



# A Perilous Match

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Can a marriage of convenience between Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet kindle true love, or will the threats surrounding them turn their vows into a perilous gamble?

When Mr. Darcy is unexpectedly named Marquess of Dorset, he's thrust into society's loftiest circles, catching the eye of every eligible young lady. Yet, his heart remains fixed on one: Elizabeth Bennet, even if she did recently refuse his hand, leaving him heartbroken.

Resolved to live as a bachelor, Darcy focuses on his duties in the House of Lords, fending off family insistence on marriage. But when he meets Elizabeth again, he realizes his feelings have not faded. Noting a shift in her manner, he risks one last proposal—with a twist.

Darcy requires a wife to appease society's demands; Elizabeth needs a powerful husband to save her family. Reluctantly, she accepts, and Darcy hopes she may see him for who he truly is, not the man she once despised.

But as they draw close, a series of perilous events emerge threatening not only their fragile happiness but their very lives. Now, Darcy must secure not only her heart but their survival.

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# Page 1

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Hunsford, Kent

Just... breathe.

Left foot, right foot. The shine of his boots in the lingering dusk. The soft, muffled crunch of the gravel with every footfall carrying him further away from her .

Concentrate. Breathe. A steady gait. One foot, then the other.

The click of the parsonage door closing echoed in Darcy's brain, keeping pace with the rhythm of his pounding heart.

Breathe.

In the far distance, a cart lumbered down the lane towards his aunt's tenant farms. Then, heavier horses' hooves moved in the opposite direction towards the London Road. London. God, why had he not kept to his original plans? A quiet Easter with Georgiana at Grosvenor Square. Perhaps the opera. He'd have been safely away from Elizabeth Bennet. He would not have proposed, and he would not have made an absolute fool of himself.

Dear God, he thought of her features, her tear-stained face marked by anger and hurt—a stern rebuke directed towards him.

I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.

Darcy looked up towards Rosings' imposing facade and wondered whether the Collinses were still entertaining his aunt, and whether it would be prudent or even possible to slip through a side door or the servants' entrance. He had neither the patience nor the fortitude to meet his aunt or her parson.

Your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others were such as to form the groundwork of... so immovable a dislike.

An immovable dislike.

Immovable.

The woman he loved, the only woman he had ever really loved, hated him. She had hated him from the beginning. Every look or gesture or word from her—how different did every moment now seem in the light of this backwards glance.

He wanted to hate her. He wanted to forget her. And then, in another moment, he simply wanted her to see that he was not the villain she had painted him. Certainly not in regard to Wickham, whom she had so championed. Even in the moment of his proposal.

Oh God. He did not want to believe that she had fallen under Wickham's spell, but she would not be the first gently-bred woman to have done so. Should he write to her about Wickham? Warn her? Would she even believe him?

Well, he should at least attempt to disabuse Elizabeth of the notion of Wickham's good character. He could not leave her vulnerable if it was in his power to prevent any injury to her. Whether she would believe him, was outside of his control.

Oh God, he felt sick. Was this heartbreak? The heavy tightness of his chest, the labouring breaths, the roiling sickness in his gut. How near it was to physical pain.

Breathe.

He would not succumb to maudlin thoughts. He would not become a lovesick fool.

He was Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley, grandson of an earl and a marquess. He would conquer this—he would. This pain was only striking because it was raw.

Unaided by torches, Rosings loomed larger, more forbidding in the late light. He saw that the Collinses were taking their leave, lingering on the front steps as Mr Collins treated his wife and her sister to a litany of praises for Lady Catherine before leading them to the footpath to Hunsford.

Darcy took a deep breath and stepped into the shadows until they were safely out of sight and elected to take the entrance by the portico where he might avoid any interview with his aunt regarding his absence. It was a precious piece of cowardice, which he would not acknowledge.

He swung open the seldom-used heavy door, the squeak of its rusted hinges echoed down the hall towards his aunt's favourite drawing room. He cursed and was only slightly relieved when rather than his aunt, his cousin Richard appeared and quickly met him.

His cousin's expression was full of anxious expectation and for a brief moment, Darcy feared that Richard had known the true purpose of his outing. He had told no one of his wishes, even Richard from whom he seldom kept secrets.

"Forgive me Richard," Darcy began, "I have a pressing matter of business..."

However, he got no further because his cousin ignored the blatant attempt to escape upstairs to his chamber.

“An express has just arrived for you,” Richard said. At Darcy’s clear alarm, he explained, “Georgiana is perfectly well, I assure you, but it does concern your Darcy family.”

“Where is it?”

Richard grimaced. “Aunt Catherine has it in her possession. I believe that she means to make another appeal on Anne’s behalf based on its contents.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “I will never marry Anne.”

“Yes, I know, Fitzwilliam, but Aunt Catherine is determined.”

Darcy swallowed a groan. “You might tell me now, so that I may be prepared for my aunt’s offensive.”

Richard’s expression turned severe, “Your uncle, the Marquess of Dorset, has died.”

“Not so surprising given his health, it hardly warrants an express.”

Richard raised an eyebrow.

Darcy bristled. “You know we were not close and he hated my father for inheriting Pemberley. He always favoured Phillip, because he always favoured Phillip’s father, Morris.”

“Nonetheless, he has died, my lord, and Pemberley is reunited with its title.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Richard appeared just as stunned by the appellation. However, with his soldier’s

forthrightness, he went on, “Against all odds, Fitzwilliam, you are now the fifth Marquess of Dorset.”

Shock briefly replaced Darcy’s despair and he did not think of Elizabeth Bennet at all. His heart beat wildly as he followed his cousin into their aunt’s drawing room. His mind ran along unlikely scenarios that brought the marquessate to his feet.

“How is this possible?” he muttered.

“You must read Phillip’s account for yourself, Fitzwilliam,” Richard said, as a footman opened the door.

His aunt stood upon Darcy’s entrance and dropped to a curtsy with glistening eyes. Nothing could have proven the news more than the triumphant gesture of his aunt and her rather self-satisfied smile.

“Never has a title found a more worthy bearer, Lord Dorset,” she said and gave him the express.

There were two letters, the first being an announcement of the Marquess’s death as well as his two immediate heirs. It was evidently meant for a more general knowledge and the second, thicker missive full of personal details.

This letter was creased in such a manner that suggested numerous readings and Darcy cast a disapproving glance at his aunt for the blatant invasion of his privacy. However, Lady Catherine only raised an eyebrow. He quickly skimmed the contents and then read it more slowly a second time, still little able to credit its contents. One whole line of the Marquessate wiped out in a single week? Even if Darcy was not fond of his uncle or his cousins, the knowledge grieved him.

His cousin Phillip’s hand was unusually hurried and uneven.

Fitzwilliam,

I have just now left the bedside of our late, lamented uncle, the Marquess of Dorset. It cannot be surprising to anyone that he is gone, though the manner of his death and how you came to be the new Marquess will no doubt shock you as deeply as it has shocked me.

As you know, the Marquess's health was such that it was felt necessary to remove him to Town for the easier access to physicians. However, Thursday last, my uncle took a turn for the worse, and the stale and unhealthy air in Town has shown us what an unwise decision had been made. I was obliged to send for his son the Earl of Swynford by express. The Earl and his son left immediately and would have been expected in Town within two days; however, instead Swynford's valet appeared at Dorset House to relate the terrible news that the Earl and his heir had been killed in a carriage accident outside Reading.

I was obliged to relate this unhappy news to our uncle, who did not at first appear to comprehend what had befallen him. He stared dumbly for some minutes, and after a long silence and unsuccessful attempts to rouse him, I sent for the physician. He continued many more hours the same, but appeared somewhat improved by the morning, and would converse with us and ask about the accident and what arrangements had been made. The bodies, of course, will be taken back to Ashburn, where they will lie in the chapel before their burial. I have sent an express ahead to our cousin Lady Swynford and her daughters and await further instruction of their wishes.

I felt it prudent to delay sending an express to you in Kent until I had a better understanding of the effects upon the Marquess. Although much affected, our uncle appeared to rally for another day and even discussed the possibility of returning to Ashburn to comfort his son's widow and his granddaughters, though his physician doubted the wisdom of such travel after his shock. In the end, the argument was for

naught.

I had retired for the evening, leaving the Marquess to the care of his valet and physician, and was not long asleep before I was roused by my own valet again. Our uncle the Marquess had been listening to his valet reading psalms when he suddenly cried out and pressed a hand to his chest and began to sweat profusely. When I returned to his bedside, he was still in this state and unable to catch his breath. Dr Winston could do little else but open another vein and ply him with wine for his own comfort. However, the Marquess was not long sensible, and after a few indistinct utterances, he expired.

I have not sent a message to Georgiana as I felt that you would wish to be the bearer of such tidings. Besides the news of such a family tragedy and its effect upon her soft heart, she will little like the expectations of a greater role in Society that your new position demands. I felt that such condolences should come from her brother.

I will remain at Dorset House and begin the preparations to take our uncle's body back to Ashburn. It was his wish to be buried in the chapel there. I do, however, urge you to return to Town as soon as possible and to meet with the solicitors and various stewards who have already begun to bombard the household here.

I will await your further instruction. Please know that I shall do whatever may be of assistance to you at this time.

Yours, etc.

Phillip Darcy

Lady Catherine hardly gave him a moment to digest the awful news.

"I know that it is a shock, nephew, and I feel for you in this moment of loss.



However, we must go forward, and we should not neglect the fact that your first days as the new Marquess will be watched by all. It has been a very long time since the Marquessate of Dorset has been in young hands and there will be many in Society coveting the chance to be the new Marchioness of Dorset.”

Darcy only stared and was somehow surprised by this fresh instance of his aunt’s naked ambition. He had never been blind to her faults, but this ... this was beyond the pale of anything he had ever experienced, and he could not allow her train of thought to continue. Understanding now Richard’s warning, he interrupted, “Aunt Catherine, let me be clear, I will not tolerate your interference in my personal affairs, including your reading my private correspondence. My uncle’s death is a private family matter.”

Lady Catherine stated. “I am your family!”

“A private Darcy matter, entirely unconnected to the Fitzwilliams.”

Perhaps it was rather insensitive and callous to make such a statement, but then Lady Catherine’s obvious machinations were appalling. The Marquess had only just died and she was angling for and envisioning her daughter to be the next Marchioness.

Lady Catherine glanced again at her daughter, whose attention remained upon the book in her lap. She would not return the look until her mother’s gaze was upon him once more. Anne briefly met Darcy’s eyes and nodded encouragingly. She had never desired their union either.

“Really Fitzwilliam,” Lady Catherine scolded, “I am your mother’s only sister, and I have only ever wanted what is best for you and for Georgiana. I only want to see my dearest sister’s children thrive and to carry out her wishes for them.”

“I do not believe that your understanding of my mother’s wishes coincides with my

own understanding, Aunt. I fear we will never agree on this point and there is little to be gained in discussing it this evening.”

She huffed, but was unable to maintain her pique, and in another moment, she stepped towards him in an unexpected gesture of affection. Her eyes teary and her expression full of genuine fondness, she took his right hand and pressed it.

“Thirty years ago when Anne came to me with the news that she was to marry George Darcy, I felt that she would make an excellent marchioness and lamented the fact that your worthy father was only the second son,” Lady Catherine said. “I do not rejoice in any death, but I cannot deny that it pleases me to see my nephew ascend to the role that should have been his father’s had merit determined who succeeds, rather than birth order.”

Lady Catherine did not often remind Darcy of his beloved late mother, though her expression and tone presently was very like her, however unlike Lady Anne’s general disposition and values. He was suddenly lonely for his mother’s advice and company in a way that he had not been since he had learned of her death while at school in Eton and had been obliged to comfort himself all the way back to Pemberley with only Wickham and his cousin Phillip Darcy to share his sorrows. He wondered what her reaction would have been to the news, though he knew that she held little affection for the Marquess. She would have been, no doubt, proud of his succession, though he doubted that her immediate interest would have been in his marriage.

Richard recalled him from his melancholic thoughts with a well-timed tease, “Careful, Aunt, in all this talk of merit, someone might take you for a radical.”

Except for a swift disapproving glance, Lady Catherine did not respond to his goading.

Darcy took the moment to excuse himself, as little comfortable with his aunt’s

outward affection as he was with her ambitions, and desirous of making his own travel arrangements, he retreated to the relative sanctuary of his rooms. He hardly knew how to feel in the tumult of the day's events. The news of his uncle's death and his sudden elevation muted somewhat the pain of Elizabeth's rejection, but he could feel it still tugging at the ragged edges of his heart.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

One Month Later

Brooks's Club, London

When in Town, Darcy preferred Brooks's gentlemen's club over White's for many reasons. The former had more spacious rooms and therefore greater privacy, the superior dining, and the higher probability of meeting with those gentlemen in society that he actually respected. Especially when one avoided the hours that the less reputable members preferred—namely when the notorious gaming tables were fullest in the evening. He was more certain of being comfortable now, therefore, in taking luncheon with his cousin Phillip and Bingley.

It was better than remaining at Darcy House, where Elizabeth would never be, and where he was continually reminded that he would never again be only Mr Darcy of Pemberley, a fairly private individual. Too much of his former life was closed to him forever.

"It will certainly take some time in getting used to hearing you referred to as Dorset or my lord," Bingley said when the servant departed. His tone was muted and his expression listless, if not solemn.

He had never felt more in charity with Bingley than now when his heart still ached for Elizabeth's loss. Nor had he ever felt so guilt-ridden. He had done his friend a grave injury, if Bingley felt even a portion of the misery that plagued Darcy for the past few weeks.

A month. Four weeks. It seemed such a short time for his world to tilt so completely.

His uncle, Lord Matlock's political allies Lord Grey and William Fremantle entered and settled in the far corner of the dining room, acknowledging himself and Bingley with a nod. He was grateful when they did not feel obliged to join their table for a drink and other courtesies. Darcy was thoroughly fatigued by the sheer volume of earnest congratulations upon his elevation, as though it was luck and not a tragedy which had made him the latest Marquess of Dorset.

Bingley did not care anything about titles or social standing. He never had. Perhaps he was the wiser for it. If Darcy had earlier appreciated Bingley's openness and adopted something of his manner, then Elizabeth would not have rejected him because he would not have slighted her or separated her sister from his friend. Perhaps she'd be with him now and he would not be waiting at his club with an equally glum Bingley and no expectation of future happiness.

God, he was pathetic.

But at least he did not have to pretend to greater spirits than he felt, and if Bingley noticed a sadness in his friend, it could easily be taken for mourning.

He would have to make a confession to Bingley soon. He dreaded it and Bingley's recriminations and look of betrayal.

He'd made no comment to Bingley's remark though his friend had not seemed to notice. He refilled both their glasses of wine and looked hard at the half-empty bottle, before saying to Darcy, "I think we both need a stiffer drink than wine with our meal."

Darcy agreed and summoned a servant to request a decanter of brandy and a set of snifters. Phillip would be joining them at any moment and he preferred brandy to wine. He rather wished that Brooks served Scotch.

“I am sorry that I am not better company,” Darcy began, “but I am glad you agreed to come.”

“Yes, well,” Bingley said with a wan smile, “I am not the best company at present either.” He looked like he would have said something more, but decided against it, looking pained.

Yes, Darcy would have to confess soon and try to discover whether Miss Bennet remained in London. If one of their problems could be solved by a confession and reunion, it behoved him to engineer it. He would not think that Elizabeth would be pleased by the resumption of Bingley’s acquaintance. He had no right to think of her at all.

God, the physical pain attached to his longing for her was surprising in its strength. He had thought that the events of the last few weeks would be a distraction and was heartily ashamed of his mindset. Three members of his family were dead, and the loss of them—even though they were not close and even though there had been a complete estrangement between the two branches of the family—should be paramount in his thinking. And it was. Darcy was doing the best to ease the transition for Lady Swynford and her daughters and to settle the affairs of his uncle’s estate which had been upended with the unexpected deaths of two immediate heirs. He did sincerely mourn his cousins’ deaths.

And yet... he could not stop thinking about Elizabeth.

He simply could not bear the thought that she was alive in the world and thinking ill of him.

Darcy took a long gulp of the brandy set before him and eyed Bingley warily. His friend was staring out the window, quietly watching the traffic below.

“How are your sisters?” Darcy asked.

Bingley appeared surprised that he had been addressed, or perhaps surprised by the subject of his friend’s question. His brow furrowed. “They are well.”

“Are they still in residence at Park Street?”

“Yes,” Bingley answered with some confusion. “They do not visit Hurst’s family in Devon until next month.” He cleared his throat and glanced at Darcy with some shame. “Louisa has wanted to arrange a dinner for you, but I told her that you were taking no social calls or obligations for at least a month.”

Darcy refrained from rolling his eyes. Of course Louisa Hurst and Caroline Bingley would be angling to be the first invitation accepted by him. “No, I... Thank you, Bingley.”

Bingley simply raised a glass in response.

“Have they mentioned any visits to any old acquaintances of late?” Darcy asked.

Bingley looked entirely confused, and then angry. “Have they importuned Miss Darcy at this time?”

“No, no,” Darcy quickly reassured him. “Nothing of the kind.” Bingley remained ignorant, then, of his sisters’ snubbing of Jane Bennet in January. He did not expect any confession on their part, but it was possible that Mrs Hurst’s penchant for gossip and loose tongue might have let something slip.

His cousin Phillip joined them then, eagerly accepting Darcy’s offer of brandy and excusing himself for his lateness.

“Grandmama turned up at Dorset House this morning,” he explained, “and I was obliged to order her rooms readied.”

“I thought she remained at Arundel with our uncle Norfolk,” Darcy frowned.

“She did, but our uncle’s wife returned home early for her trip and you know how Grandmama feels about being in the house with her.”

“Of course not,” Darcy echoed. Their grandmother did not dislike her brother’s sister as such, but she was uncomfortable with her Catholic faith and the troubles their mixed faith marriage had brought the Duke of Norfolk over the years. “Is Grandmama well?”

“Perfectly well, if somewhat tired from the journey from Sussex,” Phillip said. “She has already ordered me to tell you that she expects to see you and Georgiana this afternoon.”

Darcy replied that he would oblige the dowager after their meetings with the late Marquess’s solicitors. “Georgie will be very glad to see Grandmama. They write an alarming number of letters to one another, however, so I cannot imagine that they will have anything left to say in person.”

Phillip smiled. “You underestimate Grandmama and Georgie’s effort to please her.” He then turned to Bingley, “It is good to see you again, Bingley. You have been absent from Brooks’s all winter, though I have seen you at Covent Garden and the Little Theatre often enough.”

“Caroline likes to be seen at the theatres,” Bingley answered, “and I’ve found a new appreciation for it as a method of distraction.”

Phillip raised an eyebrow. “Distraction? That hardly sounds like the Bingley I know.



Have you, in fact, found an appreciation for Cressida Stephens, then? I know I have. Unfortunately, though, I have no title—unlike our friend here,” he said, gesturing towards Darcy, who rolled his eyes, “and therefore no hope of winning the lady’s favours.”

Bingley smiled despite himself and then smirked at Darcy’s unease. “As delightful as Welsh’s new protégé appears to be, I believe that Darcy’s interest in actresses and singers has long since waned—and he is likely the only one of us to succeed with Miss Stephens.”

“It is a dreadful waste of a title, Lord Dorset, if you are not going to invest in the charms of such ladies,” teased Phillip, refilling Darcy’s glass as well as his own, and ignoring the plate of food recently delivered to their table. “You may change your mind, Fitzwilliam, once the hordes of mammas and their eligible daughters start following you around like lost puppies waiting for your scraps of attention.”

Darcy shuddered. “God help me.”

“You may even be so desperate as to reconsider your stance against taking Miss de Bourgh to wife,” Bingley added.

“I should think not,” Darcy maintained, his expression ever glummer. He looked away from the table briefly as the thought of Elizabeth intruded again, and more painfully in the mocking subject of marriage. Elizabeth refused him. How was he ever to contemplate anyone else as his wife? He ached for her, quite stupidly.

You were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.

Had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner ...

What did it matter whom he married, if he did not marry Elizabeth? How had he ever

thought himself so far above her when he had been mired in the tangled web of general Darcy dysfunction these last weeks?

He was not worthy of her. What a novel thought. He had been raised to believe that any woman would be honoured to join their family and bear the name of Darcy.

Darcy finished his snifter of brandy quickly and stared into the glass, listening passively to Phillip's praises of his latest opera girl and Bingley's tepid responses. He suddenly saw the life mapped out before him with a dreary dullness it had never before warranted. An endless parade of sameness, the same people, clubs, theatres, and balls, to which would be now added sessions of Parliament and all the accompanying social machinations.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Gracechurch Street, London

Elizabeth lay down her volume of Shakespeare beside her on the window seat. The Bard was normally a favourite, and though she had read every play and sonnet multiple times, he had never failed to hold her attention before; yet, today, she read lines without comprehending them, and the rhythmic cadence of the speech nearly lulled her to sleep.

She watched the busy traffic of Gracechurch Street, the wagons and carriages warring for their portion of the roadway, pedestrians darting out alarmingly close to the vehicles, the muted sounds of yelling and horses' hooves carrying into the parlour of her uncle's home. Aunt Gardiner was meeting with her housekeeper, leaving her nieces to their melancholic company.

Elizabeth glanced at her sister, whose embroidery seemed to require a great deal of attention. Jane's brow furrowed when she caught the weight of Elizabeth's gaze.

"You are very listless today, Lizzy," she said quietly, and began to rifle through her basket for a different colour of thread.

"I suppose I am," she acknowledged.

Jane was paler and thinner than she had been at Christmas. She had hoped that either the cheerfulness of the Gardiner household or Mr Bingley calling upon her sister would restore Jane's habitual serenity. However, neither had happened, and Elizabeth knew why. Mr Darcy had kept her from Jane and thus ruined her chance at happiness.

Of course, she could not lay all the blame at Mr Darcy's feet. Mr Bingley's sisters and Mr Bingley himself must take their share. She could acknowledge the fault in Mr Bingley's disposition, which would allow himself to be persuaded against his heart. She compared him—unwillingly—with his friend, whom she did not believe would ever allow himself to be persuaded against anything or anyone. She disliked Mr Darcy still, despite her sympathy for any disappointed hopes he may have felt in regard to her, but she could recognise the merits of his stronger will.

She did not want to think about Mr Darcy and turned back to the window with a sigh.

"I wish that you would tell me what is bothering you, Lizzy," said Jane after a moment.

"Nothing is bothering me, dearest," she protested and moved over to allow her sister to join her at the window.

"You have not been the same since returning from Kent. Was our cousin Collins very unpleasant to you?"

Elizabeth was surprised by her sister's question. "Not very unpleasant at all, though he was determined to show what honour I forewent as Hunsford's mistress and frequent beneficiary of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's condescension," she teased.

"Be serious, Lizzy."

But Elizabeth could not be serious or she would be very tempted to confess what had passed between herself and Mr Darcy. She did not want to admit to refusing a second unwanted proposal of marriage when Jane was heartsick for a certain lack of a very much wanted proposal. It seemed callous.

"I suppose I miss Longbourn," she said instead.

Jane agreed that she was ready to be at home as well, but their uncle's business would not allow him to accompany them home for a few more weeks. Uncle Gardiner was loath to send them home by mail coach or hired coach since the recent rash of robberies along the Great North Road.

"We need a change of scenery, Jane. What say you we do a bit of shopping? Aunt said we may have the carriage this afternoon if we wish."

"I have no need of new bonnets or ribbons, but I shall accompany you, if you wish."

"I was thinking of Hatchards for a novel or two, or even Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, if we are feeling very daring."

Jane smiled at this. They had both been immensely curious about the new literary sensation that was Lord Byron, but the circulating library in Meryton was not likely to stock Byron's work, as they found the new poet too shocking for their patrons.

Aunt Gardiner joined them, then, in the parlour with a letter newly arrived from their Uncle Gardiner and their father's shared solicitor. "Mr Baker says that Mr Collins has now employed his own solicitor on the advice of Lady Catherine," she announced. "It will make the negotiations for breaking the entail that much more difficult, but he still has hope of success."

"It was not entirely unexpected that he should seek legal counsel," said Jane.

"No indeed, especially if his esteemed patroness suggested it," Elizabeth replied dryly, for her views on Lady Catherine were hard to conceal.

"I am only happy that your father is at least attempting to break the entail for your sake," Aunt Gardiner said. "I very rarely agree with my sister, but I did think it very hard that an attempt had not been made. To see Longbourn pass out of the direct

Bennet line after nearly three hundred years ...”

“Mr Collins seems sincerely attached to his profession in the church. Perhaps he will not want to give it up to be master of Longbourn,” Jane said.

Elizabeth did not think this likely, but she would not be the person to crush her sister’s optimism. There was not much more to be said on the topic until they had further intelligence from Mr Baker, so she apprised Aunt Gardiner of their plan to visit the bookshop.

“What an excellent way to spend the afternoon. There is a new volume of Roman history that Mr Gardiner is keen to read,” Aunt Gardiner said. “If you will give me a few minutes to finish a letter I must have posted today, I shall join you. We might even stop into Gunter’s for an ice or a sorbet.”

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Fortunately, Jane and Elizabeth were able to secure Hatchard’s very last copy of Childe Harold , while their aunt perused the volumes of history.

... in sooth he was a shameless wight,

Sore given to revel and ungodly glee;

Few earthly things found favour in his sight

Save concubines and carnal companie,

And flaunting wassailers of high and low degree.

Even Elizabeth blushed deeply red as she finished reading the stanza.

“Papa will not like us to read this work, Lizzy.”

“I doubt very much that Papa will care to read it himself, so how will he know the language or the contents?”

Jane’s look was slightly disapproving, and Elizabeth sighed.

“If buying this book and reading it is my small act of rebellion, I do believe that I stand in very good stead,” she argued. “At least I am not chasing after soldiers as Kitty and Lydia are wont to do.”

“I am not telling you not to buy it, Lizzy. The poetry is very beautiful even if it can be lurid, though I am not sure that I will read it through. It would be too embarrassing.”

“Dearest Jane, unless you mean to make a public recital of it, how could it possibly be embarrassing to read from the privacy of one’s own home?”

Jane started, her gaze fixed at some point past Elizabeth’s shoulder, and just as Elizabeth turned, she caught the tone of two very familiar voices as they moved from the entry to a display of political pamphlets by the counter.

Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth was not prepared to see that gentleman again. It had never occurred to her that their paths might cross in London where they ran in very different circles.

Elizabeth darted behind a bookcase and only risked peeking in their direction when she was certain that the gentlemen were adequately absorbed in their own conversation. Jane joined her with an expression of open amazement.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “You are not hiding from Mr Darcy?”

“Indeed, I am,” she admitted. She could not very well deny it.

“Why?”

“Jane,” Elizabeth began in a deceptively casual tone, “you know I am not fond of that gentleman’s society.”

“I did not think such dislike had progressed to hiding.”

“Will you please step behind this bookcase with me?” she asked. “Otherwise, Mr Darcy may see you and guess that I am here as well.”

“Elizabeth, you are being ridiculous.”

“Please!”

“Very well,” Jane conceded, “but I shall expect a full explanation for this behaviour later.”

Elizabeth bit her lip, but agreed.

They waited for a few moments, Elizabeth pretending to be absorbed in reading Byron and Jane studying her sister suspiciously. Aunt Gardiner found them there, she carried a weighty volume of Roman history and a new edition of Charles Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare for her children.

“Have you found some interesting choices for your reading?” she asked, tapping the volume of Byron that Elizabeth was holding close to her chest.

“Only the most moral and dry sermons of Fordyce would do, Aunt, as you well know.”



“I would expect no less, Lizzy,” Aunt Gardiner said dryly before turning to Jane, who had picked a volume from Maria Edgeworth.

Elizabeth took the opportunity to peek around her aunt to ascertain whether Mr Darcy and the colonel had left the shop. She did not see them, thankfully, and sighed with relief. Aunt Gardiner suggested that they step outside to see whether James had returned with the carriage while she made their purchases. Elizabeth was only too happy to oblige. She was restless while there remained any possibility of coming face-to-face with Mr Darcy inside Hatchard’s and felt safer from his notice in the busy walkway. He was likely already gone, at any rate.

Elizabeth was wrong.

She had barely taken two steps outside of the shop before she nearly ran into Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Miss Bennet,” he exclaimed, “what a pleasant surprise!”

Elizabeth’s face burned in mortification at the sight of Mr Darcy, who was standing next to his cousin, stiff and pale and shocked.

“Miss Bennet,” Mr Darcy bowed.

She hardly knew how she responded, if she responded at all. She was barely aware when her sister joined her, and she was forced to make the introduction for Colonel Fitzwilliam.

The colonel’s awestruck expression was a familiar one. Jane often had that effect upon men, though her shy smile was rarer. Elizabeth had not seen her sister smile so freely for many weeks. She wondered at Jane’s reception of the colonel’s charm, which was different from Mr Bingley’s.

Mr Darcy was even quieter than usual, and for all her efforts to hide from him, Elizabeth could hardly stop staring at him now. He was very pale indeed with marked shadows beneath his eyes hinting at many sleepless nights. His expression was strange and he could not seem to tear his eyes from her either. They continued dumbly for a long moment before Mr Darcy found his voice.

“You are well, I hope.” His tone had none of his usual sedateness.

She supposed that they must talk to alleviate some of the awkwardness of the meeting, but his address was still surprising. Perhaps she had imagined the same kind of mute anger that had characterised his unhappy reunion with Mr Wickham at Meryton.

Instead, there was a curious mixture of gentleness and coldness. A picture of vulnerability. He must be equally desirous of avoiding her notice, but he maintained the pretence of indifferent acquaintances to save them from more acute embarrassment. She was... grateful for it.

“I- I am,” she stammered and finally looked away only to notice that he wore a black armband and gloves and a black cravat. Lady Catherine had informed the Hunsford party that her nephews had been obliged to return to Town unexpectedly for a death in Mr Darcy’s family, though she had neglected the particulars. They had not been invited to Rosings again.

He must have received the news the very night she had refused him. The knowledge had made her somewhat ashamed of her words towards him then, though she could not regret her decision. It was easier to stare at the elegant falls of his black cravat than to maintain his gaze, which was full of a meaning she could not name.

“I am well, sir,” she stammered again, “thank you. And you, sir?”

His jaw clenched and she could have kicked herself. What a thing to ask someone in these circumstances.

“I mean,” she began again, but they were interrupted by one of the clerks.

“Lord Dorset,” the man approached Mr Darcy, and handed over a small bundle of sheet music, “this just came in for Miss Darcy. Shall we send the next shipment to Dorset House or Darcy House?”

“Continue sending everything to Darcy House,” Mr Darcy answered.

“Yes, my lord,” the clerk bowed and retreated into the shop.

“My lord?” Elizabeth echoed in some confusion.

“I - I came into an inheritance... unexpectedly,” Mr Darcy replied, tucking the bundle under his arm and not looking at her. He must also be thinking of their last meeting and the heated argument over the differences in their circumstances.

“My cousin is now the fifth Marquess of Dorset,” Colonel Fitzwilliam supplied.

Jane then noticed the mourning apparel and expressed her condolences. “I am very sorry for your loss, Mr—I mean—Lord Dorset,” she said. “How trying it must be to lose a relation even as one must cope with such a drastic change in situation.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” Mr Darcy said quietly.

Elizabeth fidgeted. Her sympathy for his loss did not preclude the stirrings of anger and injustice in her breast. That Mr Darcy could easily accept her sister’s kindness when he had so injured her was maddening.

A marquess. Was anyone more suited for the pride of such a station? He must be very grateful now for her refusal. If she was barely suitable to be Mistress of Pemberley, she was far less suitable to be a marchioness. His elevation must temper any suffering she caused.

She suddenly, desperately wanted to be away from his scrutiny. The mortification was only more painful for that realisation. She might have been a marchioness, and though the possibility did not hold much weight with Elizabeth, it reminded her again of the disparity of their stations. If she had accepted him, he would even now be wishing to be released from his promise. At least, she had spared them both the humiliation of such a scene.

Where was the Gardiner carriage? She could not return to Hatchard's without seeming to be running away, and while that is what she most wished to do, she could not give Mr Darcy the satisfaction of seeing her so discomfited.

"Are you in Town long?" he asked just as she had begun to think he meant to excuse himself or ignore her.

"Only a few weeks more. We are staying with my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in Cheapside." She winced, but then boldly met his gaze at the allusions to the relations he had found so beneath him.

He did not reply and looked away and Elizabeth was saved from further awkwardness by the appearance of Aunt Gardiner. She stumbled over Mr Darcy's new title in the introduction but was gratified to see his surprise in the elegance and manners of her aunt.

"Lord George Darcy was an excellent man and a great friend to my father," Aunt Gardiner was saying to Mr Darcy. "My father was the rector at Lambton and came to know your parents quite well in his line of work."

“Your father was Mr Drummond?” Mr Darcy asked.

“Yes, indeed, my lord.”

“My father often said he never found a man better suited for the office of clergy than your father, Mrs Gardiner,” Mr Darcy said warmly. “He was very glad to recommend him to the Archbishop.”

“Papa was grateful for his assistance,” said Aunt Gardiner, her features pink with pride that her father had been so remembered. “He was loath to leave Derbyshire as all native sons of Derby must be, but found much in York to be admired.”

“I cannot disagree with such loyalty to Derbyshire,” Mr Darcy replied with greater ease than he had ever exhibited in Elizabeth’s presence before. She fairly wondered at the transformation.

“I sometimes think that Darcy would never leave Pemberley, if he could help it,” the colonel volunteered with a smile. “But then, I am partial as I am a native of that county myself.”

“You make me quite envious,” said Jane, “for I have always wanted to visit the Peak District.”

“We shall have to arrange such a trip when my husband can be spared from his work,” Aunt Gardiner said. “I should dearly love for my nieces to witness its beauty.”

They spoke some minutes more on the merits of the northern counties. Aunt Gardiner glanced at Elizabeth once or twice with meaning, as though she could not reconcile the civility of the man in front of her with the description Elizabeth had provided. Elizabeth could hardly credit it herself. Did her reproofs work such a change as this? It could not be for her sake that he was so altered. Indeed, he hardly looked at her and

spoke to her aunt more often and with greater freedom.

For her part, Elizabeth was unusually reticent, feeling that any input of hers on the topic of Derbyshire's beauty and travel would seem suspicious, at least to Mr Darcy. She fidgeted and reddened and would look at him no more, and fairly launched herself in the direction of the Gardiner carriage when it finally arrived. She did not wait for the assistance of their driver or either of the gentlemen, and settled herself quickly in the corner, firmly looking out the opposite window. Neither Jane nor Aunt Gardiner remarked upon her odd behaviour though she saw them exchange a puzzled glance.

When the carriage pulled away, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Mr Darcy casting a lonely figure on the walkway. Even with his cousin standing beside him in his regimentals, he was striking and elegant. An uncharacteristic pang wrenched her heart when he pulled off his hat to rake a hand through his hair in some agitation. He spoke to Colonel Fitzwilliam and righted his appearance before walking away in the opposite direction, leaving his cousin to follow. He must still be in pain from her. She had thought that the mode of her rejection would have justly killed any remaining affection for her but it appeared he remained as affected by her rejection as she did by his proposal. How odd that they should be placed in one another's path again ...

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Darcy House, London

Darcy paced the length of his study in agitation for some minutes as his cousin Richard looked on. Thus had been their evenings since he had returned to Town following his disastrous proposal in Hunsford. His cousin rose and calmly poured himself a finger of Scotch, admiring the deep hue of the amber liquid, and lamenting aloud that his father had no love for the whiskey.

Richard then settled into a chair by the fire.

Darcy continued to pace with a furrowed brow.

“You are in love with her,” Richard said with a hint of amusement.

“What?”

“Elizabeth Bennet. You are in love with her.”

Darcy did not reply.

“It was obvious at Rosings that you liked Miss Elizabeth and I had a mild sort of suspicion that you were infatuated.” Richard flashed a smile at him as though this was a rather entertaining conversation on his part.

“I am not infatuated,” Darcy protested.

“No,” Richard agreed, “you are in love with her.”

Darcy stopped pacing and raked a hand through his hair and stared resentfully at his desk. Piles of paper and ledgers were stacked high as he had tried to make sense of his uncle's estate and holdings; yet this urgent business could not banish Elizabeth from his mind, though there had been moments—how blessed they were—when he had thought it possible to recover from this attachment in time. The numbness of shock was a great deceiver. The lady herself had quickly disabused him of the foolish notion within moments of their unexpected reunion.

His traitorous heart beat as wildly as ever in her presence.

He could not deny Richard's assertion, and so poured himself a tumbler of whiskey.

"It is a spectacularly imprudent choice, of course," Richard was saying, "but you have the luxury of disregarding financial considerations in your choice of a wife."

"I will not be marrying Elizabeth Bennet." He let out a resigned sigh. It was the first time he had admitted as much aloud. Would the slice of pain he felt at each pronouncement of her name ever fade?

"You think her unsuitable?" Richard asked.

He should think her unsuitable. He did think so for a long time. By every measure of society, Elizabeth Bennet was not the ideal choice for his bride. But he loved her; he simply... loved her, and the brief interval in which he had given in to his desire to make her Mrs Darcy had been bliss. He had allowed himself to imagine her here in this house and with him at Pemberley, her smiles and fine eyes dancing, enlivening every inch of his sometimes-sombre homes. He wanted the privilege of speaking with and waking with her each morning, her long curls cascading down her back in the privacy of their chambers. He'd spent an inordinate amount of time dreaming of taking down the hair pins himself.



How foolish he had been to think she was his only for the asking. To think that whatever scruples he'd voiced to himself—to her—had ever outweighed this clawing need for Elizabeth in his chest.

Dear God, he needed her, almost as much as he loved her. It was unsuitable, insupportable, unthinkable to be without her, and yet, this was exactly the future he was forced to inhabit.

He could not forget her. He had no choice in the matter but to love her and suffer under the knowledge that she despised him and would rather flee his presence than to exchange a few courtesies on a crowded London street.

Darcy poured himself another whiskey and dropped into a chair by the fire.

"You could do worse," Richard urged when Darcy remained silent. "Aunt Catherine is determined to marry you to Anne and since you inherited the title, I regret to say that my father is now seeing the merit in such an alliance."

Darcy groaned. "I will not marry Anne regardless of how many Fitzwilliams join in Aunt Catherine's crusade."

"I am glad to hear it," said Richard. He studied his cousin for a long moment, while Darcy continued to glower at the fire. "You could marry Miss Elizabeth, you know. She is the daughter of a gentleman, and you are now the official head of the Darcy family. You may do as you wish."

"Grandmama would protest anyone being considered as head of the Darcy family—besides herself of course," he deflected.

Richard raised his glass. "Likely," he acknowledged. "The Marchioness is formidable, but she is not likely to protest any choice of yours." It was no secret that

Darcy had always been her favourite grandchild as his father, George Darcy had always been her favourite son.

“As long as that choice is not Anne.”

His cousin nodded. There was no love lost between Lady Catherine and the Dowager Marchioness. “Lady Dorset may well support your marriage to Elizabeth Bennet.”

“I cannot marry Elizabeth Bennet,” Darcy reiterated and tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“Why ever not?” Richard asked. “I grant you that the circumstances of her family leave much to be desired, but you have never followed the dictates of the Ton, and I cannot imagine that the wishes of Aunt Catherine or my father would hold much sway in your choice. They have not so far.”

“And they do not now.”

“Then, why not make her an offer, Fitzwilliam?”

“She despises me, Richard,” Darcy admitted flatly. He grasped a poker and began to poke at the wood to encourage the dying flames. It was easier than seeing any look of sympathy or pity from his cousin. He felt awkward and ridiculous for disclosing the information or exposing any portion of his pain. However, he needed to speak and there was no one else he trusted so dearly.

Richard took the chair opposite. “How can you know that?”

“She was quite clear when she rejected my proposal.”

Richard appeared justly stunned. Apparently, he had been of similar mind that a lady

would not reject any sensible offer of marriage. His sisters had certainly followed the Fitzwilliam practical view of matrimony and had married suitably wealthy and connected gentlemen.

“I cannot believe that any sensible young lady would reject such an offer. I may have to revise my opinion of her intelligence.”

Darcy bristled at this judgement. “She was quite right to reject me. It was a thoroughly insulting proposal.” He raked fingers through his hair and loosened his suddenly constrictive cravat. “I will not repeat what was said between us, but I dwelt more upon the honour of my hand than upon my love for her.”

“Right... well, that is... unfortunate,” Richard stammered. He took a long drink of Scotch. “How did you come to say such things to her?” he asked, then winced at the callousness of his words.

Darcy shrugged as he finished his own Scotch and stared into the empty glass. He swallowed a bitter laugh. “It doesn’t matter now. I am rejected and she hates me.”

“Perhaps if you—”

He slammed his tumbler onto the table, interrupting Richard and drawing another, astonished glance from his cousin.

“It was not only the mode of my address that was so disgusting to Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said. “She had other considerations, such as the fact that I separated Bingley from her sister.”

“By Jove!” Richard exclaimed and stammered an apology for his unintentional interference. At least Darcy now knew where she had received knowledge of his role in the affair. It didn’t really matter now, after all was said and done and told Richard

so when he persisted in expressing his regret.

“You will have to tell Bingley,” Richard said.

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you think that you were wrong about Miss Bennet’s feelings?”

“I do not know,” Darcy conceded. “It is likely. Miss Elizabeth certainly believed that her sister’s feelings were deeply wounded by Bingley’s defection.”

“She may have been wrong,” Richard replied.

There was something in his cousin’s tone that drew Darcy’s attention. It had not escaped his notice that Richard admired Jane Bennet, but then most men seemed to admire her. He could not understand such admiration after having been introduced to Elizabeth. How could his cousin admire the sister more? There was something beguiling in Elizabeth’s aspect that her sisters lacked. She shone brighter than all of them, especially in her anger or agitation. Darcy firmly believed that he had not—nor would he ever—see her equal again.

“Whatever Jane Bennet feels, it is for Bingley to discover and I mean to deliver him to their doorstep in Gracechurch Street myself.”

“That may go a long way in improving Miss Elizabeth’s opinion of you.”

Darcy scoffed.

“I do not think her opinions are as intractable as that suggests,” Richard said.

“Yes, well, she believes me to have ruined the prospects of a friend for no other

reason than caprice.”

Richard looked disbelieving.

“I told you that Wickham had been in Hertfordshire.”

His cousin frowned. “You should tell her the truth about Wickham.”

Darcy hesitated. He had almost done so. There were pages filled with his ink upstairs, a letter never delivered, but sealed up and full of his confession and doubts. He still thought about delivering it into her hand if he could be sure of no interference.

“I doubt that she would believe me,” he said.

“I do not believe that Miss Elizabeth is devoid of a sense of fairness,” Richard said. “She should want to know your side of the story. God knows what he’s told her.”

“So far as Georgiana is concerned, it is not my story to tell.”

“You would not have to disclose the particulars of Georgiana, but she deserves to know something of the man that could pose a danger to her younger sisters.”

He conceded that his cousin a point. “I will think on it.”

The sound of approaching footsteps caused both men to straighten their appearance. Lady Dorset, Georgiana, and Mrs Annesley could be heard chatting amiably about their purchases, and then his grandmother enquired of his whereabouts.

With a groan, Darcy exchanged a glance with Richard and began to make his way to the music room, which was his sister’s special domain when she was in residence.

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Darcy was surprised by the elegance of the Gardiner townhouse when he alighted from his carriage the next morning. Though Gracechurch Street was habitually busy, the Gardiner home occupied the quieter, more residential end. A newer construction, it was well-maintained, the servants keeping the London soot clean of the windows and doorway.

He was... nervous. It was a foreign sensation to Darcy. He had not even been nervous before his disaster of a proposal. Yet, now he knew that he risked rejection. He took a deep breath and requested his coachman to wait for him. He did not expect to be long.

Darcy was quickly admitted upon giving his name. The butler's eyes were wide and his bow just on the side of obsequious. He inwardly cringed. Elizabeth would not appreciate reminders of the differences in their stations and how such differences had grown in just a fortnight.

He was almost relieved to discover the Gardiners were not at home and left his card. He was not sure that he was ready to face her before he could provide some evidence that he understood her reproofs. The pain of their reunion was still fresh and her eagerness to flee his presence was not something he was eager to repeat.

Perhaps the presence of Bingley would be enough to soften her towards him. He wanted her friendship, if not her love, and he valued the fierce loyalty she demonstrated towards those dear to her. He found that he wanted that loyalty for himself.

Darcy gave the direction to his friend's house in Park Lane and settled back into his carriage. He had a confession to make.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Gracechurch Street, London

Marquess of Dorset.

No intricate geometric patterns to frame the title. Just a simple, fine engraving on a crisp white card. Mr Darcy had a gift for the kind of understated elegance which stood above others like a beacon.

Aunt Gardiner had wordlessly passed the card along to Elizabeth once they had returned from their afternoon calls.

“Did Lord Dorset leave any message?” Jane asked the butler after Aunt Gardiner ordered tea to be brought to the parlour.

Hughes replied, “No miss. His lordship was here but a moment.”

It was strange to hear Mr Darcy referred to in such terms, and surprising that he had featured into the environs of Cheapside. Elizabeth placed the card back on the tray and took a seat by Jane.

“Shall we be at home for Lord Dorset should he call again, Lizzy?” Aunt Gardiner asked.

Why was such a question directed towards her? Surely they had no other suspicion but her dislike of the man. She had not told her aunt or Jane about Hunsford—or at least, she had not told them about Mr Darcy’s failed proposal since she felt it would serve no purpose but to pain them and mortify her. She had confessed, however, that

they had quarrelled in Kent, which went some way in explaining their mutual awkwardness in meeting yesterday.

Jane did not believe the explanation, but she was too considerate to call Elizabeth on her omission. Her pointed looks, however, scolded her sister sufficiently.

“We could not snub him,” Elizabeth conceded, though she hoped that he would not call again. She could not imagine that their meeting brought him any pleasure. Indeed, he had seemed just as discomfited. Perhaps he had been relieved for their absence, which would allow him to gain the credit of calling upon them without any of the attendant mortification for their continued acquaintance. Such a thought provided so much comfort that she was obliged to believe it to be the likeliest truth.

“Of course we could not,” said Jane. “It speaks well of him that he should acknowledge the acquaintance while deep in mourning.”

“Indeed,” agreed Aunt Gardiner. “What a tragedy the family suffers.”

Upon returning to Gracechurch Street the day before, she and Jane had combed through the columns of *The Times* and *The Morning Post* out of curiosity and found the news of the Dorset family tragedy buried amongst the latest developments on the Peninsula.

“To lose an uncle and two cousins. He must think very highly of you, Jane and Lizzy, to leave his card at such a time.”

Elizabeth flushed.

“I thought you said that he was a disagreeable gentleman, Lizzy?” Aunt Gardiner asked.



“I have never seen him so agreeable as he was yesterday,” she protested.

“He was a little different,” Jane acknowledged, “which is not to be wondered at, considering.”

“I saw nothing of improper pride,” Aunt Gardiner said. “He is a little stately to be sure and his manners less open than those of Colonel Fitzwilliam. He is by no means ill-favoured.”

“What of his behaviour to poor Mr Wickham?”

“You know, Lizzy,” began Jane, “we may be mistaken there. We have only heard Mr Wickham’s side of the story. Mr Bingley believed that Mr Wickham was not so wholly blameless in the affair.”

Elizabeth arched a brow. “You will blame Mr Wickham and exonerate Mr—Lord Dorset—entirely?”

Jane sighed. “There may be some misunderstanding that we are not privy to. I only believe that we should withhold our judgement. We have never seen anything but honourable behaviour in Lord Dorset.”

Elizabeth bit back her urge to protest Jane’s defence of the man. He did not deserve her testimony.

A maid entered the parlour with the tea tray and a newly arrived letter from Longbourn. Aunt Gardiner took it gratefully.

“Mr Bennet must have some special news for us to have sent another letter so soon,” she commented.

Uncle Gardiner was still at his warehouses and likely to be occupied with new shipments for some time so Aunt Gardiner felt justified in opening the missive without him. After all, it was addressed to the entire Gardiner household.

The letter was short and to-the-point, unembellished by any knowledge of the goings-on of Longbourn. They could only guess that Mrs Bennet and her younger daughters enjoyed good health, that Mrs Long and Lady Lucas continued to plague their mother's efforts to attract suitors for her daughters, and that Mrs Phillips provided intelligence of the most valuable kind—that of the movements and habits of Colonel Forster's militia. Such definite knowledge would have to wait for Mary's moralising commentary upon it. Though prone to dwell upon a critical lens, Mary was their most reliable correspondent; so diligent was she in her task that she repeated every bit of news to be had—even that which earned her disapproval because it provided an opportunity for her understanding of the scriptures and Fordyce's sermons to shine through the page. Mary dearly loved a scolding.

Aunt Gardiner read aloud.

My dear family,

I hope this letter finds all the inhabitants of Gracechurch Street in fine health. Now that the requisite household enquiries have been made, let us proceed to the intelligence you most wish to know.

I am very sorry to have to relay the knowledge that the entailment has not and will not be broken. Mr Collins remains in the capacity to turn you all out as soon as I am dead.

In short, we have received communication from Mr Collins that he does not mean to give up the entailment for a farthing less than ?15,000. As you can imagine, this sum is outside the pale of our consideration. We simply do not have the money nor the

means of raising such a tidy sum.

I would have liked to have seen Longbourn remain with my daughters, but there is nothing more to be done. Guided by the wisdom of his patroness, my heir's price is immovable; for as long as Lady Catherine believes this sum to be just recompense, Mr Collins will not negotiate.

I do thank my brother Gardiner for his assistance in this matter.

Yours, etc.

Thomas Bennet

"So that is it, then?" said Elizabeth. "There is nothing more to be attempted?"

Aunt Gardiner folded the paper, which she handed to Jane. "There is nothing more we may do without my brother-in-law's sanction, but I will speak with Mr Gardiner about this development. It is disheartening, certainly."

"Perhaps if Uncle Phillips were to write to Mr Collins, he may have more success. My father is not a solicitor after all. Uncle Phillips may be able to phrase an offer in such a way as to make a negotiation more appealing for our cousin."

"Oh Jane," sighed Elizabeth, "it is avarice and not address that will appeal to Mr Collins."

"I do not mean to suggest flattery, Lizzy, but Uncle Phillips may be better able to persuade Mr Collins into a negotiation."

Elizabeth did not think it likely, especially if he were taking his cues from Lady Catherine.

Unbidden, she thought of Mr Darcy and his declaration of improbable love. Was she foolish to have rejected a man of sense and respectability in the world? With such wealth and influence at her disposal as his wife, she might have saved Longbourn. But, no, Mr Darcy's opinion of her family was clear and freely given. He would not entangle himself any further with such a family after their marriage. They may have been lost to her entirely, especially now that he was a marquess with a seat in the House of Lords and a greater role to play in the Ton. Even she could acknowledge the just embarrassment of Mrs Bennet as mother to a marquess.

Such a recollection saved Elizabeth from something like regret, but not the shame of her mercenary thoughts.

Still, she could not stop glancing at his card, and when her aunt and sister were otherwise occupied, she slipped it into her pocket.

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Elizabeth's belief that Mr Darcy would avoid calling upon them in Gracechurch was disproved by the next afternoon. He came somewhat early in the afternoon and brought with him a very welcomed visitor—Mr Bingley.

Aunt Gardiner welcomed Mr Darcy with great warmth and pleasure. As a fellow native of Derbyshire, she was predisposed to think well of him, and though she was not more than five years his senior, she could not help displaying a sort of maternal care. She could not bear to see anyone grieved or discomfited. Her reception of Mr Bingley was warm, though a little reserved, she cast a protective glance towards Jane, and Elizabeth understood that her sister's suitor would have to prove himself to more than one lady.

Jane's embarrassment had been great at his appearance, and with little time to compose herself, gave him little encouragement beyond blushing looks.

Mr Bingley himself was more reserved than Elizabeth had ever seen him, and though he took a seat close to Jane, he spoke little to her. He seemed unsure of his reception, and the pair sat in mutual embarrassment for some time, relying on others to carry the conversation.

Mr Bingley even looked at Mr Darcy once or twice—though whether he sought approval or reassurance, Elizabeth could not say, and Mr Darcy did nothing but provide a nearly imperceptible nod. This given, his friend turned to Jane again and enquired stiltedly about the weather and whether she had been able to enjoy the parks so far this spring.

Elizabeth exchanged a rueful glance with Mr Darcy and tried to overcome her own embarrassment at his appearance, and for a few minutes, it was left to Mr Darcy and Aunt Gardiner to carry the conversation, which they did with more ease than she could have imagined.

Mr Darcy was different than he had been in Hertfordshire and Kent. Subdued, even. Kinder, certainly. She hardly knew how to interact with a Darcy that was not haughty or cold, and struggled to think of anything to say to him. She settled upon, “Colonel Fitzwilliam did not accompany you this afternoon?”

Mr Darcy raised an eyebrow and she flushed.

What must he think of her asking after his cousin so soon after her own rejection of him?

“My cousin was otherwise occupied with his Major General today, Miss Elizabeth,” he replied. “I will, however, pass along your compliments.”

“Oh!” she stammered dumbly. “I do not mean... you cannot mean that I—”

Mr Darcy smiled wryly. "I understand you perfectly."

"No! I fear you do not," she protested. "Colonel Fitzwilliam is a very fine gentleman, but I do not wish to... I am not enquiring after him particularly."

"Yes, as I said, I understand you perfectly, Miss Elizabeth," he replied, smiling widely.

He was amused!

He liked seeing her flustered.

"I will pass on your compliments, but stress that you are not asking after him particularly."

Elizabeth gaped. "You are teasing me!"

"Well yes. It is not often that I see you rendered speechless, Miss Elizabeth."

She laughed in surprise and pressed one hand to her cheek, willing herself not to find Mr Darcy charming now. "Sir, I hardly know whether to be offended by such a description of myself."

"I do not wish to ever offend you," he said with deliberate lightness that set her heart pounding at this soft allusion to Hunsford. "However, I will not deny the pleasure of surprising you, Miss Elizabeth."

There was a bustle in the front hall indicating other callers, which put an end to the gentlemen's visit. They rose with some reluctance, Mr Bingley sending anguished glances Jane's way.

Upon taking leave of her aunt, Mr Darcy approached Elizabeth. She stood, nervously, swallowed thickly when he took her hand to bow over it. "It was a pleasure to see you again today, Miss Elizabeth," he said, something unreadable but full of meaning lingering in his eyes.

"Thank you," she murmured. "It was good of you to come."

His eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he followed her gaze towards Jane and Mr Bingley. Then his attention was all her own again. "Perhaps Bingley and Miss Bennet would feel more comfortable renewing their acquaintance in another setting. Would you be available for an outing to Hyde Park tomorrow afternoon?"

Elizabeth exhaled slowly, only then aware that she had been holding her breath. "Jane," she called, finally letting go of Mr Darcy's hand, "Lord Dorset has invited us to accompany him and Mr Bingley to Hyde Park tomorrow."

Jane smiled shyly but happily. "I should like that very much."

"And you, Miss Elizabeth," Mr Darcy said, drawing her attention again, "should you like it?"

"I am not averse," she admitted. This admission was not an untruth. She would never have expected such notice and kindness from Mr Darcy after their quarrel in Kent, but he had proven himself far less resentful than she could ever have supposed. And, he had brought Mr Bingley back to her sister. No, she was not averse.

She would mind her sister and her aunt's advice in withholding further judgement of his actions concerning Mr Wickham. After all, they only knew Mr Wickham's tale. She would not be unjust when Mr Darcy had not been resentful.

"Then, that is progress, is it not?" he said quietly.

Elizabeth coloured and Aunt Gardiner looked at them with some wonderment and a new awareness. Mr Darcy bowed again and his friend followed him out, leaving Elizabeth and Jane staring after them and struggling to regain their composure when Aunt Gardiner's friends were announced.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

### The Following Day

Elizabeth had been somewhat surprised when her aunt and uncle allowed Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley to take them to Hyde Park without their chaperonage. Aunt Gardiner had been especially protective of Jane since these last months, and her introduction to Mr Bingley so reserved that Elizabeth had been nearly certain that her aunt meant to accompany them as well. At any rate, she had made certain that her husband was available when the gentlemen called again.

Whatever might have been her plan, one of the little Gardiners had woken with a fever, and with Uncle Gardiner obliged to return to his office, Jane and Elizabeth were sent on their way once Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley had been properly introduced to their uncle.

Still, as Elizabeth fetched her bonnet and gloves, Aunt Gardiner had pulled her briefly aside with a quick, "Be careful, Lizzy."

"What can you mean, Aunt?"

Aunt Gardiner shot a pointed look towards Mr Darcy who was conversing with Uncle Gardiner. Elizabeth coloured, but hardly knew how to answer the implication. She knew what it meant, though. Mr Darcy was a peer of the realm, no one in their family had such close ties to the aristocracy.

They were quickly out of the door and a luxurious landau awaited them, emblazoned with the Darcy coat of arms. The roof had been let down to reveal plush seats and a soft grey interior. Mr Bingley was already helping Jane into the vehicle.

“I thought you might prefer the open air, the day being so fine,” Mr Darcy said.

Elizabeth wished that she did not flush so easily at this evidence of his consideration, and wondered whether she would spend the entire afternoon in a constant state of embarrassment. She could not look at Mr Darcy without thinking of his proposal, the alteration in his manner, and wonder what he meant by their continuing acquaintance.

She answered with some confusion, “Thank you, my lord. It would be far too warm, indeed, in a closed carriage.”

She allowed him to assist her into the carriage and turned to Jane when he settled himself in the seat opposite to her. However, Jane’s attention was all for Mr Bingley, and they chatted amiably without the watchful eyes of Aunt Gardiner, laughing together when they spotted a small terrier break away from its mistress to chase its master halfway down the walk.

On this afternoon, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy were the more silent pair. He was perfectly polite, but his quiet almost-smile unnerved her. She felt shy of him, which she had never before his proposal.

They bypassed St James’s Park with its military parade and changing of the guard. This park was more familiar to Jane and Elizabeth for its relative proximity to Cheapside and they often took their little cousins to watch the soldiers. Hyde Park, however, was the better venue for lovers of walking and riding.

Once they crossed into Mayfair they encountered a few undeniably fashionable gentlemen who doffed their hats to Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy, and she hoped that they would not become the subject of gossip in the drawing rooms of the fashionable set upon this outing.

“Shall we walk?” Mr Darcy suggested when they reached the park’s gate.

The ladies quickly assented. Mr Bingley immediately claimed Jane's hand, leaving Elizabeth to Mr Darcy. She could not meet his eye as he helped her alight.

The walk along the Serpentine was less crowded than usual. The morning's shower had, no doubt, discouraged many ladies and gentlemen from venturing out lest they mar their boots and dress with mud. It was many hours, yet, before the fashionable crowd would descend upon the park. Thus, their small party had an unusual measure of privacy, which suited Elizabeth just fine.

They allowed Jane and Mr Bingley to outstrip them.

Mr Darcy's mourning apparel made him an object of interest for the few venturing out into Hyde Park that morning, especially among the ladies who openly stared at the new Lord Dorset accompanying two unknown genteel women.

Mr Darcy did not offer his arm as they walked together and kept a perfectly respectable distance between them. She thought of their walks at Rosings, and wondered whether he was also reminded, and knew not where to look. It was not a comfortable silence between them, and Elizabeth was thinking how she may break it, when he spoke in the same deliberately light tone he had adopted the day before.

"One might—ought—to speak a little during a long walk such as this. It would be odd to be entirely silent for the afternoon, would it not, Miss Elizabeth?"

She was startled by the allusion to their past and what she had assumed could not be a pleasant recollection. Yet, his expression was mild when she risked meeting his eyes. "Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?"

Mr Darcy smiled at this parry of his words. "Both, I imagine."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and relaxed. If he was determined to be agreeable, she would not be the one to make them awkward.

“They seem far less shy of one another today,” she remarked, gesturing towards Jane and Mr Bingley. As they emerged round the bend of the Serpentine, the sun hit the surface of the water casting a blinding reflection. She opened her parasol to shield them both.

“I am afraid that I gave Bingley very little notice of our visit yesterday,” he admitted.

“Your visit was a surprise to all of us.”

Mr Darcy stopped and Elizabeth turned to face him.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he ventured with some hesitation, “may we speak frankly?”

Elizabeth twisted the parasol’s handle nervously and hoped that he did not mean to discuss the particulars of their quarrel. “Yes, I suppose... yes.”

Mr Darcy looked off into the distance. Jane and Mr Bingley were far ahead, though they walked slow enough. Mr Bingley’s head was angled towards her sister, as though they were sharing some confidence or merely listening intently.

“I never meant to injure your sister or my friend,” he began. “I believed that I was acting in his best interest at the time and I was wrong.”

“I should not have accused you of acting out of caprice,” she conceded.

“In what other way could you have viewed my interference?” he said. “My actions were beneath me and I heartily regret them.”

Elizabeth twirled her parasol in her need to fidget. His profile was solemn, soft somehow and wounded. She could not disagree with his words. “Mr Darcy,” she began.

He turned back to her with a wry smile and she realised her mistake.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Dorset,” she said.

“Do not apologise for that, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. “Whenever I hear Lord Dorset, I expect to see my aged uncle somewhere abouts.”

“I am very sorry for your loss, my lord.”

“My loss,” he echoed dryly.

What could he mean by that tone? She had no right to ask, of course; still, she ventured, “Are you... are you alright, my lord?”

His gaze slid back to her momentarily and after a beat, he answered, “Perfectly, I am perfectly fine.”

She did not believe him. He was still pale and rather thinner than he had been in Kent, and though she could not say why, she wondered whether her rejection was responsible for part of this change. She scolded herself for this precious piece of vanity. The man was in mourning. Yet, when he looked at her with such intensity and softness, it did not seem like vanity.

They walked on, Mr Darcy’s hands clasped behind his back and Elizabeth twirling her parasol. She kept sneaking glances at his profile. He was very handsome. She could acknowledge it in the privacy of her own mind and felt a little proud for having attracted the notice of such a man.

The acknowledgement did not seem like a betrayal with Mr Bingley and Jane walking ahead and remedying one of the faults she had hurled at his person.

“I confessed all to Bingley,” he said, as though echoing her thoughts.

“Oh?” she said. “That cannot have been a comfortable conversation.”

“He was angry, of course.”

“Mr Bingley did not appear angry at all yesterday.”

“As I said, I gave him little time to be angry,” he said, explaining that his own business precluded visiting for the next few days and he did not want to waste any more time lest Mr Bingley should be obliged to accept an invitation to visit the Hursts in the country.

“He is too good-natured to remain angry with anyone,” he added.

This Elizabeth could believe.

She risked laying a hand gently upon his arm. He jumped at the touch, halting their progress. His gaze remained reverently upon her small, gloved hand, which she hastily moved away in embarrassment.

“Thank you, my lord.” She began to walk again, but he drew her back with a gentle touch to her elbow. She shivered.

“There is one other matter I would speak with you about,” he said.

Elizabeth understood immediately. “Mr Wickham?”

“I know not what sort of falsehoods Wickham has told you, Miss Elizabeth, but he does not deserve your approbation. He is not an honourable man.”

There was an awful dread in the pit of her stomach that recalled her own latest suspicions of Mr Wickham. His mercenary pursuit of Miss King had never slowed his flirtations in Meryton. It did not speak well of his character nor his constancy, and while she did not begrudge handsome young men seeking their fortunes in prudent matches, she could not tolerate such flagrant disrespect.

Whatever Mr Darcy might have said, however, was delayed, for they met another of his acquaintances.

A currie was almost upon them, its passengers elderly, and evidently fond of Mr Darcy. They smiled at him and he seemed less disposed to avoid their overtures than others they had encountered that day.

“Fitzwilliam!” the lady called. “It is good to catch you in the park, for I’ve rarely been successful at your home.”

Mr Darcy bowed, “Grandmama, Uncle.” He introduced Elizabeth to his grandmother the Dowager Marchioness of Dorset and to his granduncle the Duke of Norfolk. She dropped a curtsy, and was relieved that she did not appear so unsteady as she felt. Mr Darcy’s relations were very grand, indeed; his pride and his words in Kent were more understandable if no less insulting.

His grandmother was in mourning weeds, though her expression had nothing of the sadness she had seen in Darcy. There was a muted air of triumph about Lady Dorset and she seemed happy to meet “one of my dear Fitzwilliam’s circle.”

Elizabeth did not disabuse her of the notion and responded politely, glancing at Mr Darcy in some confusion. He gave her a wry smile.

The Duke, however, was warmer. "Hertfordshire is beautiful country. I have often stayed at Gorhambury for the shooting. Do you know Lord and Lady Verulam?"

"I have not had the pleasure," she said. "My father's estate is on the other side of St Albans, your grace, near Meryton."

"Meryton, eh? There is a nice little market for horse flesh, is there not?"

"I believe, your grace, that you are thinking of Hertford."

He conceded that she might be correct, but said to Mr Darcy, "You spent some time in Hertford last year, did you not, Nephew?"

"No, Charles," said Lady Dorset impatiently, "that was Meryton."

"I do believe that Fitzwilliam said he went to Hertford."

"Hertfordshire, brother, the county, not the town."

The Duke looked annoyed. "Is that not what I said?"

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy as the pair continued to bicker. He also appeared annoyed and resigned.

"Grandmama, Uncle," he said when they gave space for others to contribute. "Let us put this argument to an end. I visited my friend Bingley's estate Netherfield in Hertfordshire last autumn which is close to Meryton."

The Marchioness smirked at her brother, who was not prepared to concede the point.

"I'm certain Fitzwilliam has been to Hertford."



“I’m sure he has at some point, but not last year,” Lady Dorset argued.

“I have never been to Hertford,” Mr Darcy responded dryly.

Elizabeth bit her lip to conceal a laugh when the pair turned identical gazes to Mr Darcy.

“What has that to do with anything?” asked Lady Dorset.

Mr Darcy conceded very little, which satisfied his grandmother.

They chatted for a moment longer before the Marchioness and Duke took their leave.

“It was very nice to meet you, Miss Bennet,” said Lady Dorset. “I hope we will meet again while you are in Town.”

“Thank you, my lady,” said Elizabeth with a curtsy.

“We should leave them to their courting, Sarah,” the Duke said with a wink. “These young people have no use for our intrusion.”

Lady Dorset raised an eyebrow and looked again at Elizabeth with some calculation. She bristled under the scrutiny, while Mr Darcy appeared mortified.

“I apologise for my relatives, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy said when the Duke and Lady Dorset were out of sight. He looked supremely uncomfortable and the tips of his ears were pink.

Elizabeth smiled. “If we were to apologise for all of our embarrassing relations, we may spend the whole afternoon thus, and I have no wish to do so.”

“Nor do I.”

“Good. Let us settle and pretend that all apologies that need to be said have been said.” She was surprised by her desire to ease something of their mutual discomfort. She had been too used to doing otherwise, and glorying in those instances when she had made him angry or uneasy.

He agreed with evident relief. However, Elizabeth could not help asking, “Are they always so?”

Mr Darcy smiled ruefully. “I regret to say that they are often worse. They make a game of disagreeing with one another, which they have done for the past seventy-odd years. They are unlikely to change now.”

“Oh I shouldn’t wish it,” Elizabeth protested. “I find them delightful.”

Mr Darcy laughed; it made the nerves in her stomach flutter unusually. “At least someone does.”

She took his proffered arm as they resumed their walk. Was she doomed to blush at Mr Darcy’s every gesture?

In another moment, when they had almost caught up to her sister and his friend, Mr Darcy said, “There is another member of my family who more particularly wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance?”

The surprise of such an application was great indeed, it was too great for her to know in what manner she acceded to it. She immediately felt that whatever desire Miss Darcy might have of being acquainted with her, must be the work of the brother, and without looking farther, it was satisfactory; it was gratifying to see this further proof

that whatever resentment remained had not made him think really ill of her.

She sensed some great hesitation in him still, and indeed, he seemed to struggle to say something in particular, or perhaps worried that whatever must be said would fracture their present equanimity.

“If you have no fixed engagements, I would like to invite your family to dine at Darcy House.”

She could not help feeling the honour of this application and stammered her acquiescence so long as it did not contradict any outstanding engagements by the Gardiners.

“I know of none, at present, my lord, and would be happy to meet Miss Darcy and to dine at Darcy House.”

His answering smile caused her traitorous heart to skip a confused beat.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

What could he mean by such an invitation? That thought had been in the forefront of her mind for the past two days. She stared into the mirror watching her aunt's maid arrange her hair into pretty looped ringlets. Why would he encourage her association with his sister now?

She was interrupted in her thoughts by the appearance of her aunt, who had slipped into the room she shared with Jane in Gracechurch Street and tossed the latest edition of the Morning Post upon the dressing table.

"You have been very sly, Lizzy," said Aunt Gardiner.

Elizabeth retrieved the paper to find a society entry circled by a graphite pencil. She read aloud, softly, then with rising incredulity, "Long one of the most sought-after bachelors in the kingdom, his newly-minted Lordship was lately seen squiring a smiling young lady about the shores of our Serpentine. His Lordship, long known for his exacting taste and standards, appeared very well pleased with his company as were two important—though often scandalous—members of his family. This mysterious miss is an unknown, though if she has managed to capture the interest, if not the heart, of Lord D—, she cannot long remain in the shadows of Cheapside."

"As I said, Lizzy, you have been very sly."

"I have done no such thing, and I cannot understand why you are putting such stock in the gossip notices of the Post when you have never done so in the past . "

"I never had such a vested interest in the comings and goings of the Haut-Ton."

“I do not see why that should change now.”

“Do you not?” asked Aunt Gardiner pointedly. “It is very evident that you have caught the interest of the gossip mill of the Ton along with that of Lord Dorset.”

Elizabeth swallowed nervously. “They are only interested in his Lordship because he has so recently been elevated. It will, no doubt, pass.”

“And you cannot really believe that, Lizzy,” said Jane. “Lord Dorset is single, young, and very handsome.”

“And very wealthy,” Aunt Gardiner added.

“Must every single man in possession of a fortune be in want of a wife?” Elizabeth quipped.

“You may joke, Lizzy, but the wider interest in his Lordship’s affairs will treat every overture of friendship as evidence of attachment.”

“Jane, I do not deny that Lord Dorset is an object of interest throughout the drawing rooms of Mayfair.”

“Of course, where his Lordship’s interest lies, there will lie the interest of the gossipmongers,” said Aunt Gardiner. “Perhaps that may be you, Elizabeth.”

“I hardly think that one walk into Hyde Park merits all this anxiety.”

Aunt Gardiner’s look was stern. “One walk and now a dinner invitation to meet his sister.”

“And when the family is still in mourning. Surely you must see the significance of his

attentions, Lizzy. You cannot still think that he dislikes you,” said Jane.

Elizabeth sighed. “No,” she conceded, but would explain no further.

“I believe that you have concealed much about the goings-on in Kent,” her sister said.

“Lord Dorset and I met frequently at Rosings,” Elizabeth said, “which I have never concealed.”

“Perhaps you have not concealed the facts of your prior association with the marquess,” Aunt Gardiner said, “but I fear that you have concealed the nature of your meetings.”

Elizabeth frowned. “You make it sound quite illicit, which, I assure you, it was not.”

“No indeed,” Jane agreed. “However, you cannot deny that Lord Dorset seems particularly invested in your good opinion, Lizzy.”

She did not answer. Any response would lend credence to an intimacy that she could not and did not wish to claim. Her own confusion over Mr Darcy’s motives made her reticent to say anything.

“I do believe that Lord Dorset admires you, Lizzy,” said Aunt Gardiner. “It was clear to your uncle as well, and I would warn you to be careful. He is a peer and you are only a gentleman’s daughter. I fear that his family would not welcome his interest in you.”

Elizabeth laughed nervously. “I assure you, Aunt, that Lord Dorset has no intention of making any offer to me.”

Not now, she thought. No man would propose to the same woman twice after being

so soundly rejected. Moreover, she had no desire for or expectation of an offer. Mr Darcy had proven himself to be more agreeable than she had given him credit and far less resentful than she could have supposed, but he was still proud. He had apologised for his interference in Jane and Mr Bingley's courtship, but he had never apologised for his insults towards her family, and his characterisation of their faults must only seem plainer and truer now that his notoriety and consequence was greater. There was also the matter of Mr Wickham.

However, neither Jane nor their aunt knew anything about the particulars of their quarrel, so she swallowed the retort upon her tongue when they looked at her disbelievingly.

Elizabeth, though, had no more room or patience for whatever might be their suppositions and drew their conversation to safer avenues, which they graciously allowed.

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As the time drew near for their departure, every minute increased her discomposure. She could think of nothing but her introduction to Miss Darcy even as she tried to drive any motives for such an introduction from her mind. She dreaded lest any partiality of the brother should have said too much in her favour, and felt unable to equal the sketch he might have made.

Before she was quite ready, their small party was delivered to Darcy House. The house was suitably grand but not uselessly fine; its understated elegance was beautiful and said much for the taste of its owner. Elizabeth did not miss her relatives' subtle expressions of awe and she might have felt the same were her nerves not so alive.

Mr Darcy met them in the drawing room, standing upon her entrance. A young

woman remained sitting on a sofa to his right. Elizabeth was both relieved and disappointed for the small party. Perhaps the lively presence of Colonel Fitzwilliam would have calmed something of her agitation, but she soon learned that the colonel along with another cousin would join them shortly for dinner. For now, all eyes and expectations seemed to rest upon Mr Darcy and herself. The formidable introduction was now to take place just as Elizabeth's ability to please fled, leaving her wrong-footed and unsure. She wanted to make a good impression, but knew not how nor why that should be her wish.

Miss Darcy was beautiful, though less so than her brother, and when Mr Darcy stepped forward to welcome them, his sister followed.

With astonishment did Elizabeth see that her new acquaintance was at least as much embarrassed as herself. Mr Wickham had described Miss Darcy as exceedingly proud and 'grown too much like her brother', but only a few minutes' observation taught Elizabeth that the young girl was only exceedingly shy. She looked at her brother often for guidance, whose gentle attentiveness melted something of Elizabeth's reserve. She recalled Darcy's caution about Mr Wickham, and this obvious falsehood regarding Miss Darcy made her more willing to believe him.

"I am very glad to have finally met you, Miss Elizabeth," Miss Darcy began once all the introductions were complete, "for I have heard so much about you."

"And I about you," said Elizabeth, taking a seat near Miss Darcy. "I have heard, for instance, that you are a most accomplished musician."

Miss Darcy flushed and would not meet her eyes. "My brother says that you play and sing very well."

Elizabeth looked instinctively towards Mr Darcy who was chatting amiably with her aunt and uncle. He looked very pleased and comfortable with his circumstances.



“Lord Dorset has surely exaggerated my ability—no doubt for some mischievous reason of his own.”

“Oh no, my brother always tells the absolute truth!”

“My sister is only exceedingly modest, Miss Darcy,” Jane said, joining their tête-à-tête. “She never boasts of her own abilities and is never comfortable when others do it for her even when such praise is warranted.”

“And my sister is only too kind. She only sees excellence where mediocrity resides.”

Miss Darcy smiled at their gentle teasing. “You make me quite envious. I have no sisters at all.”

“Then you shall have to borrow one of ours,” declared Elizabeth. “We are five in total and I am quite willing to lend one out on most days.”

Their hostess’s eyes widened though she laughed.

“You may suppose her to be joking, Miss Darcy, but Elizabeth is in earnest.”

“Indeed, I am. I would propose a trade should you have another brother.”

“I have only the one brother,” Miss Darcy lamented, “and I am quite unwilling to give him up.”

Elizabeth was charmed by this sweet devotion and the hint of wit beneath Miss Darcy’s shyness.

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Dinner awaited only the arrival of their final two guests, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Phillip Darcy. They retired to the smaller, though not less elegant, dining room suited for family parties. Elizabeth was mildly disappointed to find herself placed so far from Mr Darcy, and next to his sister where, she could only suppose, he meant to promote a possible friendship between the two women. To her right was the Darcys' cousin Phillip, while Colonel Fitzwilliam was across from her and next to Jane. He seemed very content with his situation, and quickly monopolised Jane's smiles and blushes. Elizabeth had never seen the colonel so eager to please; she would have to warn Jane, though she did not think that her sister's heart was in much danger as long as Charles Bingley remained in the picture.

In any case, Elizabeth had no opportunity of conversation with Mr Darcy, and after their joint citation in the *Morning Post*, she longed to discover his motives for continuing their acquaintance. He was a mystery she meant to puzzle out.

His cousin Phillip Darcy was another matter. Mr Phillip Darcy, MP was a curious mixture of hauteur and flirtatiousness, and his manner showed that he enjoyed feminine company and that he was used to making himself agreeable and charming to ladies. It was a different charm that Mr Bingley or even the more worldly Colonel Fitzwilliam exhibited—for they, at least, were sincere in their attentions.

Phillip Darcy was too clever by half. It annoyed Elizabeth that only she appeared to see it. Aunt Gardiner nearly swooned after him, and if Jane were not so occupied with the colonel, she might have been similarly affected. But then, Jane always did like to see the best of people.

“Dear Georgie tells me that you withstood many weeks under the scrutiny of the Gorgon of Kent,” Phillip said, as he motioned the footman for more wine.

Miss Darcy looked as though she wanted to laugh but felt that she should not. “My cousin Phillip has never been a favourite of Aunt Catherine.”

“That honour belongs entirely to Fitzwilliam,” Phillip said. “I am only happy I need not call her aunt.”

“What an ungenerous thing to say,” Miss Darcy scolded lightly, as though this was a frequent scold between them, and she looked pointedly at her cousin.

Phillip only shrugged. “I beg you to forgive my candour, Miss Elizabeth. I am too used to speaking as I find.”

“You are far too used to my uncle’s way,” said Miss Darcy.

“The late Marquess,” Phillip explained, “was fond of using his wealth and influence to do and speak as he liked without regard to anyone’s offence.”

“A novel approach to civility to be sure,” Elizabeth said. She did not know how to respond to such disclosures amongst the family when she was not their intimate.

Phillip smirked. “I do not believe that my uncle was very much concerned with civility, Miss Elizabeth. He could afford to give offence wherever he went.”

At Elizabeth’s expression of mild disapproval, he amended his statement, “Oh do not suppose that I am in any way criticising my uncle, God rest his soul. I have often admired such artless candour.”

“You seek to emulate your uncle, then?”

He laughed, “Touché, my dear Miss Elizabeth.”

“Phillip learned well at his knee then,” said Miss Darcy. “He was my uncle’s favourite.”

“Well, I must be someone’s,” Phillip replied, taking up his wine glass again.

To this, Miss Darcy had nothing to say, so he turned his attention to Elizabeth once again.

“I was astonished that my cousins intended to entertain this evening, Miss Elizabeth,” Phillip said. “Since we are still in heavy mourning, it is not expected, and when given a plausible excuse for avoiding unwanted social obligations, Fitzwilliam would usually seize upon the opportunity.”

Georgiana looked as though she would protest this picture of her brother, but Elizabeth replied, “You are severe upon your cousin.” Though not of a disposition overflowing with sociability, Mr Darcy was not the hermit his cousin’s words implied.

“I simply speak the truth,” he said. “Fitzwilliam is not fond of society unless they be excellent company.”

“If you mean that the Misses Bennet are excellent company, I cannot argue nor wonder at Fitzwilliam’s inclination for entertaining,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. He seemed pleased by the blush spreading over Jane’s cheeks.

“I do congratulate you for your conquests, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” Phillip said, raising his glass in a salute.

“I would thank you, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth replied, feeling strange to address anyone else by that appellation, “but I deserve no such praise.”

“Do you not?” Phillip speculated. “The ladies of Hertfordshire have certainly made an impression upon my cousin and my friend here.”

“I think it hard that men and women cannot be friends without inviting talk of conquests.”

“I agree with my sister,” Jane said.

“Interesting,” the gentleman replied with an arched brow.

Elizabeth risked glancing down the table towards Mr Darcy, who appeared to have caught the tenor of their discussion. He gave her a soft, curious smile that she felt down to her toes and would not look away, even when her aunt and uncle’s attention followed his object. She coloured. Had Mr Darcy heard her mild defence of him?

She started at the sound of Phillip’s smirking tone.

“Surely Lord Dorset is not so interesting that you would neglect your dinner companions, Miss Elizabeth?”

She would not allow this Mr Darcy to discompose her, and said through gritted teeth, “I neglect no one, sir.”

“Indeed,” Miss Darcy said. “You should not tease her so, Phillip. It is hardly gentlemanly.”

Evidently, there was someone that Miss Darcy was not shy of, and her cousin seemed to delight in it. The colonel sent him a hard stare of warning.

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Mr Darcy walked them out to hand the ladies into their carriage at the end of the evening. The air was a little cool and Elizabeth tugged her shawl tighter around her shoulders. The streetlamps were more numerous and spread out evenly, casting a

warm glow upon the street. There were many carriages still out, the clip clop of horses' hooves echoing on the pavement.

It somehow felt... intimate.

"Thank you for coming, Miss Elizabeth," Mr Darcy said, walking with her to the curb, his eyes lingering for a moment upon her face. The muted streetlight drew shadows across his features, highlighting his strong jawline and the curve of his eyes, which seemed softer in the evening air. He looked quite beautiful.

"Thank you for the invitation, Mr Darcy," she replied and then flushed for her faux pas. "I am sorry. I still think of you as Mr Darcy rather than Lord Dorset. It is difficult to think of you differently."

His smile was soft but guarded. "I hope not too difficult." His voice was laced with such meaning that her breath caught.

There was so much they could not say before others. Her aunt and uncle had given them some privacy for a farewell, but a few steps did not conceal their words.

"No," she murmured. "In some ways, it is not difficult at all, my lord . "

His smile widened and she found herself answering it shyly.

"That is all I should wish for this night, Miss Elizabeth." He took her hand and kissed it, which she felt the spark of through her kid gloves.

Understandably flustered by this new gesture from him, she said with some confusion, "Miss Darcy is a dear girl, my lord. I- I should like to know her better."

"Then you shall, Miss Elizabeth," he said quietly.

He turned to hand Jane into the carriage first, and all the while, Elizabeth ruminated on the fact that they had not truly spoken all evening. She was no nearer understanding him than she had been before. However, when he took her hand again to assist her into the carriage, she was struck by the notion that he might have loved her enough to still wish for her good opinion now when by all reason there could be nothing between them.

She did not for a moment believe that she had the power to bring on a renewal of his addresses. He was generous enough not to hold their quarrel against her and to wish her well, but he was a lord and she but a gentlewoman who had spurned him once before. She did not even wish for the possibility, but she felt a real interest in his welfare and hoped that however much she may have injured him, he would not long suffer the disappointment.

She leaned forward to watch him from the window, briefly standing for a moment under the streetlamp before turning and walking slowly back to his house.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

One Week Later

Matlock House, London

“What can you mean by singling out a young lady at such a time as this?” asked Lord Matlock, flinging the latest Morning Post onto the billiard table where Darcy and Richard had been playing a casual game. “And a lady who is unconnected to the family?”

Darcy sat his cue stick to the side to take up the paper. He had seen the earlier mention of himself walking with Elizabeth in Hyde Park. Half-way down various comings and goings, he saw another thinly veiled citation and cursed the nosy busybodies of the Ton who often ran to the Post with various suppositions and sightings.

“An unknown carriage was spotted in the vicinity of Grosvenor Square, where it might be supposed that the mysterious young lady with laughing eyes was actually dining with Lord D— and Miss D—. If it be true, what can such intimacy mean while the family is still mourning for the late Marquess? Will this young Hertfordshire miss long bear the name of B?”

He could only imagine what Elizabeth must be thinking, that she must be angry with him for making her an object of discussion across Mayfair. He should have known better. He did know better, but he did not often think clearly in her presence, nor act rationally with the possibility of seeing her again.

Darcy refrained from threading his fingers through his hair or seeking a finger of



whiskey, which would reveal his agitation and the importance of Elizabeth to him.

“Well?” Lord Matlock urged. “What does all this mean? Who is the lady?”

“I did not take you for a reader of these columns, Uncle,” Darcy said, and tossed the paper to a side table with studied casualness.

“It is important to be aware of the talk in Society as a peer. You will soon learn that the gossip of the drawing rooms is consequential to the alliances of the Lords, Nephew,” he replied.

“Mother is a great reader of them,” Richard explained, “and reports interesting bits to Father.”

Before Richard could take up the paper to read it for himself, Phillip jumped up to seize it and let out a low whistle. “Twice in two weeks, Fitzwilliam. You will be raising expectations.”

Lord Matlock looked hard at this revelation. “Lady Matlock neglected to tell me of the first mention.”

“I hardly think that taking a walk in Hyde Park is a newsworthy affair,” Darcy retorted. “Nor do I see why anyone would be interested in who I invite to dine at Darcy House.”

Lord Matlock’s brow remained knitted. “It would not normally be newsworthy, my boy, but as the Post points out, you have invited a young lady to an intimate family dinner whilst you are still in deep mourning. For God’s sake, you haven’t even appeared yet in the House of Lords, but this unknown miss is gracing your table.”

“I think you are making too much of it, Uncle.”

His uncle looked entirely exasperated. “Who is the lady? Who are her parents?”

Darcy admitted with some reluctance, “Her name is Elizabeth Bennet and her father has an estate near Meryton in Hertfordshire.” He picked up his cue to return to the game.

“A perfectly respectable family,” Richard volunteered as a measure of support.

“What of her connections? Does she have a suitable fortune?”

Before either Darcy or Richard could be properly annoyed by the line of interrogation, Phillip interrupted, “I hardly see what it matters. To my knowledge, my cousin has no plan to marry soon, least of all to a Miss Bennet of Hertfordshire.”

Lord Matlock seemed buoyed by the declaration. “It is true that you shouldn’t marry until your three months of mourning are up, unless, of course, it was a pre-existing engagement,” he paused and sat near Phillip, who offered him a snifter of brandy. “You should formally announce your engagement to Anne soon.”

Darcy finished his turn and carefully chalked the tip of his cue stick. “I have no intention of doing so.”

“Why? No one will think it strange since everyone expects it, Fitzwilliam. It would ease my mind to see you well settled into your station with a proper hostess before the next session of Parliament.”

“And you think Anne suited to that office?” asked Richard with great incredulity.

“Anne’s connections are sound. Her uncle Thomas de Bourgh is a great Whig ally in the Commons.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “I will not marry Anne.”

“She would be a credit to you, Nephew.”

“I do not want to marry her and I will not.”

“Have you some romantical notion of marriage, my boy?” his uncle asked, which sparked irritation in Darcy’s breast.

“Marriage is a partnership, a matter of loyalty,” Lord Matlock continued. “You’d do better to put aside the idea of a companionate marriage for one of soundness and practicality. That is a better foundation than the flimsy notion of love.”

“I do not believe that I have ever shared what my notion of marriage should be with anyone and I do not plan to do so now, unless it be someone with whom I plan to enter into that state,” Darcy said.

Richard looked like he wished to say something but held his tongue.

“Anne would be a good match for you with her connections and her fifty thousand pounds” his uncle tried again.

“I have no need of Anne’s connections or her money, and I’ve heard this argument enough from Aunt Catherine,” Darcy said. “Let me be clear, I will not, will not marry Anne.”

Lord Matlock flushed in irritation, but Phillip interrupted again before he could make another argument. “There is no need for Fitzwilliam to rush into any marriage. He has just ascended to the marquessate—let him settle into that role before he rushes into another.”

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Richard and Darcy were silent for much of the walk back to Darcy House. Phillip had bid them adieu for the livelier company to be found at White's, though he had promised to escort Grandmama to dinner later that evening.

"My father may relent for a while, Fitzwilliam, but he is determined to cement the power and influence of the Dorset marquessate to the Matlocks and, thus, the Whigs."

"So I see," Darcy snorted. "My mother was a Fitzwilliam, is that not connection enough?"

"Better to have a wife with Fitzwilliam blood too than to bring an unknown into the family. An unknown you can never predict and you know as well as I that my father despises what he cannot predict and direct."

"Then he must prepare himself to be disappointed. The more that he and Aunt Catherine push me to marry Anne, the less inclined I am to oblige them."

"I know that, but they do not know you so well as I do. He sees you as a surer bet for his party than your uncle ever was. The old Marquess had too many Tories amongst his closest associates to make my father easy."

"I will not be a puppet for Lord Matlock."

"I believe my father knows that, but he also recognises that you have convictions, which your uncle never had. Father can work with that, because he knows your boundaries."

They turned the corner, leaving Brook Street for Grosvenor Square proper. The lane was more crowded and the pair nodded to several ladies and gentlemen ambling

towards Hyde Park as it was nearing the fashionable hour.

“The pressure will only increase, Fitzwilliam,” said Richard. “My mother and Cassandra have been drawing up a veritable list of potential brides.”

Darcy groaned. He was not yet recovered enough from Elizabeth to think of any other lady. He was not ready to make permanent and irrevocable her absence by offering her place to someone else. Even the thought of it made him ill, it would be unfair to another when he was still so deeply in love with her.

“I do not understand this urgency,” Darcy said. “They have never before been so determined to see me married.”

“Cassandra would not mind seeing her sister as your Marchioness.”

“Then, Lady Aspen is bound to be as disappointed as the rest. Margaret Seymour is barely older than Georgie.”

Richard winced. “Yes, so I have told my sister when the young lady has been promoted to me as well. My brother Aspen says she is determined to marry Margot to one of the family.”

That was hardly a secret. Richard’s sister-in-law Cassandra, the Viscountess Aspen had used her position as Patroness of Almack’s to liberally promote her own family.

“I believe that Mother is a little nervous that you will succumb to Aunt Catherine’s wishes,” Richard continued. “Though she has nothing against Anne, Mother says that it is bad enough to count her a sister. She doesn’t want to see her as your mother.”

Darcy murmured some acknowledgement. It was not surprising. There was little love between the two women. Lady Matlock had been Lady Anne’s closest friend and

jealous of the usurpation of a maternal role that Lady Catherine had tried to play for him and Georgiana upon their mother's death.

"I will not oblige them either. I mean to please only myself in my choice of a wife. It is important for Georgiana to like her future sister, but no one else's opinion will at all matter to me."

Richard arched a brow. "Then you should marry Miss Elizabeth. Georgiana certainly liked her."

"Miss Elizabeth will not have me." He was growing used to the flash of pain that accompanied this acknowledgement. Sometimes such pain was welcome, because it was better than the alternative of numbness, which he otherwise felt. The shock had not completely worn away.

She did not want him. The thought rang like a constant echo, recalling him with a jolt throughout his day and reminding him of his ridiculous stupidity. He must have said something of this sentiment aloud for Richard dismissed the suggestion.

"I am not so certain that Miss Elizabeth is so unmoveable upon the point as you believe. She seemed to be warm enough at dinner the other night."

"Miss Elizabeth is all politeness."

Richard snorted, "I know that you are lovesick for her, Fitzwilliam, but she is not all politeness. I rather think you like that about her."

Darcy could not deny it.

"Miss Elizabeth wouldn't cut you, certainly," Richard was saying, "and she made a genuine effort with Georgie. She was friendlier than I've seen to you. She defended

you against Phillip's mild teasing of your character."

His heart turned over, and Darcy looked away, so that Richard would not see the smile that threatened. It was ridiculous, really, that such small evidence against absolute dislike could thrill him.

"You should propose to her again, Fitzwilliam."

"What?" Darcy stopped, forcing Richard to stop as well.

"You should propose. Her answer may be different this time."

Darcy scoffed. "You did not hear the tenor of her refusal, Richard."

"That was before your circumstances were changed and before you made amends with Bingley."

Darcy began walking.

"Miss Elizabeth is not mercenary. If she was, she would have accepted my first offer however I presented it."

"True," Richard acknowledged as they entered Darcy House.

They continued to his study, where they would be assured of more privacy. Darcy poured them each a tumbler of cognac, a unique vintage that he found amongst his uncle's collection.

"Miss Elizabeth is the practical sort, I think," Richard said. "We know that her father failed in breaking the entail for lack of funds. You could use that to your advantage."

“I will not bribe her to marry me.”

“I did not say that you should, but she may be more aware of the material advantages of such a match now, since we know from Aunt Catherine’s loose tongue that she advised Collins not to accept anything less than fifteen thousand pounds to break the entail.”

“Pretty piece of business, was it not?” Darcy scoffed. “To Collins, Aunt Catherine’s word is sacrosanct. He will hold out for that fifteen thousand until the grave whatever argument is presented to him, and when he inherits Longbourn, he’ll run it to the ground. He has not the sense to be a proper landowner.”

Richard smiled. “Perhaps that is the argument you should make to Miss Elizabeth. Besides, that sum is nothing to you now.”

Darcy bristled. It was still unsettling to consider the increase in his fortune which now made him the wealthiest unmarried noble in England—and the resultant unpainted target upon his back. It felt the change even in his family, and most certainly in his Uncle Matlock, who now seemed to view Darcy as some unclaimed Fitzwilliam property.

He took a long drink and sat back into his chair. “There is still the matter of Wickham. She blames me for ruining his life.”

“I still think you should tell her the full truth about Wickham.”

“I did warn her to be on her guard.”

Richard shook his head. “She needs to know the truth, especially if that is why she will not agree to marry you.”



“I will not betray Georgie’s confidence,” he muttered. No matter what it cost him. He sat up straighter when a tentative knock was heard at the door. Georgiana appeared. She held a roll of parchment in her hand, which she presented excitedly to her brother.

“What is this?” he asked.

“A list of items in the Duke of Roxburghe’s library, which will be auctioned later this month. You will see a first edition of the Decameron listed. Are you not pleased, Brother?”

Darcy smiled widely and felt a spark of something almost like happiness. “Very pleased, my dear.”

“How was your outing with Eleanor and Cassandra?” Richard asked. His sister-in-law Lady Aspen and his younger sister Eleanor had been determined to draw Georgiana out of her shyness and to provide her with more feminine companionship since they had detected a lingering sadness the past autumn. Darcy had been grateful; despite his best efforts, he was not of a disposition given to comforting others easily, especially young women suffering from heartbreak.

“Very well. I found some new sheet music and some bonnets and ribbons, which you will care nothing for,” she replied, still standing in the doorway. Her eyes sparkled, and she even teased them. “However, I interrupted you both and you appeared very serious when I walked in, so I shall leave you both to it. You shall hear all about my ribbons at dinner tonight with Grandmama, if it pleases you.”

“Georgie appears more recovered every time I see her,” Richard observed when she left.

“Yes, I am very proud of her.”

“Miss Elizabeth would be good for her. She needs a sister.”

Darcy frowned. “I do not need everyone in my family trying to marry me off.”

Richard shrugged. “At least my choice aligns with yours.”

Darcy stared into his glass. He ought to deny Richard’s reasoning outright. He did not want to be twice rejected, but there was some soundness in his cousin’s argument. He had made some headway with Elizabeth. She seemed to think better of him than she had, but there was still some distance and measure of distrust, which could not be helped by the *Morning Post*’s notice of them. And yet, he wanted to hope, desperately wanted to hope that there was still some way of making her his wife.

“I will think on it,” Darcy finally acceded, ready to be done with the conversation. The last thing he wanted to do was waste more time on this tiring topic. He knew in his heart, there would never be another he’d admire as much as Elizabeth Bennet, no matter what his family desired.

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Darcy spent much of the night considering Richard's argument, especially after his grandmother's very pointed list of young ladies she considered to be eligible and her not-so-subtle promotion of his cousin Lady Claire Olivier to be his Marchioness. However, in the end, he was motivated by a short article in the latest edition of the Post . The column was essentially a list of the most eligible unclaimed bachelors of the ton. They had even the gall to print approximations of yearly income, including the inflation in his own purse since his elevation to the marquessate.

He groaned and tossed the paper towards Richard, who had stayed the evening at Darcy House rather than the more austere quarters of his bachelor rooms in the Albany.

"At least they did not make an allusion to Miss Bennet this time," was Richard's helpful rejoinder.

At least there was that. He'd already faced his grandmother's interrogation over Elizabeth and her antecedents during their tea the previous day.

"It will make the rest of this Season and the next that much more unbearable," Darcy said. Indeed, his secretary was already fielding dinner invitations in advance of his mourning period ending.

"Should you remain a bachelor, yes, then it should," Richard muttered, taking a final drink of coffee before excusing himself to meet with his major general. "At least call upon the lady, for God's sake, Fitzwilliam, instead of moping."

Darcy resisted protesting that he had not been moping since he rather feared that

would be an untruth. So, he roused himself to call upon Elizabeth, making quick excuses to Georgiana and Mrs Annesley when they appeared to break their fast.

“Where are you off to, Brother?” she asked, taking a plate from the sideboard.

“I have a few matters to attend to,” he said vaguely, and promised to be back for dinner in the evening.

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Darcy ordered his coachman to take the slightly longer route past St Paul’s Cathedral to allow himself time with his thoughts. He was reasonably nervous, but also reasonably sure that she would at least receive him. He wanted only to judge whether he had any reason to hope for a change in her opinion of him. He did not mean to propose today, but the sight of her alone in the parlour made him want to lay his life at her feet like a schoolboy. She looked concerned and only a little surprised to see him. There were faint circles of purple beneath her eyes, suggesting sleepless nights.

Elizabeth told him that Mrs Gardiner and Miss Bennet had accompanied the children to Hyde Park, where they’d been promised a visit to the cakehouse. “As you can see,” she said with deliberate lightness, “I am quite left to my own devices, my lord.”

“Being the great walker that you are, Miss Bennet, I am surprised that you did not accompany them.”

“I do not always wish to be in the midst of crowds and on such a nice day as this, the park is sure to be filled with many gaggles of children. It is nice to have some time to oneself, is it not?”

Darcy stepped back. “I am- I am sorry for intruding then. I may call another time.”

Elizabeth coloured and gestured for him to sit with some agitation. “I did not mean to suggest that you are unwelcome, sir. I have had the whole morning to myself and I am happy to have any intelligent conversation now.”

Darcy found her flustered embarrassment charming, and her words encouraging, so he sat on the sofa across from her as she rang for some tea.

Elizabeth sat down the book she had been reading upon his entrance, which he recognised to be Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* .

“You are an admirer of Byron, Miss Bennet?” he asked with an arched brow.

“Yes, I know that he is shocking, but the book is vastly entertaining, even if one is tempted to strangle Harold at several points.”

“I do not judge, Miss Bennet. I have read it myself and pretend not to notice when Georgiana steals it to read as well.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You surprise me sometimes, Lord Dorset.”

“You often surprise me, Miss Bennet.”

“I am glad of that, I think. I shouldn’t like to be predictable.”

“Heaven forbid. You could never be that . ”

A low tenderness in Mr Darcy's voice startled Elizabeth, though she looked away to conceal her reaction and the unexpected frisson that curled up her spine. They had been thrown together often since that unfortunate day in Kent, but never had she felt his past words so close to the surface as now.

Elizabeth did not know what to make of Mr Darcy's visit. It had been six days since their dining at Darcy House and she'd neither seen nor heard from him, though Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley had called upon them at Gracechurch Street. Mr Darcy was even absent when Mr Bingley called upon Jane or escorted her to Hyde Park. She had expected to see him not two days ago when Colonel Fitzwilliam had called, and even allowed herself to be disappointed when he did not follow his cousin.

That was a confusing and shocking revelation all on its own. She liked him, well enough at least to note and miss his absence and to be ashamed of some of her intemperate words in the past. There were times when she was inclined to believe her aunt and sister's supposition that Mr Darcy meant to secure her good opinion, even court her properly. But then, he had not called, and such behaviour recalled to her the unlikelihood of a man proposing twice. Not that she wanted him to court her.

Mr Darcy was a teasing man and she had been resolved to think no more about him, even when her name almost appeared in another mention in the Post alongside his own.

Except now he was here and looking decidedly unnerved.

They had lapsed into uncomfortable silence upon the delivery of tea. Elizabeth was glad of the occupation of pouring, for she was reminded too much of their awkward

meetings in Kent. There was a comfortable neutrality in asking how he took his tea, one sugar, no milk or cream.

“We must have some conversation, Lord Dorset,” she teased. “It would be odd to be sitting together drinking tea in silence, do not you think?”

Mr Darcy smiled at this returning thread in their conversation. “Ah, but am I not of the taciturn disposition that is disinclined to say anything unless it be to amaze the whole room?”

She laughed that he could mock himself agreeably. “You may speak of whatever you like, my lord, and I will be sure to be amazed.”

Mr Darcy raised an eyebrow in evident amusement. “You are too kind, Miss Bennet.” He still appeared unsettled somehow. He took a drink of his tea and then lay it to the side, forgotten.

“I know that our friendship has often been rocky, my lord, but we have come a long way, have we not?”

Mr Darcy started, his eyes gleaming at the import of her words. “Are we friends then, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth cleared her throat to disguise her embarrassment. “I suppose we might be,” she murmured and unnecessarily added another cube of sugar to her tea. It would be too sweet for her tastes, but her hands must have some occupation or she’d take them up to her cheeks to feel the heat of her blushes.

“I should not ask such a question which seems to beg for some reassurance on your part,” Mr Darcy amended. “I have been remiss in apologising to you for my words in Kent—I do not apologise for the sincere admiration behind my declaration, but the

mode of delivery was not...”

She smiled ruefully. “I imagine that we both have cause to repine our behaviour that wretched day and would wish unsaid many things.”

“Perhaps,” he said slowly, “but you were honest and I cannot fault you for that honesty nor the defence of your sister and your family.”

“Knowing her goodness, who would not defend Jane?”

He smiled wryly. “Yes, who would not?”

“But you have already apologised for separating Mr Bingley from my sister and remedied the fault by bringing them together again. I hope that you do not feel you must apologise once more, Lord Dorset.”

“No,” he muttered and looked away. Neither of them mentioned Mr Wickham, though the thought of him lingered in Elizabeth’s mind and she felt that the unspoken accusation must be so present for Mr Darcy too. He had warned her to be careful of Mr Wickham and yet had never explained himself. This she did not say.

“What brings you here today, Lord Dorset?” she asked for lack of anything else to say.

He shifted uncomfortably and clinched his jaw. She wondered if he would retreat to the windows as he had often done at Netherfield and Rosings; but he did not, and when he turned to her again, she flushed at the vulnerability in his expression.

He shifted again and leaned forwards, placing his forearms upon his knees.

“My lord?” She set her own teacup aside.



“Miss Bennet,” he began. His voice was quiet but full of meaning. “Do I have any hope that you could—in the future—reconsider my suit?”

He winced, though whether it was for the awkwardness of their present situation or the recollection of Hunsford, she could not say.

For her part, she was supremely embarrassed. She grasped the fabric at her knees, clinching and causing wrinkles from the sweat of her palms. So her aunt and sister had been right. Yet, it didn’t make sense. She had refused him, absolutely and irrevocably refused him. He was not Mr Collins with his feigned knowledge of the coquetry of ladies. There had been no mistake then, though her present feelings for the gentleman were quite confused.

“I- Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you want me? Especially after ...” She resisted a strong urge to flee. It wouldn’t do to leave him here while she escaped upstairs to her room or to the crowded street merely to avoid this dreadful embarrassment.

Mr Darcy leaned back and looked at her gravely for a long moment. It was not an expression she had ever seen from him. There was sadness, yes, and something of resignation, but it prickled at the back of her neck until she determinedly looked away.

“You do not believe that I sincerely admire you,” he declared with some wonder, almost as though he were speaking to himself.

“I do not know what to believe, my lord. Until that day in Hunsford, I’d never seen any evidence that you... well, I often thought your gaze critical and I wondered what

was so especially offensive about me,” she confessed and bit her lip. “I’m sorry, I should not have—”

“No!” he interrupted. “I would know what you are thinking. I- I have often read you wrong and I cannot make the same mistake again.”

She could not meet his eyes.

“Though I am sorry that you should have thought that I ever looked upon you so critically.”

She scoffed quietly as the words of his initial insult resounded in her head.

Not handsome enough to tempt me.

His pronouncement upon their introduction had deeply wounded her pride. She could hardly believe that he had gone from dismissive to admiring in only some short months.

“Miss Bennet,” he said softly, “I do sincerely admire you and I do not regret that confession. It has been many months since I have considered you the handsomest woman of my acquaintance.”

Her cheeks must be perfect vermillion and she did not refrain from pressing her hands idly to the heated flesh as she turned to Mr Darcy again. He was still leaning back in his seat, his expression soft and vulnerable. A single errant curl had fallen onto his forehead.

“You cannot mean that,” she murmured.

“But it is not only your beauty that I admire, Miss Bennet, but the liveliness of your

mind, your wit and intelligence, your kindness.” He started to lean forwards again, but held himself back, watching her carefully.

Elizabeth’s hands seemed to flutter of their own accord so she smoothed her wrinkled dress and then rested them upon her lap before getting up entirely and moving towards the window. Goodness, had he spoken so at Hunsford she might have been kinder in her refusal and more cognisant of any pain she inflicted.

“I did not mean to make you uneasy, Miss Bennet.” He got up, but did not move closer, for which she was grateful. Her nerves flared hot.

“I am only astonished, my lord.”

“I still want to marry you, Miss Bennet.”

Her eyes widened. She longed to ask why again but refrained from any question which would seem purposely to ask for reassurances of his admiration. Instead, she settled upon, “But you are now a marquess and I am only the daughter of a simple country gentleman. If our stations were so disparate before, they are only more so now.”

“It was but a trick of fate that led me to this title,” he insisted. “I was born a gentleman and you are a gentlewoman. So far, we are equal.”

“That was not your opinion only a month ago, my lord.”

He grimaced. “I will forever regret my words then, Miss Bennet.”

“But do you regret the sentiment behind them?” she asked with an arched brow and glanced out the window again, idly watching the traffic below to still her nerves.

“I regret that I ever made you feel inferior in any way.”

It was a pretty sentiment, but not an answer to her question.

“My lord, I will be candid if you will hear me,” she said.

“Miss Bennet,” he said wryly, “you have only ever been candid with me.”

She smiled a little and took a deep breath, before turning to face Mr Darcy completely again. His earnest expression did things she could not explain to her insides.

“I have seen firsthand the consequences of an unequal marriage and I do not wish that for myself. I want a partner to share my burdens and my joys and someone who respects me as I respect him,” she confessed. Her voice was tremulous and she was jittery with the knowledge that these words lent credence to his previous observation of her parents. “I would never want my husband to be embarrassed and to resent my presence in his life.”

“And you do not feel that I can be that partner.”

She frowned. “I do not know, my lord.”

“You must know that I respect you utterly and completely.”

“Do you?”

He flushed. “I respect your family because they are your family, Miss Bennet.”

“Perhaps you do, my lord,” she acknowledged, doubt still creeping into her tone.

“But I wonder that you respect me enough for marriage.”

“I do not- I have not the privilege of understanding you.”

Elizabeth took another deep breath. “There is still the matter of Mr Wickham,” she said, noting how he stiffened and clinched his jaw at the mention of Mr Wickham. But he did not interrupt and motioned for her to continue.

“You have said—warned me, really—that Mr Wickham may not be all that he appears to be, yet, you do not apparently respect me enough to tell me why nor answer any questions I may have.”

“You have not asked me any questions regarding Wickham,” he said defensively.

She raised an eyebrow. “Do not evade the point, my lord, I beg you.”

“I am not evading anything, Miss Bennet,” he replied.

“Why is Mr Wickham not to be trusted?”

Mr Darcy groaned and pressed a hand to his brow in frustration. “I do not wish to argue about Wickham.”

“Nor do I,” she answered, “but I do wish to hear your story as I have heard his.”

“I can only imagine what Wickham may have told you.”

“That you denied him a living explicitly meant to be his in your father’s will.”

“And you take him for his word, but not mine?” he asked hotly.

“What reasons have you given me to believe you on this matter, my lord?”

“I told you that he is not to be trusted, that he is not an honourable man.”

“But you did not provide me with any sort of explanation. Am I only to trust your proclamation and nothing else? At least Mr Wickham explained to me the reason behind your enmity.”

“I suppose his happy manners give him some credibility, shallow as they may be.”

“I have the ability to reason, my lord.” Elizabeth bit her lip against further retort. “You do not respect me to tell me the truth—that was the point I wished to make, my lord. You wish to make me your wife, yet you will not trust me with an explanation? You must see how I—” she paused, feeling her hackles rise.

Mr Darcy looked at her again and softened. He joined her at the window but kept a respectable distance. In the sunlight, she noticed his pained expression. “I apologise, Miss Bennet. I fear that Wickham brings out the worst in me.”

“Yes, he does,” she agreed and saw that he looked at her fondly.

“Lord Dorset, marriage for a woman will determine her whole life for good or ill. Men, when they have chosen wrongly, may find escape in other avenues—perhaps in careers and interests that take them out of the home. Their whole identities are their own, their respectability their own. But for women, a wrong choice will ruin her life. When we marry, we become an extension of our husbands, join their households and take their names. Our lives are hardly our own—and that is even before the arrival of children. We have no escape nor hope of one if we marry badly. Marriage is our vocation and our life,” she explained. “Even if we are so fortunate to possess wealth or marry a title.”

His expression was still soft and grave, but he looked at her for a long moment as she met his eyes unwavering. He must understand her predicament. She had only a few

times to answer yes or no in freedom and she would make them count.

“That is why I must know about Mr Wickham. I must know whether the man who asks to marry me has a resentful temper.”

Mr Darcy remained silent for a moment longer and then he nodded. “Wickham is the son of my father’s steward and a former governess for the daughters of my late uncle, the Marquess,” he began. He told her of the special interest that Lord George Darcy had taken in giving the young Wickham a gentleman’s education, that early recognising Wickham’s intelligence and potential, he paid for his schools and formed him for the Church, too often spoiling him along the way.

“My mother did not appreciate the preference, nor the fact that people began to talk of Wickham being my father’s natural child.”

“Good God!” she exclaimed.

“Yes,” Mr Darcy said with a grim smile. “One could hardly blame her. It was untrue, of course. My father was utterly devoted to my mother. Theirs was a ‘true partnership’ as you so eloquently described earlier.”

He took a deep breath. “From a young age, I recognised that Wickham was ill-suited for religious life. I cannot relate such details that are unsuitable for a lady’s ears, but I will say that by the time we were at Cambridge, Wickham’s habits were not those of a gentleman, let alone those of a clergyman. My father was always loath to believe in any fault of his favourite and Wickham knew how to exploit his affection.”

The distaste in Mr Darcy’s voice was clear.

“My lord, I do not know what to say.”

He shrugged. “My father did leave the Kympton living for his godson as soon as it became vacant. However, Wickham had no wish to become a vicar—and had never taken orders. Thus, he asked for, and was granted, the sum of three thousand pounds in lieu of the living. Within three years, he had lost the entire sum at the gaming tables.”

Elizabeth gasped. “I am sorry. I do not know what to say,” she said again.

“There is another, more painful affair between Wickham and my family that I cannot disclose to you, Miss Bennet. Believe me when I say that it is not a lack of respect or trust that forbids disclosure, but it is not my story to tell.”

Elizabeth swallowed and nodded. She believed Mr Darcy, every word, for—though much worse than anything she suspected of him—Mr Darcy’s intelligence met her own suspicion. “I thank you for confiding what must be painful indeed.”

“I should have said something before, but I have always been reluctant to expose my business before the world. Should you wish for further verification, you may speak with my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. He knows of all my dealings with Wickham.”

His words stung. She had believed Mr Wickham upon very little acquaintance and now felt the impropriety of his confession before virtual strangers. How quickly the story of Mr Darcy’s unjust behaviour had spread, though Mr Wickham had first suggested that he wanted to keep the matter private. What a fool she had been.

She sighed. “I have been so wilfully blind.”

“You are not the first to be taken in by Wickham,” he said with a quiet sadness.

“You need not find excuses for me,” she said. “My vanity was taken by his flattery. It is not pleasant to be confronted with such a picture of oneself.”



“I can find nothing wanting in you, Miss Bennet.”

She laughed, a nervous sort of laughter that might have been touched by bitterness had she any right to that sentiment. She was ashamed of herself. “I do not see how you can say such things to me, my lord.”

“I only speak the truth. You do not—cannot—see what a wonder you are.”

Elizabeth coloured. “Lord Dorset...” but she knew not how to continue or what she would say.

“You say that you want an equal partnership and someone who will value you. I can give you that, I promise you. I value you now, your intelligence and independence. I will not trap you in any sort of cage like Sterne’s wretched bird.”

The image from Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* ran through her mind, the pitiful creature beating its breast against the cage and crying for the futility of its liberator. “I cannot get out,” said the starling, “I cannot get out.” That Mr Darcy read such things too, appreciated and valued them thrilled her, and made her understand his disposition better.

“I am no trapped starling,” she argued.

“You are wasted in Hertfordshire, Miss Bennet. You were meant for more than obscurity,” Mr Darcy said, risking another step towards her, since anger was absent in her tone.

“I suppose you mean to be my liberator from such fate.”

“I would have you raised to a station more suited to your worth. What a wonder you’d be as a marchioness.”

She arched a brow. “Your marchioness, I suppose?”

“Of course,” he smiled, “but then, I felt much the same when I wanted to make you Mrs Darcy.”

She sighed again. “Lord Dorset, my opinion of your character has improved greatly since we parted in Kent. However, I do not care for you in the way that a wife should care for her husband.”

“I am well aware of that, Miss Bennet,” he said, smiling wryly. “You made your feelings quite clear on that point in the past. I do not expect so quick a revolution in your sentiments. However, I do feel that we are suited for one another. Your idea of marriage coincides with my own, and your loyalty and independence of spirit is a rarity in my world. I would treasure such a disposition in my wife.”

“Are you asking me to marry you again?”

“I would do so if I thought that I could obtain your consent.”

“Even with the knowledge that I do not love you?”

Mr Darcy looked away from her. He’d spoken of admiration and respect this afternoon but said not a word of love. The lack bothered her more than it should have, perhaps, since her own feelings did not—could not—rise to such a height. Perhaps he did not love her now, whatever their supposed compatibility, though his admiration had not faded. That was a selfish thought, was it not?

“My parents did not marry for love,” he said, “but they were very happy. In the end, they were entirely devoted to one another.”

“Perhaps it does happen in that way for some couples,” Elizabeth acknowledged, “but

it does not often happen for most.” She paused, and then added reluctantly, “I wanted to marry for love.”

Mr Darcy took a deep breath and reached out to take both of her hands. Neither wore gloves, and she was rooted to the sight of their bare flesh touching, the large warmth of his hands cradling hers. His thumbs swept over her knuckles. She swallowed thickly but allowed him the liberty.

At the very least, she was not indifferent to him. She was not unaware of the sheer beauty of his form and flushed under the watchfulness of his solemn eyes.

“Let us not speak of love this afternoon, Miss Bennet.” He stopped there, and she recalled his previous declaration. In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.

“We have this afternoon confessed all manner of things, but I find that I have another confession to make.”

She started and he released her hands. She still felt the warmth of his touch. “Tell me quickly then.”

“I have heard through my aunt, Lady Catherine, that your father has been trying to break the entail upon Longbourn. I will help you in that endeavour whether you accept my suit or not.”

Elizabeth gasped. Mr Darcy seemed determined to surprise her today. “Mr Collins wants a great deal of money to break it.”

“Yes, I know.”

“We are friends, are we not?”

She smiled at this parrot of her words. “Whatever else we are,” she admitted, “we must be friends after the last few weeks.” In another moment, she added, “I appreciate your willingness to help, but I could not allow it. It wouldn’t be your place to involve yourself in this affair, most especially when your aunt is connected to the matter.”

“Perhaps not, but I have never agreed with entails, and the undue burden placed upon families, especially women. It is not fair for you or your sisters to lose your inheritance to such a man.”

She acknowledged the unfairness, but it was the way of the world.

Mr Darcy could not resist adding a sly argument. “If I were your husband, Miss Bennet, it would be no impropriety to assist your father in breaking the entail. It would be done, regardless of the cost.”

“My lord Dorset, one would almost think that you mean to bribe me into accepting a proposal you have not yet rendered,” she teased, though there was a thread of truth.

“Perish the thought,” he replied. “But I am not above using every argument in my favour.”

“I see that you are not.” Elizabeth took a step back. “But I am not mercenary, my lord.”

“No, but you are practical, Miss Bennet.”

“Then let us speak in practicalities, Lord Dorset. I will not marry you to break the entail of Longbourn, and I will not marry you without the affection and respect

necessary for future marital happiness. I would not make either of us unhappy.”

Mr Darcy frowned. “Do I have no hope then that you may seriously consider our discussion today?”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “If we were to marry now, I am certain you would grow to resent me for my very acceptance. I do not... a marriage of unequal affection seems a recipe for future misery.”

“I concur, Miss Bennet but I am in good hopes that this may change one day. Rest assured that I have no desire to impose upon you this day. But I would ask that you give me the courtesy of considering my proposal in your own time. One never ought to be pressed into making decisions of his magnitude with haste,” he said and folded his hands in his lap.

“You are quite right, sir. But I can assure you that my mind is made up,” she said but he raised a hand to stop her.

“I understand but as a friend and as a courtesy to me and that friendship I request once more—do consider it on your own, when you have a chance to truly ponder if it would be such a terrible match and if you conclude that it is and would be, then I shall take your answer as final and not trouble you again,” he concluded.

Thus, Elizabeth found herself perplexed and utterly speechless for she knew his question was reasonable and brooked no argument.

“Very well, sir. If it pleases you to wait, then I shall ponder the question in my own time and return an answer after due consideration.”

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Elizabeth knew she ought to be gratified that Mr Darcy—she still could not think of him as Lord Dorset—had honoured her request for discretion. Indeed, when his second proposal had arrived, she had been resolute in her intent to refuse. Yet his private plea, accompanied by the most judicious arguments, had caused her to reconsider. Besides, she had felt a certain hesitation at the thought of issuing another refusal, particularly after the stern rebuke she had delivered to him not long ago.

But what had prompted him to ask in the first place? It seemed so imprudent. Or was it? He was not an imprudent man, she acknowledged, having come to a greater understanding of his character since their last parting. Her esteem for him had grown significantly, and she could not deny that she found him both handsome and intelligent, nor that she took pleasure in his company.

But love? Affection? She could not bring herself to confess to such feelings. It would be too bold.

And she was certain her assessment of the situation was correct. They would both be miserably unhappy if she agreed to this marriage. He would inevitably resent her for not loving him, and she would resent him for preventing her from ever marrying for love. Even if it was a practical match that would secure her family's future and break the entail.

Elizabeth sighed, her thoughts in turmoil, when a knock at the door interrupted her reverie. In short order, her aunt appeared.

“Elizabeth, you have a caller. Miss Georgiana Darcy is here,” her aunt announced, her tone tinged with amusement, hinting at the deeper connection with the Darcy

family. Elizabeth rose, smoothing her skirts before stepping into the hall.

The young woman greeted her with a broad smile, eyes sparkling as she removed her bonnet.

“Miss Bennet, it is so lovely to see you. I hope you do not mind my calling without notice.”

“Not in the least. Would you care for a cup of tea?” Elizabeth gestured towards the drawing room, while her aunt discreetly withdrew to the library to give them privacy.

“Heavens, no. I have just come from the cakehouse and consumed more tea and cake than I ought. If anything, I would not mind taking the air.”

Elizabeth motioned towards the garden. “My uncle’s garden is small, but there is a path that loops around the pond, if you care to join me there.”

She could not fathom the purpose of this visit. Had her brother perhaps sent her to ascertain Elizabeth’s decision regarding his proposal? But no, Mr Darcy had made it clear that he would not importune his sister. His protective nature towards her was something Elizabeth had observed during their dinner.

As they stepped outside, Georgiana smiled, taking in the garden. “What a quaint space. I adore it.”

Quaint, Elizabeth thought, was likely a euphemism for small. She could hardly blame the young woman, given that her home, Pemberley, was reputed to be grand, and she was undoubtedly accustomed to large estates.

“I am certain your estate in Derbyshire is lovely,” Elizabeth remarked.

“It is, but I enjoy the bustle of town occasionally, do you not agree? One can tire of the country.”

“Indeed. But I suppose you will spend more time in town now that your brother will serve in Parliament.”

Georgiana pursed her lips. “I imagine so. He likes to keep me close, especially after—” She stopped abruptly, biting her lip and shuffling her foot in the sand.

“I must take you into my confidence, Miss Bennet,” she began, eyes fixed on the ground.

“Then I must insist you call me Elizabeth. Two young women involved in a confederacy must use their Christian names, I declare,” Elizabeth said, hoping to ease the tension.

“Very well, Elizabeth. I must confess that I have come here without my brother’s knowledge. Not that he would have minded—he is very fond of you indeed. Which is why I have come.”

She raised her eyes, and Elizabeth saw a pleading in them that only deepened her confusion.

“Pray, what is it, Georgiana?”

“I have learnt of his proposal to you. I overheard him discussing it with our cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I should not have continued to listen, but the truth is, I am fond of you, Elizabeth. I adore the idea of having you as a sister-in-law, and when I heard that you had rejected my brother, I felt obliged to speak to you.”

Elizabeth gulped, feeling a pang of guilt not only because of Georgiana’s clear



affection for her brother but also because she was uncertain which proposal the young woman referred to.

“It has not escaped my notice that our brother is a fine gentleman. Any lady would be fortunate to have him, but I fear I am quite beneath his station, and—”

“Elizabeth,” Georgiana interrupted gently. “I have always believed in the virtue of honesty, and as such, I must insist that you listen to what I have to say before you speak further. Would you do me that honour?”

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied, taken aback by Georgiana's earnestness.

“I also overheard that one of the reasons you are hesitant to wed my brother is because of Mr Wickham and the truth my brother has kept from you about his character. I have come today to tell you what my brother could not—for my reputation's sake.”

“There is no need to confide such personal matters, Georgiana,” Elizabeth interjected quickly, not wishing to compel the young woman to expose her soul merely for her brother's sake. Yet she sensed her words were in vain.

“I must. You may already know that my father favoured Mr Wickham, though none of us could understand why. What you do not know is that I, too, was terribly fond of him once. After Fitzwilliam sent him away from Pemberley, I was distraught, for I missed his cheerful company. Where he had gone, I did not know, but then, last summer, he came to my notice again.”

Elizabeth's heart sank as she realised that Georgiana was the reason Lord Dorset had been so guarded whenever she asked about Mr Wickham. She wanted to urge Georgiana to refrain from sharing more, but the determination in the usually shy young woman's eyes was unmistakable.

“I trust you to keep my confidence,” Georgiana continued, and Elizabeth nodded solemnly. “I was taken from school last year and went to Ramsgate with a lady who presided over my accommodation in London. Mr Wickham appeared there as well, to my great delight, for I had missed him so. I later discovered that his presence was no coincidence, but a deliberate design. He—along with Mrs Younge—recommended himself to me so persuasively that I thought myself in love. Foolishly, I believed he loved me as I loved him.”

The pain in Georgiana’s voice was palpable, and Elizabeth struggled against the impulse to reach out and comfort her.

“He wished us to elope and marry, though I felt uneasy about it, having always dreamed of my brother’s presence at my wedding. Still, George persuaded me that we should keep our plans secret, given my brother’s dislike of him. I reluctantly agreed. However, Fitzwilliam arrived unexpectedly the day before our intended elopement, and upon seeing him, I found I could not go through with it. I confessed the truth. How my brother truly felt, I cannot say, for he always considers my feelings, but he sent Mr Wickham away and dismissed Mrs Younge. I felt terribly foolish, but Fitzwilliam was all grace and kindness, offering me comfort. It is a shameful story, one that could haunt me should society ever learn of it.”

Elizabeth was shaken by the tale. She had come to understand Mr Wickham as a scoundrel, but this—to deceive a young girl for her fortune and to spite her brother—was beyond comprehension.

How wrong she had been to judge Mr Darcy so harshly. She had already begun to reassess her opinion, but this revelation confirmed that he was indeed a man of honour.

Could it be that his distrust of others stemmed from this experience? She could only imagine what it was like to always be second in his father’s esteem to a man of

questionable character, and then to have that same man attempt to steal away his sister. Perhaps his actions, even his seemingly irrational concerns regarding Jane, could be partially explained by this history.

“I must thank you for the confidence you have shown me, Georgiana. It cannot have been easy.”

“It is a most undignified tale, but when I heard of your reluctance to accept my brother’s proposal, and that it was due in part to this, I could not hesitate. I had to come and speak to you, for you must know, my brother ardently admires you.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks coloured with embarrassment. She did not doubt the gentleman’s feelings; the trouble lay in her uncertainty about her own. Yet she now realised that many of her apprehensions had been founded on falsehoods spread by Mr Wickham.

“Will you promise to consider my tale as you reflect on my brother’s offer?”

“I will. It is a promise I make gladly,” Elizabeth assured her, and she meant it.

“Good. I must take my leave now, Elizabeth. But I am grateful to you for listening.”

With that, Elizabeth escorted Miss Darcy to the door and saw her to her carriage. As the vehicle ambled away, she crossed her arms, feeling uncertain about what to do with this unexpected information.

“Is it indeed so dire?” her aunt’s voice called from the parlour, drawing her from her thoughts.

“It is, I am afraid. Longbourn is in a dreadful state. Heaven knows I admire my brother-in-law, but he is no businessman. A pity about Mr Bingley, for a son-in-law with five thousand pounds per annum would have greatly eased the situation.”

Elizabeth frowned. What were they talking about?

“Well, I now understand why Mr Bennet declined your offer to help raise the funds to break the entail,” her aunt continued, sounding dismayed.

“He would never be able to repay it, not with debts amounting to nearly the same. Even if he could raise the funds to break the entail, Longbourn would be burdened with debt, and my brother-in-law Bennet would be left to face the consequences alone.”

Elizabeth suppressed a gasp. She had known her father was not a skilled landowner and that he struggled with managing the estate, but she had not realised the extent of their financial troubles. Her mind raced ahead of her heart, seeking a solution.

“If only one of the girls wed well,” her aunt sighed deeply. “It would solve everything.”

“Yes, it would. But unless Mr Bingley makes an offer post-haste, I do not see how it will end well,” her uncle replied. The conversation then turned to more cheerful topics, but Elizabeth was left to ponder what she had overheard. She knew she must take it into account as she considered Mr Darcy’s proposal.

Marriage, she knew, was the answer. But could she bring herself to abandon all hopes of a love match? Or was she merely preventing herself from considering that a love match might be possible—with the very man she had censured so severely that she had thought never to see him grace her doorstep again?

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“You must simply form alliances, Fitzwilliam. Nothing else will suffice. Parliament is a cutthroat business, and if you have any hope of achieving success, you will need friends. Earl Grey is a natural choice, given that he is my dearest friend,” Uncle Matlock remarked, taking a sip of his tea.

“I shall take it under advisement,” Darcy replied, though the prospect of managing parliamentary duties, in addition to his current concerns, did not please him. Alas, it was his duty now. He knew that all would be much easier if he had a woman by his side who could provide both support and comfort, someone to challenge his mind and nourish his spirit—someone like Elizabeth.

Had he been foolish to propose marriage again after she had rebuked him so harshly? He did not think so, for her company in recent weeks had been soothing, a balm to his otherwise anxious mind.

From across the room, his cousin Richard winked at him, engaged in a game of cards with Lady Aspen and Georgiana. The house was indeed bustling with company this day, for in addition to Lady Aspen, Lord Aspen had also come calling. He was presently in the garden, entertaining Lady Matlock with a game of pall-mall alongside Phillip and Grandmama. It was a pleasant afternoon, though Darcy could not deny the weight of strain that still lingered upon his shoulders.

A knock at the door briefly roused the company before everyone returned to their pursuits.

“Lord Dorset,” the butler announced, “a caller for you. A Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” Lady Aspen echoed, her tone betraying her confusion. “Is that the young lady you mentioned to us, Georgiana?”

“Indeed, she has become a dear friend,” Georgiana responded with a nod. Darcy surmised his sister had something to do with this unexpected visit.

“Then why is she calling on Dorset?” Lady Aspen enquired, her curiosity piqued.

“I suppose I shall have to find out,” Darcy replied, rising from his seat with an effort to maintain composure, though he felt the perspiration beginning to form on his brow. Elizabeth was here. Here, at Darcy House.

He took a steadying breath, the faint scent of her perfume already lingering in the air. And then he saw her. Elizabeth stood in the hallway, bonnet in hand, her expression tinged with uncertainty. Her countenance spoke of hesitation, as though she were not entirely sure why she had come.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Darcy approached her and forced himself to speak.

“You have come. I am glad. May I take your arrival here as a sign that you have reflected upon my suggestion and have come to a conclusion?”

She wetted her lips, glancing briefly past him before he indicated the parlour, offering more privacy. He pulled the French doors shut behind them and turned to face her.

“I have,” she replied at once. “I have decided to accept your offer of marriage.”

Darcy felt as though he had taken flight, so elated was he by her words, but the clarity in her tone caused his heart to settle back to earth as she continued.

“But you must understand, my sentiments have not undergone a material change. I do not think of you as I did at Kent, of course, but my reasons for agreeing to your proposal are of a practical nature, not romantic.”

Darcy's initial expression of joy was soon tempered by the realisation of her words. Her heart had not changed. His delight gave way to a measured reserve, and he regarded her with an intensity that spoke of both his deep affection and his hope that, with time, her feelings might evolve.

“Miss Bennet,” he said softly, “I understand you have practical considerations for agreeing to this arrangement, but I do hope that in due time, your heart may warm towards me. I am resolved to provide you with a most comfortable life, and you are already aware of the high regard in which I hold you.”

“Sir, I am fully sensible of the honour you bestow upon me, and though I may not yet possess the warmth of feeling you deserve, I am determined to fulfil my role as your wife with all the affection and esteem you merit.”

He studied her for a moment longer, then nodded, his expression resolute. “Very well. I shall present myself to your father this very week to ask for your hand. It is my wish that we expedite the wedding, for there is a matter of some importance that requires your presence by my side. I am to make my debut in the House of Lords next month, and I would be honoured to have you there with me as my wife.”

Elizabeth appeared somewhat taken aback by the speed of his proposal but gave a measured nod. “I understand and I agree. We shall obtain a special licence and proceed accordingly. I trust you are able to make the necessary connections with the Archbishop of Canterbury?”

“My great-uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, is well acquainted with the Archbishop and will be able to facilitate it.”

He noted the widening of her eyes as he spoke of his uncle and regretted mentioning it at once. She was, after all, a gentleman's daughter, and such titled relations must seem rather daunting.

"I see," she murmured, moistening her lips. "Will your family approve of me?"

"Whom I wed is of no concern of theirs, I assure you. However, I am certain my grandmother, in particular, will be delighted. I would introduce you to her now, but—"

"No, no. I did not wish to impose upon you for an introduction at this moment. I... I must be away, anyhow," she said, placing her bonnet back on her head with some haste, and then, as quickly as she had arrived, she was gone again.

Securing her consent had been a much swifter affair than he had anticipated. Indeed, a part of him felt a sting of disappointment. His imagination had, on occasion, run away with him, and during such moments of reverie, he had pictured himself whirling her through the air in a manner reminiscent of the romantic novels his sister was so fond of.

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Despite Elizabeth's assurance that her acceptance of his proposal was grounded in practicality, and despite his awareness of the Bennet family's financial predicament, Darcy could not deny the thrill of elation that stirred within him.

Elizabeth had agreed to marry him. How remarkable that a few short weeks could so utterly transform his world. When he had left her at Kent, he was certain he would never see her again, let alone gain her approval to marry him—and by special licence, no less.



Elizabeth Bennet would soon be his wife. The prospect filled him with a strange mixture of anxiety and hope. He knew the journey to winning her heart would be long and perhaps arduous, but he was determined. Surely, once she saw the depth of his affection, her feelings would soften towards him. Or so he fervently hoped.

But before any preparations could be made, there was the matter of informing his own family.

Darcy was not blind to the difficulties that might arise. He knew his good tidings would not be welcomed by all, yet he was confident of his grandmother's support. With her on his side, he might navigate the disapproving tempers of others.

"What a brief visit that was," Lady Aspen remarked as he re-entered the drawing room.

"It was," Darcy agreed, "but by no means insignificant, for—" He paused, casting a glance at Richard, whose eyes widened in anticipation, a smile playing on his lips.

"Ha, cousin, I sense you have news to share with the family. Shall I gather them?"

Darcy took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the moment. It would indeed be easier to address everyone at once, so he nodded.

Richard strode across the drawing room and into the music room, his voice echoing with amused authority. "The Marquess of Dorset has an announcement to make!"

He and Richard had been close from childhood; Darcy did not doubt that Richard already had an inkling of what he was about to declare.

"What is this? What announcement must you make?" his Uncle Matlock asked, raising an eyebrow with keen curiosity.

“With all due courtesy, if I may request your patience for a moment, you will soon know,” Darcy replied. His grandmother, Lady Matlock, and Phillip had entered the room, completing the family circle.

“This is most unusual, Fitzwilliam,” his grandmother said. “I was just about to win at pall mall. What is this matter of such urgency?”

“I understand,” Darcy said, “and I assure you, you may return to your game shortly. But I have an announcement to make that cannot wait.”

Phillip tilted his head, a hint of suspicion in his gaze. “Have you already formed an alliance within the House of Lords?”

“No, Phillip, nothing of that sort. The announcement I wish to make is that I have offered my hand in marriage to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and she has graciously accepted. She is to be the Marchioness of Dorset. We are to be married, and I intend to secure a special licence so that the wedding may occur before my formal introduction to the House of Lords.”

“But we are in mourning!” Phillip exclaimed, his tone revealing the depth of his unease. “Grandmama, surely you must tell him this is not the time to wed.”

“Well,” his grandmother said, her gaze moving thoughtfully between her grandsons, “while it is true that we are in mourning, it can be argued that the late marquess and his heirs were but distant relations.”

“He was our uncle,” Phillip insisted, his complexion reddening alarmingly.

“He was, indeed. But unlike your father, and Fitzwilliam’s father, he was not my son, having been born from my dear husband’s first marriage. He was merely my stepson, and only a half-uncle by blood to both you and Fitzwilliam.”

“This is mere semantics, Grandmama. He was my uncle.”

“Nobody is disputing that,” Darcy said, acutely aware of Phillip’s close bond with their late uncle. “I am simply pointing out that mourning for an uncle—half-uncle, at that—is not observed with the same rigor as it would be for a closer relation. Moreover, I believe it is advantageous for the estate to see the marriage take place before my introduction to the House of Lords. Stability is what is needed.”

Phillip seemed ready to argue further, but to Darcy’s surprise, it was his Uncle Matlock who spoke next.

“Phillip, we are related only by marriage, so perhaps you can take this as advice from a peer rather than from a relation. I find myself in full agreement with Fitzwilliam. The Marquessate of Dorset has been gravely unsettled by the death of the late marquess and his heirs. What is needed now is stability. A wife will signal to society that the line will continue, and this assurance will make Fitzwilliam’s position in the House of Lords much easier to establish.”

“Indeed, your uncle would undoubtedly have wished to know that his line was secure,” Matlock continued.

“Of course he would have,” Phillip admitted. “But this? This is entirely disrespectful. And this woman? You might as well be marrying a commoner!”

This caught Lady Aspen’s attention. “A commoner? My dear cousin, is that correct? Surely you are not marrying beneath your station?”

“Elizabeth is no commoner,” Darcy replied quickly. “Her father is a gentleman who owns an estate in Hertfordshire. She is a gentleman’s daughter.”

“Hertfordshire?” His grandmother said, narrowing her eyes before a smile spread

across her face. “Where not you promenading with one such young lady? What a delightful young woman. I would have taken her for a lady by her manners. But she is a gentleman’s daughter?”

“Yes, Grandmama she is. I have known her for some time. I intended to marry her sooner, but circumstances intervened, and then my uncle’s death.”

His grandmother nodded thoughtfully. “I see. Had you made her an offer a few months ago, there would have been no question of your suitability—both being of the same rank. I see no reason for concern now. Lord Matlock, what say you?”

“I have heard of this young woman myself, although my questions were met with fierce attempts of evasion. I would have preferred to see Fitzwilliam married to someone of higher rank,” Matlock replied, “but I suppose it is practical to resolve the matter before he takes his seat in the House of Lords. There is nothing more distracting than having every eligible lady in society set her cap at a man when he is attempting to prove himself.”

“And you would know this, given you were a bachelor when you first joined the House of Lords,” his wife added.

“Father, I think you have managed to unsettle Mother,” Richard said with a smile.

Lord Matlock turned a little pale at this, but then his wife joined in the laughter.

“Lord Matlock is quite right. Every lady in the Ton sets her sights on a bachelor, especially if he’s titled. I was no exception. Fitzwilliam, if you believe the young lady will make a good marchioness, I doubt anyone will oppose you.”

“Are you quite certain?” Lady Aspen asked.

“He certainly sounds it, Cassandra,” her husband replied in a tone that brooked no argument.

“You cannot be serious. They do not possess a grand estate. The young lady has no brothers. There are only five daughters, and the estate is entailed away from them, hardly the pedigree one would hope for in the Marchioness of Dorset,” Phillip glared at Darcy.

This statement elicited some suppressed gasps, but Richard quickly interjected.

“The estate is indeed entailed, but it is to my own Aunt Catherine’s vicar. I am certain that once Aunt Catherine hears that her nephew has intentions towards Miss Bennet, she will intercede and ensure that the entailment is broken. Do you not agree, Uncle?”

Matlock nodded. “Yes, under these circumstances, I am confident my sister will do what is right and encourage her vicar to break the entailment, thereby removing the stain upon the Bennet family.”

“Catherine will be disappointed, she had her heart set on Fitzwilliam marrying Anne,” Lady Matlock said then.

“I beg your pardon, dear aunt, but I had no intention to marry Anne and I do think that the entire family knows this. I know that members of the Fitzwilliam family had voiced such hopes of late,” he glanced at his uncle he swallowed and looked away. “But it was not going to happen then and it most certainly will not happen now.”

“Miss Anne would not have been a suitable marchioness either, given her poor health,” Phillip chimed in. “But how can we be sure that the Bennet family is of good reputation? I thought you deemed them unsuitable for your friend Bingley and prevented an engagement between him and this Miss Bennet’s elder sister.”

Once again, the eyes of the family darted about. Why was Phillip so determined to oppose this union? Then it came to Darcy. Phillip had been very close to their uncle and had taken an interest in the Marquessate's affair for some while, acting on their uncle's behalf. While Phillip had never shown any interest in the title itself, he'd always been concerned about the family legacy—and Darcy had to assume his cousin's desire to carry on the line successfully outweigh his love for his cousin. A circumstance that befell many in their circles.

"Fitzwilliam, the more I hear about this, the less wise it seems," Lady Aspen declared. Then again, he knew that she had always harboured hopes of her younger sister Eleanora, for him.

"But Fitzwilliam has since recognised his mistake and done all he can to reconcile Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley," Georgiana spoke up. "And besides, I can personally vouch for the Bennet family. They are an upstanding family. I recently called on Miss Bennet's uncle in Cheapside, and his home is splendidly appointed, with numerous servants."

"Mr Gardiner, Miss Bennet's uncle, is a prosperous businessman," Richard added. "Her aunt, Mrs Gardiner, hails from Lambton and was known to both of Fitzwilliam's parents."

Darcy could not have been more grateful for the support of his sister and cousin. "Mrs Gardiner's father was the record at Lambton, Mr Drummond."

"Drummond?" His uncle said. "I remember him well, he gave a splendid sermon one Christmas Eve when we called on your parents, Fitzwilliam. Do you remember?" He asked, his direction addressed to his wife.

"I do, a very honourable family. And the husband? Gardiner, you say?" His aunt asked.

“Gardiner?” his grandmother chimed in. “Is he involved in textiles? I believe he owns several warehouses. Quite respectable. And what of the other relations?” she enquired, turning her gaze to Darcy.

He felt a pang of anxiety as he struggled to recall the rest of Elizabeth’s family. Then, an idea struck him.

“Her uncle is a solicitor, as was her grandfather.”

“It is always advantageous to have relations acquainted with the law,” his grandmother observed with approval. Yet Darcy suspected that had Phillip been the one proposing marriage to someone of such modest connections, she would not have been so supportive. While she was fond of Phillip, Darcy knew he had always held a slightly higher place in her affections—a fact for which he was particularly grateful today.

“Well, setting aside all material concerns, I thought she appeared quite fond of you when I saw you together recently. Even Norfolk remarked on it, and he never takes note of such things. I believe this marriage should proceed, and without delay. I shall write to Norfolk immediately and request a special licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Well done, Fitzwilliam. I am delighted for you.”

Darcy breathed a deep sigh of relief. He had intended to ask his grandmother to assist with the special licence later, but her willingness to undertake it herself was a burden lifted from his shoulders. As he looked around the room, he noted that most of his relations seemed genuinely pleased for him, with the notable exceptions of Cassandra Aspen and Phillip. His cousin Frederick, as usual, remained silent. And his Uncle Matlock? As Darcy watched him, he saw the conniving old man’s mind already racing with the possibilities this match could present to him. He had no doubt that in short order Mr Gardiner would receive a visit from his uncle regarding a business arrangement.

For if nothing else, Lord Matlock had a keen nose for business as well as politics, and if he could not unite the Darcy family with the Fitzwilliams due to a certain Miss Bennet's presence, he would most certainly find a way to tie the Fitzwilliams into the Bennet family by way of business.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

The Little Theatre was alive with activity. Ladies fluttered hither and thither, mingling in the opulent foyer, while others ascended the grand staircases to the boxes. Elizabeth could not help feeling rather uncomfortable. She had attended the theatre before, but generally for matinee performances, which were more economical, and always in the company of her aunt and uncle.

Tonight, however, she found herself alone—well, not entirely alone. Jane was with her, but having caught sight of Mr Bingley, she had temporarily deserted Elizabeth to converse with the young man, who looked exceedingly pleased to have Jane's attention once more.

Thus, Elizabeth was left in the company of Georgiana Darcy and her fiancé. This was her first appearance in public with him since she had accepted his offer. She glanced up at him, scarcely able to comprehend that they were betrothed.

“What a lovely gown! Is it from Madame Faye?” Georgiana enquired, drawing Elizabeth from her thoughts. She looked down at her dress and nodded. “It is. I collected it this morning.”

That she, Elizabeth Bennet, daughter of a gentleman as modest as Mr Thomas Bennet, should be wearing a gown from one of the premier Parisian modistes in London was almost beyond her comprehension. Indeed, when her new fiancé had informed her that he had accounts at all the finest milliners and dressmakers, and that she was to visit them to acquire a wardrobe befitting a marchioness, she had nearly found herself in need of her mother's smelling salts.

“I had two dresses made there at the start of the season,” Georgiana said. “I would

have ordered another two, but Fitzwilliam cautioned me against being too frivolous.”

“Did he indeed?” Elizabeth said, surprised to hear this.

“He feels that a lady requires a well-outfitted wardrobe, but he also says that I am in danger of being spoiled, for both my aunts, Lady Catherine, and Lady Matlock enjoy taking me shopping. And when I went on an outing with Lady Aspen, she too bestowed upon me what Fitzwilliam called a ridiculous number of ribbons and bonnets.” Georgiana said with an amused smile. “But Fitzwilliam never holds a grudge for long. He knows I adore my bonnets and ribbons, so he lets me indulge in them.”

“Georgiana,” came a voice, and the gentleman in question approached with a smile. “Are you speaking ill of me to my bride-to-be?” he asked.

“I was only telling her how you disapprove when I spend all your money on bonnets and ribbons and such,” Georgiana responded.

“On the contrary, I do not mind it at all, so long as you spend some of the money on books and furthering your accomplishments,” he replied. “The sort befitting a young lady.” Elizabeth recalled his mention of Georgiana’s clandestine reading of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “You must ensure that your sister becomes one of those six accomplished women you once spoke of, must you not, Lord Dorset?” She added this with a small laugh, but noticed his sharp intake of breath and feared she might have said something amiss. However, he soon laughed as well.

“You have an excellent memory, Miss Bennet,” he said, offering his arm, while Georgiana looked puzzled.

“Six accomplished women?” she asked.

“May I share with your sister the content of our earlier conversation?” Elizabeth asked Mr Darcy.

“Please do,” he replied. “I fear on occasion my sister holds me in too high regard. It will do her good to hear a less flattering account.”

“I cannot imagine there is anything I could hear that would make me think any less of you,” Georgiana replied earnestly.

Elizabeth proceeded to recount the exchange they had shared during their first acquaintance, wherein Mr Darcy had remarked that he had only known six accomplished women in his lifetime. Georgiana laughed lightly at the story, but their conversation was interrupted as Elizabeth entered the Dorset box. She was struck speechless.

She had never sat in one of the private boxes before, always taking seats among the general audience with her aunt, who, though perfectly capable of affording better seats, preferred the lively atmosphere of the common folk. However, seeing the comfort of these boxes, Elizabeth had to admit that there were certain advantages to a more elevated status that she had not previously considered.

“Miss Bennet,” came a voice, and her stomach dropped as she saw Mr Phillip Darcy rise from one of the seats. She recalled their less-than-pleasant conversation at dinner some weeks prior and had heard from Georgiana that Phillip had opposed her union with Mr Darcy due to her inferior connections.

Not that she could truly blame him for it. Even her own parents had been astonished to learn that a marquess sought their daughter’s hand. Her mother, of course, had recovered from the shock almost immediately and announced the engagement in her

usual exuberant manner.

Still, her father had raised the uncomfortable topic of the family's lack of funds to provide a dowry befitting a marquess. Mr Darcy had quickly allayed such worries, but it had reminded Elizabeth once more of the unequal standing between them.

Being confronted with a member of his family who shared these concerns was less than comfortable, but she extended her hand with as much composure as she could muster, which Mr Phillip Darcy took with some reluctance.

"My dearest soon-to-be cousin Elizabeth, it is a pleasure to see you. I trust you are enjoying the theatre?"

"Very much so," Elizabeth replied, though she caught the disapproval in his tone. He was a rather supercilious man.

Mr Darcy, ever perceptive, quickly indicated the two seats at the front, and they sat, with Georgiana taking a seat beside her cousin behind them.

"That is our box," Mr Darcy said, pointing to an opulent box on the level above and to the right.

"Is that your uncle?" Elizabeth asked, spotting the Earl of Matlock in one of the boxes near the King's box.

"It is. We shall have an opportunity for formal introductions later. I had hoped to formally introduce you to my grandmother, the Marchioness of Dorset, but she was called away to her brother's estate. You met them, of course, albeit it briefly when we promenaded with your sister and Bingley."

"The Duke of Norfolk?" Elizabeth said, hearing the tremor in her voice. What sort of

family was she marrying into? Her fiancé, a marquess, his uncle, an earl, and his great-uncle, a duke? It seemed like a dream, though whether a pleasant one or not, she could hardly tell, for the anxiety it induced made her feel more ill at ease than anything else.

Yet, to give Mr Darcy credit, he had done all in his power these past two weeks to make her feel comfortable. Indeed, his demeanour seemed to have improved since becoming a marquess, and she found him far less haughty than she had upon their first acquaintance.

Indeed, he had also continued his efforts to reconcile Mr Bingley with Jane. Although she had noted that his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, had also taken an interest in Jane and had accompanied her on a promenade only the previous day. Thinking of her sister, she grew weary.

“I fear Jane will be entirely lost and not find this box, ought we to find her?”

“I am certain Bingley will delivery her to us in due course,” Mr Darcy replied with a smile. “I hear he has plans to take her to the opera next Tuesday, though I believe he is rather anxious and fears my cousin will take the lead.”

Elizabeth bit her lip and leaned forward. “I suppose I am glad for the competition for Mr Bingley might have remedied his ill behaviour, but he still caused my sister much distress.”

“But you think her mind is made up? Should I disabuse my cousin of the notion she might harbour affections for him?” he replied with a twinkle in his eye.

“You always seem rather keen on discerning my sister’s feelings based on appearances,” she said, a hint of reproach in her tone, though she could not entirely suppress the smile that accompanied it. To his credit, however, he took it in stride.

“I do indeed,” he admitted. “But I also pride myself on learning from my mistakes. If I were pressed to give an answer, I would say that your sister is still very fond of Charles. However, I would not blame her for guarding her heart against further disappointment by considering other gentlemen.”

“Lord Dorset,” Elizabeth replied, “I must say, I believe you have keenly observed the matter this time. I know my sister well, and I know she is afraid of being hurt again, but I cannot imagine that any gentleman will hold a place in her heart as sincerely as Mr Bingley does.”

A silence passed between them as the theatre around them filled with others taking their seats.

“I shall look forward to meeting your grandmother,” Elizabeth said after a moment. “Georgiana has told me many wonderful things about her.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “You will like her very much, I am certain. However, you may enjoy meeting my great-uncle even more. He is rather a character.”

“I recall from the brief interchange we had when we saw him in his carriage with your grandmother,” Elizabeth said. “It is lovely to see the two of them, at their age, still so very close. I hope to be as close with Jane when I am advanced in years.”

At this, Mr Darcy’s expression grew more serious. “They are indeed close now, but it has not always been so. You see, my Great-Uncle Norfolk is married to a woman my grandmother does not approve of. It strained their relationship for quite some time.”

“She does not like her sister-in-law?” Elizabeth asked, puzzled.

“It is not her sister-in-law that she dislikes,” Mr Darcy explained, “but her sister-in-law’s religion. My Great-Aunt Margaret is a Catholic, and it has caused my great-

uncle a great deal of stress and strain, particularly in the House of Lords. That is partly why I am determined to support the cause of Catholic emancipation once I take my seat in the House of Lords next week.”

This declaration surprised Elizabeth, though in a positive manner. She had always thought it a rather outrageous injustice that, in their day and age, Catholics were still barred from taking their seats in the House of Lords and that marriages between Protestants and Catholics were not recognised as valid. However, hearing Mr Darcy say this surprised her. She had been under the impression that most northern gentlemen were opposed to the Catholic relief proposals.

“Is that so? I am glad to hear it. Have you given thought to what other causes you might wish to support?” she asked, anxiously awaited his response. She realised she had no idea to what political views her soon-to-be husband subscribed to and hoped they would not be at odds with her own. The thought of being married to someone who supported ideas she found abhorrent was disconcerting.

Mr Darcy, however, almost immediately set her mind at ease.

“Well, abolition is a cause I am very passionate about and have been for some time. I am pleased to report that some years ago I brought my Uncle Matlock around to it. Of course, it helps that Catholic relief and abolition are on the Whig platform, but he was not initially a believer, though he is now.”

He continued, “I am also looking to sponsor a change in the law regarding the chimney sweep boys. I find it intolerable that there is so little protection for these poor children. I also believe that more must be done to support farmers. At Pemberley and Matlock, we already implement rather more liberal practices to ensure our tenants are treated well, and once I take charge of Ashburn, the same will be true there. But this is not the case in most of England.”

Elizabeth listened intently as he spoke, meandering from one topic to another, and she could hardly believe her ears. These were all causes she felt passionate about—causes her mother had warned her never to voice before a potential suitor, lest she be seen as a radical. Yet here was the man she was going to marry, sharing the very views she held dear. Had she been so very wrong about Mr Darcy?



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“Indeed, Miss Bennet is surely a diamond of the first water,” observed Lord Matlock, as he joined Darcy at the table at White’s. “She is exceedingly handsome, to be sure.”

“I am gratified that you had the opportunity to make her acquaintance, Uncle,” Darcy replied.

Elizabeth had been somewhat nervous when Darcy suggested the introduction at the theatre, but she had acquitted herself admirably, charming his uncle with her quick wit and, naturally, her striking appearance.

His uncle was seldom indifferent to such outward beauty, and Elizabeth’s evident charms could only have endeared her further to him.

“Yes, she is a most engaging young lady,” Lord Matlock conceded, taking a reflective sip of his brandy. “It is only a pity about the family.”

“I must admit that this is so,” interjected Phillip, who had been silent until that moment—Darcy shot him a warning glance. “I do not deny that she is amiable,” Phillip continued, undeterred. “Were you still merely the master of Pemberley, I would commend your choice without hesitation. But now, as Lord Dorset, such a position demands greater circumspection.”

“I am afraid your cousin is not without reason in this matter,” sighed Lord Matlock. “We may anticipate opposition from certain quarters, not least your aunt.”

Darcy frowned. “I have written to her by express, apprising her of the situation and

requesting her assistance with the arrangements regarding the entailment.”

“Indeed, I am aware,” his uncle replied, causing Darcy to realise that a response had already been received.

“She replied by return express,” Lord Matlock continued, drawing a letter from his waistcoat pocket and unfolding it.

“My dearest brother,” he read aloud, “I am most distressed by the intelligence from London. Our nephew, the Marquess of Dorset, to be married to a gentleman’s daughter? It cannot be. I had the misfortune of encountering Miss Elizabeth Bennet when she visited her friend Mrs Collins last May. While she is not without beauty or sense, she is one of five daughters, and the reports I have from Mr Collins, who is to inherit Longbourn, are not favourable. The mother is vulgar and unsophisticated, and some of the younger daughters are exceedingly imprudent, keeping company with officers of the militia.”

His cousin, Richard, who had been listening quietly, raised an eyebrow. “I was not aware my aunt held the military in such low esteem. She has always been quite proud to introduce me as Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“My dear sister can be very particular,” Lord Matlock remarked. “She may take pride in you as an officer, but when it comes to matters of marriage and family, her opinions are not always so predictable.”

“Moreover,” added Bingley, “I believe your aunt refers to officers of the militia, not the regular army. Many of them were invited to the ball at Meryton, and some behaved with less decorum than might be desired.”

“That you dismiss so easily those who are willing to lay down their lives for the country,” said Richard sharply.

Darcy, who had sensed a tension brewing between his friends ever since both had shown an interest in Jane Bennet, tightened his grip on his glass. He had planned to advise Richard against pursuing Miss Bennet, based on Elizabeth's own concerns, but after his previous misjudgement in meddling with Bingley's affections, he had refrained from intervening further. Yet, if the situation deteriorated, he might have no choice.

"I do not diminish the militia's service," Bingley responded, more composed. "But there is a distinction between the militia and the regular army, as you well know."

"Of course," Richard replied with a biting tone, "your observations are known for their infallibility."

Darcy closed his eyes, sensing the argument might escalate. He opened them only when his uncle shifted in his seat, noticing Lord Matlock appeared slightly uneasy.

"Uncle, are you troubled by my aunt's sentiments?" Darcy asked, swiftly redirecting the conversation.

"I stand by what I said. Nevertheless, it does concern me that there is division within the family. It is never well for a family to be at odds. However, I understand this opposition arises from Catherine's desire to see her own daughter as Marchioness. While I would have preferred such an outcome, we must accept what is."

"Will she attend the wedding then?" Phillip enquired. Lord Matlock shook his head. "She refuses."

"Perhaps it is for the best," Phillip remarked with a shrug. "If she is opposed, her presence might be unpleasant. It is unfortunate she cannot set aside her feelings for her nephew's sake."

“And what of your own feelings, Phillip?” Darcy asked.

“I have expressed my opinion that it is not the most advantageous match,” Phillip replied. “However, I will not stand in the way of my cousin’s happiness. We have been companions since childhood, as have we all,” he added, glancing at Bingley and Richard. “I shall curb my own objections. In time, I am sure Miss Bennet will grow into her role.”

Pleased by this declaration, Darcy leaned back. He had no doubt Elizabeth would indeed grow into her role. She was nothing short of remarkable. As Marchioness of Dorset, she would be an ideal partner at his side. He could envision them at dinners with Marquesses and Dukes, Elizabeth captivating the company with her wit and beauty.

He imagined himself in the House of Lords, delivering impassioned speeches, while Elizabeth watched from the gallery, supporting his causes—the abolition of slavery, the rights of chimney sweeps, and Catholic emancipation—issues on which they were in full agreement. He could almost hear her words of pride and affection as they returned home, her hand in his, as she expressed her love for him.

But no—what was he thinking? Such indulgent fantasies were foolish. She was not marrying him out of love; she had been clear about that. This was a practical arrangement, nothing more. Elizabeth had been forthright from the beginning.

He must abandon these hopeless longings. He might have her respect, and in time her friendship, but he must accept that her love might never be his. Better to reconcile himself to that now.

“Fitzwilliam?” Phillip’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Yes?” Darcy replied, returning to the present.

“I asked if you would join Bingley, your cousin, and myself in a game of billiards.”

Darcy looked up, realising that Bingley and Richard had already made their way to the billiards table.

He rose and followed his cousin, however, upon reaching the table, it was clear the two young gentlemen had resumed their earlier quarrel. Without Lord Matlock’s presence to temper them, they were less restrained.

“I daresay the young lady was quite happy to join me in promenading,” said Richard, while Bingley narrowed his eyes.

“And she told me of the pleasant walk you took along the Serpentine, accompanied by Lady Aspen, Lord Aspen, Lady Aspen’s sister, and Miss Darcy. She described it as a delightful group outing,” Bingley responded in a tone Darcy found unsettling. It was evident to everyone that Bingley desired Jane Bennet; there was no need for him to be so combative with Richard.

“Is that so? She seemed to enjoy it, group or not. She even expressed interest in accompanying me to the ballet, though I am aware you find it dull.”

Bingley looked surprised. “She said this?” he asked, sounding hurt. How quickly the tables had turned, Darcy thought.

“It is true, is it not? You find the ballet tiresome. You would not attend for anything, not even for the entertainment of the woman you profess to love.”

“I would take Jane to the moon if she so desired,” Bingley retorted. “I would do anything for her. Anything,” he declared, and Darcy wetted his lips, uncertain how to intervene.

“You would do anything for her, but make an offer when it was most prudent,” Richard retorted. “I shall not make such a blunder. She could be your wife now, yet another gentleman, more worthy of her affections, has come into the picture.”

Bingley moved around the billiards table, and Darcy feared a physical confrontation was imminent. He quickly positioned himself between the two gentlemen.

“Pray, let us not escalate this. We cannot afford to be thrown out of White’s for fighting before I am even seated in the House of Lords. That would be a true disaster.”

“All four of us would end up in the scandal sheets, even those of us not directly involved in this dispute,” Phillip interjected, helping Darcy to defuse the situation. “Moreover,” Phillip continued, “I doubt Miss Bennet was the one who mentioned your dislike of the theatre. I distinctly recall you saying it yourself only last week, in front of Miss Darcy and Lord Aspen. Your sister Caroline was attempting to persuade you to take her.”

Bingley blinked. “Indeed, I did say that,” he admitted. Then, looking at Richard, he asked, “Was it Miss Darcy who repeated it to Lady Aspen? Yet you would have me believe it was Jane.”

Richard shrugged. “It was said, I do not recall by whom. In any case, I intend to take her to the ballet.”

“Not if I invite her first,” Bingley replied, and Darcy sighed, while Phillip chuckled.

“This reminds me of our days at Eton, when foolish young gentlemen would fight over the ladies at the finishing school down the road. Darcy, do you remember?”

“Indeed, I do. Now, I must say that this has entirely spoiled my spirits. I am going

home.”

“Shall I accompany you?” Phillip offered. “I had thought to visit our grandmother after this, if you would like to come.”

“No, I believe I require rest more than anything. But I thank you.”

With that, Darcy took his leave. He bid his uncle goodnight and stepped out into the London streets. He had intended to spend the rest of the evening with his friends, but the argument between Bingley and Richard, along with his uncle’s unsettling news about his aunt, had left him in no mood for company.

Pulling his greatcoat tighter as the wind nipped at his skin, he turned right, intending to take a shortcut through an alleyway.

The wind whipped between the houses, and he soon realised that the alley he had chosen was rather dark. He hesitated, considering whether to retrace his steps and take a more well-lit route, when suddenly he heard footsteps behind him. He turned just as a shadowy figure lunged towards him, the glint of a blade catching the dim light.

Darcy instinctively raised his arm to ward off the attacker, but before he could fully react, another figure appeared. Richard, who had evidently followed him out, sprang forward and engaged the assailant. A brief but intense struggle ensued, with Darcy joining in to assist his cousin. Together, they managed to disarm the man, who dropped his knife before fleeing into the night.

Breathing heavily, Darcy looked down at the weapon, the realisation of what had nearly happened settling over him. He was shaken, though he endeavoured to conceal it.

“You are unharmed, I trust?” Richard asked, his voice steady but concerned.

“Yes,” Darcy replied, though his voice wavered slightly. “Thanks to you.”

Richard retrieved the discarded knife and examined it. “It seems I interrupted a robbery, though it is strange the man fled without further resistance.”

Darcy nodded, still trying to steady his nerves.

“Perhaps, as a peer, you might take up the matter of crime in the city,” Richard suggested lightly, though there was an edge to his tone.

“It is certainly something to consider,” Darcy replied, his thoughts already beginning to turn over the implications of the attack.

They walked in silence back to Darcy’s residence, each lost in their own thoughts. Darcy could not shake the feeling that there was more to this than mere robbery, though he had no proof. For now, he would take his cousin’s advice and consider what action he might take. But the unsettling notion that someone had intended him harm lingered in his mind.



One Month Later

St George's Church, London

The grand church of St George at Hanover Square, stood tall before Elizabeth, its imposing structure looming as she gazed up at the entrance. The stone steps beneath her feet vibrated faintly with the murmur of the crowd within. The church's facade with its portico supported by six Corinthian columns gave the building a refined elegance.

Elizabeth knew that the interior would be teeming with people. After all, it was not every day that the Marquess of Dorset was to be wed. She had been reminded more than once that there were no other eligible bachelors of such rank in society. Mr Darcy—she still thought of him thus—was the youngest marquess in many years, and that it should be she, Elizabeth Bennet, who was to marry him, seemed almost beyond comprehension.

“My dear, are you ready?” her father asked, drawing her attention. Mr Bennet was dressed in his Sunday best, or rather, an elevated version of it, as her mother had insisted that the family be attired in new garments for this grand occasion.

Her soon-to-be husband had most generously offered to cover the costs for the entire family, and Lydia and Kitty had taken full advantage, ordering the most elaborate gowns they could have made on such short notice. Elizabeth shuddered to think of the expense, especially since everything had been so hastily arranged. Parliament was to reconvene next week, and Mr Darcy was expected to take his seat in the House of Lords. The wedding had to be concluded before that.

“Well then, let us proceed,” her father said, offering his arm. She took it without hesitation, and together they ascended the steps to the entrance, which was held open by the ushers. She had braced herself for the sea of people awaiting her, but when she saw the hundreds of faces turn towards her as she entered, she could not suppress a gasp.

Her father squeezed her hand lightly. “Steady on, my dear. Focus on your groom,” he murmured.

“I am not certain that will help,” she replied, her voice trembling slightly.

“I imagine it will,” her father said, reassuringly.

Elizabeth was uncertain as to what her father truly thought of her impending union with the man the Bennet family had known as Mr Darcy. She had confided her conflicting emotions to no one but Jane.

As she walked down the aisle on her father’s arm, she found it oddly comforting to dwell on troubles that were not her own, and her thoughts turned to her sister’s predicament. Jane had become fond of Colonel Fitzwilliam, with whom she had promenaded more than once. Her heart still belonged to Charles Bingley, but so grave was the pain he had inflicted upon her, Jane considered her options now with great care, fearful of being hurt once more.

Indeed, as Elizabeth passed Colonel Fitzwilliam, seated with the rest of the Fitzwilliam family, she wondered what it might be like if he were to become Jane’s husband. To have Jane and herself each married to a member of the Fitzwilliam family—there was a certain solace in that thought.

Yet, Mr Bingley remained Mr Darcy’s dearest friend. When Elizabeth saw Jane, she noticed that her sister was not focused on her, but on Mr Bingley, who sat in the row

behind the Fitzwilliams. No, commendable as Colonel Fitzwilliam's intentions might be, there was no denying who would ultimately claim Jane's hand.

"Elizabeth, you must let go," her father whispered, and she realised that she had been wool-gathering so much that she had not noticed they had reached the front of the church, where Mr Darcy stood waiting to take her from her father.

She was getting married. She was getting married to Mr Darcy. She would walk out of this chapel as the Marchioness of Dorset. How could this be true?

Her breathing quickened, and she suddenly feared she might swoon in front of all these people. All her life, she had been amused by her mother's raptures, but now she feared it would be she who might require smelling salts.

"Take a deep breath," Mr Darcy said softly, his voice warm and his presence unexpectedly reassuring. She looked at him and almost forgot where they were. He inhaled, and she mirrored his action, her heart rate gradually slowing.

"Are you ready?" he asked, and she nodded. Then, Elizabeth took her place beside her husband-to-be, prepared to become his bride.

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"A grand wedding it was," Lady Matlock said later that day, as the families and their closest friends and political allies gathered at the Matlock townhouse in Mayfair. As the groom's uncle, the Earl of Matlock had agreed to host the wedding breakfast. Elizabeth took this as a sign that he, at least, approved of the union. The same could not be said for the entire family.

"It was indeed. I had not expected so many people," Elizabeth replied, still overwhelmed by the sheer number of guests.

“My dear, your husband is a marquess, and a young one at that. Everyone will wish to ingratiate themselves with him. Besides, he is related to my husband, an earl, and his great-uncle is a duke, as you know,” Lady Matlock said, nodding towards the Duke of Norfolk, who was sipping sherry in a corner, a woman by his side.

“Is that the Duchess of Norfolk?” Elizabeth asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Indeed, but you are aware that she is *persona non grata* in certain circles,” Lady Matlock said, though it was impossible to discern from her tone whether she approved or disapproved of this situation.

“Because she is Catholic?”

“Because he is not. Were they of the same faith, it would hardly be an issue. Of course, he would not have a seat in Parliament. She is also much younger, as you may know—the duke is five-and-seventy, and his wife but five-and-forty.”

“Is that so?” Elizabeth said, astonished.

“You are not yet well-versed in the ways of the ton, are you, my dear? But that is to be expected. Imagine if I came to... where is it your family reside? Merton?”

“Meryton,” she corrected.

“Ah, yes, Meryton. I should not know a shopkeeper from a knight. But do not worry, I shall take you under my wing. I did the same for Lady Aspen.”

Elizabeth looked up, surprised, for she had been under the impression that Lady Aspen was thoroughly familiar with the workings of society.

“I always thought that Lady Aspen was born into the highest circles.”

“She was. Her father was an earl as well, but rather impoverished. And, of course, there are no heirs, so the title reverted to the Crown when he died five years ago. Dreadful business. That is why she is so eager to make a good match for her sister. You know she had designs on Fitzwilliam.”

Elizabeth’s mouth grew dry at this revelation. She had had no inkling of such intentions.

“I did not know. I thought the only person who had designs on him was his cousin.”

Lady Matlock clicked her tongue. “By no means. Miss Anne harbours no designs on anyone but the gentlemen she encounters in her romance novels. It was my sister-in-law, Lady Catherine, of course, who entertained such a notion. A flight of fancy, to be sure. Lady Catherine is prone to them. But I heard you had the misfortune of her company?”

Elizabeth was uncertain how to respond. It was true she had endured that particular misfortune, but she was not about to step into what was clearly a long-standing dispute between Lady Catherine and her sister-in-law.

Instead, she decided to focus her attention on another subject. “Pray, could you enlighten me regarding Phillip Darcy? I am still unclear on the relationship between the Darcys. My husband did not explain much beyond his own immediate family.”

“Phillip? Of course, we have no close connection to him. He is on the Darcy side, naturally. As you know, the Dowager Marchioness of Dorset is your husband’s grandmother. The late marquess, whose death has caused all this upheaval, was her stepson, born from Fitzwilliam’s grandfather’s first marriage. Victoria, that is, his first wife, died in childbirth. The old Marquess was alone for several years before he married his second wife.”

Elizabeth took note, trying to keep track of the various family members.

“They had two sons, Fitzwilliam’s father, George, and his younger brother, Morris. Phillip is Morris’s son. Morris died several years ago, drowned during a fishing trip. Silly boy. Who ventures out in a storm to fish? But then, Morris was always a rattlepate. George was ever the marchioness’s favourite son, and Fitzwilliam her favourite grandson. However, Phillip found favour with his uncle, who, of course, became Marquess once their grandfather died.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Did Phillip have designs on the marquessate?”

“No, not any more than any distant relation of a titled gentleman has designs on said title. Everyone dreams. I dream of becoming queen one day—not with the current regent, of course. But no, indeed, up until this recent turn of events, both Phillip and Fitzwilliam were removed from the marquessate. After all, the previous marquess had a son, who also had a son. Who could have foreseen that all three would be taken from this earth within forty-eight hours? Dreadful.”

She glanced over her shoulder before continuing, quieter now.

“I will say that Phillip was very close to his uncle and had his own ideas about how the marquessate ought to be managed. But he and Fitzwilliam are close. I am certain he will be instrumental in aiding Fitzwilliam in his new duties.”

Elizabeth nodded, though she would not admit to anyone that she was not particularly fond of Phillip Darcy. Indeed, she found herself harbouring an antipathy towards him that ran almost as deep as her dislike of Caroline Bingley. Phillip, Caroline, and Lady Aspen all shared one characteristic in common—they were rather high in the instep and looked at Elizabeth as though she were beneath their notice. When, in fact, the Bennets had always occupied several rungs above both the Bingleys and the likes of Phillip Darcy.

It was true that Lady Catherine, who had deliberately abstained from attending the wedding, had outranked Elizabeth before her marriage, but she no longer held that power. The same was true for Lady Aspen.

“Elizabeth,” Lady Matlock said, “you look pale. Have you had anything to eat? If not, then you must try these buns.” She led Elizabeth to the banquet table, where hot rolls were waiting along with an assortment of spreads. “Do not worry, there is much more to eat than this. There is an entire banquet room set up in the back, but I had the butler ensure that the cooks prepared some simpler fare. I wished your family to feel at home.”

Elizabeth paused and looked at Lady Matlock, who seemed to realise her error immediately.

“I meant... I meant I wished to ensure there was food your family was more accustomed to. I did not think dishes like ragoût de mouton or fricassée de volaille would necessarily be palatable.”

Elizabeth forced a smile, knowing that Lady Matlock had meant no harm. Indeed, of all Darcy’s relations, she seemed the most amiable. Still, the lady’s blunder reminded Elizabeth once more that she had much to learn about the new role she now occupied.

One Week Later

Palace of Westminster, London

The day had arrived. The sun shone brightly over London, casting a golden hue upon the stately buildings that lined the streets, lending an air of solemnity to the occasion. Her husband was to make his debut in the House of Lords, an event of great significance not only for him but for his family—a family which now included Elizabeth.

They had been married barely a week and had not found time for a honeymoon, a circumstance Fitzwilliam—as she now called him in the privacy of their home—promised to rectify once the Season had ended. Then, he said, they would go to Ashburn, the estate belonging to the Marquess of Dorset, and then to Pemberley.

For the present, they resided at Darcy House—a home grander than Elizabeth had ever imagined herself inhabiting and filled with servants who admired Fitzwilliam more than she had thought possible. She had found her time there to be comfortable and serene, a surprising contrast to the feelings she once harboured towards all things associated with the man who was now her husband.

“I can hardly wait,” Georgiana said beside her, drawing Elizabeth from her reverie. Georgiana reached for Elizabeth’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I am so glad you are here, Elizabeth,” she said with a warm smile that did much to reassure Elizabeth. “I observed our uncle in the House of Lords when I was a very young girl, but never did I think it would be Fitzwilliam to take such a place.”



Elizabeth could not help but feel a flutter of nerves mingling with her natural curiosity. This was a world she had never imagined herself a part of—a world of titles, power, and influence. That she should now be entering it as the prospective Marchioness of Dorset was a circumstance almost beyond belief.

“And I am glad to be here with you, Georgiana,” Elizabeth replied sincerely. The young lady’s genuine affection was a balm to Elizabeth’s spirit, which had been wearied by the cool reserve she had sensed from other quarters of the family.

The carriage drew to a halt, and the party alighted, making their way into the grand edifice. The marble halls of the Palace of Westminster were filled with an atmosphere of gravitas, the echoes of footfalls and murmured conversations adding to the sense of occasion. Elizabeth’s heart swelled with pride as she thought of Fitzwilliam, who was soon to take his place amongst the peers of the realm.

As they ascended the staircase, they were met by her husband’s family, who had arrived separately. Elizabeth noticed Lady Matlock casting an appraising glance at her, though her ladyship’s expression remained inscrutable. Lord Matlock, ever the gentleman, offered a gracious smile and escorted the ladies to their seats in the gallery.

Phillip, walking slightly behind, inclined his head courteously towards Elizabeth. “Lady Dorset, I trust you are finding London agreeable?”

Elizabeth bristled at her new title but returned his civility with a smile. “Indeed, Mr Darcy, it is quite unlike anything I have ever known.”

Phillip appeared satisfied with this response, though Elizabeth could not help but detect a certain restlessness in his demeanour. He spoke amiably enough, yet there was something in his manner that suggested an undercurrent of tension. She felt the weight of his gaze upon her, and though his words were pleasant, she could not

escape the feeling that he regarded her with a mixture of curiosity and something more unsettling—perhaps a sense of disapproval or doubt.

As they entered the gallery reserved for the families of peers, Elizabeth's attention was drawn to the chamber below, where the lords were gathering. The House of Lords was a magnificent sight to behold, its Gothic architecture soaring upwards to a vaulted ceiling adorned with intricate carvings and stained glass. The chamber was lined with red leather benches, and at the far end stood the imposing Woolsack, the seat of the Lord Chancellor. The room hummed with the low murmur of conversation as the assembled peers took their places.

Elizabeth could scarcely suppress a thrill of excitement as she scanned the scene before her. Here was history in the making, and she was a witness to it. Fitzwilliam's name was announced, and a hush fell over the chamber. All eyes turned towards the entrance, where he appeared, resplendent in his robes of state.

“All the pomp and circumstance, it never does become boring,” the Dowager Marchioness, who sat a few seats away, said loud enough for Elizabeth to hear. “And how regal he looks.”

“Almost as if he were born for it,” Phillip agreed, and this time, he sounded genuinely impressed.

Indeed, Elizabeth felt her breath catch in her throat as she beheld him. He walked with the easy grace she had always admired, yet there was a new dignity in his bearing, a gravity that befitted the occasion. He was accompanied by two sponsors—his uncle Lord Matlock, and great-uncle, the Duke of Norfolk—who served as the senior peers introducing him to the House. As they processed down the aisle, Elizabeth could see the respect with which the other lords regarded him, and her heart swelled with pride.

As Fitzwilliam reached the Woolsack, he paused and bowed to the Lord Chancellor, who returned the gesture. Then, in a voice clear and steady, he took the oath of allegiance, affirming his loyalty to the Crown and the Constitution. The words, though formal, resonated with a sincerity that was unmistakably his own.

Elizabeth's eyes were fixed on him, her heart full as she watched him perform his duty with such calm assurance. She thought of all that had led to this moment—the trials and misunderstandings they had faced, the changes in their circumstances, and the deepening of their affection for one another.

Once the oath was taken, Fitzwilliam proceeded to take his seat among the other peers. As he did so, Elizabeth's gaze shifted to Phillip, who was seated just across from her. His expression was inscrutable, but there was a tightness around his mouth and a tension in his posture that did not escape her notice. It was as if he could not quite reconcile himself to what was unfolding before him. He had watched admiringly, but Elizabeth had to wonder—was Phillip jealous? Or was it simply because she harboured a dislike for the man that she found herself thinking ill of him?

Indeed, when she caught sight of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who sat in the opposite gallery with the rest of the Fitzwilliam family, she noted a similar expression on his face. Were these two young men uneasy about Fitzwilliam's ascension and the changes it might bring to their friendships? Was that what she saw in their faces? Mr Bingley, meanwhile, appeared utterly at ease and smiled throughout. But then, he was not related to any titled, genteel people and thus did not have to imagine himself in his friend's role.

Elizabeth felt a pang of unease. She had sensed from the beginning that Phillip was not entirely at ease with the idea of her becoming part of the family, and now, as Fitzwilliam took his place in the House of Lords, that unease seemed to manifest itself more openly. Yet, outwardly, Phillip maintained his composure, offering her a polite smile when he caught her eye.

As the ceremony concluded, the gathered family members began to make their way out of the gallery. Georgiana remained close to Elizabeth, her manner as warm and unaffected as ever. Lady Matlock and Lord Matlock exchanged a few words with Fitzwilliam as he rejoined them, while Phillip lingered a few paces behind, his countenance inscrutable.

“It was a most impressive ceremony,” Lady Matlock remarked, her tone approving though her eyes flickered briefly towards Elizabeth.

“Indeed,” Lord Matlock agreed. “You have done us proud, Fitzwilliam.”

Fitzwilliam inclined his head in acknowledgment, though his gaze seemed to seek out Elizabeth, who met his eyes with a smile that spoke more than words could convey.

“Lady Dorset,” Phillip said as they descended the stairs, “I trust you found the proceedings interesting?”

“Very much so,” Elizabeth replied. “It is a rare privilege to witness such an occasion.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” Phillip responded. “It can be overwhelming at first. My uncle told me he found himself rather at sea more than once as he found his way. I can imagine it is no easier for the wife of a peer who is not accustomed to all the pomp and circumstance. I shall be glad to assist you.”

“I am grateful, Mr Darcy,” she replied.

“Please, Phillip. We are family now, after all,” he said, and she nodded, wondering if she had been wrong about him. She had made a habit of misjudging, between her errors with Mr Wickham and Fitzwilliam, had she not?

The party made their way to the waiting carriages, and as they settled inside, Georgiana took Elizabeth's hand again. "I am so glad you were with us today," she said softly. "It meant a great deal to my brother, I am sure."

"And to me," Elizabeth replied, her voice equally soft. The warmth in Georgiana's eyes was a comfort, and she felt a renewed sense of determination. She was a high-ranking lady now, and her husband a peer. There was much good she could do in this world, once she knew what to expect. For now, she had to get through the afternoon. The Matlocks were hosting a grand dinner, a dinner Fitzwilliam had fretted over as he wished to ensure she was comfortable.

She had not worried about the matter too much, having been to many a dinner, but now they were on their way, she worried.

"Pray, who will be at this dinner?"

Georgiana tipped her head to one side. "Well, the Darcy and Fitzwilliam families, of course. Earl Grey is certain to be there, and Earl Fitzwilliam. He is a distant cousin of ours. Some members of the Whig party, and I hear Lady Caroline Lamb will attend. And rumour has it, Lord Byron might come."

At this, Elizabeth gasped. Lord Byron, Earl Grey—these were names she knew from the broadsheets but had never hoped to meet in person. Suddenly, as the carriage neared their destination, she could not deny the anxiety that rose within her, and she had to wonder—was she ready for her first grand outing as a marchioness?

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

The grand dinner party at Matlock House loomed large in Darcy's mind as the evening approached. It was to be the first such engagement for him and Elizabeth as a married couple, and the importance of the occasion weighed heavily on him. He was still alight with excitement over his introduction to the House of Lords, which had been one of the grandest moments of his life, outside of his marriage, but now as the evening loomed, he thought of Elizabeth.

They had been married one week and already she was expected to fulfil her role. If at least they had been able to ride in the carriage to his aunt and uncle's home, alas, he had to remain at Parliament a little while longer.

Now as his uncle's townhouse came into view, he spotted her carriage and breathed a sigh of relief.

"If you will excuse me, I must greet my wife," he said and was about to exit when his great uncle spoke up.

"Your wife? Darcy, are you befogged? When did you get married?"

"Uncle, last week. You were in attendance." Darcy said but Norfolk looked at him puzzled.

"Ah, that was you. That is right. To that lass from Hertford."

"Hertfordshire," Darcy corrected but Lord Matlock waved his hand.

"Go, Fitzwilliam, or we will be here all night," he said with a smile and Darcy

hurried to Elizabeth's carriage. Calling her name, he slowed down.

"Fitzwilliam," she said. Hearing her speak his name still felt like a rare gift, he was so used to her calling him Mr Darcy or Lord Dorset—which she still did in public. But his name sounded sweet from her lips. "It was such a grand ceremony."

"Indeed, it was," he agreed. "I was nervous, very nervous indeed."

"You did not look it. You looked regal and as though you were always meant to be there."

He smiled at her, grateful she had thought so.

"I am glad you thought so. Now, this dinner—we do not have to stay long, I expect it shall be frightfully tiresome," he said, worried about her comfort. "You must tell me if you feel overwhelmed at any point," he murmured as they entered the carriage.

Elizabeth turned to him, a slight frown creasing her brow. "You need not worry so much. I assure you, I am perfectly capable of navigating a dinner party."

Darcy hesitated, "I know you are, Elizabeth. But tonight's gathering will be rather more formidable than most. The guests are not only family but also some of the most influential men in the country. I merely wish to ensure you are at ease."

Elizabeth's expression softened, but Darcy detected an undercurrent of tension in her voice as she replied, "I appreciate your concern, but I cannot help but feel as though you doubt my abilities. It is as though you think I might falter, that I might not meet the expectations of such company."

"That is not my intention," Darcy began, but he did not want to deepen her impression that he thought her incapable. Their relationship had thawed considerable

and he'd even found himself in riveting conversation with her since their night at the theatre. Her views aligned with his on many things and he'd enjoyed those directions. The last thing he wanted was to upset her.

He could only hope that the evening would unfold smoothly, though a gnawing sense of unease lingered in his chest.

The grandeur of Matlock House was in full display as they arrived. The stately manor, aglow with the light of countless candles, stood as a beacon of aristocratic elegance. The guests had already begun to assemble, their carriages lining the driveway, and the air was thick with the anticipation of the evening's festivities.

Darcy escorted Elizabeth up the steps, his hand lingering on hers as though to convey unspoken support. Yet the earlier exchange hung between them, casting a shadow over their arrival. He could sense the tension between them, a tension he had inadvertently contributed to with his overprotective nature. As they approached the grand salon, Darcy steeled himself for the evening ahead, determined to make the experience as pleasant as possible for Elizabeth.

Inside, the salon was a glittering scene of wealth and power. The walls, adorned with rich tapestries and paintings of noble ancestors, bore witness to the illustrious history of the Matlock family. Darcy's eyes swept the room, noting the presence of influential figures whose approval he had once taken for granted but now weighed more heavily upon him with Elizabeth at his side.

Lord and Lady Matlock greeted them with the practiced ease of seasoned hosts, their smiles warm yet measured. Darcy nodded politely, though his attention was focused on Elizabeth, ever worried that she was comfortable.

"Fitzwilliam and Lady Dorset, we are delighted to have you with us," Lady Matlock said to Elizabeth, her tone gracious but with a hint of something more. Darcy knew



his aunt well enough to understand she too was worried about Elizabeth. “You must meet some of our other guests—many of them are most eager to make your acquaintance.”

Darcy watched as Elizabeth inclined her head in acknowledgment, her gaze sweeping the room. He observed her closely as Lady Matlock led her through the throng, introducing her to a procession of distinguished guests. Darcy noted the measured politeness of their interactions, the subtle scrutiny from those who were meeting Elizabeth for the first time. He felt a surge of protectiveness, wishing he could shield her from the judgemental eyes of the elite.

When they reached Earl Fitzwilliam, a distant cousin, Darcy’s tension eased slightly. He respected the Earl and knew him to be fair-minded. The Earl’s stern countenance softened as he addressed Elizabeth.

“Lady Dorset, it is a pleasure,” he said with a bow. “I have heard much of you from my cousin, and I must say, he speaks of you with the highest regard. I was very sorry to miss your nuptials but I only just returned from Scotland.”

Darcy could not help but glance at Elizabeth, catching the polite smile she offered in return. “Thank you, my lord. It is an honour to meet you. You must join us for dinner at Darcy House soon.”

“I would be delighted,” he replied and nodded at Darcy appreciatively, as though confirming Darcy’s choice of wife had been a good one.

As the evening progressed, Darcy remained close to Elizabeth, though he was careful not to hover. He knew how much she valued her independence and did not wish to stifle her. Still, he could not shake the concern that gnawed at him. He watched as she engaged with Fitzwilliam Lamb, the future Lord Melbourne, noting how her expression alternated between interest and wariness as Lady Caroline Lamb flitted

about the room with an energy that reminded Darcy all too vividly of Lydia Bennet. He felt a pang of unease, hoping the comparison was not lost on Elizabeth.

Nearby, Darcy observed Lord Byron in animated discussion with a small group. Darcy had never cared for the poet's brooding demeanour, and he was relieved when Elizabeth did not engage him in conversation. Lord Byron was a handsome man who easily captivated women's attention and he had to admit he'd worried about Elizabeth being drawn into his circle. It was one thing to indulge in his literary pursuits, as both he and Elizabeth did, but another to keep his company.

Such envy was of course silly, as she had made it clear how she felt about him but he could not help himself.

When the time came for dinner, Darcy ensured Elizabeth was seated beside him, her presence a comfort amidst the weighty conversation that unfolded around them. The table was a spectacle of culinary excess, the finest dishes laid out with ostentatious splendour. Yet, despite the outward grandeur, Darcy could sense Elizabeth's unease. He knew that she felt the weight of expectation, not only from him but from the assembled company, many of whom regarded her with the cool reserve that came with old blood and entrenched privilege.

It was a relief they were seated across from Earl Fitzwilliam, who made efforts to engage Elizabeth in light conversation, along with Lady Matlock, who was at Elizabeth's other side.

Darcy soon found himself drawn into a discussion about politics. As the conversation turned to the pressing issues of the day, Darcy felt Elizabeth's attention on him. He was keenly aware of her presence, her interest in his views. The topic of Catholic emancipation arose, and Darcy addressed it with his usual measured consideration, aware of the potential ramifications of his words.

“I do hope to address Catholic emancipation this year,” Earl Fitzwilliam said then. “Norfolk will be on my side, I know it. And I hope you too.”

“Of course, my Lord. It is an issue of great import, and one that cannot be approached lightly,” Darcy said in response to the Earl’s enquiry. “While I understand the fears of those who see such measures as a threat to the established order, I believe it is our duty to consider the broader implications for the stability and unity of the realm.”

Earl Grey, a towering figure in the Whig party, nodded in agreement, though Darcy sensed the challenge in his gaze. The discussion deepened, with Darcy holding his own among the fierier rhetoric of others. He spoke of the necessity of balancing tradition with progress, of the duty of the aristocracy to lead by example and to enact changes that would benefit the nation as a whole.

As he spoke, Darcy could feel Elizabeth’s gaze upon him. He knew her opinions on the matter well, as they had discussed it at home but he also knew that she would not voice her thoughts in such a setting. Glanced at her briefly, catching the admiration in her eyes, which filled him with a deep sense of satisfaction. Yet, even as he marvelled at the connection between them, he could not ignore the lingering tension from their earlier disagreement. He wished he could reach across the table, take her hand, and assure her that his concern for her was rooted in his care for her, not doubt.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice low and intimate despite the surroundings, “are you enjoying yourself?”

Elizabeth smiled, but Darcy could see the strain behind it. “I am. It is a remarkable experience.”

“Indeed,” he said, his hand finding hers under the table. “And you are remarkable.”

The simple words seemed to ease some of the tension in Elizabeth’s expression,

though Darcy knew the unease had not entirely dissipated. He felt a pang of guilt, wishing he could do more to shield her from the judgements of others.

As the dinner ended and the guests began to disperse to the drawing rooms, Darcy guided Elizabeth through the throng, his hand resting lightly at her back. They exchanged pleasantries with various guests, Darcy's manner relaxed yet attentive to her every move. He sensed the evening had been a trial for her, and he was determined to help her navigate it with as much grace as possible.

It was as they were leaving that they encountered Phillip once more, who had been deep in conversation with Earl Fitzwilliam. He approached them with a smile that did not quite reach his eyes.

"Lady Dorset, I hope the evening has not been too overwhelming," he said, his tone polite yet laced with a subtle condescension.

Darcy was grateful for his cousin's care of Elizabeth and flashed a smile. "Not at all, Mr Darcy. It has been most enlightening." Darcy noted the edge in Elizabeth's tone, though he was unsure where it came from as she had no reason to feel weary of Phillip. He had been unhappy with Darcy's choice but since then, they'd made their peace and he'd been exceedingly kind and considerate of her.

Phillip's gaze flickered briefly to Darcy before returning to her. "I am glad to hear it. I trust you will soon become quite accustomed to such gatherings."

Elizabeth smiled, though Darcy could sense the underlying tension between the two men. "I am sure I shall."

"And you? How are you? Ready to take on the highway robbers of London? Or should I say the alleyway robbers?" Phillip said with a chuckle.

Elizabeth frowned and Darcy shook his head. Elizabeth was as yet unaware of what had happened that evening in the alley as he had not wanted to ruin their wedding the next day.

“Alleyway robbers?”

“Did he not tell you? Our dear Lord Dorset was almost robbed blind if not for Colonel Fitzwilliam’s interference. Goodness, I was unaware you did not know. Do not be alarmed, all is well now,” Phillip said looking slightly embarrassed as he noted his error. “I shall bid you a good night.”

As they took their leave, Darcy felt Elizabeth’s hand on his arm and noted she held on tighter than before.

“You were attacked?” she asked, her face pale.

“Hardly. A man attempted to rob me but we were able to fight him off. It is what comes with living in town, I am afraid,” he said but Elizabeth looked alarmed.

“You could have been hurt,” she said, her words trembling as they came out.

“I could but I was not. Please forgive me for not telling you but I did not want to cast a shadow over our wedding. There is no need for alarm. Now, shall we go home?”

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Darcy slipped into the house with uncharacteristic haste, hoping to avoid being seen by Elizabeth. This was not his custom. Since their wedding, he had made a point of seeking her out the moment he returned home to greet her, and over the past few days, this attentiveness had seemed to soften her disposition towards their union. Indeed, she had more than once stepped out of the drawing-room to meet him, her smile warm and genuine, a sight that had touched his heart.

Today, however, as he returned from Angelo's Fencing Academy, he was keen to bypass her. Yet, as he passed the drawing-room, Elizabeth turned at the sound of his footsteps.

"Fitzwilliam," she called. He could not help but smile at the sound of his name on her lips, though his hand instinctively moved to his neck.

"Elizabeth, I did not mean to disturb you. Please, return to your reading. I shall join you presently."

"I have finished my chapter and—Fitzwilliam!" she exclaimed, her voice laced with concern as she approached him. Her gaze immediately fell upon his neck. "What on earth has happened? You are hurt!"

Darcy offered a small, reassuring smile, attempting to soothe her evident worry. "It is nothing to be troubled over, my dear. A minor incident during fencing, nothing more. The physician has already tended to it." He had hoped to change and don one of his wider cravats to conceal the conspicuous cut where Phillip's foil had grazed him.

Elizabeth was not so easily reassured. Her eyes, wide with concern, searched his face.

“Minor, you say? Yet you return with a wound and a bandage at your neck. How did this come about?”

Darcy hesitated briefly, as though considering how best to allay her fears. “I was fencing with Phillip,” he explained with measured calm. “He was momentarily distracted by a noise outside, and the tip of his foil caught me. It is but a mere scratch, I assure you.”

“Distracted, you say?” she repeated, her brow furrowing. “Does Phillip often display such carelessness in his fencing?”

“No, not at all,” Darcy replied, shaking his head slightly as if to dismiss her concern. “Phillip is usually quite adept. It was an unfortunate moment of inattention, nothing more. There is no cause for alarm.”

Yet, despite his reassurances, Darcy saw Elizabeth’s disquiet deepen.

“You have encountered much misfortune these past few days. First the robbery and now this,” she said, her tone suggesting a lingering suspicion, though of what, Darcy could not discern.

“Please, there is no need for concern. I am unhurt, and living in Town brings with it such challenges. That is why I had a proposition for you. Parliament will be in recess for the summer, and I thought I might take you to Ashburn, the Marquess of Dorset’s seat. What say you?”

Elizabeth regarded him, her head tilted slightly as if she were not entirely certain what to make of this suggestion. In truth, he had wished to take her to Pemberley, but time was pressing, and it was necessary that he visit Ashburn sooner rather than later.

“We could bring Jane with us. Georgiana could join us for a time, though she will

have to be dispatched back to town within a fortnight as she is to travel to Matlock with my uncle and aunt, but I should like to show you the estate, and later in the year, we might visit Pemberley.”

He waited, hopeful that his distraction might succeed, and to his relief, she nodded.

“I suppose it would be well for us to see Ashburn and for the servants there to become acquainted with us. I shall speak to Jane,” she said, but then she drew a deep breath. “You must take greater care, can you promise me that? I worry.”

Darcy felt a rush of warmth and smiled. “I am glad to hear that you care.”

“I am your wife, am I not?” she replied, though a smile played about her lips, and Darcy could not help but wonder if, perhaps, a little light of affection had ignited in her heart for him as well.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

To say that Elizabeth was troubled by her husband's injury would be an understatement. First the robbery on the eve of their wedding, and now this—it felt strange, almost portentous. She was unsure whether it was her growing feelings for Fitzwilliam, which she could no longer deny, or the nagging suspicion she harboured towards Phillip Darcy, or perhaps a mixture of both.

She could not quite pinpoint the source of her aversion to his cousin, but she recalled the flashes of envy that had crossed Phillip's face on the day Fitzwilliam took his seat, and the manner in which he had opposed their union—a fact she had learnt from Jane via Colonel Fitzwilliam. Perhaps it was this—perhaps she disliked him because he seemed to harbour an unspoken dislike for her. Yet, whatever the reason, she found herself unable to cast aside this lingering unease, no matter how hard she tried.

As Fitzwilliam changed from his fencing attire, Elizabeth found herself haunted by the image of the bandage, stark against his skin. It was not simply the injury that troubled her, but the deeper realisation of what it represented. For the first time, she truly confronted the fear that something might happen to him—a fear that had lurked at the edges of her consciousness but had now come sharply into focus.

She resolved that she must, at the very least, soothe her suspicions regarding Phillip, for it was the only thing she could control. Later that evening, after Fitzwilliam had retired to his study, Elizabeth sought out Georgiana, whose gentle presence had always been a source of comfort. The younger woman was seated at the pianoforte, playing a piece by Haydn with her usual grace. Elizabeth listened until the music ceased, and Georgiana looked up.

“Elizabeth, how are you?”

“I am well, but Georgiana,” she began, “may I ask you something? It is about your cousin, Mr Phillip Darcy.”

Georgiana turned from the pianoforte, her expression one of mild curiosity mixed with concern. “Of course, Elizabeth. What is it?”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, choosing her words with care. “I confess, I do not know him well, and I wonder—what is your opinion of him? How would you describe his character?”

Georgiana’s hands stilled on the keys, and she glanced away, a shadow of unease passing over her features. “Phillip is... complicated,” she began slowly. “He is not without merit, but he is also not without flaws. His temper can be quick, and his disposition is sometimes difficult. He is not like my brother.”

The carefulness of Georgiana’s reply did not escape Elizabeth, and it only served to deepen her unease. “Do you mean to say he is not a good person?” she asked.

Georgiana looked troubled, as though torn between familial loyalty and a desire to be truthful. “He is not a terrible person,” she said at last, her words deliberate, “but he is also not... what one might hope for in a friend or a brother. There are times when he can be unkind, though he is capable of charm and wit.”

Elizabeth absorbed this in silence, carefully considering Georgiana’s words. She did not wish to voice her own suspicions, not when they were based on a single incident, however unsettling. She did not wish to alarm Georgiana unduly, especially given the close bond between her and her brother. And yet, Elizabeth could not dismiss the growing sense of foreboding that seemed to gather around the figure of Phillip Darcy.

“I see,” Elizabeth said at length, offering Georgiana a reassuring smile. “Thank you for your honesty, Georgiana. I was merely curious.”

Georgiana nodded, her brow still furrowed with concern. “Is everything well, Elizabeth? You seem worried.”

Elizabeth forced herself to relax, to push aside the unease that threatened to overwhelm her. “I am fine,” she replied, though the words felt hollow even as she spoke them. “I was only concerned after hearing of a small mishap during your brother’s fencing match with Phillip. But it is nothing to worry about, I assure you.”

Georgiana’s expression softened, and she reached out to touch Elizabeth’s hand. “Fitzwilliam is always careful, and he would never put himself in harm’s way. And Phillip adores him. I am sure it was just an accident.”

Elizabeth nodded, though her heart remained troubled. She knew that Fitzwilliam was indeed careful, that he possessed a natural caution that often served him well in both business and personal matters. But the look in Phillip’s eyes—the coldness, the envy—continued to haunt her, and she could not help but wonder if there was more to the incident than Fitzwilliam had perceived or was willing to acknowledge.

As the evening wore on, Elizabeth’s thoughts became increasingly introspective. She found herself reflecting not only on the day’s events but also on the depth of her own growing feelings for husband. The fear she had felt upon seeing his injury had been visceral, immediate, and it had shaken her more than she cared to admit. It was as though, in that moment, she had been forced to confront the reality of her attachment to him—a reality she had perhaps been avoiding until now.

She had entered their marriage with a sense of duty and friendship, but over time, she had come to realise that her feelings for Fitzwilliam were far deeper than she had initially understood. She cared for him—not just as a partner or companion, but with a fierce and protective tenderness that both surprised and frightened her. The thought of something happening to him, of losing him, was unbearable.

This realisation brought with it a new set of fears and uncertainties. Elizabeth had always prided herself on her independence, on her ability to navigate the world with confidence and wit. But now, she found herself grappling with emotions that were unfamiliar and unsettling. She did not know how to reconcile these feelings with her self-image, nor how to express them to her husband without feeling vulnerable or exposed.

But for now, she simply allowed herself to feel, to acknowledge the depth of her affection for Fitzwilliam and the fear that accompanied it. She did not know what the future held, but she was determined to face it with the same courage and resolve that had always guided her. Whatever challenges might arise—whether from Phillip or from within her own heart—she would meet them head-on, with her husband by her side. And she would protect him, just as fiercely as she knew he would protect her.

As the fire in the hearth burned low and the shadows lengthened, Elizabeth rose from her chair and made her way upstairs, her mind still racing with thoughts and emotions. She paused outside the door to Fitzwilliam's study, listening to the quiet rustle of paper within, and felt a wave of affection wash over her. She would speak to him, she decided—perhaps not tonight, but soon.

Ashburn Court, Dorset

“I have not been to Ashburn in such a very long time,” Georgiana declared.

Elizabeth smiled at her husband, who was seated beside her as the carriage rolled up the long driveway to Ashburn Court. They had just passed the gatehouse, and already Elizabeth was in awe of the place. It was grand, akin to Chatsworth or Blenheim.

“The grounds are magnificent,” Elizabeth marvelled as she gazed out of the carriage window. “I daresay they are even larger than Netherfield.”

“Indeed they are,” Fitzwilliam replied, a touch of pride in his voice. “But not as vast as the ones at Pemberley.” He smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. “I do rather boast about Pemberley, do I not?”

“And rightfully so,” Georgiana interjected. “It is, after all, one of the grandest estates in the north. I believe it to be almost the finest in the entire realm, though I may be biased, having been born and raised there.” She turned to Elizabeth with a warm smile. “I cannot wait for you to see it.”

“Nor can I,” Fitzwilliam added, the warmth in his voice unmistakable. He shifted in his seat, so that his knee rested against Elizabeth’s. The connection, slight as it was, brought a comforting sense of closeness that she found rather wonderful.

Over the past few weeks, they had grown increasingly close, and while Elizabeth felt a tinge of sadness at leaving behind the familiarity of Darcy House, which had become her refuge since they married, she was also eagerly anticipating seeing

Ashburn.

“When Jane arrives, the three of us must venture into the village,” Georgiana said. “It is quite lovely—so quaint—and there is a sweet shop you will simply adore.”

“I believe it will do Jane good to be away from London for a little while,” Elizabeth replied thoughtfully. “She may find some peace of mind.”

“Indeed,” Georgiana agreed. “It cannot be easy for her, being caught between our cousin Richard and Mr Bingley. Though it seems clear to anyone who observes Jane and Mr Bingley together that they share a special understanding.”

Fitzwilliam shook his head when both women looked at him. “I have learned my lesson—this is between Miss Bennet and her two suitors.”

Fitzwilliam had impressed her time and again with how much he had evolved since the early days of their acquaintance. He valued her opinions and advice and did his utmost to be respectful of her perspectives. Though Elizabeth often found herself curious about which suitor her husband deemed more suitable for her sister, she had refrained from asking, knowing it was not their concern. Whoever Jane ultimately chose, it was clear that each gentleman came with his own merits and faults. A respite in the countryside would provide Jane with the clarity she needed.

Even if Jane were still in London, she would not have to contend with both gentlemen, for Colonel Fitzwilliam has gone to Kent to call upon his aunt—a long-overdue visit.

“There is the house,” Fitzwilliam said, his voice betraying his excitement. He pointed out the window to a home that exuded grace and charm. Ashburn Court stood before them, a grand Tudor-style manor house with its tall chimneys, mullioned windows, and ivy-clad walls—a perfect embodiment of elegance and history.

The carriage came to a stop, and Fitzwilliam exited first, offering his hand to Georgiana, who had been seated opposite them, and then to Elizabeth. As he helped her down, Elizabeth noted how his hand lingered on hers, his touch more intimate than usual. She found she did not mind it in the least.

“Here we are,” he said, gazing at the estate with a look of true admiration. “While I am a northern gentleman born and bred and Pemberley has my heart, I daresay this is one of the finest estates in the south.”

“I can hardly believe this is now one of our homes. I cannot wait to explore the gardens,” Elizabeth marvelled.

“You should do so this evening,” Georgiana suggested enthusiastically. “Are not the gardens here simply marvellous at sunset, Fitzwilliam?”

Fitzwilliam nodded at once. “Indeed they are. Will you do me the honour of allowing me to show you the estate?” His voice held a note of eager anticipation. “I know Jane will be here in a few days, and you will wish to explore with her, but I daresay it is better to know your way around beforehand.”

Elizabeth needed no further persuasion. She was already looking forward to exploring the gardens with him but chose not to reveal her excitement just yet. Instead, she allowed herself to be swept up in the moment, relishing the thought of discovering every corner of Ashburn with her husband by her side.

### One Week Later

“What a beautiful estate,” Jane remarked as they strolled through Ashburn’s splendid garden. Elizabeth had to concede that it was indeed quite grand. She had not expected to be so impressed by Ashburn, especially as Fitzwilliam had not extolled its virtues. In fact, he had remarked that it paled in comparison to his beloved Pemberley. Elizabeth did not know what to anticipate, having formed only a vague image of Ashburn from his words. Now, however, she could see that it was indeed a magnificent place.

The gardens were vast, four times the size of those at Longbourn, and even grander than those at Netherfield, with various sections dedicated to different flowers, fruits, and herbs. At present, they were walking through the rose garden, the sweet scent of a myriad of roses accompanying their steps.

“I never thought it would be so grand. It will take all day to explore,” Elizabeth said, a note of awe in her voice. Jane had only just arrived that morning and was still acclimating to her new surroundings, while Elizabeth, having been at Ashburn for a week, still felt as though she had only just arrived herself.

“How are Aunt and Uncle?” she asked, and Jane smiled.

“Our aunt enjoyed Bath, but I know she was glad to be getting home. She is rather pleased that she and Uncle will have the house to themselves for a time. Mother and Father will have their hands full with our cousins.”

Elizabeth chuckled, for the Gardiner children had gone to stay with the Bennets at



Longbourn. It was the Bennet family's way of repaying the Gardiners for keeping such a good eye on Jane and Elizabeth while they were in London.

"I am grateful you have invited me to stay here," Jane remarked.

"Well, I imagine you shall visit more often now, as Fitzwilliam and I will be here regularly. Though I suspect he would much rather be at Pemberley."

"It must be beautiful. Mr Bingley has spoken of it often. He mentioned that he and Mr Phillip Darcy used to spend their summers there, sometimes with Colonel Fitzwilliam, and, of course, Mr Wickham."

"How are things between yourself, Mr Bingley, and Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Elizabeth enquired, eager to steer the conversation away from Mr Wickham. "Have you decided whom it is your heart wants?"

Jane sighed. "It is rather peculiar that they both seek my company now. Colonel Fitzwilliam has gone to Matlock for a few weeks with his father, now that Parliament is in recess, and Mr Bingley has gone to Netherfield. I was quite taken aback to hear of it. I am grateful that you invited me to Ashburn, as it affords me some distance to think. But enough about me—what of you and Lord Dorset?"

Elizabeth smiled, "I think when it is just the two of us, you can forgo his official title." She paused, she had anticipated this question but found herself unprepared to answer. "He is kind," she began slowly. "Fitzwilliam affords me every comfort I could ask for, even sending for books from Town when I express interest in volumes that are not available here. Everything is arranged just as I wish it. He is attentive and caring, and we share some of the most riveting conversations."

"In other words, he is the ideal husband?" Jane prompted with a gentle smile.

Elizabeth shrugged slightly. “I cannot deny that my feelings for him have altered these past few weeks. I find myself caring for him more than I thought possible. I worry for his safety. The day before our wedding, he was almost injured in a robbery,” she said, pausing their walk.

“A robbery? Goodness gracious, I had no idea!”

“I only discovered it by chance. And then he was injured during a fencing match with his cousin. Not badly, but enough to alarm me. Ever since then, I have been plagued by thoughts of dread, wondering what life might have been like if he had not returned to me. Not so much because I would have been alone, but because he would have been gone. The thought troubles me, and the more I dwell on it, the more I realise that I could not bear to lose him. There was a time when such a notion would have made me laugh, but now... now I care for him deeply.”

Jane’s smile widened. “It seems your heart has found its true path. Perhaps everything is unfolding as it was meant to. Can you imagine it? You and Fitzwilliam together, perhaps even with an heir?”

Elizabeth looked down at her feet, “I think not. We have not even spoken of an heir. We do not share a bedchamber,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, aware that such topics were not usually discussed openly.

“You have not? But you have been married—”

“I know, but I felt uncomfortable, and he promised not to rush me. Although, the longer we are married, the more I wonder if perhaps I—” she faltered, feeling her cheeks flush. “If perhaps I wish for him to rush me, even if only a little.”

“So, you can imagine yourself as his wife, in every sense of the word?”

Elizabeth smiled broadly. “Yes. I can. I can see myself walking through these gardens with him when we are old, our grandchildren running around us, and still loving him with the same intensity I feel now, perhaps even more.”

Jane squeezed her sister’s hand, her expression one of deep contentment. “Then you have found what you were meant to. And I could not be happier for you.”

Elizabeth smiled to herself. It was true, these past few days had been peaceful and full of growing affection between herself and her husband, something she never imagined possible. Her feels had grown beyond friendship and she knew he still felt as he had in Hunsford—though he hadn’t said so. He made it clear through his gestures and attentiveness, and yet he was not pressing her for anything and that made her care for him even more.

“I suppose my heart does know what it wants, at long last,” Elizabeth began.

Jane, with a knowing smile, said, “I think your heart knew all along.”

“Well, you see? Coming to Ashburn has already given me some clarity, and it may do the same for you,” Elizabeth replied.

“I certainly hope so,” Jane began, but her words trailed off. “That is... it can’t be...” she whispered, her eyes fixed on a figure in the distance. “George Wickham?”

Elizabeth followed Jane’s gaze. Indeed, there he was, strolling leisurely down the road, his arms swinging by his sides as if he hadn’t a care in the world. The sight of him made her stomach clench, memories of their last conversation flooding back—back when she had still held him in some regard, believing his every word.

“Why in the world is he here?” Elizabeth murmured, her voice tinged with both confusion and distaste.

“I’m afraid we’re about to find out,” Jane replied as they drew nearer. Turning back now would have been impossible, and so they continued on their path.

“Goodness, goodness,” Mr Wickham exclaimed with a sly smile that Elizabeth once might have found charming. “If it isn’t Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Bennet. Oh, excuse me,” he added, placing a hand over his mouth as though suppressing a chuckle. “I must correct myself—Lady Dorset. Who would have thought, after everything I told you.”

“Indeed, after everything you told me,” Elizabeth repeated, her tone steely as she met his gaze. How she had ever believed anything this man had to say was now beyond her comprehension. It was so clear to her now—he was a liar, a scoundrel, a man not to be trusted. Her thoughts turned to her sweet sister-in-law, Georgiana, and what Mr Wickham had done to her. Her fingers twitched with the impulse to slap him, but she knew it would be thoroughly unsuitable for a lady to act in such a manner.

“What brings you to Ashburn?” she asked, determined to keep the conversation civil.

“Oh, I am on leave from my regiment,” Mr Wickham replied smoothly. “So I thought I would return to a place where I spent many a summer in my youth. The late Mr Darcy used to bring me here, and I spent many happy hours with dear Georgiana and Phillip. Of course, Darcy himself was never well-disposed towards me, even then. And Colonel Fitzwilliam—Richie, as we called him—was always by Darcy’s side. Bingley was here at times as well, but that was later, when we were older.”

Elizabeth’s mind spun at the mention of Phillip Darcy. She had been unaware that Phillip and Richard Fitzwilliam had known Mr Wickham so well, but it made sense—they were all her husband’s cousins, after all, and had been friends since childhood.

“I was unaware that you were acquainted with Phillip Darcy,” she remarked.

“Oh yes, we were quite dear friends. Not so much as boys, but later, at Cambridge. We grew very close then. We still write to one another. In fact, that is how I learned of your good fortune, Miss Bennet—Lady Dorset. I was actually on my way to see him now. It would be rude of me not to call on a friend when we happen to be in the same town, would you not say so?”

Elizabeth was about to express her surprise that Phillip Darcy was at Ashburn, since she had believed him to be staying in Town, but she refrained, not wanting to appear ignorant of her own family’s affairs.

“I did not know he had arrived yet,” she said instead, implying that she had known of his visit, just not the exact timing.

“Oh yes, he arrived yesterday. Have you not seen him yet? Well, I suppose the cottage is a little far from here. Frankly, I was surprised that Darcy did not put him up at Ashburn—excuse me, Lord Dorset. I will never get used to it. I thought he was proud enough before his elevation,” Mr Wickham said, waving a hand dismissively, though his eyes sparkled with mischief. “But I must not speak ill of your husband.”

Elizabeth felt her temper rise at Mr Wickham’s insinuations but held her composure, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing he had ruffled her.

Elizabeth stood rooted to the spot, the encounter with Mr Wickham leaving her more unsettled than she cared to admit. Mr Wickham’s insinuations, his sly smile, and his casual reference to Phillip Darcy as a dear friend gnawed at her. How could it be that Phillip, who appeared so reserved and gentlemanly, still maintained a connection with someone as unscrupulous as Mr Wickham?

Mr Wickham seemed to sense her discomfort. “Well, I must be off,” he said with a casual wave of his hand. “It was lovely seeing you both—such unexpected pleasures are rare indeed.” He gave them a mock bow, his eyes gleaming with mischief, before

sauntering off down the road.

Elizabeth watched him go, her mind racing. She turned to Jane, who seemed equally perturbed by the encounter.

“I always had a bad feeling about Phillip,” Elizabeth admitted quietly as they began to walk back towards Ashburn. “There’s something... something the matter with him. I can’t quite place it, but it’s as if he’s envious of Fitzwilliam, though he tries to conceal it. And now, this—Mr Wickham claiming they are still close friends... It makes me wary.”

Jane nodded slowly, her brow furrowed. “It is indeed strange, Lizzy. For him to still correspond with Mr Wickham... it does raise questions.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth agreed, her voice tinged with unease. “And yet, I don’t want to jump to conclusions. But this encounter—there’s more to it than meets the eye. I think... I think I must speak to my husband about it.”

Jane gave her sister a supportive nod. “Yes, you should. If anyone can shed light on the matter, it’s him.”

As they walked back to Ashburn, Elizabeth’s thoughts churned. She couldn’t shake the sense of foreboding that had settled over her since Mr Wickham’s appearance. If Phillip Darcy truly was as close to Mr Wickham as he claimed, what did that say about his character? And what could this mean for the Darcy family, for Georgiana, and for the harmony she had so recently found with Fitzwilliam?

Upon their return to the estate, Elizabeth felt a renewed resolve. She would not let this matter rest until she had spoken to her husband. If there was something amiss with his cousin, if Phillip’s intentions were less than honourable, then he needed to know. Elizabeth would not allow anything—or anyone—to jeopardise the happiness

she had only just begun to embrace.

And so, with determination in her heart, Elizabeth made her way to find her husband, ready to unearth the truth about Phillip Darcy and his mysterious connection to George Wickham.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Having parted with Jane, who decided to give Elizabeth time alone with Fitzwilliam to discuss the matter regarding Mr Wickham, Elizabeth made her way into the drawing-room. To her surprise, she found Phillip seated beside Georgiana and her husband, engaging in cheerful conversation.

“My dearest cousin,” Phillip exclaimed upon spotting her. Rising, he bowed and took her hand, pressing his lips lightly upon it. Elizabeth was grateful for her gloves, as she would have disliked the sensation of his lips on her bare skin. She could not decide whether her scrutiny of him was justified, or if she was being unduly critical.

“How are you?” he enquired, gesturing for her to sit beside Fitzwilliam, who smiled and briefly placed his hand atop hers. The tender gesture, which would have disconcerted her only weeks ago, now brought her a quiet pleasure.

“I am well,” Elizabeth replied. “My sister and I took in the countryside earlier. I was surprised to come upon a good acquaintance of yours,” she added, immediately regretting her words as she recalled Georgiana’s presence.

Phillip shifted slightly, crossing one leg over the other, and looked at her.

“An acquaintance of mine, you say? Do you speak of George? Oh, George,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Can you believe it, William? He has the audacity to call on me to tell me he was in Ashburn, as though we were still companions. Elizabeth, I do hope you did not put too much stock in his words.”

“It is not up to me to interpret his words, only that he said he was on his way to meet you, and that you would be waiting—which to me, suggested a prior arrangement,”



she said, repeating what she'd been told.

Georgiana, who had been quietly observing, shifted uncomfortably, clutching at the material of her light dress. Elizabeth chided herself for bringing up the matter in front of her. She noticed the way Fitzwilliam's approving gaze had suddenly turned to one of mild disapproval, which chilled her. She had come to value his opinion greatly, and she very much wanted him to think well of her. And yet, here she was, perhaps ruining any progress they had made.

"Elizabeth," Fitzwilliam said gently, "you must know that anything George Wickham says should be taken with a grain of salt."

"A pound of salt, more like," Phillip added with a chuckle. "It is true, I was once quite close to the young man. Indeed, at Cambridge, we were the best of friends. But I soon discovered his true nature and have kept my distance since. Certain events made that necessary, as we all know. However, I have found with people like Wickham, it is sometimes best to maintain a civil connection." He glanced at Georgiana.

"I do not know why you would want any connection with a man like him," Georgiana said, narrowing her eyes. "After everything he has done."

"You know the saying, keep your friends close, but your enemies closer," Phillip replied, giving Georgiana a light elbow as though she were still a little girl.

"I see," Elizabeth said, though she was surprised she was only now hearing of this.

"Well," Phillip said, rising and smoothing down his pantaloons, "I must take my leave. I shall see you tomorrow for the shooting, I saw a number of pheasants earlier?" He pointed an index finger at Fitzwilliam.

At the mention of shooting, Elizabeth instantly tensed, but her husband had already risen to shake his cousin's hand. "Phillip, I wouldn't have thought I would need to remind a gentleman like yourself that pheasant season is still weeks away. Though we do have rather a lot of rabbits."

"Indeed there are. Well, I shall show you the best hunting grounds so you may be prepared when the hunting season starts—I am intimately familiar with the estate, after all."

"I really wish you would have agreed to take a guest room. I feel dreadful knowing you are staying in an inn in town," Fitzwilliam said.

Phillip shook his head. "No, we must ensure the tenants and servants know that you are master of Ashburn now, not me. They saw far more of me over the years, so we must make it clear to whom they now answer." He bowed to Elizabeth and then to Georgiana before taking his leave.

Fitzwilliam walked him to the door, and Elizabeth took the opportunity to turn to Georgiana.

"I do apologise, did not mean to make you uncomfortable, I was simply taken by surprise that your cousin would claim a friendship with a man like Mr Wickham."

"He does not know how truly wicked he is," Georgiana replied quietly. "Very few people know of my shame. But it is true, Phillip and George Wickham were once quite close, though they no longer are."

"I sense you are not partial to him," Georgiana observed keenly. "Given our conversation in London."

Elizabeth straightened. She had not realised her antipathy towards Phillip was so

easily detected.

“It is not that I dislike him,” she replied, choosing her words carefully. “I do not know him well enough to say one way or the other. He strikes me as somewhat secretive, perhaps even...”

“Wary?” Georgiana finished for her. “For he is. But that is just Phillip. He has always been like that. He is a fine gentleman once you get to know him—you will see.”

With that, Fitzwilliam returned to the room, and the conversation shifted to other topics. Yet, as he spoke of the following day’s hunting trip with his cousin, Elizabeth could not shake a sense of unease.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

The morning sun bathed the rolling hills of Ashburn's estate in a warm, golden glow as Darcy and Phillip rode together in companionable silence. The rhythmic beat of the horses' hooves against the earth provided a soothing cadence, yet an undercurrent of tension seemed to pervade the air, unspoken but palpable.

"Tell me, has Miss Bennet at last chosen which suitor shall claim her heart, or does she remain undecided?" Phillip enquired as they rode.

"I am of the belief that there was never any true competition between Bingley and Richard, although it was not my place to say so."

"It is unlike you not to voice your opinion, Cousin," Phillip replied with a laugh.

"I have learnt to keep my thoughts to myself when it comes to such questions. My involvement is the reason Elizabeth and I almost lost our chance at happiness, and I will not squander it now," he replied, though Phillip clicked his tongue.

"It seems all has worked out well for the both of you," he said from just behind Darcy, for he had allowed Darcy to take the lead. Before Darcy could reply, his horse suddenly whinnied, rearing up with a force that caught him unawares. The powerful creature bucked beneath him, hooves striking the air as if reacting to some unseen threat. Darcy's grip on the reins faltered, his body lurching forward as he struggled to maintain his balance.

"Steady, boy, steady!" he called out, his voice taut with the effort of calming the frantic animal.

But the horse was beyond control, its wild eyes rolling as it continued to rear and twist. Darcy's heart raced, adrenaline surging through his veins as he clung to the saddle, every muscle straining to remain mounted. Time seemed to slow, the world around him narrowing to the frantic pulse of the horse beneath him and the cold sweat trickling down his spine.

"Fitzwilliam!" Phillip cried. "Take heed!"

He heard his cousin's words but could not react. For a fleeting moment, he felt his centre of gravity slip—his body pitching precariously to the side. The ground below loomed with terrifying proximity, and he knew that a fall from this height could be catastrophic. He braced for the impact, the bone-jarring crash that seemed inevitable.

But just as suddenly as it had begun, the horse's frenzy abated. With a fierce tug on the reins, Darcy managed to bring the animal back under control, the wild bucking reduced to a nervous prance. He took a deep breath, willing his racing heart to steady, his hands gripping the leather reins so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

Phillip was beside him in an instant, his face flushed with a mixture of concern and something that almost resembled amusement. "By Jove, Fitzwilliam! That was a near miss!" he exclaimed, though there was a lightness in his tone that belied the gravity of the moment. "It seems your luck has taken a rather unfortunate turn of late."

Darcy forced a smile, though the unease from earlier now clung to him like a shadow. "Indeed, it would appear so," he muttered, his voice strained. The near accident had unsettled him more than he cared to admit, and Phillip's nonchalance only deepened his growing discomfort—especially as Elizabeth's words of caution entered his mind.

As they resumed their ride, Darcy could not help but replay the incident. The horse had been well-behaved before—what could have startled it so abruptly? He cast a glance at the trees, searching for any sign of danger, but found nothing out of the

ordinary. The seeds of doubt, planted by the earlier fencing mishap and Phillip's curious behaviour, began to grow with disquieting speed.

By the time they returned to the house, Darcy's mind was a storm of suspicion and unease. The path wound back through the estate's gardens, the fragrance of blooming flowers doing little to soothe his troubled thoughts.

As they dismounted and began to walk towards the manor house, Darcy broke the silence. "There is something I have been meaning to ask you," he began cautiously. "Regarding Wickham."

Phillip's casual demeanour faltered for a moment, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "What of him?" he replied, his voice carefully measured.

"You were once friends," Darcy continued, his gaze fixed on his cousin's face. "But I was under the impression that your friendship ended after the... incident with Georgiana."

Phillip nodded, his expression inscrutable. "Indeed, it did. Wickham and I have not been on familiar terms since that time. Although, I must confess, he did call upon me to request a loan, as your wife rightly surmised. I refused him, of course. If he has any sense, he will have left Town by now, the scoundrel."

Darcy scrutinised him closely, searching for any sign of deception. "Had you encountered him more recently, here in Ashburn? I only wonder who might have informed him of your whereabouts."

"How he learnt of my presence here, I cannot say. However, I did cross paths with him by chance some weeks ago," Phillip admitted, his voice cool. "He was on leave, much as he is now, and we encountered one another in Town. I did not seek him out, Fitzwilliam, but neither did I wish to cause a scene by ignoring him."

“And what did he have to say on that occasion?” Darcy pressed, unable to keep the edge from his voice.

Phillip hesitated briefly before shrugging with an air of nonchalance, as if dismissing the matter. “He spoke highly of your wife, in fact. He implied that Elizabeth had a certain fondness for him before you came into your title.”

Darcy’s jaw tightened, his hand gripping the reins with renewed tension. “That is a baseless insinuation, and Wickham knows it.”

“Of course,” Phillip responded smoothly, raising his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. “I merely relay what was said. Wickham has always been adept at twisting the truth to his advantage, and I would advise you not to take his words to heart.”

But the damage was done. Darcy’s thoughts churned with anger and doubt, old wounds reopened by Wickham’s insinuations, now tainted with the suggestion of Elizabeth’s supposed affections. Rationally, he knew Elizabeth harboured no such feelings for Wickham—but the mere suggestion was enough to unsettle him profoundly.

As they neared the house, Phillip added, “You know better than anyone what manner of man Wickham is. But remember, Fitzwilliam, not everyone is as they seem. It would be unwise to let the words of a rogue like Wickham drive a wedge between you and those you hold dear.”

Darcy nodded, but his thoughts were elsewhere, lost in the tangled web of suspicion and unease that now ensnared him. As much as he wished to dismiss it all as mere coincidence, the shadow of doubt lingered, casting a pall over the bright morning and leaving him with a foreboding sense that he could not easily shake.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

“I think I shall explore the temple,” Elizabeth declared, later that morning as she and Jane rode out together. Her quarrel with Darcy pressed upon her and she found herself dreadful company, though also did not want to divulge the argument to her sister. “Would you care to join me?”

Jane smiled, though her expression was tinged with a trace of fatigue. “I think I will ride a little further along the path and take in the view of the lake. But do be careful, Lizzy.”

“I shall,” Elizabeth promised, grateful for her sister’s decision for she needed to be alone and think.

As she approached the temple—a folly built by one of Fitzwilliam’s predecessors—Elizabeth dismounted and tied her horse to a nearby tree. Her eyes traced the delicate carvings that adorned the columns and the frieze above. The Temple of Athena was even more beautiful up close, its design a perfect blend of grace and strength, much like the goddess it honoured.

Elizabeth stepped into the outer portico, the cool stone beneath her feet providing a welcome respite from the warmth of the sun. She let her fingers trail along the smooth surface of a column, lost in thought as she admired the craftsmanship of the structure. The air was still, the silence of the temple only broken by the distant call of a bird and the rustling of leaves in the breeze.

It was in this quiet moment that she heard the sound of footsteps behind her. Startled, Elizabeth turned to find herself face to face with George Wickham, his expression a curious blend of nonchalance and something more calculating.



“Lady Dorset,” he greeted her with a charming smile that once might have disarmed her, but now only served to set her on edge.

“Mr Wickham,” she replied coolly, her heart quickening at the unexpected encounter. She had hoped never to find herself alone with him again, and yet here he was, as if conjured by some dark twist of fate.

Mr Wickham took a step closer, his eyes lingering on her face with an unsettling intensity. “What a fortunate coincidence, to find you here in such a secluded spot.”

Elizabeth resisted the urge to retreat, instead lifting her chin with quiet resolve. “I did not expect to see you here, Mr Wickham, considering this secluded spot is on my husband’s property.”

“I must confess, I was hoping for a moment alone with you.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed, and she felt a chill despite the warmth of the day. Had he been following her? And what of Phillip’s assurances to send him away? “I cannot imagine what you would have to say to me, sir, that could not be said in company.”

Mr Wickham’s smile faltered, and a flicker of something darker passed over his features. “There is much that can only be said in private, Lady Dorset.”

“I am aware of the sort of things you say to a lady in private, especially when such ladies are young and impressionable and from a wealthy home,” she said and Mr Wickham’s eyes sparkled with understanding.

“I understand you have heard certain things about me now, regarding my connection to Miss Darcy.”

“Yes, I have,” Elizabeth replied, her voice steady. “I know what you did to Georgiana

Darcy, and I must tell you, Mr Wickham, I find your actions reprehensible.”

Mr Wickham’s expression hardened, but he quickly masked it with a look of wounded innocence. “Georgiana Darcy is a liar, just like her brother. They have both conspired against me, twisting the truth to suit their own ends.”

Elizabeth shook her head, her resolve unwavering. “I do not believe you. I know my husband, and though I once judged him harshly, I have come to see his true character and realise that what you told me in Meryton was untrue. And Georgiana is a gentle soul, incapable of the deceit you accuse her of.”

Mr Wickham’s eyes flashed with anger, but he swallowed it down, taking a step closer. “You must understand I told you those things about your husband because I was afraid—afraid that you would choose him over me.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened, she was quite taken aback by the sudden shift in his tone. “That makes no sense. I did not even like him then, and you knew it.”

“Ah, but I know the power of wealth and status,” Mr Wickham replied, his voice low and persuasive. “I knew that once you saw Darcy’s true worth—his estate, his fortune—you might be swayed. But know this, Elizabeth, I was in love with you then, and I am still in love with you now. I wanted to see you alone so I could finally confess this.”

Elizabeth felt as though the ground had been pulled out from beneath her. Mr Wickham’s words left her momentarily speechless, her mind reeling from the implications. But then she saw the calculation in his eyes, the way his gaze drifted to her lips, and she understood—this was not love, but a twisted form of manipulation.

“Mr Wickham,” she said firmly, taking a step back, “Your words are highly inappropriate and whatever you think you feel, it does not matter. My loyalty and

affection belong to Lord Dorset, and no one else.”

Mr Wickham’s expression darkened, the mask of charm slipping away to reveal something far more menacing. “Are you so certain, Elizabeth? Have you never wondered what might have been between us?”

Elizabeth felt a rush of fear, but she stood her ground. “No. You may have fooled me once, but I see you for what you truly are now. And I will not betray the man I love.”

It occurred to her then that she had just admitted her true feelings for Fitzwilliam—both to herself and to Mr Wickham. What a peculiar way to come to this realization. At that moment, the sound of hoofbeats reached them, and both turned to see Jane approaching on horseback.

“Mr Wickham,” Jane called out, her voice steady but laced with warning. “You are trespassing. If Lord Dorset finds you here, it will not go well for you.”

Mr Wickham hesitated, his eyes flicking between the two sisters, but he saw the resolve in their faces and knew he had lost. With a bitter smile, he bowed slightly. “Very well. But remember, Elizabeth, I will always be near. Should you change your mind—and I am certain you will—come and find me.”

With that, he turned and strode away, leaving Elizabeth and Jane standing in the shadow of the Temple of Athena, the air thick with tension.

Jane dismounted quickly and rushed to her sister’s side, taking her hand in hers. “Are you all right, Lizzy? What did he say to you?”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “Nothing that matters, Jane. He tried to unsettle me, but he did not succeed. I am just glad you came when you did.”

Jane gave her a reassuring smile. “We should return to the house. Your husband will want to know what happened.”

Elizabeth nodded, but as they walked back to their horses, she couldn’t shake the lingering unease that Mr Wickham’s words had stirred in her heart. She knew she had to tell Fitzwilliam everything, but she also recalled the unpleasant quarrel from earlier. Should she burden him with this today? It might make their already fraught day worse, and they had just begun to grow closer. Besides, if he heard the truth, was it possible he would confront Mr Wickham and get into a fight? Yes, she could see it happening—and that would certainly be detrimental for a sitting member of the House of Lords.

She would have to consider how to approach the matter carefully, very carefully indeed.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Darcy stood by the window, his gaze fixed upon the distant horizon, his thoughts wholly occupied with Elizabeth's absence. The regret of their quarrel that morning weighed heavily upon him, and he could not help but reproach himself for having been so unreasonably harsh. Her evident dislike of Phillip—a sentiment he had noticed before but dismissed as mere misunderstanding—had irked him more than he was willing to admit. Phillip, along with Bingley and Richard, had been among his dearest friends since childhood. He fervently hoped that, in time, Elizabeth might come to appreciate their worth.

Yet it was not only Elizabeth who harboured antipathy towards Phillip. Darcy could not ignore that Phillip's opinions regarding Elizabeth had always troubled him. Phillip had been vehemently opposed to their union, and this opposition gnawed at him. How could his life, his future wife—whom he was ardently endeavouring to win—and one of his closest friends be so irreconcilably at odds with one another?

In any case, he had resolved to apologise. The quarrel between them was horrid—a stark contrast to the previous week at Ashburn, when they had dined together each night, taken walks, and enjoyed one another's company. Indeed, he had observed that she would, at times, cast a glance at him when she thought herself unobserved, or smile at him in those unguarded moments—in a manner he recognised only in women who held a man dear.

He could only hope that he had not ruined it all.

The sound of horses approaching on the gravel driveway caught his attention, and he rose, feeling a twinge in his back—still sore from the near-fall he had suffered on horseback. To his surprise, he saw his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam,

dismounting outside.

“Richard!” he called, stepping out. “What brings you to Ashburn?” he asked as his cousin approached with a smile.

“There are matters I must discuss with you concerning our cousin. Shall we go inside?” Darcy nodded, now bewildered. What could there be to discuss regarding Phillip?

“You look dreadful, Fitz. The circles beneath your eyes almost overtake your visage. Is married life keeping you up all night?” Richard chuckled.

Darcy felt his cheeks warm and shook his head. “No... not at all.”

“No progress with Lady Dorset?”

“There was, but we quarrelled, and I fear all hopes of further progress are now dashed. Richard, one of the reasons for our quarrel was Phillip. Elizabeth does not care for him, nor for his past connection to Wickham. And I am afraid Phillip does not care for her either.”

“Does he not?” Richard asked as they entered the parlour. “I thought he had abandoned his objections.”

“No. I believe he attempted to persuade me that she harbours feelings for Wickham. I am not entirely certain of the truth in that.”

“Well,” Richard said, “I have arrived just in time, for I have news concerning not only Phillip but also Wickham. First, I trust you are aware that Wickham is in town?”

“I am,” Darcy replied. “Elizabeth and Miss Bennet came upon him while out walking

and he implied he was here to see Phillip, which he denied.”

“Ah, it all makes sense. I have made the acquaintance of a certain Mr Denny, who served in the militia with Wickham. They remain in contact, and he informed me that Wickham is here at the invitation of none other than Phillip. Darcy, they were as close as ever the last time this Denny chap spoke to Wickham, which was but a fortnight ago.”

“What?” Darcy exclaimed, unable to believe his cousin would maintain a friendship with such a man.

“Furthermore,” Richard continued, “Denny revealed that this friendship has only intensified in the past few months. He mentioned that Wickham was frequently collected by a carriage bearing the coat of arms of—well, yours.”

Darcy sank into a chair, unable to comprehend what he had just heard. “You mean to tell me that Phillip and Wickham were here at Ashburn together whilst our uncle was still alive?”

“It seems so. I impressed upon Denny the importance of providing accurate information, and he assured me of its truth. The two were close, not only here but in town as well. Denny spoke of Wickham as being close friends with Phillip, almost like family.”

Darcy could hardly believe his ears. How could this be so? Phillip and Wickham? Friends? All of Elizabeth’s concerns appeared to be validated now.

“I felt you needed to know, especially now that Phillip and Wickham are in town. Fitz, I cannot help but think there is something unpleasant brewing.”

Darcy nodded and stepped to the window where, to his great relief, he saw Elizabeth

and Jane approaching.

“You are right. And so was Elizabeth. Come, you need to be with me when I speak to her so she can hear the news,” he said and together, the two stepped outside to greet the two young ladies.



*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Elizabeth's mind was in turmoil, and she could scarcely meet Jane's eyes, let alone those of her husband, who awaited her with an expression of growing concern. The familiar sight of Ashburn Court, with its sprawling gardens and stately facade, did little to soothe her troubled heart.

Dismounting from her horse, she handed the reins to the waiting groom, her hands trembling ever so slightly. Fitzwilliam, noting her agitation, approached with the quiet determination she had come to recognise and, despite herself, to admire.

"Elizabeth," he called softly, his voice laced with concern. "Is everything well? You seem troubled."

Elizabeth forced a smile, but it did not reach her eyes, and she could feel Jane's anxious gaze upon her, silently urging her to be cautious with her words.

"We are quite well, thank you," Elizabeth replied, though her voice lacked its customary lightness. "The ride was pleasant, though perhaps a little too long."

Fitzwilliam's eyes narrowed slightly, not missing the evasion in her answer. His gaze, so penetrating and yet so tender, seemed to reach into the very depths of her soul. "Elizabeth," he said quietly, drawing closer so that only she could hear, "I can see that something has unsettled you. Pray, tell me what it is."

Elizabeth hesitated, her thoughts in a whirl. How could she possibly tell him the truth? If she revealed the full extent of what had transpired it would only serve to inflame his temper. Yet, she knew she could not keep this from him.

With a small sigh, Elizabeth squeezed Fitzwilliams hand, seeking courage in the warmth of his touch. “There is something I must tell you,” she began, her voice steadying as she resolved to speak the truth, though she would temper it for his sake. “We briefly parted, Jane and I, and I then encountered Mr Wickham over yonder by the temple. He... he approached me and, though his manner was civil enough, his words were unsettling.”

Fitzwilliam’s expression darkened at the mention of Mr Wickham’s name, his grip on her hand tightening ever so slightly. “What did he say?” he asked, his voice low and measured, though she could hear the simmering anger beneath it.

Elizabeth hesitated only a moment longer before continuing. “He spoke of you, and of our marriage. He attempted to cast doubt upon your character. He also made some unwelcome advances towards me, but I assured him that his attentions were neither wanted nor appropriate.”

Fitzwilliam’s jaw clenched, and she could see the effort it took for him to remain calm. “Did he harm you in any way? Did he—”

“No,” Elizabeth interrupted gently, placing her free hand on his arm in a gesture of reassurance. “He did not harm me. I am quite well, I assure you. I only tell you this because... because I would not keep anything from you, particularly where Mr Wickham is concerned.”

Her husband’s eyes softened as he gazed at her, a mixture of love and admiration in his expression. “Thank you for telling me,” he said quietly, though his voice still carried the weight of his concern. “I am sorry that you had to endure such an encounter. You should not have to deal with the likes of him. And I am sorry for my behaviour this morning. You see, it appears you were not wrong about Phillip at all.” He glanced at his cousin and it was only then she noticed the presence of Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Elizabeth,” he said with a grave look, “there is something you should know, something that concerns both Wickham and Phillip,” The colonel said.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened as she looked between the two men, her heart quickening with a new sense of dread. “What is it?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The colonel exchanged a glance with Fitzwilliam before turning to Elizabeth. “I have recently learned that Phillip has not been entirely truthful with us. He has continued his association with Wickham, despite claiming to have severed all ties. Moreover, it appears that Wickham’s presence here at Phillip’s invitation.”

“Just as Wickham indicated, when you met him in the village,” Fitzwilliam said.

Elizabeth’s lips parted. “You mean to say that Phillip... that he has been in league with Mr Wickham all this time?” she asked.

“It appears so,” Colonel Fitzwilliam confirmed.

She felt a wave of shock wash over her. She glanced at her husband, whose face had grown pale with anger and disappointment.

“I cannot believe that Phillip would do such a thing,” Fitzwilliam muttered, more to himself than to anyone else. “But the evidence is clear. He has betrayed us, Elizabeth, and for that, and for doubting you, I am deeply sorry.”

Elizabeth placed a hand on his arm, her touch gentle but firm. “There is no need to apologise, Fitzwilliam. You are not responsible for Phillip’s actions. We must simply deal with the situation as it stands and ensure that Mr Wickham can do no more harm.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam, sensing that the conversation had turned to matters of a more

private nature, stepped forward once more and offered his arm to Jane. "Shall we take a turn in the gardens, Miss Bennet?" he suggested with a kind smile. "I believe it would do us all good to take some fresh air."

Jane, who had been listening quietly, nodded in agreement and took his arm. "I think that would be a good idea, Colonel Fitzwilliam," she replied, casting a sympathetic glance towards Elizabeth before allowing herself to be led away. "There is something we must discuss," she said and Elizabeth knew that the good colonel was about to be dissuaded from pursuing Jane, her heart and mind made up in favour of Mr Bingley.

Once they were alone, Fitzwilliam turned to Elizabeth, his expression softening as he took both her hands in his. "Elizabeth, I am sorry," he began, his voice thick with emotion. "I fear that in trying to protect you, I have failed. Phillip is my cousin, my friend, and yet I did not see what he truly was. And as for Wickham... I should have done more to shield you from his malice."

Elizabeth shook her head, her heart swelling with affection for the man before her. "You have nothing to apologise for," she insisted, her voice gentle but firm. "You are not to blame for their actions. You have always acted with honour and integrity, and that is what matters to me."

Fitzwilliam's eyes shone with unshed tears as he gazed at her, and he pulled her closer, resting his forehead against hers. "Elizabeth," he whispered, "I love you more than words can express. I cannot bear the thought of you being harmed or unhappy, and I will do whatever it takes to protect you, now and always."

Elizabeth's heart swelled with emotion, and she reached up to cup his face in her hands. "And I love you, Fitzwilliam," she replied, her voice steady and sure. "I did not realise how much until now, but I do. You are everything to me, and I cannot imagine my life without you."

“You have made me the happiest man alive,” he whispered, before lowering his lips to hers in a tender, heartfelt kiss.

The world around them seemed to fade away as they stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms, Elizabeth allowed herself to forget the strange circumstances that had led them to this moment—and the conspiracy they were still fighting to uncover.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Elizabeth waved after Jane and Georgiana's carriage, both sad to see them leave and glad to know it was for good reason. Jane had chosen to return to Hertfordshire to reunite with Mr Bingley, who'd sent an enthusiastic express with an invitation to both her and Georgiana the day before.

After hearing the news regarding Phillip and Mr Wickham, Mr Bingley hadn't hesitated to invite Georgiana along as well, to get her out of harm's way.

Having seen the carriage off from the posting house, Elizabeth felt a pang of solitude, though her spirits were buoyed by the thought of returning to her husband. The last few days might have been fraught with strain because of their discoveries, but also with a sense of joy. At last, she and Fitzwilliam were a couple in spirit, heart, and body as well as on paper—and she could not be happier.

"Lady Dorset, shall we return?" her lady's maid, Mabel, asked but Elizabeth shook her head.

"I have a mind to look at the water for a little. Would you mind stopping at the milliner's to collect my new hat?" Elizabeth asked.

Then, she walked the brief distance to the water and inhaled the fresh air. Dorset was quite a beautiful county and the more time she spent at Ashburn Court, the more at home she felt. The village gave way to the rugged beauty of the shore, where the waves rolled gently onto the pebbled beach. She relished the peace as she breathed in the crisp sea air, her heart momentarily lightened by the tranquillity. It was early, adding to the quiet and peace as the beach was empty as yet.

But the calm was abruptly shattered. As she turned to continue her exploration, a strong arm encircled her waist, pulling her back with alarming force. A hand clamped over her mouth, muffling her cry of alarm. Panic surged through her as she struggled fiercely, her heart pounding furiously.

Just when she feared she might lose consciousness, the sound of hurried footsteps reached her ears—someone was rushing towards them. The next moments were a blur. Her attacker was wrenched away, and Elizabeth stumbled forward, gasping for breath. Her saviour, a robust man with a determined expression, engaged the assailant in a fierce struggle. With a powerful blow, the attacker was sent reeling and fled down the shore, disappearing into the distance.

Breathing heavily, Elizabeth turned to her rescuer, only to be struck dumb with disbelief as his features came into focus. The man was none other than George Wickham. Her relief quickly turned to a tumult of emotions—shock, confusion, and deep mistrust.

“Mr Wickham?” she whispered, her voice trembling. “What are you doing here?”

Mr Wickham raised his hands in a gesture of peace, his face earnest. “Lady Dorset, I know this must be shocking, but please, you must listen. I’ve been following you—”

“Following me?” she interrupted, her fear and anger palpable. “Why?”

“Because you are in danger,” he said urgently. “I have come to warn you. There is something you do not know—about Phillip.”

Elizabeth’s confusion deepened. “Phillip? What does he have to do with this? What is going on?”

Mr Wickham glanced around nervously. “Everything I said at the temple, everything

about my feelings for you—it was all a lie. I was paid to deceive you.”

Elizabeth recoiled in disbelief. “Paid? By whom? And why would you do such a thing?”

“By Phillip,” Mr Wickham admitted, regret evident in his voice. “He wanted to drive a wedge between you and Da- Lord Dorset. He thought that if you believed I had feelings for you, I might be able to tempt you away, thus ruining your marriage. Or at least causing it strain. Phillip offered me a substantial sum to do it.”

Elizabeth’s mind reeled. “So, everything you said—it was a deception?”

Mr Wickham nodded. “I thought it was just another scheme. But now I see Phillip’s plans are far more sinister. When I told him I failed and that you appear thoroughly enamoured of Lord Dorset, he grew enraged and told me he would have you dealt with.” He nodded at the man who’d run away.

“He sent this rogue?” she asked, alarmed.

“And the one who came after your husband in London,” he confirmed. “You see, Phillip wants the estate and title. He has been plotting against him for months, and he will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. You must help me. I must speak to Lord Dorset. I must tell him everything.”

Elizabeth’s thoughts raced. “Why should I trust you now?”

Mr Wickham’s gaze softened. “Because I owe it to you and him. I may be a scoundrel, but I do not want his death on my conscience. If you inspect his saddle, you’ll find it cut. I was sent to do it, though I changed my mind as I was in the middle of it. I hate your husband, I do. But I was very fond of his father and I suppose there is still some sort of good in me for I could not do it. Phillip is furious with me.”



Elizabeth stared at him, torn between disbelief and the unsettling notion that he might be telling the truth. “I need to know everything. Why did you do this? Why did he hire you?”

Wickham nodded. “I will tell you all on the way. But first, we must get to Ashburn Court. There is no time to lose. None of you are safe here. I will tell you everything on the way. Come, let us fetch your maid—I do not expect you to travel alone with me.”

With a heavy heart and questions swirling in her mind, Elizabeth allowed Mr Wickham to guide her back to the village. The peaceful sea, once so inviting, now felt like a place of hidden dangers. As they moved, the weight of Mr Wickham’s revelations pressed heavily upon her, each step taking her closer to Fitzwilliam and the truth that awaited.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

Darcy stood at the top of the grand staircase in Ashburn Court, watching intently as the door from the foyer to the hallway swung open. Relief coursed through him as Elizabeth entered, but it was quickly tempered by a gnawing sense of unease. Something was amiss. Her usually bright and lively eyes were dulled with distress, and her complexion was ashen. Then, to his utter dismay, he saw Wickham following closely behind her.

A surge of anger flared within him, but it was swiftly overshadowed by a deep concern that clawed at his heart. What could have transpired to bring about such a sight? And why was Elizabeth in the company of Wickham? Darcy descended the stairs with quickened steps, his worry increasing with every stride.

“Elizabeth,” he called out, his voice taut with anxiety. “What has happened? Are you unhurt?”

She turned towards him, her eyes wide. Darcy’s breath caught in his throat; never had he seen her so shaken, so utterly vulnerable. When she spoke, her voice trembled, and it was clear that she was exerting all her strength merely to remain composed.

“We- we must talk, in private,” she whispered, casting a brief glance at Wickham before returning her gaze to Darcy. “There is something you must hear—something of the utmost importance.”

A cold dread settled over Darcy, tightening his chest. He glanced towards Wickham, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. “What is this? Why is Wickham here?” he demanded, his voice rough with unease.

Elizabeth's hand found his, and she gripped it with a desperation that sent a chill through him. "Please, Fitzwilliam, just listen. I beg of you."

Darcy swallowed hard, his concern for her momentarily overriding his instinct to dismiss Wickham out of hand. He nodded stiffly, guiding both Elizabeth and Wickham towards his study. As they entered, Richard, who had been waiting within, rose to his feet, his expression grave. His eyes flickered with surprise and concern as he noted Wickham's presence.

"What is this about?" Darcy repeated, his gaze never wavering from Wickham. "What game are you playing now, Wickham?"

Wickham raised his hands in a gesture of appeasement, his countenance uncharacteristically earnest. "No game, Lord Dorset. I swear it. I have come to reveal the truth—a truth that has been concealed from you for far too long."

Darcy turned to Elizabeth, searching her face for answers. "Elizabeth, what is happening?"

She took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice was soft yet laced with a gravity that made Darcy's blood run cold. "Fitzwilliam, you must listen to him. I know you have every reason not to, but please trust me on this."

He clenched his jaw and nodded curtly at Wickham, though his posture remained rigid, his guard up. "Very well. Speak."

Wickham hesitated, his gaze shifting between them. At last, he began, his voice low and measured. "I have kept a secret—a secret that even your father carried to his grave. There is a reason he took such an interest in me, even at the expense of his own son. You see, I am not merely the steward's son. I am your cousin—born of your uncle, Morris Darcy. I am Phillip's half-brother. Born out of wedlock, of course."

Darcy froze, his eyes widening in shock. “What are you saying?”

“I am a Darcy by blood,” Wickham reiterated. “Morris Darcy, your uncle, had an affair many years ago with Mrs Wickham—my mother. I am the result of that union. Mr Wickham, the man who raised me, was aware of the truth, as was your late father.”

Wickham handed over a folded document, which Darcy accepted with visible reluctance. “This is a letter from your father to Mr Wickham, vowing to support me in the absence of my true father, Morris Darcy, who had no interest in me.”

As Darcy read the letter, his lips parted in disbelief. “This is my father’s hand, the contents confirm what you have said, but—”

“I have additional proof if you require it,” Wickham interrupted. “Correspondence between my parents, and between your uncle and my mother. Phillip has known all along. It is one reason he has always kept his distance from the Darcy family, preferring the company of the late Lord Dorset.”

Darcy’s mind reeled with the impact of these revelations. “I cannot believe it,” he murmured, looking up at Wickham. “If this is true, why did you not use this against me sooner?”

Wickham offered a wry smile. “I was tempted many times, I assure you. But I had given my word to Mr Wickham that I would not. My existence would bring disgrace upon the Darcy name, and I owed him my loyalty. Besides, your father was always good to me. Moreover, Phillip made it worth my while.”

Elizabeth stiffened slightly. “He paid you to remain silent?”

Wickham nodded. “He did. Phillip feared the scandal would devastate his mother.

Thus, he ensured I had no reason to make trouble. But as we grew older, his resentment towards you, became insidious. Never more so than when you rose in station.”

“Resentment?” Darcy echoed, folding the letter with trembling hands.

Wickham sighed. “Phillip envied you. It was clear to us both that you were your grandmother’s favourite, and Phillip encouraged me to make your life difficult. I did so willingly, but it was at Phillip’s behest. As you inherited the title of Marquess, his envy turned to something darker. He felt that everything you possess—your title, your estate—should have been his.”

Darcy’s hand tightened around Elizabeth’s, the enormity of Wickham’s words pressing down upon him like a weight. “This is madness.”

“It is the truth,” Wickham insisted. “Phillip believes the title should be his by right, and he will stop at nothing to see it so. He cannot abide the thought of you producing an heir, further diminishing his claim. He sought to prevent your marriage to Elizabeth, and failing that, he has endeavoured to destroy it. He even went so far as to hire me to seduce her, to provoke a scandal that would ruin you both. But when that did not suffice, he resorted to far more sinister means. He means to see you dead, both of you. He made an attempt on Elizabeth’s life this afternoon.”

“What?” he rounded on Elizabeth, cupping her cheeks. “Are you harmed?”

“No,” she replied. “Thanks to Mr Wickham who came to my aid.”

“I could not let Phillip do such a terrible thing. I might feel that Lady Dorset’s taste in husbands is poor, but I always found her enjoyable company and that is hard to find,” he said with a shrug.

Darcy's breath caught, his face paling. "He would see us dead? My own cousin?"

Wickham nodded solemnly. "Yes. He has orchestrated numerous accidents, including the near-fall from your horse and the robbery on the eve of your wedding. Each incident was intended to harm you, to scare you away from the role given to you. He hoped you might decline it and allow the title to move to him. If you still do not believe me, you may wish to inspect your saddle, you will find evidence of tampering. Phillip tasked me with it, but I could not bring myself to carry it through."

Darcy turned to Elizabeth, his eyes filled with a mixture of anguish and rage. "You tried to warn me..."

Elizabeth nodded, her voice a mere whisper. "I did not have proof, only a sense that something was wrong. But now..."

Wickham continued, his voice laden with regret. "I am sorry for the harm I have caused, to both you and Georgiana. My actions were inexcusable, driven by jealousy and greed. But I see now that the Darcy name, my heritage, deserves better than what I have done. I will do whatever I can to put an end to Phillip's machinations."

Darcy shook his head, his expression grim with determination. "The past cannot be undone, but we can ensure that this madness ends here. You will help us expose Phillip's treachery."

Wickham nodded earnestly. "I will do whatever is necessary. I owe you that much."

Darcy turned to his wife, his expression softening as he reached for her hand once more. "We shall face this together," he said quietly, his voice firm yet tender.

Elizabeth nodded, and his heart swelled with love and resolve when he saw the expression of devotion on her face. "Together," she echoed.

As they stood united, the shadows of deceit and betrayal began to recede, giving way to the dawning hope that, together, they could overcome even the darkest of trials.

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:51 pm*

The next morning, the drawing room at Ashburn Court was thick with tension as Elizabeth, her husband, and Colonel Fitzwilliam prepared for the confrontation that would decide Phillip's fate. Fitzwilliam had made the difficult decision to offer Phillip a choice—leave the country quietly, or face arrest and public disgrace. It was a solution that might protect the family's honour, but the gravity of the situation weighed heavily on everyone present.

Elizabeth sat by the window, her hands tightly clenched in her lap. The anxiety was almost unbearable, but she forced herself to remain calm, knowing that her husband needed her strength now more than ever. Fitzwilliam himself paced the room, his expression a mask of steely resolve, though Elizabeth could sense the turmoil simmering just beneath the surface. Colonel Fitzwilliam stood by the door, his arms crossed, exuding a calm readiness that belied the seriousness of the moment.

When the door opened and Phillip entered, his confident stride faltered slightly as he took in the scene before him. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his tone laced with suspicion as his eyes darted from one face to another. "I thought you said Grandmama came calling but your faces tell a different tale."

Fitzwilliam stopped pacing and faced him, his voice cool and controlled. "We need to talk, Phillip. We know about everything—your schemes, your attempts to ruin my marriage, and your efforts to harm me. We know why you have done it, and we have the evidence to prove it."

Phillip's expression hardened, but there was a flicker of unease in his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. This sounds like more of Wickham's lies."



Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped forward, his voice firm. "This is no lie. We have Wickham's confession, witnesses, and proof of the tampered saddle. The game is over, Phillip. We caught the man you hired to harm Lady Dorset and he too confessed. It is but a matter of time before we catch the scoundrels you hired in London to attack Fitzwilliam."

For a brief moment, Phillip's mask slipped, revealing a flash of panic. But he quickly recovered, sneering at them. "You think you can threaten me? I am the rightful heir. You never showed any interest in the estate or our uncle. I was there for him, always. I spent more time with him than even Swynford, his own son. You were never meant to be marquess, Fitzwilliam. The title should have been mine, if not Swynford's."

Fitzwilliam's voice remained calm, though there was a hard edge to it. "The title was never yours to claim, Phillip. I will not live with your threat over my head. Indeed, Richard would have you arrested at once."

"I would, it is what you deserve. Prisons are for people like you, but our cousin is more worried about the wellbeing of his Darcy family."

"Indeed, they do not need another scandal after everything. So, Phillip. Leave England quietly, and we can avoid further scandal. Refuse, and I will see you arrested and prosecuted. Even if it harms the family," Fitzwilliam said.

Phillip's eyes narrowed as he assessed his options. He opened his mouth to retort, but the door behind him creaked open, and Mr Wickham entered, his presence immediately shifting the atmosphere in the room. Mr Wickham's usual air of bravado was absent, replaced by a sombre determination. He looked directly at Phillip, his gaze unflinching. "It's over, Phillip. The truth is out. It's time to face the consequences."

Phillip's composure cracked, his eyes widening in shock. "You? You've betrayed

me?”

Mr Wickham nodded grimly. “You left me no choice. The evidence is overwhelming. You cannot escape this.”

“You would side with him? After you told me for years that you hate him?”

“I do not care for Dorset, no. And that will not change. But the Darcy blood runs through me as well and I will not kill my own kin, nor do your dirty work anymore. Brother,” Mr Wickham said, and Phillip’s eyes flashed.

“So you told them? Our dirty secret? William, what do you think our dear Grandmama will say when she finds out her no-good youngest son had a scoundrel for a side step? Can her heart take it? And then you threaten to tell her about me on top of it? Do you wish to cause her apoplexy?” Phillip taunted and Fitzwilliam curled his hands into fists.

“I daresay, from all I have heard the old lady is rather spry and strong. Besides, she knows what sort of man our father was, Phillip. Everyone does. It is no wonder the two of us have turned out as we have, given his blood,” Mr Wickham said and shook his head. “But I might redeem myself yet. But for you, there is no hope.”

“Redeem yourself, they will throw you away like the nothing you are, George,” Phillip said. “As for me, I will not leave England, and I will not be shamed. I will—”

In a sudden, desperate move, Phillip lunged towards Elizabeth, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her towards the door. “I will not go down without a fight!” he snarled, his grip on her tightening.

Elizabeth froze unable to react as horror played out all around her.

“Let her go, Phillip!” Fitzwilliam shouted, his voice laced with fear and anger. He took a step forward, but froze when Phillip tightened his hold on Elizabeth, dragging her further towards the exit.

The colonel and Fitzwilliam exchanged a tense glance, both unwilling to make a move that might put Elizabeth in greater danger. Mr Wickham, however, had positioned himself subtly near the door, ready to block Phillip’s escape.

As they reached the threshold, Phillip’s desperation wavered, and with a frustrated snarl, he shoved Elizabeth forward. She stumbled, but he was there in an instant, catching her before she could fall and she felt the relief as his strong arms wrapped around her. In the chaos, Phillip bolted out the door, running down the hallway and out of the house, followed by Richard while Mr Wickham awkwardly stood in the doorway.

Fitzwilliam held Elizabeth close, she could feel her heart pounding. “Are you alright?” he asked, his voice thick with concern.

Elizabeth nodded shakily, tears brimming in her eyes. “I was so frightened, Fitzwilliam. I thought... I thought he might—”

“He’s gone,” Fitzwilliam murmured, holding her tighter. “You are safe now, Elizabeth. I swear, I will never let anyone harm you again. My dearest, I have wronged you deeply. I did not listen to your concerns, and I dismissed your suspicions when I should have trusted you—trusted your judgement. You have every right to be angry with me, to resent me for my blindness.”

Elizabeth shook her head gently, her eyes softening as she reached out to take his hand in hers. “Fitzwilliam, I forgave you long before now. You wanted to believe the best of your family—that is no fault of yours.”

Fitzwilliam squeezed her hand, drawing her closer to him. “You have been so understanding, so patient with me. I do not deserve your forgiveness, Elizabeth, but I am grateful for it. I can never express how sorry I am.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “You are a good man, Fitzwilliam. You may have made mistakes, but so have I. It is natural to want to believe in the goodness of those we hold dear. And I know that your heart was in the right place.”

“Your understanding heart, your loyalty to your family—they are among the many things I love about you, Elizabeth. You have shown me what it truly means to care for those we love, to stand by them even in the face of doubt.”

Elizabeth blushed at his words, her cheeks tinged with pink as she gazed into his eyes. “And there are many things I admire about you, Fitzwilliam,” she said softly. “Your sense of honour, your integrity, the way you care for those around you..”

Fitzwilliam stared into her eyes, and Elizabeth knew that he could see the depth of her love reflected. “Elizabeth, I love you more than words can ever convey,” he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. “You are my heart, my soul, my everything.”

“And you are mine,” Elizabeth replied, her voice equally tender. “I love you, Fitzwilliam, with all my heart.”

The world seemed to fade away as they leaned into each other, their lips meeting in a soft, lingering kiss that spoke of all the love, trust, and devotion they had for one another. In that moment, all the pain and betrayal seemed to melt away, leaving only the pure, unbreakable bond they shared.

Two Months Later

On Route To Dorset

The early morning sun painted the countryside in a soft, golden glow as Darcy and Elizabeth's carriage rumbled along a country road. They had departed from their inn at an early hour, eager to complete the final leg of their three-day journey from Longbourn to Ashburn Court.

The short visit to Hertfordshire had been a joyful one—Jane's engagement to Bingley had been celebrated with much excitement by the entire family, and seeing Georgiana mingle with the Bennet sisters had been a delight. His sister needed the company of young ladies her own age, and although he did think the younger Bennets a trifle silly, their hearts were in the right place.

"Bingley's proposal has brought so much joy to Jane," Darcy remarked, his hand resting gently over Elizabeth's. "It is clear that she will be contented with him."

Elizabeth nodded, her smile softening with affection. "Yes, it has been a long time coming, but worth every moment. Jane deserves nothing less. I only hope Colonel Fitzwilliam will not be too downcast. Though he accepted her refusal with grace, I know he conceals his feelings well. The Fitzwilliams are wont to do that."

Darcy sighed, "Indeed, he has a tendency to fall in love easily. In that respect, he and Wickham are more alike than I ever cared to admit."

Elizabeth looked at him with surprise, tilting her head slightly. "Wickham? In what

way?”

A pensive expression crossed Darcy’s face. “Both have always been drawn to the idea of romance, of love at first sight. But while Richard’s affections are honourable, Wickham has often used his charm for more selfish ends. Yet, despite all that has transpired, I must acknowledge a change in him. He has written to me, you know.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows in astonishment. “He has? What did he say?”

Darcy’s voice softened. “He wrote to inform me that he lost Phillip’s trail in Devon, but he has not given up. He is searching the London area now, while Richard has returned to Ashburn.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in surprise. “I can scarcely believe it. After all that has passed between you...”

Darcy met her gaze, “I cannot forgive him entirely for what he did to Georgiana, but I believe he is genuinely remorseful. He told me that hearing her cry when I confronted him that day changed something in him. He realised the full weight of his actions, and for the first time, I think he truly regrets them. Perhaps it is what set him on the path to redemption. It might even have been what made him reconsider when he was sent to cut my saddle strap.”

Elizabeth squeezed his hand. “You have a generous heart, Fitzwilliam. It is not easy to extend mercy to someone who has wronged you so deeply.”

Darcy shook his head slightly, a rueful smile playing on his lips. “I have learnt that holding onto anger only deepens the wounds. Wickham is no longer an enemy—he is someone seeking redemption, as we all are in our own ways.”

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The carriage continued its journey, morning turning into evening and then into night. They had intended to reach a posting inn by nightfall but had decided to press on, both eager to return to Ashburn Court.

But as they rounded a bend in the road, the peace was abruptly shattered. The carriage came to a sudden halt, the jolt throwing them both against their seats. Darcy immediately tensed, his hand instinctively reaching for Elizabeth's.

"Stay inside," he commanded, his voice low but urgent. Shouts could be heard from outside, followed by the unmistakable sound of horses rearing in distress.

Elizabeth's eyes widened in alarm as she clutched his arm. "Fitzwilliam, what is happening?"

Before he could respond, the carriage door was wrenched open with a force that nearly tore it from its hinges. A rough voice barked at them, "Out! Now!"

Darcy's heart pounded as he took in the sight before him. Three masked bandits surrounded the carriage, their weapons glinting menacingly in the dim light. The leader, a tall man with a scar running down his cheek, brandished a pistol and gestured for them to step out.

Darcy's mind raced as he assessed the situation. A pistol was kept in the carriage for just such an occasion, and Darcy knew he needed to act swiftly.

"Take what you want," Darcy said evenly, his voice betraying none of the turmoil within him. "But leave the lady alone."

The leader sneered, clearly revelling in the power he held. "You're in no position to make demands, my lord," he spat, his eyes gleaming with malice. He grabbed Elizabeth and tore her out of the carriage, causing her to stumble and fall.

“Elizabeth!” he bellowed as he saw her fall. The leader sneered and motioned for one of his men to grab her, then he approached Darcy. He had to act. Now. Without thinking, he planted a facer on the man. “How dare you!” Darcy shouted. While the bandit was temporarily stunned he swiftly entered the carriage, pulled up the cushioned seat, and grabbed the loaded gun.

Darcy leaped out, brandishing the weapon.

As he emerged, he was ready. Just as one of the younger bandits lunged towards Elizabeth, Darcy raised the pistol and fired. The shot rang out, and the bandit fell to the ground, clutching his shoulder in agony.

“Hastings, the seat,” Darcy called and glanced at the coachman who sat beside the groom on the box seat with his hands raised. The young groom gave a nod and leaped off the box seat, knocking down the man who’d been holding them up. The weapon the bandit had been holding fired, but missed—Darcy knew it was difficult to hit moving targets, as did the groom. The bandit was thrown to the ground, allowing the coachman to grapple for his weapon.

Hastings climbed down while the third bandit made for Elizabeth, who sat on the ground dazed and with blood trickling from her lip.

The leader, who’d displayed such bravado moments before, crawled on his hands and knees after his dropped weapon while the groom had control of the man at the front. However, the third man who was significantly younger than the others, had grabbed Elizabeth, despite having suffered a bullet wound.

“Let me go,” he called. “Or I shoot her!” he said, his hand shaking so hard Darcy feared he might shoot her on accident.

“Coward, shoot them all,” the leader called while Darcy and Hastings stood, both



unsure what to do.

“Let her go,” Darcy called, “And you can go.”

“Shoot her! That was the order!” the leader called.

Darcy’s stomach dropped. The man hadn’t said, ‘that is an order. He had said that was the order. They had orders, someone had planned this ambush. With blank horror it occurred to him that these men were likely sent by Phillip. He trained his weapon at the leader.

“Is this worth whatever my cousin paid you?” The man flinched and Darcy knew his suspicion had been true. “He won’t pay you unless you do what he ordered you, and you already failed. Call off your men, or you shall not live to see another dawn,” Darcy growled, his voice cold and unyielding.

“I am no coward, I do not take orders from the likes of you. Out here, our rules apply,” he said. “Frank, take her.”

The young man stood, shaking but then to Darcy’s horror, he grabbed Elizabeth by the hair with his free hand and dragged her towards the hedgerow.

“I can shoot him, I have good aim,” Hastings called. Knowing there was no other choice, Darcy nodded at the coachman—whom he knew to be a former member of the Royal Army—and the man took a shot, aiming for the bandit’s leg.

A blood curdling scream came as the man went down, now shot in the shoulder and the leg. However, as he went down, Elizabeth lost her footing, and tumbled forwards hitting her head on a tree.

“Elizabeth,” he called, his voice strained. Darcy pulled Elizabeth into his arms,

cradling her close, there was a cut on her head which bled profusely. She looked ashen and confused.

“Fitzwilliam, I feel... unwell. The world is... turning,” she muttered and fell unconscious in his arms.

“Elizabeth,” he whispered hoarsely, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Wake up, please.”

“My lord,” the coachman said, his voice laced with worry, “we must get you back to Ashburn Court. You need a physician at once. Get her ladyship inside the carriage. We will tie up these men and send for the constable to collect them. We have enough rope for all three of them.”

“I will guard them,” the groom said and held up three pistols. “I am armed well enough now, thanks to these three.”

“Collect the discarded one the leader dropped,” Hastings said and the two set about their task while Darcy carried Elizabeth into the carriage. He sat and stretched her out across the bench, her head resting in his lap. He pressed a handkerchief against her head wound feeling helpless.

After what felt like an eternity the vehicle set into motion again and they rushed towards Ashburn, a couple of hours distance away through mostly nothing but forest. There was not a town nearby they could stop at for care and at least at Ashburn, they could summon their physician with haste.

By the time they reached Ashburn Court, the sky had darkened, and a cold wind had begun to blow. The household was in an uproar as the injured party was brought inside. Servants rushed to fetch hot water and blankets, while the best local physician was summoned with all haste.

Amidst the chaos, Richard hurried from his chambers.

“What in the world has happened?”

“We were attacked on the road from Salisbury by Phillip’s hired hands, they are tied up by the roadside with my groom who is guarding them. Please, fetch the constable and get them. They are two hours north, Hastings can direct you,” he called as he carried Elizabeth into the house where he placed her in her bed and then paced the room to wait for the physician.

### The Following Day

#### Ashburn Court, Dorset

Elizabeth awoke to the dim light of early morning filtering through the heavy drapes of their bedchamber. A dull throb pulsed through her head, and her body ached as if from some great exertion. For a moment, she felt disoriented, the events of the previous day swirling in a haze of pain and fear. Yet as her eyes fluttered open, she became aware of a warm presence beside her. Her husband sat at her side, his face etched with concern, his hand gently clasping hers.

“Fitzwilliam...” Her voice was hoarse, scarcely more than a whisper, but it was enough to rouse him from his deep contemplation. His head snapped up, and the relief that suffused his countenance brought tears to her eyes.

“Elizabeth,” he breathed, leaning closer, his free hand cupping her cheek with infinite tenderness. “Thank Heavens... I was so afraid...”

She managed a small, reassuring smile, though her heart ached at the sight of the worry that lined his face. “I am... I am all right,” she murmured, though she could see that he was far from convinced.

Fitzwilliam’s hand trembled slightly as he stroked her cheek, his eyes searching hers as if to reassure himself that she was truly awake, truly with him. “You were unconscious for so long... I feared...” He trailed off, his voice catching in his throat.

Elizabeth squeezed his hand, endeavouring to push past the fog that clouded her

thoughts. She remembered the bandits, the gunshot, and the sickening impact as she was thrown against a tree. And then, in a sudden rush, she recalled something else—a realisation that had come to her just before she lost consciousness.

“Fitzwilliam...” she whispered, her heart beginning to race. “There is something I must tell you, something important.”

Fitzwilliam leaned closer, his worry deepening as he searched her face. “What is it, Elizabeth? What troubles you?”

She drew in a shaky breath, her eyes filling with unshed tears. “I... I believe I am with child. Or I was.”

For a moment, there was only silence as Fitzwilliam absorbed her words. His hand stilled against her cheek, his eyes widening in shock. “You are... with child?” he echoed, his voice barely above a whisper.

Elizabeth nodded, her tears spilling over as she looked up at him. “I thought I was, but now I am not certain. What if- what if....”

“Let me fetch the physician, he is here,” Fitzwilliam said quickly, rising from his seat to call the doctor.

“My lady, I am glad to see you awake. You were conscious a few times, but I do not expect you remember, my name is Mr Hockley,” the physician said as he approached the bedside with a respectful bow.

“I do not. My... head... It was so foggy. But, sir, am I with child? I thought I was, but the incident—”

The man smiled kindly and patted her hand. “I did not notice anything on

examination. Lady Dorset, I must ask a delicate question, if you permit it?"

She glanced at her husband, and then said, "You may, Mr Hockley."

"Have your courses been regular?"

Elizabeth could feel her cheeks redden at the nature of his query, but she needed to know if she was correct in her thinking, "They were... until a month ago."

The elderly physician nodded, "Well, it is too soon to say for certain. However when the housekeeper changed your clothing and bedding she did not report any signs of bleeding nor anything of concern."

"So I may be with child?" Elizabeth asked.

Mr Hockley smiled gently, "Often it is the woman who knows first. Rest assured, if you are with child, then there is no cause for alarm. With proper care and rest, I expect you to make a full recovery."

The weight of the physician's words crashed over Elizabeth like a wave, leaving her momentarily speechless. Relief, joy, and fear mingled together, overwhelming her. She glanced over at Fitzwilliam, and in that moment, all the pain and fear of the past day seemed to dissolve, replaced by a profound sense of gratitude and love.

"Thank you," she managed to say.

Fitzwilliam reached out to grasp her hand once more, his touch both gentle and firm as he addressed the physician. "Thank you for everything, Mr Hockley."

The physician nodded, a small smile playing on his lips as he gathered his things. "I shall return later to check on her again. In the meantime, rest is the best medicine."

As the physician departed, Fitzwilliam turned back to Elizabeth. He appeared to struggle to find the words. But Elizabeth saw it in his eyes, in the way his hand trembled slightly as he held hers.

“We are going to have a child,” he whispered, his voice filled with wonder and awe. “Elizabeth... I... I do not know what to say.”

Elizabeth smiled through her own tears, her heart swelling with love for the man who had risked everything to protect her. “You have said enough,” she replied softly. “Your actions speak louder than words ever could.”

Her husband’s voice trembled with emotion as he spoke. “I was so afraid, Elizabeth. Afraid I would lose you, and now... now we are to be parents.”

Elizabeth reached up to touch his face. “We shall be, and we shall love our child with all our hearts,” she said firmly, her voice filled with the strength she knew they both needed. The physician had said it was too early to know, but she felt it, as she had prior to their long journey home.

Fitzwilliam leaned down, pressing his forehead against hers, his breath warm against her skin. “I love you, my dearest, darling Elizabeth. More than words can express. I do not know what I should do without you.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached with the depth of her own love for him, a love that had only grown stronger through all they had endured. “You will never have to find out,” she whispered. “I will always be by your side, just as you have always been by mine.”

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The following days passed slowly, but Elizabeth found the strength to rise from her bed by the third day, and by the morning of the fourth, she felt almost her old self.

Still, when she noticed Fitzwilliam's eyes upon her, she observed the shadows of worry that still lingered. It was odd—why would he look troubled? They had received good tidings. Then it came to her—Phillip. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, urging him to speak what was on his mind.

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, her voice soft but steady. “What is it? You seem troubled.”

He hesitated for a moment and appeared to be gathering his thoughts before he spoke. “There is something you need to know, Elizabeth,” he said, his voice low and serious. “Something that happened after the attack... something that concerns Phillip.”

The mention of Phillip's name sent a chill through Elizabeth, and she looked at her husband with wide, questioning eyes. “What is it? What has happened?”

Fitzwilliam took a deep breath, his expression grave as he began to recount the events that had transpired. “After the attack, I sent Richard to fetch the bandits. He managed to track them down, and after some persuasion, they confessed to being in the employ of Phillip. Although we already knew that.”

Elizabeth's hand went to her mouth in shock.

Fitzwilliam nodded, his jaw tightening with anger. “Yes. The bandits revealed that Phillip had given them explicit instructions—to kill us both. He wanted to ensure that neither of us would survive, and that there would be no chance for an heir to secure the Dorset line.”

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat, and she instinctively pressed a hand to her abdomen, where their child was growing. The thought of how close they had come to losing everything—each other, their future, their child—was almost too much to bear.



Her husband continued, his voice hardening as he recounted the rest of the story. “With the information from the bandits, Richard was able to locate Phillip. Wickham joined him, along with the local constables. They confronted him, and under pressure, Phillip finally confessed to everything.”

He paused, his expression darkening as he relived the horrors of Phillip’s betrayal. “Phillip admitted that he had tried to kill me on several occasions—through the accidents, the robbery, all of it.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock, but Fitzwilliam pressed on, needing to tell her everything. “He first attempted to convince me not to marry you. He admitted to everything Wickham told us, including that he enlisted Wickham to seduce you, believing that if he could create a scandal, it would destroy our marriage. But when he saw that you and I were growing closer instead, he became desperate.”

His hand tightened around hers as he spoke, his voice filled with a deep, simmering anger. “That is when he decided to have us ambushed on the road. He thought that if he could kill us both, he would be rid of us, and he would inherit everything—Ashburn, Pemberley, the title... everything.”

Elizabeth felt a wave of nausea wash over her as the full extent of Phillip’s treachery sank in. “He would have killed us both...” she whispered, her voice trembling with disbelief. “All for greed and envy...”

Fitzwilliam nodded, his face etched with sorrow. “Yes. But he has been caught, Elizabeth. Phillip will never be able to harm us—or anyone else—again.”

Elizabeth let out a shaky breath, the relief mingling with the fear and anger that still lingered. “Thank Heavens...”

Fitzwilliam reached out, cupping her face in his hands and looking deep into her eyes.

“You must not dwell upon it,” he said firmly. “We are safe now, Elizabeth. And we have a future to look forward to—a future with our child.”

Elizabeth blinked back tears, overwhelmed by the love and determination she saw in his eyes. “I was so afraid, Fitzwilliam... afraid of losing you, afraid of what might happen...”

His voice softened, and he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “You will never lose me, Elizabeth. We have faced so much already, and we have come through it stronger than ever. We shall face whatever comes next together, as husband and wife—as a family.”

Elizabeth felt the weight of his words settle over her, bringing with it a sense of peace that she had not felt in days. She leaned into his embrace, her heart swelling with love for the man who had risked everything to protect her, who had never wavered in his devotion, even in the face of betrayal and danger.

“I love you, Fitzwilliam,” she whispered. “More than words can say.”

His arms tightened around her, and he rested his forehead against hers, his eyes closed as he let the warmth of her presence wash over him. “And I love you, Elizabeth. More than I ever thought possible.”

For a long moment, they remained thus, holding each other close, their hearts beating as one. They had endured so much, faced so many trials, but they had emerged stronger, their love deepened by the challenges they had overcome.

As they lay together, the first light of dawn began to filter through the curtains, bathing the room in a soft, golden glow. It was a new day, a new beginning, and as they gazed into each other’s eyes, they knew that whatever the future held, they would face it together—with love, with courage, and with the unbreakable bond that

had been forged in the fires of adversity.

They were not merely husband and wife—they were allies, soulmates, bound together by a love that would endure, no matter what trials they faced. And as they drifted off to sleep, their hearts full of hope and promise, they knew that they had been granted a precious gift—a second chance at happiness, at life, and at the love that would sustain them through all the days to come.

Three Years Later

Pemberley House, Derbyshire

Darcy looked out over the grand estate that was Pemberley, grateful to be home.

Parliament was not in session and he and his family had returned to their Northernmost estate a fortnight ago.

It had been heaven thus far.

He and Elizabeth had decided to hand Ashburn to the widow Swynford, wife of the marquessate's heir and her daughters to live at for as long as they wished.

While he had grown to love the estate, that love had been tarnished by the events that had happened.

Likewise, he had given use of Darcy House entirely to Georgiana while he and Elizabeth had moved to Dorset House, as was befitting the Marquess of Dorset.

But for the time being, he was contented at Pemberley.

Elizabeth, now glowing with the anticipation of new life, wandered through the verdant gardens, her hand gently resting on the small swell of her abdomen.

Darcy smiled as he looked at their young daughter, Anne, a spirited girl of almost three years, skipping alongside her, chasing butterflies with all the carefree joy of

childhood.

The estate, once again, resounded with the innocent laughter of children—a sound that brought deep contentment to its master.

From the nearby terrace, Darcy observed his wife and daughter, his heart swelling with pride and love.

The joy on Elizabeth's face, framed by the golden afternoon light, was a balm to the memories of the hardships they had endured.

The estate's beauty seemed to mirror the serenity they had found in each other's arms.

“You look contented, brother,”

Georgiana said.

His younger sister had flourished into a confident and gracious young woman, in no small part because of Elizabeth's influence.

He would miss her terribly once she left Pemberley to move into a house of her own, as the wife of Captain Henry Floyd, an esteemed, respectable young officer who had charmed her during Christmastide and intended to make her his wife by this coming Michaelmas.

“I am, Georgie.

I am indeed.

It is nice to have the family together,”

he said and smiled as he spotted Jane and Charles Bingley coming down the path to join Elizabeth.

Their son, three-year-old William—named after his godfather, Fitzwilliam Darcy—toddled along.

He was glad for his friend for he'd never seen Bingley happier than since he'd become a husband and father.

Of course, he and Georgiana were not the only ones who'd found marriage in their path.

Surprising as it might have been but the news of Richard's marriage to Anne de Bourgh—conducted in a scandalous manner by eloping to Gretna Green—had shaken the Fitzwilliam family, thought Darcy had found it a rather wonderful match, for Anne had long admired Richard.

Anne, long overshadowed by her mother's formidable presence, had bloomed under the colonel's tender care.

Their marriage had been a quiet affair, marked by sincerity and mutual respect.

They had recently welcomed their first child, a son named Thomas, who was already the pride of both families and had served as a bridge between Anne and her mother.

Lady Catherine, who had found herself turning to Darcy and Elizabeth for comfort after Anne's elopement, had relented and convinced Mr Collins to give up the entailment on Longbourn, which had brought great relief to the family and allowed Lady Catherine to expand her family immensely.

Indeed, she and Mrs Bennet had forged a rather peculiar friendship, which consisted of mostly passing judgement upon others while sipping sherry side by side whenever

they saw one another.

‘You will be missed,’

he said and squeezed his sister’s hand.

“I shall be living in Sheffield, William.

I will be back so often you will not be able to stand the sight of me.

And I shall be at Ashburn for Christmas,”

she assured him.

“Ah look, there they are,”

she called then and pointed at the two carriages which were presently ferrying his Fitzwilliam family into the courtyard.

Swiftly, he made his way down the stairs and met Elizabeth, with little Anna on her hip.

“They are here,”

she said.

“We are about to have a very full house indeed.”

Darcy’s hand found hers, and he squeezed it gently.

“Indeed, we are.

And I would not have it any other way.

It is moments like these that make all we have endured worthwhile.

Pemberley has become our sanctuary, a place where we can live in peace and happiness.

With all our family.”

Elizabeth leaned into him, her voice filled with affection.

“I am grateful for it every day, Fitzwilliam.

We have been blessed with so much, and I cherish every moment we spend here.”

“I always knew you would make a wonderful mistress of Pemberley.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Lady Matlock and Lord Matlock.

Darcy was grateful for their support over the years.

Lady Matlock, in particular, had formed a close bond with Elizabeth.

The two women shared a mutual respect and understanding, and their friendship had grown strong and steadfast.

“Elizabeth, my dear,”

Lady Matlock greeted her warmly, embracing her with genuine affection.

“How are you faring? You look positively radiant.”



Elizabeth returned the embrace, her smile sincere.

“Thank you, Lady Matlock.

I am well, as are we all.

I trust your journey was not too arduous?”

“Not at all, though I could drink a cup of tea,”

she said and Elizabeth nodded, indicating for her to enter while Darcy greeted his uncle and cousin.

“Lord and Lady Aspen did not join you?” he asked.

“Frederick did not wish to leave Matlock, he is taking his duties of impending fatherhood as serious as I,”

Richard informed him, his wife, Anne smiled at him, with one hand on her rounded stomach.

“Being with child does not agree with Cassandra,”

she explained.

“Not everyone is as fortunate to have an easy term.”

“Indeed, Lady Aspen will be staying at Matlock for the remainder of the season,”

Lady Matlock continued.

“Cassandra never was one for travel.

Any sort of locomotion makes her ill, even a brief journey from Matlock to Pemberley and even more so now she is with child again.”

Elizabeth smiled faintly.

“I suppose we all have our ways.”

Darcy knew she’d never grow close to Lady Aspen, referring to her as such still to this day rather than the more personal Cassandra.

She was, however, close to both Georgiana and Anne.

And of course, Jane, who had moved into a nearby home with Bingley.

“Faith, I heard Lady Catherine finally persuaded that vicar to give up the entailment,”

Lady Matlock said then, the old dislike for her sister-in-law evident in her tone.

“It was about time.”

She glanced back at Richard and Anne before lowering her voice so only Darcy and Elizabeth could hear.

“I dare say, she almost drove her own daughter away, that battleaxe.

Good to see she has grown some sense.”

“My mother could scarcely contain her excitement when the papers were signed,”

Elizabeth recounted with a laugh.

“She spent the better part of a week planning improvements to the house and

grounds, all the while declaring that she had always known Mr Collins would see reason.”

Lady Matlock chuckled.

“I can imagine.

It is a relief to know that Longbourn will remain in the family.

Mrs Bennet must be overjoyed.”

“She is,”

Elizabeth confirmed, her tone affectionate.

“It is as though a great weight has been lifted from her shoulders.”

“What are you gossiping about?”

Lord Matlock asked then as they all made their way to the drawing room.

From the corner of his eyes, Darcy spotted Jane and Charles Bingley still in the garden.

The two always preferred their own company.

Charles and Richard had never truly mended their falling out, after Jane chose Bingley.

It was not that they were outright enemies, but they were far from friends.

“Just your sister,”

Darcy said and his uncle waved his hand.

“Ah, that one.

She will turn every hair on my head grey yet.

Let us talk of more interesting things—such as how we are going to get support for our cause.

Catholic emancipation.

I am determined to make progress this year.

Norfolk will not stop talking about it.

Is he coming?”

Darcy shook his head.

“He and my grandmother are in Brighton.

As for our cause, the matter has taken longer than any of us anticipated,”

Darcy admitted, his brow furrowing slightly.

“But we remain resolute.

The passage of the bill is inevitable, though we must continue to navigate the political currents with care.”

Lord Matlock nodded in agreement.

“These things take time, that is true.

But the tide is turning.

We must remain steadfast.

I have put Wickham in charge of getting the support of Lord Maddox.”

Darcy’s eyes widened.

“Uncle, you know I do not approve of such methods.”

His uncle shrugged, “A little incentive has never hurt anyone.

Maddox is already in support of Catholic emancipation as it is, he just needs a little nudge.

I also need his vote if we have any hope of passing the law regarding the climbing boys.”

Darcy sighed.

Wickham and he would never be friends, but he knew that Wickham had tried his best to redeem himself.

To that end, his uncle had devised a cunning plan—he would use Wickham’s talents for deception for good.

Thus, he’d hired Wickham as his aid and Wickham did all manner of tasks for Lord Matlock, among them sleuthing out any hidden secrets political rivals might have so that Lord Matlock could use them to his advantage.

Wickham had shown himself to be adept when it came to such tasks and appeared to thrive with his new duties.

Darcy was not about to make a habit of including Wickham in family gatherings, but he had to confess the man had not done one dirty deed since revealing his true status as a Darcy.

A status that remained shrouded outside of the family.

However, the immediate family knew.

Their grandmother, shocked to learn of the existence of another grandson when she was nearing her eighth decade, had managed both the shock of Phillip's deception and the arrival of Wickham with astute grace.

Phillip, never a favourite of hers at the best of times, had been transported to Australia with the Dowager Marchioness's approval though she had done him the kindness of arranging an upgrade in his transportation and lodgings.

He was, after all, a Darcy, even if he had fallen from grace.

The Dowager had also sent along a guard who was to ensure Phillip did not come to physical harm—and to ensure that he did not leave Australia.

This punishment had effectively erased him from their lives.

No one spoke of him anymore; he was dead to the family, his name mentioned only in hushed whispers when absolutely necessary.

His mother, ashamed and heartbroken after learning of his connection to Wickham and his nefarious plans for Darcy and Elizabeth, had distanced herself from the family, retreating into a life of quiet seclusion.

“Wickham has proven himself to be reliable,”

Richard remarked, drawing Darcy back to reality.

“I never thought I’d see the day, but I believe he’s truly trying to make amends.”

Darcy nodded, his expression contemplative.

“It’s difficult to forget the past, but perhaps there is a measure of redemption to be found.

At the very least, Georgiana has accepted his apology, and that is what matters most.

Now, who is ready for a spot of tea?”

The day wore on, filled with laughter and conversation, as the families enjoyed each other’s company.

The children played in the garden until the last rays of sunlight faded, their laughter mingling with the gentle rustling of the trees.

As darkness fell, the group moved indoors, where a sumptuous feast awaited them.

Seated around the long dining table, the warmth of the fire casting a soft glow over the room, Darcy looked around at the faces of those she held dear.

Lady Matlock was deep in conversation with Georgiana, while Richard regaled him with tales of his latest military exploits.

Anne smiled contentedly, and Jane and Bingley exchanged fond looks across the table.

Darcy's heart swelled with gratitude as he took Elizabeth's hand beneath the table.

"We've come so far,"

she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

Darcy met her gaze, his eyes full of love.

"We have, Elizabeth.

And we have so much to look forward to."

She smiled, her eyes shining with happiness.

"With you by my side, I know we can face anything."

Darcy raised her hand to his lips, pressing a tender kiss to her knuckles.

"Always, Elizabeth.

We are bound by more than just love—we are bound by our shared dreams, our hopes for the future, and the family we have built together."

As the evening drew to a close, Elizabeth and Darcy stood together on the terrace, looking out over the estate that had become their haven.

The night was clear, the stars twinkling brightly above them, and the cool breeze carried the scent of roses from the garden below.

In the quiet of the night, surrounded by the love of their family and the beauty of Pemberley, Darcy felt a profound sense of peace.



The trials of the past had led them to a future rich with love and joy, and as Elizabeth rested her head on Darcy's shoulder, he knew that whatever challenges lay ahead, there was nothing they could not achieve together.

THE END

Thank you for reading!