me... you attract me... you excite me. I am vastly intrigued by your looks, your mind, your ambitions, your bravery... all of it, really. I have been well and truly attracted to exactly two women in my life.”

“I suppose I am one of them?”

“Obviously.”

“I am curious who the other is, and why you are not courting her.”

“Mrs Black,” he blithely replied, then laughed just slightly.

She stared at him for a minute in deep thought.

“You do realise that I have no need to marry at all, and that though I am the daughter of a gentleman, I have been unambiguously in trade the past several years, so my

condition in life is decidedly below yours. You should also note that, while I will curtail or reduce my personal instruction if and when I wed, I do not plan to give up this school... ever. ”

“Yes, I understand all that, and find it admirable,” he replied, though if he were honest with himself, he would have to admit he had not thought of half of her assertions. It did not, however, change his ambitions.

“Most men would not,” she stated emphatically.

“I am not most men. If I wanted the same sort of wife that most first circle men want, do you truly think it has been beyond my ability to attract one for a decade?”

She stared at him unnervingly for a moment. “I suppose I understand. After hearing what I have said, and assuming that sooner or later I will say something even more distressing; are you still interested?”

“More than ever! I do not imagine a squeamish man is for you, nor a docile or typical woman for me.”

“Why tell me before I finish my tale? The smarter move would be to continue the evening in case there are any fatal impediments, at which point you could withdraw without me detecting your interest.”

“Basic fairness. I hope you will tell me your story, with or without your charges in the room. Regardless of what you decide to reveal or hide in the next hours, for me to have this goal in mind, with you unaware, seems... dishonest.”

“I will give you that,” she said pensively, then stood thinking for a moment.

“Are you unbothered by the fact that I disabled Mr Wickham in the middle of a dance

without breaking a sweat, with nobody noticing, and could have killed him with little more effort?”

“To tell the truth, I was fascinated by Miss Elizabeth Bennet before I left Meryton and might well have already returned if not for your family. Even with them, I had not given up, and I honestly believe I would have pursued you ere long... even if just to shut up my annoying cousin.”

She laughed but gestured for him to continue.

“I was even more intrigued to learn the curious history of ‘Miss Gardiner’ from the Turners, then piqued by Mrs Black, after hearing about her from your uncle, then triply beguiled by Mrs Duff after witnessing you dispatch the bane of my existence.”

He smiled ruefully. “To be absolutely clear, I am not disconcerted—I am impressed. Lucky me, I do not have to pick between the only three women who have ever fascinated me.”

She stared a moment, and finally asked, “Are you bothered by the fact that I trained your sixteen-year-old sister to do the same or worse and will similarly instruct every daughter or niece I ever have.”

“Once again, more impressed than bothered. Only a weak man would let squeamishness dissuade him.”

She shrugged. “By that definition, I can assure you that the world is chock full of squeamish men.”

“Fortunately for both of us, we need not concern ourselves with the rest of the rabble. We only need one partner who matches us.”

Elizabeth was still thinking about what he said when Jane poked her head in the door to ask if they would be delayed much longer.

She sent her back to the parlour then finished answering his question.

“Listen to the rest of my story and sleep on it. If you are still interested, return in the morning and I will give you an answer.”

“It will be my pleasure,” he replied with a smile that Elizabeth thought clearly demonstrated exactly why he could not be as jovial as Mr Bingley. He would not last a week in the marriage mart if he openly displayed it on a regular basis.

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Once everyone was seated, Elizabeth began. “I have decided, very much against my usual inclinations, to trust all of you with my story.”

Lydia said, “I know I am the least trustworthy woman in the room, but I swear on my life to keep it to myself.”

Amber added, “If I am ever tempted to speak, I need only remember you felling that man like an oak tree without batting an eye.”

Everyone laughed and the tension eased.

Elizabeth sighed and looked at Darcy nervously to find him watching her intently. Subtlety did not seem to be his strong suit.

A few days earlier, she had overheard Mary wondering aloud if she even liked men at all, and it had made her wonder. She certainly liked some men. Her business centred around protecting ladies from scoundrels, so by necessity she spent most of her time

thinking of and dealing with the worst. Even then, starting with her Uncle Gardiner (but not her father), she could name dozens of very good men.

Even though she had to concentrate on the worst of the lot, she had no real qualms about the rest. She had also never felt the slightest flutter of real attraction for any man, and certainly nothing like love.

She had never even considered a possibility with Mr Darcy, any more than she would consider a relationship with a prince. It was just not something one thought of.

She wondered if she might have been attracted to him if he had attended dinner and been polite that first night. It was hard to say, since the man trying to court her had improved manners via his relationship with her uncle. She doubted she would have gotten along with Mr Darcy if she had met him before his reformation. Her instructions to her students to disregard first impressions had its limits.

Now that she apparently had a handsome suitor, who already knew her darkest secret , she began to gain enthusiasm for the idea of courtship. He openly admitted she was the only eligible woman to ever catch his attention, so she thought it only fair to admit that she did find his attentions... interesting. She also had to admit that she had never been entirely indifferent to him, despite her protestations to the contrary.

She knew how minds worked enough to be aware that true indifference could easily be triggered by simply considering a man not worth forming the slightest attachment to.

All in all, she eventually decided Mr Darcy intrigued her more than enough to see what he was about.

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Her woolgathering finally complete, Elizabeth began quietly.

“Most of you know the basic story. Longbourn is entailed, and the Bennets turned a blind eye to the future and saved nothing . Mrs Bennet has obsessed about getting her daughters married before her husband dies, which is surely weeks or months away. That means we all had to come out at fifteen, and she threw us at any reasonably solvent man who came along.”

She stopped and stared around at her audience, then finally at Darcy who had taken the seat next to her (apparently just to disconcert her).

Everyone nodded, since all but Miss Darcy had seen it personally or experienced it.

Elizabeth frowned. “I came out at fifteen and at first, it seemed fun and exciting. Most of the boys at the assembly were ones I had known for years, so the possibility of finding a husband seemed remote, but I did enjoy dancing, and some quite mild bits of flirting.”

“I have been out in that society for seven years, Lizzy,” Jane stated. “I appreciate your sentiment but wonder why you did not survive the second month, if you admit it was fun and exciting.”

Elizabeth sighed and frowned, staring at her sister and wondering how Jane saw the world. Had her sister been questioning this for five years, or five minutes?

“Mr Bingley is not the first wealthy man to lease Netherfield. For the first month after I came out, you were on that trip to the seaside with Charlotte Lucas... remember?”

Jane nodded confusedly.

“While you were gone, I met Mr Jacobson. ”

Jane and Mary gasped while Lydia and Kitty just looked bewildered, all for the same reason. None had ever heard the name.

Darcy frowned enough to crack stone, since he suspected he knew where the story was heading.

“Do not be surprised if you never heard of him. The three youngest were still in the schoolroom, and not very interested in their elder sisters. Jane was away with Charlotte.”

Everyone nodded, so she continued.

“The man was everything handsome and charming,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “You all remember the mannerisms I warned you about with the soldiers... well, he had all of them, and I fell for his bait.”

Now everyone was frowning, but she continued quickly.

“I do not mean I was ready to sneak off with him at a ball,” she said with a glance at Lydia. “Nor was I expecting his addresses just yet, but like any young girl in the throes of first infatuation, I imagined it. For the most part, though, I just thought him fascinating. He was all a young man ought to be—handsome, lively, well-mannered, rich . My mother loved him! ”

She was showing the first real signs of nervousness any of them had ever seen, but she ploughed on relentlessly.

“A few weeks in, I began to suspect something was not quite right . I could not put my finger on it, but I started feeling... cautious. He was just a bit too polite, too determined, too complimentary about my looks or wit, too quick to profess feelings that had not had time to develop.”

She glanced around to find everyone hanging off the edges of their seats, then stared straight ahead as if reliving a memory.

“At a ball in Stoke, he apparently decided he had been patient enough. I was cautious, but not as cautious as I now teach. Even so, he engaged in his machinations. I never worked out if my mother was complicit in his scheme, or simply naïve and careless. I still do not know for that matter.”

She stared around again. “I ultimately ended up locked with him in the library.”

They all gasped, though it had been obvious where the story was heading for some time.

She laughed lightly but grimly.

“Unfortunately for him, I played there as a child. We were on the second floor, but the room had a perfectly acceptable tree outside the window. I entered a few minutes before his arrival, so I was lucky enough to be away from the door. He locked it and started calling out for me, which was when I became alarmed. Before he found my hiding spot, I jumped through the window and climbed down the tree. If I was in any other house or it was winter, I would have been ruined, but I managed to return to the party with none the wiser.”

They all stared, and Kitty finally said, “That must have been frightening!”

“Terrifying!”

Elizabeth sighed resignedly with a frown that could curdle milk.

“I asked my mother point blank if she knew he planned to entrap me. She denied any knowledge of the plan specifically, but then informed me, in no uncertain terms, that

she had no objection to the scheme, nor should I, as long as a proposal was forthcoming.”

“Good Lord!” Jane said, while Darcy and Kitty swore under their breaths in far more colourful language.

Elizabeth thought some more. “After I confronted my mother, I walked home early, through the fields, in the dark, because the man was still prowling around the house. When I arrived at Longbourn, I confronted my father directly. Anyone care to guess what he said?”

Nobody had the nerve to take on that challenge, so they were rather startled when her voice became low and mannish.

“I congratulate you, Lizzy. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed a little in love now and then. It is something to think of, and it gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. Should you manage to bring him or another man to the point, bring them to me.”

The revelation was met with stunned silence that could be cut with a knife.

Darcy was the first to eventually recover. “Was that it?” he asked, in a tone indicating he would be happy to discuss the matter with the indolent man at his earliest convenience.

“Not quite,” said she, then after a short pause, she added in that man’s voice again, “I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be.”

Darcy was halfway out of the chair before he realised that he had nowhere to go and nobody to fight.

“I took what little money I had saved and left for the post coach at sunrise.”

She looked intently at Maria.

“I planned to go alone, but your father found me at the station. He did not ask intrusive questions, but the man’s attentions had not gone unnoticed. Sir William suspected there were very few reasons for a young lady to be dancing and flirting with a gentleman one night, and alone on the post the next day. He very kindly escorted me to my uncle’s house and returned.”

“Astonishing,” Maria breathed in awe, both for her father’s actions and his good sense in keeping it to himself.

“Charlotte took this course several years ago, with one of my other instructors, for obvious reasons. I suspect Lady Catherine has a rude awakening coming,” Elizabeth replied with a smirk.

Everyone burst out laughing, and the tension was released. It seemed obvious why Elizabeth had done what she did, but she continued after a moment.

“My uncle confronted my parents, and their argument was one for the ages. In the end, between my uncle and my father, we came to an uneasy truce that lasted five years. I was but fifteen and my father had absolute power over me. Eventually, we agreed that I could spend half or more of my time in London, as long as I left the raising of the rest of his daughters to himself. I had to be at Longbourn at least five months of each year, and I had to keep my thoughts on my parents and sisters to myself. I have been biting my tongue for five years.”

“Did you worry at all about us, Lizzy?” Jane asked in a harder voice than she customarily used.

Elizabeth stared at her shoes for several minutes and finally looked at her sister.

“I have done my best to ensure you did not encounter any especially bad men, but otherwise, I kept the bargain with our father. I had little choice. He is indolent, but capricious when crossed, and he was never willing to sign my care over to my uncle. I think he enjoyed holding it over my head. I did what I could, but it was a bad position to place a child in.”

“And you never thought to tell us?”

“Which of you can be reliably trusted with secrets?” Elizabeth snapped angrily.

Mary and Jane looked somewhat put out by the assertion, but both would eventually agree with the assessment.

“What happened to the man?” Jasmine asked.

“The Runners were new back then, and Uncle was nowhere near as flush or well-connected as he is now. That was lucky for me, because I was allowed to go to work for him when he needed my help more than he worried about the propriety of it. That first year was difficult for both of us, but as you can see, it worked out well in the end. There were certain risks involved, but I have emerged the better person for the experience. I would not trade what I have done for the world, nor would I condemn any other lady to the same fate. It was the forge that formed me, but forges are hot.”

They all stared, and she gave Darcy a hard look, which he took to mean he could criticise Gardiner at his peril. He nodded to acknowledge that he was not there and had no right to an opinion.

Elizabeth sighed. “In case you are curious about my erstwhile suitor, the man turned out to be an even bigger liar than his history suggested. He was not even using his

real name, because he wanted to keep his wild oat sowing away from his father's notice. In the end, his status is too lofty for our usual methods of disposal—which I will not elaborate on. The only way I could hurt him would be to kill him and dispose of the body, and that causes its own inconveniences.”

The matter-of-fact way she made the statement chilled everyone in the room, but she continued, “Tempting as it is, I have never been quite ready for that step.”

They all spent a few minutes trying to absorb the implications.

Eventually, Darcy asked, “Have you kept track of the cretin?” in a tone suggesting he might want to hunt the man down himself.

Elizabeth looked at him for some time, and finally said, “I check on him periodically.”

She paused for quite some time staring Darcy in the eye, which had the rest of the room's inhabitants wondering if they had learnt enough about how to register the eyes' actions in that second day of training to work out what was happening. They all concluded that they had no idea.

Elizabeth finally said, “I have been reliably informed he recently suffered a lost tooth and broken nose.”

Darcy's grin turned downright feral, which confused the ladies even more.

Elizabeth was exhausted and tired of rehashing the past, so she suggested it had been a big night, and they should all seek their beds.

Darcy paused on his way out the door. “I will see you tomorrow.”

24. Breakfast of Suitors

“Ah, Darcy, good to see you. If you have not broken your fast, we will sit down in a half hour.”

“I would be very pleased to join you, Gardiner. I apologise for appearing so early without notice.”

“Do not trouble yourself, you are always welcome. There are ladies visiting in the parlour, so what say you to joining me in my study until breakfast?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

The gentlemen retired to the study where a coffee service was already waiting and spent a few minutes with the social niceties.

Gardiner finally asked, “Have you a particular reason to visit? Anything related to last night’s excitement perchance? Mrs Black gave me the particulars, and you can be assured my man in the Navy will be having words about the security of their prisoners.”

“It is about last night, but not necessarily about Wickham. I am assured his next assignment will be far more secure, and noticeably less pleasant than the Navy would have been. The fool never knew when to leave well enough alone.”

“I understand he came close to compromising that poor girl.”

“He did. I am extraordinarily happy Mrs Duff was there.”

“I suppose it ended well enough, so I thank you for appraising me, and even having the kindness to do so before breakfast,” Gardiner replied with a twinkle in his eye.

“I actually have another topic to discuss, if you do not mind.”

“Pray, proceed.”

Darcy paused. “I wish to inform you that I have asked Miss Elizabeth for the privilege of courting her. She promises an answer today, which I hope will be positive.”

“Hope or expect?”

“If she planned to reject me out of hand, she probably would have done so last night when I asked her, but I would consider it presumptuous to say I expect it.”

“Hmmm... What do you seek from me? Consent? Blessing?”

“I hope for both. I suspect Miss Elizabeth makes her own decisions for the most part, so I do not presume I need either from you, but you are effectively her father, so I wish to pay you the respect you have earned.”

Gardiner chuckled heartily. “You will let me know if such an approach works when it is your sister’s turn.”

Darcy joined him in laughter. “You shall be the first to know.”

“Well, you are correct in your assumptions. I would be as likely to direct the wind as Lizzy, so she will do as she chooses. I will take whatever credit is due to me for her

upbringing, but she has mostly driven her own fate these five years. That said, you have my blessing, and should you come to an understanding before her majority, I will help you beat some sense into her father.”

“I suspect she has had a club ready for her father for some time, so I am not worried. Her majority is only a few months away.”

Gardiner glanced at the clock. “It is time for breakfast. Pray, join us.”

The men left to join the family, but just before they reached the parlour, Gardiner pulled him aside. “Wait here about two minutes if you will so I can ensure the ladies are ready for company. They were deep in discussion when I made my escape. I shall call for you in a moment.”

Darcy wondered why he did not have his servants do that, but just suspected old habits died hard.

A minute or two later, Gardiner called him into the parlour, where he found Elizabeth alone.

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“I thought my uncle was acting peculiar,” she said with a laugh. “Good morning, Mr Darcy.”

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth. I admit your presence is unexpected, but most welcome.”

“I suppose you came here to tell him about your request?” she asked somewhat sharply.

“Yes, but not necessarily for consent or blessings. I owe him the respect and courtesy of knowing what I am about. I would expect the same from any man who wanted to court Georgiana, and I would look with suspicion upon anyone who did not.”

She chuckled, “By that standard, you are either early or late... but be easy. I have given your request a good deal of consideration. If you are truly interested, I am willing to proceed. I admit that I find you intriguing, though I am unprepared to call it love, or even affection. I am curious to see where it goes, but I should like to be very quiet until we know what we are about.”

Darcy closed the gap, took her hands, and kissed the back of each knuckle. He made no effort to do anything more intimate (as was wise with any woman who could thrash you). They had no gloves, so it was slightly more intimate than the contact between friends, but not likely to make their passion burst into flames.

She gave a winsome smile. “I know I can appear fearsome, but I have never allowed any man even this close. I would hope we can—”

“We shall proceed as slowly as we are comfortable with. This is as new for me as it is for you.”

“Yes, it has always been clear you are not another Mr Bingley. I suppose we have both been, by necessity, concerned with the worst of the opposite sex. Shall we join the family?”

When they entered, they nodded to the parents and greeted the children who were old enough to join for meals. Miss Gardiner’s thirteenth birthday was coming up in a week, so that became the primary topic for the rest of the meal.

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After breakfast, Mrs Gardiner went with the children to the nursery while Mr Gardiner went to his office, leaving Elizabeth and Darcy alone with a maid doing some mending to chaperone.

Darcy asked, “I am happy to see you here, but slightly surprised. What is happening with your students?”

“You know that my father has required my presence at Longbourn for half of the year, though I have been dragging my feet enough to cut it down to about four months. I am not the only instructor. Mrs Rose is managing the class today. You will eventually meet Mrs Scarlet, Auburn, and Jade.”

“Do they all employ similar disguises?”

“They all use aliases, but most are married or widowed, so less concerned with their reputations. The evolving clothing through the course is part of the curriculum, so they do the same but not the makeup.”

“Would it be impertinent to ask what they are doing?”

“Ordinarily, I would not allow it, but if we are courting, we must learn to trust each other to have any hope of success.”

“I agree. I have always wanted a love match, which most of my contemporaries believe is somewhere between absurd and unlikely.”

“I have never been partial to pessimism. More often than not, it is self-sabotage. I have as well hoped for a love match, but was—”

When she ran out of words, Darcy quietly suggested, “Sceptical, perhaps?”

“That works well enough, I suppose.”

“Can you guess the first adjective I heard to describe you?” he asked with a smirk.

“It is hard to say. Since you got it from my uncle, it could easily have been impertinent, brave, foolhardy, stubborn—”

He laughed lightly. “Not even close. He asked me to attend dinner and engage in polite conversation with a niece who was a bit too cynical for her own good.”

“That turned out well,” she said with a grimace.

“I hear your scepticism, but I believe it did turn out well. I doubt I could have achieved even the most tepid sort of affection if I had not reformed myself a bit with your uncle’s help.”

“It is hard to say, but I cannot disagree.”

“With your coin analogy, I want to get to the guinea of love/hate, but I doubt I would have managed to even get onto the farthing without improving my manners. When I said I might have ignored you that first month without your uncle’s intervention, I was serious.”

They laughed together, and Darcy rather thought he had moved an inch from a farthing to pence, and optimistically hoped he might even have a shilling in sight.

She sighed. “I think my uncle feels responsible or guilty for my cynicism, as he calls it. I like to think of it more as pragmatism or scepticism, but he could be right. He just wants me to be happy and fears my exposure to the worst of men might hamper it.”

“What do you believe?”

“I try to teach my girls to have balance in all things.”

“I remember you lecturing Bingley and me about unbalanced risks at Netherfield.”

“I imagine you now comprehend how difficult it was for me to maintain my composure in that meeting.”

“I never apologised for that.”

“Why? You never trapped me in a library.”

“I was too disbelieving.”

She shrugged. “I met a lady once who said to think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure. I thought it an admirable sentiment at the time, but now I find it slightly na?ve. I have to be cautious that my profession does not make me think only of the past as its remembrance annoys me beyond measure. That leads to bitterness and regret, but one needs to balance the good with the bad. You must strive to overcome the blinders of your upbringing, just as we all do.”

“I hope I have made an adequate start.”

“I can assure you that not every man would stand there and listen to what I had to say at Netherfield as gracefully as you did. I walked into that room half-expecting to walk to Longbourn at five, an activity I was not looking forward to.”

“I could have done better.”

“Your presence in this parlour, right here and now, indicates you did well enough. We shall both have to overcome certain elements of the past.”

“I believe that is true, which brings us back to trust, as you alluded to earlier. I do not believe there can be love without trust.”

“I agree. Love requires trust... kindness... strength... character... patience... courage. It is a difficult road we travel.”

Darcy chuckled. “You shall have to review your advice to Miss Kitty. Most worthwhile things in life are hard. ”

“That they are, but I think we have made a good enough beginning for one day. We have beat the rules of propriety nearly to death, but I think they are mostly counterproductive at this stage. Honest conversation, as difficult or supposedly improper as it might be, seems the only path to success.”

“You never answered the question about what your girls are doing today. Was that deliberate?”

“No, I just got distracted. Believe it or not, after last night’s demonstration, the girls asked for another Brutality Day.”

“Not my business, then?”

She paused a moment. “I very strongly recommended to the girls to never tell any man about that except their future husbands.”

“You make exceptions for husbands that do not apply to guardians?”

“Of course. Every secret between husbands and wives is a crack that can grow into a fissure. I will not assert that there can be no secrets, but there should be few.”

“Well, I am not your husband yet...” he said, then glanced to see if she was frowning

or not. "...so I shall not ask to know."

She was pensive for a moment. "Actually, you should eventually know all about the course, and you will never have an easier class to observe."

He very much liked the fact that she was thinking as if they would be a couple. He could not say whether their mutual affections were climbing, or if she was simply acting on her prohibition against pessimism. He knew the easiest way to make any endeavour fail was to assume it was likely to do so, and the converse was probably true. If they wanted to become a couple, they should just act as if they would eventually be one.

She stood up abruptly. "Enough courting for one day! Time for some brutality."

Elizabeth asked the maid to call for Darcy's carriage, and they were off.

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The ladies of the class were most disconcerted by the appearance of a gentleman. Darcy was uncertain if they were most worried about their unladylike behaviour, or that they were wearing the ugliest gowns ever made. Their consternation was not helped overly much by Elizabeth telling them to quit whining in Mrs Black's voice.

Jasmine softened it by observing that they had been training with the two ogres for two days, and one man was pretty much the same as another, which softened their discomfort a bit.

Muted grumbling continued until Georgiana enthusiastically showed off her ability to smash the second hardest of the chalk boxes with a single blow. Darcy was entirely appreciative and enthusiastic in his approbation, which naturally made the rest of the ladies anxious to earn their share of the accolades.

Elizabeth explained that she had boxes of different strengths, and Georgiana had worked her way up. She allowed him to smash a couple of them just for fun, and the ladies got some real pleasure from that—especially the part where he failed on the first punch with the box that she said was a match for his size and physique.

That was nothing though, compared to the ultimate pleasure derived from watching plain old Lizzy Bennet, dressed in a pretty blue muslim day dress, toss him over her shoulder and drop him onto a mat like a sack of potatoes.

He laughed his head off, though it took some time to get enough breath to do so.

### 25. Desolate Times

“Mr Darcy, where have you been keeping yourself these many weeks since we left that wretched backwater? We have been desolate without your company,” Miss Bingley said with far too much enthusiasm.

“Yes, most desolate indeed,” her faithful shadow Mrs Hurst echoed, while Mr Hurst punctuated the statement with a grunt.

Darcy tried his best not to flinch at the vulgarity of the sentiment and the tone used to speak it. He wondered if that was what young ladies were taught in seminary, and if so, why? What instructor thought that was the way to attract a man?

He was not enjoying the evening, and it had barely begun. He had, of course, not expected to, but he had accepted the invitation a week earlier, and did not have enough sense to defer it.

He thus found his mind struggling with the incongruity of spending a good part of the day with a group of ladies being trained to injure or kill men with their bare hands, then moving to an elegant Park Lane drawing room, and feeling like his danger had increased! At least his hearing had been safe back in the good old days where the women were at least honest about the damage they planned to inflict.

“It has hardly been so long as all that, Caroline,” Bingley answered placatingly, which annoyed Darcy almost as much as his sister. He was beginning to wonder if Bingley would ever grow up.

Naturally, he had no intention of informing his friend that he had spent half the day covered in chalk dust, and he most certainly had no plans to share that Miss Jane Bennet had thoroughly bested him in a target smashing contest. No, he had no intentions of discussing the various Bennet sisters at all.

“Oh, you are so droll, Charles,” Miss Bingley replied with a snap of her fan and something like fluttering of her eyelashes.

Darcy chuckled softly as he was reminded of earlier in the day, when his almost entirely recovered sister spoke on that exact subject. Georgiana had asked if something Mrs Black said was correct—namely, did men assume a woman fluttering her eyelashes had a bug in her eye?

Naturally, she asked the question when they were all standing around a barrel eating with their fingers like field hands, and she just had to ask right when he was drinking some ale—accidentally, of course.

He began to wonder how the barely fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Bennet had learnt to be such a keen observer. She was still tight lipped about how it all started, but it seemed logical to assume she must have learnt fast, given the danger of her chosen profession. That left him to wonder if Mr Gardiner had any idea what those first months were like, or if Elizabeth hid that from him, just like she hid it from her father.

He assumed he might know eventually—or not.

Darcy ignored the byplay and answered the original question.

“I have had several matters of business to attend, and as your brother correctly mentioned, it has been but a fortnight.”



“It has seemed far longer! ”

He debated the response a second, and finally said, “I suppose you should have stayed at Netherfield. The country is much more pleasant this time of year, and you would not have been dreary at all.”

He quite enjoyed watching her face bristle like a cat momentarily before she got her expression under control while Bingley just laughed. He idly wondered if Miss Bingley was aware of how transparent she was, or if she thought she had her mask firmly under control. Naturally, that led him to wonder if his own expression all these years had been less inscrutable than he always believed, and nobody ever told him. After all, who would?

“Now you are being so droll, sir. I could not wait to leave.”

Darcy gave his response a moment of thought.

“It is auspicious then, that you have given up your ambition to marry a landed gentleman. If Netherfield is insufficient for your needs, I should say the estate of any gentleman you might marry would be torture. It is fortuitous that you managed to learn that with only a month in the country, and you should thank your brother for his forethought in exposing you to the life of a country gentleman before you were committed. I applaud your decision to search in town. I understand bankers are particularly good targets these days.”

That one left her gasping like a beached fish and Darcy wondering what in the world had gotten into him. He had been ignoring the annoying woman for years with nary a word of rebuke, and all of her pretensions were about to be thwarted.

What made him say those particular words at that particular time?

For a moment, he wondered if it was because of the ongoing twinge in his right shoulder caused by either his paramour's elder sister besting him at boxing, or perhaps it was being tossed to the floor like a sack of rocks, apparently for the sole purpose of showing off. Naturally, like most men, he had no objection to showing off in principle—he just preferred the role of victor to that of vanquished.

It eventually came down to something Elizabeth said in a conversation about philosophy they engaged in during the afternoon while Mrs Rose was putting the other girls through a few drills.

Elizabeth asserted, “I do not always succeed, but I try to understand what those about me are doing, and when I can do so without extraordinary effort or risk, I try to improve their lives, even if just a tiny bit. It often takes very little.”

That stuck with him, and he eventually realised he was doing Miss Bingley a disservice by remaining quiet. As long as he tolerated her blatant flirting, he was implying he was not bothered by it. For an ambitious woman, that was tantamount to encouragement.

Her brother was also complicit, and even more so when she abused guests in his house, but that was a discussion for another day (or never).

For his part, it seemed his duty to dissuade her ambitions definitively, though ideally without being cruel. Perhaps this salvo would do the job, or more likely it would make her redouble her efforts. Regardless, he planned on spending very little time around the Bingleys before his courtship resolved itself.

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Dinner turned out as tedious as he expected. He tried several times to redirect conversation away from Miss Bingley's topics, but she could not be dissuaded for

long. He tried to encourage Bingley to take a crack at it, but that had just as little success.

They spent the evening in the same old tedious conversations about the same old things, and he wondered how the ladies did so without running mad. Of course, that led him to wonder if they actually had gone mad , which might explain a great deal.

The separation eventually came after at least two courses too many, and he found himself with Bingley and Hurst, much like that last night in Netherfield... aside from being free of the disagreeable presence of the viscount, of course.

Bingley said, "I have been thinking of returning to Netherfield. Would you care to join me?"

Darcy studied his brandy snifter for a moment, and finally asked, "What compels you to return?"

His friend sighed. "I just want to know ."

"Know what? Whether you are cut out for the life of a landowner, or about Miss Bennet?"

Bingley thought about it long enough for Hurst to fall asleep, which was probably for the best.

"Both, I suppose. I am still very interested in Miss Bennet but distressed by her relatives."

There was not the slightest chance Darcy would inform his friend he had sparred with those relatives a few hours earlier, nor would he tell him that he would find them entirely reformed (or at least mostly).

He most certainly would not inform his friend he was sceptical that Miss Jane Bennet would accept him. She was no longer the desperate woman with a mother pressing her at any reasonably solvent man. Even putting aside the fact, that she could hold her own in a fight, and disregarding the fact that her sister was actually wealthy enough that none of the girls needed to marry—Darcy was not at all certain Miss Bennet would accept a man weak-willed enough to allow his sister to run roughshod over him. She might have before her sister's training, but that ship had sailed.

He could not say any of that, of course, so he tried the next best thing.

“What about your relatives?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean your sister's manners are not noticeably better than Miss Lydia's, when you get right down to it. She certainly cannot compete with Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, or even Miss Mary.”

Bingley was astonished that Darcy had just named four of the five Bennet sisters without batting an eye, and he would have wondered about it for some time, if he did not believe Darcy probably found the family as distressing as he did.

“Do you think Miss Bennet would reject me over my sisters?”

“I have no idea. I am just saying that if you go to her on bended knee saying you will take her over your objections about the people that she loves having inadequate manners, having done nothing to secure your own family's behaviour—well, I doubt much good could come of it. Hypocrisy is hardly a good basis for romance.”

“You think she might reject me?” Bingley asked with a squeak.

“I say nothing of the sort. She may well accept you just to get security. She may reject you out of hand. She may ask for a courtship, or some evidence that you can act like the head of a family. There are a dozen ways it could end, but unless you speak a bit more openly and humbly , you will never know.”

“It sounds very hard.”

“I was recently advised by someone very wise and trustworthy that everything worthwhile in life is hard. Are you prepared to do the work? If not, you might be better angling for an easier target.”

Bingley looked thoughtful, so Darcy decided to let him stew on it. He doubted his friend really had what it took to win a Jane Bennet who was no longer desperate, and probably not cut out for the life of a landowner either—but then again, neither were his problems to solve.

He wanted to get the evening over with, and the sooner they joined the ladies, the sooner he could leave.

He briefly considered trying to speak to Miss Bingley with even less subtlety, but ultimately decided it was a waste of time. Hopefully, he would soon be publicly courting Miss Elizabeth, and that would drive the last nail in the coffin of Miss Bingley’s ambitions. He seriously doubted that anything he said would get the job done.

26. Breakfast of Supplicants

Breakfast at Elizabeth's house was a relatively noisy affair. It was not nearly as chaotic or indecorous as Longbourn, but still, the ladies had settled in better with Lizzy Bennet at the head of the table than the stern and unyielding Mrs Black.

The ladies had all awoken to find they had several of their own day dresses in their closets and wondered how they got there. Lydia speculated that Elizabeth had made the request when the ball upset the normal order of things.

It seemed plausible, but they were curious, so Mary asked, "I know this class is special, and it went all askew after the ball; but how does it compare to your ordinary classes."

Lydia thought that question too general. "Yes, Lizzy. For example, why do we have our own clothes now?"

Elizabeth kept buttering her toast and took a bite just to taunt them but ultimately thought it would not hurt to be more specific.

"This course was different, but not as different as you might think. I patterned the instruction slightly after military techniques used since Roman times... though training in today's British Army varies widely from almost nothing to very rigorous."

They hung on every word excitedly.

"I only have a fortnight, so everything has to be compressed. The ugly gowns on the

first day serve two purposes. Who wants to guess?”

Georgiana said, “I suppose we would not be safe wearing our ordinary clothing in the areas you took us to.”

“That is correct. Your day dress costs between two and ten times what most of those people make in a year. Your clothing, demeanour, manners, speech—they all mark you as being high born, and possibly worthy of a bit of robbing. The dresses mute that impression. Me cuffing the pickpockets on the head was another subtle sign we were not to be messed about, and of course, though you may not have seen them, there were four stout men following us the whole time. You were perfectly safe but left feeling on edge. Why?”

Mary took a guess. “To make us receptive to instruction? I remember feeling I had better pay attention or I might be lost in that place forever.”

Elizabeth laughed. “That is correct. One more reason... anybody?”

Surprisingly, it was Kitty who came up with the answer. “To make us bond together.”

“Exactly... us versus them ... with Mrs Black playing the role of them .”

“What do they do in the army?” Jasmine asked.

“Different armies do different things. They take away all civilian clothing and make them wear uniforms. Some use funny haircuts or extremely difficult training to make them form cohesive units. For example, some make recruits hike twenty miles the first day with a heavy pack. That would be overdoing it for us, but parts of the technique work.”

Jane guessed, “So the gradual improvement of our situation... moving from the

dungeon to rooms... making us help each other dress... revealing your identity.”

“All right on schedule, except for revealing my identity. I sometimes become Miss Gardiner, but most of the time I just become a less severe Mrs Black. To answer Lydia’s burning question, you have your own clothing now because it was here all along. Maids in your respective houses packed all the clothes and put them on the carriage while you ate breakfast... just as they always do.”

That led to a discussion about all the tricks, mean and otherwise, that had been used on them and the reasoning involved. Some were surprised to learn that Brutality Day had a purpose beyond just learning to defend themselves. It was also a way to pull them together after making all of them get outside their own heads for a while.

They all had their heads spinning, and a newfound respect for their sister who had invented the course when Kitty or Georgiana’s age.

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After breakfast, they were to sit in the parlour for some general discussion for an hour or so, then Elizabeth planned to start speaking to them one on one for the last few days. That task would be shared by Mrs Rose, so it did not take forever.

Before the split, Lydia asked a question that had been plaguing her for a few days.

“Lizzy, do I understand that when Papa dies, presuming our deportment is good enough, you will allow us to live here with you?”

“That is correct,” she replied somewhat dubiously.

Lydia chewed on her lip in a quite uncharacteristic manner, indicating she was either nervous about asking a question or shy—either of which was unprecedented.



“What if he is not dead?”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows raised questioningly, so Lydia continued before her courage ran out (also unprecedented).

“Could some of us try to find husbands here instead of in Meryton? Mr Bingley has been the only fresh blood there in quite some time, and—”

“You need not elaborate, Lydia,” Jane replied calmly, leaving Elizabeth wondering what her sister even thought about her erstwhile former and possibly future suitor.

While Elizabeth was thinking, Jane said, “I once heard you say London had a million inhabitants. That seems a better stream to fish in than four and twenty families.”

“It is if you are not too fastidious,” Elizabeth replied.

“What does that mean?” Jane asked

“Would you marry a tradesman? A merchant? A banker? An attorney?”

“I would,” Kitty surprised everyone by answering first and quite emphatically.

“Go on, Kitty,” Mary suggested.

“Who says we have to marry a gentleman, anyway? I would say Uncle Gardiner is five times the man our father is. Sir William is a much better man, but he was a tradesman a decade ago. What is so special about being the son of a gentleman?”

“There, you have hit on the home question, Kitty—though it brings up a few others.”

“Such as?” Jane asked curiously.

“Let us just put aside the fact that half of the Bennet family’s behaviour was dragging the rest down before this course. We may further assume that all of your manners will either improve or you will face the wrath of Mrs Black.”

Everyone chuckled as designed.

“You can still, according to the narrow-minded way the gentry thinks, drag your sisters down by marrying down. I assume none of you would marry a stable hand, and if you did, it would seriously harm your sisters... no?”

They all agreed, since it was fairly obvious.

“How about if you marry an attorney who is a third son of a gentleman? We can all agree that would not harm anybody else, correct?”

They all nodded.

“Now, let us say this attorney is not the son of a gentleman, and has no connexions at all... still the same good man, but of a lower social sphere.”

Jane said, “I believe we all would have to agree on whether that is acceptable before we began. For example, I was being actively courted by Mr Bingley, but he is not a gentleman... just very wealthy.”

“Exactly. So, the answer to all of this is that if you want to marry in London, you should all accept in advance that some of you might marry down, and the rest must agree not to whinge about it.”

“That seems entirely reasonable to me,” Mary replied quickly.

Elizabeth thought about it for a minute, and finally added, “Do you all agree, keeping

in mind that with your minuscule dowries, you will not be attracting the most prosperous tradesmen? I would not allow anyone to even take up with someone who cannot afford a wife in reasonable comfort, but I would not object to a parson or tradesman with a few hundred a year.”

They all discussed it amongst themselves for a few minutes and agreed it all seemed reasonable.

The non-Bennets were watching the discussion with full attention, and perhaps just a touch of envy.

When the Bennet sisters all agreed that the scheme sounded reasonable, Elizabeth looked around and took a breath.

“May I assume you all believe I expected this outcome?”

They all laughed, but nobody disagreed.

She turned to the other ladies. “What I am about to say applies to all of you, not just the Bennets.”

They all gasped, and their ears perked up.

“We are now into the area where this class is absolutely unique. I will allow anyone in this room, except Miss Darcy for obvious reasons, to live here for as little or as much time as you want... if ... you meet certain requirements.”

They all watched eagerly, so Elizabeth continued.

“First—in this house, girls are out no earlier than seventeen, and eighteen would be preferred—no exceptions.”

Kitty and Lydia looked somewhat crestfallen, but they both managed to work out that it was eminently reasonable before they stuck their feet in their mouths.

“Second—everyone in this household will be accomplished. This is not Longbourn. I presume you all heard through the gossip network what I said to Miss Bingley at Netherfield. If you want to live in my house, you will learn to be a credit to your education when you marry. You will learn some of the conventional accomplishments such as music and the like, but you will also learn how to manage a house and raise your children properly. Once again, no exceptions!”

“Will we have a chance to learn those things, Lizzy?” Kitty asked plaintively.

“Of course! It would be silly to live in a school and learn nothing. You all have years to learn and look what you have accomplished in a fortnight. You will have to put your backs into it, though. I will not accept half-hearted efforts.”

They all started chattering excitedly. While Maria and the Weatherbys were not desperate to leave their homes, they all saw the great advantages of being here in town, at least part of the time—not the least of which was a chance for more education for free.

Nobody mentioned it, or even thought about it at the time, but since the Cheapside Runners business consisted almost entirely of protecting very eligible women, some of them must have eligible brothers. Elizabeth had, of course, thought about it, but she was disinclined towards abusing her uncle’s customers with matchmaking.

Elizabeth called for order, and said, “There is one more tiny little matter that I should bring to your attention before any of you decide to live here or not.”

They all stared in rapt attention, the excitement for the grand adventure building by the minute.

Elizabeth looked around sternly. “This room only!”

“Of course,” Mary said instantly and everyone agreed.

Elizabeth blew out a nervous breath, which seemed unnatural to most of the ladies after the previous ten days.

“Mr Darcy and I are courting. By the time you arrive, there is a reasonable chance I will be gone, and you will be under the tutelage of Mrs Rose and my other instructors.”

The excited screams that erupted from that revelation assaulted Darcy’s ears as he entered the parlour, so he naturally joined in—since her assertion was music to his ears.

### 27. Signs and Portents

Elizabeth was slightly startled by her suitor's appearance but thought it a very good sign that her first reaction was a smile. She liked to see him walk in the door and wondered if she might just be farther along on the path to true affection than she expected in what was only their third day of real courtship.

She left her chair and gave him her hands. He reciprocated by placing a kiss on her knuckle. She took it as another good sign that she liked the feeling.

"Am I interrupting, Elizabeth?" he asked pensively.

"I did not expect you, Fitzwilliam, but it is a pleasant surprise."

Darcy wanted to dance a jig over her happy reaction and their easy acceptance of Christian names, but he simply smiled and squeezed her hands tighter, which was another thing she did not hate.

"I see our slow, steady, and quiet plan proceeds apace," he added with a smirk.

She just laughed and shook her finger at him (the one on the hand he was not still holding). "I suppose that idea was a touch na?ve."

"What do you mean?" Lydia asked quietly, which pleased both. It may have been slightly intrusive to ask about their private conversation, but since it was happening in the same room a few yards away, it was hardly a capital crime. Since Lydia's voice seemed to be dropping about an octave a week, it was approaching downright

pleasant.

Elizabeth turned to face her charges, with Darcy taking up station beside her. “Do you want an explanation from Lizzy Bennet or Mrs Black?”

“How about Lizzy Black,” Mary hopefully suggested, prompting a bout of giggling that Mrs Black would hate, but Lizzy Bennet rather enjoyed.

Lizzy and Darcy sat on a sofa, and Elizabeth began.

“Courtship in our society is a bit of a fraught endeavour. Ladies are supposed to be demure and opaque, or they are considered forward, while men are supposed to be bold but not too bold, while somehow understanding what is hidden behind the mask of polite demureness. It is absurd, but it is the society we live in. Courtships generally progress in fits and starts, driven at least theoretically by signs and portents. ”

She glanced around to ensure full attention.

“One of the things we usually discuss in the last few days is how to get around those societal limitations by learning to read the signs and make your own indications comprehensible to men, whom we can safely assume are—”

She glanced at Darcy, who helpfully supplied, “Lunkheads... loggerheads... clodpoles.”

“Correct!” she replied to everyone’s amusement. “There is a point where a relationship is nothing, as far as society is concerned. They have not met or have just been introduced. After that, in the ideal scenario, the couple gives signs of increasing intimacy over time. A dance is practically meaningless. A significant dance, slightly more so, depending on previous signs. Two dances in one evening are somewhat more. First, last, and supper sets count for more. Calling at a lady’s home once is

meaningless. Twice in a week more. Two significant dances in one evening or calling four times in a week is enough to reasonably raise expectations.”

Elizabeth paused, reluctantly acknowledging that even though that was all basic, it was new to at least half her class—as usual.

“During all those interactions, a couple should be chaperoned or in company, and what they are supposed to say is constrained by the rules of propriety, which I hope all of you understand at this point?”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“As the couple becomes more intimate, they should increase in understanding such that they can relax the rules, carefully. For example, neither Fitzwilliam nor I gave permission for use of Christian names. That would have been frightfully forward if we knew each other less, but we each took a chance that our intimacy was sufficient to assume such permission.”

“What if one of you was not ready?” Jasmine asked.

“Good question. In that case, you have a test. Do you discuss it and come to a resolution... ignore it and let it fester... ask someone else to help you? Every relationship has many such tests, and how they resolve them has a significant impact on how well they live.”

“That seems complicated,” Amber observed.

“It is, but so is life.”

They all looked thoughtful, so Elizabeth continued.



“All of this should be simple, but it is not, because nobody teaches it. We are all left to muddle through and let us just say, the results are mixed.”

“In our house, they are not mixed at all,” Kitty observed to everyone’s surprise. Nobody contradicted her, nor were they confused about how well or poorly things were handled at Longbourn.

“That is correct, Kitty, and that is where things get tricky. These signs and portents are hard enough for the couple—but to make matters worse, they do not happen in isolation! ”

All the Bennet ladies let out longs-suffering sighs.

“With a mother like ours, you need not elaborate,” Mary said.

“Yes, all of you except Miss Darcy saw how Mrs Bennet abused poor Jane and Mr Bingley. To be honest, they never had much of a chance. Mr Bingley unwisely came on too strong and too fast. I have no idea whether Jane managed to gradually loosen up her general agreeableness enough for him to understand her nature or not, but I doubt he really knew her well enough at the end. Mrs Bennet took his ill-disguised attentions and tried to turn those portents into expectations with brute force. I will be surprised if he returns, but if he does not, I would blame her.”

“Why do you blame her, Lizzy,” Jane asked in a much more serious tone than usual. “Mama would say in a crude and vulgar way that I did not do enough to bring him to the point, but might she be right? What if I did not gradually increase our intimacy as you suggested?”

Elizabeth had not planned to have that discussion publicly, but if Jane was game, she would go along.

“You and your suitor need time and honest conversation to work those things out. To be frank, I was sometimes tempted to light a fire under you while I doused him with a bucket.”

Everyone burst out laughing, especially since she said it in Mrs Black’s voice.

Elizabeth sighed. “That behaviour is not our parents’ only sin, or even their worst one. The behaviour of the whole family at the ball was horrific, and anyone with half an ear knows the financial impediments to a union with a Bennet. However, none of those placed both of you in a thoroughly untenable situation. He is rich enough that your financial straits need not be the death knell to his ambitions, and he must have learnt about that the first week. Boasting loud and long about your supposed conquest , meant Mr Bingley had to decide . He had to commit or withdraw. He did the latter in a rather cowardly way, but withdrawal was nearly inevitable.”

For a minute, Jane looked like she might be angry, though at whom was unclear. Elizabeth let them all stew a moment, but fortunately, Georgiana broke the tableau. “You do realize his sisters come with him?”

The whole room burst into laughter and Elizabeth decided to quit picking on poor Jane for the moment. She personally thought Jane had a narrow escape from a weak-willed man but would never say so. There was always a slim chance he would grow up eventually, but when he did, he would likely find himself either in competition, or more likely, too little too late.

Kitty once again surprised everyone by calling them to order. “Is that why you wanted slow and quiet, Lizzy?”

“Exactly! We have known each other a few months, but I never had any hint of his interest, nor did I expect or encourage it. Quite the opposite, if I am honest. We have had perhaps a dozen conversations in total. They were all quite fraught, so we had

more signs to work with than usual, but we still do not know each other all that well.”

Darcy chimed in, “I was somewhere between interested and fascinated in Elizabeth back in Netherfield, but had not decided I was interested enough to pursue her over the objections she just outlined... so... Miss Lydia... what should I have done?”

Lydia was not entirely certain Mr Darcy had ever spoken to her before, but she had been the first to put on the boxing gloves, so she was not to be intimidated.

“You should keep it under your hat.”

“Correct... continue.”

She was flummoxed for a minute, but it became clear. “In the ordinary course of business, you would gradually start calling on her, dancing and conversing in company, and so forth.”

“Go on.”

“Before you could do that, you met Mrs Duff and got dragged into a dance where she smote that deserting scoundrel, so you had to do something more precipitate.”

“That is correct. I believe every couple has trouble knowing what they can or cannot say, but at the very least, they owe each other honesty. If I wanted any hope of success, I had to clearly state my intentions.”

They all nodded in thought, so he continued, “Miss Jasmine, what comes next?”

Jasmine was less startled by being called this time.

“I suppose you had to come clean with Lizzy, and maybe her guardian since you were

skipping several steps?” she speculated.

“Yes, but nobody else. Why, Georgiana?”

“Because you are of the first circles, and she is not well known. When it becomes public, society will treat both of you worse than Mrs Bennet, at least until you become engaged. If it goes off, then Miss Elizabeth would suffer society’s derision for disappointed hopes. ”

Elizabeth gently said, “What core principle would be relevant?”

They thought a bit, until Maria suggested, “Unbalanced risks?”

“Mostly. There is also the chance we would just not get on well. If that be the case, it is best to learn quietly and slink off to our corners to lick our wounds.”

They all thought about that a bit.

Lydia finally asked, “You can trust us, Lizzy, but why did you tell us?”

“The same reason Fitzwilliam had to ask my permission to court me without the usual subtle buildup: basic honesty. When I made the offer for you to live with me, you had to know I might not be here. Of course, you will have companions and the like, but it would be dishonest to withhold that.”

Lydia said, “To be honest, I would rather live in the barn with the ogres and eat chalk dust than return to Longbourn.”

The group burst into raucous laughter and became a lot more relaxed. Eventually, they settled down and Elizabeth rang for tea.

Darcy said, “I would like to point out a subtlety of Elizabeth’s offer of a place to live. She said it two ways, with the latter being more correct.”

Everyone, including Elizabeth, looked confused.

“She first offered for you to live in this house, and later said she offered to live with her.”

“What is the difference?” Mary asked.

Darcy chuckled. “If she marries me, as mistress of my homes, she decides who is welcome. This is a very nice house, but mine is adequate enough, despite my decided lack of ogres. You would all be welcome, should my wife invite you. The place has been far too quiet with just Georgiana and me since our parents died, and it will be some years before our children are old enough to liven it up. If the problem is too much quiet, it is hard to beat a gaggle of girls as a remedy.”

Everyone sat stunned while Darcy wondered if he had just scored a goal or dug his own grave.

The question was soon resolved when Elizabeth smiled brightly, leaned across, and kissed him on the cheek—which really set the cat among the pigeons.

Lydia asked rather impertinently, “Is this one of those cases where you can disregard a rule of propriety?”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, but remember what I said. Only do it very carefully, and only do it in company you know well, and I suppose we should add one more useful guideline.”

“Which is?”

“Only do it if your beau is devilishly handsome!”

### 28. Slow, Steady, and Quiet

“Aside from being a propriety violation, was that kiss a sign or a portent,” Mary asked impertinently.

“Either one, I suppose,” Elizabeth replied with a smile. “I think it is a sign that my class schedule needs to be torn up.”

“What are you thinking?” Darcy asked curiously.

“We have told a dozen people of our courtship, but they are all trustworthy, so it is still quiet to the world at large. We need to work out how to get my father to allow my sisters to reside here a while longer.”

“I would just mention the wealth of suitors available to Mrs Bennet and let her carry the torch,” Darcy suggested.

Lydia found that idea hilarious, and the rest joined in her laughter.

“That has one problem... she would want to join us.”

“I assume...” he began, but she cut him off abruptly, even though he was probably about to agree with her sentiments. “Absolutely not! Not now! Not ever!”

“That seems harsh, Lizzy,” Jane said.

“It is what she deserves. She has never shown me any particular consideration, and I

feel no need to show her anything. I did not hie off to London to make my living protecting spoilt rich girls by choice! ”

Jane looked stunned, while Elizabeth hoped Mr Bingley disappeared entirely and the next suitor was delayed, because Jane really needed to grow up a bit more before marriage.

“Considering that and what happened at the ball, I concede your point,” Jane replied morosely.

“That is good, because I will not be moved. For five years she has complained about my presence when I was at Longbourn and about my absence when I was not.”

“That leaves the problem of what to do with your father,” Darcy suggested.

“If we stay a month, or even another fortnight, we will miss Christmas and New Year at Longbourn,” Lydia pointed out.

“Will you rue missing it?” Darcy asked.

“Not really. We can do much better here on our own, I think.”

“So back to Mr Bennet.”

Elizabeth thought about it a bit. She had forgotten Christmas entirely.

She was still thinking about her father when Darcy had a suggestion.

“A lot depends on how our courtship proceeds.”

“How so?” Jane asked curiously.



“Most of the girls are underage and will be for years. Elizabeth, you have suggested your father is characterized by indolence and cruelty.”

“Not necessarily motivated by the latter, but it certainly can play a part in his actions.”

“It would be a shame for someone to go through a courtship, only to have it thwarted at the last moment by her father.”

“What do you suggest?”

“After we are married, I should be able to convince him to make Gardiner and myself their guardians... at least in certain matters. If nothing else, I can always bribe him.”

“No bribery necessary,” Lydia said. “Threatening him with telling our mother he is preventing courtships should do the trick.”

Everyone chuckled, and Elizabeth said, “It is nice to know your streak of cruelty is not entirely beat out of you Lydia.”

“It just needs to be directed properly, like you did with that deserter.”

“What you do with your father depends on whether we marry or not, and it is too soon to tell. Could we put it off?” Darcy asked.

“That should be easy,” Jane replied. “I will write slightly different letters to each of my parents. My father will ignore his, and my mother’s will keep her off our backs. I think I can easily arrange for a month or six weeks without upsetting anyone too awfully much.”

“That should be long enough,” Elizabeth said.

“Papa will be dancing in the streets,” Kitty said, and nobody chastised or disagreed with her. “I think Mama will be relieved to skip the Christmas celebrations, and the servants certainly will.

Elizabeth was happy to see one of the younger sisters thinking about the servants. Perhaps, they would be fine in the end, but she shuddered to think of what a near run thing it had been.

Alicia Weatherby asked rather timidly if they were also welcome to stay, and with the appropriate response, they set out to write to their own parents at the same time. The Weatherbys were kind, sensible, and not wealthy enough to sponsor the girls for a season, so no objection was expected.

Jane set about writing her letters, so Elizabeth and Darcy told the other girls to find something else to do. There was mending from the orphanage to be done, lessons to be learnt, lunch to be ordered, and Elizabeth even had a few old bonnets that Lydia and Kitty could use to teach Georgiana how to refresh them.

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The couple decided a walk in Hyde Park was just the thing. It was about a mile and a half from Elizabeth’s home in Gower Street, so they decided to just walk. Elizabeth brought one of her famous ogres for propriety, even though she had often walked in far worse places by herself. She felt perfectly safe with Darcy for superfluous protection, but she wanted to avoid any whiff of scandal if they were observed.

They spent the first part of the walk marvelling over their unusual history. They’d never had a real conversation before the Netherfield ball and had not had an ordinary one, ever. Darcy advanced the theory that it was probably for the best, as any path that did not result in his reformation would have been doomed to failure. Elizabeth did not dispute that, and while she wanted to dig into his history with her uncle, she

was in no hurry to do so. Conversely, Darcy very much wanted to know more about her years in the Runners, but once again, did not want to corrupt their walk with that discussion.

They spent the rest of the walk speaking about ordinary things, if only to prove they could if nothing else. They canvassed what they liked to do, how much and which subjects they liked to read, the obvious superiority of a plain dish over a ragout, their favourite sweet and tea shops. Elizabeth encouraged a rather long and rich description of Pemberley, and it struck her as a not too terrible sounding place to live. Darcy asked how she became a card sharper and laughed over some of the antics. He was slightly less sanguine to learn she had been taught by an unrepentant gamester but laughed at her stories anyway. He avoided his history with Wickham but told what he remembered about his mother.

In the end, walking four or five miles was not really a challenge for either and Elizabeth even dragged Nathaniel in to agree with her on a dispute over Shakespeare, since it was obvious she was right, and Darcy was wrong.

All in all, for the several hours of perfectly ordinary, mundane, courtship (as in devoid of interfering relations, rogues, gossips, scoundrels, or eight girls) the walk had much to recommend it.

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The next week saw the group settle into a routine. Jane's letters were clever and almost honest (well, almost-almost honest at least), so their stay had been extended until Easter if nothing changed, with Mr Gardiner having legal responsibility for them.

The school had no classes scheduled until after the new year, so they did not have to worry about making room for new students.

Their course curriculum had been thoroughly ravaged, but since they had some time, they decided to continue the rest of the lessons at a leisurely pace. Elizabeth assigned all but Jane and Georgiana to Mrs Rose and spent a few hours with each of the two who had suffered recent disappointments.

She found Jane retained the lovability and kind nature she had always enjoyed, but she gradually reduced her naïveté and tendency to think the best of everyone.

The first breakthrough came when Jane asserted the Bingley sisters were snakes in the grass, and a latter came when she called Mr Bingley a feckless weasel. Elizabeth suggested she might be taking the lesson just a bit too far, as only about a third of the problems they had as a couple could be laid at his feet. Elizabeth did point out that, as the head of his family, and in control of the purse strings, he most certainly owned his sisters' behaviour.

In the end, Jane decided if he came calling again, she would sit him down and have an honest discussion, though she was not optimistic that he would either come calling or survive the conversation.

Miss Darcy had boxed herself into an endless cycle of her own making since Ramsgate, exacerbated by her brother's lack of preparing her for the real world she was entering. Elizabeth did not blame him for it, since he did no worse than the vast majority of guardians (including her own), but it was unfortunate.

To Georgiana's credit, after the takedown of Mr Wickham (whose identity she still fortunately did not know), she seemed to revert mostly to her original personality, which was too shy for Elizabeth's taste, but not the end of the world.

After a few hours of conversation, Elizabeth quite liked her, and certainly did not consider adding another sister as an impediment to her courtship. She was a lovely young lady with a good heart, and with another year of Mrs Annesley's tutelage, she

would be fine. If she remained too shy, she could always lock her up with Lydia or send her back to the barn to smash targets until she got over it.

Mrs Annesley came over the next day, and never quite left. Georgiana did not feel any need to return to Darcy House, and her guardian liked her right where she was anyway.

The companion resumed lessons with Georgiana, which naturally included all the girls except Jane and Mary, much to the improvement of all.

Mrs Rose had no classes and lived in the house, so she joined in on the instruction, mostly to flex her teaching muscles with something other than their defence curriculum.

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For the next fortnight, Darcy and Elizabeth walked most days and even took a drive in Gardiner's curricula.

Darcy obtained several suits of clothes matching Mr Gardiner's style, and with a bit of training from Elizabeth about how to behave, he felt as invisible as she did. He even drove her by Darcy House just to test his luck. He was vastly amused when several of his own grooms did not give him a second glance. That was almost as amusing as when he did the same at Bingley's house, where Miss Bingley stared directly at him and turned her nose up. That was the most fun he'd ever had!

He thought perhaps the old phrase 'the clothes make the man' might have been onto something.

One day, when they had become more comfortable and trusting, she even dressed as a maid and wandered the street alone while he observed from down the lane. He was

astonished by how well she pulled it off. She was invisible unless she wanted to speak to another servant, in which case she became their best friend in the world for the space of two minutes. She did, however, draw the line at his suggestion that he could dress as a footman. Even she had her limits.

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Colonel Fitzwilliam finally was brought into the secret at about the time Georgiana's course was originally to end. Darcy invited him around for dinner with the redoubtable Mrs Black and quite enjoyed revealing all the secrets of the group. The colonel was as thunderstruck as the rest had been.

During the separation of the sexes, they were speaking of all the things Darcy had learnt, and the extraordinary turn of events.

"I told you, cousin. You have it bad."

"You notice I never disputed you."

"Now that you mention it, I suppose not."

"Now that the secret is out, I suppose I should admit that you were right all along."

"Ever wonder if you ever would have sucked it up and returned to Meryton," Gardiner asked curiously.

"I have given that a great deal of thought. I am convinced that our love story was nearly inevitable," he said, then took a sip and chuckled. "Odds are, had I not encountered her at that ball, I would have returned to Meryton to find her missing, and I would be in your drawing room right now begging you to put me out of my misery."

The men laughed a bit, and Gardiner finally said, “The colonel had the right of it. You do have it bad. Any idea how she has it... not that it is any business of mine?”

“You do not feel the guardian’s need to poke and pry?”

“I did not say that. I did poke and pry, but—”

His pause was noticeable, but Darcy felt prodding him along would be counterproductive. Mr Gardiner was no Caroline Bingley (or Darcy) to be easily spurned into making a costly mistake.

Gardiner finally said, “I suppose Elizabeth has her honesty policy in place, so you should know. She read a thirty-page report on you before your sister started the school. She knows a great deal more about your life than you know about hers.”

“I suppose you must have commissioned that about the time I returned to Cheapside?”

“I did.”

Darcy was not particularly distressed about it. He imagined there were dozens or hundreds of big reports about him lying all over London. Elizabeth had not mentioned it, but that was not surprising. Even for someone as brave as her, it was not an easy topic of conversation.

Gardiner said, “I shall save you the trouble of telling her you know, since it was all my doing.”

“There is no need. We have been surprisingly easy about sharing intimate details.”

“So, your courtship is progressing, how?” Gardiner asked, more out of curiosity than

concern.

“It depends on where you set the beginning. If you start at the failed dinner engagement, it is inching along like a worm. If you start when I asked for a courtship, it proceeds at breakneck speed.”

“Many things in life are like that... slow and then fast. Think about stepping off a cliff. The first dozen yards are relatively peaceful, but the last dozen, far less so.”

They all laughed at possibly the worst analogy in history, which was saying something for a bunch of lunkheaded men.

“My business was like that,” Gardiner said pensively. “When Lizzy came to me, I was just barely keeping my head above water. I had the idea but lacked contacts.”

“What happened?” Darcy asked curiously. He had always been fascinated by self-made men (or women, though they were harder to find). He was born the heir to centuries of tradition. Nothing he ever did in his life could compare because even if he made a new business from scratch, he would always have the backing of Pemberley.

“A lot of things, really. In business, as in much of life, success builds on success—though the converse is true for failure. I had a couple of clients of limited prosperity when Lizzy came. They were sufficiently wealthy to make tempting targets for the Wickhams of the world, but not enough to make me wealthy. Most thought my service was worth about the same as a couple of footmen, and you well know they are a penny a pound.”

“I can see that. I would not have engaged you at that point.”

“True, but when I saved your sister’s life and £30,000, I suppose you became a



supporter?”

“Naturally.”

“Well, that is how it worked. Lizzy begged me to allow her to earn her keep, so I had her act as a sort of companion. She had to disguise herself as a friend. When she could not get into some functions, she invented the servant’s disguise. I can assure you there is nothing more invisible in this world than a plain looking servant in livery. She was like a ghost.”

“I see.”

“The first time she clearly and unambiguously saved a girl from a rather nasty compromise attempt, things started looking up. We got more and better clients, she refined her disguise, she eventually started her school, and it just built from there. The two support each other now. I feed her school clients, and she makes my job far easier.”

“I salute you, sir,” the colonel replied jovially.

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Gardiner turned his attention to the colonel. “I am curious. Are you to return to the continent?”

“I must if I want to make general, and I need that to avoid starving in the gutter when I retire. They make about three times what I do.”

Gardiner nodded, and finally said, “It is not my place to advise you, but if it were—”

“I can always disregard advice, but I cannot evaluate what I do not hear. Only a fool

goes into battle without the very best scouting reports he can get.”

Gardiner nodded. “I cannot tell you how to live your life, but I doubt very much that you will ever make general.”

Both the colonel and Darcy perked up at that. “Meaning?”

“This is not based on definitive information, mind you, but you are far likelier to make earl than general, if you take my meaning.”

“I suppose you imply my brother’s longevity is... at risk?”

“Considerable risk. He owes a great deal to people who should not be trifled with.”

Darcy and the colonel did not know whether to feel surprised, sad, or indifferent.

“Is there anything I could do to save him... if I were so inclined?”

“Not unless you could go back in time and beat some sense into your father when you were children. His fate was cast before he left for Eaton. It has just taken all this time, and a lot of difficulties for many people, for it to catch up with him.”

Darcy asked, “Should we at least try?”

Gardiner gave him a very hard stare and just waited him out.

Darcy finally said, “I see your point. In a just world, I would be more inclined to help fate along.”

“Yes. You can do nothing, and you should do nothing. The man has dug his own grave. Let him be buried in it.”

“Good riddance,” the colonel muttered, but he had some thinking to do.

“While you are thinking, Colonel, I would ask you to consider something.”

“Of course!”

“Elizabeth makes more money than a general, and more than her father, while I make considerably more than her. If you deviate from the three professions gentlemen are theoretically supposed to select from, you have choices where you need not even dodge bullets.”

“He has you there,” Darcy said quickly before his cousin could react. “I would be happy to discuss some opportunities with you.”

“More charity?” the colonel asked, though not as emphatically as he once might have.

“Hardly. It would be business... the dreaded trade , but I think you could do many things quite profitably.”

“I will give it some thought.”

“While you are thinking about it, I suggest we rejoin the ladies,” Gardiner asserted.

29. Seasons of Love

A week later, Lydia asked at dinner, “Lizzy, are we still going to the theatre?”

“Yes, but I have to think about when. Christmas is coming up, and you are all staying in town, so there is no hurry. I think we should delay until our courtship is public.”

“I am curious. How do you afford a box?” Mary asked.

“Oh, that is easy. Wealthy people lease boxes for a season or several. Fitzwilliam, I imagine you have one?”

“Of course,” he replied softly, then added in a tone worthy of Lady Catherine. “It is expected of a man of my station, and to do less would be an insult to my ancestors,” which elicited a nice laugh from the group.

“And you attend perhaps a half-dozen times per year, at best?”

“I suppose so. I have family and friends who use it, but it sits empty more often than not.”

“Exactly. My uncle and I have protected and educated dozens of ladies. Their guardians are grateful, so it requires little more than a few notes to get a box any time we need one.”

“If we wait until our courtship is public, we can use the Darcy box. It might even be a good opportunity to make some sort of announcement.”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth said thoughtfully, not the least bit distressed by discussing the possibility of making their courtship known. After all, if they were not thinking it was likely to succeed, what were they even doing?

She added, “It will require some thought. It is one thing to make our courtship public, and quite another thing to make my school public. I am not entirely certain I want to do it all on the same evening. I do not believe I can keep the school secret for long, nor do I want to since I am proud of what I have accomplished—but the same night might be a bit much.”

Darcy chuckled. “The gossips of the ton would fall into fits,” which elicited another giggle of agreement.

Kitty suggested, “Maybe you worry too much. We are all your friends, sisters, and future sister. Telling a few prolific gossips that it is just a family outing might put them off the scent... at least for a time.”

“That might work,” Darcy said. “Or it might not, but either way, I do not see any point in hiding the ladies if they will be all staying at my house soon.”

That statement was yet another one that could be considered just a touch presumptuous, but Elizabeth certainly did not mind, and the rest of the ladies had no opinion, since they would all be happy with anywhere that was not Longbourn.

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“Tell me about your Christmas traditions,” Darcy asked on a visit a few days later. They were sitting together on a sofa after dinner, and if their hands happened to be touching under Elizabeth’s dress, nobody was the wiser.

Elizabeth looked to her sisters, so Mary answered. “To be honest, we do not do all

that much. When we were children, we did all the usual things... hung greenery... gave gifts... plum pudding... wassail... carols... that sort of thing. Of course, we went to church and did boxes for the servants. The last few years though, my parents have found all of that to be too much bother, so we mostly have a slightly improved dinner and perhaps exchange a few small gifts.”

Darcy nodded. “We are the same. When my mother was alive, we did all those things you mentioned. I tried to keep it going after she died with modest success while Georgiana was little. The last few years, we have fallen into a bit of indolence. We sometimes go to my uncle’s, but I am not exactly in charity with him these days.”

“We could have a nice celebration here,” Elizabeth suggested. “There is no need to be constrained by the past. I have traditionally spent the holidays at Longbourn, so no classes are scheduled until after the new year.”

“Oh, yes... that would be just the thing,” Lydia gushed enthusiastically (though in a mostly ladylike manner), to which the others added their own enthusiastic responses.

“Perhaps, if all goes well, it could be the first of many.”

“I have heard worse ideas,” she replied with a small squeeze of his hand that he did not dislike.

Jane said, “I believe we could manage to organise everything, so you need not lift a finger, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “You do understand that when I said we , I really meant all of you in general and Jane in particular ,” which produced some half-hearted grumbling.

Both members of the couple were quite happy with the progress of their courtship, finding it neither too fast nor too slow. Whilst it was a big decision, and neither was

quite ready to commit for life, or even to speak of love, the path in front of them seemed clear enough for the moment.

Mary gave the area between the couple a pointed stare, to which Elizabeth shrugged, believing she had given adequate explanations for increasing intimacy , and wondering how she would react to her sisters' inevitable romances.

Fortunately, unless Mr Bingley found a backbone forthwith, and somehow weaselled Jane's location from Darcy, it seemed unlikely to be an immediate issue.

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The Christmas decorations were going along apace, and the house was looking more festive than ever. Mrs Rose quite enjoyed the spectacle, as she had been alone the previous years. She had, of course, gone to visit the Gardiners and enjoyed her time with their children immensely, but it was nice to have some activity in her own home.

She, like Elizabeth, had not properly earned the title of Mrs , but nobody disputed it. She was about Jane's age in years, but considerably older in wisdom. She had come to Elizabeth's attention after she was put upon by a man and she refused to marry the brute. Her father was dead, and she still had a sister, not yet out, living with her stepfather, whom she had never gotten along with. They made the entirely reasonable choice to tell everyone she died of some vague fever, and she left for London with ? 100 to her name, feeling lucky to have even that.

She had joined the school, first as a sort of maid and assistant, and later as a full-fledged instructor. Elizabeth thought she should be married by then, but she did not seem to be in any hurry, since Elizabeth paid her a high enough wage that she need never marry if she chose not to. If she did choose to, she had saved a rather tidy dowry for herself, and Elizabeth was quite proud of her.

Elizabeth wondered if she would ever choose to enter the fray, but since it was not her business, she wondered silently and sporadically.

She had three other instructors, since the school ran year-round, even when Elizabeth was at Longbourn. Mrs Scarlet, Mrs Auburn, and Mrs Jade had actually earned their prefix the usual way by walking down the aisle. Mrs Auburn and Jade were widows who liked to work a week or so each month, but they both had their own households and did the work for a bit of extra spending money, and she enjoyed the work. Mrs Jade was similar to Mrs Rose in situation and worked just about full time, though she mostly lived with her aging mother.

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Sunday the 22 nd of December came, and Elizabeth took those of her charges who wished to attend to the local church, as she had the two previous Sundays.

She had an arrangement with the local rector for exclusive use of a small balcony with a screen that allowed them to worship in private. She did that because some of her charges wanted to worship and some did not. Publicly worshiping was obviously incompatible with their anonymity, nor would most congregations be sanguine with four to eight strangers appearing for a few weeks, only to be replaced with yet other strangers a fortnight later.

The balcony solved the problem handily. It was a fairly common accommodation for people in mourning or recovering from illness. They made it a point to arrive early and leave late, wearing a veil if necessary to preserve their anonymity.

Since the start of their courtship, Darcy had joined them. Ordinarily, a man like that would attract more attention than a church fire, but with clothing a step below Mr Gardiner's, he slipped in and back out without a second glance.



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Back home, they had a nice noisy Sunday dinner that was almost like a more refined Longbourn. Elizabeth was quite in charity with her little family.

It was the twenty-fourth day of their sojourn into London. In less than four weeks, nearly everything had changed. The heathen savages of the Netherfield ball were gone, but they had become decorous without losing any of their spirit. Amber, Jasmine, Maria, and Georgiana had bonded with the others, so it was more like a family of eight sisters than anything else.

Naturally, she was also being courted by a handsome, kind, and witty man, and to be honest, there was not a lot to complain about in that front. His interest had been quite a surprise, but certainly not an unpleasant one. Given how badly they had started out, it was just short of a miracle—but she was happy to accept what fate had placed in her path.

All in all, she was quite satisfied with her lot.

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After dinner, they retired to the parlour immediately. Separation of the sexes made no sense when Darcy was the only man in the house other than the servants.

Elizabeth and Darcy sat by themselves slightly apart from the others, where slightly was the propriety-compliant way to say— as far apart from the others and as close together as possible.

They spoke for a while, and she found herself quite contentedly leaning her head against his shoulder, silently reminiscing about some of their acquaintance, while Darcy seemed happy to just contemplate the other ladies' activities.

She giggled slightly, which made Darcy give her his full attention.

“What is so funny, Elizabeth?”

She sighed. “I was thinking about what I would like for Christmas, and the thought brought up some memories that should , by all rights be distressing, but it struck me as amusing instead... which I believe is the best way to handle such remembrances.”

His full attention was on her. “If you have a Christmas present in mind, I would love to hear about it. I will do my best to obtain your heart’s desire.”

“What if it is too much?”

“I cannot imagine you asking too much, but I suppose you can tell me what you want, and I could tell you if it is obtainable.”

She smiled and thought about it a bit.

“Mrs Black would definitely disapprove of both my remembrance and my desired gift.”

“Now you have my curiosity fully piqued! Will you tell me either the remembrance, the gift, or ideally, both.”

She looked into his eyes and gave him a soft smile with a hint of mischief.

“The remembrance is just something I heard some time ago that now strikes me as rather amusing. Someone suggested a wager that seemed a sure bet at the time.”

“I hope he knew how good of a gambler you were, else he may not have exactly prospered,” he replied with a laugh, quite enjoying the little byplay. “Now, will you

quit messing about and give me the remembrance.”

“All right... I shall give you the remembrance and my Christmas wish all with one breath. I once overheard a man say, ‘I would happily bet a year’s income the future Mrs Darcy will not be some niece of a Cheapside tradesman,’ and my Christmas wish is for him to rejoice that he did not actually make the bet, because he would lose.”

All joking put aside, Darcy was caught with a great deal of chagrin about his earlier comment, but great joy to see that Elizabeth looked on the event with amusement, or possibly even approbation. He was embarrassed by his earlier faux pas, but since that had been the start of his reformation, he had no real reason to repine.

He stared into Elizabeth’s eyes, and then at her lips, and asked softly, “Was that what it sounded like?”

“If it sounded like a propriety violation that would put Mrs Black to the blush, because a lady is strongly implying that she would like a proposal for Christmas... then it was. If it sounded like anything else, you really need to get your hearing checked.”

Darcy laughed lightly, but not enough to draw anyone else’s attention.

She looked chagrined, and was embarrassed to see she could not keep looking in his eyes, so she leaned her head down to his chest and spoke from the heart.

“When you asked for a courtship, I was flattered and interested, but not overly optimistic about our chances. Over the next few days, I began to like you and entertained some modest hopes that we might suit. Over the next few weeks, I came to like you more and more. Today, I find I love you with all my heart, though I cannot truly say when like and respect became love. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun— but make no mistake. I have arrived. I love you, and I would

be much obliged if you might make a proposal at your earliest convenience.”

Darcy laughed lightly. “You are correct that your request is unorthodox—and Thank Goodness for that! I believe I was farther along on the path when I asked for the courtship, but I did not yet love you, nor did I know you well enough to be certain I ultimately would. Now though...” and he leaned down to kiss the top of her head. “...now, I am absolutely certain I love you with all my heart. Your timing is impeccable as I was just coming to understand that myself. I would be most honoured and vastly pleased if you would consent to be my wife.”

Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him; but, though she could not look, she could listen, and he told her of feelings, which, in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable.

Eventually, she removed her head from his chest and looked him straight in the face. Neither of them really paid any attention to the rest of the room’s inhabitants. They could only pay attention to each other, and when he leaned down to place a soft kiss on her lips, it was fortunate that Jane had already dragged everyone out of the room.

Their first kiss was soft, and warm, and protective, and understanding, and everything a first kiss should be. They had both read about first kisses and expected anything, from nothing to lightning. As it transpired, it felt just exactly like they hoped and expected, and as their courtship seemed to be a very orderly and progressive one, it was just enough. They both felt the beginnings of what they would later come to recognise as banked passion... they both felt a sense of belonging, as of coming home to a warm fire and happy children... they both felt a sense of trust and wonder and affection.

It was wonderful, and the whole touchy idea of when to announce their courtship seemed entirely solved.

“I do love you... so very much, Fitzwilliam.”

“You are my life, Elizabeth.”

### 30. Christmas Cheer

Decorating Elizabeth's house well for the holidays was an easy enough task, given it boasted ten ladies, one strapping gentleman, and two ogres to share the load.

Elizabeth was slightly surprised to learn that Lydia and Kitty had no memory at all of the great fun of going into the forest to pick branches. She wondered if they were just too young the last time they had put in the effort, or if their early memories had been subsumed by their later, less desirable activities. They had both, in her opinion, responded quite well to the course... but they had a fortnight of good behaviour against several years of bad. While she was optimistic, she would reserve judgement and maintain vigilance.

Since they had to leave London to get to any good forests, Elizabeth was tempted to spend two hours going to Longbourn to get the miserable interview with her father over and done with. She eventually decided she did not want to spoil the trip. They settled for visiting the estate of one of their clients that was less than an hour away.

Lydia and Kitty revelled in the novelty of being out in the forest with nothing to do and no officers to chase. They rushed about to and fro, and before long they were laughing along with the Weatherbys and Maria like a bunch of little children. It was wonderful to see.

She and Darcy had the onerous task of gathering mistletoe for kissing boughs. They were assigned the task for the obvious reason that he was the tallest person in the group, and they were the only ones who could actually test the mistletoe to ensure it worked as advertised. Some clumps may even have required multiple tests—better

safe than sorry.

They lunched at a nice little tea house in a nearby market town. Their group was big enough to burst the place at the seams, so Elizabeth and Darcy got stuck in a tiny little private parlour in the back. Neither complained of the discomfort.

At the end of a wonderful day, the house was beautifully decorated, the Yule log was ready to light, and all was right with the world. The colonel and the Gardiners were invited to join for dinner, and a great time was expected by all.

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During a lull in the conversation, Lydia asked, “When will you marry, Lizzy?”

Jasmine said, “Oh yes, have you picked a date... and may we attend?”

Elizabeth laughed. “You may assume you are invited to just about everything, Jasmine. We have not picked a date yet.”

Darcy suggested, “You asked for a proposal for Christmas... how about a wedding for your birthday?”

He was not bothered by having what should have been a private discussion around a crowded and noisy dinner table. Everything else in their courtship had been unorthodox, and why fix that which was not broken?

Elizabeth laughed lightly, but before she could say anything Gardiner observed, “It does rather neatly solve the problem of consent, and the timing seems about right.”

Elizabeth thought about it a moment, and finally said, “Very well. I suppose a dozen ladies can plan a wedding breakfast, and I need do nothing at all.”

Darcy said, “Whilst we have solved the problem of consent, I still feel it would be right to go to Longbourn before we announce the engagement publicly to seek your parents’ blessing. I imagine we will wed from London?”

“Yes, I believe so. My connection to Longbourn is paper thin, and aside from Charlotte, I think I have everyone I want in this room right now.”

“Are you certain you wish to exclude Mama and Papa, Lizzy?” Mary asked, then rushed ahead before Mrs Black could bite her head off. “I am not saying you should or should not... just that you should give it some thought. However good or bad they have been as parents... she is our mother, and I believe she was a good one when we were young.”

While Elizabeth was thinking that over, she got a good-sized surprise from Lydia. “Let Kitty and me keep her in line. I think I can convince her to behave properly, and I can escort her out if she gets out of hand.”

The sheer insanity of Lydia Bennet offering to monitor and correct someone else’s manners left Elizabeth entirely flummoxed.

Fortunately, Darcy was slightly less stunned. “I shall not say whether they should be included or not, but I do thank you, Miss Lydia, for your offer. I think that might be a very good idea.”

“I suppose you cannot start now without getting Mrs Black peeved with you, but you may start calling me Lydia at your leisure. I think I can speak for us all when I suggest we will be your sisters soon enough.”

Darcy looked to Elizabeth, who said, “I see no problem with you using Christian names for my sisters in private, though I shall insist on strict propriety in public, or anywhere that we can be overheard. The ton will try their best to break me, and there

seems little profit in giving them one more club to beat me with. The other ladies can decide for themselves.”

“It took but a moment for all the ladies to agree to the scheme. Even Mrs Rose, who had never even told Elizabeth her Christian name was Edith, was happy to join the crowd.

Elizabeth continued, “As to inviting my parents or seeking their blessing... I should like to think about that overnight and discuss it tomorrow.”

“That is sensible. I will follow your lead on this,” Darcy replied.

The rest of the meal passed more peacefully with no fraught conversations. Elizabeth suggested that, since she was joining the first circles, all the ladies in the room should have new gowns for the occasion, including Mrs Rose, and the other teachers if they wanted them. That left Darcy wondering exactly how wealthy she was, because it was not a trivial expense, and she barely batted an eye.

When the evening came to a close, and Darcy reluctantly left to return to his cold, empty, dreary house, he took the brief opportunity to give Elizabeth a quick kiss.

As he was turning to go, she said, “You remember my strictures against procrastination. Let us go to Longbourn in the next two days and get it over with.”

Darcy suggested, “Let us meet with Gardiner tomorrow to strategise, and go the next day.”

Elizabeth agreed with a kiss, and he left very reluctantly.

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“Whilst I do not usually condone outright lying, I feel no real compulsion to be entirely comprehensive with the truth,” Gardiner said the next morning as they sat with coffee to discuss the matter.

“Out of curiosity, do you object on moral grounds?” Darcy asked, but whether he was more inclined towards curiosity or procrastination was hard to tell.

“I feel my morals need only match or best whomever I am dealing with. I mostly avoid it for practical reasons. Every time you lie, you have to keep the lie in your head. If you can get by with simply omitting unnecessary details, it makes it easier by reducing the chances to contradict yourself.”

Elizabeth added, “It is also easier to recover from the truth being discovered if you were not outright lying. For example, if my father ever decides he wants to know what I have been doing in London all these years, he can discover it easily enough. I can justify not telling him because he never really wanted to know, but if I had been outright lying to him, that would be much more difficult.”

Darcy said, “It seems that you have thought through a lot of moral dilemmas and conundrums?”

Elizabeth laughed brutally. “That is because of the school. Every conceivable moral question has been asked and answered. The first few years, it was not uncommon to have a question come up that I just could not answer without some thought and research.”

“I am impressed,” Darcy said, while giving her hand a little squeeze. “Everything I was expected to know was handed to me on a plate.”

“True, but your responsibilities are far greater. If I decided to shut down my school upon marriage, my future students would suffer, but the past ones are already fixed. If

you did something wrong, hundreds could easily suffer greatly, and there is no possible way for you to escape the responsibility.”

Gardiner said, “I applaud these philosophical discussions, and recommend you keep them up through your life, but for now, perhaps we should deal with the issue at hand.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It matters not what we do for my wedding. I suppose I should even arrange for my parents to attend, but mostly because it would seem odd to have them absent. The critical thing is to obtain consent for my younger sisters.”

“That seems sensible, and I can host them. I feel no need for them to see your house or even be made aware of it,” Gardiner said.

“Perhaps I can do that one better. I could host them at Darcy house.”

Elizabeth thought about that for a time. On the one hand, the grandeur of the house might make her mother expend all her vulgarity before the wedding day, and it would keep her out of their hair as the girls prepared. It would be easy to have her occupied with shopping on Bond Street and having tea with the upper crust. Contrarily, she did not like establishing the precedent of having her mother in her house.

Darcy said gently, “I can understand your reluctance, but they are your parents, and they are far from the worst in the world. Are we to exclude them from our lives forever because of how they raised you? Are our children to never know their grandparents? Will it be up to Gardiner or me to walk your sisters down the aisle, or could they have their father should they so choose?”

“All good points,” Elizabeth said with a sigh. “I am reminded that on many occasions, I have had to counsel my students that bitterness punishes yourself for someone else’s failings.”

“Are you finding it difficult to take your own medicine, Elizabeth?” Gardiner asked with a laugh.

“Goose and gander, I suppose,” she laughed. “All right, we put them up in Darcy house. I doubt we shall even see my father after he sees the library, and with my mother...”

While she was thinking, Darcy said, “Perhaps Mrs Annesley could assist her?”

“We would have to triple her wage,” Elizabeth replied with a laugh.

Once the general outlines were laid out, they decided to get on with it. Elizabeth had sent a note the previous day asking to meet before noon, so they got up in the morning and all three headed to Longbourn.

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The meeting at Longbourn turned out to be both anticlimactic and disappointing.

Trying her best to be conciliatory but only just, she said, “Mama, Papa, Mr Darcy and I are engaged and will be wed on my birthday. We are here to ask for your blessings.”

Mrs Bennet’s effusions about Elizabeth’s engagement were exactly as predicted, and to be honest, she would have been somewhat disappointed with anything else. There was a great deal to be said about carriages, jewels, connexions, and pin money, which gave her the opening she had been waiting for.

“Yes, yes, that is all well and good, Mrs Bennet, but I have not offered my consent yet.”

Darcy said, “You need not trouble yourself, sir. I have no need of any dowry or other

support from you, and Elizabeth will reach her majority on her wedding day, so the point is moot.”

They had discussed whether to just say it outright and see what happened or beat around the bush and eventually decided to just get on with it. After five years, Elizabeth was tired of tiptoeing around her father, and while she had some fears that he might deny her sisters, she had no doubt her mother could make his life miserable if he did.

“I suppose so,” he said. “It is not as if you have been around much anyway,” he added dismissively.

Darcy squeezed her hand twice which was their prearranged signal to follow Napoleon’s maxim, never interrupt an enemy when they are making a mistake.

Instead of taking her father’s bait, Elizabeth turned her attention.

“Mama, your suggestion of connexions brings up a subject we should like to discuss. You know that eligible men in this town are practically nonexistent. Fitzwilliam and I would like our sisters to live with us, at least during the season—and all the time if they like.”

She felt slightly guilty about that particular prevarication, but not very. For all she knew, the girls might want to winter or summer in Longbourn.

Darcy said, “I have a younger sister due to come out next season. She is more than a dozen years my junior and has been raised more like an only child than not. She would like company when she comes into society, and you know they will have far more suitors under the Darcy name than in a small town like this... no offence.”

“No offence!” Mrs Bennet squeaked. “How could I take offence?”

While she was not the most sensible woman in the world, she had never been deficient in sniffing out advantage. Whether she could use it profitably was another story entirely, but she could certainly recognise it when she saw it.

Mr Bennet said, "What exactly are you proposing, Mr Darcy?"

Darcy hated the smirk on the man's face, and the way it was clear he was enjoying having the whip hand.

"My wife shall be responsible for deciding who stays in our homes, and she has invited her sisters. I should like to have your consent for them to live under my sponsorship and protection until they wed."

"That sounds expensive," Bennet said, and Elizabeth hated that she could not decide if her father was trying to act responsibly for once, or if he was just dragging out the discussion for his own amusement.

"Not to a man of my wealth. I can assure you that they would not be a burden. I understand you spend around ?150 per annum for each on their upkeep now. If you would send me that, I would be quite satisfied."

They did not care if Mr Bennet contributed or not, since Elizabeth could have sponsored the girls even without Darcy's wealth, but they had decided offering the man a sop to his pride would not be amiss. At the very least, it left them one negotiating point they could give up on with great reluctance if the patriarch became recalcitrant.

"You do know, I assume, they do not have dowries sufficient for your circle," Bennet said.

There was no way he would tell the father that Elizabeth alone had enough to give

reasonable dowries to all her sisters, even if he did not contribute a farthing. There was no need to either rub the Bennets nose in it, get the patriarch's back up, or make Mrs Bennet even greedier than she might otherwise be.

Elizabeth said, "Fitzwilliam is being quite generous. I can also say that I have been saving some money the last five years, and I have sufficient to ensure Mama lives in comfort after your demise."

Bennet looked like he was about to drag things in a direction she did not want, so Elizabeth helpfully added, "Or not!"

Mrs Bennet looked like she was about to give her husband a piece of her mind, and Elizabeth was surprised to see her father capitulate immediately—though later, she would wonder why she was at all surprised he took the path of least resistance.

"I suppose I shall have access to your libraries, then?" he asked hopefully, apparently ready to reluctantly accept a deal that was entirely to his benefit.

"Of course," Darcy said gently. It was easy to be magnanimous in victory when it cost nothing.

"I suppose you have papers to sign?"

"I do," Darcy said, and as per their original plan, they implemented divide and conquer. Elizabeth hated not taking part in something important, but she recognised the need to coddle her father's pride. The gentlemen retired to the library, she presumed to beat their chests and revel in their manliness, while she spoke to her mother about the wedding.

In the end, she just held her nose and spoke the white lie that her daughters had been so well trained they could manage the decorations and wedding breakfast without her

assistance, and at her time of life, it would be much better to enjoy herself.

Another half hour of describing in detail all the wonderful things she could do during her (hopefully) short visit to Darcy house, and the deed was done.

They left right after lunch and were back on Gower Street before dark.

31. What Congratulations Will Then Flow In

Elizabeth's wedding day dawned bright, clear, and not especially cold. The months leading up to it had been the happiest of her life, and she was rather astounded at how well it all turned out.

Her sisters had changed from likely to ruin the family to models of propriety, such that Elizabeth had to occasionally remind Lydia it was still acceptable to have some fun. Seeing Lydia trying to gently coerce their mother into better behaviour was hilarious, especially when gentle coercion seemed insufficient and more aggressive means were employed.

Other possibly unpleasant relations had been entirely handled by Darcy. While she ordinarily wanted to fight her own battles, she was willing to bend on that matter. Thus, she had not even met Lady Catherine, and would not for another year, because Darcy had travelled to Rosings to tell her personally of his engagement. Similarly, Miss Caroline Bingley had been dispatched with little fuss or bother, and while he was at it, Darcy told Bingley he could not even speak to Jane until a fortnight after the wedding, at which point they could fend for themselves. The Bingley's were not invited to the wedding, and nobody rued their loss.

The friends from her class had all become much closer over the two months from the proposal to the wedding, and there was truly nothing she could ask for that she did not already have.

Finding out that the man who had so egregiously insulted her sight-unseen was in actuality the best man she had ever known had much to recommend it as well, though

she tried her best not to carry on too much about him.

Fortunately for her equilibrium, some things could be counted on. Her father came to Darcy House, retired to the library, and was rarely seen again except at meals. He learnt early on that his sharp tongue was not quite so acceptable in Mr Darcy's house as it had been when he was lord and master over all the eyes could see. With a few hard looks, he became by turns, less sarcastic, less capricious, and slightly more interesting. Eventually, Darcy decided he liked his father-in-law well enough, and Elizabeth took the news with supreme indifference.

She entered the church on her father's arm, mostly as evidence that her Uncle Gardiner was stubbornner than she was. She understood his reasoning but hated the necessity of conforming to expectations.

All of that went out of her head as soon as she saw her groom waiting anxiously at the front of the church. As she walked down the aisle, she was at first stunned to notice the church was bursting at the seams, with a number of men having to stand in the back. She had expected perhaps a dozen or two attendees. They had a number of friends from Meryton, but not all that many since Elizabeth already had all of her best friends staying in her house. She wondered if these were all Darcy's friends, or perhaps just London gawkers.

She had walked about a dozen paces when she gasped as the conundrum was resolved. By the time she saw the fifth lady who had made it through her school and thence into good marriages, then recognised their husbands and former guardians, she realised they were all there for her.

She had no idea if her uncle had quietly put out the word, or they had all just learnt independently. While they all understood the reasons for remaining anonymous, it seemed likely most of her history would become London gossip soon enough. There were just too many people to keep it quiet.

Fortunately for her, she had two things to prevent fretting. The first was that she did not care . Anyone who looked down on her for her school could be disregarded out of hand, and it might be a handy way to separate out false friends. On top of that, she had the kindest and handsomest man in the world standing anxiously forty yards away and all would be well. They could always just remain at Pemberley if the ton got too tetchy.

When her groom took her hand, she truly felt like all was right in the world. In some ways, it seemed like her courtship was just too easy and orderly. A good story would require her husband to complete some great Labour of Hercules to be worthy of the fair maiden, but that was just silly. He invited eight young ladies to live with them, which was certainly heroic enough for her.

They said the words, and in some ways the ceremony seemed to take forever while simultaneously being over in a blink.

When she signed the register, she had to remind herself to sign ‘Bennet’ and not spend all day giving up Miss Bennet, Miss Gardiner, Mrs Black, and all the other aliases that had made up her life in her formative years. All in all, she thought Mrs Darcy would suffice.

The wedding breakfast was sumptuous, tasty, and there was plenty to go around, thus lending credence to her uncle having alerted the hordes. She was never entirely certain she understood all of his motivations. He might have wanted the ton to know that Mrs Darcy had powerful friends, and there was nothing like a show of brute force to bring the plebes into line. He might have just wanted her to know how loved and appreciated she was and how many lives the two of them had protected. For all she knew, he might even have seen it as a business opportunity, which might sound cynical, but since his business was trading money for safety, one could hardly criticise.

All in all, she was just happy that her parents both made good impressions. Mr

Bennet was an erudite and educated man, and whilst he never had anyone to exercise his wit on in Longbourn, London had enough gentlemen to bring out his best side, and there was a certain amount of amusement to be had when he ran up against someone better read. Mrs Bennet was by any measure, a handsome woman, even with five grown daughters, one married. With a bit of happiness, and a lot of relief from anxiety about her future, she reverted more to the mother Elizabeth remembered from her youth. She could not forget the last five years but thought she could eventually forgive .

Darcy had not exactly been a sluggard with regards to bringing friends and acquaintances to the wedding, and between them and Elizabeth's crowd, there was a great deal of boisterous conversations, many a new connexion made, and for all they knew, probably some future courtships begun.

In short, it was the most wonderful day of her life. The wedding night brought no anxiety, since she received a great deal of mortifying whispered advice from her former charges, most of whom appreciated all she had taught them and just wanted to return the favour.

As expected, their night was bliss... pure bliss.

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Whilst Elizabeth and Darcy enjoyed London, time showed that it was best handled in moderation. Of course, they had to attend the season to launch all the ladies into it the first year or two, but once the children came, their presence was not quite so necessary.

The first season after their wedding would have been easy enough had Elizabeth not been with child, but even so, she found that she could hardly enter a ballroom or musicale without bumping into one of her old students. It was something she had never expected, having mostly paid no attention whatsoever to the ladies after

graduation, but they certainly remembered Mrs Black.

She had turned the running of the school over to Mrs Rose entirely and even made her a full partner, so it continued to prosper. Elizabeth could pay it very little attention, but Mary stepped in to represent her whenever it became necessary.

During that first year, they endured the torture of making Kitty and Lydia come into at least modest compliance with both Miss Bingley's and Mrs Black's ideas of an accomplished lady. That said, when the time was right for Kitty and Georgiana to come out, they decided to defer it for a year and have Lydia join them.

The Weatherby sisters were of similar enough ages that they just latched onto the group, since launching half a dozen at a time seemed very efficient. The Weatherbys' chaperonage was solved easily enough by inviting their parents to stay at Darcy House during the season, and if they got stuck chaperoning the Bennet girls, nobody complained.

Despite the offer to stay in London, Maria Lucas returned to Meryton for a year, then joined her sister in Hunsford the next. To the surprise of everyone, she effectively came out with Anne de Bourgh. They made an odd pair with a decade between them, but somehow it all seemed to work out. Lady Catherine was as proud (and nauseatingly boastful) of Maria's eventual marriage as she was of Anne's. By then, the Darcys had more or less reconciled, so they visited for a fortnight or two every Easter.

Mr Bingley eventually returned hat in hand to Jane. He was most disconcerted to find the colonel at the table regularly, but after a good honest conversation, which included a great deal about all the various sisters, Jane decided to give him another chance, presuming he got his house in order first.

Jane had matured in the interim, and she spent the time to teach him the lessons of Mrs Black. She even suggested they consider a similar school for gentleman, and was

surprised when they did not laugh her out of the room out of hand, though nothing ever came of it.

Jane and Bingley eventually married and purchase Netherfield, where she found taking care of her far less excitable mother was not much of a chore, especially when their young children found Grandmother Bennet much like the young Mrs Bennet had been before her years of crippling anxiety. She was still not particularly decorous, but young children did not mind.

The colonel, meanwhile, quite enjoyed tweaking Bingley's nose by speaking to Miss Bennet in a way that could not help but rile his jealousy. It was therefore a surprise to everyone in the world except Mrs Black when he proposed to Mrs Rose and was accepted. He had to promise her he would do his best to keep his brother alive so she would never have to be a countess, but alas, some tasks were beyond even him. It took the couple decades to recover the earldom's finances from the depredations of his father and brother, but eventually, all was well with the world.

Mary quite surprised everyone by deferring her season time after time. She came to Elizabeth in the year she reached her majority and suggested setting up another school geared to servants and tradesmen's daughters. She had been saving her pin money to start it, but it was not quite sufficient.

Elizabeth loved the idea, so bought her a building and hired some staff without even dipping into her own fortune or pin money by simply asking for donations from her former students. In actuality, she only asked one particularly friendly and well-connected student and considered the problem solved (correctly).

Mary's school was free for servants, but otherwise modelled on Elizabeth's pattern of charging what the guardian could reasonably afford.

She ran the school until the ripe old age of twenty-six when her luck ran out, and she accidentally captured the heart of a young gentleman. She made him work for it, but

in the end, they were blissfully happy. She never moved from London or gave up control of her schools but let others take care of most instruction.

Both schools continued to prosper and grow, eventually training hundreds at a time all over the country.

For many generations, several descendants of the Bennet girls served a few years as Mrs Black, and the world became just a slightly better place.

~~ Finis ~~

[1] Brag is a high-skill, bluffing-based gambling game that originated in England and is considered a direct precursor to Poker, emphasizing psychological play and strategic betting to outmanoeuvre opponents.