







# Look on the Heart (Darcy and Elizabeth Variations #10)

**Author:** MJ Stratton

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Elizabeth Bennets father has raised her to value a persons character more than their appearance.

He learned the hard way that physical beauty can conceal poor behavior—an error he made in marrying his wife.

Determined not to repeat Mr. Bennets mistake, Elizabeth resolves to judge people by more than outward appearances.

When Mr. Darcy, a guest of the new resident of Netherfield Park, attends the local assembly, she is intrigued.

Mr. Darcys face has been the subject of gossip and ridicule all his life.

A port-wine birth mark covers a considerable portion of his face and invites suspicion and cruelty from those around him.

A broken nose and scar only worsen his appearance.

When his friend Bingley insists that they attend an assembly the night of his arrival, Darcy is reluctant.

What lady would not find it a punishment to stand up with him? When he meets Elizabeth Bennet, he is captivated at once.

She sees him.

As their acquaintance deepens, Mr. Darcy finds himself in love with the country miss.

But one misunderstanding threatens everything.

Letting the past dictate his actions, he breaks Elizabeth's heart.

Understanding comes, and he must now seek forgiveness from the only lady who has ever loved him.

This Darcy and Elizabeth Pride and Prejudice variation is a sweet, low-angst story where beauty is more than skin deep, and a happily

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

## Chapter One

Twelve-year-old Darcy trudged up the stairs, shoulders stooped, and brow furrowed in displeasure and frustration.

Once again, George Wickham triumphed. Their scuffle had ended when he pushed the young heir into the pond and drenched him from head to foot.

As he spluttered and splashed, George stood on the bank laughing.

“The water goes a long way in improving your appearance!” he jeered. “Perhaps you ought to remain there!” Cackling, Wickham had scampered off, leaving Darcy to struggle to the bank and return to the house.

Once safely in his chambers, Darcy yanked on his coat, attempting to remove it.

The wet fabric was not easily overcome, and he huffed in exasperation.

With one final tug, the coat came off, and he tossed it on a hard wooden chair in disgust. Another set of clothing ruined, he thought dismally.

Papa will not be happy. His father never believed Darcy when he tried to explain how certain...

incidences occurred. Instead, the older man accused his son of clumsiness and then hired a fencing instructor to ensure improvement.

“Fitzwilliam?” Lady Anne Darcy appeared in the doorway.

She noted his appearance and sighed. Closing the door behind her, she came forward and brushed the damp hair out of her son’s eyes, her fingers lingering on the large red, wine-colored mark that covered his eye and cheek.

The mark crept up into his forehead but was hidden by his brown locks.

“Young Mr. Wickham again?” she asked sympathetically.

Darcy nodded. “I promise, it was not clumsiness this time. We were tussling, and he shoved me—”

“I know, my dear. That boy is bad through and through. I wish your father could see it.” Lady Anne sighed and moved to sit on a nearby chair. Her hands came to rest on her rounded stomach. Darcy’s brother or sister would be born before winter.

“What was it about this time?”

He looked away. “It was nothing,” he muttered.

“Do not lie to me.” Lady Anne frowned. “Disguise of every sort ought to be avoided at all costs. Come now, what did he say?”

Darcy swallowed the tears that threatened. He was the Darcy heir—he would not cry. “He said my face would send ladies screaming someday. When I punched him, he blocked and pushed me into the pond. He laughed from the bank and said... He said I looked better wet.”

Lady Anne’s expression grew foreboding. “What nonsense,” she huffed.

“Mama, we both know that your beauty and Papa’s handsomeness passed me over completely.

” Darcy grabbed a cloth and began to scrub at his damp hair.

It was, in his opinion, his best feature.

The soft brown curls hung in an attractive way.

The color reminded him of chocolate. Unfortunately, such often went unrecognized due to the unfortunate nature of his other features.

Darcy was not ugly—he knew that. He did not have a hunched back or a hooked nose.

His eyes did not turn in different directions.

Instead, his features, which were very much like his father’s, were marred by a large red congenital mark.

It was not only on his face. The ‘wine stain,’ as the servants called it, covered his neck, too, but his clothing hid it most of the time.

Certainly, his ears were large for his head, a fact which George pointed out often, and he had a prominent cleft chin.

With thin lips and a long, straight nose, he looked rather stately at times, particularly when he was upset.

His teeth were tolerable and had come in straight, though he feared Wickham would knock one out someday.

In short, at only twelve years of age, it was clear that the heir to Pemberley would be rendered nothing remarkable to look at, owing to his wine mark.

George's other words returned to his thoughts.

"'Tis a good thing you have a fortune," his once-friend scowled. "Otherwise, you would have no chance of finding a bride!"

Darcy was too young to consider such things, of course, but the words had cut him deeply and he wondered if there was any truth to the taunt.

His mother sighed deeply. "You favor my brother," she said crisply. "The earl is a good man. His countess loves him deeply, despite his birth mark."

That was a kind way to refer to a blemish. Darcy hated it.

The Countess of Matlock was a rare beauty.

Darcy had heard often enough of the ton's shock when she had married Lord Matlock.

They had all assumed she had done it to secure a title and fortune, but that was balderdash.

Anyone with eyes and a bit of sense could see it was a love match.

It gave Darcy hope that someone would look past his unremarkable outward appearance someday.

While Lady Anne had always been supportive and protective of her only child, his father had grown more distant with each passing year.

The current master of Pemberley was a strikingly handsome man, with cool blue eyes and dark, wavy hair.

He was six feet tall, with an aristocratic brow and Grecian profile.

His wife, likewise, had been the season's Incomparable when she came out.

Their match had been founded on mutual affection, but Darcy knew he had driven a wedge between his parents.

"Son." Lady Anne's quiet words drew Darcy's attention back to her.

"I need you to remember something. The true worth of a person is who they are on the inside—not what they look like on the outside. Someone's character will tell you more about them than happy manners or a handsome appearance.

When you take the measure of another, be sure to look on the heart.

"She came to her feet and walked towards her son.

Lady Anne placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"You, Fitzwilliam Darcy, have a good heart and a noble character. You behave with honor, even when you are treated shabbily by those you should be able to trust. I am sorry to say that the world, as a whole, places more value on beauty and poise than they ought. Looks fade, and eventually—if we live long enough—we all lose our poise and become stooped with age. In the end, a person's true worth is what goes unseen—it is what lies within.

"She placed a hand on his chest. "Promise me you will never forget this. Promise me you will be a man untouched by pride and unruffled by those who would judge you



by your appearance.”

Darcy choked on a sob and nestled into his mother’s chest as her arms came around him. “I will get you wet,” he said, his words muffled.

“That is no matter.” She stroked his hair again and kissed the top of his head. “Someone will see your heart one day. You will give it to her, and she will treasure the gift. Do not settle for anyone less worthy than a woman who will love you forever.”

“I shall try my best, Mama,” he promised. He pulled away and took the handkerchief she offered. “Do not tell Father,” he begged as she turned to the door.

“I make no such promises,” his mother replied firmly.

“The abuse George Wickham is leveling at you must end. You are a hundred times the person he is, and I will not tolerate his behavior any longer.” Her hand came to rest on her stomach in a protective gesture.

“If he treats you so dreadfully, how will he treat your younger brother or sister?”

Darcy did not reply. He waited for his mother to leave and then stripped off the rest of his sodden clothes.

Father would call him weak and then assign more lessons to “make his son and heir stronger.” Perhaps I am weak , he thought.

Perhaps I shall never amount to anything. Mayhap Father will disinherit me.

He shook his head at the absurdity. No, if there was one thing Mr. George Darcy of Pemberley held sacred, it was the importance of preserving and passing down the

estate to his own blood.

As much as George Wickham tried to claim the place of the spare , he was nothing more than the son of a steward.

George Darcy's legacy would remain with his eldest child.

Later, as Darcy returned to his bedchamber, he heard raised voices coming from his parents' sitting room. He crept to the door, moving as quietly as he could. It was partially open, and he leaned in to hear what they were saying.

"You coddle the boy too much, Anne!" Mr. Darcy said firmly. "He does not need sympathy; he needs a sound lashing and a lesson in defending himself."

"Both of which have already been provided by you," Mama protested. "He is twelve years old and will go to school next year! Fitzwilliam has been looking forward to being away from that boy. You wait—our son will flourish among his equals."

His father did not answer immediately. At last, he spoke. "I mean to send George with our son," he said quietly. "'Tis the least I can do to thank his father—"

"His father is already compensated! You pay him far more than other stewards earn. What is this debt you claim to owe him? Why do you favor another child over your own son?" Mother's voice rose with each question.

Darcy feared for her equanimity. He could picture her shaking with rage, her eyes brilliant as she confronted her husband with righteous anger.

"Wickham saved my life!" Father shouted. "Ten years ago. There was the flood that spring—do not you recall? I stepped onto the bridge, and then of a sudden there was nothing under my feet. He had a rope on his saddle and threw it to me. I would be

dead, Anne.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Darcy's mother sighed. "And so, you feel you must go above and beyond to satisfy the debt. Pray, is your honor more important than your son?" Her tone was low and unyielding.

"Young George's attacks grow more pronounced.

Fitzwilliam no longer confides in you because you do nothing.

Will he die because you believe your honor demands it?

And what of this child? We have hoped and prayed for another for so long...

Can you not see what the boy is doing? He acts as though he is a second son—and you treat him as such.

Would you make him your heir if our children died? "

Mr. Darcy scoffed. "That is ridiculous. I treat him—"

"You treat him no differently from our son—the heir to Pemberley!" Anne snapped. "Tis clear you will not see reason. I shall have to ensure my son is safe in my own way."

"Anne," Mr. Darcy said tenderly. "You will come through the birth safely. There is no need to fear." Unspoken was the master of Pemberley's true fear—Fitzwilliam had overheard it. He feared the child would bear the same unfortunate mark upon his or her face as their elder brother.

“You do not know that. The sense of foreboding has only grown. I shall act in any manner I can to ensure my son is protected should I not survive. To begin with, I wish to propose a compromise: send young Wickham to Harrow. Fitzwilliam can join his cousins at Eton.”

Darcy thought it a wonderful notion—and a sound strategy. He hoped his father would agree.

Mr. Darcy sighed. “Very well. I believe that is a suitable compromise.”

“I want the papers drawn up and everything finalized before my lying-in,” Lady Anne warned. “Should the worst happen, I shall consider this part of my final requests. Know this, husband—I shall haunt you if you go against my wishes!” She was being playful now, yet still serious.

Darcy backed away from the door slowly before turning and hurrying to his bedchamber.

The conversation both worried and elated him.

Perhaps he would be away from Wickham at last. I shall be able to breathe, he told himself.

He would go to Eton in January; it was not so far off.

And Mama would have the baby before then, too.

Yes, the future looked brighter already.

Darcy sat in the parlor as his father paced the floor. Mama had been in her chambers for three days and the master of Pemberley looked frantic with worry. Each time a

maid brought word, there was nothing new to report.

“She will be well,” Mr. Darcy murmured to no one in particular as he stoked the fire. “She and the child will be well.” He resumed his pacing. Turning to his son, he said, “You ought to go to bed. ’Tis late.”

Darcy shook his head. “I would prefer to wait with you, sir.” It was the honorable thing to do.

“As you like.” His father continued to wear a path in the rug, hands clasped behind his back and brow furrowed in concentration. From time to time, a maid came to refresh the teapot, though she need not have bothered—it went untouched.

At last, near midnight, word came. “You have a bonny daughter, sir,” the midwife said, holding out the precious bundle. George Darcy took the babe carefully, his face awash with relief and joy. He sighed heavily, his finger tracing the baby’s cheek. “Perfect,” he murmured.

An icy knife struck Darcy’s heart, but he said nothing.

“Little Georgiana,” his father murmured. “You are as beautiful as your mother.” Turning to the midwife, his smile faltered. “What is it?” he asked brusquely.

“Your wife is sleeping, sir,” she replied solemnly, “though I do not know if she will survive the rest of the night. Best say your goodbyes.”

George Darcy gasped. “No!” he cried. “There must be something you can do!” He bolted from the room, the precious baby still clutched to his chest.

Darcy’s heart sank. She knew, he thought, recalling all the little things his mother had done for him the last few months. Still in shock, he hurried from the room and

upstairs to find her.

Pushing the door open slowly, he saw his father seated in a chair beside the bed. Georgiana lay in his lap. Mother's eyes were open. Darcy entered the room and came to his dear mama's side.

"Fitzwilliam," she said hoarsely. "My dear boy. Remember all I have taught you—character and goodness of heart above all."

"I will, Mama," he replied, struggling to suppress his emotions.

"Take care of your sister," she instructed. "Tell her about me and make sure she grows into a worthy woman. Teach her everything I have taught you."

"I promise." He fell silent as his mother turned to his father.

"George," she murmured, "remember your promise."

Mr. Darcy nodded, reaching out to take his wife's hand. "I shall do it all," he vowed, raising it to his lips and kissing it tenderly.

Mrs. Darcy's eyelids fluttered closed. The little family sat in silence as her breaths grew shallower and shallower, until they stopped completely.

George Darcy let out a gasp of anguish and began to weep in earnest. Frozen in disbelief, Darcy did not know what to do.

Suddenly, his sister was in his arms, and his father had collapsed beside the bed, his face buried in the coverlet as he clutched his wife's hand.

She looks as though she is sleeping, Darcy observed. Beautiful as ever, Lady Anne

Darcy looked angelic against the white pillows. Her golden hair was plaited and lay across her shoulder. One hand rested on her stomach; the other lay in her husband's grasp.

George Darcy was never the same after his wife died.

He kept his promises, though, and Darcy went to Eton without Wickham.

The two youths drifted apart. The former became the gentleman his mother had hoped for, and he grew to understand that true worth and beauty came from within.

His unfortunate, blemished appearance meant he went largely unnoticed by his peers.

There were other, more desirable targets for their cruelty—at least, that was what he told himself.

In truth, he suspected his cousins had warned the others against teasing and mockery.

He became close to his cousin, Richard Fitzwilliam, the second son of the earl of Matlock.

Richard had plain, unremarkable features, unmarred by the so-called 'mother's mark.' Unlike Darcy, however, his gregarious personality made up for the lack.

Darcy, on the other hand, remained a solemn, stoic sort of person. After Eton, Darcy went on to Oxford.

Wickham went to Harrow and then to Cambridge.

Darcy hardly saw his former friend—and current enemy—except during the summer months.



Though Wickham came to Pemberley for meals, Darcy rarely encountered the miscreant.

His time was better spent learning all he could from his father.

Still, tales of Wickham's misdeeds reached him, and though Darcy heard them all, there was nothing he could do—so long as his father remained content to clean up his protégé's messes.

They were both still in school when word came that Mr. Darcy had died.

Suddenly, the unsightly Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was master of a large estate.

With all the responsibilities came an unexpected turn of events—Darcy found himself the object of much speculation.

Ladies began to show interest where once there had been none.

Ever mindful of his mother's warnings, Darcy retreated to Pemberley to mourn and to consider how he might move forward.

At least I have no need to deal with Wickham any longer, he thought one afternoon.

The man had accepted three thousand pounds in exchange for the living Mr. Darcy had intended for his godson.

With four thousand pounds, he ought to be able to make something of himself.

Though Darcy doubted Wickham's intentions, the man's affairs were no longer his concern—not now that he was master of Pemberley.

Georgiana's guardianship was shared between Darcy and his cousin, Richard. The little girl missed her father fiercely, but in consequence, she grew close to her brother. Darcy vowed to do everything he could for his sister, and in doing so, fulfill his promise to his mother.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Chapter Two

Darcy tugged at his waistcoat as he looked at his reflection in the mirror.

Trust Bingley to attend an assembly the evening I arrive, he thought in amusement.

His friend was ever fond of society. Darcy, on the other hand, did not enjoy socializing.

He was the male equivalent of an overlooked lady—those who approached typically wanted something.

Funds for investing, dance partners for their sisters, and even hopes of brokering a marriage between him and some female relation.

No one outside his family, save for Bingley, wanted Darcy simply for his company.

He had agreed to attend the assembly with his friend and host somewhat grudgingly.

Sighing, Darcy reached up and traced the long, thin scar that ran from his temple to his chin.

Richard had suggested growing a beard to conceal it, but he had declined.

'Tis not as if it does any harm to my appearance, he thought again, running his finger along the raised red line.

As usual, this is as good as it will ever get.

With that, he picked up his gloves and left the room.

Mr. Charles Bingley, Darcy's friend of three years, waited in the parlor.

The gregarious young man greeted him by handing Darcy a glass of port.

Bingley was tall and lanky, with red hair and a ready smile.

His blue eyes twinkled with good humor. "I am tremendously excited about this evening," he said, downing his own glass of port.

"I have met several agreeable gentlemen and hope to meet more of my neighbors tonight."

"You always love to make new acquaintances," Darcy said neutrally. An assembly was not his idea of an enjoyable evening. It was always the same. Ladies would give him a cursory glance before turning away, only to feign interest when word of his fortune spread.

"Come now, Darcy! Your expression appears as though you are bound for the gallows! Is the prospect of an evening of dancing so terrible?" Bingley laughed and refilled his glass.

"You will certainly not want for partners." Darcy drank his own glass before placing it on the tray. "Ladies prefer an amiable, handsome dance partner. They will not look twice at me—you know this."

"So the ladies of the ton are superficial and shallow. That does not mean every female you meet is of their ilk! We are in the country. People here are naturally friendlier

and more welcoming. Why, even that scar on your cheek will not deter them. How did you get it, anyway?"

Darcy grimaced. Memories of Ramsgate and George Wickham filled his thoughts. He looked down as he attempted to school his features. "It was an accident," he said indifferently. "My cousin claims it makes me look roguish."

Bingley laughed, and Darcy joined in half-heartedly.

In truth, Wickham had struck Darcy when he interrupted the man's attempt to elope with Miss Georgiana Darcy.

Furious at being thwarted, Wickham had attacked his former friend before fleeing the house.

His ring had left a long gash on Darcy's face and broken his nose.

The latter had healed well, though a bump now marked the bridge.

The gash had required stitches. It had become inflamed, and though long and thin, it remained raised and red.

Wickham's parting shot, before he fled, had been that a scar might improve Darcy's appearance enough to make a woman want him.

In vain, he had hunted for the blackguard, determined to see him transported or thrown into debtor's prison. Darcy held enough of Wickham's markers to ensure it, but his old enemy had eluded capture. Even Richard's military contacts had been unable to trace him.

"Where are they?" Bingley groused, calling Darcy's attention back to the present.

“We will be late!”

“Do not fret, Charles.” Miss Caroline Bingley glided in, nose in the air, and overdressed for a country assembly.

Her sister and brother-in-law, Louisa and Reginald Hurst, followed.

“The carriage is ready, and we may depart. Dear Mr. Darcy, I am dreadfully sorry you have been coerced into attending this insignificant country event—and so soon after your arrival!”

Miss Bingley’s simpering was nothing new.

She, like so many others, had discounted him until she learned of his fortune.

After that, she had used his friendship with her brother to attempt an intimacy that did not exist. Now she came to his side and slid her arm through his.

Her dark curls were expertly styled; ringlets kissed her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with avarice as she looked up at him.

Miss Bingley batted her lashes in what she likely thought was a coquettish manner.

“I shall save a set for you if you like, sir,” she murmured. Her inflection, warm with false affection, made his skin crawl.

“I will be certain to dance with you and Mrs. Hurst. As my host’s sisters, ’tis expected.

” He maintained an even tone, struggling to keep the derision he longed to express in check.

Kind and honorable, he reminded himself.

A gentleman does not speak meanly of or to others.

He had repeated his mother's final lessons in his mind so often that they were permanently inscribed there.

“There is no need to be shy, sir.” She leaned closer. “I shall look forward to our set.” Miss Bingley did not release his arm, and so he escorted her to the carriage and handed her inside. The Hursts followed, and before he and Bingley boarded, his friend caught his arm.

“Darcy, if my sister is a bother, I shall speak to her,” Bingley murmured. “I know she expects—”

“It is of no concern, Bingley,” Darcy assured him. “As long as you understand I will not offer for her, even if she attempts to claim compromise, then I shall continue to behave as I always have.”

“Very good. Yes, Caroline is quite fixed on being the next mistress of Pemberley. I fear she will become unbearable.” Bingley shrugged apologetically. “If you wish to hie it to London, I will not stop you.”

Darcy chuckled. “No, I prefer the country. Besides, Georgiana is enjoying her time with my aunt and uncle. I would not wish to spoil her fun.”

In truth, Georgiana had begged to go to the earl and countess. The scar on Darcy's face was a constant reminder of her near-ruinous mistake. She could scarcely look at him without bursting into tears.

They climbed aboard the carriage. The gentlemen sat on one side, which made for a

slightly cramped ride, but Darcy did not complain.

Meryton was not far from Netherfield Park, and so the discomfort would be of short duration.

Instead, he listened as the ladies chattered on, speaking meanly of people they had not yet met, speculating about their circumstances and supposed lack of refinement.

It was a pity they were not as open to new acquaintances as their brother.

By ascribing the worst to those they never met, they prevented new friendships from even beginning.

The Meryton Assembly Hall was lit outside with lanterns.

There were no other carriages waiting, which told Darcy they were later than he thought.

Being fashionably late was Miss Bingley's attempt at showing the country bumpkins how refined she and her family were.

Unfortunately, it also meant the dancing had already begun—and he noted the lady's displeasure.

I wonder if she thought I would ask her for the first, he mused.

"Mr. Bingley! 'Tis a pleasure to see you!" A portly gentleman with graying hair approached and bowed.

"Sir William! Good evening. May I present my guests?" Bingley quickly introduced his family and Darcy. Sir William's gaze slid over Darcy as though he were invisible.



His daughter appeared at his side, and he promptly introduced Miss Charlotte Lucas.

Darcy felt an immediate affinity with the lady.

She had dark hair and dark eyes, and, like Darcy, an appearance criticized by society.

In short, she was very plain. Yet, there was an air of intelligence about her as she greeted the others.

Unlike her father, she saw Darcy and offered him a kind smile.

She appeared to be about seven-and-twenty, and Darcy wondered how many times her heart had been broken.

At least she has no blemish to mar her features.

Bingley immediately asked the lady to dance and escorted her away. The second set was forming, and Darcy turned to Mrs. Hurst.

“Would you care to dance?”

Mrs. Hurst agreed at once. Her younger sister frowned disapprovingly and folded her arms petulantly as he led the elder to the floor.

They danced in silence. Mrs. Hurst did not appear inclined to converse, and so Darcy made no effort.

Instead, he looked around the room at the other attendees, wondering who they were and regretting that he had not asked Sir William for more introductions before inviting Mrs. Hurst. I shall remedy that immediately upon the conclusion of this set, he decided.

Bingley would likely wish it as well, and so Darcy would accompany his friend.

Mrs. Hurst scuttled off as soon as the set concluded, heading straight for her sister. Bingley came to his side, still escorting Miss Lucas.

“My lovely companion has offered to make more introductions,” he said cheerfully. “Miss Lucas, shall we?”

Darcy trailed after them. Every few feet, they were stopped and introduced to several amiable young ladies, all of whom spoke exclusively to Bingley after casting Darcy only a fleeting glance. It was as if he were invisible.

While Bingley spoke with Miss Long, Miss Lucas turned to Darcy.

“Are you enjoying your time in Meryton, sir?” she asked.

Startled at being addressed, he floundered for a moment before answering.

“I only arrived this afternoon,” he confessed.

“Though I am looking forward to seeing more of the area. It has been many years since I did more than pass through Hertfordshire on my way north or south. Tell me, are there any interesting prospects nearby? Ruins, perhaps?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, there are several. Mindsen Chapel is located near Preston—it dates back to the fourteenth century. There is also St. Etheldreda’s Church near Graveley.

And if you wish to venture further afield, Theobalds Palace lies in nearby Cheshunt.

It was once owned by King James the First.”

“You are very well informed, Miss Lucas,” Darcy said appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“Oh! Here are the Bennets. It seems Mrs. Bennet grew tired of waiting for us to come to her.” Miss Lucas sounded amused as a matron with five ladies trailing her approached.

Darcy had never seen such beauty in one family.

His mouth fell open slightly as he beheld them, and he almost missed the introductions.

The matron was introduced as Mrs. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn.

Her daughters were Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary, Miss Catherine, and Miss Lydia.

Each curtsied in turn, and Darcy smiled at Bingley’s predictable reaction.

The eldest daughter was a rare beauty, and his friend looked utterly entranced.

It was the second lady who drew Darcy’s eye, however.

Unlike the other ladies, her gaze had not slid past him as though he were invisible.

Instead, it lingered on his face, her expression interested and intrigued.

Darcy felt flustered and was certain his attempted smile had looked more like a grimace.

Bingley quickly asked Miss Bennet for a set and led her away.

Mrs. Bennet watched, her pleasure clear before instructing her other daughters to secure a dance partner.

“I believe I shall sit out this set, Mama,” Miss Elizabeth replied. “There are so few gentlemen, you know.”

“Have it your way,” Mrs. Bennet said dismissively.

Elizabeth’s attention turned to Miss Lucas, and the two began conversing.

Evidently forgotten, Darcy backed away until he could lean against the wall.

From there, he truly looked at Miss Elizabeth.

She was petite, a head shorter than her friend.

Her deep brown hair was fashionably styled, with curls touching her cheeks and kissing her neck.

Her dark eyes sparkled with good humor, so very unlike Miss Bingley, whose eyes glistened with avarice.

Miss Elizabeth’s figure was light and pleasing, hinting at an active nature.

She wore a champagne-colored gown embroidered with thread that glistened in the candlelight.

Darcy’s throat felt tight. Never had a lady’s presence—or appearance—struck him with such force.

Ladies had attracted him in the past, to be sure, but this...

this felt very different. Almost immediately upon acknowledging his attraction, he shrank inwardly.

No ladies wanted him—not for himself. Cursing silently, he leaned his head back against the wall and sighed.

He ought to dance with Miss Bingley and thus fulfill his duty to Bingley.

Then he could retreat to a corner and remain undisturbed.

The next set was forming, so he sought out the lady. She looked entirely too pleased and accepted immediately. 'Tis only one set, he told himself. I can manage.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Chapter Three

“What think you of the new neighbors, Eliza?” asked Charlotte.

“’Tis hard to form an opinion after such a short meeting,” Elizabeth chided. “First impressions are rarely correct.”

“Yours are,” Charlotte disagreed. “Come now, I wish to know.” Her friend took Elizabeth’s hand pleadingly.

Elizabeth laughed. “Very well. I shall do my best. Let us begin with the Hursts. Your father introduced him and Miss Bingley to us while you were dancing with Mr. Bingley. Mrs. Hurst’s introduction came after the set.

The gentleman seems a man of fashion. I believe he was already in his cups when he arrived.

Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst give every appearance of high-born, fashionable ladies, despite it being known that their fortune came from trade.

Both seem to place themselves above others, which does not bode well for their future in Meryton. ”

Elizabeth paused for breath, her gaze going to Mr. Bingley and Jane, who were now dancing.

“Mr. Bingley seems eager to please and be pleased. His attraction to Jane is hardly

surprising. I would have doubted his sanity if he had not liked her at once. As for Mr. Darcy..." She trailed off.

The man had barely said two words. He was nowhere near as attractive as his friend.

Mr. Darcy had a wine stain birth mark covering most of one side of his face.

It was dark red—one could hardly miss it.

A long scar ran down one side of his plain, unremarkable face.

It looked recent, for it was still red and raised.

His nose, likewise, appeared to have been broken at some point.

Lydia would call the gentleman 'ugly,' but Elizabeth did not think his appearance warranted such a harsh description.

Beneath the birth mark and scar, she could tell he was a handsome man.

"What of him?" Charlotte sounded very eager.

Elizabeth understood her friend's excitement.

As a lady with little physical beauty, she thought her best chance of marrying at all was to find someone equally ill-favored.

Elizabeth thought her friend did herself a disservice.

Charlotte would find someone who looked beyond her appearance and saw the good that lay within.

“He is exceptional,” she finally replied. “I detect deep, hidden pain. Did you see how my mama overlooked him? It was as though he were not there.”

“’Tis very surprising,” Charlotte agreed. “He is from the North and has a fortune of ten thousand a year. Can you believe it?”

“Yes, Mama ought to have been falling all over herself.” Elizabeth laughed. “I think I should like to know him better.”

Charlotte’s face fell.

“Oh.” She sounded so dejected. “He will not look at me if you show him interest.”

“I have not staked a claim in his heart, Charlotte. I merely wish to know him better so I might understand his character. If you wish to befriend him with hope of marriage, I shall not stand in your way.”

Her friend’s expression brightened, and with a nod, Charlotte departed. Lady Lucas waved from across the room, and she hastened to see what her mother needed.

The set ended, and Elizabeth moved to a chair to watch the next one. She did not usually sit out two in a row, but she wished to observe for a time. Lydia and Kitty were speaking animatedly with the Goulding brothers, and Mary conversed with Mrs. Long in the corner.

Voices behind her drew her attention, and Elizabeth turned slightly to see Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy speaking.

“Come, Darcy, you must cease standing about in this stupid manner. I must have you dance. There are many lovely, agreeable ladies here! Surely, someone—”



“There is not a lady here who would not find it a punishment to stand up with me,” came the curt reply.

Elizabeth’s heart seized. Surely, he did not feel that way about himself!

“That is ridiculous. Any lady you asked would accept—”

“Yes, they would,” Mr. Darcy interrupted. “It does not follow that they would not find it a punishment to do so. Bingley, I have been through this with you many times.”

“You have, and I maintain you cannot predict every lady’s motives. Not every woman is mercenary, and not every woman looks only to find fault. Miss Bennet, for example, is an angel! Never have I met a kinder, softer-spoken lady. I am certain she would not object to dancing with you.”

Mr. Darcy sighed deeply. “I shall find a partner if it pleases you, my friend. Forgive my dismal mood.”

Elizabeth turned to see Mr. Darcy push away from the wall. Mr. Bingley pointed directly at her, then folded his arms and raised an eyebrow. Nodding once, Mr. Darcy came towards her.

“Miss Elizabeth, I believe,” he said kindly. “Would you do me the great honor of dancing the next set...with me?” He trailed off awkwardly and looked away.

He is nervous, Elizabeth thought. Smiling kindly, she nodded her acceptance. “Would you care to join me as we wait? The musicians are taking a respite.”

He looked relieved and nodded, taking a seat beside her.

“Forgive me for prying, but I perceive that dancing is not your favorite activity,” she said gently when he did not speak.

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat. “You are correct. I find it difficult to converse with people I do not know well. Light topics do not appeal to me.”

“I, too, prefer substance in discourse,” Elizabeth replied. “Tell me, sir, what think you of books?”

He looked surprised but smiled. The action made his eyes twinkle, and she felt a little jolt in her middle.

“I cannot speak of books in a ballroom,” he said, winking. “Your friend, Miss Lucas, told me something of the ruins found nearby. Are there any other prospects you would recommend? I ride out regularly and wish to take in the sights.”

Thoroughly intrigued, Elizabeth told him about her favorite places, ending with Oakham Mount.

“I walk there each day the weather permits,” she told him enthusiastically.

“I dread the coming winter, for I shall be kept indoors more often than I like. Mama quite despairs of me—I am forever coming in with spoiled petticoats.”

The musicians struck a chord, and Mr. Darcy stood. “I believe this is our set,” he said amiably. “Miss Elizabeth, shall we?”

“With pleasure, sir. There is nothing I enjoy more than dancing.”

“That is hardly singular for someone of your sex,” he replied, his tone still teasing.

Mr. Darcy offered his arm, and she took it.

It felt solid beneath hers. So, not a soft gentleman, she thought.

They took their places, and she regarded him speculatively.

His coat was well cut and fitted him perfectly.

He wore not a bit of color, save for his cravat pin, which was made of some sort of red stone—a ruby, perhaps, or maybe spinel.

They began to dance. The song was slow, which allowed them to continue their conversation. Mr. Darcy spoke of his favorite pastimes, which included pugilism, fencing, and riding.

“Do you shoot?” Elizabeth asked. “Longbourn has a plethora of birds, though I believe Netherfield’s own population has gone unchecked for many years. My father and the other gentlemen in the area enjoy the sport.”

“’Tis not a favorite activity, but I do enjoy the occasional excursion,” Mr. Darcy replied. “I prefer fishing. It is quiet and allows one to enjoy plenty of introspection.”

“You would be a favorite of my uncle, then,” Elizabeth said. “He lives in town and cannot partake of the activity as often as he likes, however. There is a large pond north of Netherfield Park where you might enjoy some angling.”

The dance steps took her away from him for a time, and she watched carefully as he performed the movements with precision. For a gentleman who does not enjoy dancing, he is very proficient, she mused.

“Sir William has invited the gentlemen to a shooting party next week,” Mr. Darcy

said when they reunited.

“He loves company,” Elizabeth replied. “Sir William was knighted some twelve years ago. Formerly, he was a shopkeeper. I believe a very eloquent speech given to our king secured him the honor. If you ask him, he would be pleased to tell you all about it.” She smiled mischievously and winked, causing him to chuckle quietly.

The sound washed over her, sending a thrill from head to toe.

“Miss Lucas seems a lovely lady,” he continued. “Are you close friends with her?”

His interest in Charlotte made Elizabeth’s heart simultaneously seize and leap for joy.

Charlotte, she knew, wished to engage Mr. Darcy’s affections.

But what if I wish the same? she thought.

I could never wound Charlotte in such a way!

Unsure what to do, Elizabeth determined to see how matters unfolded before giving them further thought.

I have only just met the gentleman, after all, and the burden of courtship is not on the lady.

When their dance ended, Elizabeth was disappointed. She thanked Mr. Darcy warmly before he departed then wandered about the room until she came to her mother’s side. Mrs. Bennet was speaking with Mrs. Goulding in a voice that carried farther than Elizabeth liked.

“Who is that strange gentleman who danced with you, Lizzy?” her mother asked. “I

do not recall being introduced to him, though he came with the Netherfield Party.”

“His name is Mr. Darcy, Mama,” she replied. “He is, from what I understand, Mr. Bingley’s particular friend and will stay with them for some time.”

“Probably a poor, hangers-on sort,” Mrs. Bennet snorted. “Why, look at him! Charlotte Lucas has a prettier countenance!”

“Mama, that is unkind,” Elizabeth chastised. “You have not even made his acquaintance!”

“Trust you to take a fancy to an unattractive, poor prospect, Miss Lizzy,” Mama tut-tutted. “It will not do at all. No, you must let Charlotte Lucas have him. I heard Lady Lucas mention how perfectly suited the gentleman is for her daughter’s temperament.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Elizabeth scoffed. “I will not cast aside a new friendship simply because a man’s features are not what you admire.

” Her papa had warned her often enough about the dangers of a pretty face.

If sense and kindness do not accompany a handsome appearance, then it is worthless, he had told her.

Dear Jane had the best of both—angelic beauty and a personality to match.

Still, her father’s words resounded in her mind.

Mama, she knew, had used her beauty to entice Mr. Bennet into proposing, only for him to discover that she possessed little beauty within.

Mrs. Bennet cared more for her reputation and her daughters’ prospects than for charity or character.

Her mother waved a dismissive hand. “You will go your own way as you always do, child,” she said scornfully. “Do as you will.”

Elizabeth left her to seek other company, finding Jane amidst the crowd. Her elder sister was speaking animatedly with Charlotte, her face alight with happiness.

“Mr. Bingley has asked for another set,” she told Elizabeth, her excitement palpable. “Can you believe it?”

“I could believe nothing less, dear sister. He was smitten from the first moment he beheld your angelic face.” Elizabeth grinned and took Jane’s hand. “Take care not to lose your heart before you know him.”

“A lady’s imagination is very rapid, is it not? Here we are, having just met two amiable gentlemen and already planning our weddings,” Charlotte added.

“Two?” Jane’s brow furrowed. “Mr. Hurst is already attached, Charlotte.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Do not you recall meeting Mr. Darcy, Jane?” He had been standing right in her company. How could her sister have missed the gentleman?

Jane blushed. “I fear I stopped listening after meeting Mr. Bingley,” she murmured, ashamed. “I am sorry, Lizzy.”

Charlotte laughed again. “We can hardly blame you, Jane. ’Tis clear you were both completely absorbed in each other from the moment you met. Take care to secure him as soon as may be. Leave him in no doubt of your feelings.”

“That is very mercenary, Charlotte.” Elizabeth did not approve. “Jane has only just been introduced.”

“Men’s attention can be fleeting,” Charlotte replied sagely. “They are such fragile creatures. If they believe their affections are not returned, they will abandon the chase.

“That contradicts Mama, does it not, Jane?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “What is it she said? We must ‘increase a man’s love by suspense,’ or some such nonsense.”

They laughed merrily, and when Mr. Bingley came to claim Jane’s hand for a second set, Charlotte and Elizabeth exchanged delighted glances.

“I am very happy for her,” Charlotte replied. “I hope I can come to know Mr. Darcy better as well. You are fortunate that he asked you to dance.”

Elizabeth turned to her friend. Charlotte sounded... “Are you jealous?” she asked incredulously. “Charlotte—”

“No, Eliza, do not mind me. Is it foolish of me to hope that a gentleman who is as plain as I will have no qualms about my appearance?” Charlotte’s shoulders drooped.

“’Tis plain to see that he admires you. I could see it when you danced together.

Just promise me, Eliza, that you will not break his heart.

I know your wish to marry for love. Do not give him hope where there is none. ”

“I do not know whether to be affronted or not,” Elizabeth replied testily.

“Do you imagine that I am so shallow as to believe I cannot love a man who is not as well-favored as most? We have only just formed an acquaintance, Charlotte. How can I know anything about my feelings or where they might fall after one dance?” She huffed and folded her arms. Already, her pique cooled.

Charlotte did not mean any harm. She had experienced falling in love more than once only to be passed over for a prettier face.

The men who could not see Miss Lucas’s worth were foolish and blind.

“Forgive me.” Charlotte sounded so dejected. “’Tis not as if there was any hope. Both handsome men and those less favored wish for pretty wives.” Shoulders still drooping, her friend moved away. Elizabeth watched her, concern on her face.



What in the world... Had the arrival of their new neighbors robbed everyone of sense?

Later, the Bennet ladies regaled their father with tales of the evening. Mama crowed over Jane's victory. "Two sets, Mr. Bennet! Can you believe it? He will propose before Christmas—mark my words."

"I have marked them, madam. What of the other new guests? How do they compare?" Papa's sarcasm was lost on his wife, and Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

"The ladies were elegant and refined. Oh, the lace on Miss Bingley's gown—"

"Stop, I beg you! No lace. I am heartily sorry I inquired."

"Did you see the ugly, scarred gentleman?" Lydia burst out. "I cannot recall his name, for I was forced to look away when he was introduced. Ghastly!"

"Mr. Darcy," came Mama's crisp, disapproving voice cutting across her youngest's laments. "Yes, Elizabeth danced with him. Such a disagreeable man—not at all handsome."

Elizabeth frowned. "I found Mr. Darcy's company perfectly acceptable. He is a good conversationalist."

"You are welcome to him," Lydia said, making a face.

"Such an unfortunate appearance would be a trial to look upon every day, though I suppose one could put up with it to be mistress of his estate. Miss Bingley said it was worth ten thousand a year. Can you imagine all the finery? The gold, the jewels!"

Mama considered it. "You are young, my dear," she said. "There is no need to rush

into marriage. I suspect you will secure both wealth and a handsome countenance in your future husband. Take care not to waste your beauty on someone so undeserving. Now, off to bed. The Lucases will come tomorrow.”

Elizabeth’s sisters and her mother left, but she did not move. Papa turned an inquiring eye on his favorite daughter, raising a brow. “Well, Lizzy?” he asked. “Tell me more about Mr. Darcy.”

She complied, telling him everything she had learned of the gentleman. “He is not ugly, Papa,” she said gently. “I will admit only that he is not so blessed in his looks as some. I suspect his other attributes more than make up for his lack of physical beauty.”

“Not an Adonis, then?” Her father chuckled. “It seems I taught my lessons well. Have a care, though, Elizabeth. Sometimes a person’s character matches their outward appearance. Such is the case with Jane. She is as beautiful inside as she is out.”

“Do you suspect Mr. Darcy of the same, that his outward appearance matches his heart?” Elizabeth was incredulous. “’Tis not like you to make hasty judgments.”

“I am not judging—merely urging caution. Look on the heart, my dear, as the scriptures tell us, and you will not go wrong. I have tried to emphasize this as I taught you to sketch characters. I fear now that I focused more on detecting the bad masked in beauty.”

“Mr. Darcy, I believe, is much like Charlotte—stalwart, reserved, and very aware of what those around him think.” She recalled the overheard conversation between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. How sad it must be to believe others sought his company purely out of a desire to gain or take advantage.

“I trust your judgment and look forward to meeting the gentleman. For what it is

worth, I believe Mr. Bingley is much like Jane. He is open and amiable, and I expect I shall learn upon further acquaintance that he is exactly as he appears.” Mr. Bennet stood, groaning a little as he did so.

“I am happy for Jane, if that is the case. She deserves nothing less.”

Elizabeth followed her father from the room and upstairs to their respective bedchambers. She fell asleep dreaming of the warmth of Mr. Darcy’s smile.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Chapter Four

News of Darcy's fortune soon spread, and before long, he could no longer remain at the edges of the room.

Ladies and gentlemen alike sought his attention.

The former simpered and batted their eyelashes, making calf's eyes as they complimented his attire, intelligence, and wit.

It was nothing Darcy was not used to, though he missed the brief anonymity he had enjoyed upon his arrival in Hertfordshire.

Though they socialized several times a week, Darcy had not caught more than a glimpse of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Others claimed his attention, and he was unable to break away.

His mother had effectively taught him polite and refined behavior; therefore, he could not bring himself to be rude.

His honor and character were everything to him, and he could not disgrace Lady Anne's memory by behaving as anything less than a consummate gentleman.

Fortunes changed one evening when the Netherfield party dined at Lucas Lodge.

Darcy's mood was not the best, having been subjected to Miss Bingley's complaints

for the entire carriage ride.

The lady lamented everything from the weather to the company they were to keep.

“Miss Bennet is, of course, the one exception,” she said haughtily.

“A rare beauty, that one,” Hurst agreed. “Bingley, you had best secure her before some other gentleman lures her away.”

“How can you say that, my dear?” Mrs. Hurst cried. “Miss Bennet may be a sweet, lovely girl, but what do we know of her family?” The lady’s gown rustled as she shifted, clearly agitated by her husband’s proclamation.

“We must discover what we can.” Miss Bingley spoke with confidence. “It would not do for my brother to marry someone unworthy.”

“You both had best stay out of my affairs,” Bingley warned, more severe than Darcy could ever recall hearing. “Miss Bennet is the daughter of a gentleman, which is more than either of you can claim.”

The ladies protested loudly, and Darcy turned to look out the window, wishing the carriage ride would soon end. His wish was granted, but Miss Bingley latched onto his arm as they went inside.

“Look at them, Mr. Darcy!” she said, her exclamation filled with false sweetness. “They act as though they are important, but truly they are nothing more than country nobodies. Do not you agree?”

“I would never dare contradict a lady,” he said neutrally. “I find the society much like that around Pemberley. In a way, Hertfordshire reminds me of my home.” Darcy struggled to maintain his polite expression. “I am sorry to hear you do not enjoy

country life.”

“On the contrary!” Miss Bingley sounded panicked. “There is nothing I like better than spending time away from the busyness of town. I am sure the residents around Pemberley are more refined than those of Hertfordshire—that is all I meant.”

Darcy fought the smile that threatened to overtake his stoic expression.

He wondered what Miss Bingley would think of Argus Atkins, the old gentleman from the neighboring estate.

Mr. Atkins spoke loudly due to hearing loss, and no longer adhered to society’s expectations.

He spoke his mind and feared no consequences for doing so.

Then there was Mrs. Annabella Wilson—a notorious gossip with a shrewd wit.

It was an odd but lethal combination. She would cut Miss Bingley down to size, Darcy thought.

The image amused him, and he felt somewhat ashamed of it.

“Dear Jane!” Miss Bingley finally released his arm as she greeted Miss Bennet, taking both of her hands. “How do you do this evening? We have been looking forward to Sir William’s hospitality!”

Darcy saw his chance and backed slowly away.

He greeted others as he moved about the room in search of...

he did not know. The prospect of yet another evening mired in conversation with people who would not meet his gaze for more than a few seconds did not appeal to him.

Yet, he had come, for he knew that he might at least speak with Miss Lucas and Miss Elizabeth.

Both were engaging conversationalists, though he had not spoken to either more than briefly.

In truth, he most hoped to speak with Miss Elizabeth.

His thoughts must have summoned her, for they nearly collided as he left the parlor for the larger drawing room where the card tables were laid out.

“Forgive me,” he said, bowing crisply. “I was not attending.”

“Think nothing of it, Mr. Darcy.” Miss Elizabeth’s smile was warm and inviting, and he grinned in response. “’Tis rather crowded in there, and I wished to escape.”

“May I accompany you?” he asked, dismayed by his desperate tone. “I confess I came this way in hopes of finding you.” He had not realized it until he spoke, but it was the truth.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, but she did not look disgusted or nervous.

Nothing for it now, he thought. I have searched long enough for someone like her.

He would not be shy about pursuing an acquaintance with Elizabeth Bennet.

Perhaps she is the one who will see me for myself and not for my fortune.

“I have no objections,” she replied, her warm smile never wavering.

“If you find my company tolerable, then who am I to say ‘nay?’ Follow me, sir, for I know what most guests do not. Sir William has opened another room for those who seek quieter pursuits.” She leaned closer.

“He does this for my father. ’Tis the only way Mr. Bennet can be tempted from Longbourn. ”

Darcy laughed lightly. “Is that so, Miss Elizabeth? Well, lead on! I am intrigued and wish to be introduced to your father.”

“Of course, sir. He has a rather singular disposition, however, so consider yourself forewarned! Still, he is never unjust.” Elizabeth led the way into the hall.

Directly across from the parlor was another, smaller chamber.

It appeared to be a private sitting room, comfortably appointed with chairs and a settee.

A fire danced in the grate. The drapes were drawn, but the space was bathed in the warm glow of many candles.

Work baskets were tucked neatly beneath chairs and tables, and a small stack of books rested on a low table beside a chair near the hearth.

“This is the family’s private sitting room,” Elizabeth said, confirming his thoughts. “Sir William is very obliging to open it during his soirées and card parties.”

“’Tis his way of pacifying me .” A voice from near the fire drew Darcy’s attention to a man sitting in an overstuffed armchair.



The gentleman peered around the high back of the chair, which faced away from the door.

“As you see, Sir William has provided me with books, port, and a warm fire. Others may join me if they please, but most prefer the distractions found across the hall.” He turned to Elizabeth. “Who is your companion, my dear?”

“Mr. Darcy, may I present my father, Mr. Thomas Bennet? Papa, this is Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley’s friend and guest.” Elizabeth spoke his name with pride, and Darcy saw the unmistakable affection shown in her eyes.

Mr. Bennet appeared to be a man of about fifty, with thick salt-and-pepper hair and a pair of spectacles perched upon his nose.

His countenance was both genial and inquisitive.

He gestured to the settee before rising and moving to a nearby chair.

Darcy complied, feeling unaccountably gratified when Elizabeth chose to sit beside him rather than take another seat.

“My Elizabeth told me she enjoyed your conversation at the assembly,” Mr. Bennet said. “That is a rare event, I assure you. More often, she comes home lamenting insipid dance partners and tiresome ladies.”

“He is in jest,” Elizabeth protested, turning to face Darcy. “I do enjoy balls and assemblies. ’Tis he who abhors socializing, not I.” Her feigned scowl, ruined by a mischievous wink, only made him laugh all the more.

“She knows me well,” Mr. Bennet acknowledged. “I am rather particular about which gatherings I attend. The demands of society wear on me.” He leaned back in his chair

with a shake of the head. “But Sir William is a friend of long-standing, and thus I make the effort.”

Elizabeth sighed with familiar exasperation. “If you left the house more often, perhaps society would not seem so tiresome.”

“When you are old and beset with children as I am, you will better understand.” He turned once more to Darcy. “Tell me, sir, do you play chess?”

Darcy remained in conversation with Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet for some time before she suggested they return to the gathering and mingle. As they stood, Mr. Bennet thanked him warmly for the stimulating exchange.

“Do call on me, sir. We might play a game or two and speak further of books and estates. After hearing you describe your libraries, mine may appear rather modest, but I dare say we might find some common ground among its many volumes.”

“I shall, sir, thank you.” Darcy grinned and offered his arm to Miss Elizabeth. “May I escort you?”

“You may, sir.” She laid her hand gently upon his arm. Darcy could not help but compare her light, natural touch with Miss Bingley’s habitual, catlike grip. He much preferred Elizabeth’s manner.

“I believe you have given my father another reason to attend such events,” she remarked as they re-entered the parlor. “I have not seen him enjoy himself so thoroughly in quite some time.”

“I hope my company did not disappoint you,” he said, the words escaping him unbidden.

“Not at all, sir.” A touch of color rose in her cheeks; however, she appeared neither uncomfortable nor discomposed. “Though our acquaintance is yet new, you seem an intelligent man. I should be pleased to call you a friend.”

His heart gave a sudden, startled leap. “Thank you,” he said, suffusing his voice with warmth. “I intend to seek out Oakham Mount on the morrow. It lies between Netherfield Park and Longbourn, if I rightly recall.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

“Yes, that is so. I walk out most mornings. Perhaps our paths will cross.” She sounded hopeful, and Darcy turned to look at her.

“I would like that,” he replied with quiet sincerity.

Never had he been more acutely aware of his own plain appearance than when gazing into her countenance.

He admired her deeply. That he could feel so strongly on the strength of such a brief acquaintance baffled him.

Yet it seemed as though his heart had at last recognized what it had long been searching for—and having found it, could only move forward without hesitation.

Elizabeth excused herself a few moments later, gesturing to her sister, Miss Bennet, who was waving at her from across the room.

Darcy stepped back toward the edge of the gathering, placing himself where he might observe the lady without obstruction.

She spoke with evident animation, her beautiful face alight with good humor and her eyes aglow in the candlelight.

Never had a lady so entranced him. Never had he beheld such beauty, grace, and intelligence united so perfectly in one person.

Charles may have Miss Bennet, he thought.

The younger sister is by far the superior creature.

“I can guess the nature of your reverie.” Miss Bingley’s sultry tones made Darcy frown.

“I should imagine not,” he replied curtly, knowing he was being more brusque than civility required.

“You are bemoaning the prospect of so many evenings spent in such company,” she continued, oblivious to the dismissiveness in his tone.

“Surrounded as we are by those so beneath us—compelled to endure their attempts at refinement, all the while longing for a place where true elegance may yet be found.”

“My thoughts were more agreeably engaged, madam.” His gaze had returned to Elizabeth, now conversing with Miss Lucas. Both ladies wore cheerful smiles, and Darcy found himself wishing he knew the subject of their amusement.

“What is it that so occupies your thoughts, sir?” Miss Bingley moved closer to his side and possessively placed her hand upon his arm.

“I was meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.” His lips curved into a half-smile, and his gaze softened as he imagined Miss Elizabeth’s eyes turning toward his own.

The woman clawing his arm practically purred in response. “And which lady has inspired such ardent admiration?”

Her simpering did little to disturb his thoughts. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he replied distractedly.

The effect of his words was instantaneous. She dropped his arm and drew in a sharp breath. “Miss Eliza Bennet, she drawled. I am all astonishment! Pray, when am I to wish you joy?”

When he did not reply, she turned and swept away. Once she was out of earshot, he murmured to himself, “Soon, I hope.”

Not long after, a cry for dancing arose. Sir William and the other gentlemen set to work removing the furniture and rolling back the rugs. One of Miss Elizabeth’s sisters took a seat at the pianoforte and began playing several jigs.

Darcy looked about the room in search of Elizabeth, intending to solicit her hand for a set. Instead, he came upon Miss Lucas first and approached her.

“I thank you for the offer, sir, but I suspect you intended to ask another.” Miss Lucas appeared dejected, and Darcy studied her countenance.

“I shall not retract the offer, Miss Lucas,” he replied kindly. “You have been very welcoming to the residents of Netherfield. It would be an honor to stand up with you.”

“Very well.” She agreed, but she lacked enthusiasm and did not appear to be pleased.

Darcy wondered if he had somehow given offense to the lady.

The cause became apparent mid-set, when something across the room drew her notice.

Following her gaze, he saw Miss Elizabeth, animated and radiant. Miss Lucas’s expression faltered.

“My friend is the most deserving lady in the world.” Darcy turned back to Miss Lucas and found her studying him.

“I wish you every success.”

“It was unpardonably rude of me—”

“No, sir. You merely followed my gaze. Forgive me for allowing my attention to wander. ’Tis only...” She drew a deep breath before speaking once more. “Forgive my candor, sir, but I had hoped—” She hesitated, her cheeks suffused with color.

As the set concluded, Darcy led her to the side of the room where they might enjoy a modicum of privacy.

“I do not know you well, Miss Lucas, but you seem to me a woman of considerable worth,” he said with quiet gravity. “If my actions gave rise to expectations, I offer my sincere apology.”

He knew full well he had given her no such encouragement, but he felt he ought to offer something by way of consolation, nonetheless.

“How do you manage it?” she asked desperately. “You possess a self-assurance I can only envy.”

He understood her meaning and answered plainly. “True worth lies within,” he replied. “My mother taught me to seek one who might recognize it.”

“I see it,” she whispered. “But I also see that it will not suffice. Eliza is a worthy choice, sir. She will marry for nothing less than mutual affection. I, on the other hand, would content myself with any man who would offer a secure home.”

“Do not undervalue your own worth, Miss Lucas.” She gave a solemn nod and turned away without another word.

‘Tis a sorrowful truth that beauty is prized above character. Miss Lucas’s sensible mind and steady disposition would benefit any man wise enough to value them.

Alas, too few ever looked beyond outward appearance.

Darcy could acknowledge that those blessed with fortune—regardless of their charms—would always possess options when it came to selecting their marriage mate.

He did not know Miss Lucas’s precise circumstances, but he suspected that had she a sufficient dowry, she would already be wed.

Fate had not dealt kindly with her. That his preference for her friend had wounded her, he could not doubt.

If only there were something I could do.



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Chapter Five

The morning sun was slow to chase away the autumn chill.

Elizabeth did not mind. She knew her morning walks would soon be curtailed until spring and was determined to enjoy them while she could.

Winter walks were less agreeable and occurred but rarely.

The trees had long since been stripped of their leaves, and the last of the flowers had succumbed to the cold.

She hurried down the well-trodden path and onto the broad lane that served as Longbourn's drive.

A few minutes later, she turned onto a narrower trail leading toward Oakham Mount—her favorite walk.

She walked the path at least twice each week.

Today, however, she hoped Mr. Darcy had taken her subtle hint and might meet her there.

She found the gentleman fascinating and wished to know him better.

His loquacity in conversation with her father had vanished the moment they rejoined the larger company.

Though still amiable and unfailingly polite, his desire to be elsewhere had been obvious, at least to Elizabeth.

She wondered whether the posturing of certain guests had robbed him of any chance to enjoy a simple gathering.

Mr. Goulding, for example, fancied himself something of a speculator.

He had done well enough in years past but had since ventured into riskier schemes.

Elizabeth had overheard him urging Mr. Darcy to invest in his latest endeavor.

The gentleman had politely declined, but as the evening progressed, his posture had grown increasingly rigid.

By the time they took their leave, it was clear he had endured enough.

She climbed the slope to the top of Oakham Mount with quiet purpose. I want nothing from him but friendship, she thought. How lonely he must be. If I can offer him that, I shall.

Lydia had again spoken rudely of Mr. Darcy's appearance on their return from Lucas Lodge the previous evening.

"He is ghastly, is he not?" she giggled with Kitty. "I suppose, were he a militiaman, that scar might be called dashing rather than disgusting. But nothing can excuse the horrid bloody stain."

"What if he got the scar in a duel?" Kitty whispered eagerly. "Can you imagine?"

"What would an unattractive man have to duel over? Kitty, you are so stupid!" Lydia

scoffed, pinching her sister hard on the arm.

The family coach was crowded, and the close quarters made their words seem excessively loud.

The two continued to snip at one another until they reached Longbourn, at which point they climbed unceremoniously over Jane and Mary to exit the carriage first.

“Have a care, girls!” Jane admonished, firm yet kind.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet said nothing, but Elizabeth turned a gimlet eye upon her father as they entered the house.

“You did not even defend Mr. Darcy!” she said brusquely. “After spending such a pleasant time with the gentleman, how could you let your daughters speak so cruelly of him?”

“They are shallow and harmless,” Mr. Bennet replied. “I dare say Mr. Darcy would not concern himself. He seems too intelligent for that sort of pettiness—and I imagine he has heard far worse.”

“Words still wound, no matter how often one hears them.” Elizabeth folded her arms and glared at her father’s indifferent countenance. He withdrew in silence, leaving her simmering in frustration. She went to bed still feeling irritated.

Shaking off the recollection, she reached the summit of the hill and paused to draw breath.

The climb was not especially difficult, but she had taken it at a brisk pace and now found herself in need of respite.

Crossing to a fallen oak log, she seated herself and rubbed her hands together to warm them.

Her gloves were thin, and quite unequal to the morning's chill, but the fur-lined pair she owned tended to grow unpleasant during a long walk.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth."

She started in surprise, turning toward the sound.

"Mr. Darcy!" she exclaimed, catching sight of him at the edge of the tree line atop the mount.

He sat astride a large, brown-and-white stallion.

The horse tossed its mane in the crisp morning light, its breath misting visibly in the air.

Mr. Darcy dismounted, and Elizabeth rose to greet him.

"Will you sit beside me, sir?" she asked, gesturing to the log. "'Tis more than large enough for two."

He nodded and joined her. "This tree was felled a few years ago," she explained. "The local furniture and cabinet maker harvested the oak timber. My father's desk was fashioned from the very wood."

"A fond reminder of his boyhood, I expect. This oak tree must have been a sterling specimen for a lad to climb."

"Only for a boy, Mr. Darcy?" She lifted a brow in mock offence. "I must inform you

that you are in the presence of the finest tree-climber in the shire. My speed reaching the top remains unbroken—and as the tree is no more, it shall stand indefinitely.” She smiled triumphantly.

“Do you still climb trees, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked, eyes bright with amusement.

“I shall never confess it.”

Her answer appeared to delight him, for his smile deepened.

He ought to do that more often, she mused.

His smile does much for his features. He was not an outwardly handsome man—nor would he ever be; indeed, society would never agree to that.

But Elizabeth did not mind. She found his face interesting.

The broken nose and the scar added a touch of mystery—at least Elizabeth thought so.

“Do you find me handsome, Miss Elizabeth?”

His unexpected question caught her off guard, and Elizabeth responded before she could think better of it.

“No, sir.” Clapping a hand over her mouth, her eyes widened in horror. Dropping it again, she hastened to apologize.

“There is no need,” he said, raising a hand to silence her. “I asked and expected an honest reply. Had you answered otherwise, I should suspect you of seeking my favor for some self-serving purpose.”

“Appearances are not everything,” she protested earnestly. “I like your company very much.”

“An old friend once said that only those with none claim looks to be of little importance.” The tone of his words held a bitter note, and he bowed his head, his gaze on his clasped hands. “Yet your words would seem to contradict his.”

“Your friend sounds dreadfully boorish,” Elizabeth replied, with a flash of indignation. “My father has impressed upon me that a person’s worth lies within. You, sir, are far more than your face.”

He glanced up at her quizzically. “My scar does not trouble you?” he asked, plainly astonished. “’Tis a recent addition to an already imperfect countenance.” He traced a finger down its length, a thoughtful look overtaking him. “Does it make me appear roguish?”

She laughed. “I have heard it whispered once or twice.” After a brief pause, she continued. “Have you been approached by those seeking only to benefit from your acquaintance?”

“Such is often the way for those with wealth,” he replied indifferently. “Perhaps I find it easier to discern sincerity, precisely because...” He trailed off.

“Because people overlook you at first,” she said quietly, “only to trip over themselves for an introduction once they learn of your fortune?”

He looked at her, eyes alight with surprise. She pressed on.

“I noticed it at the assembly. Mama scarcely acknowledged your presence—though she is shallower than most. Even after learning of your income, she did not believe you worthy of her daughters’ notice.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Mama is absurd.”

“That is not how most matrons respond.” He seemed amused rather than offended. “Tell me, did she warn you against me?”

“Not directly,” Elizabeth admitted, rubbing her hands together for warmth. The sun had begun to warm her cheeks, but the air remained sharp. “I must apologize on her behalf. She would never own to any fault, I fear.”

He grinned. “Think nothing of it. Her opinion is not singular. I have heard worse. Most mamas are willing to overlook my visage for the sake of seeing their daughters as mistress of Pemberley.”

“Is it a very great estate?” She had grown curious about Mr. Darcy’s home. He lived in the North, but she could not recall if she had ever heard precisely where.

“It is. Pemberley is in Derbyshire, very near the Peak. The estate spans some ten miles. It is maintained largely through tenant farms, though we also harvest timber and raise sheep. Most recently, I have invested in a number of textile mills.”

“Trade, sir? How scandalous!” She winked to show her teasing words. “In truth, I cannot object. My dearest relations in London are likewise engaged. My uncle, Mr. Gardiner, owns an import-export business. He is quite successful.”

“Trade is the way of the future,” Mr. Darcy acknowledged. “There are tradesmen now who possess greater incomes than some peers. Those who refuse to accept progress and accept change will inevitably be left behind. The future waits for no one.”

“A most astute observation, sir. I only wish more of society shared that view. Instead, we judge one another by accidents of birth, condemning without thought and often without justice.”

They fell silent for a moment, each considering the weight of their conversation.

“May I ask a somewhat impertinent question, Miss Elizabeth?” He turned to her.

“You may, sir, though I reserve the right not to answer.” She was intrigued now—what could he wish to ask?

“Tell me of Miss Lucas,” he requested. “We shared a peculiar conversation last night.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Elizabeth understood his meaning at once.

“Poor Charlotte,” she murmured. “She, too, suffers from the world’s shallow notions.

As one of her closest friends, I can say with certainty that she has experienced heartache that she did not deserve.

Though her features are plain, her heart is good.

She is sensible and kind and owns a keen wit.

Miss Lucas would make any man a most excellent wife.”

The thought that Mr. Darcy might have an interest in her friend gave Elizabeth a moment’s unease—jealousy, her mind supplied.

But she dismissed it. How could she feel such an emotion?

Mr. Darcy was a recent acquaintance. And yet...

she could not deny he had become dear to her.

She liked conversing with him more than any other gentleman she had known.

“I feel for her,” he murmured. “I believe she hoped...”

“Yes, I suspected as much, though she relinquished the notion almost at once. It

speaks to her self-respect. Charlotte fears dependence upon her relations, and with a small dowry—barely five hundred pounds—and only her good sense to recommend her, potential suitors have looked past her more often than is just. At seven-and-twenty she is nearly on the shelf, and I believe the future frightens her.”

“You speak in her defense most admirably. Miss Lucas will yet find someone worthy.”

“I tell her as much, but she grows less inclined to believe it with each passing year.” Elizabeth sighed. “I had best return to Longbourn. My family is accustomed to my morning walks, but I have been longer abroad than usual.”

“Yes,” he concurred. “It would not do to make them worry.” He stood and extended his hand.

Elizabeth accepted it and allowed him to help her to her feet.

He held her hand a moment longer than strictly necessary.

Their eyes met, and she smiled shyly. He returned the smile before releasing her hand with reluctance.

“Until we meet again,” he murmured, taking a step back.

Cheeks warming in a blush, Elizabeth inclined her head and turned away.

She glanced over her shoulder as she reached the top of the descending path.

Mr. Darcy had mounted his horse with the aid of the old log and now raised a hand in farewell before turning towards Netherfield Park.

Elizabeth watched him until he disappeared from view, then continued on her way to Longbourn.

Darcy

She was magnificent. Elizabeth's impassioned defense of Miss Lucas revealed much about her character.

She possessed not only charm and wit, but also loyalty and compassion—qualities Darcy valued above all others.

She was, in his estimation, near to perfection, and he feared it was only a matter of time before his heart was lost completely.

She embodied everything he desired in a wife.

His reason cautioned him against such intensity after so brief an acquaintance, but his heart was already decided.

Will she have me? he wondered. Would she ever accept someone like me? He knew his worth—at least, in substance if not in form—and hoped she might come to see it as well. As I see hers .

The ride back to Netherfield passed swiftly, and before long he was dismounting before the stables. Handing his reins to a waiting groom, he instructed amiably, "See him properly cooled, rubbed down, and given a measure of oats."

The lad nodded and led the horse away. Darcy pulled off his gloves as he ascended the rear steps to the house.

This entrance led to a modest antechamber where boots and coats could be shed and

one might rid oneself of the mud and chill of the outdoors before entering the main part of the house.

He took a moment to brush the worst of the debris from his greatcoat before proceeding to his chambers.

The rest of the household still lay abed, and he knew from past experience that breakfast would not be served before ten. He would dine in his sitting room; he was already ravenous and disinclined to wait.

His valet, Brisby, met him inside his chambers. “A bath has been drawn, sir, and your breakfast tray will be up directly.”

“Thank you.”

Brisby assisted him in undressing, and Darcy soon lowered himself into the steaming water.

He leaned back with a quiet sigh. The heat erased the chill from his limbs and washed away the scent of horse and leather.

A soothing fragrance rose from the water—some oil Brisby had added to ease the ache in his muscles.

Darcy soaked until the warmth faded, then emerged, dried, and dressed in fresh clothing.

As he enjoyed his breakfast, his thoughts returned to Elizabeth. I must woo her. A lady of sense and spirit deserves more than presumption. It would be foolish to assume that, simply because he was wealthy, she would welcome his suit.

That is not what I want, in any case, he reminded himself. A lady worth having must love me for myself. Pemberley and all I possess ought only to be an added benefit. Already, she had passed one important test—Elizabeth had admitted she did not find him handsome.

Intent upon pursuing the matter fully, Darcy began to outline in his mind how best to proceed. They were often in company; perhaps calling at Longbourn with Bingley would be a suitable first step. Mr. Bennet invited me, he reasoned. I may as well make use of the invitation.

Satisfied with his intended course, Darcy finished his breakfast and turned to his correspondence.

A letter from his steward required immediate attention—after all, the work of an estate holder was never truly at an end.

And when that is finished, I shall write to Georgiana.

He longed to be easy with his sister again.

Perhaps if I tell her about Elizabeth, she will be more inclined to respond. What lady can resist a little romance?

### Chapter Six

A letter from his cousin awaited him when he came downstairs, and Darcy seized it at once. He had been hoping for news for some time. Since the debacle at Ramsgate, his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, had devoted considerable time and resources to locating Wickham.

“’Tis time, Darcy.”

Richard had looked every bit the colonel that day, standing in Darcy’s study in his scarlet coat, hands clasped behind his back.

“Why do you insist on protecting him? Wickham has never been your friend!”

He had scowled, shaking his head.

“In fact, I believe the word enemy would be the most accurate descriptor. The man weaseled his way into your father’s affections, only to disgrace his memory by attempting to elope with Georgiana.”

“You are correct, Richard. I cannot say what has prevented me from acting. When he came for the reading of the will, I had thought it would be the last we saw of him. That appears to have been wishful thinking.”

Darcy had sighed and leaned back in his chair.

My father would have been ashamed of the man Wickham has become.

He shook off the memory. He and Wickham had not been close since long before they were sent to separate schools, yet somehow, the weasel had continued to insinuate himself into their lives.

The words of a long-ago conversation between his parents returned to his mind. His mother had been correct. By treating Wickham as a second son, George Darcy had allowed his godson to expect an inheritance he was never meant to receive.

Darcy broke the seal and unfolded the letter, hoping at last for news.

Darcy,

I shall begin by satisfying your curiosity, for I suspect you would scan my letter for news of our mutual friend.

I have no word of Wickham, though I have traced him as far as London.

He has likely buried himself deep in the bowels of the city.

It will take some time to discover his whereabouts, but I assure you, I shall find him.

He has been a plague upon you for far too long.

Georgiana, I am sorry to say, is still morose. She moves through my mother's house as though afraid of upsetting someone. I can scarcely get two words from her at a time. She is reading your letters—do keep writing. Perhaps she will eventually open up and become more like herself.

My mother is attempting to match me with her goddaughter.

Do you recall Miss Prudence Wilson? I used to tease her dreadfully about her

freckles.

Well, she is now five-and-twenty with no prospects.

It seems she has turned away more suitors than most, for reasons she refuses to disclose to her mother.

What say you, Darcy? I need an heiress to marry, and I already have a rapport with Prue.

It would allow me to sell my commission.

Prudence is her father's only heir, as well, which means she comes with an estate.

Something tells me it will not be so simple to secure her hand, however.

Maybe I ought to try for Anne instead. But you would have to secure a bride first, before our aunt abandons her dreams of uniting Rosings and Pemberley.

How are you enjoying Hertfordshire? It is quite different from Derbyshire.

I recall one of my friends, Colonel Arthur Forster, is stationed in a small market town called Meryton.

Is that not near Netherfield Park? If you should happen to see him, give him my regards.

Perhaps I shall take a few days' leave and come to call. Bingley would welcome me, would he not?

I shall write again soon. With any luck, my men will have news of Wickham's



whereabouts ere long.

R. Fitzwilliam

Darcy folded the letter and sighed deeply.

He had hoped his cousin would report that Wickham had been found and confined to debtor's prison.

Darcy held a small fortune of markers as leverage.

After Ramsgate, he had personally sought out and purchased as many of Wickham's debts as he could.

The amount he now held would be sufficient to keep the reprobate imprisoned for the rest of his life.

He found it interesting that his cousin mentioned Miss Wilson.

Richard had protested his mother's matchmaking efforts for years.

Now, it seemed, he entertained the notion.

The lady in question was not so well-favored as some.

Darcy admired Miss Wilson for her intelligence, but she had never stirred the slightest of romantic inclinations in him.

She will do very well for Richard, he mused— that is, if he can win the lady's heart .

Darcy knew something his cousin did not: Miss Wilson had turned away her suitors

because each had proven to be mercenary.

Another memory assailed him. A year after his father's death, Darcy had agreed to attend a soirée with his aunt.

There, in the gardens, he had found Miss Wilson weeping.

She had confided in him, speaking candidly of her longing for love.

The encounter had been improper and imprudent, but it had done the lady good, and neither of their reputations had suffered for it.

He wished his cousin the best in his pursuit. He would need it.

A second letter awaited him, and Darcy felt a jolt of surprise upon noting it was from Georgiana. This was the first letter she had written since his departure, though he had sent her a missive every week. Eagerly, he broke the seal and unfolded it.

Dear Brother,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am working diligently as I study with the masters.

Aunt Matlock is ever attentive and oversees my lessons with exacting oversight.

I confess, I wish she were less so, for I feel as though I scarcely have time to breathe.

If it appears I am not sufficiently occupied, she assigns me yet more work.

How I long for the chance to read a novel—or anything besides history and French.

Pray, write to her on my behalf, that I might have some relief .

Hertfordshire sounds lovely. The people you describe appear so diverse and entertaining.

Of particular interest are the Bennets. You mentioned their estate is called Longbourn, I believe.

Is it as large as Netherfield Park? I cannot imagine six ladies in one household!

Poor Mr. Bennet. Do you think he is often overwhelmed by so many females about him?

You must tell me more about Miss Elizabeth.

She sounds delightful. And you say Mr. Bingley is paying her sister great attention?

I cannot imagine Miss Bingley approves. She has longed for a connection to the first circles, and from what I gather, Miss Bennet has none.

I hope Mr. Bingley does not allow his sisters to dissuade him from love.

I am feeling better, Brother. I wish to assure you that I am recovering apace. Thank you for your patience as I do so. If you mean to stay in Hertfordshire for Christmas, perhaps I might join you there.

With love,

Georgiana

Darcy's heart lifted as he read his sister's words.

Georgiana would be well. She had learned a hard lesson, but she would be stronger

for it.

His sister had inherited their mother's looks.

Miss Darcy had flaxen hair and a fair complexion, and she was every bit as beautiful as Lady Anne had been.

He had been remiss in her education. Darcy knew he ought to have taught her how to discern those with less than honorable intentions.

Now, it seemed, she had healed enough that he could begin.

He would reply immediately. And perhaps she might, indeed, join me here for Christmas .

Bingley had invited him to stay at least until the new year.

If I mean to ask Miss Elizabeth to marry me, then Georgiana should know her future sister.

The thought thrilled him, and he took himself upstairs to his chamber so he could write to his sister in private.

Dear Georgie,

How pleased I am to hear from you! It sounds as though our aunt has been keeping you busy.

I shall write to her at once and request she allow you a little more leisure.

Everyone requires time to themselves—to enjoy a good book, walk out in the air or

visit the shops.

Has she taken you to Bond Street yet? You must persuade her to go so you may select some new music.

I am greatly enjoying my time in Hertfordshire.

The country is quite different, but not in a disagreeable way.

I appreciate the milder weather, for I have been able to ride out every day.

There have been several shooting parties as well, and Netherfield's dinner table has benefitted from our efforts.

Some evenings are spent away from the estate.

Most recently, we attended a soirée held by Sir William Lucas, a local knight fond of entertaining.

His parties, while rather crowded, always include the Bennets, who are their nearest neighbors.

When last I wrote, I mentioned the Bennets of Longbourn.

I have since learned more about the family and so can satisfy your curiosity.

Mr. Thomas Bennet is master of the estate.

I had the pleasure of conversing with him at the aforementioned soirée.

He is not fond of society, and so Sir William arranged a quiet sitting room for him

during the evening—near enough to hear the festivities, yet far enough for peace.

He is a clever and engaging gentleman, and I look forward to our next exchange.

The lady of Longbourn is Mrs. Frances Bennet, though I believe her closest lady friends call her Fanny.

I must confess, I know little of her. She has paid me scarcely any notice, which is unusual.

I suspect she is aware of my fortune, yet never has she thrown her daughters in my way.

She is forthright and loud—rather reminiscent of our aunt, Lady Catherine.

I appreciate candor above all, and Mrs. Bennet does not disappoint in that regard.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

The eldest daughter is Miss Jane Bennet, who, as I mentioned, has drawn Bingley's attention.

She is not unlike you—tall, fair, graceful—and beautiful.

Miss Bennet appears to return his admiration, and I am pleased for them both.

Should his sisters attempt interference, I shall give him my opinion.

Though she is reserved, I believe Miss Bennet holds Charles in esteem.

However, they have known one another less than a month, so perhaps I speak too hastily.

Miss Mary Bennet is the third daughter. She plays the pianoforte and prefers quiet pursuits.

I know little more. Her two younger sisters, Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia, are seventeen and fifteen.

Both are lively, though sorely lacking in propriety.

It is not my place to speak harshly, but I am compelled to mention that they seem ill-prepared for society.

I hope their behavior does not bring distress to the household.

Now, to the lady you most wish to hear of.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet is the second daughter.

She has dark, curling hair that catches the sunlight with glints of chestnut, and fine eyes—lively and intelligent, framed by long lashes—which seem to always be alight with wit and good humor.

She is, I am told, an excellent walker—and I can now attest to the truth of it, for I encountered her only this morning while riding. We spoke for a time.

Dear sister, never has a lady captivated me more.

She is a breath of fresh air, and I find I admire her deeply.

Though I do not yet feel it is time to request a formal courtship, I do intend to pursue Miss Elizabeth in earnest, and if I may be so fortunate, to one day call her my wife.

Never have I felt so unprepared, so unworthy.

How could such a beautiful, charming, and intelligent woman choose me when others—more handsome and affable—might court her instead?

Yet my impression is that she is not one to be swayed by such things.

If I am so blessed as to earn her favor, she will be Mrs. Darcy ere the Season begins.

Now, I must close. Bingley wishes to call at Longbourn this afternoon, and I am no less eager than he. When I next write, I shall tell you more of Miss Elizabeth. For now, I remain



Your affectionate brother,

F. Darcy

He sanded and sealed the letter. Darcy's heart felt uncommonly light—more so than it had in many months.

Georgiana would recover, and so, he believed, would he.

Picking up the missive to place it on the salver, he left his room for the second time that morning.

Bingley and his sisters were likely already at table.

“Darcy!” Bingley called as he entered the breakfast room. “Have you already eaten? I would wager you were out and about before dawn. How do you do it, man? We did not return to Netherfield until quite late.”

“I suppose 'tis borne of years of habit.” Darcy joined them at the table, intending only to have a cup of tea while they dined.

“You are looking well this morning, sir.” Miss Bingley leaned over and touched his hand lightly before taking a piece of toast from the plate in front of him.

“That waistcoat is very fine.” Her gaze swept over him.

Darcy noted the brief wince she barely managed to conceal as her eyes landed on the scar and crooked line of his nose.

“Thank you, Miss Bingley,” he replied politely, his tone neutral.

He was well aware of his appearance and had no need for empty flattery.

Recalling Miss Elizabeth's refreshing honesty that morning made him smile, and he quickly masked it behind a cup of tea, lest Miss Bingley think it meant for her.

"Will you come with me to Longbourn?" Bingley asked. "Louisa and Caroline claim they are otherwise engaged this afternoon."

"Goodness, Charles, must you pester Mr. Darcy?" Miss Bingley scolded her brother. "I am certain he has other matters requiring his attention. Why would he wish to call at Longbourn?"

"On the contrary, Miss Bingley," Darcy returned smoothly, "I completed my correspondence after my ride. I am quite at leisure. Mr. Bennet invited me to call, and I cannot disappoint him."

"Capital!" Bingley cried. "Let us take the carriage, shall we? I have no desire to arrive smelling of horse." He grinned before shoveling a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

"I shall be ready whenever you say the word," Darcy replied. "I confess, I am eager to test my chess skills against Mr. Bennet. He claims to be a master."

"Just like you, to go for chess rather than to see the ladies." Bingley teased with a snort.

Miss Bingley's reply was high-pitched and slightly frantic. "Charles, do not be absurd. You are the only one throwing yourself at a Bennet. Mr. Darcy has no interest in seeing ladies," she said desperately. "Is that not right, sir?"

Darcy could not suppress a grin as he took another sip of tea. The poor lady was

destined for disappointment, for he was as eager as her brother to see one of the ladies of Longbourn.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

### Chapter Seven

The gentlemen from Netherfield called upon Longbourn frequently, much to Jane's—and Elizabeth's—delight.

Mrs. Bennet ignored Mr. Darcy in favor of flattering Mr. Bingley.

Her behavior perplexed Elizabeth. It was not like her mother to disregard any man in possession of a large fortune.

Something about Mr. Darcy seemed to displease her, though Elizabeth knew not what.

Rather than dwell on the strangeness of her mother's conduct, Elizabeth made it her object to be as attentive and kind as she could to the gentleman—only to make amends for Mrs. Bennet's poor manners, of course.

In truth, she liked Mr. Darcy very much.

His conversation was always stimulating, and his manners beyond reproach.

He tried to converse with Elizabeth's younger sisters, though with only limited success.

Mary proved the most receptive, though she soon abandoned all discourse for solitary pursuits.

Kitty and Lydia behaved abominably, pulling faces and whispering behind their hands.

It was abundantly clear to all what—or who—was the subject of their mirth.

Mr. Darcy bore it all with admirable composure, still striving to be civil despite their discourtesy.

As it happened—much to the chagrin of Bingley and Darcy—Miss Bingley and the Hursts accompanied the gentlemen after all.

The former kept close to Mr. Darcy whenever possible, though it appeared to Elizabeth that she was torn between restraining her brother's growing attachment to Jane and maintaining her own imagined claim upon her brother's friend.

Mrs. Hurst seemed content to follow her sister's lead and preserved an air of superiority whenever she called.

Her husband usually selected a chair in a distant corner and was content to ignore everyone.

Mr. Darcy appeared to enjoy Mr. Bennet's company.

He frequently stepped out of the parlor to join her father in his study.

Elizabeth occasionally followed, but more often refrained, suspecting the gentlemen preferred the privacy of their discussion.

She wondered what they spoke of, but she could not learn much from her father who only gave her a cryptic grin whenever she inquired.

Yet, she gathered some insight from the chessboard, whose arrangement shifted each time Mr. Darcy withdrew.

The morning proved gray and overcast. If she wished to avoid the coming rain, her walk must be brief.

She donned her outerwear and set off, fixed upon reaching Oakham Mount and returning without delay.

It had been some time since she had last met Mr. Darcy upon the summit, and she could not deny her hope that he might appear again.

Private discourse was impossible in company.

Elizabeth found their unguarded conversations far more engaging when they could speak without fear of interruption.

There was still much of the gentleman that intrigued her, and she was determined to learn more.

Today the mount was deserted. She barely had time to swallow her disappointment when she espied Mr. Darcy's horse cantering across the field.

Her heart leaped as she stepped to the edge of the rise, ensuring she might be seen.

He reigned in for but a moment before turning his mount toward her, and within minutes, he arrived.

Dismounting, he secured the reins to an obliging branch, then turned and bowed.

"Miss Elizabeth," he greeted her, ever courteous. The warmth in his tone pleased her,

and when he straightened and smiled, she felt again that strange stirring. He would never be called handsome, yet something enigmatic about him captivated her.

“Good morning, sir!” she returned, offering a curtsy and a smile warm with genuine pleasure. “The sky threatens, and I must curtail my usual walk. Naturally, I came to my favorite spot.”

“I am very pleased to see you here today.” He moved to take a seat on the large oak log.

She joined him as was her custom, and they sat in silence, observing the landscape stretching out before them.

Elizabeth could see smoke rising in the distance, likely from Netherfield’s chimneys.

Something startled a flock of birds in the field; they flew up in a flurry before dispersing.

“Well, sir,” she finally said. “You have now been in Hertfordshire for nearly a month complete. What do you think of our quaint community? I believe Miss Bingley finds it too rustic for her tastes.”

He made a face, and she laughed.

“I have ever felt more welcome in the country than in town,” he replied, rubbing his hands along his thighs in a distracted fashion. “The posturing and false friendships are wearisome.”

“I can readily believe them to be so,” Elizabeth concurred. “I hope our company is agreeable enough that you remain for some time. Mr. Bingley, I am sure, will be pleased to have you.”

He smiled, though he did not look directly at her. Mr. Darcy's gaze was distant, and a pleasant smile played about his lips.

"I have no plans to depart at present," he said. "Though I may need to go to London and retrieve my sister at some point. She is with my aunt and uncle now—I am attempting to persuade her to join me, but the thought of strangers deters her."

Elizabeth kicked at the ground in front of her.

"Yes, Mary is much the same. You may have noticed how she retreats soon after guests arrive. Even those familiar to her are not often favored with her company. And Mama is no help. She puts such stock in appearances, and Mary is, unfortunately, the least well-favored of the Bennet sisters."

"There is nothing wrong with your sister's appearance." Mr. Darcy sounded almost affronted on Mary's behalf, and it warmed Elizabeth's heart.

"Yes, I know. My father has tried his best to impress upon our minds the importance of seeking an intellectual match—and a gentleman of good character." She left it unsaid that he had erred in choosing based on outward beauty alone when he courted her mother.

"Mary tries very hard to be seen and heard. She goes about it in all the wrong ways and will not listen to correction. She will learn someday, I hope."

Mr. Darcy rubbed his cheek. Elizabeth noted the stubble along his chin and wondered whether he had ridden out before permitting his valet to shave him.

An absurd longing seized her—to touch his cheek and feel the roughness of his scruff beneath her fingertips.



Her throat grew suddenly dry, and she swallowed, glancing away lest she yield to the impulse.

“Bingley, Hurst, and I are to dine with the officers.” Mr. Darcy’s change of subject was sudden but not unwelcome. “My cousin has bid me to convey his regards to Colonel Forster. They served as comrades-in-arms once.”

“Indeed? I had no notion our local militia colonel had seen battle.” Elizabeth thought most militiamen had never seen true combat; it seemed she had been mistaken.

“Yes. They were both at the Battle of Corunna. My cousin saved the colonel’s life, though not before being wounded himself. Colonel Forster can no longer serve in the regulars, but his experience remains valuable to the Crown, and he was therefore granted command of the —shire militia.”

Elizabeth was impressed. Her father had read to her of the battle, which had taken place in 1809 in a coastal city in northern Spain.

There had been nearly one thousand casualties, including the dead, wounded, and captured.

British forces had since rallied in their efforts to thwart the Little Corsican.

“I am glad your cousin was not lost,” Elizabeth murmured.

“I thank you.” He shifted slightly, scuffing the toe of his boot against the earth. “My aunt was beside herself with worry when we received no word of him. He is now stationed at the Home Office. Lady Matlock is determined he should marry, so he may sell his commission.”

“I wish your aunt success in her endeavor.” She smiled, though he did not meet her

gaze. “And I hope you enjoy your time with the officers.”

He chuckled. “Yes, it may prove to be an interesting afternoon. Bingley can befriend anyone. Do I sound too bitter if I confess I suspect I shall end up in a corner, alone and entirely unnoticed?”

Her heart ached for him. She reached out and lightly touched the top of his hand before withdrawing. “There is no shame in acknowledging what may be,” she said gently. “Perhaps you shall be proven wrong?”

“An idle fancy, I think, Miss Elizabeth. Never fear—I came to terms with my lot in life long ago. Cruel words no longer wound as they once did.”

She frowned. “You ought not speak so meanly of yourself. I value your friendship and look forward to our conversations.”

He turned to look at her, his expression unreadable. No matter his features, his eyes were entrancing—dark and warm, with a mysterious depth that drew her in. They stirred something within her, though she could neither name the feeling nor fully understand it.

“I thank you, Miss Elizabeth, for reminding me of my mother’s lessons. I know my worth—I assure you. But there are days when my burdens feel heavier than others.” He stood and offered her his hand. “Allow me to assist you. I must return to Netherfield.”

She accepted his hand and rose to her feet.

“I must go as well. ’Tis nearly time for breakfast, and my father will miss me.

” She paused, then lifted her brow with a playful smile.

“He relies on my ‘good sense’ to shield him from my silly sisters.” She released his hand—which she only then realized she had held far too long—and stepped back. “Until we meet again, Mr. Darcy.”

He inclined his head and turned away. Elizabeth did the same, skipping lightly down the path and out of sight. She did not see the gentleman pause and glance back, watching until she disappeared from view.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Breakfast at Longbourn proved a noisy affair, yet Elizabeth paid it little attention.

Her thoughts lingered on their neighbor's guest. Without meaning to, she had become attached to him.

Mr. Darcy was a friend—of that she was certain—but could he be something more?

Did she even wish for such a thing? He was all a gentleman ought to be in honor, principle, and behavior—and such attributes, to her mind, far surpassed any mere handsome countenance.

After breakfast, the ladies retreated to the parlor.

The clouds had grown ever darker, and Elizabeth knew rain threatened.

Each settled into their own pursuit: Jane brought her embroidery and joined Elizabeth, while Kitty and Lydia bickered in the corner as they attempted to refashion one of Lydia's bonnets.

Mary, with a book in hand, ignored them as always.

It was in this atmosphere that a note arrived from Netherfield for Jane.

She read it through and then handed it to her sister.

My dear Miss Bennet,

I hope this note finds you in good health and spirits.

My sister, Mrs. Hurst, and I would be most delighted if you would dine with us at Netherfield today.

The gentlemen are to dine with the officers, and so we ladies will be forced into each other's company for the duration.

As someone with sisters, surely, you must know how dangerous such a plight can be!

Louisa and I will most certainly detest each other by the night's end!

Pray do not trouble yourself to refuse, as we shall take it quite amiss if you do. We sincerely hope you will favor us with your presence.

Yours most sincerely,

Caroline Bingley

Elizabeth handed the note back. "'Tis a shame the gentlemen are dining out." She already knew this, for Mr. Darcy had mentioned it that morning. "Shall we ask Papa for the carriage?" She glanced out at the dark clouds once more. "It will rain before you get there; I am certain of it."

"What is this?" Mrs. Bennet appeared as if conjured, snatching the note from Jane's hands. "Yes, you must accept, Jane," she said with brisk authority. "And we might contrive a way for you to remain at Netherfield overnight. I have just the thing—you will take Nellie."

"Mama!" Elizabeth cried, dismayed. "It will rain—"

“Precisely.” Mrs. Bennet interrupted triumphantly. “And then Jane will be obliged to spend the night.”

So many flaws riddled that reasoning that Elizabeth was rendered speechless. Gaping, she turned to Jane, but her sister merely shrugged.

“I shall send a note to Miss Bingley accepting her invitation,” she said with composure, rising and quitting the room. Unwilling to let her mother’s scheme go unchallenged, Elizabeth rose and made to follow.

“And where are you going, Miss Lizzy?” her mother asked, stepping into her path.

“I must speak to Papa about an important matter.” She stepped to the side, but Mrs. Bennet grabbed her arm, halting her progress.

“You will not spoil this for Jane! It is perfect—she will have more time in Mr. Bingley’s company. Come now, Elizabeth, surely you can see the advantages.” Mama beamed at her own ingenuity.

Sighing, Elizabeth gently disengaged her arm. “And if Jane is caught in the rain and falls ill? She will hardly endear herself to Mr. Bingley from her sickbed.”

Laughing, Mrs. Bennet shook her head. “No one ever died from a soaking. A slight chill will keep her at Netherfield Park all the longer. Eventually, she will be able to leave her bed and join the others downstairs.”

Knowing her mother would not be swayed, Elizabeth left without another word.

To her relief, Mrs. Bennet made no further attempt to detain her.

Determined to speak with her father, she approached the study door and raised her

hand to knock, only for it to open at that moment, revealing Jane, a sly grin on her face.

“It is taken care of,” she said, her smile touched with mischief. “Papa has agreed to spare the horses so I may take the carriage. Mama will not learn of it until it is too late.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You sly creature! I had no idea you were capable of such cunning. Brava!”

Jane’s smile wavered. “I do not want our mother to ruin this,” she whispered. “She has driven away so many suitors. A pretty face will not always compensate for troublesome relations.” She reached out, gave Elizabeth’s arm a gentle squeeze, and disappeared—no doubt to pen her reply to Miss Bingley.

Elizabeth entered her father’s study. He looked up from his book with a smile and gestured to the chair beside him. “What brings you here, my dear?” he asked, closing the volume and giving her his full attention.

She laughed lightly. “Jane anticipated my prior purpose, but I have another matter to discuss with you.” She fidgeted, her mind occupied by her father’s habitual indifference for his daughters—an indifference that troubled her more than ever, with the militia soon to be stationed in Meryton for the winter.

“I am concerned for Kitty and Lydia,” she finally said. “The militia—”

“Oh, you must not worry about them!” Mr. Bennet chuckled. “Gracious, Lizzy, there is no cause for concern. Your sisters have nothing to tempt a man to marry them beyond their charms. No one in his right mind would look on them in that light.”

“But what of less honorable intentions, sir?” she asked hesitantly.

“Not every officer in the militia conducts himself as a gentleman ought. Some are eager to feign affection and offer the world, making extravagant promises, and then leave a young lady compromised and disgraced. A moment’s carelessness may cost a girl her future. ”

Elizabeth prayed he would understand. He had once been a young man himself.

Mr. Bennet frowned and folded his hands across his chest. “You make a fair point. I shall have to consider the matter. It would cause undue havoc to declare your sisters no longer out, but perhaps a few restrictions would serve them well. I shall see to it, Lizzy. You have my word.”

It was more than she had hoped. Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. Disinterested Mr. Bennet might be, but he still loved his daughters dearly.

“Thank you, Papa.” Rising, she bent to kiss his cheek before leaving the room.

Feeling lighter than she had in days, her spirits buoyed by this success and her earlier exchange with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth was firmly of a mind to enjoy the rest of the afternoon.

I do hope I am present when Mama sees the carriage waiting in the drive, she thought in amusement. Yes, it will be a sight to see.



### Chapter Eight

Darcy's thoughts were elsewhere as the gentlemen returned from dining with the officers.

The weather had turned as expected, and rain lashed the carriage windows.

He watched streams of water race down the glass as he pictured a pair of fine eyes dancing with merriment.

That morning's encounter with Elizabeth on Oakham Mount had left him unusually unsettled.

His decision to pursue her in earnest had consumed him, yet he remained uncertain how best to proceed.

How did a man properly court a woman of worth?

He longed to do it aright but having never attempted such a pursuit before, he felt decidedly at sea.

"Ho there!" Bingley's sudden exclamation drew Darcy's attention, and he looked up to see what had prompted it.

A carriage lay mired in the muddy drive of Netherfield; it appeared the driver had ventured too near the edge and become stuck.

“That is Mr. Bennet’s carriage,” Bingley observed, his face lighting with anticipation. “Perhaps...”

Their own carriage navigated around the stranded conveyance and came to a halt beneath the portico.

Bingley was the first to disembark and ascend the stairs to the house, followed by Hurst. Darcy came last, silently hoping to find Elizabeth inside.

He was disappointed to discover only Miss Bennet.

Bingley, however, looked delighted to see his ‘angelic beauty’, and turned quickly in her direction.

“I had no notion you meant to call today!” he exclaimed, greeting her with unfeigned joy. “We saw your carriage outside.” He took the seat next to Miss Bennet and leaned forward in anticipation of her reply.

“Yes, I had just set out for home when the carriage wheel...well, you saw it,” Miss Bennet replied, her smile as serene and guileless as ever. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst exchanged pointed glances. No doubt, they believed the entire event had been orchestrated.

“You must stay the night!” Bingley declared. “It is nearly dark—far too late to send you back to Longbourn. I trust your horses are safe in the stables?” He looked thoroughly pleased with the situation.

Miss Bennet confirmed that her father’s coachman had led the horses to the stables, and that her maid and footman had been received in the servants’ quarters.

To Darcy’s eyes, she looked fatigued, though she bore it with composure as she

spoke quietly with Bingley.

He was eager to seek respite in his chambers, though propriety demanded he remain with the party.

Supper would be in a few hours, after which he might plead exhaustion and excuse himself for the night.

Miss Bingley kept close to Miss Bennet throughout the evening.

Bingley had no further opportunity to speak with his lady love, causing a scowl to linger on his brow until the hour grew late.

By the hour of nine, Miss Bennet's cheeks were flushed, her eyes glassy.

Darcy began to suspect she had taken ill.

Before he could draw Bingley's attention to it, she swooned in her chair beside Mrs. Hurst.

"Miss Bennet!" Bingley cried, leaping to his feet and rushing to her side. He placed a hand to her forehead. "She is very warm," he murmured. "We must get her upstairs."

"I shall call a footman," said Miss Bingley, a note of urgency in her tone.

"Do not be ridiculous," Bingley snapped, lifting Miss Bennet into his arms. "I have two perfectly sound limbs. Louisa, come with me." Mrs. Hurst rose at once without comment, casting a sharp glance at her sister before following him from the room.

Miss Bingley stepped closer to Darcy and hissed, "This is surely a ploy to thrust herself into my brother's notice. If their driver were competent, the carriage would

not have become stuck.”

Darcy frowned but gave no immediate reply. He did not believe Miss Bennet capable of such calculation. “I think you do the lady an injustice,” he said at last. “She seemed truly unwell. I hope her malady is of short duration.”

Miss Bingley huffed but said no more. Hurst, oblivious to the commotion, snored in his corner. When Bingley and Mrs. Hurst returned, he roused with a start, blinking in confusion.

“A note has been sent to Longbourn regarding Miss Bennet’s need to stay,” Mrs. Hurst informed her brother. “We shall send another in the morning.”

“But what of the apothecary? Ought we not to send for him?” Bingley ran a hand through his hair, looking more distressed now than he had at the moment of Miss Bennet’s collapse. He paced the room in evident agitation.

“There is nothing more to be done for her tonight,” Mrs. Hurst assured him. “I shall have a maid sit with her. By morning, she may very well be recovered.”

Darcy retired soon after, weary from the long day. As he drifted to sleep, he realized that with Miss Bennet confined to bed just down the hall, it was exceedingly likely that her next younger sister would arrive at Netherfield on the morrow to tend her.

November 13, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

The note from Netherfield came as something of a surprise.

Jane was well enough, but the carriage had become mired in the mud.

Elizabeth suspected her mother’s hand in the matter, though she quickly dismissed

the notion.

Beyond lamenting loudly when the carriage departed Longbourn, Mrs. Bennet had known nothing of Jane's rebellion until it was time for her eldest daughter to depart.

It was a greater shock, when the following morning, a stableboy arrived with a note from Netherfield for Miss Elizabeth. She opened it at the breakfast table, a sudden panic gripping her as fear for Jane took hold.

Dear Lizzy,

Oh, I am dreadfully embarrassed. Dining with Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley was delightful.

They expressed great interest in me and in our family, asking all manner of questions as we dined.

Later, they bid me a fond farewell as I boarded the carriage.

It was nearing dusk , and I wished to be home before nightfall.

As we turned down the drive, however, we became stuck in the mud just off the gravel path.

Despite John Coachman's efforts, and the aid of several footmen, the carriage would not budge, and I was obliged to return to the house and the hospitality of my friends.

The gentlemen returned, and we took supper.

I had begun to feel ill before then, but it was not until we were gathered in the parlor that I was overcome.

Oh, Lizzy! I swooned. When next I woke, I was upstairs in a guest chamber, with a maid seated beside me.

Do not be alarmed, dear sister, for there is nothing seriously amiss other than a sore throat and a headache.

I wish to return home so as not to be a burden, but Mr. Bingley and his sisters will not hear of my being moved before I am fully recovered.

They have sent for the apothecary, but in truth, I long for you. Will you come?

Yours, Jane

“I must go to Jane at once,” Elizabeth said to her father. “She writes asking for my presence.”

Mr. Bennet looked up from his breakfast. “And what does your sister’s letter say? John Coachman is to return from Netherfield today with the carriage and horses. He can take you to your sister’s side. Can Jane not wait until then to see you?”

“Jane has taken ill, sir.” She quickly explained how Jane had come to such a predicament. “I should like to see how she fares for myself,” she added firmly. “Have you any objection?”

“No, no, off you go.” Mr. Bennet waved a hand. “Though you had best be gone before your mother comes down and delays you with some foolishness.”

Elizabeth stood, thanked her father, and hurried from the room.

In a trice, she made herself ready, and left the house.

She knew she could reach Netherfield Park more quickly by traversing the fields.

The rains of the previous night had left the ground sodden, but she lifted her skirts and pressed forward, hoping for the best.

'Tis not as though I am going to see anyone but Jane. I shall be fit enough to attend her. Even as she thought it, she knew she deceived herself. Elizabeth very much hoped to see Mr. Darcy, despite having spoken with him only the day before.

An unfortunate misstep landed her squarely in a puddle, splattering her petticoats with mud.

With a sigh, she blew a damp curl from her face in an attempt to avoid further damage to her appearance and continued on.

Try as she might, by the time she reached Netherfield, she appeared decidedly disheveled.

As she approached the house, she caught sight of a solitary figure in the distance—a gentleman in a greatcoat, walking slowly down the path with his hands clasped tightly behind him.

In an instant, she knew it was Mr. Darcy.

He hailed her as she drew near, greeting her with a broad smile. A pleasant warmth filled her, and she returned his smile readily. “I have come to inquire after my sister,” she said. “Pray, sir, is she well?”

“I am pleased that I might predict your behavior with some accuracy,” he teased. “You see, I knew you would come the moment Miss Bennet’s note was dispatched. Come, I shall take you to her. The maid reported this morning that she had a restless

night.”

“Jane is rarely ill, but when she is, it tends to be severe.” Elizabeth fell into step beside him, her skirts swishing about her ankles as she walked.

“And you, Miss Elizabeth? Are you likewise hale and hearty, and ill only on rare occasions?” He turned a quizzical gaze upon her, his scar stark against the otherwise smooth plane of his face.

There was something striking in the way he looked at her, and her heart fluttered once more.

“I despise being ill,” she informed him crisply, hoping to mask her emotions.

“I make a dreadful patient, you know. No one but Jane can tolerate my complaints. Sickness means being confined indoors, and that I cannot abide.”



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

He chuckled. “Yes, well do I know it! I feel likewise.” He opened the door for her, and she crossed the threshold into Netherfield’s antechamber.

Another door led to the manor’s entrance hall, but before they reached it, the housekeeper, Mrs. Nicholls, appeared and greeted them with a respectful curtsy.

“Miss Elizabeth,” she said with a pleasant smile, “if you will allow me, I shall see to your pelisse and boots.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth replied, already unfastening the garment. She passed the pelisse to Mrs. Nicholls and bent to unlace her boots, exchanging them for a pair of house slippers she had carried with her.

“I shall have these dried and brushed for your return, miss,” the housekeeper promised, accepting the bundle and retreating through a side door.

Elizabeth straightened and smoothed her gown, far more presentable now, even though her hems were still splashed with mud. She looked up at Mr. Darcy and shrugged. He grinned and gave her a wink.

“Will you greet Bingley and his sisters now, or would you prefer to wait until you have seen your sister?”

His question gave her pause. In truth, she had no desire to see the superior sisters, but politeness—at least for Jane’s sake—required it.

“I suppose I ought to inform them of my presence,” she grumbled, which drew

another quiet laugh from him.

He led her down the long entryway to a passage on the left. Two doors down, they reached the breakfast parlor, and within, the rest of the household.

“Darcy! And Miss Elizabeth.” Mr. Bingley rose at once and came forward. “How do you do?” The smiling gentleman turned to Elizabeth. “You have come to inquire after your sister, have you not?”

“If you please, sir, I should like to know how she fares.”

Across the room, the ladies had not stirred, but Elizabeth caught the whispered words hems and mud . Unperturbed, she gave them no notice, keeping her attention firmly on Mr. Bingley.

“I have sent for the apothecary,” Mr. Bingley informed her. “Come, I shall take you upstairs.”

They departed, Mr. Darcy following behind. Elizabeth was glad of it—his presence comforted her. She counted the stairs silently as they climbed. Twenty steps brought them to the first landing; fifteen more to the corridor above, and at its end, a door.

“Pray, let me know how she truly is after you have seen her. I have naught but the maid’s account. And while I do trust her word, in my experience, we as humans are often more truthful with family.”

Mr. Bingley looked so earnest in his concern that Elizabeth laughed in hopes of easing his anxiety.

“I believe you have the right of it, sir. I promise, I shall speak with you directly after I have spoken with Jane.” She exchanged a glance with Mr. Darcy, then opened the

door and slipped inside without looking back.

Jane lay motionless in the bed, her face pale against the linens. Her head turned as Elizabeth entered, and she croaked out a greeting.

“I feel dreadful,” she rasped. “Oh, Lizzy, I began to feel unwell yesterday before I even departed. It was part of the reason I went to Papa to request the carriage. And yet, here I am, ill all the same.” Jane coughed and reached for Elizabeth’s hand.

“Mr. Bingley has sent for Mr. Jones,” Elizabeth murmured, pressing her sister’s fingers gently. “We shall have you to rights in no time. You do not seem well enough to return home.”

Jane sighed. “No, I am not. And I cannot even enjoy Mr. Bingley’s company from this bed.”

She sounded very put out, and Elizabeth smiled despite herself.

A short time later, she excused herself to find Mr. Bingley. Her concern for Jane had eased somewhat, though it was plain she was far too unwell to be moved. Mr. Jones would no doubt agree.

As Elizabeth neared the parlor, she heard voices coming from a nearby room—the ladies of the house, it seemed. She changed direction, her steps halting when she heard Mr. Darcy’s name. Unabashed and curious, she crept closer so she could hear.

“You must try harder, Caroline,” came Mrs. Hurst’s insistent tone. “He is everything you have ever wanted, and you have been given a rare gift. The man is under your brother’s roof, and you have his exclusive company!”

“It is not so simple. I have tried everything you advised—agreeing with him,

complimenting his appearance—dreadful though it is, and still, nothing. He does not pay me the slightest attention! Why, he has stared more at Eliza Bennet than he has ever looked at me. A country bumpkin with no real beauty—’tis insulting!

I could have any man I wanted in London. ”

“But you want him . Or rather, you want what he can offer. No gentleman of the first circles has shown the slightest interest in you, Caroline.” A teacup rattled, and Mrs. Hurst fell silent.

A moment later, she spoke again. “Miss Elizabeth possesses nothing that you do not have in abundance. We have gathered enough from Jane to know she has connections to trade and no dowry to speak of. Mr. Darcy would never take such a... travesty for a wife. Beguile him. Draw him in. I did it with Hurst.”

“Yes, and we both know how well that turned out. This petty revenge we have pursued—is it worth it? Yes, you have placed yourself above those who tormented us, but are you happy?”

Miss Bingley sounded a little mournful, and Elizabeth felt pity for whatever pain she had suffered.

“Mr. Darcy is not at all handsome, Louisa. Even Mr. Hurst is better favored. And that dreadful scar makes it all worse. His nose—once his best feature, apart from his hair—is now ruined, too. How could you wish me condemned to look upon that face every day?”

Whatever flicker of pity Elizabeth had felt vanished in an instant, replaced by fury. She turned on her heel—and collided squarely with Mr. Darcy’s solid chest. Her cheeks, already flushed with indignation, deepened to crimson.

He placed a finger gently to his lips, then reached for her hand, and drew her silently away. Only once they entered the library did he speak.

“I can see you are angry,” he said kindly. “Pray, pay them no mind. I am used to it.”

“Being accustomed to cruelty does not make it excusable!” She folded her arms in a huff, her chin lifting slightly. “How despicable!”

“Miss Bingley never had any hope of becoming Mrs. Darcy,” he said, lifting a hand to trace her cheek with a single finger. “Her flattery is too transparent.”

Clearing his throat, he stepped back and restored a more proper distance between them. Elizabeth felt the loss of his proximity keenly.

“You deserve better.” Her hand rose of its own accord to touch the place he had brushed, then dropped back to her side.

“I thank you for your kindness. You speak with such understanding. Your words...they mean a great deal to me. Now, shall we go in search of Bingley?” He gestured to the door, and they left together in search of their host.

Mr. Bingley met the news of Jane’s condition with a concerned frown and promptly invited Elizabeth to stay at Netherfield until her sister recovered sufficiently to travel home.

She accepted with gratitude, as a small unbidden thrill rose within at the thought of being in close proximity to Mr. Darcy a little while longer.

### Chapter Nine

Elizabeth enjoyed the stay at Netherfield more than she expected.

Mrs. Hurst's and Miss Bingley's dismissive behavior did not affect her, for she had ample opportunity to exchange witticisms and stimulating conversation with Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Bingley likewise joined in but eventually declared, with amused exasperation, that he could not keep pace with the pair and chose to listen instead.

When Elizabeth expressed regret, he waved her off.

"Books are Darcy's purview," he said. "'Tis clear you match him in that regard. I am content to observe."

Each day, Mr. Bingley inquired after Jane and her progress. It was slow, but with the aid of tinctures brought by Mr. Jones, her voice soon lost its raspiness, and she began to rest more easily.

Mrs. Bennet arrived at Netherfield with the younger girls in tow to check on her dearest daughter.

Naturally, she exaggerated Jane's condition, insisting that her daughter not be moved for at least three days.

Mr. Bingley agreed at once, appearing thrilled at the prospect of keeping Miss Bennet

under his roof.

His sisters, however, were clearly displeased.

Elizabeth observed their exchanged looks of derision and inwardly cringed, knowing her mother's gauche behavior reflected poorly on the family.

Mama had best tread lightly, lest she ruin Jane's chance at happiness.

Mr. Darcy did not engage in conversation during the visit, yet Elizabeth detected no hint of judgment from him.

It was a relief, for she feared he would hold her family's conduct against her and find her wanting.

Mrs. Bennet, for her part, further displayed her ill-breeding by ignoring him entirely.

He did not seem to mind. Elizabeth felt a pang of sympathy.

He must be well accustomed to such treatment.

How can he bear it? she wondered. People either fawn over him or dismiss him completely.

Why is beauty the first thing one notices when meeting another?

By Saturday, Jane felt well enough to join the others for dinner.

Elizabeth watched her sister converse with Mr. Bingley, her lovely countenance aglow with happiness.

Yet she could not help but notice the continued disapproval in the glances of the gentleman's sisters.

Their meaning was unmistakable, and Elizabeth wondered whether Mr. Bingley might be susceptible to persuasion.

If so, Jane's future happiness could be at risk.

"Will you return home tomorrow, Miss Elizabeth?" Mr. Darcy's inquiry broke into her thoughts.

"Mama wishes us to stay until Monday, but we shall ask for the carriage after church. I know Jane—she will not wish to trespass upon Mr. Bingley's hospitality longer than necessary." She sipped her soup, directing her attention toward her sister.

"Does she like him?" Mr. Darcy sounded at once wistful and curious. "They seem well-matched."

"Jane does not often share her feelings, though I have every reason to believe she is losing her heart to him. Will Mr. Bingley's sisters object?"

"They wish for their brother to marry into the first circles. Even with his fortune, he is still from trade. There are few peers who will lower themselves in that way." His tone bore a sardonic edge, and when Elizabeth turned to look at him, he raised one brow and smiled.

After dinner, Miss Bingley sought to engage Mr. Darcy's attention.

She flitted about him, flirting with exaggerated sweetness, before settling herself at the pianoforte.



There, she played romantic ballads and concertos, but he paid her no mind.

Elizabeth found the performance highly amusing, though she made no remark.

She was content to observe Jane and Mr. Bingley seated close to each other by the fire, heads bent in quiet conversation.

They made a lovely pair, and though it had been only four weeks since his arrival, it was evident that Jane clearly favored him above all other gentlemen.

Elizabeth mused on the nature of love and how unpredictable it could be.

Mr. Darcy sat very near her and she remained acutely aware of his presence.

His proximity exerted a curious pull upon her attention, as though a magnetic force drew her gaze.

When she turned to look at him, she was startled to find he was already watching her.

His expression was fathomless, but in his dark eyes she glimpsed something tender—perhaps even affection—for her.

He did not look away. It made her heart flutter and her breath catch.

A cough from Jane broke the spell, and Elizabeth turned at once. Her sister looked pale and weary, a handkerchief clutched in her hand as she leaned into the cushions of the chair.

Elizabeth rose and pronounced with sisterly authority, “I believe it is time to return you to bed, Jane,” Her sister did not protest, and Elizabeth helped her to stand.

Jane looped her arm through Elizabeth's, and they left the room together.

Though she regretted parting from Mr. Darcy, she welcomed the distance, for she needed space to make sense of the feelings stirring within her.

"I shall be glad to go home tomorrow," she murmured to her sister.

Jane nodded weakly. "I do not feel entirely myself, but I believe I should rest better in my own bed."

Elizabeth opened the chamber door and led her sister inside. In a trice, she was in a night gown and tucked securely beneath the covers. Bending to kiss her forehead, she bid her goodnight and went to her own chamber.

It seemed preposterous that affection could develop so quickly, yet that was precisely what had occurred.

Mr. Darcy had awakened feelings entirely new to her—exciting, unnerving, and somehow joyful.

His intelligence matched her own and never once had he made her feel inferior.

If he could love her, she believed she would be most pleased.

Love? The thought came unbidden. How very rapid is my imagination.

No sooner do I recognize that I hold him in some affection, than it fancies me as his wife.

It would not do. Elizabeth needed more time before she could determine the truth of her feelings.

Mr. Bennet's words of warning rang in her memory, and she knew she must be certain of Mr. Darcy's character before forming any attachment she might later regret.

The ladies returned to Longbourn the next day, much to Mrs. Bennet's displeasure. She complained loudly that Jane had returned unengaged and blamed Elizabeth for it.

"You ought to have pretended to fall ill!" she cried. "Then Jane could have nursed you and spent time with Mr. Bingley."

Elizabeth did not deign to answer her mother's ludicrous proclamations.

Instead, she went to her chamber to rest. She felt thoroughly weary, having slept but little the night before.

Jane, on the other hand, seemed much improved and attempted to calm their mother's nerves as Elizabeth left the parlor.

The following day, their father cleared his throat to gain their attention.

"I hope, my dear, that you have ordered a good meal for this evening, for we are to have company."

Mrs. Bennet's exclamations interrupted her husband, who waited with visible impatience for his wife to finish.

"It is not Mr. Bingley, my dear. No, it is a man who I have never before seen in all my life and who will, upon my death, have the power to cast you all out. My cousin, Mr. William Collins, writes to extend an olive branch to the family. He will arrive at four o'clock."

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! How could you not give me time to prepare? Goodness, I must speak to Hill!” Mrs. Bennet rose in a flurry, leaving her plate half full as she rushed from the room, calling for the housekeeper.

“That was badly done, Papa,” Elizabeth chastised mildly when the others had gone and they were alone. “She will be unbearable for the rest of the day.”

“I must have my amusements, Lizzy—you know that.” Mr. Bennet chuckled. “Here. Read the letter. You will find it as amusing as I did, I am certain.”

Elizabeth took the letter and began to read silently.

Sir,

We have not been introduced, and it falls to me to rectify this unfortunate matter.

I am William Collins, eldest son and heir to Mr. Josiah Collins, late of Kent.

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honored father always gave me much uneasiness.

He spoke about the matter often while he lived, and I have long regretted the breach that prevented me from knowing my relations.

Since suffering the misfortune of his loss this past year, I have frequently wished to heal the rift.

It is no easy thing to undertake, and for some time my own doubts restrained me, lest my actions seem disrespectful to his memory, for it had ever pleased him to remain at variance with your household.

Likewise, the thought of how I would be received by those who, in his telling, had wronged my dearest father, filled me with dread, for I could only imagine your response would be what he told me—that of derision and dismissal.

My mind is, at long last, now made up on the subject, for having received ordination last Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honorable Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

The name, cousin, may not hold familiarity to you, for she moves in exalted circles, far beyond those you command.

My patroness is the widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh—a baronet of some considerable property when he was alive—and a grander lady never lived.

Neither is there one so predisposed to be generous, offering her condescension to all those honored with her notice.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Providence has favored me in securing a patroness whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of her parish.

Here it shall be my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards her ladyship and to be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies instituted by the Church of England.

She is everything that is good, and I shall fulfill her bidding in whatever manner lies within my power.

The duties of a clergyman are vast, and the ordination I received demands a certain standard of conduct.

Moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence.

This includes my own house and relations.

As I have none other living than the Bennets of Hertfordshire, I seek to rectify this matter immediately .

On these grounds, I flatter myself that my present overtures are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of the Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side and not lead you to reject the offered olive-branch.

I must do my duty to repair that which is broken, and to atone for my position, which will usurp your daughters upon your demise.

I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters and beg leave to apologize for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends.

If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, the eighteenth of November, by four o'clock, and shall trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday se'nnight following, which I hope will be no inconvenience.

I am, sir, with respectful compliments to your lady and daughters,

Your well-wisher and friend, William Collins

Elizabeth looked up at her father, whose amusement remained unchecked.

“What manner of man is he?” she asked. “This is the most nonsensical letter I have ever had the misfortune of reading. What olive branch? What can he mean?”

“Is it not obvious, Lizzy? Mr. Collins means to offer for one of my daughters.”

She chuckled. “Are you certain? His praise of Lady Catherine is excessive. One might safely assume he is in love with his patroness. Any lady he marries will certainly come second in his affections.”

“Indeed, I suspect it will be so. No matter. He will provide much amusement, I think, for the duration of his stay. It will please Mrs. Bennet to throw her daughters in his path. Jane will be excluded, of course. And you? Will you allow your mother to steer him toward you?” Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow at his daughter, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Mama will be disappointed if she does. I will not be forced into a marriage not of

my choosing, no matter how she wails and complains.” She speared the eggs with her fork, then took a bite.

“Yes, I thought you would profess as much. I cannot say that I blame you, particularly when a superior specimen is available.”

Elizabeth choked on her egg. Eyes watering, she took her teacup and sipped carefully, trying to soothe the cough that overtook her. “I do not know what you mean,” she said hoarsely.

Mr. Bennet laughed. “I am not blind to the man’s interest in you, my dear. Why do you think I have welcomed him into my study? I wished to understand what manner of man Mr. Darcy is. I am impressed. He is intelligent, thoughtful, and dutiful—a rare treasure among his set.”

“We are only friends, Papa,” she cautioned. Mr. Darcy had made no declaration, and she did not wish to raise false hopes.

“Friends, is it? That is good. A solid relationship ought to begin with friendship.” His expression turned serious. “I do hope you will not form your final opinion based on anything but his character.”

She understood his meaning and bristled. “I am not so shallow. He is a good man. I only meant for you to understand that there is nothing more between us...”

“Not yet.” Her father finished the thought, and she scowled. “Have a care, Lizzy. You are a fair way along the path to losing your heart. I could not give you up to anyone less worthy.” He stood, bent to kiss the top of her head, and hurried to his study.

She had not believed Mr. Darcy’s attentions obvious to anyone but herself.



Yet she still doubted them. His intense looks puzzled her, and while she hoped they signified genuine regard, she could take no step until he made his intentions known.

Her father was right, however. Her heart hovered at the precipice of falling in love, and if she did not guard it carefully, she would tumble headlong into the abyss before she fully understood what had happened.

Elizabeth remained at the table for some time, idly moving food about her plate, lost in thought.

When her tea had grown cold, she finally rose.

There would be time enough for reflection.

For now, she would seek Jane, who still coughed, and Elizabeth wished to assure herself of her sister's well-being.

### Chapter Ten

Mr. Collins arrived precisely at four o'clock. He stepped down from the hired gig and straightened, grinning at the Bennets, who stood waiting to receive him.

“My dear cousin!” he cried, stepping forward and bowing to Mr. Bennet. “At long last, I have arrived at your doorstep.”

As Mr. Bennet performed the introductions, Elizabeth studied their cousin with keen interest. Mr. Collins was a tall, stout man of about five-and-twenty, with a saccharine smile fixed upon his face.

When he removed his hat, Elizabeth noted that his brown hair lay flat against his scalp and his locks were in need of a thorough washing.

They proceeded into the house. Mr. Collins's commentary continued without pause as they entered the drawing room.

Mrs. Bennet rang for tea, her lips pursed in evident displeasure.

Elizabeth was surprised her mother had not yet said anything untoward, though she knew it was only a matter of time.

Their guest praised the house, the furnishings, the decor, and finally the Bennet daughters.

They bore the attention with grace, though Kitty and Lydia wrinkled their noses in

distaste.

After tea, Mr. Bennet led Mr. Collins to the study, leaving the ladies alone in the drawing room. “Have you ever seen such a poor specimen of a man?” Lydia exclaimed at once. “Why, even Mr. Darcy looks better.”

““Beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them.”” Mary said solemnly.

“David Hume, Mary? I am impressed.” Elizabeth leaned over and tapped her sister’s hand, offering her a warm smile. “And you are not incorrect.”

Mary smiled hesitantly, clearly pleased at the praise. Elizabeth felt a twinge of guilt. Her younger sister so rarely received approval from anyone in the family.

“Only those with ugly features speak such proverbs,” Mrs. Bennet snipped.

“Keep your musings to yourself, Mary. Lydia is correct—Mr. Collins is regrettably favored, though I do not agree that he is worse than Mr. Darcy. That ghastly scar...” She shuddered.

“Still, Mr. Collins will inherit Longbourn, and so we must be polite.”

Kitty and Lydia grumbled but did not argue.

Elizabeth wondered how far her mother would go when she learned about Mr. Collins’s so-called olive branch.

Mr. Darcy’s fortune had not lured her mother into thinking well of him.

Would she behave differently with the heir to Longbourn?

To do so would expose the greatest of hypocrisy.

Yet, it seemed entirely in Mrs. Bennet's character to behave just so.

Later that evening, Elizabeth noted her mother and their guest speaking quietly in the corner of the drawing room. Curiosity overcame her, and she crept closer until their conversation became audible.

"I have every intention of offering an olive branch in penance of the unfortunate circumstance that places me before your daughters in the entail, madam," he said seriously.

"Oh? Then you will sign away your rights? That is very good of you." Mrs. Bennet preened and tapped his arm with her fan.

"Not at all, madam." Mr. Collins looked positively panicked.

"I shall offer marriage to one of your charming daughters. By marrying a daughter of the estate, you will have a home when your dear husband departs this mortal coil. 'Tis the least I can do.

And it fulfills the commands of my patroness, who said to me only recently, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. Choose a gentlewoman, for my sake. And for your own, let her be a useful sort of person.' And, so you see, ma'am, I have come as expeditiously as possible to select a bride from among my cousin's daughters. I am very partial to Miss Jane Bennet—"

"I am afraid, sir, that my daughter is being courted by a gentleman from a neighboring estate." Mrs. Bennet's sharp interjection cut him off before he could finish the thought.

“And I am afraid that Elizabeth, next in age, is far too willful for a clergyman. My Mary, however, is the perfect choice. She is studious and pious, and in every way the ideal match.”

Mr. Collins frowned. “She is not as well-favored as her sisters, but I suppose other qualities will compensate for the lack.”

Elizabeth bristled but held her tongue, intent on hearing the entire exchange.

“It is folly for a man and wife not to be well-matched in appearance, sir. Surely, your patroness has spoken of the dangers.” Mrs. Bennet batted her eyes.

“Let us speak plainly. A man with lesser physical advantages will find it difficult to manage a wife of superior beauty. Other men will flatter her away. No, ’tis far better to marry someone less attractive. ”

Elizabeth nearly laughed aloud at her mother’s absurd reasoning.

Was that truly her belief—that the best marriages occurred when both sides were equally handsome?

Goodness, no wonder she had married Mr. Bennet.

Her father was a handsome man, even now, in his sixth decade.

Still, it came as a relief that Mr. Collins would not direct his attentions to her, though she could not be certain how Mary might feel.

Mrs. Bennet’s words appeared to have made an impression, for Mr. Collins nodded sagely.

“Yes, Miss Mary it will be. I shall make myself agreeable to her and then offer my hand in marriage. Thank you, Mrs. Bennet, for your wise counsel.” He bowed and left her side, crossing the room to take a seat beside Mary.

Elizabeth remained where she was, musing on the overheard conversation, and resolving to speak with Mary as soon as she could.

November 19, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

The next day, the ladies decided to walk into Meryton.

Jane, feeling quite like herself again, longed to be out of doors.

Mr. Collins asked to accompany them, and though they had received their fill of him the previous evening, they agreed.

He never ceased talking, so conversation with him—or anyone else—was nearly impossible.

The only time he fell silent was when he ate.

The man consumed enough to feed two, slouching over his plate and filling his mouth until it could hold no more.

He offered compliments on everything served at table, from the boiled potatoes to the pheasant.

At one point, he inquired whether the estate employed a cook.

Mrs. Bennet’s stiff reply confirmed it. She seemed affronted at the suggestion that her daughters might set foot in a kitchen.

Elizabeth wondered whether her mother understood that a wife with no cookery skills would be of little use to a man such as Mr. Collins.

They departed soon after the morning meal.

Lydia and Kitty bounded ahead, their heads bent together in eager discourse.

Mr. Collins and Mary followed. He offered his arm to the lady, and she accepted.

His ramblings began the moment they set out and continued the entire way to Meryton.

Elizabeth and Jane brought up the rear, the former keeping a sharp eye on the pair ahead, hoping to gauge her sister's opinion of their cousin.

"You seem rather contemplative today," Jane observed. Elizabeth quickly told her sister everything she had overheard the night before. Jane sighed deeply.

"Mama has ever been thus, Lizzy. Why is it a surprise to you now? Yes, she desires wealthy husbands for her children, but a wealth of good looks is just as important to her. Have you never heard her tell Mrs. Long how she wishes for handsome grandchildren? Yet even Mama will not turn away Father's heir."

"I wonder what Mary thinks of him," Elizabeth mused.

"On the surface, they seem well suited. I do not speak of their appearance, but rather their interests. Mary is pious and morally inclined. Marrying a clergyman would be logical. But look—observe her posture. She is rigid and holds herself well apart from the man. Perhaps she dislikes him."

"It has been less than a day—impossible for any of us to form a clear opinion."

Elizabeth nodded. "You are wise, Jane. We had best watch and wait."

They entered Meryton to find Kitty and Lydia speaking with Mr. Denny and an unfamiliar, handsome man in a blue coat.

Upon reaching them, Mr. Denny introduced Mr. George Wickham to the walking party.

He was a fine specimen of the male sex, with dark blond hair and startling blue eyes.

His features were perfectly proportioned, without the slightest hint of asymmetry.

"I mean to join the militia," he told them. "Miss Lydia assures me I will look better in a red coat, and my friend Denny promises good employment and agreeable company."

Lydia batted her lashes. "You are most welcome to Meryton, sir! Why, my aunt is to have a card party on the morrow. You should come!"

Mary hissed, "Lydia, you cannot offer invitations on our aunt's behalf!"

Their sister laughed. "Fie! We are to take tea with her. We can ask then."

Jane drew in a sudden breath, and Elizabeth turned to see what had caught her attention.

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were approaching on horseback.

A gasp from Mr. Wickham made her turn back to him.

His face had gone pale, and he swallowed hard.



Another glance at Mr. Darcy told Elizabeth the two men knew each other—and that their acquaintance was not a friendly one.

Mr. Darcy's face was dark with fury, his features twisted in anger.

He appeared frightful, and for a moment, she could see why others might find him unappealing.

'Tis a good thing his heart does not match that countenance. She watched as he turned his horse and galloped away the moment he reached the edge of the high street.

“On second thought, Denny, I had best move on.” Elizabeth turned once more to regard Mr. Wickham. He looked uneasy, even frightened. “Miss Bennet, can you tell me when the post coaches depart?”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

“The incoming coach will not arrive until late this evening at ten o’clock,” Jane replied. “It departs at seven in the morning. And the mail coach has already come and gone today.”

Mr. Wickham looked dismayed. “I came in the colonel’s private coach alongside Denny,” he said. “I suppose I ought to go and arrange a ticket at once.” He bowed and walked away. Denny called after him, offering a parting wave to the ladies.

“What do you suppose that was about?” Lydia pouted. “I want him to stay! He is the handsomest man I have ever seen.”

“‘Tis not as though he would like you,” Kitty grumbled. “You are a child!”

The girls bickered as the party made their way to the haberdashery to complete their errands. Mr. Bingley had not followed Mr. Darcy but instead dismounted and joined them. He could offer no explanation for his friend. Elizabeth meant to ask Mr. Darcy as soon as she could.

Darcy

He kicked his mount into a gallop, racing towards Netherfield Park as swiftly and safely as he could.

He is here. How on earth... But it did not matter. He would write to his cousin and summon him to Hertfordshire at once. There was a chance Richard could reach Meryton before Wickham escaped. Did the village have a post coach or mail coach? He did not know.

He reined in his horse before the stables and dismounted.

A groom came forward, and Darcy handed off the reins with a nod of thanks then hurried inside.

He gave little thought to his appearance—he must surely look wild—and took the stairs two at a time until he reached his chamber.

In two strides, he crossed to his writing box.

Opening it, he withdrew a fresh sheet of paper and uncapped his ink bottle. He dipped a quill only to find it needed mending. With a muttered curse, he tossed it aside and seized another. This one served, and he began to write.

Richard,

Wickham is here. I saw him in Meryton. Make haste, for I do not believe he will remain now that he has seen me. Our months of searching may be at an end.

Darcy

With shaking hands, he sanded and sealed the letter. He entrusted it to one of his grooms, who set off immediately on a fast horse. Darcy stood at the window, watching until the rider vanished from view. With the help of Providence, Wickham would soon no longer be a threat.

He did not leave the house again that day, instead brooding over the situation. The latest letter from Georgiana had held more enthusiasm than the last—a promising sign of progress. His sister would be well and whole again, and having Wickham contained could only hasten that outcome.

Darcy recalled Miss Elizabeth's confusion as he had ridden away.

He owed her no explanation, yet he felt compelled to give one all the same.

She was already dear to him, and he wished to confide in her.

Of all people, he felt she would understand the plague Wickham had been to the Darcys. She would empathize.

Only later did he recall that there had been another unknown gentleman among the Bennet sisters. Who is he? he wondered. When Bingley returned that evening, he had his answer.

"The man is a cousin," Bingley explained. "Mr. William Collins. While you were distracted, he rambled on at length about his patroness...who is...none other than Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

Darcy sat straight up. "That man is my aunt's parson? Unbelievable."

Bingley wagged his brows and laughed. "I suspected the name would mean something to you. I am certain you will find him entertaining. He is rather loquacious—much like Mrs. Bennet, but even worse. I could hardly get a word in for every five he uttered. I dare say your aunt's ears are burning—he hardly composed a sentence without invoking her name. "

"Then I shall have something to look forward to." Darcy raised his glass and took a drink.

The ladies had retired, leaving the gentlemen alone in the billiards room. Hurst had played two games before retreating to a chair next to the decanter. Bingley and Darcy continued their game, the former taking his turn while the latter savored his brandy.

“Your turn, old chap.” Darcy rose and took his place. Bingley stood off to the side as he aimed.

“Miss Elizabeth asked after you.”

Bingley’s words, unexpected though they were, sent a thrill through Darcy, and he missed the shot.

Straightening, he turned to face his friend. “You did that on purpose.”

“I cannot win against you any other way.” Bingley’s grin widened. “She seemed rather put out that you rode off so abruptly.” He waited, clearly expectant. When Darcy remained silent, Bingley slapped his thigh. “Come now, Darcy! She likes you—do not throw this away!”

“You mean I must not permit my fears to rule my actions?” Darcy glanced at the corner where Hurst now snored lightly, the decanter empty.

“I am merely being cautious, Bingley. We—you and I—wish to marry for more than connection or wealth. Those are society’s expectations.

It has ever been easy for you to gain a lady’s attention; her regard soon follows.

That is not the case for me. Ladies are drawn to my place in society, not my person. Is it wrong that I proceed with care?”

Bingley was one of the few of Darcy’s friends who knew the extent of his past suffering, but even he could not truly understand. There were parts Darcy did not share with anyone. He hoped one day he might...with the right lady.

“I promise, I shall not close myself off to the possibility,” he said at last. “Pray, let

me go about it in my own way.”

Bingley nodded, though his expression remained skeptical. “You are always careful. But be warned: love robs even the wisest of their judgment. It clouds the mind.”

Darcy inclined his head in acknowledgment. They retired soon after. He would rise early and seek out Elizabeth on Oakham Mount.

### Chapter Eleven

Colonel Fitzwilliam arrived shortly after six o'clock that evening. Dressed in his red coat, he waited for Darcy in the parlor.

"I believe I surprised your hostess, Darcy," he said jovially. "She seemed quite flattered that the son of an earl would grace her with his presence."

"Miss Bingley is easily impressed," Darcy remarked. "My horse is ready. Shall we depart?"

"Yes, I think so. Better to see it done. My men are standing by to escort our mutual friend to the Marshalsea. He made a grave error last summer." The colonel's tone hardened. "I will accompany them, for I shall not rest easy until he is safely locked away."

"There is no guarantee that he has not already escaped." Darcy did not know whether Wickham was aware that Richard hunted him, but he suspected that merely seeing his old rival would be enough to send the blackguard running, especially after Ramsgate.

Richard shrugged. "I believe he is still in the village. The notion of riding to town in a cart would be abhorrent to that rat. No, he will have purchased whatever comfort he could afford. I shall send one of my men to Forster. We may need the extra support."

"Do as you will."

They left the house and mounted their horses. Richard's men fell in behind them. The

ride into Meryton passed swiftly. There was no moon, and the night was dark, so they kept to the main roads, to avoid mishap.

The inn at Meryton blazed with light. One of the soldiers departed, to fetch assistance from the colonel's residence, while the other followed Darcy and Richard inside.

Within minutes, they spotted their quarry in a shadowed corner.

He had a barmaid in his lap and a full plate of food before him.

Upon seeing them approach, he shoved the woman aside and tried to stand.

Richard stepped forward, pressed a firm hand on his shoulder, and forced him to sit.

"I am pleased to see my understanding of your nature was accurate." Richard's broad, mocking grin was devoid of warmth.

His eyes were steely as he regarded his prey.

With a sharp tug, he pulled out the chair opposite and sat.

"Darcy thought you would flee. I knew better. You never could resist your comforts."

"This hovel is hardly comfort," Wickham scoffed. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"Judgment has come, Wickie. Did you truly believe you would escape consequences for your actions last summer?" He clicked his tongue and shook his head. "No, I am afraid you crossed a line even Darcy's patience could not abide."

"I did nothing wrong. The wench is unsullied and, sadly, unmarried." Wickham



sneered. “’Tis likely for the best. Had I married her, I might have sired a beast as ugly as her brother.”

Darcy smiled—a cold, unaffected smile. “Such petty insults, Wickham. I expected better.”

Richard leaned forward. “Unfortunately for you , we have evidence of your wrongdoing.” Richard reached into his coat and pulled out a stack of markers tied with twine.

“Debts collected from Lambton to Ramsgate. Let us see... fifty pounds in Lambton—quite the sum. Twenty pounds in Ramsgate. And in London, a total of three hundred pounds. Tell me, how did you manage it? Did you move on each time a debtor came to collect? Two pounds alone is enough to see a man imprisoned for life in the Marshalsea. Darcy here bought the debts—did you know? And now he has called them in.”

Wickham’s face grew paler with each word. “You know I cannot repay it,” he spat. “All this for wooing your sister?”

“On the contrary, Wickham. Our score stretches back years.”

Darcy’s words drew Wickham’s attention, and he scoffed.

“Still trying to best me?” he mocked. “Your wealth and connections are all you have. It must be pleasant to have funds enough to waste on something so frivolous as revenge.”

“Revenge? No, Wickham. This is justice. Justice for my sister, and for everyone you have harmed through your profligacy—”

“And justice for you, I suppose?” Wickham interrupted. “Is it my fault you were born with such unfortunate features? They say your mother cried when she beheld you—”

Richard moved so quickly that Darcy could scarcely follow what happened. In an instant, his cousin had Wickham by the coat and dragged him out of the corner and across the table. “Not another word, scum!” he barked. “Higgins, help me with this baggage.”

The soldier stepped forward and seized Wickham’s arm.

Colonel Fitzwilliam took hold of the other.

As they made their way to the door, Darcy could feel the eyes of the other patrons upon them.

He ignored their stares and felt a measure of relief when Richard’s other man appeared accompanied by Colonel Forster and two more soldiers.

“Forster! Good man,” Richard greeted him cordially. ”Help us prepare this dastard for transport to London, will you?”

“As you say,” Colonel Forster replied. “We have the irons. Let us move this spectacle outside. I am sure the proprietor would appreciate it.”

A man at the bar gave a grateful nod as they filed out through the door.

Wickham protested his ill use, his cry rising in volume as they clapped the irons onto his wrists. Richard presented the markers as evidence, and Colonel Forster gave them a quick inspection.

“I am afraid these men have every right to arrest you, sir,” Forster said coolly. “I

must say, I am relieved Denny did not sign you on. I should hate to find a wolf in our midst.” He turned back to Richard. “I can provide a cart in the morning to transport the prisoner. Will that suffice?”

“Perfectly, old friend. Is there a secure place to hold this wretch? We shall need a solid guard. Wickham is a slippery one.”

Forster agreed to see it done, and Darcy watched as the red-coated soldiers escorted the prisoner away. Wickham continued protesting until the very last.

“It seems as though I shall not be departing so soon,” Richard mused. Do you think Bingley will give me a room for the night?”

“I half expected you to say you would sleep outside Wickham’s door,” Darcy jested dryly.

Richard laughed. “No, Roberts will stay in the cell with our friend. Higgins and the others will keep watch outside. Forster will see to it he does not escape.”

“I wish matters had unfolded differently, but I cannot allow him to hurt anyone else.” Darcy considered that his father would have disapproved.

Richard frowned. “I can see where your thoughts are going. Uncle Darcy would not have stood idle either. Do you truly believe your father would have let Wickham go unpunished after attempting to elope with his daughter?”

“I hardly know.” Darcy sighed and turned his steps toward his mount. “My father was just, and I believe he meant to be kind. Yet I could never be certain I had pleased him.

“Your father placed too much importance on a man’s outward form. My uncle valued

character, yes, but believed it was a man's bearing that commanded respect. That belief did not serve him well as a father."

"Yet he was great friends with yours." The words came out laced with bitterness, but he did not care. He quickly urged his horse into a canter. Richard followed.

After catching up with Darcy, the colonel said, "Their history is complicated, or so Lord Matlock has said. By the time Uncle Darcy offered for your mother, I believe he no longer noticed my father's affliction.

Still, his expectations for a son were far more exacting than that of a brother-in-law.

He was hard on you—no one disputes that.

He judged you with greater severity than he ever did my father.

You must not let it color your perspective of him entirely. "

Darcy did not respond. In the past month, old wounds had reopened, and long buried feelings had stirred.

Insecurities he thought conquered had resurfaced and had crowded his hard-won, quiet confidence.

He longed to speak with Elizabeth—to assure himself she was real, that the admiration he thought he had glimpsed had not faded.

They arrived at Netherfield Park, careworn and weary. Richard quickly ingratiated himself with Bingley and his sisters. To Darcy's surprise, Miss Bingley ignored him entirely, content to speak with his cousin instead. Before retiring, Richard joked about offering Miss Bingley his hand in marriage.

“She would accept, you know,” Darcy warned. “Miss Bingley would like nothing better than to become the daughter of an earl. My connection pales in comparison.”

“I had best tread carefully, then. Mother would be seriously displeased if I foiled her plans.”

With that, Richard bid him goodnight, and Darcy retired.

He lay awake long into the night, staring up into the dark canopy above his bed.

Sleep eluded him until the clock struck twelve.

When it came, it brought dreams that taunted him—memories of Eton, of university, of failures and doubts.

Yet despite his restless night, he rose early, determined to ride to Oakham Mount.

Elizabeth would be there. Of that, he felt certain.

Darcy knew her well enough to predict that.

The morning air was cold, and the scent of rain still lingered.

He mounted his horse and set off at a brisk trot, his breath rising in pale clouds.

He was grateful for his warm greatcoat. Richard had already gone, leaving behind a brief note stating his intention to depart at first light.

Darcy did not blame him. Every moment Wickham remained free was another moment he might yet escape.

The hill loomed ahead, and he soon discerned a figure standing at its summit. Elizabeth. Urging his horse forward, he dismounted a short distance from her and secured the reins to a low-hanging branch.

“Good morning,” he said.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

She dipped her head in greeting, then tilted it slightly as she studied him. “Was there a fire at Netherfield?” she asked, lifting an arched brow. “Or a flood?” She did not sound angry—merely curious. “Mr. Bingley did not ride off, so I can only assume you forgot something.”

“I shall tell you all if you wish,” he replied, helping Elizabeth take a seat on their familiar log. “I fully intended to explain myself.”

He joined her. Elizabeth's expression was one of open expectancy. “I confess to great curiosity,” she admitted. “You left so suddenly. And that gentleman—Mr. Wickham—he looked frightened.”

“He was.” Darcy’s reply was low and rough. He drew a breath to steady himself and continued. “Our meeting was as unexpected for me as it was for him. You see, Wickham and I share a long and disagreeable history—one that has, at last, reached its end.”

He fell silent, and when Elizabeth prompted him to continue after a few moments, he pressed on.

“Mr. Wickham is the son of a respectable man—Pemberley’s former steward.

Years ago, he saved my father’s life, and, in gratitude, my father became his child’s godfather.

Young Wickham used that connection to his advantage, securing a place at Harrow, and later at Cambridge.

All the while, he maintained a studied charm and cultivated my father's favor.

He came to believe he was entitled to the privileges of a second son. ”

“When my father died, he left his godson a bequest of one thousand pounds and the promise of a valuable family living, if he chose to take orders. Wickham declined, instead accepting a sum of three thousand pounds in lieu. I saw no more of him until the living fell vacant, at which point he demanded it of me regardless. When I refused, he flew into a rage and swore vengeance.”

He looked away, jaw tight. “Last summer, he nearly succeeded. He attempted to elope with my sister. We thwarted him, but Georgie was devastated and has never been the same.”

Elizabeth's brow furrowed. “So yesterday was the first time you had seen him since—?” She trailed off, and her sympathetic expression nearly broke him. Lord, he did not want her sympathy. He wanted her love.

“Yes. I rode back to Netherfield and sent an express to my cousin, Richard—Colonel Fitzwilliam. Together, we gathered evidence of his debts, sufficient to see him imprisoned. Richard took him away this morning.”

“I recall he inquired as to when the next coach to London would depart,” Elizabeth murmured. “Are you so fearsome that he would flee rather than remain in your presence?”

Darcy sighed. “Wickham has tormented me for years,” he admitted.

“During our confrontation last summer—well, he saw a side of me he never had before.” He reached up and traced the scar, the memory of the incident still fresh in his mind.



“I believe he truly feared I would kill him at our next meeting.”

He kicked at the earth beneath his boots. “Never have I felt so powerless,” he said tightly. “Georgiana wept after Wickham’s parting words, which sought to degrade and humiliate her before he fled and disappeared. He left me bleeding, and she believed she had caused my demise.”

“And Miss Darcy—how does she fare now? Has she recovered?”

“My sister does better than when I left London. My presence became a reminder of all she wished to forget.” He plucked at a tuft of dry grass at the base of the log, his gaze distant.

“Is there more?” Elizabeth’s perception startled him. “You mentioned a long history. Has this Mr. Wickham always sought to usurp your place? Is that the foundation of your mutual dislike?”

“He was my childhood tormentor,” Darcy admitted quietly.

“Wickham filled my thoughts with every unkind notion, and it is his voice that echoes those doubts still. I have labored to overcome it all, and yet when I stand before him, I can feel as powerless as I did as a child.” He hesitated, inwardly wincing.

Oh, what must she think of me, laying bare such weakness? Surely, she will be disgusted.

“My father always counseled me to dwell on the past only so far as its recollection brings us pleasure. Yet I would amend his wisdom with a conviction of my own.” Her tone was soft but sure.

“Let us reflect upon the past only insofar as its memories grant us clarity and fortitude. To ignore discomfort or pain that we have endured is no remedy. ’Tis only in acknowledging our trials that we may lay them to rest. As for the specter that troubles you,” she added, placing her hand gently on his arm, “I see no sign of it.”

Darcy turned and met her gaze. It brimmed with admiration and respect—no trace of the revulsion he feared would be present.

Overcome, he took her hand in his and pressed a reverent kiss to her fingers.

“Thank you,” he whispered, her hand still near his lips.

“You cannot imagine how your words touch my heart.” He lowered her hand but did not release it—the connection—to have her hand in his felt natural and right.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, drawing Darcy’s eyes upward. “You had best return to Longbourn,” he said reluctantly. “Bingley means to call this afternoon. May I—would it be too forward to ask if I might call on you as well?”

Her lovely eyes brightened, and her countenance bloomed with a smile that stole his breath. “I should be pleased to receive you,” she said earnestly. “Until later, sir.”

He let go of her hand, and she rose. He stayed seated, watching as she waved and began her descent. Everything about her entranced him. He longed to follow, to wrap his arms around her and tell her how ardently he admired and loved her. Soon, he thought. Very soon.

### Chapter Twelve

Darcy accompanied Bingley to Longbourn later that day.

Ominous clouds hung low in the sky, and the air threatened rain.

As such, they chose the carriage, for neither wished to return to Netherfield drenched.

Though his outward appearance remained composed, Darcy could scarcely contain his anticipation.

Ever a reserved man, he harbored a near-frantic eagerness within.

Elizabeth had agreed to receive him—it seemed nothing short of miraculous.

Her manner had been sincere; he believed her.

Surely, he had at last found a lady who might love him for himself.

Still, unwelcome doubts niggled in the corners of his mind.

Seeing her will dispel them, he told himself firmly, pushing the thoughts aside.

“I have the invitation to the ball at Netherfield,” Bingley announced, waving the envelope in his hand. “Do you suppose Miss Bennet will agree to stand up with me for the first?” His face glowed with anticipation and happiness, his delight almost boyish.

Darcy nodded. "She will. Miss Bennet expresses her feelings with proper delicacy, as any lady should; she is demure yet attentive. Even a fool could discern that she holds you in high regard." He tapped his boot impatiently against the floor of the carriage, irritated by how slowly the journey to Longbourn seemed to pass.

"Thank you, Darcy. Caroline and Louisa insist they are better judges of Miss Bennet's heart and claim she remains untouched by my attentions.

I almost believed them—I am not a lady, and their sentiments often elude me.

"Bingley gave a rueful shrug. "But your confidence encourages me. I shall ask her for the first set—and the supper set as well."

"Seize your happiness, my friend." Darcy allowed himself a rare grin, the movement pulling slightly at the scar along his cheek. May I soon enjoy such felicity, he silently hoped.

Bingley's brow creased in concern. "You do not believe I act too soon?" he asked anxiously. "What if I am mistaken in her feelings?"

The man looked genuinely perplexed, which nearly prompted a laugh, but Darcy schooled his features. "Many happy marriages are founded on less than what you share with Miss Bennet," he assured Bingley. "If you fear haste, propose an extended engagement, or request permission to court her openly."

Bingley brightened at once. "An excellent notion! I shall do so!"

The carriage slowed as it turned on the Longbourn drive. Darcy leaned forward, peering through the window, his heart quickening. In a few moments, he would be in Elizabeth's presence once more.

When the carriage halted, Bingley stepped out first, adjusting his coat as he waited. Together, they approached the door and rang the bell.

“I am most relieved Caroline and Louisa chose not to accompany us,” Bingley murmured as the door swung open.

Darcy offered no reply, though he silently agreed. The butler, Mr. Hill, ushered them inside. From down the hall, voices echoed—Mrs. Bennet’s unmistakable tones pierced the air of the manor. Darcy winced inwardly; the shrillness of her manner strained the ear.

They were announced, and as they entered the room, Darcy looked around for Elizabeth.

She sat upon a settee, her sister Miss Mary beside her.

On the latter’s left sat a gentleman he recognized from Meryton— Mr. Collins, Bingley said he was, who held the living at Hunsford, thanks to Lady Catherine’s patronage.

Mr. Collins turned as the newcomers entered, surveyed them both, then returned to his conversation.

“Mr. Bingley! Oh, we are so pleased to see you, are we not, Jane? Does my daughter not look well today, sir?” Mrs. Bennet beamed, then cast a disapproving look at Darcy and wrinkled her nose.

“And your friend is welcome, too, of course.” She barely looked at him as she spoke, and Darcy saw the slight shudder that followed.

“Your hospitality is appreciated, Mrs. Bennet,” Bingley replied kindly, sending Darcy

an apologetic glance. Bless him, Bingley had never understood why others showed distaste for Darcy—or rather, for the mark he bore.

Mrs. Bennet quickly directed Bingley to Jane's side, and Darcy crossed the room to take the chair beside Elizabeth on the settee. "Good afternoon, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary," he said courteously. "Will you introduce me to your guest?"

The man frowned, clearly displeased at the request, yet remained silent.

Elizabeth smiled warmly, her eyes twinkling in that way that made his stomach lurch. "Certainly, sir. This is our cousin, Mr. William Collins of Hunsford, Kent. He is visiting and will return to his parish at the end of the week."

"Indeed?" Darcy replied somewhat distractedly as he eyed the man more closely.

So, this was the toady to whom his aunt had granted the living.

He could hardly be anything else, given Lady Catherine's tastes.

She had once sought his opinion when the post first became vacant, but he did not recall any mention of a William Collins among the candidates.

Naturally, she had selected someone other than whom I recommended, he thought. Such was ever her way.

"Do you know the parish, sir?" Mr. Collins asked.

"I am favored beyond my expectations. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is the most gracious benefactress! Why, just last week, she advised me on the state of my garden. 'Mr. Collins,' said she, 'a parson's garden ought to be both beautiful and functional. Yours is neither, and you must set it to rights at once.' I promised, of course, to spend

some time in it daily until it met her satisfaction. ”

Darcy exchanged a glance with Elizabeth. Who was this ridiculous man? Obviously, he adored his patroness and would comply with her every whim. Lady Catherine preferred such subservience. “I am familiar with the area,” he hedged. “My aunt is Lady Catherine—”

“Mr. Darcy of Pemberley!” Mr. Collins cried, his dull countenance lighting up in recognition. “I thought I recognized your name. Your most revered lady aunt has spoken often of your engagement to your fair cousin, Miss de Bourgh. Why, only the other day—”

Elizabeth drew a sharp breath, and Darcy felt his heart drop, a chill passing through him. “I am not engaged to my cousin, sir.” His tone was firm, intended to discourage further comment by the strange man.

“But sir!” Mr. Collins protested, “your noble aunt insists it is so. You are to unite two great estates. What will your cousin do if you fail to fulfill your duty to your family—and to her?”

Darcy offered a stiff smile. “My aunt has long cherished such a union, but the matter is settled only in her imagination. My cousin is an heiress and may marry where she chooses.”

“But—”

“Mr. Collins.” Darcy’s expression hardened. “My affairs are my own, and you will kindly cease assuming your involvement.”

The parson spluttered but offered no reply. Instead, he turned to Miss Mary and launched into a discourse on Fordyce’s sermons. The lady did not appear to welcome

the conversation.

“Would you care for a stroll in the garden, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth asked with urgency. He rose at once. Miss Mary cast a look of alarm in her sister’s direction. A silent exchange passed between them, followed by a subtle nod. Whatever message had been conveyed, Darcy could not decipher it.

They gathered their things and left the house for the garden.

Most of the foliage had perished with the cold, save for an abundant patch of hellebore.

Darcy admired winter roses. They bloomed from December through March—a welcome burst of color when the weather was often cold and gray.

Elizabeth would appreciate that, he mused.

“I must apologize for my cousin, sir,” Elizabeth said desperately. “He has been in residence but a day, and already we tire of his presence.”

“He is your father’s heir?” Mr. Darcy asked, though the truth was plain. Why else would they receive someone so objectionable?

She nodded. “He comes with an olive branch,” she murmured. “My mother hopes to pair him with Mary.” Her cheeks reddened. “I cannot repeat her reasoning. ’Tis unkind.” Her eyes dropped, and she absently shifted the leaves beneath her boots.

“Mrs. Bennet’s opinions are her own,” Darcy assured her.

“I intend no disparagement upon your sister, but I believe I can surmise your mother’s logic.



” It appalled him. Mrs. Bennet clearly placed great weight on superficial traits, much as his father had once done.

Surely, she sought to secure a match for her plainest daughter with Longbourn’s heir.

“And how does your sister feel about the matter?”

“I hardly know. Mary’s reaction just now suggests she finds Mr. Collins’s company tedious. I have not shared my mother’s sentiments with her—I would not wound her so.” Elizabeth looked worn and troubled.

Darcy offered his arm, and they strolled the path. After a time, he said, “She deserves to know.” He added nothing more. Elizabeth, he trusted, would understand. His father had tried to hide his own distaste for the mark upon his son’s face. The effort had only compounded the hurt.

“Mary has been subject to my mother’s unkind remarks for years,” Elizabeth murmured after a moment of silence. “I believe she is immune to them now.”

“No one is ever immune. One may grow accustomed to horrid treatment—numb, even—but words still wound.” He knew he sounded bitter and made no attempt to conceal it.

Had he not already told Miss Elizabeth he was used to others behaving as though there were something wrong with him?

The wine stain had darkened with age, and with it, the distaste of others had only increased.

That anyone should scorn another for a defect entirely outside their control was beyond his understanding.

Thank heavens for gentlemen's fashion—cravats and high collars concealed the largest patches of dark red skin along his neck.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Elizabeth sighed. "I shall speak with her tonight," she vowed. "Mary is a perfectly lovely person, though a little pedantic at times. 'Tis unfair to place this burden upon her without her consent. Oh, Mama will be livid if..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

They walked in silence for a moment before Darcy cleared his throat nervously. "Bingley is hosting a ball," he said after a moment. "I would be honored if you would dance the first with me."

She turned and looked up at him, beaming. "I would be pleased to!" she replied, her delight unmistakable. "I dearly love to dance."

Darcy could scarcely believe it. He let out a breath he had not known he held and grinned.

"I look forward to it." They returned to the house, hoping for tea after their time in the cold.

In the drawing room, Mrs. Bennet hovered over the tea tray, prattling about balls and fripperies while she poured.

"Jane is an excellent dancer, Mr. Bingley," she said. "You will not regret partnering with her for two sets."

Before Bingley could answer, Mr. Collins interrupted.

"I flatter myself that a clergyman may enjoy such delightful entertainments on

occasion. I, too, anticipate your glorious event, sir. In fact, I should like to take this moment to solicit the hand of my fair cousin, Miss Mary, for the first two sets. Indeed, I hope to secure a set with each of my cousins.” He turned and offered Miss Mary a smile of such obsequious warmth that she recoiled slightly before granting her reluctant acceptance.

Once assured of the first set, Mr. Collins proceeded to request a set from each of the remaining sisters.

The gentlemen departed soon thereafter. Darcy listened quietly as Bingley chattered, his thoughts drifting to the many events of the past days.

Wickham was gone. Miss Elizabeth had agreed to allow him to call...

I shall write to Georgiana. Perhaps she will come to Meryton.

Upon reaching Netherfield, he retired to his chambers and composed a letter, determined to send it with the next post.

Dear Georgie,

I have much to tell you. Indeed, our cousin may have already shared the news before this letter reaches you, but I shall not delay.

Wickham is gone. He appeared in Meryton, the small market town near Netherfield Park, and I sent word to Richard at once.

Our cousin came without hesitation, and the blackguard is now safely confined in debtor’s prison.

My dear sister, he cannot harm you any longer.

You are free. I am free. At last, we both are free.

I want you to join me in Hertfordshire, dearest. I believe you would find the neighborhood much to your liking.

There are young ladies of your age, and you would have the opportunity to meet Elizabeth.

She is a remarkable woman, and I believe her warmth of spirit would surely benefit us both.

Will you come? Richard might escort you, or I shall fetch you myself once Bingley's ball is concluded.

Did I tell you? There is to be a ball at Netherfield Park on the twenty-sixth of November.

Bingley has flustered his sisters by insisting upon it and then demanding the preparations be completed in haste.

He wishes to dance with his angel. I believe he will marry Miss Bennet, though his sisters oppose the match.

They make a handsome pair, and I wish him every happiness.

Write to me soon, and we shall make all the arrangements.

All my love,

FD

Dinner that night proved tedious. Miss Bingley insisted upon lamenting the upcoming ball and the many preparations it required.

Darcy ignored her, his thoughts occupied with the hope that he might walk out on the morrow.

The storm clouds still hung heavy overhead, though they had yet to release their burden.

He retired early, determined to make the attempt.

Morning dawned with a distinct chill in the air. He set out on horseback, keeping an eye on the gathering storm. Elizabeth awaited him atop Oakham Mount, where he dismounted and took her hand in greeting.

“You look lovely this morning,” he said, pressing a kiss to her fingers.

“I worried the rain would begin before I could set out.” She smiled, her eyes alight with warmth. Darcy led her to their fallen log, and together they gazed out over the fields in companionable silence.

“Mary retired before...” she hesitated. “I shall make the attempt after breakfast.”

Oh, how he adored her! He reached out and took her hand, which rested on the log between them. Darcy caressed her fingers, pivoting so he faced her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he began, “I...admire you—very much.” He could not say love yet, not until he was certain she was unlike the others. His heart yearned to trust her, but a lifetime of judgment and cruelty had taught him caution.

She looked at him tenderly. Elizabeth’s free hand rose and touched his cheek where

the crimson stain marred his skin. She did not recoil; rather, she traced its edge with her thumb.

“I look forward to our dance, sir,” she said. “The first set! Never has that dance meant so much to me...until now.”

Darcy lifted his hand to rest over hers, still pressed to his cheek, and closed his eyes. With his other hand, he wove his fingers through hers where they rested on the log between them. A sudden raindrop struck his face, jolting him out of his reverie.

“You will be soaked by the time you reach home,” he said, releasing both her hands.

“As will you,” she teased. “Until we meet again, Mr. Darcy.”

She rose and hurried away, pausing at the edge of the mount to wave. Darcy remained still until she was out of sight, then mounted his horse and trotted back to Netherfield.

I am well and truly lost.

### Chapter Thirteen

Days of rain kept Darcy indoors, affording him ample time for reflection as the sky let loose its relentless deluge. Rain streamed down the windowpanes in steady rivulets, distorting the view beyond. His musings matched the turmoil outside.

I love her, he thought after days of contemplation. I love her and wish to marry her. Yet, did he dare ask? What if she refused? He could not endure the heartbreak such a rejection would bring.

But she said I might call upon her, he reasoned.

Surely that signified she would be amenable to more.

Still, the burden of his disfigurement pressed heavily upon him, a silent reminder that love might never be freely given.

Darcy thought he had conquered these feelings long ago, yet now, when faced with a chance for happiness, they surged forth, filling him with anxious dread, borne from years of judgment and rejection.

What if, his mind whispered, what if she is not what she seems?

The war within him raged until he concluded that the course was to ask Elizabeth for her hand in marriage—and pray for a favorable reply.

That evening, Netherfield would be filled with guests.



He would dance the promised first set with Elizabeth, and ere the night concluded, he would propose.

If— when— she accepted him, he would be the happiest of men.

Georgiana will adore her. Yes, his shy, withdrawn sister would be delighted to have a sister at long last. Together, he and Elizabeth would help revive the wounded girl. It was a heartening thought.

Darcy's valet assisted him in dressing for the ball.

He wore a blue coat, and a cream, gold-embroidered waistcoat.

His cravat was tied in an elaborate knot, held in place by a finely wrought jeweled pin.

He studied his reflection in the mirror, imagining how he might appear were the dark red stain absent from his face.

If he looked intently, he could discern his resemblance to his father.

But there was no sense in mourning what could not be changed. He turned away.

As he walked toward the ballroom, he heard the other guests arriving. Servants completing the final touches to the decorations. Candles and mirrors lined the walls, casting a warm glow throughout the space. A chalk design adorned the center of the floor, soon to be trampled beneath eager feet.

Darcy positioned himself where he could watch the entrance, eager to glimpse Elizabeth the moment she arrived.

He did not wait long. The Bennets were among the first of the guests to appear.

She looked radiant. Her gown was cream, with gold embroidery along the hem of the skirt.

He felt a thrill of pleasure— they matched, and entirely by chance.

She paused just inside the doorway, scanning the room until her eyes met his.

Her lips curved into a smile, and she stepped forward.

Darcy left his post near the wall and quickly closed the gap between them.

“You look lovely, Miss Elizabeth,” he said in greeting.

“I thank you, sir. It appears we have unintentionally aligned our apparel this evening.” She smiled and gave him a playful wink. “Did you ask my maid what I intended to wear?”

Her teasing manner eased his nerves, and he shook his head. “I categorically deny it,” he stated, adopting a firm tone. “It was purely a happy accident.”

She laughed, her eyes alight with amusement. “I believe you, sir, I assure you. Ah, here is Charlotte! I must greet her before the first set begins.”

Darcy accompanied Elizabeth to Miss Lucas’s side, noting she looked downcast as they approached. He believed he knew the cause. His heart went out to her, and he fervently hoped she might soon have some opportunity for happiness.

“Dear Charlotte!” Elizabeth embraced her friend warmly. “I am happy to see you this evening. The rain has kept us all indoors far too long. I hope you are prepared to

dance with my cousin. Mr. Collins means to make himself as much a nuisance as he can.”

Miss Lucas frowned. “Is he so terrible?” she asked. “We exchanged a few words at your aunt’s card party, and he seemed an amiable man.”

Darcy had not known about any card party and regretted missing another evening in Elizabeth’s company.

He understood that her aunt was married to the village solicitor.

Miss Bingley would consider the connection beneath them—even more so than the Bennets or the Lucases.

Yet, it mattered not. He would have much time in Elizabeth’s company that evening.

As the ladies conversed, he allowed his gaze to travel about the ballroom.

It had filled with guests, all engaged in lively conversation.

Mr. Collins stood near Miss Mary—too close, perhaps—who appeared displeased by her companion’s attentions.

She shifted subtly to the side, to put distance between them, but he followed her movement, continually closing the space between them.

The pair gradually moved from their original position.

Darcy wondered if Elizabeth had yet spoken with her sister.

At last, the final guests arrived, and the musicians signaled the beginning of the first

set. He turned to Elizabeth and extended his hand. “Miss Elizabeth, I believe this is our set.”

As Elizabeth took his hand, he addressed Miss Lucas. “If you are free, I should be pleased to dance the second with you.” Miss Lucas inclined her head in acceptance, though a trace of melancholy lingered on her countenance.

He escorted Elizabeth to the center of the floor.

Bingley and Miss Bennet stood at the head of the set, both appearing pleased with their partner.

Miss Bingley partnered with a local gentleman; Darcy could not recall his name.

Her displeasure was evident, as she bore the ordeal with ill-concealed distaste.

She caught Darcy’s eye and cast him an appraising look before turning away.

He wondered if she had at last abandoned her pursuit of him.

The music began, and he and Elizabeth moved through the steps in silence for a time, until she spoke.

“Are you always so stoic in the ballroom, sir?” she asked, the corners of her mouth twitching with amusement. “It would seem quite strange to pass half an hour in complete silence.”

“Do you speak as a rule while dancing?” he asked, curious. “I am not gifted in small talk. It feels an insurmountable task to concentrate on the steps and hold a conversation at the same time.”

She laughed lightly. “I do not always speak while dancing,” she admitted. “Sometimes, I prefer to observe my partner and the other couples.”

She fell silent as the dance carried her away, but when they reunited, Darcy resumed their conversation.

“I hope to bring my sister to Netherfield for Christmas,” he said.

“Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance when she comes?” If she comes, he amended privately.

Georgiana had not yet replied to his letter, and he had no way of knowing if she would consent.

Elizabeth smiled brightly. “I would be honored. I am always pleased to make new acquaintances.”

“Are you, truly? I confess, I dread it. There are always looks of pity or disgust. Rarely do people respond as you did toward me—with kindness and curiosity.” He forced the bitterness away, unwilling to let such thoughts spoil the evening.

“People are blind. ’Tis unfortunate. We must do our best to make them see.” She regarded him steadily, her gaze warm and inviting. His heart leaped.

The second half of the set passed in quiet pleasure.

He and Elizabeth shared many looks—glances full of warmth and understanding.

When the dance concluded, he led her from the floor.

Miss Lucas stood waiting nearby, and Darcy conversed with both ladies until the next

set was called.

One of Sir William's sons approached to claim Darcy's beloved, and he had to push down a surge of jealousy.

If she accepts my proposal, he thought, I shall ask her for another set. Perhaps two.

Miss Lucas was an engaging partner, and they spoke pleasantly during the second set.

Elizabeth was nowhere to be seen for the third, and Darcy resumed his post near the wall.

Sometime later, she reappeared, her sister at her side.

Miss Mary soon disappeared into the crowd, and Darcy made his way to Elizabeth.

She appeared happy to see him, yet a guarded tension lingered about her eyes and her mouth as she spoke.

He dismissed it, though unease prickled in his chest.

Darcy requested Miss Bingley for the fourth set. It was his duty as a guest in her brother's home, but he meant to return to Elizabeth afterward. He need not fear watching her partnered with another, however, for Elizabeth sat out that set with Miss Lucas. He wished he were there beside them.

Though Miss Bingley accepted his hand, she made little attempt to disguise her distaste for his presence. Darcy endured the dance, and when the final strains of music ceased, he escorted his partner to Mrs. Hurst's side and bowed, departing at once in search of Elizabeth.

She and Miss Lucas stood near the wall, conversing quietly with their backs to him. As Darcy neared, Elizabeth's words reached his ears, her frustration palpable.

"I do not know what to do, Charlotte! He is the worst sort of gentleman, and we are forced to endure him! How can one tolerate his manner, let alone his appearance? He holds himself above his company, lording his good fortune over all of us!" She huffed and shook her head, her earrings swaying with the motion.

A hollow opened in his chest, her words echoing louder than the music around him. He scarcely heard Miss Lucas's reply.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

“Turn him in my direction, Eliza. You know I am not so hopelessly romantic as you. I cannot afford to be. All I want is a home of my own, and he can provide it. When his proposal is refused, I shall be there to console him.”

“You are wonderful, Charlotte. Though I do not agree with your views on marriage, I shall not stand in your way. I have endured him long enough and can do it no longer. My family agrees—even my mother, fixated as she is on securing husbands for her daughters. Still, she will be displeased when he is rejected. ’Tis an eminently suitable match, and many will see it as foolish to refuse. ”

“You need not fear for your future, dear friend. Once I have secured his proposal, I shall ensure you and your family always have a comfortable home.” Miss Lucas nudged Elizabeth with her elbow, and the pair chuckled.

Darcy stood still, stunned by the turn of a single moment.

I knew it, he thought. She is just like the rest. Crueler.

Every hope he had dared to entertain fell away, leaving only the sting of humiliation.

He had loved her—and she had mocked him.

He withdrew with measured steps, unwilling to betray the depth of his wound, and once he was beyond their notice, he fled the ballroom.

In his chambers, Darcy summoned his valet. I cannot stay here another minute. If she does not want me, then I will not remain to be ensnared by another. His man appeared



within moments, his ordinarily composed demeanor unsettled by the urgency of the call.

“Pack my trunks,” he ordered. “We are leaving before the ball concludes.”

“Yes, sir.” The man did not question him and set to his task at once.

Darcy yanked the cravat pin from his neckcloth and flung it onto the dressing table in disgust. He tore off his tailcoat with such force that he winced at the sound of straining seams. No matter—it could be mended.

The waistcoat came next, and he hesitated only a moment before pulling it off.

He hated the very sight of it, for it reminded him not only of her, but of the jest she made.

What had seemed playful now felt cruel, as though she laughed behind her fan at his expense.

How could she? he railed inwardly. I loved her!

I love her still. How could she prove no better than the rest—than those who have mocked me all my life?

He would not weep. No, he would not shed a tear for a heartless deceiver. She is worse than ten Miss Bingleys. Oh, how his heart ached. Already he missed her...or the woman he had believed her to be.

He and his carriage were ready in remarkably little time.

In haste, Darcy scrawled a brief note to Bingley, claiming an urgent matter had drawn

him back to town.

I shall never return to Netherfield, he vowed.

Bingley would likely marry Miss Bennet, which meant Elizabeth would often be in her sister's company.

Was he now to lose one of his few true friends as well? Intolerable.

Too anguished to rest, Darcy sat rigidly in his carriage, the road to London unfolding beneath the wheels he scarcely heard. He stared out into the blackness beyond the window, praying he might one day recover from his worst heartbreak.

Elizabeth

After supper, Elizabeth looked about for Mr. Darcy. Failing to find him, she thought little of it. No doubt he had sought solitude; he did not enjoy society as she did. Her thoughts wandered to recent events, particularly her conversation with Mary the morning following her promise to Mr. Darcy.

“Mary?” She knocked on her sister's bedchamber door and entered. “May I speak with you?”

Mary glanced up from her book, her eyes wide with surprise. She slowly set it aside. “Yes, of course. What is it, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth shut the door behind her and seated herself beside Mary on the window seat. “I wished to discuss something with you. It concerns Mr. Collins.”

Mary's lips drew into a tight line, frowning. “If you refer to his poor attempts at courtship, then I already know. It does not surprise me that Mama has directed him to

me. I am her ugliest daughter and therefore the most acceptable for our toady of a cousin.”

Elizabeth blinked, startled. “That is the harshest thing I have ever heard you utter,” she said, impressed. “And yet I must admit—you are not wrong. I overheard our mother telling Mr. Collins that you would make the most suitable wife. Her remarks were...not flattering.”

A dry chuckle escaped Mary. “I know what she thinks of me.” Her bitter words pricked Elizabeth’s heart. “Because I lack beauty, I cannot possibly have feelings. She will be furious when I refuse his proposals.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock. “You will? Brava, dear sister! No lady deserves to be burdened with such a man, especially a dear sister.”

“The problem remains that in doing so, I will incur Mama’s wrath and Mr. Collins’s disdain. What am I to do?”

Elizabeth considered, then leaned forward, her gaze steady.

“For now, do your best to discourage him. I do not know whether you will succeed—he seems remarkably obtuse. Already our father has tired of him, amusing as he seemed when first he arrived. I shall think of something to mitigate any damage that may arise from your refusal. Never fear; I shall stand by you, and our father will not force his daughters to marry against their will.”

A flicker of doubt crossed Mary’s features. “He might do so for you. But for me? I cannot see it.” She looked so small and defeated. Elizabeth wrapped her sister into a warm embrace. “I shall speak with him, if you wish it.”

Mary nodded, leaning into her. Elizabeth felt a rush of affection for the oft-forgotten

Bennet sister and kissed her head.

That had been nearly a week ago. Their father had agreed to support Mary, though his assurances had done little to calm her, for Mr. Collins lurked about every corner like a specter.

And this evening, after dancing the first with her, he had asked for the supper set, too.

When Mary refused, it left her to sit out the remainder of the ball.

Elizabeth had consoled her sister as best she could, then vented her frustration to Charlotte.

She ought not to have maligned Mr. Collins so thoroughly, especially with regard to his appearance, but his character ran counter to everything her father had instilled in her.

Unfortunately, it appeared the gentleman was very much the same on the inside as he was on the outside.

Charlotte, ever practical, had offered a solution.

When Mary rejected Mr. Collins's proposal, she would be there to distract him and lead him away.

Her willingness to marry such a man spoke volumes.

Charlotte would settle for an obtuse and obsequious fool rather than remain a spinster and face the future alone.

Elizabeth did not approve, but she would not interfere.

If her friend believed she could find contentment in a marriage of convenience, who was she to protest?

Mr. Darcy did not appear when the carriages were called.

The excuses Elizabeth had made earlier for his absence now rang hollow.

Perhaps something had happened to call him away from the ball.

Surely, he would not do so without bidding me farewell, she thought.

But he owed her nothing. They were neither engaged, nor even courting.

Still, she could not shake the sense that his behavior was unlike him.

I shall await his call tomorrow, she decided, holding to the conviction. She felt certain he would come.

During the carriage ride home, Jane revealed that Mr. Bingley had asked to court her, and she had accepted.

Elizabeth felt a rush of pleasure at her sister's good fortune.

As she lay abed that night, she reflected on how very much she admired Mr. Darcy.

Once she did not think him handsome, but now she had to admit she had been entirely mistaken.

Even with the wine mark on his face, his scar, and his broken nose, Mr. Darcy was one of the handsomest men of her acquaintance.

As she drifted off to sleep, she whispered a prayer that she would soon have the same felicity as Jane.

### Chapter Fourteen

Elizabeth did not sleep longer than usual the morning after the ball.

Eager to be up and about, she hoped Mr. Darcy would be waiting for her atop Oakham Mount.

He did not seem the type to linger abed, even after a late night.

The thought pleased her; it proved they were very like-minded.

She dressed without a maid, twisting her hair into a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

Her bonnet would suffice to keep her curls in place during the walk.

The gown she chose was simple and easily donned without the aid of a maid.

As the household still slept, Elizabeth slipped quietly from Longbourn and hurried down the familiar path toward her favorite place.

The morning air was brisk, but not unbearable.

The cold roused her senses, and by the time she reached the summit of the hill, her cheeks stung and her legs tingled with cold, yet she felt invigorated.

He was not there. No matter, she thought.

He will not be long. Elizabeth settled herself on their log and waited, tapping her legs to warm them and tucking her gloved hands into the folds of her cloak.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. Perhaps I misjudged his propensity for early mornings, she jested with herself.

Resolving to wait ten minutes more, she rose and began to pace the length of the mount's crest. Her breath curled in white clouds before her, and she rubbed her arms briskly for warmth.

At last, she turned her steps towards home.

He remains in his warm bed, she thought, her mood dipping. I ought to have done the same.

With quick strides, she retraced the path and soon reached Longbourn. Once inside, she tucked her wool gloves into the pocket of her cloak, removed her bonnet and retreated to the breakfast room, resolving to seek out a hot cup of tea as soon as might be.

Mr. Bennet joined her shortly after, noting the bright flush of her cheeks. "Winter is in the air, my dear," he quipped. "I should think it time to curtail your strolls until the weather grows more temperate."

"I think not, Father," Elizabeth replied, reaching for the teapot. "I shall not cease my morning rambles until the chill proves truly overpowering."

"As you like it." He selected a scone and split it open. "Tell me—will Mr. Collins propose to Mary today?" He lifted his brows and gave them an exaggerated waggle.

"If he does, she will refuse the offer." Elizabeth did not find her father's teasing



amusing and frowned slightly.

“Will she?” He blinked in surprise. “Well, I did not think... No matter. What is to be done?”

“Promise you will support her when our mother begins her tirade,” Elizabeth begged, lowering her voice. “Mary has seen Mr. Collins’s character for what it is and rejected the match. Mama will be furious—”

“I shall not force her,” Mr. Bennet interrupted, slathering butter onto his scone. “I would not wish for any of my daughters to be tied to the bumbling buffoon.”

Elizabeth’s smile returned as she took a sip of tea. “Then you will not protest when Charlotte arrives to whisk him away?” She batted her lashes in mock innocence and raised the cup once more.

Mr. Bennet laughed heartily. “You have already arranged it all! Good. I wish to be present for the spectacle.”

“Mary’s discomfort is not a source for your amusement, Papa.” Elizabeth said sharply, lowering her cup. “You must grant her some dignity. Our mother will embarrass us enough, and Mr. Collins is likely to despise us all for rejecting his olive branch.”

“Let him. Then I shall never be forced into his company so long as I live.”

Mr. Bennet took a bite of his toast. They fell into silence enjoying their repast until, a short while later, Jane and Mary entered.

They seated themselves in their usual places near Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet, partaking of their breakfast quietly as they awaited the others.

One by one, the remaining Longbourn residents trailed in—Kitty first, Mr. Collins last.

Mrs. Bennet's face lit up when the gentleman appeared, then bade Kitty to move so he might sit beside Mary. Kitty scrambled to obey, though Mary cast her a pleading glance, silently willing her to remain where she sat.

"I wish for a private audience with Miss Mary over the course of the morning," Mr. Collins declared, directing a sickly, self-satisfied smile toward his young cousin, whose dread was barely concealed. Her lips moved almost imperceptibly. Was she rehearsing what she would say when she refused him?

Mrs. Bennet clapped her hands with enthusiasm. "Everyone up! Come now, leave Mr. Collins to his interview. Make haste!"

Mr. Bennet did not look pleased. With a sigh, he left the room. Mary cast another pleading glance—this time with Elizabeth, who offered a slight nod in acknowledgment. She would station herself just outside the door and intervene, if necessary.

Kitty and Lydia, already giggling, departed arm-in-arm, Mama trailing behind. Jane gave Elizabeth a curious look when she lingered but said nothing.

Elizabeth crept closer to the partially open door and leaned in to listen.

"My dear cousin," Mr. Collins began, full of pompous ceremony.

"You have waited in suspense, I am sure, for my proposal. Never fear, for I shall satisfy your desires without delay. First, however, I must outline the reasons for entering into the married state. First, I believe it proper for every clergyman in easy circumstances—such as myself—to set an example of matrimony within his parish.

Second, I hold that it will contribute to my present happiness. And lastly, my esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has commanded me to find a wife as soon as may be. She is a woman of great discernment in all these things and knows better than I what shall secure a man's felicity.

Thus, I have come to Longbourn in hopes of finding a wife from among my cousin's daughters.

As you are aware, I am to inherit your father's estate upon his demise, and by choosing one of his daughters for my wife, I shall atone for the misfortune of my birth, which places me above the ladies of Longbourn in the line of succession. ”

He paused, and Elizabeth could well imagine his puffed chest and insufferable pride that accompanied his speech. Foolish, irksome man, she groaned inwardly. Poor Mary, to be subjected to such drivel.

“In addition to these sentiments, your dear mother impressed upon me the importance of choosing a wife whose physical attributes most align with my own. She has, quite rightly, informed me of the dangers of having a wife who is more attractive than her husband. As a clergyman, I cannot take the risk of having a wayward wife, and so I passed over your two elder sisters, who are more lovely and well-favored.”

He left out the condemning words ‘ than you,’ but Elizabeth felt sure her sister did not mistake his meaning.

“And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection.” Elizabeth nearly gagged. What affection? He had insulted poor Mary and puffed himself up with his own importance!

“I am afraid, sir, that I cannot accept you.” The words were spoken quietly but with unmistakable firmness. “You would not make me happy, and I am certain I could not

possibly make you happy, either. Thank you for the honor of your proposal, but I must refuse.”

Mr. Collins replied at once, his ingratiating, condescending manner making Elizabeth’s skin crawl.

“I understand it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application. It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy of your acceptance. In marrying me, you secure the futures of your mother and sisters. Can you be so unchristian as to refuse?”

“I—I cannot!” Mary burst from the room, brushing past Elizabeth and running up the stairs. The parlor door, now fully open, revealed a stupefied Mr. Collins frozen in place with astonishment.

Where is Charlotte? Elizabeth groaned inwardly and stepped forward.

“Sir,” she said quickly, entering the room, “forgive my poor sister. She does not know how to convey what she wishes. Will you allow me to explain further?”

Mr. Collins straightened to his full height and gave a solemn nod. “Of course. I shall hear you.”

Elizabeth gestured toward a chair, and once they had both seated themselves, she began hesitantly. “You have impressed a good lady with your manner. My sister is aware of it but fears she may usurp another’s dearest hopes.”

She looked down, plucking at a thread on her gown.

“Mary is reserved and timid. She dreads the notion of harming another’s heart by accepting your offer.

Do not distress her—or yourself—any longer.

Your olive branch has been extended and received with appreciation.

We do not doubt your generosity. When my father dies, I am confident you will not turn us away, especially if you have married a dear friend of the family.

” Elizabeth fell silent, watching his countenance for a reaction.

“I do not understand. In whom have I inspired such devotion?” His eyes gleamed with curiosity and no small measure of self-satisfaction, as though already imagining himself as a gallant knight, rescuing a princess.

Elizabeth hesitated. “I do not know if I ought to speak,” she murmured, lowering her gaze. If she appeared too eager, he may suspect some artifice.

“Oh, but you must! I am to return to Hunsford on Saturday. How can I extend an offer to another if I do not even know her name?”

He stood and began to pace the length of the rug. “Oh, what a muddle!” He paused and turned back to Elizabeth, clasping his hands. “I beg you, cousin—tell me. I shall not betray your confidence.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:01 am*

Elizabeth suppressed a smile, then replied in measured tones, as though reluctant to betray her friend's trust. "Miss Charlotte Lucas has confided in Mary and me. She is intelligent and capable—well suited for the life of a clergyman's wife.

Mary suspected you meant to propose and has been in agony at the thought of destroying another's chance at happiness.

Pray forgive her sudden flight—she found herself quite at a loss for words. "

Mr. Collins sank onto the settee, wonder and gratification spreading across his face. "Miss Lucas. Her father is a knight. Oh—and we are equally matched in appearance, just as Mrs. Bennet suggested. It is perfect. I thank you, Miss Elizabeth, for enlightening me. I must go to Lucas Lodge at once—"

"Charlotte visits every morning after a ball or assembly," she said in a rush. "I have no doubt she will be here before the morning has passed."

Mr. Collins puffed up with importance. "Then I await her arrival." He turned toward the window that overlooked the drive. "Look! Here she comes now!"

"May I offer a suggestion, sir?" Elizabeth asked, rising from her seat. "Take Miss Lucas on a walk before you propose. A lady likes to be so favored." She could scarcely contain her triumph—Mary was safe from their cousin at last.

"Indeed!" Mr. Collins clasped his hands behind his back. "Thank you." He remained by the window until Hill admitted Charlotte, and once she was announced, Elizabeth stepped forward and kissed her friend's cheek.

“I have paved the way for you,” she whispered. “Invite him to Lucas Lodge to dine.” As she drew back, she caught the gleam in Charlotte’s eyes and smiled.

“Miss Lucas!” Mr. Collins cried. “What a pleasure to see you. Why, how fetching you look after our late night—like a rose in bloom.”

Charlotte blushed with pleasure.

“Thank you, sir,” she replied. “I have come with an invitation for you to dine at Lucas Lodge this afternoon. Pray, say you will accept—my mother looks forward to receiving you.”

Mr. Collins stepped closer. “Dare I hope that another lady is as eager for my attendance?”

He waggled his brows, with such absurdity that Elizabeth had to cough to cover her laughter. She moved away, close enough to hear, but far enough to lend an air of privacy.

“Indeed, sir. There is another who anticipates the pleasure of your company.” Charlotte laid her hand lightly on his arm, batted her lashes awkwardly and gave him a practiced smile. Mr. Collins straightened, visibly gratified.

“Shall we depart?” he asked. “Do you have further business with my cousins?”

“I believe our business can be concluded in but a few moments. Perhaps you should gather your coat and hat.” The suggestion sent him bustling from the room, leaving the ladies alone.

Charlotte faced Elizabeth, grinning. “What did you say to him? I expected to find the house in complete chaos!”

Elizabeth laughed merrily. “I merely told him my sister Mary could not accept him without wounding another’s hopes.

“It will prevent any lingering resentment, at least on his part. I must say, my father looked forward to refusing his cousin’s suit.

He will be disappointed to be denied his amusement.

” That did not trouble her. Mr. Bennet took far too much pleasure making sport of others’ foibles.

Charlotte embraced her. “Thank you, Elizabeth!” she whispered.

“I shall have my own home at last. Mr. Collins seems malleable. Perhaps I shall be able to influence him in some manner. And you must know—your family will always have a place with us when your father dies. That is, if there are no other options. Tell me, did Mr. Bingley propose last night?”

“No. But he asked Jane for a courtship. She has been daydreaming ever since. I understand he has gone to London but will be back in a few days. Papa has granted them leave to exchange letters. She sent one this morning—how many do you think will go between London and Hertfordshire before he returns?”

They laughed and together they stepped into the entrance hall and joined Mr. Collins who was just reaching the bottom of the stairs, his hat in hand and his hair newly arranged. They bid Elizabeth farewell and departed.

Sighing in relief, she ascended the stairs and made her way to Mary’s chamber. She tapped lightly upon the door and waited until her sister bid her entry.

“Is he gone?” Mary asked, sitting on her bed with her pillow clutched to her chest. “I



am sorry! I could not form the words and ran!”

Elizabeth sat beside her. “Peace. Mr. Collins has gone with Charlotte. I may have intimated that your refusal was in service to our friend.” Winking, she wrapped her arm around her sister.

“There will be no repercussions from our cousin. Our mother, however, will be furious. Hopefully, Jane’s courtship with Mr. Bingley will suffice to prevent her hysterics. ”

Mary breathed a sigh of relief and rested her head on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “Thank you. I cannot express how happy I am to escape that fate. I fear, however, I shall now be Mama’s least favorite child.”

Elizabeth kissed Mary’s head. “You deserve happiness as much as the rest of us,” she insisted. “Papa was prepared to defend you—we spoke of it at breakfast. Never forget how we love you, dear sister.” She shifted slightly. “Perhaps, once Jane marries Mr. Bingley, they will invite you to town.”

Mary looked up. “Jane will surely take you,” she replied. “After all, the pair of you are very close.” Mary’s eyes narrowed. “Unless...Elizabeth, is there something you wish to tell me?” She smiled and raised an eyebrow.

Laughing, Elizabeth withdrew her arm and clasped her hands in her lap. “I do not know,” she admitted. “There are hopes, but...Mama will be displeased, but I find I do not care—not when my own happiness is at stake.”

“It is Mr. Darcy, is it not?” The telling blush on Elizabeth’s cheeks answered Mary’s tentative question. “I knew it! How very clever of you! Mama has been too busy watching Jane and Mr. Bingley to notice him courting you.”

“Say nothing,” Elizabeth begged. “He has not yet made me an offer, though I hope he will.” Surely, he would come to call when Mr. Bingley returned—she felt certain of it.

Mary studied her closely. “You do not mind his...” she hesitated, biting her lip.

“If you refer to his appearance, then no. Mr. Darcy is a good man—honorable and kind. Why should I care about the marks on his face? Papa has always taught us to look on the heart. We cannot always judge a person’s character by how they look on the outside—outward appearances may not reflect the truth of what lies within.

” She laced her fingers together and released a heavy sigh.

“Do you love him?” Mary asked. “I have never been in love. What is it like?”

Elizabeth drew in a breath and exhaled slowly, considering.

“Love is when you cannot imagine a day without the other person,” she began.

“They are your first thought when you wake, and your last before sleep comes. Your entire being longs for them. You wish to bring them joy, to see them smile, to help them feel how deeply they are loved. Love transcends the physical. When you love someone, you see beyond what the world sees and perceive the heart.”

Mary sighed. “That was lovely. I hope I may experience it someday.”

“You will, Mary,” Elizabeth promised. “You will.”

### Chapter Fifteen

Nearly a week had passed since the Netherfield Ball.

Elizabeth missed Mr. Darcy and walked out every day in hopes of meeting him on Oakham Mount.

He never appeared, and she began to worry that something had befallen him.

Convincing herself that her fears were unfounded, she settled on patience.

It was likely that Mr. Darcy merely refrained from visiting without his friend, owing to Mrs. Bennet's inhospitality.

He would come when Mr. Bingley returned.

Two days after the ball, Jane received a note from Miss Bingley.

It was filled with falsehoods. The lady claimed they were all bound for town for the winter and had no intention of returning.

She further intimated that her brother had formed an attachment to Miss Darcy and was eager to be once again in her company.

Jane's distress became evident briefly before Elizabeth reminded her sister it would be the work of a moment to write to her suitor for clarification.

She did so, enclosing Miss Bingley's letter with her own.

A reply came two days later. Mr. Bingley reassured Jane of his love and his intention to call upon her on the second of December.

News of Charlotte's engagement infuriated Mrs. Bennet.

She wailed for hours, complaining of Mary's stubborn refusal.

Mr. Collins, however, assured Mrs. Bennet that he understood her daughter's position and appreciated her thoughtfulness.

After many long-winded declarations, he firmly declared that Mary's selflessness had brought him his felicity, and so, in gratitude, the Bennet ladies would always have a place to live once Mr. Bennet met his reward.

This settled the matron's nerves, to everyone's relief, and she ceased her wailing.

Her wayward daughter, too, felt relieved, and resumed her usual practice of avoiding her mother's notice.

Elizabeth waited with Jane in the parlor, eager to see Mr. Darcy again.

She imagined his face—his soft smile, and kind eyes.

His character was of the highest caliber, and she knew she was well on the way to loving him.

Indeed, I already do. The realization struck her, and her heart warmed.

With him, she felt at ease. He did not dismiss her opinions as many of his sex were

wont to do.

Instead, he debated and discussed, delighting her with his thoughtful rebuttals.

He countered her repartee with measured confidence, the perfect foil for her witty banter.

Mr. Bingley arrived during calling hours. Jane heard the carriage first and met Elizabeth's gaze, taking her hand and squeezing it lightly. "He has come, Lizzy!" she whispered fervently. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement as she smoothed her free hand down the front of her gown.

Mrs. Hill came to the parlor door and stepped aside as she announced their guests; yet to Elizabeth's disappointment, she spoke but one name.

"Good afternoon," Mr. Bingley greeted them. "I cannot express how much I have missed being in your company. Miss Bennet, you look particularly fetching today."

Mrs. Bennet and the three other ladies were not in the room, which allowed Jane to answer freely, rather than endure their mother's interruption.

Hill departed with instructions to send in a tea tray, and to inform the rest of the family of Mr. Bingley's arrival.

The gentleman took his seat next to Jane, clasped her hand, and kissed it as he settled in.

"Forgive me, sir, but I had expected Mr. Darcy to be with you," Elizabeth interjected before he and her sister became too lost in their conversation. "Is he well?"

"It was the most peculiar thing," he replied. "I received a note from him the morning

after the ball, informing me he had left for town. Some sort of emergency.” Mr. Bingley shrugged. “I have yet to receive any further word from him—I am sorry I cannot tell you more.”

Elizabeth’s heart seized. Was he well? What of his sister? “Will he return to Netherfield Park?” she asked, desperate for any scrap of information.

“His note intimated he had no intention of returning. The situation is very bad, or so he said. I am certain I can convince him to come when...a desirable event takes place.” He turned to Jane with a fervent look, one filled with promise for the future.

Elizabeth scarcely noticed Jane’s equally fervent expression. Instead, a dull ache settled in her chest, and she suddenly felt too confined within the parlor.

“Pray, excuse me for a moment,” she murmured.

She might have saved her breath—neither of them looked up in acknowledgement.

So she hurried out and ascended to her chambers.

With trembling hands, she shut the door, locked it, and stumbled to her bed.

Collapsing upon it, she curled to her side and stared blankly at the wall, her thoughts whirling.

Never to return? she repeated silently. Why?

He had given every indication that he would offer for her.

She had expected a courtship. Yet, now he was gone.

Perhaps his friend was mistaken, she reasoned.

Was Mr. Darcy not an honorable man? Surely, he could not raise a lady's expectations and then abandon her.

That would be dishonorable and ungentlemanly.

Perhaps I do not mean as much to him as he does to me.

The thought stung, and her mind slid toward despair. She forced herself to reject it. He will return, she told herself firmly. He will come back to me.

December 24, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Mr. Bingley's sisters remained in town. Jane learned he had scolded them thoroughly for attempting to interfere in his life. They, in turn, declared they would have nothing to do with so low-born a lady. If he married Miss Bennet, they said, then they would be compelled to distance themselves.

"I reminded them that they are the daughters of a tradesman, and as such, Miss Bennet is higher placed in society than they are. Caroline did not like that one jot." He chuckled, and the others joined in.

Elizabeth wondered how long Mr. Bingley's sisters would maintain the estrangement. Their brother remained their connection to the first circles, owing to his friendship with Mr. Darcy.

Thoughts of that gentleman often crept in when least expected, and Elizabeth fought valiantly to keep them at bay.

She succeeded during the day, for the most part, but her memories coalesced into

dreams at night.

His beloved countenance haunted her, and in sleep, her mind conjured all manner of reasons for his abandonment.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrived on Christmas Eve, and everyone promptly donned their warmest clothing to venture outdoors in search of greenery. The Gardiner children were divided among the adults, and each group wandered off in different directions.

“Hurry up, Lizzy!” Lydia tugged on Elizabeth’s hand, pulling her deeper into the trees.

“I see some mistletoe over there!” Her younger sister adored Christmas.

Lydia was often selfish, but the season brought out the best in her.

She had begun the tradition of gift-giving when she was only eight, always choosing with care.

No one ever felt disappointment when opening something from the youngest Bennet.

Still vain and foolish, she often purchased a fine gift for herself as well.

Elizabeth followed half-heartedly. She had no desire to participate in the festivities.

Mr. Darcy had not returned. With each passing day, her hopes dwindled further.

Jane’s felicity only deepened her own low spirits.

No one appeared to notice, save Mary, who would now and again touch Elizabeth’s



arm and offer a sympathetic look.

Not even Jane knew of Elizabeth's hopes, so she kept her feelings to herself, unwilling to cloud her sister's happiness with the weight of her own misery.

"Help me up!" Lydia reached toward the lowest tree branch, which was only an inch or two out of her reach. "There is enough here to make several kissing boughs! I shall have a kiss from Denny—you wait and see!"

Rather than rebuke Lydia about the impropriety of her remark, Elizabeth laced her fingers together and offered her a step.

Lydia clambered onto the lower branch and began stripping mistletoe, dropping it to the ground as she worked.

Elizabeth gathered the fallen sprigs into both her basket and her sister's.

Lydia lowered herself back down, Elizabeth wrapped her arms about her waist, steadying her until both her feet touched the ground.

"Look at our baskets!" she crowed triumphantly. "I am certain Kitty will not have found half so much. Where shall we put the boughs, Lizzy? One in the parlor, one in the drawing room. Do you think the dining room is a good spot?"

"I hardly know, Lydia," she replied wearily. "Shall we look for some other greenery now?"

Lydia agreed and skipped off. Elizabeth watched her go, struck by how very young her sister appeared in that moment. Fifteen was such a tender, difficult age. If only Lydia knew how blessed she was to be so young and unburdened by love.

Shaking off the morose thoughts for what seemed the hundredth time that afternoon, she picked up both baskets and followed.

Later, they adorned Longbourn with their collected greenery and yards of ribbon.

Candles lit every surface, and when all were aflame, the atmosphere transformed into something nearly magical.

The children chattered excitedly about the coming feast and the parlor games they would play.

Elizabeth watched it all with a sense of detachment.

Is this what heartbreak feels like? If so, she wished she had never known love. Papa always jested that ladies liked to be crossed in love now and then. Elizabeth was not so certain she agreed. If the end result was this heavy, oppressive sorrow, then she would have gladly done without it.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Her thoughts drifted again as she watched her young cousins dancing around the room.

The Gardiners' eldest daughter sat with Lydia, painstakingly tying mistletoe to gilt hoops.

White berries stood in stark contrast to the green leaves and bright red ribbons.

The result was quite pretty. A sudden image of Mr. Darcy reaching up and plucking a berry while gazing deeply into her eyes filled Elizabeth's mind.

She blinked rapidly to dispel the tears that threatened to spill.

"You have been very quiet this evening." Mrs. Madeline Gardiner, Elizabeth's favorite aunt, joined her on the settee. "Tell me, what occupies your thoughts?"

"'Tis nothing," Elizabeth replied, hoping to forestall her aunt's further inquiry. "I am not in the mood for festivities—that is all."

"Lizzy, you must be honest with me, my dear, or I shall be unable to help you."

"You cannot help, Aunt. My state of mind depends upon another, and you hold no power over him." Elizabeth's shoulders drooped as she battled the tears that threatened.

Mrs. Gardiner patted her knee. "Ah, so it is a gentleman. Who is it? Do not tell me you pine for Mr. Bingley—he is utterly besotted with your sister."

Elizabeth chuckled. “I have no interest in Mr. Bingley, I promise. Jane and he are perfectly suited to one another, and I would never interfere with their happiness. Look at them! Have you ever seen two people more ideally matched?”

Jane and Mr. Bingley sat in a corner, whispering together as they worked on some ornament or other. Jane’s blue gown complemented her fair features, and her admirer wore a coat in a similar hue. They looked as though they had been fashioned to suit one another.

“You will not distract me, Lizzy.” Mrs. Gardiner tapped the back of Elizabeth’s hand with her finger. “Who is he?”

Elizabeth smoothed her blush-colored skirt and clasped her hands in her lap. “He is Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire. He came with Mr. Bingley, and I fear I have foolishly fallen in love with him.”

“Mr. Darcy?” Mrs. Gardiner’s surprise made Elizabeth turn to face her.

“How very singular. Lambton lies but five miles from Pemberley. ’Tis a beautiful place—one I would not mind visiting again someday.

” Her brow furrowed. “I do not recall meeting him. The Darcys rarely left the estate. There were rumors that the boy was disfigured—”

“There is nothing wrong with his appearance!” Elizabeth interrupted hotly.

“Peace, Elizabeth. I am merely telling you what was said. I understand he bears a wine stain mark on his face. I recall hearing that the elder Mr. Darcy was an imposing, handsome man—very concerned with appearances. You can imagine what having a less than perfect son meant to him.”

Elizabeth's heart ached for her love and the trials he had suffered at the hands of those who ought to cherish him. "His misfortunes have been great, indeed," she whispered aloud. "Oh, Aunt. He did not even say farewell."

"Did he leave you with expectations of his return?" Mrs. Gardiner asked.

"He as good as told me he wished to propose. I did not discourage him—indeed, I anticipated it! And then—" She choked on a sob. "Then he was gone. He did not come back. I have foolishly given my heart to someone who will not love me in return."

Hastily, Elizabeth drew a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes, hoping her tears went unnoticed by the others.

"I want to hate him for it, Aunt, but I cannot. Instead, the ache inside me grows and presses upon me, for I am unable to reveal my heartbreak, as almost no one suspects he paid me court. Mary, observant as she is, discovered it—and now you—but I have felt alone in my misery."

Her aunt slipped an arm around her shoulders. "Come to me in the new year," she murmured, pressing a kiss to Elizabeth's temple. "We shall host you for the season, and you will forget all about dishonorable men."

Sniffing, Elizabeth nodded. "May I wait until Charlotte and Mr. Collins have married?" she asked. "She has requested that I stand up with her."

"Of course, dearest. I shall speak with your uncle and father to make the arrangements. Perhaps Mary would like to join you." Mrs. Gardiner gave her niece another brief embrace and rose to speak with her husband about their plans.

The idea of Mary's company seemed like a fine one.

As the most overlooked sister, Mary was often left out of such invitations.

Since Elizabeth had begun confiding in her, a stronger bond had formed between them.

Perhaps it might grow even more if they shared a season in town.

Resolving to pose the idea to her sister immediately, she glanced about the room.

Mary sat at the pianoforte, playing Christmas songs.

The melody of God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen floated across the space, adding warmth to the festive atmosphere.

Elizabeth approached and reached out to turn the page as her sister finished a stanza.

Her sister looked up and smiled gratefully.

As Mary played on, Elizabeth shared their aunt's invitation and asked whether she would like to come.

Mary nodded happily. With that settled, Elizabeth went to her aunt and informed her that she and Mary would be delighted to visit London in January.

Pleased, Aunt Gardiner assured them they would enjoy all that town had to offer.

Elizabeth agreed, inwardly resolute that she would put Mr. Darcy from her mind.

It was Christmas, after all. She ought to enjoy every moment.

### Chapter Sixteen

Time had ceased to have meaning. One day was very much like another.

Darcy never left his chambers, eating little and drinking more than he ought.

Georgiana remained with their aunt and uncle, unaware that her brother had returned to town.

He remembered writing to her from Netherfield Park, asking for her to come.

Then, a brief note indicating a change in his plans to keep her with Lord and Lady Matlock, affording Darcy the solitude he needed to mourn in peace.

A fire blazed in the grate, making the room oppressively hot. He did not care. His valet came and went, removing half-eaten trays of food and refilling the decanter when ordered. He wondered morosely what day it was. Friday? Tuesday? Was Elizabeth happy?

You do not care, he scolded his wayward thoughts.

She is just like all the rest. Worse, for she hid her disgust, luring me in with her wit and vivaciousness.

At least the others made no secret of their disdain.

Many tried to hide it, only to betray themselves in time.

Not Elizabeth. She should be an actress on the stage, he grumbled to himself. Never have I seen a better performance!

Darcy wallowed in his misery. Soon enough, he would conquer this infatuation.

No, he thought. It is not an infatuation.

He loved her, and that made the betrayal all the more painful.

She had pretended she would accept him when he proposed—only for him to learn she had merely been preparing the way for her friend, Miss Lucas! It was the worst sort of deception.

How can I go on? he moaned, rolling to his side. The sheets twisted around his legs, and he kicked to free himself. At last, he sat up and left his bed. Swaying slightly, he maneuvered past the furniture until he stood before a looking glass.

Disgusting, he thought, looking away. The wine-colored mark seemed even more vivid in the dim light and the jagged scar trailing down one side of his face rendered him more grotesque still.

She could never want this. Darcy closed his eyes.

What woman would wish to spend her life waking beside a monster?

Anger surged within him, and without thinking, he curled his hand into a fist and struck the looking glass.

“Blast!” he shouted, cradling his bleeding hand.

Stumbling, Darcy rang for his valet. “I require assistance,” he said, motioning to his



wounded hand.

Brisby rushed to do as he was bid, bringing a cloth and a pitcher of water.

Sighing heavily, Darcy sat and allowed his man to bandage his hand.

Once it was cleaned and wrapped in white linen, he dismissed the servant and padded to his bed.

More scars to mar my appearance, he thought bitterly as he pulled the covers over his head. 'Tis no wonder Elizabeth does not want me.

“Are you ill?” Richard’s voice roused Darcy from a deep slumber. “Nothing short of illness would keep you abed for so long, nor prevent you from writing to your family. Tell me, Darcy, have you contracted the plague?”

Groaning, Darcy sat up. “Leave me in peace, Cousin,” he snapped. “Leave me to my wretched existence.” He rubbed the grit from his eyes and ran a hand through his hair, cringing as he realized it was matted and filthy.

“I am afraid I cannot do that, my friend. Georgiana is frantic with worry. 'Tis after Twelfth Night!

Your paltry excuse of an emergency satisfied neither her nor me, and so I have come to learn why you refuse to leave Darcy House.

” Richard folded his arms and raised a brow. “Speak, or I shall force it from you.”

“If you mean to torture me, you need not bother. Nothing you might do could surpass what I have already endured.” He was bitter—he knew it—but everyone could go hang for all he cared.

“I shall tell you what you wish to know, and then you will leave me to my suffering.”  
Darcy swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose.

He pulled on his banyan and crossed to the pair of armchairs before the fire.

“Take a seat.” He poured two glasses of brandy, then handed one to Richard before settling into his own chair.

His cousin accepted the glass but paused before raising it. His eyes fell on Darcy’s bandaged hand.

“You injured yourself?”

Darcy followed his gaze and let out a dismissive breath. “A moment’s foolishness.”

“I see the mess, Darce. What did the looking glass do to deserve such punishment?”

“It reflected the truth,” he replied with a bleak smile.

Richard said nothing for a moment, merely studying him over the rim of his glass. Then with trace of finality, he set the drink on the table between them, untouched. “This is very unlike you, Darcy,” he muttered. “Why, even Wickham never caused you to—”

“I care not about Wickham!” Darcy snapped.

“He rots in debtor’s prison, as he ought!”

” He drained his glass in a single draught and set it down hard.

Then, he leaned forward, clutching his scalp with both hands as if to hold his

thoughts in place, his frame taut with strain.

“He was right. No woman will want me—only my fortune and connections.”

“Balderdash! My mother loves my father.”

“His birth mark is not as pronounced.” Darcy touched his cheek where he knew the edges of the wine stain lay. “A small red mark above one eye can easily be hidden by hair.”

“And yet, my father has never attempted to disguise it. Even now, his hair grows thin, and the mark is plainly seen.” Richard did not appear impressed. “You will have to try harder than this, Darcy. Why, after all these years, do you entertain Wickham’s drivel? What happened in Hertfordshire?”

Darcy swallowed hard and looked away.

Richard let out a low whistle. “You fell in love! Who is she? Why have you not offered her your hand?”

“She will not have me. I heard—Bingley hosted a ball. I meant to ask her that night—for a courtship, if not a proposal. But I overheard her speaking with a friend... The lady’s friend once expressed an interest in my person, and to overhear Elizabeth say she would help her secure me...

’Tis a deception of the worst kind. She drew me in with her arts and allurements—no other lady has succeeded so thoroughly.

” Darcy sighed heavily, Elizabeth’s mean-spirited words reverberating in his thoughts.

“Elizabeth, is it? Richard grinned at his cousin. “And you are certain she spoke of you? Never has a woman been able to hide her disgust from you. This Elizabeth would have had to do it for over a month—almost two. Are you certain it was you to whom she referred when she conversed with her friend?”

“There is no doubt!” Darcy slammed the palm of his uninjured hand on the arm of the chair.

“Tell me exactly what she said. You remember; I can see it in your eyes.” Richard leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands in front of him, eager to listen.

Slowly, Darcy recounted the conversation he had overheard.

“She called me the worst sort of gentleman, claiming others are forced to endure me. I recall her saying, ‘How can one tolerate his manner, let alone his appearance?’ After that, she accused me of holding myself above company and lording my good fortune over ‘one and all.’” He drew in a breath, determined not to weep before his cousin.

“Miss Lucas—that is the name of her friend—told Elizabeth to turn me in her direction. She is... She is not a handsome woman, and a spinster in the making.”

“Darcy! I am surprised. It is not like you to denigrate another’s looks.” Richard frowned, clearly displeased by the remark.

“No, that is not what I meant. I sought only to explain—Miss Lucas is not a romantic lady—by her own admission. Her plain features have hindered her prospects for marriage, just as mine have hindered my own. And then...Elizabeth said she would not stand in her way, that her entire family agrees. Why, even her mother does not wish me to be part of their family, and she is devoted to securing husbands for her daughters.”

Richard's brow furrowed, and he sat up, leaning back in his chair. "Is that all they said?"

Darcy closed his eyes, reliving it once more.

"Elizabeth said, 'He will not be happy to have his offer refused. It is an eminently suitable match, and many will see it as foolhardy...' Miss Lucas replied that Elizabeth had no need to fear for the future. She said...she said the Bennets would always have a place once she accepted my proposal."

Richard narrowed his eyes. "Two clever women. Of course, you would not have fallen in love with a stupid woman." He spoke slowly, deliberately, fingers laced together.

"What do you mean?" Darcy's muddled thoughts struggled to comprehend. "What has their intelligence to do with anything?"

Richard laughed. "Darcy, tell me—what intelligent woman would ever believe that a scorned lover would willingly welcome her and her family into his home? By your own account, Miss Lucas is clever. Do you truly suppose she would expect you to live under the same roof with a woman you once loved? No woman would invite such rivalry into her household—certainly not knowingly. You say Miss Lucas assured your Miss Bennet that she would never be without a home once she married you, and she was well aware of your attachment. Can you not see how utterly illogical that would be?"

Comprehension dawned. "You believe they were not speaking about me."

Richard smiled.

A small sliver of hope stirred in his breast. Could it be? "But if that is so, then—"

Darcy gasped. “No! Fool! Utter fool—I abandoned her! She will despise me now.”

Frantically, he stood. “I must go to her at once and beg her forgiveness.” He began to move around the room, yanking open the curtains and ringing for Brisby.

“Not like that! Darcy, you are a sight. Look at yourself! Sober up and take a bath. You can return to Hertfordshire in a few days.”

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Darcy turned to look at his cousin. “What if you are wrong?” he asked, deflating. “How could I bear to face her, only to be turned away?”

“How can you not? If you are not willing to fight for your lady, then you do not deserve her.” Richard folded his arms. “You have placed yourself in a dreadful situation. I do not pity you. However, if this Miss Bennet loves you, then she will forgive you in time—but you must show her genuine remorse.”

“I regret my hasty decision more than I can express.” Darcy sighed and dropped back into his chair. “I suppose I ought to see Georgiana before I depart.” He fiddled with the ties of his banyan, knowing his sister must be filled with worry.

Richard’s words echoed in his mind. “Heavens, Richard, did you say it is after Twelfth Night?” He stared at his cousin, incredulous. How had so much time passed? Surely not!

“Indeed. Why do you suppose I came here? Mother and Father insisted you were merely occupied with whatever emergency kept you from our winter celebrations. I knew better. My cousin, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, holds his family in the highest regard. You would have found a way to our side, even if half your tenant cottages had burned down.”

Richard picked up his untouched glass of brandy and drained it.

“I shall be going. Come for supper. Mater insisted I issue the invitation. Order that bath,” he added, brushing past Darcy’s valet, who had just entered.

The colonel departed, leaving Darcy alone—and coherent—for the first time in a month.

Days later, doubts still lingered. Darcy questioned whether he would possess the courage to return to Hertfordshire.

If Richard was correct, then Elizabeth would be furious.

He had intimated his desire to propose. They had shared a marvelous dance.

And then he had left—abandoned her. No one had known of his awkward courtship, so he hoped she had been spared the derision of her neighbors.

But what if he is wrong? Richard's logic seemed too easy—too good to be true. Darcy could not believe it.

He went to the looking glass—a new one, discreetly replaced by his staff one afternoon while he slept.

Carefully, he traced the outline of the despised mark that had plagued him all his life.

As it had darkened with age, even cosmetics could not fully conceal it.

Wherever he went, stares followed. He would never escape their judgment—always he would be found wanting.

Could Elizabeth truly desire that? he wondered.

His aunt and uncle had faced something similar.

Granted, Lord Matlock possessed plain features marred by the same kind of mark at



birth.

Darcy had heard it before— he would be incredibly handsome if not for the scar, broken nose and, as Lady Catherine and numerous society matrons were apt to say, ‘that unfortunate blemish.’

It did not seem likely that any woman would wish to tie herself irrevocably to a man whose physical traits might pass to her children.

He amended the thought—it did not seem likely that any woman could love a man whose marred countenance might manifest in her children.

Many women had wished to marry him—for his fortune, not his face.

And then there was Elizabeth. She had seemed to like him despite his physical failings.

Had she been sincere? He still did not know.

Why not trust your first impressions? The errant thought gave him pause.

Before overhearing that dreadful conversation, Darcy had felt certain Elizabeth would welcome his attentions.

Had she been in love with him? Until he professed his feelings, propriety dictated she remain silent.

I never gave her the chance, he realized. Perhaps I ought to.

Having decided on the matter, he bathed and dressed, and feeling more himself than he had in some time, Darcy left his chambers and made his way to the study.

A large stack of correspondence caught his attention, and he groaned.

Seating himself at the desk, he began to open the letters one by one, determined to make progress before dinner.

He set aside old invitations, which would require replies filled with apologies and excuses for his delay. Several letters from his steward had also gone unanswered. Guilt gnawed at him as he realized just how grievously he had neglected his duties.

Among the letters were two from Bingley.

Feeling unequal to reading of his friend's felicity, Darcy set them aside.

"They can wait until tomorrow," he murmured aloud.

He had no doubt they contained news of an engagement.

Such happy tidings would be difficult to bear while uncertainty still hung over his future with Elizabeth.

Sighing deeply, Darcy reached for his writing materials.

His steward's letters had, thankfully, not contained anything pressing.

Still, they required responses. It was a good beginning—a small step toward reclaiming a sense of normalcy.

After more than a month of misery, he felt prepared to take it, at last.

And once I have set it all to rights, I shall go to Hertfordshire.

Yet, even as he thought it, doubt crept in once more. Ought I to venture forth?

### Chapter Seventeen

Though she strove to maintain a cheerful demeanor, Elizabeth found the holiday season tinged with gray.

It became increasingly difficult to endure the general happiness surrounding her.

Jane and Mr. Bingley, particularly, were absorbed in one another.

Their love, so evident and unguarded, served only to remind Elizabeth of Mr. Darcy, and she therefore began avoiding her sister whenever Mr. Bingley was present.

The Bennets spent Twelfth Night with the Lucas family.

Mr. Collins had returned, and his wedding to Charlotte was to take place on the ninth of January.

They would return to Kent immediately following the wedding breakfast. Elizabeth's cousin pontificated at length on the generosity of his noble patroness, who had condescended to lend him the use of one of her lesser carriages to convey his bride to the parsonage.

Charlotte bore it all with composure, the contentment of her situation written plainly upon her countenance.

"Thank you, my dear friend," Charlotte said to Elizabeth when they had a moment in private.

“I know it seems a foolish choice to you, but I am truly happy. Mr. Collins is a good man, albeit a little nonsensical. I shall be well cared for and will have a home of my own at last. ’Tis all I have longed for these many years.

” She leaned closer and whispered, “Papa has been exceedingly generous with my wedding clothes. It pleases him to have a daughter married at long last.” Her cheeks flushed.

“I believe he wants grandchildren.” Charlotte had three younger brothers, all of marrying age, who remained unattached.

Maria and two other young boys were also still at home.

Elizabeth forced a smile. “Perhaps your example will encourage your brother John to marry at last.” The heir to Lucas Lodge assisted in the management of the estate but had shown no inclination to find a bride.

Elizabeth absently touched a bracelet on her wrist, her thoughts straying once more to Mr. Darcy.

“I am happy for you,” she said after a pause.

“If anyone can make a sensible man of Mr. Collins, ’Tis you. ”

Charlotte grinned. “Yes, I think so. His devotion to Lady Catherinehis patroness must first shift to me. I will not compete with a woman who holds no claim to my husband’s name.” She grimaced. “He speaks excessively of her—it grows wearisome.”

They laughed together, and Elizabeth’s heart lightened. Charlotte reached out and took her hand. “You will stand up with me, will you not?” she asked. “I do not wish

for any other.”

“What about Maria?” Elizabeth felt surprised to be so favored. “She is sixteen—”

“—And has no wish to accept the honor.” Charlotte pulled a face.

“She claims she is too timid to have so many eyes upon her. Mama assured her that it would be Mr. Collins and I who would be the objects of attention, yet Maria would not be moved.” Her earrings danced as she shook her head.

“Thus, I must appeal to you! There is no one more fitting, for ’t’is through you my happiness has been secured. ”

Elizabeth sighed with exaggerated gravity. “Well, if you must insist...” She winked, and Charlotte released her hand to embrace her. She returned the gesture with warmth, grateful for her dear friend.

“Mr. Collins beckons,” inclining her head toward her betrothed. “We shall speak later.” Charlotte departed, weaving her way through the guests until she reached the parson’s side.

Elizabeth found herself alone once more. Rubbing her gloved hand up and down her arm, she drew her shawl more tightly about her and moved toward the edge of the room.

The Gardiners had returned to London shortly after Christmas. Elizabeth would go to them after Charlotte’s wedding, conveyed in her father’s carriage. Mary, too, would accompany her, and together they would enjoy the London season. I shall forget him, Elizabeth thought. ’Tis only a matter of time.

“Lizzy?” Jane peeked into Elizabeth’s chamber, her hair plaited and hanging over one

shoulder, her night gown, soft and well-worn trailing along the floor as she entered. “May I speak with you?”

Elizabeth looked up from the book she was reading while reclining in bed. “Come in,” she said, placing a ribbon neatly between the pages and closing the volume. “I had just finished the chapter.”

“Heaven forbid I interrupt you!” Jane giggled, shutting the door behind her. “Would you have read on, had I not come?”

“Of course!” Elizabeth shifted and patted the bed beside her. “What brings you here after our late night at Lucas Lodge?” She thought she knew. Jane was no dull creature—surely, she had noticed her favorite sister was keeping her distance.

“Tell me why you are sad.” Jane rested her head against Elizabeth’s. “I am not blind. Though Mr. Bingley occupies much of my time, I can see you are avoiding me. Will you not tell me what has happened? Have I offended you?” she asked with genuine concern.

Elizabeth hastened to reassure her. “No, it is not you. I promise—the fault lies entirely with me. Or rather, my distress bears no relation to you or Mr. Bingley.” She sighed heavily. “I have suffered a...disappointment,” she murmured, her words scarcely audible.

“A disappointment?” Jane echoed, puzzled.

“Who?” After a pause, she said, “Ah, Mr. Darcy. I knew you were friendly with the gentleman, but I had no notion that he had touched your heart.” She wrapped her arm around her sister.

“And now he is gone. Oh! That is why you asked Charles if he knew when—or

if—he would return. I am so sorry, dearest.”

Tears welled and began to fall as Elizabeth recounted all that had passed between her and the gentleman from Derbyshire.

“And then he left—without a word! What am I to think?” Sniffing, she accepted the handkerchief Jane offered and dabbed at her eyes.

“I want to hate him for treating me so abominably, but I cannot. I still love him.”

“And so you and Mary will flee to London and spend the season with our aunt. You mean to forget him, do you not? Does our sister know?”

Elizabeth chuckled and nodded. “She is more observant than you might suppose. Did you know Mr. Collins proposed to her, and she refused? She asked for my help, and I redirected his attentions to Charlotte.” She quickly explained Mary’s distaste for their cousin, and her reluctance to be matched to him simply because she was plainer than her sisters.

“It has worked out for the best. Charlotte has promised our family a home should our father die, and in return, she will marry and gain a home of her own. Is it not wonderful?”

“I am very glad it turned out so well. You will enjoy your time with Mary. London is full of delights. Perhaps I shall join you—if Mr. Bingley proposes.”

“You mean when , do you not?” Elizabeth nudged her sister.

“He is smitten—any fool could see it! I give you another month—at the most—before he is down on one knee.” She ran her hand over the coverlet, brushing away a pang that stirred beneath her calm.



Oh, how she had hoped to be in the same situation with Mr. Darcy!

Jane laughed lightly. “Yes, I cannot mistake his ardor.” She leaned forward and kissed Elizabeth’s brow. “You will find the same happiness. Lizzy, I must ask—may I share your disappointment with Mr. Bingley? Perhaps he will have some insight into his friend’s behavior.”

“Yes, of course.” Elizabeth waved a hand, feigning indifference, though the thought of another knowing her sorrow stung a little.

“Remember, Jane, Mr. Darcy made me no promises—not truly.” The words were not quite false, yet neither were they wholly true.

He had spoken nothing explicitly, but in Elizabeth’s mind, his honor had been engaged.

I shall not mourn him, she told herself.

“You may believe that if it gives you comfort.” Jane frowned.

“He has wounded my dearest sister—ruined your happiness, perhaps forever! You love deeply, just as I do. If Mr. Bingley had abandoned me, leaving me to the derision of our neighbors and disappointed hopes, I do not believe I could love again.” Jane touched Elizabeth’s cheek, then slipped from the bed. “All will be well.”

“I pray it will be so. “Good night, Jane.”

Her sister returned the sentiment and left the room, leaving Elizabeth to her thoughts. Feeling unequal to reading, she extinguished the candle and turned onto her side, drawing the coverlet to her chin. Perhaps I shall find relief in my dreams.

January 9, 1812

Elizabeth waved as the carriage bearing the newly wedded Collinses trundled away.

Before boarding, Charlotte had embraced her and whispered, “I hope you will come to me in the spring, Eliza. I wish to show you my new home, and a lady’s company would be most welcome.

Father and Maria will travel in March—they could collect you at the Gardiners’.

You need not stay until summer—six weeks, perhaps, and then you might return to town for the rest of the season. ”

After assuring her friend she would pose the request to her aunt, Elizabeth had stepped back, allowing others to say their farewells. Now, the carriage rounded a bend and disappeared.

“Lizzy, will you ride back to Longbourn with me and Mr. Bingley? Mary will come, too.” Jane raised her brows, her meaning clear—she and her suitor wished to have a private word with her.

“Yes, of course.” Elizabeth gathered her things and waited with her sisters and Mr. Bingley. Once seated inside the gentleman’s carriage, he cleared his throat and began.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

“Miss Bennet told me about...well, you know.” He shifted uncomfortably.

“I cannot account for his behavior. 'Tis very unlike Darcy to vanish without a word.

I have written him twice and received no reply.

It troubles me exceedingly, for Darcy is a diligent correspondent.

Perhaps we can make sense of this together.

Did anything untoward occur at the ball? ”

“No, not that I recall. Let me see...we danced and parted on good terms. I had other partners—”

“You left the ballroom to assist me—do you recall, Lizzy?” Mary interjected. Perhaps that was when he received word and departed.”

Mary’s words stirred a memory. Elizabeth had comforted her sister before returning to the festivities.

“Yes, and then I spoke with Charlotte. Mary had grown distressed by Mr. Collins’s persistent attentions.

I complained to Charlotte...” Elizabeth paused.

“I spoke more freely than I ought. Indeed, I said some rather harsh things of Mr.

Collins.” She stared at Jane in sudden comprehension, her eyes wide.

“Could he have overheard and believed I referred to him?

She shook her head. “No—I did not see him. And his manner has never suggested he would act rashly, without confronting me.”

“I am afraid it might have been exactly that. Darcy is very sensitive about his appearance. He conceals his feelings well, but the wounds he bears have never truly healed.” Mr. Bingley furrowed his brow in thought.

“If he heard your words—particularly if they were intemperate—he might have made assumptions.”

“I suppose we shall never know.” Elizabeth shrugged, masking her true feelings.

“I intend to enjoy the season in town. Mary and I shall visit the shops and the museum. There will be all manner of entertainments and delights. I am certain I shall forget Mr. Darcy very quickly.” She turned an apologetic smile on Mr. Bingley.

“Forgive me, sir, for my rambling. You have given me much to consider—thank you.”

Her words effectively ended the discussion, and though Jane and Mr. Bingley exchanged glances filled with meaning, Elizabeth ignored them.

If Mr. Darcy had fled without clarifying an overheard conversation, then clearly, he did not trust her as he ought.

I made my preference for him clear, she thought firmly.

I am not required to temper my speech at every moment, for fear I might hurt his feelings.

And if he is unwilling to engage in conflict now—when we are not attached—then how would it be with a more intimate connection?

These musings offered little comfort, but she did not care.

She had always met trials with the intent of overcoming them.

This would be no different. On the morrow, she and Mary would go to town.

There, she would immerse herself in social engagements and in entertaining her little cousins.

In time, her heart would mend, and she would meet another.

He will not be Mr. Darcy, a contrary voice in her mind whispered.

No, she replied inwardly. He will not. But perhaps that is a good thing.

The two sisters spent the afternoon packing trunks and preparing for an early departure.

Elizabeth selected her best gowns for travel.

Her aunt had promised a visit to the modiste, and they would choose fabric for new gowns from her uncle's warehouse.

She wanted something in a spring shade—perhaps blue, or maybe pink.

Her favorite walking gown went into the trunk, along with a pair of sturdy boots.

She added books, writing materials, and other necessities before closing the lid with a soft thud and fastening it shut.

“Are you finished with your packing?” Mary stepped into the room. “I am as well. I have never stayed in London for any length of time. What if I have forgotten something?”

Elizabeth chuckled and rose from where she had knelt by her trunk.

“I am certain you have all you require,” she promised Mary.

“And if you do not, then our aunt will know the best shops where we can purchase whatever we lack. That is the lovely thing about London—one can find nearly anything there.”

Mary smiled. It softened her features and made her pleasant to behold. “I am very excited,” she said. “You and Jane always go everywhere, and I cannot wait to take my turn.”

“Kitty and Lydia have protested,” Elizabeth observed. “Goodness, did you hear Mama tell Papa that the younger girls ought to be allowed to go, too? I am pleased he stood his ground.”

“They will have entertainment enough with the officers.” Mary frowned. “I worry they will do something foolish.” She crossed the room and sat upon the coverlet. “Do you ever feel the same?”

Elizabeth nodded and joined her. “’Tis a constant worry,” she confessed.

“Papa does not check them, and Mama encourages their wild behavior. It is good that Jane will marry Mr. Bingley. Then, if one of the younger girls ruins us, we will at least have somewhere to go when Papa dies from the shock.” They both laughed.

“All jests aside, they are full young to be out—let alone in London society. I believe our father knows it, hence his refusal. Perhaps this show of firmness will lead into tempering some of their excesses.”

“One can only hope.” Mary wrapped her arm around Elizabeth and rested her head against her sister’s shoulder. “I like to think I have grown from the girl I was at fifteen—and even from seventeen. Perhaps our sisters will, too.”

Elizabeth nudged Mary lightly with her elbow. “Yes, I believe you are right.” Mary rose soon after and left the room. Elizabeth sighed deeply and flopped back onto the bed. Hertfordshire held too many memories of Mr. Darcy, and she longed to be gone.

Tomorrow cannot come soon enough.

### Chapter Eighteen

Dinner with the earl and countess was pleasant enough.

They did not press him for an explanation, which he appreciated.

His emotions were still raw, and now, suspecting he may have acted in haste, he longed to return to Hertfordshire—and to Elizabeth.

Still, he recognized the need to pacify his relations and reassure Georgiana before he departed. Tomorrow shall suffice , he thought .

His sister had observed him with a peculiar mixture of curiosity and unease.

He could hardly blame her. When last they parted in the autumn, Georgiana had believed he despised her for her poor judgment.

Yet the opposite was true. Darcy struggled to forgive himself for his own failings, for nearly losing her to a scoundrel.

After supper, he sat with her, offered his full attention, and praised her growing skill on the pianoforte.

By the time he left Matlock House, she had appeared more at ease and even cheerful.

It gave him hope that she was at last beginning to recover from her ordeal with Wickham.



The following morning, he instructed Brisby to pack his trunks. As he sorted through his papers in the study, gathering what he would require in Hertfordshire, his butler, Simms, knocked at the door.

“An express has just arrived for you, sir,” he announced, his countenance impassive and posture rigid.

He approached the desk with a silver salver and held it out.

Darcy took the missive and nodded his thanks.

Sims bowed crisply and withdrew. Darcy hastily broke the seal and recognized his steward’s hand.

Dear Sir,

I write to inform you that Mrs. Reynolds has suffered a serious fall late yesterday afternoon. She slipped while descending the back stair and struck her head on the landing. Though the physician was summoned at once she has since developed a high fever and drifts in and out of consciousness.

In her waking moments, sir, she has called for you repeatedly.

While the household remains in good order, I urgently request your immediate return—both for her comfort and to prepare for any decisions should her condition worsen.

With respect,

R. Smith

Darcy's breath caught. Mrs. Reynolds—so capable, so constant—had been with the family since he was four years old.

She had watched over him in childhood, steadied him after his parents died, and supported him through every stage of his life since.

She never saw the physical imperfections that marked his countenance.

The thought of her suffering, perhaps dying, without his presence, stirred a deep ache in his chest. Darcy folded the letter and put it with the papers on his desk.

There was nothing for it. He would go to Pemberley at once.

He rang for his valet and gave instructions to prepare for his departure before returning to his correspondence.

Before the day ended, he made haste for Pemberley.

The journey would require three to five days, depending upon the weather and the state of the roads—both of which were notoriously unpredictable in winter.

He could only hope that the weather remained fair, Mrs. Reynolds's health improved, and nothing further delayed his return to Elizabeth.

He was well into his journey when a thought startled him out of his musings.

Blast. I ought to have written to Mr. Bennet, informing him of my wish to call upon his daughter.

Darcy resolved to do so immediately upon his arrival.

Unfortunately, fate conspired against him, and the task was never completed.

March 1812

Darcy wearily climbed down from the carriage in front of Netherfield Park. Though he would need to return to London soon to complete business postponed during his stay in Derbyshire, he could no longer delay. He must see Elizabeth.

He had remained at Pemberley far longer than he had intended.

Mrs. Reynolds's condition had grown more dire in the days following his arrival.

Her fever had raged, and for a time, it seemed she would not recover.

Darcy scarcely left her side, speaking quietly to her even when she was insensible, pacing when the fever worsened, and refusing all reassurance until the worst had passed.

Only when the physician declared her out of danger did he begin to breathe freely once more.

On the fourth day of her improvement, she was able to sit up and take broth. Her eyes, dulled by illness, regained a glimmer of their former keenness. When Darcy entered her chamber that morning, she studied him.

"You are troubled, Mr. Darcy," she murmured, her words rasping but steady. "And not only on my account."

Darcy sank into the chair beside her bed. "You are not mistaken," he admitted. "Though I thank Heaven you are recovering, my heart is not yet easy."

She gave him a faint smile. “I have known you since you were a boy. You need not explain, but if it would ease your burden, I am listening.”

He hesitated, then bowed his head. “I believe I am in love, Mrs. Reynolds. Entirely, irrevocably. But I left her. As I was about to make my sentiments known and offer a courtship—or even marriage—I believed she rejected me because of my imperfect appearance.”

Mrs. Reynolds said nothing, only nodded for him to continue.

“I overheard a conversation between Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her friend, Miss Lucas. and I misunderstood what I heard—I believed Elizabeth had spoken against me, had demeaned my appearance. I left Netherfield and fled like a child. But now I believe I erred—her words concerned another. I should never have gone. I ought to have stayed and asked her to clarify what I heard—to have trusted in her character.” He gave a mirthless laugh.

“Instead, I allowed wounded pride and fear to govern me.”

Mrs. Reynolds reached out and laid a weak hand over his. “You have always been your worst judge, Fitzwilliam. You must go to her and explain. If she loves you, she will forgive you.”

He lowered his gaze, her quiet words striking a tender place.

“I had meant to call upon her before I received word of your injury,” he murmured.

“Everything was prepared. And then—” He broke off and shook his head.

“I could not go while you were unwell. You know you have always been more to me than a servant. I could not have borne it if—”

He swallowed, his jaw tightening. “But I have not ceased thinking of her. Not for a moment. I misjudged her. I misjudged everything.” His eyes met Mrs. Reynolds’s knowing look. “I must see her and beg her forgiveness—if I have not already lost the right.”

Her fingers closed gently over his. “Then do not waste another moment. Go to her—before you begin doubting again.”

With every mile that carried him nearer to Hertfordshire, his anxiety grew. Would Elizabeth welcome him, or would she be furious? She had every right to be angry. And yet, he clung to the hope that her generous nature would allow them to make amends.

When the carriage turned into the drive at Netherfield, the sight of the familiar house filled him with nervous anticipation. The butler opened the door, and after a brief look of surprise, regained his stoic mask.

“Mr. Darcy, sir. Mr. Bingley did not expect you.” His eyes flicked to the red mark on Darcy’s face, lingering for just a moment. He had the grace to control his reaction, showing no visible sign of distaste.

“Yes, I know. I meant to go to London but had it in mind to stop at Netherfield first. Might I speak with your master?”

The butler—Griggs, if memory served—stepped aside to admit him. After removing his greatcoat and hat, Darcy followed him to Bingley’s study.

“Mr. Darcy, sir.” Griggs announced.

“Darcy! What a surprise!” Bingley’s delighted welcome went some way toward settling his nerves. He had left with little explanation in the autumn—friends

deserved better.

“What brings you to Netherfield Park? You are just in time to wish me joy. Miss Bennet has agreed to be my wife.”

So, they were engaged. “Congratulations, Bingley. I am sure you will be very happy. Darcy cleared his throat. “I came to see you, of course—and others of our mutual acquaintance.” He tugged nervously at his coat sleeves, hoping his eagerness was not too obvious.

Bingley’s brow furrowed. “I am afraid I have not the pleasure of understanding you,” he said slowly. “I am pleased to see you, my friend, but what others draw you here?” There was a shrewdness in his manner, and Darcy wondered just how much he already knew. “You are welcome, to be sure.”

Darcy swallowed hard. “I—that is, I have come to renew my acquaintance with Miss Elizabeth, in hopes of being granted an official courtship.” He shifted nervously, still standing since Bingley had not yet invited him to sit.

At his pronouncement, his friend’s brows lifted, but he did not appear surprised.

“I thought as much. Unfortunately, you will not find my future sister in Hertfordshire—you had best pray she will even speak to you.” He gestured to a chair, and Darcy took it with visible relief.

Bingley seated himself as well, crossed his arms and fixed him with a look that was both knowing and disapproving.

“You left with nary a word—and after raising her expectations. Upon my word, Darcy, I have never known you to be capricious. I suspect I know your reasons, but I cannot approve”

“Where is she?” Each word drove the breath deeper from his chest, and now real fear filled his heart. Have I ruined my one chance at happiness and love? “I must speak with her. Last autumn—”

“Save your explanations for Miss Elizabeth, Darcy. I, perhaps, understand you better than most. I know you well, but even I cannot excuse your behavior. You knew you had raised her expectations. And despite your suspicion and doubt, you should have withdrawn honorably . It was badly done.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

“I know! There is no excuse for it. Even explanations seem hollow. I was weak—I allowed my mortifications and self-doubt to overtake my judgment. After months of spending time with Miss Elizabeth, I ought to have trusted her character—”

“Once more, I tell you—save it for Miss Elizabeth,” Bingley repeated.

“She is in London, staying with her aunt and uncle on Gracechurch Street. ‘Tis already too late to call today, even if you depart now, but at least you would be in the same city. I cannot guess how she will respond. Jane, forgiving creature that she is, still speaks of your departure with disappointment. Her sister, however, owns a more forceful nature. I doubt she will forgive without some true sign of contrition.”

Yes, Elizabeth was never shy when expressing her sentiments. Unlike those who had always judged him based on his looks, she had seemed fair-minded and slow to judge. But he had betrayed her trust. What will she say to me? Anxiety surged anew.

“If you will excuse me, Bingley, I shall take my leave. Thank you for...preparing me for what I may expect.”

Bingley rose with him. “Miss Elizabeth was not herself all winter. She left for London in January, directly after Miss Lucas married Mr. Collins.” Giving Darcy a friendly pat on the back, he continued playfully: “Godspeed, my friend. I suggest you proceed humbly. If she agrees to hear you, I shall count it a miracle.”

Darcy bowed and left for London in haste. As he boarded his carriage, the full force of Bingley’s words struck him. Miss Lucas married Mr. Collins? Cold dread settled over him.



I have made the most egregious error .

He now understood the conversation he had overheard had not concerned him—they discussed Mr. Collins. She was not speaking of me. Every last doubt that lingered after speaking with Richard, and now Bingley, vanished.

I have wronged Elizabeth so grievously—how shall I ever atone for it?

With a start, he realized he had not even asked Bingley for Elizabeth's direction on Gracechurch Street. With a grimace of embarrassment, he returned to the house and made the inquiry. Bingley laughed, and offered him a slip of paper.

“Farewell, Darcy. I wish you all success in your suit—you will require every advantage.”

Once more aboard the carriage, Darcy spent the hours to London in deep reflection.

How was he to make amends? Was it even possible?

Others might bring flowers, sweets, or trinkets—but such trifles would not impress Elizabeth.

And would there be time? Though it was only early March, he and Richard were expected at Rosings Park in a matter of weeks for their annual visit.

Hang Kent, he thought bitterly. My future happiness depends on winning Elizabeth's hand. My aunt can wait.

With renewed determination, he settled into the plush squabs of the carriage, plotting his next steps. Hours later, he arrived at Darcy House. Tomorrow was the fifth of March. He would call at Gracechurch Street and see Elizabeth.

For now, he desperately wished to stretch his legs. It was a little past three o'clock—time enough for a brisk walk before dinner.

Elizabeth

Hyde Park was one of her favorite excursions.

She and Mary were often given the use of their uncle's carriage.

He did not object—it was frequently at their disposal, as his warehouses lay at an easy distance.

Mr. Gardiner did not hold to ordering his conveyance when his destination stood within sight of his home.

Thus, she and her sister made daily use of it, embarking on small adventures with their aunt, from Bond Street to the museum.

Each diversion helped her forget, if only for an afternoon, the man who had won her heart and then left her behind.

That afternoon, spring was burgeoning in the air. Leaves budded upon the trees, and early blossoms were beginning to unfurl. She breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of snowdrops, crocuses, and primroses. "I love it when the earth comes alive again," she told Mary.

"Indeed," her sister replied, as they walked arm in arm.

Mary carried herself with a quiet confidence that grew with each passing day.

Elizabeth found it remarkable. For too long, the middle Bennet sister had been

overlooked.

Freed from their mother's harsh judgments, she had begun to flourish.

Her features might still be considered plain, but with their aunt's guidance, she had learned how to show her best features to advantage.

The overall effect was pleasing. At present, Mary enjoyed the attentions of one of their uncle's associates, a prosperous importer named Marcus Finch.

Elizabeth hoped they would suit. It would be most diverting to witness Mrs. Bennet's astonishment upon learning her least-favored daughter—at least when it came to beauty—would be the first Bennet to marry.

But Jane was now engaged, and so it might not come to pass.

Their elder sister had written only the day before, announcing that Mr. Bingley had proposed—and she had accepted.

They would marry in May. Their Mama was, of course, exultant.

Jane wrote that she had visited every neighbor, lording her daughter's good fortune over one and all.

Plans were underway for a lavish affair—not at all to Jane's taste.

Yet their sister did not object; rather, she declared herself delighted to bring such happiness to her family.

“You are to depart for Kent tomorrow,” Mary observed. “Are you prepared?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I am eager to see Charlotte again. Sir William wrote to our aunt—he and Maria are lodging at an inn this evening and will collect me from Gracechurch Street tomorrow morning. If I recall aright, ’tis a journey of many hours.”

Charlotte had been married nearly two months, and Elizabeth could not help wondering how she fared with Mr. Collins.

Her letters spoke of contentment and well-ordered days.

Elizabeth was glad her friend had found satisfaction in her new life, though she knew she could never be so sanguine had she herself married Mr. Collins.

As for Mary, well, she had not hesitated to voice her relief once they were away from Longbourn.

“I am pleased someone could find joy with Mr. Collins,” Mary said, as though privy to Elizabeth’s thoughts. “He did not suit me—not as Mr. Finch does.” Mary’s cheeks flushed, and she bit her lower lip.

Elizabeth, her brow arched and a knowing smile upon her lips, leaned closer. “Have you something to tell me?” she asked. “Come, you must not allow me to go to Kent without knowing all!”

They laughed together, and Mary’s eyes sparkled as she obliged her sister’s curiosity.

“Mr. Finch—Marcus—has asked to approach our uncle. He is not a gentleman, but I should live quite comfortably as his wife. He owns a house in town, very near our aunt and uncle’s residence, and it is large enough to accommodate a family.

Oh, Lizzy, he does not mind that I lack beauty—or that my dowry is small.

He says I am beautiful to him, and that true worth lies in a woman's mind and heart.

He even calls my eyes 'striking,' though Mama always said they were too sharp.

We share many of the same interests, too. I am very happy!"

"That is all I wished to hear. Heaven knows, I do not care if he is a tradesman. It is a man's character that truly matters. 'Look on the heart,' our father always says. Mr. Finch is the best of men. You and Jane will both be deliriously content."

Mary sobered. "What of you?" she asked. "Have you...that is, do you feel any better?"

Elizabeth fell silent. "I am unsure," she admitted.

"I cannot forget him easily, though I wish I could. And yet..." Her attention was suddenly arrested by a figure ahead; something—someone—had drawn her gaze.

Mr. Darcy strolled along the path walking perpendicular to their course, hands clasped behind his back, head bowed.

His hat was drawn low and his collar turned up, no doubt to obscure his features.

She stopped short, her words fading. Mary followed her gaze, her expression hardening as she recognized the gentleman.

"Let us go at once," she said, tugging on her sister's arm. Elizabeth did not resist, and they turned and hastened down the path, away from Mr. Darcy. A twig cracked beneath her foot with sharp snap.

"Miss Elizabeth!" He called out, but she did not pause, nor did she turn.

As though they had not heard, she and Mary left the park and boarded their uncle's awaiting carriage.

In a trice, they were gone. Elizabeth's heart beat wildly and tears sprang to her eyes.

Oh, how I have missed him! His image lingered as she closed her eyes, willing back the tears.

"Are you well?" Mary asked. "I suppose seeing him was bound to happen eventually—"

"I am well," she insisted. "Perhaps I ought to have greeted him..." She shook her head. "I was a coward, Mary. I ran. What if he had meant to explain why he left?"

"He has had months to offer an explanation." Mary folded her arms. "I suppose, now that he knows we are in town, he will rush to seek you out."

Sighing, Elizabeth leaned back against the squabs.

"I shall leave for Kent on the morrow," she murmured.

"Our meeting will be delayed, though I dare say he will not mind." They lapsed into silence, and Mary left her sister to her thoughts for the remainder of the journey to Gracechurch Street.

Before they went inside, Mary took Elizabeth's hand.

"Will you hear him if he tries to explain?" Elizabeth struggled to keep her countenance composed, revealing neither disapproval nor encouragement.

"I hardly know," Elizabeth replied. "I suppose I shall decide if the moment comes."

Mary nodded, and together they entered the house. Elizabeth dismissed the incident as best she could, determined to enjoy the evening before her departure for Kent.

### Chapter Nineteen

Scarcely a moment too late! Darcy groaned, frustration nearly choking him as he made his way back to Darcy House.

Elizabeth had been walking with another—her sister, Miss Mary, he believed.

Their hurried pace suggested they had seen him and deliberately avoided any greeting.

He could hardly blame them. He had wounded Elizabeth in the worst possible way.

I shall set it to rights on the morrow—if she will allow me to speak—to grovel...

Yet he could not deny the grim truth: his own folly might have cost him the one woman who would have completed him.

He passed the night in restless torment.

Dreams—nightmares, rather—of Elizabeth refusing him haunted his sleep.

He woke several times, and at last, near dawn, he rose.

Remaining abed would serve no purpose. One glance into the looking glass confirmed the toll the night—and the past months had taken.

He looked rather dreadful. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his entire bearing



reflected fatigue.

Oh well, he thought, tracing the edge of the port-colored stain that still appeared on his countenance.

It is not as though my appearance could be made worse.

He grimaced, knowing his mother would have scolded him for such self-deprecation.

Once dressed for the day, he went to his study, and gave his attention to his correspondence.

Several business matters required his decision before departing for Rosings at the end of the month.

Richard's leave would not begin until the twenty-third of March, and they intended to leave that morning.

If I can make amends with Elizabeth, Darcy vowed , he will go without me .

I will not leave her again, not if she will forgive me.

Aunt Catherine would be displeased, but he would not be moved.

Besides, he had no desire to endure his aunt's pronouncements that he and Anne must marry.

Neither he nor his cousin had ever wished for such a union, and now that he knew love, Darcy could not settle for anything less.

The morning crept by. At last, Darcy ordered the carriage readied. Dressed for the

weather, he instructed the coachman, and with the Gardiners' direction tucked securely in his pocket, he boarded the vehicle.

The drive proved interminable, and he tapped his foot in agitation as delays mounted.

It felt as though Providence itself taunted him as they were forced away from the direct route due to overturned wagons blocking various streets.

I deserve this, he admitted. It is fitting punishment for my rashness and pride last autumn.

Resigned, he folded his arms and waited for the journey's end.

At long last, the carriage pulled to a stop before a handsome house on a well-kept row.

Warehouses could be seen in one direction, while in the other, rows of tidy houses stretched onward.

The Gardiners' residence stood out with its red-painted door and a large pot of flowers gracing the step.

Early spring blooms offered a cheerful welcome.

Clearing his throat nervously, he stepped forward and knocked.

The door opened to reveal a butler with a stern expression, who gave him a cursory—and unmistakably disapproving—glance.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” He extended his card and silently prayed the door would not be closed in his face.

“Wait here.” The door did shut, but not with finality, and he clung to the hope that it would reopen to admit him. After what felt like the longest five minutes of his life, the butler reappeared.

“The ladies will see you.” He stepped aside, accepting Darcy’s greatcoat and hat before leading him through a short hall into the drawing room.

It was bright, tastefully appointed, and furnished in a subdued, fashionable style.

Darcy’s eyes quickly found its occupants: Miss Mary Bennet, seated primly, and a woman he did not know.

“Mr. Darcy. I am Mrs. Madeline Gardiner. Welcome. You are already acquainted with my niece.” The lady’s bearing was graceful and genteel; no one unfamiliar with her husband’s profession would ever suspect that she belonged to trade.

She did not flinch at the sight of his countenance, as so many new acquaintances did, and for that, he was quietly grateful.

“Yes. I am pleased to see Miss Mary again, of course. Is Miss Elizabeth also at home?” He looked about with hope, striving to remain composed.

“No.” Miss Mary’s answer came swiftly and with unmistakable sharpness—her single word cutting him like a knife. “My sister left this morning.”

Mrs. Gardiner gestured for Darcy to be seated.

“Did she return to Hertfordshire?” He would follow her to the ends of the earth if

needs be.

“Forgive me, sir, but I fail to understand why you care.” Miss Mary’s glare made it plain—she knew everything, and clearly, her opinion was far from favorable.

“Mary, be kind to our guest,” her aunt interjected gently, though her tone held a trace of coolness. Her manner, like Miss Mary’s, betrayed no fondness for him. So, Darcy thought grimly, she knows, too.

“I wished to speak with her...of everything.” He did not know what else he could say. It was evident the two ladies before him knew precisely what had occurred, and neither approved. “Pray, will you tell me where she has gone?”

“My sister’s affairs are her own.” Miss Mary folded her arms, her glower unwavering.

Perspiration rose along Darcy’s brow. He had expected a cool welcome, but this reception tested even his resolve. Still, he could not give up.

“Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Mary,” he said earnestly.

“I am very aware of how badly I have conducted myself. I can offer no acceptable excuse and must blame a diminished sense of my own consequence—an affliction I have carried since boyhood. All I wish is for an opportunity to apologize to Miss Elizabeth. I cannot do so in writing; we have no formal understanding, and she would be within her rights to disregard my letter. If, after hearing me, she still wishes nothing to do with me, I shall accept her decision without protest. But pray, will you help me?”

The ladies exchanged a glance. Some unspoken understanding passed between them, and Miss Mary gave a barely perceptible nod before turning back to him. A

mischievous glint brightened her countenance. “She is in Kent,” she said, amusement coloring her tone. “Hunsford, to be precise.”

He blinked. “Are you in earnest?” It seemed too fortuitous to believe. “My aunt—”

“Yes, my cousin, Mr. Collins, is your aunt’s parson. Do not you recall?” Miss Mary smirked again. “Elizabeth is visiting Mrs. Collins. ”

Color rose to his cheeks. “Mr. Bingley mentioned Miss Lucas had married,” he mumbled. Clearly, they had puzzled out much of his reason for quitting Hertfordshire. At the very least, they suspected as much.

“Oh, so you passed through Hertfordshire before coming to London?” He must have said something to recommend himself, for Miss Mary’s manner grew noticeably warmer. They conversed comfortably for another quarter hour before he rose to depart.

“I fear I must take my leave,” he said. “I am pleased to come to know you better, Mrs. Gardiner, and to see you, too, Miss Mary. Now, it appears I have pressing business if I am to set out for Kent on the morrow.”

His horses should by now be well rested after the trip from Hertfordshire; if not, he could change them at Bromley. His valet might object, as his trunk would need to be repacked.

The ladies offered farewells, and he left the house.

The drive back to Darcy House brought with it a different sort of anxiety.

He had, by all appearances, gained the approval—and perhaps even the forgiveness—of the ladies at Gracechurch Street.

But he knew full well: winning Elizabeth's would not come so easily.

Elizabeth

Sir William and Maria Lucas arrived to collect Elizabeth at nine o'clock.

It was early, but they meant to reach Kent by tea time.

Mrs. Gardiner sent her with a basket of victuals: a crusty brown loaf, cheese, and some dried fruit.

A few biscuits, wrapped neatly in a square of linen, were also included.

The Lucases brought their own hamper, well filled, and they agreed to stop only if necessary.

The roads were good and the weather fair.

Sir William's well-sprung carriage made for a comfortable journey.

Elizabeth sat gazing out the window, admiring the landscape.

The country was showing all the signs of spring.

Leaves had begun to green, and the fields and hedgerows were just beginning to bloom.

Even the roadside verges were dotted with early wildflowers, adding to the charm of the landscape.

Conversation flowed easily, with Sir William and Maria keeping the mood light.

Before long, Elizabeth found her thoughts no longer lingered on Mr. Darcy, nor did it feel as though she had fled London to escape him.

“My Charlotte has written of the parsonage at length,” Sir William declared proudly. “She enjoys her parish duties, too, and writes that she keeps chickens and pigs.” He beamed. “I have every hope for her felicity as Mrs. Collins.”

“I could not be more delighted by my friend’s contented state.

” Elizabeth spoke sincerely, though she still wondered how her dearest friend would fare with a husband so entirely devoted to the opinions of another lady of consequence.

“Charlotte is the most deserving of women. I cannot tell you how eager I am to see her again. It has been an age. Why, I do not believe we have been parted so long since my come-out.”

Maria nodded in agreement. “I feel very much the same, Lizzy. She is my only sister, you know. Now I am trapped in a house full of gentlemen with only my mother for company.” She pulled a face.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Elizabeth laughed. “I am certain my father would commiserate with you, Maria, though his situation is quite the opposite. I dare say he feels the same, surrounded by the plethora of women within Longbourn’s household.” Sir William joined their laughter, and Elizabeth felt her heart grow lighter.

Around the midpoint of their journey, they paused to stretch their legs.

Elizabeth strolled about the yard before a handsome inn, where the carriage now waited.

They had stopped in Bromley, at The Bell Inn, a fashionable establishment that catered to wealthier patrons.

Another inn stood several miles distant, but Sir William, being a knight, preferred to stop where the company would reflect his station.

As she strolled, Elizabeth observed other travelers milling about. Ladies in fashionable attire walked on the arms of gentlemen of equal consequence. A few children trailed behind, with maids and governesses following to attend them.

“Come now, Miss Elizabeth. It is time to depart.” Sir William appeared at her side.

“Only a few hours remain, I believe.” He offered his arm, and together they returned to the carriage.

Maria already waited within, one of the baskets resting on the seat beside her, the cloth pulled back to reveal the delights within.



“Will you have some bread and cheese, Lizzy?” she asked, holding out a napkin with a generous portion of each.

Elizabeth accepted it gratefully and ate in thoughtful silence as their journey resumed.

In time, Sir William dozed, and Maria followed soon after, leaving Elizabeth alone with her thoughts.

Inevitably, they turned to Mr. Darcy, and the ache she had tried so diligently to suppress stirred once more.

I believed myself healed, she reflected dismally. But I was mistaken. A heart that is broken does not so easily mend.

A pang of guilt accompanied the memory of her flight from the park. Mr. Darcy had called her name—and she had fled.

My courage always rises whenever I face trials or intimidation, she mused. And yet, at the first sign of distress, I fled. My word, what a fickle creature I have become !

Had she not longed for the chance to speak with him, to hear his explanation? And when that opportunity was presented, she had turned away. When did I become so contrary?

There was nothing for it now. The moment had passed, and she was already well on her way to Kent.

Mr. Darcy might seek her at Gracechurch Street—or he might not.

Should he go, the Gardiners would surely guard her whereabouts from those unworthy of such knowledge.

It was poor consolation. A traitorous, fanciful part of her longed for him to pursue her—for some proof, however irrational, that he still loved her.

Even if he did speak with you, 'tis unlikely he would renew his unofficial addresses.

She huffed, crossed her arms over her middle, and turned once more to the window. He made me no promises. There were only implications—allusions. Still, she had hoped he might offer for her, and when he had left without a word, it had devastated her.

Elizabeth had no desire for thoughts of Mr. Darcy to overshadow her lovely holiday in Kent.

She gathered every memory of the gentleman—and all the feelings attached to their acquaintance—and wrapped them, in her mind, with proverbial paper, locking them away in some imaginary trunk.

Her visit with Charlotte would not be marred by the longings of her heart.

Instead, she would celebrate her friend's felicity and enjoy the comfort of the Collinses' hospitality.

Perhaps if fortune smiled, she would even meet the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself.

By the time the carriage slowed before a handsome, gray-stone house on a quiet lane, the hour was such that their hosts had already laid out tea.

A low stone wall enclosed the parsonage, its base bright with spring blossoms. Trees shaded part of the dwelling, and Elizabeth suspected a kitchen garden lay behind it, well out of sight.

Awaiting them were Mr. and Mrs. Collins , Elizabeth thought wryly.

Charlotte wore a white mobcap and apron, and her arm looped through her husband's.

Mr. Collins stood tall and proud, his usually greasy hair clean and freshly combed, his typically rumpled attire pristine.

When he grinned, it was without sanctimony or condescension—merely genuine.

Sir William descended first and then offered his hand to assist Elizabeth and Maria. Together, they approached their hosts.

“My dear Sir William! Cousin Elizabeth! And Miss Maria!

Welcome to our humble abode. Come! We have tea waiting, and I—that is, we—wish to show you the parsonage.

“He seemed inclined to say more, but Charlotte placed a gentle hand on his arm.

He fell silent, casting his wife a look of grateful admiration.

She stepped forward and greeted her friend and family with warm embraces.

They entered a pleasant drawing room at the front of the house.

“Mr. Collins's study lies across the hall,” Charlotte explained.

“This room is reserved for callers. I have a private parlor at the back of the house for my own use. 'Tis very comfortable—but I shall show you later.

We have a lovely tea prepared: biscuits, tarts, and an herbal blend called Kentish mint—all locally grown. ”

“It sounds delightful,” Elizabeth said, taking a seat beside Maria as Charlotte began to pour and serve the tea. Mr. Collins soon launched into conversation with his father-in-law, leaving the ladies to their own.

“I trust your journey was an easy one,” Charlotte said, passing Elizabeth her tea. She next served Maria, who accepted with a grateful smile.

Elizabeth nodded. “Indeed, it was. What lovely country! I believe I could live in Kent forever.” She smiled happily and took a sip. “This blend is excellent! What sort of mint is grown here that would give it such a robust flavor?”

“I have yet to learn the secret. The garden behind the parsonage boasts three varieties.” Charlotte sipped her tea and gave a small hum of satisfaction. “We have other herbs as well, some of them imported. I wished to welcome you with a taste of Kentish fare.”

“I heartily approve. Never have I had a mint tea so fine! Thank you, my dear friend.”

After their repast, Mr. Collins conducted them on a tour of the house, proudly pointing out various improvements. When they reached the bedchambers, he paused before one of the closets.

“Lady Catherine had shelves installed here,” he declared.

“They have since been removed. I once managed well enough with folded garments—after all, a gentleman’s attire differs greatly from a lady’s.

But now that I am married, my dear Charlotte has wisely observed the necessity of

having a place to hang her gowns.

I dare say, my shirts are far less wrinkled when not folded and kept on a shelf. ”

Elizabeth exchanged a look with Charlotte, her eyes dancing with amusement. Inwardly, she wondered what other changes her friend had quietly introduced into her husband's habits.

This may prove a most diverting visit indeed.

### Chapter Twenty

“Charlotte, I can see that marriage agrees with you.” Elizabeth sipped her tea, smiling at her friend over the top of the cup. “Why, I have never seen you glow so brightly!”

“Thank you, Eliza.” Charlotte took a bite of cake, chewing with thoughtful deliberation.

“Mr. Collins has proven to be an exemplary husband and partner. He performs small acts of kindness each day and strives to emulate my proper behavior. What is more, his devotion to Lady Catherine has begun to wane. Do not mistake my meaning—he still calls on her weekly as she demands, but he returns with more complaints of her highhandedness than praises for her beneficence or condescension.”

“And you had nothing to do with his transformation.” Elizabeth’s sarcasm was obvious, her grin shared knowingly with her friend.

“I may have pointed out a few things. Thankfully, he is receptive to gentle direction. Other men might insist they know better than their wives. I am well aware of the blessing it is to have a husband who willingly seeks to correct his faults.”

Sir William and Maria had claimed fatigue and retired to their chambers. Mr. Collins had departed on parish duties, leaving Elizabeth and Charlotte free to converse in private. Elizabeth relished the opportunity; how she had missed her friend’s good sense since she had married and gone away.

“I am very happy to be here,” she ventured, seizing the moment to speak her mind.

“Mary is enjoying the attentions of a suitor in town—she begged me to convey her apologies for remaining in London with my aunt.”

“How has the season progressed for you?” Charlotte raised a brow. “I am not blind, Lizzy. There is a melancholy about you. It was present even before my wedding. I had hoped it would have lifted by now, but I see I was mistaken.”

“I saw Mr. Darcy yesterday,” she admitted.

“He was walking in Hyde Park. Mary hurried me away, and I ignored him, though he called after me.” She sighed and set her cup and saucer on the tray.

They rattled slightly in her agitation. “Should I have acknowledged him—turned to greet him, and permitted him to offer his excuses?” She set her cup and saucer down on the tray.

They rattled a little. Such was her agitation.

“The hurt in my heart has turned to anger. I want to shout at him for the pain he caused.”

Charlotte tut-tutted sympathetically. “I cannot say what would have been the best course of action. Perhaps he has a reason for his abandonment, though it does not follow the reason is an acceptable one. I should warn you—Mr. Darcy and his cousin come to Rosings Park each spring to assist with the management of the estate. Lady Catherine has already spoken of their impending arrival.”

Elizabeth swallowed. “I thank you for the information—and for the opportunity to prepare myself accordingly. When next we meet, I shall have regained my equanimity, and we may greet one another as common and indifferent acquaintances.”

Charlotte laughed. "You may say that if you believe it will be so. My dear Eliza, you are as much in love with Mr. Darcy now as you were when he departed after the Netherfield Ball. I know your temperament. Perhaps his visit to Rosings will allow you both to settle your differences and begin anew." She sipped her tea, humming in contentment.

"Until you learn what drove him from Hertfordshire, I fear you will continue to be haunted by his memory."

"I have imagined the worst. Mr. Bingley believes he overheard our conversation concerning Mr. Collins. Dear Charlotte—I owe you an apology for my words that evening. In the short time since our arrival, I see clearly that you are well-suited to my cousin. Forgive me." Elizabeth regarded her friend with earnest affection, gratified to see no trace of resentment.

Charlotte grinned. "It is all forgotten. I cannot deny that it requires a particular sort of woman to manage my husband. In this, I am perfectly suited to the task. There is a long way for us to go—and an entire lifetime in which to do so. Now, you must not attempt to change the subject. Mr. Bingley believes our conversation at the ball was overheard. If that is the case, it explains much. Still, he ought to know you well enough to realize your words referred to another. Given his...history...I can understand why he left the company without a word."

She sighed. "I can, too. My words were intemperate and wholly out of character. You cannot know how often I have regretted them. I am the cause of my own misery."

"No," Charlotte interrupted. "You cannot place all the blame upon your shoulders. Mr. Darcy is a grown man with experience in the world. He ought to have approached you directly. Though you have not been explicit, I gather he intimated something of his intentions before the ball. I should say his honor was engaged. A gentleman ought not to have left you with unfulfilled expectations."



Elizabeth reached out and took Charlotte's hand in gratitude.

"I value your staunch defense. Now it remains to be seen whether Mr. Darcy and I may settle our differences, or whether we must part ways forever. It will make matters exceedingly awkward going forward—Mr. Bingley, his dearest friend, is engaged to my sister."

Charlotte clapped her hands in delight. "I had not heard! Is it recent?"

"Yes. Mary and I had a letter just before my departure. I am certain Lady Lucas will include the news in her next missive." Suddenly restless, Elizabeth rose. "I believe I shall walk in the garden for a time. After spending the day in the carriage, I long to stretch my legs."

Her friend chuckled. "Do not wander too far. I know well how many delights will draw your attention—and how many paths you will wish to explore. Tomorrow is soon enough."

Elizabeth wandered through the gardens surrounding the parsonage.

They would be truly lovely in a few weeks' time, once the flowers had begun to bloom in earnest. For now, the grounds appeared well tended, with no trace of dead foliage.

She wondered whether Mr. Collins or his wife had contributed to the neatness of the flower beds.

Charlotte had always enjoyed working with her hands.

The gardens at Lucas Lodge had been under her care before her marriage.

Mrs. Bennet had long labored to keep her own in equal condition, though she had never managed to surpass the splendor of those at Lucas Lodge.

No doubt Charlotte would transform the parsonage's modest plot in a like manner.

Elizabeth mulled over the conversation they had shared in the small parlor at the back of the house.

More than anything, she wished for an opportunity to set matters right with Mr. Darcy.

Oh, why did I not speak with him in the park?

She knew the answer. I was not ready. Would she be ready when he arrived in Kent?

Would they have the chance to speak, or would he be too occupied with his aunt and cousin?

Choosing to let the matter rest until she must face him, she returned to the house.

The next day, Mr. Collins informed his guests that they were invited to dine at Rosings Park that evening. "Lady Catherine wishes to make the acquaintance of my guests," he said simply. His words lacked the superfluous monologue Elizabeth recalled from Longbourn.

"What condescension!" cried Sir William, clearly delighted. "I had not expected such an honor. My dear Charlotte, what a compliment. You are very fortunate in your esteemed neighbor."

Charlotte thanked her father, though Elizabeth noticed her press her lips together ever so slightly.

She wondered what sort of interference the great lady had already imposed upon the household of the parsonage.

Content to listen to the conversation around her, she ate her eggs and toast and said nothing.

“What shall I wear?” Maria asked in a tone verging on panic. “I did not pack anything suitable for a visit to a great house! Oh, Charlotte, I shall disgrace you!”

“Peace, dear sister.” Mr. Collins’s demeanor was surprisingly calm and reassuring.

“Simply wear whatever gown you have that is the finest. Lady Catherine will not object. Indeed—” he cleared his throat—“my patroness likes to see the distinction of rank preserved. Whatever you wear will be adequate to please her exacting standards.”

Charlotte gave her husband an approving nod, and Elizabeth watched as he straightened in his chair and returned the gesture. As dinner resumed, she reflected on how well matched Mr. and Mrs. Collins seemed. They will have a very happy life together, she mused. I could never have imagined it.

Later that evening, they strolled down the lane toward the great house.

Mr. Collins pointed out his favorite natural features and praised the gardens of Rosings.

“They will be bursting with blooms in a few weeks. The estate is renowned for its roses—which, I suppose, you might have guessed, given the name.”

Elizabeth much preferred Mr. Collins’s new manner of speaking to his monologue of last December, when he had enumerated the worth of Rosings and of the lady to

whom he felt beholden.

She listened attentively now, offering the occasional comment.

All too soon, they arrived and were shown into a large, opulently furnished drawing room.

Gold leaf adorned nearly every surface, and the furniture was finely appointed and ornate.

Three persons occupied the room—two elder, one younger.

The lady seated in a grand, stately chair, Elizabeth judged, must be Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Her countenance was impassive, though tinged with disapproval, as she examined her visitors.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

As Mr. Collins performed the introductions, Elizabeth observed the other guests.

The first lady, she presumed, must be a companion—an assumption that was confirmed as the introductions proceeded.

The final occupant surprised Elizabeth most. Miss Anne de Bourgh glanced up when her name was spoken, and to Elizabeth's astonishment, she noted the young woman had a red wine stain, not unlike her cousin's, spreading across half her forehead.

The mark extended down over one eye and was of deep crimson.

The appearance did not shock her; in fact, Elizabeth could see past it easily, having had much practice with the lady's cousin.

It was plain to her that the heiress of Rosings Park was a handsome young lady, if a little timid.

Miss de Bourgh offered only a brief nod to each guest before turning her gaze to her lap once more.

“So, you are Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I understand you are Mrs. Collins's particular friend.” Lady Catherine quirked a brow and gave Elizabeth a cursory glance. “You seem to be a genteel, pretty sort of girl.”

“Thank you, ma'am. Mrs. Collins and I have been friends for as long as I can remember. She is an excellent lady. I am pleased to be a guest at Hunsford Parsonage.” Elizabeth cast a glance at Miss de Bourgh, who did not stir. “Your

grounds are most lovely, madam,” she continued.

“Yes, no other estate may compare with Rosings Park, save perhaps Pemberley. And as the two estates are soon to be united, there is scarcely any difference.” Lady Catherine sniffed.

Miss de Bourgh shifted slightly. So, she is listening, Elizabeth mused.

I wonder what she would say if she knew her cousin had categorically denied being engaged to her.

Not that it mattered to Elizabeth. Perhaps after he left Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy made some arrangement to marry his cousin.

The thought struck her with a pang, and she struggled to master the tears that stung her eyes.

“You must take the time to tour the park before you take your leave,” Lady Catherine directed Sir William.

“I understand from Mr. Collins that you will not remain longer than a sen’night; therefore, it is imperative for you to seize the opportunity while you can.

Miss Elizabeth and Miss Lucas are welcome to walk the grounds as often as they wish during their stay. I am very liberal in that way.”

“Yes, thank you.” Sir William seemed uncertain how to respond, but his usual affable manner soon asserted itself.

He began to speak to their hostess of his knighthood.

Lady Catherine, to her credit, listened with attention, occasionally offering remarks on how such matters ought to have been conducted when he was first presented at St. James's.

After fifteen minutes, during which the rest of the party listened in silence to their exchange, dinner was announced.

Elizabeth found herself seated near Lady Catherine, and thus underwent an interrogation from the moment the first course was served.

"You are the second of five daughters?" the lady inquired.

"Upon my word, your mother must have been a slave to your education. And your poor father! How he must suffer, having no son. I cannot imagine he hears much sensible conversation."

"My father would agree with you, madam. Save for myself and Jane, he declares his daughters to be among the silliest girls in all England. My eldest sister is soon to be married, and I dare say he does not look forward to the loss of one less sensible companion in the house." Elizabeth took a sip of her soup.

"Married? That is good for your family. Tell me, is he wealthy? Will he provide for you once your father is gone? Your father's estate is entailed upon Mr. Collins, is it not?"

It would behoove all your sisters to take that into account when accepting proposals.

"She sniffed delicately and signaled the butler for the next course.

"Mr. Bingley is a fine man, your ladyship, and his temperament is a perfect match for my sister's.

I am certain they will be incredibly happy together.

” Elizabeth refrained from answering the lady’s probing questions directly, bristling slightly at the implication that only fortune mattered when considering one’s future.

“Such a fine gentleman!” Sir William interjected.

“He leased the largest estate in the area—Netherfield Park. Mr. Bingley is affable and courteous, a desirable guest at any house in Hertfordshire. His arrival caused quite a stir. Many young ladies sought his attention, but it was no surprise when he settled upon Miss Bennet. She is one of the jewels of the county and a rare beauty.”

Lady Catherine nodded imperiously. “Miss Elizabeth is a pretty sort of girl. Of course, it follows her elder sister possesses the same beauty. Such things are usually passed down in families. ” She turned to her daughter, who seemed to wilt under the scrutiny.

“It is a good thing Anne’s future is secure. No one would want her otherwise.”

A slow burn of anger rose within Elizabeth.

How could a mother speak so meanly of her child?

She began to wonder whether Mr. Darcy was subjected to similar hurtful remarks from his aunt.

That would certainly explain why he only comes only once a year.

I should not wish to spend more time than necessary with someone so...

unkind. She made it her aim to befriend Miss de Bourgh while in Kent.



The lady deserves to receive some kindness in her life.

Lady Catherine dominated the evening, with only Sir William inserting a word now and then.

Maria remained silent, likely too nervous to speak.

Mr. Collins replied whenever his patroness spoke to him, but otherwise confined his conversation with his wife and his guests.

Elizabeth noticed Charlotte touch his sleeve several times—a subtle signal, it seemed, to temper his abundant remarks.

Upon returning to the parsonage, all retired directly to bed. Elizabeth lay awake for a time, meditating on the events of the past two days. As sleep finally overtook her, she had it in mind to take a long walk on the morrow in hopes of clearing her head.

### Chapter Twenty-One

“You are fortunate I was able to change my leave, Darcy. Mother will be pleased, for it means I shall spend Easter with her rather than remain in Kent.” Colonel Fitzwilliam tugged at his sleeves and looked out the carriage window.

“Now, remind me why we are leaving for Rosings nearly three weeks early.”

“Elizabeth is staying with her friend at Hunsford Parsonage.” Darcy quickly explained what he had learned.

“I intended to leave for Hertfordshire yesterday, but upon discovering she had come to Kent...well, I altered my plans. I only hope she will hear me long enough to permit an apology and beg her forgiveness.”

“Yes, you have quite the task ahead—groveling is so unbecoming in a Darcy, but I trust you shall manage it.” Richard grinned.

“Truly, it was masterful—a grand disappearance without so much as a word of explanation. Still, if Miss Elizabeth is even half as besotted as you are, she may take pity on your poor, tortured soul and forgive you. And if my suppositions are wrong, and she was, in fact, speaking of you, then you can retreat to Pemberley, lick your wounds, and compose mournful sonnets to the portrait of her you will no doubt hang in your study. By the bye, have you written to Bingley lately?”

Darcy laughed. “That will do, Richard. I take your meaning,” he said, still grinning with chagrin.

“As to Bingley, I had a letter from him yesterday. He is engaged to Miss Bennet and wishes me to stand up with him in May. I plan to write to him as soon as we arrive at Rosings and accept.” Darcy closed his eyes and pictured Elizabeth beside him, her hand in his as they exchanged vows.

I hope it is not too late. Without thinking, he reached up and traced the mottled skin of the scar, then the dark red blotch that discolored his visage.

“It will not disappear, no matter how often you touch it. Besides, you only draw attention to it when you do that.” Richard rolled his eyes and stretched his legs as far as the carriage allowed.

Crossing his ankles, he laced his fingers behind his head.

“How will you deal with our aunt? You know she will raise the matter of your marriage to Anne. Does Miss Elizabeth know the entire scheme is the invention of our aunt’s own making? ”

“She does. The topic arose while I was in Hertfordshire.” Darcy folded his hands and rested them in his lap, attempting to still his nervous movements. “Lady Catherine can bluster as she pleases. I will not marry Anne. Besides, our cousin has already told me she would refuse, were I to offer.”

“Did she, now?” Richard looked genuinely surprised. “Does she not wish to marry? Anne is not so sickly as our aunt claims. Anyone would appear frail if confined indoors at all times. The old gorgon is far too preoccupied with shielding her daughter’s face from the world.”

“Anne sneaks out in her phaeton on occasion,” Darcy murmured.

“Had our uncle not died so early in her life, I dare say she might have led a far

happier existence.” Sir Lewis had died shortly before Anne’s sixteenth birthday.

The once cheerful child had become a shadow of her former self.

She never attended school, and her mother refused to allow visitors outside the family.

Darcy had heard her words on the subject often enough.

“ I cannot have anyone seeing that ghastly mark. ’Tis one thing for a man to bear it, but a lady?

Neither I nor my sister had such an ugly blemish.

I blame the weakness of the de Bourgh line.

You will have to marry her, Darcy, to spare her the criticism of the ton. ” It was dreadful.

“We ought to do something for her. She has been under our aunt’s control far too long.”

“Did I not tell you?” Richard sat up, grinning.

“I am under orders from my father to bring Anne back to town with us. Parliament keeps him there or he would come himself. How we shall manage it, I know not. Our dear cousin turned five-and-twenty in January. If we cannot take Anne away, then he will come for her in June.”

Darcy’s brow crept upward, his scar pulling slightly with the movement. “We shall have to spirit her away in the night. Aunt Catherine will never consent.”

“Anne can make her own decisions now. The estate is hers entirely since coming of age. Why do you suppose our aunt has become so persistent in urging your marriage? With Anne installed at Pemberley, she believes she might still exert control over Rosings.”

Darcy laughed out loud. “She is mistaken if she believes I would allow her to remain in the manor house. No—Aunt Catherine would go to the dower house and live on her jointure. Has she forgotten who has managed the estate books these past five years? I know precisely how lavishly she spends. Rosings can sustain her, but one poor harvest would plunge the estate into debt. There is not enough set aside to weather a true emergency.”

“How well I know it.” Richard sighed. “Maybe I ought to marry Anne myself. Miss Wilson, sadly, married a baronet from Staffordshire. Uniting with my cousin would certainly benefit me. She is not disagreeable—timid, to be sure, but I am gregarious enough for two. I could resign my commission—that would please my parents.”

“If a marriage of that nature is what you desire, you have my blessing. Anne deserves some measure of happiness. I often wonder why my mother differed so greatly from her sister. I was raised gently. My mother taught me my worth, though my own feelings of inferiority have often caused me to forget it. Has Lady Catherine ever loved poor Anne? She disparages and criticizes.”

His cousin shrugged and leaned forward, reaching for the hamper of food.

“It is worth considering. The last time I was on the Continent, I had a close encounter with the enemy I would rather not repeat.” He looked away briefly—whatever memory had surfaced, he suppressed it swiftly.

“Perhaps I shall mention it to Anne, and see if she would be willing to enter into an arrangement of convenience. I would be kind to her—and faithful. It would be a far

better situation than she has known for years.”

“Cheese, Darcy? Richard offered suddenly. “I am famished.”

They ate in companionable silence. Darcy’s thoughts moved in rhythm with the carriage wheels, tumbling one over the next.

He wondered whether Elizabeth had yet been introduced to his aunt, and what she had made of her.

He had little good to say of Lady Catherine, and he continued assisting with the estate only out of respect for his father.

George Darcy had managed everything at Rosings after Sir Lewis’s death—at least until his own passing five years before.

“Bromley.” Richard nodded toward the window. The carriage had slowed and now entered the yard of the coaching inn. Two grooms approached and began to change the horses. “I need to stretch my legs.” His cousin opened the door and climbed down.

“I believe I shall join you.” Darcy followed.

The yard smelled strongly of horse and sweat.

People passed swiftly in all directions, going about their business.

He and Richard strolled a short way from the bustle and paused in the shade of a broad tree.

Out of habit, Darcy kept his hat tilted low, hiding his blemish.

He caught himself at once. Blemish? His mother, were she here, would be disappointed in him for thinking of it in such terms.

Elizabeth makes it easier to bear . Had I not been a fool, I would even now be enjoying her company.

There was no use bemoaning the past. All he could do was hope she would allow him to apologize. And even if she does, it does not follow that she will allow me to renew my addresses. The thought churned his stomach, and he drew in a deep breath and exhaled to ease the nausea.

Pray, Elizabeth. Do not turn me away. I could not bear it if you did.

Within fifteen minutes, the carriage was back on the road to Hunsford.

Two hours or so of travel still lay ahead, but by the morrow, Darcy would see Elizabeth again.

He wondered where he might encounter her.

Surely, she would be outdoors walking the paths surrounding Rosings Park.

Perhaps I ought to call at the parsonage with Richard first. And then what?

He might contrive a meeting—somewhere private—so they could speak openly without interruption.

Richard dozed, leaving Darcy alone with his thoughts. He turned over countless possibilities in his mind, yet by the time the carriage rolled to a stop, no firm plan had taken shape. Weary, he climbed down, followed by a still-groggy Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“You had best be coherent when we face our aunt,” Darcy warned. “She will not take kindly to our early arrival, especially without notice.”

“You did not write?” Richard gaped, then laughed. “You are mistaken, Cousin—she will see it as proof you mean to marry Anne at last. I do not envy you!” He bounded up the steps ahead of him.

Shaking his head, Darcy followed more slowly.

His cousin waited at the top of the stairs.

The door opened without them knocking, and Rosings’ long-time butler, Stanley, greeted them with his usual solemnity.

“Lady Catherine has been informed of your arrival,” he intoned.

“She demands to see you before you go upstairs.”

“Lead on, Stanley,” Richard declared. “I am certain my aunt cannot wait to welcome us.” He chuckled under his breath and nudged Darcy with his elbow.

They followed the butler down the hall. Darcy noted several changes since his last visit, frowning slightly as he considered the cost. Four new paintings lined the entrance hall, none of which he recognized.

No doubt more would be found in his aunt’s favorite drawing room.

As they were announced, he glanced around.

The furnishings had, indeed, changed there as well.



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

“Darcy! Fitzwilliam! You were not meant to arrive for another three weeks. How very rude to surprise me in this fashion. You ought to feel fortunate that I had your rooms prepared last week; otherwise you would have nowhere to sleep.” Darcy stepped forward and kissed her cheek, murmuring a polite greeting.

Richard followed and did the same, though with a broader smile.

“I could hardly wait to see you, Aunt,” Richard said warmly.

“I had to persuade Darcy to come early. He was terribly busy with estate business, but ever the devoted cousin, he cleared his schedule to accommodate me. Now—where is Anne? I do not see her.” He looked about the room as though their cousin might appear from behind the settee.

“Anne is upstairs changing. When we heard you were here, she insisted on donning on a more becoming gown to welcome Darcy—and you, of course.” Lady Catherine turned to her other nephew. “I hope you intend to fulfill your duty, Darcy. She has waited long enough.”

“I do not understand your meaning.” Darcy kept his features impassive. “I am as eager to see my cousin as Richard.”

“Richard has no reason to be eager.” Lady Catherine frowned. “Must I remind you of your obligation? Anne is perfectly suited to you. You even share the same... traits. It is exactly what your mother wished. Uniting Pemberley and Rosings Park will make you one of the wealthiest men in all England.”

“If wealth were my primary concern, I would consider your suggestion, Aunt. Since it is not, there is nothing more to say on the matter.” He maintained his impassive demeanor, hoping she would let the subject drop.

“How can you say that?” she cried, raising her voice.

“Given your deformity, no one else will want you. Since Anne shares your unfortunate malady, she can have no cause to complain. Darcy—do you think handsome ladies will accept you? My dear sister filled your head with fairytales and foolish dreams of love. You are a grown man. See the world as it is and do as I say.”

“That will be the end of it, Aunt, or I shall take a room at the Rose and Crown in the village.” Darcy bowed.

“I believe I shall go refresh myself.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left the room, his thoughts already meditating on a pair of fine eyes and the one woman who had—he hoped—begun to care for him despite his failings.

He did not see Anne until supper. Lady Catherine presided at the head of the table, appearing as forbidding as ever as she surveyed those seated around her.

Anne sat beside Richard, her gaze fixed on her plate, whispering responses to his quiet questions.

Anne’s companion, Mrs. Jenkinson, was placed next to Lady Catherine, with Darcy seated on the companion’s other side.

The seating arrangement did not go unnoticed.

His aunt had placed him lower in a petty attempt to chastise him.

More the fool she, for I prefer this seat to one by her side.

“My parson has guests,” Lady Catherine began. Darcy knew this and feigned indifference. “He has lately married. His wife’s sister and her particular friend are to stay for six weeks. Mrs. Collins’s father will return to Hertfordshire in a few days.”

“Darcy, did you not meet Mr. Collins in Hertfordshire?” Richard’s eyes were filled with mischief. “Ought we not call and wish him joy?” Darcy silently thanked him for the strategic diversion.

Richard turned to Anne. “What think you of the guests?” he asked, drawing attention away from their cousin. “I assume our aunt has had them to dine.”

“Yes,” whispered Anne. “I like Mrs. Collins. Her sister, Miss Lucas, is quiet, but seems like a demure young lady. I did not have the opportunity to speak with Miss Elizabeth. But Mama spoke with Sir William at length. He is a gregarious, friendly man.”

“Your observations are insipid, child.” Lady Catherine’s imperious voice interrupted her daughter.

“Miss Elizabeth is intelligent, but I sense impertinence in her manner. Sir William, knighted though he may be, reveals his roots in trade through unceasing conversation. His daughter is a timid little mouse and no great beauty. Still, their company is diverting enough and brings some variety to our otherwise confined and unvarying society.”

Darcy bit his tongue. He liked Sir William—loquacious, yes, but entirely genuine. His imperious aunt’s sharp criticisms were well known, and her tendency to belittle her guests no longer shocked him.

“I cannot wait to meet them.” Richard’s cheerful reply made Darcy grin, though he smothered it before he could be observed.

“Anne,” Richard continued, “you ought to accompany us to the parsonage on the morrow. It would only be to pay a call. What say you?”

“Anne will remain here. It would not do for anyone to see that hideous mark.” Lady Catherine huffed as she accepted a serving of asparagus from the footman.

“Nonsense! Anne, tell me you will come. It would please us greatly. “He gave Darcy a significant look, who quickly lent his agreement. This seemed to pacify their aunt; no doubt she interpreted this as encouragement, and graciously granted her permission for her daughter to leave the house.

Tomorrow, Darcy thought. Tomorrow I shall see Elizabeth.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Elizabeth sat in Charlotte's drawing room, contentedly observing the view from the front window.

It overlooked the garden and the lane that led to Rosings Park.

Beyond the lane, woods and walking paths stretched into the distance.

She had explored one of those trails earlier that morning and had come upon a bluebell meadow.

The dismal mood that had clouded the previous day had lifted, and now she conversed pleasantly with her friend.

Maria and Sir William had gone to the village, and Mr. Collins was engaged in a meeting with Lady Catherine, thus the parsonage enjoyed a rare peace.

Their relative solitude was broken by Mr. Collins's abrupt entrance. He burst into the room, gasping for breath. "My dear Charlotte, you must make haste! We are to have callers in but a moment. I rushed back as quickly as I could, for it would not do to welcome such exalted guests into our—"

"Mr. Collins," Charlotte interrupted, speaking firmly, yet kindly.

"Pray compose yourself. We can scarcely understand you. Why do you not sit and tell us who is expected?" She did not look up from her work, nor did she reveal any

outward sign of exasperation.

Her calm demeanor had its desired effect, and her husband soon gathered himself and replied in a more measured tone.

“Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam are at Rosings Park. Their early arrival has both pleased and vexed Lady Catherine. The gentlemen informed me of their intention to call this morning as I quitted the manor.” He slowly sank into the nearest chair.

“I am very sorry, my dear—I allowed my excitement to overcome me. Never did I imagine such condescension!”

“Mr. Darcy is already acquainted with all the current residents of the parsonage,” his wife reminded him in the same calm tone.

“It is only proper that he should call. His cousin likely accompanies him in search of diversion.” She set aside her work basket and offered Mr. Collins a pleased smile.

“I thank you for alerting us to their imminent arrival so I might call for tea.” Rising, she briefly pressed his hand.

“Why do you not look over your sermon and determine whether Lady Catherine’s advice may be applied? ”

Mr. Collins nodded, visibly more relaxed than he had been but moments earlier.

“Yes, very good. I shall join you when the gentlemen arrive. Perhaps Maria and Sir William will have returned by then.” He ambled off, and once he had gone, Elizabeth turned to her friend.

“Brava, Charlotte. ’Tis a fine match you have made. I congratulate you.” She grinned and gave a conspiratorial wink.

“My husband is an excitable man—a curious mixture of several personalities familiar to us. At times, I see my father, my mother, or even Lydia in his demeanor. Yet he is a wonderful husband. Did you note the flowers on the breakfast table? He picked them for me just this morning.” Charlotte sighed in quiet satisfaction.

“Yes, he bears some interesting traits, but as we grow together, I believe we shall have a pleasing life.”

“A vast deal more than pleasing, I should say. He may not have loved you when he proposed, but it is plain to see that he adores you now. More than that, he respects your guidance. What a rare treasure!” Elizabeth returned her gaze to her embroidery.

Charlotte chuckled. “Do not tell me you now regret not having secured him for Mary!” The two ladies descended into laughter.

When their mirth subsided, Elizabeth wiped a tear from her eye. “Mary has not your temperament. It was not long ago that she looked on us all with condescension and self-importance. I fear she would have brought out the worst in Mr. Collins, rather than the best.”

“Before I go to order tea...Lizzy, we did not expect Mr. Darcy for several weeks. Will you be well? Will the call discompose you?” Charlotte’s genuine concern warmed Elizabeth’s heart.

“I can manage. I may choose to speak with others, but I shall not shrink in his presence.” A knot formed in her stomach, but she struggled to maintain her cheerful demeanor. It would not do to betray weakness.

Her friend nodded and left to see to the tea and biscuits.

Elizabeth tried to concentrate on her embroidery but found the effort futile.

Her gaze drifted to the window, where she watched for the gentlemen.

Before Charlotte returned, she espied their approach—both walking briskly and bearing sticks.

Mr. Darcy was immediately recognizable, accompanied by another gentleman in a blue coat.

Sir William and Maria had, regrettably, not returned, and thus would not be present to serve as a buffer between her and Mr. Darcy. Charlotte reappeared just before the bell rang, and when the gentlemen were shown in, Mr. Collins entered the parlor as well.

“Mr. Darcy, welcome to our home.” Charlotte curtsied, as did Elizabeth, though she avoided looking directly at the guests.

“Mrs. Collins, thank you. Will you allow me to present my cousin, The Honorable Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam?” He stepped forward, and Elizabeth glanced up.

He was not a handsome man. In truth, he was quite ordinary in appearance, but his ready smile made his countenance pleasing.

Unlike his cousin’s, his features were smooth and clear.

Not that it signified. Perhaps I look for some likeness to Mr. Darcy, she thought.

Still, she did not turn her gaze upon that gentleman; she did not yet feel equal to it.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, sir.” Charlotte’s voice drew Elizabeth back to the moment. “You have met Mr. Collins, of course. This is my dear friend, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, in Hertfordshire. I am afraid my father and sister are in the village. They will be sorry to have missed you.”



“Never fear! My aunt sent me with an invitation for you all to dine after church services. As I understand it, you were all at Rosings just two days ago. Still, she insists you join us on the morrow. I hope it will not disrupt your plans.” Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned.

“If it should, pray tell me, and I shall impart your regrets to Lady Catherine.”

“We shall be pleased to accept,” Charlotte replied. “We have no fixed engagements. Is that not right, Mr. Collins?” Her husband nodded with enthusiasm. Elizabeth could see the effort he exerted to restrain his wayward tongue and silently applauded his success.

After they seated themselves, Elizabeth felt a measure of relief when Charlotte joined her on the settee in silent support.

Mr. Darcy took a chair on her left, and Colonel Fitzwilliam sat to Charlotte’s right.

Mr. Collins occupied the final seat and began conversing with Mr. Darcy as his wife poured the tea, which had just been brought in by a maid.

“How long are you in Kent, Miss Bennet?” Colonel Fitzwilliam addressed her kindly, and Elizabeth angled her body away from Mr. Darcy as she replied.

“Sir William shall return to Hertfordshire in a few days. Miss Lucas and I are to remain for six weeks. My uncle will send his carriage and a servant to retrieve us. After that, I shall go to London, while Miss Lucas returns home.”

She felt Mr. Darcy shift beside her. Part of her wondered why he said nothing; the other part felt relieved that he did not.

Colonel Fitzwilliam continued his inquiries, and before Elizabeth knew it, the call

had ended—without a single word exchanged between her and the gentleman seated at her side.

She knew it had been impolite to ignore him, yet she could not bring herself to care.

Besides, he did not lack for conversation.

Mr. Collins did very well entertaining his guest.

The callers stood to take their leave, the others rising with them. As they turned toward the door, Mr. Darcy addressed her. “Do you still walk out in the mornings?” he asked.

Something desperate colored his tone. Elizabeth could not help but meet his gaze. In his eyes, she saw sorrow, remorse, apology, and something more—tenderness. It pierced her heart, and she nodded with effort, swallowing the hard lump that had risen in her throat. I still love him.

He granted her a small smile and departed, following his cousin out the door.

“Well, Lizzy, that went better than I imagined. Mr. Darcy is clearly suffering.”

Mr. Collins, ever alert to speak, responded to his wife’s words. “Mr. Darcy is suffering, my dear? I thought both gentlemen looked very well, indeed. You know, Lady Catherine attributes their early arrival to Mr. Darcy’s growing affection for Miss de Bourgh.”

Charlotte turned a sharp look upon her husband.

“And we have agreed that we shall do nothing to interfere in that matter, have we not?” She shot him a disapproving glance.

“I recall you telling me Mr. Darcy declared he was not engaged to his cousin. The situation is none of our concern.” She folded her arms and arched an expectant brow.

Her husband did not exactly quail, but he nodded, chagrined. “Yes, my dear. I remember. I shall not mention it again.” With that, he excused himself, citing the need to complete his sermon before the afternoon ended.

By either fate or good fortune, Elizabeth did not meet Mr. Darcy on her walk the next day.

It was hardly surprising; the area about the parsonage offered numerous paths, and without a prior arrangement, the chance of encountering someone was slim.

She would have preferred to speak with him before that evening’s dinner, but now the opportunity had passed.

Neither did she see him at church. Colonel Fitzwilliam gave no explanation, offering only a vague hello before hurrying out after his aunt.

Rather than fret, she intended to assist Charlotte with her parish duties and perhaps walk into Hunsford.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Time often hastens when one longs for it to slow, and lingers when one would have it fly.

Thus, the hour to dress for dinner arrived far sooner than Elizabeth would have liked.

Unfortunate though it was, such was the nature of life.

Resigned to an uncomfortable evening, she donned a simple gown of blue, trimmed with cream ribbon at the waist, sleeves, and hem.

Her hair she arranged to match the occasion, twisting her locks into an understated yet elegant chignon, with curls that kissed her neck and framed her face, lending her a pleasing countenance.

“You look well tonight, Miss Eliza,” Sir William complimented her. “And, look! Here, too, is Maria.” He took his daughter’s hand and kissed her cheek. “How lovely you are, my dear.” Maria thanked him in a whisper, still evidently anxious about dining with such exalted personages.

Mr. and Mrs. Collins soon appeared, and the party departed.

The walk to Rosings was brief, and Elizabeth took quiet note of the fresh blooms lining their path.

She did not speak but listened instead to the conversation of her friends.

Her stomach felt unsettled. A fluttering sense of unease made her wish she had stayed

behind at the parsonage.

It worsened the nearer they drew to the manor and reached its height as the party was announced in the drawing room.

“We are very grateful for your invitation, Lady Catherine,” said Mr. Collins, bowing politely. “It is an honor to dine at Rosings again so soon.”

“Yes, well, Sir William is to depart soon, and my nephews are here.” Lady Catherine waved her hand dismissively. “Take your seats, all of you. I detest looking up when I am speaking.”

Elizabeth seated herself beside Miss de Bourgh on a long settee, with Colonel Fitzwilliam on one side and an open space on the other. Mrs. Jenkinson was not in sight, and thus she felt no guilt taking the place.

“Good evening, Miss de Bourgh, Colonel.” Elizabeth greeted them pleasantly, noting how little space separated the pair. A flush tinged Miss de Bourgh’s cheeks, deepening the hue of the wine stain upon her face.

“It is a pleasure to see you, Miss Bennet.” Her quiet speech held steady as she glanced up, only to quickly look away with haste. “I am also happy to see my cousins.”

“And I am very pleased to see you.” Colonel Fitzwilliam took his cousin’s hand and pressed it lightly, before releasing it, careful to avoid the notice of a certain someone.

“Does my cousin not look lovely this evening, Miss Bennet?” Though the colonel’s words seemed sincerely spoken, Miss de Bourgh scoffed quietly.

“Miss de Bourgh is lovely,” Elizabeth replied with conviction.

“I have never seen such symmetry of feature, except perhaps in my sister, Jane.” She spoke honestly; had the young lady had not borne the mark upon her face, society might well have numbered her among London’s beauties.

Her blush brought it to the fore, and Elizabeth could easily see past the wine stain mark on her face.

Miss de Bourgh lifted her eyes and met Elizabeth’s gaze. “You need not flatter me, Miss Elizabeth. I know what I am.”

“I am not offering flattery. Falsehood serves only to bring about trouble or misunderstanding. Besides, the Bard himself reminds us that, ‘beauty is bought by judgment of the eye.’ I speak only as I find.”

“Well said, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth started. Mr. Darcy had approached without a sound. How long had he been listening?

“I believe you once said disguise of every sort is your abhorrence, sir,” she said crisply. “Tell me—do you agree with my estimation? Does not Miss de Bourgh look well this evening?”

“My cousin is always lovely. I fear, however, that my attention is fixed in another direction at present.” His eyes held hers, his gaze so intense it made Elizabeth feel as though she might swoon.

“Best watch what you say, cousin. Lady Cat is watching.” Colonel Fitzwilliam’s timbre was low, and Elizabeth glanced out of the corner of her eye. Lady Catherine glowered, clearly displeased. They were spared a tirade when a servant announced that dinner was served.

Place cards were set that evening, and Elizabeth found herself seated at the far end of the table, opposite Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh.

Her companions were Maria and Colonel Fitzwilliam—Maria said little and the colonel kept her engaged with his cheerful banter through the first course.

For a time, Elizabeth allowed herself to forget Mr. Darcy, so lively was the colonel's conversation.

“When will you marry Anne, Darcy?” Lady Catherine's words rang down the table.

Without waiting for a reply, she turned to Sir William, seated on her left.

“It is a perfect match, you know. They both have fortunes. Besides that, neither shall do better, given the...unfortunate appearance they possess.” The lady slurred her words slightly, and Elizabeth wondered how many glasses of wine she had consumed.

Sir William spluttered, his face turning scarlet. Neither Mr. Darcy nor Miss de Bourgh acknowledged the insult. He sat rigidly, spooning soup into his mouth with a neutral expression, while his cousin hunched her shoulders and lowered her head.

“I say, Aunt, must we discuss personal matters at table?” Colonel Fitzwilliam inquired sharply.

Though it was hardly polite, Elizabeth was grateful for the interruption.

Her heart ached for the individuals so cruelly slighted.

“I dare say I can offer more pleasant entertainment for your guests. Sir William, I must tell you about my brother's first experience at Almack's.”

For the remainder of the meal, the good colonel regaled the party with wildly exaggerated tales, including amusing anecdotes from town and his time on the Continent.

By the time the ladies withdrew from the table, the company was much more at ease.

As they moved to the drawing room, Elizabeth drew alongside Miss de Bourgh, offering silent reassurance with a gentle touch to her arm.

Never had Elizabeth imagined she would leave Rosings with a softer heart towards Mr. Darcy.

He still owed her an explanation, but at last she felt prepared to hear him.

At the close of the evening, he and the colonel escorted the party to the door.

She leaned close as he helped her with her wrap.

“Do you know the bluebell grove?” she whispered.

“Yes.” His reply was just as quiet.

“Meet me there in the morning—eight o’clock.” There was no time to say anything more. The parsonage guests left the manor house and boarded one of her ladyship’s carriages for the short journey home.



### Chapter Twenty-Three

He was more nervous than he could ever recall.

There remained every possibility that Elizabeth would listen—and then walk away.

The thought made his heart ache, and he once more cursed the pride and wounded sensibility that had driven him from Netherfield.

With considerable impatience, he forced himself to hold still while his valet shaved him and assisted him with his attire.

At last, he quitted his chambers and hastened from the house.

He knew the path to the bluebell wood. Indeed, it had been a favorite place to play when he was young. Though it was only March, the first blossoms would be emerging; April brought its true splendor.

Darcy walked at speed. The familiar route took him through Rosings' gardens and into the woods that bordered the estate.

He had trodden this trail often as a boy, roaming the grounds whenever he and his parents visited Lady Catherine and Cousin Anne.

This day, he scarcely registered the beauty about him, nor the song of birds dancing on the air, as he strode briskly down the dirt path.

When the trees opened into a clearing, he froze in place—his breath caught at the loveliest sight he had ever beheld.

Elizabeth strolled leisurely among the early blooms, a small posy of white and purple crocuses gently clutched in her hand.

Her blush-pink gown flattered her light and pleasing figure, and she wore neither bonnet nor spencer.

He espied both lying upon a nearby log. Though the air was warm for March, he wondered if she might be cold.

Stepping forward, a twig cracked beneath his boot. Elizabeth turned sharply, her body tense and gaze wary.

“Miss Elizabeth.” He bowed, hoping he did not appear as rigid as he felt. “Good day to you.” Straightening, he smiled, hoping the depth of his sentiment was plain to see his eyes. Stepping nearer, he asked, “May I walk with you?”

She nodded, the posy of flowers still clasped in her hand. Darcy offered his arm, and she took it. They walked in silence for some time, until at last he cleared his throat.

“I owe you a most profound apology,” he began.

“I-I overheard your conversation with Miss Lucas at the ball. Richard—my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam—eventually persuaded me that I misunderstood, that I had acted on false assumptions. He pointed to the possible errors in my reasoning and understanding of what I had heard. Even if your words had concerned me, I ought to have met the matter with honor and ended our acquaintance respectfully—not vanished without explanation.”

He rubbed a hand over his face. “My honor was engaged—of that there can be no doubt. Yet at the first trial of affection, I failed you. Rather than trust in the lady I had come to know, I allowed shadows of the past to haunt me. Doubt prevailed, fed by long-held humiliations I had never fully cast off—and I fled. It was the gravest mistake of my life, and I fear I have forfeited my happiness—perhaps forever.” He halted and turned to face her.

“You are superior to me in every way—in spirit, in wit, in heart. Pray tell me I have not lost you. I would spend a lifetime atoning for the wrong I have done you.”

Elizabeth’s gaze searched his face, yet she said nothing. With each passing moment, his unease deepened. Finally, she spoke.

“That was a very pretty speech, sir. I confess, I do not yet feel entirely confident in your words. Will there always be some question—on your part or mine? One cannot simply withdraw when life proves difficult.” She slipped her arm free, turning away from him.

“Neither of us is blameless in this. But I would have welcomed the chance to explain myself—whatever I had done—before you vanished without so much as a word.”

She whirled to face him then, her inflection rising, anger flashing in her eyes.

“You left me! Without a word! My hopes and dreams...shattered! I questioned everything: what I had done to deserve such treatment, whether I had misunderstood you, whether I had misjudged our understanding. I wept, sir, and I fumed—yet for all my anguish and indignation, I could not bring myself to hate you.”

Her words struck deep, and his remorse grew sharper with every syllable. What pain he had caused her!

“You do not speak too harshly—I have earned your censure. Every word you speak is justified, and I cannot defend my behavior, nor would I try. You have every right to be angry with me.”

He rubbed the marred side of his face, as if hoping to erase it. “Any account I offer must sound like an excuse. But the truth is, I have long been subjected to cruel remarks and empty flatteries—ladies feigning admiration while privately recoiling from my...affliction.”

“Do not call it that!” Elizabeth snapped, whirling to face him.

“I never saw it as anything more than a mother’s mark.

Yes, I am aware of what people say about those marked in such a way.

Mr. Darcy, I believe I once mentioned that my father taught me to look on the heart, and that is what I have always endeavored to do—though I failed, on the very occasion of which we speak.

I-I made certain to apologize to Charlotte for my words regarding Mr. Collins—”

“Mr. Collins?” Darcy’s brow furrowed, then his eyes widened. “Him. It was him you spoke of. Oh.”

It all fell into place. He replayed the conversation, now engraved upon his memory. With a long sigh, he sank down on a nearby log. Elizabeth’s bonnet and spencer sat beside him.

“I am the worst of fools!”

To his surprise, Elizabeth began to laugh. He lifted his eyes. Her hands, one still

clutching the crushed flowers, were pressed to her mouth, but she could not suppress the sound. Mirth overtook her.

“If I do not laugh, I shall weep!” she exclaimed. “The one time I judged someone unfairly, and it caused such chaos. What a tangled mess!” She came and seated herself beside him, as they once had on Oakham Mount.

“I cannot entirely excuse your behavior, however understandable it was. It was Mr. Bingley who helped me piece together what may have occurred. I admit to being furious that you had not come to me for an explanation—that you thought so little of my character, or my regard, to believe me capable of such duplicity. It was badly done, sir.”

“I am sorry.” He reached out and placed a hand over hers. The one holding the flowers now rested in her lap. The blooms were limp, their petals rumpled by their careless handling. “Will you forgive me?”

His eyes sought hers, hesitant but hopeful. The hand in her lap rose and cupped his cheek, her thumb lightly tracing the edge of the mark upon his face.

“Yes.”

One simple word, and his heart soared. “Truly?” he asked, clearly astonished.

“Well,” she said with a grin, her fine eyes twinkling merrily. “I suppose I shall require you to find the golden fleece first—or perhaps slay a gorgon.”

Darcy laughed. “The first I cannot help with, but I fear there is a gorgon who must be dealt with ere long.” Thoughts of his aunt clouded his mind, and he frowned.

“You mean Lady Catherine, do you not? I could scarce believe a woman would speak

so of her own daughter and nephew. How can you endure it?” She huffed, withdrawing her hand to her lap. “Miss de Bourgh seems a lovely woman. It is a shame so few men cannot see beyond her outward features.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam has expressed a desire to pursue our cousin’s hand. I wish him success and will support him. Anne has been made to suffer far too long...she deserves joy.”

They fell silent, both staring out across the little meadow. The early bluebells were few, which made their scattered blooms all the more dear. The song of birds surrounded them, joined now and then by chatter of some unseen creature.

A few minutes later, a doe and her fawn stepped delicately into view, ambling through the grass. Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath but otherwise remained silent. When the pair had passed, she turned to Darcy.

“I have never been so close to a living deer before. Longbourn’s woods are not large—I do not believe there are many there.”

“I am pleased to have shared this event with you.” Darcy turned toward her and squeezed her hand as it rested on the log. “Is it too much to ask that we begin where we left off—only now with a clearer understanding and a promise that I shall reform my pig-headed ways entirely?”

She smiled, just as he had hoped. “It is not too much to ask. Perhaps we might renew our morning walks. Does your aunt lay claim to much of your time while you are at Rosings?” Her foot scuffed the earth in front of them, stirring memories of Oakham Mount.

“I attend to estate affairs in the afternoons,” he replied. “My mornings are my own. My aunt believes I am inspecting tenant cottages. I do so on occasion but not every

day.”

“Then there is time for a morning stroll. I am pleased.” She gave him a mischievous grin. “Will your cousin be joining us? I liked him very much.” The twinkle in her eye left no doubt she meant to tease, and he responded by adopting an air of mock offense.

“Better than me? I am wounded! Dear Elizabeth, must I challenge my cousin to a duel for your hand?”

“Never! Besides, I have lately learned the good colonel’s affections lie elsewhere. My poor heart shall bear the loss—it is full of another anyhow.” The fondness in her gaze made his heart falter.

He longed to speak, to fall to one knee and beg her to become his wife. It is too soon, he reasoned. Ten days past, she likely despised me. Instead, he cleared his throat.

“Bingley is to marry your sister. Miss Bingley will be delighted to learn her dearest wish will be fulfilled—that her brother wed a gentlewoman.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

“Yes, I can well imagine her exclamations of joy.” Elizabeth shook her head.

Several strands had fallen from her pins and now brushed against her cheeks.

She pulled her hand from beneath his and tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

“I believe Miss Bingley had higher hopes for her brother.” One brow arched in silent amusement, and she gave him that impertinent look he so adored.

“Do not you mean to say she hoped for more for herself?” She smiled and took his hand again.

“Miss Bingley believed proximity would compel me to propose—that my want of good looks would make me desperate for any woman who would accept me. She did not perceive that others had tried the same approach over the years. Her disapprobation was always evident; thus, her motives were never selfless. Unfortunately, for these disingenuous women, however, my mother impressed upon me the importance of finding one who could see beyond outward appearance.” He paused, his gaze fixed on hers. How I love her .

“I never truly understood what my mother meant—until I met you. My dearest Elizabeth, never have you shuddered at the sight of my face. Never have you treated me as though I had carried some affliction. You, my darling, are the rarest of treasures—and I love you.”

Tears welled in her eyes. Without thinking, he drew her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her trembling fingers—his own eyes stinging, overwhelmed by the gift she



had given him with one simple word.

“I love you, too,” she whispered.

The flowers in her lap forgotten, she reached up once more, her fingers tracing the vivid mark that had brought him such torment.

Darcy tilted his head and lowered his lips to capture hers.

The kiss was tender, their soft lips suffused with longing and the unspoken promise of future happiness.

When he drew back, he regretted it at once.

“Forgive me for the liberty,” he murmured, their lips still close.

“There is nothing to forgive.” Her palm still cupped his cheek. “I liked it very much.”

Elizabeth shifted, but only to slip her hand into the crook of his arm. When he looked at her, she smiled and rested her head against his shoulder—a gesture so natural, so unguarded, that his breath caught.

“I have been told you do not often stay in Kent for long. Mr. Collins, it seems, has suffered greatly from your aunt’s...ramblings.” Elizabeth released his arm and sat up. Darcy immediately felt the loss, but said nothing.

“My cousin and I rarely stay more than a week. But I believe the colonel will not object to lengthening our visit. He means to court Anne—and, I believe, win her regard.” Darcy smiled gently.

“He will make her a fine husband. Richard is dutiful and kind; he would not wound

her willingly. Though he is expected to marry an heiress, it is not his chief motive in seeking our cousin's hand.

Anne ought to be mistress of Rosings, yet she will not defy her mother.

My uncle, Lord Matlock, has asked Richard to remove her to Matlock House, as other matters have, regrettably, delayed himself from addressing the situation with his sister. ”

Elizabeth clapped her hands, which had rested in her lap since their kiss. “I am so happy for Miss de Bourgh!” she cried. “I cannot fathom the misery she has borne for so long!” But then her face clouded. “Perhaps I can. My mother... Oh, poor Mary.”

She turned to him, regret softening her gaze.

“Do you recall my next youngest sister? We have grown close. My mother sees no beauty in her third daughter and thus attempted to marry her to Mr. Collins. Mary asked for help, so I spoke to Charlotte, suggesting we might direct him toward her instead. That conversation was the very one you overheard.”

Her cheeks flushed red as she brought both hands to her face.

“I am mortified by the way I spoke of Mr. Collins. Though he is often absurd, Charlotte suits him perfectly. She has softened his harsher tendencies, and in time, he may become quite tolerable. And yet, I—who admonishes to only look at one's heart—mocked him for his manner and person.

I see now that I judged him as harshly as others have judged you.

” She looked down, her voice quieter. “It was badly done of me, too.”

“Let us think on it no more.” He spoke soothingly, hoping to ease her distress.

“Spring is a time of renewal. Let us begin anew—fresh, like the budding leaves and the flowers coming to life.” He paused and stood, taking Elizabeth by the hand and pulling her up beside him.

“When you leave Rosings, I shall follow. There are still some months left in the season, and it is an ideal time to court a lovely lady—provided she does not mind the stares that will surely follow us. I fear they are inevitable. But we shall have the support of my aunt, Lady Matlock, and her husband, the earl—”

Elizabeth interrupted him. “Mr. Darcy, I believe you have missed a rather important step in planning our future.”

Her countenance, far from censure, sparkled with mischief, and he was enchanted. He knew at once what she meant.

Darcy caught both her hands and gathered them to his chest, pressing her slender fingers against the steady beat of his heart.

Stepping closer—so near that his breath mingled with hers—he spoke.

“Elizabeth, my dearest, will you grant me the honor of a formal courtship? Though I feel I have forfeited every claim to your good opinion, I long for the chance to prove myself worthy. This heart,”—he guided her hands a fraction higher—“has been yours from the moment I understood it, and it shall remain so, if you will permit me to show it day by day.”

“A courtship is a fine beginning.” Elizabeth’s joy was unmistakable. “Yes, sir, I shall.” She reluctantly released his hands.

“Charlotte will be missing me. I have been gone far longer than usual.” Together, they began the walk back toward the parsonage.

Elizabeth regaled him with stories, some drawn from her childhood, others she plainly invented to amuse him.

In turn, he spoke of his father and sister, and of his mother—who, when he was a boy, had told him to ‘look on the heart,’ just as Mr. Bennet had suggested Elizabeth do.

There was not time to offer a full portrait, but it was a beginning.

“Will you walk tomorrow?” he asked, holding open the garden gate.

“If the sun shines? Yes, of course! Winter kept me far too confined, and London walks were never so engaging. I plan to make full use of Rosings Park and the surrounding country during my visit.” She smiled shyly. “Bluebells?”

He understood her meaning at once. Nodding, he stepped back and watched until the door closed behind her. His apology had turned out better than he had dared hope, and he would be forever grateful for her forgiveness.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Mr. Darcy faithfully courted Elizabeth for the remainder of her stay in Kent. Their daily walks became a cherished ritual, and though they had spoken no further affirmations of love, a steady certainty took root between them—one neither had known before.

As the day of her departure neared, he, too, planned to return to London. Lady Catherine, he reported, had protested his decision most vehemently, declaring that his business in Kent remained unfinished.

“She insisted I ought not to leave until I had secured a betrothal to my cousin,” Darcy said dryly as they strolled along one of the winding paths near the parsonage. “I regret to say I disappointed her.”

Elizabeth suppressed a smile. “And does Lady Catherine know the reason she will be disappointed?”

“She does not,” he admitted, a faint smirk curving his lips. “Yet soon enough, she shall. The colonel’s efforts to win our cousin’s affection have borne fruit. Anne blossoms under his care, and I believe she will accept his proposal when he offers it.”

Elizabeth’s smile deepened. “I am very pleased for Miss de Bourgh. Every lady deserves a happy ending.”

Darcy gave a low laugh, though it held little mirth.

“Yes, a life away from an overbearing mother who speaks unkindly of her daughter.”  
He exhaled.

“I ought not to speak ill of my aunt, but it grows ever harder to remain silent. She has spent years belittling and restricting Anne, stifling her at every turn.”

Elizabeth nodded, turning thoughtful. “I understand you perfectly. Whenever Lady Catherine speaks ill of Miss de Bourgh—or of you—I must restrain myself from leaping to your defense. Your cousin is far more than the pale shadow her mother has tried to make of her. And as for you, sir...” she hesitated, casting a brief glance at him before continuing.

“Your character is such that no outward appearance can diminish it.”

Darcy’s glance touched her—warm, unreadable—but no words followed.

Encouraged, Elizabeth pressed on. “Her words remind me of my own mother. For as long as I can remember, she has spoken thoughtlessly, often cruelly, without regard for the pain she causes. I used to excuse it: ‘She is my mother,’ I told myself. ‘She does not mean it so harshly.’ But hearing your aunt has made me realize how easily we excuse what ought not to be borne, simply because it is familiar. ’Tis a frightening thing, is it not?

How one grows accustomed to unkindness, even from those who ought to love us best? ”

A silence settled between them—not awkward, but contemplative. At last, Darcy spoke.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “One tells oneself it is simply the way of things—that nothing can change. But sometimes, one must choose to be the change.”

Elizabeth's heart swelled. There was something remarkable about him—this man who had once kept silent in the face of cruelty but now sought to speak when others would not. In that moment, she knew she had been right to trust and forgive him, and that she would always choose to stand beside him.

After a pause, she angled her head, her manner light and untroubled once more. “And tell me, sir, what of your aunt? Has she resigned herself to being thwarted, or will she soon follow me to Longbourn and attempt to prevent my own happy ending?”

Darcy smiled, a gleam of mischief mingling with tenderness as he cast her a sidelong glance. “Knowing my aunt, I suspect we have not yet heard the last of her protests.”

Elizabeth laughed, and as they walked on, the path ahead seemed clearer than ever before.

Elizabeth and Maria would depart on the morrow.

Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam planned to do likewise.

A few days earlier, at the end of one of their morning walks, Mr. Darcy had asked whether she and Miss Lucas might prefer to ride to London in his carriage.

A maid could come as a chaperone. Elizabeth had agreed, and a note was promptly sent to her uncle, informing him of the change of plans.

The residents of the parsonage were invited to tea one last time before Elizabeth and Miss Lucas departed.

They had often dined at the great house, where Lady Catherine's pronouncements and exclamations continued to serve as both vexation and entertainment.

Her frequent remarks on Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh's appearances were often followed by declarations of how well-suited they were to one another.

Elizabeth, hearing such talk, felt a curious mix of jealousy and anger, though she wisely held her tongue in the face of the lady's relentless opinions.

The appointment for afternoon tea began like so many other she had attended during her stay in Kent.

They walked to Rosings Park beneath a warm sun, the breeze cool enough to make the air perfectly delightful.

A servant announced them into the opulently appointed drawing room, where the residents of Rosings were seated about the room.

The servants had already laid the tea service, and the delicate china rattled faintly as Miss de Bourgh reached for her cup.

Her hands trembled beneath the weight of the room's oppressive silence.

Lady Catherine had yet to speak—a dangerous sign in itself.

Her lips were pressed into a severe line, her eyes alight with a fire that promised imminent eruption.

Then, with all the imperious force of a queen pronouncing judgment, she fixed her gaze on Colonel Fitzwilliam and declared, "I know all, Fitzwilliam!"

Every occupant of the room flinched, even if only slightly, as though each had sensed what was to come.



The colonel, to his credit, did not waver. He set down his teacup with a deliberate air and met his aunt's eyes, revealing no intention of retreat. "Then there is little need for pretense, Lady Catherine. I love Anne, and I intend to ask for her hand in marriage."

A strangled sound escaped Lady Catherine's throat—part scoff, part gasp of utter outrage. "It is not to be borne!" she cried. "Anne, a married woman? And to you? It is both preposterous and impossible! She is meant for Darcy!"

Lady Catherine's self-contradictions would have inspired humor had not her words been so insulting.

Elizabeth, seated beside Charlotte, darted a glance toward Darcy, whose countenance remained composed, but the tension in his hands—clenched tightly around his saucer and teacup—betrayed his inner agitation.

"Indeed, she is not," Colonel Fitzwilliam countered coolly.

"Anne has reached five-and-twenty. She has inherited Rosings, Aunt. It is hers by right. And when she is my wife, we shall settle here, while you—" he paused, and though his delivery was gentle, his words were merciless—"shall retire to the dower house."

The effect was instantaneous. Lady Catherine surged to her feet, her hands clenched into fists.

"You ungrateful boy!" She whirled on her other nephew, her face darkened with fury. "This is your doing, Darcy! Had you done your duty and married Anne, as your mother and I intended, none of this would have come to pass!"

Darcy, who had remained silent until now, rose as well.

His tall frame stood in calm defiance of his aunt's outrage.

When he spoke, his speech was measured, yet firm.

"I never intended to marry Anne, nor was there ever any agreement to do so. My mother did not wish a marriage of convenience for me."

"Nonsense!" Lady Catherine spat. "She is plain, and with her...infirmity, who else would have her?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam bristled. "Infirmity? You speak of a congenital mark as though it were a curse. I say it is nothing. It does not lessen her intelligence, her kindness, or her beauty."

"Beauty?" Lady Catherine scoffed. "Her appearance has ever been a trial! But she and Darcy—yes, they might overcome even that, for their misfortunes are similar. He, too, bears the mark. Who else would take a man so deformed?"

A cold silence fell over the room. Darcy's visage was unreadable, yet Elizabeth saw the faintest flicker of pain in his eyes—a wound reopened by his aunt's cruelty. She could not remain silent.

"You forget yourself, madam," Elizabeth said, her declaration clear and unwavering.

All eyes turned to her. "Mr. Darcy is a man of honor, of integrity. He is generous to those in his care, loyal to his friends, and possessed of a heart that values virtue over vanity. He is to be admired, respected, and—most of all, loved."

Lady Catherine rounded on her, eyes narrowing. "Loved? And who, pray, would love such a man?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin. “I would...I do.”

A collective gasp was heard. For a heartbeat, Darcy forgot to breathe. Elizabeth’s words had reached some part of him long guarded, and though his lips parted slightly, he uttered no reply—only watched her, astonishment and longing warring in his gaze.

Lady Catherine’s reply, when it came, dripped with venom. “You? A mere country miss, with neither connections nor fortune, would set yourself against my will?”

Elizabeth smiled, though steel glinted beneath it. “Pray, remember, your ladyship, that your will holds no dominion over my heart, nor over Mr. Darcy’s.”

“I will not be interrupted in this manner!” Lady Catherine cried. “You have no regard for duty, for propriety! You—”

But Elizabeth did not back down. “And you, madam, forsake the value of love and individual worth to satisfy your vanity and thirst for control,” Elizabeth retorted, her utterance unwavering.

“You have no notion of what duty truly is, Lady Catherine. It is not forcing a daughter into an unwanted marriage, nor is it seeking to bend others to your will for your own comfort. True duty lies in upholding what is right—even when it defies expectation. It is found in love, in kindness, in loyalty.” She turned her gaze upon Darcy, her eyes softening. “And in choosing one’s own happiness.”

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Lady Catherine's mouth opened, then closed—apparently at a loss for words. The silence stretched long and heavy with unspoken challenges, until at last she turned on her heel. Her skirts swept behind her as she muttered, “This is not to be borne. Not to be borne.”

She stormed from the room.

For a moment, no one spoke. Then Colonel Fitzwilliam released a low whistle and turned to Anne, who had remained motionless throughout, her cheeks tinged pink, her eyes bright.

“Well, my dear,” he murmured, “shall we take a turn about the garden? I believe we have much to discuss regarding our future.”

Anne smiled—the first true, unfettered smile she had shown in years—and took his arm.

Darcy turned to Elizabeth, his eyes shining with unguarded emotion. “Miss Elizabeth...I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude.”

“I merely spoke the truth, Mr. Darcy.”

And for the first time in all their acquaintance, Fitzwilliam Darcy could find no words at all.

Mr. Darcy's carriage, though large, felt snug with its five occupants settled upon finely upholstered seats.

The arrangement was comfortable, yet the intimacy of the journey to London could not be denied.

Maria sat beside her, already nodding off, while across from them, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh were quietly engaged in their own conversation.

And on Elizabeth's other side—so near that his sleeve brushed hers—sat Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth doubted the travel arrangements were as coincidental as Mr. Collins had claimed.

“It would be wholly unnecessary to send a maid,” he had declared with placid assurance.

“Neither of your suitors will behave with impropriety, and Miss Lucas shall accompany you. It would be no different than if Miss Mary or one of your younger sisters served as chaperone. Yes, I believe all is in order.”

Elizabeth had not missed the smug look on Charlotte's face as Mr. Collins spoke, nor the way her friend had carefully avoided meeting her eyes.

No, this arrangement had not come about by happenstance—it was Charlotte's doing.

With a word here and a well-timed suggestion there, she had guided her husband's will to serve her own, ensuring the journey would proceed with little interference and abundant felicity.

Elizabeth would have to thank her for it later.

Colonel Fitzwilliam recounted more of Lady Catherine's objections after the Collins party had taken their leave the night before.

“She returned to the drawing room—still furious—threatening to speak with ‘her brother the earl’ about upstart youth and their pretentious behavior. I informed her that the future— her future—would depend upon her behavior henceforth. I warned her plainly: if she persisted in opposing my engagement to Anne, she would find herself living out her days alone in the dower house. She blustered and protested but did not prevent my betrothed from leaving Rosings at my side. I do not believe she has truly yielded, however. Even now, I suspect she is scheming her revenge.”

The others laughed, but Darcy met his cousin’s eye with a look of gravity, and Elizabeth understood—there was truth beneath the humor.

The first leg of their journey passed in easy companionship, but as the carriage rolled steadily along the well-worn road to London, the natural fatigue of travel began to take hold.

Maria gradually slumped lower, her head resting against Elizabeth’s shoulder, her breath soft and steady in sleep.

Across from them, Anne and the colonel spoke in hushed tones, their words too quiet to discern, but their meaning was plain.

Newly possessed of her inheritance, Anne spoke of the improvements she hoped to make at Rosings, and the colonel listened with an attentiveness that bespoke deep affection.

Elizabeth watched them with quiet satisfaction. It was a gentle kind of happiness—the sort that asked for no fanfare, yet was no less profound for it. Miss Anne de Bourgh, once wan and subdued, now had a light in her eyes, and the colonel, though he did not speak it, was utterly devoted to her.

A shifting movement beside her drew Elizabeth’s attention. Mr. Darcy, seated close,

was watching her.

She did not turn her head to meet his gaze, yet she was acutely aware of it. She could feel the weight of his regard—not heavy nor oppressive, but warm and steady. It unsettled her—not from discomfort, but from the realization of how accustomed she had become to his presence.

Elizabeth's gaze drifted to the landscape beyond the window. The green fields stretched wide, the trees budding with the promise of spring. The rhythm of the carriage wheels against the road was steady, lulling—and for a moment, she allowed herself to simply exist in the quiet peace of it all.

Then came a call from the driver.

“Bromley ahead! We'll be stoppin' to change the 'orses.”

Anne and the colonel stirred first, eager to take the fresh air. As he, Anne, and Maria alighted, Darcy hesitated, appearing to weigh a decision. When he spoke, his timbre was low and careful, as if reluctant to disturb the quiet that had settled between them.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, “might I call upon you tomorrow? At Gracechurch Street?”

Elizabeth's breath caught slightly at the question. He seemed calm and composed, but meeting his eyes, she sensed that something more lingered beneath the surface—a fragile hope tempered by uncertainty. It is as if he scarcely dares believe my affection is truly his to claim.

She did not hesitate. “Yes, sir. I shall be very pleased to receive you.”

A tension she had not realized he bore seemed to ease at once with her reply, and she watched him closely as the corner of his mouth lifted just slightly. “Thank you,” he

murmured.

The moment was fleeting, yet it settled something within her.

The door stood open, and Darcy stepped out and extended his hand.

She placed her hand in his, and he helped her descend the carriage.

The air was crisp, scented with fresh hay and distant rain, yet it was not the change in weather that made her feel breathless.

It was the realization that something had shifted.

Their course was now set, not by grand declarations, but by a simple question, a quiet answer, and the trust that tomorrow would come.

By late afternoon, they reached London. The carriage drew up before Gracechurch Street, and Maria, blinking sleep from her eyes, roused herself enough to climb down from the carriage.

When Elizabeth reached the door of her uncle's home, she turned for one last glance at Darcy, whose eyes had never left her. No further words need be spoken—there was no need. The promise had already been made.

Tomorrow .



### Chapter Twenty-Five

To Elizabeth's astonishment, the door opened before they could knock, revealing not a servant, but Jane—radiant and unmistakably happy. Mary rushed to join them.

“Jane!” Elizabeth cried, rushing into her sister's arms.

“I could not wait any longer!” Jane exclaimed, drawing her close. “I arrived only yesterday. Charles brought me to town for wedding clothes—and I bring news!”

“Girls, girls, come! Mrs. Gardiner called, ushering them inside. Warm greetings followed, and the parlor soon hummed with animated chatter. Jane's arrival was a delightful surprise, but her announcement left Elizabeth truly astonished.

“Mama has insisted we move the wedding forward,” Jane said with a laugh, her cheeks flushed. “She claims spring weddings are all the rage and has persuaded Papa that it must take place by the end of April.”

Maria clapped her hands in delight. “How wonderful! Spring in Hertfordshire is my favorite time of year!”

Elizabeth leaned forward, her eyes alight with amusement. “And what does Papa make of all this?”

“He said that so long as Mama does not redecorate the drawing room again, he will permit it.” Jane smiled. “I believe he is quite content. He and Mr. Bingley have become very fond of one another.”

Elizabeth's heart warmed further at the mention of her sister's betrothed. He and Jane truly seemed destined for happiness.

"And there is more," Mary added. "I am engaged!"

"You are?" Elizabeth repeated, delighted by her sister's good fortune.

"To Mr. Marcus Finch," Mary confirmed. "You recall the gentleman. Jane has not yet met him. He is rather intelligent and attentive. I am very happy!"

"Yes, our sister is happier than I've ever seen her." Jane said, beaming. "Perhaps we ought to have a double wedding!"

"That is extraordinary. Oh, I am very pleased to see you all. I have missed my family."

"Mama wrote to me," said Mary, retrieving a letter from her pocket. "Jane brought it from Longbourn. Here. You must read it—Mama's reaction was exactly as you would expect."

Elizabeth unfolded the letter and read aloud the line Mary indicated with amused disbelief: "I am astonished that of all my daughters, it is my plainest who secured such a match. Still, I suppose Mr. Finch must appreciate piety and pianoforte more than beauty."

All the ladies dissolved into laughter.

That evening, after supper and once Maria had retired early, fatigued by the journey, the three sisters lingered in Jane's room, nestled together like they had done as girls.

"You are glowing," Jane said affectionately, brushing a stray curl from Elizabeth's

brow. “Mary told me Mr. Darcy called here before you left. Is it true what I suspect? Did you see Mr. Darcy in Kent? Has he spoken to you?”

Elizabeth's smile spread slowly, forming a gentle curve of her lips. “He has. And he means to call tomorrow.”

“Lizzy...how did you forgive him?” Jane asked. “After all that happened?”

Elizabeth studied her hands in quiet reflection for a moment.

“It took time,” she admitted at last. “But he offered a sincere apology. How could I do otherwise than forgive him? He showed humility in acknowledging his misunderstanding of the conversation he overheard, and the grave mistake he made by fleeing to London instead of remaining and asking for clarity. He listened when I expressed both my distress—and my own failings. He became not only the man I could love, but one I could trust. He proved himself worthy of forgiveness—and of affection. And...” she darted her eyes between her sisters, “He asked for a courtship.”

Mary gasped. “He is everything I imagined in a Byronic hero—but with sense and virtue.”

Elizabeth laughed. “He would be horrified by the comparison, Mary.”

“And before we return to Longbourn,” she added with a conspiratorial smile, “Mr. Darcy means to take me to a ball—his aunt’s annual gathering.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “A London ball? With Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes!” Elizabeth replied, her smile softening. “I never thought I should look forward to such a thing, but now...I find I cannot wait.”

The sisters remained awake long into the night—talking, dreaming, and laughing. Three young women on the cusp of bright futures, their bond deeper than ever.

The morning air in London held the whispers of spring, cool against Elizabeth's cheeks as she stepped onto the stoop of her uncle's house on Gracechurch Street.

A carriage stood waiting, but it was not the vehicle that drew her notice.

It was the man standing beside it—tall and composed, his coat neatly brushed, a modest bouquet of violets and pale roses in his hand.

“Mr. Darcy,” she greeted, her smile blooming as she descended the steps.

He bowed with quiet formality, then held out the flowers. “For you, Miss Elizabeth.”

She accepted them, touched. The petals were delicate, their fragrance subtle and sweet. “They are lovely. Thank you.”

“There is a park not far from here,” he said after a brief pause. “Would you...take a turn with me?”

“I should like that very much.”

The park proved a quiet haven nestled between streets already bustling with carriages and foot traffic.

The gravel path wound past budding trees and early flowers pushing through the soil.

Children's laughter rang in the distance, and birds sang overhead—but Elizabeth scarcely heard.

The world had narrowed to the gentleman beside her and the muted cadence of their steps.

They spoke first of light things—the brightness of the morning, Jane’s upcoming wedding, the absurdity of London fashions.

Then came one of their easy silences: that companionable hush they had come to share, full of meaning yet free of pressure.

Darcy slowed, but even before he did so, Elizabeth felt the shift.

She sensed it in the way he glanced more than once to the gravel path before them.

He paused beside a low stone bench. Darcy turned to her at last, his gloved hands clasped behind his back.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he began, then paused and softened it: “Elizabeth.”

The sound of her name on his lips made her breath catch.

“I have thought of this moment a thousand times, and yet, no imagining has ever come close.”

She looked up at him, heart fluttering.

“There was a time I believed no woman could look at me without pity—or revulsion. My aunt called me marked, cursed, unworthy of affection—and worse.” He met her eyes with quiet intensity.

“But you saw me , Elizabeth. Not the mark I bear, not the name I carry—not the man society measures. Me , Elizabeth—the man beneath it all. And you offered more than

civility or tolerance. You offered kindness. Wit. Affection. You challenged me, changed me.”

Elizabeth’s eyes stung with unshed tears.

“You are the only woman who has ever looked past my outward appearance—looked upon me without flinching. The only one who has loved me—not in spite of my infirmity, but regardless of it. And I...”

He drew a breath and dropped to one knee. “I love you, Elizabeth. I always shall. Heart, soul, entirely. If you would have me—if your feelings have not changed—will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

For a moment, all she could do was look at him: this man who had stood rigid in her company, now knelt before her in vulnerable hope.

This man whose pain she had come to know—and whose heart she now held in her hands.

She could hardly speak, so full was her heart.

But she stepped closer and took his hands in hers.

“My feelings have changed. They have deepened, Mr. Darcy. I love you. I have never been more certain of anything. Yes, I will marry you.”

The breath he released was almost a laugh—soft, incredulous. He rose, bringing her hand to his lips. The kiss he pressed to her glove was not for show. It was reverent. Grateful.

They sat on the bench for a time, speaking in low murmurs, their hands never parting.

The city moved around them: ladies glanced over their shoulders, gentlemen looked on with surprise, curiosity, or disdain. But they did not notice. Not now.

They were wrapped in their own little world—two hearts, each marked in its own way: his, outwardly; hers, within. Yet both had come to be seen, known, and chosen—proof that love, when it looks beyond the surface, may heal what pride and misjudgment cannot.

The walk back to Gracechurch Street was unhurried, filled with soft laughter and quiet promises.

Elizabeth's cheeks were flushed—not from the breeze, but from the joy still blooming in her heart.

Her hand rested lightly on Darcy's arm, and though they kept a proper distance, the fondness between them was unmistakable.

When the door to her uncle's house opened and she stepped inside, Maria gasped. "Oh, Elizabeth—your face! You are glowing!" She darted forward and looked from one to the other. "You are engaged! Oh, you must be!"

Jane and Mary appeared in the hall behind her, both smiling in anticipation. Elizabeth looked at Mr. Darcy and he gave her the smallest of nods.

"Yes," Elizabeth said, laughter dancing in her tone. "We are engaged."

Cheers and warm embraces followed. Jane embraced her tightly, tears in her eyes, and Mary, uncharacteristically animated, clasped both of Elizabeth's hands. "You are to be Mrs. Darcy. You shall be mistress of Pemberley!" she exclaimed. "Oh goodness, what will Mama say?"

Maria practically danced with excitement. “Oh, how I shall enjoy carrying this news back to Meryton! They will never believe it—though they must, for I saw it with my own eyes. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy engaged! What a tale it shall be!”

Mrs. Gardiner called from the stairs as she descended, drawn by the noise. “Whatever is the matter?” Her eyes widened when she took in the scene, then softened with understanding. “Well,” she said, arching an elegant brow at her niece, “I suppose congratulations are in order.”



*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

She stepped forward and ushered them toward the drawing room. “Come now—there is no need to celebrate in the entrance hall.”

Elizabeth blushed and curtsied playfully as they moved into the room. “Yes, Aunt. Mr. Darcy proposed in the park. He will write to my father for permission. But I believe Papa will not object.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled knowingly. “Three marriages in one spring. Your mother will go distracted.”

The room burst into laughter.

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, glancing at her sisters. “And I believe we must begin shopping at once for bonnets, gowns, and lace. Jane, Mary—will you come with me tomorrow? With three ladies to clothe, we have no time to lose!”

“Of course,” Jane said, still radiant herself.

Mary nodded primly. “Indeed. I believe it is my duty, as your most sensible sister, to ensure you are properly attired.” This drew another round of laughter, for Mary’s wit and spirit had transformed since her time away from Longbourn.

They had barely caught their breath when the Gardiners’ butler entered to announce, “Mr. Bingley and Mr. Finch, ma’am.”

Mr. Bingley entered first and bowed to the company—his ever-cheerful smile brighter than ever—and made straight for Jane. Mr. Finch, a tall, genteel man with

intelligent eyes and a quiet reserve, followed close behind and offered a polite bow.

“I believe I now understand why we find the house so animated today,” Bingley said, glancing between Elizabeth and Darcy with clear delight. “May I offer my hearty congratulations? I hoped all would work out for the best—and now we shall be brothers in truth!”

Mr. Finch echoed the sentiment with a soft smile. “It seems, Miss Mary, that I am in excellent company among future grooms.”

Introductions were made all around. Mr. Gardiner emerged from his study to welcome the visitors, and soon the drawing room was alive with conversation.

Mrs. Gardiner addressed the three gentlemen with warm hospitality. “You must all dine with us this evening. We cannot allow such joyous news to pass uncelebrated.”

“I would be delighted,” said Bingley, beaming at Jane.

“And I would not dream of refusing,” added Mr. Finch, his gaze resting fondly on Mary.

“It would be my honor, ma’am,” said Darcy. “I thank you.”

As everyone seated themselves and tea was brought in, Elizabeth looked about the room—at Jane, glowing with happiness; at Mary, serene as she had never been before—and at Darcy, who now held her gaze with love and certainty. She felt her heart brim with gratitude.

Three sisters. Three marriages. And a house full of laughter and affection.

Tea was served—light cakes, buttered toast, and delicate sandwiches.

Elizabeth was nestled between Jane and Darcy, while Mary and Mr. Finch shared a quiet corner of their own.

Mr. Bingley, ever the genial guest, divided his conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner with such cheerful ease that even Maria, unaccustomed to such fashionable company, appeared perfectly at home.

Mr. Gardiner, after complimenting the gentlemen on their timely arrivals, smiled and nodded at each in turn.

“You are fortunate men,” he said warmly.

“May you find as much joy in marriage as you have brought to this house today.” Then, with a fond glance to his nieces, he added, “And if I do not return to my warehouses now, I shall accomplish no work today at all.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled as she watched him go. “He will carry the news to every clerk in the building. I dare say the price of tea shall rise in celebration.”

“I shall be very pleased to pay it,” Darcy replied, his gaze still resting on Elizabeth.

Across the room, Maria was eagerly asking Jane about her wedding plans, quite overcome with the notion of the three Bennet sisters married within the same spring.

“Shall you have matching dresses?” she asked earnestly. “Or is that too much to hope for?” Her sly smile betrayed her jest.

Jane laughed lightly. “I believe that would be too much for Meryton to bear—three sisters in identical gowns.”

“Though if Lydia were here,” Elizabeth said dryly, “she would insist on being the

first Bennet sister to marry, wearing crimson and gold, and declaring herself the bride, regardless of who was actually getting married.”

The room rippled with laughter.

As tea continued, Darcy leaned toward Elizabeth and murmured, “I shall send my letter to your father this afternoon, but perhaps...you would prefer to write as well? I believe he will value your words most.”

Elizabeth turned to him, surprised but touched. “Yes, I should like that.”

Mrs. Gardiner, ever perceptive, gestured discreetly to the small writing desk in the corner of the room. “If you wish to use it, my dear,” she said gently, “you may. Mr. Darcy can sit with you, of course. I shall be as unobtrusive as a shadow, I assure you.”

And indeed, she was true to her word. Mrs. Gardiner settled herself by the window with her work basket to do a bit of mending, giving the three young couples a measure of privacy—her presence quiet and reassuring, and noticed only by Elizabeth.

Elizabeth seated herself at the desk and drew forth a sheet of thick cream paper. Darcy sat beside her, his presence a steadying comfort. She dipped the pen, paused, and began.

My dearest Papa,

I write with news I hope you will receive with joy.

Mr. Darcy has asked for my hand, and I have accepted him.

He means to write to you himself with the proper request for your permission, but I wished to tell you with my own words.

I believe you now will better understand my morose behavior last winter.

Mr. Darcy is the best of men, Papa, and I love him. I have taken your lessons to heart and looked past outward appearance to see the kind, genuine soul within. He makes me very happy, and I could not have asked for anyone better than him. Pray give us your blessing, Papa.

Out of necessity, my return to Hertfordshire will be delayed.

Sir William will retrieve Maria as previously arranged and is delighted to carry with her news of the Bennet ladies' felicity.

Pray, comfort Mama when Lady Lucas brings word of my engagement to Longbourn.

And pray, attempt to temper the flood of words—whether reproachful or effusive—that will doubtless follow.

Your affectionate daughter,

Elizabeth

She let the ink dry, folded the letter neatly, and sealed it. Darcy offered to have it sent by express that evening.

Their fingers brushed as she passed him the letter. "There. If that does not win my father over, nothing will—though I dare say your fortune may help tip the scales. Do take care with it. I should not like to rewrite the whole thing if you drop it in a puddle."

Darcy laughed, warm and unstrained. “Minx. I shall endeavor to keep it dry, Elizabeth, though I suspect even soaked through, your words would prove persuasive.” He took the letter with exaggerated care. “I shall guard it as I would the deeds to Pemberley.”

Then, leaning forward to whisper in her ear, he added, “And if your father is not swayed, I shall remind him that I am quite accustomed to difficult women.”

Her eyes danced. “Then let us hope he sees that, like you, I improve upon closer acquaintance.”

Mrs. Gardiner glanced up from her mending just once, smiled to herself, and returned to her needlework.

The room hummed with cheerful talk and teasing banter, teacups clinking gently on saucers, and the occasional laugh ringing like music through the space. It was a perfectly ordinary moment—yet for Elizabeth, it felt like the beginning of something extraordinary.

And perhaps it was.

*Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:02 am*

Happy was the day when Mr. Bennet gave away his three eldest daughters in marriage.

Their respective betrotheds had earned both his respect and approbation, for each owned a sterling character and a heart of pure gold.

Mr. Bingley and Jane did not mind sharing their wedding day with the others; indeed, they preferred it, for the attention that might otherwise have rested solely upon them was divided between three joyful couples.

The knowledge that Mr. Darcy was exceedingly wealthy tempered Mrs. Bennet's dismay at Elizabeth's engagement.

She quelled her tongue—especially after Elizabeth reminded her of the consequences should she ever again demean him.

Mrs. Bennet agreed and kept her distaste to herself, going so far as to threaten Kitty and Lydia with punishment if they dared utter a word against their new brother-in-law.

Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh attended the wedding, along with the rest of the Earl of Matlock's family and Miss Darcy.

Elizabeth quickly adored her new sister and the countess, finding kindred spirits in both.

Lady Matlock's love for her husband was obvious.

The earl also bore a crimson stain on his face—less prominent than his nephew's or niece's—but his wife and family paid it no heed.

The denizens of Meryton whispered behind their fans at the odd couple, speculating how such a match had come about.

Long accustomed to murmurs, the earl and countess simply ignored them.

"Anne and I are to marry at the end of the summer," Colonel Fitzwilliam told Darcy and Elizabeth during the wedding breakfast. "Do say you will come. I have already begun the process of selling my commission."

Darcy and Elizabeth agreed with heartfelt pleasure.

Lady Catherine, incensed by her daughter's newfound independence, wrote to Lord Matlock with wild accusations, suggesting Anne was unwell and unfit to manage Rosings.

She miscalculated spectacularly, for her brother, well acquainted with his sister's dramatic tendencies, dismissed her claims at once and sided with his niece.

Together, the Fitzwilliams and Anne returned to Kent and arranged for Lady Catherine's removal to the dower house.

Forced to live on the interest from her jointure, she grew bitter and resentful, refusing to acknowledge her daughter or new son-in-law.

They, in turn, gave her no thought at all.

The Bingleys remained at Netherfield until the lease expired, finding the familiarity of Meryton a pleasant place to begin their married life—but a little too close to Mrs. Bennet to maintain their comfort.



Bingley had discovered a love for the country beyond mere social pleasures.

Drawn by the promise of good shooting and the charm of northern scenery, he purchased a modest but elegant estate less than twenty miles from Pemberley.

There, he found both the game and the neighbors agreeable.

Jane adapted easily into married life, and under her gentle guidance, she tempered her husband's tendency to invite half the country to dine at a moment's notice.

Their four children—two sons and two daughters—were often found in the company of their Darcy cousins, and the bonds formed in childhood endured into their adult lives.

Between their families ran a thread of lasting affection, shared trials, and years of laughter.

Miss Caroline Bingley eventually married the second son of a baronet.

He owned a small estate inherited from his mother.

Though the lady was appalled to discover her husband preferred the country, she gradually reconciled herself to the life, raising a son and a daughter, both of whom received the full measure of her attention.

Mary and Mr. Finch resided in London. His business flourished, adding to their wealth. In time, they purchased a large town house near Hyde Park. Mary bore two daughters and three sons, all as handsome and kind as their parents.

Darcy took Elizabeth to Pemberley for part of their wedding tour.

Georgiana returned to London with Lord and Lady Matlock, but joined them in July.

The Darcys remained in Derbyshire until it was time to return to London for the Fitzwilliam wedding.

Elizabeth was in awe of the grand estate, delighting in the many walks and scenic views of the Peaks.

She asked eagerly when she might explore the grounds, and Darcy promised he would show her every path himself.

The staff welcomed their new mistress with warmth and deep respect.

Her love for their master was obvious, and that alone endeared her to them.

Within the first year of their marriage, Darcy and Elizabeth welcomed their son and heir.

He was born with a small mother's mark on his forehead.

Elizabeth kissed it each day, praising her son's handsome features—the same features that graced each and every generation of Darcy males.

Their daughter arrived two years later—a beautiful child who strongly favored her mother.

Miss Darcy bore a small faint mark above her left eyebrow.

Darcy's love for his precious children never wavered.

And so, beneath the fabled shades of Pemberley and in the sunshine-dappled meadows of its grounds, the Darcys raised their children to see with wiser eyes—not through the veil of beauty or blemish, but with the discerning gaze of the heart.

For in that quiet truth, well learned and dearly held, they found their richest inheritance: that love, when it is pure and steadfast, dwells not in perfection of form, but in the soul that loves in return.