



Darcy's Redemption

(Holidays with Darcy and Elizabeth)

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Category: Historical

Description: During an Easter visit to his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Elizabeth Bennet unexpectedly overhears a private conversation between Mr. Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. What she learns challenges everything she thought she knew about Mr. Darcy—his character, his intentions, and the man beneath the proud exterior. As doubts and revelations swirl in her mind, she is forced to confront her own assumptions and prejudices.

Then, on Easter Sunday, a visiting bishop delivers a sermon that speaks directly to the hearts of both Elizabeth and Darcy, compelling them to reflect on their own pride and the barriers it has created between them. But will this moment of introspection be enough to change the course of their relationship? As misunderstandings give way to newfound awareness, the two must decide whether they can set aside their pride and truly see one another for who they are.

A novella-length variation in the Holidays with Elizabeth and Darcy series, this story offers a fresh take on love, redemption, and the power of second chances during the Easter season.

Disclaimer: Due to the nature of this work and the setting of Easter, it does have overtly Christian overtones.

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Chapter One

Fitzwilliam Darcy's arrival at Rosings the Wednesday before Easter took Elizabeth Bennet by surprise. She was visiting her cousin, Mr. Collins, and his new wife Charlotte, her closest friend. Elizabeth would never have come solely for Mr. Collins' sake, but when Charlotte—then still Miss Lucas—had invited her to visit when her father, Sir William Lucas, would come later in the spring, she had agreed to join the family without hesitation. Only afterward did she consider how awkward the stay might be, given that she had rejected Mr. Collins' proposal just days before he had offered for Charlotte. Even so, that had not been reason enough to refuse the invitation.

What she had not anticipated was encountering Mr. Darcy there.

Upon reflection, she realised she should not have been surprised. After all, Mr. Darcy was related to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the mistress of Rosings Park and Mr. Collins' esteemed patroness. Still, she had not expected to see him often during her stay.

To her astonishment, however, Darcy and his cousin called at the Parsonage soon after their arrival. Darcy claimed he had come because he was acquainted with both Mr. and Mrs. Collins—and, of course, with Elizabeth herself—but she could not understand such civility so soon after his arrival.

However, Darcy soon exhibited what Elizabeth believed was his usual behaviour, speaking little and far from cordially. His cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, was left to carry the conversation. The colonel was everything Darcy was not—lively, friendly,

and an engaging conversationalist. As he had done at Netherfield, Darcy retained his disconcerting habit of staring at her.

This unsettled Elizabeth because she could not explain his purpose. She still believed he did so only to find fault with her, which naturally deepened her dislike. After all, who could like a man who spent most of his time staring in what she presumed to be disdain?

The day after their first visit, she encountered both Darcy and his cousin on her morning walk through the groves of Rosings. Perhaps to say she encountered them was an overstatement, for in truth, she heard them on the path nearby and immediately turned around.

However, just as she began to make her way in the opposite direction, she overheard a name that made her stop in her tracks.

“...you say Wickham has been in Meryton all this time, and you have done nothing to warn the people of that town about his proclivities?” she heard the colonel’s voice demand, his tone sharp with disbelief.

“What was I to do, Richard?” Darcy bit out, his voice tense with frustration. “I saw him one afternoon in town, speaking with several young women of my acquaintance. I was barely able to restrain myself and certainly did not speak to him since all I wished to do was call him out for his disgraceful treatment of my sister. However, I could not and rode away instead. Perhaps I might have whispered a warning in a few ears before I left, but before I could think to do so, a message arrived at Netherfield from him. He threatened if word of my ‘interference’ reached him, he would claim that he had taken liberties with Georgiana, ruining her reputation entirely. I was unwilling to risk her in this way.”

Elizabeth barely stopped the gasp that threatened to escape her lips. Her breath caught

as she tried to make sense of it. This went beyond Wickham's denied inheritance. He had always painted himself as the victim, a wronged man with no recourse but to rely on the generosity of others. But if Mr. Darcy was telling the truth—and the urgency in his voice suggested he was—then Wickham was not merely a man cheated of his due. He was a blackmailer, a man who wielded threats as weapons.

Her heart pounded as the implications settled over her. What kind of information did Mr. Wickham possess that would drive Mr. Darcy to such lengths? And what had transpired between him and Miss Darcy that could so easily be twisted into scandal?

She had believed Wickham without question, had allowed his easy manner and charming words to colour her perception of Darcy. But now... now she was no longer certain. Mr. Darcy may be proud, distant, and often insufferable, but there was an undeniable sincerity in his words. He had borne Wickham's presence in silence rather than endanger his sister .

A chill ran through her as she recalled how quickly the officers, and indeed most of Meryton, had welcomed Wickham. How readily she herself had believed his tale. If he was half as dangerous as Darcy's words suggested, then how many young women had unknowingly placed their trust in him?

Elizabeth's pulse quickened, her feet frozen in place. She longed to move, to slip away before she was discovered, yet she could not tear herself from the conversation unfolding before her.

She was forced to ask herself a question she had never considered: had she been entirely, devastatingly wrong in her understanding of the two men?

She must have made a noise, for the conversation between the two men, which had continued while Elizabeth's mind wandered, suddenly broke off.

“Is someone there?” came the sharp voice of the colonel.

Elizabeth tentatively stepped forward. “It is just me,” she said, her voice tentative and unsteady, betraying her unease. Too late, it occurred to her she might have pretended she had just come upon them, but her tremulous voice likely gave her away.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward confidently, hoping to make it appear she had not heard their conversation. However, the moment her eyes met Mr. Darcy’s, she knew. He knew she had heard it all.

“You heard us,” he said, his voice soft but firm. Elizabeth hesitated, unsure if he was upset with her, and waited for him to continue.

Instead of answering, she nodded her agreement.

Darcy sighed. “I realise that what I said to you that night at the ball left much unsaid, but I could not risk my sister’s reputation. He told you about the denied living,” he asked, again phrasing it in such a way that Elizabeth could not tell if it was a question or a statement.

“He did,” she confirmed.

Scoffing, Darcy glared at her. “He did not mention that he was given the value of the living after my father died and that it was his subsequent application for the living that was denied, did he?”

Elizabeth returned the glare. “He did not,” she answered in a tone that did not quite match the ferocity of her gaze. Nearly as soon as she said it, the foolishness of believing Mr. Wickham dawned on her and she realised that her determination to see only the worst in the man standing in front of her had caused her to swallow the tale without question. Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed with heat as she finally understood her

mistake.

Her eyes slid shut in realisation. “Forgive me for assuming the worst and believing his lies,” she said, her voice soft and hesitant. Although she now recognised her error, it did not change the mortification she was feeling at that moment.

To her surprise, Darcy’s voice was gentle. “There is nothing to forgive, Miss Elizabeth. Others with far more experience than you have been taken in by him,” he said. “I... as you heard, there was a reason I could not say more. In a way, I... I did attempt to warn you, but I could not be too direct. My intention was to put you on your guard.”

“It would not have worked,” she admitted ruefully. “He flattered me, and I was vain enough to allow his—I suppose the only word is charm—I allowed his charm to sway my thinking. I should have recognised the impropriety of his revealing such intimate details about his life to a stranger, but I—,” she paused and sighed heavily, unwilling and perhaps unable to continue.

However, Darcy took it up. “Because I had insulted you instead of flattering you,” he finished.

Elizabeth stared at him in surprise.

Darcy sighed, taking his hat off with one hand and running his fingers through his hair with the other. “I had forgotten about my words until something Bingley said after we left the area recalled them to my memory. It startled me to remember what I said then, and when Bingley pointed out that it was likely that you had heard my words...,” he paused again, unsure how much he should say. “My words that evening were patently false and meant only to make my friend leave me alone. I suppose I also meant to warn you off since I was in no mood to inflict my company on any stranger that night. I would ask for your forgiveness..”

He closed his eyes for a moment, running his hands through his hair again, while Elizabeth stood there mute. The two had nearly forgotten about the colonel's presence entirely, until he cleared his throat, startling them both.

"Darcy, you might as well tell her the whole of the story," Fitzwilliam said, his voice rough with anger from his earlier confrontation with his cousin. "Wickham can be persuasive, and once she returns to Meryton, perhaps she can do something to rein in some of his more dishonourable behaviour."

He nearly snarled the last, his fury barely contained. Elizabeth, unsettled by the intensity of his emotion, instinctively stepped closer to Darcy. Although she had always believed she disliked Darcy, his steady presence was oddly reassuring in the face of the colonel's tightly leashed rage.

"If Wickham learns that she has spoken in my defence, he will target her," Darcy protested. "He knows that I often visit my aunt at Easter and will know that I have spoken to her. Elizabeth has four sisters, and Wickham would not hesitate to use one of them to get back at her. Not to mention, he would also speak against Georgiana."

"Why did you not speak sooner?" Fitzwilliam demanded. "You have held onto debts of his for years and could have had him thrown into Newgate or Marshalsea right after that incident at Ramsgate—or you could have acted years ago, not long after your father died when the bastard ran up debts in your name from Lambton to London."

"Richard!" Darcy barked.

The colonel shot him a sharp look at the reprimand in his tone, but understanding dawned a moment later. He exhaled heavily, closing his eyes briefly before murmuring a quick apology to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth waved it off. "I do not know what I might do, but I should like to hear the whole story. I have heard enough by now to piece some of it together, but I would rather not rely on fragments; that is, if you believe I ought to know it."

Exhaling slowly, Darcy removed his overcoat, laying it on the ground. "Might we sit, Miss Elizabeth?" he said. "It is a long story, and I would prefer to tell it sitting down."

It was Elizabeth's turn to look at him in surprise. "I cannot sit," she stammered. "If someone were to see the three of us together, simply standing here, it could be bad enough, but if we were seen sitting on the ground together, people would assume far worse."

"What if another lady were present?" the colonel asked. "Anne knows the whole tale, and if we can sneak her out, a meeting would appear more innocent. Lady Catherine will assume that Miss Bennet and I are chaperoning you and Anne if she hears of it, and she will ensure no one speaks against her daughter's reputation."

Darcy scowled at his cousin. "Richard," he grumped, "you know that Anne and I are not engaged, nor will we ever be. Neither of us wishes to marry the other, regardless of what Lady Catherine believes."

Fitzwilliam's mood had obviously lightened, since he only laughed at the look on his cousin's face. "Yes, but her belief that you will one day acquiesce is entertaining. Our aunt will be delighted if Anne and you are walking out and will not even think to scold our poor cousin about exerting herself."

"Richard," Darcy scolded again. "I am so glad that my pain amuses you, but I hardly wish to give your aunt further fodder for her ambitions. However, I think your idea of a chaperone is a good one, and perhaps Mrs. Collins could be persuaded to join you. She is a married lady, after all, and a far better chaperone than our unmarried cousin."

“ My cousin is likely at Rosings keeping your aunt company right now,” Elizabeth jested. “Come, you might tell me the beginning while we walk towards the parsonage. We will have to find an excuse to keep Maria from accompanying us, otherwise you will have to speak softly so she does not overhear. While my friend knows how to be discreet, her younger sister does not.”

That said, the three began to wend their way towards the parsonage. Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm, which she took hesitantly, believing he meant to keep her close so he could speak quietly.

Yet, for his part, the light touch of her hand on his arm grounded him in a way he had never experienced before. Although he had tried to forget Elizabeth while he was in London, he had been unable to completely erase her from his mind. Now, more than ever, he wished to make her his own. However, he remained torn about doing so, uncertain as to how she would be received amongst the ton and particularly by his aunt and uncle. Would he fulfil his parents’ wishes for him if he married a penniless country miss?

Regardless, it might be difficult to reveal the full extent of Wickham’s depravities, but with her steadying touch, he felt strong enough to speak of it—fully and for the first time. Although his cousin knew the whole truth, they seldom spoke of it, for Fitzwilliam had witnessed much of it firsthand.

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Chapter Two

“As Wickham himself told you, his father was my father’s steward,” Darcy began, his voice low, meant for Elizabeth’s ears alone. “We played together as children, but my father never recognised his more vicious tendencies for what they were. I was something of a rule-follower—” he cleared his throat, drawing a soft giggle from Elizabeth “—whereas George constantly tested boundaries. He frequently persuaded me to go along with him though I always tried to temper his more outrageous schemes.

“Only once did I accompany him when a prank went too far and caused harm to another. I do not remember exactly what we did, but we injured several sheep belonging to one of my father’s tenants. When confronted, I accepted the blame, unaware that Wickham had already told both our fathers the idea had been mine. By the time I learned of his lie, it seemed pointless to correct it, but from that moment, I was no longer as free with him as I had been. I began to distance myself, realising he had no true regard for honour .

“That autumn, I went to school with Richard, and it was a very good year for me without George there. However, the following year, he joined me at school. Since my father insisted we room together, it became more difficult to avoid him. More than once, I found myself in trouble for something he had done. Often enough, another boy or even a teacher was able to vouch for me not being near where the trouble occurred, but that only pitted us against each other more.”

Darcy exhaled heavily, gathering his thoughts before continuing. “When we went to Cambridge, it was much the same although I refused to room with him. At first, my

father was displeased, but I remained adamant and told him about some of Wickham's more egregious antics. Reluctantly, he conceded. Without Wickham always nearby, I was able to distinguish myself among my peers, earning high marks in several areas. My father seemed proud of me—or so I believed—but I suspect he preferred hearing of Wickham's exploits, naturally toned down for my father's consumption.

“Wickham rarely attended classes and, as I understand it, was threatened with expulsion more than once. To be entirely truthful, I do not even know if he completed his studies. During his final year, I was at Pemberley and knew nothing of his affairs.”

Darcy scrubbed a hand down his face, hesitating before he continued. “Surely you can understand my frustration when I learned my father had suggested in his will that I assist Wickham and even hinted that I should grant him a living when one became available. Even had he taken orders, he would have been wholly unfit for such an office. So when he came to me, requesting the value of the living instead, I was only too happy to oblige. I gave him three thousand pounds in addition to the one thousand my father had left him outright.” He swallowed hard, his jaw tightening. “He signed a receipt for the sum, and, thoroughly disgusted by what I knew of the man and his character, I hoped never to see him again.”

He paused again, and Elizabeth looked up at him, concern etching her features. When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, as though the words pained him. “Last summer, he intruded upon my notice once again.” Darcy told how Wickham had conspired with his sister's companion to persuade the fifteen-year-old girl to elope with him and would have been successful had Darcy himself not arrived a few days before the intended elopement.

“Had he succeeded with her, I might have lost my sister forever. That scoundrel could have taken her from me—and it would have been my fault, for I sheltered her too

much from life's harsher realities, leaving her naïve to the true nature of my former friend. Oh, I might have seen her on occasion, but only when Wickham wished to use her as leverage to extort further funds from me." As he spoke, it was obvious that his pain was significant and that he blamed himself for what had happened.

"He squandered four thousand pounds in just a few years; her dowry of thirty thousand would not have supported his excesses for long. And when that was gone? He might have abandoned her, left her destitute in some foreign place—or worse, inflicted upon her some vile disease born of his own debauched habits," he finished quietly.

At a small noise from her, he lifted his free hand to caress hers. "Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth, I should not speak of these things to you. But I sheltered my sister to the point that I made her an easy target for a man like him, and I would hate to see you injured by him as well."

Elizabeth started at this idea. "He has not injured me," she informed him, looking down at her hands, noticing briefly how much his touch comforted her. "My pride is hurt a bit, but mostly because I was naïve enough to believe his lies. I should have known better than to allow a man I did not know to speak to me as he did." Elizabeth shook her head. "I was a fool, Mr. Darcy, and entirely prejudiced because of an idle comment that hurt my pride."

Neither Darcy nor Elizabeth noticed that he was still holding the hand that was resting on his arm as they stared into each other's eyes for a moment. Something seemed to pass between them, and when the colonel announced their arrival at the parsonage, breaking the spell between them, they both flushed as they realised the impropriety of their relative positions.

"Shall we go in?" the colonel asked. "Have you been able to convey to Miss Bennet some of what you wished to share? Do we still need Mrs. Collins to accompany us on

a walk?”

“I have shared the most important details, but the question remains—what is to be done about him?” Darcy said. “Perhaps Mrs. Collins will have some insight none of us have yet considered although we have not yet asked Miss Elizabeth for her thoughts. I have often observed that your mother was far more adept at administering punishment than either your father or mine. It is possible these ladies will have suggestions for handling the miscreant that would never occur to either of us.”

Less than half an hour later, Maria was sent on an errand with a servant to a neighbour’s house, and Charlotte accompanied Elizabeth as they took a turn in the garden with the gentlemen.

“Charlotte,” Elizabeth said, her voice tight as she admitted to her friend how utterly wrong she had been. “The colonel and Mr. Darcy have some information about Mr. Wickham that is important for our neighbours in Meryton to learn. However, we must do so carefully; if Mr. Wickham learns the information came from Mr. Darcy, he may retaliate against him.”

“So you now believe that Mr. Darcy is innocent of the charges your favourite laid at his feet?” Charlotte teased.

“He was never a favourite, Charlotte, but I did consider him a friend,” Elizabeth retorted, her cheeks flushing pink in mortification. She had anticipated her friend would tease her, but had thought she would wait until they were alone. That she called Wickham a favourite in front of the gentlemen was a reminder of her foolishness in believing him.

Noting that her teasing had fallen flat, Charlotte quickly grew more serious. “What do our friends need to know, gentlemen? Is he a gambler, a rake, a despoiler of women?” This was still said with a light tone, unknowingly touching on all of the man’s vices.

Both Darcy and Elizabeth blushed at such forthrightness from the rector's wife. The colonel only grimaced, causing Charlotte to blanch, her shock evident. "He is all those things, Mrs. Collins, and more," the colonel said gravely. "Wickham is known to run up debts he never intends to pay and to promise marriage to young women, when he has no intention of following through. Once he gets what he wants from these women, he moves on to the next. My cousin has found husbands for several women after they have been in company with Wickham."

Elizabeth paled at this rather blunt description. "What sort of women? Gentlewomen?" she asked rather desperately.

"Only one that I am aware of," Darcy replied, his tone telling Elizabeth all she needed to know. Georgiana was the only gentlewoman with whom he had trifled out of a misplaced desire for vengeance. While this ought to have relieved her concerns, it did little to calm her worries.

Darcy continued, "Most have been the daughters of tenants or were serving women. I tried warning my father long ago, but he would not believe me. Most at Pemberley and the surrounding areas learned to be wary of him and his promises long ago, but I could not warn all of England about him. I hold enough of his debts to have him thrown in Marshalsea for some time, but am reluctant to use what I have against him."

"If he is in Marshalsea, who would believe him if he spoke against another, such as your sister?" Elizabeth asked. "Anything he said then could be attributed to his bitterness at having his debts called in. Besides, who would he tell? The other debtors?"

Darcy sighed and looked at his cousin. "It could work," he replied slowly. "But I struggle to believe it could truly be that simple to eliminate him from our lives."

The colonel gave the three an evil grin. "I have long asked that you simply allow me to put him down like the dog he is. He cannot speak to anyone if he is dead."

Darcy turned a furious glare on his cousin. "No, Richard, we have discussed this before. It is one thing to kill another in battle, but you are speaking of taking a life in cold blood."

"He is a soldier now," Elizabeth interjected, seeking to alleviate the obvious tension between the two men. "Could you not have him transferred to the front lines somewhere? Or perhaps to India?"

For a moment, both gentlemen stared at Elizabeth. "How have we never considered this before?" the colonel asked his cousin.

"You have only known he was in the militia for a few days," Darcy said, grimacing. "I could not tell you in a letter, and I had not seen you until we both arrived here."

The colonel considered this for a moment. "Who is his commander?" he asked, his question coming out sharper than he intended and startling both ladies. Darcy gave his cousin a quelling glare though it hardly affected the officer.

Elizabeth answered, "Colonel Forster," before Darcy could reply. "Although it has not been confirmed, the officers expect they will move to Brighton or to another larger camp soon. I do not know whether that will make it easier or more difficult for you to have him transferred, but it is likely the militia will not be in Meryton much longer."

"If the colonel is wise, he will check with all the merchants in the area before he departs to see what sort of balances his men have with them," the colonel mused. "Having been in one place for a long time, it is likely Wickham has significant debts, not counting debts of honour."

“I could hint to my father that some businesses nearby have gone bankrupt because of unpaid debts from militia officers,” Charlotte interjected. “Since he was a shopkeeper before his elevation, he would be more sympathetic and might suggest to the colonel that he discover what his men owe and insist they pay it before they leave the area. If it becomes known publicly that Wickham owes a great deal, then people may be more reluctant to trust him.”

“What of the women he has used?” Elizabeth asked, her voice soft.

“I have not heard any gossip from Mama, but you said his typical victims are serving women?” Charlotte asked, looking at the gentlemen for confirmation.

Elizabeth gasped. “Earlier this year, in February, if I am not mistaken, the grocer’s daughter was sent away to stay with relations for a time, and the tanner’s daughter not long after. You do not think...” she trailed off, unwilling to say more.

“There may have been other reasons beyond what you are thinking, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy replied softly. “Despite my lack of love for my former friend, I would not want to accidentally harm another’s reputation by supposing something that may be untrue. I know what Wickham is capable of, but he is not the only militia officer who is likely willing to do the same.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and took several deep breaths before speaking in a soft yet unmistakably angry tone. “My father should have said more, should have warned my sisters about the dangers these officers pose. My foolish and flighty sisters, despite their instruction in what is right, often disregard it. Had one of these men been so inclined, they could have harmed one of them. I am fortunate never to have encountered such a man during my walks. Yet, had someone told me sooner, would I have believed them? I, too, was quick to trust and even quicker to judge.”

“Miss Elizabeth, your father likely expected the soldiers to act with honour,” Darcy

replied, seeking to calm her. “He may have never considered that they would do anything to harm you or your sisters.”

Elizabeth shook her head as she opened her mouth to reply, but Charlotte cut off any answer she may have intended to give.

“Eliza, my father also did not consider the idea that these men would act in a less than honourable way, and did not warn me or my sisters either,” she said.

“But Maria does not flirt with the officers as outlandishly as Kitty and Lydia do,” Elizabeth retorted. “I suppose it is foolish of me to expect my father to do anything when he already allows my sisters to behave so improperly. Nothing Jane or I have said to him has ever changed his mind.”

Darcy considered it best not to reply and shook his head subtly at his cousin. The two men allowed the women to glare at each other for several moments before Elizabeth finally conceded. “I can still be angry at him for his lack of concern, Charlotte Collins, but perhaps he is not so guilty. For all his faults, he is a good father although I wish he would do more for my younger sisters.”

“Come, Eliza, you and I both need to write some letters about the damage a militia unit has done nearby,” Charlotte said, looping her arm with Elizabeth’s. “We will need to ensure our details match, and between the letter to my mother and your letter to yours, they will be able to fill in the gaps so that all of Meryton realises what can happen if the militia leave debts behind. Perhaps we can issue a warning to our sisters about young girls in the area who were sent away, but we will need to be cautious to make sure no one jumps to any conclusions about members of our neighbourhood. If there is already talk of that sort, Mama has not mentioned it to me, and I would prefer not to give her fodder for gossip.”

“Very well, Charlotte,” Elizabeth agreed, before turning to curtsy to the gentlemen.

“We will spend the rest of our morning writing these letters so we might post them this afternoon. If we time them correctly, our mothers will receive them before the Easter service, which will give them a sufficient audience to share their conjectures.”

They took their leave from the gentlemen who likewise promised to send a few letters of their own. Darcy would send a letter to his man of business to enquire about Wickham’s debts in Meryton, and Fitzwilliam would write to Colonel Forster to see what he could learn about Wickham’s time in the militia.

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Chapter Three

A few mornings later, Elizabeth walked through the grove once again and encountered Mr. Darcy there. She accepted his offered arm, and they walked together, almost unaware of their actions, having grown more comfortable with each other. Since their arrival in the area, Mr. Darcy and the colonel visited the parsonage daily. If Mr. Collins was present, Mr. Darcy spoke little, but Elizabeth noticed that if the man was not in the room, Darcy was more talkative. She found this dichotomy interesting.

This was the first time Elizabeth had encountered him alone on one of her walks. She had heard him say more on Wednesday than at any other time in their whole acquaintance, but today he was as quiet as he had often been in Meryton. She wondered what it signified.

For several moments, the two walked in comfortable silence, with Elizabeth's hand resting on his arm and their steps synchronised. It was Elizabeth who broke the silence and broached the subject that had been on her mind since the previous afternoon. She had received a letter from her sister Jane who was in London with their aunt and uncle to escape their mother's histrionics over Mr. Bingley's departing the area without a word in the autumn.

"Mr. Darcy," she began, hesitating only slightly at the topic which might upset them both, "when you and your party were at Netherfield in the autumn, your friend gave the impression—to my family and all of my neighbours—that he was interested in my sister Jane. Yet he left after the ball and never returned. Can you tell me why he did not come back?"

For a moment, Mr. Darcy hesitated, taken aback by the question. He recalled his conversation with Bingley on the subject and debated how much to disclose—especially given the fragile peace between himself and Miss Elizabeth. Yet, if he truly wished to make her his wife—which he now desired more than ever—he knew he must be honest. He was not completely certain whether he would offer for her, for he was still worried how his marrying her might affect his sister’s prospects, but he did not want to give her anything else to hold against him.

He exhaled slowly. “His sister persuaded him not to return, I believe. As you may recall, Mr. Bingley left for town on business the day after the ball, intending to return within a few days. However, Miss Bingley, seizing the opportunity, ordered the house closed the very next day, forcing us all to accompany her to town. I did not see my friend for nearly a fortnight after that.

“When we finally met again at the club—I refused to visit his home—he confided his sister had nearly convinced him that your sister did not truly care for him. She claimed Miss Bennet would accept him when he proposed, but only because her mother wished it. He asked my opinion on the matter, and truly, Miss Elizabeth, I did not know what to say. Until Sir William approached us at the ball, the idea of the match never occurred to me. Though I observed Miss Bennet closely that evening, I saw no indication of her particular regard for Bingley.”

He paused at Elizabeth’s scoff and turned to look at her, bringing them both to a stop. “Please, allow me to finish,” he said, his voice low but sincere as he caught her eye and held it. “I told my friend that I had not spent enough time in her company to judge her feelings and that my observations were far from conclusive. While I did not notice any obvious signs of affection, I urged him not to take my opinion as absolute, for he had been the one in her company. Given his own behaviour towards her, he risked being seen as offering his attentions in earnest. If he did not intend to follow through, I advised him to remain in town a while longer before returning to assess Miss Bennet’s true sentiments for himself.

“As far as I know, my friend has not returned to Netherfield, and we have spoken little since.”

Darcy hesitated again, closing his eyes in indecision, unsure how much to reveal. Once more, he decided that complete honesty was the best course.

“That last night at Netherfield, Miss Bingley tried to imply that I was honour-bound to her because of my behaviour while staying there. I denied her claim, explaining that I had done nothing out of the ordinary, beyond visiting my friend at his request. I never gave her any particular attention, except for dancing with her once, as required, at any event we attended together. Hurst agreed with my statement, but then I took it a step further .

“I also pointed out that, given his attentions towards Miss Bennet while in the area, Bingley was far more likely to be considered honour-bound to that lady—especially after dancing with her three times at the ball. Miss Bingley took great offence to this statement and tried to explain how things were different in the country than in town. I agreed, though not in the way she desired, and pointed out that his dancing with Miss Bennet could be seen as a form of engagement. If Mr. Bennet had been an avaricious man, he could have demanded Bingley return to make an offer. Miss Bingley did not agree with that view.

“Since then, I have refused all invitations from the Bingleys and the Hursts. The few times I have seen Mr. Bingley since the autumn have been at the club, and if we have attended the same events, I have deliberately avoided him whenever he was with Miss Bingley.

“I am fairly certain I have offended my friend at this point, and I am uncertain whether I can even call him such anymore. As I have no intention of marrying Miss Bingley, her presumption that I was honour-bound to her was, quite frankly, ridiculous.”

Darcy stopped there, allowing her time to digest his words.

“Jane is in town; she has been there since January, with my aunt and uncle,” Elizabeth said after a moment. “My sister called on Miss Bingley, but the visit was short, and when Miss Bingley returned it, over three weeks later, she barely stayed ten minutes before claiming an appointment and leaving. Miss Bingley has made it clear to my sister that she does not wish to continue the acquaintance, even claiming not to have received any of the letters my sister sent to her to announce her arrival in town.”

Nodding, Darcy began to walk once again. “I have often warned Bingley about his behaviour towards women.” He noticed Elizabeth’s sharp intake of breath. “No, no, he has never...” A quick glance confirmed that Elizabeth’s cheeks were likely as pink as his own. He cleared his throat. “He simply pays women too much attention and then loses interest quickly. As I said, I have not seen him in some time.”

Elizabeth frowned at his reply. “My sister is heartbroken. While it may not have caused her physical harm, he has injured her. She did care for him and thought he returned her feelings. Jane conceals her feelings, but if she had shown more, Miss Bingley would have accused her of being unladylike or a fortune hunter, not to mention what Mama might have said or done. It was bad enough when I refused my cou...” Elizabeth stopped abruptly, not wanting to reveal so much to Mr. Darcy, not when she remained uncertain in her opinion of the man.

“So Mr. Collins did propose to you,” Darcy said, a wry grin on his face. “When Miss Bingley attempted to argue that I was honour-bound to her, she hinted you were likely to be married soon. It took me a moment to take her meaning, but then I recalled the way that man had toadied up to you all evening.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to stop, prompting Darcy to turn and look back at her. “What did my potential marriage to my cousin have to do with your connection to her?” she

demanded more sharply than she intended, startled by the thought.

Elizabeth was rather surprised to see the flush rise up his neck, turning his cheeks and ears a deep shade of pink .

“She, uh, she noticed my, um, fascination with you early on during our stay in Meryton,” he stammered. “I, uh, accidentally confessed my admiration for your fine eyes one evening at Lucas Lodge. It was the night you refused my first request to dance with you.”

Elizabeth stared at him, her mouth agape. After a moment, she closed her mouth and her eyes as she considered what to say next. “I thought you stared at me so often because you were looking to find fault,” she admitted.

Darcy chuckled, and Elizabeth’s eyes, full of anger, flew open.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said softly, staring into her eyes, “do you spend much time looking at those things you find distasteful?”

His question took her by surprise, and she let go of the anger at the idea that he was laughing at her. “No,” she answered.

“Neither do I,” he replied. “If I stared at you—which I am not denying, I was unaware of how often I did so—it was simply because I find you fascinating. You are unlike most women of my acquaintance who seek to flatter me at every turn; instead, you challenge me. You never hesitate to state your opinion regardless of whether it was the opposite of mine. You have even demonstrated greater understanding of a topic on more than one occasion.”

“Because I disliked you,” she said, her temper flaring once again. The anger dissipated almost as soon as the harsh words left her lips. “Forgive me,” she added,

her gaze fixed firmly on the ground. "I said I had forgiven you for your words that first night, but I suppose I am still holding onto a grudge."

Darcy looked at her, his eyes filled with resignation. "It is my own fault," he said. "Richard and I spoke yesterday afternoon, and he asked me some pointed questions about my stay in Hertfordshire. Although I should have realised it myself, his questions made me see how badly I behaved. I know it will take time to correct the impression I gave you, but I hope that, one day, you will come to understand that I am not that man. At least, I am trying not to be him anymore. I knew I had become somewhat..." He hesitated, searching for the right word. "...insufferable, but I did not realise the extent of it. After this summer..." He trailed off again, and for a long moment, neither spoke.

Elizabeth shook her head. "My opinion of you was too harsh. Yes, your words at the assembly were cruel, and you should never have spoken them, or at least apologised long before. However," she hurried to add, surprised at how much she wanted to ease the pain she surely was causing, "however, your behaviour was not so bad. I simply built it up to be worse in my mind because of your words. Jane and Charlotte both tried to convince me you were not so terrible and encouraged me to question Mr. Wickham instead of believing him completely, but I wanted to see the worst in you. You have apologised, and I said I forgave you. I find it... more difficult to let go of the hurt than I realised."

"I apologise, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy breathed. "You have every right to hold a grudge against me for my words, but I do hope you will one day find it within you to forgive me. Perhaps it is too much to think that my words might be forgotten. Is there anything I might do to earn your forgiveness?"

Once again, Elizabeth stopped and turned to face the gentleman. "Why do you care, Mr. Darcy? We are not from the same level of society and are unlikely to encounter one another frequently in the future."

Darcy ran his fingers through his hair, something Elizabeth had noticed he did only when highly agitated. “I hope that will not always be the case, Miss Elizabeth. I... I admit to rather enjoying your company. At the very least, I would like to think that the two of us can be friends and might encounter each other from time to time. In fact,” Darcy rushed to speak, having come to a decision, “with you here, I thought to invite my sister to join me at Rosings. The two of you would get along very well, and she needs the company of other lively young women to restore her spirits. How long are you to remain in the area?”

Elizabeth considered him for a moment, tilting her head to one side as she did so. “You would bring your sister here to meet me?” she asked.

“I would,” he agreed. “My aunt can be intimidating, but I believe that your friendship would outweigh any hardships caused by being near my aunt.” He paused and asked again. “How much longer will you stay with the Collinses?”

“Another month,” Elizabeth replied. “Maria and I arrived a fortnight ago with Sir William, who returned home. My uncle will send a carriage to convey us to London, and then Jane will accompany us home to Longbourn.”

“If you and my sister get along as well as I hope, perhaps we could accompany you to London. However, I am as yet uncertain that my sister will withstand a month in my aunt’s company, but, as I said, if your presence balances my aunt’s interference, she will wish to remain as long as you do.”

Yet again, Elizabeth examined the man standing in front of her. “You are different from what I expected, Mr. Darcy,” she said after several moments passed. He had resisted the urge to squirm under her scrutiny, and her words gave him relief.

“Have you found a way to forgive me for my inaccurate and hateful words at the assembly?” he asked, his voice soft.

Elizabeth looked down at the ground, not wanting to meet his eyes, especially after catching a glimpse of the earnestness she saw there. “I am trying,” she whispered, barely loud enough for him to hear. “You injured my vanity, and despite the fact that I know I ought to forgive you, I have held onto my hurt for so long that now I am unsure how to let go of the resentment.”

“I will do all in my power to convince you to forget what I said then,” Darcy promised seriously, then attempted to lighten the mood by teasing her. “Should I flatter you to erase the memory of my slight?”

Elizabeth’s lips turned up in a slight smile. “I am not sure that you are capable of flattery, Mr. Darcy. Moreover, I would always prefer honesty. In truth, I am accustomed to being found lacking, particularly in comparison to Jane, and what you said is scarcely worse than anything my mother has said about me. In some ways, your words were almost kinder, for at least you proclaimed me tolerable.”

Darcy shook his head. “You are lovelier than your sister, Miss Elizabeth. Although you may not be what is considered classically beautiful in the eyes of society, I find you much more attractive than Miss Bennet. You are not only enchanting, but lively and engaging, and I have never been bored in your company.”

Ducking her head, Elizabeth blushed at receiving such praise from him. She was still struggling to understand him and was having a difficult time reconciling how he had behaved in Hertfordshire with how he behaved here. When she first arrived, she had believed there were many similarities between him and his aunt, but she was now questioning her assumption. His openness with her about his sister’s struggles as well as in the matter of Mr. Bingley surprised her, but she began to recognise that he had always treated her differently than he did everyone else.

“I would be pleased to meet your sister,” she finally admitted, unwilling to comment further. “When might she arrive?”

He considered that for a moment. "I will write to her when I return to the house and will send my coach and coachman back to London to retrieve her. My sister's companion will come with her, and the coach I used is the most comfortable one for travelling. She could arrive as soon as Monday, but if I know my sister as well as I believe I do, she will arrive late in the afternoon on Tuesday."

The topic of the conversation had shifted enough that Elizabeth could now look at him again. "She will need two full days to pack her trunks, sir?" she said, deliberately teasing him to see how he would react.

To her surprise, her companion let out a laugh. "Indeed, she might," he said after a moment. He bent nearer to her ear and, with a conspiratorial wink, whispered, "I once believed that Caroline Bingley packed an excessive amount whenever she travelled, but that was before my sister turned fifteen. The first time my aunt took her shopping for gowns, I was astonished at the amount they spent. She has assured me it will only become worse as my sister grows older."

Caught off guard by his tease, Elizabeth laughed, more loudly than she intended. She lifted her free hand to cover her mouth as she turned to look at him. However, since she was not watching her step, her foot caught on an uneven patch of ground, and she stumbled forward.

She would have fallen had Darcy not reacted swiftly, tightening his hold on her arm while his free hand came to her waist to steady her. In the process, her hand slipped from his arm, and he instinctively wrapped both arms around her, drawing her close.

"Elizabeth," he breathed, and she felt the light touch of his breath against her forehead.

She looked up and saw how close they were to each other. For just a moment, she felt the urge to draw closer, but startled at such a thought and immediately stepped back.

He released her just as quickly, and she thought she imagined that he seemed resigned. Surely he did not wish to embrace me, she thought. He may be far more kind than I once thought, and while we might be friends now, or at least more friendly than we once were, he cannot desire anything more with me.

Darcy interpreted her step back as a rejection of him, instead of supposing her reaction was one based in discomfort and uncertainty. Since both were unwilling to comment on the incident, the two walked silently for the next several minutes.

“Miss Bennet,” Darcy began, returning to some of the formality of the early part of their acquaintance, “please forgive me if my actions just now offended you. I was only attempting to keep you from falling and not to... to take liberties with your person.”

“Think nothing of it,” Elizabeth said airily, still attempting to calm her racing heart that had begun again when he spoke. “I did not assume any untoward intentions, but correctly attributed their cause. I thank you, sir, for keeping me from falling over my own feet, for that would have been unpleasant.”

As she had intended, Darcy laughed, but his laughter was not as bright as it had been earlier. The two walked next to each other, though without touching, for a few more minutes until they arrived at the parsonage. Darcy said his goodbyes at the gate and watched until Elizabeth closed the door behind her.

To everyone’s astonishment, a knock at the door reverberated through the parsonage just as the family sat down to dinner. No one had been expected, and it was late in the evening for a call. Exchanging startled looks, Charlotte and Mr. Collins immediately feared the worst and wondered what dire news they would receive.

Collins bounded from his seat as quickly as a man his size could and met a housemaid in the hallway as he went to open the door for the unexpected visitor.

Much to his surprise, he recognised the man standing before him.

“Bishop Baines!” he exclaimed, as he bowed nearly to the ground. “I am so pleased to see you at my house on a Saturday evening. But, sir, what are you doing here?”

“I have decided to visit Hunsford for Easter,” the bishop replied. “I had not planned to travel at all, but something told me I was needed here this evening. If you do not mind, I would like to deliver the sermon in the morning, for I was inspired as I travelled. I have a very particular message in mind and believe it is necessary for someone in the neighbourhood, or I would not be here.”

Mr. Collins was astonished. He could scarcely refuse such a request, but he had written what he believed to be the most engaging sermon—with Lady Catherine’s help, of course—and had been looking forward to delivering it on the morrow. Perhaps he could still find a way to share at least a portion of his little homily with his parishioners, for he would hate for them to miss the message that Lady Catherine had deemed essential.

The bishop seemed to recognise at least a portion of Mr. Collins’s inner conflict. “Perhaps,” he suggested, “we each could deliver part of our sermons. If you speak first, then I could share a few words at the conclusion of the service. My message will not take long, but I believe it to be of great importance.”

Mollified, Mr. Collins agreed to this unusual arrangement. He would speak first and, instead of his planned forty-minute sermon, attempt to pare it down by half. He then invited the bishop to join his family for the evening meal, assuming the man of God had not already eaten.

“I thank you, my good man. You are correct—I have not had a chance to stop for a meal and would be delighted to join you and your family. As I recall, you are newly married. Are more than just you and your wife present?”

Mr. Collins acknowledged that it was so, explaining that his wife's sister and his own cousin, who was also his wife's friend, were visiting.

The bishop was interested in all three ladies and was very civil to them all. He was particularly intrigued by Miss Bennet, wondering if she was part of the reason he had felt compelled to come to Hunsford so unexpectedly.

Dinner was the most enjoyable meal Elizabeth had experienced since her arrival at the parsonage. While she delighted in her friend Charlotte's company, Mr. Collins had made mealtimes as tedious as he had once done at Longbourn. With the bishop there, he appeared to be almost cowed into silence and spoke only a little during the meal.

Elizabeth was grateful that her friend had managed to refine her husband's manners somewhat; he no longer talked with his mouth full, and when he did forget, his wife corrected him gently. She acknowledged that Mr. Collins showed improvement in other respects as well, and she was pleased to see that perhaps her friend's life would be more tolerable than she had initially feared.

After dinner, the bishop was shown to a bedroom that had been hastily prepared for him during the meal. Elizabeth, who had occupied the best guest room, would share with Maria for as long as the bishop remained in residence. The change did not trouble her; she was accustomed to sharing with one of her sisters at home.

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Chapter Four

EASTER SUNDAY

S unday morning dawned bright and fair. The family rose early, as was their habit, but Mr. Collins left for the church almost immediately, far earlier than usual, eager to prepare the space for the bishop's visit. He also wished to practise his revised sermon to ensure that he left out none of Lady Catherine's essential points

Elizabeth and the others from the parsonage also arrived at the church earlier than most of its parishioners. The bishop offered Charlotte his arm for the walk, but she declined, allowing Elizabeth to take it instead. Charlotte accompanied her sister, and the four walked by twos, with Charlotte and Maria taking the lead.

"Tell me, Miss Bennet," the bishop asked as they strolled, "what do you think of your cousin's sermons?"

Elizabeth turned to him, wondering exactly what sort of answer he sought. She hesitated, then replied carefully, "Sir, I would prefer not to speak ill of any family member, regardless of how distantly related. Charlotte is my dear friend. Mr. Collins is... unique, an appropriate term, I suppose. I have encountered worse. His style of speaking is somewhat..." She paused, searching for the right word. "Loquacious."

The bishop chuckled. "An apt description, given what I have heard."

Elizabeth continued, "He has improved somewhat under my friend's guidance, but he still relies heavily on his patroness for her opinions. Some might argue he is too

reliant on her and not reliant enough on the Word of God.”

The bishop nodded. “I have heard similar remarks, though not as kindly stated. It is interesting you mention his patroness, for much has been said about her influence. I agree that your friend seems to have a good effect on him. With encouragement, he may learn to be less dependent on others.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I imagine it troubled him greatly to cut any part of his sermon to make room for yours. He adheres strictly to a forty-minute length because Lady Catherine deems it ideal.”

The bishop raised a brow. “It is troubling that a minister should so slavishly adhere to an arbitrary rule. He will be quite surprised when my sermon lasts only five minutes rather than the twenty he assumed. However, if he is as you say, I doubt he managed to cut his sermon fully in half.”

As they walked, he continued, “While it is not quite a violation of ecclesiastical law, something must be done about his dependence on his patroness’s dictates. We prefer our ministers to be their own men, not so heavily influenced by external pressures. Lady Catherine, after all, is not even a peer in her own right—her title is merely a courtesy from her father, and her standing persists only because her brother is an earl. I wonder if speaking to her would have any effect or whether addressing her brother might prove more effective.”

Elizabeth nodded, unsure whether a response was necessary, and continued towards the church with the bishop. Charlotte and Maria had arrived a few minutes earlier, as she and the bishop had slowed their pace during the final stretch, absorbed in conversation.

Upon reaching the church, Charlotte guided Elizabeth to her seat before escorting the bishop to his place. She then turned to speak with her husband, who stood at the door,

greeting parishioners as they arrived.

Elizabeth watched as the congregation entered with quiet reverence, as was fitting for Easter Sunday. Many women wore new gowns and bonnets, while those who could not afford entirely new garments had at least something freshly altered or refurbished.

The tradition of wearing new clothing for Easter had always intrigued Elizabeth, and she enjoyed observing the different fashions members of her own community chose for the occasion. Now, in a new setting, she noted the same custom and smiled at the sight of young women preening as they proudly displayed their finery. She suspected that many of these garments would make another appearance in a few short weeks for May Day, especially since Easter fell in mid-April this year.

Five minutes before the sermon, Lady Catherine arrived with Anne and her companion. Anne leaned heavily on the latter for support. Elizabeth recalled Mr. Wickham's words about Anne's supposed engagement to Darcy and grew frustrated at yet another lie that man had told her. Resolving to put him out of her mind, she turned her attention back towards the new arrivals.

Behind the ladies walked Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth's gaze lingered on Colonel Fitzwilliam for only a moment before moving to Darcy. She remembered her first impression of him at the Meryton assembly—undeniably handsome, yet rendered less so by what she had perceived as his arrogance after his slight of her person. But yesterday's events had caused her to look at him anew. Today, his firm-set jaw and aggravated expression piqued her curiosity. She wondered what had troubled him already this morning.

She observed him for several moments, unnoticed, until at last he looked up and caught her staring. His expression, unreadable at first, shifted instantly into a smile—one brighter than she had ever seen from him.

Once again, she wondered at the cause. Surely, it could not be her affecting him so. Despite their near embrace the day before, there was no way he could be interested in a country-bred woman of such little consequence—not when he was so wealthy, his estate so vast, and his uncle an earl. And yet, she could not entirely suppress the slight thrill his smile sent through her.

Oh, foolish girl, she chided herself. You must not let a mere smile affect you so. You barely even like the man—you have only just learned to tolerate his presence. She almost laughed at her own wit at using his own words in this instance. And you certainly cannot think yourself interested in him now. You know as well as anyone that he will never offer for someone like you.

Determined to banish such thoughts, she dropped her gaze and did not lift it again until she heard Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam greeting her and her friends from the aisle beside them.

“Good morning, Mrs. Collins. Miss Bennet. Miss Lucas,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said. “How are you this fine Easter morning?”

“We are quite well,” Charlotte replied.

“Christ is risen,” Darcy said, echoing the traditional greeting for the day, nearly staring at Elizabeth as he spoke.

“He is risen indeed,” Elizabeth murmured, speaking for the first time, unable to look away from Darcy.

“My aunt intends to invite you all to join us for tea later,” the Colonel added, interrupting the lingering looks passing between Elizabeth and Darcy.

“Oh,” Charlotte said. “We would be happy to accept. However, you should know that

we have an additional visitor. The Bishop of Rochester arrived last night during dinner. In fact, he will share this morning's sermon with my husband. He mentioned that he had a few words to say to the congregation and felt that God had led him here because someone specifically needed to hear them."

Darcy turned to her, his expression shifting. "The Bishop of Rochester, you say? Alasdair Baines? Is he a Scottish gentleman?"

"Yes. Are you familiar with him?" Elizabeth asked, surprised at the tone of his questions.

A low, quiet chuckle escaped Darcy. "He is my godfather," he replied genially. "I look forward to hearing what he has to say. I also hope he will accompany you to my aunt's house for tea this afternoon. It has been some time since I have seen him, and I would very much like to greet him. Please let him know, in case I do not have the opportunity to speak with him sooner."

Before Charlotte could respond, Lady Catherine's sharp voice rang out.

"Fitzwilliam! Richard! Stop standing in the aisle and take your seats. You are delaying the service!"

Exchanging a grimace, both men moved to do as they were bid.

Mr. Collins stood up a few minutes later and opened the service, leading the congregation in a few hymns before beginning his sermon. He spoke at length on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, inexplicably tying that to the greatness of his patroness.

My brethren, on this most holy of days, we reflect upon the resurrection of our Lord, who, in His infinite mercy, triumphed over death and granted us the promise of

eternal salvation. Indeed, it is through divine grace that we are offered redemption, just as it is through the benevolence of certain esteemed individuals that we receive guidance in our earthly lives.

Consider, if you will, the many virtues displayed by the honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Her wisdom and generosity, though of course not to be compared with the Almighty's, offer a shining example of how those in positions of influence might lead others upon the righteous path. Like a shepherd tending her flock, she provides us all with wise counsel and gracious support, much as our Lord showed compassion to His disciples and followers. It is through her unwavering sense of duty and propriety that we are reminded of the divine order that governs both Heaven and Earth.

Let us then strive to be ever humble, ever grateful, and ever obedient to those whom providence has placed above us, knowing that by such submission, we follow the great example of our Saviour, who, though He was above all, took on the form of a servant for our sake. And may we rejoice today, not only in the glorious triumph of our Lord over the grave, but also in the wisdom of those who guide us in our daily lives—wisdom that, in the case of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is most thankfully bestowed upon us.

Elizabeth, seated in the second pew, was grateful that only the bishop could see her face during the sermon. From the looks he exchanged with her—and, apparently, with his godson seated in the pew in front of her and to her right—it was clear he was unimpressed by the comparison and struggled to maintain a neutral expression. Having only met him the night before, she had quickly deduced that he found humour in many things. While this ought not to have been amusing, its sheer absurdity left no choice but to silently laugh at the folly of it.

It was more than a half hour later when Mr. Collins finally finished and invited the bishop to share a few wise words. The bishop did so, thanking Mr. Collins for his kindness in shortening his sermon to allow him a few words.

The few words he spoke held far more power than anything Mr. Collins had ever said. His slight Scottish brogue commanded the congregation's attention, requiring careful listening, yet his words resonated with undeniable weight .

We are indeed called to follow Christ's example, as Mr. Collins has noted. Paul tells us in Philippians that our Lord set aside the glory of His divinity and took on the form of a servant. He walked this earth with neither wealth nor land of His own, choosing instead to give of Himself for the sake of others.

Let us mind this well, for a man is not made honourable by his silver or his bloodline, but by his deeds. Too often, we mistake worldly standing for worth and grant respect where none is due, all for the sake of rank or coin. But the Almighty does not judge as man does. It is not fine birth or full coffers that make one worthy—it is the heart. Beware, my friends, of setting your eyes only on what the world esteems, lest ye fail to ken the true worth of the person before you.

Darcy winced as he heard this, knowing that he was guilty of this very thing. He saw his godfather look at him pointedly and knew this was intended, at least in part, for him. Later, when the bishop came to Rosings for tea, they would have to speak further about this matter. When contemplating thorny personal issues, such as Georgiana's near ruin and his own desire to ignore perceived family dictates to marry a penniless country gentlewoman, Darcy had not sought any counsel other than his own. For a moment, he wondered if he had approached his godfather in the autumn, after the incident in Ramsgate or written to him while he was staying at Netherfield, would he have acted differently and perhaps not given Elizabeth a reason to dislike him in the first place.

One of the greatest lessons of our Lord, and of Easter itself, is that of forgiveness. We have been forgiven much—aye, more than we can reckon—yet how many of us still cling to old grievances we should have long since laid to rest?

Tell me, are any among us without fault? Can a single soul here claim they have ne'er stumbled, ne'er spoken in haste, ne'er harboured an unkind thought? And yet, we are quick to condemn our neighbours for their failings, though slow to offer them the grace we ourselves so often need.

Who among us has never misjudged another? Who has not mistaken reserve for arrogance, or silence for disdain? We are not called to look only at what is before our eyes, but to seek deeper, to strive for understanding, and to judge—not by appearances—but by truth.

Elizabeth, already on the verge of being overcome by the bishop's earlier words, felt these words were somehow intended directly for her. She had mistaken Mr. Darcy's character, and even now, despite his repeated requests for forgiveness, had been unwilling to give it. It appeared, given what she had learned of him in Kent, that she had allowed his words from the assembly to colour her every encounter with him, deliberately looking for any evidence that would justify her dislike of him. No matter what happened next, she needed to forgive him fully and to release any lingering resentment that she harboured.

As promised, the bishop did not speak long. But it was obvious to all that the short homily he delivered was far more enlightening to those who had heard it, and most left uplifted rather than oppressed, as Mr. Collins' sermon had left them.

Two people in the service were likely the most affected. Elizabeth stood for the final hymn, her mouth moving as she repeated the familiar words, but her mind was not on them. Instead, she was thinking. Have I ever seen Mr. Darcy for who he truly is? Will I allow him to show me, that is, if he wishes ?

The other person affected was Darcy himself. Perhaps I have been entirely mistaken, he thought. My father and others have taught me to value my position and my wealth, but those are not the things that matter. I told Elizabeth that I thought she would be a

good friend to my sister, but truly, she would be a good friend to me as well. She would be a good wife, if I can persuade her, but first, I must show her that I do not value material things as highly as I do a person's character. I must show her the man I am, not the arrogant fool she met in Hertfordshire. Since the bishop is my godfather, I will persuade Aunt Catherine to invite him to remain a few days at Rosings. Then, I will seek his wise counsel instead of my own, and he will be able to help me know what I must do to win Elizabeth's heart.

Chapter Five

The following day, Elizabeth once again walked the grove, her mind still racing as she thought over the sermon from the day before. Although she had wished to speak to the bishop privately, there had been no opportunity. Not long after the bishop had joined the family at the parsonage for a late breakfast after church, he had accompanied them to Rosings for tea.

At Rosings, there had been little opportunity for anyone to speak, for Lady Catherine had not particularly enjoyed the bishop's sermon, though she had offered much praise for the one given by Mr. Collins. It seemed that nearly everyone else was reflecting on the sermons of that morning, for they all allowed Lady Catherine the floor in peace. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam had little to say in reply to Lady Catherine's proclamations. Mr. Collins was the only one who spoke, and he mainly agreed with every word out of the mouth of his patroness.

Even the bishop remained quiet. He knew enough of Lady Catherine to know that arguing with her would be foolish. Instead, he reviewed in his mind several Proverbs that helped him keep silent, particularly reminding himself of the verse from the tenth chapter that read "...he that refraineth his lips is wise."

Elizabeth laughed at the memory. Darcy had insisted on accompanying the Collinses party home to carry the bishop's belongings back to Rosings. Lady Catherine had argued that a footman could retrieve the valise, but Darcy countered that he needed the exercise and would walk with his godfather there and back. Although the great lady had reluctantly conceded, Elizabeth could not help but note how much Lady Catherine resembled her sister Lydia when denied her way.

Darcy and the bishop had walked with Elizabeth as they made their way to the parsonage. Charlotte had encouraged Mr. Collins to hurry so they could ensure the staff had packed Bishop Baines' things, leaving Elizabeth to be escorted by the two men. As they walked, Darcy offered Elizabeth his arm, which she hesitantly accepted, feeling awkward because of the incident from the day before. Recalling what had been said that morning, she straightened her back and attempted to act as unaffected as he seemed to be.

During this short walk, Bishop Baines had quietly confessed what he had been thinking during Lady Catherine's diatribes, causing his companions to laugh. Elizabeth had to stop walking, lifting her free hand to join the one already resting on Darcy's arm as she steadied herself after so much laughter. This action caused her laughter to fade into a breathless chuckle as she glanced up at him, only to find his gaze already on her, warm with amusement... and with something else. For a fleeting moment, the absurdity of the day—Mr. Collins' sermon, Lady Catherine's bluster, the bishop's dry wit—melted away, leaving only quiet understanding between them.

"Are you well, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked quietly, observing the myriad of expressions that crossed her face in that moment. He continued to examine her closely as he had always done, yet this time it felt different. She knew now that he was not looking to find fault, but she was not sure what it might signify.

"I am," she replied, equally softly, but she barely heard her own words over the sudden rush of her pulse. Her hands still rested lightly on his arm, but she was acutely aware of every point of contact between them. The strength beneath the fine fabric of his coat. The way he had not shifted away when she drew close. The look in his eyes that seemed to be telling her... something. She knew not what.

Her breath caught as they lingered in the moment, neither moving nor speaking. She did not notice that the bishop had taken several steps ahead and now observed them with keen interest. Nor did Darcy. His attention remained wholly fixed on her, his

usual reserve momentarily forgotten.

A noise in the distance brought both of them back to themselves, and the moment was gone. Darcy cleared his throat and shifted slightly, though he did not step away. Elizabeth let out a small, self-conscious laugh, dropping her gaze as warmth spread through her. She could still feel the press of his arm beneath her fingers, solid and steady. Straightening, she dropped her second hand before resuming a more proper hold on his arm.

A few paces ahead, Bishop Baines paused as if just realising they had fallen behind. He turned, his expression unreadable, but there was something in his eyes—speculation, perhaps, or quiet amusement—as he watched the couple. Elizabeth briefly wondered if, in addition to being a member of the clergy, he was something of a mind reader. The way he had shown up yesterday seemed to imply some sort of divine appointment.

Darcy finally spoke, his voice softer than usual. “Shall we catch up?”

Elizabeth nodded as they resumed their walk, but the spell of the moment lingered, an awareness neither of them could entirely dismiss. Only a few minutes later, the party arrived at the parsonage, and soon thereafter, Darcy left with his godfather. Mr. Collins had much to say, and so Elizabeth did not have the opportunity for quiet reflection until that morning.

As she walked through the grove, this incident, along with so many others, weighed on Elizabeth’s mind. She had craved time alone since the night before when she once again shared a room with Maria Lucas who had wanted to talk about her day. Worse still, she had spoken at length about Colonel Fitzwilliam, comparing him to his cousin. Much of what the girl said about Mr. Darcy was negative since Maria still believed Wickham’s lies about the man. This fact only added to Elizabeth’s troubled thoughts that morning, for while she and Charlotte had done what they said and had

written to their mothers about the fictional trouble caused by a troop of soldiers in a nearby town, she still worried whether their plan would be successful.

With her thoughts so conflicted, Elizabeth walked more quickly than usual and soon found herself nearing a walled garden. She glanced around for a moment, for she had not encountered such a location on any of her previous rambles. In the distance, she could see Rosings, but it seemed that the garden was at some distance from the manor, yet within its boundaries.

Slowly, Elizabeth moved towards the ivy-covered entrance, and upon reaching out, found the door unlocked. This seemed invitation enough, and she slipped inside, astonished by the sight before her.

Unlike the rigidly ordered gardens at Rosings, this space felt almost wild. Someone clearly tended it often enough—there was no debris on the pathways, and nothing was overgrown—but nature had been allowed to shape its own beauty here. The walls that enclosed the space on all four sides had ivy climbing up them and the hedges that lined the pathways showed the tender green of new spring growth.

The air was fragrant with the mingling scents of hawthorne and primrose, layered with the sweetness of violets that dotted the ground in delicate clusters. The grass, though lush, had been carefully cut back so as not to intrude upon the gravel paths, which were lined with daffodils and narcissus, their golden heads swaying gently in the light breeze as if they too turned towards the sun's warmth. Several types of wildflowers had begun to appear, adding their subtle beauty to the scene, while in shaded pockets, forget-me-nots formed carpets of soft blue that tempted Elizabeth to stretch out and rest upon them.

In places, the stone of the enclosing walls peeked through the greenery, but for the most part, all the beauty here came from nature rather than man's design—or so it seemed. She inhaled deeply, the lingering coolness of morning still present in the air,

though softened by the promise of a warm day ahead. A deep sense of peace settled over her .

Moving along one of the pathways, she came upon a weathered stone bench nestled in a quiet corner. Without hesitation, she sat down, letting the atmosphere envelop her.

Hoping to find a quiet refuge, Elizabeth had brought her journal with her. Writing down her thoughts had always helped her make sense of them when they felt tangled, and never had her mind been in such disarray as it had been since Mr. Darcy's arrival. She carried a pencil with her book and intended to write her thoughts in pencil which she would later transcribe in ink, that is, if her thoughts proved worthwhile of being treated thusly. Her mind was in such a muddle that she was uncertain what, if anything, of use she would be able to convey.

Finding the bench an adequate spot for writing, she opened her journal and began to jot down what she had learned about Mr. Darcy since his arrival.

1. Mr. Darcy did not look at me to find fault.

Was it possible that he admired her? He had hinted at it, she considered, but she had so far refused to consider that he might be serious. No, he said I was fascinating, she reminded herself. Is that the same as admiration?

Since that was one of the thoughts that troubled her most, Elizabeth did not want to continue along this route. Instead, she moved on to the next point.

2. Mr. Wickham is not at all the gentleman he claims to be. In fact, he is rather terrible, and I hope that my mother and Lady Lucas can be of use by spreading their gossip about him .

Setting down her pencil, Elizabeth spent several minutes contemplating what Mr. Wickham had said to her while reconciling it with what Mr. Darcy said and did. The more she considered Mr. Wickham, the more she realised the man had merely imitated a gentleman in his words, while his actions ought to have conveyed a different impression.

Suddenly, the idea that he had pursued Miss King only after her inheritance became public knowledge seemed more avaricious than sensible. Elizabeth had, at first, defended his defection by jokingly observing that handsome men needed something to live on as much as the plain. However, in light of what she now knew about him, his motivations were more suspect. She wondered if there was some way she could warn Miss King, but was uncertain as to how she could accomplish it. Hopefully, the lady's guardian would take care before allowing the match to proceed.

3. Mr. Darcy is a far better man than I gave him credit for being.

Elizabeth considered the obvious care he showed for his sister and the pain he must have endured since the summer. He had nearly lost her to his former friend, and it was obvious that he regretted not protecting her better. Not only that, but she had seen a different side of him in the last few days. After the day before, she realised that he possessed a dry sense of humour and was not as stuffy as she had believed.

Had he shown this side of himself when he was in Hertfordshire, Elizabeth would not have disliked him at all. However, she also considered that, perhaps, he had done so, but she had been blinded to it by her prejudice against him .

This led her to the last item she needed to include on her list, the most difficult to write and to admit to, even to herself. Eventually, after a few moments of hesitation, she picked up her pencil and wrote next to the number four.

4. I have been a blind fool who has allowed herself to be misguided due to vanity and

pride.

She recalled saying to Charlotte on the night of the assembly that “I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine. ? 1 ” It was true; she had been mortified by his insult that evening, causing her to deliberately seek evidence of his incivility. Perhaps, had Mr. Darcy not said what he did, or, at least, not within her hearing, she would not have felt so... so determined to dislike him. Perhaps, had their acquaintance not begun in the manner it had, she would have questioned Mr. Wickham’s confession to her sooner and not so easily believed his words.

Since meeting Mr. Darcy again, he had apologised several times, but she still held those words against him. At church the day before, the bishop had spoken of forgiveness, specifically mentioning that it was human nature to misunderstand and misjudge at times, but that we were called by Christ’s example to forgive. Elizabeth could no longer hold onto his words from so long ago. Particularly not when he had proven himself since then to differ from her long held opinion of him.

“Pride has been my failing,” she murmured to herself, closing her journal and tucking her pencil into her reticule. “That, and stubbornness,” she added with a sigh.

Rising from the bench where she had sat for the past half hour, she turned—only to find the very subject of her musings approaching.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:22 pm

Chapter Six

U pon his return from the parsonage on Sunday evening, Lady Catherine attempted to corner Darcy, pressing him once more to acknowledge the supposed engagement between himself and his cousin Anne. As he had done countless times before, he refused. But this time, another voice rose in his defence.

“Lady Catherine, you know as well as I do that Anne Darcy made no such promise,” Bishop Baines interjected, striding into the room unannounced. He had not bothered to knock—he was well aware of the lady’s intentions, having heard his godson speak of them on numerous occasions.

Lady Catherine’s eyes flashed with indignation at the visitor. “What do you mean by barging into a private conversation uninvited, one that does not concern you at all?” she demanded.

“Aye, but it does concern me, since it pertains to my godson, and his happiness is at stake,” the bishop said calmly, his measured tone a stark contrast to Lady Catherine’s indignation. His burr softened his words, but there was no mistaking the steel beneath them. In his anger, his accent was far more pronounced than it had been earlier that day when he spoke from the pulpit.

“My friend, George Darcy, told me o’ yer attempts to force his hand—how ye brought a marriage contract to him in the very days after his wife’s passing. Aye, ye carried it wi’ ye to the funeral itself and tried to insist Anne had wished for the match. He spoke to me o’ it then, and we discussed it many a time after, for that wasnae the only occasion ye sought to finagle him into doin’ as ye wished.”

Her anger mounting, Lady Catherine gestured with her cane to silence him, but he disregarded the motion and took a step forward. “I came here because I ken I had a message to deliver,” he said, but his voice was softer than usual, forcing Lady Catherine to remain silent in order to hear him. “I believe the message intended for my godson has been conveyed although I didna know it was him who needed it until I saw him this mornin’. But now, I have one for ye as well.”

He paused, ensuring Lady Catherine was paying close attention. “Ye’ve set yerself up here like a queen, meddlin’ in the lives of those beneath ye. Yet, ye do nae good for anyone. That fool of a parson should never have been ordained and certainly nae with ye as his patroness, for ye’ll ruin him. I’ve never heard such a ridiculous sermon as I did this mornin’, and I sense yer hand in it. I admire Mrs. Collins too much to have the man defrocked, but I’ll see to it he gets some guidance—and perhaps a bit o’ time away from ye and yer influence.”

“My godson will nae be forced to marry yer daughter. Neither she nor he wish to marry each other, and I believe the woman Darcy here has set his heart upon will do him much good.” He turned to his nephew then. “Ye’ve decided, have ye nae? Ye willnae let foolish notions separate ye from one who is so ideally suited to ye?”

“I will not, Godfather,” Darcy replied. “I bungled it at first, but I will do what it takes to win her. She is a rare jewel.”

“What is this?” Lady Catherine demanded. “What is this jewel you speak of?”

To her astonishment, Darcy refused to reply, other than to say, “You are hardly someone in whom I would confide, Aunt. You will know when it is time, but not before. Bishop Baines, might I show you to your room? Your sermon this morning has left me with much to contemplate, and I would like to ask you a few questions. How long do you intend to remain in the area?”

With that, Darcy led his godfather out of Lady Catherine's formal sitting room and upstairs to the guest wing where his godfather's room was located. He had also asked the servants to move his things to a room near his godfather's so the two would share a sitting room for the duration of his stay. Lady Catherine would be incensed when she learned what he had done, but Darcy found he no longer cared.

The two men spent a great deal of time talking that evening as Darcy confessed many of his fears and assumed failings. He had not seen the bishop in several years, since not long after his father's death and wished he had done a better job of keeping in contact with the man. Perhaps he would have made fewer mistakes if he had.

The next morning, Darcy rose early and went for a walk in the gardens and groves surrounding Rosings. Though he did not intend to meet Elizabeth there, he could not deny that he hoped to encounter her.

After walking for some time without seeing her, he considered turning back to Rosings. Later that day, he and the colonel could call on the parsonage, for he wished to speak with her. Following his conversation with his godfather the previous night, he knew he needed to apologise once more—for the whole of their acquaintance in Hertfordshire that autumn—and hope for a fresh start.

The previous evening, Baines had urged him to set aside his concerns for Georgiana's future if he married Elizabeth; Darcy could still hear him say, "Stap yer haverin', lad, and go after the lass." He had laughed—not at the sentiment, but at the phrasing, so reminiscent of something his godfather had once told him when, as a boy, he had questioned his ability to one day manage Pemberley.

More importantly, Baines had reminded him that his worries stemmed from valuing status and wealth over qualities such as character and genuine affection. Darcy recalled an instance when he heard his father and godfather speak of their own late wives. It had occurred when Darcy was in London for part of the season, not long

after he had entered society; his father had invited him to share a glass of brandy before they left for an engagement. Darcy had dreaded the demands of society and had accepted the invitation, hoping to delay their evening.

He had contributed little to the conversation, instead listening as the men reminisced about their wives and how deeply they missed them. Interwoven with their memories were admonitions for him to consider more than beauty, status, and wealth when choosing a wife. Would she be someone he could bear to spend weeks at a time with? Would she be a true partner rather than a mere adornment?

That evening, Darcy had approached social gatherings with a new perspective, more determined to engage with the women he met and to make himself agreeable. Yet in the years that followed, he had allowed others to inflate his pride until status and wealth once again became his chief concerns. His godfather's words had reminded him of what marriage truly meant—and what it could be when shared with someone he loved.

The only remaining concern was whether his new resolve would be enough to win Elizabeth's heart and persuade her to give him her hand.

As Darcy trod the familiar paths around Rosings, he unexpectedly came upon a walled garden. He thought he must have only seldom walked this way before, for he had no memory of ever seeing it before that moment. The ancient stone walls, partially veiled in ivy, lent the place an air of secrecy, as if it belonged to another world entirely. Drawn forward by curiosity, he reached out and found the door unlocked. With a gentle push, it swung open on silent hinges, revealing the hidden sanctuary within.

There, in a corner of the garden, seated on a low stone bench, was Elizabeth.

Darcy froze. As much as he might have mocked another man for such fanciful

notions—and likely had—he felt, in that moment, as though time itself had halted. The soft light filtering through the trees bathed her in a golden glow, illuminating the dark tendrils of hair that had escaped her bonnet. She was unaware of his presence, her gaze lowered to the book in her lap, her expression serious as she seemed to write something in it.

His heart pounded painfully against his ribs, his breath caught somewhere in his throat. He had thought himself prepared to face her, but now, in the quiet beauty of this secluded garden, he found himself disarmed. Even had he wished to speak, he could not. His tongue was tied in knots; all he could do was stand there, drinking in the sight of her, feeling as though the very ground beneath him had shifted.

For several minutes, he stood motionless, simply watching her. Then, she murmured something under her breath—too softly for him to hear—before closing her book and rising. The movement seemed to break the spell that had held him frozen, and he stepped forward.

She had only just straightened when their eyes met across the distance.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said, surprise threading through her voice.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he replied, his tone grave and solemn.

A silence stretched between them, neither looking away.

“I have forgiven—” Elizabeth began.

At the same moment, Darcy spoke. “Please forgive?—”

They both stopped short, surprise flickering across their faces. Then Elizabeth exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking her head.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” she said. “Please, continue.”

Darcy hesitated. He had hoped to see her and to make amends, yet now, standing before her, words failed him. What was an apology in the face of all that had passed between them? Especially in light of yesterday’s sermon and the many revelations of the day.

“No,” he said at last, his voice softer. “Please, what were you going to say?”

Elizabeth studied him for a moment, her green eyes searching his as she debated momentarily exactly how to speak. Then she clasped her hands before her and spoke.

“It was wrong of me to continue to hold a grudge after your apology the other day,” she admitted. “I was going to say that I have forgiven you. For everything.”

Darcy felt as though the breath had been stolen from his lungs. Of all the beginnings he had imagined to this conversation, this was not among them. He had expected civility at best, indifference at worst, but not this—this wholehearted absolution that he knew he had not yet earned.

“You are generous,” he said at last, his voice rough with emotion. “Far more than I deserve.”

A faint, knowing smile touched her lips. “I cannot say that I have forgotten everything. It is a fault of mine, to hold a grudge for entirely too long and to be unwilling to change my mind once it is made up,” she paused before continuing. “We have both made mistakes, Mr. Darcy.” There was no accusation in her tone, only reflection. “Though I suspect you would insist that yours were greater.”

He exhaled a short, humourless laugh. “I would, and I would be right.”

To his astonishment, she laughed in return—a genuine laugh, light and unguarded. The sound sent warmth flooding through his veins, so unexpected yet so welcome that he could scarcely believe it.

“I hoped to come upon you this morning,” he admitted. “I wished to apologise,” he continued, seizing the moment before it could slip away again. There was something about offering his apology here, in this garden, that felt right—as though the very air around them was conducive to a fresh start. “For my words in Hertfordshire, for my presumption, for all the ways I wronged you and misjudged you.” He paused, then added, “For causing you pain in any form.”

Elizabeth’s expression grew thoughtful. “I find I must apologise as well.”

Darcy frowned. “For what?”

“For actively seeking to believe the worst of you,” she admitted. “My own pride blinded me to the truth.” She glanced away briefly, as if gathering her thoughts. “I was so certain of my own judgement that I never considered I might be wrong. My father looks at the behaviour of others to find amusement, and I have adopted his habit of looking down on those around me. I believed myself to be too intelligent to be taken in; yet, that is exactly what happened. Instead of questioning the impropriety of that man revealing to me such personal details, I was flattered to believe that he thought well enough of me to confide in me. It never occurred to me that he might be using me in an attempt to spread a story that would paint you even more of a villain than my neighbours considered you to be.” She winced as the words left her mouth, but she could not retract them.

He shook his head when she opened it to apologise. “No, I deserved that. You had every reason to think ill of me.”

“Perhaps.” Her gaze returned to his. “But I should have questioned my certainty. I

have learned much since then,” she laughed softly, “in large part due to your godfather’s timely arrival. When he said he had a message for someone, I never dreamed he meant me.”

“I have learned much in the last few days as well,” he murmured. “We had lost touch after my father’s death, but I was glad to see him; more so now, since he has been instrumental in both of us coming to a better understanding of matters.”

For a moment, neither spoke. The hush of the garden wrapped around them, broken only by the distant chirping of birds and the rustling of leaves.

Then Elizabeth drew a steady breath and offered him a small, tentative smile. “It is time I return to the parsonage, Mr. Darcy. Would you like to accompany me?”

Something inside him eased, as though a weight he had carried for months had shifted, allowing him to breathe more freely. He managed a nod.

“Yes,” he said. “I would like that very much.”

Side by side, they left the walled garden, speaking of trivial things as they walked. Neither had enjoyed the company of the other so much as they did that morning.

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Chapter Seven

Georgiana arrived at Rosings the following day, as expected, in the early afternoon. She could scarcely contain her eagerness to visit the parsonage and pleaded with her brother to make the arrangements as soon as possible. It seemed Darcy was not the only one who had written to her since arriving in Kent—for Colonel Fitzwilliam, too, had sent a letter almost immediately after meeting Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Until Darcy's letter arrived on Saturday, he had not mentioned the lady in his correspondence—not since Hertfordshire. Then, he had written of Miss Elizabeth only a few times, always favourably, particularly in contrast to Miss Bingley. However, while Darcy had remained silent, his cousin had not, and Fitzwilliam had much to say.

Since their first meeting in the grove on Wednesday, Fitzwilliam had been watching his cousin closely. He recognised that Darcy's admission to Miss Bennet regarding his sister had not merely been prompted by what she had overheard. Had it been anyone else, Darcy would have been mortified and done everything in his power to prevent further discovery. Instead, he had spoken to Elizabeth freely—almost easily—and if nothing else, that convinced Fitzwilliam of one thing: Darcy was in love.

Over the days that had followed, Fitzwilliam continued his observations and soon realised that while his cousin was indeed smitten, he still struggled to make a decision. What Elizabeth thought of the matter was less clear. On that first day, she had been nearly hostile towards Darcy, her manner stiff and cool. Yet as they spoke, her sharpness softened though she remained cautious. However, in subsequent

meetings, Fitzwilliam noted a further change—her reserve did not vanish entirely, but something had apparently shifted.

By Sunday, he found himself studying them both closely. During the sermons, they each seemed deeply affected—at least by the bishop's words. As for Collins's sermon, Fitzwilliam could hardly recall a single phrase; it had taken all his well-honed discipline to keep a straight face at the man's absurd ramblings, especially as he related the death of Christ to his patroness.

In the colonel's letter to his ward shortly after their arrival at Rosings, he had shared a few of his observations, so Georgiana was eager to meet Miss Bennet for herself.

Therefore, when Georgiana arrived at Rosings, she greeted her aunt as was proper, but did not remain long to exchange pleasantries. The moment she could, she pleaded a need to rest and asked her brother to escort her to her room. Their cousin Fitzwilliam accompanied them.

Once they were all in the sitting room attached to her bedchamber, she turned to her brother expectantly.

"When may we call at the parsonage, Brother?" she asked, her eyes alight and clearly impatient.

"I thought you were tired, sprite," the colonel said with a chuckle.

"Nothing that a brisk walk cannot cure," she replied with the wide-eyed expression that usually resulted in her guardians giving in to her.

Darcy huffed a quiet laugh. "You have only just arrived and told Aunt Catherine that you needed to rest. She will be quite put out if she learns that you are going to pay a call so soon after your arrival."

Georgiana huffed. “I have waited since the autumn to meet this lady who has fascinated you for months. It seems that you have finally decided to offer for her, but I have yet to meet her. She is just a mile away, and it is past time for me to meet her,” she countered, slipping her arm through his and looking at him with a determined expression. “You must allow that I have been very patient.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had been watching with amusement, interjected, “Come now, Darcy, we might indulge her in this matter. I should not mind a visit to the parsonage myself.”

Smiling, Darcy finally capitulated to his sister’s request. “I intended it all along, Georgiana. Mrs. Collins is expecting us; she was only uncertain as to the time of your arrival. As I expected, you arrived early enough in the afternoon to make it possible for us to call before the acceptable calling hours are over.”

Georgiana glared at her brother. “Why did you not say so?” she complained .

Darcy only laughed, surprising his sister and cousin. “Come, let us pay a call to the parsonage. I would be delighted to introduce you to Miss Bennet, Georgiana, and she is looking forward to meeting you as well.”

With that, the Darcys and Fitzwilliam left Rosings and made their way towards the parsonage where they were expected.

“Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, we are delighted to see you again at our humble parsonage,” Mr. Collins said when their guests were announced. “And this lovely young lady must be Miss Darcy. Have you come to celebrate your brother’s engagement?”

“Engagement?” Georgiana stammered, looking at her brother in startled surprise.

“Yes, to Miss de Bourgh. Lady Catherine told me yesterday that the banns could be published, starting this Sunday,” Collins replied.

This proclamation was met with silence. Finally, Darcy found his voice. “You will do no such thing,” he exclaimed. “I am not engaged to my cousin, and neither she nor I wish to marry the other.”

A loud rap at the door startled them all. Before anyone could move from where they were, they heard Lady Catherine demanding entrance. “Show me to my nephew at once, girl, and do not bother to announce me. My rector would not think to deny me admittance to his home since I am the one who granted the living.”

Another voice was heard following this one. Darcy immediately recognised it, as did Elizabeth and the others, but Miss Darcy did not know who had spoken. “Lady Catherine, granting the livin’ doesnae give ye the right tae march intae the man’s house uninvited. It’s only proper tae let the maid dae her job an’ announce ye.”

The next moment, both Lady Catherine and Bishop Baines entered the parlour where the rest were seated. The gentlemen rose from their seats quickly upon the lady’s entrance although the ladies were a little slower. Georgiana and Maria looked frightened at the entrance of the newcomers while Elizabeth and Charlotte remained composed.

“What is the meaning of this, Aunt?” Darcy demanded. “Why have I just heard from Mr. Collins that you told him to publish the banns for Anne and me to wed? You know that I would have objected as I never intended to marry my cousin. If you cared about your daughter, you would know she does not wish to marry anyone and certainly does not want to marry me since she knows I need an heir for Pemberley.”

“She does not know what she wants,” Lady Catherine insisted. “Neither do you,” she said to Darcy. “You will marry; it is what your mother wanted.”

Darcy sighed heavily. “Not this again, Aunt Catherine. You know as well as I do that statement is not true. My mother mentioned it in passing, when Anne and I were children, but she would have never forced it upon me if neither Anne nor I were willing.”

“You will marry her, Fitzwilliam,” she repeated, turning to him triumphantly. “I have already sent the announcement to the London papers. If you do not wed her, you will ruin her reputation, and you will be decried as a rake.”

Darcy turned to face her, aghast. “You would do that to me? To your daughter? Aunt, I spoke to you on Sunday about this very matter, and the bishop confirmed that neither my mother nor father ever sought an engagement. Hear me now, Lady Catherine; if your announcement is published, I will have the newspapers print my father’s final letter to me, which stated what I have already told you—that my father never supported a marriage to my cousin. There are other things in the letter and in his journals as well, that you would not want printed, I daresay,” Darcy said, his face severe as he looked at his aunt.

That lady blanched at this threat, turning on her heel without a word, and almost flew from the home. Mr. Collins followed her, shouting nonsense intended to soothe her, but his words had little effect. The rest of those in the room stood silently watching, until the bishop let out a little chuckle that seemed to relive some of the tension.

Still, no one spoke again until Fitzwilliam quietly addressed his cousin—though everyone heard his words. “What did Uncle George write in his journals?”

“Nothing that I am aware of,” Darcy replied sedately. “He hinted at a few things, little things that would likely embarrass her were they to become known but not enough to cause a scandal. However, nothing was stated overtly. I knew just enough to know the threat would work to silence her on the matter.”

Just then, he caught Elizabeth's eye. She had obviously heard him, and she winked at him, silently approving his subterfuge. His heart leapt at earning praise from her, and he was more determined to win her heart.

She was not the only one, for the bishop then clapped his back. "Well done, lad," he said, a note of pride in his voice. "I daresay she may have been bluffin'—or if she did send a note, it canna have been long since. She likely thinks there is time yet to stop it reachin' town. I would have reminded her o' what we discussed a few days past, but ye seemed to have it well enough in hand."

Darcy nodded. "I have a longstanding agreement with the primary newspapers to not print any announcement that I do not deliver myself. It is possible that a gossip rag might have printed something, but that would have been far easier to refute. When we return to Rosings, I will write to my uncle to inform him of what his sister has attempted, but I doubt there will be any lasting harm from this."

"What will Miss de Bourgh do?" Charlotte asked.

"Anne has told her mother often that she feels she is too weak to marry," Fitzwilliam replied. "She wishes to remain at Rosings for all of her life. While she may wish for some freedom that she does not have under her mother's dominion, she knows she is not strong enough for life in town or to be a wife to anyone. She also does not believe she could run this estate on her own, which is why she allows her mother to remain in control."

"Does the estate belong to her, then?" Elizabeth asked.

Darcy nodded. "It does," he replied. "Legally, it became hers on her twenty-fifth birthday with her uncle and me as trustees. As long as she wished to allow her mother to remain in charge, we have not attempted to do otherwise, but in Sir Lewis's will, the estate became hers upon her marriage or upon reaching that birthday. She has the

right to send her mother to the dower house, but she has chosen not to do so.”

“Most like because she didnae have the strength to put her out,” the bishop interjected wryly .

“Will she do it?” Maria said, entering the conversation for the first time, her curiosity overcoming her shyness for a moment.

Fitzwilliam sighed. “I am uncertain,” he said. “We have encouraged her to take her place for several years now, but Anne has always been unwilling. Even if she does not wish to marry, she needs a husband who can act on her behalf.”

“What if you were to marry her, Colonel?” Elizabeth interjected. “For myself, I would prefer to marry for love, but I know marriages amongst the peerage are often arranged for other reasons. It could be mutually beneficial for you both.”

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat. “There are advantages to the match, and it is unlikely Anne will live to reach thirty, or so she tells us, but I am uncertain I am willing to make the sacrifice.” Seeing how the unmarried ladies regarded him, he continued. “I am not saying that marrying Anne would be a sacrifice, just that I would be giving up, umm, certain things, if I were to wed her. For example, it is unlikely that I would ever have children while married to her.”

“You wish to have children someday, Colonel?” Charlotte asked.

“I believe most men do, even those who do not need an heir to inherit,” the colonel replied before clearing his throat. “Nevertheless, Anne has stated that she does not wish to wed at all, and I am unwilling to broach the topic at present. I would not want my cousin to believe I was taking advantage.”

“Come, let us speak of something else,” Darcy suggested. “If Anne were here, she

would not like hearing herself being spoken of in this manner. ”

“Yes, let us turn to more pleasant topics,” Elizabeth agreed. “Come, Miss Darcy, sit with Maria and me, and tell us where you purchased that lovely shawl.”

Darcy shot her a grateful look, delighted that Elizabeth was already helping his sister to feel at ease.

Chapter Eight

The remainder of the week passed with little interference from Lady Catherine or any others. Darcy and Elizabeth were tacitly courting, neither speaking openly about what they were doing but enjoying the time to come to know the other better.

They were seldom left entirely alone—between Charlotte, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Georgiana, a chaperone was almost always present, though often at a discreet distance that allowed for private conversation. The bishop had remained for a short time after Lady Catherine's departure for London, but upon her return—her ears still ringing from the scolding her brother had delivered—Bishop Baines deemed it a fitting time to take his leave. Lady Catherine did not repeat to anyone what her brother had said, and, in fact, barely spoke to Darcy at all, and saw fit only to give Elizabeth disdainful looks, but she said nothing else about her daughter's supposed engagement to her cousin.

Still, the pair managed a few walks alone in the early hours, and several times they ended up in the same garden where they had met on the Monday after Easter. While little had been said about that day, they each recognised their meeting had been fortuitous.

On Friday afternoon, as he took his leave from the parsonage after tea, Darcy leaned in to whisper a request for a meeting in their secret garden the next morning. Elizabeth readily accepted, eagerly anticipating his purpose for asking. She dared not breathe a word to anyone for fear that someone would feel obliged to chaperone the couple. Elizabeth trusted Darcy and did not believe he would do anything that might dishonour her.

Early the next morning, before anyone else in the parsonage had stirred, Elizabeth slipped away quietly. The cool morning air invigorated her as she made her way towards their secret garden, and she took great pleasure in the tranquillity of the hour. A fine mist clung to the hedges, and she was careful to avoid brushing against the damp foliage. Pulling her shawl more tightly around her, she walked carefully along the path, her heightened heartbeat owed not only to the brisk pace but also to the anticipation thrumming through her.

She paused as she neared the entrance, laughing softly at herself. A little over a fortnight ago, she would have dreaded a private meeting with Darcy, perhaps even gone out of her way to avoid him. Yet, here she was, eager—impatient, even—to see him. The thought amused her, and she was still silently laughing at herself as she pushed open the garden gate and stepped inside.

Darcy was already there, waiting in the golden light of the sunrise. His tall form was silhouetted against the morning glow; his posture was rigid, his hands clasped behind his back. For a moment, Elizabeth hesitated, taking him in. His broad shoulders bore the weight of his many responsibilities, and in his stance, she glimpsed something of the man she had first met in Hertfordshire—the proud, reserved figure who had once stood apart from all others. But why did he seem so tense now in this place that had become theirs?

She had no time to wonder further. At the faint sound of her approach, he turned, and at once, his entire countenance changed. The tension in his frame eased, his eyes softened, and a slow, almost disbelieving smile touched his lips.

“You are here,” he murmured, stepping towards her.

Elizabeth smiled in return, her heart warming at the simple, heartfelt words. “I said I would be.”

He exhaled slowly, obviously relieved. “I half feared you would change your mind and not come. It was daring of me, perhaps even reckless, to ask you for a private meeting. It is one thing to accidentally encounter each other, but we have never before planned our meetings.”

She raised a brow. “Have I given you reason to doubt me? As I entered, I was reflecting on how differently I have thought of you since our first meeting here. I know you too well now to doubt your kindness and goodness, and I know you would never harm me.”

Unable to hold back any longer, Darcy reached for her hands, and used them to pull her closer to him. “I wish to love you, Elizabeth,” he breathed. “Do you... that is... I know you have not always liked me, but do you think it might be possible that you would one day accept my love and offer... and offer your own in return?”

“Oh, William,” she said, her voice warm and tinged with a slight embarrassment as she addressed him by his sister’s nickname for him. “It is not only possible but a certainty. Was it not Marlowe who wrote, ‘ Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight? ? 1 ’ I believe the first time I truly saw you was on Monday, here in this garden. Perhaps, had you not insulted me at the assembly, I would have seen you sooner—but your words that night blinded me to the man you truly are.”

Darcy grinned. “Do you recall the first part of that verse?” he asked, his amusement deepening when she smiled in response. In a deep, almost husky voice, he recited:

It lies not in our power to love or hate,

For will in us is overruled by fate.

When two are stripped, long ere the course begin,

We wish that one should love, the other win, ? 2

As he stepped closer, he placed her hands against his chest, his own arms sliding around her waist. "Like you, I was blind to my own feelings at first. Perhaps my blinders fell away sooner, but I refused to admit what I felt for you. I was a fool, Elizabeth, to think I could resist your pull, and I might have remained a fool if not for the timely arrival of my godfather." He tilted his head, mischief gleaming in his eyes. "Ought we to name a son after him?"

Elizabeth laughed brightly. "You are getting ahead of yourself, sir," she teased. "We cannot have children if we are not wed, and we cannot marry if you do not ask the question. Since I have yet to hear it from your lips, propriety demands we refrain from such talk."

Darcy smiled down at her, tightening his hold around her waist. "Marry me, Elizabeth," he breathed.

Nearly breathless, she gazed up at him, unable to resist one last tease. "Was that an order, sir, or did you mean it as a question? If the latter, I must have a word with your tutors about their instruction, for it was rather poorly formed..."

Her words trailed off as Darcy, having had quite enough of her teasing, silenced her with his lips.

When he finally released her, they were both a little lightheaded.

"You still have not asked properly, sir," Elizabeth murmured when she could once again form words.

"And now I know precisely what to do when your teasing refuses to end," Darcy replied, his lips descending towards hers once more. Just before they met, he

whispered, “I will try Shakespeare this time, my love. Now, ‘ peace, I will stop your mouth. ”

Eventually, they did depart from the garden. Determined to meet Elizabeth’s exacting standards, Darcy found a way to pose the question properly. When he finally did so, she answered in a manner satisfactory to them both.

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When Darcy arrived in Hertfordshire a little more than a se'nnight after his proposal had been accepted, Mr. Bennet was still astonished by how quickly his favourite daughter had changed her mind about the man. Her letters, starting with the one immediately after Easter, had revealed her change of heart towards the gentleman, but Mr. Bennet was still surprised when he arrived and formally requested her hand in marriage just a fortnight after that date.

Mrs. Bennet, however, was far more accepting of the situation. Now that Mr. Wickham had been exposed as a rake and a scoundrel, she easily reconciled herself to the idea that Mr. Darcy had been misunderstood all along. While she still hoped that Mr. Bingley would return to Jane, Darcy's arrival and subsequent engagement to her least favourite daughter mollified her somewhat.

The letter from Elizabeth that Darcy carried to her father eased the way, at least to some extent. As was his custom, Mr. Bennet attempted to amuse himself at Darcy's expense with his sardonic wit. However, he soon discovered that Darcy was too intelligent—and too self-possessed—to serve as a suitable target for his humour. Although he was somewhat reluctant, Mr. Bennet consented to Darcy's suit; however, he objected to their marrying at the end of May, as this would give him only one month with his daughter. The promise of free access to Darcy's library made him finally stop his teasing and acquiesce to the marriage.

Mrs. Bennet was hardly sanguine at the idea of a wedding ceremony in a little over a month, but Darcy promised to assist in whatever way he might. The idea that he would obtain an appointment for Elizabeth with one of the finest modistes in London appeased her, and by the time he left Longbourn, he felt he had navigated through his interactions with both of Elizabeth's parents well enough. Her father had granted his

blessing and consent, the banns would be read beginning the following Sunday, at which point Elizabeth would be home. With luck, Darcy would soon find a place to stay in Hertfordshire so he, along with his sister and other family members, could remain nearby until the wedding.

The next month was a hectic one for Darcy and the Bennet family as they prepared for the ceremony. Georgiana returned to London with her brother, and accompanied Elizabeth to the modiste along with Elizabeth's sister and aunt. After just a few days in town, Georgiana accompanied the ladies to Hertfordshire in Darcy's carriage while he rode alongside.

It had not taken Darcy long to find a nearby estate to lease. He briefly considered asking Bingley to allow him the use of Netherfield Park, but hesitated to inform his friend of his plans. After further discussion with Elizabeth, he decided against it when he discovered that Purvis Lodge was available for occupancy at once. While Mrs. Bennet complained that "the attics were dreadful," this did not bother Darcy since he would not be there long enough to be concerned about the attics.

At times, the month seemed to last far longer than it ought to have, but it passed quickly enough in reality. Elizabeth tolerated her mother's exuberance well, being accustomed to it, although she sought to protect Darcy and Georgiana from it as often as she could. Soon, the wedding day arrived, and Elizabeth met Darcy at the altar where each pledged their love to the other in front of their friends and family. To their great delight, Bishop Baines had agreed to officiate the ceremony, which felt fitting to the pair.

Happy was Mrs. Bennet on the day her least favourite daughter married.

Ecstatic was the newly minted Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy when she and her husband departed in their carriage for their wedding trip. Her husband had not informed her of their final location, but she knew he had made arrangements for comfortable and, more importantly, private, lodgings for them while they travelled. She would miss her

sisters, particularly her dearest sister Jane, but Jane and Mary were to travel to Pemberley with Georgiana where they would spend the summer together.

Kitty and Lydia had begged to be included, but soon had given up on their insistence when Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner invited them to travel north with them in July. The Gardiner children would accompany them, and Darcy had offered the use of a second carriage to make the journey more comfortable. Elizabeth seconded this and asked the entire party to join them at Pemberley for a portion of their trip .

The Gardiners gratefully accepted the offerings; only Mrs. Bennet seemed a little put out because they had arranged everything without her assistance. Likewise, she disliked not being included, but when reminded of her dislike of travel, finally accepted that she would not like to make the journey if it required her to sit in a carriage for days on end.

Of the four sisters who travelled to Pemberley that summer, only two returned at the end of it. Mary and Georgiana formed a friendship almost as close as the one that existed between Elizabeth and Jane, and they both remained at Pemberley until they married. Even when they married, they wed brothers, and remained in close proximity all their lives. Georgiana married the elder, a viscount, while Mary married the second son, who inherited an estate only ten miles from the family's primary estate near Chesterfield. Even their children came near together, and they each had a boy and a girl within their first few years of marriage.

Although she did not marry that summer, Jane found a husband while at Pemberley. At one of the first events hosted by the new Mrs. Darcy, she met Mr. Andrew Livesay, a friend of Darcy's from his university days. Mr. Livesay, who resided at his ancestral estate in Lancashire, was a few months older than Darcy but had yet to inherit. Due to a scandal involving a rather substantial gambling debt and rumours regarding his habits with women, Livesay's reputation in town had suffered in the years since leaving university. However, from nearly the moment he met Jane, he became determined to win her and do whatever it took to convince her to accept him.

At his request, he was permitted to extend his stay at Pemberley well beyond the fortnight for which he had initially been invited. He courted Jane earnestly, yet she refused to accept his suit outright given his reputation. Instead, she agreed to a courtship on the condition that he prove himself constant. As he could not remain at Pemberley indefinitely, they maintained their acquaintance through letters, with Mr. Livesay writing to Darcy, fully aware that his words would be shared with Jane. Darcy, in turn, allowed Jane to read his friend's letters, as had been Livesay's intention all along. Over the autumn and winter, their correspondence deepened their understanding of one another, with Jane often including a few lines in reply.

When the Darcys went to town for the following Season, Jane accompanied them. There, she met Mr. Livesay once again, and after observing his conduct for a time, finally accepted his proposal. She had insisted upon this period of waiting, to determine that he should not fall back into his bad habits when surrounded by temptation. He proved faithful, and in May—one year after the Darcys' wedding—Jane became his wife.

Unlike their elder two sisters, Kitty and Lydia returned south with the Gardiners when they departed. Their time at Pemberley had left a lasting impression—especially on Kitty. During her stay, she had become acquainted with the rector of Kympton and quickly believed herself to be in love. The rector, however, hesitated to offer for her, concerned that she was too young and too flighty to manage the responsibilities of a parson's wife.

After speaking with Darcy, he sought an opportunity to talk with Kitty under Elizabeth's chaperonage. With kindness and sincerity, he encouraged her to take time to mature, learn from her elder sisters, and develop the steadiness required for such a role. Though disappointed, Kitty heeded his advice. Over the next few years, she grew in both confidence and sensibility, gradually distancing herself from Lydia's more reckless influence.

When she and the rector met again several years later, their feelings had not faded.

Now possessing a newfound poise and sense of purpose, Kitty quickly won his regard, and he proposed. Their marriage proved to be long and happy, blessed with several children.

Lydia, on the other hand, was by far the most difficult Bennet for whom to find a suitable husband, as she remained adamant that she would marry only a soldier. Unlike Kitty, she had learned little from their time at Pemberley. Only her connection to the Darcys prevented her from making the worst of mistakes. After Lydia embarrassed even the battle-hardened Colonel Fitzwilliam with her shameless pursuit of him, Darcy decided to intervene. Sitting her down, he spoke to her with the gravity the situation required, impressing upon her some much-needed truths.

At nineteen and the only Bennet daughter still at home, Lydia found herself in a precarious situation. Despite Darcy's warnings, she believed that an officer from the newest militia encampment in Meryton was serious when he promised marriage in exchange for her virtue. A few months later, when she realised she was carrying his child, the officer had already left the area without a trace.

Heartbroken, she wrote to Lizzy, expecting that Darcy would come and force the man to marry her.

Darcy did come—but not in the way Lydia had imagined. Instead of chasing after the officer in Brighton, he presented her with two options. She could travel to Scotland to stay at his estate near Aberdeen—a journey that would require a sea voyage—or she could marry a stranger. An acquaintance of Darcy's cousin had recently lost his wife and was in need of someone to care for his two-year-old son before departing for the Americas. The marriage would provide Lydia with protection and respectability while ensuring the man had a wife to care for his child without diverting the funds he needed to establish his business in Boston.

Faced with few alternatives, Lydia accepted the second option. Within a fortnight, she was married and standing aboard a ship in Portsmouth, preparing to depart for the

New World. Briefly, she indulged in self-pity, lamenting that none of her family had come to see her off. But then she recalled Darcy's harsh words and, for the first time, admitted to herself that she was responsible for her predicament. Still, she consoled herself with the thought that her new husband was rather handsome. While he was not as wealthy as Darcy or even Jane's husband, he was more successful than Kitty's. That, she decided, was triumph enough.

Their marriage was eventually consummated. After Lydia gave birth to a little girl, she went on to have two more children with her husband. They were happy enough, she supposed, and kept in contact with her mother and sisters only through infrequent letters.

WHAT ABOUT OUR DEAR COUPLE?

As one might expect of two people so deeply in love, they lived happily ever after. That is not to say they never faced challenges—two such passionate individuals could hardly live in perfect harmony at all times. Yet, perhaps their marriage was all the stronger for it, as their reconciliations surely led to at least two of their five children.

The first came several months before Jane's wedding, not long after they had travelled to town for the Season the spring after they married.

While Elizabeth had suspected she was with child, she had decided to wait until she felt the quickening to inform her husband of the blessed event. This occurred just days after arriving at Darcy House and in the midst of the various appointments with the modiste to ensure they would all be well dressed for the balls and parties they were obligated to attend.

When Elizabeth first told him, he was delighted by the news, but the declaration that followed shocked Elizabeth. "We must return to Pemberley at once," he said, after releasing her from his embrace.

Elizabeth, seated comfortably on the settee, arched a brow. “At once? I have only just unpacked my trunk. We were to spend the season in town. I have no desire to repack only to spend another three or four days in the carriage.”

“This is no jest, Elizabeth,” he said firmly. “You must have fresh air, rest, and?—”

“—the company of sheep instead of my family?” she teased, but at the dark look he gave her, she sighed. “Fitzwilliam, truly, I am well. My mother carried five children without difficulty, and hundreds of children are born in town on a daily basis in far worse conditions. Are you truly so worried?”

“You are my wife, and I would have you take every precaution,” Darcy protested. “I cannot imagine losing you to any of the illnesses that are rampant in town. Pemberley is the best place for you right now.”

“And Jane?” she challenged. “Would you have me leave her in the midst of her courtship? She has been separated from Mr. Livesay for months. They were to court openly so she might have a chance to learn more of him.”

His jaw tightened, and for a moment, she thought he might insist, but then he exhaled slowly. “You would deny me the chance to care for you?”

Elizabeth softened, reaching for his hand. “I would never deny you that. But must it be in Derbyshire? Can we not find a compromise?”

It was not their first argument, nor would it be their last, but both had taken to heart the advice given to them before their wedding. Bishop Baines had reminded them in the marriage ceremony to heed Paul’s words in Ephesians: Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner had offered similar counsel, and the Darcys had tried to abide by it.

Thus, as the night wore on and neither would yield entirely, a solution was reached in

the early hours of the morning. Darcy had heard from Mr. Phillips recently, who told him that Netherfield Park was newly available for lease, and so they would divide their time that spring between Hertfordshire and London.

Elizabeth remained unconvinced that the air in Meryton was any fresher than in town, but she could not deny that she enjoyed the frequent opportunity to escape the bustling city—and the satisfaction of knowing she had, in part, won the argument .

Bennet Alasdair Darcy was born at Pemberley in the autumn, following the longstanding tradition of the Darcy family in naming their heirs after his mother's family name. Bishop Baines turned down the Darcys' request that he serve as the boy's godfather, claiming he was too old for the honour, but still often sent gifts for the child and visited the family at Darcy House and Pemberley as often as he could, acting like a substitute grandfather in place of George Darcy.

At the celebration of the child's christening, which Bishop Baines attended, Elizabeth asked him why he had come to Kent that Easter.

"I cannot state exactly what it was, my dear Mrs. Darcy," the bishop had replied after a moment of reflection. "Something told me that I was needed. Being a member of the clergy for so long, I am quite used to these sorts of leadings, and since it was not far, made the arrangement to travel directly to Hunsford. It had already been mentioned to me that the new rector there, your cousin, needed some—direction, shall we say? It was a simple enough matter, and I am glad I visited."

"We were grateful as well," Elizabeth replied. "I was holding onto my resentment tightly, and while I cannot speak for my husband, I feel almost certain his pride would have caused him to muddle it, leading to months or years of unhappiness for us both. I know now that he is perfectly suited to me, although I did not realise it at the time."

Bishop Baines laughed at this. When Darcy made their way to the pair, he enquired

about what made the elder man laugh, and the conversation was repeated in part.

“Yes,” Darcy replied, wrapping an arm around his wife, “we are very grateful. I was far too worried about material objections and had forgotten much of my father’s teachings. Elizabeth has quite the temper and had I said to her what I had been thinking when I arrived in Kent, she would have rightfully been angry with me. I think you helped us avoid many harsh words between us.”

Elizabeth smiled up at her husband, a smile that showed everyone who saw it how much she loved him now. Observing this, the bishop smiled, glad that he had been the tool to bring his godson happiness.

After Bennet came Anne Elizabeth, Richard Thomas, William Alexander, and finally, Beatrice Margaret. The couple had debated at length over Beatrice’s name, but when Darcy recalled the moment of his proposal, and how frequently he used Benedick’s words in their marriage, he found it perfectly fitting. Their youngest daughter not only took after her mother but also lived up to her namesake, leading all the men in her life on a merry dance.

In the many years of their marriage, they did occasionally return to their secret garden at Rosings though they never learned the story of how it came to be. There was a vague rumour that it had been built by some far-flung relative of Sir Lewis to commemorate a lost love, but that did not explain why it was so carefully tended. That mystery remained, but some suspected that Sir Lewis had paid a tenant a substantial honorarium to ensure it’s upkeep.

However, in honour of its place in the courtship of Elizabeth and Darcy, not long after their wedding, Darcy had one built at Pemberley. It was at some distance from the manor itself, for it was intended as a private spot for the couple to get away from their responsibility and remember what drew them to each other. Not long after their return to Pemberley after Jane’s wedding, Darcy took Elizabeth in a ride in a cart, for he had become increasingly protective of her the closer she came to her confinement,

and brought her to the spot where the garden had been built.

“It is perfect, Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth said when he showed it to her. “So like the one at Rosings but entirely our own. I will enjoy spending time here with you often.”

“It is for us alone, and for the guests that we invite here,” he whispered, his breath fanning her ear causing her to shiver slightly in response. “Once this little one is born,” he began, bringing his hand around her to lay protectively on her abdomen, which seemed to be growing each day, “we will bring him or her from time to time, but I intended this for us, my love. There is a key for the door. You and I will each have one, as will the head gardener, since it will be his responsibility to care for what is within. But no others will be permitted here without invitation.”

“Oh, really?” she asked, turning in his arms and arching her brow in the way that he loved. “So we will not be interrupted here at all?”

When he shook his head, she rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him, sliding her hands around the back of his head to draw him closer. Many hours passed before they returned to the manor house, and after that day, whenever they visited their little garden, they always brought a blanket and a picnic lunch. When the weather was warm enough—and occasionally when it was not—they frequently lost themselves in the privacy of their secluded retreat. Darcy remained ever grateful for the garden at Rosings that had brought them together and for the chance he had been given that Easter to earn redemption.