



# The Heroic Mr Darcy's Bad Manners

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** A wealthy Elizabeth Bennet navigates the ton, old family feuds, counterfeit scandals, and falling head over heels in love with Mr Darcy.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet, headstrong and witty, is about to unleash her undying admiration onto one unsuspecting Mr Darcy.

Mr Darcy has one mission: To find the lady who bewitched him at the masquerade. Unfortunately, he is clueless to the fact that the masked Queen Elizabeth and Miss Elizabeth are one and the same, which naturally leads him to put his foot in his mouth—repeatedly—until nothing but the consumption of an unrivalled amount of humble pie will redeem him.

Mr Darcy is given ample opportunity to pitch his woo when Mr Bennet enters London society as a peer of the realm, but Lord Matlock is furious, and an old family feud ignites rumours of a most serious nature. Mr Bennet certainly has a valid reason to hate town...

The Heroic Mr Darcy's Bad Manners is a low angst, chaste novel but for kisses, ogling, and skinny-dipping, where Elizabeth falls head over heels in love and the Bennets are of elevated rank.

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# Page 1

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Lambton, 13 th July 1801

Elizabeth

“It is a lovely summer’s day, excellent for travelling, and the roads are in very good condition.”

Francine Bennet was giddy with anticipation and had not stopped talking since they left Derby. Elizabeth worried that Uncle Gardiner regretted inviting both her and her loquacious mother to accompany him on such a long journey. She glanced up at him and was relieved to see a benevolent smile gracing his countenance. He was too happy to feel any perturbation, regardless of the provocation.

“And for such a good cause too.” Her mother sighed, looked significantly at her daughter, and clasped her hands to her bosom. “I remember when your father proposed to me. I was shocked that the handsome and astute owner of Longbourn had even noticed my existence. He was so heartbroken that I worried for him, as did Sir William, though he had not yet received his knighthood and was only plain Mr Lucas back then. But regardless of their rank, the entire neighbourhood embraced him and tried to comfort him as best we could, did we not, Brother?”

Mr Gardiner nodded solemnly.

“I had no idea he was singling me out as his future wife, but one day he fell to his knees and begged me to end his suffering and agree to marry him. I was speechless for such a long moment that he felt it incumbent upon himself to declare his ardent feelings. And then—he made me promise to never change.”

Elizabeth laughed and thought wryly that her father must have long since repined discouraging her mother's silence. She sighed and hoped that she too would one day be so madly in love. It must be with a prince, or at the very least a lord, who rode a shiny white stallion with gold reins and owned a property far away from Longbourn. She would not mind travelling quite an extensive distance, even to the continent—about which she had only read but never visited. Though the Midlands had much to offer as well, she imagined that France or Greece must be infinitely superior.

“Lizzy!” her mother admonished. “Are you wool-gathering? We are here, look.”

Mrs Bennet pointed out of the window, and sure enough, they had arrived at a busy inn. The Rose and Crown, she read on a sign above the door.

“Is she here?”

“No,” her uncle chuckled. “She is at the parsonage, but we shall see her later. We need a good dusting and cleaning before we meet my future wife.”

“Yes, of course, Uncle,” Elizabeth agreed demurely, though washing her face was not what first sprang to mind when she stepped out of the carriage.

Farther down the lane, by the smithy, stood an impressive horse chestnut tree beckoning her to conquer it.

“I can see the direction of your thoughts, Lizzy, and there will be no tree climbing while we are in Lambton. What would your future aunt think of us if we allowed you to run wild as you do at home? Oh no, we are to make a good impression on the fine lady so that she does not jilt dear Edward.”

“Certainly, Mama!”

Elizabeth had not thought of it in that way and was heartily ashamed of her inclinations. It would not do to destroy her uncle's happiness, now that he had found a young miss he wanted to marry. She only had one aunt, but Mrs Phillips favoured her sweet and well-behaved sister Jane. If there was any justice in the world, Miss Cavendish would be adventurous and prefer small but courageous and boisterous girls.

"Oh, let the child be, Francine. She has been cooped up in the carriage for nigh on three days. Lambton is a small, quiet town and perfectly safe. I say we let her explore a little round the premises while we make the arrangements with the innkeeper."

"Oh please! May I, Mama?"

Mrs Bennet frowned but must have realised the advantages of letting Elizabeth release her pent-up energy before she was required to sit still at the vicarage.

"You may, but only within the boundaries of the inn. Just the garden and the courtyard, mind you."

"I solemnly promise," the nine-year-old avowed with a serious mien.

"Keep an eye on her, will you?" Mrs Bennet mumbled to their driver, who was leading their horses towards the mews.

Elizabeth heard the driver's deep sigh as she watched her mother and her uncle Gardiner enter the inn. Only when they were out of sight did she allow her eyes to roam the adventures on offer. The street was tempting, with a teahouse nearby, but she had promised not to venture that far.

The garden was small; not much more than a few shrubs and a bench. She watched the mews, where a fine-looking carriage was being harnessed for departure, but that

was not what caught her eye. Behind the conveyance and beyond the mews was an enclosure where something white and shiny beckoned with joyous neighs. The driver, who was supposed to watch her, had disappeared to tend to her uncle's horses.

Elizabeth walked round the inn and espied the most magnificent beast she had ever seen. Charlotte Lucas had a white cat, but that was nothing compared to the impressive white horse that was fit for a king. Besides, the cat was deaf, and the horse was not. She could tell by the ears that were pinned back against its head.

She approached, and the horse made a funny face, wrinkling its nose and baring its teeth as if it were attempting to smile but could only muster a grimace. Elizabeth laughed, stopped at the gate, and looked about. The horse was alone in the field and stood at the opposite end regarding her with big sorrowful eyes.

“Are you lonely, dear horsey?”

The steed nodded by throwing its head up and down. It must be horse language for an invitation, she reckoned, and climbed up onto the top of the gate—it was not a tree, so she was breaking no promises. The horse stamped its hoofs impatiently in an obvious invitation for her to proceed. She jumped off the gate and tumbled into the soft grass, earning her green stains on her dress that her vigorous brushing spread wider rather than removed. She sighed as she got to her feet whilst imagining the scolding she would receive.

The sound of pounding on the ground made her raise her head. The horse must have been deprived of company for a long time because it was charging towards her at full gallop, and although she would never admit it, she became a little frightened by its haste. It would soon be upon her, but she did nothing at all because her legs would not obey her. She just watched until it reached her and reared up on its hind legs.

If she did not move, its hoofs would land on her, but her feet trembled and remained

frozen to the ground. She covered her head with her arms and waited for the inevitable impact.

A shadow emerged from her right and smashed into the horse's chest. A tall and gangling boy had come to her rescue. Her legs collapsed as he pushed the beast away from her. If not for him she would surely have been trampled to death.

A lovely rich, soothing voice spoke from above, calling for her to leave the enclosure, but her legs were still not cooperating; they trembled so violently that walking was simply impossible.

"Mother! You must not open the gate. This beast is wild and untamed. I cannot vouch for your safety."

"You have him well in hand, dear Fitzwilliam. I am certain I shall be safe until I have rescued the adorable little girl."

Elizabeth watched the boy struggle. He leapt high in the air, managed to grip the horse's mane, and used all his weight to bring its head towards the ground.

Two soft arms wrapped around her and lifted her to her feet.

"You must not carry her in your condition," the boy admonished his mother.

"Do not worry, Fitzwilliam. She is as light as a feather," the woman replied.

Elizabeth was carried to safety just as four men came running to aid the boy. Fitzwilliam... The name had a distinguished ring to it; he might even be royalty, though not from a faraway land. He was very handsome with his head of unruly brown curls, which might have been tamed before he had to fight the beast. He was much older than she was, yet still not a man like her uncle. Whatever he was,

Elizabeth would forever admire him for his heroic rescue. She broke down in tears and hid her face in her hands. It would not do to cry at this moment, and she never cried, but cry she did...

“Hush, little one. You are perfectly safe, and no harm will befall you,” the lady tried to console her.

“I know, but my eyes do not want to obey me,” Elizabeth lamented.

The lady laughed softly and patted her head.

“Lizzy!” Mrs Bennet cried, and she was ripped from the solicitous lady’s arms. “What on earth have you done this time?”

Elizabeth cowed at her mother’s wrath and could not get a word out. She worried about what Miss Cavendish would say and glanced at the boy who had rescued her. His handsome face was marred with a scowl. She closed her eyes, and a fresh bout of tears trickled down her cheeks.

“I am Lady Anne,” the lady informed her mother. “And my son just braved a wild beast to save your daughter. She had entered the enclosure where an untamed and vicious stallion is kept in solitude because of his history of attacks on both horses and men. He charged at her, but by the grace of God, Fitzwilliam managed to shove him away before she was trampled.”

Mrs Bennet glanced at the horse. Four stout men were struggling to lead the raging beast away. “I am most grateful.” Mrs Bennet tempered her vexation and spoke with misty eyes.

“It was our pleasure, I assure you,” Lady Anne said. “Your daughter is charming, and I believe just a few years older than my daughter at home. I could not bear to see a

child injured, even if it is not my own.”

“I am most grateful. We are here for the wedding of my brother, Mr Gardiner, and I only went inside for a minute to speak to the innkeeper...” Mrs Bennet hurried to excuse her moment of inattention.

Her uncle humbly stepped forwards at the mention of his name. “Lady Anne, we are most obliged to you and utterly impressed by your son’s bravery. If I can ever be of service to you, please do not hesitate to ask.”

He offered Lady Anne his card, which she accepted.

Elizabeth dared to open her eyes when she was certain neither her uncle nor her mother sounded angry with her.

“I am very sorry for causing you so much trouble.” She glanced at her rescuer and gasped. A trickle of blood ran down his hand.

“You are bleeding!” she cried and ran to him.

She pulled out her handkerchief from her pocket and tried to dab it, but he pulled back.

“That is not necessary.” He spoke with a pleasant voice, hiding his hand behind his back.

“Would you allow me to inspect your wound?” Lady Anne asked.

“It is only a small nick of no consequence and will heal by itself,” Master Fitzwilliam asserted heroically.



He must be the bravest boy she had ever met, not at all like the Lucas boys, who cried with hardly any provocation. Her admiration grew, and she was ever so pleased when Lady Anne suggested they all needed a cup of tea after their ordeal. Her disappointment when Master Fitzwilliam begged off to go to the bookshop was poorly hidden. Elizabeth reluctantly followed Lady Anne, her mother, and her uncle to the inn whilst casting long glances back at her saviour.

## Page 2

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Elizabeth

The Argyll Rooms, 9 th June 1811

It was a tightly governed subscription masquerade held by the Countesses Jersey, Cholmondeley, Cowper, and the latter's mother, Viscountess Melbourne. Only those with a voucher from one of the patronesses were allowed to pay the two guineas for a ticket, regardless of their position in society. Elizabeth was fortunate that her grandmother was acquainted with Viscountess Melbourne, or not even her great-uncle, Lord Limerick, would have managed the feat.

Viscountess Melbourne née Milbank had entered London society the same year as Maeve Bennet née Conyngham. They had formed a friendship that had lasted for decades.

The only fly in the ointment was that Jane had not accompanied them. She was at home, missing all the entertainments in town and looking after the Gardiners' four children. Mr and Mrs Gardiner were currently in Sussex visiting a friend whilst Elizabeth led a life of luxurious parties and balls.

Grandmother Bennet had ordered them all new costumes, and Uncle Henry had, after much persuasion, allowed his sister to dress him more adventurously than was his wont. He preferred the dull domino with a hooded black cloak and a black half mask that covered only his eyes.

Elizabeth had chosen to dress as Queen Elizabeth, wearing an exact copy of the then twelve-years-old Princess Elizabeth's attire in a portrait [1] by William Scrots from

1546. The red dress had wide arms and a hooped skirt. She had even coloured her hair red with powder to match the Virgin Queen's. The queen had been known as tall and striking, so her grandmother had ordered a pair of shoes with high heels for Elizabeth, who was below average height. To conceal her tanned face, she had painted a full-faced mask in a pallid complexion with the renowned bright red lips. Only her eyes were visible, and she hardly recognised herself in costume.

Queen Elizabeth was quite the rage at present. Her memory had been revived with the Napoleonic War and the threat of invasion as a romantic symbol of the national resistance to foreign threats.

Naturally, Uncle Henry was dressed up as Henry VIII and her grandmother as Anne Boleyn.

Their carriage drew to a halt by the steps of the Argyll Rooms. Elizabeth was awed by the entrance hall, which was ornamented with Corinthian pillars illuminated by gilt lamps and led to the first of the three supper rooms. Elizabeth let her eyes roam the crowd of guests and felt a bit overdressed. Amongst the costumes she spotted a mail coach guard, a peasant girl, a sailor, a lame Chelsea pensioner, and one Venetian nobleman.

“Doctor Lancet, at your service. May I feel your pulse?”

The masked gentleman had appeared out of nowhere because her mask obscured her peripheral vision.

“You certainly may not!” Elizabeth huffed in indignation. “What nerve!” she whispered to her grandmother.

“Beware of the gentlemen tonight, my dear Eilís.” Her grandmother often used the Irish equivalent of Elizabeth when addressing her granddaughter. “People seem to

believe that donning a mask excuses them from adhering to propriety. You should only speak to those who seek to obtain a proper introduction from your family. You must be careful about those with whom you decide to form an acquaintance, because once introduced, it cannot be undone. The inconvenience arising from an ill-judged introduction may not be slight, and much worse than a dull or annoying friend. The dangers posed by low company must not be forgotten. You should regard every request with a suspicious mind and ensure that it is desirable to both parties.”

“Certainly. I shall solemnly promise not to allow any doctors to feel my pulse.”

“I am not too concerned. You are an astute young lady whom I am immensely proud to call my granddaughter.”

Elizabeth smiled, took her grandmother’s offered arm, and they ventured deeper into the assembly. There were so many rooms, each one larger than the last. The fanciful elegance was a credit to the taste of Colonel Greville, the man who had founded the institution.

The first supper room was superb and of a grey colour with scarlet draperies. Her grandmother escorted her straight through to the second room, this one stone-coloured with a green trellis paper on the walls. They continued on to the grand saloon with three tiers of elaborately ornamented boxes designed for theatrical performances. Today, the oblong space with elliptical ends was dressed as a ballroom.

Elizabeth’s gaze travelled the room, past the scarlet-covered benches for those who wished to sit out the current set and to the opposite end where the stage was situated. Above it, the appropriate motto *Sollicitae jucunda oblivia vitae* —Pleasant forgetfulness of a troubled life—was written in wide gold letters.

Three gentlemen entered from the billiard room, and Elizabeth was relieved that her

gasp of surprise could not be heard above the din. It was him! It had to be... His back was turned, but the way he moved struck her as exceedingly familiar, and how his lush brown curls played atop his coat was further proof. He was fully grown now and filled out his tightly fitted coat very nicely. Yet there was not a shadow of doubt in her mind. She could feel it from the depths of her soul that the gentleman dressed as a gentleman, with no mask or adornments of any kind, was her Lambton hero, Master Fitzwilliam.

That she might happen upon him as a fully grown woman was an unexpected pleasure, and she was beset by an onslaught of nervous flutters that threatened her very existence. Her lungs constricted, whilst her heart beat frantically in her chest when the gentleman turned slowly in her direction.

It was he! The years had only enhanced his features, and he stood before her as the most handsome gentleman she had ever beheld. No one could compare to him with his strong jaw and striking eyes. She could stay as she was, relishing the prospect of Master Fitzwilliam for all eternity, and be quite content.

Unfortunately, her grandmother chose that very moment to introduce her to a friend. Elizabeth obediently exchanged the civilities necessary before resuming her vigilant watch. He had not moved but was gazing at the crowd when his eyes suddenly were directed at her.

Elizabeth thought she might swoon. The colonel from His Majesty's Army standing beside him whispered something in his ear, and he smiled. Elizabeth's knees quivered; they had transformed from reliable joints to something of jelly-like consistency.

The third fashionable gentleman in his party joined the conversation. He was the only one who had made an effort to conceal his identity, unless the colonel was not truly an officer. However, judging by how he carried himself, Elizabeth supposed that he

wore regimentals on a regular basis. From their slight gestures and inquisitive looks in her direction, she was convinced they were talking about her. Could he have recognised her and be debating with his friends whether he should approach her or not?

Belatedly, she remembered that her face was fully covered in a painted mask, and she exhaled in disappointment.

“Dear Eilís, are you well? I can hear you sighing as if the world was coming to an end,” Grandmother Bennet enquired in obvious concern.

“I am very well indeed. I just recognised a friend I have not seen in years.”

“If it is a gentleman, I suggest that you do not appear too eager and allow him to approach you. Nothing lingers longer than a bad reputation.”

Grandmother Bennet’s advice was so contradictory to her mother’s that Elizabeth had to laugh.

“I promise to adhere to your strictures in this instance. Particularly since my face is covered and it is highly unlikely he will be able to recognise me.”

“I am not so certain, as I can see a gentleman approaching, and his eyes appear to be fixed on you, my dear.”

True enough, Master Fitzwilliam was walking decidedly in her direction, and she had but seconds to bolster her composure.

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Darcy, a few minutes earlier.

“You have garnered the attention of Queen Elizabeth, I believe. She is transfixed on you and has not looked away since we entered.”

Darcy glanced across the room; close to the door at the opposite end, a red-headed Queen Elizabeth abruptly turned away. He smiled and pondered who it could be.

“Father will be glad he did not attend. The queen is standing next to the newly appointed Marquess of Limerick,” Viscount Crawford informed his brother and cousin.

Darcy had no idea what Crawford was talking about. “I did not know his lordship had a squabble with the mighty Irishman.”

“It is a fairly recent development, though he has never liked the man. They quarrelled in the House of Lords about something or other when the marquess had the nerve to call my father an Irishman. Let us just say that he did not look favourably upon the sobriquet.”

“Is there any truth to it?” Darcy wondered.

“Not that I know of.” The viscount shrugged.

The queen was standing in between the marquess and a petite elderly lady who was chatting with the formidable Viscountess Melbourne. By their closeness and expressions, he surmised that their connection was of long standing, but who was the young lady? Darcy ran the few tall red-heads he knew through his mind but could think of no one who resembled the miss in question. It was certainly not Miss Bingley’s willowy figure. No stays in the world could enhance one that much.

“I have an idea,” the viscount announced, interrupting his ruminations. “Are you not out of favour with Father?”

“What do you mean?” Darcy probed.

“You were not best pleased he foisted Miss Throwbridge upon you at dinner last night.”

Viscount Crawford was correct in that assumption.

“She is a sixteen-year-old child,” he grumbled at his cousins.

“Their estate is conveniently close to Pemberley, and she has a significant fortune,” the colonel interjected.

“I have no interest in pursuing any of Georgiana’s friends,” Darcy remarked firmly. “Even if Uncle needs Lord Throwbridge’s vote for his new bill.”

“Yet, you cannot tear your eyes away from the delectable queen,” the viscount snickered.

“Do you know her?” Darcy queried. “I am trying to determine who she is, but I have had no luck so far.”

“Not precisely,” the viscount admitted. “She must be a distant relation of the marquess as he has no children of his own. The elderly lady beside him is his sister. I suppose the young miss could be either her daughter or granddaughter. Judging by the queen’s ample bosom, I am leaning towards the latter.”

“Montgomery!” Darcy admonished.

“Do not be such a prig. You know as well as I that certain things begin to sag with age...”



“Even I take umbrage with that!” the colonel protested.

“You are both so dull... Do you care to make it interesting?” The viscount did not relent; his brother’s and cousin’s admonishments had no effect on him.

Darcy had a fair inkling as to the direction of the viscount’s enquiry. He was always suggesting some form of wager. “I am certain I do not care to know.”

“I have ten guineas that are yours if you ask the Virgin Queen to dance. You have to dance with someone, you know, and it might as well be an acquaintance of Lady Melbourne’s as anyone else. If Father becomes a bit miffed you have danced with a relation of his current sparring partner, I would reckon that as a bonus.”

“You would pay me ten guineas for dancing a set, which I am obliged to do regardless of any monetary inducements?”

The viscount nodded. As Darcy did not care one way or the other, and was curious as to who the lady was, he saw no reason to object. “It is the easiest money I have ever made,” he drawled and walked directly across the room to engage the mysterious queen.

He bowed to Lady Melbourne, who was a friend of his aunt’s, and the young lady’s relations. He almost laughed when she was introduced as Queen Elizabeth; that, he had surmised by her costume. Yet, the secrecy intrigued him, and he turned to request her next set. She raised her head, and the most enchanting green eyes rendered him speechless. His dry mouth did not cooperate for what felt like a minute, and only a herculean effort brought him back to his senses.

#

Elizabeth

“Ah, it is Mr Darcy,” Viscountess Melbourne informed her. “He has a large and prosperous estate in Derbyshire. There is not a scandal attached to his name—and in superior society, which is quite the feat. I dare say he is one of the most eligible gentlemen town has to offer, but he is aloof. He has every young miss vying for his attention, even though he bestows it but rarely. You must be flattered that he is singling you out amongst all the accomplished and even titled young ladies in attendance here tonight.”

Viscountess Melbourne looked pointedly at Elizabeth, who felt her heart sink into her stomach. If he was one of the most sought-after gentlemen in London, something she had no trouble believing as she watched him approach, he might not be interested in a stupid child who had endangered both himself and his mother. She had read Lady Anne’s obituary in the newspaper less than a year later. That information had given perspective to his admonishment when his mother had followed him into the enclosure. If she already had been ill, he might look unfavourably on the child whom she had risked her health to save.

Elizabeth used her quick wit and made a request to Viscountess Melbourne. “If the gentleman is indeed coming this way, would it not be fun to introduce me as Queen Elizabeth?”

The great lady hid behind her fan and chuckled. “Indeed, it would.”

Her grandmother was eyeing her quizzically, so Elizabeth deliberately avoided meeting her eyes. It was easily done as she would have had to turn away from Mr Darcy, and that would not be polite—or possible.

Viscountess Melbourne performed the introductions and kept her promise of not exposing Elizabeth’s true name.

“Has Miss Darcy accompanied you, Mr Darcy?” Viscountess Melbourne asked.

“No. My sister is not yet out, your ladyship.”

“Oh, I did not mean your sister. I know she is full young. I was enquiring after Miss Eudora Darcy.”

“Unfortunately, my aunt had a prior engagement. She regretted that it prohibited her from attending your ball.”

“I am a bit disappointed. I was greatly anticipating introducing her to my friend.” Viscountess Melbourne turned to Elizabeth’s grandmother. “Maeve, you would adore Miss Eudora Darcy. She is a perfect mixture of eccentricity, sarcasm, and wit to be thoroughly entertaining. You must allow me to introduce you both at our earliest convenience.”

Elizabeth did not hear her grandmother’s reply because in that very moment, Mr Darcy bowed before her and extended his hand.

“Your Majesty, may I have the pleasure of your hand for the next set?”

“You may, Mr Darcy.”

Unfortunately, the current set was not finished, and they were obliged to wait until it concluded.

“You are Lord Matlock’s nephew, are you not?” Lord Limerick grumbled.

“I am,” Mr Darcy replied hesitantly.

He must have noticed her uncle’s provocative undertone. Elizabeth had no idea what significance this Lord Matlock had in Mr Darcy’s polite request to dance, but the grumbling alone made her worried that her great-uncle held a grievance towards Mr

Darcy's relation. She was not of a mind to allow even him to thwart her acquaintance with the gentleman, now that she had finally reunited with her heroic Master Fitzwilliam.

"Have you tasted the ratafia, Mr Darcy?"

"I have not, and it would be my pleasure to escort you to the refreshment table while we wait for the set to begin." He turned from her and met the eyes of Lord Limerick. "If your lordship would allow it?"

Uncle Henry glared at Mr Darcy, who met his lordship's belligerent mien with a steady calmness that eventually made her stubborn uncle relent. With his curt nod, they were allowed to escape.

"So, what is your true name, Queen Elizabeth?"

"It is Elizabeth Alexandra Mary, Mr Darcy. And what is your full name?"

"I see. You are set on being mysterious. I suppose there is no chance I could convince you to remove your mask?"

"It is not yet midnight, and there is a game tonight of guessing who is who. I am afraid that you have already exposed yourself to me, and I shall have, at least, one correct answer."

"Very well, my fair queen. I shall be patient. Of course, that means I shall have to follow you all evening until the clock strikes midnight."

Elizabeth did not at all mind the company of Mr Darcy and preferred it for as long as possible. Yet, she understood that it was not wise to admit it.

“That depends, Mr Darcy.” She paused to see whether she had his full attention, and she was delighted when his gaze was fixed on her face. “On whether you are able to keep up with me.”

Mr Darcy barked a laugh. “I assure you that I am not yet so feeble as to be unable to manage two hours of frivolity.”

“I love to dance, and to walk about. I do not relish sitting down with nothing to do.”

“Neither do I, Queen Elizabeth. I declare we are evenly matched. I too would rather be occupied versus languishing in idleness.”

“The only time I remain in one attitude is when I read,” Elizabeth admitted a bit too frankly.

“What do you like to read?” the gentleman asked.

“I like a variety of different genres, and I particularly enjoy Shakespeare’s comedies, but I shall admit to having a preference for novels. Now you may despise my taste if you dare.”

“Indeed, I dare not. I have read the occasional novel myself.” Mr Darcy chuckled at her incredulous expression and promptly offered an explanation. “I have a much younger sister, and I would not allow her to read a book for which I cannot vouch. In my experience, young ladies are rarely interested in books of a more serious stamp.”

“Do you often find novels to be inappropriate for your sister?”

“No, not very often. The ones I have read contain mostly romantic twad—um, innocent but fanciful romance.”

Mr Darcy looked abashed, so Elizabeth replied with a light tone. “You are an ideal brother, then.”

“I do not admit to being ideal, but I am the only one she has, and I do not take my responsibilities lightly. Since we lost both our parents, I have been more of a father figure to her than a brother.”

“I am so sorry for your loss,” Elizabeth replied with much feeling. “I cannot imagine it, as both my parents are alive and healthy. It must have been exceedingly difficult to raise a sister whilst grieving.”

“It was, but it has been five years since my father died and ten since my mother’s illness,” Mr Darcy demurred. “It gets easier with time, especially after I became more familiar with running the estate on my own.”

“Oh my! I did not even consider that.” Elizabeth put a comforting hand on the arm that was escorting her. “You have had so much to bear on such young shoulders.”

He did not reply, but by the sorrow easily read in his eyes, she gathered it had been much more difficult than he would admit to.

They had reached the refreshment table. Mr Darcy gallantly filled her cup and handed it to her.

“Oh dear, I have not given this endeavour enough consideration,” Elizabeth admitted as she peered down at the drink in her hand. “I do not suppose there is a meadow to be found nearby. I am in dire need of a hollow straw.”

Mr Darcy smiled, revealing an adorable dimple on his left cheek.

“None whatsoever.” He grinned.

He obviously believed she would have to remove her mask completely to drink, but Elizabeth had another idea. She faced him and lifted the mask enough to slip the cup underneath and to her mouth.

“I have now caught a glimpse of your lush lips, so you might as well reveal the rest of your face.”

Elizabeth tilted her head, looked deeply into his cerulean-blue eyes, and adjusted the ribbons on her mask. “I think not. You are not a patient soul, Mr Darcy, and it is my belief that you are woefully in need of practice.”

He groaned, but she contained the laughter bubbling in her chest. It had become a game, and she never lost a battle of banter.

“Let me relieve you of your cup. I just heard the master of ceremonies call our set.”

Mr Darcy took her cup and put it on a side table. He was so chivalrous compared to the gentlemen she had encountered in Meryton, and he grew even further in her esteem. He may very well be without flaws, but that remained to be seen, and she would defer her judgment until they had danced at least the first of their set.

“I must deduce by your reluctance to show your countenance that you are known to me,” Mr Darcy whispered tantalisingly close to her ear. “Would it be correct to assume that you would admit it if my guess is accurate?”

Elizabeth nodded, still bewildered by the frisson his breath on her ear had sent scurrying down from her head to her toes.

“And may I enquire whether my assumption that you are known to me holds any bearing?” he continued.

“We have previously encountered each other, yes,” she allowed but did not give any further detail.

“Intriguing,” he mumbled before he left her side to position himself opposite her in the line.

The first dance was a lively reel that did not allow much conversation. However, the second was a minuet, which was a slow-paced couples’ dance. They circled each other, and Mr Darcy approached her from behind, seized her hands, and twirled them around. Elizabeth’s step faltered, and her back accidentally touched his chest. She tightened her grip on his hands and hoped that he had not noticed. His support brought her steadfast and unwavering through the set, and when it ended, she was uncommonly out of breath.

“I deprived you of your glass of ratafia when they called our set, so I believe it is only fair that I provide you with another,” Mr Darcy suggested in his low, rumbling voice.

“Certainly. It would be quite ungentlemanly if you did not,” Elizabeth retorted with a parched throat.

Mr Darcy escorted her seamlessly to the refreshment table. His height and character parted the sea of dancers to allow them a quick departure. He filled two glasses and looked about him.

“It is rather warm and crowded. Would you like to take some fresh air?”

“Yes please.” Elizabeth took a sip of her ratafia and accepted his offered arm. He guided them through the supper rooms and up a flight of stairs. He turned left, and suddenly they were out on a balcony overlooking the street. They were not alone, but the balcony ran the length of the entire building, so no one was standing too close.



“I hope you do not mind the balcony. I would not have you ruin your dress and slippers in the mucky street,” Mr Darcy explained.

“Not at all,” she admitted, looking down on the busy thoroughfare.

“You are not too cold?” he asked with concern.

Elizabeth chuckled; she was warm from the dance, the crush, and Mr Darcy’s close proximity. “Not in the slightest,” she replied, making the gentleman smile.

He did not look at her but gazed upon the moonlit sky.

“You do not have an accent, so am I correct in surmising that you are from town?”

The seemingly innocent question did not fool Elizabeth. She knew exactly what he was about. “No, I am country born and bred.”

“And the name of your father’s estate?” he enquired.

“That, I shall not tell you, even though I doubt you are familiar with it. It is modest compared to yours, but then again, most estates are,” she retorted enigmatically.

He turned to her then. “You have visited Pemberley?”

“No, but I have relations who have more knowledge about it than I. But I was so fortunate as to be invited to tea by your esteemed mother once, at the Rose and Crown in Lambton.”

It was as much of a hint as she was willing to offer. The rest he must determine without further clues. A shadow crossed his face, and he bowed his head.

“You said that we had met before, but it does not count if I was not present.”

“You were, but it was not at Pemberley.”

“I wish I knew who you were, but I am at a loss,” Mr Darcy admitted dejectedly.

“It is bad manners, my heroic Mr Darcy, to admit that I left no lasting impression. I would rather have assumed that I did.” Which was the absolute last hint she would give him before the clock struck twelve.

He studied her intently whilst rubbing his chin. His eyes were dark pools in the faint moonlight, and she was captured in his steady gaze.

“Your eyes are uncommonly beautiful. I should have remembered you from that feature alone,” he admitted, sending frissons down her back.

“You are cold.” He misinterpreted her slight quiver and escorted her back to the ballroom. “Do I ask too much, or would you honour me with a second set?”

“Certainly, Mr Darcy.” She acquiesced readily, delighted that he had deigned to ask.

Their delicious banter continued through their subsequent dances; she had never been more entertained in her life and did not wish the evening to end. Elizabeth glanced at the clock; it was ten to twelve. In just ten minutes she would have to reveal her face. Would he be disappointed she was no one but the foolish girl he had once rescued? Or worse, disappointed by her looks. Perhaps he hated freckles; the sun had unfortunately left a light dusting on her nose.

Grandmother Bennet was hastening towards them, and by the expression on her countenance, Elizabeth surmised something was amiss. Once their gazes met, her grandmother slowed her pace and appeared to compose herself.

“Dear Eilís , I am exceedingly sorry, but Henry is unwell, and we have to return home rather urgently.”

“Pray, what is the matter? Is it his heart?” Uncle Henry’s health was a cause for concern. He suffered palpitations of the heart, and his advanced years did nothing to alleviate her worries.

“I am not certain,” her grandmother prevaricated, which only made Elizabeth’s apprehension grow.

“Think nothing of it. I have had a splendid evening, and we must not tarry to return Uncle Henry to the comforts of Limerick House. Have you sent for his physician?” Elizabeth asked.

Grandmother Bennet nodded absentmindedly and turned away. Elizabeth supposed the gesture was to allow her to say her farewells to Mr Darcy with a modicum of privacy.

“Mr Darcy, it has been a pleasure.” Elizabeth dipped into a deep curtsy. Her heel shook, but she avoided disgrace by sheer strength.

“May I call upon you?”

The desperation in Mr Darcy’s voice pleased her deeply and matched the sentiments she felt in the pit of her stomach.

“I would like that very much,” Elizabeth admitted, unabashed, holding his gaze for longer than was strictly proper.

Her grandmother cleared her throat, and Elizabeth hastened after her. She led her on a convoluted route to the entrance, where Uncle Henry waited with their shawls and the

carriage stood ready at the bottom of the steps. He looked pale and drawn but, to Elizabeth's relief, not terribly ill.

Yet he slumped after he had seated himself and appeared to have aged a decade.

"Is there anything I can do for your present relief?" Elizabeth enquired.

"No, thank you, my dear. I have had a shock, but I shall revive soon."

Elizabeth itched to enquire but dared not lest it upset her uncle further. Her grandmother held no such qualms.

"The nerve of the Campbells..." she hissed.

Uncle Henry shook his head. "The baronet must have died given that the family has returned to town."

"It has been twenty-two blissful years with their absence from society. I suppose I believed they would never be welcomed in London, but no one seems to remember. Let us pray it will be of short duration and that they will soon return to the North."

Uncle Henry pressed his lips together in a combination of displeasure and disbelief.

Her grandmother continued. "We should take precautions while we gather our wits. Meanwhile, I shall have the knocker removed. I cannot allow them to call until I have decided whether to acknowledge them or give them the cut direct."

Elizabeth was shocked. To give someone the cut direct was hardly ever done and must be proof that those Campbells were utterly corrupt.

"As much as I would like you to cut them," Uncle Henry murmured tiredly, "to do so

may cause undesirable attention.”

“You are right. I would rather avoid the acquaintance without stirring old grievances.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Darcy

Darcy was discouraged as he stood on the pavement outside the corner house on Berkeley Square. The knocker was down. He scratched his head and blinked, but that did not change the fact that Limerick House was not receiving visitors. His lordship had fallen ill at the ball the previous night, which had cut their evening short. The ailment must be serious since not even the ladies were accepting callers.

It was to be hoped that the marquess would soon recover and allow him to gaze upon the face of the most intriguing lady he had ever met. The fact that he was infatuated with a woman he had not even seen was proof of how captivated he had been. He was not concerned about her suitability; the company she kept proved she was of elevated rank, and that his dear mother had invited her to tea confirmed her excellent connections. She was a graceful and elegant dancer, though she had mis-stepped when he had accidentally or not bumped into her back. He could not fault her for that, and the long look she had given him upon her departure convinced him that she had been as affected as he. They had been standing right beneath a chandelier that had allowed him to study the emerald-green eyes that were scorched into his memory as the most striking, irresistible, enchanting...

Darcy sighed deeply and turned towards his uncle's house. Richard was an early riser and would not mind the intrusion. He walked the few yards and was admitted by Matlock's butler and escorted to the library, where his cousin was sipping his coffee whilst perusing the morning gazette.

"God! You look awful." Richard flinched in an exaggerated fashion as he tried to keep a straight face.

“Thank you.” Darcy bowed and accepted both the chair and the cup of coffee his cousin offered.

“Did you not sleep at all?” Richard asked with a smirk.

“I did, but apparently not long enough to restore my handsome face. Though I am certain my beauty will be returned much quicker than your ugly snout.”

Richard grinned. “We both know that there is no salvation from the aristocratic Matlock nose. Count yourself lucky you resemble your father. But I must admit that I am surprised to see you this morning. I would have put twenty guineas on you being in Lord Limerick’s front parlour by now.”

Darcy felt warm and tugged at his cravat. “I would have been if the knocker had been up,” he admitted.

“I surmised as much, but that you confess it so readily intrigues me. I have never seen you so bewitched by a lady, and you have not even seen her face. Which is significant. What if she needs the full-face mask to hide a hideous feature?”

Richard was not usually so sceptical by nature, but it was his prerogative to think of both plausible and far-fetched impediments to every event. Yet, Darcy was not concerned. He had seen her beautiful eyes and long lashes—even her lush lips when she drank the ratafia—but it was not only that which had drawn him in. It was her quick wit, unassuming comportment, and easy conversation that had made him remain by her side until the marquess’s sister had ripped her from him. Her pleasing figure was far down the list of her attributes and accomplishments, he reckoned, though it could not be overlooked as his initial incentive. Her tangible qualities were exquisite, yet it was the incorporeal attraction—the intense feeling that heightened his senses—that had drawn him in. He could not walk away, even though he risked ridicule and incessant badgering from his cousins. No, he had followed her around

like an obedient puppy and catered to her every need—with no regrets or concerns for his reputation. She must have cast a spell on him because it was exactly the opposite of his usual behaviour. He, who prided himself on being impossible to trap, would not mind so much if it were Queen Elizabeth who ensnared him. Not that he would expect such behaviour. She did not fawn or act coquettishly. No. She charmed him effortlessly without using any arts or allurements.

“What did Lady Melbourne put in that ratafia?” Richard muttered.

Darcy did not know. Perhaps she was a witch and had laced the beverage with a love potion, because Queen Elizabeth had rendered him spellbound from the moment he looked into those enchanting emerald orbs. Immediately, a bolt of lightning had travelled through his core and created a desperate ache for her company. It was so very unlike him that he would not be surprised if he had been drugged out of his wits. Yet, he had not imbibed much before, during, or after the ball, and he had definitely not taken any opiates. He had seen what those substances did to reasonable young men, and he was not tempted. Wickham sprung to mind, though he would rather not think of that reprobate, who had had the audacity to request the Kympton living when he had already been compensated for its value.

“I see that you are not forthcoming, but that will not prohibit me from enquiring... Why are you here?”

“That they have taken down the knocker implies that Lord Limerick’s ailment is more serious than I first assumed,” Darcy mused.

“Then you simply wait until tomorrow, or the next day. It is likely that whatever ails him, it will pass eventually.”

Darcy sighed. It was fortunate that Lord Limerick’s sister, in her distress, had called his queen by her real name, but the revelation had not spurred any memories about



who she was. All he knew was that she had met his mother. The conundrum was driving him from his senses and he, who prided himself on his patience, would have liked to have seen Eilís this morning. The lure of her unmasked was a temptation he simply could not withstand.

Richard asked him to join the Matlocks for refreshments, and he accepted as his stomach grumbled its displeasure.

Lord Matlock scowled at him as he entered the breakfast room tailing his cousin. The patriarch disliked Lord Limerick and had already been apprised about his dance partner at the ball.

“I have heard that you danced with Lord Limerick’s niece, Darcy. I forbid you to have any form of acquaintance with that despicable family.”

“Dearest, it was a long time ago.” Lady Matlock tried to placate her husband.

“Twenty odd years is not enough to forget the depravity of that family. You must avoid all association with them. I shall not brook opposition,” the earl thundered.

Darcy raised his eyebrows to Richard, who gave a slight shake of his head in reply. He clearly did not know what his father was talking about either.

“Could you tell us more?”

“It was the greatest scandal that London’s superior society has ever experienced. The marquess’s niece, though he was but an Irish baron back then, married a friend of mine. Sir Arthur was a Scottish baronet with a modest estate in Dollar. She dabbled in counterfeit goods—Egyptian artefacts and coins to be precise. She was caught and convicted in a very public trial. It was the talk of town for years. When was this, Audrey?”

“1789, if I remember correctly,” Lady Matlock mused whilst buttering her roll.

“Yes, I believe that is accurate.”

“I still cannot believe it of Catherine.” Lady Matlock was staring absentmindedly out of the window and spoke to no one in particular.

“I am sorry you were deceived by a family friend,” Lord Matlock comforted his wife, patting her hand.

“Was Lady Catherine involved?” Darcy was incredulous. He could not believe his very proper and strict aunt was a criminal.

“I was not speaking about my sister-in-law,” Lady Matlock corrected him. “Lady Campbell’s Christian name was Catherine. She came out the same year as my youngest sister, but they were bosom friends from an early age. She married the baronet, moved to Scotland, and my sister never spoke to her again. She lived so far north and Felicity in Hertfordshire. By the next Season, she was already incarcerated at Newgate.”

#

A week went by, and the knocker was still not up when Darcy received a disturbing letter from Georgiana. Wickham had been calling on her at Ramsgate, and she fancied herself in love with him. She hoped for her brother’s blessing to marry the ne’er-do-well, which was never going to happen.

He called for his carriage, travelled to Ramsgate as quickly as possible, and managed to save his sister. The journey took him days to complete. He chased Wickham to hell and paid for the servants’ silence. When he returned, Limerick House was empty of its residents; the marquess had clearly recovered enough to leave for his Irish estate.

Darcy would have ridden to Limerick if not for his need to comfort his despondent sister. Not a note had she left him. She could not breach propriety by writing to him herself, but she could have requested that Lord Limerick pen a short missive—instead of leaving him in a void of uncertainty.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Elizabeth

Longbourn, late August 1811

“May I have my green morning dress?” Elizabeth asked Betty.

Betty was the long-suffering lady’s maid shared by all five Bennet sisters.

“It is in the scullery, being washed as we speak.”

It was Elizabeth’s favourite, but she supposed that another would do just as well. It was not as if she was expecting any visitors.

“Oh well, I shall take the blue one.”

“I am sorry, but that too is being washed,” Betty admitted with a frown developing between her brows.

“The yellow?” Elizabeth questioned with less hope.

Betty shook her head.

“This is very strange because I am absolutely certain that I have not worn it since it was cleaned last week.”

“I was a little bewildered when all your dresses were in the laundry basket. I should have asked you,” Betty admitted ruefully.

“I can assure you that it was not I who put them there. Do I have any gowns at all?”

“Yes, the white is in your dressing room.”

“The one which is too short, too tight, and has a large, irremovable stain running almost from top to bottom?”

“Yes.”

The mortification upon realising her blunder was turning Betty’s face crimson. She obviously understood what a mistake she had made, so Elizabeth saw no reason to admonish her. The choice was simple: she must wear the tattered gown or pull down a woollen winter dress from the attic. One glance out of the window disabused her of the latter suggestion; the sun shone brightly without a cloud in sight.

She let Betty help her into the awful garment and went to the breakfast room. She paused on the threshold. Lydia was already seated, which was unusual because her youngest sister preferred to sleep late. Her suspicions rose when Lydia giggled, and Elizabeth was utterly convinced when her youngest sister laughed aloud.

“Did you put all my dresses in the laundry, Lydia?”

“Why would you believe it was me? I always get the blame, even when I am innocent.”

Elizabeth raised her brows and glared at her sister.

“It was a great lark. I suppose I should regard your accusation as a compliment. I am, after all, the only one creative enough to think of it and brave enough to do it.”

Lydia grinned, and Elizabeth looked at her father, who slowly lowered his

newspaper, looked at her, smirked, and dived behind the paper again.

Elizabeth huffed and seated herself in a vacant chair. She buttered her roll with unnecessary force, took a tiny bit of her favourite preserve on her finger and tasted it. She would not put it past Lydia to have added salt or something even more unpalatable to it, but the plum jam tasted delicious.

“Will you read to me after breakfast?” Lydia asked as if she had done nothing wrong. “Papa insists that I learn Roman history.” She pouted, but the Bennet patriarch was unmoved by his youngest’s antics. “I learn much quicker when listening to you read, and I can add new ribbons to my old bonnet. That way, we shall have completed two tasks at once.”

“I cannot. I intend to go on a vigorous walk,” Elizabeth replied firmly. Lydia should have thought about that sooner, preferably before pranking her.

Mr Bennet lowered his paper again. “In that dress?” he wondered aloud.

“I do not mean to be seen,” Elizabeth promised. “I shall not walk on the road, and I certainly have no intention of venturing anywhere near Meryton. I plan to take the western path towards Netherfield, and that house has stood empty for nigh on a year.”

“As long as you avoid detection, I suppose I must allow it.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Elizabeth ate a hearty breakfast before she rose, grabbed her bonnet from the ante room, and hastened out of the door.

The air was warm, and the sun was shining in a clear blue August sky. She set out at a brisk pace but soon realised there was no reason for haste and slowed her walk to a

leisurely stroll. She passed the path leading to Oakham Mount, which would leave her too exposed to passers-by in her current attire, and chose to venture farther towards Netherfield. She had not walked that far since the previous year and thought it a splendid idea to see whether anything was amiss. Avoiding her exasperating sister for as long as possible was another incentive.

Uncle Henry had purchased Netherfield after his sister married the late Mr Bennet and had used it himself in the intervening years when he visited from Ireland. Recently, however, he had chosen to stay in London more and more, and although he had muttered about leasing the estate to someone who would occupy it, the event had never happened. Netherfield had stood empty now for nearly a year. A visit to the forsaken house would give her something to write about in the next letter to her grandmother. That would in turn oblige her to return a letter, and if fortune was on Elizabeth's side, she would mention Mr Darcy.

It was to be hoped that he was searching for her, and making enquiries with Grandmother and Uncle Henry would be the best place to begin. If only they had remained in town... The heat, stench, and the return of undesirable acquaintances had unfortunately sent them packing to áth Dara, and the chance of Mr Darcy travelling as far as Limerick to seek her out was slim to none.

No. Her best chance was that he had enquired about her to someone who kept a correspondence with her grandmother or with Uncle Henry.

Elizabeth's inattention was about to cost her dearly. She was walking on an exposed path along the side of a pond when two gentlemen riders approached from afar. They had not noticed her yet because their heads were turned towards Netherfield House whilst pointing and gesticulating. There was something vaguely familiar about the posture of the taller gentleman that set her heart racing in her chest. Could it truly be Mr Darcy?

In the next blink of an eye, she remembered her dreadful attire, and the need to escape notice was of the utmost importance.

Of course, there was only one place that would conceal her whereabouts but also offer an unobstructed view...

It was a decent scheme that struck her as her only choice, but it came at a price, and in this instance, it was her dignity that would suffer. It was neither proper nor wise, but she flattered herself that she was quite proficient, albeit out of practice. It must have been ten years since she had last climbed a tree. Yet, it was better than to be caught in this hideous, ill-fitting dress. A copse beckoned, and she ran until she reached a low-hanging branch and hauled herself up into the protection of the dense verdure. Her skirt caught and ripped as she climbed, but she did not have time to be cautious.

When she could no longer see more than a glimpse of the ground below, she deemed herself safe enough and found a sturdy branch to sit on with a picturesque view of the pond. The glance down made her cling to the trunk in sheer fright. She closed her eyes and willed her breathing to slow and her racing heart to calm. This had been a terrible idea. Heights had not bothered her at ten, but age had obviously made her fearful. The gentlemen were closing in, and she had better remain in her precarious position or face mortifying embarrassment. Between the two choices, a potential fall did not intimidate her quite so much as falling in Mr Darcy's esteem. She had made her bed and must lie in it, but for the fact that she was sitting, and most uncomfortably so. If only she had had the wherewithal to position herself astride the branch, that would certainly have made her feel safer than she was now. She tucked her skirt under her bottom as the colour did not blend well with the trunk.

She could hear their voices, and they had moved close enough for her to distinguish their words.



“If you decide upon Netherfield, you will have to mend the fences first. Especially if your intention of breeding horses comes to pass. It would cost you dearly if one should escape. I wonder at the value of the endeavour if you will not be able to purchase the property in the not-too-distant future, though.”

Elizabeth would have recognised that voice in a chorus of a hundred people. It was Mr Darcy, and he spoke as if his friend was interested in leasing Netherfield. Uncle Henry must finally have put the property for let.

But why here of all places? Mr Darcy must have discovered her whereabouts and had come to find her under the guise of adviser to a friend looking for an estate. How clever of him to arrive with such a plausible excuse. He had thought about everything and made certain they could become better acquainted without raising too much suspicion in the neighbourhood. She was not surprised; the gentleman she had encountered at the Argyll Rooms was intellectually superior to everyone she had ever met.

“I agree. Mr Phillips answered evasively when I enquired. I shall not move forward with my business before I know for certain that a purchase is possible, but that will not prevent me from leasing the place. What do you say, Darcy. Do you approve?”

Elizabeth held her breath in anticipation. Mr Darcy’s reply would say much about his future plans—and his intentions towards her in particular.

“The house is modern and well kept, it is an easy distance from London, and the location is excellent for your purpose.”

Elizabeth’s heart soared in joy. The giddiness forced her to compose herself and to quash the desire to laugh. If she had not been caught in such an embarrassing situation, she would have scrambled down the trunk, welcomed him to Hertfordshire, and congratulated him on his astuteness. A quick glance towards the ground revealed

a head of dark hair directly beneath her, and she prayed he would not look up or she would surely be discovered. The foliage was by no means rich enough to conceal her from below.

“It is a terribly warm day,” his friend lamented.

“Bingley!” Mr Darcy barked.

For reasons unknown to Elizabeth, he was not amused, but at least she now knew the name of his friend. It might prove a useful piece of information in the future.

“Oh, come on! Our survey is done, and it is sweltering out here. May I remind you that we have been riding since the sun broke the horizon?”

“We enjoyed a pleasant respite at Mr Phillips’s office,” Mr Darcy said.

“If you prefer to reek of sweat and horse while we ride back to London, I cannot help it. But I prefer the pleasant odour of water lilies and reeds above the foul stench I smell at the moment.”

“What if someone happens to see us?” Mr Darcy protested.

“And who would that be?” Mr Bingley’s voice heightened in exasperation. “According to Phillips, it is two miles from Netherfield to Meryton, and we are at least half a mile from the house.”

“Netherfield abuts other estates...”

Mr Darcy must be speaking about Longbourn, Elizabeth surmised, and it pleased her that he had taken the trouble to find her home.

“There is only Longbourn village on this side of the estate, and it is more than two miles west. I dare say the only person we might encounter is Mr Bennet surveying his boundary, and we have nothing he has not seen before. As for the reputed beautiful daughters, I seriously doubt any of them would walk this far.”

“They could ride,” Mr Darcy replied evenly.

“Not along this path,” Mr Bingley protested. “The low-hanging branches would rip the bonnets off their heads.”

Which reminded Elizabeth that she needed to notify Mr Hill that the path was long-due for some trimming. It had lain mostly unused for years, but that would change if Mr Bingley leased Netherfield. Uncle Henry employed a capable steward, and his side of the border was always well maintained.

It was sweet of Mr Bingley to believe her father ever surveyed his land, but Mr Bennet rarely stirred from his beloved books, and he had a steward to address these sorts of matters. Mr Hill could be prevailed upon when needed, but he was not the kind of man who made an effort if it were not strictly necessary.

Mr Bingley laughed. “I knew you would see my way of thinking. The last one in the water is a cowardly nincompoop!”

Elizabeth heard the gentle thumps of two pairs of boots landing on the path, then the rustling of clothing before the sound of fabric being ripped startled her nearly off balance. She closed her eyes as laughter rang out in the air. Mr Bingley had an amusing high-pitched laugh, whilst Mr Darcy’s low rumbles reverberated through her soul.

She fought valiantly to quash her curiosity; it was highly improper to look yet impossible to resist. Slowly, she allowed her eyelids to flutter open.

Water splashed as the gentlemen ran into the water. They would be disappointed when they discovered it was only about knee-deep on a fully grown man, which would do nothing to relieve her current torture.

She should keep her eyes closed, but those organs did not obey her. Instead, they were fixed on two strong and brawny legs splashing water as they ran. Reverently, she let her eyes travel upwards to watch the muscles of his buttocks play under his skin. Above, a narrow waist broadened into a sturdy set of shoulders.

An onslaught of unfamiliar sensations played havoc in her mind and caused her breath to quicken. She was no more capable of forming a coherent thought than she was of taking flight towards the sky.

The gentlemen were at the opposite end before they realised that the pond was very shallow indeed. Mr Bingley laughed, but her eyes were not fixed on him, they were attached to the other gentleman's behind. Mr Darcy flung himself into the water. Then he rose, grinned at his friend, and called the victory. Mr Bingley protested because he had set the first foot in the water, whilst Mr Darcy claimed the glory for being the first to get his hair wet. A friendly squabble ensued that was never concluded before they turned and walked back towards her hiding place.

Elizabeth would have been sent plunging towards the ground by the gentlest breeze, yet she continued to stare through the leaves, unabashed. The gentleman never glanced in her direction, and for that she was grateful. His head remained bent to avoid stepping on the stones and branches the Bennet and Lucas children had thrown into the pond over the years. She spared not a single glance at Mr Bingley. No, it was Mr Darcy's strong, Greek-like figure that held her in rapt attention. It was a sight she would never forget, and if she were to be honest, one she would not mind revisiting.

The gentlemen disappeared underneath the verdure of the tree she was sitting in. They wrestled with their saddle bags, and it sounded as if they were drying off before

dressing.

“You should not have ripped your shirt, especially since you lost in any case,” Mr Darcy snickered.

“Firstly, I won the race, and secondly, no one will be able to tell that my shirt is ripped beneath my coat and cravat.”

“Do you even know how to tie your own?”

“I am not completely without skills, Darcy, but no. Tying a cravat is not among my accomplishments.”

“Do you need help?”

“Yes,” Mr Bingley admitted dejectedly.

“I shall tie your cravat if you admit that I won the race.”

Mr Bingley groaned before he laughed. “One day I shall outwit you, even if it is the last thing I do.”

“It is easily done,” Mr Darcy allowed. “You are more proficient at currying the ladies’ favour and more agreeable in company. In both instances you are in every way superior to me.”

Elizabeth nearly swooned at Mr Darcy’s humility, though she heartily disagreed—he was perfectly capable of wooing a lady...

The gentlemen mounted their horses, and rhythmical thumps notified her that they were moving away. With a sigh of relief, Elizabeth climbed gingerly down from the

tree, smoothed her threadbare skirt, and strolled happily back to Longbourn.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Mrs Bennet

Longbourn, September

“We shall all need new dresses,” Mrs Bennet rejoiced.

Mr Bingley had let Netherfield. It was said he was a gentleman of fortune, and he was rumoured to be attending the monthly assembly in just a fortnight.

“How so? I can see no reason for such an extravagance before I have even received the rents due at Michaelmas,” Mr Bennet protested. “I am certain our daughters can outdo all our neighbours just as well at the next assembly as this one.”

“How can you be so tiresome? Mrs Nicholls told Mrs Long that Mr Bingley was certain to attend. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single gentleman in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. You know as well as I that Mrs Goulding’s nieces will be dressed to the nines. Surely you must have funds stowed away somewhere amongst all this clutter.”

Mrs Bennet frowned as her eyes travelled across her husband’s study. The dark, masculine room was filled to the brim with books, a chessboard, and a collection of insects.

“Will you leave my study if I give you some funds?”

“That depends on how much you are forwarding. I implore you to remember that we have five daughters, and I would not mind something new myself.”

Mrs Bennet picked an imaginary speck of lint off her fichu and smoothed her skirts, refusing to meet her husband's probing gaze.

"I shall strongly advise against it. With your beauty, Mr Bingley might find you the fairest of them all."

"Do not be ridiculous. Although I once was a great beauty, having five grown daughters has certainly taken my mind off any consideration for myself."

Unaware of the contradiction in her two statements, she pondered how to make her husband understand the significance of her request. It was vital that one of her daughters produce a son. She made herself comfortable in the chair opposite her spouse.

Mr Bennet sighed and pulled a black box from his bottom drawer. Keeping the contents hidden from her view, he withdrew a few banknotes, then returned the box to its safe place and locked the drawer before handing the notes to his wife.

Mrs Bennet accepted and counted the bills with a frown.

"This chair is surprisingly comfortable," she mused, relaxing into the seat.

It was Mr Bennet's turn to frown. Mrs Bennet pretended not to notice and continued to fidget with her money.

Mr Bennet jerked the drawer open and slammed the box onto his desk. Grumbling, he offered her a significantly larger stack of notes.

"How good of you, my dear Mr Bennet. I knew I would persuade you. I was certain that you loved your girls too much to neglect their attire. Well, how pleased I am! And it was such a good joke, too, that you pretended to be stingy. What an excellent



father you are. I do not know how I shall ever repay your kindness.”

“If I am not mistaken, you promised to leave my study,” Mr Bennet reminded his wife. “My coffers have been thoroughly emptied, and I assure you I have nothing more for you to extort.”

“More? Oh, that is definitely not necessary. I am certain what you have already given me is quite sufficient. In fact, I might have settled for a little less.” She smiled, rounding the desk to give Mr Bennet a soft peck on his forehead.

“Thank you ever so much. I shall leave you to your business and share the good news with our girls.”

As predicted, Mrs Bennet’s daughters were all delighted to be provided with new dresses and lauded their good fortune. The money was shared equally, and the cackling noise such a blessing produced surely travelled down the hall into Mr Bennet’s study. Mrs Bennet gleefully imagined the patriarch lowering his head into his hands as she called for the carriage to be readied.

#

Elizabeth

Half an hour later, the Bennet ladies entered Mrs Elliswick’s combined drapery and haberdashery.

“Lizzy, can I have some of your money? You always wear your yellow dress,” Lydia begged.

“Absolutely not,” Elizabeth protested vehemently.

Mrs Bennet turned and studied her so intently that Elizabeth blushed. She could not reveal to her sisters why it was so important to her to have a new dress because their teasing would be relentless, and they might very well decide to embarrass her in front of the gentleman in question. That depended upon whether Mr Darcy would accompany Mr Bingley to the assembly, or even to Netherfield, but why would he have encouraged his friend to take the place if not for the excuse to be near her? She had every reason to hope.

Elizabeth glanced at Jane. She had not even confided her encounter to her most beloved sister. It was a secret she had kept completely to herself, as her reputation would be irrevocably ruined if anyone discovered what she had done.

Lydia continued to whine, and Elizabeth grew increasingly concerned that her mother would force her to comply. Jane saved her by offering Lydia some of her own money, but Mrs Bennet would not hear of it, and Lydia was left to sulk until it was her turn to choose a fabric.

Elizabeth chose a white sheer muslin and a broad silk ribbon for her waist. It was expensive because so many layers were needed lest she embarrass herself with a diaphanous habit, but she left only one layer for the short, puffed sleeves. It was not as if her upper arms were something to conceal. In addition, she purchased pearls to adorn the finished dress.

The next two weeks flew by in preparations, and fortunately, all the dresses were finished in time for the ball.

#

The night of the assembly.

Elizabeth was speaking to her friend Charlotte Lucas when the assembly doors

opened to admit Mr Bingley, his two sisters, the eldest's husband, and an unknown entity towering behind him. The familiar shape drew her eyes whilst her heart pounded wildly in her chest. It would not do to be caught ogling him. Yet, her body went rigid at the mere sight of Mr Darcy—though he was more formally attired than at their last encounter. Mr Bingley was handsome with easy, unaffected manners. His sisters were fine ladies with an air of decided fashion. Mr Hurst only looked the part of a gentleman, but Mr Darcy's Adonis-like figure soon had all the eyes in the room directed at him.

It was easily discernible that Mr Darcy did not relish the attention, or the admiring looks. Elizabeth could be nothing but relieved by that notion. He was clearly not impressed by the ladies who flocked to his delectable presence and coquettishly fluttered their lashes at him.

Soon the news of his reputed ten thousand a year was in general circulation. Elizabeth had not known he was so very wealthy, and the knowledge that his income exceeded her father's fivefold was slightly daunting.

Mr Bingley asked Charlotte for the first set, and as they moved away to join the forming lines, Sir William approached the Bennets.

"Mr Bingley is an agreeable gentleman, and I dare say he would do very well for my Charlotte. But his friend cuts an even finer figure. Would you allow me to introduce the very estimable Mr Darcy?" Sir William asked.

Jane swirled towards her, and Elizabeth sent her an almost imperceptible shake of her head. Her eldest sister was aware of her association with Mr Darcy at the masquerade ball, but Elizabeth did not want everybody else to know because that would turn their relationship into a public spectacle.

The last thing Elizabeth wanted was for their reintroduction to be made by the kind

but loquacious Sir William. He had a habit of droning on and on about his visit to St James's, and she would not have that moment marred with insipid conversation. She was a little miffed that Mr Darcy had yet to seek her out. He must know her name, even though he did not know her face. She imagined he had enquired about her in town and had discovered her real name and the direction of her father's estate—why else would he have come to Meryton? Perhaps he thought it wise to pretend they did not share a prior acquaintance because that would draw the attention of the tattlers and not allow them much freedom in each other's company. Her neighbours were a curious lot and would eavesdrop at every opportunity. No, it was best to be circumspect and avoid bringing attention to their reunion. She hardly managed to finish the thought when Mr Darcy turned abruptly away from the kind Sir William and bowed to one of Mr Bingley's sisters.

"I am afraid that you are too late, Sir William. The gentleman has already engaged Miss Bingley for the next set," Elizabeth announced before Jane pulled her away almost as rudely as Mr Darcy had snubbed an introduction.

"I need your aid," Jane commanded.

Elizabeth had little choice but to follow. As she was dragged out of the room, she noticed the longing glance Mr Bingley directed at her most beautiful sister. She smiled at him, and he had the decency to blush a little, which spoke well of his modesty.

Jane continued her march straight out of the assembly hall and ambled a little farther down the lane for good measure.

"Lizzy, was that your Mr Darcy?" Jane enquired breathlessly.

"He is not my Mr Darcy," Elizabeth clarified. She had never had the courage to relate her tender feelings towards the gentleman, only that he had been a pleasant partner.

Jane huffed impatiently. “You know what I mean—the gentleman with whom you danced at the masquerade.”

“That, he is...” Elizabeth admitted with a sigh of contentment.

“Then why did you not greet him before he engaged someone else to dance?”

“Because I do not want every busybody in Meryton to gossip about us before we have had a chance to become better acquainted. I scarcely know anything about him, and he knows even less about me. If I had singled him out from the moment he entered, we would not have a moment of peace. Not to forget what machinations Mama would subject us to. No, believe me, it is better this way. I am convinced that I shall have a chance to speak to him during the course of the evening. But for now, we had best return to the ball because I have it on good authority that Mr Bingley would like to request your next set. So, it would not do to tarry much longer in this abandoned street.”

“He is everything a young man ought to be, is he not?” Jane smiled in the darkness.

“He is very amiable,” Elizabeth allowed whilst leading her sister back into the assembly room. “Pray, do not mention to anyone about my prior acquaintance with Mr Darcy. At least not until we have had the time to reconvene.”

“You have my word,” Jane promised solemnly.

The sight of him dancing with another lady, and one as beautiful and fashionable as Miss Bingley, at that, did sting a little. But he would have been abominably rude if he had not paid the respect a sister of a friend deserved. The thought comforted her, and the unpleasant notion soon passed.

The set ended, and Mr Darcy immediately engaged Mr Bingley’s married sister. He

surely wanted to finish his duty sets to reserve the rest of the evening for her pleasure, as he had done at the Argyll Rooms. They had danced two sets and had spoken for more than an hour together, before, between, and after.

When half the evening had passed, Elizabeth's concern rose by each passing minute. The Meryton ladies' favourable impression of Mr Darcy was waning. Most had already decided that he was too proud, believed himself to be above his company, and was impossibly difficult to please. Whilst Mr Bingley had made the acquaintance of the principal people in the room, Mr Darcy stalked the outskirts of the party, wearing a most forbidding and disagreeable countenance.

Mary was hiding in the shadows of a column. By the look of her hunched posture, Elizabeth worried that she had suffered a great disappointment. She approached her sister and sat beside her.

"Pray, are you well, Mary?"

"I am quite well, though I wish Sir William had ordered more candles. It is impossible to read in this poor lighting."

"I dare say that would have defeated your purpose because then it would have been even foggier from the tallow."

Mary sighed and shut her book with a thump.

"What were you reading?" Elizabeth asked for the sake of a topic for conversation.

"Meditations by Marcus Aurelius."

"The philosopher and Roman emperor?" she asked in bewilderment. Her sister was fond of Fordyce's sermons, and she was surprised to learn that Mary was reading

something else.

“For it is one of the acts of life, this act by which we die. It is sufficient then in this act to also do well what we have in hand.”

“True, and so should we when no partners are to be had. We shall be satisfied with entertaining ourselves. Would you rather admire the splendid dancing, or do you relish some conversation?”

“I would prefer to read,” was Mary’s pithy reply.

Quite contrary to the philosopher she has just quoted, Elizabeth thought. It was not possible to always be content with what one had, and she surveyed the assembled guests for an obtainable dance partner. Curious, she stared at Mr Bingley’s good-looking and pleasant countenance. He was dancing with Jane, who was glowing under his marked attention. He must have made himself agreeable indeed to produce the delighted blushes that suffused her sister’s cheeks.

The set ended, and Mr Bingley was immediately accosted by Sir William. By his response to the master of ceremonies, who was prone to think too highly of his own importance, she deemed him gentlemanlike. Which was more than she could say about his sisters. With an air of superiority, they raised their noses against the motley assembly but for Jane, whom they whisked away to the refreshment table. The portly husband of the eldest sister was attached to the arm of his wife, but by the glances he sent towards the card room, Elizabeth surmised he wished to be elsewhere.

Sir William should not have interrupted Mr Bingley, or he, instead of his sisters, would certainly have escorted Jane to the punch.

Elizabeth turned to Mary to observe Mr Darcy clandestinely in the periphery of her vision. He kept his head fixed on the floor until he passed Sir William and Mr

Bingley and had no choice but to be introduced to Mrs Bennet, Jane, Kitty, and Lydia. He nodded curtly, turned on his heel, and departed to resume his strutting round the room. Elizabeth gasped when he turned unexpectedly towards her.

A sudden onslaught of nerves made her acutely embarrassed. “May I borrow your book, Mary?”

“Why? You will not be able to read it.”

“Nevertheless, I would like to see it.”

Mr Darcy was coming in their direction, and she needed something to hide behind until her faculties returned.

Mary complied with a huff, and Elizabeth opened the book to peer over the rim. It was possible to read when you held it this close. Mary needs spectacles , she mused whilst Mr Darcy halted uncomfortably near to where she was seated. Fortunately, he turned towards the dancers. Mr Bingley was speaking to Mrs Bennet whilst staring moon-eyed across the room at Jane.

Mr Darcy shifted his stance, and Elizabeth ducked behind the book. Her gaze fell on a random sentence that emboldened her. Remember

how long thou hast been putting off these things, and how often thou hast received the opportunity from the gods, and yet dost not use it. Thou must now at last perceive of what universe thou art a part, and of what administrator of the universe thy existence is an efflux, and that a limit of time is fixed for thee, which if thou dost not use for clearing away the clouds from thy mind, it will go, and thou wilt go, and it will never return.

Elizabeth closed the book and handed it back to Mary. Should she dare approach Mr



Darcy or continue in the vein she had thus far—admiring from a safe distance what she craved the most. Bravely, she made to rise, when an exuberant Mr Bingley joined his friend, and her courage left her. If only he had brought Jane to introduce us properly, she lamented when their family was mentioned. She strained to hear but took pains to hide her eavesdropping from the gentlemen.

“I must have you dance,” Mr Bingley encouraged his friend.

Mr Darcy thoroughly rejected the idea and even told an untruth—that he detested the exercise unless he was particularly acquainted with his partner. He was acquainted with her ; they had danced and spoken at length at the masquerade. He must know her face by now. Like his name and fortune had been bandied about the room, so had the reputed beauty of the Bennet sisters—usually referring to the two eldest in particular.

It was at that moment that Mr Bingley turned Mr Darcy’s attention towards her, suggesting her as a particularly desirable partner, and she held her breath in anticipation. He had been made aware of her presence. She almost giggled but quashed the impulse lest that lead him to believe she was not a fully grown woman.

Mr Darcy’s gaze lingered upon her. She kept her chin high and her eyes on the dancers performing before her. He will soon recognise me and certainly request at least one set.

Elizabeth imagined the different approaches he could make. Like exclaiming his regrets for not immediately recognising the beautiful lady and offering to save her from her tedious position against the wall as he had once saved her from the enraged, trampling horse. Her mind wandered back to that glorious day in Lambton.

She was so occupied by her thoughts that she almost missed Mr Darcy’s reply to his friend’s insistence he should dance. Shame enveloped her like the deluge of a waterfall. In the next instant, rage replaced her embarrassment. Mr Darcy spouted

nonsense—a palpable gross absurdity.

Tolerable, indeed!

Elizabeth's heart constricted most painfully in her chest. How can he be so cruel? Or have I been wretchedly blind? I who pride myself upon my discernment. Elizabeth looked frequently in the mirror, and not once had she believed herself to be so unpalatably ugly as to be rejected upon the merits of her face. The thought had never entered her mind, but Mr Darcy's slights were by no means at an end; he still had to disparage her further.

"I am in no humour, at the moment, to give consequence to ladies who are slighted by other men. You..."

Elizabeth thought her humiliation was complete but was at that very moment proved utterly mistaken.

"Are you blind?" Mrs Bennet interrupted, startling the gentlemen. She had sidled up unnoticed and glared aghast at Mr Darcy. "You must be very short-sighted if not."

"My eyesight is perfectly adequate," Mr Darcy bristled.

"Heaven forfend! Imagine the audacity!" Mrs Bennet cried. "I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt after you have been prancing around the room all evening as the perfect peacock, but as your sight is not impaired you must allow me to enquire. Who are you to think yourself so high above the good people of Meryton? You may fancy yourself so very important, but let me tell you, you are nobody of consequence in this neighbourhood!"

Mr Darcy scowled at Mrs Bennet, who was not cowed. Beside her, Mary rose and hastened to her mother's side. Elizabeth shrank in her seat. Nothing good could come

of Mary's preaching.

"Pride," observed Mary, who ironically prided herself on the solidity of her own reflections, "is a quite common failing, I believe. Human nature is particularly prone to cherish the feeling of complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary."

Mr Darcy did not say a single word in reply. Her mother huffed and walked away whilst lamenting the rudeness of young men today. Elizabeth reminded herself that evils were sent into the world for humans to endure and not to fly in the face of their God at every provocation. It had not the desired calming effect, and as she had heard quite enough, she rose swiftly from her chair and accidentally, or not, stepped on the offending gentleman's toes on her escape across the room.

She dipped into a shallow curtsy and muttered an insincere apology before hastening as far away from the oaf as she was able. It was a blessing that Charlotte was standing at the opposite end of the assembly room, and she approached her with intent purpose.

"Dearest Charlotte!"

Her friend's expression was a combination of concern and confusion. It was the right expression if Elizabeth had related what Mr Darcy had just said, but he must not for a moment believe that he had truly injured her. She was completely indifferent to the

gentleman, who barely warranted the name, and she must ensure that he was so apprised.

"Would you laugh as if I had just told you an amusing jest?"

Charlotte's expression changed from light bewilderment to full-fledged astonishment.

“Please, I shall explain later.”

Charlotte complied and laughed lightly.

“You will explain yourself promptly for compelling me to perjure myself. It is uncomfortably warm in here. I suggest we take the air to cool ourselves.”

Charlotte fanned her face for good measure.

Elizabeth forced a smile and laced her arm with her friend's. With their heads pulled closely together, they left the assembly room and entered the small garden. Once out of the door, Elizabeth released her clammy hold and began pacing before Charlotte, who chose to sit on the only bench.

“Please tell me, what has you at sixes and sevens?”

“A ghost from the past,” Elizabeth muttered without slowing down. “An addleheaded, crack-brained, clod pole!”

“What is the matter? I have never seen you so unsettled.”

“I am perfectly well,” she lied. “I have simply been subjected to the cruellest and most ungentlemanly ridicule. I had to escape before I lost my temper, and I am most grateful for your timely rescue.”

“Does trampling on a poor gentleman's toes count as keeping your composure?” Charlotte probed with a slight smile.

“Yes. When one is provoked to claw someone's eyes out, I deem a slight discomfort to the toes the least to be expected.”

Charlotte giggled, but her countenance soon turned serious.

“You cannot go about offending a respectable gentleman such as Mr Darcy. He is not of our sphere and is a man of great consequence.”

“I am perfectly aware of his consequence. It is his person that I object to.”

“Why? What can he have done to you to deserve such disrespect? As far as I can tell, you have not exchanged one word while spending two hours in the same room with no dialogue between you.”

“It is a long story.”

“Then it is a good thing that I have nothing better to do than listen to a dear friend, and I dare say you promised me an explanation.”

Elizabeth stopped pacing and regarded Charlotte quizzically, pondering how much she should relate and how much she should conceal.

“Do you remember the boy who rescued me from the wild and vicious horse I was so stupid as to approach?”

“Yes, who could forget? You lauded your handsome knight for years—” Charlotte halted abruptly and appeared contemplative. “It cannot be?”

“It can. It was Mr Darcy.”

“Then why are we here? We shall return promptly inside and find your hero. You must, at the very least, thank him for his bravery.”

Charlotte rose from the bench and walked towards the entrance. Elizabeth hastened

her stride and grabbed her friend's hand to stop her.

"No. Please do not. Resume your seat."

"Whyever not?" Charlotte enquired, yet she did what Elizabeth suggested.

Elizabeth sat heavily beside her and hid her face in her hands. "Because he has just insulted me most grievously, and when I believed nothing worse could be said, he mortified me beyond redemption." Her voice was hoarse and muffled by her hands.

"Eavesdroppers never hear anything good about themselves," Charlotte reminded her.

Elizabeth leapt to her feet, resumed her restless pacing, and told her friend about Mr Darcy's mortifying words. After this admission, she slumped down on the bench and buried her head in her hands. "My mother heard, and she accused him of being a nobody in Meryton, and Mary eagerly joined in to preach about improper pride. I have never been so humiliated in all my life," she sobbed. "How could he do it? How could he, within a few months, have changed from the witty and charming gentleman I met in town to a disdainful and selfish oaf who has no regard for my feelings?"

"Dearest Elizabeth, I had no idea that you met him in town."

Elizabeth removed her hands from her face and drew a fortifying breath. It was better to relate the last without facing her friend. Instead, she gazed into the darkness. "I did not tell you because I thought I would never see him again. We met at a masquerade ball at the Argyll Rooms, a week before I returned to Meryton. He had discarded his mask, so I immediately recognised him. I hardly believed my luck when he requested an introduction. I eagerly accepted, and we danced two sets and spoke for the rest of the evening. He singled me out—in a ballroom filled with the most beautiful, accomplished, and even some titled ladies. How could I not be flattered?"

Charlotte embraced her, and Elizabeth rested her aching head on her friend's shoulder.

"Has the gentleman touched your heart?" Charlotte gently enquired.

"Yes," Elizabeth whispered.

They sat in quiet contemplation until Elizabeth managed to compose herself tolerably well.

"As for his pride," Charlotte remarked, "he has a right to think highly of himself. Mr Darcy is an exceptionally fine young man with family, fortune, connections, and everything in his favour. It is his behaviour towards you that offends me. He was probably the object of rumours of the marital kind after the masquerade. Could he simply be trying to quash them to avoid ruining your reputation?"

"Too far-fetched. I am certain that Grandmother or Uncle Henry would have notified me if such was the case."

Charlotte shivered, and Elizabeth sat up. "You are cold and should go back inside," she admonished.

"Will you join me?"

"Only as far as the anteroom to fetch my pelisse. Would you be so kind as to tell my mother that I have returned home with a headache?"

"You cannot walk alone in the dark!"

"I shall take the carriage."

“Is there anything I can say to persuade you to stay?”

“Indeed, there is not.”

“Very well.” Charlotte rose, and they walked inside, parting at the anteroom.

“I shall see you in the morning when Mama calls on Mrs Bennet.”

“I shall look forward to it with pleasure,” Elizabeth lied as she left and made her way to their family’s carriage, which was fortunately waiting just outside the assembly hall.

Her father was still awake when she reached Longbourn, but she required only solitude and retired to her chamber with a sore heart.

#

Lady Lucas was a good and kind woman who was not too clever to be a valuable neighbour to Mrs Bennet. She had several children of which the majority were boys, but the two daughters were the Bennet girls’ intimate friends. After an assembly, the Lucas ladies paid an absolutely necessary visit to Longbourn to enumerate every little detail from the eventful ball.

It pained Elizabeth to even hear about Mr Darcy, but he was naturally the focal point. His ill-treatment of Elizabeth and disagreeable manners were communicated to exhaustion. Fortunately, Mr Bingley’s attentiveness to Jane eventually steered the conversation to a more pleasant topic, and Elizabeth could ease her troubled mind with her sister’s good report.

Charlotte’s fortune in securing Mr Bingley’s first set had soon been surpassed by him dancing two sets with a blushing Jane.



“Oh yes. I heard him call her an angel,” Elizabeth added to their discussion about Mr Bingley’s intentions.

“I heard Mr Robinson ask Mr Bingley how he liked Meryton and who was the most beautiful girl in the room. He replied immediately to the latter, ‘ Oh, Miss Bennet. There cannot be two opinions upon that point.’” Charlotte imitated Mr Bingley’s voice.

“Upon my word! That was very decided. Oh well, it may still come to nothing, you know,” Mrs Bennet gushed, rather flustered.

“My overhearings were more to the purpose than yours, Eliza,” Charlotte continued.

Elizabeth had hoped they had exhausted the theme about her encounter with Mr Darcy, but that was obviously too much to ask.

“Mr Darcy is not so worth listening to as his friend, is he? Poor Eliza!—to be only just tolerable.”

“I beg you not to put it into Lizzy’s head to be vexed by Mr Darcy’s ill-treatment, Charlotte. He is such a disagreeable man. It would be a misfortune to be liked by him,” Mrs Bennet established firmly. “You must write a letter to Maeve. You know I do not have time to write, Lizzy. You must tell her to give him the cut direct when she returns to town. He is not worth speaking to because he sat by Mrs Long for half an hour without a word spoken between them.”

“I am certain you are mistaken, Mama,” Jane intervened on Mr Darcy’s behalf. “I saw him speaking to Mrs Long.”

“That was only because she asked him a question he could not refuse to answer.” Mrs Bennet would not allow herself to be mollified when her mind was set.

“Miss Bingley told me,” Jane said, “that he does not speak much unless he is intimately acquainted with his partner. With his friends, he is remarkably agreeable.”

“I do not believe a word of it.” Mrs Bennet raised her chin. “If he had been agreeable, he would have spoken to Mrs Long.”

“I would rather wish he had danced with Eliza,” Charlotte suggested.

Elizabeth leapt to her feet. “Please excuse me,” she said but did not give a reason for her abrupt departure from what had become a torment. She did not escape quickly enough to miss her mother’s protest, however.

“Lizzy must never dance with Mr Darcy, or I shall never speak to her again!”

## Page 6

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The Longbourn ladies soon waited upon the ladies at Netherfield. Elizabeth was fortunate that the gentlemen were out shooting when they called. The visit was returned in due form, and it was obvious that Jane's pleasing manners had earned the goodwill of Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley; however, it was equally clear that they found Mrs Bennet intolerable and the other sisters not worth speaking to. Jane received their attention with pleasure, but Elizabeth saw superciliousness in how they treated everybody and could not like them. She would have gladly avoided the acquaintance if it had not been so obvious that Mr Bingley admired Jane and that her sister was on her way to reciprocating his feelings.

The Bennets were invited to Lucas Lodge for a dinner party, and to Elizabeth's consternation and Jane's delight, the Netherfield party was present.

Elizabeth noticed she was becoming an object of interest to Mr Darcy and was conscious at all times of the whereabouts of the gentleman. Whenever he walked in her direction, she moved the opposite way, which happened quite frequently in the course of the evening.

Suspicion arose that he was intentionally following her as they engaged in a game of cat and mouse. She was winning until Charlotte requested she entertain the guests at the pianoforte, which would not allow her to escape should he move her way.

"You are a strange friend who always wants me to sing and perform before all and sundry. My vanity does not move in that direction, and I would rather not perform before those who are accustomed to the very best."

"You cannot continue to avoid Mr Darcy. If you allowed him to become acquainted

with you, you might change his misguided opinion.”

“Thank you, but no. I am as acquainted with that gentleman as I ever wish to be.”

“I see... Would you at least sing one song? Then I promise not to request anything more from you for the rest of the evening. You have a particularly lovely voice that never fails to captivate me, and it would not be amiss to display your best talent before the Netherfield party.”

Elizabeth humoured her friend, though her fingering was sorely lacking the practice necessary to be deemed proficient. What worried Elizabeth was whether a certain gentleman might offer to turn the pages if he was indeed following her. If that was the case, she had a ready solution.

“Mary? You read music so well, would you mind turning the pages for me?”

“Certainly.” Mary preened at the praise, and the sisters assumed their seats at the pianoforte.

Elizabeth looked at the sheets of music and barely avoided Mr Darcy’s piercing glare. He was nowhere near the instrument, but unfortunately that only gave him a better view. She quashed a shudder and wished that the ever-present Miss Bingley would occupy him for the duration of her song. It was however vital that she found a piece she could play reasonably well so as not to suffer any further mortification.

She espied *Rose on the Heath*, after the poem *Heidenrosling* by Goethe, and thought it quite fitting. Perhaps she should seek to revenge herself, as the rose did in the song.

“A good choice. It fits your voice,” Mary commented.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth replied and began singing.

“ Once a boy a rosebud spied,

Heathrose fair and tender.

All array’d in youthful pride—

quickly to the spot he hied,

ravished by her splendour.

Rosebud, rosebud, rosebud red,

Rosebud fair and tender.

Said the boy, ‘I’ll now pick thee,

Heathrose fair and tender.’

Said the rosebud, ‘I’ll prick thee,

So that thou’lt remember me.

Ne’er will I surrender.’

Rosebud, rosebud, rosebud red,

Rosebud fair and tender.

Now the cruel boy must pick

Heathrose fair and tender.

Rosebud did her best to prick.

Vain 'twas 'gainst her fate to kick—

she must needs surrender.

Rosebud, rosebud, rosebud red,

Rosebud fair and tender.” [2]

The assembled guests were uncommonly quiet, and Elizabeth immediately regretted allowing herself to be persuaded. She glanced at Mary, who was blinking rapidly.

“I am quite overcome. I have never heard you sing with so much feeling,” Mary whispered as the applause began in earnest.

Elizabeth was lauded by her neighbours, who came forwards and formed a protective ring around her. She was sheltered from the certain disapproving glare of Mr Darcy, but Miss Bingley entered their midst.

“I shall happily provide you with the address of my master, if you wish to improve your fingering.”

She slid onto the pianoforte stool, forcing Mary to yield, and played Dussek's Sonatina with perfect fingering.

After Miss Bingley's performance, Lydia begged Sir William for dancing, and the knight was by nature friendly and obliging. Furniture was moved out of the way, and Mary finally had her turn to exhibit at the pianoforte. Elizabeth circled the room and watched her sisters enjoy themselves. Lydia's lively dancing of the reel must take the blame for her inattentiveness because when Sir William called out to her, she

immediately obliged him.

The hair rose on her neck when she discovered that Sir William was engaged in conversation with Mr Darcy, or rather a monologue, judging by the latter gentleman's tightly closed lips. She dipped into a curtsy and turned abruptly to make her escape.

“My dear Miss Eliza!”

Elizabeth disregarded Sir William's pleas and found refuge out of doors. She rushed down the steps from the terrace and hid behind some shrubs. Once she had regained her breath she acknowledged the childishness of her behaviour. One must hope that the gentleman soon tired of their neighbourhood and returned to town. He certainly did not appear to enjoy either balls or dinner engagements. It would be in everyone's interest if he left, she agreed with herself.

The hinges on the terrace door squeaked. Elizabeth startled, held her breath, and hoped that it was Charlotte and not Sir William. She could not excuse or explain her rude behaviour to the kind but loquacious man.

“I can guess the subject of your reveries.”

It was Miss Bingley's grating voice, and the reply would reveal her company.

“I should imagine not.”

The mellow tones of Mr Darcy made Elizabeth quiver involuntarily.

“You are amazed and bedazzled by Miss Eliza Bennet's enchanting voice and incomparable beauty.”

“You deem her a beauty?” Mr Darcy's incredulity laced his tone. “I would as soon

call her mother a wit!”

Elizabeth sank to her knees whilst Miss Bingley giggled.

“You are so droll, Mr Darcy. If we were not in company, I would have laughed aloud. You simply must tell me what you said to her at the assembly that offended her so grievously. Miss Eliza is avoiding you as if you were the devil himself.”

“I assure you that it has nothing to do with me. We have never been so much as introduced. I do not know why she is behaving so strangely, and I am of no mind to discover it.”

Mr Darcy’s voice rose with each syllable. He sounded terribly angry, which baffled Elizabeth. If anyone had reason to be vexed it was she—not the swaggering oaf.

“I am only jesting. I have no interest in Meryton’s hoydens. Imagine how insupportable it would be spending many evenings in this manner of society. I was never more annoyed. The insipidity, the noise, yet they are all so self-important. What I would give to hear your strictures on them.”

“Your conjectures are all wrong,” Mr Darcy decried petulantly, and the hinges squeaked again.

Elizabeth heard a feminine huff before the hinges cried for the last time that evening. She walked round the house and re-entered through the front door. Charlotte was waiting for her in the anteroom with her shawl in her hands.

“Shall I inform your family that you have a headache?” she enquired dully.

“Yes please,” Elizabeth agreed, regarding her friend quizzically.



“I owe you an apology,” Charlotte offered.

“Whatever for?” Elizabeth asked.

“For forcing you to sing when you were not inclined to perform.”

Elizabeth pulled Charlotte in for a fierce hug.

“My current indisposition has nothing to do with my song. I am pleased to have induced Mary to tears. I shall tell you all about it when you visit on the morrow. At the moment, I am in dire need of headache powder and my bed.”

Charlotte returned the hug and smiled wanly.

“I hope you recover soon.”

“I am certain I shall.” Elizabeth smiled and left.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

It was some mornings past the Lucases' dinner party that Jane received an invitation from Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. She hastily read it while the servant awaited a reply.

"Read it aloud," Mrs Bennet demanded, her eyes sparkling.

"Miss Bingley has invited me for a whole day's tête-à-tête. The gentlemen are to dine with the officers."

"Dining out," said Mrs Bennet. "That is very unlucky."

"May I have the carriage?" Jane pleaded.

"You may not. Think of what your father would say if the horses were to be away for the entire day," Mrs Bennet admonished.

"Generally, those among us who are called patricians are rather deficient in paternal affections [3] ," Mary interjected.

"Her father does not mind," Mr Bennet drawled from behind his newspaper.

"You must go on horseback." Mrs Bennet looked gleefully out of the window whilst disregarding Mr Bennet. "It looks like it is going to rain, and then you will have to stay the night!"

Mrs Bennet attended Jane to the door with cheerful prognostications of inclement weather, and Jane had not been away for long before it rained hard. Mrs Bennet was

delighted, but Elizabeth became uneasy when the rain continued without intermission for the rest of the day.

“This was indeed a lucky idea of mine,” Mrs Bennet mentioned more than once through the course of the evening. Just how fortuitous she had been was proved the next morning when a note was delivered to Elizabeth. Jane had taken ill.

Contradictory emotions warred within Elizabeth. Jane said she suffered a trifling cold, but knowing her sister as well as Elizabeth did, she knew she would not complain unnecessarily. That she had written at all was proof she was very ill indeed. On the other hand, there was the matter of Mr Darcy, whom she would prefer to avoid.

She could manage to enter Netherfield clandestinely through the kitchen. But she was being silly. What was Mr Darcy to her? Absolutely nothing! Jane was infinitely more important, and she needed her sister. Come to think of it, Miss Bingley had not a nurturing bone in her body. Jane must be suffering neglect—or worse, tedious company.

Elizabeth declared her resolution to visit the patient. The carriage horses were occupied in the fields, so she would have to walk, but the distance was nothing when one had the motive.

“May I borrow your book, Mary?”

“You may. I have finished it,” Mary acquiesced and fetched the tome.

The three miles were done in an hour, though her skirts suffered in the dirty, wet grounds. She was approaching the kitchen in long strides when she heard Mr Darcy call her name. She imagined herself to be her mother, who proficiently and frequently overlooked her father’s calls for attention, and hastened through the door, where the

housekeeper, Mrs Nicholls, was ever so pleased to see her.

“I have come to enquire about my sister,” Elizabeth said.

Mrs Nicholls expressed her relief she was there because Jane was not well at all. She offered to escort Elizabeth to her sister, but it was then that Elizabeth’s luck ran out. The housekeeper, who was unaware of her tactic of avoidance, led her first to the dining room, where the entire Netherfield party were having breakfast. Elizabeth curtsied, stated her errand, and was taken to a feverish Jane before anyone had recovered enough to return her greeting. Poor Jane had begun coughing after she had sent the note.

When the clock struck three, Elizabeth felt she had to return home. Miss Bingley offered her a carriage, which so distressed Jane that the lady had to rescind the offer and instead invite her to stay.

Elizabeth would have politely declined if Jane had not been so ill. She accepted reluctantly and wrote a note to Longbourn to send necessities to the two sisters.

#

At half past six there was a knock on the door.

Elizabeth walked as quietly as she could so as not to awaken Jane, who had finally fallen asleep. She opened the door with a finger to her lips, slipping out and closing it behind her before asking what the maid wanted.

“Dinner is served, miss. Mr Bingley is eager for you to join their party.”

Indecision warred within her. It would be abominably rude to reject Mr Bingley’s kind offer, and the maid was already aware that Jane slept.

“I shall sit with Miss Bennet while you eat,” the maid offered, sensing Elizabeth’s reluctance to leave the patient unattended.

“Thank you.” Elizabeth surrendered to that which was unavoidable and walked down the stairs towards the voices emanating from the dining room. She halted just outside the door to straighten her back and bolster her spirits.

“She has nothing to recommend her but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning.”

The voice sounded like Mrs Hurst, which was confirmed by Miss Bingley’s reply.

“Indeed, Louisa. I could hardly keep my countenance. Imagine the two of us scampering about the countryside windswept and forlorn.”

“We would never! Her petticoats were six inches deep in mud.”

Elizabeth wondered what she could have done to Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley for them to abuse her so.

“Your picture may be exact, but I thought that Miss Elizabeth looked uncommonly well. Her dirty petticoats quite escaped me.” Mr Bingley’s voice of reason did much to soothe Elizabeth’s unease.

“You observed it, Mr Darcy,” Miss Bingley purred. “I am convinced you would not wish your sister to make such an exhibition.”

“Certainly not!” the oaf confirmed.

Elizabeth, as she saw it, had two choices. She could run back to her room and cry into the pillow, or she could raise her chin, enter, and make the residents of Netherfield as

uncomfortable as they deserved to be.

She looked at the stoic footman in the porter's chair. She had long known Tommy as he was the child of a Longbourn tenant. She caught his eye and raised a quizzical eyebrow. Tommy rolled his eyes back in his head, and she almost laughed aloud. She mouthed thank you and entered.

She donned an imaginary confidence, approached Mr Bingley, and just so happened to turn her back on Mr Darcy and the supercilious sisters.

“Thank you for your kind invitation, Mr Bingley. I assure you that I would have been content with a small tray in my room, or if that were too much to ask, a bow and arrow to forage in the woods.”

She smiled brilliantly at Mr Bingley, who chuckled.

“That will not be necessary, Miss Elizabeth. I have a sister to keep house for me, and though much can be said of her civilities, she sets an excellent table.”

“I am much relieved she is not finding it too daunting to perform in the wilds of Hertfordshire.”

“As am I, but enough about my sister. How is Miss Bennet faring?”

Elizabeth immediately sobered.

“She is feverish but has finally fallen asleep. It is to be hoped that the rest will aid her recovery.”

“Should I send for the apothecary?” a concerned Mr Bingley enquired.

“I would first like to see whether she improves overnight. If her condition worsens, I might solicit your errand boy to fetch Mr Jones on the morrow.”

“Any time, Miss Elizabeth. My servants are at your disposal.”

Servants began to enter with platters, and Elizabeth took the offered seat next to Mr Bingley. She paid Mr Darcy no mind as he was thoroughly entertained by Miss Bingley’s incessant chatter. As soon as the meal concluded, she excused herself and resumed her anxious watch over Jane.

The night passed with short moments of slumber in between Jane’s spells of coughing. There was no improvement in the morning, and Mr Jones was called to administer a draught. The concoction helped, and by the afternoon, Jane was feeling a little better. Elizabeth ordered a tray for dinner, but when her sister promptly fell asleep after the meal, she felt she must thank Mr Bingley for his thoughtfulness.

With dread filling the pit in her stomach, she approached the parlour where the party was assembled. In her hands she clutched her book, an item she had brought to hide behind. It was ridiculous; she, who never shrank from confrontation, had become a coward in the company of Mr Darcy. But no longer. He deserved no attention and certainly no reverence of any kind. If he wanted to insult her, she was completely indifferent to his opinions.

A footman opened the door and announced her. Fortunately, Mr Darcy sat at a desk in the far corner, writing a letter. Mr Bingley and his family played cards.

“Miss Elizabeth, how good of you to join us. How is Miss Bennet?”

“I am glad to assure you that she is improving, though she is not well yet. I must thank you for summoning the apothecary. His draught has done wonders in addition to the fervid care she has received under your roof.”

“It is no trouble, I assure you. Whatever it is in my power to provide for Miss Bennet’s comfort, you need only ask.”

“Thank you, Mr Bingley, but she has no further needs at the moment.”

“Will you join us, Miss Elizabeth? There is always room for one more. I shall request another chair.”

Elizabeth glanced at the stack of coins. She had not thought to bring any money and would never stoop to borrowing.

“I thank you but no. I have my book, and it is beckoning me.”

Since the Bingleys and Hursts occupied the only table and chairs, her remaining choice was a sofa, which made her vulnerable if Mr Darcy decided to join her. She almost laughed at her own silliness. With his low opinion of her, he was more likely to sit on the floor.

She sat and opened her book.

“Do you prefer books over cards? How singular,” Mr Hurst drawled.

As an individual whose sole purpose in life, it seemed, was to eat, drink, and play cards, he was one to speak. Elizabeth refrained from answering, but her humorous musings made her able to smile and nod.

“Miss Eliza Bennet,” Miss Bingley pronounced, smirking and glancing at Mr Darcy, who happened to raise his head from his letter, “despises cards, is a great reader, and takes no pleasure in anything else.”

“You forget that I am an excellent walker.” Elizabeth smiled. “Though I dare not



recommend my peripatetic nature as an admirable trait. I have sometimes heard it mentioned as a great failing...”

She returned her attention to the book but not without noticing a pained expression on Mr Bingley’s face. In the future, she must curb her sarcasm to avoid further embarrassing the innocent gentleman.

Elizabeth turned the pages to chapter two. Begin the morning by saying to thyself; I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, and unsocial [4] . Which fitted perfectly in this company. What would Marcus’s philosophy prescribe to endure such unpalatable society? To act against one another is contrary to nature. It is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away. Terrible advice! What was she supposed to do? Embrace the oafs and shrews sitting in this very room? Whatever it is that I am, it is a little flesh and breath, and the ruling part. She leafed past a section she had read at the assembly and found another passage upon which to dwell. Do the things external which fall upon thee distract thee? Give thyself time to learn something new and good and cease to be whirled around. Well, that was good advice. Lately, her days had been much occupied with her desire to avoid Mr Darcy. But her heart still ached, and indifference was not yet within her grasp. It was a cruel fate that by force repeatedly put her in his path. But was she not the ruler of her own fate? The first thing she would do when she returned home was to write to Grandmother Bennet. She was currently with Uncle Henry at his Irish country estate, but they were due back in town before Christmas.

Elizabeth felt a piece of fabric graze her bare shoulder. Someone or something was standing directly behind her. She leapt in her seat and shut her book with a resonating thump.

“I beg your pardon for startling you. I was only curious to see what book kept you so engrossed that you did not even notice me coming.”

The velvety baritone unsettled her, and the book shook in her hands. She dared not turn and meet his stormy blue eyes because that might compel her to say something she would live to regret. She was far from recovered from her imprudent infatuation given that her entire being was immediately on high alert.

“It is *Meditations* by the Roman emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius,” she informed him with the appearance of calm.

“You would not want your sister to read gentlemen’s literature,” Miss Bingley snickered. “Miss Eliza has a quaint taste.”

“You are mistaken. I condone any lady who reads to extend her mind.”

To say Elizabeth was shocked would be an understatement, though the Mr Darcy from the Argyll Rooms would have agreed. She had come to think of them as two separate people. Perhaps there was a good and an evil twin? She opened her book on a random page and read: ... see distinctly what kind of thing it is in its substance, in its nudity... She hastily turned the page with heat rising in her cheeks. It would not do if Mr Darcy happened to be reading over her shoulder that he should see anything that reminded him of a certain sojourn to the pond. Body, soul, intelligence. To the body belong sensation, to the soul appetites, to the intelligence principles. She belatedly grasped the meaning of sensation and turned yet again. The best way of avenging thyself is to not become like the wrongdoer. That was a sentiment for which she would not blush.

“Does your father approve of your unfashionable reading habits?” Miss Bingley wanted a part in the conversation.

“It is not my book. I borrowed it from my sister Mary. It was a gift from our uncle, who wanted my sister to expand her mind from her usual religious texts.”

“Was that the uncle who is the attorney in Meryton or the uncle who has a London shop?”

Elizabeth glanced at Miss Bingley, who smirked at Mrs Hurst.

“Neither. It was a gift from Uncle Henry, who is not strictly my uncle but my father’s. He is my grandmother’s brother.”

She hoped, by omitting Uncle Henry’s title, that Mr Darcy would not be reminded of the masquerade ball. It was too late to rekindle the flame that had been irrevocably doused at the Meryton assembly.

“Do you find it interesting?” Mr Darcy hastened to enquire before Miss Bingley continued her tirade.

“Yes, though I do not agree on all accounts. I do not believe that you should not be vexed and simply turn away from the arrogant, deceitful, and unsocial.”

Was not that exactly what she had done? Cowardly running away and striving to avoid encountering Mr Darcy. It was of an insignificant comfort in this instance to have abided by the strictures of Marcus Aurelius.

“Mr Darcy, do join us. Mr Hurst is playing me abominably and keeps winning every game. I need your prowess to beat him.”

Elizabeth recognised the ugly feeling of jealousy that shone from Miss Bingley’s eyes, regardless of how misplaced the sentiment was. She could not stand for a moment without garnering all the attention, and particularly the notice of Mr Darcy. The gentleman released a barely audible sigh and sat down next to Elizabeth on the sofa.

Elizabeth was on her feet within the blink of an eye and promptly excused herself. She declared to have neglected her sister for far too long, which was true. That she could not bear to be so close to Mr Darcy had nothing to do with her hasty escape.

#

Elizabeth spent the chief of the night in her sister's room, and by morning she wished to send a note to Longbourn. She desired for her mother to come and judge the situation. Mr Bingley dispatched the note expeditiously. Mrs Bennet complied and arrived with her two youngest daughters soon after breakfast.

Had Jane's ailment been dire, Mrs Bennet's misery would have been great indeed, but finding nothing alarming in her condition, she saw no need for an immediate recovery. After half an hour in Jane's chamber, Miss Bingley invited Mrs Bennet and her three healthy daughters to join her in the parlour, where Mr Bingley was eagerly awaiting news. Mrs Bennet, of course, pronounced her daughter to be very ill indeed and not to be moved, with which Mr Bingley heartily agreed.

"You have a very sweet room here, Mr Bingley," Mrs Bennet gushed. "And a charming prospect over the gravel walk. Netherfield does not have its equal in the country. I hope you are not thinking about quitting it any time soon. Though I know you have a short lease."

Elizabeth stiffened. The last thing she needed was for her mother to mention the owner of the estate and bring back memories of a night best forgotten.

"Whatever I do, it is done in a hurry," Mr Bingley replied. "Therefore, if I decide to quit Netherfield, I would be out in five minutes. However, I am quite fixed here at the moment."

Elizabeth could not laugh at his quip because if there was truth to his boast, Jane's

heart was at risk of breaking as much as her own. With her sister's disposition, heartache would affect Jane much more than herself. It was quite possible she would never recover...

"The country is a vast deal more pleasant than town, is it not, Mr Bingley?" Mrs Bennet was not one to take no for an answer.

"They each have their advantages. I would be happy in either," Mr Bingley replied indifferently.

"Aye. That is because you have the right disposition. Whilst that gentleman"—Mrs Bennet looked directly at Mr Darcy, and Elizabeth felt a surge of dread run through her veins—"looks down upon the country as if it is nothing at all. Our neighbourhood is quite large, and we dine with four-and-twenty families. And Uncle Henry—"

Elizabeth could not allow her mother, no matter how well deserved her set-down would be, to continue. The Bingley sisters were snickering, and even the agreeable Mr Bingley could hardly keep his countenance. If the suspicions she harboured were true, it was best for all concerned that Miss Bingley were not apprised about their illustrious connections. She interrupted her mother's speech with the first thought that entered her mind.

"Have you seen Charlotte since I left, Mama?"

"Yes, she called yesterday with her father. Sir William is an agreeable man, is he not, Mr Bingley? A man of fashion, so genteel and easy. He always has something to say to everybody. That is my idea of good breeding. Those who fancy themselves so very important and above their company, throwing insults at young ladies haphazardly, quite mistake the matter."

The deafening silence that followed Mrs Bennet's rant was torture to the fragile

Elizabeth. She pretended she had not heard her mother's barb.

"Did Charlotte dine with you?"

"No. She was needed at home to make the mince-pies. My girls do not toil in the kitchen, but then they are not as plain as Charlotte. My Jane! One seldom sees anyone better looking. When she was but fifteen, a gentleman was very much in love with her and wrote her some pretty verses—"

"Yes, and so ended his affection," Elizabeth interrupted impatiently. Would this day never end? "I fancy many infatuations have been overcome in such a way. I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love."

"According to the Bard, poetry is the food of love." Mr Darcy's resonant baritone almost made her flinch.

"Of a fine, stout, healthy love, it may be. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet would starve it entirely away."

Elizabeth could feel Mr Darcy's eyes boring into her, but she did not meet his gaze. She trembled in dread of what her mother might say next. Utterly exhausted, she walked to the window, embraced herself, and gazed out into the withered garden. Behind her, Mrs Bennet continued to flatter Mr Bingley, who was unaffectedly civil. When her mother finally called for the carriage, Lydia put herself forward and begged Mr Bingley for a ball he had mentioned in passing at the assembly. Elizabeth's mortification was complete, and her relief was palpable when her family left after extorting Mr Bingley's promise to arrange a dance.

Elizabeth returned instantly to Jane and left it to the Netherfield party to make critical remarks about her family.

#

The next evening Jane was much improved. Her fever had broken, but her cough remained.

“You should join our hosts for a while, Lizzy.”

“I shall, but only if you come with me, dear Jane.”

“You know I cannot. I would be mortified should I break into a coughing fit in front of Mr Bingley. But you must go and express our gratitude for his hospitality. I do not want him to find fault with the Bennet sisters’ manners.”

“I doubt that he will. He is too much inclined to think well of you, and he has proved himself to be a solicitous gentleman, even towards me.”

“What do you mean, even you?” Jane frowned. “You speak as if you do not deserve every consideration, and I heartily disagree with that notion.”

Elizabeth kissed her sister’s hand. Jane was her staunchest protector, and though she never saw fault in anyone, Elizabeth knew that Jane held her in the highest regard a sister could manage.

“I only meant that I am not the lady his heart desires, yet he is very attentive to my needs.”

“He is everything a gentleman ought to be,” Jane agreed.

“Yes. You have mentioned that fact quite a few times already, and I have not disputed it once.”

Jane tried to glare at her but failed miserably. She giggled, but that endeavour sent her into a long coughing fit.

“You should not speak,” Elizabeth admonished. “It only makes you cough. For the sake of your rest, I shall oblige you and join the rest of our party. If Mr Bingley is present, I promise to leave him in no doubt of our gratitude. Would that suffice? Please, do not speak. You need only nod, and I shall be gone.”

Jane smiled with watery eyes brought on by her coughing. Elizabeth smiled back at her sister until she had closed the door. Her cheeks ached from forcing the gesture, and she rested her head against the cool panel. She took a fortifying breath, shoved herself from the door, and descended the stairs.

The Netherfield party was assembled in a front parlour. Elizabeth curtsied and stood close to Mr Bingley. Jane would enquire whether she had remembered to thank the gentleman, and Elizabeth made certain her mission on behalf of her sister was accomplished.

Miss Bingley requested she join the sisters. They were having a dispute and needed a mediator to negotiate the difference in their opinion.

“What do you think, Miss Eliza? I must have your opinion upon a subject because my sister is no help at all. Mr Darcy has been hinting about a pair of fine eyes he encountered in town, and I wonder what it means.”

“Perhaps Mr Darcy is engaged to be married?” Elizabeth enquired.

She dared a glance at the object, who had his nose in a book, but his eyes did not travel across the page.

“He is not, and definitely not to the aforementioned lady. He engaged the Irish miss



for a set because of a wager with his cousins, Viscount Crawford and Colonel Fitzwilliam. They are the sons of the Earl of Matlock.”

“How quaint,” Elizabeth remarked numbly. “I did not know that a wager was the customary way to choose your dance partner in town.” It was fortunate that despite the shock, her sarcastic wit never failed her.

“Of course you did not. You can have had but little opportunity to travel to town and frequent our sphere.”

“You are correct in that assumption,” Elizabeth readily agreed, primarily because their paths had never crossed, which led her to assume that Miss Bingley’s supercilious behaviour was not founded in reality. Mr Bingley’s fortune was from trade and could therefore not be regarded as of the highest circles. But the main reason was that she did not have the wherewithal to spar with Miss Bingley. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest. The most magical evening of her life had been a lark to Mr Darcy. The lump in her throat grew to unmanageable proportions. If she did not escape, she would disgrace herself.

Elizabeth rose abruptly.

“Pray, excuse me. I must see how Jane is faring.”

“Certainly. Your devotion to your sister is admirable,” Mr Bingley praised. “Shall we play that round of billiards now, Darcy?”

Elizabeth hastened out of the door just as Mr Darcy agreed to the sport. Her feet thundered up the stairs. She bent her head to the floor and did not greet the unliveried manservant she passed. Staggering into her chamber, she tumbled head first onto her bed and buried her face in the pillow. The desire to scream was quashed, but the tears were allowed to flow freely in the privacy of her room.

She had been wretchedly blind and had allowed a childhood fantasy to abscond with her reason; but she would be a fool no longer. Oh no! Her time as an advocate of romantic twaddle was to become a distant memory soon enough. There simply had to be another possibility than marriage for a genteel lady, for the gentlemen she had met did not induce her towards matrimony. Her grandmother sprung to mind. She might not oppose having her granddaughter's company, but she was in Limerick, and their return to town had been delayed. She was not due to arrive in London before the twenty-seventh

of November, which felt like eons away.

She was doomed to suffer the unpalatable company of Mr Darcy for nigh on another fortnight. It was insupportable with the counterfeit Mr Darcy and his fakespearian quotes. Elizabeth leapt from her bed. She was in urgent need of a copy of Twelfth Night to confirm her suspicions—that it was music and not poetry that was the food of love. But to get to the library she had to pass the billiard room where the glib Mr Darcy was engaged in a game, and he was the last man in the world she would like to see. Pacing the room seemed to be her only choice until the house quieted.

With the blindfold removed she was able to see clearly. Young Mr Darcy had rescued her from the untamed stallion to act as a hero to impress his friends. The tale would be enhanced and exaggerated at the boys' leisure, as was the wont of the Lucas boys. A young John Lucas had once pushed Charlotte into the pond with the sole intent of acting the hero when he rescued her. The tale was less impressive when you knew that the pond was only knee deep at most. But John had boasted about his heroic action until Lady Lucas had boxed his ears for ruining Charlotte's dress.

Another disturbing thought entered her mind: she could not remember whether it was Mr Darcy or his mother who had entered the enclosure first. Had he rescued his mother and cared not for the child who was attacked? And she, fool that she was, had conjectured a fairy-tale from her imagination.

But what made her heart ache in sorrow was that the gentleman she had met in the Argyll Rooms was but a mirage of what she had thought him to be. He was a fictional character worthy of a mawkish romance novel. No, he was worse than that. He was an imposter who had willingly preyed upon her heart and duped her into falling in love with him.

An onslaught of fresh tears assailed her. She slumped into the window seat and buried her head in her hands.

How she would endure another minute in Mr Darcy's presence was unfathomable, and her mind reeled with designing opportunities for her escape. Feigning an illness was more likely to force her to remain. If only she could think of a plausible reason to beg her father to call her home. Preferably one that would not engender any probing questions.

#

Jane recovered and by the next day deemed herself well enough to endure the carriage ride home. A dispatch was quickly penned, and Mr Bingley was glad to send a boy to Longbourn with the note. Elizabeth became desperate when Mrs Bennet's reply stated that the horses could not be spared. It was obviously a lie, and in a fit of pique, Elizabeth begged Mr Bingley for the loan of his carriage. The gentleman acquiesced but only if they remained for another day. Elizabeth could have cried if her emotions had not already been numbed by pain. By the evening, Jane was well enough to join the party for a short spell in the parlour, and Elizabeth was mollified when Mr Bingley behaved as solicitously towards her sister as only a true gentleman could. Surely his feelings were so much engaged it would overcome his capricious nature...

She was not as fortunate when she went to the library to borrow a book. Mr Darcy already occupied the room. She turned on the threshold and did not leave her room

until Mr Bingley's carriage was ready at the bottom of the steps.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

A letter from her grandmother awaited Elizabeth when she returned to Longbourn. The perceptive old lady had detected a melancholy in her granddaughter that Elizabeth had deflected by enquiring after what she knew about Mr Bingley. She had explained that the gentleman, who was handsome, agreeable, and well situated to support a wife, was currently pursuing Jane. His only known disadvantages were two supercilious sisters, who could not be overlooked when one was unmarried, and a self-admitted tendency towards capriciousness.

Unfortunately, the widowed Mrs Maeve Bennet had no idea who Mr Bingley was but promised to investigate once she and her brother returned to town.

Elizabeth counted it as a particular blessing that her sisters had yet to relate the sordid encounter with Mr Darcy to her grandmother because her móraí [5] did not mention him. Either they had not written or they assumed that she had informed her herself.

Elizabeth's respite at home was short lived. Mr Bennet's cousin, a Mr Collins, arrived unexpectedly. Judging by the parson's greeting, her father had been informed about his visit but had chosen not to tell his family. His motives were easily discovered when Mr Collins turned out to be a tall, heavy-looking man of five-and-twenty, who needed no encouragement to speak with little sense.

"Dear enchanting cousins! As you know, I am heir presumptive to Longbourn," Mr Collins declared before he had even been served his tea.

"You are misinformed," Mr Bennet drawled. "My father and I broke the entail the year I came of age."

Mr Collins spluttered and spat, whilst his face took on an alarming shade of red. “I do not believe it! My father—”

“Was mistaken,” Mr Bennet interrupted. “I shall happily show you the documents at my solicitor’s office on the morrow. According to my will, my first-born grandson will inherit Longbourn. But let us not bother the ladies with tedious talk of business.”

Mr Collins’s eyes took in the incredulous countenances of the ladies present and nodded reluctantly. He did not gainsay his host and chose instead to expound upon his obsequious admiration for his exalted patroness. He had not been long in their company before everyone but Mr Bennet was heartily tired of hearing his voice. The patriarch found his cousin to be highly entertaining, and as a result, he spent more time with his family.

Elizabeth was not amused, and as Mr Collins droned on and on about his venerable patroness, she was wool-gathering. She stared vacantly out of the window and paid no heed to the raindrops’ slow descent down the windowpane.

“...in the point of true beauty, Miss de Bourgh is far superior to the fairest of her sex.”

Elizabeth listened to the raindrops patter against the glass, but Mr Collins’s pitter-patter occasionally intruded upon her thoughts. Especially after her mother mentioned the new additions to their community.

“I had no idea that the illustrious Mr Darcy was in the neighbourhood. You know, of course, that Lady Catherine and Lady Anne were sisters, and consequently she is the aunt of the present Mr Darcy.”

Poor Mr Darcy, who had such a termagant for an aunt!

“Miss de Bourgh has a very large fortune, and it is believed that she and her cousin will unite the two estates.”

Elizabeth had just taken a sip of her tea, and she swallowed it the wrong way. She coughed, and Mrs Bennet slapped her on the back.

“Pray, child! Must you upset my nerves by choking?”

“It was not my intention,” Elizabeth croaked. “May I retire until this bout has receded?”

“Yes, you should rest in your room and not spread the ill humours.”

Elizabeth curtsied to no one in particular and hastened to her room. She threw herself on the bed and buried her face in the pillow.

Of course Mr Darcy is engaged. A gentleman of his standing with a prosperous estate must naturally marry to beget the necessary heir.

The last thought made the tears threatening to spill impossible to retain. How stupid she had been. He probably was engaged even when we danced at the masquerade ball. Her current misery was her own fault for allowing her imagination to run so freely with her high-flying fancies. Her admission did nothing to relieve the ache in her heart, but it did harden her resolve to stay as far away from Mr Darcy as possible, at the very least until this wearying infatuation was but a distant memory.

#

Lydia intended to walk into Meryton in the hope of discovering whether Lieutenant Denny had returned from town. Elizabeth joined her sisters but for Mary, and at Mr Bennet’s request, Mr Collins was to attend them. Even the patriarch was beginning to

tire of the incessant chatter from his cousin, which was not strange considering he had spent his morning at Mr Phillips's office, explaining the broken entail to exhaustion. Mr Collins was not a sensible man—a deficiency that had not been tempered by either education or society.

According to her mother, Mr Collins had been raised by an illiterate, miserly father, which had given him originally great humility. His humble upbringing was counteracted by self-conceit and a weak head, which was probably a consequence of the early and unexpected prosperity of receiving the living in Hunsford. The result of these circumstances were an unfavourable mixture of unwarranted pride and unpalatable obsequiousness.

Mrs Bennet had further apprised Elizabeth that having such a good house and sufficient income had compelled the parson towards matrimony. His sycophantic praise of the beauty of the Bennet sisters was only tempered by him proclaiming them not brought up too high—which would have displeased his patroness. At first, he had singled out Jane, as the eldest and most beautiful of the sisters, but his hopes had been discouraged by Mrs Bennet. Once he had been informed that his chosen lady was soon to become engaged, he had changed his admiration to the second eldest daughter, whom he deemed almost Jane's equal in beauty. Mr Collins had forwarded this affront within Elizabeth's earshot, and the distinction of second best had not raised him in her esteem. Quite the contrary. Her mother had then tried to steer him in the direction of Mary, whom she believed to be the most suited of her daughters to become a parson's wife. Mr Collins had afforded Mary one glance before he had declared her too plain, which had made Mrs Bennet lose all interest in the eligible gentleman. No one disparaged her mother's girls without heartily regretting it...

Mr Collins's never-ending stream of pompous nothings was met with civil but evasive replies from his cousins as they walked the mile to Meryton. The sisters were afforded a brief respite when they happened upon a couple of officers from the militia. The two youngest especially were delighted by the introduction to a new



addition, a Mr Wickham, due to his favourable appearance. The whole party was engaged in agreeable conversation when Mr Bingley was discovered riding down the street. Distinguishing one lady in particular, the gentleman came directly towards them. Unfortunately, he was accompanied by Mr Darcy, and Elizabeth slipped quickly into the haberdashery. It was ominous how he turned up wherever she went. Was she ever to be safe from his presence?

Fortunately, Mr Darcy rode off suddenly in a cloud of dust that allowed Elizabeth to leave her hiding place. Unfortunately for Jane, Mr Bingley followed his friend, and the sisters were left to return home with Mr Collins.

Despite the parson's long legs, his gait was rather slow, making them late for an engagement that evening. Mrs Phillips had invited them all to one of her lauded card parties. It was a good thing she was Mrs Bennet's sister and easily forgave their tardiness. Elizabeth was quite certain that Mr Darcy had not been invited. Her mother had lamented the fact due to her worries that Mr Bingley might forget all about Jane should they spend an evening apart.

The militia was present, and with them was the newly enlisted Mr Wickham. Elizabeth acknowledged that a slight degree of admiration was reasonable. The officers in general were a creditable, gentlemanlike set, but Mr Wickham was beyond them in person, countenance, air, and walk. Her broad-faced, port wine breathing, and stuffy uncle Phillips followed the officers about the room and performed the introductions whilst all female eyes were turned to the newcomers.

Elizabeth was the happy woman the handsome lieutenant chose for a partner, and she enjoyed the agreeable manner with which he immediately fell into conversation. Not at all like a certain other gentleman who thought himself above Meryton's society. Mr Wickham could make a rainy day sound interesting—the commonest, dullest, most threadbare of topics. She dismissed an intruding thought about philosophy, art, and politics. It was an enjoyable evening, and she was the fortunate one who garnered

the envious looks of her friends.

Mr Wickham politely declined her aunt's invitation to play whist, and Elizabeth thought that it might be to prolong their pleasurable tête-à-tête. She rejoiced in the company until the gentleman introduced the most unpalatable subject she could imagine.

"How long has Mr Darcy been visiting the neighbourhood?"

"About a month," she replied in the most disinterested manner she could muster.

"He is a man of large and noble property in Derbyshire. A clear ten thousand a year."

Elizabeth cared not if he had ten times as much, but how was she to disabuse Mr Wickham of the notion that she held the slightest interest in that gentleman?

"You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you information about that man than myself. I have been intimately acquainted with him since infancy."

Elizabeth's heart dropped into her stomach, and whatever admiration she might have felt was immediately extinguished. Mr Wickham did not notice her detachment and droned on.

"You may well be surprised, Miss Bennet, by such an assertion, after seeing the cold manner of our greeting earlier today. Pray, do you know whether he intends to remain long in the neighbourhood?"

Had he not noticed her mad dash into the haberdashery? She had not been present to witness any greeting, cold or not. He was more like Mr Collins than her first impression had allowed. The parson certainly paid no attention to his audience when he droned on and on.

“I am sure I have no idea. Please excuse me, Mr Wickham, my mother is calling me.”

Mrs Bennet had done no such thing, but given his previous form, she doubted that Mr Wickham had noticed. Elizabeth was in no mind to hear anything about Mr Darcy, and certainly not from someone who was intimately acquainted with the oaf and must know most of his affairs. Particularly his romantic interests and his engagement to the lauded Miss de Bourgh, about which Elizabeth had no wish to know anything at all. It was unfortunate that such an otherwise agreeable acquaintance had to be cut short, but there was nothing to be done about it. Hence, she added Mr Wickham to her list of gentlemen to avoid in the future.

When they returned home in the evening, Jane was sad she had missed Mr Bingley. He had visited to offer the Bennet family an invitation to a ball on the twenty-sixth of November. Mrs Bennet immediately concluded that a proposal was imminent and ordered Jane a new dress whilst her sisters had to manage with the ones from the assembly.

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A week of incessant rain had prevented everyone in the Bennet household from venturing out of doors. Fortunately, the weather cleared in time for the ball. Mr Collins had requested Elizabeth's first set, and her mother's scowls had prevented her from rejecting him. It was of no matter because this was Jane's night, and Elizabeth was only glad he had not asked for her eldest sister's first set instead. It was to be hoped that Mr Bingley would have that honour.

Netherfield looked splendid, illuminated by torches. Upon entry, Elizabeth had to acknowledge that Miss Bingley had created a wonderful ball with enough light and exquisite flower arrangements. In that, she much resembled her mother—a comparison that the lady would not relish, so Elizabeth kept her opinion to herself.

Mr Bingley greeted them jovially until he set eyes on Jane. After that, his general incivility to the rest of her family was easily forgiven. He engaged Jane for the first set and spoke hardly a word to anyone else. Elizabeth felt confident that it was impossible he would leave her sister in a hurry, despite having threatened to quit Netherfield on a whim...

The musicians tuned their instruments, and Mr Collins came to claim his set. Elizabeth suffered the embarrassing half hour with grace and disregarded Miss Bingley's snickers. It was not her fault that the parson lacked proficiency, and she kept her chin raised until the ordeal was over. She curtsied to Mr Collins and sought the more pleasant company of Charlotte. But she did not find her friend before Captain Denny requested the next set.

By fortune she had not encountered Mr Darcy thus far, and she wondered whether he might have returned to town. His presence had not been missed in the receiving line,

and she had not seen hide nor hair of him since they arrived. Elizabeth chided herself for thinking about Mr Darcy, as any thoughts about that gentleman were quite unwelcome, and she had so far enjoyed the ball with the exception of her set with Mr Collins.

Elizabeth danced with two more officers before she managed to find Charlotte. But she was immediately importuned by the ever-present Mr Collins.

“May I have the supper set, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Mr Collins!” Elizabeth was of no mind to raise the kind of questions dancing two significant sets with an eligible gentleman would induce. She turned to her friend. “Charlotte, may I introduce my cousin, Mr Collins?” At her slight nod, she continued, “Sir, Miss Lucas is my most estimable friend and daughter of the knight, Sir William Lucas, who frequents St James’s.”

“Good Lord, a knight you say? He is not a peer, but I am sure Lady Catherine would be most displeased if I slighted such an elegant lady. Would you do me the great honour of your hand for the next set, Miss Lucas?”

And thus, Elizabeth neatly convinced Mr Collins that Charlotte was an excellent partner. She would have to beg the forgiveness of her friend on the morrow and offer her a salve to restore her sore feet.

Elizabeth smiled to herself and regarded Charlotte, who had engaged her cousin in a lively conversation. She would gladly leave it to her friend to entertain even the most ignorant fool for all eternity.

“May I have the honour of your next free set, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth jolted out of her pleasant reveries and stared unblinkingly at Mr Darcy. He

must have thought she was someone else because he looked at her with a stunned expression on his face. If she had not been in such a predicament, she would have laughed, but it was the supper set that was about to commence, and the last thing she wanted was to partner Mr Darcy through the meal. Yet, her mind was not cooperating. Staring into his deep ocean-blue eyes robbed her of her ability to think clearly, and all that was left was to acquiesce.

“I have the first set after supper free, Mr Darcy.” For some inexplicable reason, his eyes widened at his own name, which could not come as a surprise to him. The man was exceedingly puzzling in addition to devilishly vexing. Unabashed, he continued to stare at her, and before he gathered the wherewithal for conversation, Elizabeth dipped into a curtsy.

“Excuse me, my mother is calling for me.”

Elizabeth hastened across the floor, barely escaping bumping into several dancers, and made for the protection of her mother. She was regaling a group of matrons about the fortune of her dear Jane, who was currently dancing her second set with Mr Bingley. She immediately turned her attention to her second eldest daughter in lieu of her friends.

“What did the disagreeable Mr Darcy want? Pray tell me you did not agree to dance with him.” Mrs Bennet scowled at the now vacant spot Mr Darcy had just occupied.

“He left me no choice, Mama,” Elizabeth admitted with chagrin. “But I do feel the twinge of a headache coming on. May I have the carriage to convey me home?”

Her mother rose and escorted Elizabeth to an empty balcony.

“That may prove difficult,” Mrs Bennet admitted ruefully. “I may have ordered the coachman to park our conveyance where it would be certain to be the last to leave.”

“I could walk,” Elizabeth offered.

“In the dead of night? I think not.” Her mother frowned and shivered. “It is too cold out here, Lizzy. I cannot become ill because I have invited Mr Bingley to dine with us on Saturday.”

“But that is only five days hence. I understood Mr Bingley must away on business to town on the morrow,” Elizabeth protested whilst being hauled back inside.

“Mr Bingley assured me that he would be away for but a day. As for your conundrum with Mr Darcy, I suggest you hide in the library before the set begins.”

“Excellent suggestion, Mama. It would not be embarrassing at all should he discover me there!”

“There is always the attic,” Mrs Bennet mused before she loosened the fierce grip on her daughter’s arm. Mr Bingley and Jane were approaching, and Elizabeth was immediately forgotten.

Mrs Bennet continued to flatter Mr Bingley, who bore the incessant praise with composed poise. Jane looked radiantly happy to have been singled out, and her smile was more brilliant than ever. Supper was announced, and on their way to the dining room, she insisted that Elizabeth sit with them since she had no partner. Elizabeth acquiesced because Mr Bingley, as master of the house, would be seated at the opposite end of the room to Miss Bingley, who had secured Mr Darcy as her dinner partner.

Miss Bingley chose Lady Lucas, as the lady first in rank, to show the way for the guests, and her mother as the second. It was not ideal that her mother would sit close by the lady of the house, prone as she was to drawing hasty conclusions. It had not escaped Elizabeth’s notice that her mama had already announced Jane’s engagement

to Mr Bingley as a certainty when she had interrupted her tête-à-tête with Meryton's matrons. Mrs Bennet was currently conversing with Lady Lucas, and judging by Miss Bingley's scowls in her direction, their topic was unpalatable to their host. Mr Bingley chose Sir William as the highest-ranking gentleman, who offered to escort Elizabeth to the table.

Elizabeth sighed and thanked the footman who had just filled her glass with wine before she tasted the white soup. Her dinner partner's loquaciousness fortunately made any attempts at conversation redundant, and her eyes travelled the long table to watch her mother. She was not making herself agreeable to the lady of the house, who bent her head to the frowning gentleman beside her. She was in no doubt about their topic and wished she had sat closer to Mrs Bennet to temper her exuberance. Her father was also situated too far away from his wife to be of service. It was a good thing that Mr Bingley and Jane were conversing to the exclusion of everyone else—a conversation which lasted until the meal concluded.

Afterwards, Charlotte was trying to persuade Elizabeth to play the pianoforte when she halted abruptly mid-sentence. She stared wide-eyed over her shoulder, and curious as she was, Elizabeth turned to see what had caught her friend's attention.

"Miss Bennet," Mr Darcy greeted her and bowed. "Our set is about to begin," he informed her, offering his arm.

Elizabeth had no choice but to take it. She was escorted into the ballroom and took her place in the line, where she read amazement in her neighbours' looks. They, undoubtedly, thought she had lost her senses. There was not a house in the vicinity where his insults had not been the prime topic ever since the Meryton assembly.

The music began and Elizabeth's distress increased. She could not meet her partner's eyes but fixed her gaze on a silver button on his coat. She was obliged to dance, but no one could force her to speak, and Elizabeth remained silent for the entire half-



hour. The only one who spoke was Sir William, who, on his way across the floor, spotted the illustrious Mr Darcy. He flattered him for his excellent dancing and expounded upon the beauty of his desirable partner. The latter made Elizabeth flush in embarrassment. Surely Sir William had been informed about the insult? What could the Lucases mean by the constant reminders? She surmised that Sir William was deliberately trying to elevate her in the haughty gentleman's esteem, ignorant to the fact that it could not be done. Did they not understand how painful it was to her?

Sir William ended his interruption by alluding to a desirable event whilst glancing at Jane and Mr Bingley. They were engaged for their third set of the evening and may as well have declared that an understanding had been reached. Mr Darcy's eyes followed Sir William's gaze.

“—but let me not interrupt your superior dancing. You will not thank me for detaining you from your bewitching partner, whose lovely eyes are now berating me.”

Sir William finally left them, but Mr Darcy showed no sign he had even heard the man. His eyes were directed at Mr Bingley and Jane with a sombre expression.

The set ended with not a word exchanged. Mr Darcy held her hand as he had frozen in the middle of the last step. Elizabeth jerked it out of his grip and positioned herself opposite so as to curtsy. She could not look at him but fixed her eyes on his flexing hand.

“Miss Bennet,” he began, but Elizabeth was at the end of her tolerance and had already turned her back on him. His calling did not induce her to return, nor did it slow her steps. She continued out of the ballroom and found solace in the empty library.

#

Darcy

His valet was tugging at his coat sleeves. The ball had finally ended, and he asked Grey with an affected air of indifference, “Have you heard anything downstairs about a family called Bennet?”

It was safest to enquire about all the Bennets in the area rather than to risk raising suspicions by asking about the one who intrigued him. What had possessed him to request Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s hand for a set was beyond him. He had stalked the outskirts of the ballroom and found a perfectly good hiding place where he was mostly obscured from the savage revellers. For some inexplicable reason, his eyes had been intent on following the insignificant miss about the room as they had for the majority of his stay at Netherfield. She was a lowly country squire’s daughter and could not hold a candle to his Eilís. His failure to find that lady had by no means discouraged him from pursuing her. Quite the contrary. He was decided: it must be she and no other!

His excuse must be that Miss Elizabeth Bennet did not behave as any other lady he had ever met. That must be it. She piqued his curiosity, which naturally led him to enquire about her. Her assiduous avoidance of his company bordered on the ridiculous. Rightly, he had made unflattering remarks that had provoked her to retaliate, for which his boots had suffered a minor injury. It was baffling that she had not once since curried his favour. She must have heard his income being bandied about as quite significant in this unsophisticated little neighbourhood. But no, the lady continued to avoid his company as if he were the plague. It was rather humorous how she had leapt up when he took the seat next to her on the sofa.

“Yes. It is the most prominent family in Meryton. There are five daughters of reputed beauty, and they are well liked in the community. I have heard nothing worse about them than the patriarch’s penchant for wielding his sharp sarcastic wit upon his unsuspecting neighbours and wife. She herself is rather ignorant, and marriage

minded, but there have been, as far as I have discovered, no scandals attached to their name in recent years. Unlikely as it may seem with two such dissimilar partners, the Bennet household is regarded as a happy home.”

Grey disappeared into the dressing room with Darcy’s coat, and he was forced to raise his voice when it hit him that he had just caught his infallible valet in an error.

“Sir William outranks Mr Bennet. He is a knight,” Darcy corrected his valet whilst trying to hide his glee.

“He did, but an earldom has been created that has elevated Mr Bennet to the peerage.”

“But that is impossible!” he exclaimed in shock.

Grey looked at him with something akin to pity in his eyes. A sense of unwarranted dread gripped his chest. Or perhaps not entirely unwarranted if he considered the slights he had so unjustly bestowed upon the earl’s daughter. He immediately disregarded his misgivings as ridiculous. What did it matter to him whether Mr Bennet was an earl, or even the next king of England for that matter?

“How recently?”

“It was announced in this evening’s paper, but the residents of Meryton and Longbourn village have known for years that this day would come.”

“I find that hard to believe. I have heard not a single word about it, and those kinds of fortunate events never fail to be boasted about.”

His valet was regarding him with an expression of trepidation, as though he was about to inform him of something he would not like to hear. He even cleared his

throat, which was unheard of.

“Out with it, Grey!” he barked with unnecessary force. He was vexed and unable to conceal it.

“I believe... Um, that is to say...well...your hapless remarks at the Meryton assembly, and the unfortunate behaviour of Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, have not recommended your party to the small but protective society of Meryton. I have never encountered any community so willing to preserve and shield a family as I have seen in this quaint little town.”

“I know of what you speak with regards to my slight of the second eldest Bennet daughter, and I received quite the set-down for my callous words. You have seen the damage to my boot, and Mrs Bennet and the mousy daughter thoroughly berated me, but I suppose you already knew that?”

Grey nodded solemnly.

“What I do not understand is why Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst would be slighted. Not to forget Mr Hurst and Mr Bingley, who are incapable of offending anyone. Mr Hurst because he does not apply himself, and Mr Bingley because he is unfailingly agreeable to all and sundry. So why are we regarded as such outcasts as to be deemed a threat to the fortunate elevation of Mr Bennet?”

“I have surmised that they are worried about fortune hunters.”

At that ridiculous assertion he barked an incredulous laugh.

“Yet they do not reject Mr Bingley’s obvious pursuit of their eldest daughter. He is from trade...”

“No, but Miss Elizabeth has enquired about him amongst the servants. She harbours doubts about his constancy.”

“Preposterous! And why is she on such intimate terms with Netherfield’s servants as to enquire about personal matters?”

“The estate’s owner is a relation. The same one who requested Mr Bennet’s earldom be created.”

He had to know, just to quash the unease.

“The Earl of Longbourn. A rather modest estate for an earl, would you not say?”

“No, sir. He is the Earl of Glentworth. It is a free-holding of significant size, and the current holder leaves no heir apparent, so Mr Bennet was given the estate when the earldom was created.”

“Glentworth... Is that not in Ireland?”

The whole scheme sounded strange because the Bennets had held Longbourn for generations.

“Yes, in Limerick. The previous owner’s health is believed to be failing, though the Prince of Wales elevated him to marquess this spring.”

Memories of a masquerade ball assaulted his senses. The pair of emerald-green eyes in the face of a delightful dance partner, to be precise. Lord Limerick’s niece, whom the viscount and the colonel had egged him to engage with a despicable wager. Could Queen Elizabeth and Miss Elizabeth Bennet be the same person?

Oh God! I hope not...

No, it could not be. His lordship's sister had addressed her as Eilís, not Elizabeth. Besides, the lady he had spent that evening with had been considerably taller than Miss Elizabeth. He was familiar with growth spurts from his own youth, but never had he seen or heard about anyone shrinking three inches. It was simply not possible.

He expelled a harsh breath and assumed that Eilís and Miss Elizabeth must be related. It was not so strange that they shared the same eye colour if that was the case.

Yet, the jolt that had passed through him as Miss Elizabeth had met his eyes in the ballroom had not only been from admiration of the most intelligent and gorgeous eyes he had ever seen, but it had also been one of recognition.

Darcy stumbled into a chair and rested his head in his hands.

“Pray! Are you unwell, sir?”

His valet's concerned words barely penetrated his clouded mind. Had he insulted and disparaged the one lady he could not forget? No! Fate cannot be this cruel. Miss Elizabeth's pleasing figure was not as plump as the current fashion, and he doubted she had dimples in her thighs, but she did have a full...um...backside, which was a sign of wealth. He admitted that her dark, curly hair closely resembled the ancient Greek and Roman ideal, not that she ever wore the elaborate coiffures he had so often seen copied from ancient busts and paintings. She had a natural quality to her face through no use of cosmetics, but her complexion bore a slight tan and a light dusting of freckles.

Despite the distinct disadvantage of never seeing the face of the apparition he had encountered at the masquerade, it was not only her height that distinguished her from Miss Elizabeth. Queen Elizabeth had an ebullient nature Miss Elizabeth lacked, and the hair colour was different as well. Eilís had copper red hair, whilst Miss Elizabeth's was mahogany brown, and though he could admit to himself that he was

in slight danger from the enticing siren, she was nothing to the mind of Queen Elizabeth. If he compared the two, Miss Elizabeth appeared rather dull and definitely more reserved.

Darcy wondered whether he was being fair. His conversations with the lady had been few, short, and had not touched upon profound existential questions as they had with Eilís.

Miss Elizabeth had, on rare occasions, proved to have a quick wit that one could not fail to observe.

“I hardly know...”

“To answer your previous question, sir, Mr Bingley is generally liked, Mr Hurst generates indifference, but Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst’s supercilious airs and propensity to look down upon everyone they meet have not induced Meryton’s residents to be explicit or forthcoming.”

He noticed that Grey had not mentioned the inhabitants’ perception of him, for which he could only be grateful. He had not promoted himself to anyone because he had not thought it necessary in this town of little to no consequence.

Elizabeth

The night following the ball had opened to a new scene at Longbourn. Mr Bennet's elevation into the peerage had been discovered after they had returned from Netherfield, when her father had finally found time to read the evening's gazette. The havoc had prevented everyone from finding any rest, and come morning, most of the residents were still abed.

Mr Collins's leave of absence extended only to the following Saturday, and time was of the essence. Having no feelings of diffidence to make it distressing to himself, and considering the encouraging news about Mr Bennet's elevation into the peerage, he set out in an orderly manner. Finding the newly appointed Lady Glentworth, Lady Elizabeth, and none of the younger girls in a parlour after breakfast, he addressed the matron.

"May I hope, madam, to solicit a private audience with your daughter Elizabeth?"

Lady Glentworth turned a narrowed eye on the parson. "You may not."

Mr Collins spluttered, huffed, and scratched his head. "Dear Mrs Bennet, your modesty does you no disservice, but allow me to assure you of the purpose of my discourse. Your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble, but my attentions have been marked. From almost the moment I entered your distinguished abode, I singled out your second eldest daughter—"

"Mr Collins!" Lady Glentworth tried to interrupt the ridiculous parson, but he only raised his voice above that of the mistress of Longbourn.



“Before I run away with my feelings on the subject, perhaps it is wise to expound upon my reason for marrying. Indeed, the very purpose of my coming here was to select a wife from amongst your beautiful daughters.”

Elizabeth watched her mother’s cheeks turn crimson and could hardly keep a straight face. Imagining the solemn Mr Collins being run away with his feelings struck her as humorous, but her mother looked as though she thought otherwise, and the ignorant fool continued as if Lady Glentworth had not spoken.

“Firstly, I think it the right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances such as myself to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, I am convinced that a wife would add greatly to my own happiness. Thirdly, and perhaps what I should have counted as the first and foremost reason to marry, it was advised and recommended by the very noble lady whom I have the honour and privilege of calling my patroness. The admirable Lady Catherine de Bourgh has twice condescended to give me her opinion upon the subject—”

“MR COLLINS!” Lady Glentworth cried to no avail.

“It was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford—during a quadrille. Mrs Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh’s footstool when she said to me, ‘Mr Collins, a clergyman like you must marry. Choose a proper gentlewoman for my sake as well as your own. Let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up too high, but able to make a small income go a long way. Bring her to Hunsford, and I shall visit her!’”

Mr Collins paused theatrically, but unfortunately, it was not long enough for Elizabeth—or her mother—to gather their wits and end the clergyman’s speech before he turned his attention upon her.

“Allow me to observe, fair cousin, that the notice of the great Lady Catherine de

Bourgh is by no means the least of the advantages I offer. Your liveliness and vivacity must naturally be tempered by the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. Our son will be your father's heir, and once that melancholy event occurs, I am prepared to inherit Longbourn. Um, I mean manage the estate until the child comes of age. You cannot be so eager to quit your childhood home? By accepting my hand you will always be at Longbourn. This is my motive, and I assure you that I am perfectly indifferent to fortune. I make no such demands upon your father, though I suspect that, given my cousin's recent elevation, the rumoured one thousand pounds in the four per cents is grossly underrated."

Elizabeth leapt to her feet, her action momentarily stunning Mr Collins. Heavy footsteps were approaching when the clergyman bent awkwardly at the knee. He grabbed the back of a chair for support, but the furniture was insufficient to carry his heavy frame, and he tumbled to the floor at the exact moment her father entered the parlour.

"What is the meaning of this?" he queried whilst frowning at the prostrate parson. "I heard raised voices and have come to investigate."

"Mr Collins is proposing to Elizabeth," Lady Glentworth informed her husband.

"He is shouting a proposal without her father's consent?" Lord Glentworth looked incredulously at his wife.

"Yes indeed," she confirmed.

Lord Glentworth's expression was black when he ordered Mr Collins to his feet and to accompany him to his study without delay. The ladies listened in stunned silence as the patriarch admonished his cousin the entire way to his book room. "I suppose the announcement in last evening's newspaper has greatly enhanced your admiration for my daughter. Henceforth, you are to address me as Lord Glentworth, my wife as

Lady Glentworth, and my daughters with the title 'lady' before their names. I expect you to show all of them the same deference as you do your patroness. That includes having the decency to ask for the consent of the father of a lady not yet of age. I can assure you that I shall never give it!"

"Lady Glentworth," her mother whispered. "How well that sounds. Oh, I do hope Henry is well."

"I would suppose so, or Father would have been the Marquess of Limerick," Elizabeth assured her mother. "I dare say Uncle Henry is tired of waiting for Papa to join him in town and has browbeaten the Prince Regent into elevating him."

"I do hope you are correct," Lady Glentworth replied, hastening after her husband.

Elizabeth escaped to the garden where Charlotte was approaching from the path to Lucas Lodge.

They greeted each other warmly but remained quiet for a moment while raised voices from her father's study drifted through the windowpanes.

"I have come to enquire how you are faring after the ball, Eliza." Charlotte looked at her with concern written on her countenance. "I know Mr Darcy offended you, but you would be a fool not to acknowledge the attention he has since bestowed upon you. He danced only with you at the ball, which must mean that his opinions have changed."

Elizabeth waved her handkerchief before Charlotte in a gesture to beg for a truce. "I am sorry, Charlotte, but I have more pressing matters to address."

"Of more consequence than securing a wealthy gentleman?" Charlotte protested.

Elizabeth laughed. Even Charlotte, as with most sensible people, did have moments of utter ridiculousness.

“Infinitely more consequence,” Elizabeth assured her friend. “Mainly to avoid an undesirable match.”

Charlotte gazed at the window of Lord Glentworth’s study, from which pieces of the heated conversation could be discerned. The voices alternated between Lord Glentworth, Mr Collins, and Lady Glentworth.

“Perhaps I may be of service to you,” Charlotte suggested.

“You may as long as the favour does not include Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth allowed.

At that very moment, a red-faced Mr Collins stormed out of the door.

“I could invite Mr Collins to return to Lucas Lodge and prolong his stay by offering him a meal.”

“Dearest Charlotte! If it is not too much of an imposition.” Charlotte shook her head in denial. “You are the very best of friends.”

“Mr Collins!” Charlotte called after the aggravated man, who turned and bowed to her, scowling at Elizabeth.

Soon they were strolling arm in arm down the path to Lucas Lodge whilst Elizabeth hastened to return to the house.

After telling her mother that Mr Collins would be away for most of the day, she brought forward her wish to leave for town. Her mother offered a plausible excuse by stating she did not feel Elizabeth was safe whilst Mr Collins still resided under their

roof.

“You cannot go unchaperoned,” her father said, impeding her plan. “There was an announcement in yesterday’s paper about my elevation to earl. I dare say that was what prompted Mr Collins’s abominable behaviour, which must mean that other gentlemen may become equally impudent.”

“You did not see the way that libertine leered at our daughter. I shall escort her myself since you cannot be persuaded to go to town. Heaven knows I have tried often enough,” Lady Glentworth offered.

“Have you forgotten that you have invited the Netherfield party for dinner on Saturday?” Lord Glentworth reminded his wife.

“Oh dear!” Lady Glentworth fretted. “I almost forgot. Mr Bingley and Jane’s engagement party. And I have invited our closest neighbours to celebrate. But I am certain Mrs Hill has the preparations well underway, and I shall return tomorrow. I could purchase hothouse flowers and wine.”

“Mr Bingley has yet to propose, Mama,” Elizabeth cautioned her mother.

“He danced three sets with her at his ball, which is a decided declaration of his intention. He cannot retract with honour. I have much to do. I must go at once to Mrs Long and beg her to escort Lizzy to town. Her taste is excellent, and she can purchase the flowers I need for the party. Perhaps I should hire musicians from town...”

“Cease, woman! I may be an earl, but I am not made of money.”

Lady Glentworth hastened out of the room calling for Mrs Hill to order the carriage.

“Uncle Henry might need you in town, Papa.” Elizabeth smiled at her father. “You

could escort me, and we could make a merry party of it.”

“Absolutely not.” Her father frowned. “But your mother’s scheme might have merit. He might not pester me to come if I send you. Excuse me, I must make the arrangements. You should eat a hearty breakfast, Elizabeth. You may not have another opportunity for a decent meal before you arrive in town.”

Elizabeth ordered Betty to begin packing for an extended stay in London. Mrs Long was prevailed upon to escort Elizabeth and to purchase the necessary hothouse flowers for Mr Bingley and Jane’s engagement party.

It was all arranged to suit Elizabeth perfectly. She was free of Mr Collins’s odious company and Mr Darcy’s heart-breaking presence with so little inconvenience. She would be languishing in luxury in London. After expressing her well wishes to Jane and exacting a promise from her to send the expected news express, she bade her sister a heartfelt farewell and left.

Darcy

Meanwhile, at Netherfield.

Despite Darcy's eagerness to leave for town before darkness made the journey treacherous, he could not allow his friends to behave so abominably towards a peer. He should have left at the break of dawn, as he would have preferred, but had foolishly assumed that Miss Bingley and the Hursts would rise before noon on the day of their departure and had therefore been waiting for his hosts for several hours.

"You cannot leave the area without a proper farewell to the most prominent members of the neighbourhood. It is simply not done in polite society. You should visit Sir William and the Earl of Glentworth, at the very least," Darcy admonished. He was appalled at Miss Bingley's disregard of proper manners, regardless of how little she enjoyed her neighbours' company. He had leapt to agree with her scheme of following Bingley to town, leaving Meryton and its confounding residents behind. After his dance with Miss Elizabeth, he was as eager as ever to resume his search for Eilís.

"I have not been introduced to Lord Glentworth, and I am rather cross you have never mentioned such an illustrious neighbour, but I would not mind paying him a visit if you deem it necessary," Miss Bingley agreed with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"Neither have I," Hurst admitted. "But it would not do to insult a member of the peerage."

"Had I known there was an earl in the vicinity, I would have invited him to my ball!"

Miss Bingley exclaimed, sounding rather miffed at being denied the pleasure of hosting him. “Where is Lord Glentworth’s estate?”

“Oh, I would say 3 or 4 miles from Netherfield.”

“That close!” Miss Bingley screeched and turned away from him, huffing in indignation.

Darcy enjoyed making sport of his friends and did not enlighten them for the pleasure of seeing their surprise when they realised that Lord Glentworth was none other than Mr Bennet.

“Then I suggest we begin with a short visit to Sir William.”

It was an order more than a suggestion, and none of their party dared oppose Darcy, though Miss Bingley muttered under her breath, “I dare say that a short visit is quite impossible in that garrulous man’s home.”

This only confirmed his valet’s poor depiction of Miss Bingley. But still he could not believe her to be so bad as Grey had described. She had a sarcastically bent wit, which was common amongst the ladies of his acquaintance.

Darcy had his way and kept the visit to the obsequious Sir William polite but short. The party returned to their carriage and set out down the lane.

Miss Bingley regarded the picturesque view with a frown. “Rap on the ceiling, Mr Hurst. The driver must have had a bit too much to drink last night because this is the lane to Longbourn—”

“There is no mistake,” Darcy interrupted in an even voice.



“But...” Miss Bingley’s protest was never finished because they had already arrived.

“I shall remain in the carriage while you bid Mr Bennet farewell,” Miss Bingley pronounced.

“You would snub Bingley’s future family?” Darcy enquired innocently. “I understand he danced three sets with Miss Bennet at your ball...”

Miss Bingley’s crestfallen countenance was quite worth his small omission of the facts.

“Absurd!” Miss Bingley sneered, but she alighted from the carriage despite her misgivings.

Darcy owed Hurst an apology for keeping Mr Bennet’s elevation of rank to himself, but an opportunity to apprise him had not presented itself this morning. His excuse must be that the decision to join Bingley in town had been made in a hurry late last night and the packing and closing of the house had been completed in utter chaos with the hosts abed past noon. Besides, it was hardly his fault that Hurst had not read the newspaper.

Upon entering Longbourn they were shown into a parlour where the family was gathered. It was unusually quiet, and the mistress, who had looked uncommonly miffed, brightened upon their entrance.

“Miss Bingley, how good of you to come. Mr Hurst and Mrs Hurst, how delightful it is to see you...and your friend too,” she added reluctantly.

Darcy was struck by the lack of respect the marriage-minded matron afforded him. What could she mean by it? It was obvious that she did not like him, but most matchmaking mamas put their personal preferences aside when an eligible gentleman

of substantial means graced their house with a visit.

“I am particularly delighted because it saves me a trip to Netherfield with the formal invitation for my dinner on Saturday.”

“That is quite impossible.” Miss Bingley smiled sincerely. “We are leaving for town on business that cannot be delayed and only came to bid you farewell.”

“How unfortunate... Then you must promise to come as soon as your business is concluded. I shall serve at least two courses,” Lady Glentworth boasted.

“You set a very fine table, Mrs Bennet,” Mr Hurst managed to say before his sister by marriage spoke again.

“We cannot say when that would be. My brother imagined that his business might be concluded in three or four days—”

“But Mr Bingley assured me he would be back no later than tomorrow afternoon, saying his business would take less than a day,” Lady Glentworth interrupted.

Miss Bingley laughed coquettishly. “We are certain that it cannot be so. My brother is always terribly late because he assumes that everything can be accomplished in less time than is necessary. It would not be the first time his assumption has been wrong, and then there are all the diversions in town that are certain to detain him even longer.”

She nodded at Darcy, but he did not acknowledge her, occupied as he was searching the room for the second eldest Bennet sister, and noting also that Lord Glentworth was missing.

“Mr Darcy is eager to see his sister, and we are scarcely less so.” Miss Bingley

smirked at Lady Jane. “Miss Darcy has not her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments. The affection she inspires in me and Louisa is heightened quite above everyone else. I would dearly love to call her my sister.”

“Preposterous, explain yourself,” Darcy barked, glaring at the presumptuous Miss Bingley.

That lady laughed coquettishly to a quiet room whilst Lady Jane shrank before his eyes. “I meant no offence, Mr Darcy. Who would not rejoice in having such a sweet and genteel sister?” Miss Bingley simpered.

Lady Jane was paying Miss Bingley rapt attention. The widening of her eyes and their sorrowful flickering towards the door told him another story from the one he had previously perceived. Darcy had not observed any particular regard in the lady towards his friend. Perhaps she was not given to strong outward expressions of feelings but concealed her affections behind a mask of serenity. Miss Bingley’s falsehoods clearly saddened her. If it was so, it was to be hoped that Bingley’s intentions were serious, this time...

A throat cleared in the doorway.

“Lord Glentworth.” He hastened to greet the man with a reverent bow.

“Mr Darcy,” the earl replied evenly.

Darcy could not decipher the look the earl directed at him, but he did rejoice in Miss Bingley’s dumbfounded muteness.

“What a lark, Papa!” Lady Lydia exclaimed whilst smiling mischievously. “First Lizzy rejects Mr Collins...”

Darcy could not remember whether he had gasped, stumbled, or sworn because the feeling that sentence engendered in him robbed him of his senses. He had just seen Mr Collins strolling into Meryton with Miss Lucas on his arm. He had thought the redness on the parson's face was due to the exertion, but could it have resulted from a more nefarious reason? Had her rejection not been received with respect? That might explain the odd atmosphere in the Longbourn household. Elizabeth may have been ruined and sent away to a distant relation. He was so occupied with his own thoughts that he nearly missed Lady Lydia's next outrageous observation.

"...and now Mr Bingley has left to pursue Miss Darcy without her brother's consent. I may still be the first Bennet sister to marry if you would only approve of Mr Wickham's suit, Papa."

"You may suppose he would do as well as the next fellow. A lady likes to be wooed and courted as it gives her a certain distinction amongst her friends," the earl drawled. "But Mr Wickham will not do. He is a mere lieutenant, and his wages cannot support a wife—least of all you, dear Lydia. He needs a partner in life who can make a little go a long way, and that would not suit your expensive habits of frippery and lace."

Lady Lydia rolled her eyes but did not gainsay her father.

"May I have a word with you in private, Lord Glentworth?" Darcy asked, quite unamused by the youngest Bennet daughter's unbridled tongue.

The earl let him suffer under his scrutiny for an insupportably long moment before he agreed and escorted him to his book room.

It was obvious that he had affronted the patriarch of Longbourn during his stay in Meryton, and he feared that only the utmost earnestness would persuade him to listen.

Therefore, he lay before him his dealings with Mr Wickham in no uncertain terms. If

he could save another man's daughter, or a sister, from the havoc that scoundrel left behind, he would do so. He held an inherent belief that despite his capricious nature, the earl could be trusted in important matters. It also served to disabuse Lord Glentworth of the notion that Bingley was pursuing his sister.

The earl immediately sobered and thanked him sincerely for his warnings about the libertine. He assured him that measures would be taken to curb the reprobate's machinations.

"Underneath your austere nature you are a good man, Mr Darcy."

The earl shook his hand, but that only left him with the realisation that the praise was unsupported by his behaviour. Lord Glentworth's benevolence stood in stark contrast to his own conduct at the assembly, where he had injured the man's daughter with his callous remarks upon her appearance. And as if that was not enough, he had harmed her further by pointing out her failure in attracting the opposite sex. It was cruel beyond belief, and his foul mood was no excuse. He was exhausted after rescuing his sister from the worst of scoundrels and disheartened that he had not found Eilís, which by no means justified his abominable behaviour.

"I do not deserve your praise. I did not act as I ought at the assembly and insulted your daughter most grievously. I owe her an apology and would like your permission to beg her forgiveness."

"You just confirmed my statement. Only a decent man would admit to his faults, but you are too late. Lizzy left for an extended family visit about an hour ago."

"That is unfortunate indeed. Please convey my regrets upon your earliest convenience."

"I shall forward your apologies in my next letter, but do not concern yourself too

much. It may ease your regrets that we have often made sport of your ill-formed comments, and a lady likes to be affronted now and again. She is hardly Lady Glentworth's favourite daughter, but the circumstance has left her with a most devoted mother."

Lord Glentworth was such a strange mixture of quick parts, sarcastic remarks, and caprice that Darcy could not understand his character. He chose to bid the patriarch farewell and joined his friends in the parlour. Miss Bingley had regained her speech and was currently holding Lady Jane's dainty hands in an iron grip. Her behaviour towards her friend had undergone such a material change that Darcy had to quash the impulse to laugh at the sudden reversal.

"My dearest friend. I regret nothing more than leaving your company, and I hope to soon enjoy many delightful new conversations in town. In the meanwhile, we may lessen the pain of separation by a most frequent and unreserved correspondence. I quite depend upon you for that."

Lady Jane listened to Miss Bingley's high-flown overtures with a mistrust Darcy could not fault. There was more to the lady than first met the eye.

"I do not know when that might be," Lady Jane replied coolly. "I have no such future plans."

"I beg to differ," Lady Glentworth imposed upon the conversation. "My brother has begged you to join them in town when they leave after Christmas. He was hoping that you would keep Madeleine company during the tedious winter."

Lady Jane did not confirm.

"Please do, Miss Bennet!" Miss Bingley cried.

“That would be Lady Jane to you,” the former Miss Bennet gently reminded her.

Darcy thought that Miss Bingley had made the request to further the acquaintance a bit late, and judging by her expression, so did Lady Jane.

“As to your request, I shall consider it,” Lady Jane finally allowed.

Darcy thought she looked pensive, but Lady Glentworth did not notice and rejoiced in the easy manner in which everything had been concluded. It was strange that she was so keen to connect her family to Bingley’s whilst making no effort to ensnare Darcy himself, whose consequence was ten times that of his friend. It was apparent that she had not forgiven his snub of her daughter, and no amount of money, country estates, or houses in town could persuade her to like him. That perspective urged him to respect her character even though she was too effusive and loquacious for his personal taste.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth bade goodbye to Mrs Long in the carriage, who was in a hurry to acquire the flowers Mrs Bennet had requested whilst there was still some daylight left.

Elizabeth entered what she soon discovered to be an empty house. Her grandmother and Uncle Henry had yet to arrive, but the upper servants had been sent in advance and assured Elizabeth that they were expected any minute. Her chamber was promptly readied whilst Elizabeth took refreshments in the parlour. Her mind was occupied with whether or not she should tell her grandmother everything, but she decided against it. If they should happen upon Mr Darcy during the Season, it was best if they could meet as indifferent acquaintances. That would not be possible if Grandmother Bennet were apprised of his insult, and scenes might arise that would be unpleasant to both. Not that she was the least bit concerned about how Mr Darcy was faring.

A commotion in the entrance hall jolted Elizabeth out of her worrisome thoughts, and she went to greet her relations.

“Elizabeth! What a pleasant surprise. Is Jane not with you?” her grandmother greeted her.

“No, my company must suffice for the moment. Jane’s suitor, Mr Bingley, is expected at Longbourn for a dinner engagement on Saturday. He is likely to ask for my father’s blessing and propose after having made his intentions clear at his ball last night.”



“I see. Then I suppose I must excuse her, and you must tell me more about Mr Bingley once I have refreshed myself after the journey.”

Her grandmother ascended the stairs just as Uncle Henry entered. He drew her in for a big hug before he too abandoned her for his ablutions. A peace settled upon Elizabeth, who busied herself in the library whilst she awaited her relations. She needed something to read before bed, and Uncle Henry’s shelves were well stocked.

Half an hour later her grandmother found Elizabeth curled up with a book in the library.

“So...” She paused. “What truly brings you to town in such a hurry?”

Elizabeth told her all about Mr Collins and his ridiculous proposal. Especially his reluctance to accept her mother’s opposition to his suit, which she turned into a funny anecdote. Mr Bingley’s marked attentions at the Netherfield ball were also examined and approved before the evening drew to its natural conclusion.

#

“You have not once mentioned Mr Darcy,” Grandmother Bennet remarked at breakfast the next day.

“That is simply because there is nothing to tell,” Elizabeth said as indifferently as she could muster and reached for the jam.

“Yes, well. I am afraid I have no news to relate either. Our leave-taking was rather abrupt, but I would not be surprised if he calls as soon as he is apprised of our return.”

“Indeed, I think not.” Elizabeth hid behind her cup. “Since he has made no attempts

thus far, I very much doubt we shall ever hear from him.”

“What would you like to do today?” her grandmother enquired with a frown between her brows.

“Nothing,” Elizabeth replied and heard her grandmother’s sigh of relief. “I travelled yesterday, and we returned very late from the Netherfield ball the night before, so I am quite happy to remain at home.”

“I admit that I am utterly relieved. The journey from Ireland is not getting any shorter, and this body is not getting any younger. I know not for how long it will tolerate all these long journeys back and forth. Fortunately, we do not have any engagements before Saturday, when we are attending Lady Middleton’s ball. I am certain I can persuade her to include you in the invitation, Eilís.”

“That is not necessary,” Elizabeth assured her. “I had a note from Aunt Gardiner this morning, who invited me to dine with them on Saturday. I would like to accept if you do not mind?”

Her grandmother was regarding her quizzically but acquiesced to her request. It was not like Elizabeth to avoid entertainment of any kind, and she tried not to blush. This shying away from engagements just because she might happen upon Mr Darcy had to stop. If only she could wait until Jane was engaged to Mr Bingley. She hoped to receive an express with joyful news no later than Sunday. Which reminded her that Mr Darcy was still in Hertfordshire and no threat to her equilibrium in London. Though she risked encountering his ungentlemanly cousins.

Uncle Henry stirred from his newspaper. “Maeve told me that you received an unwanted proposal, and that Jane is soon to be engaged.”

“Yes, the first sent me hither in due haste. My mother worried he would not respect

my father's objections. I found his declaration of being run away with his feelings particularly diverting, especially since he fancied himself in love with Jane first." Elizabeth chuckled, but Uncle Henry did not look amused.

"Does he know the specifics of your father's will?" he questioned brusquely.

"Yes. My father informed him after Mr Collins revealed he was not even aware of the broken entail. According to his letter, he came prepared to offer us an olive branch to mend a breach in the family."

Uncle Henry huffed. "To atone for the sins of his father may not have been as important to him if there had not been the prospect of an estate to tempt him. He must have been pleased to discover that the Bennet girls are beautiful and everything lovely. But your father made the right decision to send you here. If my suspicions that his reason had a more nefarious bent are correct—namely to secure Longbourn for himself—Jane's imminent engagement must have spurred him into acting. It is specified in your father's will that Longbourn goes to the first-born grandson, regardless from which Bennet sister he is sired," Uncle Henry explained. "Mr Collins must be aware of that fact and hoped to beget the heir before Jane and her beau. His only chance to secure Longbourn for himself would be to take a wife from amongst you girls, hasten his bride to the altar, and sire a son..."

The conditions also explained why Lady Glentworth was so keen to see her daughters married—to birth a son.

"Honestly, after meeting the man in question, I doubt that he knows much about anything. But he does have a meddlesome patroness."

"Let us forget all about Mr Collins as I would like to know more about this Bingley chap," Uncle Henry demanded.

Elizabeth complied and gave her relations a summary of all Mr Bingley's dealings—with the exception of the friend he had brought to Netherfield. She would have to relate Mr Darcy's presence in Hertfordshire at some point and was astonished that none of her sisters had mentioned him in their letters, though Jane was the only faithful correspondent. Her mother usually left it to Elizabeth to relate any news, and her father wrote only what could not be overlooked. Mary was too engrossed in her own concerns, and Kitty and Lydia were much like their father. Though their true reason for neglecting letter writing was that they were too busy chasing after the officers in the militia.

"It is convenient that you are here, Eilís. I am refurbishing your family's appointed chambers this winter and would like your assistance," Mrs Bennet said.

"Certainly, when do you plan to begin?" Elizabeth asked.

"Tomorrow is as good a day as any. We need wall-papers, fabric, linens, and quite possibly some furniture. We should inspect the rooms and make a list before we go to the shops, which means we should make a good beginning today. It is fortunate indeed that you are here because you are more familiar with your parents' and sisters' tastes than I."

"I do not believe you need to worry about my father's accommodations. You know he hates town, and it is unlikely he will spend much of his time here."

A shadow passed across her grandmother's face, and Uncle Henry lowered his newspaper.

"In this he no longer has a choice," Uncle Henry grumbled. "He is the Earl of Glentworth and must assume his duties when the Season begins."

Elizabeth was glad it was not she who must take that unwelcome news to her father.

The butler came with a calling card on a silver salver and offered it to her grandmother.

“We must delay the inspection of the rooms, dear Elizabeth. Lady Melbourne has asked me to call as she has an acquaintance she wants to introduce me to.”

#

Sunday morning.

Elizabeth was reading a letter in quietude when her grandmother entered the parlour and looked about the room to ascertain they were alone. She was surprised the older lady was up so early the night after Lady Middleton’s ball. She herself had gone to bed before midnight after a pleasant visit to the Gardiners’.

“Dear Eilís, have you received any news from Jane?”

“No, not today at least. This letter is from Charlotte,” Elizabeth replied.

“I am at a loss as to what to do...” Maeve Bennet sighed and sat down heavily on an old-fashioned settee. She looked tired, her features drawn and eyes shadowed.

“May I be of assistance?” Elizabeth offered.

“Yes, perhaps I should inform you. You know him better than I and may have a better understanding of his conduct.” Her grandmother turned towards her and grabbed her hands, which worried Elizabeth.

“A certain Mr Bingley attended Lady Middleton’s ball last evening, though no opportunity arose for an introduction.”

Elizabeth could only nod whilst worrying whether Mr Darcy had accompanied his friend. The letter from Charlotte had informed her that the aforementioned gentleman had returned to town the very same day she had left for London, and that was four days ago. No, that seemed unlikely. Perhaps Charlotte was mistaken, because if he had returned, he surely would have accompanied Mr Bingley to Lady Middleton's ball—a titbit her grandmother would have been eager to relate if it had been so...

"I understand that Mr Bingley singled out Jane to such an extent that expectations of a forthcoming proposal were raised."

"Yes. Sir William mentioned as much to me at the Netherfield ball."

"Sir William?" Grandmother Bennet huffed in disbelief. "I do not believe a word that comes out of that flibbertigibbet's mouth. Oh no, it is your opinion I seek. But keep in mind that young gentlemen today are prone to fall in love with a pretty girl for a few weeks, then forget all about them as soon as they encounter another charming young lady."

"I assure you"—Elizabeth lowered her voice in exasperation—"that is not the case with Mr Bingley, who is most violently in love with Jane."

"Violently in love!" Her grandmother huffed. "The expression is so hackneyed and indefinite, it gives me little idea of what has transpired. It is as often applied to a flighty half-hour acquaintance as it is to a strong, long-lasting connection. Pray, tell me, how violently in love is Mr Bingley?"

Her grandmother was a shrewd and discerning lady, but in this instance, Elizabeth believed she was wrong.

"I have never seen a more promising inclination," Elizabeth assured her. "He grew quite inattentive to other people because he was wholly engrossed in Jane. Every time

they met it became more obvious and marked. At his own ball he offended two young ladies by not requesting a set because he danced thrice with Jane. I myself spoke to him on two separate occasions without receiving any answers. Could there be any finer symptoms? Is not general incivility the very essence of love?"

"Oh yes! Of the kind of love I suspect he has felt. Mr Bingley was supposed to return to Meryton the very next day and had accepted an invitation to dine at Longbourn yesterday. But he is still in town and highly engaged in making love to his newest conquest. Last evening he smiled and danced twice with Miss Helena Bergman. Mind you, she is not to be trifled with. Her Swedish father must be of Viking blood because he is as tall and broad-shouldered as he is fair and bad tempered. Mr Bergman has fathered four sons who resemble him in every way. Mr Bingley will not be left unscathed should he trifle with their only daughter and sister. Poor Jane! With her disposition, I am concerned she will not soon recover. It would have been better if it was you, dear leanbh [6] . You would have laughed yourself out of it much sooner."

Her grandmother rose to pace the floor. Elizabeth could not believe Mr Bingley had forgotten about Jane so soon—and that he had failed to keep his dinner engagement at Longbourn. There must be a plausible explanation as to why he had shown Miss Bergman marked attention. Two dances were not a declaration...

"Do you believe Jane could be prevailed upon to come to Limerick House?" her grandmother asked. "A change of scenery would do her good, and we could entertain her so well that she forgets that there ever was a Mr Bingley."

"I cannot believe it. Mr Bingley must have a good reason for behaving thus. Perhaps Miss Bergman is his cousin, and he was aiding her to gain notice amongst the other gentlemen?" Elizabeth argued, but her grandmother simply raised an eyebrow in reply.

"Perhaps he is not the man I thought he was," Elizabeth allowed reluctantly. She

doubted very much that she had been so mistaken, but her confidence had shattered when the most agreeable gentleman proved to hardly warrant the name. “He certainly surrounds himself with questionable friends. They must be more alike than I initially thought...”

“Some of these young men gad about and make love to everyone they meet, but there is no substance to their amorous trifling,” Mrs Bennet huffed.

“Or they stand about in a stupid manner hurling haphazard insults,” Elizabeth added. She was quite finished with men if what her grandmother had just said about Mr Bingley was true—and it must be, because her grandmother would never lie.

“You should settle for the quiet brooding sort of gentleman, Eilís. Still waters run deep, and their feelings are sincere, though I suppose they are not prone to showing them.”

Elizabeth scrutinised her grandmother’s innocent countenance. She had not mentioned Mr Darcy since the first night.

#

Darcy

“Lord Limerick is back in town,” Colonel Fitzwilliam mentioned whilst Darcy was taking a swig of burning hot coffee. “According to my source, his niece has joined him, and his sister.”

The coffee went down the wrong way, and he almost suffocated without Richard lifting a finger to help him. He gasped and grabbed a glass of water, which he gulped down to rescue his tongue. “Excuse me while I choke to death!” he grumbled and spluttered.



“No one dies from drinking coffee,” Richard replied evenly, trying to hide his grin behind his own cup.

Darcy waited for his cousin to offer more details of his own volition, but after an eternity of about a minute, his patience was waning. “Which source would that be?”

“Your aunt, Miss Eudora Darcy. I happened upon her at Mrs Thistlewait’s musical soirée . I did not know that she was acquainted with his lordship’s sister, but she had been introduced through a mutual acquaintance. Lady Melbourne, I believe.”

Darcy wondered why his own aunt had not shared such vital information with him. Of course, she did not know that the alluring Queen Elizabeth had enchanted him. It had been his intention to continue to call upon Limerick House, even though his attempts last June had been thwarted by an absent knocker and a mad dash to Ramsgate to save Georgiana from the clutches of that scoundrel Wickham.

When he had returned to town, the Limericks had left for Ireland, whilst he had a despondent sister to console. He had been anxiously awaiting news about the elusive Miss Eilís for six months now, and to have it confirmed that she was here, in London, made his heart pound at an alarming rate. He could finally visit her—or perhaps not. So many months had passed; she might have married.

His chest constricted, which was ridiculous when considering a lady with whom he had spent but a couple of hours.

It was quite coincidental that he chose to pay his aunt a visit directly after he left his cousin. He had not seen her since he left for Netherfield and reckoned it was long-due.

He entered the parlour of his eccentric aunt’s modest town house. She was an enthusiast of stuffed animals, and a selection of dead creatures stared at him from

various postures.

“Darcy! How good of you to grace your old aunt with your presence. And convenient, I might add. It saved me from leaving the comforts of my home in this freezing cold to call on you.”

“I am happy to have spared you an unpleasant trip,” Darcy remarked cheerfully.

“I was hoping you could join me for a visit tomorrow morning. I have gained a new acquaintance who is not so new to you. You were introduced summer last, during a masquerade at the Argyll Rooms.”

Hope bloomed in his chest, but he had to be certain.

“I remember the event, but it was quite a crush, so you must be more specific.”

“Does Lord Limerick ring a bell?”

“It does,” he replied evenly. His aunt could be meddlesome, and it was best not to appear too eager.

“His sister told me that you danced two sets with her granddaughter and spoke at length in between. I almost accused her of being mistaken because you rarely if ever pay pronounced attention to any young lady.”

“True. I am cautious about raising expectations I have no intention of fulfilling.” Which was as much of an admission as he would give at this moment. After all, he had yet to see her face...

“That is wise, I am sure. I suppose that means you have no interest in knowing that her granddaughter was quite distraught that they had to leave so abruptly. And just

before midnight too. I understand the masks had yet to be removed?”

“That is correct, but I did not wear one.”

“Of course you did not. Heaven forfend you add levity to your dreary existence,” his aunt mocked good-naturedly before her countenance turned serious. “It has been five years, Fitzwilliam.”

She rarely used his Christian name—only when she was about to berate him.

“My dear brother would have been grieved to see that you have become so serious. Your burdens are heavy and many, but some liveliness is allowed as long as you do not shirk your duties, and we both know that will never happen.”

“I did last summer...”

“No, you did not. You saved Georgiana from a horrible fate, and now it is time to save yourself from becoming an old curmudgeon at seven-and-twenty.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked in earnest.

“Come with me to Limerick House on the morrow and bring sweet Georgiana. I have someone I would like her to meet. Lord Limerick’s great-niece would be a delightful friend to my own niece, and perhaps more...”

She did not say that she might become Georgiana’s sister, but they both knew that was what she left unsaid. It effectively proved that Eilís was still unmarried, or his aunt could not have made such an assumption. He did not bother to correct her premature conclusion. It was too early to speak of marriage, but she must have received a full report of the evening, and he was well aware that he had acted out of character. He was infamous for avoiding entanglements, to the great consternation of

marriage-minded mamas and their daughters.

When and who would become Mrs Darcy would be his choice, and not the result of nefarious scheming.

“Are you not the least bit curious about what more my friend had to say?”

Darcy mock scowled at his aunt, who was uncommonly coy today.

“According to my new friend, you made an exceedingly favourable impression upon her granddaughter, and she has been pining for a word from you for nigh on six months. She has been quite out of sorts that you have not called...”

His stomach flipped. She had been as affected as he, and hope surged through his veins.

#

Darcy slept poorly, and his sister was regarding him with a quizzical expression the next morning. He stopped fidgeting with his signet ring and looked unseeingly out of the carriage window. The moment had come, and his sentiments wavered between anticipation and dread. After all, he had never seen her face but for the stunning eyes, long dark lashes, and a glimpse of her tempting lips. He was more familiar with her figure than her face, which was an odd notion. She was tall and carried herself with a debonair elegance that was utterly exquisite.

Yet, he could not but harbour a sliver of worry that he might be disappointed when he saw her without the mask. He had formed an image that might have no bearing in reality. The resemblance to another young lady he had recently met was eerie and may have fooled him into conjuring unattainable perfection.

Would it matter? He had no answer to his own question, but he was about to discover the truth. The carriage drew to a halt. A footman lowered the steps and opened the door. He alighted first and aided his aunt and sister safely to the pavement. With his back to Limerick House, he wondered whether she was anxiously waiting, even stealing clandestine glances from behind a curtain, or, God forbid, she was indifferent and had forgotten all about the June evening at the Argyll Rooms.

The butler announced them, and Darcy entered behind his aunt and Georgiana. Beside Lord Limerick's sister sat none other than Miss Elizabeth Bennet—now Lady Elizabeth, of course—with a healthy glow to her delicate cheeks. It confirmed that his suspicions at Netherfield had been correct—Elizabeth and Eilís were related.

“Miss Darcy, how nice of you to call. I was just thinking about you.” The lady of the house greeted them all warmly and glanced at Elizabeth, who turned her head to gaze out of the window.

His interest in her was unnerving him, especially since he was about to reunite with Eilís. It would not do if she caught him ogling another lady. He swallowed and let his eyes travel the room only to discover that there were no other occupants. Eilís was not present, but at least he had found someone who must know where she was. He bowed deeply whilst Aunt Eudora greeted her friend with warmth. Judging by their low whispers, the matrons had concocted some form of scheme. But if so, where was Eilís?

“Thank you, my dear. I have brought my nephew and niece today. I understand that Darcy is acquainted with your granddaughter, and the young must have much to relate. It has been so long since they were last in each other's company.”

The matron nudged Elizabeth, and by that lady's serious expression he believed she might have preferred to forgo his company altogether. She smiled benignly at Georgiana, who looked forlorn as she stood wringing her hands with her eyes fixed

on the floor.

Elizabeth approached his shy sister and curtsayed. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss Darcy.”

She offered no greeting to him; a slight that did not go unnoticed by her grandmother, who gritted an admonishing, “Eilís!” through clenched teeth.

“Excuse my poor manners, Mr Darcy. I did not notice you,” she lied. “What a pleasure to see you again so soon.”

Darcy flinched and stared at her as he had done so many times before. It was not her words as much as the sarcastic tone in which it was delivered. Belatedly, his brain registered that Mrs Bennet had called her Eilís. To be certain he looked over his shoulder, but no one had entered behind him, and a sickening feeling formed at the pit of his stomach.

“Would you allow me to introduce my sister to you,” Darcy fumbled. The muscles in Lady Elizabeth’s cheeks showed some sign of activity. They had just been introduced by his aunt, and he fervently hoped she would not laugh at him. He was much relieved when she schooled her expression.

“Certainly, it is my great pleasure to meet your lauded sister.”

It was the wrong thing to say, because Georgiana shrank before their eyes. Lady Elizabeth noticed and immediately and easily amended the way she approached his sister.

“I have heard that you are a great lover of music, and I long to converse with someone who shares my interest. You see, I have four sisters, and not one is the slightest bit interested in music. Although one of my sisters plays, the endeavour is

driven by duty rather than pleasure.”

Georgiana’s eyes flitted to her face. “That is impossible,” she whispered.

Elizabeth had made an elegant turn and drawn Georgiana in. He admired the ease with which she conversed and made even his reserved sister feel comfortable.

“It is a slight exaggeration, but not by as much as one would think. I must warn you, though, that my passionate interest by no means is matched with any reasonable talent. My playing is tolerably good but cannot compare to the proficient masters I have heard in town. If your brother allows, may we abscond to the music room and play?”

The banter reminded him of a certain masquerade where Eilís, Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth, or whatever she preferred to be called, had occasionally outwitted him. Elizabeth glanced at him without meeting his eyes. He had to look down at his coat to see whether he had sullied himself, but her eyes were fixed on a silver button on his waist-coated chest.

“Indeed, I have no objections,” he croaked in an unfamiliar voice.

“You may, but not before you have shown my friend your costume,” Mrs Bennet interjected.

The matrons exchanged knowing looks, but Elizabeth’s rigid stance showed that she ardently opposed the request. Perhaps it was a secret?

“Certainly,” she finally acquiesced and disappeared down the hall.

She returned a few minutes later carrying a red dress he recognised immediately, and all the air was ripped from his lungs. A frigid shiver ran through him as Lady

Elizabeth pulled a pair of shoes from beneath the generous skirt.

“Imagine dancing in these monstrosities!” She smiled at Georgiana.

The heels were ridiculously high, and much higher than anything he had ever seen before.

“Heaven forbid!” Georgiana exclaimed with feeling.

“You managed exceedingly well,” Mrs Bennet boasted. “You did not stumble once,” she declared.

“Not true,” Lady Elizabeth corrected. “I did, but you are kind to pretend not to have noticed.”

She presented the shoes for Aunt Eudora to examine. “I cannot fathom how you managed to walk,” his aunt remarked in astonishment.

“I can attest that it was with great difficulty. I was fortunate only to stumble a couple of times, and not once did I fall.” Lady Elizabeth hummed in that deep and pleasant voice he had heard so little since the masquerade. Why had he not recognised it? Because she had avoided him at all costs and hardly spoken a word to him that was not strictly necessary. Which was perfectly understandable in view of his behaviour.

“But why would you subject yourself to such inconvenience?” his outspoken aunt enquired with her usual frankness.

“I was portraying Queen Elizabeth, and she was, as you know, tall and striking with a pale complexion and golden red hair. I had to dye my hair and painted a full face-mask porcelain white, to which I added her famous bright red lips.”



“She was a sight to behold,” Mrs Bennet gushed. “She turned the heads of several gentlemen that evening,” she added with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Shall we adjourn to the music room, Miss Darcy?” Lady Elizabeth suggested abruptly. She hung the dress on a chair to be admired and approached Georgiana with an extended arm.

Mrs Bennet looked in bewilderment between Darcy and Lady Elizabeth before she exchanged a concerned glance with his aunt.

Georgiana accepted her arm but looked at him for guidance. “My brother—”

“He is too polite to impose upon two young ladies with secret affairs to discuss,” Lady Elizabeth interrupted, escorting his sister out of the room.

Darcy was left awkwardly rooted to the floor, in the middle of the room, with his mind reeling. Every encounter with Miss Elizabeth Bennet played in rapid succession through his mind, including the assembly, where his cruel remarks had made her fine eyes water and spill. Her subsequent efforts to avoid him suddenly made perfect sense. He had grievously injured her and then made sport of her by following her around—effectively thwarting her efforts to escape his company—and adding insult to injury at Lucas Lodge, Netherfield, and Bingley’s ball. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was Eilís!

His eyes misted, and he bowed his head to the floor. What could be done? Nothing! It was in every way horrible, with no hope of redemption. He had lost.

“Darcy!” Aunt Eudora touched his arm and brought him out of his miserable thoughts. “What is the matter? I have called your name three times with no response.”

“Pardon me. I have a twinge of a headache,” he lied. “Please, do not allow my slight

indisposition to ruin your visit.”

“Then you must at least sit,” Aunt Eudora insisted.

Darcy let himself be led listlessly to a chair and sat where he was put. Mrs Bennet ordered a cup of willow bark tea, and he drank the bitter concoction obediently, but the fuzziness made him feel wretched. He did not deserve their compassion.

An eternity later, Georgiana returned, giggling, her head bent closely to Elizabeth’s. It was just further proof of his failings. Of course Lady Elizabeth was the perfect woman to bring his reserved sister much-needed joy and companionship.

“It has been a pleasure, my dear.” Aunt Eudora rose.

Darcy hoped he had managed to thank Mrs Bennet for her hospitality as well but could not remember when he stepped out of the door. Georgiana chatted happily about her time with Lady Elizabeth whilst his aunt stared out of the window with a tight expression around her mouth. He conveyed her to her home and handed her out himself.

“We shall discuss what happened later,” Aunt Eudora announced with a quick glance at his sister. Darcy was glad she had the wherewithal to spare Georgiana the sordid story.

It was with a heavy heart that he entered his house. When he had left this morning, he had a fervent hope that his life would no longer be lonely and void of the companionship only the lady of his heart could provide. He returned with shattered aspirations. Georgiana disappeared to the music room to practise a piece of music she hoped to play with Lady Elizabeth. He did not have the heart to disabuse her. It was highly unlikely Elizabeth would have anything more to do with the sister of the most disagreeable gentleman of her acquaintance.

#

Elizabeth

Elizabeth had stiffened in her seat when the butler had announced Mr Darcy, and by the time their visitors entered, the air had been as frigid as a winter filled with woe. His eyes had swept the room as if he was looking for something, or rather someone. Someone other than the country bumpkin Elizabeth Bennet.

It was plain to see that Mr Darcy's opinion of her had changed once he had become aware of her elevated status. Of course, now that he had discovered she was not without desirable connections, he would want to introduce his sister...

He paid her every deference as Lady Elizabeth. The contrast between how he had behaved towards her when she was the plebeian Miss Elizabeth brought a foul taste to her mouth. Mr Darcy was nothing but an arrogant, prideful man who thought about nothing but standing and consequence, which was a trait that she could not respect. His disappointment when he discovered that she was Queen Elizabeth must have been very great indeed. Mr Darcy's crestfallen expression bespoke his shock. The very thing she feared the most had happened—her face was a disappointment. He did not regard her as beautiful, merely tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt him. Why had he come?

If it were to further disparage her, she did not plan to be as lenient as she had been in the past. The blindfold had been ripped from her eyes, and she could see him for what he was—a pompous, arrogant, insufferable oaf, devoid of every feeling. And this infatuation she suffered must naturally abate with time.

The butler entered with a letter addressed to Elizabeth on a silver salver. She unfolded the paper and was stunned at its contents. Her dear friend was engaged to be married to none other than Mr Collins.

“Unfathomable,” she whispered.

“My thoughts exactly,” her grandmother replied drily. “Please enlighten me, Eilís. What have you done to poor Mr Darcy?”

“Nothing,” she replied truthfully.

“Do not play coy with me. You must know why he has turned from an ardent lover to a miserable creature who hardly dared speak a word to you. Do not think that I missed your cold reception, and I must admit that I was heartily disappointed in you. Why, you hardly talked about anything but Mr Darcy after the masquerade. Yet, since your return to London you have not mentioned him once. I thought that it was because you despaired of ever seeing him again. His aunt and I were greatly anticipating reuniting the two of you, as I have it on good authority that he was as bewitched by you as you were by him. What happened, Elizabeth?”

Grandmother only used her English name when she was cross—a notion that Elizabeth could not bear. It broke the dams that had teetered on the verge of destruction for weeks. Once unleashed, the tears gushed down her cheeks in a steady, untameable stream.

“Oh dear!” Her grandmother rose and enveloped her in her arms. “Let us adjourn to my sitting room. We can speak freely there, where no one can hear us.”

Elizabeth managed to nod and kept her head down until they entered her grandmother’s sanctuary. She sat whilst her grandmother went to her chamber for a fresh handkerchief. Through the door of the room she had never entered she saw an intriguing painting. It was a young boy with a halo of white curls on his head. He was dressed in a pink coat and short breeches. It was her father as a young boy, but that was not what surprised her. They had a similar painting at home, but in the one here, a girl who appeared to be exactly the same age stood smiling with her hand laced

with his.

“Who is that girl with my father?” she questioned her grandmother when she returned with the handkerchief.

“That is Catherine, his twin sister.”

Elizabeth forgot her own misery for a spell at that shocking news.

“I did not know you had a daughter or that my father had a sister.”

“She died before you were born, and the subject is painful to me. I beg you not to enquire any further. Besides, I am not to be distracted from my purpose. We were discussing Mr Darcy, and I shall not rest until you have related all your dealings with the man.”

Elizabeth did as requested and told her grandmother everything she remembered from when she had left town last summer until Mr Darcy had entered their parlour that very day.

When she had finished, the matron looked pensive. “He mortified your vanity, which justly incurred your contempt and indignation,” she declared.

“How unreal and fleeting the glories of love are,” Elizabeth lamented. “I was a child, unprepared for the heavy affliction that had befallen my heart like a thunderbolt. Yet, these events withered a healthy affection irrevocably and crushed its hopes forever.”

“I would not go that far,” her grandmother replied. “Love is complicated and may begin with more pain than pleasure, but I assure you, it is worth it in the end. Do not despair yet.”

“I bow to my fate, which compels me to resign any aspirations I previously may have harboured,” Elizabeth said with humility.

“I need some time to think...” Her grandmother appeared lost to the world after that remark. Elizabeth left her to her contemplations to reply to Charlotte’s letter.

Dear Charlotte,

I do not know whether I shall be able to come to your wedding as my grandmother has embarked upon refurbishing the house and Uncle Henry is forever occupied with his business.

I would love nothing more than to visit your new home at Easter, but as my family’s plans are not yet fixed, I can make no promises.

Life in London is rather dull at the moment. We have few engagements and even less good society. I miss my friends, and your letters are a great comfort to me...

Over the following days, her grandmother was much occupied and left the house for hours on end. Elizabeth surmised she was ordering fabrics and furniture.

Darcy

Some idiot was hammering on his door. It was completely unnecessary to make such a clamour in the middle of the night. Was a gentleman not allowed to sleep?

Darcy pried open his eyes and was surprised to see that he was still in his study—not in his chamber as he had supposed. At least it explained why his body ached from head to toe. His neck was particularly sore, and he was busy rubbing it when the door crashed into the wall. Colonel Fitzwilliam strutted in as if he owned the place. Darcy was immediately vexed at his cousin's impudence, which was amplified by his pounding headache.

“Georgiana sent me an urgent note to come at once, and I worried something terrible had befallen you. I did not expect to find you deep into your cups, asleep in your chair whilst drooling all over your desk. If I had known, I would have stayed in my nice warm chamber. It is glacial out.”

Darcy wiped his mouth and squinted at his two cousins. Or was it just the one?

“Then I suppose you may as well return home. Your business is concluded. There is nothing that needs your attention here,” he growled. It was unfortunate he was instantly beset by a bout of hiccups.

The two-headed monster did not obey him, instead ringing for a servant before seating itself, uninvited, by the fire. It shoved its feet towards the flames, and he was certain its boots would later leave soot marks on his expensive oriental rug.

The door opened to admit his butler, and one of the oafs ordered refreshments to be brought forthwith. He said nothing until the coffee, accompanied by meat, bread, and cheese had been delivered.

Darcy was about to fall asleep again when the ogre nudged him—hard. He tumbled to the floor, and had not the ground been so blasted unsteady when he finally got up, he would have boxed the monster’s ears.

“Crawford!”

“It is Colonel Fitzwilliam, and you are out of your senses. I have never known you to be so melancholy, or so despondent as to resort to drinking yourself into a stupor.”

“Most assuredly,” Darcy agreed. “I am vacillating between self-preservation and existential wrath. To quote Pauli’s words, ‘ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not, but what I hate I do.’”

Richard was eyeing him quizzically. He did not often quote biblical verses, and Darcy might as well inform the one from whom he could never keep a secret.

“Do you want to hear a funny story?” Darcy did not wait for a reply because the story was by no means humorous. “Or rather a horror story of gothic proportions.” And he admitted his feelings for Queen Elizabeth, Eilís, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and Lady Elizabeth.

Once he had finished, he groaned and reached for the tumbler, which was ripped out of his hand before he could bring it to his mouth.

“Richard!” he bawled and rose to pummel the idiot. And he would have, had his legs not chosen that moment to entangle themselves in the aforementioned oriental rug. He tumbled to the floor whilst cursing the stupid carpet to hell.



“I suggest that you sleep until your faculties are restored,” Richard remarked drily.

After a moment in the embarrassing prostrate position, Darcy was hoisted to his feet and carried to his bedroom.

“Put him in his bed,” Richard ordered. “Bring a bucket. I suspect he will be sick at some point...”

He sank into his pillow and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, it was still dark out, and Richard snored lightly from an informal position on his sofa. The room smelt of foul regurgitation, and he drank greedily from a glass of water he found on the table beside his bed.

“We had an interesting conversation last night,” Richard suddenly drawled from the sofa.

Darcy rubbed his head and tried to remember what he might have said but had no recollection of even receiving his cousin.

“So, which is it?” Richard asked. “Is it Eilís, Queen Elizabeth, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, or Lady Elizabeth?”

“I am certain I have no idea of what you are speaking,” Darcy prevaricated.

“Then let me remind you by quoting your words. I have fallen hopelessly in love, mentioning all the four ladies. You continued charmingly though. Eilís, Queen Elizabeth, Miss Elizabeth, and Lady Elizabeth must do as God pleases about loving me, but my affection for her cannot change. I may be miserable, but I shall never cease to love her most ardently. May God forsake me if I ever love another woman! I shall be eternally wretched if I ever in word or in deed am unfaithful—till the day I die. End of quote,” Richard informed him. “My question remains, who is it?”

“If I tell you, will you stop bellowing?” he entreated. His cousin’s powerful voice made his head throb.

“Certainly. I shall even order you a fresh cup of coffee,” he promised.

“They are all one and the same lady,” he admitted before sinking back into his pillow.

“I offer you my sincerest felicitations,” Richard smiled. “When is the blessed event?”

“Never! She despises me, and rightly so. I cannot think of my behaviour without abhorrence. There is not a man in this world less deserving of her approbation than me.”

“She must be a cold-hearted wretch,” Richard asserted with feeling.

“She is anything but. Lady Elizabeth is loveliness itself. Her goodness, compassion, wit, and intelligence are my idea of perfection. But when I entered Meryton’s monthly assembly I did not recognise Eilís. Miss Elizabeth had brown hair, appeared more reserved, and was significantly shorter. The dark, tallow-fogged assembly room did not allow me to see her exceptional eyes properly—the only true feature of hers I glimpsed on the night of the masquerade.”

“The Marquess of Limerick’s relation?”

“The very one...”

“I noticed your penchant for her society, but I did not suspect a serious attachment on such a short acquaintance.”

Darcy disregarded the obvious. When had he ever remained by a lady’s side for an entire evening?

“Bingley began pestering me to dance and pointed out Miss Elizabeth as a particularly desirable partner. As I mentioned before, I did not recognise her as Eilís, or as you would recall her, as Queen Elizabeth.”

He could not go on and repeat what he had said then. He bowed his head and rested it in his hands.

“Knowing something about your unyielding temper, I can imagine how you responded to Bingley’s well-meant prompt. The thought must have been unpalatable because you were already bewitched by Eilís, and once your mind is set, not ten wild horses could change your course.”

“It is worse than that. I was cruel and insulted her to her face,” he groaned.

“It cannot have been that bad. I have never known you to be cruel,” Richard tried to mollify him.

The comfort was undeserved. “Then you do not know me as well as you thought. I called her looks tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me and continued to insult her by proclaiming her slighted by all other men, for no other reason than because she was sitting out one dance. My offences were overheard by her mother and sister, who richly berated my insufferable manners before Elizabeth marched out of the room by way of my toes...”

Richard barked a laugh before his expression sobered. “What a disaster!”

“It turns out that, in matters of the heart, I am nothing but an ignorant blunderbuss,” Darcy admitted dejectedly.

“I assume you have begged the lady’s forgiveness for your callous remarks and assured her of your improved opinion.”

“I sent a message through her father,” Darcy replied lamely.

“And what was her reply? Did she forgive you?”

“It depends upon how faithful a correspondent Lord Glentworth is. It was done as we bade our farewells, and Elizabeth had already left for town.”

It was Richard’s turn to groan. “You truly are a dolt head. You cannot wait for weeks and allow the insult to fester before you, then by way of a messenger ask for forgiveness. This is worse than I imagined. What did she say to you yesterday that has you in the doldrums?”

“Very little. She greeted my sister and pretended not to see me.”

Richard tried, unsuccessfully, to hide a grin behind his coffee cup. “You do not exactly blend in with the furniture.”

“I should think not!” Darcy replied, vexed at his cousin’s mirth at his expense. “Well, I may have turned my head away whilst searching for Eilís. At that time, I was not aware that she was Lady Elizabeth.”

“How did you discover it?”

“When Lady Elizabeth snubbed me, her grandmother called her Eilís. I have since discovered that the name is the Irish equivalent of Elizabeth. Then Aunt Eudora wanted to see her costume. I did not realise what that meant before Elizabeth carried her red Queen Elizabeth dress into the room and pulled out a pair of shoes with abominably high heels. That is why she was so tall at the Argyll Rooms and appeared to have shrunk three inches in Hertfordshire.”

“I still find it hard to believe that you did not recognise her voice or manners much

sooner,” Richard complained.

“If I had allowed Bingley to introduce me, I might have. But I did not and therefore had hardly heard her voice. To me, she was just an insignificant country bumpkin whom Bingley happened to single out because she was the sister of his latest angel. Needless to say, Lady Elizabeth took pains to avoid me after the assembly. I am ashamed to admit that I found her behaviour intriguing. I may, on occasion, have followed her about and eavesdropped on her conversations. It is particularly distasteful now that I know she desired me to call and was distraught when I did not. My callous words must have injured her deeply, and then I kept pestering her with my unwanted presence. She must have long desired my absence by then. In retrospect, it is not strange that she was so skittish at Netherfield.”

“Lady Elizabeth resided at Bingley’s estate?” Richard questioned, surprised. “And you still failed to recognise her?”

It was puzzling, and he had admitted, if only to himself, that the former Miss Elizabeth more than intrigued him. It was further proof of his abominable flaws as a suitor.

“Only for five days when her sister took ill with a violent cold. Miss Jane Bennet had dined with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst one evening whilst we gentlemen were engaged with the militia. Elizabeth arrived the next morning as I was strolling in the garden. I called her name, but she eschewed me by hastening through the kitchen entrance. I did not see her before dinner that evening, when she walked in on us whilst we were disparaging her windblown appearance and long solitary walk.”

“Are you certain she heard you?”

“Yes, she made a comment that left me in no doubt. By that time, I had acknowledged I was in some danger, but it felt like I was being unfaithful to Eilís,

which only vexed me. I regard myself as steadfast, and to lust after two women was unnerving at best. Yet, one night I passed her reading on the sofa, and I could not help but let my fingers graze her elegant neck.”

“Darcy! She must have berated you, and rightfully so.”

“No, she startled and shut her book with a thump. It was not until I sat down beside her that she leapt to her feet and hastened back to her recovering sister.”

Richard rose and paced before him. “If she hated you, or even was indifferent, I believe she would have boxed your ears. If she dared trample on your toes, she does not lack courage. I would like to meet this paragon of female attributes and gauge for myself. I do not believe that all hope is lost, though the road to recovery, after what you have destroyed, may be daunting and humbling.”

“Lady Elizabeth is too civil to box my ears. You should have seen her comportment yesterday, Richard. She could not even bear to look at me!”

“Because she is still infatuated?”

“No! Because of the immovable contempt and dislike that is obvious in all her dealings with me. I was just too ignorant to see it!”

“So, you are just going to give up and continue as if nothing is amiss?” Richard sounded more resigned than he had ever heard him.

Darcy studied his cousin. He was rubbing his temples with a grim set around his mouth. He did not only look resigned but utterly dejected.

“No. Though there can be no chance of ever changing Lady Elizabeth’s opinion of me, I do not intend to continue as before. If nothing else, this experience has taught

me a valuable lesson or two in how to act or not to act. I know I am a selfish being, or so I was up until this moment. But my pride, arrogance, and selfish disdain for the feelings of others have cost me dearly. I am not so much a fool that I do not recognise that, and I must do everything in my power to become a better man. One that would have been worthy of Eilís.”

“Lady Elizabeth,” Richard corrected.

“She has been Eilís in my private contemplations for so long. I suppose I must drive all thoughts of her from my mind.” And from his dreams, but that he did not voice aloud.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth's sojourn to town proved an endless source of entertainment. She accompanied her relations to Lady Cowper's ball and kept a vigilant eye on the entrance whilst conversation flowed around her. She was obliged to contribute, occasionally, as Lord Limerick had many acquaintances. Some young men, and some old indeed, sought an introduction to the unknown lady in his party.

She was watching for the arrival of a certain gentleman, and after less than fifteen minutes, Mr Darcy strutted into the ballroom. Like a peacock, he turned the heads of all the young ladies in attendance—he was so very handsome, particularly his eyes and his Apollo-like form. It could not be denied that he was worldly and educated as well; it was a shame his character was lacking.

She turned away so as not to be recognised, mustered all the energy of her character, which was generally fertile in resources, and made herself pleasant to her company.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Mr Darcy engage a young lady for the next set. Elizabeth was unprepared for the pain the common display brought to her heart. She was obviously still besotted, and, perhaps, would always be because the love was too profound to be disregarded. Elizabeth sighed and bowed her head. If it could not be conquered, she must bury it deep in her heart.

“Lady Elizabeth, Mr Brummell has requested an introduction.” Her grandmother smiled.

“The lauded dandy?” Elizabeth whispered in astonishment. That would give her



something to boast about to her father, who would certainly laugh and make sport of her.

“A fine gentleman,” Uncle Henry added with the barest hint of irony. “He is a great friend of the Prince of Wales. I was introduced to him at the Charleton House fete in June,” he further explained.

“Certainly,” Elizabeth acquiesced, and once the introductions were made, he engaged her for the next set.

Brummell was above six feet tall from head to toe with a handsome face, and Elizabeth was not ignorant of the honour he bestowed upon her, nor the notice they drew as they entered the line.

“You are an accomplished dancer,” he flattered her after a few minutes of dancing in silence.

“Thank you, but I must credit my excellent partner.”

Brummell smiled. “You should see me where I shine,” he observed.

“And where is that?” Elizabeth enquired politely.

“During my daily baths,” answered the fop in all seriousness. “I soak for at least an hour every day.”

Elizabeth quashed the impulse to giggle. “Oh my! Every day? Have you no concern for washing away the protective layer of perspiration and subjecting yourself to diseases entering your body through your pores?”

“Certainly not!” the fop scoffed. “It is quite the opposite. Rinse away the grime and

the germs will surely follow.”

“Indeed, it must be so,” Elizabeth replied. “You will not find me guilty of such extreme ill-breeding as to differ in opinion from the esteemed Mr Brummell.”

They separated and assumed new partners. Elizabeth came face to face with none other than Mr Darcy and bolstered her courage to fight the tremulousness that threatened to overcome her. The stubborn infatuation still rendered her as possessed by an affectionate heart, even though the subject of her admiration had trifled most cruelly with her feelings and had taken unfair advantage of her youth and lack of experience. First love was a stubborn affliction indeed.

“Lady Elizabeth!” he exclaimed in his usual beauteous tone whilst all colour drained from his face.

“Mr Darcy,” she greeted in a high-pitched voice she hardly recognised. But she had sworn to treat him as an indifferent acquaintance. As a direct consequence of this promise, she offered him a small smile as she would every gentleman she encountered.

The gesture clearly startled Mr Darcy, and he stumbled. “I beg your pardon. I am not usually this clumsy, but your ethereal presence would make any man trip over his own feet. Whilst you dance truly gracefully—so feminine and ladylike,” Mr Darcy uttered to her surprise. It was not like him to pay her compliments. Could he be mocking her? She must have frowned or something equally disbelieving because he closed his mouth so abruptly that his teeth clattered.

Fortunately, their rendezvous was short. She was handed back to her partner and that was that. A sigh of relief escaped her. It was not so bad to meet Mr Darcy as indifferent acquaintances; at least he was more civil.

The dance ended, and Mr Brummell escorted her back to her relations who were surrounded by eager gentlemen waiting to be introduced. Elizabeth smiled wryly to her partner. She was not too vain as to recognise why she was suddenly the belle of the ball.

“Thank you, Mr Brummell. It has been a pleasure and an honour.”

The gentleman left for the card room with Uncle Henry, and another young man approached whom her grandmother introduced as Viscount Crawford. Elizabeth thought she recognised the name but could not place it.

“Was that Mr Darcy I just saw you dancing with?” the viscount queried.

“Briefly, yes, but my partner was Mr Brummell,” she boasted.

“A very fine gentleman.”

Elizabeth nodded and supposed he was speaking about the lauded friend of the Prince Regent, who was frequently mentioned in the newspapers as the arbiter of gentlemen’s fashion.

“I cannot hold a candle to Darcy’s noble face and impressive stature, but I still have the nerve to request a set.” The viscount offered her his arm, Elizabeth accepted, and they moved to the line.

“You admire Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth probed, baffled at this turn. She was still not absolutely certain that the viscount had not misspoken and meant Mr Brummell.

“Admire! You may depend upon it. He has not his equal in all of Europe. I speak of him altogether, as to his beauty, his manners, and his talents. Mr Darcy, owing to his extreme reserve and excessive shyness, has never desired to be known or to be

favoured but by his own particular friends. Yet, I know few so capable or so distinguished. His voice is remarkably fine, and his language is always persuasive and eloquent. He would have made an excellent politician if his vanity had bent in that direction. Mr Darcy, of course, would deny it vehemently and refute any claims of excellence of speech.”

“How can he be shy?” Elizabeth doubted.

“Your question should be why it becomes him so well. I dare say any other man would be awkward, but Mr Darcy is at his most graceful when he is utterly embarrassed. I have known him since he was a boy, and the ladies have been running mad for him since he was fifteen years old!”

The viscount laughed and looked as if he remembered some funny anecdote.

“Mr Darcy did not dare to look any lady full in the face until well after he had come of age. It was the loss of his estimable father that forced him into society, and not so seldom his friends had to ply him with brandy to encourage him to dance.” Lord Crawford smiled, and so ended his praise of Mr Darcy.

“Dare I accuse you of not being entirely in earnest and suggest that you might be prone to exaggeration.” Elizabeth had a hard time believing a word the viscount said.

“Look at the breadth of his shoulders before you join the hue-and-cry against me,” the viscount said, grinning.

Elizabeth laughed merrily, and the badinage continued with the pleasant viscount until their set ended.

When the ball was over, Elizabeth had been engaged for every set and spent a pleasant supper with Lord Winterbourne. She had not seen a trace of Mr Darcy and

supposed he must have left for another engagement.

“What a splendid evening,” Grandmother gushed in the carriage on their way home. “You were in high demand this evening, Eilís. I am all anticipation for when the Season begins in earnest.”

“I owe it all to Mr Brummell for singling me out,” Elizabeth demurred.

“Nonsense!” Uncle Henry growled as their conveyance rolled to a halt in front of Limerick House. “You won them over on your own merit. Who would object to such beauty and wit combined?”

#

Elizabeth awoke as the noon sun reached her face. In her exhausted state, she had forgotten to close the curtains. Too tired for company, she ordered a tray to her room and anticipated a few pleasurable hours reading in the window seat. But her mind was too unsettled. The words floated round the page in a disorderly fashion as her thoughts kept returning to a certain gentleman. There was no reason to lament what could not be, but she could cherish the memories, particularly the feelings Mr Darcy had aroused in her when they had flirted at the masquerade ball and the exquisite view from the top of a tree... A thrill had flowed through her veins, lighting every nerve in her body. The idea worked quite well to separate her childhood hero and the unmasked dance partner from the Mr Darcy who had entered the Meryton assembly. She almost convinced herself that they were not the same man. The evening’s success had assured her that Mr Darcy’s cruel rejection did not reflect upon her attractions but rather the gentleman’s disposition to disapprove of everyone beneath him in consequence. He had spent half an hour in Mrs Long’s company without speaking as much as a word to her. Mrs Bennet had been convinced it was because Mrs Long did not own a carriage. The irony of the fact that Elizabeth and her family now outranked him made her giggle. She was not made for misery and welcomed the improvements

to her spirits most heartily.

She did not see her relations till she ventured down in the afternoon. Lord Limerick was out on business, but her grandmother returned at two o'clock. Elizabeth hastened to the hall to greet her, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

"Are you well, Eilís?"

"Oh yes, very well indeed," she replied to her grandmother's query.

"Let me order tea and refreshments. I have something I wish to speak to you about."

"Certainly," Elizabeth agreed and followed her grandmother into the parlour. She had no idea what the lady wanted to address, but her mien was serious.

"I have visited Miss Eudora Darcy," her grandmother revealed once the refreshments had been served. "She assured me that Mr Darcy spent months searching for you after the masquerade. It was most unfortunate that we took down the knocker that night, though that could not be helped. He called the next morning, and every morning after that until some urgent business called him away. When he returned, we had left for áth Dara, and you had returned to Hertfordshire. You know the rest..."

"If he truly wanted to make himself pleasant, he should at least have treated me with respect," Elizabeth protested.

"Do you not believe he would have treated you with humble deference if you had sought an introduction? You had the advantage of knowing who he was, whilst he had thought that you were a tall, red-headed beauty who had absconded to your Irish estate without a thought about your beau. If I have understood the chronological order of the assembly correctly, you had more than an hour to make yourself known to Mr Darcy before he made his uncharitable remarks. You obviously have a turn for

masquerading because he never recognised you. You must acknowledge that, in this instance, it worked to your disadvantage.”

Elizabeth was startled that her grandmother would put the blame at her feet for the heartache she now suffered. She would dearly like to exculpate herself from the charges. Had she done them both a disservice and acted coquettishly, or worse—like a child? The possibility caused considerable agitation and provoked her to defend herself.

“If I were to form an attachment to any gentleman, he must treat every lady of all layers of society with respect. I cannot esteem one who rejects a lady based on her lack of beauty or consequence, without any regard for her character. Besides, it was not only that which earned my disapprobation. He cruelly mocked my mother’s lack of understanding.”

“Much like your father?” her grandmother enquired. “Well, you are not wrong, but have you considered that his feelings for Eilís would have made the attempts of his friend to engage him with other young ladies unpalatable? I shall leave you to contemplate. I must get ready before the theatre this evening. At my age, that is not a small feat.”

Her grandmother left, and Elizabeth sat stupefied for a few moments before she too hastened to her chamber and rang for her maid.

Once the ladies’ preparations were complete, the three residents of Limerick House left for Drury Lane. It was a crush, and friends of the marquess delayed them so much that the play had already begun when they entered their box. Elizabeth looked at the people next to them. A married couple, she surmised, of exceptional beauty. The pair was in that regard well matched. A lady from the box beyond greeted the gentleman, who she then learnt was Lord Ponsonby, but the gentleman completely overlooked her, and his wife bent her head as if in mortification. Elizabeth regarded the snubbed

lady, who was uncommonly beautiful and appeared to find humour in the insult. The fair-haired gentleman beside her turned his head in her direction, and Elizabeth gasped. She even heard his voice suggesting loudly to the entire party that they should dine at his house after the performance. There was no chance she was mistaken.

“Grandmother! Mr Bingley is here. Look, in the box beyond Lord Ponsonby’s.”

Maeve Bennet lifted her opera glass and directed the device at the aforementioned box. She lowered it slowly and nudged Elizabeth.

“Pray, do not consider greeting Mr Bingley when he is enjoying that particular company.”

Elizabeth glanced at the box. There were four gentlemen and four ladies, none of whom were known to her. She could see nothing amiss. They were fashionably dressed and appeared amused by the comedy being performed on stage.

“But why?” Elizabeth complained. In her mind it was the perfect opportunity to establish why Mr Bingley had not returned to Meryton, though his business, at this particular moment, did not appear to be that pressing.

Her grandmother leant in and whispered in her ear, “The short gentleman is respectable enough. He is the Duke of Argyll.”

“A duke!” Elizabeth interrupted. She could not fault the amiable Mr Bingley for his exalted friend.

“A Scottish duke, but the ladies are courtesans. It is the three Dubouchet sisters and their friend Miss Julia Storer. The latter is the fallen niece of the Irish Earl of Carysfort, and her mother, the Honourable Mrs Storer, was one of the maids of



honour to our king's royal mother. Miss Storer received the finest education in France and finished at Hampton Court. Soon after, her mother sent her on a visit to Mrs Cotton to help her with her nine small children. Whilst there, the girl managed to entangle herself with her host's husband. She concealed her disgrace until she was seized with the pangs of labour while paying her respects to Her Majesty in court! Her mother and uncle were enraged by her indiscretion and hastened her off to the country. Her brother even risked his life calling out Colonel Cotton. He was wounded but not fatally so. She yet again abused them by writing to the colonel, who came running, and the scandal was complete. Now she has five or six children and lives in a small remote hovel outside town. I demand that you avoid an introduction to those ladies should anyone be so foolish as to suggest it."

"Certainly!" Elizabeth promised, but she saw the inequity in disparaging the ladies whilst praising the peer.

"You do not want to be associated with the unvirtuous, frivolous carousers, because your reputation will suffer."

If this is the superior society in town Miss Bingley boasted about, she could have no reason to look down upon the honest, decent people of Meryton.

From then on, Elizabeth took pains not to look to her right lest Mr Bingley notice her and forward the undesirable introductions. She set her sight directly across the room and met the cavernous gaze of Mr Darcy. He nodded in acknowledgement, and Elizabeth bowed her head in return. He was attending with an elderly couple of distinction, and she could just see the contours of two other gentlemen at the back of the box. At least he has not joined the disreputable party to my right, she thought wryly as the mere notion of him having a mistress sent a pang to her chest.

One of the gentlemen behind him leant forwards, his face catching the light, and she immediately recognised him. What was Viscount Crawford doing with Mr Darcy? By

the looks of it, he was no more intimidated by the gentleman than she. Elizabeth directed her eyes and thoughts to the stage, and soon the comedy *The Honey Moon* engaged her entirely. Mr Elliston played the duke so very chivalrously and was everything a gentleman ought to be to win his fair lady.

A commotion to her right disrupted the performance. A young buck climbed up from the pit into Mr Bingley's box. He was received with boisterous laughter and congenial handshakes, except from Mr Bingley, who was frowning in displeasure. He might have been duped by an invitation from an illustrious duke and been caught unaware in the clutches of the ill-reputed ladies? He might not even know what they were. With that comforting thought, Elizabeth returned her attention to the play.

When the lights were turned on during the interval, Elizabeth stayed with her grandmother to avoid encountering Mr Bingley and his disreputable companions. Uncle Henry left to fetch refreshments, and Elizabeth used the opportunity to enquire about the viscount.

"Grandmother, please do not look, but opposite our box I spotted Mr Darcy with an elderly couple and two gentlemen, one of which is Viscount Crawford."

"Yes, they are cousins, and the couple are the viscount's parents, Lord and Lady Matlock, while the colonel in regimentals is the viscount's brother. Please do not mention them to Henry as it will only upset him. Lord Matlock and Henry had a fall-out years ago with no hope of redemption."

Of course, the cousins whom Miss Bingley had told her had suggested the wager that prompted Mr Darcy to dance with her at the masquerade! If only she had remembered that titbit when she had met the viscount at Lady Cowper's ball...

"I wonder why you chose to introduce him to me if his family is so distasteful?"

“I would not have done so if Henry had not joined Mr Brummell in the card room, but I happen to disagree that children should atone for the sins of their parents. Besides, Miss Eudora Darcy speaks very highly of him, and his brother in particular. If Colonel Fitzwilliam had been in attendance, I would have chosen him, but as he was not, the viscount had to do.”

“Are the Matlocks so very bad, then?”

“Oh yes. I would advise you to avoid them as best you can.”

Her grandmother did not explain, and Elizabeth dared not ask because the lady’s eyes were glittering dangerously. Instead, she expounded upon the play and how amusing it was. Henry joined them, carrying wine to quench their thirst, and soon the interval was over. Mr Bingley and his party never returned, and Elizabeth took pains to avoid glancing at Mr Darcy. She succeeded most of the time.

The next morning.

“Perhaps we should invite your family to town for Christmas?” Grandmother Bennet mused during breakfast.

“Mr and Mrs Gardiner have spent every Christmas at Longbourn since they married. I fear the children would be terribly disappointed if they could not go this year,” Elizabeth informed her cautiously. It was not that she was opposed to the idea, it was just that she had become accustomed to celebrating the festive season with the Gardiner family.

“I am not so high in the instep that I cannot invite your mother’s family to join us. I have accepted your mother, and when one can tolerate that lady’s fluttering nerves and fancies, one can very well manage the genteel and proper Madeleine and Edward Gardiner.”

Her grandmother sounded miffed, and Elizabeth hastened to mollify her. “Of course. Yet, I could not suppose before you extended the invitation. It is my father about whom I am most concerned. You know he hates town...”

“Of course, he has not been since... Well. Never mind. It is best to leave old grievances behind and only think of the past as it gives you pleasure. Your father will have to rally his courage and overcome what has possessed him to avoid London’s society so judiciously. He has no choice in the matter as it is his duty to take his place in the House of Lords. It can no longer be delayed as he is now the Earl of Glentworth and you, a leanbh, are Lady Elizabeth.”

“I am,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “And Lady Elizabeth is very much anticipating a jolly Christmas with all my dear family. Thank you, móraí .”

She rose and hugged her grandmother. “Shall I write the letters?”

“Yes, if you would be so kind, I shall be very grateful. These old hands are prone to cramping when I write several letters at once.” Her grandmother reached for the morning gazette and leafed past the war news to the gossip columns.

“Think nothing of it,” Elizabeth replied graciously.

“Heaven forfend!” Grandmother suddenly cried with her nose in the newspaper. “Well, I never...”

“What is the matter?” Elizabeth asked, concerned.

“You are mentioned in the gossip column. Let me read it to you. At Lady C’s ball the Earl of G’s daughter was introduced to superior society. Lady E was quite the rage and in demand as a desirable partner. She danced with Mr B, Viscount C, and the Lord W, to mention a few, and they all seemed delighted by the petite Grecian goddess with dark curly hair and bright green eyes. Could she be this coming Season’s incomparable? This author waits in delightful suspense.”

Elizabeth was stunned speechless for a mere moment before her faculties returned and she laughed outright. “Imagine what they will write when Jane is introduced. I predict the accolades will be even greater. She is the indisputable angel.”

“Do not disparage yourself, Elizabeth, it is not becoming,” her grandmother retorted. “Jane is beautiful, but so are you in your own right.”

They were interrupted by the butler, who chose that moment to enter with a stack of

letters on a silver salver. Elizabeth accepted the tray and passed the invitations to her grandmother, discovering two envelopes beneath them addressed to herself.

“Finally, a letter from Jane. Or rather two.” She smiled at her grandmother. “I was worried I had not heard from her, but now I understand perfectly. See!” She showed the first letter to Grandmother Bennet. “She has written the direction remarkably ill. It is not strange it was missent elsewhere. Do you mind if I read Jane’s letters before I write the Christmas invitations?”

“Indeed, read your letters,” her grandmother allowed. “I admit I am curious as to what she has to say about Mr Bingley.”

“The first was sent on the day I left for town. How strange...” Elizabeth mused. “Jane writes that Mr Darcy, Mr and Mrs Hurst, and Miss Bingley came to bid the family farewell as they had decided on a whim to join Mr Bingley in town. Miss Bingley then implied that there was a connection between Mr Bingley and Miss Darcy. Mr Darcy was unaware and opposed it vehemently, but that is not what concerned Jane. Miss Bingley was unpleasant and patronising for most of the visit, but when she realised that Father had become the Earl of Glentworth, she completely reversed her sentiments and dearly wished to continue the acquaintance. Jane is remarkably sceptical towards her overtures, and I shall give her leave to doubt Miss Bingley’s sincerity. She is a great deal too apt to believe people in general, you know. I heartily commend her new-found wariness, especially when it concerns Miss Bingley. I dare say she is a parvenu who thinks of nothing but clawing herself to the highest possible standing in society.”

“That is ungenerous, Eilís .”

“Indeed, but it is also true,” Elizabeth replied with a smile, and her grandmother could not conceal the tugging at the corner of her mouth that quite ruined her admonishment.

The behaviour of Miss Bingley did not reflect on the lady's brother, who had not been present and was therefore probably both ignorant and innocent of his sister's machinations. He had not been apprised about their elevation in rank when he had courted Jane and therefore must be acquitted from having a mercenary motive.

It was suspicious that the entire Netherfield party had left after the ball when it was only Mr Bingley who had business in town. It might even explain why Mr Bingley had not returned to Meryton. She would not put it past his sisters or his friend to join together in nefarious scheming for their own inexplicable purpose.

Elizabeth turned the page and found a short postscript from her father.

Mr Darcy begged for a moment of my time and wanted me to convey his sincerest apologies for insulting you. As you are not a vain creature, I assured him you would accept. I cannot tell you about his other errand in this letter, but I believe that under the austere exterior he is a decent man who takes prodigiously good care of his sister.

Elizabeth huffed and tried to fathom what Mr Darcy could have related to convince her father. But it was a futile endeavour. Instead, she opened the second letter, where Jane's marked dismay regarding Mr Bingley's failure to return for their mother's dinner was uncharacteristically notable.

"How is Jane?" Grandmother enquired after a long silence.

"I hardly know," Elizabeth muttered. "She is unhappy due to Mr Bingley's failure to return to Netherfield."

"It is clear that Mr Bingley has no intention of honouring his promise to return. What say you we invite Jane to join us in advance? We can assert that she is needed for the preparations before Christmas, and I am certain that a change of scenery will be just the thing."

“I think it is a splendid idea.”

If Jane were here, it would be easier to determine her frame of mind and entertain her, should her spirits prove to be low.

#

Darcy

Darcy decided to pay Bingley a visit after the spectacle he had made of himself at the theatre. If he was still determined to pursue Lady Jane, he should avoid embarrassing himself in front of her relations. Although he doubted Bingley knew the marquess, he should have recognised Lady Elizabeth. The hypocrisy hit him at once. He should allow Bingley the benefit of the doubt.

The butler announced him in Hurst House’s parlour. Bingley looked as though he had barely slept and was still half in his cups.

“Mr Darcy!” Miss Bingley exclaimed, clutching his arm as usual. It was a vexing presumption he had yet to disabuse her of. If it had been Lady Elizabeth who behaved in a likewise manner, he might not find it so tiresome.

How had Elizabeth perceived Miss Bingley’s overfamiliarity? The latter had acted with impudence quite often at Netherfield. It was to be hoped Lady Elizabeth had not supposed he welcomed Miss Bingley’s advances. A critical voice in his head reminded him that she could only know what she observed, which was that he did nothing to discourage the harpy, whilst she was not privy to his private thoughts on the matter.

“You have abused us abominably by waiting for so long to see us.” Miss Bingley pouted in a most unbecoming way.



Darcy startled. When had his obligations included the duty of visiting Bingley? “It has been but a week, or two at the most,” he protested.

“Yet, it has been too long for some.” Miss Bingley fluttered her lashes. “Dear Charles has been so occupied with his friends that he has had no time to return to sweet Jane. I am in desperate need of your counsel. Should I send her a letter to assure her she is not forgotten?”

“I cannot advise you on that. Your own conscience must guide you.” If this had been a few days ago, he would have had much to say, but his recent epiphany had made him doubt his astuteness. “Bingley!” he exclaimed loudly to awaken the gentleman who had managed to fall asleep during his tête-à-tête with his sister.

Bingley startled and blinked rapidly before greeting him properly.

“I had a wonderful evening at the theatre yesterday,” Bingley informed him.

“Yes, I know,” Darcy replied evenly.

“Were you there too?” Bingley cried. “I did not see you. You should have joined my party. We had ever so much fun.” Bingley grinned, winced, and rubbed his temples.

“Oh yes,” Miss Bingley crowed. “He was invited by the Duke of Argyll and joined his entourage.” She paused, presumably to add dramatic affect to that titbit of news. “It was quite a scandal how he married the duchess only three weeks after her Scottish divorce,” she gleefully informed him. “But, as he declares himself to be blissfully happy, who am I to object?” she added with false demureness, excessively proud to be associated with a duke.

However, the duchess had not been in attendance, and the duke had been surrounded by ladies of ill repute. His Grace’s affair with the infamous Harriette Dubouchet had

been long and convoluted but had ended some time ago. She was now under the protection of the noticeably young Marquess of Worcester, who had disgraced himself by climbing into the duke's box from a lower tier only last evening.

The Duke of Argyll's infatuation with his current wife was of long standing. It had lasted almost two decades whilst she was married to another, but he was not the first gentleman to have his head turned by the beautiful and vivacious Harriette. Even the Prince Regent was reported to have sent her a letter of invitation to join him in Brighton. The flighty lady's reply was rumoured to have demanded that if he was interested, he must come to her.

Acknowledging that his reflections were futile, and detaining him from his purpose, he chose to disregard Miss Bingley as much as possible and turned his full attention to her brother.

"I sat across from you in the Matlocks' box. I am surprised you did not notice, but I am more concerned that you did not appear to detect that the Marquess of Limerick sat two boxes to your left." He let the implication linger in the air.

To his advantage, Bingley grasped the consequence quickly, and a concerned expression clouded his face.

"Was Lady Jane with him?" he enquired, fidgeting with his coat sleeves.

"No, it was only the marquess, his sister, and Lady Elizabeth."

"You should have notified me," Bingley accused him.

His sister muttered something to the effect of, "That mousy little thing, how could one expect him to notice."

Darcy chose to overlook the slight and to continue his conversation with Bingley. “I tried, but by the interval you had left.”

“Yes. We went to Mrs Sydenham’s for a short spell, but she served us blood pudding and called it a meal. Fortunately, I convinced them to join me here, and we had a pleasant evening of cards and games—”

“I assure you the duke was served an excellent dinner at my table,” Miss Bingley interrupted again.

Darcy fervently hoped the guests who had dined at her table were not the entire party from the theatre, but surely Bingley was not so stupid as to bring those ladies home to his unmarried sister.

“I am certain they were delighted. You set an excellent table, Miss Bingley,” Darcy responded honestly.

“The Marquess of Worcester particularly enjoyed the lamb, but Mrs Sydenham swears to blood pudding, and that you will not find at my table,” Miss Bingley huffed.

Darcy directed what he was certain was a scowl at Bingley, who had the decency to avert his eyes. He must have a serious conversation with his friend, but not in front of his sister and not until he was sober.

“Do you know dear Jane’s fortune? I have not heard a word spoken about it, and when a lady does not ensure that her greatest attribute is publicly known, I am inclined to believe it is because she has none. In Meryton, it was believed she had only a portion of a thousand pounds upon the death of her mother, which is a paltry sum indeed. It is certainly nothing to my excellent fortune.”

Darcy fixed a glare at Miss Bingley that could have made a puddle freeze over, but the lady was inured to reproach. But even worse, did she genuinely believe he was interested in idle gossip?

The critical inner voice that had been admonishing him frequently during the course of the last few days forced him to admit the unpalatable truth. Yes. She had reason to believe he would stoop to disparaging, belittling, and judging those beneath him in consequence. He had joined her critical abuse of the residents of Meryton for nigh on a fortnight before he had thought twice about it. He was no better than Miss Bingley. If anything, he was worse due to his education and consequence. With prominence came responsibility, and he had shirked his duty to those not so fortunate as himself. He was determined to do better in the future and decided to begin at once by defending the lady who did not deserve Miss Bingley's censure. But she was not finished.

"I dare say that Jane will make a good match regardless of her lack of fortune. She is sweet and the daughter of an earl, but the rest of her sisters will not entice any gentlemen of notice. Particularly the dowdy Eliza. She has no beauty and no conversation to speak of. I know you found her dull company intriguing, but not even your excellent efforts could make her the least bit interesting. Especially since they do not have the protection of a brother to inherit."

The rage was sudden and complete. It did not help that she had pointed out what would only pain him.

"The marquess's fortune is excellent, but I know not how much of it he has settled on his great-nieces. What I do know is that a special remainder was added under the conditions of the marquessate—similar to Lord Nelson's—where the title may be passed to male issue of sisters and daughters. Lord Glentworth is his heir, and should he not sire a son, the first-born son of the Bennet sisters will be next in line." Lord Matlock was well informed and knew the specifics from when the marquessate was

created. The earl had been vocal about his objections to the conditions Lord Limerick demanded. The marquess was fortunate that he had the support of the Prince Regent because many a lord had sided with his uncle's loud protests. He could not begrudge the marquess his wish to continue his line, even if he had to resort to his sister's progeny. If Darcy himself did not sire a child, the fee simple Pemberley would go to Georgiana's son by the conditions in his will.

Mr Bingley revived from his crapulence and sat up. "Lady Jane will inherit?"

"Her son may, yes."

Darcy cursed his temper and loose tongue. He was not at all certain that Bingley and his capricious nature would suit the beautiful and serene lady. The hypocrisy of that thought was glaringly obvious. Had he not been of a mind to warn his friend against forming an attachment to the reserved lady? With Bingley's disposition, he would not thrive in a loveless marriage, but how plausible was it that his friend would remain constant? He fell in and out of love more often than anyone he knew. It had been unwise of him to reveal the marquessate's unconventional patent because Miss Bingley began pestering her brother to return forthwith to Hertfordshire with the most mercenary motive in mind, and Bingley had little choice but to agree. Lady Glentworth was in favour of the match, and he was suddenly concerned that Lady Jane would submit to pressure from her marriage-minded mother and an eager suitor regardless of her own wishes. But how could he discourage the Bingleys without undue interference?

"You do not even know whether Lady Jane is still at Longbourn," Darcy blurted out. Bingley was about to ring for his valet to pack for an impromptu visit to Netherfield, and Miss Bingley had obviously not been sincere when she promised to be a faithful correspondent to Lady Jane. "Allow me to enquire of my aunt whether Lady Jane is expected to join her sister in town." It was a plausible excuse since Elizabeth was in London. It was to be hoped that Lady Jane would soon follow because the marquess

was an astute man who would not allow his niece to be duped or cajoled.

“Lady Matlock?” Miss Bingley probed, always eager to imply a great familiarity with his most illustrious connections.

“No, Miss Eudora Darcy.” A lady who did not suffer fools and had taken an instant dislike to Miss Bingley. “She is a friend of the marquess’s sister, who would know the whereabouts of her granddaughter.”

“Very well.” Bingley smiled brightly. “I shall await your intelligence on the subject before I pack my bags.”

Before he revealed any more that was better left unsaid, Darcy bade his friends goodbye and hastened back to Darcy House.

#

Elizabeth

“Are you ready, Eilís ?” her grandmother called from the entrance hall.

“Yes, I shall be with you in a mere moment,” Elizabeth replied from above. They were returning Miss Eudora Darcy’s call, an endeavour she dreaded because there was a slight chance Mr Darcy would be present. It might be a long and tormenting half-hour before they returned home.

They arrived at Miss Darcy’s town house in mere minutes and entered the narrow entrance hall. A butler took their warm cloaks and showed them into a parlour with an abundance of stuffed animals, even stuffed birds, which she had not seen before.

Miss Darcy had a caller, but rather than Mr Darcy it was the colonel from the theatre.

Elizabeth was naturally sceptical. He was the brother of the deceitful viscount and equally culpable for the wager that had prompted Mr Darcy to dance with her at the masquerade.

They greeted each other, the older people warmly and the younger with cautious reserve.

“I have not yet had the pleasure of hearing you play, Lady Elizabeth. Could you be persuaded to entertain us on my pianoforte?” Miss Eudora Darcy enquired.

“It would be my pleasure.” At the very least, it would save her from conversing with the colonel. Elizabeth looked about the room but could see no pianoforte.

“The instrument is in the next room,” the older lady explained and rang the bell.

A footman entered and opened the double doors revealing the pianoforte. Elizabeth rose, as did the colonel.

“May I turn the pages for you?”

As much as she would relish thwarting him and declining, she could not be so rude. With a tight nod of acceptance, she sailed to the instrument and began to play a light piece she knew by heart. She could not help but smile at the bewildered colonel, who obviously could read music. It spoke well of his discernment that he discovered very quickly that she was not playing what was on the sheet before her. Once the piece concluded, she allowed him his gallantry and leafed through the music at hand.

“Lady Elizabeth, I would dearly like to hear your strictures about how my cousin Darcy behaved in Hertfordshire...”

Elizabeth turned to the hovering colonel and smiled to give the impression she was

about to tease, but in reality, she was deadly serious.

“Indeed. But you must prepare yourself, for what I am about to relate is very dreadful.”

The colonel barked a laugh. “I can well imagine, but do continue. I doubt that you can shock a seasoned soldier.”

He was warning her that he knew what had transpired.

She turned fully to him, the sheets of music all but forgotten in her hands.

“The first time I saw him was at a ball, and how do you think he behaved?”

The colonel shifted uncomfortably and denied having any knowledge.

“He danced only four dances with his friends, though gentlemen were scarce, and I know for a fact that more than one lady was sitting down without a partner.”

“Darcy’s reserve makes him ill-qualified to recommend himself to strangers,” the colonel defended his cousin.

“Unless he is paid,” Elizabeth remarked evenly. “I have it on good authority that his price is a mere ten guineas.” She turned to the instrument and sang an Irish air that left no room for conversation. When the song ended, she closed the instrument and returned to her grandmother’s side.

#

Darcy



A familiar knock resonated through his study.

“Enter,” he called, and it was no surprise to him that Richard came through the door.

The colonel immediately went to his port and poured them both a generous measure. The tumbler was thrust into his hand before Richard settled into a chair.

“I just called on Miss Eudora Darcy.”

A sense of foreboding settled in his stomach.

“Really. And what business had you with my aunt?”

“Nothing, but her servant had left her card at my barracks. I thought it might have something to do with you and went promptly to her house.”

The colonel was habitual, and his aunt knew that leaving her card without a message would send him expeditiously to her door.

“And what did you discover?”

“I did not have the time to enquire before additional guests came calling.”

“Who?” he growled, though his cousin’s countenance betrayed him.

“Mrs Maeve Bennet and Lady Elizabeth. I do not know how she discovered it, but she knows about the wager.”

“What wager?” he stupidly asked before he remembered the ridiculous bet he had accepted from Crawford.

“She is under the impression that you needed monetary inducement to dance with her.”

He let his head fall into his hands and sighed. Would this farce never end? Was he to be faced with his failings at every turn?

“We must try to disabuse her of the mistaken notion that you do not like her.”

“It is no use. Nothing can be done. I have seen to that with my abominable behaviour...”

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Jane arrived in town just in time for the event of the Season, Lady Jersey's Christmas ball. Their father accompanied her sister on the trip, a rare occurrence that prompted his mother to hope for a prolonged stay.

"You must have tea with us and warm yourself by the fire," her grandmother entreated.

"I cannot if I am to return to Longbourn before dark." Lord Glentworth had not even removed his hat and stood in the entrance hall ready to flee.

Lord Limerick had heard the commotion and poked his head out of his study.

"Glentworth! A word if you please," his lordship shouted.

"I cannot oblige you. I must leave at once while there is still light." Lord Glentworth took one step towards the door.

"But you will join us for Christmas," her uncle demanded.

"I very much doubt it," her father replied.

"Thomas, you must join us, and it had better be sooner rather than later," Lord Limerick called whilst Lord Glentworth walked out of the door and entered his carriage. The equipage left at once, with the marquess blustering at the top of the steps. "I need a divine intervention," he muttered.

Jane was hastened to her room to unpack before joining her sister to prepare for the

evening's event. Grandmother had ordered both girls new dresses with the old measurements her seamstress had taken last summer. Small adjustments were made in a frenzy before the sisters had a moment to themselves.

"Are you well, Jane?" Elizabeth enquired. Usually so perceptive of her sister's moods, she could not determine Jane's present state of mind.

"I am," she replied with little conviction.

"Then why do I not believe you?" Elizabeth arched her brows.

"There is nothing the matter with me but some ridiculous doubts following our elevation of rank." Jane sat down heavily on her bed and was joined by her sister. "Have you questioned people's sincerity since our good fortune became known?" she asked.

"Dear Jane, I have been questioning the sincerity of most people since long before I was aware of Father's coming elevation to the peerage. I am far less trusting than you, and I welcome your new-found cynicism most heartily. You are too apt in general to believe everything you hear, which is why I was particularly impressed by your last letter."

"I do not relish being cynical," Jane lamented.

"Well, you should. In my experience, not all are what they seem upon first impression. It is easy to be deceived by a handsome face and agreeable manners."

"How am I to tell the difference?" Jane whispered.

"We shall endeavour to become wiser together, and it is not as though we are friendless. Our dear grandmother will certainly give her opinion decidedly upon

every gentleman vying for our attention.”

Jane sighed in relief whilst Elizabeth rose to allow her to rest before the evening’s entertainment. She kissed her head and left to her own preparations.

#

It caused quite a stir when Jane entered the ballroom on Lord Limerick’s arm. Just as Elizabeth had predicted, they were immediately surrounded by eager gentlemen vying for an introduction. They were both promptly engaged for the first set, though Elizabeth harboured misgivings about her partner. She immediately recognised the young buck as the one who had climbed into Mr Bingley’s box at the theatre. Judging by his appearance, she doubted very much the Duke of Beaufort’s son was of age. Fortunately, he danced well enough even if his conversation bordered on the impolite.

“I feel it incumbent upon myself to warn you not to allow any expectations to be raised on my behalf.”

“I can assure you there is no chance of that!” Elizabeth replied wryly. Her feelings were not likely to become engaged by a stripling just out of leading strings.

“I meant no offence. It is just that my heart is no longer mine to give,” the young man added.

Elizabeth’s own heart immediately softened.

“Are you engaged or perhaps married?” she asked out of politeness.

“No, not yet,” the swain answered ruefully. “Though I consider myself married, we have yet to say our vows before God.”

How lovely! Even at such an early age, Lord Worcester showed an admirable devotion to his heart's desire. To be so admired must mean that there was an incredibly lucky lady somewhere.

"Is she here?" Elizabeth asked whilst searching the edges of the room for a scowling young woman.

"Unfortunately not. She was not invited, and I promised her not to dance with any other lady, but my father would not hear of it."

He looked so forlorn she could not help but pity him.

"I give you leave to tell her I was a very disagreeable dance partner. Barely tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt you." Elizabeth smiled at the disheartened boy. She was relieved when the dance ended as he had spoken about nothing else but Harriette, his lady love.

Three undesirable partners later, she excused herself by pleading a need to refresh herself and went in search of the designated room.

It was not Elizabeth's intention to eavesdrop, but when a certain gentleman was mentioned, she could not help but stop and pretended to admire some paintings.

"Mr Darcy has taken an interest in you. He never dances with anyone besides the lady of the house or his particular friends. It is as much as a declaration from a gentleman of his ilk. You should put on a becoming dress come morning because I predict you will have a desirable caller on the morrow."

Elizabeth gazed upon the likeness of a distant ancestor of Lady Jersey with underserved attention. Why she would torment herself in this way was a conundrum, but her legs did not want to move away.

“I was so relieved when he asked me to dance. I had been sitting out for three dances, but he engaged Miss Villiers before me.”

“She married Lord Ponsonby two years ago and is Lady Ponsonby now. Honestly, Millie, you must keep up with the titbits, though I suppose you may be excused in this instance. Lady Ponsonby has not ventured much into society since the scarlet fever left her more or less deaf. His lordship must love her very much to overlook her deficiency.”

Elizabeth had seen Lady Ponsonby at the theatre; she was stunningly beautiful and of a demure disposition, which was exactly what a gentleman looked for in a wife. There was no reason to disparage her.

“Oh, he is dancing with Miss Carter now,” the young girl lamented.

“That freckled little thing does not hold a candle to you, Millie.”

“I am hardly any prettier,” the one called Millie demurred.

“You have a noble nose and an excellent character. I dare say Mr Darcy is less attracted to fickle beauty and prefers a good God-fearing girl.”

It was not long before Miss Millie’s good fortune was bandied about the ballroom as the newest titbit. Elizabeth, always conscious of Mr Darcy’s whereabouts, thought the girl had imagined too much intention behind her one set, which became apparent over the course of the evening. Mr Darcy danced every set and showed a penchant for the overlooked and miserable. He typically chose the ladies who were infrequently engaged by other gentlemen, a scheme she heartily applauded though it differed vastly from his behaviour in Meryton. It confirmed her belief that Mr Darcy behaved differently in his own sphere as opposed to a lesser society in the country.

Elizabeth danced the next set with a young untitled gentleman. He was handsome, but to engage him in conversation was an arduous task. She was being escorted back to her grandmother when she spotted a familiar face amongst the gentlemen and excused herself before another young buck had time to engage her. She made a direct line and flashed past Mr Darcy, who was leading a young lady back to her family.

“Mr Knightley,” she said, curtsying and smiling at her cousin’s neighbour. He was a frequent visitor at the Hartfield estate—a daily occurrence judging by her cousin Emma’s letters.

“Lady Elizabeth.” He bowed. “John told me that your father has been elevated to the Earl of Glentworth.”

“Yes, he has,” Elizabeth confirmed and changed the subject. “How is Emma? Is she here?”

Mr Knightley raised his brows. “I highly doubt Mr Woodhouse would ever allow her to come to London.”

“You are quite right, how silly of me,” Elizabeth agreed. Mr Woodhouse’s nervous disposition was excessive and severely limited Emma’s movements, prospects, and even her diet.

“I would not go that far. You are a witty and clever creature, and one is allowed to hope, I suppose.”

Elizabeth did not know whether to be offended about being deemed a creature or flattered by the unexpected praise. Mr Knightley was a restrained gentleman who did not shy away from frequently scolding her dear cousin Emma. Emma was Aunt Gardiner’s niece, and because of Mr Woodhouse’s fluttering nerves and her own father’s distaste for travelling, the cousins by marriage were mostly left to correspond



through numerous letters.

“Is she well?” Elizabeth enquired.

“Yes, very well. Though I cannot condone her new occupation.”

“And what has Emma engrossed at the moment?”

“Matchmaking.” Mr Knightley frowned. “I am certain Miss Taylor does not appreciate her efforts. Nothing good can come of it. It is best to refrain from meddling in people’s personal lives.” He was staring over her right shoulder and seemed distant. “Yet, I must ask you why Mr Darcy is scowling at me.”

Elizabeth laughed, fighting the impulse to turn and see for herself. “I can assure you that it is not you he has directed his critical eyes towards but me.”

“Why would he scowl at you?” Mr Knightley asked in bewilderment.

“He is listing my faults,” Elizabeth quipped. Mr Knightley’s frown deepened, which hastened her to add, “It is a habit of his, and if I am not impertinent, I shall soon grow afraid of him.”

Mr Knightley shook his head and smiled crookedly. “I must disabuse you of such a notion. As a gentleman myself who knows something about other gentlemen’s dispositions, Mr Darcy is definitely scowling at me, and he is not looking at you to find fault. Quite the contrary.”

Elizabeth was shocked silent and could only stare at Mr Knightley, who obviously knew no more about Mr Darcy than he did about the man in the moon.

“Me thinks Emma’s new endeavour might be contagious, but we shall not argue

about that on this fine evening. Will you give her my regards when next you see her?" Elizabeth requested, curtsied, and left to find her family.

People were moving towards the dining room, and she was fruitlessly searching for her relations in the throng when someone obstructed her path. It was quite an annoying time to be short in stature; for a moment, she wished she had donned Queen Elizabeth's shoes.

"Lady Elizabeth," the gentleman who had stepped in front of her said, bowing deeply and offering her his arm.

Elizabeth was reluctant to take it because she was not certain whether they had been introduced. It was difficult to distinguish his unremarkable appearance in the sea of new acquaintances, and her grandmother firmly objected to accepting introductions that had not been approved by her family.

"Mr Elliswick, at your service." He bowed again. "We were introduced by the Duke of Argyll," he asserted, but Elizabeth did not know said duke by anything more than his name. The only Elliswick she had heard of was Meryton's seamstress, and she doubted the woman had an acquaintance who was a guest at Lady Jersey's Christmas ball.

Mr Elliswick took her silence for acceptance and laced his arm with hers.

"Excuse me!" she cried, but Mr Elliswick led her forcefully towards the balcony door.

"Release me this instant, or I shall scream," she warned.

Mr Elliswick smirked and pulled her farther from the safety of the ballroom. "You may scream as much as you like. I am sure even the marquess will agree to our

marriage if we are discovered loitering alone on the balcony.”

“He will not,” Elizabeth protested. “And I most certainly shall never entertain such a ridiculous threat. What do you want from me?”

The oaf did not even answer, and Elizabeth’s valiant resistance brought them to an abrupt halt.

“Campbell! Release the lady at once!” Mr Darcy’s rich baritone voice commanded.

Elizabeth had never been more delighted to see his forbidding countenance than at that very moment. She glanced at Mr Elliswick, or Campbell, or whatever his real name was, utterly relieved he had not succeeded in pulling her out onto the balcony. He glared back at her with such hatred that she became scared enough to admit to it.

Mr Darcy was by her side in the next instant and repeated his command. Faced with a furious Mr Darcy who towered two or three inches above him, the man finally released Elizabeth, who rubbed her arm where his fingers had dug into her flesh.

“Return to your family, Lady Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy ordered curtly.

Did he believe she was about to follow the rake willingly out onto the darkened balcony? “I shall once I have informed you that I did not move this way—” Because she could not allow him to think ill of her? She was being silly, he already did.

“Lady Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy whispered and looked up.

Elizabeth followed his gaze and saw the twig of mistletoe hanging directly above her head. Unfortunately, the Campbell reprobate had also discovered the dratted verdure and picked a berry. Before she had the wherewithal to step away, he leant in. Her quick response saved her from a kiss on the lips. She wrenched her head to the side

and the sloppy kiss landed on her cheek.

Elizabeth lowered her head to avoid a repeat performance and huffed as she rummaged in vain through her reticule, when a handkerchief was handed to her.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy.” She accepted the silk cloth and wiped her cheek whilst she turned her back decidedly to the whippersnapper Campbell.

Mr Darcy offered her his arm. Glancing up at him, she saw his eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

“May I escort you to your family?”

Elizabeth laid her hand on his arm. Out of two evils, he was definitely the most palatable choice. “You may,” she replied firmly. “Thank you for your timely rescue, Mr Darcy.” She did not deign to award Mr Campbell with so much as a glance, but the girl called Millie was looking at her with narrowed eyes. “I am sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologise for. It is Mr Campbell who should apologise to you,” Mr Darcy replied with feeling.

“Of that there could be but one opinion, but I was not speaking about that rake. I was apologising for occupying so much of your time.”

“It is my pleasure to be of service to you. I can assure you that I have nothing better to do,” Mr Darcy protested.

“I beg to differ,” Elizabeth replied, nodding discreetly at the young ladies who were following them with their eyes. “I have received askance glances and narrowed eyes since accepting your arm. You have created quite the stir tonight. I believe Miss Millie is particularly miffed. She is believed to be the chosen one and expects a caller

on the morrow.”

Mr Darcy bowed his head and looked anything but happy. He escorted her to her family and left the dining room so quickly he must have been desperate to escape her company. She did not know where he went, but Mr Campbell made no reappearance neither during nor after the meal.

It was to be hoped that her jest about ladies had not injured Mr Darcy. The gentleman reverted back to his former habit of stalking the outskirts of the party when he was not poised in a corner with his hands clasped behind his back. With the scowl he was wearing, no young miss dared approach him.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Lord Glentworth declined Lord Limerick's invitation to spend the festive season in town. It was no secret to Elizabeth that her father hated London, but he need not consort with anyone outside their family circle, which rendered his obstinacy bordering on the ridiculous. Not to mention he further angered the marquess, who wore a thundercloud over his head when he read his nephew's letter.

"It appears that we have no choice but to celebrate Christmas at Longbourn," he gritted between clenched teeth. "But mistake me not. By Twelfth Night, we shall all be gathered in this house. Including your recalcitrant son." He scowled over the letter at his sister.

"Certainly, Henry," she agreed.

Elizabeth saw the uncertainty flickering across her grandmother's countenance and sought to appease her.

"He who lives to make sport for his neighbours, and laugh at them in return, will not lack entertainment in town..."

With the implication that the entire family would join them in London after the festive season, completing the refurbishing became an urgent matter. The next two weeks were spent finishing the family rooms and shopping for gifts. Most of their acquaintances had left to spend Christmas at their country estates, so there were hardly any social obligations. They left for Longbourn on the twenty-fourth and enjoyed a lovely family dinner. The days in between Christmas Day and the new year were delightfully spent playing games and cards and eating well beyond what was necessary. But a storm was brewing. Uncle Henry was becoming restless, and her

grandmother became more uneasy with each passing day.

The Gardiners left on the second of January, but due to Charlotte's wedding to Mr Collins on Thursday the ninth, the Glentworths wished to stay beyond Twelfth Night and leave for town on the tenth.

Charlotte came to say her goodbyes on Wednesday. She entreated Elizabeth to write often and consider visiting Kent as she was unlikely to return to Hertfordshire soon. Sir William and Maria were to go in March, and Charlotte suggested Elizabeth might join them if she liked. Elizabeth did not refuse but neither did she make any promises as she foresaw little pleasure in a visit to Mr Collins's abode.

Charlotte and Mr Collins were wed on a frigid morning. The bride and groom set off to Kent from the church door, and everybody had as much to say on the subject as usual. After half an hour of gossip on the church steps, frozen fingers and toes forced the Longbourn residents to make a hasty retreat. Whilst everyone fought for a place closest to the warmth of the fire, Uncle Henry reminded them to finish their packing. They would leave for town on the morrow, at first light.

"You may go on without me," Lord Glentworth proclaimed.

"Out of the question!" Lord Limerick boomed. "You can no longer delay fulfilling your responsibilities."

"I loathe the peerage and have no wish to join the scheming miscreants," Lord Glentworth growled.

Elizabeth regarded her obstinate father, who looked inordinately vexed.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion in your book room?" the marquess suggested with a nod at the ladies.

“You can have nothing to say to me that cannot be voiced with my family present,” Lord Glentworth retorted.

“Then allow me to remind you that I am a member of that peerage you deem so unworthy,” replied Lord Limerick.

“By merit, not by an undeserved birth right,” Lord Glentworth contradicted. “The two do not compare.”

It was true. The Marquess of Limerick had once been the son of a protestant bishop who was elected to the Irish Parliament. Upon his father’s death in 1794, he had inherited his barony and taken his seat in the Irish House of Lords. After the untimely death of his wife, he made politics his career and held such offices as Keeper of the Signet and Privy Seal of Ireland, Clerk of the Crown, and Hanaper of Ireland.

Following the Act of Union, he became a representative peer in the British House of Lords. As a renowned Unionist, and a close friend of the Prince of Wales, he was awarded the newly created earldom in 1803. When King George’s illness made his son Prince Regent, the long friendship earned him the elevation to marquess.

“I can say the same for you. You have earned your place in the House of Lords. I expect you to honour the obligations that I have bestowed upon you.”

Lord Glentworth blinked. His uncle was a fierce debater who was never at a loss for words. Elizabeth was impressed that he had made her stubborn father waver in his obstinacy, but it was not so strange; there were few people her father liked, and even fewer he respected, but the Marquess of Limerick was one of them.

“I am grateful for the honour you have bestowed upon me, but you are still of a sound mind and an excellent representative of our family in the House of Lords. I shall do my duty when I no longer have a choice in the matter,” Lord Glentworth declared.



“Then I proclaim that your choice is hereby irrevocably rescinded. I am in my seventh decade, and you have much to learn. I shall not be moved in this. We leave for town on the morrow. If I have to use force, I shall not hesitate to cast you in irons to accomplish it.”

Lord Glentworth’s shoulders slumped in defeat, and he hung his head. “How can I abide the cruelty of town, hobnob with the despicable peerage—associate with the malefactors that killed my twin sister?” he spoke sotto voce . “I simply cannot abide the thought...”

Elizabeth was shocked. Her grandmother had begged her not to enquire about her daughter, but not for a moment had she imagined murder could be the reason.

The marquess modulated his voice and spoke matter-of-factly, as one would to a child. “I am not unfeeling as to your loss, especially considering the tight bond the two of you shared, but Catherine would never wish for her demise to haunt every aspect of your life. She was lively and vivacious, as were you before all of this happened. As for the Campbells, who must take the majority of the blame, the likelihood of encountering any of them is slim, and the baronet died last May.”

It was the third time Elizabeth had heard mention of someone with the name Campbell; it could not be a coincidence that none of them were pleasant... Had her aunt Catherine been run over by a carriage, shot, or fallen at the hand of an abusive husband? Elizabeth’s imagination reeled with possibilities, each one more outrageous than the last.

“Am I to have no say in the matter?” Lord Glentworth complained.

“No. You should let your mother’s excellent example guide you. She has managed her grief and does what is expected of her and beyond, though she was not spared the gruesome sight any more than you.” And so, the marquess ended his tirade.

“Papa!” Elizabeth cried.

“Not now, Lizzy.” He dismissed her and stormed to his book room with his mother and wife trailing close behind.

The five Glentworth sisters all turned to the marquess for enlightenment.

“The less said about old grievances the better,” their uncle replied to the unspoken questions. “I say it is best not to burden you lovely young ladies with what cannot be undone. I suggest you go to your rooms and finish your packing.”

All the sisters did as he demanded, albeit reluctantly. They gathered in Jane’s room and soon discovered that not one of them had any idea what had happened. The only one who knew a Catherine Bennet had ever existed was Elizabeth, who had happened upon her portrait in her grandmother’s bedroom. She gave as accurate a description as she could of the young blonde girl and her eerie resemblance to their father. It was strange indeed that she had never been mentioned, and that alone provoked wild speculations for the rest of the evening. But no begging or cajoling remotely tempted the adults to reveal anything of significance. In this instance, even their mother remained tight-lipped.

As Lord Limerick had declared, the entire Glentworth family left at the break of dawn in a three-carriage procession. In the first carriage, while the gentlemen sat silently glowering, the dowager reminded her daughter-in-law about an oft-discussed subject. The expectations in town regarding a prominent family with five daughters differed vastly from the country. It was not done to have all daughters out at once. When Lady Glentworth protested, Mrs Maeve Bennet gently reminded her of the considerable cost to have all five girls fitted at once. Not that they were poor, but they were not made of money. She brooked no opposition; Lydia and Kitty were too young and wild to be out, and she suggested Lady Glentworth should hire a governess at the first opportunity. Mary had declared herself not out and was allowed

to wait another year.

In the second carriage the four eldest sisters continued debating the mystery at hand, whilst a sullen Lydia had to ride with three upper servants. Mrs Maeve Bennet's lady's maid had once been a governess but had chosen to train herself for a different profession after minding a particularly exuberant flock of children. She had the youngest Bennet daughter well in hand by the time they arrived at Limerick House, and Lydia's mood improved upon espying her refurbished chamber. Limerick House was grand enough that all the sisters had their own room, and for one who had shared all her life with a snoring sister, such a luxury was a blessing indeed.

They settled easily into town life, and a selection of governesses were interviewed over the coming days. After a week, the knocker was put up and the parlour readied for callers. Mrs Maeve Bennet predicted a plethora of curious visitors and declared that only Elizabeth and Jane would receive them, with herself as chaperon. Lady Glentworth adhered to her mother-in-law's strictures with alacrity and declared that her nerves needed a bit more time before entering London's superior society.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Amongst their morning callers were the Matlock brothers, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Viscount Crawford, with whom Elizabeth had danced at Lady Middleton's ball.

"Lady Elizabeth," the colonel demanded her attention. "I have brought my brother because I believe he owes you an apology."

Elizabeth rose from the sofa. "You may both follow me," she replied evenly, escorting the gentlemen to the far corner for a modicum of privacy. She was out of favour towards the brothers for setting the disgraceful wager.

"The colonel here has convinced me that I owe you my sincerest apologies for prompting Darcy to dance with you with the lure of monetary gain. I assure you that ten guineas would not have persuaded my obstinate cousin if he were not already inclined to beg you for a set. I am solely to blame, and neither my brother nor Darcy have any share in the guilt. In Darcy's defence, I must acknowledge that he never accepted my guineas. I know not how you came about this knowledge." The viscount glared at his brother, who appeared unmoved by the scowl.

"Your brother is innocent. I was informed by a lady who is Mr Darcy's particular friend."

"How vicious to relate such an unladylike tale!" the viscount exclaimed, clearly happy to foist the blame upon anyone but himself. "I must assume that she is no friend of yours, Lady Elizabeth."

"Of that there cannot be two opinions. Yet, she did not know I was the lady she was speaking about and must therefore be exempt from malicious intent. What I would

like to know is why you spoke so decidedly in favour of Mr Darcy and lauded his prowess—to me of all people?”

“I thought that was obvious,” the viscount grumbled. “I never saw a man so madly, wildly, and romantically in love with any daughter of Eve as your Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth laughed heartily whilst she shook her head in bewilderment. “Do not be ridiculous. I am of a mind not to believe a word you say because I know from the man himself that I am barely tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him.” Elizabeth overlooked the viscount’s stunned expression, mostly because she did not want insincere refutations of Mr Darcy’s bad manners. She expertly changed the subject. “In my limited experience, gentlemen can have only two emotions.” Elizabeth smiled disarmingly. It no longer injured her to speak about the insult. It was much more fun to make sport of Mr Darcy and laugh at his fastidiousness. “Love is not one of them.”

“And which would they be?” the colonel queried with raised eyebrows.

“They are either vexed or not,” Elizabeth replied decidedly.

“And some ladies express opinions that are not their own for the pleasure of a debate.” The colonel smiled.

“It is impolitic of you to expose my true character to your brother when I had hoped to pass myself off with some degree of credit.”

“I do not believe your reputation has been damaged, madam. Least of all by me,” the colonel replied good-naturedly.

Elizabeth could not help it; she liked the colonel very much. He was, in person and manners, most truly a gentleman. He had not tattled about his brother or tried to

exempt himself from blame but had brought the viscount to her home to redeem himself. An admirable trait to be sure. Yet, she could not avoid noticing that he had stolen surreptitious glances at Jane during their entire discussion. Was she witnessing the first sparks of an infatuation?

“Mr Bingley and Miss Bingley,” the butler announced, startling Elizabeth and her companions. Speak of the devil, Elizabeth thought wryly.

Mr Bingley had wasted no time in calling upon Jane after their return to town, though it was strange he had not done so before the festive season. She immediately excused the slight by acknowledging that the visit had been of short duration, and they had attended but one event—at which Mr Bingley had not been present. It was highly unlikely he had known that her sister was in town.

Mr Bingley had brought with him a large bouquet of roses and made for the sofa Elizabeth had recently vacated. He seated himself beside Jane and offered her the flowers. Neither time nor distance appeared to have lessened his admiration. It was easily discernible by how close he chose to seat himself to her sister and how directly they engaged in conversation. Yet, his blunder at the theatre and recent interest in Miss Bergman were not so easy to forget. Could he be making love to all blonde ladies of beauty?

A sigh behind her made Elizabeth turn back to the colonel, who had until then hidden his hands behind his back. When he brought them forwards, she noticed he held on tightly to a lovely little nosegay with a single blooming peony. It must have cost him a fortune because peonies required much heat to be forced into early bloom. Upon noticing her attention on the flower, he offered it to her, but Elizabeth shook her head.

“I thank you, but no. I am in no need of incentives to forgive your waging blunder. May I suggest that you give it to the lady who loves peonies above all other flowers,” she graciously offered. “My sister Jane.”

“No, I cannot interrupt when Mr Bingley is occupying all her attention,” the colonel said, nodding towards the sofa.

Elizabeth reverted her gaze to her sister, who was flanked by Mr Bingley and his own sister. Jane appeared ill at ease between the sister and brother who were ever so eager to rekindle their friendship.

“Jane, dear? I am sorry to divert you from your friends, but I need you to settle a dispute between myself and the good colonel.”

The colonel’s eyes widened, and Elizabeth thought this was not the moment to become missish because Jane rose with alacrity and was soon at her side.

“How may I be of assistance?” Jane asked.

“The colonel is too abashed to give you the nosegay he brought for fear of it being outdone by Mr Bingley’s generous bouquet. I am trying to convince him that the size of the offering does not matter when presented with your favourite flower.”

Elizabeth disregarded the viscount’s short bark of laughter and looked encouragingly at the colonel. She discerned a faint redness to his cheeks as he offered her sister the posy.

Jane was, as predicted, thrilled about the peony and brought it to her nose before fastening it on her fichu.

“It is absolutely lovely. Thank you, Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

The redness in the colonel’s cheeks sprang out in full bloom. Elizabeth found his bashfulness endearing, as did Jane by her appraising looks.

The viscount brought forward his bouquet and offered it to Elizabeth, who in this instance accepted the bribe in exchange for her forgiveness.

Mr Bingley, prompted by his sister, rose and joined the Matlock brothers.

“Lady Jane, would you allow me to take you on a ride tomorrow?”

Mr Bingley, the viscount, and the colonel were three souls of the same mind and spoke simultaneously of the great merit of such an excursion. Elizabeth had to turn away lest she burst out laughing. A ride in this wintry weather! She met Miss Bingley’s eyes, which sobered her mirth. That lady was scowling but smoothed her expression when she discovered she was being observed.

Jane glanced at her grandmother, who was chaperoning the ladies and their callers.

“Why do you not all go and make a merry party of it,” the older lady suggested.

Elizabeth thought it was a splendid idea. That would allow Jane to compare the gentlemen, though she doubted her sister agreed. It was all too much for Jane, who liked to please everyone she met, yet there was no doubt that at least two gentlemen would be disappointed in the end.

It was decided that they would all go for a ride through the park on the following morning. Including Elizabeth, at Jane’s insistence.

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. The allotted fifteen minutes of a social call had long since passed. The gentlemen proved their astuteness and bade their farewells.

“Heavens!” Grandmother Bennet exclaimed as soon as the guests had left. “For a moment I worried they would break into a fight for your attention, Jane. Elizabeth, I



trust you to deflect their attention on the morrow should Jane be overcome.”

“I shall,” Elizabeth promised. “You may have no concerns in that regard.” Meaning Mr Bingley in particular.

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The next morning.

Elizabeth looked in the mirror and was pleased with her new royal-blue riding habit. She donned an embroidered spencer over it, trimmed and finished after the fashion of a uniform, and a little grey fur stable-cap with a blue band. She had dressed warmly but was glad the sun was shining and it was not too frightfully cold.

“You look lovely!”

Jane stood in the doorway, impatient to depart.

“Have the gentlemen arrived?”

“Yes, they are waiting in the blue parlour. Make haste, Lizzy. You look beautiful and need no further embellishment.”

“I suppose I should thank you, and I would, if I did not suspect you are prevaricating in order to greet your suitors more speedily.”

Jane just smiled and waved her sister along.

The gentlemen, in their eagerness, had moved to the entrance hall to wait for them. Mr Bingley, the colonel, and the viscount all competed to gain Jane’s attention whilst Mr Darcy stayed in the background, scowling as usual. Why had he come if it was only to be displeased? Or had he joined his cousins in vying for Jane’s attention?

Dear lord! I hope it is not so... He would eventually find a lady to court and marry,

but it was to be hoped it would be someone she did not need to encounter.

She supposed she should count her blessings instead of borrowing tomorrow's sorrows. After all, Miss Bingley had not joined them.

Lord Limerick owned a small selection of riding horses. Jane, who was the better horsewoman, rode a stallion, while Elizabeth was riding her grandmother's docile mare.

Instead of turning right towards Hyde Park, the colonel led them in the direction of St James's Park.

They had ridden but a few hundred yards when Elizabeth's horse turned abruptly, and no pulling on the reins could persuade the beast to change her course. Elizabeth prepared herself for an early arrival back at Limerick House when pounding hoofs approached from behind. She said a quick prayer and hoped that the cantering horse would not spur her mare into a race. She sat comfortably while the horse walked, but her confidence in her abilities did not stretch to a full gallop.

The high and mighty Mr Darcy rode up beside her and thankfully slowed his pace.

"Pray, have I blundered and offended you in some manner? If so, I swear it was not by intention," Mr Darcy enquired contritely.

"I assure you, you have not offended me," she promised. "Of late," she added as an afterthought.

"Then what is the matter? You turned so abruptly, I assumed..."

"Oh, nothing is the matter," Elizabeth replied innocently. "Nothing whatsoever, only she apparently preferred to walk this way." She gestured to her horse.

Mr Darcy laughed heartily. It was a deep, resonating sound that was quite pleasant, Elizabeth mused.

“I beg your pardon, madam. It was ungentlemanly of me to laugh at you.”

“Think nothing of it. For what do we live for but to make sport for our acquaintances and laugh at them in return?” Elizabeth smiled wryly, but Mr Darcy still carried a look of concern about his countenance.

“Do you require any assistance?” he probed.

“Yes, if you do not mind. I would like to join the rest of our party. Poor Jane. I have left her quite alone with her zealous suitors.”

Mr Darcy grabbed the reins and expertly turned the obstinate animal in the right direction.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth whispered whilst clutching the pommel. She expected the beast to oppose his heavy-handedness, but the mare followed obediently. “How do you do it?” she questioned, abashed. It was not an everyday occurrence that she needed assistance from a gentleman.

“You must be assertive and not allow the horse to determine in which direction it should turn.”

“You make it sound so easy, but in my limited experience, it is not that simple.” Her fright with the Lambton beast had left her timid of the giant animals, and she had only recently allowed her father to teach her to ride.

“Are you afraid of the horse, Lady Elizabeth?”

“Not at all,” she replied with a confidence that was unfounded. “Or, perhaps a very little,” she hastened to admit lest her boast induce him to let go of the reins. He must think her cowardly, and she glanced at him, but he wore a warm smile for which she could not account.

“May I be so bold as to recommend one of Lady Jane’s suitors?”

“Yes, you may.” Elizabeth was curious whom he would advocate; whether it would be his friend or his exalted relation.

“Although all three are good men in essentials, I value Colonel Fitzwilliam above the rest.”

Elizabeth was surprised; he was the last she expected him to recommend, though she agreed to a certain extent. He was the best man but also the one who had the most to gain. Mr Bingley was wealthy, and the viscount would be a peer. Lord Crawford would one day be as rich as Croesus. According to an article in a newspaper she had recently read, the Matlock estate, including the mines, yielded sixty-eight thousand pounds a year. Though a pittance compared to the Duke of Devonshire’s one-hundred-and-eighty thousand pounds, Elizabeth surmised the colonel most likely received a generous allowance from his father but still needed an occupation to support him.

“I surmise from your expression that you have reservations,” Mr Darcy said.

“Not reservations per se, only a mild concern that he has the most to gain,” Elizabeth admitted with brutal honesty.

“The colonel is not mercenary,” Mr Darcy refuted with feeling.

“I am not accusing him, but one cannot be too careful when choosing one’s life

partner. I simply wish the best for my sister. I imagine you desire nothing less for Miss Darcy than a marriage of true affection?"

Mr Darcy nodded his assent.

"In all fairness, I suppose no gentleman is without flaws. Mr Bingley has proved to be capricious, and he certainly has questionable connections."

"I cannot deny that Mr Bingley is changeable and impetuous. To yield too easily to one's whims must necessarily leave important business undone and could be of no advantage to oneself or anyone else. Yet I would have thought considering your relationship with Mr Gardiner you would not hold his roots in trade against him," Mr Darcy remarked.

Elizabeth noted with some surprise that Mr Darcy had said little in defence of his friend, but he had made one wrong assumption.

"I was not speaking about his father. I was thinking about his insincere sister."

Mr Darcy looked surprised, but she was not finished.

"I am also concerned about the friends he surrounds himself with in town. I am certain you know of whom I speak since we were both at the theatre, so I shall not debase myself by mentioning any names."

"There is no need. I quite understand and can only agree with you. In his defence, on the night in question he was not surrounded by his usual friends. He had recently become acquainted with the Duke of Argyll, who I suspect has led him astray. It was the duke's friends and not Bingley's whom you saw at the theatre. I suppose Bingley's ignorance does not speak in his favour, but I am more intrigued by what you hold against Viscount Crawford."

Elizabeth was relieved to hear that Mr Bingley was not debauched but simply a bit naïve. He was more than commonly anxious to please and yielded too easily to persuasion, which were traits she was beginning to think less commendable than she had once believed. She felt less compassion towards the glib viscount.

“He is frivolous and lies convincingly, which are not traits one would wish for in a husband.”

“I am not convinced Crawford’s interest in Lady Jane is genuine. The viscount likes to meddle in people’s affairs and may have invited himself to thwart Bingley in an effort to aid his brother. And me,” Mr Darcy added sotto voce .

Elizabeth drew a sharp intake of breath. Mr Darcy had not gainsaid her, which spoke volumes, but had his last barely audible admission been for Jane or herself? Let me first see how he behaves, she said to herself. It will then be early enough for expectations...

They reached their party, and nothing more could be spoken about the topic of Jane’s suitors.

A few minutes of silence followed before the colonel exclaimed, “Here is my barracks!” He pointed to a neat and compact piece of architecture that appeared to greatest advantage when viewed at a distance. “I have forgotten something. Would you mind very much if I fetched it? I promise I shall not be long.”

“I have never seen a barracks.” Jane stretched her neck to peer inside.

“If you allow it, I would be honoured to give you a short tour of the premises,” the colonel offered.

“I would be delighted.” Jane smiled and allowed the colonel to lift her to the ground,

which induced a scowl from Mr Bingley.

“We could make a party of it, if the rest of you would like to follow,” the colonel suggested.

“I just saw General Wellesley move towards the Admiralty. Would you like an introduction, Mr Bingley?” the viscount suggested.

“To the famous general? I certainly would, sir,” Mr Bingley agreed eagerly, Jane momentarily forgotten.

“I doubt it was Wellesley because he has been in Portugal since 1810,” the colonel drawled.

“Exactly! He must just have returned!” the viscount eagerly exclaimed.

Mr Bingley and the viscount disappeared round the corner whilst Elizabeth looked longingly at the gate. She was curious and would not mind a glimpse into the strange and, to her, mysterious life of a soldier.

“If you want to accept, allow me to aid you from your horse,” Mr Darcy spoke from below. He had dismounted, tethered his horse, and come to be of assistance. “There is no mounting block here.”

“Yes, I would like that very much,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Do you permit me to put my hands upon your waist and aid you to the ground?” Mr Darcy enquired ever so politely.

Elizabeth nodded and relished the large and comfortable hands that enveloped her and brought her safely down from her perched position.



“Thank you,” she breathed but dared not meet his eyes. If she had, he might correctly assume how affected she was by the small gesture. Instead, she hastened after her sister and left it to Mr Darcy to tie up her horse. Jane had disappeared, but in the yard, a sergeant was teaching a sword exercise to a group of new recruits. It was entertaining, and Elizabeth watched in awe.

“Pay attention! Draw your swords by taking a firm grip on the hilt. At the same time, throw the sheath smartly backwards like this.” The sergeant showed the ensigns how it was done, but not one managed to imitate him, and they all appeared quite forgetful of his warnings.

“Steady there, Barnstable! You never grip the blade with your fingers, you clodpate.”

The solemn-looking sergeant had his ensigns drawing their swords perfectly ere long. Elizabeth accepted Mr Darcy’s arm and entered the accommodations, where Jane was inspecting Colonel Fitzwilliam’s unimpressive room from the threshold. It was square with a large trunk, a cot, a small desk, and nothing else. She had imagined that a colonel’s quarters would have been better furnished. The colonel used Jane’s distraction to withdraw something from his trunk, small enough to be concealed in his hand, and he hid it in his pocket before Elizabeth could see what it was.

“You must excuse the poor conditions. I do not sleep here very often,” the colonel explained.

“No. Usually I find him in my study sipping my best port.” Mr Darcy grinned, surprising Elizabeth with his wry comment.

“I am simply doing my duty to my ward,” Colonel Fitzwilliam replied, unperturbed.

“You must show me where in my father’s will it says, must drink copious amounts of

Darcy's port . I missed that paragraph," Mr Darcy drawled.

"Certainly. If you lend me a quill, ink, your father's will, and five minutes alone with all three items, it can be arranged."

Mr Darcy smiled. "We are happy to have you, even if you empty my wine cellar. We are quite dull when it is just my taciturn self and my reserved sister."

"It must be blissfully quiet," Jane remarked.

The colonel looked askance at her, and Jane could not keep a straight face. She giggled, and the colonel erupted in a wide grin.

Had he believed Jane to be deprived of humour? If so, he was in for a shocking surprise because Jane could be just as wry and witty as Elizabeth, though she only displayed it to those she was particularly familiar with, which showed her marked preference for the colonel, who was neither handsome nor plain. Remarkable, Elizabeth decided was the best term to describe him, and most certainly a gentleman. She could not fault his impeccable manners.

"What is taking you so long?" Mr Bingley had come to find his wayward lady, and the viscount followed at a leisurely pace.

"Did you meet the general?" Elizabeth enquired.

"No." Mr Bingley sighed dejectedly. "He was already gone when we turned the corner."

"Shall we proceed to the park?" the colonel suggested. "Leave the horses," he commanded. "It is not far." He hastened to offer Jane his arm before any of the other gentlemen had the opportunity to do so, and Elizabeth followed quickly behind

before anyone had the time to offer her the same.

“Far to what?” Mr Bingley asked. “Have you not noticed that the ground is covered in snow?”

“I have arranged a little surprise for the ladies,” the colonel said but could not be cajoled into telling them what it was.

They proceeded the short distance to St James’s Park, which lay directly behind the Horse Guards’ barracks. The snow- and frost-covered park sparkled in the sun, creating the perfect backdrop for romance. A group of recruits marched a path through the snow so that the ladies’ boots would not suffer the wetness. A tent had been erected by a small copse of trees, probably to allow some privacy from the hundreds of people gathered in the park, and it was thither that the colonel escorted them.

Inside the tent, three sleighs fully equipped with furs and blankets stood in a row, and three footmen were ready to serve them from overflowing baskets.

Elizabeth was impressed by the colonel’s clever and inventive efforts.

“A picnic!” Jane exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with joy.

“In the dead of winter,” Mr Bingley muttered disapprovingly.

“I cannot take all the credit,” Colonel Fitzwilliam demurred.

“Yes, you can,” Mr Darcy insisted.

“Not entirely on his own,” the viscount refuted. “I suppose you had something to do with it, Darcy? Do not try to deny it because I recognise your footmen.”

“I have no wish to deny it,” Mr Darcy stated firmly. “I have simply provided what my cousin wished.”

With all eyes on Mr Darcy, the colonel used the gentlemen’s distraction to hand Jane into the first sleigh and secure a seat beside her.

“We had better take a seat close to Lady Jane,” the viscount prompted Mr Bingley.

That spurred the other gentleman to haul himself into the second sleigh, and the viscount quickly followed. Which left Elizabeth and Mr Darcy with no choice but to share the third.

The gentleman pulled back the blankets and handed Elizabeth into the sleigh. She was happy to find heated bricks to tuck under her cold feet and sheepskin on the seat. She clandestinely regarded Mr Darcy whilst he seated himself. She could detect no vexation in his expression. His lips curled into a ghost of a smile that belied any regrets at being deprived of Jane’s company. Quite the contrary, his countenance was one of marked pleasure. It made her believe that he thought better of her than he had done in Hertfordshire, which in turn sent a frisson down her spine. He is solicitous because you are now a lady , she reminded herself.

“I did not know the colonel was such a romantic,” Elizabeth remarked to distract herself while Mr Darcy tucked the blankets firmly around them. He was particularly diligent in securing her blanket; no draught could be felt when he was finished, and the warmth of the fur relieved the tension in her taut muscles.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam certainly is a romantic at heart, though he is not prone to ridiculous displays.” Mr Darcy, quite unnecessarily, defended his cousin when he was satisfied with her comfort.

“Would you deem this a ridiculous display?” she enquired incredulously.

“No, you misunderstand me. He would never act to embarrass or injure but would gladly provide those small gestures that ladies enjoy. In that I have much to learn,” he admitted with chagrin. “See.” He nodded almost imperceptibly towards the colonel and Jane. Colonel Fitzwilliam pulled a pair of hairpins decorated with a single pink flower from his pocket. He offered them to Jane, who secured the ringlets framing her face to prohibit any loose strands from ending up in her food. If you stretched your imagination, the flowers on the pins resembled peonies. The colonel was nothing but thorough, it would seem...

The footmen served them wine before they were offered an assortment of cold meat, bread, cheese, and pies.

“You look particularly well today, Lady Elizabeth. Is that a new riding habit?”

Elizabeth almost choked on a piece of cheese.

“Yes, it is. Thank you!” She regarded him quizzically because his speech sounded rehearsed and his compliment was baffling.

Mr Darcy inhaled and opened his mouth as if to speak. She looked at him expectantly, but no words left his lips. He simply stared at her, and at such close proximity the familiar tug of his allure provoked her to turn her gaze towards the park. Fortunately, the servants had left a wall in the tent open to allow the guests the opportunity to enjoy the magnificent view. The canal was covered with ice skaters, which provided amusing entertainment to those who observed them.

“The frost-covered trees are so beautiful,” she remarked in awe. “I adore how they sparkle in the sun. Everything becomes so light and bright it almost scorches your eyes.”

Mr Darcy swallowed audibly and nodded. Mr Bingley complained about not feeling

his toes, to which the viscount added his loud agreement. Jane offered the gentlemen her heated bricks, but the men at least had the sense to decline her generous offer.

“Lady Jane, unfortunately, business will keep me occupied and deny me your lovely company for a most insufferable week, but I would be delighted if you would go for a ride with me on Saturday next?” Mr Bingley asked.

“We should all go,” the viscount interjected.

“My phaeton only seats two.” Mr Bingley smiled. “You may follow in your own conveyance. Lady Jane and I formed an acquaintance when I leased the neighbouring estate to Longbourn last autumn, and business has kept us apart for far too long. We have much to talk about since last we were in each other’s company, at my ball on the twenty-sixth of November.”

It was a clear warning that he wanted Jane for himself, and even Viscount Crawford saw the futility of his endeavour. He conceded the day in Bingley’s favour but not without a jab at the gentleman.

“Business often keeps you occupied, I presume.” The viscount’s smile looked more dangerous than pleasant. “Although I have had the pleasure of seeing you at several social events, and most interestingly at the theatre with the most questionable company.”

Mr Bingley’s face reddened, and he scowled at the viscount, who did not appear the least perturbed.

“I was the Duke of Argyll’s particular guest. Besides, I cannot be expected to seclude myself like a hermit in the evenings, even if business occupies my days.”

“Of course not, but—”

“Crawford!” the colonel roared, and that gentleman wisely closed his mouth.

The viscount looked sheepishly at Jane. “Do not concern yourself, Brother. I would never mention such debauchery in the presence of a lady.”

You just did, Elizabeth thought. But it was a comfort to see Mr Darcy’s glare directed at someone else for a change.

“Crawford! A word if you please. In private.”

The viscount nodded, and it looked as though he had realised his mistake. “May I suggest that we return to our horses? It is becoming rather cold, and I am concerned about the ladies’ comfort.”

“Not yet,” Mr Darcy refuted. “We have one surprise left.” He turned to Elizabeth. “If you would excuse me for just a moment?”

Elizabeth nodded. Mr Darcy leapt elegantly from the sleigh, tucked the pelt he had just vacated firmly about her, and disappeared behind the tent. He returned with three stable hands who each brought a horse. He joined her in the sleigh whilst the horses were put to their equipages. A few minutes later, they pulled abruptly from the tent to circle the canal. Elizabeth was startled by the jolt and grabbed Mr Darcy’s hand.

“I beg your pardon,” she muttered and released it the moment she discovered what she had done. Henceforth her every attention was directed across the canal at the bird-cage walk, which was not open to the public.

“No pardon is necessary,” he allowed.

In truth, the bird-cage walk was not much to look at during the winter, and she turned towards the ice skaters and met Mr Darcy’s bottomless eyes. He was staring at her, as

had been his wont in Hertfordshire, and she felt the fingers of a ghost run down her spine.

“It is my turn to beg your pardon. It was not my intention to make you uncomfortable, but your bewitching eyes, glittering in the bright sunlight, robbed me of my faculties,” Mr Darcy admitted, coloured, and turned away.

“Thank you,” she whispered. She was flattered. If only the rest of her face had not been such a disappointment...

They circled the rest of the two-thousand-eight-hundred-foot-long canal in silence before returning to the colonel's barracks. In truth, she had been thoroughly entertained by the ice skaters' antics and the view of Mr Darcy's noble profile. With the romantic backdrop of the frost-covered park, Mr Darcy's solicitousness, and his improved civilities, her defences had thawed.

When the sleigh drew to a halt, she was not allowed so much as to remove the blankets herself, but Mr Darcy's gentle administrations took her safely to the ground.

On their return to Limerick House, the viscount and Mr Bingley were quick to take their positions to either side of Jane, effectively blocking anyone who wanted to intrude. Fortunately, the colonel had the sense not to try to squeeze a fourth horse alongside them in the narrow street. Instead, he kept Elizabeth company whilst Mr Darcy brought up the rear of their parade through town.

Elizabeth's mare was most willing to return to the mews and gave her hardly any trouble but hastened into a trot when they drew near. Elizabeth handled the increased pace tolerably well but for a ribbon she had tied round the curl draped over her shoulder. It was whipped loose and flew elegantly towards the sky. Elizabeth turned and watched Mr Darcy snap it up in mid-air and tuck it into his breast pocket. She quickly forgot the fanciful notion that he might keep it as a token because as she



turned her head back to the road in front of her, she almost ran over an errand boy who was crossing the street.

“I beg your pardon,” she called after him, which was all she could do. Her stubborn mare would not stop regardless of how forcefully she pulled on the reins.

Mr Darcy flipped the boy a coin for his trouble. A generous half-crown, judging by the lad’s heartfelt expression of gratitude.

When Elizabeth and Jane entered Limerick House, it was with light hearts after a successful excursion. To be met by an uncommonly stern father in the entrance hall took them by surprise. The gentlemen had been wise to bid their farewells by the mews and were spared encountering the incensed Lord Glentworth, for which both ladies were grateful.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Elizabeth was stunned by the vehemence in her father’s voice, and Jane visibly shrank into herself. Elizabeth could not remember his ire ever to have been raised against Jane, though she herself had not been so fortunate. Which was why she was able to find her voice first.

“I do not have the pleasure of understanding you, sir. We have been on a short ride to St James’s and had a light picnic in the park.”

“With the Matlock heir!” he spat.

“Yes, the viscount has been calling, and I danced with him as early as Lady Cowper’s ball in December,” Elizabeth admitted. “I suppose you must ask your mother because she was the one who introduced me. I know you do not care for the Matlocks, but their sons are amiable gentlemen.”

“Mrs Maeve Bennet!” he bellowed.

Their grandmother came down the stairs at a pace that belied her advanced years. She regarded them one at a time and promptly suggested they should adjourn to the library.

As soon as the door closed behind his mother, Lord Glentworth turned his glare at her.

“You introduced my daughters to the spawn of Matlock,” he accused her.

“I did,” the matron admitted with a calm that infuriated her son.

“Please explain why you would have them consorting with those...those miscreants?”

“Firstly, because the boys were highly recommended by a trusted friend, and secondly, because I do not believe that children should suffer for the sins of a father. Can you not see the irony, dear Thomas? That Matlock’s sons are vying for your daughter’s attention?”

“My children are not pieces in a chess game. This is why I have been so reluctant to come to town. The games of the alleged superior society are exactly what I cannot abide.”

“It is not a game, Papa.”

Elizabeth was shocked that Jane had dared to raise her voice—as was her father it would seem. He was staring at his eldest daughter as though she had suddenly grown horns from her head.

“Although they are both amiable and gentlemanlike, Colonel Fitzwilliam is excellent

company,” Jane said.

“As a second son, he must be, or does he have an elderly uncle who has left him a fortune?”

“No, I do not believe so. He is an honest and honourable man but not wealthy,” she reiterated in a matter-of-fact manner.

“I thought you admired Mr Bingley,” Lord Glentworth mocked.

Elizabeth’s ire rose, but Jane looked into her father’s eyes, unperturbed.

“Mr Bingley is an agreeable man, but to be deemed excellent one must show steadfastness and resolve. Mr Bingley has proved to be capricious in his esteem and too easily persuaded by his sisters.”

Lord Glentworth eased his rigid stance, and a gleam of mischief shone from his eyes. “I always supposed Lizzy to be the studier of character.”

“We all must apply ourselves in the treacherous waters of society, and occasionally err to become wiser,” Jane replied.

Lord Glentworth bowed to his eldest’s wisdom and allowed his daughters to remove their wet and cold riding habits whilst he conversed loudly with his mother for more than an hour.

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Miss Eudora Darcy called on Maeve Bennet the next morning, and Elizabeth joined them upon returning from her morning stroll in the park.

“You are glowing, my dear. Pray what has put such a delightful blush in your cheeks?” Miss Darcy enquired.

“That must be due to my walk through Hyde Park this morning. The air was brisk but invigorating.”

“Do you walk every morning?” Miss Darcy looked amazed.

“As long as the weather permits,” she admitted.

The next morning, whilst Elizabeth was strolling the park, a familiar figure approached on the path. Mr Darcy tipped his hat, mis-stepped, and continued his walk with a sigh. He truly had an air of shyness about him that Viscount Crawford had expounded upon on their first encounter.

She thought nothing more about it until she encountered Mr Darcy escorting Miss Eudora Darcy the very next morning.

“Lady Elizabeth, I have adopted your morning ritual and must admit that it is refreshing to take the air in the morning.” Miss Eudora Darcy finished her sentence with a light cough.

“Pray! Are you well, Miss Darcy?”

“Oh yes, I have the constitution of an ox, but I would not mind the support of an extra arm...”

Elizabeth was skilfully manoeuvred back to Darcy House, on the corner of Grosvenor Square.

“Would you join us for tea, Lady Elizabeth?” Mr Darcy asked in a mellow voice.

“Please do,” his aunt urged.

Elizabeth looked up at the large stone building. As the third in a row of Darcy, Matlock, and de Bourgh houses, the family reigned over the majority of the west side of the fashionable square. She accepted the invitation, sent her footman downstairs to warm himself at Mr Darcy’s behest, and followed the master into an opulent entrance hall of marble, painted ceilings, and gold trimmings. She then better understood his exalted position in society and why he was sought after by the eligible ladies and revered by the gentlemen.

He had changed since his sojourn to Hertfordshire—his manners had certainly improved, and he treated her with deference. Mr Darcy held himself under good regulation, but he was so very formal compared to the gentleman she had met at the masquerade. That man had delighted her with witty banter and delicious amorous trifling.

“I hope you will not mind me calling for Georgiana to serve our tea. She is still practising, but you are too generous to resort to ridicule if she should happen to make a mistake.”

“Certainly not, Mr Darcy. We all had to learn at some time, and preferably with someone capable of overlooking our blunders.”

“Which is exactly what I would expect from you, Lady Elizabeth. As long as the mistakes are not too egregious to forgive.”

“I can assure you that my temper is not resentful, and I am determined to disregard any little blunders. It is only tea, after all. There are no mortal sins to commit,” she magnanimously allowed.

“Since Lady Elizabeth is in such a forgiving mood, may I suggest that you and Georgiana entertain your guest?” Miss Eudora Darcy probed.

“Me?” Mr Darcy replied in an unnaturally high tone.

“Yes, you,” his aunt confirmed as Miss Georgiana Darcy entered the room. “Is it not a splendid idea that you and your sister play a duet on the pianoforte? The new one Herr Salieri sent that one of his young students composed. The fantasy for four hands.”

Miss Georgiana Darcy nodded vigorously at her aunt’s suggestion and looked imploringly at her brother.

“I only play to help Georgiana since she has only two hands...” Mr Darcy protested meekly.

“Oh please, do play!” Elizabeth begged. She would not mind someone else displaying for once.

Mr Darcy acquiesced, though reluctantly, and they adjourned to a splendid music room with a grand piano. His unease was apparent as he fidgeted with everything from his coat-tails to his lapels before settling behind the instrument. There was no need to worry; the brother and sister beautifully played a delicate piece of music that brought tears to Elizabeth’s eyes.

She was almost miffed when they finished but applauded with the enthusiasm the music deserved, which was most vigorously. Was there nothing Mr Darcy did not excel at? Except for his occasional bad manners, he was a saint, which made it ever so much harder to loathe him.

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“It is Miss Eudora Darcy and her delightful niece. We are at home,” Grandmother Bennet informed the butler after perusing the cards he brought.

There had been three cards on the silver salver, and Elizabeth’s stomach did a little flip. It was most likely Mr Darcy who was accompanying them. She had not seen him in a week and no longer thought about him. Well, at least not as much as she used to. Yet, her treacherous eyes stole towards the door.

Miss Eudora Darcy entered with Miss Georgiana Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. He who had participated in the unpalatable wager had since done much to redeem himself. Favouring Jane for one—his taste was exemplary—forcing his brother to apologise was the second, and thirdly, he was excellent company.

“Eudora, how wonderful to see you!” her grandmother exclaimed. “I am delighted you brought your dear niece and the strapping colonel. Young ladies are especially delighted by red-coated callers, are they not? Especially those who have proved themselves by being particularly brave.”

“I have seen but little of actual battle, Mrs Bennet,” the colonel demurred. “My work is usually limited to administration and the occasional training session.”

“I was rather thinking about the battlefields of drawing rooms, sir.”

Her grandmother raised an eyebrow and looked directly at Elizabeth, who forced a smile for the sake of courtesy. Her quarrel with Colonel Fitzwilliam was all but forgotten. She offered to serve the tea and escaped to a table across the room to arrange it. To her consternation, she could hear her mother and sisters approaching in



the passage, bickering as they went. By the sound of it, they were coming hither...

“Do not sigh at me, Miss Lydia!” Lady Glentworth admonished.

“I did not sigh,” Lydia protested equally loudly.

“I can hear your breath, and it is not proper to breathe so loudly when I am scolding you,” Lady Glentworth continued. “We are not at Longbourn and must adhere to the strictures of the haut ton .”

The voices were close, and they would soon impose upon their guests.

“Mama, I believe Grandmother is receiving callers.” The soothing voice of Jane tried to warn Lady Glentworth, but she was sorely mistaken if she thought that titbit would calm their excitable mother.

“Splendid!” Lady Glentworth screeched and sailed into the room. She surveyed the occupants, and her eyes gained a dangerous glint when she espied the colonel. Next, she discovered Miss Georgiana Darcy and moved towards the girl, whose eyes widened in concern. Mrs Maeve Bennet hastened to perform the introductions, but that did not deter Lady Glentworth, who dipped into a curtsy before continuing her course.

“What beautiful lace! You simply must tell me where you purchased it,” Lady Glentworth demanded. She reached out to touch the fabric of her fichu, and the girl flinched.

Elizabeth held her breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and waited for her mother to admonish the reserved Miss Darcy. To her surprise, it did not happen. Instead, her mama remained silent for what felt like an eternity whilst she studied their guest. Then she stepped away and seated herself in a chair. Elizabeth hastened to break the

awkwardness by serving the ladies their tea.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Darcy. Lizzy has spoken so much about you that I feel like I know you already.” Lady Glentworth had modulated her voice, and it was more tender than any she used whilst speaking to her own daughters.

Elizabeth had not thought her mother had it within her to change, but the improvements in her behaviour were marked. Unfortunately, Lydia had yet to improve and stared openly at Miss Georgiana Darcy, who fanned herself to quash the blush suffusing her face.

“Please be seated, Lydia. I shall bring you your tea shortly.”

Her sister must wait until their guests had been served, Elizabeth thought whilst she handed the colonel his cup. He thanked her prettily for the tea and conducted himself as a true gentleman. At least he refrained from ogling her eldest sister, and for that small mercy Elizabeth was glad. Jane became exceedingly uncomfortable under heavy scrutiny, though she suspected that she did not mind the colonel’s longing looks as much as she did everyone else’s.

“Tell me, has my dolt-headed cousin managed to improve his abominable first impression?”

If he meant to throw her off guard, he would be sorely mistaken. She smiled and replied most innocently.

“Not at all.”

“He will have my head for revealing this, but it was he who suggested I arrange the picnic in the park. He is a true romantic at heart, even if he displays it but little.”

“You mistook my meaning, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I was referring to his heroic action. You see, he once saved my life when I was a child.”

She could see the colonel’s mind churning and was for the first time happy to receive the company of Miss Bingley, who hardly waited for the butler to announce her. She glided into the room and seated herself next to the younger Miss Darcy.

“Dear Georgiana, and ever in the company of your esteemed colonel. He takes prodigiously good care of you, and one might wonder whether there is to be an announcement in the future that will bring much pleasure to your families.”

Elizabeth wondered what she was at suggesting a connection between the cousins beyond the relationship of a guardian to his ward. What could she possibly mean to accomplish?

“Dear Jane, I have come with a message from my brother, who was exceedingly grieved he could not accompany me on my call on you today. As you know, business has taken him away for a few days, and he is worried you might forget him. I immediately put him at ease and declared that sweet Jane would not soon forget her dearest friends.”

Miss Bingley’s smile was sickeningly affected, and Elizabeth fought not to shudder. The colonel clearly believed it was time to change the subject.

“Miss Darcy,” he addressed his ward more formally than was his wont. “I believe you have brought an invitation with you.”

“Oh yes, I had almost forgotten.” She rummaged through her reticule and found an elegant invitation that she presented to the lady of the house. “I would be much obliged if you would attend my small dinner party and bring all your family.”

“It is her first time hosting an event,” Miss Eudora Darcy boasted. “I thought it was best to enter this stage of her education with only our closest friends present.”

Her grandmother expressed her gratitude most endearingly, the colonel eased his rigid stance, and Miss Bingley’s mouth turned into a most unbecoming pout.

The lady of the house called for entertainment, and Miss Bingley launched herself towards the pianoforte with alacrity. She chose an Italian love song that she performed scientifically, but her voice was not pleasing. It was obvious that she had studied with a master, but nature had not been charitable.

“Would you take a turn about the room with me?” Elizabeth enquired of Miss Eudora Darcy, affording the colonel and Jane a moment of privacy whilst Miss Bingley was distracted.

The older lady readily agreed and laced her arm with Elizabeth’s. “The colonel is very agreeable and gentlemanlike. His admiration for Jane does not prevent him from being polite and attentive to me, as so often happens with ill-bred young men these days.”

“You believe the colonel admires Jane?” Elizabeth questioned in astonishment. Though she should not be surprised; Miss Eudora Darcy had been little in their company, but she was a keen observer.

“Of that there can be no two opinions!” the lady exclaimed. “Although he is not overt in his regard, it is clear to me, as I have known him all my life.”

“You need not convince me, as I heartily agree, but Jane has several suitors and must be allowed to choose. I shall admit, if only to you, that the colonel is my favourite.”

Miss Darcy smiled. “I am relieved to hear it. I supposed you would prefer the

amicable Mr Bingley.”

“I have lately come to appreciate a more steadfast nature than one who is agreeable without the presence of mind.”

Once their morning callers had left, the anticipation of dining at Darcy House was the order of the day. Especially since all the current occupants of the house were included.

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*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Mr Darcy was waiting on the steps of his house, in the freezing cold, to greet his guests when they arrived. Miss Georgiana Darcy clearly had the wisdom to remain inside on the frigid February evening. She welcomed them warmly in the entrance hall with Miss Eudora Darcy at her side.

“Do come in,” she whispered timidly.

Elizabeth smiled to encourage the girl. It was certainly easier to focus her attention on the sister than on her brother, whose rigid stance made her uneasy.

Miss Darcy escorted her guests to a well-appointed parlour. She served the ladies a glass of sherry and the men a tumbler of port while they waited for dinner to be announced.

Lady Glentworth, always effusive in her praise, was complimenting the room and the furniture when the knocker resonated through the house. Whoever was at the door was certainly eager to be inside, which was not so strange when one considered the weather.

“It is probably our cousins,” Mr Darcy informed his sister. “I shall greet them whilst you entertain our guests,” he offered and hastened out of the room.

Miss Georgiana Darcy looked at her aunt for guidance, and Elizabeth realised that the young girl was unprepared to induce conversation. To help her she commented upon the flower arrangements and was so fortunate that her hostess had made them herself. A discussion about the outrageous prices of hothouse flowers followed—a topic that everyone was in consensus about.

“We are leaving!” Lord Limerick’s voice boomed, shocking everyone.

His eyes were fixed on the door, where a distinguished elderly couple followed Viscount Crawford and Colonel Fitzwilliam. The Matlocks!

Elizabeth was close enough to hear her grandmother insisting that they stay and behave with decorum. They were, after all, Miss Georgiana Darcy’s guests, and it was her first time entertaining. The reasoning seemed to work upon her brother, who had the decency to look abashed at his host. Poor Miss Georgiana Darcy seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“Matlock!” Lord Limerick greeted the man without pleasure.

“Limerick!” Lord Matlock retorted, sounding equally displeased. “When I was made aware whom you had chosen as your guests”—he looked accusatorily at Mr Darcy—“I was obligated to come and warn you against the acquaintance.”

“I am my own man and shall invite whomever I choose,” Mr Darcy replied evenly.

If she read the colonel’s lips correctly, he mouthed “sorry” to his cousin, which she interpreted as proof that the Matlock parents were an uninvited addition.

Elizabeth was slightly impressed Mr Darcy dared to call out his formidable uncle. Lord Matlock was a respected earl who was known for his political industry; but that was not why Elizabeth esteemed him. She had recently heard that Lord Matlock was one of the very few peers who was loyal to his wife. Lord and Lady Matlock were known to be devoted to each other, which was a rare occurrence indeed amongst the peerage, and heartily romantic in a young lady’s eyes. Could they truly be so bad?

“Which Bennet daughter is it that my sons are making a fool of themselves over?” Lord Matlock asked, losing some of Elizabeth’s regard. “I warned the king against

the Act of Union and allowing the Irish peerage into the House of Lords. Never before have so many been elevated into an undeserved rank.” His emphasis on ‘Irish’ as though it left a foul taste in his mouth bespoke his contempt.

“That is rich coming from you,” Lord Limerick countered.

“I am not Irish!”

“You can take the Irish out of Ireland, but you cannot take the Irish out of the man,” Lord Limerick asserted.

Lord Matlock threw his hands in the air. “It has been eight hundred years since my ancestors left Dublin for the Midlands!”

“Which proves my point!” Lord Limerick smiled victoriously.

Whether one was Irish or English mattered little to Elizabeth. What she could not fathom was why a father would not rejoice at the prospect of such a beautiful, kind, and compassionate lady as Jane for a daughter-in-law. But to her surprise, Lord Matlock’s glare was directed at her.

“Is that the one?” he asked Mr Darcy, but Elizabeth answered before their host recovered from his bewilderment.

“I assure you, neither the viscount nor the colonel has the slightest interest in me,” Elizabeth declared.

“Then who?” Lord Matlock boomed.

“I believe this is not such a good idea,” Mr Darcy deflected. “I would suggest you return to your home.”



“Out of the question. I shall not allow my sons to consort with criminals.”

“You are going too far,” Mr Darcy protested before deaf ears.

“The Campbells are back in town,” Lord Limerick gritted through clenched teeth. “I would not speak about consorting with criminals if I were you.”

“Campbell was acquitted in the court of law,” Lord Matlock replied coldly.

“By your perjury,” Lord Limerick accused him.

The combatants stepped closer and closer to each other.

“I spoke in earnest on behalf of a friend,” Lord Matlock defended himself.

“Yes. Your friend—the lying counterfeiter,” Lord Limerick charged. “Whom you had known for but a year?”

“Our acquaintance was of longer standing than that. We attended Oxford together.”

It was all too much for Jane, who could not stand any argument. “I am she,” she stated as she stepped between the arguing gentlemen. “I shall immediately rescind my permission for the gentlemen to call if my acquaintance displeases you, Lord Matlock.”

“That will not be necessary,” the colonel objected, glaring at his father.

“Father, you cannot accuse this lovely creature of anything untoward,” the viscount defended Jane.

“Lady Catherine Campbell née Bennet, this man’s sister”—he pointed a trembling

finger at Lord Glentworth—"was equally beautiful. But looks can be deceiving. She was a fraudster, and a treasonous one to boot," Lord Matlock informed his son.

The likeness of a young girl in her grandmother's bedroom sprang before Elizabeth's inner eye. Her father's beloved sister whose murder had injured him beyond repair. Could Lord Matlock's accusations be true?

In the periphery of her vision, she saw her father charge towards the earl.

"You dare accuse my sweet innocent sister! She was deceived and misled by your friend. She had not an artistic bone in her body. It is impossible that she made the counterfeit Egyptian artefacts. It was all your dear friend—Baronet bloody Campbell. You peers are all the same. Disguising and deceiving to protect your own. I loathe the hypocrisy, and I hate the town that sacrificed my sister as the last woman in England to burn at the stake! As a spectacle of entertainment for the depraved citizens of London..."

Elizabeth gasped. It was no wonder her father was disgusted by the mere thought of residing in town.

"Georgiana, you may excuse yourself," Mr Darcy demanded more than entreated.

The girl dipped into a quick curtsy and fled. Miss Eudora Darcy followed after a wordless plea from her nephew.

"Which of the Campbells are we speaking about?" Mr Darcy asked.

As if which bloodline they have descended from matters in this instance, Elizabeth thought.

"Their seat, Castle Donnachaidh is in Dollar in the Scottish lowlands," Lord

Glentworth added.

“There was proof,” Lady Matlock interjected.

“I had not thought you as easily deceived as your husband,” Lord Glentworth said, turning to Lady Matlock. “Catherine was well known to your family as your sister’s dearest friend, but you are just like the rest of the miscreants, too much like your fraudulent husband. Yet, I was the one who was ridiculed in the newspapers, and even to my face, for my choice of wife. The beautiful Miss Gardiner was a tradesman’s daughter, born to a second son who devoted his talents to maintaining a small country law office. A wise man who served his fellow townspeople was found wanting by your ilk. My wife may not be fashionable or always act within the strictures of the haut ton’s ideas of propriety, but not once, in twenty-odd years of marriage, have I had reason to question her loyalty or her complete honesty. She does not disguise or pretend, she speaks nothing but the plain truth, good or bad, and that is of true value in a marriage.”

Lady Glentworth looked at her husband with devotion and approached him to lace their arms together in unison against the Matlocks. “My dear Lord Glentworth,” she whispered adoringly.

Elizabeth had always secretly thought that her father had been blinded by her mother’s beauty and had entered an ill-advised match.

Lady Glentworth had been an exceptionally handsome woman in her youth and still was to this day, though her beauty had matured. To hear her father laud her character traits as something to admire removed all concerns she may have harboured. Her parents were not equally matched in understanding but had chosen each other for sensible reasons. It was a revelation—to everyone present, judging by the stunned faces surrounding her. The Matlocks had nothing to say, Mr Darcy frowned, Viscount Crawford looked about to flee, whilst the colonel kept a steady comforting gaze upon

Jane.

“We are ruined!” Lydia whispered.

“We are not!” Lord Glentworth protested. “An old lie will not damage you in the eyes of a true gentleman. You may not marry a lord, but a tradesman, a vicar, or an officer will do just as well if not better. Having an honest occupation is the making of any man,” he asserted with conviction.

“I resent your implication,” Lord Matlock hissed. “I have managed my estate for nigh on thirty years and had a successful career in the House of Lords. By your definition, I am an honest man who would never perjure himself in a court of law.”

“Except for the fact that you have.”

“Do you have any proof to your claim?” Colonel Fitzwilliam questioned.

Lord Glentworth lowered his head. “I do not but for the fact that the artefacts appeared before my sister left her home for the Scottish lowlands. I swear on my father’s grave that no one at Longbourn ever had the equipment or knowledge to make any counterfeits of quality, be they Egyptian artefacts or coins. When the first fake scarab was discovered in London, the purchase was traced back to the Campbells’ residence in Dollar. The court did not believe me as the Campbells swore under oath that the equipment and half-finished pieces had been found in Catherine’s dressing room. Your father testified to this piece of fiction as I understood he was visiting his friend at the time.”

“How long ago was it that the counterfeit scarabs were discovered?” Mr Darcy tried to interject, but his uncle heard nothing but Lord Glentworth’s accusations.

“I saw it with my own eyes!” Lord Matlock insisted.

“You worthy wiseacre saw what the Campbells wanted you to. Did you ever question Catherine’s lady’s maid as to whether she had seen the tools in the dressing room before that fateful day? No, you believed your fellow peer, and the pleas of an untitled but honest country girl were nothing to you.”

Lord Matlock remained silent with a deep frown between his brows.

“I thought not...” Lord Glentworth sighed.

Miss Eudora Darcy had returned unnoticed moments ago. “Was the lady’s maid called as a witness in court?” she queried.

“No,” was Lord Glentworth’s abrupt reply. “She had acquired a new position by the time I had the wherewithal to enquire after her, and the baronet was tight-lipped when I demanded to know her whereabouts. I suppose it would have mattered but little. Who would believe the testimony of a servant over that of the then Viscount Crawford?”

Lord Matlock turned to his wife. “Is there any truth to Lord Glentworth’s claims?”

Lady Matlock’s eyes were brimming with tears as she nodded. “It is true that Catherine was not artistically bent. I have it on good authority as she was my sister Felicity’s closest friend. I am ashamed to admit that we used to laugh at her attempts at drawing. According to my sister, her embroidery was not much better, and she could neither play any instruments nor sing a clean note, but she excelled in foreign languages and calculations.”

“She was wasted on the Campbells, who could not appreciate her sharp wit and unconventional accomplishments. She came from a good but untitled family and was the great-niece of an Irish baron, but they denigrated her for not boasting any ancient blood in her veins.” Lord Limerick had stayed in the background but stepped

forwards. “To be of exalted Irish ancestry does not matter to Matlock. He is too scared his own line should become known.”

“In this company, centuries of Bennets matters but little. I shall have you know that the Benéts came to the British Isles with William the Conqueror, alongside your precious nephew’s ancestor, Sir Richard d’Arcy. Our extended family still have a seat in Banchory in Scotland,” Lord Glentworth boomed. “Though I wish we did not, because it was whilst visiting our relations that we were introduced to the dastardly Baronet Campbell.”

“The material point to my coming here,” Matlock interrupted, choosing not to address Lord Limerick’s nor Lord Glentworth’s set-downs, “is that the old grievance has reappeared. I suspect the return of the Campbells to London, in addition to Mr Bennet’s elevation to an earl, has spurred the tattlers. It will make Lord Glentworth and his family’s entrance into society exceedingly difficult, and I have no wish to have my family name dragged through the mud with yours. Boys, I suggest we return home forthwith and do not further the acquaintance with Glentworth or Limerick. Including any of their, admittedly beautiful, daughters.” The viscount sprang to his feet and glanced ruefully at Jane, who raised her chin in defiance, whilst Lord Matlock turned to his nephew, who was fixed in astonishment. “I suggest you distance yourself as well, Darcy. No good can come of sullyng your respectable name by associating with their tarnished ones.”

“I am grieved indeed—grieved and shocked!” Mr Darcy exclaimed.

“Is it absolutely certain that Lady Campbell was guilty? Her family has good reason to believe otherwise,” Miss Eudora Darcy interjected. “I am certain that something could be done...”

“There is no doubt in my mind,” Lord Matlock confirmed with conviction.

“Have you even attempted to determine who speaks the truth? And what has been done to quash the rumours?” Miss Eudora Darcy insisted.

“My eyes were opened to Lady Campbell’s true character twenty-three years ago, and I have no wish to stir a past best forgotten. As to the gossip, you know as well as I that nothing can be done to stop it. The houses of Glentworth and Limerick will be subjected to derision or will simply be shunned—if they are fortunate.”

Mr Darcy made no answer. He seemed scarcely to have heard his uncle’s reply and paced the room in earnest meditation. Regarding his contracted brows and gloomy air, Elizabeth instantly understood. Her power over him, if such a thing had ever existed, had depleted with the assurance of their disgrace. She had thought his opinion of her had improved as they, against their inclination and by the perversity of mischance, had been thrown repeatedly into each other’s company. Their similar roles in supporting a sister and cousin on the treacherous path to romance had created a sort of bond between them, and the consequences of becoming better acquainted had culminated in a better understanding.

He would certainly wish to distance himself from her family in the foreseeable future, and she could not condemn him for it. But the chasm between them brought nothing consolatory to her bosom, nor did it palliate her distress. It only confirmed the wishes she had fought so valiantly to repress. Never had she felt so honestly that she loved him—as now when all love must be in vain. His pride would not allow the shades of Pemberley to be polluted by the family of a convicted counterfeiter...

Elizabeth staggered to a chair, sat, and closed her eyes. A tear leaked from her eye and ran unchecked down her cheek, and she bowed her head. By the shuffling feet and the opening of the door, she reckoned the Matlocks were leaving. Mr Darcy must have long desired their absence, and she prayed her father or uncle would soon end this misery.

It could not be a coincidence that dinner had not been announced. The servants were certainly listening outside the door, waiting for the bickering to end, and she was not so naïve as to think they would keep quiet. Oh no, everything that had been said—with added embellishments—would be all over town by morning. What did it matter that her great-uncle was a marquess? Nothing in this instance...

A shadow fell over her eyes, and she opened them to study an immaculate pair of Hessian boots.

“Is there anything I can bring you for your present relief?”

Mr Darcy was all politeness. In truth, he had proved himself to be the perfect gentleman during adversity, and she would reciprocate by offering him the same. She would not prolong their suffering.

“I thank you, but no.”

The awaited departure came. Lord Limerick kindly asked Mr Darcy to give Miss Georgiana Darcy his excuses and say that matters had arisen that demanded their immediate attention.

Mr Darcy rigidly complied and escorted his guests to the street when the carriages were ready. Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had remained after his brother and parents departed, offered Jane his arm and whispered fervently into her ear all the way to the carriage—occasionally soliciting a nod in response.

The gloomy night sky matched Elizabeth’s mood perfectly. Heavy clouds obscured even the slightest ray of moonlight from illuminating her path as she walked towards the dark outline of their carriage. She swallowed a sigh of relief they were leaving. Mr Darcy escorted the Glentworth ladies, and she would not insult him by making known how she wished to escape his presence.



“Do not despair,” Miss Eudora Darcy whispered in her ear.

It was a well-meant sentiment, though impossible to adhere to.

Mr Darcy waved away the footman and handed her mother into the carriage. The unwavering Colonel Fitzwilliam aided Jane. There was a small chance that he would not abandon them completely. Elizabeth procrastinated to allow Mr Darcy to make his excuses and move away. It was not to be, and she took the offered hand of the man who could not even bear to look at her. His expression was unyielding, as if he found the service particularly distasteful but his upbringing did not allow him to shirk what he believed was his duty.

Elizabeth set her foot on the first step, and the hold on her hand tightened. She may have been too hasty stepping up onto the second, though the poor light must take some of the blame for what followed. Something cold and slick hit the sole of her shoe, which slipped on the patch of ice. Her feet were swept away from beneath her, and she braced herself for the hard impact of the pavement.

It did not come—instead, she was enveloped in two strong arms and cradled to Mr Darcy’s chest in a swift motion that planted her lips on something soft. She wrenched away, but the grip tightened and would not allow her to move more than an inch.

“Elizabeth!” her mother screeched. “Thank heavens for your quick thinking, Mr Darcy. I am certain she would have been knocked senseless if her head had been allowed to hit the pavement.”

Mr Darcy did not answer, and she dared look into the dark pools of his eyes glittering in the faint lamp light. He was frozen in place; in distaste she reckoned, and she was desperate to escape the embarrassing moment as quickly as possible.

“You may put me down now, Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth's soft request only made him blink once. He still held her as a recalcitrant child about to be put to bed.

Then Mr Darcy drew a harsh intake of breath and lowered her slowly to the ground.

"Thank you," she whispered and grabbed the door with both hands and hoisted herself into the carriage whilst Mr Darcy's large, warm hand lay steadying on her lower back. She seated herself and glanced at the gentleman, who still held his left hand raised as a support for something invisible.

A footman wiped the step before he folded it and closed the door, whilst Mr Darcy's unwavering gaze held her captive until he disappeared from sight. Could it have been his lips I crashed into? No. It must have been his cheek. Dear Lord, let it have been the latter and not his mouth. How utterly mortifying! She touched her cheek to feel the texture. It was not soft enough. Then she felt her lips to compare. Heaven forfend! I kissed Mr Darcy! Though it was an accident and the impact too hard to be deemed pleasant...

"Have you injured your face, Lizzy?" Mrs Bennet asked.

"No, I do not believe so," Elizabeth admitted, abashed, having forgotten that she was not alone.

"I am ashamed of you," Lady Glentworth admonished. "You could at least have thanked the gentleman for his assistance."

I did! Elizabeth wanted to say, but to her consternation, she had not thanked him for his timely rescue but rather for putting her down afterwards.

"You owe him an apology for your clumsiness and should express a modicum of gratitude for not allowing you to fall to a certain death."

“I hardly believe I was in mortal danger,” Elizabeth protested.

Lady Glentworth huffed.

“Good gracious,” her mother whispered. “Fitzwilliam Darcy! Heaven forfend. I did not recognise him...” She turned to Elizabeth. “He was the one who rescued you from the wild beast in Lambton.”

“He was,” Elizabeth confirmed and turned her gaze out of the window.

“He has rescued you twice!”

Elizabeth chose not to answer. It did not matter—nothing mattered any longer. Whatever feelings Mr Darcy had once expressed to his cousin must have sailed away on the HMS Family Scandal . A scandal that would not be contained to the guests at Darcy House. It would spread through the drawing rooms as the latest on-dit. She would not be surprised if it already were. A lady had turned away from her when she was out riding. In a retrospective light, it may not have been a coincidence.

If Mr Darcy had wavered before, which had often seemed likely, all doubt must now have been settled in her disfavour. If he were determined to be as happy as an unblemished family name would allow, he would return no more to Limerick House.

Should he not return in a sennight, or a fortnight at the most, she would understand and give up every expectation, every wish to be the subject of his admiration. Most likely, he was congratulating himself on his lucky escape, and she was the only one who harboured any regrets...

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Jane had donned a warm dress, and Elizabeth watched her pace restlessly in the parlour. Elizabeth sat in the window seat, watching for Mr Bingley, who should have arrived quarter of an hour ago. Finally, the butler entered, but instead of announcing the expected gentleman, he brought Jane a missive on a silver salver.

“Mr Bingley has sent me a message,” Jane informed her evenly. “He is not coming. Unexpected business has prohibited him from fulfilling his obligation.”

Elizabeth could not help but think he had heard the rumours and was deliberately avoiding the acquaintance. Perhaps Mr Bingley and his sister were more alike than she had initially thought. Parvenus , desperately seeking acceptance in superior society. It was certainly a fitting description of Miss Bingley.

“Stop frowning, Lizzy. I am uninjured. My only motive for the day’s excursion was to discourage Mr Bingley from continuing his pursuit of me.”

“You have decided upon a gentleman amongst your plethora of suitors, then?” Elizabeth kept her tone light.

“Yes.” Jane’s tone was firm, but her expression softened as she looked directly at Elizabeth. “I know not what kind of arts and allurements Colonel Fitzwilliam has wielded. He is not the most handsome, nor the most agreeable man I have ever encountered. Yet, he has drawn me in and left me defenceless against his charms. I yearn for him, Lizzy!” Jane revealed in a rare moment of earnest feeling. She immediately blushed crimson and bowed her head. “Pardon me. I am uncommonly silly today...”

“No, you are not,” Elizabeth disagreed. “I understand more than you know.”

Jane’s head snapped up. “You do?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth kept her voice as neutral as possible and turned her gaze out of the window. “There is no rationality to attraction.” She had said all she wanted upon the topic, and dearest Jane knew her well enough not to enquire about what she did not divulge voluntarily. Her feelings were familiar yet new—definitely confusing, and never in accord with Mr Darcy’s. She could have said more and told her sister of the exact repercussions of being the victim of one of cupid’s arrows...

The square lay mostly empty and deserted but for one lone rider. The only joy on this dreary day—Colonel Fitzwilliam, who arrived moments later.

“Lady Jane! I had not expected to see you,” the colonel exclaimed in obvious pleasure.

“Mr Bingley is detained by some business and cancelled our ride.” Jane smiled, belying any displeasure she might have felt at the aforementioned gentleman’s abandonment. She touched her ringlets to ascertain they were in perfect order and smoothed her skirt. Jane’s unusual fidgeting with her appearance was quite telling.

“What a fool,” Colonel Fitzwilliam muttered. “Pardon me,” he immediately corrected himself. “I should not have called Mr Bingley a fool. Especially when it is to my advantage to find you at home and delight in your unexpected company.”

It spoke well of his manners that he recovered so quickly.

“I came to assure Lord Glentworth and Lord Limerick of my continuing support, and to offer my services. If I can be of aid, do not hesitate to ask,” he implored, looking directly into Jane’s eyes with a steady gaze.

Jane clutched her heart with the fervour of her emotions displayed on her countenance. The contrast to how she acted with Mr Bingley was clear to Elizabeth, as was the extent of her sentiments. Jane liked Mr Bingley, but she loved Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“I am certain my father and uncle will be pleased to hear it, as am I,” Jane boldly admitted. “There is one service I may beg of you.”

“Anything that is in my power to bestow will be yours,” the colonel promised.

“I would be delighted if you could bring Miss Georgiana Darcy on your next visit. We owe her an apology for ruining her dinner party,” Jane acknowledged. “I do hope she is not too distraught after the calamity.”

“Miss Darcy is very well. I saw her less than an hour ago, but bringing her hither may prove to be difficult,” the colonel disclosed with chagrin. “Mr Darcy is no longer in town. He departed abruptly to resolve a problem at one of his lesser estates and left my mother in charge of Georgiana. Under the circumstances, she may not allow her to visit.”

The colonel looked imploringly at Elizabeth, who turned her head and stared at the desolate street. It would not do for Jane to see the tears welling in her eyes and question what would bring neither any pleasure.

Elizabeth could not fault Mr Darcy’s decision to abscond to wherever his, real or imagined, business would take him. They had been much in each other’s company, and to distance himself from the Glentworths was the only sensible course. But she had become used to his society and attentions and was beginning to feel a very affectionate friendship for him. She despaired of ever meeting another man who showed half such intelligence and devotion to duty, or took such tender, diligent care

of his friends and family. He had paid her unremitting attention at the masquerade ball, and if she was to be earnest—also at the picnic and the disastrous dinner at Darcy House.

Mr Darcy was a man of the world, but his character was staid and reserved. How she would have relished bringing liveliness to his sombre life. But it was not to be...

The butler brought the post. The few letters these days were mostly retractions of invitations. Elizabeth had not even known such a thing existed. To uninvite someone was never done in Meryton, and she longed for home. London had lost its allure, but her father had changed his mind and decided they would remain in town and face the scorn with family pride. But not even Lydia remained her lively self when accosted with scorn and contempt. A shopping excursion to Bond Street had proved to be less pleasant than anyone had imagined, and Elizabeth had not anticipated the event at any rate. Not that society had dared cut them. It was the askance glances and fervent whispers that were disconcerting; then there were those who risked crossing the busy street to avoid greeting them. Elizabeth longed for the thrill of a ball, but the invitations were trickling down to none at all.

“What do you all say to a trip to the theatre tonight?” Grandmother Bennet suggested.

“And subject ourselves to the derision of the peerage?” Lord Glentworth looked incredulously at his mother.

“To show that we have nothing to be ashamed of,” she countered, daring her son to gainsay her.

“We would not even fit into the box if we all go,” he deflected.

“I suppose we should only take Eilís and Jane. I would not subject the younger girls to scorn, but those two have been introduced and are established favourites amongst

the gentlemen.”

“Very well,” Lord Glentworth conceded through clenched teeth. “We shall do it your way, but do not say that I did not warn you. The approbation of superior society means nothing to me, but Lizzy and Jane may think otherwise.”

Lord Limerick and his entourage arrived early to the theatre in the hope of avoiding the worst crush and succeeded beyond his expectations. Very few of his acquaintances stopped to greet them. Instead, they stuck their heads together and whispered whilst looking askance at them. The evening was not directly unpleasant as no one dared disparage them to their faces, but the whispers made it impossible to be at ease. The play was not compelling enough to draw Elizabeth in, and she was relieved when her uncle and father decided to leave before it had ended to avoid the smothering crowd.

Following the disappointing excursion to the theatre and Mr Bingley’s desertion, a quiet period commenced. Two months passed in quiet pursuits and little entertainment, though they were not utterly abandoned by all their friends. Miss Eudora Darcy and Lady Melbourne were two of her grandmother’s friends who chose to overlook the rumours. They continued to visit, though Miss Georgiana Darcy never accompanied her aunt. She had retired to Pemberley with her companion, or so they said. Elizabeth enquired after Mr Darcy, but by the evasive replies she received, no one appeared to know exactly where he was, and she stopped mentioning him.

Charlotte’s letters conveyed her increasingly tenacious wish that Elizabeth should join Sir William and Maria’s planned visit to Hunsford. Elizabeth had hoped that they would return to Longbourn for the spring planting, but that was not possible because the House of Lords was in session. Lord Byron had given his first address as a member. He was in opposition to the government’s repression of Luddite violence against the manufacturing industry, particularly in his home county of Nottinghamshire. Lord Limerick and Lord Glentworth both had strong opinions on



the subject, and even Lord Glentworth decided to remain in town. Her father thrived with his gentlemanly pursuits and lack of social engagements. Lady Glentworth and her two youngest daughters found happiness in shopping in the lesser part of town. Tradesmen cared but little about scandals of decades past when there was money to be earned. Mary prospered under the tutelage of a new music master, and Jane blossomed under the colonel's unwavering attentions.

Elizabeth declined Charlotte's invitation to Hunsford to avoid tainting the Lucases' name with their family scandal, though avoiding Rosings Park was another incentive. Lady Catherine de Bourgh was Lord Matlock's sister and known for her frankness. Elizabeth's presence might provoke scenes that would be unpleasant to all.

The colonel's devotion to his courtship with Jane had not abated. He stood steadfastly by her side, but the Earl of Matlock could not be pleased. Elizabeth, who spent much time in the window seat regarding the busy street, had noticed that he always came riding from the direction of St James's and his barracks—never from Grosvenor Square where Matlock and Darcy House were situated. He never spoke about it, but Elizabeth would not be surprised if it turned out he had been cast off.

Jane's engagement to Colonel Fitzwilliam came as no surprise on the first day of April. The colonel had been summoned to headquarters and was to be dispatched for Spain with due haste because the British Army was in desperate need of guiding engineering officers. The colonel refused to leave England without permission to write to Jane; he proposed and was immediately accepted.

Lord Limerick and Lord Glentworth promptly summoned their attorney to draw up the papers giving the colonel the tenancy of Longbourn rent free. They wished to provide a steady income for him to support a wife, which would allow him to resign his commission. This was not so much an act of charity as it was their means to secure the future of Longbourn, Glentworth, and Limerick.

Colonel Fitzwilliam declined. He owned a modest estate in Derbyshire yielding nigh on three thousand pounds a year—a fact that came as no surprise to Jane. He did, however, agree to resign his commission.

#

Elizabeth was sitting in her habitual window seat when a commotion in the entrance hall prompted her to leap to her feet and hasten towards the door. She was halfway across the room when the door opened and Lord Glentworth entered with the most genuine smile that had ever graced his countenance.

“Be at ease, Lizzy. I have come bearing the most excellent news...” Her father’s expression turned mischievous. “You will never guess it!”

“No?” Elizabeth exclaimed and doubted that the return of Mr Darcy to town was the cause for her father’s exhilaration.

“We are saved!” Lord Glentworth informed her. “By the grace of the almighty, Gardiner has found my sister’s lady’s maid. She is in London, and even better yet, she is willing to testify that my dearest Catherine did not have the supplies to make coins or Egyptian artefacts in her dressing room but that they were placed there whilst she was visiting a friend. By the time they returned, the supplies had been found, and the former Viscount Crawford had been brought as a witness. It is nothing short of a miracle.”

Whilst Elizabeth was very happy about this news, she still harboured some misgivings.

“Will a maid be enough to prove Catherine’s innocence?” she questioned her father.

“I have doubts, but I am not completely discouraged.”

“No, I would imagine not.”

“Nevertheless, I must make every effort to clear Catherine’s name. We are going out into society with our heads held high, and no one will ever again disparage our name without facing severe consequences.”

“Lord Matlock!” Elizabeth cried. “Will he be tried at court for slander?”

“I very much doubt it,” her father mused. “His title is likely to protect him. But he will be the subject of derision and censure, which I suspect will be of shorter duration than he deserves.”

Poor Mr Darcy! His name would be tainted by association.

“I must go to Gardiner at once and interview the maid. Pray the court will accept our case, dear Lizzy. I shall compose a panegyric of Catherine to present to the judge.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

The atmosphere at Limerick House was much improved, even though speculations ran rampant in every newspaper, and they were still not certain whether there would be a new trial. The shocking revelation was the talk of town. The Matlocks received the brunt of the public ire, widening the chasm between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. He would never reacquaint himself with the Limericks and Glentworths when his own family were disgraced by their actions. His pride would never allow it.

It was a good thing that the colonel was their second son. Yet in a moment of dark despair, he offered Jane the opportunity to withdraw from their engagement.

Jane would hear none of it and more or less demanded that the banns be read as soon as possible. She was not about to abandon him in his time of need when he had remained by her side through her family's fall from grace. "For better or for worse," she gently reminded her dear colonel.

Everything was proceeding in their favour until one day, when her father came home sporting an expression of consternation.

"Pray! What is the matter? Did the court deny us a new trial?" Elizabeth hastened to her father's side and offered to fetch him a glass of port.

He accepted and requested that Elizabeth join him in the study. He sat down at Limerick's desk, steeped his fingers, and glanced unseeingly into the air. Dread settled in Elizabeth's stomach as her father's contemplations lasted much longer than she was comfortable with. At last, his eyes seemed to settle on her.

"The strangest thing happened at my attorney's office today," her father admitted,

sending another frisson of unease down her spine. “A Scottish gentleman, the owner of Stonehaven Castle, has written to Mr Gardiner. He asserts that he bought a forged scarab from the Campbells no more than five years ago.”

Elizabeth nodded; this was good news. “Was it one of our Banchory cousins?” she asked. It may not be helpful if the witness was a relation, even a remote one, because his integrity might be called into question.

“No. I am certain it was not one of our relations. The gentleman wished to remain anonymous, and we both know that it is not in any Bennet’s nature to allow anyone else to take credit for our accomplishments.”

“As it should be.” She smiled wryly.

“Further investigations have proved that they are still producing counterfeits to this day. They only changed their market. A shipment has been discovered, destined for France. I dare say the Prince Regent would wish it would continue as he harbours no qualms against fooling the French.

“ I am stunned that after nigh on twenty-three years I have a decent chance of clearing Catherine’s name. I know it will not bring her back, yet I cannot help but think that I should have done more at the time...”

Elizabeth was about to excuse him. At the time he had been a young man of barely one-and-twenty. Too young to be burdened with such a task. Then she remembered that was almost the same age as Mr Darcy had come into his inheritance, with the responsibility of not only a vast estate but also a grieving young sister. She loved her father dearly—enough to realise he was not without faults, of which some were more grievous than others, but love was unconditional in its purest form. Instead of offering him empty platitudes, she rose, circled his desk to give him a warm hug, and left him to his thoughts.

The court accepted their petition to reopen the trial, which was set to be held on the fifteenth of May. Jane was determined to wed very soon after it ended. She was only willing to postpone it for that long to allow her father and Uncle Henry to participate. The last day of May was finally agreed upon.

#

The Old Bailey, Friday 15<sup>th</sup> May 1812, before The Right Hon. Claudius Stephen Hunter, Lord-Mayor of the city of London.

Elizabeth followed a vexed Lord Glentworth elbowing and pushing his way forwards through the staring mass of simpletons and doorway idlers gathered before the Justice-Hall. The trial of John Bellingham, who had shot the prime minister two days earlier, was to begin later in the day. The aggravated spectators had assembled at the Old Bailey for hours in advance for a chance to spit, curse, and scowl at the perpetrator. A frightened Elizabeth kept her head low whilst trying not to lose sight of her family.

The crush was no less unbearable inside, and the next moment she stood face to face with the Mr Campbell who had accosted her at Lady Jersey's Christmas ball.

Mr Campbell effectively blocked her path and hissed, "Your father is delusional if he supposes this travesty of a court case will clear his name. The only advantage will be the name of Campbell resurrected to its former veneration. Your treasonous aunt is burning in hell, as she deserves." He paused and raised his chin. "You may quote me to your father."

"I certainly shall not deign to repeat such rubbish," Elizabeth cried.

"Eilís?" Grandmother Bennet was at her side and laced their arms in a broad but short united front. "What is the meaning of this? You are blocking the entrance."

“He!” Elizabeth exclaimed and glared at the interloper. “He would not let me pass and has been spouting nonsense.”

Her grandmother stepped forwards, but the nincompoop moved to stop her when Elizabeth felt a comforting hand on her back.

“Move!” the Marquess of Limerick shouted so loudly the entire hall quieted.

The scoundrel dared not oppose her uncle with all the attention directed at him, and he allowed them to pass.

“Who was that man?” Elizabeth whispered in her grandmother’s ear.

“The baronet Catherine married had a son from a previous marriage, and that was he. The Campbells have been shunned in good society ever since the counterfeit became known. I suppose the young man blames Catherine for his misfortunes.”

That certainly explained a great deal, and Elizabeth could not but be grateful for Mr Darcy’s timely rescue at Lady Jersey’s ball. Mr Campbell’s intent had likely not been to force her to wed him but to destroy her reputation. Thank heavens for Mr Darcy!

They found their seats in the first row and waited for the trial to begin.

The court’s Mr Baron Graham opened the case. “Lady Campbell was tried by the second Middlesex Jury before Mr Baron Hotham. The court proceeded to pass sentence as follows. Guilty, death.”

The courtroom erupted in a melee of shouts before the judge called the room to order. He had to threaten to evict them all before the spectators quieted.

Fiona Alcorn was sworn.

“I am Fiona Alcorn. I was Lady Campbell’s lady’s maid and had accompanied her on her visit to Mrs MacLeod on that fateful morning. Upon our return, Viscount Crawford, now Lord Matlock, the magistrate Mr Castleton, and the officer Robert Dawson were cataloguing a number of items I had never seen before.”

“How long had you been in Lady Campbell’s employ?”

“Nearly two years.”

“Describe to the jury what you witnessed in the dressing room or any other chamber at Lady Campbell’s disposal.”

“I never saw anything of note. There was the usual attire, some jewellery, and shoes. Cosmetics and the like. She did not smoke the pipe,” she assured the court with disgust. “Nor had I seen the metal, the vials with aqua-fortis, or moulds ever before in her possession.”

“What about Egyptian artefacts? A scarab or any other jewellery?”

“She had none,” the maid replied with conviction.

“The prisoner pleaded she was with child. I see that a jury of matrons were sworn in, who returned with a verdict the forewoman delivered. In their opinion, if she was with child, it was very young, for she had not felt the quickening.”

“I believe Lady Campbell spoke the truth, but it was as the matrons declared, too young to have quickened.”

“Why did you not witness, madam?” Lord Glentworth’s barrister thundered.

“I was never called, and the distance from Dollar to London was quite out of my



reach. Immediately after Lady Campbell's arrest, I was offered a position with the Duchess of Argyll. You could not expect me to refuse, though it has weighed heavily upon me these past three-and-twenty years that she was burnt at the stake. I dare say if her innocence was not enough to save her, a child should have been."

The crowd murmured their acquiescence whilst Elizabeth gasped in horror and turned to her grandmother. "She was burnt alive?"

"No, Elizabeth. They strangled her first, then waited half an hour to be certain she was dead before they lit the fire."

"You were there?"

"Certainly. I could not abandon my child at her most trying moment. We were all there, your father and Henry, to offer what we could of solace and prayer. She was so frightened I hardly kept my composure."

Elizabeth felt tears well in her eyes. "How you must have suffered!"

"I did not suffer—I grieved, I raged, and I felt bereft. I still do at times. But I could not allow myself to wallow in misery. I had a bereaved son to care for, and soon after an agglomeration of granddaughters to dote upon. Later, my brother needed me to keep his house. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to be of use to my dear relations. The loss is permanent, but others filled the gaping void, little by little, until the sorrow became bearable."

Miss Alcorn left the stand, and Lord Matlock was called and sworn in.

The earl cleared his throat. "My presence was requested by the local magistrate who wanted me to join him as an independent witness to his search of the lady's private quarters. We entered her bedchamber but found nothing of note. Proceeding to Lady

Campbell's dressing room, we found that she was in the act of making shillings and sixpences."

"Why did a rich lass make sixpences when she could've made ten-pound notes?" someone mumbled amongst the spectators.

Lord Matlock disregarded the question and continued his narrative. "We confiscated the moulds, two tobacco pipes for melting the metal, copper, pewter, tin, lead, aquafortis, sandpaper, cork, a polishing board, and other finishing implements like crumbled Cheshire cheese used to colour the coins to make them look old."

"Did you question why you found proof of coining when she was accused of counterfeiting Egyptian artefacts?"

"I did not. I supposed it was irrelevant which kind of counterfeiting we discovered as long as we found proof to support the assertion."

"'Tis cause coining's treason. Ye wanted 'er to 'ang!" someone shouted from the upper tier.

The judge quieted the shouting and gestured for Lord Matlock to continue his narrative.

"The lady returned twenty minutes later. We tied her hands and searched the contents of her reticule. We found two good shillings and a good half-crown immediately, but after ripping out the lining, we found a bad sixpence."

"Did anything at all pass between you and Lady Campbell that could possibly induce her to hope that if she told the truth, it would be better for her. Even a means of escaping?"

“No. I guarded her against it. The first question she asked me was what I thought they would do to her. I replied that it was impossible for me to answer such a question and that it was a pity that she, as a lady, would give way to such business as coining.”

“Did she ever deny the accusations?”

“Yes. She pleaded her innocence and said she had never been concerned in any kind of counterfeit. I showed her the scarab that Lord Carnarvon had purchased at Robert Romani’s hosier shop in Friday Street, Cheapside. The signature on the receipt proved that the scarab had come from Lady Campbell. She denied any knowledge, and that was nearly all the conversation we had.”

Mr Castleton, the magistrate at the time, had long since passed, and a summary from his testimony in 1789 was read by a barrister. It coincided with Lord Matlock’s rendition of events.

“How long would you say it took from the magistrate’s arrival before the search of Lady Campbell’s suite commenced?” Lord Matlock was asked.

“I would say about an hour.”

“Would you deem that enough time to move the items you discovered into the accused’s quarters?”

“Perhaps, but we only postponed the search because we were waiting for the lady to arrive home.”

“Yet, you did not wait until she returned.”

Lord Matlock looked uncomfortable. “No. I believe the magistrate wanted to be finished with it to allow him to return home before nightfall.”

“You may step down, Lord Matlock.”

Four witnesses were called who all gave Lady Campbell a good character.

The judge rubbed his chin and appeared impatient to finish this postmortem conundrum.

“Miss Alcorn’s testimony would have saved Lady Campbell from her death sentence, but it does not prove her innocence. Her husband, Sir Arthur Campbell, died in May 1811 and cannot be questioned. I have a scarab delivered from a gentleman who prefers to remain anonymous. He asserts in his letter that it was purchased from the Campbells only five years ago, but without his testimony I cannot change the verdict.”

A gentleman rose to Elizabeth’s left. “It was I,” rang out a deep and familiar baritone voice.

“Step forwards, Mr Darcy.”

The gentleman was sworn in before the questions proceeded.

Elizabeth stared at Mr Darcy, unabashed. His back was turned, so she was safe from notice though not unaware of the telling glance that passed between her sister and grandmother. It had been months since they had last been together at Darcy House, and she believed he had avoided her company because of the scandal. So why was he here? What could he mean by it?

“Inform the jury how you came to be in possession of this scarab,” Lord Glentworth’s barrister implored.

“It was part of a shipment about to set sail from Stonehaven Harbour—”

“I thought the port was destroyed by a storm?” Lord Matlock’s barrister interrupted.

“It was, but not in its entirety. You can dock small vessels on what is left, which is where my ship was when Campbell’s sailors dropped a crate, and that scarab was one of the items that fell out when it broke. It was slightly damaged in the accident. As you can see, there is a chip on the left side. Sir Arthur offered it to me for a pittance of what it was worth. At the time I reckoned it was due to the damage. Not before this winter, when rumours began circulating about counterfeited Egyptian artefacts, did I begin to suspect foul play.

“My conscience demanded that I investigate my suspicions. First, I searched for and found Lady Campbell’s lady’s maid. Because of my recent purchase I had reason to believe that the forgery had continued long after Lady Campbell’s unfortunate demise. I understand that she was tried in September 1789, after only five months of marriage. She could not, within that abbreviated time span, have made all the items that I have since discovered to have been shipped from Stonehaven Harbour to the port of Le Havre. To be certain, I enquired of Miss Alcorn how much luggage Lady Campbell had brought to Dollar upon her marriage, and it was not substantial beyond her wardrobe and personal items. My conclusion was that Lady Campbell was innocent.”

It seemed to Elizabeth that Mr Darcy had gone to a great deal of trouble to find a lady’s maid twenty-three years after her last known position and discover the smuggling route of seasoned contrabandists. The task must have occupied him for... Good gracious! This is why he left town so abruptly after the disastrous dinner at his house. Colonel Fitzwilliam said he had travelled to one of his lesser estates to resolve a problem. But why had he not said so? Elizabeth answered her own question: Because if Lord Matlock had known, he would surely have done everything in his power to stop him...

“Do you know how many shipments have been sent to France?”

“No, not precisely, but it was indicated at least two shipments a year, though none has left since Sir Arthur died last May...”

“I believe we have enough to decide, unless you have anything further to add, Mr Darcy.”

“No, My Lord.”

The judge concluded by advising the jury to take all the facts into their most serious consideration. “If you have any doubt, give the accused the benefit of that doubt. But if you conceive Lady Campbell guilty of the crime alleged against her, in that case you find her guilty.”

The jury, after two minutes of consultation in the box, expressed a wish to retire, and a sworn officer of the court accompanied them to the jury room.

“Do you believe the jury will be out long?” Elizabeth probed her grandmother whilst keeping Mr Darcy in the periphery of her vision. He was approached by an incensed Lord Matlock but remained calm when answering his uncle’s accusations.

“No, I surmise it will not take long to acquit Catherine. I only wish we had had a Mr Darcy twenty-three years ago...”

Her obstinate eyes strayed to the aforementioned gentleman, and she watched her father approach him. Lord Matlock left in a fury whilst Lord Glentworth shook hands with Mr Darcy, and they spoke quietly between themselves. At a moment of contemplating something her father said, he turned to her, and for the briefest of moments, their eyes met.

Her grandmother must have heard her sharp intake of breath because she was studying her with interest. But Mr Darcy wore such a wistful, tired expression she

could not help the compassion swelling in her breast. Then it struck her! He had witnessed against his own relations, in favour of her family. What could he mean by it? Of course, his sense of justice and obligation must have been his concern. Even if it was to the detriment of himself...

She must think of something to say because her grandmother's gaze was becoming intolerable.

"I am shocked," Elizabeth whispered. "How very noble of Mr Darcy to suffer such detriments to his own family for the sake of ours."

"Certainly, but in my experience, young men do not sacrifice their good name merely because it is just. I believe he has made you his study—and not to find blemishes, mind you. I sensed a deep connection that you so vehemently denied. Do you have an understanding with the gentleman?"

Elizabeth's heart hammered as if to escape the confinement of her chest. She was about to deny its fondest wish without betraying the sentiment so utterly without hope of fruition. "No. Blemishes are easily discovered. I must suppose his disappointment at my lack of any spurred him to find other faults."

Her grandmother frowned. "Mr Darcy must be the exception, then. A most excellent example of a respectable and admirable man."

Elizabeth was inclined to agree and nodded her head.

"How unfortunate, though I never perceived him as one of those violent young lovers who would rant and storm on behalf of their heart's intended. He is reserved, to be sure, and likes to carry his own way. Even though I cannot account for this blessing, I am inclined to accept it as his sacrifice is much in our favour."

Elizabeth was quite relieved her grandmother had not questioned her about her sentiments. She had never been more at a loss to make her feelings appear what they were not.

The jury was out for just fourteen minutes, and on their return to court, their countenances indicated acquittal.

Their names were called, their verdict was asked for in its usual form, and the foreman announced the decision. "Not guilty upon the indictment of counterfeit." The Recorder passed the sentence of the third Middlesex jury before Sir James Mansfield in a solemn manner.

The Glentworths and Limericks rose. No one felt the need to celebrate but had to forge through the crush to leave. Elizabeth had hoped to secure a moment of Mr Darcy's time, if only to express her gratitude, but her lithe frame had not the strength to withstand the sturdy men who elbowed their way to the door. She left just in time to see Mr Darcy step into his carriage and drive away.

She understood better his haste when Lord Matlock nudged her out of his way and shouted his nephew's name. She would not think his retreat an act of cowardice but a wise decision to move the confrontation that would surely unfold to a more private quarter.

Her father took hold of her arm and pulled her out of the swarming masses.

"We owe Mr Darcy our gratitude. I hope, at the very least, that you invited him to dine with us?" Elizabeth entreated.

"I did," her father replied, sending a surge of hope through Elizabeth.

"He declined and professed he would not want to importune us with an unpalatable



guest from a family that would only remind us of our loss. I pointed out to him that I already count Colonel Fitzwilliam as a Glentworth in everything but name, but he could not be moved. It led me to believe that he was speaking about more than the miscarriage of justice. But I suppose such a busy man may be occupied by his other business and only returned to town for the trial. I had the impression that he was to leave at dawn on the morrow, and that may account for him not wanting to spend a late night with us.”

Elizabeth, who had thought their disgrace was keeping him away, could not help but believe it was for her sake he had declined. How was she to inform him that her feelings had undergone such a material change when he perpetually shunned her company? Or might she, instead of seeing too little, have fancied too much?

The rest of the day was spent in solemn contemplations, but already the next day proved that a burden had been lifted from Lord Glentworth’s shoulders. Her mother coming giggling down the passage was the first sign that something had shifted.

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It came as no surprise to the public that Lady Catherine Campbell née Bennet was acquitted. The Campbells faced trial, and the Fitzwilliam family suffered derision for witnessing in the Campbells' favour. The newspapers were gleefully emphasising the irony that Lord Matlock's son was to marry Catherine Bennet's niece, and the caricaturists were merciless in their depictions.

Lord Matlock was not tried. The judge acquitted him on the basis that he had simply related what he saw, though he was reprimanded for his investigation that had left much wanting. The family escaped the tattlers by retiring to their country estate.

Elizabeth's favourite place in Limerick House was the window seat facing the square. With the warm weather, plenty of people were out and about, but Mr Darcy was never among them...

She had not always thought so well of him as she did now, but time and distance had allowed for deeper reflections. It had been a long time since she had admitted that he was the recipient of her affections, but now she comprehended that he was exactly the man who suited her most in disposition and talents.

Elizabeth was readying herself for bed when someone scratched at her door, and she called, "Enter." The soft sound could only be Jane's, and her informal apparel would not disgrace her in the eyes of her sister. Jane took the brush from her hand and continued to work her curls with a gentle hand.

"I wish to invite you to join me on my bridal trip."

Elizabeth gazed at her sister in the mirror. She knew it was commonly done to bring a

sister on a wedding trip, but why Jane would want her to impose upon her and the colonel was unfathomable. She had always surmised that those who did were not best pleased with their choice of husband... To think the colonel would agree to the scheme for any other reason than to please his wife was even less plausible. If she ever were so fortunate as to secure Mr Darcy, she would wish to be quite alone with him. Mortified by her thoughts she regarded herself in the mirror, studying the redness blooming on her cheeks.

“Where are you travelling?” she asked with trepidation.

“North,” was Jane’s short reply, and Elizabeth saw that her sister was as abashed as herself. Jane developed a spot of redness on her neck when she was apprehensive, and it struck her that her sister and the colonel might be visiting his relations. If that was the case, she had no problem understanding why Jane needed the fortification of a sister.

“To Matlock?” Elizabeth enquired with a raised brow.

“No!” Jane cried, aghast. “Richard’s father has not forgiven him for marrying a Glentworth... We are planning a visit to the Lake District.”

That was unfortunate. Elizabeth could easily imagine lazy days languishing by a romantic lake, holding hands and exchanging clandestine kisses. A sister, even one who was as pleasant company as herself, did not belong in that picture. If, on the other hand, they were going to Pemberley, she might be tempted to accept regardless of the inconvenience to the bride and groom.

“Are you stopping in Lambton?” Elizabeth asked as indifferently as she could muster. Pemberley was quite close. It was to be hoped that she might accidentally happen upon Mr Darcy in the village and show him every civility.

“No, we have no such intentions,” her sister refuted in a comforting voice.

Jane must still believe that I dislike Mr Darcy , Elizabeth mused. Yet, she could not muster the courage to relate the change in her sentiments towards the gentleman.

“Very well!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I shall consider it.”

“Oh! Very good. I am very much anticipating the trip, and having you with me would make it even more pleasant. I dare say the colonel would be very pleased should you decide to join us. He is as eager as I. I promise we would not tax you too much and will have a very pleasant journey. Imagine the sights we would see and what lovely nature we would pass. I dare say it would satisfy even your hankering for adventure and rambling through the countryside.”

Jane was prattling, which was uncommon. There were too many verys for her sister’s subtle nature. She must be dissembling to some degree or other. Perhaps she was inviting her out of a misguided form of obligation.

“If I am to be honest, Jane, I do not think it is a very good idea...”

Her sister looked crestfallen, so Elizabeth gave her a quick hug, assured her she would be most content remaining in London, and shooed her out of her room.

Elizabeth approached her grandmother the next morning and asked for a word in private, so they adjourned to Mrs Bennet’s sitting room.

“Jane invited me to join her on her bridal trip.”

“How wonderful!” her grandmother exclaimed. “But you do not look happy,” she added, modifying her exhilaration. “I cannot see why not.”

“They are going to the Lake District...”

“I thought you wanted to see the Lakes. I am certain I have heard you mention as much on several occasions.”

“I have been so wretchedly blind...”

“Dear Leanbh. I do not believe a change of mind regarding the Lake District can be deemed wretched,” her grandmother mused.

“I am not speaking about the Lakes,” Elizabeth clarified.

“Oh!” her grandmother cried as if she had experienced a sudden epiphany. “What can I do to help you?”

“You can take me to Pemberley under the guise of a trip north. No one would be any the wiser if we go no farther than the Midlands.”

“Why?” her grandmother asked plainly.

“To show my gratitude for the mortification and sacrifices Mr Darcy has suffered on behalf of my family,” Elizabeth dissembled.

“And?” Grandmother Bennet questioned, not allowing herself to be taken for a fool.

“To determine whether Mr Darcy returns my admiration,” Elizabeth finally admitted.

Maeve Bennet regarded her for a long moment, making Elizabeth squirm under the heavy scrutiny.

“I am quite certain that he cares for you. In fact, I know he loves you most fervently.”

“How can you speak so decidedly?” Elizabeth doubted.

“Because Eudora told me so when we returned to town in November. She is almost his closest relation and knows most of his affairs.”

Elizabeth knew she was staring most unbecomingly at her dear relation, but she could not help it. She searched her grandmother’s eyes for signs of mirth or prevarication. Finding none she asked, “Why did you not tell me?”

“Because you did not want to hear it. You held on to your grudge regardless of what I said, which convinced me you needed to discover the truth for yourself. Now that you have, you may leave it to me.” She tapped her nose and left not only her sitting room but the house.

#

Elizabeth had hoped that Mr Darcy would attend his cousin’s wedding—he did not, and she was left to repent an opportunity lost.

Because of the trial, only their intimate family were in attendance. Jane preferred a quiet wedding and shone brilliantly in her new light-blue dress. The breakfast was held at Limerick House with a small selection of family and close friends.

The newly married couple were to leave the next morning for their bridal trip. Elizabeth and her grandmother had been invited to join Miss Eudora Darcy at her estate, Edensor, and they were to leave in a procession of carriages as far as Derbyshire for the safety of both travelling parties.

Two and a half days later, they turned off the main road at a lodge. For some time, a beautiful wood stretched over a wide extent and gradually ascended over half a mile, when suddenly the wood ceased, and they found themselves on the top of a

considerable eminence. The carriage drew to a halt to allow the travellers to enjoy the view.

Jane opened the door to the carriage Elizabeth and her grandmother shared with Miss Eudora Darcy. “Would you mind joining me for a moment, Lizzy?”

“Not at all,” she assured her sister.

Elizabeth peered out to discover, at the opposite side of the valley, a large, handsome stone building that stood well upon the rising ground. It was backed by a ridge of high woody hills, whilst in front a stream of natural importance swelled into a lake without any artificial appearance. “Where are we?” Elizabeth muttered in astonishment.

“You may guess.” Jane smirked most vexingly.

“Is it Chatsworth?” Elizabeth could well imagine it was the home of a duke, but Jane shook her head. “Haddon Hall?” Another shake of denial. Elizabeth huffed and stepped out whilst trying to remember which other great estates in the area she had heard mentioned. “Good gracious! Is that Pemberley?” Elizabeth swept her eyes across the valley and spotted a couple of young lads up the stream with fishing rods in their hands. Uncle Gardiner would regret he had not accompanied them...

“I need to stretch my legs and wondered whether you would like to accompany me? The grounds are delightful, and I am very much inclined to explore after sitting so very long in one attitude.”

Elizabeth was surprised she had not requested the colonel’s company, but since she was inclined to walk, reckoned it was best not to suggest it.

“Excellent, my dear,” the colonel called from his carriage. He was leaning out of the

door whilst sending his wife a significant look.

Jane grabbed her arm and strode vigorously towards a bench not ten yards from the carriages and gestured for Elizabeth to sit.

“I thought we were to stroll,” she complained.

“We have walked, now we shall sit and admire the view.”

Elizabeth did as requested in sheer bewilderment at Jane’s commanding tone of voice. It must be the colonel’s influence, and she was not certain she liked this development in her serene sister’s character.

Jane sat beside her, turned to face her, completely disregarding the picturesque view, and grabbed her hands. She looked at her imploringly, as though she had something particularly distasteful to relate.

“You have been very sly with me,” she accused. “Very reserved. But however little you are willing to tell me, do not suppose me ignorant of your plight or unaware of your feelings.”

“I know not of what you speak,” Elizabeth prevaricated.

Jane slowly nodded her head. “You do. In fact, I believe not much else occupies your thoughts, and it has been so for quite some time. I have watched you turn from my vivacious, happy sister to someone quiet and contemplative, hovering in impenetrable sadness. You see, I observe in you what you surely have recognised in me—a preference for a certain gentleman, an ardent infatuation, or dare I say love.”

Elizabeth stared at her sister before slowly turning her head towards Pemberley.



“I only ask you to be honest,” Jane said cryptically and rose. “At least with yourself, and, it is to be hoped, with the gentleman who owns your heart. I dare say there is reason to aspire to a happy conclusion. But, for now, I shall leave you to your thoughts,” her sister declared and walked away.

Elizabeth remained rooted to the bench. Was this not what she had coveted? To be granted an opportunity to show her improved impression, her willingness to forgive the slights—though he had not even begged her pardon in person. Faced with the possibility, she hardly knew whether she had the courage...

“Wait!” she cried, but Jane had already entered the colonel’s carriage. Elizabeth returned to her conveyance and joined her grandmother. Whilst she pondered this conundrum, they descended the hill where the road wound with abruptness, crossed a bridge, and turned onto a side road. Looking out of the window, she watched as Jane and the colonel’s vehicle continued on towards Pemberley’s door. An elderly-looking housekeeper—less fine and more civil than she imagined would have greeted them at Chatsworth or Blenheim—came hurrying down the steps. Her brother-in-law alighted and handed out his bride before her view of the house disappeared around a bend.

“This is my Edensor, or rather it is Mr Darcy’s, but I have the tenancy for as long as I live,” Miss Eudora Darcy informed her guests only five minutes later.

The house was much smaller than Pemberley but rivalled Longbourn. Elizabeth thought she could be very happy here, especially considering the close proximity to Mr Darcy’s estate, which was in easy walking distance should she be so inclined.

“May I stretch my legs?” she asked her grandmother. “Jane’s idea of a stroll is by no means sufficient.” She chuckled.

Maeve Bennet allowed her to abscond as she might as well get her hems dirtied before she changed for dinner.

Elizabeth thanked her grandmother and walked towards a sheltered path winding along the river with trepidation growing in her mind. Mr Darcy had avoided her company for months, yet both Jane and Grandmother Bennet believed there was reason to hope. Neither would have put Elizabeth in this precarious position if they thought Mr Darcy might object. Jane, in particular, must know something Elizabeth did not, which was not so unfathomable when she considered her closeness with her new husband. Mr Darcy and the colonel were not mere cousins, they were dear friends, and as close as brothers. Could Mr Darcy have spoken to the colonel and begged them to come and bring Elizabeth? If so, her being here would be an anticipated event. The sound of a horse approaching intruded upon her happy thoughts and reeling mind.

She stepped out of the path to allow the rider to pass whilst she pondered what to say to Mr Darcy when she encountered him.

The bright sun reflecting off the water scorched her eyes, and she turned her back to it just as the rider came around the bend. A man was trotting slowly with a sodden child clutched in his arm—a forlorn young fisherman, she surmised, as the man lifted his head.

The rider was none other than Mr Darcy, and her heart danced a reel in her chest. She vacillated between dread and pleasure before the delight of seeing him won the battle of emotions. For that short space of time, she thought his feelings for her were still unshaken—until she espied his countenance. The shock written on his face betrayed that her arrival was unexpected, and the beating of her heart increased to a deafening rhythm. What must he think of me? Visiting his aunt just minutes from his doorstep?

Let me see how he behaves before quashing every expectation, she decided and fought for composure.

He drew his horse to a halt in front of her.

She curtsied and with anxious curiosity looked into his eyes.

“Mr Darcy!” She looked away. He was in his shirtsleeves and wet to the skin, but his countenance was serious—more as he had looked in Hertfordshire than in London. Did he object to her presence? It was a painful but not an improbable conjecture.

“Lady Elizabeth?” he greeted with a questioning tone of voice.

“I have come with my grandmother and Miss Eudora Darcy,” she explained. “They were so obliging and invited me for a visit to Edensor. I had no idea Pemberley was so close.” She glanced up at him just in time to see his face change from surprised to crestfallen.

A droplet fell from a wayward lock and travelled down his face. He blew at the offending strand, which barely budged. He had no hands free with the child sitting in front of him, secured by his arm, and the reins in his other hand. How dearly would she have liked to run her hand through his hair, even when wet. To be allowed such an intimacy...

The child of six or seven summers shivered and appeared blue about the lips. She took the shawl draped unused over her arm and gave it to Mr Darcy.

“Wrap the child in this. It should keep him warm until you reach the house.”

“Thank you,” Mr Darcy said and grabbed the shawl. Their fingers grazed each other—his hand was so chilled. “You are cold!” she exclaimed. The water must have been freezing. She stepped promptly back. “Pray! Do not allow me to detain you.”

He rode off, and she stood gazing after him, boldly ogling his figure exposed by a wet, clinging shirt. She adored water; it may very well be her favourite thing when pertaining to Mr Darcy.

She was pathetic... Not a word had she spoken about how delightful she found Pemberley, or her pleasure in seeing him, or anything remotely similar to her true sentiments.

Mr Darcy turned and glanced at her for a brief moment before he disappeared out of sight. The gesture delighted her. He was not completely indifferent.

She walked slowly back to Edensor. The butler opened the door and ushered her inside, informing her that the ladies had retired to their rooms.

“Would you like an escort to your chamber?” he offered to Elizabeth’s relief.

“Yes, if you would be so kind.”

“Certainly, madam.” He rang for a maid. “Would you like to join Miss Darcy and Mrs Bennet’s tour of the house when you have rested?” he asked while they waited for the servant.

“Yes. Thank you, I would be much obliged.”

“There is a bell in your room,” the butler informed her, “should you need anything. Hannah has been assigned for your personal comfort and will respond to your summons.”

“Thank you,” she repeated.

Hannah arrived. She was a lively girl about Elizabeth’s own age. They reached her chamber papered in Spanish fly green with a white wainscot and gold trimmings. In the middle of the room stood a large bed with a canopy, and fresh flowers made the chamber smell like a meadow. Smiling, she went to a window to enjoy the delightful prospect of the winding valley. She sighed in contentment and felt a sudden impulse

to dance a reel.

The tour of the house was rather quick, and once it was completed, Miss Eudora Darcy imparted that they had been invited to Pemberley for dinner and they had best hurry if they were to arrive on time.

“My nephew is always so attentive to my needs. He knows I keep only the one cook, and I usually send her by post between London and Derbyshire,” Miss Eudora Darcy explained. “He was concerned that she would not arrive in time to prepare our meal, and he therefore invited us to dine with him this evening.

That little titbit of news made Elizabeth feel uneasy. She had come implicitly to see Mr Darcy, but when she encountered him, she had become tongue-tied and had forgotten everything she had planned to say. She needed more time to prepare a speech, but as that was not to be had, Elizabeth donned her shawl with trembling hands and entered the carriage for the short drive to Pemberley, where they were welcomed by the housekeeper.

“May I enquire whether the child who fell into the river is well?” Elizabeth asked, which earned her surprised looks from her grandmother and Miss Eudora Darcy.

“How good of you to ask,” the housekeeper replied in astonishment. The master could not have informed her about their awkward meeting by the riverbank nor related whose shawl the child had been wrapped in. “Little John is very well indeed. The fish he had caught got loose, and he fell into the river when he tried to retrieve it. Fortunately, he managed to grab hold of a stone in the stream, and the master rescued him out of the water.”

“John is fortunate to have such a heroic master,” Elizabeth quipped.

“He certainly is, and better yet, he appears unharmed but for the fright. He is still

here, warming himself by the kitchen fire whilst being spoilt rotten by our cook. She was never blessed with children of her own and heartily welcomes the intrusion. It was convenient since the kitchen fire is the only one that is lit at the moment.”

“I am relieved he appears to have suffered no lasting injury,” Elizabeth admitted, and the housekeeper escorted them to the dining room.

Dinner was awkward at best. Mr Darcy enquired after her family, then coloured and bowed his head. It was a potent subject with the recent trial and the downfall of the Matlocks.

“Thank you, they are all very well. How is your sister, Miss Darcy?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“Is she not here?”

“Um, no. She is visiting one of our neighbours, Miss Throwbridge, who is her particular friend.”

“I am sorry I missed her. Would you be so kind as to send her my regards?”

“Certainly.”

After the stilted conversation that did nothing to appease her nerves, Mr Darcy scarcely uttered another word. Several minutes elapsed without the sound of his voice. Unable to resist the impulse of curiosity, Elizabeth raised her eyes and waited for a glance in her direction so that she could smile to cheer him, but his eyes darted so quickly away that she never managed it. She found him looking at Jane as often as herself, and frequently at no object but the floor. He plainly expressed more thoughtfulness and less anxiety to please than when they had been together in

London. She was disappointed, and angry with herself for feeling so. What could she possibly expect after he had shunned her for months?

With their small party, there was no separation of the sexes after dinner. Elizabeth was requested to entertain, and she was glad she had spent her time wisely and practised diligently of late. She was in no humour for conversation with anyone besides Mr Darcy, but she hardly had the courage. In her solitude by the pianoforte, she dwelt on the subjects that would deaden her hopes—Mr Darcy's silence, gravity, and indifference. It was better for all concerned to give him up when his society afforded no pleasures that could atone for the wretchedness she felt.

Elizabeth was certain she could feel Mr Darcy's gaze burning into her skin before the music captured her completely. She finished and was applauded until her cheeks were ablaze.

What was she to do? How could she give him encouragement without being too forward? It was not as though she could request a private moment with the master of the house.

To her consternation, her sister stifled a yawn. The colonel noticed and promptly announced their wish to retire. It had been a long journey, and they had farther still to travel.

"When do you depart?" Elizabeth asked the colonel, hoping it was not at first light. She might find herself in dire need of Jane's consolation ere long.

"Not for a few days." Her brother-in-law smiled.

"What a relief," Elizabeth muttered gratefully. It meant that she would have an excuse to visit Pemberley under the guise of seeing her sister for a few blessed days more. Mr Darcy's head snapped up. She was finally able to bestow the smile she had

been so eager to give, and the gentleman returned the gesture.

It was with a slightly lighter heart that Elizabeth left for Edensor with her grandmother and Eudora Darcy.



Elizabeth

Elizabeth awoke from the sun's rays filtering through her window. She glanced at the clock; it was a quarter past five. She turned her back to the light, but her body hummed with energy. After fifteen minutes of listening to the cheerful chirping of a blackbird, she huffed, sat up, and rose to dress. Something simple would have to do. She was not disturbing the servants at such an ungodly hour.

The park outside her window beckoned. She found the sturdy walking boots that would not be ruined in dewy grass and donned a light shawl to stave off the morning chill. She walked determinedly through the quiet passage and down the stairs. A sleepy footman drew the latch and opened the door.

“Do you need an escort, madam?”

“I thank you but no. I shall only stroll in the garden and not venture far from the house.”

The air was refreshing, and she chose to enjoy the early blooms in the rose garden first, but the hill beyond was beckoning her to proceed. She followed the path into the wood, and at first, she thought the dimming light was due to the trees hanging over her head. It was not until the first raindrop landed on her nose that she noticed the clouds blowing in from the west. The deluge that followed came as a complete surprise, and she was too far from the house to reach it before she would be wet through. A fork in the path led to a Grecian folly, and she dashed thither to take shelter.

She shook the raindrops from her hair and shawl, quite prepared to wait out the fierce summer storm. Thunder rolled somewhere in the far distance, and the sky gave no indication the deluge would abate any time soon. The loud drumming on the roof must account for her not hearing the rider before he was upon her. Coming down the hill at break-neck speed was an informally dressed master of Pemberley. She was not a horsewoman but felt herself proficient enough to judge when someone had a good seat, and Mr Darcy's was particularly fine, but he was moving too fast. She pulled deeper into the folly in case he did not manage to stop.

The horse skidded to a halt on the muddy ground with only inches to spare. A devilishly handsome Mr Darcy, still with his morning stubble, jumped down and strode into the folly. She let her eyes wander across his wide shoulders and chest before boldly dropping them lower. For a moment she worried he was about to wrench off his shirt by the way he was fiddling with his hand inside it. Instead, he pulled out a threadbare royal blue ribbon matching the one she had lost at their wintery picnic. To think he had kept it for so long pleased her ever so much and allowed her hope to soar.

Mr Darcy must have got rain in his eyes because he raked his wet shirtsleeve over his face to dry himself off. He shook his dripping hair and sent a droplet that landed on her cheek. She wiped it away, and the movement notified Mr Darcy that he was not alone in the folly.

His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

“Eilís?”

Elizabeth could not decide whether her presence was a pleasant or an undesirable surprise. Nevertheless, it was the opportunity she so fervently had wished for. Now was the moment for her resolution to be executed, and she must act whilst her courage was high.

“Mr Darcy!” she exclaimed, curtseying. “I can no longer delay expressing my fervent gratitude. Even if I must remind you of painful recollections best forgotten. I have been most anxious to acknowledge your exemplary kindness to my family, which in turn has grievously injured your own. Let me thank you again and again, on behalf of my family.”

“I harboured no hope you would welcome my presence after I treated you so abominably in Meryton and my family caused you so much grief. I am delighted you have come.”

She understood how he had taken the blame upon his own shoulders because that was the kind of man he was. Dutiful to a fault.

“You are not culpable for what transpired when you were a mere child in leading strings. I doubt you ever knew the facts, judging by your incredulous expression when they were revealed to us. As for your bad manners—I am still waiting for an apology from your own mouth. For that I hold you responsible, but your recent sacrifice saving my family’s name has done much to alleviate my pique.”

“It was for you alone,” he blurted out, startling Elizabeth with the vehemence in his voice. “I shall not deny there were other inducements such as justice and truth, but your family owes me nothing.”

He stepped closer, whilst his expression softened.

“I have delayed my approach till I could address you with a reasonable request and not the mere ravings of a passionate man. My sense tells me that I should forfeit your respect and esteem, but my heart disagrees. In the twelve months you have been known to me you have inspired a deep and abiding affection. Your visit to Derbyshire has given me hope, that to which I before scarcely dared to aspire. Do you still think meanly of me, or has your opinion improved?”

Despite her bashfulness choosing that moment to descend into an abrupt onslaught of shyness, Elizabeth forced herself to speak, albeit not very fluently. “My opinion has not changed at all.” She smiled wryly. “I am steadier in my attachment than that, and though I am now surrounded by flatterers, my regard has not waned since you rescued me from the wild beast in Lambton. Since that very moment you have been my weakness. It remains to be seen whether you can be my strength.”

She could read by the changeable expressions on his face the moment when he remembered the old incident.

“You were the young girl who dared venture into the mad horse’s enclosure?”

She nodded, ashamed.

“You charmed my mother,” he mumbled.

“I believe so, or she would not have invited the unruly child to tea at the Rose and Crown.”

“I can be your everything—if you will let me.”

There was nothing she wanted more, yet her distrust was deeply rooted.

“I am almost afraid of asking, but what did you think of me when we happened upon each other yesterday?” Elizabeth questioned.

“I know enough of your disposition to be certain that if you had travelled willingly to Pemberley, I might stand a chance. So, when the first admission you made to me was being brought here unwittingly, my hopes and wishes were quashed.”

“I was fully aware we were travelling to your neighbourhood. I just did not know that

Edensor was this close to your home. I now better understand why you were so silent and grave last evening. I thought you indifferent.”

“Never,” he replied vehemently. “I was arguing with myself, after my unpardonable behaviour and my family’s disgrace, how you could ever be prevailed upon to love me.”

Elizabeth lowered her eyes to the ground.

“Will you allow me to explain?” Mr Darcy pleaded.

She nodded her acquiescence.

“I admired Eilís from the first moment we met. I was intrigued by your mind, impressed by your wit, and utterly bewitched by the time I discovered your exceptional eyes. No superlatives could ever do them justice. They are not only large and of the finest green, but full of character and so expressive whether they are flashing in indignation or softly adoring. They are so bright I could see my reflection in them.”

If Elizabeth was honest, her heart believed it was better to be admired by the fine, noble-looking gentleman than adored by every man in the world. She contemplated the bitter sufferings of their past. Love was the most arbitrary, ungovernable passion of nature. Like a wild, feverish dream and days of delirium.

“You are the handsomest woman of my acquaintance,” Mr Darcy assured her.

“I would as soon call my mother a wit,” Elizabeth countered before he perjured himself any further.

Mr Darcy bowed his head in mortification. “You heard me,” he whispered. “And my

shame is complete. I am a selfish man who was taught good principles but chose to follow them in pride and conceit. So, I would still be if not for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth!”

“I believe your description was tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt you.”

He flinched but stepped closer, and with a finger under her chin, he gently raised her head to arrest her in the depths of his blue eyes.

“Firstly, that was obviously a barefaced lie, and my abominable behaviour was inexcusable. I deserve no forgiveness, so I shall not ask it of you. But I can explain why I uttered the lies and behaved so rudely. I did find you pretty, and that irked me because I had set my course. I was determined to find Eilís and look at no other lady before I had discovered whether our connection was as strong as the night of the masquerade implied. I was in a foul mood when I entered the assembly, having been thwarted at every turn in that endeavour, which was emphasised by greatly failing my sister. I declare it aged me into my dotage, and I became a churlish old curmudgeon who enjoyed trading boorish sarcasms with Miss Bingley. You are clearly very handsome but of a vivacious and expressive beauty that stole upon me by degrees—after we became acquainted, rather than what might have struck me upon first sight. Your charm is difficult to describe, a *je ne sais quoi*, an irresistible allure that drew me in even against my will. My heart was set on Eilís, and little did I know you were one and the same.”

“I shall not prevaricate but strive to be equally honest. My heart shattered at the assembly, but I am not made for misery, and I am breaking in a brand-new heart. It is hard—this second time—but there is a depth to you that draws me in. I am quite defenceless and shockingly vulnerable to your charm.”

“I shall endeavour to be worthy of you. To be your friend, protector, and, if you will have me, your husband and lover. You may be repulsed by how needy I am,” he

admitted, taking hold of her hand, “but I have been heartsick for so long and crave your touch, your approbation, and ultimately, your love.”

Her happiness was of a tranquil nature—closer to melancholy than mirth in its expression. It was as though a profound sense of peace and comfort had descended. Their lips met in a long, delicious kiss, sweet yet so ardent in its expression it drew a warm current into her youthful heart and reanimated its wildest passion.

Elizabeth drew back, rested her head on his shoulder, and sighed. Releasing months of grievances and looking to the future with pleasure was not without its perils. Her heart had decided that she loved this man—the flawed gentleman and not the hero she had worshipped as a child. Back then she had pursued shadows and lived on hope. Her feelings were no longer of a wild and rapturous nature but had calmed into sanguine certainty. There would undoubtedly be sorrows, interspersed between joy and felicity, but a weight had lifted from the region of her heart. He may still be a little too proud, and sometimes a bit patronising; but she was not flawless, and Fitzwilliam loved her. There were no doubts in her mind that he found her attractive because who would so relentlessly pursue someone they found only tolerably handsome? Certainly not Mr Darcy. He was used to having his way, and she was fortunate that she was the lady he desired.

“I adore you,” he whispered fervently into her ear. “Not only as a lover or a friend—but in essentials. A chuisle mo chroí —the pulse of my heart.”

“You have learnt Irish?” Elizabeth muttered into his shirt in amazement. His embrace tightened around her, pulling her close.

“I am not an eloquent man, but I am clever, and I searched through my library to find something to say to you that might persuade you to marry me. Have I succeeded?”

“You have,” Elizabeth admitted, tired of fighting what could not be conquered.

“You will marry me?” Darcy asked again.

“I will.”

“How soon?”

Elizabeth chuckled at his eagerness. “As soon as the banns are read. Would that suit you?”

“We could marry in a week with a common licence,” Darcy suggested with hope in his voice.

“And deprive my mother the pleasure of pestering Papa for a fortnight with lace and flower arrangements? I think not. She would never forgive me.”

“Your parents have a peculiar relationship.”

“Thank you for putting it so delicately. But yes, they have a singular sense of humour. Do not let their banter fool you, because they do love each other. Unfortunately, Lydia has inherited a combination of their worst traits. She can be trying. In fact, on the day... No, that is a story for after we are married.”

“You cannot leave it at that. I simply must know.” Darcy smiled. “What did she do?”

“She put all my dresses in the scullery at once. I was left with a stained one I had long since outgrown.” Elizabeth hoped he would leave it at that as her face flamed in embarrassment. But he was studying her and touched her warm cheeks, so she blurted it out. “I may have encountered two gentlemen riders out on my morning walk and had to climb up a tree to avoid being seen in my abominable attire. Though the view of the pond was worth the injuries to my pride.”



Darcy looked thoughtful, but she could see when he realised exactly what her implication insinuated.

“Did the gentlemen go for a swim?”

“You know as well as I that the pond is too shallow. Though I feel it incumbent upon me to assure you that my eyes never strayed from one particular gentleman...”

He was baffled for a moment before his face erupted in a wry smile.

“Did you like what you saw?” He grinned with raised eyebrows.

She aimed to swat his arm but missed, and her hand landed firmly on his *derrière*. Her cheeks heated even more, and she buried her face in the crook of his arm. He would not allow it and held her at arm’s length.

“Your blush is most alluring,” he drawled.

“Oh, there is a lull in the rain. Do you think it is because the weather approves of our understanding?” She smiled impishly.

“To Hades with the rain and the sun. I just want to kiss you again to be absolutely certain this is not one of my delightful dreams.”

“I suppose you will never know unless you act upon it.”

“There is my *Eilís*,” he growled, kissing her soundly.

“I believe it is time to return to the house,” Elizabeth advised, though she would rather stay in the folly forever. His kisses only improved upon familiarity, but it would not do to wait until they were missed and risk being discovered thus engaged.

“Pemberley is closest,” Darcy determined, tucked her hand around his arm, and walked briskly towards his house. The clouds still hung dark and heavy over their heads. The rain had offered them a respite for escape, but the pause would not last long.

“Your horse!” she cried lest he forget his mount.

“He will follow of his own volition,” Darcy declared. Sure enough, the beast was plodding not far behind.

“Why is it you were out riding at this ungodly hour and in this inclement weather? I hope nothing is amiss.”

“No, nothing but a lack of sleep. I tend to rise early, but knowing your delectable presence was in my aunt’s house—so close yet out of reach—made it impossible to rest. Knowing Richard only planned to stay for a fortnight, and assuming you and Mrs Bennet would most likely travel south under the colonel’s protection, my time was limited.”

Elizabeth could only be happy, even if he had slept as poorly as she, when the result had been so gloriously in her favour.

“We are not travelling with the colonel. They are for the Lake District.”

“Really? He has not mentioned anything of that nature to me. In fact, he said only yesterday that should I require more time...he would be willing to postpone their return south. He has rented a house at a new resort in a quaint fishing village. I suppose Ramsgate and Brighton are too full of soldiers for his liking and Scarborough too close to Bingley’s relations. They are going to Sanditon.”

It was clear that her sister and Richard had schemed to bring them together. Yet she

could not quite condone the method they had used. If Jane had been honest, she would have travelled willingly to Pemberley.

“I declare, your mischievous cousin has had a reprehensible influence upon my hitherto flawless sister. She, who has never schemed or conspired, tried to trick me into compliance and not so much as hinted that they were bound for the delightful Pemberley and its dashing master. Because of their subterfuge, I had to inconvenience both my grandmother and your accommodating aunt to travel hither.”

“You cannot understand how happy that makes me. To hear that you travelled here with an express wish to see me. I cannot repine their artful machinations when the consequences are so greatly to my liking.”

“Please, do not suppose I object to the outcome, but I cannot help but feel we would eventually have reached the same conclusion without the awkwardness upon our arrival if we had been better prepared...”

“Certainly, but that would have deprived my dear cousin of the chance to make sport of us, and he cannot help it. He loves to laugh, especially at my expense.”

“That does not diminish my wish for a small kind of vindication.”

“Indeed. What do you have in mind?”

A fat drop of rain hit Elizabeth’s nose. Darcy must have felt one too because he grabbed her hand in his. “Come, we had better run before we become soaked.”

So, they raced down the rest of the hill and ran through the garden as fast as their legs could carry them. At least that was true for Elizabeth, though she suspected that Mr Darcy’s long legs could have carried him faster still. A young boy must have seen their mad dash through the rain and met them to take the master’s horse—an

indication of a well-managed estate. Darcy acquiesced and thanked him moments before they burst, laughing, through a set of glass doors. Elizabeth's mirth quieted upon spying the magnificent library. She let her eyes travel shelf upon shelf of floor-to-ceiling books.

"Good gracious!" she whispered reverently.

"Do you approve?" the master enquired with eager anticipation.

"Who would not! I have never seen so many books in my life." She strolled farther into the room as if pulled by an invisible force.

"I promise we shall explore it later, but not before we have dried our wet attire."

"Are you always this commanding?" Elizabeth smiled and tugged off her shawl that had caught most of the rain. Mr Darcy looked stricken.

"I would not wish you to become ill, madam."

"Of course not. I was only teasing."

The newly affianced separated for a brief moment to refresh their attire. By design, they reunited in the breakfast parlour and waited for the colonel and his bride to make an appearance.

Standing close, with Darcy's back to the door and Elizabeth more or less hidden from sight, they waited a long time. Darcy used the interim to relate humorous anecdotes from when he and his cousin were inventive little lads who indulged in mischief more often than not.

Elizabeth could readily believe it of the colonel but was sceptical about her

betrothed's tomfoolery.

The door opened during a particularly funny story, and Elizabeth pressed her lips together to contain her mirth.

Darcy saw her struggle and walked forwards, forcing Elizabeth to step backwards until her back hit the wall. He planted a hand on each side of her head and towered over her with a gleam in his eyes that confirmed his tale of youthful knavery.

"I demand some respect—" he yelled.

Rapid steps approached, and Elizabeth peeked out to watch a stone-faced colonel advance upon them.

"Good gracious! You are engaged," cried Jane.

The colonel halted abruptly and turned to his wife with an incredulous expression. "How did you deduce that from the display before us?"

"That is not the countenance of an enraged Lizzy but a deliriously happy one," Jane replied calmly.

Elizabeth lost her composure and laughed heartily. "True!" she admitted.

Darcy turned towards the intruders with a wide grin. "Respect from my scheming dolt-head of a cousin," he cried. "How would you like to punish him, dearest?"

"Please, do not call me that!"

"Dare I ask why not?"

“That is what my mother calls my father when she is vexed.”

“What would you like me to call you?”

“Mrs Darcy, but only in private. In public you must call me Lady Elizabeth, but with family or friends you may call me Lizzy.”

“What if I prefer Eilís?”

Elizabeth stepped closer and raised her chin.

“I shall accede to you calling me your Incomparable Exalted Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth.”

The colonel cleared his throat. She had completely forgotten about their company and her revenge.

“I had never thought that after ending an acclaimed military career I would stoop to chaperoning two lovesick fools. We had better send a message to Edensor that Elizabeth is here and is staying for breakfast before they send out servants to search for her.”

Jane snickered and looked at him lovingly. “Your performance is excellent. I dare say you exceed the expectations of even the most forbidding old matrons.”

“Then you will not oppose me when I declare that the betrothed couple cannot be under the same roof without supervision?” the colonel declared whilst wriggling his eyebrows.

Jane bit her lip in contemplation.

“We could all go to the Lake District,” Elizabeth suggested to call them out.

“There never was a trip to the Lakes,” Jane admitted. “We were so happy and could not bear to watch our dearest relations be so decidedly unhappy that we schemed to bring you two together to end your misery. I dare say we would have been successful in our endeavour had you only acquiesced to join us, Lizzy.”

“Our plan was as solid as an over-ripe plum.” The colonel grinned. “But all that ends well...”

“I should summon Doctor Scott and have him bleed your excessive pride.” Darcy smirked.

“When one is wed to the most precious woman in the world, pride will always be under good regulation,” the colonel asserted with immoderate gratification.

After breakfast they all gathered in the library. With the rain pelting steadily on the windows, there was not much else to do. It was fortunate that they had books, a fine chessboard, and cards to entertain them.

The gentlemen were playing chess when Mr Darcy’s booming voice startled Elizabeth to her feet.

“Put that down or I shall have you hanged for thievery!”

“Not a chance, Fitzy.” The colonel smirked and gulped down the last lemon tart.

“Why did I invite you here again?”

“You did not. I sent you a letter inviting myself.”

“That is correct, though I retain the authority to evict—”

“Oh, look at the time.” The colonel fished out his pocket watch and sprung to his feet. “It is time for your nap, darling.” He marched to Jane, took the book from her hands, put it gingerly on the table, and expertly helped her out of her chair. “We shall join you at dinner,” he called over his shoulder, and they were gone.

“Excellent chaperons,” Elizabeth muttered.

“Yes, I dare say they are,” Darcy drawled with a gleam in his eyes.

She had never seen him thus. So at ease and free with his words—unguarded and content. She liked to think she was the main reason for his present comfort, but being in his own home must necessarily account for part of the change.

“You are uncommonly quiet,” he remarked with concern.

“I cannot always be witty and loquacious. I must allow for some contemplation upon the inconsistencies of the man I love.”

“I hope you do not believe me to be inconstant?”

“Oh no, that was not what I meant. I am trying to sketch your character, but I do not get on at all,” she lamented playfully.

“I am your servant, madam, and you have the rest of your life to come to an understanding.”

“I am exceedingly sorry to be the cause of a rift in your family,” she admitted.

“You are not. The cause I mean. I am. It was my decision and my decision alone to



investigate the Campbells. When I discovered their perfidy, I had no choice but to act. Lord Matlock is a decent man who has erred grievously. Of that fact he is painfully aware and is hiding his shame behind indignation. With time, I believe we shall mend the chasm, if not completely, by some measure.”

“When your reply is so reasonable I cannot object, but I am in awe of your discernment.”

Her comment made Darcy look a bit uncomfortable, and she was sad to see that she had disrupted his ease.

“Discerning and wretchedly blind. I still cannot account for not recognising you at the Meryton assembly.”

“Let us leave the grievances in the past and think only of the future. We have a wedding to plan, and it would be wise to decide as much as we can before my mother is apprised.”

“In this I shall bow to your commands,” he graciously offered. “I understand your sister had an intimate family wedding, but you may have a lavish society event if that would please you.”

He looked at her expectantly. What would he prefer?

“I think not. I would like something similar to Jane’s wedding.”

“Thank heavens!” Darcy muttered breathily.

“And I would not like to wait for as long as it takes my mother to plan a lavish affair.”

“Even better!” he rejoiced.

“I suggest we return to town and wed as soon as possible.”

The expression of heartfelt delight suffused over his face became him very well.

“You cannot imagine the effects your sentiments have on me. I have wished, longed, and prayed for your approbation. Despite my fear of being deemed conceited, I am excessively proud to become your husband.”

Such expression of sentiment could have only one effect on a girl madly in love. She rose, and by default, he did as well. They met in the middle for a violent expression of love. They remained thus engaged until their kiss was broken by the sound of the knocker, which notified them that guests had arrived. Hand in hand they left the library and walked to the entrance hall with nary a thought for what the servants might think.

Miss Eudora Darcy took one look at their joined hands and clapped her own together. “Brava, or should I say bravo. Whoever instigated this happy conclusion, it was about time. Would you not agree, Maeve?”

“Indeed, I am quite tired of scheming to bring the two together. A respite is most welcome.”

“There is still Mary, Kitty, and Lydia,” Miss Eudora Darcy reminded her friend.

“Heaven help us!” Mrs Bennet complained with feeling. “We have come to take you to Edensor, Elizabeth. I see that a change of attire would not go amiss...”

Elizabeth looked down at her sodden hems and shrugged.

“I shall see you in an hour or two.” Darcy spoke as if trying to convince himself that an hour was not that long. “We are to dine at Edensor tonight.”

“Yes,” she agreed breathlessly. Then before she changed her mind, she followed her grandmother out to the waiting carriage.

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:24 am*

Darcy approached Richard's chamber with long strides; his elation was of such a nature that needed to be shared. He rapped on the door and impatiently waited for footsteps to approach, but hearing nothing, he knocked a second time with more force. Finally, the rustling sound of fabric could be heard, then his cousin's slow footsteps moved towards the door only to open it a fraction to peer out at him.

"What the deuce do you want?"

Richard was in his shirt with bare feet and rumpled hair.

"We are expected at Edensor for dinner in little more than an hour, and you are still sleeping," Darcy admonished.

His cousin blushed, as he should.

"I was hoping to entice you to have a tumbler of port with me in my study."

"We need to dress for dinner," Richard reminded him.

"Formality be hanged!" he growled impatiently.

"I have never thought you would eschew propriety and have me scandalising your servants in my night-shirt."

"You have never seen me this happy," Darcy admitted in brutal earnestness.

Richard chuckled but could not be persuaded.

“Go to your suite and make yourself presentable to your betrothed. You should begin by washing that smug look off your face.”

“Dearest, I do not begrudge you a moment with your cousin,” the dulcet voice of Lady Jane drifted from within the room.

Darcy had completely forgotten about her presence. He had appointed them with a suite of rooms, and the idea that she might have joined his cousin in his room had quite escaped him. The thought planted conjectures in his mind for when he was a married man himself, and he turned abruptly towards the master’s suite.

“That will not be necessary. Darcy is leaving to dress for dinner, as should we.”

The door closed behind him as he walked, deliriously happy, to his own chamber.

#

At dinner that evening.

The small party containing only family forwent formality and assembled more intimately in Edensor’s smallest dining room.

“We should all move to Pemberley,” Darcy suggested.

“Elizabeth cannot stay at Pemberley now that you are engaged,” Richard contradicted.

“I assure you that she would be perfectly safe under my roof,” Darcy declared.

“Her safety is not the issue,” Richard argued.

He resented the implication. "I am a gentleman," he replied coolly.

"You forget that I have recently entered the married state myself and know something of the madness that befalls a man violently in love. Besides, who is to say that it is not Elizabeth about whose behaviour I am the most concerned?"

He whipped his head round to Elizabeth, whose cheeks were turning the most delightful shade of red. He could not let the disparagement stand even if she were most tempting, and, as their kisses had shown, of a passionate nature.

"I give you my word," he declared firmly.

"On this I shall not be moved," Richard countered.

The cousins glared at each other, neither inclined to yield.

"I do not mind remaining at Edensor," Elizabeth soothed.

She was so sweet and always obliging.

"I dare say Eudora is only happy to host you for the few days before we return to town," Richard suggested, then turned to Darcy. "Elizabeth is not yet one-and-twenty, so you need Lord Glentworth's consent, though I suspect that will be easily granted. But..." He paused and glanced at his wife. "Glentworth might be less inclined to give his blessing if your honour is not intact..."

Darcy heard Elizabeth's short intake of breath beside him. She looked astonished before she erupted into a wry smile directed at her sister. He followed her gaze, and Lady Jane smiled as serenely as ever and would have fooled him had he not discovered a red spot forming on her neck.

Darcy glanced at Richard, who looked less comfortable by the moment. This was a turn he would never have surmised, but he decided against prolonging the awkwardness by enquiring, even though it irked him no end that Richard was thwarting his wish to move Elizabeth to Pemberley.

“Out of the question, Darcy!” Eudora said firmly.

“I have been overruled and bow to the majority.”

Elizabeth patted his knee under the table, and Richard’s insistence she could not reside in his house suddenly became more understandable. The simple touch enflamed him.

Before the Pemberley party left Edensor for the night, Darcy requested a moment of Elizabeth’s time in private, whilst holding a small box tied with a tattered blue ribbon.

Mrs Bennet and Eudora exchanged significant looks and allowed the betrothed couple a moment in Edensor’s library. He grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and grinned at the clandestine glances she sent at the box in his hand. He hoped she would not be disappointed...

“Open it!” Darcy handed it to her once the door had closed.

Elizabeth pulled off the ribbon and peered into the box. The contents made her laugh, and he sighed in relief. She was not offended.

“In Hertfordshire, and later in London, I noticed your devoted interest in this. At first, I worried I had sullied myself because your eyes never lifted from that silver button, and I was left utterly bereft of the pleasure of gazing into your beautiful eyes. I thought you should have it, so that you can occasionally enjoy its allure and never

again avoid my eyes. If you ever give it back to me, I shall know I have disappointed you and promise to immediately amend whatever concerns you have. I want you to have it in exchange for the blue ribbon you lost during our ride back from the picnic in St James's Park, because I have grown rather attached to it. I would like to continue carrying it for the times we may spend apart."

Elizabeth laced her arms around his neck. "I shall cherish it," she promised and pulled him down for a blazing kiss. She pulled back only to mutter, "You may keep the ribbon," before she resumed her ardent expression of gratitude, love, and passion...

#

Georgiana returned to Pemberley the next day and expressed her joy over the prospect of a sister. She chose to stay at Edensor to become better acquainted with Elizabeth.

Whilst his most precious ladies were chatting amicably, Darcy used the opportunity to pull his aunt aside. There would be no time to commission a new wedding ring for Elizabeth—at least he hoped not. He had therefore brought a small selection of what was obtainable at Pemberley and sought his aunt's opinion on which would suit his blushing bride.

Eudora studied the rings. They were all old, ostentatious, and not the current fashion.

"Give me a moment," his aunt requested and disappeared for several minutes. When she returned, she brought one of her own.

Eudora had once been engaged to be married, but her betrothed had died before the wedding. He had gifted her a dainty ring that was exactly to Elizabeth's taste, but Darcy could not accept it.



“While I appreciate the gesture, I cannot deprive you of your token of Edward’s affection,” he declared.

“Balderdash,” Eudora cried loudly enough to draw the attention of the young ladies. “Though it comes with certain conditions. I demand to be recognised by your children as something akin to a grandparent, and I reserve the right to indulge them beyond measure when they visit, which I plan to be quite often.”

“All fifteen of them at once?” He smiled.

Eudora swatted his arm but then laughed aloud and muttered, “Conceited little devil,” so low he almost missed it. “A Darcy never begets more than two children, a boy and a girl, and that I can manage.”

#

Two days later, the Pemberley party left for London, where consent was given with everyone’s honour still intact. The wedding was held within a month. Darcy grinned throughout the entire ceremony, to the detriment of his aching cheeks, which were not used to quite so much exercise. Elizabeth was his, and even more important, she was happy, smiling radiantly on his arm throughout the breakfast that followed, contentedly as they moved to Darcy House, and ecstatically during the course of the night.

June 1813.

Elizabeth

“You should not excite your nerves in your condition.”

Elizabeth scowled at her obtuse husband. “My sister is birthing her first child. Not ten wild and untamed horses will keep me from her side.”

He sighed and surrendered, as he usually did when something was particularly important to her. She had not yet needed the silver button, and she rose to kiss his brow before she left him.

“You must see to your cousin whilst I am occupied. He already looks a bit green,” she whispered in his ear and glanced at Richard Fitzwilliam before racing up the stairs.

“No running!” Darcy bellowed from Limerick House’s library.

She had entirely forgotten and modulated her pace to an eager walk. It was yet early days, and her condition did not encumber her movements very much.

Jane was pacing her chamber with her hands on her back.

“Is the pain still bearable?” she enquired upon entering.

Jane smiled in assurance before another pain halted her step. When it relented, she

resumed her walking. “How is Richard faring?” How typical of her sister to worry about her husband even at such a time as this.

“He is well taken care of. Between my husband, your father, Viscount Crawford, the Marquess of Worcester, and Uncle Henry, I dare say he will be kept entertained, and quite possibly foxed until you have delivered the babe.”

The breach with Matlock had recently been mended. At Elizabeth’s insistence and cajoling, even Lord Glentworth had buried his resentment for the sake of family. They would never be friends, but they tolerated each other’s company when necessary. So far, no such leniency had been offered to her husband’s aunt Lady Catherine, partly due to her refusal to accept Elizabeth, but Elizabeth had not yet given up hope it could be done with time. After all, one did not get to choose one’s family. Poor Mr Bingley sprang to mind. His sister was still unwed and could not forgive her brother for bungling his courtship with Jane. That was a household Elizabeth was infinitely relieved her sister had not become a part of...

“To come at such an inopportune time,” Jane lamented.

“I dare say Mary does not mind, unless the birth drags out overnight...”

Their younger sister had been wed that morning to the young Marquess of Worcester. The marriage had been a rushed affair, though not due to any impropriety by the newly wedded couple. It was the marquess’s father who had wished the union to be executed with haste. The young buck had been linked to the infamous Harriette Dubouchet for quite some time. According to the rumours, it had ended abruptly when he had caught her in flagrante delicto with General Wellesley. When he soon after began to show a marked interest in the much more suitable and pious Lady Mary, the duke forwarded the match with alacrity.

Lady Glentworth, when Mary’s beau became known to her, had immediately declared her most overlooked daughter to be the handsomest of them all—an irony

that was not lost on Lord Glentworth, who made so much sport of his wife that he received the set-down of his life. He had since refrained from mocking her, at least when she was present.

The future duke, and now Mary's husband, was an awkward fellow. He was not handsome, nor did he bother to make himself agreeable to all, but Mary's steady presence and obvious admiration had mellowed him into adulthood. And his parents adored Mary. She was not used to such attention but seemed to thrive, nevertheless.

"I think he is coming," Jane said, jolting Elizabeth out of her pleasant memories.

"Surely not!" she replied before she had the wherewithal to think. She had heard enough tales to believe that birthing a child would take hours upon hours. Jane's pains had begun less than four hours ago.

"Surely so!" Jane snapped, and the midwife ordered her to bed.

"I cannot walk," Jane cried.

The door tore open and in strode Colonel Fitzwilliam. He must have been listening just outside the room, and he carried his wife expeditiously to the bed. After fluffing her pillows and making sure she was as comfortable as possible, he tried to remove himself, but Jane would not have it. She grabbed his hand and wailed. All colour left the colonel's face, and Elizabeth hastened to the opposite side of the bed.

"Pray, let go of Richard's hand and take mine! Your husband should not be here, Jane."

Jane appeared not to hear her admonishment. Her face was scrunched in concentration, effort, and pain.

"Too late," the midwife grumbled, lifting the new-born babe from underneath the

sheet. The sturdy boy took one look at the elderly lady and wailed even louder than his mother had just a moment before.

“Well, that was easy,” Elizabeth muttered. “Who would have thought birthing a child could be done with so little inconvenience...” she added, earning a scowl from Jane. She had better make herself useful and relieved the midwife of the malcontent child. She offered to clean him whilst the accoucheuse dealt with the afterbirth. Jane was in no need of her services as she was gently tended by her adoring husband.

An hour later, Colonel Fitzwilliam brought his pride and joy to greet the rest of the family. Jane had fed the babe and was sleeping peacefully.

“He is tiny,” Darcy remarked in awe.

Elizabeth disagreed but refrained from saying so.

“As sturdy a lad as I have ever seen!” Lord Glentworth contradicted.

“I have to agree with Glentworth,” Lord Limerick boasted. “Let me be the first to toast this strapping young fellow, and the sequel to Longbourn, Glentworth, and Limerick. May he live a healthy and prosperous life!”

“Hear, hear!” Worcester and Crawford contributed in unison.

“To Henry Thomas!” Colonel Fitzwilliam announced. Jane had decided to name him after his maternal great uncle and his paternal and maternal grandfathers.

#

June 1815.

“You cannot travel in your condition!”

Elizabeth scowled at her husband, even though she was heavy with her second child.

“I birthed your heir at Pemberley, I might as well deliver our daughter in London. She will most likely want to spend most of her time there in any case. You know, shopping for lace and ribbons.”

It was Fitzwilliam’s turn to scowl at her.

“You cannot expect me to forgo my sisters’ weddings to such prominent figures?”

Kitty had drawn the attention of the widowed Lord Ponsonby nigh on a year ago. Only in the privacy of her own thoughts did she believe the earl had been attracted to Kitty’s cough. He was somewhat of a hypochondriac and relished speaking to exhaustion about any disease, whilst her sister was drawn to his uncommonly handsome face... But due to the discrepancy in their ages, Lord Glentworth had forced them to accept a long engagement. He would not allow Kitty to wed before she came of age, and neither tears nor cajoling had moved him. The time was up and the wedding but a sennight away. Elizabeth could have managed, with a month to go, to return safely to Pemberley before the baby was due, if not for the fact that Georgiana was to wed a fortnight after. She had met the distinguished young colonel through Richard. It was fortunate that the Napoleonic War had ended two days ago, because her intended was French.

“You know how weddings can induce labour,” Fitzwilliam argued.

He was not wrong. Jane had given birth to her son just hours after Mary’s wedding, and her darling Master Fitzwilliam had announced his arrival at Uncle Henry and Aunt Eudora’s wedding.

After Lord Limerick had grieved his wife for three decades, Elizabeth supposed that losing his sister to the houses containing young great-grandchildren in them had prompted him to remarry. He must also have realised that if he chose a woman of

sense and education, it was not the worst fate that could befall a man of distinction.

But what could she say that would convince her husband to travel for three days with a heavily pregnant wife only to be subjected to unending social events and her mother's effusions? She would rather not return the silver button as it had become a sort of sport to never use it.

"You win. We shall travel to London. But mind you, I am planning a very slow journey, so you should order your maid to pack immediately," Darcy conceded.

It must have been the lure of Georgiana's wedding. He could not keep away, and he used her silent insistence as an excuse.

"I love you so very much, Fitzwilliam!"

He stood and hauled her to her feet so that he could envelop her within his embrace.

"Not as much as I love you, dear wife. Please, promise not to have our baby until after Georgiana's wedding. Preferably with a week to spare."

"Indeed," she chuckled in the crook of his arm. Such a promise was impossible to keep.

June 1816

Little Anne Francine Darcy had surprised them all by waiting the entirety of a fortnight after Georgiana's wedding to make her appearance. By the time of his daughter's birth, Fitzwilliam Darcy believed his family to be complete. It was a known fact that within the Darcy family one was blessed with a son and a daughter, nothing more, though nothing less. Therefore, when an invitation to Lydia's wedding arrived, he opened it with a more composed demeanour than on previous occasions.

Elizabeth watched him read the missive, then saw him pause, then reread the same sentence over and over again.

“I believe my eyesight is failing. Would you read this for me?” he enquired of his wife.

“Certainly, my dear.”

He handed her the letter with a mien suggesting it contained something particularly distasteful. He pointed at a line, and Elizabeth read it aloud.

“Lady Lydia Bennet of Glentworth to Captain George Wickham. Was that all, dear?”

“It cannot be one and the same. Pray tell me it is not my father’s godson who has imposed upon our family?”

“Oh! They have already wed.” She tried to divert him, but he was like a dog with a bone and only glared at her. “They were married over the anvil at Gretna Green, but my mother is pretending it never happened and is inviting us to what I suspect will not be a simple affair. After Mary and Kitty’s extravagant weddings, she will want Lydia’s to outdo them both.”

“So, he has succeeded in seducing an heiress at last. I am shocked, and grieved I did not have the wherewithal to send him to prison after Ramsgate, at the very least.”

She lowered the letter into her lap. “I am not so certain. Lydia seems to be a willing bride. When the militia moved to Brighton, Mr Wickham was transferred to the navy where he rose quickly in rank and won a substantial sum in prize money. By my father’s account, he is now quite wealthy in his own right, and Lydia’s fortune is tied up in such a way that he cannot withdraw from the principal.”

“You cannot possibly suggest we should attend?”



“I think we must. If only to assure ourselves there is affection between them. Though I suppose even that is too late since they have been wed these three weeks, which may already have had consequences...”

She looked intently at her husband, who immediately understood her meaning.

“I suppose I should be grateful you are not heavy with child this time, or you would surely have delivered during the service.”

When Elizabeth did not immediately laugh at his jest, he eyed her suspiciously. “I hope you were not affronted by my poor joke?” he gently enquired.

“Not at all. I am excessively diverted, first and foremost because you have quite mistaken the matter.”

“Surely not...”

“Would it be so strange? It can hardly come as a surprise...”

Elizabeth raised one eyebrow and let her eyes roam his body in a suggestive manner.

“But...” he stuttered. “No one ever begets more than two children?”

“Do they not?”

“Not a Darcy. May I remind you that even your father had but one sister.”

“How can I forget? But we were just speaking about Lydia. The fifth Bennet sister...”

Darcy rose abruptly and hauled her to her feet. “If you have gained any weight, I cannot detect it.”

“It is too soon to be marked, but there is a tiny bump here.” Elizabeth grabbed his hand and placed it atop the small swell.

Darcy added a slight pressure, and his eyes widened before he laughed and twirled her around.

“Have I told you lately how amazing you are?”

“Not for the last half hour.” She smiled. “Are you pleased?”

“Pleased is an inadequate expression for the joy I feel, dearest. When I believe my life to be complete, you give me yet another gift to rejoice in. Did you know that I once threatened Aunt Eudora to sire fifteen children?”

“Fifteen!” she screeched. “Heaven forfend... I shall as soon ban you from my bed.”

“Our bed, Queen Elizabeth.”

Darcy pulled her close for a searing kiss. “I highly doubt you could abstain for longer than I, my precious and passionate siren.”

He was not wrong, so she did not refute it. Instead, she changed the subject.

“So, when shall we leave?”

Darcy chuckled. “At your service, your highness. I shall leave at my sovereign’s request.”

“Ample rewards await my most loyal subject.”

“Such as?” He kissed her neck.

The approaching sound of pounding little feet made the lovers jump apart.

“Master Fitzwilliam,” a tired nursery maid called in vain.

The door burst open. “Papa!” the young child cried and ran into his father’s open arms. He shrieked in delight as he was tossed into the air.

“You little rascal.” Darcy put him down and ruffled his curly hair. “I should not reward you when you have run off from poor Miss Gable.”

“No, you should not,” Elizabeth agreed. “But who can resist when one is greeted with such utter delight?”

“Shall we leave the children at Pemberley when we travel to London?”

“Absolutely not! My mother would never forgive me. Nor would Jane, Grandmother, Georgiana, Mary, Kitty—”

Darcy held up his hands in mock surrender before hoisting his son back into his arms.

“Shall we ask Miss Gable to pack your bag? For we are to London.”

Master Fitzwilliam nodded eagerly.

#

June 1851.

Elizabeth

“I cannot in my condition,” Darcy protested.

“Pray, enlighten me! What condition is that?” Elizabeth enquired.

“If you have not noticed, I am rather advanced in years.”

Elizabeth regarded her husband. The years had treated him well. His hair was thinner, but the silvery colour became him. His smiling wrinkles were a testimony to all the joy they had shared, whilst the permanent crevice between his brows was proof of his unwavering concern for his family’s wellbeing. If she was to be honest, he was even more handsome today than he had been forty years ago.

“No, I had not. To me, you are still the strapping gentleman who swam naked in Netherfield’s pond.”

“Come and sit in my lap,” he demanded with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

“I cannot. I am too old for that,” she protested. “Besides, I might break your legs.”

“Certainly not! You are as lithe and alluring as the apparition I met at the masquerade.”

Elizabeth sat gingerly on her husband’s knees, but he was of another mind and pulled her close.

“Then I must conclude that we are both in health and should not miss the Great Exhibition. According to Jane and every newspaper, it is a resounding success. But if you are decidedly against it, I suppose I could go by myself.”

Darcy

Darcy sighed in defeat. Years of felicity had taught him when it was best to adhere to her strictures. Besides, he had a hankering to see the lauded exhibition himself. Elizabeth knew his protests were mostly for the pleasure of debate. Over the course

of nearly forty years of marriage they had both practised forgiveness, been realistic in their expectations of each other, listened carefully, been honest, and fought fairly. But last but not least, been blissfully happy and grown utterly dependent upon each other. There was absolutely no chance she would venture to town alone. Wherever she was, he would follow. If only to hold her close and be allowed to touch her delectable curves.

“My heroic Mr Darcy’s bad manners are quite delightful...” she whispered and buried herself deeper into his embrace. “I think you must bury me with the silver button because you will never have it back!”

The End