



Unwillingly Mrs. Darcy

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Category: Historical

Description: A forced betrothal, a family in ruin, and one impossible choice—Elizabeth never thought her path would lead to Pemberley

After rejecting Mr. Darcy's preposterous proposal, Elizabeth Bennet never expected to see him again. But when Darcy becomes ensnared in an unwanted betrothal and Mr. Bennet's illness leaves her family on the brink of ruin, an unthinkable arrangement arises—becoming Mrs. Darcy.

With Kitty and Mary in tow, she relocates to Pemberley, where her new husband's quiet devotion and unwavering care for her sisters begin to challenge all she once believed about him.

As Darcy seeks to mend past wrongs and reunite Jane with Bingley, Elizabeth dares to hope their union may be more than mere convenience.

But just as trust begins to take root, a revelation threatens to upend everything.

Can she truly place her faith in the man she once vowed to despise?

Unwillingly Mrs. Darcy is a sweet and clean variation of Jane Austen's timeless classic, *Pride and Prejudice*, and it's above 60,000 words long

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Elizabeth

9th April 1812

Hunsford Parsonage, Kent

Elizabeth Bennet stood frozen, her breath catching in her throat as she stared at Mr Darcy. Had she heard him correctly? Had he... proposed? To her? The very man who had insulted her family, undermined her sister's happiness, and carried himself with such insufferable pride. What on earth was he thinking?

Her confusion swiftly gave way to outrage as his words replayed in her mind. He had offered himself to her in the most abhorrent manner imaginable. Insinuating that he was proposing against his better judgement, deriding her family as a stumbling block he would deign to tolerate, and describing his feelings for her as though they were an affliction rather than a joy. Indeed, he had spoken as though she had imposed them upon him, as though his attachment were her fault, something for which she ought to atone by accepting him.

Her hands curled into fists, the fabric of her gloves straining against the tension in her fingers. His audacity, his arrogance—it was intolerable. And yet, perhaps she ought not to have been surprised. Had not Colonel Fitzwilliam recently spoken of Mr Darcy's interference in her sister's courtship with Mr Bingley, lauding it as an act of brotherly concern?

My cousin did his friend a great favour, sparing him a marriage beneath his station. From all I heard, the young lady in question was certainly charming, but rather cold,

with a family that would undoubtedly hinder the gentleman's standing among the gentry .

Elizabeth's indignation surged anew. Her sister Jane, cold? Impossible. Jane's sweetness and gentleness were beyond compare, and Mr Darcy had the audacity to twist those virtues into faults. Worse still, he now dared propose marriage to her—the sister of the very woman whose happiness he had so callously destroyed because he deemed her unworthy of Mr Bingley.

Her eyes narrowed as she fixed him with a piercing glare, her vision tunnelling until only his face remained. She straightened her posture, drawing herself up to speak.

“Mr Darcy, to say your words surprised me is an understatement. But make no mistake—I would not marry you, not if you were the last man in all of Kent. Nay, not in all of England! How dare you make this proposal after the misery you have wrought upon my family? After the cruelty you inflicted upon my beloved sister?”

Mr Darcy's expression shifted to one of astonishment. His composed demeanour faltered as he blinked rapidly, his lips parting as though to speak but failing to form the words.

“Miss Bennet, I... I assure you, I do not understand what you mean,” he said finally.

“Do you not?” she retorted, her voice cutting like a blade. “Do you deny interfering in my sister's courtship with Mr Bingley? Advising him against her, suggesting that marrying her would bring ruin to his prospects?”

Mr Darcy's face darkened, his jaw tightening as he straightened his posture. His eyes, so penetrating mere moments ago, now held a defensive glint.

“I see,” he said coolly. “Well, since you ask—yes. I advised my friend against such a

union. I believed—and still believe—that he would have done himself a great disservice by marrying your sister. A marriage cannot thrive without genuine affection, Miss Bennet, and I saw none on her part.”

Elizabeth’s voice rose, trembling with fury. “And how, pray, did you reach this cruel and baseless conclusion? Did you even deign to speak with her? To ascertain her feelings?”

He hesitated. “No, I did not. That would have been improper.”

“Then you presumed.”

Mr Darcy bristled. “It was not presumption—it was observation. Your sister showed no indication of deeper feeling towards Bingley. Her regard for him seemed no more than amiability. My friend deserves to be with someone who genuinely cares for him, not merely for his fortune.”

Elizabeth’s chest heaved as she struggled to contain her anger. “You have misjudged her entirely. My sister is the kindest, most selfless woman I know. She is reserved, yes, but her heart is pure, and her love for Mr Bingley was sincere. Your interference has caused her unbearable suffering. Even now, months later, she pines for him! That you could cause her such pain, all because of your unwarranted opinions—I shall never forgive it.”

Her voice wavered slightly on the final word, but she continued. “But of course, such cruelty is no novelty to you, is it, Mr Darcy? It is your way, to wield your power and influence without regard for the consequences.”

Mr Darcy’s brows furrowed deeply. “Miss Bennet, I beg your pardon. To what, exactly, are you referring?”

“To Mr Wickham,” she replied, her voice sharp as a blade. The name alone seemed to strike him like a physical blow.

“Wickham,” he repeated, his tone low and scornful. “Of course. I should have known that his lies would influence your opinion of me. I ought to have accounted for your connection to him before proposing.”

“You should have,” Elizabeth said, her voice icy. “It would have spared both of us much distress. I am grateful to Mr Wickham for enlightening me about your character—your shameful treatment of him, depriving him of the living promised to him by your own father.”

Mr Darcy’s features hardened, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Elizabeth pressed on, her fury giving her strength. “You pride yourself on being a man of honour, Mr Darcy, yet your actions speak otherwise. To think that you could believe I would accept a proposal from someone so selfish, so disdainful of others—I scarcely know what to say.”

“Nor do I,” Mr Darcy replied, his voice low with tightly controlled emotion. “If this is truly what you think of me, I regret ever making a fool of myself by proposing to you.”

Elizabeth drew a breath, prepared to continue her tirade, when the sound of hurried footsteps and the crash of a door interrupted them.

“Elizabeth!”

Elizabeth turned, startled, just in time to see Kitty rush into the room, followed closely by Maria Lucas. Kitty’s face was blotched with tears, her entire body trembling with distress.

“Kitty! What has happened?” Elizabeth asked, moving quickly to catch her sister by the shoulders.

“We must go home,” Kitty sobbed. “There was a letter from home—Father... Father has been in an accident!”

Elizabeth’s stomach dropped. “An accident? What do you mean? Is he... is he...”

Kitty shook her head wildly, struggling to speak through her tears. “His carriage overturned. He was on the London Road, coming home, and... oh, Lizzy, it is dreadful!”

Elizabeth felt her sister slump into her arms, her weight heavy with despair. She tightened her grip, whispering soothingly as Kitty’s sobs wracked her body. A moment later, Elizabeth turned to Maria, her voice trembling.

“Maria, where is Mr Collins?”

Maria stepped forward hesitantly, glancing nervously at Kitty before holding out a crumpled letter. Elizabeth released one arm from around her sister and reached for it, smoothing the paper as best she could with trembling hands.

Only then did she became acutely aware of Mr Darcy’s presence behind her. She glanced back to see him standing still, his expression unusually grave as he watched the unfolding scene.

“Mr Darcy,” she said curtly, her tone barely civil.

He bowed slightly. “I will excuse myself. I do hope the news is not too terrible.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left. Through the doorway, Elizabeth saw

him pause briefly outside, glancing back over his shoulder. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met. The smouldering anger she had felt moments ago flared, but as quickly as it came, it evaporated.

Her family needed her.

Elizabeth turned back to the letter, cradling Kitty with one arm. The ominous words on the page blurred as tears pricked her eyes. But she would not falter—not now. Whatever awaited them, she would face it head on, for her father's sake and for her family's future.

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Elizabeth

Elizabeth sat in a stiff-backed chair opposite Charlotte, her friend's steady composure showing signs of strain at last. Charlotte leaned forward, her hands tightly clasping Elizabeth's, her face pale with worry. Upstairs, Kitty, still trembling, busied herself packing her belongings with Maria Lucas's assistance, leaving Elizabeth and Charlotte to grapple with the weight of the family crisis in hushed tones.

"Charlotte, it is dreadful," Elizabeth murmured, her voice low but trembling with barely contained emotion. "Mary writes that my father is unable to move or speak. He was in and out of consciousness for two days. It must be his head. The accident... it seems to have been quite severe. The apothecary was summoned while the surgeon was out of town, but he has now returned and was brought from Meryton to attend to him, but neither could offer a definitive account of his condition."

Charlotte gave Elizabeth's hands a reassuring squeeze. "Do not give yourself over to despair so easily, Eliza," she said gently. "It is often the case that such injuries appear worse at first than they prove to be with time. When you arrive home, you may find the news better than you feared."

Elizabeth pressed her lips into a thin line, staring at the floor as though its worn boards might offer the solace she could not find in her heart. "I dearly wish to hope so."

The sound of the front door opening interrupted their subdued exchange. A moment later, Mr Collins's rotund frame filled the doorway, his customary air of self-importance ill-suited to the sombre occasion.

“Well!” he began, clasping his hands together with an affected solemnity. “The carriage is readied. Charlotte, be so good as to fetch my bags. Pack for at least a fortnight—nay, better make it a month!”

Elizabeth lifted her head sharply, the tension in her neck pricking like a needle. “You intend to accompany us, sir?”

“But of course!” Mr Collins replied, his tone suggesting it was the most natural conclusion imaginable. “You are my cousins, dear Elizabeth, and as such it is my sacred duty to see you and Catherine safely home. The road to Hertfordshire is long, and propriety demands that a gentleman undertake such a journey to ensure the safety of young ladies.” He straightened his waistcoat importantly. “Moreover, your father’s grievous misfortune calls for a steady hand to render what assistance may be required.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, hardly able to believe his audacity. Though her instinct was to protest, her mind raced with the undeniable reality of the situation. The journey from Kent to Hertfordshire would take two days, possibly more, given the recent rains—and travelling unchaperoned would invite censure at best, and outright scandal at worst. Indeed, they had been accompanied by Sir William’s cousin on the journey there, for propriety’s sake.

Despite the irksome truth of Mr Collins’s practicality, Elizabeth could hardly credit his self-congratulatory sincerity. Her long-held suspicions about his priorities, however, were only confirmed when his next words all but shattered any pretence of altruism.

“Charlotte, my dear, pack my best garments,” he instructed, barely glancing at his wife. “For, should Mr Bennet’s condition be as dire as it seems—heaven forefend—I must stand ready to assist by taking on the duties of the head of the family.”

Elizabeth bit down hard on the inside of her cheek to restrain the sharp retort that sprang unbidden to her tongue. So this, then, was Mr Collins's true purpose—not compassion, but calculation. His keenness to attach himself to Longbourn during such a time betrayed not concern for her father's health, but rather an eagerness to establish himself as its inevitable heir.

Still, she forced a calm reply. "Your willingness to accompany us is most generous," she said with the utmost civility she could muster, though her lips threatened to press into a thin, disapproving line.

"Think nothing of it, Cousin Elizabeth!" he assured her, his grin almost beaming. Turning back to Charlotte, he gestured for her to attend to his packing. "Come, Charlotte. We must not delay."

Charlotte rose with her usual grace but cast an apologetic glance at Elizabeth before departing with her husband. The absence of their footsteps left an oppressive silence behind them.

Elizabeth exhaled heavily, releasing the tension coiled in her shoulders. She turned to gaze out of the window and caught sight of a carriage retreating down the winding drive. Within its plush interior, Lady Catherine de Bourgh's turban nodded rhythmically with the uneven rocking of the vehicle. Even from a distance, the gems in her headdress captured the sunlight in dazzling flashes.

A strange thought flitted unbidden into Elizabeth's mind—Was Mr Darcy travelling with his aunt? Her heart clenched involuntarily, though whether from irritation or some other feeling she refused to name, she could not be sure.

She shook her head, silently chastising herself for the distraction. How dare he intrude upon her thoughts now? Had she not borne enough vexation without adding Mr Darcy to her troubles?

It seemed impossible that only hours earlier, he had stood before her, presumptuous and arrogant, offering a proposal of marriage so galling that she could scarcely believe her ears. That episode alone had been enough to ruin her spirits—and yet fate had conspired to overshadow even that affront with the dire news from Longbourn.

Elizabeth straightened in her chair, pressing her palms against her lap. Now was not the time for indulgent reveries, particularly not where Mr Darcy was concerned. Her immediate duty was clear, she must prepare herself to meet whatever awaited her at home with as much fortitude as she could summon.

If Mr Collins's insufferable company was the price she must pay for propriety's sake, so be it. But there was a bitter comfort in the knowledge that both she and Kitty understood his true motives all too well.

"Let him posture," she muttered to herself, rising from her seat with determination. "Whatever his schemes, they shall have no sway over us."

Turning briskly, Elizabeth strode towards the staircase. There would be time enough for frustration and grievances later. For now, she must ready herself to return to Longbourn, to be a source of strength for Kitty, and to face whatever trials awaited them upon arrival.

"Well," Mr Collins began, clasping his hands together with a self-satisfied air, "we are nearly back in Meryton. I know you must be fretting terribly, but rest assured, all will be well. The moment we arrive, I shall take charge of the estate to ensure its smooth running during my cousin's convalescence."

Elizabeth refrained from responding to her cousin's presumptuous declaration. There was no need for him to take charge of anything. Longbourn was managed capably,

even without a steward, her father's capable hands ensured its proper governance. Truly, Mr Collins's interference was neither required nor welcome.

But, of course, that was not the true purpose of his determination to involve himself. His eagerness to secure his place as the future master of Longbourn was plainly evident, an ambition that Elizabeth fervently hoped would remain unfulfilled for many years to come.

Perhaps such thoughts were unkind—indeed, even uncharitable. After all, Mr Collins was family. Surely, he did not wish for a family member's death. Yet Elizabeth could not suppress the lingering suspicion that, in his mind, the loss of a cousin and the acquisition of an estate were neatly recorded as wholly separate matters.

She sighed, glancing towards her sisters. Kitty's eyes were red-rimmed, her lips still trembling with suppressed sobs.

"All will be well, Kitty. It was an accident—nothing more. He will recover."

"And we shall pray for him diligently," Mr Collins interjected, his tone self-righteous. "I am certain your sister Mary has already undertaken such devotions. I have always known her to be a pious young woman."

"Mama will be beside herself," Kitty whispered, her voice barely audible as she ignored their cousin. "Her nerves... they are so fragile, even at the best of times."

Elizabeth offered a faint smile of reassurance. "Yes, Kitty, but do not underestimate her resilience. Every time we were unwell as children, she was the most devoted nurse. She will care for Father with the same tireless affection. Despite all their quarrels, they love one another dearly. I cannot imagine one without the other."

"Indeed," Mr Collins replied with a grave nod. "We must all trust that matters shall

improve in due course.”

As the carriage rumbled along the now-familiar roads towards Longbourn, Elizabeth found herself reflecting on her own words. She had spoken them to comfort her sister, but the anxiety swirling within her heart refused to be soothed. Try as she might, she could not dismiss the sense of foreboding that clung to her like a shadow, whispering of calamities yet to come.

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Darcy

25th April 1812

Darcy walked through the grove at Rosings Park, his thumb and index finger rubbing together to release some of the pent-up strain that coursed through him. A fortnight had passed since Elizabeth Bennet had issued her stern rebuke, and since she had received the dreadful news about her father. There had been no news from Meryton, and Darcy knew that, really, he should not concern himself with what happened at the Bennet family home. She had rejected him. Indeed, she had made it quite clear that she thought nothing of him.

And yet, he couldn't help but worry. He knew William Collins well enough to understand that the moment he had a chance, he would take charge of the estate. And what would become of the Bennet women?

He might allow them to stay under his thumb, he might ask them to leave. If he did, where would they go? He shook his head. This was not his concern, he reminded himself once more.

Such things happened to families across the country every day. If a family had no son, these circumstances could happen. Indeed, he had to fault Mr Bennet for this. For while, once upon a time, entailments were almost impossible to break, they weren't now. An involved negotiation, an exchange of money, sometimes a hefty sum, might be required but it could be done. And with five daughters, he had to have considered it. It was only responsible. Had he not been able to afford the cost?

Perhaps, when his wife was younger, he had still held out hope for a son. But with Jane Bennet now two-and-twenty and the youngest daughter almost the same age as Georgiana, he had to know that a son would not be forthcoming.

His gaze fell upon Hunsford Parsonage, which rose out from the surrounding trees. Before he could make up his mind, his feet were already taking him in that direction.

He made his way over to the unassuming building and knocked on the front door. To his surprise, the mistress of the house herself answered.

“Mr Darcy,” Charlotte said, her blue eyes widening with surprise. “What brings you here? My husband has not yet...”

Darcy clenched and unclenched his hands, feeling a little foolish for having come here. What did he want? He cleared his throat.

“Right. Of course he hasn’t. Has there been news? From your husband, that is, regarding the circumstances at the Longbourn estate?”

Even to his own ears, he sounded stiff and awkward. However, if Mrs Collins noticed, she did not say anything and instead beckoned him to come inside.

“Would you like a cup of tea? I can have one made.”

“I would not wish to impose.”

“You are not. In fact, I was going to have one, and I can have the cook make one just as easily for two. Would you like tea?” She dipped her head to one side, and when he nodded briefly, went into the hallway and in a gentle tone spoke to her servant.

She soon returned and, beckoning him to sit by the window, she sat in the exact same

seat where Elizabeth had sat when he made his proposal to her. And he noted he was in the same chair where he had received her rejection. He shuddered at the memory but then banished it from his mind. That was the past now.

“You asked about the Bennets? I received a letter from my husband yesterday. The report is not good. It appears that Mr Bennet has suffered not only an accident, but an accident caused by – well – apoplexy.”

“Goodness gracious,” Darcy said, taking his hat off and realising that he had neglected to do so earlier. “I did not realise.”

“How could you?” she said. “No one could have imagined. Mr Bennet was so healthy. Of course, he always had strain with the lack of an heir and such but his physical health has always been well. But anyhow, it is quite dreadful. They have taken care of him as best they can, and a surgeon is looking after him, but as far as I know, it took several days for him to be fully conscious, and even now he cannot speak properly or move his right side at all. He cannot sit without assistance.” She looked out of the window. “It is quite dreadful.”

“Goodness, so is his life still in danger?” Darcy asked.

“It appears not to be, at least not immediately. But if he will ever be who he was before, I cannot say. My mother wrote to me as well. She and Mrs Bennet are—I will not say friends, for they are not, but they are well acquainted—and she has voiced her concern.” Charlotte glanced down at her hands. “Mrs Bennet, apparently, is rather concerned about my husband’s presence.” Her voice was quiet, barely a whisper.

Darcy looked at her. It was unseemly to speak negatively of one’s spouse, of course, so he understood that she could not say more. She didn’t need to. Darcy had already imagined that Mr Collins might have his eye on the estate, and he doubted that the man was very skilled when it came to estate management. One had to be raised in

that environment to be able to know the ins and outs of such estates.

“It is such a shame that poor Jane was left disappointed when Mr Bingley left town,” Charlotte said, and Darcy looked up.

“Why do you say this?”

“Well, Mr Bingley may not own an estate, but he is a businessman. He would have connections to help the family. He would be able to perhaps even help the family break the entailment. It is not that I do not wish to be lady of a larger home, but I have always known Longbourn as the Bennet estate. The idea of me being mistress of Longbourn one day—it does not sit well with me, even if Mrs Bennet thinks otherwise.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “I understand. It is indeed a shame that the family does not have a male benefactor.”

“Not just that. Jane and I, we get along very well, and she has written to me many times since I moved here. And I still recall how joyful she was when she wrote to me about Mr Bingley. She would tell me how lovely a dancer he was, and how charming, and how he made her heart glow.” She smiled briefly, but then the smile faded. “But it seems she was mistaken in her feelings for him. For if he had cared for her, I doubt he would have left in such a manner.” She looked up at him. “I know I ought not to speak of him in such terms. You are his friend, after all, and surely have more insight into his character.”

“I assure you, my friend’s character is sound,” Darcy said, although he wasn’t sure if he could say the same about his. The last two weeks he had been plagued with doubts about his own actions. His friend had truly cared about Jane. He had to admit, after hearing Elizabeth’s fierce defence of her sister, he had to believe Jane felt the same. And now Charlotte Collins. Had he made a grave mistake?

A maid entered then with a tray of tea and served it quickly. Darcy looked at his tea, drinking it down far too quickly. He didn't want tea, really. He wanted to go back to his chamber, but there was much to think about. His feelings on the topic were more than conflicted. He felt guilty for his actions regarding Jane, and still ashamed at the accusations Elizabeth Bennet had levelled against him in regard to Bingley—though he also felt anger at her similar accusations involving Wickham, where he had acted blamelessly. It still bothered him that Elizabeth Bennet would think so ill of him, to believe the word of a scoundrel over him.

He finished his tea and politely bade his hostess farewell, requesting that she let him know if she received any more news from Longbourn.

He had to come to terms with what he had done, but the more he considered it, the more he wondered if Elizabeth Bennet had been correct all along.

He had ruined her sister's happiness guided by nothing but his observation. And if he had been wrong about that, if he had let impressions guide his actions, could he fault her for having done the same to him?

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Elizabeth

2nd May 1812

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The household at Longbourn was in disarray. Mr Collins, eager to establish his dominion as heir apparent, had installed himself as administrator of the estate. But his abilities, never particularly suited to the practical management of such affairs, proved wholly inadequate. Matters that ought to have run smoothly—labourers' wages, the maintenance of the stables, the procurement of feed—descended swiftly into chaos under his heavy-handed yet inept governance. Servants found themselves confounded by contradictory orders, and tenants grew restless as routine concerns were either mismanaged or entirely ignored.

Though wracked with worry for her father's health, Elizabeth Bennet had little choice but to step into the breach. Each day brought a new crisis—a neglected account book in need of review, repairs promised by Mr Collins but forgotten, disputes amongst staff that needed smoothing over.

In truth, her vigour for the task was fuelled less by any desire to salvage Mr Collins's reputation—such a feat was far beyond mortal means—and more by her determination to protect the Bennet family name during a time when it seemed more precarious than ever. Though the entailment had always hung over Longbourn, the reality of Mr Collins's accession cast a new and foreboding shadow over her home.

If only Papa could recover.

The thought carried Elizabeth through her busiest hours, a fragile hope in the midst of calamity.

Mr Bennet remained gravely unwell, confined to his chamber and under the near-constant supervision of the village surgeon.

For some time, it had been entirely unclear what had caused his accident. It hadn't been until he'd awoken, unable to speak and paralyzed on the left side of his body that the true culprit had become clear.

Apoplexy.

It was a dire diagnosis, made all the more difficult to comprehend as her father had always been strong and healthy. And now? Now he could not feed himself properly, nor dress himself. Indeed, most days he lay in his darkened chamber, unable even to converse for the illness had robbed him of his voice.

For her father to recover even a semblance of his former self, the prognosis was grim and unremitting. Speech was laborious, movement restricted, and each passing day revealed only the barest signs of improvement. The fire in Mr Bennet's sharp wit—a defining trait of his character—was now but a faint glimmer, the cruellest injury yet to Elizabeth's aching heart.

Jane had returned home from London shortly after their father's accident, bringing with her a quiet melancholy that did not escape Elizabeth's notice. Jane said little of her time there beyond polite generalities. Still, the sadness that clung to her upon arrival betrayed a heavier burden than simple worry over their father.

Elizabeth knew Jane had harboured hopes of seeing Mr Bingley, even venturing once to call upon Caroline—though no visit had been paid in return, at least not to Elizabeth's knowledge. Certainly, her sister still pined for Mr Bingley, and she had to

wonder why he had left her as he had. Would it help her sister to know the reasons?

Thus far, Elizabeth had chosen not to divulge Mr Darcy's interference in the match. There was too much to worry about already, and Jane did not deserve to bear yet another grief amidst the upheaval at Longbourn. Nonetheless, a pang of guilt struck Elizabeth each time her sister turned those soft, wistful eyes towards her with unspoken questions that Elizabeth could not answer.

It was late in the afternoon when Elizabeth returned from an exhausting round of estate errands and found Jane sitting in the parlour with their mother. Mrs Bennet, typically effusive even in crisis, was, for once, subdued. Occupying herself with an embroidery while Jane gazed in silence out of the window. The air was heavy, the quiet so unlike the bustling, chaotic noise which had typified Longbourn of late. Elizabeth's entrance seemed to break the spell.

"There you are, Lizzy," Mrs Bennet exclaimed, although she scarcely looked up from her work. "What news from the orchard? I do hope Mr Collins has finally resolved that matter with old Timothy."

Elizabeth's mouth tightened. The matter in question—a straight forward complaint regarding an uprooted tree—had been exacerbated into an unnecessary argument when Mr Collins insisted on exercising his perceived authority, ultimately neglecting the actual problem entirely.

"The matter is settled," Elizabeth said coolly. "Although I confess, Mama, it required no small degree of diplomacy to achieve."

Mrs Bennet sighed dramatically and turned to Jane. "See what a burden your poor sister has taken upon herself, Jane! All because Mr Collins cannot organise his own boots, let alone an estate!"

“Mama, please,” Jane murmured gently, her expression one of weary resignation. “It will all be well in time.”

Elizabeth glanced sharply at her sister. “What makes you so confident?” she asked, dropping into a chair and loosening her shawl.

Jane gave her a faint smile. “Because it must be, Lizzy. We have no choice but to believe that.”

Their mother sniffed and returned her focus to her sewing. “Well, in any case, I do not see why it must be Lizzy sorting all this out. Mr Collins ought to make a better effort. He so badly desires to take your father’s place even temporarily, why not start acting like a landowner now?”

Elizabeth rose, unable to remain seated. She paced to the window, the familiar frustration bubbling just beneath her calm exterior. She said nothing, unwilling to ignite one of her mother’s familiar tirades about injustice and entitlement, but her silence spoke volumes.

“Mr Collins is doing what he thinks best,” Jane said softly after a moment, standing and joining Elizabeth by the window. She placed a comforting hand on her sister’s arm. “He simply lacks direction.”

“Direction!” Elizabeth exclaimed, turning to look at her. “Even now, you would defend him?”

“I defend no one,” Jane replied, her composure unshaken. “I simply acknowledge that anger will not serve us, especially now.”

“Oh Jane, you are too kind for your own good,” their mother said. “Hang that dreadful man, and that wife of his who already sees this as her home.”

“That is not kind. Charlotte did not choose this,” Elizabeth countered, but her mother merely rose and walked out, shaking her head as she mumbled about the Collinses getting their hands on Longbourn.

“Lizzy, I do not blame you for feeling as you do, nor does Mama,” Jane said. “You have taken on more than you ought. But for what it is worth, I see how much you are doing—for all of us. I am grateful.”

Elizabeth softened under her sister’s gaze. Jane had always possessed an uncanny ability to steady her.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

They stood for a moment longer, gazing out over the lawn, watching as the lengthening shadows heralded evening’s approach.

“Lizzy,” Jane said at length, her voice hesitant. “Do you think Papa will ever—”

Elizabeth shook her head sharply, cutting off the question.

“Do not think on it now,” she said firmly, although she knew her plea was as much for herself as it was for Jane.

They parted soon after, Jane retreating to her room and Elizabeth returning to her father’s study to leaf through a pile of neglected letters awaiting attention. She sat at his desk, the faint scent of ink and old parchment bringing memories of happier days, when her father had presided over this very desk with his customary sardonic wit and a glass of brandy in hand.

Elizabeth allowed herself a rare indulgence, she rested her elbows on the desk and lowered her face into her hands. For the first time since the accident, the enormity of

it all threatened to overwhelm her. Longbourn, her family's sanctuary, felt so fragile now. And Jane's quiet heartbreak, her mother's anxieties, her own burdens—it all rested too heavily on her.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Elizabeth composed herself at least. She could not—would not—give in to despair. There was too much still to be done.

But one thought echoed persistently in her mind, one that she could no longer dismiss. Longbourn—its people, and its legacy—deserved better than Mr Collins' mismanagement.

Elizabeth resolved that when the dust settled, she would ensure that the estate's future was safeguarded. But for now, she could only press on and hope for the best.

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Darcy

Several days had passed since Darcy's unsettling conversation with Mrs Collins, and as he made his way to the breakfast room, his mind remained clouded. No further correspondence had reached him from Hertfordshire, leaving him wholly ignorant of Mr Bennet's condition—and, by extension, the fate of the woman to whom he had so recently proposed and been refused.

"Fitzwilliam," Anne murmured as he entered. She sat at the table, her habitual pallor more pronounced, the dark circles beneath her eyes deeper than usual. Before her rested a bowl of porridge, untouched save for the faintest ripple in the milk.

"My mother wishes to see us both," she added with wearied resignation.

Darcy suppressed a groan and instead inclined his head ever so slightly. The last thing he desired was another audience with his aunt. Lady Catherine was bound to subject him to some overbearing proclamation or directive. Moreover, he had resolved to quit Rosings Park at the earliest opportunity, he had lingered too long as it was. Richard had departed just the day before, returning to his regiment, and without his cousin's light-hearted company, Darcy could find no reason to delay his departure further.

"Do you know what this pertains to?" he asked Anne, a feeling of dread beginning to coil within him.

"I do," she said, her tone imbued with resignation. "It concerns our future—specifically matrimony."

Darcy exhaled sharply, allowing his disdain for the topic to momentarily cross his face. “Again?”

Anne offered a small, rueful smile, though her gaze remained fixed on the untouched porridge before her. “It has ever been thus.”

Of course, it had. His aunt had harboured designs for their union as long as Darcy could remember. Lady Catherine’s declarations that he and Anne were destined for one another, decreed from the cradle by their mothers—her sister, the late Lady Anne Darcy, and herself—had been a constant refrain throughout his youth.

And yet the assertion remained dubious. His own dear mother had never mentioned the matter during her lifetime, though she had died when Darcy was but fourteen. Surely, had such an arrangement been genuinely fixed, his father might have at least alluded to it? But no such references had ever been made. The notion, he supposed, had been entirely devised by Lady Catherine—or perhaps jested at by their mothers in earlier days, and misconstrued by his aunt into a matter of great seriousness.

Darcy’s opinion of the so-called arrangement was one of vague exasperation. His feelings on his cousin Anne’s position were kinder. She lived beneath the oppressive rule of her mother, with little opportunity for autonomy.

Before Darcy could further ponder the situation, Lady Catherine entered, sweeping into the room with the self-assurance of a reigning queen. Her gown, fashioned from her favourite taffeta, rustled with every step. In so many ways, Darcy thought, his aunt seemed frozen in time, carrying herself as though she were the belle of society, rather than a lady firmly beyond her prime. She took her place at the head of the table with military precision, her back stiff and straight as ever, her countenance commanding attention.

“Fitzwilliam,” she began, her tone imperious but touched with feigned amusement.

“How good it is to see you. You have been uncommonly absent these past few days. Pray, do not tell me you have been avoiding me?” She let out a self-satisfied chuckle, as though the idea was too ridiculous to entertain.

“Certainly not, Aunt,” Darcy replied with composure.

“Good.” Lady Catherine folded her hands with deliberate ceremony. “I shall get straight to the matter of your wedding, as it is one of utmost importance to all concerned. I had long pictured you as a winter bridegroom—winter ceremonies are the most elegant, you know—but as I understand it, spring suits you better. So, let us compromise and settle the affair in the autumn.”

Darcy blinked, his aunt looked entirely earnest.

“Aunt,” Darcy said, clearing his mind. He wasn’t quite certain if she was serious or not. “I do not know what wedding you speak of. No proposals have been made.” That was not technically true – a proposal had been made and thoroughly rejected. Although not to Anne de Bourgh.

“Fitzwilliam, you know perfectly well what I mean. Your wedding to Anne. It is about time we set a date. You are not getting any younger. You are seven-and-twenty already. You must have an heir to carry on the line, lest Pemberley fall into the hands of your dreadful Darcy cousins. And Anne is three-and-twenty. She needs a husband before she’s considered an old maid and ends up on the shelf. Surely, you do not want that for your cousin?”

Darcy looked at Anne, whose cheeks had reddened as she looked down at the floor.

Darcy paused for a long moment, his hand resting firmly on the edge of his chair. Then, as if summoning all the weight of his resolution, he stood.

“Aunt Catherine,” he began, his voice steady though laden with finality, “I must clarify, now and for all time, that I have no intention to marry Anne. Not now, and not ever.”

A sharp intake of breath echoed through the room. Anne, who had been sitting pale and withdrawn, flushed a furious shade of pink. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap, her thin shoulders almost folding inward as if she might disappear altogether.

Lady Catherine stared at him as if he had declared a wish to leap off the nearest cliff. Her wide-eyed incredulity quickly transformed into stormy outrage. Her voice, low and venomous at first, rose steadily in indignation.

“Fitzwilliam Darcy,” she thundered, her beringed hand striking the arm of her chair, “I know very well that you do not mean this! You are your mother’s son, and she, in her infinite wisdom, decided this match with me years ago. It has been settled since you were but a child. You and Anne are destined, marked by providence itself to unite Rosings and Pemberley.”

Anne winced visibly at the mention of her own name as she kept her gaze firmly fixed on the polished floorboards.

Darcy remained steadfast. He squared his shoulders and regarded Lady Catherine with an icy calm that only deepened her fury.

“Your fancies, madam,” he said evenly, “may bring you comfort, but they do not concern me. I have tolerated them long enough. Let me be clear: I do not love Anne and never shall. No affection binds us, and nothing save your own contrivances upholds this illusion of a future union. I will no longer indulge your imaginings. Your scheming ends here.”

“Fitzwilliam!” Lady Catherine half-rose from her chair, her face mottled with rage.

“You will marry her! You have no alternative. Think of your lineage, your honour, your duty! Are you not a man of principle? Of family loyalty?”

Darcy’s gaze darkened. “You mistake stubbornness for loyalty, and antiquated notions for principles. My future, like my happiness, is my own. You may think that you can command my obedience, but, with respect, madam, I am no longer a boy under your influence. I will chart my own path, free of your interference.”

The crackling tension in the room was almost unbearable. Anne’s head dipped so low that her chin grazed her chest. She was trembling faintly, and for a moment Darcy felt a flicker of pity for her—a woman so constrained by her mother’s iron will that even the possibility of independence seemed unthinkable.

Lady Catherine stared at him, her expression frozen in disbelief and mounting indignation. “This is preposterous! You will regret these words, Fitzwilliam. Mark them. You dare to defy your family for what? Your pride? Your fancies? Do not think I will forgive you for this folly!”

Darcy stepped forward, his voice turning frigid. “I seek no forgiveness, Aunt. I ask only to be left in peace. Pemberley will remain my concern, my duty. As for Anne,” he turned briefly to her, softening his tone, “I wish her only the freedom and happiness she deserves, far away from the shadows of expectations neither of us should bear.”

Anne’s hands twitched, but she gave the faintest of nods, though her gaze never rose.

With that, Darcy made his decision clear. “This conversation serves no further purpose. You may rage as much as you like, Aunt, but I have spoken, and nothing will compel me to change my course.”

Lady Catherine remained briefly in her chair, glaring after Darcy with visible

frustration, before rising with dramatic force. Her skirts rustled violently as she swept past Anne without so much as a word and stormed from the room. The distant slam of the door reverberated through the air, a loud punctuation mark to her indignation.

Darcy, now alone with Anne, released a slow breath, his carefully composed demeanour softening. Turning to his cousin, he noted her slight form still hunched in the chair, her head bowed.

“Anne,” he said gently, moving to stand beside her, “I owe you an apology. None of this was your doing, and yet you’ve borne the brunt of it all. My objection is not, and never was, to you. It is to this relentless forcing of a marriage I do not wish for.”

To his astonishment, Anne raised her head and looked at him—truly looked—her pale blue eyes filled with weariness and something else, a glimmer of relief.

“I know,” she said quietly. “And I agree with you entirely, Fitzwilliam.”

This startled him. “You do?”

Anne folded her hands neatly in her lap, gazing down at them. Her voice wavered but grew stronger as she continued. “I never wanted this union either. But you know how Mother is, her wishes have always dictated my life. I do not have your strength... I do not know how to stand against her.”

Darcy felt a pang of sympathy for his cousin. “You are stronger than you realise, Anne. Living under Aunt Catherine’s rule would test the fortitude of anyone.” His voice softened. “I wish my uncle were still alive. He was a sensible, kind man. With him by your side, things might have been so different.”

Anne nodded, blinking rapidly as though fighting tears. “Father was my ally. He had a way of softening Mother, of tempering her more... forceful inclinations. Since his

death, I have felt unmoored.”

Darcy frowned, memories of his late uncle, Sir Lewis de Bourgh, resurfacing with clarity. The man had been the epitome of patience and quiet wisdom, able to coax even Lady Catherine into moderation on occasion. His loss had created a void, not only for Anne but for the entire family.

“I am sorry, Anne,” Darcy said sincerely.

Anne inhaled deeply and squared her shoulders slightly, her next words surprising him further. “But the truth, cousin, is that even were I capable of defying Mother, I could never agree to marry you.”

Darcy tilted his head, curious. “Oh?”

She gave a nervous laugh, clasping her hands tighter. “Because my heart is not my own to give. It has long belonged to another.”

He blinked, entirely unprepared for this revelation. “To whom?”

Her pale cheeks coloured. “Richard,” she confessed, her voice trembling. “For years, he and I have understood one another as few else can. But Mother would never countenance such a match, not with his lack of fortune or standing. She deems him unworthy, though I know in my heart he is far more than I could ever deserve.”

Darcy stared, momentarily at a loss for words. The sheer audacity of Lady Catherine’s obstinacy struck him anew. To deny Anne the freedom to marry a man she clearly held in high esteem, a man of honour and integrity like Colonel Fitzwilliam, was unforgivable.

Anne looked up, concern clouding her expression. “You’re shocked, I know. But

please, do not feel burdened by this knowledge. My affection for Richard changes nothing here. If anything, I am relieved that you and I are of one mind.”

Darcy managed a faint smile, admiration growing for his soft-spoken cousin. “Shocked, yes,” he admitted. “But more than that, I see a reflection of my own struggles in your circumstances. Richard is a fine man, Anne. You needn’t feel unworthy of him—he would be fortunate to have your regard.”

Her lips curved into a faint, but genuine smile. “You are very kind to say so.”

The cousins sat quietly for a moment, an unspoken accord passing between them, both grateful that this long-held tension was now dispelled.

When Darcy rose to his feet, Anne looked up at him inquisitively. “Where will you go now?” she asked.

He adjusted his coat and straightened his shoulders, his tone firm. “To Darcy House. There are matters I must address, and I fear I’ve delayed them far too long.”

As he stepped away, Anne called softly after him, “Fitzwilliam.”

He paused at the door, turning back to meet her gaze.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

He gave her a small, reassuring smile. “Take care, Anne.”

And with that, he departed Rosings, leaving behind the turbulence of Lady Catherine’s schemes and turning his focus towards making amends where they were most urgently needed.

The following day, Darcy made his way down to the breakfast room, enjoying the peaceful calm at his London house. He stepped into the breakfast room to find buns, butter, and lemon curd already set out on the table. The aroma of eggs wafted up from below stairs, bringing a smile to his face. His cook knew him well.

He took his seat just as Mr Jones, the butler, entered carrying the morning paper and placed it neatly on the table.

“Good morning, sir,” Jones said, his gaze lingering on Darcy. Something seemed to be on his mind.

“Good morning, Jones. I trust you are well?” Darcy replied.

“I am, sir,” Jones answered, hesitating slightly as he glanced at Darcy again. It was obvious something was weighing upon him.

“Out with it, man. What is it? Did you see something dreadful in the paper?” Darcy asked, sensing an unusual tension in the room.

Jones hesitated, then finally confessed, “Yes, sir. I could not help but notice the announcement. Please let me be the first to offer my congratulations.”

“Congratulations?” Darcy raised an eyebrow, bewildered. “On what?”

He furrowed his brow, a sinking feeling of dread forming in the pit of his stomach. “What precisely are you congratulating me on, Jones?” he asked again, a biting edge to his tone.

Jones hesitated but stood firm. “On your impending nuptials, sir. I shall look forward

to welcoming the new lady of the house.”

Darcy froze, his heart beating unevenly as a cold chill washed over him. “My what?” He reached for the paper, snatching it from the table with such force that Jones flinched slightly. Flipping feverishly through to the announcements, his eyes fell upon it, a bold and unmistakable proclamation:

It is with great pleasure that we announce the forthcoming union of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire, to Miss Anne de Bourgh of Rosings Park, Kent. The nuptials are to be celebrated with joy and propriety in a ceremony at Rosings in the coming months, as agreed by the families of the bride and groom. This alliance, uniting two venerable estates, promises to uphold the highest traditions of the landed gentry.

Darcy’s jaw clenched as he reread the words, incredulous. His aunt Catherine’s scheming hand was clear in every line. Fury bloomed hotly in his chest as he threw the paper onto the table. He had warned her—repeatedly—that such manipulation was unwelcome, even abhorrent. And now this.

“Jones, bring me writing materials at once ! ” Darcy demanded. Without waiting for acknowledgment, he strode to his study, pacing like a lion in a cage while Jones swiftly arranged his desk. Seating himself abruptly, he dipped his pen into the ink with such force that a blot appeared on the paper.

His hand moved furiously, the letter forming rapidly, every stroke of his pen a vehement denunciation of his aunt’s brazen actions.

Madam,

Your latest attempt to force my hand exceeds all bounds of decency and decorum. That you would publish a fraudulent announcement of my marriage without my

knowledge or consent is not only a grievous insult to me, but an affront to truth itself. I will not be complicit in this dishonourable charade. You have jeopardised my good name and that of Miss de Bourgh by such reckless presumption.

I demand that you publicly retract this announcement immediately, else I shall be compelled to take steps to set the record straight, no matter how uncomfortable they might prove for you. Your conduct is unbecoming, madam, and does no credit to the noble house you claim to serve.

F. Darcy

Darcy's fury drove him on, nearly blotting another word when a knock on the study door interrupted him.

"Sir," Jones began with clear hesitation, "Mr Beecham has arrived and wishes to offer his congratulations."

Darcy slammed his pen down. And so it began. Mr Beecham, his godfather, was usually a welcome guest. However, on this day Darcy wished to see nobody—certainly not until he had sorted out this disaster. He would have to publish a retraction. Of course, that would harm Anne greatly. But he had to do something. Otherwise Beecham would be the first of many.

"Send him away, Jones. Tell him I am indisposed—and do not admit any other visitors."

"Yes, sir," his butler replied, retreating swiftly.

Alone once more, Darcy pressed his head into his hands, the frustration was overwhelming. This was nothing short of a disaster. The wheels of rumour were already turning, and he could only imagine what the next days would bring.

How could his aunt's brazen tactics be undone without leaving reputations—his and Anne's—in tatters? For the first time in many years, Darcy felt completely outmanoeuvred.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Elizabeth

12th May 1812

L ongbourn was infused with an oppressive silence, the kind that Elizabeth felt in her chest as much as she heard with her ears.

She sat by the fire, her hands folded tightly in her lap. Across from her, Jane absent-mindedly worked on a piece of embroidery, her usual serenity replaced with a subdued melancholy. Kitty shifted irritably on the sofa, while Mary sat straight-backed in her chair, her hands neatly resting atop a book, though she hadn't opened it.

It was Elizabeth who finally broke the quiet. "We must face it—Papa's condition is unlikely to improve soon, if at all. Mr Collins will not be here forever, and I can limit the damage he is doing for now, but if things get worse... If Papa doesn't improve..."

"Or if the worst were to happen," Mary said, speaking out loud what they were all thinking but none dared to say.

"It won't," Kitty protested.

"You cannot know that," Mary fired back. Jane sighed and raised her hands.

"Let us not quarrel, please. It is wise to talk about the options open to us, for we do not know what tomorrow will bring. Father may well recover fully. Uncle Gardiner has found a physician from Edinburgh who is in Town at the moment to see to a patient, and he will come here for a consultation on his return to Scotland. All may

yet be well. But if it is not, then we must see what can be done. Do you agree, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Indeed, we must be prepared. We all hope and pray for Father's recovery but even if he gets better it will take time, and the estate might struggle. I do not wish to burden Mother more than is necessary but if it comes to it, we may need to explore..." she paused, hating the words before they left her lips, "alternative means to support ourselves. Especially if Mr Collins were to be Master of Longbourn."

Kitty looked up sharply. "Alternative? What do you mean?"

"I mean," Elizabeth said gently, "that we might have to consider earning our own living. Seeking employment. We ought to consider it now, so that we can be prepared."

The words hung in the air like a black cloud. Mary, predictably, was the first to react, her tone clipped. "I doubt any of us has the skills required to support ourselves respectably in such a manner."

Elizabeth allowed herself a grim smile. "Perhaps not, but necessity doesn't often ask if we are prepared, does it?"

"Besides, we all know how to sew," Mary said. "And I can teach music."

"You? Teach?"

Kitty leapt to her feet. "We wouldn't even be talking about this if Mr Bingley had done what everyone thought he would and married Jane!"

The accusation was sharp enough to pierce even Jane's enduring composure. Her face

turned crimson as she glanced at Elizabeth in mute appeal.

“That is enough, Kitty,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We are not in this situation because of Mr Bingley. We must focus on what we can do, not rail against what others have or have not done.”

“Oh, it is easy for you to say,” Kitty snapped. “But if Mr Bingley—”

“Kitty, stop.” Jane’s voice, soft but determined, silenced her. Jane turned her gaze to her younger sister, and for a moment her own quiet heartbreak was apparent in her eyes. “You cannot speak of him that way. Whatever happened was his own decision, and we must accept it for what it is.” Her voice faltered slightly, but she continued. “We cannot begrudge him his freedom to choose his path, even if it meant diverging from ours.”

Kitty slumped back onto the sofa, arms folded tight against her chest, her lower lip quivering.

Mary, pragmatic as ever, added her opinion. “This only proves what I have said all along—that love is entirely unreliable, driven more by whim than reason. One cannot depend upon it for stability or security. Far better to trust in one’s own rational mind than in such fleeting fancies.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. Her sister often read romance novels but she’d never expressed much desire for a romance of her own, but this assessment was rather more surprising than Elizabeth had expected. “That is a rather bleak perspective, Mary, even for you.”

“It is not bleak, it is practical.” Mary adjusted her spectacles, her tone as dispassionate as always. “Had we placed our confidence in something more steadfast, we might not find ourselves so precariously balanced between hope and despair. We

might, for instance, already have skills we could use to gain employment. As it is, we have accomplishments meant for wives. I doubt anyone will want to take us on for our skills in watercolouring and embroidery.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to reply, but she was interrupted by the sound of hurried footsteps in the hallway. The door flew open, and Lydia burst in, her face glowing with her usual air of mischief and disregard for decorum.

“Wait until you hear!” she exclaimed, waving a crumpled newspaper in the air. “It is all the talk in The Post ! Mr Darcy is engaged!”

Elizabeth’s heart gave an unaccountable lurch. Surely Lydia had misunderstood. “Engaged?”

“To whom?” Jane asked, her voice filled more with polite interest than genuine curiosity. The entire family was unaware of the proposal, and Elizabeth preferred it that way.

“Who else but that sickly little mouse he calls his cousin? Anne de Bourgh!” Lydia settled herself on the sofa beside Kitty and dropped the paper onto the table. “Did you not tell us she was dreadfully boring, Kitty?”

“She was rather dull, with all the charm of a wet blanket,” Kitty said with a giggle.

“Kitty,” Jane chastised her. “Do not speak so unkindly about someone.”

“Well, she is correct,” Lydia added. “I don’t see why Lady Catherine thinks it is such a triumph. What a boring couple they’ll make—though they deserve each other, I suppose.”

“A triumph, what do you mean?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, the announcement reads as though it is the grandest thing to ever have happened.”

Elizabeth reached for the newspaper, her pulse thrumming in her ears as her eyes scanned the page. When she found the announcement, the words seemed to leap off the page.

It is with great pleasure that we announce the forthcoming union of Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, Derbyshire, to Miss Anne de Bourgh of Rosings Park, Kent. The nuptials are....

The room seemed to tilt slightly, the text blurring for a moment before coming back into focus. Elizabeth read the words again, then again, as if she could somehow make them say something different. However the stark proclamation remained, Mr Darcy was to be wed. Why did this news unsettle her so?

“Well, that will be a grand affair,” Jane said and shook her head. “I am surprised, Mr Bingley told me Lady Catherine wished for such a match, but I did not think Mr Darcy had designs on his cousin.”

“I suppose he never was someone who enjoyed being personable and sharing his thoughts. I always assumed he was a stick in the mud. And this proves that Mr Darcy is every bit as stiff and dreadful as I thought. Can you imagine marrying him?” Lydia shuddered theatrically. “I can still remember how grouchy he was at the Netherfield ball.”

“No one asked for your opinion, Lydia,” Elizabeth said tersely, folding the newspaper and setting it back on the table.

“Oh, Lizzy, don’t scowl so,” Lydia retorted, unbothered. “I’m sure you agree with me. Isn’t he just the most dreadful bore? You should know better than us, you had to

endure his company at Rosings as well. Pray, did you observe any affection between them or is it just a match of convenience?"

Elizabeth felt the attention of her sisters upon her, and she forced her lips into a tight smile. "I am neither here nor there on the subject of Mr Darcy and while I saw him on occasion at Rosings, I have no insight into the arrangement," she said, her voice deliberately light. "And in any case, his engagement matters not to us."

"Of course it doesn't matter," Lydia said breezily, getting to her feet. "Still, I'm right, aren't I? He is a bore. It is such a shame Jane and Mr Bingley did not end up married, for I dare say it would have been a marvellous wedding. The pair of them might be dreadfully dull but I am certain the food would have been otherworldly. And the number of titled gentlemen there—I would have found a rich husband with ease."

"You only ever think of yourself," Mary said and Lydia rounded on her.

"Someone must. Especially given the current situation," she said and then flounced out of the room, leaving behind an oppressive quiet.

Elizabeth smoothed her gown over her knees, staring down at the fabric. Mr Darcy, engaged. Her breath felt tight in her chest, her thoughts cascading into a disordered whirl. What troubled her most wasn't that he was promised to Anne—it was the sharp sting she felt at that knowledge.

Only weeks ago, she had turned him down, and with great certainty. She had convinced herself that he deserved her rejection, both for his pride and his role in Jane's heartbreak. Not to mention his actions against poor Mr Wickham. But that certainty seemed to waver now, unsettled by the memory of his impassioned words and the intensity in his eyes.

If his feelings for her had been as strong as he claimed, how could he have turned so

quickly to another? Had she been mistaken about the sincerity of his proposal? And why, when she had every reason to dismiss him, did she find herself pierced by the thought of him with another woman?

“Lizzy?” Jane’s soft voice broke through her thoughts.

Elizabeth looked up, startled. Jane’s face was kind but concerned. “You seem troubled.”

“I am only tired, Jane,” Elizabeth replied with a wan smile. “Nothing more.”

But as the conversation dissolved and the sisters each retreated into their private thoughts, Elizabeth slipped quietly from the room. As she wandered the grounds of Longbourn, she tried to make sense of the turmoil that churned inside her.

The announcement shouldn’t matter, she told herself, over and over. And yet, no matter how she framed it, the thought of Mr Darcy bound to someone else lingered in her mind like a shadow, too solid to be ignored.

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Darcy

Darcy bolted out of Brooks frazzled, for he had barely sat down for a fifth of whiskey when he had been set upon by not one but two different acquaintances whose names he barely remembered, but who had wished to give him their heartfelt congratulations on his impending wedding to his cousin.

This had been a recurring theme over the last week and a half, wherever he went, be it for a stroll in the park, or a meal out, or even to church. Last Sunday, people were congratulating him on a wedding he had never agreed to.

Not even at his gentleman's club was he safe from reminders of his upcoming wedding. He'd thought of possible solutions for the situation—claiming that the newspaper had made a mistake had been at the top of his list. Alas, his aunt had sent similar announcements to *The Times*, *The Morning Post*, and *The Courier*. There was no way to claim that they had all been mistaken.

He would have had to tell all of the ton that his aunt had schemed behind his back.

He had considered it, but he knew that would be a scandal too far. The entire family would be talked about. Society liked nothing better than a scandal, and Darcy knew he could not be the one to give it to them. It would affect not only his aunt—who would be humiliated—but Anne and possibly the entire Fitzwilliam side of his family.

Of course, his aunt must have known he would not do this to his own flesh and blood, and thus felt safe in her manipulations

Vexed, he made his way along St James Street but then paused. Among the congratulations and well-wishes he had received not only in person, but in writing, had been a note from Bingley, asking him to stop at Grosvenor House so that they might take a drink together and talk, for it had been a few weeks since they had had a proper conversation.

Darcy had not seen his friend since the fateful visit to Rosings and his disastrous proposal. In truth he had been avoiding him, not just because he didn't wish to burden Bingley with his current situation, but also because he knew if he saw his friend, he'd have to tell him about Kent and his conversation with Elizabeth Bennet—and admit what he'd done.

He'd have to confess that he had made a mistake with regard to Jane Bennet, and Darcy genuinely feared Bingley might never forgive him. Still, such pride had to come to an end.

Besides, the most selfish part of him needed to talk to his friend. To gain his advice. How ironic that was. Usually, Darcy considered himself the one who gave advice, not the one to receive it. However, he had been a prisoner of his own racing thoughts for far too long. He had to talk to someone. And then, once he had unburdened himself he hoped that Bingley could forgive him.

He made a turn and hastened towards Grosvenor Square. Once there, he knocked and was properly admitted by Hazelton, the Hurst's butler.

He was shown into the parlour. Bingley joined him momentarily. Immediately, he saw that his worst fears had been right. Bingley looked as though he had not slept well in weeks, the dark circles under his eyes bore witness to this. His face also looked somewhat gaunter than Darcy was used to, although the same amiable smile played around his lips.

“Darcy, as I live and breathe! It has been an age and a half since I last saw you! Say, how has Rosings treated you?” He waved his hand as he walked to the sideboard, picked up two glasses and poured whiskey without asking.

“Faith, it was a disaster,” Darcy said and his friend nodded sympathetically.

“Well, I can imagine. I have seen the announcement. I daresay, I suspect a scheme by your dear aunt?”

“Aunt Catherine has taken it upon herself to force a match neither myself nor Anne desire. I left Rosings after making it quite clear to her that I did not wish to wed. And not two days later, there is an announcement of our impending nuptials.”

Bingley handed him the drink, one eyebrow raised. “You said Anne does not wish it either? You spoke to her on the matter?”

“I had to. I was quite blunt with my aunt regarding my feelings towards Anne, and then I felt it necessary to explain to Anne. I did not want to hurt her feelings. To my surprise, I discovered that she already has an admirer, and he is someone she is fond of as well.”

Bingley crossed one leg over the other, head slightly dipped to the side.

“And who, pray, might that be?”

Darcy quickly made a report on what had transpired, and Bingley raised his eyebrows even higher.

“Richard and Miss de Bourgh? A curious match though, I suppose it makes sense. They are both beset upon by parents who are very strong-minded. Your Uncle Matlock likes things done his way too, doesn’t he?”

Darcy nodded. “Indeed. But it seems my aunt is determined to make a match out of Anne and me. This campaign, announcing that we are engaged is a last-ditch effort on her part, I am sure. And it is increasingly difficult to combat. Half of London have already congratulated me on my upcoming wedding.”

“I see. Well, what do you intend to do?” Bingley asked. “You can’t outright deny it. It would be a scandal.”

“Indeed. It would. I wrote to my aunt and told her that no matter what, I will not marry Anne. I will refuse. Naturally, if I do refuse, there will be a scandal as well. No matter what I do, there will be a scandal of some sort.” He groaned and took another sip.

“So what will you do? I assume marrying her is out of the question?”

“Of course it is, for both our sakes. I intend to see my uncle, Lord Matlock. I do not think there is any other way. I will need him to see sense and speak to my aunt. It is awkward, because I cannot tell him that it is not only I who does not wish for this wedding.”

“He does not know about Richard’s designs on Anne?” Bingley asked.

“He does not. Richard has not spoken to him yet. In fact, I have not spoken to Richard since Anne told me about him.”

“What an intricate web,” Bingley said. “It is never easy, is it? Love, marriage—when we were young, we thought it was all so simple. We would meet someone we liked, marry them, defy our parents’ convention if they did not agree with our choices and live happily ever after,” he scoffed, and took a gulp of his drink. Darcy felt a shift in the air as the conversation moved away from his troubles to Bingley’s.

Darcy drank the rest of his whiskey and set the glass down. Only then did he feel strong and courageous enough to admit to his own wrongdoing.

“Speaking of love and such, Bingley, I fear I have made a mistake.”

“You are admitting to a mistake?” Bingley chuckled. “I think I can count on one hand how often that has happened. And I will not even need all of my fingers.”

His friend’s words stung a little, but he also knew that they held the truth.

“Indeed, it is no laughing matter, my friend. You see, I think the advice I gave you along with your sisters and brother-in-law was quite wrong.”

Bingley sat up straight, his hands crawling around the edge of his seat. “You mean regarding Jane?”

“Yes. I know I called her cold and calculating. But I have since spoken to several people who know her, and it appears that I was wrong. It seems her feelings for you were genuine. It was only her reserved character that led me to believe otherwise. I was worried for you and believed I was doing you a favour but now it appears perhaps I was wrong and robbed you of a chance at happiness.”

Bingley wetted his lips and cleared his throat before speaking in a more serious manner than was usual for him.

“It was not your interpretation of Jane’s demeanour that made me choose to walk away,” Bingley said to his surprise. “It was the way that the four of you convinced me that it would be detrimental for myself and my future to be connected to her family. Indeed, I do recall my brother-in-law Hurst saying that would also be bad for Jane, because everybody would think that she set her cap on me only for my money. If there was already gossip circulating stating that she did not truly care for me, then

our marriage would always be dogged by these rumours. It would hurt her. And I didn't want to do that. Although now, I think I was mistaken. I should not have listened to anybody, I should have trusted my heart. I knew in my heart that Jane loved me, as I loved her. As I still love her. I allowed myself to be influenced because I am weak of character."

Darcy wanted to tell him that this was not so, but he knew that would be doing his friend a disservice. For the truth was Bingley was easily influenced. And he always had been. And if Darcy was perfectly honest, he had taken advantage of his friend's gullibility on occasions. Never in a malicious way, of course, but if he thought that Bingley was on the wrong path regarding a matter or another, he knew that he could easily influence him. However, this had always been done for his friend's benefit, at least that's what he had always believed. Such as in this instance. Yet he'd been wrong.

"I feel it is my responsibility. I have always looked out for you. But I gave you poor counsel in this case, and for that, I am sorry. I would encourage you to speak to her. To see if perhaps you could reconcile. I know in these days, especially, she will need someone who genuinely cares for her by her side."

"I do not think that she would want me," Bingley said sounding morose. "Indeed, I cannot imagine that she would..." He paused and looked up at Darcy. "What do you mean, 'in times like these'? Why now? Has something happened to Jane?" The panic that gripped his voice was obvious and spoke of the deep care he had for the young woman.

"You have not heard?" Darcy said.

"Heard what? Do not keep me in suspense. What has happened, Darcy?"

Darcy took a deep breath. "Mr Bennet had an accident some weeks ago. I heard of it

from Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who received a letter while at Rosings Park. I am told it was apoplexy and the situation is quite dire. Collins has gone to Longbourn to—”

Bingley slammed his open palm onto the arm of his chair. “That weasel! I should have known that he would immediately take advantage of such a situation. Goodness gracious. Poor Jane. She must be beside herself. I wish I could help. I wish there was something I could do... Jane... That dreadful man, he will most certainly take advantage of the family if he can. We cannot allow that to happen.”

“Of course not,” Darcy said. “But one thing after the other. Has she returned home to Longbourn? Or do you believe she might still be with her relatives here?”

“I was unaware Jane was in Town at all,” Bingley said, his voice pained. “If I had known, I would have called on her.”

“She was visiting her aunt and uncle in Cheapside. Miss Elizabeth mentioned it once.”

“I see. Well, then perhaps we ought to call on her there? See if she is still there and if not, the Gardiners may be able to assist us. I wonder how Mr Bennet is,” Bingley said. Darcy noticed that he appeared more vibrant now that he had decided to try and rectify things with Jane Bennet.

“The Gardiners will know. They can give us what news there is. And perhaps they can facilitate communication between the two of you. If you like,” Darcy said.

Bingley nodded. “Indeed, I would like it. I have thought of her often these past few weeks and I regret ever letting her go. Darcy, it is as though I am missing a part of myself and now knowing that she is going through such difficulty without me there to support her, makes me feel dreadful. Though I am unsure if she will speak to me after what I have done.”

“If what I was told is correct, she was as fond of you as you of her, and if that is so, I must surmise she still cares for you. In any case, we need to find out. If she is at her uncle’s home, you can talk to her and if not, at least we can find out the current status of the Bennet family.”

Bingley rose, but then paused. “I know why I care so much, but what of you, old friend? What is your stake in all of this? Simply guilt over your role?”

Darcy pondered telling his friend the truth, but he decided against it. He did not need to know about this humiliating turn of events. Instead he cleared his throat and managed to conjure up something akin to the truth.

“I got to know Miss Elizabeth Bennet and her sister Miss Catherine when they stayed at Rosings Park and I wish to know how they fare,” he said.

This appeared to satisfy Bingley who then rang the bell for his man who swiftly brought around their coats and top hats.

Arriving at the Gardiners’ house, Darcy and Bingley were greeted by a cheerful maid who showed them to the parlour and then disappeared to fetch Mrs Gardiner.

As they were settled into the chairs in the parlour, the clamour of Cheapside receded, though faint echoes of its bustling life seeped in through the closed windows.

Darcy had not been to this part of town in some years. The neighbourhood bore a character of industrious vigour, with its narrow cobblestone streets flanked by buildings of varying quality. Modest shops displayed goods in crowded windows, from ribbons and silks to cheeses and bread, while hawkers called out their wares.

It was not a setting Darcy frequently traversed, its earthy vitality a stark contrast to the rarefied order of Mayfair or Grosvenor Square. Yet, he found himself taking note of it now, reflecting on the proximity of such lively commerce to Elizabeth Bennet's relatives. It felt odd to think of her here, in this home, to think that she had been in this space he now occupied, perhaps even sat on this same chair.

For a brief moment, he imagined her in this very parlour, laughing with her sisters, and a smile flashed across his face.

Why was he smiling? She'd turned him down in a most rude fashion. Yes, she'd had her reasons and she had been misled by Wickham, but still... She'd told him how little she cared for him and yet here he was, looking to find out how her family—and by extension she—was faring.

When Mrs Gardiner finally entered, her wearied face betrayed sleepless nights and unrelenting care. As she entered the parlour, her expression lightened with polite curiosity. Upon seeing the two gentlemen rise to greet her, she inclined her head in a measured but warm gesture.

"Mr Bingley," she began, her voice steady but kind. "It is good to see you again."

Darcy frowned for he had not been aware that the two had crossed paths before. Bingley, likewise, appeared puzzled but Mrs Gardiner quickly reminded him.

"We met one afternoon at Longbourn. You and my niece were about to leave for a walk when my husband and I arrived. I do not blame you for not remembering, it was but a brief interaction."

"Of course, Bingley said in his most affable tone. "I do recall. Your children were with you. Jane spoke of them on our walk. She much adores them."

“As they do her,” she said with a smile before turning to Darcy.

“I do not think we have had the pleasure, Mr Darcy,” she said. “Although of course I would recognise you anywhere. You look so much like your father it is uncanny.”

“You knew my father?” he asked, surprised to hear this. He did not know much about the Gardiners, other than what Elizabeth and her sister had shared while at Rosings and the bits and pieces he’d picked up during his time at Netherfield.

“My father was rector at Lambton many years ago, and your parents were always exceedingly generous to us.”

“Are you Mr Whitby’s daughter?”

She smiled broadly. “Indeed, Marjory Whitby is my maiden name.”

Darcy’s posture straightened, his guarded expression softening slightly. “I recall my father speaking highly of your father, Mrs Gardiner,” he replied. “Your family’s connection to Lambton is well known to me. My mother often mentioned your father’s diligence and wisdom in his work, and she considered his guidance invaluable to the community.”

A faint, fond smile flickered across Mrs Gardiner’s face. “I always held your mother in the highest regard. Lady Anne’s kindness was unmatched, and she set a standard of hospitality and grace that I have never forgotten. Pemberley was—indeed, I am sure, still is—a place of exceptional character under your care, Mr Darcy.”

Darcy inclined his head, feeling both humbled and uneasy at the mention of his late parents. “Thank you, Mrs Gardiner. Their legacy has always been my highest responsibility.”

Mrs Gardiner looked at him with quiet approval, the shared remembrance bringing a moment of thoughtful silence. “I confess,” she continued, “it is rather remarkable to find myself meeting you here, so many years later and so far from Derbyshire. But some connections, I suppose, endure across time and distance. Now, pray, what brings you here?”

Darcy looked at Bingley who had his hands curled into fists.

“We came to enquire after Mr Bennet’s health and the family in general. We were under the impression his eldest daughter, Miss Bennet, was here. Is she still?”

Her smile faltered. “Jane has already returned to Longbourn. It has been some weeks now, although she writes as does Elizabeth. I am afraid Mr Bennet is gravely ill. The physicians have done what they can, but...”

She stopped, drawing a slow, shaking breath. The silence that followed seemed heavy with unspoken fears. Darcy frowned, swallowing a growing unease. Bingley, his face unusually grave, murmured soft condolences, while Mrs Gardiner clasped her hands in her lap as if to steady herself.

“I understand the challenges must be immense,” Darcy said after a moment. “If there is any way we might be of service—anything at all—please say so.”

Her eyes flickered with uncertainty, and she hesitated. “You are very kind to offer, sir, but the situation is complex. There are many factors to consider.”

Bingley interjected gently, his concern evident. “Perhaps some assistance can be rendered? I—”

“Mr Collins has already interposed himself,” Mrs Gardiner interrupted with evident reluctance, “and has offered his assistance to the family. He insists he is acting out of

duty, but I fear his presence has brought more strain than comfort I am afraid.”

At this, Darcy stiffened. Collins was precisely the sort of officious fool who would exacerbate rather than alleviate a crisis. Bingley frowned, sharing his friend’s unease.

“Excuse me if I am blunt but I wish Mr Collins would leave them in peace,” Mrs Gardiner admitted, her quiet exasperation escaping in a sigh. “With Mr Bennet so unwell and Mrs Bennet quite overcome, his presence serves only to complicate things. He is...” She paused, evidently struggling for a delicate term. “...rather insistent in all matters.”

Darcy’s disapproval deepened, and though he did not speak, Mrs Gardiner seemed to intuit the direction of his thoughts.

“The estate is entailed upon him, is that correct?” Bingley asked.

“Indeed. It is a shame my sister-in-law and her husband never had any sons, or that Mr Bennet managed to break the entailment, but I am afraid such is life.”

Darcy pressed his lips together. If Elizabeth had accepted his proposal—and perhaps if he had made his proposal in a manner that was less insulting to her family—he could have helped. None of this needed to have happened.

His past proposal to Elizabeth had been unequivocally refused, and their ensuing interactions had left him with little certainty about her regard. Yet the dire circumstances of the Bennet family seemed to demand action, regardless of the personal risks involved.

“I may be able to help when it comes to Mr Collins. He and my aunt are close, and I know him somewhat. I might be able to persuade him to leave Longbourn for the time being. A letter informing him he is needed at Rosings ought to suffice.”

Mrs Gardiner looked at him with a mixture of gratitude and concern. “You are a man of honour,” she said softly. “If there is hope for their protection, perhaps you are the one who can secure it. At least for the time being. However, if my brother-in-law should fail to recover, or worse still, then I do not think such a reprieve will last long.”

“I had a mind to contact Ja... Miss Bennet. Through the proper channels of course. I wondered, would you be able to write to her and let her know that I am available, should she wish to ... that is to...” Bingley looked at his hands as his words trailed off.

Darcy felt a wave of sympathy for his friend, followed by another of pure guilt for he knew he had caused all of this.

“I shall write to her and tell her you called and enquired after her,” Mrs Gardiner said, putting Bingley out of his misery. “As for your offer regarding Mr Collins, if you could be of assistance, that would be helpful. The situation is rather dire I am afraid. A physician with some experience with apoplexy is coming soon and we hope he can help, but there are of course other considerations connected to that.”

Financial considerations, Darcy understood at once. But of course Mrs Gardiner could not say this out loud. Still, it was understood.

Darcy was not sure what else he could do beyond inspiring Collins to depart, but he vowed to think of something. There had to be some sort of assistance that could be rendered. Perhaps between he and Bingley they could offer a loan—but would the Bennets take it from them after everything that happened?

It did not appear as if Elizabeth had shared with Mrs Gardiner what transpired between them, but then again, she surely had other matters on her mind. But the rest of the family? Did they know what he'd said about them? And if they did, would they

be willing to accept his help?

As they left the Gardiner residence and returned to their carriage, Darcy's mind churned with thoughts. His sense of duty, intertwined with an undeniable regard for Elizabeth, urged him forward. Even so, he could not ignore the immense challenges of the path he had chosen. Elizabeth's independence, her disdain for his charity, and her fierce loyalty to her family would make this undertaking no simple task.

He had been about to get into the carriage when Mrs Gardiner called after them. Darcy looked back, expecting her to have thought of something else related to her nieces but alas, it was not that at all.

"I almost forgot to give you my sincere congratulations on your impending nuptials, Mr Darcy."

His stomach dropped. This again.

"Thank you," he said and turned to leave. He had to take care of this inconvenience, sooner rather than later. A glance at his pocket watch revealed it was almost time to meet with his uncle. Perhaps Lord Matlock would be able to talk sense into his sister and get rid of at least one issue for Darcy, for as it was, things were piling up and he could not wait to be done with this troublesome situation.

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Darcy

“William, I do not know why you act so. Anne is not such a terrible match. And she is a respectable young lady, yes, she is sickly and she’s getting on a bit in years, but she is lovely. Handsome to look at when she makes an effort. Well accomplished. You could do worse.”

“I do not doubt my cousin’s accomplishments or virtues, Uncle,” Darcy said, a little exasperated now. “But that does not mean I wish to marry her. She does not wish to marry me either,” he said, though he said this carefully, not wanting to give up Richard and Anne’s secret.

“Does she think she can do better?” said Uncle Matlock, and Darcy swallowed hard.

“It is not a matter of her thinking she can do better. It is a matter of our wishes not being respected. We do not wish to marry one another. It is as simple as that. Uncle, please speak to Aunt Catherine. Make her see sense.”

“And how, pray, do you propose I do that? Even if I could speak to her—and she would listen to me, which she never does—how do you propose we rid ourselves of the scandal in the making?”

“Surely you know people who—”

“Know people who can do what? Travel through time and undo the announcement,” Uncle Matlock said.

“No,” Darcy said. “Someone who might take the blame for it. Perhaps some—”

“You’d have me and your aunt get some poor fool to take the blame for the announcements? For there were several as you know.”

“No, Uncle. I do not wish to make a...” he ran a hand through his hair, exasperated now. “I wish for you to make my aunt understand this was and is a mistake and make amends for her actions. We could simply not speak on the matter again and quietly spread the rumour that the engagement ended. In time, people will forget.”

“Nephew, do not be ridiculous. A broken engagement is almost as bad for your reputation as no engagement at all. And for Anne? To be seen as someone who cannot even get her own cousin down the aisle? No. Nobody would have her after that. Darcy, why do you not simply marry her? After all, you are seven-and-twenty. Do you not want an heir? Do you not want a wife and family?”

He took a deep breath. Of course, he wanted a family. He wanted an heir. He wanted to get married. Unfortunately, the woman he had wanted to marry had rejected him most severely, and he could not picture himself with anyone else despite this. As for Anne—he could not see it. He would not see it. He adored Anne but as a cousin, and a friend—not as a potential wife.

“I do not wish it,” Darcy said, but it came out sounding weak.

“Do not wish it? Come now, William. Do not be foolish. What you wish and do not wish may not matter. The announcement is made, so you might as well make it a reality. After all, it isn’t as though you are engaged to somebody else, are you?” He chuckled, as though he already knew the answer, and Darcy forced a smile. He wasn’t going to get anywhere with his uncle. That much was clear.

And yet, he looked at the man, for suddenly, he had an idea. His earlier conversation

with Mrs Gardiner, the argument with Elizabeth, and the subsequent realisations, still weighed heavily upon him. The family was looking financial ruin in the face, for he knew well how much specialist physicians could cost. When his mother took ill, his father had physicians brought in from Scotland, Ireland, and even one from Spain. The cost had been astronomical, but they'd had the funds to afford it. The Bennets did not.

And should the worst happen, the women were entirely exposed to Collins' good will.

Yes, indeed. He knew what would happen and he could not allow it to. In that moment, he made up his mind.

He would go to Longbourn and speak to Elizabeth Bennet. But it would not only be in order to help rid the young woman of her insufferable cousin for the time being. No. He would make the situation change permanently. If she agreed,

He would ask her once more to marry him. Although this time, it wouldn't be out of love. It would be out of necessity—not just for him, but for her.

If she agreed, then they would all win. He would be rid of the arrangement with Anne, his aunt could save face, and Anne would be free to be with Richard. And Elizabeth Bennet would have the money she needed to help her father.

This may have sounded quite calculated, but in addition to the practical matters, Darcy thought that this situation might have other positive outcomes. Indeed, if Elizabeth married him, he could show her the man he truly was capable of being. A good man. A man falsely accused of being wicked by a man more wicked than Darcy had words for.

Perhaps in time, she would see that she had been wrong about him, just as he had

been wrong about her sister. He now understood that he had been wrong. That guilt weighed on him. He had brought misery upon Bingley, upon Jane Bennet, and by extension, the family. He had to make up for that, but if there could be a way where he too could benefit, why not? He would be reluctant, of course.

He did not want her to feel as though he were tricking her into anything. And truly, he wasn't. He continued to have romantic feelings for her, despite her scorn of him. But that wasn't so much why. He wanted to marry her to prove himself. And to help those he had wronged.

No, it would be the best option for all of them. He would speak to her. If she rejected him again, then so be it. But if she accepted, then perhaps there would be another chance for him to prove to her what sort of man he really was.

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Elizabeth

The drawing room at Longbourn was modestly furnished but warm, the light from the soft evening sun filtering through the windows. Mrs Bennet paced anxiously, wringing her hands, while Jane and Elizabeth sat by the hearth. Elizabeth appeared composed but observant, while Jane looked pale, her brow furrowed. Opposite them sat Mr Eversham, a specialist of advancing years with a deliberate and thoughtful manner. He had come from Scotland to tend to a patient and, thanks to Uncle Gardiner, had agreed to examine Mr Bennet. Now, they awaited his verdict.

He adjusted his glasses before speaking.

“Well? What can be done, Mr Eversham? Can you heal him? Make him as he was?” Mrs Bennet asked, her voice rife with anxiety.

“Mrs Bennet, I understand your distress,” Mr Eversham said calmly, “but apoplexy and the resulting paralysis are grave matters. Recovery cannot be assured, but there are methods of treatment that may provide some relief. However, they require diligence and patience.”

Jane leaned forward, her voice soft but steady. “What treatments might those be, Mr Eversham?”

Mr Eversham folded his hands together and nodded thoughtfully. “Bloodletting is often employed to reduce the pressure upon the brain, though in cases such as your father’s, where a previous attempt has been made, it must be considered carefully. Leeches applied behind the ears or to the temples can sometimes assist in drawing out

excess humours.”

Mrs Bennet gasped, sinking into a chair and clutching her handkerchief. “Leeches! Good heavens! Oh, my poor Mr Bennet!”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows arched. “The town surgeon has already used leeches once, and it did not work. Is there nothing more that can be done?”

“Treatments such as bloodletting or leeches can be repeated with some regularity. There are additional measures,” Mr Eversham continued. “The application of mustard plasters and warm poultices to the limbs may encourage circulation. Friction rubs with stimulating oils, such as rosemary or camphor, have been used to restore sensation and movement in affected limbs. Gentle manipulation of the muscles may, in time, provide some benefit.”

Jane’s expression remained steady. “Is there any hope that he might regain the ability to walk?”

“It is difficult to say,” Mr Eversham admitted. “Some patients do regain partial mobility if attended with care and perseverance. The key is to maintain warmth, avoid idleness of the limbs, and ensure that he is not left to languish in bed too long, lest his strength waste away.”

Mrs Bennet moaned, throwing her hands up in despair. “Mustard plasters, leeches, bloodletting, rubbing the limbs—such barbarity! Elizabeth, Jane, I cannot bear it!”

Mr Eversham allowed himself a small smile. “I assure you, Mrs Bennet, these are the most trusted treatments of our time.”

“What of galvanism? I have heard about it, is it effective?” Jane asked.

“Galvanism?” Elizabeth’s tone sharpened, though curiosity gleamed in her eyes.

“Galvanism is a most novel and ingenious treatment, though its efficacy remains uncertain,” the physician said. “Galvani pioneered the practice in animals and a fellow Italian named Volta is experimenting with it. I do not advise it. Hardly any physician practices it.”

“Pray, what is it?” Mrs Bennet asked. “We can leave no stone unturned.”

“Mrs Bennet, I must advise against it. In essence, it is the application of a mild electrical current to the affected muscles has been trialled in some cases. The theory is that it may restore function to the limbs.”

Mrs Bennet paled as if it had not been her who’d demanded the treatment’s details. “Shocking my poor husband? Oh, I will not hear of it!”

Elizabeth ignored her mother’s protests and turned back to Mr Eversham. “And has this method seen success?”

“There are accounts of minor improvements, though not in all cases,” he admitted. “It remains an uncertain treatment. The best success has been seen when physicians and nurses have been on hand regularly. One of the Prince Regent’s cousins had a case in the family and the Prince Regent paid for such treatments, and around the clock care. The relation fully recovered, or almost. But the chap may have recovered without treatment, there is no way of knowing.”

At what cost? Elizabeth wondered. They did not have the purse the Prince Regent did, after all.

Jane took her mother’s hand, her quiet resolve steadying them both. “We will consider all options carefully. Would you be willing to write down an estimate of

what it might cost to get the very best treatment, as well as other options?”

Mr Eversham rose, inclining his head solemnly. “I shall leave you to your deliberations. Should you wish to proceed with any of these treatments, please send word. I will return on the morrow to discuss the best path forward and am happy to make referrals to any practitioner you wish.”

As he departed, Elizabeth turned to her sister, her expression both weary and resolute. “Jane, these treatments may not promise certainty, but we owe it to Papa to explore every possibility.”

Jane nodded. “Yes, Lizzy. Whatever it takes, we must do what we can.”

Elizabeth appeared ready to respond when a burst of voices from outside drew her attention. Rising, she moved towards the window and glanced out.

“It seems Mr Collins is being quite thoroughly detained,” Elizabeth remarked, observing her cousin with her younger sisters. She caught fragments of conversation and watched as Mr Collins crossed his arms and shook his head in Lydia’s direction.

Mrs Bennet paused her lamentations. “What’s that, Lizzy? Who is Mr Collins speaking to?”

“Mary, Kitty, and Lydia,” Elizabeth replied, peering through the curtain. “Lydia appears to be pleading her case to attend yet another ball. Mr Collins, in turn, does not seem agreeable.”

Through the slightly open window, Lydia’s voice rang clear. “Mr Collins, you are not our father! It is simply unreasonable! Why, any young lady of sense would know the importance of such engagements!”

Mr Collins's reply was equally distinct. "My dear cousin, your father's absence does not mean I will condone unseemly conduct..."

Mary's calm voice interjected, "Lydia, please, this insistence on frivolities is unbecoming."

Kitty's stammering voice added, "Oh, but Mr Collins, do consider how splendid it would be and such a distraction..."

Another exasperated exclamation from Lydia was enough to draw Elizabeth back from the window, shaking her head with a smirk.

"It appears, Mama, that Mr Collins is quite determined to impose his moral authority, despite Lydia's best efforts to defy it. She has, unsurprisingly, informed him he is not her father."

Mrs Bennet's despair surged anew. "Oh, that girl will be the ruin of us all!" she wailed. "She will turn him against us, and then we will all be without house or home, put out on the streets. My nerves, Lizzy! Jane! My nerves!"

"Mother, we will not be put out on the streets. We have Aunt and Uncle Phillips and the Gardiners. Do not fret."

But fret their mother would, and Elizabeth knew that no matter the cost of her father's treatment, it would do nothing to soothe her mother's nerves.

Later that afternoon, as Elizabeth walked along the quiet lanes of Meryton, her thoughts were heavy. The uncertainty of her father's health plagued her mind, and so did the dismal feeling of helplessness. She had returned from the tense atmosphere of

Longbourn earlier, her mind reeling with grim realities.

The letter from Mr Eversham had arrived that afternoon as promised and contained within it a careful summary of treatment options and their associated costs. He noted that traditional remedies could continue, though with limited efficacy, alongside his observation that electrical stimulation might prove more promising. The procedure would require a specialist from Scotland who had experience with apoplexy, a physician of great reputation but significant expense. The specialist would need to remain in residence for several weeks, adding to the costs.

Elizabeth had read the sums with mounting dread. Mr Eversham estimated that the best physician's treatments, travel expenses, and necessary accommodations would amount to nearly three hundred pounds to cover a physician who could exclusively care for Mr Bennet, along with two assistants to take care of his needs, one for the day and one for the night—a sum so immense for her family that she could scarcely comprehend how they might gather it. Longbourn, already strained with debts, could not possibly stretch to accommodate this additional burden. However, this was the very best treatment and the treatment that might allow them to properly help their father recover his health. There were much cheaper options, especially when they continued to provide the nursing care themselves and worked with the local surgeon—but their father's chances of recovery were low.

As she mulled over the figures, a deeper ache settled in her chest. If only her family's circumstances were less precarious. If only her father had not delayed so long in discussing Longbourn's inheritance. What pained her most was her own utter inability to help, standing helpless while they tried to scrape together a solution.

Once again, her thoughts slipped unbidden to Mr Darcy. She recalled that day in Kent as vividly as if it had been yesterday—the sharpness of his words, the intensity of his eyes as he declared his affection.

If she had accepted him, her life could be so different now. There would be no sleepless nights fretting over money, no hopeless meetings with physicians tallying sums beyond their reach. Instead, she would be settled, perhaps even proud, as the wife of a man whose fortune alone could shield her family from any number of storms.

The thought twisted her insides. Foolish! Such vanity and bitterness now, after all that had passed between them. Mr Darcy had been insufferable, and she would have been miserable. His arrogance, his disdain for her connections—they could never be reconciled. Hadn't he insulted her entire family? Insisted on Jane's unsuitability for Mr Bingley?

"No," she murmured aloud, shaking her head, her steps faltering on the shaded path. A rush of heat stung her eyes, and she furiously brushed away tears that began to form. How could she even think of him now, much less imagine a life in which she had accepted him? He was proud, overbearing, impossible.

And yet, somewhere deep within, a nagging sense of regret stirred. Could things have turned out differently? Would she have had the strength to temper his arrogance if she had acted differently?

The thought offered no comfort—only pain, like a blade pressed into a raw wound. Elizabeth straightened her back, forcing herself to keep moving forward.

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Elizabeth

5th June 1812

Elizabeth adjusted the wicker basket, which was unbearably heavy. It was beginning to press into her flesh. Beside her, Mary asked, “Do you want me to take it? We can take turns carrying the heavier basket.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I shall manage. It’s not much further, anyhow.”

Mary adjusted her grip on her own basket, which contained a lighter load of yarn and other materials, while Elizabeth carried jars of compote, milk, and eggs.

In an effort to cut down on expenditures—much of which was eaten up by treatments for her father and Mr Eversham’s fees—the Bennets had let go of the maid, keeping only Hill and the cook. Even they were working reduced hours. That left Elizabeth and her sisters to manage the shopping on their own. Usually, they would take the carriage, but Jane had taken it to accompany Lydia to the Forsters’ home. Captain Forster had kindly offered to take Lydia with him to Brighton. This had been presented as an enjoyable excursion to keep Mrs Forster company, but Elizabeth knew it for what it was—charity. Everyone knew the Bennets had fallen on hard times.

“Do you think Kitty will ever recover from not being able to go to Brighton?” Mary asked, drawing Elizabeth out of her thoughts.

“I hope so. She ought to understand. It is kind enough of the Forsters to take Lydia on

and cover all her expenses. We can't expect them to take both girls. Besides, Kitty isn't truly friends with Mrs Forster."

"That is true. I heard Mr Collins say he must soon return to Rosings. It will be a shame to lose his company," Mary said.

Elizabeth looked at Mary. Her sister had always been slightly peculiar, and she genuinely did not understand Mary's affection for their cousin.

"Mary, do you truly mean it? Do you truly see value in his being here?"

Mary shrugged. "He cares about the family, and he prays for Father diligently. We ought to be grateful."

"Oh, Mary, sometimes I think you and Jane are more alike than you realise."

"I think not," Mary replied. "Jane is hopelessly romantic. She still pines for Mr Bingley, you know? She hopes he will show up in his grand carriage and sweep us all off our feet. I am rational. We must ensure Mr Collins remains favourable towards our family. We must keep people close now. We do not know what will happen—especially if, well... especially if the worst should happen, and Mr Collins becomes master of Longbourn." Her voice hitched on the word 'master', and Elizabeth saw that her feelings ran far deeper than she wanted to admit.

"I do not think that will be necessary," Elizabeth said. "You heard that Mr Bingley called on our Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. I think that is a sign he still cares for Jane, though she does not seem inclined to accept him."

She had been more than a little surprised to hear this news from her aunt when it had arrived by letter a week ago. That Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy should arrive at Cheapside to speak to their aunt had been shocking. In a way, she'd understood that

Mr Darcy might, given he kept a home in London and he'd been present when the letter arrived. Charlotte had informed her that he'd kept abreast of the developments. This had surprised her, but perhaps her words had awakened something in him, some kind of empathy he'd lacked thus far. But for Mr Bingley to join him? That had been a true surprise.

“Nor should she. He treated her badly. To disappear as he did—it was shameful. She would be foolish to take him back.”

“Although,” Elizabeth said gently, “it would not be terrible for our family if she did.”

Mary said nothing, her expression unreadable as they walked in silence until the sound of carriage wheels against the dusty lane drew their attention.

Elizabeth turned to see a stately carriage approaching. Its polished wood gleamed in the afternoon sun, and the horses' glossy coats betrayed breeding far superior to what most local families could boast. As the carriage drew nearer, she recognised the intricate crest on the door—a design she had seen somewhere before but could not place.

When the carriage slowed to a halt and the door opened, Elizabeth hesitated, setting her basket down. She half-expected Mr Bingley to emerge, his warm, affable demeanour unmistakable. Instead, it was Mr Darcy who stepped down, cutting an imposing figure as ever.

“Mr Darcy,” Mary muttered under her breath. “What's he doing here?”

“I cannot say,” Elizabeth replied.

Mr Darcy inclined his head politely. “Miss Bennet. Miss Mary. I trust you are well.”

“Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said, struggling to mask her bewilderment. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I was on my way to Longbourn,” he explained. “May I offer you a ride? The baskets look rather burdensome.”

Elizabeth blinked. He had intended to visit Longbourn? Why? It made no sense. But then it struck her—had Mr Bingley sent him on his behalf to plead his case? That would be foolish. It was Mr Darcy, after all, who had put a stop to the courtship. Still, the situation puzzled her. Why had Mr Darcy called upon the Gardiners in the first place? She hadn’t spent much time pondering it but had arrived at one possibility—he felt guilty. And well he should. But to come all the way to Hertfordshire seemed rather strange.

“I do not think…” she began, but Mary was quicker.

“That would be lovely. These baskets are rather heavy,” she said, picking up hers again and making her way towards Mr Darcy. Elizabeth could not protest.

Mr Darcy bent over to pick up Elizabeth’s basket, and she saw the momentary strain in his eyes at the unexpected weight. Still, to his credit, he managed to carry it with apparent ease while handing her in.

The carriage’s interior was lavish, the upholstery rich velvet in shades of burgundy and gold, offset by polished mahogany panelling. Silk curtains framed the small windows, granting an illusion of privacy even as sunlight filtered through.

She took her seat beside Mary, while Mr Darcy sat with his back to the driver, as propriety dictated.

“May I ask—” Elizabeth started, but Mr Darcy spoke at the same time, enquiring

after her father. She folded her hands in her lap and motioned for him to continue.

“I do beg your pardon. I did not mean to interrupt you, but I wondered how your father is. When Bingley and I called upon your aunt she explained the situation.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together while Mary spoke up.

“He is not well. A specialist has come from Edinburgh. He examined him and suggested treatments he has had success with. We are applying the less costly ones as the very best treatment is beyond our reach.”

“Mary,” Elizabeth hissed. It wasn’t proper to discuss finances in public, especially not with a man like Mr Darcy.

“He asked,” her sister replied.

“We will manage,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We always do.”

“Of course,” Mr Darcy said. “I was sorry to hear of your father’s misfortune.”

“Is Mr Bingley coming, then?” Mary asked, and Elizabeth stared at her sister. When had Mary become so forward?

“Bingley may yet call upon the family. He did not wish to intrude during this difficult time, but he asked me to extend his best regards.”

By then, they had arrived at Longbourn, since it was only a short distance by horse and carriage. Mr Darcy exited first and handed them both down. When his hand curled around Elizabeth’s, he held her back for a moment. She looked at him, puzzled.

“I wondered if I might have a moment of your time,” he said as Mary made her way to the house. Her sister paused briefly, tilting her head slightly to one side, before turning and disappearing inside.

“I do not know what we have to discuss, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

“Believe me, there is much to be said.” He picked up the basket again and carried it to the door, leaving it for Hill, who had appeared to take it inside. He then returned to Elizabeth’s side and offered his arm. She narrowed her eyes, looked at his arm, and then at his face until he dropped it, clearing his throat awkwardly.

“There is something I need to discuss with you. Perhaps we could walk in the garden? It would be more proper.”

“As you wish, Mr Darcy,” she said, wondering what it was he wished to discuss. They entered Longbourn’s gardens together. It was peculiar to be walking with Mr Darcy again after their last unpleasant conversation.

“I have come to talk to you about a matter of great importance, and I would like you to keep an open mind to my proposition.”

Elizabeth’s shoulders stiffened. She had not cared for his last proposition, and she could not imagine this one would be any better.

“Mr Darcy,” she said. “If Mr Bingley wishes to apologise to my sister, he really ought not use an intermediary. I will be happy to tell Jane to consider Mr Bingley once more if that is what he wishes, and—”

Mr Darcy raised a hand. “Miss Bennet, it is not Bingley I am here to speak about. It is myself. For you see, since last we spoke, my circumstances have changed.”

She paused, suddenly recalling his engagement. “I heard. You are soon to be wed. Please accept my congratulations.”

“I would thank you, but I am not really engaged. You see, it was a scheme constructed by my aunt. You have met Lady Catherine, and you can judge her character. Suffice to say, neither myself nor my cousin knew about the announcement.”

Elizabeth’s breath hitched at Mr Darcy’s statement. The weight of his words settling slowly. “Am I to understand, Mr Darcy, that your aunt took it upon herself to... announce your engagement to your cousin, and yet neither of you expressed a willingness for it?”

Mr Darcy inclined his head. “That is precisely the case. Anne and I have never wished for such a union. Indeed, Anne’s heart—” He paused, adjusting the set of his shoulders as though bracing himself. “Anne’s heart has already been bestowed elsewhere.”

Elizabeth bit her tongue to suppress a comment about Lady Catherine’s presumptions. The memory of the formidable woman still loomed large in her thoughts, imperious and unrelenting. It was easy enough to imagine such schemes springing from her.

“And what, pray, has this to do with me?” Elizabeth asked coolly.

Mr Darcy straightened. His gaze was steady, calculating but also tinged with something else—a glimmer of uncertainty? “I have come to request your help, Miss Bennet. The simplest solution to this conundrum, without injuring the reputation or prospects of either party, is for me to enter into matrimony—” he paused, carefully selecting his next words, “—but not with Anne.”

Elizabeth stilled. Realisation swept over her like a cold wind, her face flushed with disbelief. “You mean to say you are here to— What? To propose marriage to me? Have you forgot how explicitly I refused your offer last time?”

Mr Darcy held up a hand, his expression softening with something resembling regret. “I remember your rejection, Miss Bennet, with perfect clarity. I assure you this is not a matter of sentiment or affection. My request is born out of necessity.”

“Necessity,” Elizabeth repeated, her voice sharper now, laced with incredulity. “And you expect me to serve as the convenient answer to your dilemma?”

Mr Darcy ignored her barbed words and continued with calculated resolve. “You are entirely justified in your indignation, Miss Bennet, but please listen to what I have to say. There are many women who might accept my hand, that is correct. Yet what I need is not a traditional marriage.”

Elizabeth’s brows rose in pointed challenge. “You astonish me, Mr Darcy. Pray, enlighten me as to what sort of union you do seek.”

“A marriage that will fulfil a purpose—a practical alliance, no more.” Mr Darcy’s expression was almost impassive, though a flicker of something behind his words suggested vulnerability. “Once I am wed, I can publicly attribute the wedding announcement to a simple misunderstanding—a miscommunication by the papers, exaggerated beyond control. It would be a far kinder resolution than exposing my aunt’s overreach and embarrassing her or Anne.” He hesitated. “Furthermore, I believe your family would benefit from having someone to shoulder certain financial burdens during these challenging times.”

Elizabeth recoiled as though struck. Her temper rose sharply, and she demanded, “And this—this altruism—am I to suppose it stems from pity?”

“Not pity,” Mr Darcy said firmly, his voice steady, though he seemed acutely aware of the insult she had perceived. “Never pity. Call it reflection, or perhaps guilt over past mistakes. My intervention in Bingley’s courtship was one such misstep, though not all your accusations were well-founded. I... I do not care to argue those points now.”

Elizabeth regarded him with scepticism. “You must know how insultingly practical your offer sounds. Have you considered, Mr Darcy, that I might refuse you a second time?”

Mr Darcy dipped his head, acknowledging her rebuke. “I have considered that possibility at length. Still, I hoped to present the proposition fairly, with the recognition that we might assist one another. Think of it not as matrimony in the conventional sense but as an arrangement of mutual benefit. You need not accept today, but I ask that you at least consider it.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “You cannot mean it, Mr Darcy. It is ludicrous. I will not entertain such a proposal.”

Mr Darcy sighed. “I expected this reply, and I do not blame you, but I do wish you to think it over. I shall be staying at the Charlton Arms Inn until the day after tomorrow. Think it over. Discuss it with your family if you wish.”

With that, he took his hat and bowed before returning to his carriage, leaving Elizabeth behind, utterly shaken.

Elizabeth

In the dim afternoon light, Elizabeth Bennet nestled into the worn armchair beside her father's bedside, the gentle rhythm of his breath filling the silence of the room. Mr Bennet lay still, one side of his face drooping slightly as if the weight of his ailments had pulled him into an unsettling slumber. Elizabeth opened a battered copy of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, a book she had read before and which was also one of her father's favourites. As she began to read aloud, the worn pages felt soothing under her fingers, yet her heart was heavy.

"How strange it is, that a fool or a knave, with riches, should be treated with more respect by the world, than a good man, or a wise man in poverty!" Her voice quivered as the story unfolded, echoing in the stillness, but her eyes began to blur with the quickening tears that streamed down her cheeks.

Usually, her father would chime in with witty remarks when she read this book or ask her to re-read a certain section so they could debate it. Now, he lay still, locked in his own body, even when awake.

She bit her lip, stifling a sob. Her father could not sense her heartache, nor could he feel the desperation that twisted within her as she gazed upon his frail, sleeping form.

She was desperate to help him, to ease his discomfort and make him the man he had once been. The cost of the best treatment was prohibitive unless she did the one thing she'd sworn she'd never do—marry Mr Darcy. The idea of it twisted her stomach into knots.

Yes, he had evidently seen the error of his ways and spoken to Mr Bingley—who appeared keen to reunite with Jane. But did that make up for the vile things he had said about her family? How horribly he had treated Mr Wickham? And yet... if she were married to him, he could provide the help they needed.

She was drawn from her thoughts by the sound of approaching footsteps, and her mother entered, her expression a mix of concern and weariness. “Lizzy, dear...” she started. Elizabeth closed the book, the words lingering in the air as she met her mother’s gaze. Mrs Bennet’s visage softened immediately at the sight of her daughter’s expression and the tears that had not yet dried on her face.

“Here, take this,” she said, handing her a handkerchief.

“Mother, I cannot bear to see him like this. We must find a way to secure the funds for the specialist. The treatment is costly, and...”

Mrs Bennet’s brow furrowed. “I have thought about the matter as well. There are things we can sell to help raise funds. The silverware perhaps. My brother and sister will surely also assist us financially, but it will be difficult.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth replied, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. “And it may not be enough. We could also consider a part-time position for me, perhaps as a governess. I have already spoken to my sisters about the possibility of us working.”

Her mother sighed, glancing at Mr Bennet as he slept. “That is a noble thought, Lizzy, but it would leave me here alone. I thought if we could hire the physician Dr Eversham recommended he could stay in one of the estate’s cottages, but we would continue to do the nursing work ourselves. That way we might be able to manage it. But the man’s fees are high. I thought perhaps we could arrange a soirée. Invite those in our circle... they might contribute to a collection to aid in the expenses.”

“Yes, a soirée could bring in donations,” Elizabeth brightened at the suggestion, though worry still shadowed her face. “We could use the evening to explain Father’s condition. Perhaps Mr Bingley might be willing to help.”

A flicker of hope kindled in Mrs Bennet’s eyes, which then died out as quickly as it had arrived. “But then our reputation will be ruined forever. We have already taken charity from the Forsters when they took Lydia, and if we have a soirée then... well, we will always be known as the beggars of Longbourn.”

“Mother, I think not. Nobody would be so unkind to us,” she said, but her mother shook her head.

“A family that relies upon charity is not a family any man will wish to marry into, Elizabeth. You know this. Ah, if only Jane had married Mr Bingley, we would all be saved. Mr Bingley’s money could have made all the difference. My sister-in-law wrote to me that he called upon them a fortnight ago, seeking to find Jane. It seems clear that he is still fond of her. Perhaps there is still a chance?”

Elizabeth looked away, her thoughts instantly back to Mr Darcy and his proposition. If she put her family first, perhaps she should accept him. But... how could she?

“I do not think Mr Bingley is a viable option,” she said, looking to change the course of the conversation.

“Of course, of course. We must find the funds to help him. Oh, but I wish there were another way, other than begging and ruining all of your chances. I wish your father was well enough to talk, then I could ask him what to do. In these times, I value his wise counsel more than at any other.”

Reluctantly, Elizabeth rose from her seat beside her father, casting a final glance towards the still form of Mr Bennet. “You should take a rest now, Lizzy,” her mother

urged softly. "I shall stay with your father for a while."

With a heavy heart, Elizabeth made her way to the parlour, where she found Jane standing by the window, gazing out into the garden.

"Lizzy," Jane said quietly as she noticed her sister, turning away from the view to meet her gaze. "I cannot help but worry."

"Neither can I," Elizabeth replied quietly. "I think Mother looks thinner each day." She sighed, feeling the weight of their situation pressing down on her chest. "It seems nobody else has noticed."

"I have," Jane admitted, her brow knitted with concern. "But with everything happening, I fear we are all too absorbed in our own fear for Father to pay attention to her wellbeing."

Elizabeth nodded, her heart aching for them all.

"If only we could find a way to make him better, to ease the weight off Mother's shoulders," Jane lamented, casting her eyes to the floor. "Ways that do not involve asking for assistance from wealthy men."

"Mother has been pressuring you to reconsider Mr Bingley, hasn't she?" Elizabeth ventured, her heart sinking a little.

"Yes," Jane said, her tone laden with uncertainty. "But just because he called upon our aunt and uncle does not mean he wishes to court me again. And even if he did... I am not certain I could accept him after all that has passed. He hurt me, Lizzy. When Mary said Mr Darcy was coming to call on us, I feared he might wish to speak to me about Mr Bingley. I would not know what to say. I am glad it appears he only came to speak to Mr Collins. He is leaving, did you hear?"

Elizabeth looked up. “He is?”

Jane nodded. “In the morrow. Apparently Mr Darcy informed him that Lady Catherine desperately needs his help with the wedding preparations but does not want to disturb him or burden him.”

So perhaps his proposal to her had not been the only reason for his visit. He’d come to rid them of Mr Collins—at least for the time being. Normally, she would have chided him for lying to a man of God, but in this case she did not mind it. Although it made her wonder even more about Mr Darcy’s intentions. She glanced at Jane.

“There is something I have not told you yet, about Mr Darcy.” She hesitated, knowing the implications of her confession. “He proposed to me. Twice.”

“Mr Darcy? Twice?” The surprise was evident on her face, the gravity of the revelation sinking in. “And you declined his offer. Pray tell me why, Lizzy. You appeared to be fond of him at one point, in fact I wondered if you were setting your cap on him.”

Elizabeth gave a sigh and then told Jane all about Mr Darcy’s role in Mr Bingley’s departure for London. How he and Mr Bingley’s sisters had wished to separate them, fearing the Bennets to be a poor choice for a man wishing to better himself in society. When she finished, she waited to see what her sister’s reaction would be.

For a moment, Jane struggled to find her voice. “How could he? Mr Darcy, of all people, should understand the strength of his influence over Mr Bingley,” she said, her brow furrowing with disbelief. “It is unfathomable to think he would let such biases influence Mr Bingley’s heart.” She clenched her hands, her mind racing as she grappled with the implications of Elizabeth’s revelations.

“So you see, it was not entirely Mr Bingley’s doing, nor his desire to part from you.

He was encouraged by a man he trusted, and by his sisters.”

“He always did value their opinions—do you think he truly regrets it now?”

“I am sure, that is what Mr Darcy led me to believe, and Aunt Gardiner’s letter certainly indicates it as well.”

She looked at Jane as her sister’s jaw moved back and forth, as if she were trying to make sense of it all. She knew Jane wanted to forgive Mr Bingley, and hearing that he had been manipulated might help make it easier.

“You can see why I would not want to marry him. Yet, when he called on us earlier, he proposed once more —not out of love, but for purely practical reasons. The marriage would help us financially and also allow him to escape his aunt’s machinations.” She made a full report of what Mr Darcy had told her and Jane listened, stunned.

“Lizzy, I do not know what to say. I can understand why you do not wish to marry him but if it is mainly because of what he has done with regard to myself and Mr Bingley, do not let that be your guide. He had seen the error of his ways and one must show grace.”

“You are too good for this world, Jane,” she said. “But how can I marry a man who has done such things to my family, and who looks down on me? I could not spend my life with him and be happy,” she paused and glanced out of the window, trying to gather her thoughts. “Yet, at the same time he holds the key to helping father. If we wait much longer...” Even if Jane forgave Mr Bingley, it would be some time before they could be together, and she could not very well ask him for money. Besides, she would never do such a thing, not unless he offered and even then, they would need to be married. All of this could be weeks away if it happened at all.

Just because Jane wanted to forgive Mr Bingley, her heart had been badly wounded. Did Mr Bingley want to marry her, or did he simply feel guilty for the way he had been so easily influenced? There were too many variables, too many uncertainties...

Mr Darcy was offering money now...

“What if you were to come to an arrangement?” Jane asked.

“Arrangement?”

“If you and Mr Darcy were to enter a courtship, even one that was false, that might be enough—if he only has to disprove his aunt’s story and quieten the gossip regarding his forthcoming nuptials. He may be willing to help us in return. I do not see why you must marry him,” Jane said, and Elizabeth was thoroughly surprised by her sister’s level of deception. Although... was it? If they married it would be a deception as well, would it not?

“To enter into a courtship with Mr Darcy whether false or not, would also draw society’s attention to our family. And if we were not to wed, scandal would ensue,” Elizabeth said.

Jane’s eyes glistened with unshed tears as she spoke, “Though if Papa were not to recover, what would our family’s reputation matter?”

The sisters exchanged glances, the weight of the situation pressing upon them, but also reinforcing their bond. “Perhaps I ought to speak with him. But Jane, this is indeed a terrible state of affairs,” Elizabeth said with a sigh, a trace of a smile creeping onto her lips despite the circumstances. “We seem to be entangled in a web of misunderstandings and misplaced affections.”

Jane nodded thoughtfully, her heart still heavy but resolute. “Nevertheless, we must

not lose hope. We have much to consider, Lizzy, and perhaps we can find a way through this chaos.”

Together, they shared a moment of silent agreement—an unspoken vow to navigate the trials ahead with courage, united in their determination to seek love and joy, no matter how daunting the path may seem.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth walked along the gravel path leading to the inn, her heart was thundering in her chest as each step brought her closer to him. The prospect of facing Mr Darcy again unnerved her, though she steadied herself with long-practiced composure. Before entering, she paused to address the innkeeper. "Please inform Mr Darcy that I am waiting for him outside. He is expecting me."

Moments later, Mr Darcy emerged, the faintest of smiles softening his otherwise serious demeanour. Elizabeth's chest tightened involuntarily. She chastised herself for the sudden flutter, reminding herself why she was here.

"Miss Bennet," Mr Darcy greeted her warmly as he approached. "I must admit, I had hoped you had reached a decision quickly. Although your countenance implies there is more to discuss."

Elizabeth took a steadying breath. "Indeed, there is much to discuss, Mr Darcy. Let me begin by saying I have not decided, though it would be foolish of me to deny the weight of my family's circumstances." She met his gaze squarely. "That said, I must be transparent. I have no desire to become Mrs Darcy, and I struggle to believe your intentions in proposing this arrangement are entirely pure."

Mr Darcy let out a quiet snort in response to her words, an uncharacteristic and unguarded reaction that caught Elizabeth by surprise. "Pure intentions? Miss Bennet, I make no such claim. It is true—I desired to marry you. In truth, my feelings for you have not much altered, despite your stern rebuke the last time we spoke on this subject. However, I assure you, this is no underhanded ploy."

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, her scepticism plain. “Yet you admit your feelings have not changed. Am I to believe this proposal is wholly driven by necessity? Might it not be your way of achieving your original aim after all?”

“Partially,” Mr Darcy said honestly, surprising her. “But my reasons are far from singular. Yes, I do hope that this marriage might provide an opportunity for you to reconsider your judgement of me. Still, I must insist that our conversation focuses on matters of practicality, not my affections.” He straightened, and Elizabeth could tell he was restraining himself. “There is no need for conjecture, Miss Bennet. Whatever my motives, this arrangement serves a greater purpose. We both have families to protect. We can do so together.”

“Why must it be a marriage? Why can’t it be a courtship? A false courtship. Surely that would satisfy anyone curious about your circumstances?”

He shook his head. “I had considered it. While it might silence the gossips amongst the Ton, it would not help me—or my cousin—in the long term. As long as I am unwed, my aunt will insist that I marry Anne. No, I must have a wife, there is no other way around it.” He paused before addressing her further, “Besides, a courtship that does not end in a marriage could bring suspicion on you, I do not wish society to judge you or your family harshly.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. A part of her did feel some sense of relief that her reputation had figured in his final decision. However, she had to keep her feelings at bay, so she hardened her heart and said, “A neat little solution for you. But what would become of me should I tire of being your unwilling bride?”

Mr Darcy stepped closer, his voice lowering slightly. “I thought you might ask such a question. Which is why I wish to make something clear. I propose an agreement. We will marry to preserve appearances—for both our families’ sakes—and after sufficient time has passed, we can annul the union, if that is still your wish. I will

arrange everything, including a generous settlement, and shoulder the blame entirely. It will not reflect poorly upon you.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught. “An annulment? You would simply allow me to leave you—freely, without contest?”

“Yes,” Mr Darcy affirmed. “Though I hope you might find staying with me more agreeable than you currently imagine. Whatever your ultimate decision, my intention is to ensure your family is provided for.”

Elizabeth hesitated. “And you suppose I could remarry after such an annulment? Surely you know what is said of women in our society who have a marriage end thus. No matter how much you claim to take the blame, it will be I who is held responsible.”

Mr Darcy frowned slightly. “It is possible that society’s views would hinder such prospects, though the blame will rest solely upon me. Still, even if that outcome makes a second marriage difficult, you would have independence and security, unbound by any obligations to me.”

Elizabeth could hardly believe what she was hearing. “And you would commit all of this to paper? An agreement properly witnessed and recorded?”

“Every word,” Mr Darcy replied without hesitation. “My solicitor will handle the particulars, and your uncle may review them for fairness.”

Her astonishment was palpable. He was agreeing to nearly all the terms she might have demanded—but why? “Is marrying your cousin so intolerable to you that you’d go to these lengths to avoid it?”

Mr Darcy’s jaw tightened briefly. “It is not just my reluctance, Miss Bennet. My

cousin Anne does not desire the match either.” He leaned closer, his voice dropping slightly. “Though it is not widely known, Anne has affection for someone else—my cousin Richard. Lady Catherine would never consent to such a union, but my marriage to you might finally permit it to happen quietly.”

Elizabeth blinked, processing the revelation. She had met Colonel Fitzwilliam briefly when he visited Rosings, and had thought him to be a fine, upstanding gentleman. She wondered why Lady Catherine favoured Mr Darcy over his cousin. “Does Lady Catherine know of their feelings for one another?”

“She does not,” Mr Darcy said sharply. “And she must not. Were she to suspect, she would do everything in her considerable power to thwart them. Richard’s prospects depend upon her goodwill—and that of my uncle, his father the Earl of Matlock. Perhaps things might have been different were he the first son, but as the second, my aunt would see him as a less desirable prospect.”

Elizabeth felt her discomfort rising. The weight of the situation was heavier than she had imagined. Yet, as she considered the prospects of supporting her family, sparing her sisters undue burdens, and alleviating Mr Darcy’s guilt-ridden sense of responsibility, she realised that his proposal might indeed hold the only viable solution.

“I...” she hesitated. “I am unsure if you understand the financial burden, Mr Darcy. My father’s best chance at recovery is to have a physician at his side as often as possible, a physician like this is expensive.”

“It would also benefit him to have nurses to aid him, and your mother. I am aware. I have made enquiries. I know just such a physician who is willing to come here and stay at Longbourn, or one of the cottages nearby. He can bring trusted assistants as well.”

“I could not presume to ask you to pay such a sum.”

“You, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, could not,” he said. “But Mrs Darcy, Mistress of Pemberley most certainly could—and should. Of course, you would have to consent to return to Pemberley with me, otherwise we will not be believed.”

She pondered this for a moment and then said, “There is one condition I would add.”

Mr Darcy waited patiently.

“If I must live at Pemberley, I will take Mary and Kitty with me. If mother is to have a physician and nurses to help, then they will not be needed. Indeed, I fear they are ill-prepared to manage things at home, and absence might harm their development more than it helps.”

“And what of Jane and your youngest sister, Lydia?”

“Lydia is content to stay in Brighton with the Forsters for now. They have invited her to spend the summer with them. Jane would never agree to leave, she will stay to care for my mother and father. If I am to be separated from my father, then I would wish that she remain with him.”

A faint smile softened Darcy’s face. “If your father was well enough to travel then I would have suggested that he recuperates at Pemberley with us. Indeed, as soon as his physician says that travel is permissible, then I insist. The fresh Derbyshire air is a balm to the soul and would do him a world of good. Of course, your sisters would be welcome at Pemberley. I imagine Georgiana will find their company most agreeable.”

Elizabeth was startled yet again by the ease of his acquiescence. “You would have everything ready for us? The treatment, arrangements for my family, all written and

formalised?”

“Absolutely,” he affirmed.

Elizabeth hesitated for only a moment longer before she reluctantly agreed. “Then I suppose, Mr Darcy, you and I are to be wed.”

Mr Darcy’s expression softened further, the intensity of his gaze warming. “I give you my word, Miss Bennet, that I will not let you regret this choice.”

But as Mr Darcy walked away to make the preparations, Elizabeth wondered—could such a promise truly be trusted?

Darcy

Darcy entered the elegantly appointed parlour of Bingley's London residence. He had spent the better part of the morning in his solicitor's office, reviewing the final legal documents to secure Elizabeth Bennet's future and her family's financial stability. The satisfaction that came from knowing these measures were in place steadied him as he navigated the city's busy streets.

The wedding was just over a week away, and every step taken to prepare for it had strengthened his resolve. The responsibility he would shoulder as Elizabeth's husband was no burden to him—it was a privilege, one he would earn through unwavering devotion and concrete actions.

As Darcy handed his coat to Bingley's butler, the man himself emerged from the adjoining room, all easy energy and good humour.

"Darcy!" Bingley exclaimed, his face breaking into a wide grin. "I had almost given up on your arrival. Were the affairs of the day as tedious as ever?"

"They were necessary," Darcy replied, allowing himself a rare smile. "Matters with my solicitor required some final attention."

"Well, never mind that now," Bingley said, waving him into the parlour. "Come in, man, and make yourself comfortable. There is claret, if you like. And you have the look of someone about to deliver good news. Tell me, have you been lured into buying another estate? Or perhaps some other business venture? You do enjoy keeping me in suspense."

Darcy settled into a leather armchair near the fire, accepting a glass of claret. “Nothing of the sort, I assure you. My news concerns a personal matter.”

Bingley arched an intrigued eyebrow. “A personal matter? That can only mean one thing. Well, Darcy, out with it.”

Darcy took a deliberate sip from his glass before answering. “I am to be married.”

For a moment, Bingley simply stared, uncharacteristically speechless. Then, he broke into a broad smile. “Married? Have you decided to give in to your aunt’s demands? You cannot mean it!”

“Not my cousin, no. It is another lady I’ve chosen to make my wife. My uncle made it clear the only way I could escape this situation would be to marry another. And so I am.”

“Who is the fortunate lady?”

Darcy’s voice softened slightly as he replied, “Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” Bingley’s grin widened further. “Well, I daresay that is the best news I’ve heard all year! But Darcy, I am astonished—and delighted, of course. How did you manage to overcome... well, all that once stood between you?”

“It has been a rather winding road, and it is not a wedding of love,” he said. “I felt dreadful over my interference regarding your courtship with Jane Bennet, and I do not think she has forgiven me yet... Anyhow, it seemed the best solution. I am free of this imposed union with Anne, and she will have my wealth at her disposal to help care for her family,” Darcy replied, with a small but genuine smile on his lips.

“Well, whatever the reason for your union, I am glad. She is a most remarkable

woman—spirited, clever, all that is fitting for a man like you. Darcy, you truly have reason to be proud. But tell me, when is the wedding?”

“Just over a week from now,” Darcy said, setting his glass down on the table before him. “Which brings me to why I am here. I can think of no one better suited to be my best man.”

“Of course!” Bingley exclaimed, his face lighting up with genuine pleasure. “It would be my greatest honour.” His excitement tempered slightly as he leaned back in his chair, gazing into his glass. “And... might I ask, how is her family?”

“They are well,” Darcy replied evenly, though his knowing glance betrayed an understanding of the real question.

Bingley hesitated, his genial demeanour giving way to something more tentative. “And... Miss Bennet? Have you seen her?”

“Yes, on several occasions,” Darcy said. “She is in good spirits. I believe the prospect of Elizabeth’s marriage has eased some of her family’s difficulties.”

Bingley’s grip tightened on his glass. “Do you think she...” He paused, then tried again. “Do you think she might forgive me—for leaving as I did? For the manner of it?”

Darcy’s gaze softened. “Miss Bennet is kind-hearted. I believe there is every chance for forgiveness. But you must speak to her yourself, Bingley. If you do nothing, she will have no cause to reconsider.”

Bingley sighed, nodding slowly. “You are correct, of course. I only hope I have not irreparably damaged her opinion of me.”

Darcy's reply was firm but encouraging. "Her esteem is not beyond reclaiming. The rest depends on you."

The two men sat in companionable silence for a moment before the conversation turned towards the upcoming wedding. When Bingley asked whether Darcy's family would attend, Darcy's expression darkened.

"I doubt any of them will come," he said flatly.

"Not even Georgiana?" Bingley asked, a flicker of concern in his tone.

"She will be in attendance, but she is the only one. As for the rest, none will come. Lady Catherine has exerted every effort to dissuade the rest of the family. Nobody wishes to stand between her and me, including members of the Darcy family," Darcy admitted. He withdrew a folded letter from his coat and handed it to Bingley. "My uncle, Lord Matlock, has made his position clear as well. This arrived this morning," he said and waved the letter.

"Pray, what does the letter say?"

"It..." Darcy said and ran a hand along the outer edge. "Let me read it to you."

William,

Your recent announcement has left me both surprised and somewhat dismayed. During your last visit to Town, you gave no indication of so serious a courtship, let alone one leading so swiftly to marriage. Such a significant event ought not to have been kept from the family.

Lady Catherine has, as you might imagine, already made her position abundantly clear during her recent visit to Matlock. Her outrage was as passionate as it was

unrelenting. While I have often regarded her protests as little more than idle bluster, her vehemence this time leads me to approach the matter with caution. I must admit to some reluctance in attending the wedding, as I fear it may further provoke division within the family. Indeed, I think it best that neither I nor your aunt or cousins attend. Gregory and Richard may well come if they wish, but I believe they too are aware of the implications.

Despite this, know that you have my sincere wishes for your happiness. My concern lies only in avoiding unnecessary discord among those most affected by your choice.

Yours faithfully,

Matlock

Darcy placed the letter back in his pocket with deliberate care. "It is of no consequence. I had not truly wanted them there. Gregory and I have never been close, and I understand Richard must remain in my aunt's good graces for when he makes his announcement regarding his situation."

A comfortable silence settled between the two men for a moment. Then, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Bingley said, "So, you are marrying Elizabeth Bennet. I know you said it is not a marriage of love, at least for her, but I recall you speaking quite warmly about her once..."

Darcy allowed himself a rare smile. "It is true. And though I thought my affections might diminish after her refusal, they have persisted. I do hope that over the next weeks and months I might convince her I am not the dreadful man she thought I was. Although, I cannot be certain she will come to see it."

"I am certain you can convince her, your charms are well hidden but I am sure she can find them," he said. "But if not, are you prepared for an unhappy union?"

“I have offered her the chance of an annulment,” he said. Bingley’s eyes grew wide.

“It is a gamble.”

Darcy nodded solemnly. “It is. We are both aware of it. If Elizabeth decides the marriage does not suit her, she will still be cared for, as will her family. I have ensured it through my solicitor, and Mr Philips will oversee it as well.”

Bingley frowned slightly. “Darcy, that could create scandal for you.”

“It is of little concern,” Darcy said. “By then, I hope to have convinced her otherwise. If not, I will bear the consequences. She and her family will be financially secure either way.”

There was a brief pause before Bingley spoke again. “And you believe you can win her over?”

Darcy’s expression grew contemplative. “I must try. Whether or not I succeed, I will ensure her family is secure.”

Bingley placed a reassuring hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Then we shall both hope for happy outcomes. For you, and perhaps for me as well.”

Darcy smiled faintly. “Indeed, let us hope.”

Their conversation came to a natural end as the afternoon light began to dim. Together, they made their way to the billiard room, the unspoken weight of the futures they hoped to secure lingering between them as they prepared to take the next step forward.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Elizabeth

4th July 1812

Pemberley, Derbyshire

The road to Pemberley had been long and, for Elizabeth, unexpectedly fraught. Mr Darcy had taken great care to arrange the journey, breaking it into manageable stages with accommodations prepared at every stop, but they had travelled separately for most of it. Elizabeth remained with Mary and Kitty, while Georgiana and Mr Darcy rode in another carriage.

If Mr Darcy's intention had been to offer Elizabeth and her sisters the greatest possible comfort, the result felt oddly alienating. She rarely saw him, and when she did, it was at a polite distance, his attention focused on ensuring everything went smoothly rather than on any personal interaction. Elizabeth had found herself struggling to discern his mood.

The journey felt suspended between past grievances and the uncertain hope of a future—awkward, polite, and restrained. It was exhausting.

By the time the rolling hills of Derbyshire came into view, Elizabeth was relieved to near their destination. As the sisters rode in the hired carriage, her thoughts wavered between apprehension and awe. Pemberley had been described to her as a grand estate, but she could scarcely imagine what awaited them.

Kitty, restless from the days of travel, peered eagerly out of the window. Mary, in

contrast, busied herself with a small book on philosophy she had insisted on bringing, pausing now and then to make thoughtful notes in the margins.

“She is not at all as I imagined,” Kitty said suddenly, breaking the quiet.

Elizabeth turned to her. “Who?”

“Miss Darcy, of course,” Kitty replied. “I confess, after all we heard from Mr Wickham, I expected her to be haughty and cold. But she is nothing of the sort.”

Elizabeth offered a small smile. “She has surprised me as well.”

Kitty nodded. “She is quite lovely, really. Perhaps a little shy, but very kind. I wonder...”

“What do you wonder?” asked Mary, her tone half-curious, half-dismissive as she paused her reading.

“Well,” said Kitty thoughtfully, “if Mr Wickham’s tales about her were untrue. Perhaps he was mistaken—or even lying.”

The words lingered in the air, heavy with the implications of all Mr Wickham had said and done.

“Mr Wickham has always had a knack for presenting himself favourably,” Elizabeth said carefully. “It is possible that his perspective was biased. What he claimed about Miss Darcy—and her brother—may not have been the whole truth.”

“Perhaps he thought it was the truth,” Kitty mused. “People see what they want to see, don’t they? Maybe he saw what he hoped, rather than what really was.”

Mary looked up sharply. “You are giving him far too much credit. He has rather loose morals.”

“Pray, I did not know you were such an expert on George Wickham,” Kitty teased.

“I am not, but I am in possession of my senses. He tried to charm Miss King until her uncle stepped in, then he tried to charm Elizabeth and then Lydia. He has no loyalty. And as for Pemberley and its master,” she gave a pointed look at Elizabeth, “I remain sceptical. This arrangement may serve a purpose, but as for happiness...”

Elizabeth sighed inwardly. “I understand your doubts, Mary. I am not entirely certain what to expect, either.”

Kitty tilted her head. “Do you truly believe Mr Darcy is as proud as he seems? Or might he actually be different than we assumed?”

“Different how?” Mary asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. What if he’s secretly a knight in shining armour?” Kitty grinned. “It could explain everything! His helping us to pay for Papa’s treatments, and now bringing us to Pemberley. He might be trying to prove himself, in his own quiet way.”

Elizabeth couldn’t suppress a small laugh, though it was tinged with unease because she knew Mr Darcy meant to prove himself one way or the other. “A knight in shining armour? I think Mr Darcy would bristle at the idea. He is a man of substance and practicality, not romantic fantasy.”

Kitty frowned slightly, but her hopeful tone persisted. “Maybe, but a man can be noble without being sentimental.”

Elizabeth glanced out of the window as the carriage rounded a gentle bend. The trees parted, revealing a vast and verdant expanse. In the distance stood Pemberley, its grandeur undeniable even at this distance.

The conversation quieted as all three sisters took in the sight. The house rose up from among its lovely gardens, its stone facade bathed in the afternoon light. The long approach revealed pristine grounds, and groves of trees as well as flower beds, all arranged to perfection. It was both magnificent and imposing, a reminder of the life Elizabeth had stepped into. No wonder Mr Darcy had not bristled at the cost of the physician. Keeping up Pemberley had to cost a fortune.

Mary let out a contemplative sigh. “It is quite extraordinary.”

Kitty, for once, was speechless, her eyes wide with admiration.

The carriage slowed, and Georgiana and Mr Darcy, who had arrived slightly ahead of them, came into view. They stood near the front steps, clearly waiting to greet their guests. Georgiana smiled brightly and waved, her youthful enthusiasm a stark contrast to Mr Darcy’s calm reserve.

“Whatever awaits,” Elizabeth said quietly to her sisters as the carriage came to a halt, “we must try to meet it with an open mind. Pemberley is not just Mr Darcy’s home—it is mine now.”

“And ours, too, for a little while,” Kitty chimed in, her excitement returning.

As they descended from the carriage, Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy. He looked every inch the master of the estate, but when his gaze met hers, she thought she saw something softer—a flicker of uncertainty, or perhaps hope.

Kitty’s words lingered in her mind. Could Mr Darcy truly be a knight in shining

armour, trying in his own way to bridge the gap between them? Elizabeth didn't know. But she resolved, as they stepped into the shadow of Pemberley, to find out.

"Welcome to Pemberley," Georgiana said brightly, her soft voice carrying a note of excitement. "I do hope you will find everything to your liking."

Kitty beamed at her. "It's all so grand already, Miss Darcy. The estate is even lovelier than we imagined."

Georgiana's cheeks pinked slightly. "I am so glad you think so. There is much to see—the gardens, the park, the lake—it's one of my favourite places to walk. I can show you anytime you wish."

She continued eagerly, gesturing towards the sprawling grounds. "And the library! Oh, Elizabeth, I know you enjoy reading—my brother has the most magnificent collection. We will spend hours there, I am sure."

Elizabeth offered Georgiana a grateful smile, touched by her efforts to make them feel at home.

Mr Darcy stepped closer to Elizabeth, his expression a mixture of formality and quiet sincerity. "I've asked that my mother's chambers be prepared for you," he said. "They are among the loveliest rooms in the house, with excellent views of the gardens."

Elizabeth was caught off guard by his thoughtfulness, her surprise evident. "Thank you, Mr Darcy. That is most kind of you."

"Anything your sisters require," he continued, his gaze turning towards Kitty and Mary, "will also be arranged. Pemberley is at your disposal."

Kitty clasped her hands together. “Oh, thank you, Mr Darcy! Do you suppose we might take the carriage to Lambton soon? Aunt Gardiner has told us so much about it, and I’m simply dying to see it.”

Mr Darcy’s mouth curved in a slight smile. “Of course. We will arrange an outing at your earliest convenience.”

Mary, though less effusive, was no less curious, and spoke up. “I should like to see my chamber first. There is much to do—I must write to Mama and let her know we have arrived safely.”

Georgiana inclined her head. “Of course, Miss Mary. I think you will find your room quite comfortable, though perhaps not as quiet as the library, should you wish to write in peace.”

Mr Darcy gestured towards the doors. “Shall we?”

The group stepped inside, the grandeur of Pemberley’s entrance hall eliciting a collective gasp from the Bennet sisters. High ceilings arched above them, adorned with intricate moulding, while the polished marble floors gleamed in the soft light streaming through tall windows. A magnificent staircase wound upwards, its banisters carved with elegant patterns that spoke of craftsmanship and history.

Waiting at the base of the staircase was an older lady. Mr Darcy had told Elizabeth all about Mrs Reynolds, the housekeeper. She smiled at them, her demeanour both professional and warm.

“Welcome home, Mr Darcy,” she said with a slight curtsy, before turning to Georgiana. “Miss Darcy, it is a pleasure to have you back.”

Georgiana greeted Mrs Reynolds with evident fondness, then introduced her to

Elizabeth and her sisters. “This is Mrs Reynolds. She has been with us since I was a child and oversees the entire household.”

Elizabeth smiled politely. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Reynolds.”

“And an honour to meet you, Mrs Darcy,” Mrs Reynolds replied with a kindly expression. “We are so delighted to welcome you to Pemberley.”

Elizabeth felt a slight flush creep into her cheeks at the title, but she managed a gracious nod.

Mrs Reynolds turned to Kitty and Mary, greeting them as well, before indicating that refreshments had been prepared in the drawing room should they desire them after the tour of the house.

The steward, Mr Somerville, joined them next, introducing himself and offering assurances that any practical needs regarding the estate would be managed promptly. His efficient manner made it clear Pemberley’s operations were in steady hands.

Georgiana took charge of the tour, leading the way through grand halls, richly appointed sitting rooms, and the library, which drew audible gasps from Mary and Elizabeth alike.

“This is magnificent,” Elizabeth murmured, marvelling at the towering shelves filled with books of every description.

Mr Darcy stood nearby, observing her reaction with a hint of quiet satisfaction. “It is yours now as well,” he said simply, before excusing himself to attend to estate matters.

As they moved on, Georgiana proved to be an adept guide, balancing information

with her natural warmth. She pointed out features of the estate with enthusiasm—the artwork in the gallery, the guest quarters, and the central dining room, which was both impressive and welcoming.

Mary was content to observe, clearly taking mental notes on everything she saw, while Kitty chattered incessantly about all the possibilities for their stay.

“I had no idea Pemberley would be so splendid,” Kitty said as they entered yet another grand room. “No wonder Aunt Gardiner was so eager to tell us about it!”

Elizabeth was quieter, taking in everything with measured contemplation. Georgiana’s sweet and unassuming nature, coupled with Mr Darcy’s efforts to provide for her family, began to form a complex picture in her mind. As they ascended the staircase to view their chambers, she found herself wondering if she had ever truly understood him—or, indeed, his world.

“Your rooms are here,” Georgiana said, opening a door to reveal a beautifully appointed suite. “I do hope you find them to your liking.”

“They are lovely,” Elizabeth assured her, though a small knot of unease lingered in her chest.

As they settled into their chambers, Elizabeth watched Georgiana return to her brother’s side and saw them converse quietly before Mr Darcy headed down a hallway. He might seem aloof at times, but he clearly cared deeply for his sister—and, it seemed, for ensuring Elizabeth felt welcome in this new life.

Whatever lay ahead, Elizabeth resolved to approach it with grace, curiosity, and courage. Pemberley was hers now, for better or worse—and so, too, was Mr Darcy.

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Elizabeth

19th July 1812

A fortnight had come and gone when Elizabeth found herself preparing for her first Sunday service as Mrs Darcy. They had skipped the Sunday the week of their arrival, too busy and hectic had everything been, but there was no putting it off now.

As she dressed, her sisters' voices drifted from the adjoining rooms, chattering about Pemberley, Georgiana, and the prospects of visiting Lambton. Elizabeth couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm, though her own mood was more pensive.

When she descended the sweeping staircase, Mr Darcy was already waiting near the front entrance. Clad in a finely tailored coat, he appeared as calm and composed as ever, but Elizabeth thought she detected a trace of apprehension in his eyes as he stepped forward to greet her.

"Good morning," he said, his voice warm but formal. "I trust you are ready?"

Elizabeth nodded. "My sisters will be down shortly."

"And you?" Mr Darcy asked, his tone softening. "Are you comfortable with this?"

Elizabeth met his gaze, startled by the genuine concern in it. "I will manage," she said simply.

Soon, Mary and Kitty joined them, and the party made their way to the waiting

carriage. Georgiana sat with Mary and Kitty, keeping their spirits high with her cheerful conversation. Elizabeth, seated opposite Mr Darcy, remained quiet for most of the ride, her thoughts tugged in multiple directions.

When they arrived at the small church in the neighbouring village of Kympton, Elizabeth could not help but think back to Mr Wickham's words. He was to have the position of vicar, the living that went along with it, and a permanent position.

Yet, Mr Darcy had taken it from him. Or so he had said. But was that correct? Had he spoken truthfully? Or was it all lies? He'd spoken quite ill of Miss Darcy and she was as effusive and kind as Mr Bingley.

She pushed these thoughts aside now for she knew she had to play a role this day. That of Mrs Fitzwilliam Darcy, Mistress of Pemberley.

As they entered into the small, unassuming church, the congregation turned to greet them. The vicar, a kind-faced man in his middle years, welcomed Mr Darcy and Elizabeth with great warmth, offering effusive congratulations on their recent marriage.

Throughout the service, Elizabeth was acutely aware of Mr Darcy beside her. Though they maintained a courteous distance, his every movement—the way he turned a page of the hymnal or bowed his head in prayer—felt significant.

Afterwards, as they strolled back to the carriage, Mr Darcy spoke quietly to her. "You handled that very well. I know such formalities are hardly of comfort at present."

She tilted her head, catching the earnestness in his tone. "It is not the formalities that trouble me, Mr Darcy, but the pretence of it all."

Mr Darcy paused, allowing their steps to fall slightly behind the others. “I have no desire for you to feel trapped,” he said after a moment. “You must know that. If, after time, you find this arrangement to be untenable, I will honour our agreement.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught. His solemn words unsettled her, not because they surprised her, but because they reminded her of how deliberately he had crafted this path—one in which she retained some semblance of agency.

“I do know that,” she said quietly, averting her eyes. “Thank you.”

Their return to Pemberley was a more subdued affair. The journey passed quickly, punctuated by Kitty and Georgiana’s chatter and Mary’s occasional interjections. Once inside, Mr Darcy excused himself to his study, and Elizabeth found herself at a loss for what to do. After wandering the house for a while, passing by more maids and footmen than she ever thought a person could need, she made her way into the gardens.

The air, fresh and warm, helped her chase away some of her troubling thoughts. Perhaps this was just what she needed, a little air, a little freedom, a little time alone.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Darcy

Darcy was on one of his habitual afternoon walks when he caught sight of Elizabeth, some distance ahead, on the woodland path that skirted the edge of Pemberley's sprawling grounds. Her posture was thoughtful, her pace unhurried. Though the sight of her in such a serene setting might have brought contentment, he hesitated. Perhaps she wished for solitude.

Yet something about the slight slump of her shoulders suggested she might welcome company. Resolving to let her decide, Darcy quickened his steps until he was within polite range.

"Mrs Darcy," he said softly, and Elizabeth started, spinning to face him.

"Oh!" she said, her voice tinged with both surprise and self-conscious amusement. "I did not hear you approach. Please, do not call me that—not while we're alone."

He inclined his head, smiling faintly. "Elizabeth, then. May I join you?"

She hesitated for a moment, searching his face, then said, "If you wish."

They fell into step together, the path wide enough to accommodate a comfortable distance between them. The rustling of leaves overhead and the distant twitter of birdsong filled the pauses in their conversation. For a time, neither spoke, but it was not an uncomfortable silence—more a mutual weighing of how to begin.

At last, Darcy glanced at her. "You seem preoccupied. I hope this morning's service

was not too tiresome.”

Elizabeth sighed, her gaze fixed on the path ahead. “The service was bearable. It is everything surrounding it that weighs upon me.”

Darcy frowned, his steps faltering slightly. “What do you mean?”

She stopped and turned towards him. “My sisters. My father. Their future, uncertain as it is, preoccupies me constantly. When I consider what may happen if my father’s condition worsens...” She trailed off, pressing her lips tightly together.

Darcy’s jaw tightened, and his voice, when he spoke, was steady but intense. “You need not face this uncertainty alone, Elizabeth. I promised to help, and I intend to honour that promise.”

She appeared to study him for a long moment, then began walking again. “You do seem determined to prove yourself honourable,” she said, her tone teasing but tinged with earnestness.

“I must,” he replied. “If only to show you the truth of my character. I would never offer reassurances I did not mean.”

Elizabeth glanced sideways at him, a flicker of appreciation in her eyes. “I begin to see that your desire for precision is not as cold as I once believed.”

Darcy smiled faintly at the unexpected praise but sensed her hesitation. “You have doubts still.”

“Not doubts,” she said, frowning slightly. “Questions. Uncertainties that time may resolve, though I cannot say whether they will resolve in your favour.”

Her words stung, but Darcy accepted them. He was silent for a time, weighing his next words.

“And your sisters?” he asked gently. “Do you think they will adjust to their new surroundings?”

Elizabeth gave a soft sigh. “It is difficult for them. Mary has always been the quiet sort and it is difficult to get her to stop thinking and fretting. Kitty, likewise, has been reserved. I had hoped they would find a way to find joy again here, away from Longbourn and the constant reminders of father’s illness, but to no avail.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. “I too had hoped their time here would be a respite from the worry of the recent months. I regret that it is not the case. Do you think it would be better for them to return to Hertfordshire?”

“I think not,” Elizabeth said, not wanting to admit that she didn’t want her sisters to leave in part because she was desperate for their company, even if it was a quiet, withdrawn company. “I only wish for them to settle, to find some purpose.”

“They deserve that much,” Darcy said as he scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“I hope,” he said carefully, “that in time, Pemberley will come to feel less like a house and more like a home—for you and your sisters.”

Elizabeth looked up at the stately structure, its grandeur softened by the warm afternoon light. She glanced back at him, her expression tinged with gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said simply.

Darcy held her gaze for a moment longer than necessary, then offered her his arm. “Shall we return?”

The sun had almost dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows over the sprawling gardens of Pemberley. Darcy stood at the drawing room window, his fingers lightly clasping the curtains as he observed the stillness outside. Yet his mind was anything but tranquil.

Hosting Elizabeth's sisters at Pemberley was a task he had agreed to with determination but little preparation. They were a family so different from his own in both demeanour and temperament—loud where his family was restrained, whimsical where his was focused, and now, in light of Mr Bennet's illness, visibly burdened by concerns he could only speculate upon.

His promise to Elizabeth—to care for her family as if it were his own—had come easily enough in words. But now the reality of it loomed larger. It was no longer just about ensuring Elizabeth's comfort. Her sisters were anxious, displaced, and, frankly, felt uneasy in his presence.

A small, hesitant voice broke his reverie. "Fitzwilliam?"

He turned to find Georgiana standing in the doorway, her embroidery hoop held in her hand. She approached cautiously, as she often did when discussing matters she thought might unsettle him.

"Is something troubling you?" she asked softly, perching on the arm of a nearby chair.

"Not troubling, exactly," he replied, though his voice carried a distant note. "I was contemplating Elizabeth's sisters. Mary and Kitty. They don't seem to be adapting well to life here."

Georgiana frowned thoughtfully. “I’ve noticed the same. Mary, especially—she’s so quiet. She rarely speaks during meals, and when she does, it’s with such solemnity. Kitty, too, though it seems as though she’s putting on a brave face. I think their father’s illness weighs on them more than we realise.”

“Elizabeth told me as much,” Darcy said. “It’s their concern for Mr Bennet that keeps them so subdued. I feel... inadequate, in some respects. I can handle issues of estate management, negotiations, even politics, but this? I don’t know where to begin.”

His confession felt heavier than he intended. Georgiana regarded him with quiet understanding.

“You begin by making them feel as though they belong here,” she said.

Darcy leaned against the back of a chair, his brow furrowed. “Easier said than done. I hardly know their personalities. Elizabeth, of course—she is endlessly captivating. But her sisters... they are still an enigma to me. Their concerns, their hopes, their interests—it’s all beyond my understanding.”

“Maybe not entirely,” Georgiana said after a moment. Setting her embroidery aside, she clasped her hands in her lap. “When I first returned to Pemberley after...” Her voice faltered, but she steadied herself and continued. “After Father died, I thought nothing would ever bring me joy again.”

Darcy straightened, his jaw tightening at the memory of their shared loss.

“But then,” Georgiana went on, “you encouraged me to take up my music lessons again. You never pushed me, never demanded anything of me. You simply provided me with something to do, something to hold on to when my thoughts threatened to overwhelm me. I didn’t realise it then, but it saved me, Fitzwilliam. It gave me purpose.”

Darcy's face softened at her earnestness. He understood how much it had cost her to share this.

Georgiana continued, her tone more assured. "Perhaps Mary and Kitty need something similar. Distraction, yes, but also something that will give them a sense of accomplishment—a reminder that they're more than their worries."

Darcy looked at her, a faint glimmer of hope shining in his expression. "But what? I hardly know what would engage either of them."

Georgiana tilted her head slightly, a smile playing on her lips. "Well, I've noticed a few things during their stay here. Mary has a natural affinity for the pianoforte, though she plays as if she's unsure of herself, as if no one has ever encouraged her to see it as more than a chore. With a proper instructor, I think she could truly flourish."

Darcy considered this, the gears in his mind already beginning to turn. "And Kitty?"

Georgiana's smile deepened. "She enjoys being around children. At church, she was practically surrounded by them. They seemed to flock to her. She has a warmth about her that draws them in, and she seemed different with them. Lighter. Happier."

Darcy raised an eyebrow. "You've been paying closer attention than I realised."

Georgiana shrugged modestly. "It's easier to observe when people don't see you as a threat. They hardly notice I'm there half the time."

Darcy crossed his arms, pacing slowly as he absorbed her words. "A music instructor for Mary... perhaps lessons with one of the local masters. And for Kitty... there are orphanages nearby. A placement could give her the opportunity to connect with children regularly."

Georgiana's expression brightened. "That sounds perfect. I think they might surprise you, brother. A little kindness and effort could go a long way with them. And Elizabeth will appreciate it too."

The mention of Elizabeth caused Darcy to pause, his thoughts briefly straying to her. It was strange how the act of understanding her sisters—their complexities, their struggles—seemed to draw him closer to understanding Elizabeth herself. She was deeply intertwined with them, and as he sought to ease their burden, he wondered if it might win her a small measure of trust.

"You are correct, Georgiana," he said finally, his voice resolute. "I shall make the arrangements at once. Mary and Kitty deserve more than mere comfort. If I can give them a sense of fulfilment while they're here, it's worth the effort."

Georgiana smiled at him. "It suits you, you know. This new side of you."

Darcy gave her a quizzical look. "What side?"

She shrugged playfully. "The side that listens more than it broods. Elizabeth must have had quite the effect on you."

A flicker of amusement lit Darcy's eyes as he shook his head. "Enough of your observations, sister. If you'll excuse me, I have arrangements to make."

As he strode towards the door, Georgiana called after him, "I'm sure Mrs Darcy will be impressed!"

He didn't dignify the comment with a reply, but a faint smile touched his lips as he left the room.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Elizabeth

28th July 1812

A nother week had gone by and Elizabeth found herself ever more torn over her place in the world. She was becoming used to life in Pemberley, and Mr Darcy was more than cordial, but she worried about Kitty and Mary. Had she been selfish to bring them here?

She found herself dwelling on this thought more often than she wanted, but at least for once she had distraction at her fingertips in the form of a letter from Jane. Her sister had written for the first time since Elizabeth had left, and she was presently in a mind to return an answer at once. Elizabeth dipped her quill into the inkwell and set pen to paper.

Dear Jane

I was most gratified to receive your letter and to learn that Mr Bingley has returned to Netherfield. That he comes without his sisters gives me some hope that his motives are pure. It is not often that men of his standing allow themselves to retrace their steps so earnestly, let alone act with such apparent openness.

I cannot deny, however, that I understand your hesitation. After all, this is the same gentleman who allowed himself to be so easily swayed from what seemed to be a genuine attachment. Yet, perhaps this very return is a sign of a lesson learned—a demonstration of his own growth and of his acknowledgment of the mistake he made in leaving you behind.

You say he visits often, and I can scarcely restrain my curiosity about what passes between you during these calls. Does he ask after your health? Your thoughts? Does he attempt to rekindle the light-hearted exchanges that once seemed so natural between you? Dearest Jane, you must tell me all—whether his manners have returned to the warmth they once held or whether there remains some formality, some hesitation on his part.

As I think of you and Mr Bingley, I cannot help but reflect on what Mr Darcy revealed to me in Kent last year. You may recall my shock and indignation when I discovered that he played a role in separating the two of you. His reasoning at the time—however misplaced and unjust it was—stemmed, he claimed, from a concern for Mr Bingley's interests. Yet, I must also admit that his influence in that matter still stings when I consider the pain it caused you.

Now that Mr Darcy is my husband, I find myself re-examining his character—seeing it, perhaps, with clearer eyes than I might have otherwise managed. While his actions were misguided, I have come to understand that they arose not from cruelty, but from pride and a deep sense of responsibility towards those he cares for. This does not excuse him, of course.

This, dear Jane, brings me to my point: if Mr Bingley has now returned of his own accord, if he is seeking to make amends, then perhaps he too has learned the value of following his own heart rather than bending to the will of others.

Do not think me presumptuous, dearest sister, in urging you to keep an open mind and heart. I know how much you have endured and how fiercely you guard your peace of mind. But I also know how much joy he once brought you—and how much joy you are capable of bringing to one another.

Should he prove himself worthy, should he demonstrate with actions and not merely words that he respects and values you as you deserve, then perhaps you might allow

yourself to trust him once more.

Your happiness is my fondest wish, dear Jane, and it is in this hope that I await your next letter with more eagerness than you can imagine. Do write soon and tell me everything—everything!

Yours always, Elizabeth

P.S. Mr Darcy sends his regards. He has been particularly attentive of late, which is to say, he asks every morning whether I have heard from you and how you are doing. I suspect he shares my hope for your happiness—though he is loath to say so outright.

She sat back, shaking her head. How odd it was that she should be married to Mr Darcy while her sister may well become Mrs Bingley—if she allowed herself to open her heart.

Life certainly took them both in peculiar directions but who could know what would happen next? For the time being, all she could do was hope for the best, and play her part.

The dining room at Pemberley was grand and imposing, even after having been at Pemberley for three weeks, Elizabeth could not get used to it. High, vaulted ceilings supported a sparkling chandelier that bathed the room in warm light. Heavy burgundy curtains were pulled back to reveal the dark evening outside, while the crackling fire in the marble hearth added warmth to the room.

This night, she had dined with only her sisters as Mr Darcy and Georgiana had been invited to a soiree in town. Mr Darcy, being the most prominent landowner in the county, sat on a great many boards and often found himself called away. As his wife,

the invitation had been extended to her, but because her presence was not expected she politely declined, wishing to spend the evening with her sisters.

Elizabeth looked at Mary and Kitty, noticing how different they seemed. Only weeks ago, Mary had been lost in her sermons and Kitty overshadowed by Lydia's antics. Now, in the opulence of Pemberley, both appeared more at ease, their earlier discontent gone. This, indeed, was rather strange for they had appeared so sullen that she'd considered bringing them to Derbyshire had been a mistake. However, for the past few days, their mood had lifted.

Mary dabbed her lips with her napkin and glanced hesitantly at Elizabeth before speaking. "I must say," she began, her voice measured, "I did not expect this arrangement of Mr Darcy's to interest me as much as it has."

"Arrangement?" Elizabeth asked as she took a mouthful of the delicious lemon tart the cook had prepared.

Kitty leaned forward in anticipation, prompting her eagerly. "Well, what is it, Mary? Tell Lizzy what you told me earlier!"

Elizabeth tilted her head, intrigued. "What arrangement do you mean, Mary? Do not keep me in suspense."

Mary straightened in her chair, her composure tinged with faint excitement. "Mr Darcy has arranged for me to take pianoforte lessons with Mr Chauvel, he tutors some of the finest musicians in Derbyshire. He visited the estate this afternoon to meet me and assess my skill." She paused, the slightest blush colouring her cheeks. "He said I have great potential, though I must devote myself more thoroughly to practice if I am to improve."

Elizabeth smiled, setting her fork down. "That sounds promising, Mary. I did not

know you still wished to develop your music.”

Mary’s expression softened. “It is not merely for my enjoyment, Lizzy. Mr Darcy has also found me a volunteer position at the convalescent home in Lambton. I will be helping organise musical activities for the wounded soldiers, providing them with a small respite from their troubles. The opportunity to serve in this way...” Her voice grew quieter. “It gives me purpose. I begin to see how one might balance one’s own pursuits with something greater.”

Kitty chimed in before Elizabeth could respond. “And I am to volunteer at the orphanage near Lambton! Mr Darcy wrote to the matron there himself. He spoke so highly of me—can you imagine? Me! She met with me yesterday and has asked me to help with the younger children.”

Elizabeth turned to Kitty, her heart softening at her younger sister’s enthusiasm. “That sounds wonderful, Kitty. Are you looking forward to it?”

Kitty nodded vigorously, her curls bouncing. “Oh yes! She introduced me to them just this afternoon. Georgiana took me. The children are so sweet, and they’ve already started calling me Miss Kitty.” She trailed off, searching for the right words. “I feel like I’m doing something good. Important, even.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened with emotion as she regarded her sisters. For so long, she had seen their lives stifled by the constraints of Longbourn—by their mother’s ambitions for them, by the lack of opportunity in Meryton. She remembered Kitty’s dissatisfaction, her longing for attention and adventure, and Mary’s sombre isolation. Yet here they were, thriving. Mr Darcy had not merely welcomed them into Pemberley, he had seen their potential and found ways to nurture it.

“You both seem... changed,” Elizabeth said softly, her voice laden with awe.

Kitty grinned, her cheeks rosy. “Perhaps Pemberley has magic in its halls! Or maybe—” She broke off, feigning thoughtfulness. “Maybe Mr Darcy is secretly a knight in shining armour after all!”

Mary scoffed but did not entirely mask her smile. “Let us not descend into such childish fancy, Kitty. Mr Darcy is a practical man, not a knight or an enchanter.”

Elizabeth laughed, their easy camaraderie lightening the weight in her heart. She leaned back in her chair, observing them fondly. “Be it magic or mere kindness, I am glad to see you both so well-placed and—dare I say—happy.”

Kitty reached across the table to clasp Elizabeth’s hand, her grin fading to something softer. “And what of you, Lizzy? Are you happy?”

Elizabeth hesitated, looking down at their joined hands. “I do not know yet,” she confessed. “But seeing you both so fulfilled gives me hope. Perhaps, in time, I too might find my place here.”

The quiet crackling of the fire filled the room, the rich scent of the evening’s feast still lingering in the air. Elizabeth allowed herself a moment to revel in the peace of the scene, her sisters’ faces flushed with excitement and a hint of contentment.

Though she had once considered this marriage an act of duty and compromise, there was something undeniably comforting in seeing the good that had already come of it.

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Darcy

29th July 1812

Darcy briskly descended the stairs the following morning, the sun already high in the sky.

He had shared the good news with Miss Kitty and Miss Mary the previous morning and had been in attendance when the pianoforte teacher had begun to instruct Mary. He had seen how delighted she was. Likewise, he understood that Kitty genuinely appreciated his efforts to secure her position at the orphanage. He was more than happy with what he had been able to accomplish for the two young ladies, and he genuinely hoped that it would help them find their place.

However, the truth was that what he really wanted to know was how Elizabeth would react to these deeds. Yes, it was true—he had wanted to help her sisters. But at the same time, he had also wanted to show Elizabeth that he could genuinely be counted upon and trusted. That he truly meant to help her and her family. By now, he had hoped this was evident, but one could never be certain.

Anticipation filled him as he poked his head into the breakfast room, but he found only her sisters and Georgiana sitting around the table, deep in conversation. The trio didn't even notice him. The footman opened his mouth, ready to welcome him, but Darcy quickly shook his head. He didn't want to be seen, not now. He didn't want to interrupt the sisters and be drawn into a conversation.

Not when he desired to see Elizabeth.

Turning towards the drawing room, he checked to see if she might be there, aware that at times she took breakfast in that quieter space. It too was empty. He sighed, hands sliding into his pockets as his shoulders slumped. She must still be asleep. He considered asking Mrs Reynolds but decided against ringing for her just for this. Instead, he opted to take a walk. She'd surely be awake by the time he returned.

Stepping outside, he breathed in the fresh scent of blooming flowers. It was a peaceful day. The sky was a brilliant blue with only a few white clouds here and there. The air was alive with the chirping of sparrows and the occasional warble of blackbirds—a concerto of Derbyshire in summer and Darcy smiled. He always loved the sound of birdsong.

He clasped his hands behind his back, a habit picked up from his grandfather, who often walked the estate in the same fashion. Georgiana frequently teased him for this resemblance, saying it made him look far older than he was. Of course, she had never met their grandfather, who had died before she was born. But his portraits—along with his other illustrious forebears—still hung in Pemberley, capturing the same thoughtful stance.

At the lake, Darcy paused to watch the ducks and swans circle lazily. He wished he'd brought some kitchen scraps for them to enjoy. Just as he pondered returning with some, a commotion drew his attention. A flurry of birds—ducks and swans—took flight towards the far end of the lake, all seeming to congregate in one spot.

Darcy tilted his head in curiosity, peering in that direction. There, standing among the flock, was Elizabeth.

A smile tugged at his lips. She stood tossing greens to the eager birds, dressed in a pastel peach gown with a pelisse lightly draped at the front. Her hair was styled in a half-up, half-down fashion, her bonnet resting beside her, along with her gloves.

Steeling his resolve, Darcy started towards her, though a pang of hesitation lingered.

As he neared, she turned and greeted him with an open smile. “Mr Darcy,” she said lightly, though there was something warmer about her today.

“Elizabeth,” he replied, dipping his head. Then, after a brief pause, he added, “Please—if I am to call you Elizabeth, perhaps you should call me Fitzwilliam. Or William.”

Elizabeth hesitated, biting her lip. “I do not know if that would be proper.”

“Certainly, it must be if I am to call you Elizabeth,” he countered. “Or, if you prefer, simply Darcy. Many of my relations do.”

Her lips curved upwards. “Darcy, then. That would suit me.”

“Good. We agree,” he said, nodding. “I had in mind to feed the birds as well, but I forgot to bring anything for them.”

Immediately, she extended a small bowl filled with spinach, lettuce, and other greens.

“May I assist?” he asked, his hand brushing against hers as he reached into the bowl. The contact was fleeting but absorbing. Darcy froze momentarily, dismayed when he noticed her eyes widen and her posture stiffen. He quickly turned away, tossing the greenery towards the hungry birds to diffuse the awkward moment.

“Maxwell! Josephine!” he called to the two swans fighting off smaller ducks for the greens.

Beside him, Elizabeth chuckled. “You have named them?”

“Of course. These two, and some of the geese as well. They’re not here now, but they often are in the afternoons.”

“And their names?” she prompted, tilting her head in curiosity.

He smiled, his earlier discomfort forgotten. “The swans are Maurice, Jacques, Jacqueline, and Celeste. The ducks visit less frequently and are harder to tell apart. I’ve decided they haven’t earned names yet.”

Elizabeth laughed, and the sound warmed him.

“I had not taken you for someone who names his birds,” she teased.

Darcy shrugged. “It’s a habit I picked up from my mother.” He paused, his voice softening. “I suppose, it is a way of honouring her.”

Elizabeth’s smile faded into something more thoughtful. “I would have liked to have known her. I’ve heard so many kind things said about her from the locals.”

“She deserved every word,” he replied, watching as the birds finished the last of the greens.

They stood in companionable silence for a few moments before Elizabeth spoke, “I must thank you,” she said glancing up at him. “For helping Mary and Kitty find meaningful occupations. They both seem so much more at ease already, and Mary’s delight in her lessons is plain.”

Darcy inclined his head modestly. “I am gratified to hear that they are settling in. It is Georgiana I must credit for the inspiration, however. She found similar solace in new pursuits after...” He hesitated, the shadow of old grief flickering across his face. “...after our parents died. She was so young then, scarcely aware of how her life had

changed when our mother died but she was very aware when our father left us. Music became her solace.”

“Your parents’ loss must have been devastating for you both,” Elizabeth said softly.

“It was,” Darcy admitted. “But I also found distraction. Although not in music, I am afraid but rather in labour. As a lad of twelve, after my mother died, I began visiting the tenants on the estate. I even helped with their chores, or at least tried to.”

Elizabeth’s brow arched as a playful smile spread across her lips. “You hardly seem the sort of man to milk a cow, Mr Darcy.”

At that, Darcy laughed—a rich sound that seemed to carry the last of his tension away. “Quite right. My attempts at milking were a failure of notable proportions. My skills were far better suited to repairing fences, which is where I spent much of my time.”

Elizabeth grinned, her amusement twinkling in her eyes. “Did your father not mind such endeavours?”

Darcy’s expression softened at the mention of his father. “He was aware. If he disapproved, he never said so. I believe he rather liked the idea. He always believed that a good landowner understood his tenants and the hard work that they did. And there is no better way to understand a man than to work beside him. But my aunt...” Darcy’s jaw tightened slightly. “She came to call unannounced one day. She saw me covered in dirt, my shirt untucked, and my hair in such disarray it was evidently alarming to her. To say it set her bristles up to see me in such a state is an understatement.”

Elizabeth clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle, but Darcy’s voice took on an edge.

“She stopped my activities at once,” Darcy continued, his eyes darkening. “Summoned me into the drawing room and delivered a lecture on decorum. She said that it was not a suitable manner in which the heir to Pemberley should act. I suspect she was more incensed by the fact that I ignored her instructions, than by my dishevelled appearance. She has always sought to control my life, even then. And no one—no one—dares to stand up to her.”

Elizabeth’s expression softened into something closer to admiration. “But you did,” she said gently. “You didn’t marry Miss Anne.”

A wry smile tugged at Darcy’s lips. “And how did I manage that?” he scoffed, though without malice. “Not with words or courage. I concocted a ruse to keep from her match.”

“That ruse helped my family immensely,” Elizabeth said, her tone steady.

Darcy inclined his head, acknowledging the truth of her statement. “It did. But it doesn’t change the fact of my cowardice. I should have told her plainly that I would not be so dictated.”

“Perhaps you should tell her now how you truly feel?” Elizabeth suggested. “What more can she do?”

Darcy gave a short laugh that lacked humour. “More than you might think. In fact, I need Lady Catherine’s aid in another matter—one of some delicacy. The matter that we discussed the other evening.”

Elizabeth’s brow raised, curiosity flickering in her gaze. “To break the entailment?”

Darcy nodded stiffly. “Yes. Should I succeed, it will provide the stability and protection your family requires.”

“But if it causes you more hardship, perhaps now is not the time.”

“It is precisely the time. While your father’s health is stable, I do know that your mother continues to worry and I believe it will alleviate her concerns to know that whatever the future may bring, Longbourn shall remain with the Bennets. He caught the expression on Elizabeth’s face and quickly added, “It is no trouble. It is part of our agreement, after all.”

“I understand,” Elizabeth said with quiet sincerity. “Though I assure you, if it proves too great a burden, my family can explore other avenues.”

“Nonsense.” Darcy’s voice held a firm finality. “It is a task I am entirely capable of handling, and I shall see to it directly.” He bowed his head, preparing to leave. “I will bid you good day, Elizabeth. There are matters I must address.”

He turned and strode towards the manor, his long strides carrying him purposefully. Yet, beneath his polished exterior, frustration churned. Even in absence, Lady Catherine’s shadow loomed over his life, meddling in his plans. The realisation only sharpened his resolve to face the matter and deal with her interference once and for all.

Darcy entered his chambers with an uncharacteristic heaviness in his step, his jaw set in a firm line. Though his resolve was steadfast, an inner tumult churned in his chest. Lady Catherine. Of all people, why did it have to be her he needed to convince? He moved to the writing desk near the window and stared out briefly.

Seated, he uncapped his ink bottle and set quill to paper. His first words came swiftly, his displeasure lending force to the movement of the quill.

Pemberley

29th July 1812

Dearest Lady Catherine,

It is with the deepest respect that I take up my pen to address you after a regrettable gap in our correspondence. First, allow me to extend my apologies for the hasty nature of my recent marriage. I fear that circumstances at the time necessitated swift action, preventing a thorough explanation to you, my esteemed aunt, to whom I owe so much.

Darcy stopped, staring at the neatly inscribed words. Respect. Esteemed. How false they rang in his own ears! His fingers tightened slightly around the quill, and he stood abruptly, pacing the room to steady himself. He reminded himself of his aim, this was not for Lady Catherine—it was for Elizabeth and her family. Their security mattered above all.

Seated once more, he continued.

Had we the opportunity to speak more openly before the matter was resolved, I would have informed you of what has long been true. My affections for Miss Elizabeth Bennet grew naturally, and in such depth that I was compelled by both love and duty to act decisively. Though I understand your hopes rested on a union between myself and your daughter, my dear cousin Anne, I trust you will recognise that such a connection was never desired by either party .

Darcy sat back, running a hand through his hair. He sighed sharply, the sound low and controlled, before leaning forward again to focus on the point that most concerned him.

Nevertheless, I do not write to rekindle quarrels of the past but instead to address an urgent and practical matter. Dear aunt, you have always acted in the best interests of our family. Indeed, your tireless advocacy for family unity and respectability has benefited us all. It is in that spirit I now humbly seek your assistance to correct a matter that threatens those very virtues.

The entailment tied to Longbourn has placed Mrs Bennet's family in an uncertain position. With the death of Mr Bennet looming a possible reality, I cannot, in good conscience, allow his widow and daughters to be turned out of their home, nor do I think it would reflect well on our broader connections if such a tragedy were left unresolved. This circumstance touches not only on their stability but, as Mrs Bennet's family is connected to the Darcys through me, on ours as well.

Darcy paused to ensure he maintained his tone, politely imploring but leaving no room for denial of responsibility.

To mitigate this risk, I believe it is in the shared best interests of our families—Darcy, Fitzwilliam, and Bennet alike—to seek a resolution by breaking the entailment. Mr Collins will no doubt resist this action, but I am certain he will defer to your guidance on the matter. It is my hope, then, that you will kindly exert your influence on him to achieve a satisfactory outcome. Surely you will agree that such a path best preserves our family's reputation and standing .

Darcy ended the letter with customary but measured pleasantries.

Yours with utmost regard,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

He read over his work, ensuring no hint of derision, no raw emotion, bled through his composed script. Yet within him, a fire simmered, a resentment that only swelled as

he saw his aunt's face in his mind, imagining her indignation at his marriage and her indignation to be asked for assistance.

Standing abruptly, he folded the letter, sealing it with wax before handing it to a footman. "Have this posted immediately."

As the footman departed, Darcy sank into an armchair, one hand over his face. He had done what needed to be done. But the bitter taste of it lingered. Once more, Lady Catherine loomed over his affairs, her reach as insufferable as ever.

"She will not win," he muttered under his breath. Then, thinking of Elizabeth—her confidence, her wit, her unwavering kindness to even the most vexing of her relations—his jaw relaxed.

"She has changed everything," he thought quietly. His lips quirked into a fleeting smile. For her sake, he could endure this indignity. For her sake, and for her family's future, he would.

Elizabeth

15th August 1812

“They are so adorable!” Kitty said as Elizabeth and Georgiana sat with her in the drawing room. Elizabeth smiled, noticing that Kitty looked far happier than she had in months. It had been a fortnight since she had started volunteering at the orphanage. Initially her visits were twice a week, but she had since made the habit of going there almost every single day. The children adored her, and Kitty could not be more delighted.

She had bloomed in a way Elizabeth had never expected. Mr Darcy had done a great favour. In fact, he had done both of her sisters a great favour because Mary likewise seemed in much better spirits. She volunteered at the Home for Convalescent Soldiers in Lambton twice a week and, in addition, took pianoforte lessons with the master teacher another two afternoons a week.

Mary had also made friends with some of the women who volunteered at the convalescent home and spent time with them, while Kitty and Georgiana were now as thick as thieves. It made sense, as they were closest in age. Elizabeth would often find them together in the library, reading similar books or discussing the ones they had already read, or working on watercolour paintings together. Other days they went into town together, purchasing ribbons and bonnets.

Mr Darcy had been exceedingly generous with her and her sisters. At the start of each week, they received an allowance from Mrs Reynolds, and whenever they needed more—which was often the case with Kitty but not so much with Mary and

Elizabeth—they could simply ask Mrs Reynolds.

Elizabeth appreciated that she did not have to ask Mr Darcy for money every time she needed it. It would have been humiliating to have to ask for an allowance.

Indeed, he had done everything he could to make her comfortable. Elizabeth peered out of the window and saw Mr Darcy there, walking with Mr Somerville, the steward. She rubbed her lips together in thought and then paused as she took in the man.

Their conversation at the lake, as innocent as it might have been, had changed something in her. It was silly, she knew, that a talk about naming swans and squirrels should have made her look at Mr Darcy in a different way. At the same time, it wasn't just that.

He told her deeply personal things about the loss of his parents and about his feelings towards his aunt. He trusted her—even after she had given him such a stern rebuke.

She couldn't help but wonder if she had been wrong about him.

No, she reminded herself. While she might've been wrong about some aspects of his character, there were others that felt true. He was a prideful man, though now she could see that he was willing to admit when he was wrong. Still she had to remind herself that he had separated her sister from Mr Bingley—while he may have recanted and tried to undo his actions, the fact remained that if it weren't for him, Jane and Mr Bingley might have been happily wed by now. That deed could never be forgotten or forgiven.

Or could it?

“Lizzy?” Kitty called, her voice a little shriller than usual, and when Elizabeth looked up, she realised why. Her sister had been talking to her, but she had entirely ignored

her—not purposely, but her thoughts had wandered as they often did.

“Yes, adorable. I am glad.”

“You were not listening at all,” Kitty said.

“I was. I...” She glanced at the spot next to Kitty where Georgiana had been sitting, and found it empty. Frowning, she turned to her sister. “Where did Georgiana go?”

“Lizzy,” Kitty said and rolled her eyes. “You were wool-gathering. Georgiana left a short while ago. She has a riding lesson. Mr Darcy asked me if I wished to learn to ride.”

“He did?” Elizabeth asked.

“He did, but I told him I have no desire to. The beasts frighten me,” Kitty responded with a look of distaste on her face.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Just because you were kicked by a donkey when you were a child. Not all horses are the same, and they are most certainly not donkeys.”

Kitty waved her hand dismissively. “Whatever the case may be, I shall keep my feet firmly on the ground. Say, what did Jane write?”

Elizabeth blinked. “Oh,” she said, almost having forgot the letter from her sister that had arrived the previous day. “She says that all is well at Longbourn. The physician is looking after Father very well, and she says that he appears to be making improvements. Mother was alarmed by the amount of bloodletting they are doing, but it is supposed to be an effective treatment.”

“And what of Mr Bingley? Has he called upon Jane yet?” Kitty asked but was

interrupted when the front door opened and then closed. The sound of flat shoes against the marble floor drifted to her ears, and she knew at once it was Mary.

“What a day! Three new soldiers arrived today. They are in such dreadful shape. I cannot wait for the wretched war to be over. These brave men—They have served King and country well, and yet they receive so little in return,” Mary said breathlessly as she entered the room.

“Well, they have you to keep them company,” Kitty said, chuckling.

“There is nothing to laugh about, Catherine,” Mary said, and Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up. Mary hardly ever used their full names, and when she did, it was only when she was gravely upset. Kitty, who had inherited some of Lydia’s easy ways, raised her hands placatingly.

“You know I do not mean it in a bad way. They have you, and they can be grateful. Besides, I heard the vicar say in his sermon last Sunday that they will be making a collection for the returning soldiers. Mr Darcy has already pledged a small fortune,” she said.

Elizabeth nodded. Mr Darcy had told her about this when the two of them had dined together alone a few nights ago. She had been surprised that he would inform her of an upcoming large expenditure. The money, after all, was not hers, and therefore she should not be concerned. But he had insisted. She was his wife after all, and what was his was hers.

This she knew not to be true. Legally, nothing was hers, and everything was his. But she couldn’t help but feel pleased that he had included her in the decision.

“That is very kind of him,” Mary said looking at Elizabeth.

“Indeed, he is not half as bad a man as Elizabeth would have us believe,” Kitty said, and both her sisters stared at her.

“I never made him out to be horrid,” Elizabeth said defensively.

“You were so distraught about the possibility of marrying him, you might as well have said that he was Lucifer himself,” Kitty said, and Mary nodded with a solemn expression.

“I was perhaps wrong about the man, in some regards.”

“Do you mean because he was responsible for parting Jane and Mr Bingley?” Kitty said.

Elizabeth stared at her sister. “How do you know?”

“Georgiana told me,” Kitty replied, and then shrugged. “I suppose I should not have said anything. She overheard Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley talking about it after your wedding, in fact. He encouraged Mr Bingley to attempt to woo Jane back. And then he mentioned that he was wrong to advise Mr Bingley to leave her in the first place. Georgiana said it did not sound as if it was the first time they had spoken on the matter.”

“Is it true?” Mary said, her eyes now wide. “Did you know about this? Is that why you were so opposed to marrying him?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “That and other reasons. Let us not talk about this behind his back. It would be most inappropriate. It is inappropriate that the two of you know.”

“Very well, but is that why you are sometimes hard on him?” Kitty asked.

“It is in part. Jane is our dear sister, and we all know how much she has suffered.”

“She has. But if Mr Darcy saw the error of his ways and is now trying to remedy it, is he not worthy of another chance?” Mary asked, pragmatic as ever.

“Indeed. We all misjudge people at one point or another. I recall when Mr Wickham visited us, and he spoke of the Darcys. He said that Georgiana was a bore and high in the instep. She is not like that at all.”

Elizabeth felt herself cornered—not just by her sisters’ sound arguments, but by the feelings she had harboured over the last few months, which had only grown. She knew now that Mr Darcy was not the terrible man she had thought him to be.

She understood that she had misjudged him just as he had misjudged Jane. And yet she couldn’t allow herself to—what? Reconsider?

For the longest time, she had counted the days until she could end the marriage and return home with her sisters. But these last few weeks she hadn’t thought about it once. As news from Longbourn was increasingly positive, she had felt lighter. In fact, she had even enjoyed dining with Mr Darcy and talking to him.

Was it possible that he was succeeding in his quest to show her that he was not the man she thought him to be? Or was he perhaps showing himself from his best side to somehow trick her into giving up on the idea of an annulment?

That was the problem. She did not trust him. No matter what he did or how kind he was, she could not trust him. Or did she not want to trust him?

She sighed, but then was drawn back to reality when her sisters’ voices penetrated her thoughts.

“Did he really?” Mary said.

Elizabeth looked up, aware that she had once again missed a good portion of the conversation. Kitty was speaking.

“Yes. Georgie said that the living was meant to be Mr Wickham’s if he wanted it, but he turned it down. He said he wanted to read the law instead.”

“What did you say?” Elizabeth asked, now paying close attention. For this—the sordid tale of how Mr Darcy had cheated poor Mr Wickham out of his living—was one of the reasons why she felt herself unable to trust him.

“But that is not how Mr Wickham told the story,” Mary said ignoring Elizabeth’s request. “He said Mr Darcy took it from him.”

“That is what he told me,” Elizabeth confirmed.

“Well, Georgiana said this isn’t true. She also said that when they were younger, Mr Darcy would often favour Mr Wickham and bestow upon him gifts, both financial and material, that Mr Darcy did not receive himself. He justified this by saying that Mr Wickham was a poor orphan and therefore deserving of assistance.”

“Well, there is nothing wrong with that,” Mary said. “If one is poor, one will take the affection and assistance one can get.”

“That is true,” Kitty said, “but Georgiana said that Mr Wickham was never truly grateful for this. To the late Mr Darcy, he was more than grateful, at least on the surface, but he used those gifts, attention, and affection to taunt our Mr Darcy. It was quite unkind of him.”

This was not what Mr Wickham had told her. He had said that the late Mr Darcy had

been kind to him and shown him affection, but he had never said that he had favoured him. It must have been galling, she thought, to be the only son of a great man and to find oneself having to share his affection and attention with someone one so deeply disliked.

Elizabeth did not want to think on the matter anymore. But if this was true—if Mr Wickham had not only turned down the living in exchange for financial assistance to read the law—then that meant he had lied to her. He had already exaggerated when it came to Georgiana. She had looked upon him more kindly in that regard, for recollections she knew, could vary. And perhaps he truly saw Georgiana as high in the instep. Maybe she had been when she was a small child. After all, one could never know how someone perceived another person. Her perceptions of both Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham appeared to have been wrong. Mr Darcy's perception of Jane had been wrong. But if Mr Wickham had, in fact, taunted Mr Darcy, been favoured by his father, and then lied about the living, what did that mean for anything else he had said?

If everything Mr Wickham had told her about Mr Darcy was lies, then the only true objection she could hold onto against the man was his actions against Jane. And even that he had already admitted to and was attempting to remedy.

In fact, what she hadn't told Kitty about the letter was that Jane had written her that Mr Bingley was making regular visits to Netherfield, travelling from London for long weekends with frequency.

And he always called on Longbourn. He always brought baskets with sweetmeats from London, expensive marmalade and curd, and imported fineries, which he presented as gifts to Mrs Bennet and Jane, as well as everyone else in residence, from the maids to the physician and his nurses.

He would bring medical journals he found and talk to the physician to ensure Mr

Bennet's care. This was probably something he had arranged with Mr Darcy, but in any case, Jane appeared genuinely pleased by Mr Bingley's affection and attention.

She could not think about this anymore. She could not allow the wall she had built around her heart when it came to Mr Darcy to crumble entirely. She had to hold onto at least some of her defences. She could not allow herself to feel affection for the man only to be disappointed again.

Or could she?

Elizabeth

31st August 1812

“E lizabeth!” Georgiana shouted as she and Mary giggled on the sidelines, “Hit it harder!” Elizabeth raced to keep up as her sister Kitty batted the shuttlecock with her racket, sending it soaring into the summer sky.

Elizabeth ran backwards. She barely managed to hit the birdie, catching it on the outer edge of her racket. It spiralled awkwardly across the net Kitty had begged the footman to set up earlier. The shuttlecock just managed to clear the top before dropping onto the ground on Kitty’s side.

“Victory!” Elizabeth declared, raising her arms in mock triumph.

“That was hardly fair,” Kitty huffed, running to retrieve the birdie. “You hit it with the edge. That doesn’t count.”

“Does it not?” Elizabeth asked, turning to Mary with an exaggerated look of enquiry. “What say you, umpire?”

Mary raised her fan to shade her eyes from the sun and pondered the question dramatically. After a moment, she agreed wholeheartedly with Elizabeth, earning a glare from Kitty.

Elizabeth chuckled, surprised at how carefree she felt. It had been a long time since she had felt so at ease. Being away from her parents, and Jane had been difficult, but

the recent good news from Longbourn had lightened her spirits. The past weeks spent here at Pemberley had helped her feel more hopeful.

Just as Elizabeth bent to pick up the birdie and switch sides with Kitty, the door to the house opened. Mr Darcy stepped out into the sunshine.

“It’s Fitzwilliam!” Georgiana cried, waving enthusiastically in his direction. “Come play!”

Mr Darcy walked towards them, dressed in a pair of light trousers and a waistcoat with a matching coat. His attire was less formal than usual, likely owing to the summer heat, but it suited him well.

Mr Darcy had accompanied her on walks around the lake in the mornings before the heat became too oppressive. Though their conversations had remained polite and far from serious, those moments had given her an opportunity to know him better—to appreciate him in ways she never had before.

“Elizabeth,” Mr Darcy said as he neared. “I must confess I disagree with your sister. I think you clipped the birdie rather unfairly.”

“Do you?” Elizabeth replied, planting her hands on her hips. “I was unaware that was against the rules.”

“You must be playing by Bennet House rules,” Mr Darcy teased with a smile. “I assure you, I would not let you get away with it.”

“Is that a challenge, Mr Darcy?” Kitty asked as she joined them. “It certainly sounds like it.”

Mr Darcy chuckled. “I think not. I am not dressed for sports.”

“Come now, Fitzwilliam,” Georgiana said, bounding over to him. “You love shuttlecock! Why not play doubles? You and Mrs Darcy against Kitty and I. Mary can stay on as umpire.”

Mary fanned herself gracefully and gave a serene nod. “I am in full agreement. I would rather enjoy my spot here in the shade.”

Mr Darcy sighed good-naturedly, his gaze meeting Elizabeth’s.

The match began, with Kitty and Georgiana showing surprising enthusiasm and energy. Elizabeth stood beside Mr Darcy, her own racket in hand, the pair ready to counter their challengers.

“You had better keep up, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth quipped, her eyes twinkling. “I will not tolerate failure.”

“Fear not, Mrs Darcy,” he replied with mock solemnity. “You could hardly find a better partner.”

The shuttlecock flew over the net with a sharp smack from Georgiana’s racket. Mr Darcy lunged to meet it, sending it back in a precise, powerful stroke. Kitty scrambled to hit it, but Elizabeth leaped in, intercepting the return with a high swing that sent the birdie straight back at Kitty’s feet.

“A valiant effort, but to no avail!” Elizabeth announced triumphantly. Mr Darcy raised a brow, clearly amused by her performance.

“I believe we agreed upon teamwork,” he murmured as the game continued. “Not solo heroics.”

“I’ll thank you to stay out of my way unless absolutely necessary,” Elizabeth teased

in reply.

The rally continued, with Kitty's overenthusiastic volleys sending the shuttlecock wild on more than one occasion, while Georgiana moved with quick determination to make up for it. Mr Darcy's precision paired comically with Elizabeth's exuberance as they collided in their attempts to hit the same shot more than once.

"Will you leave something for me to do?" Mr Darcy asked after one such near-miss, where he had pulled back just in time to avoid Elizabeth's dramatic swing.

"Only if I must," she replied, with a smile. "I should not want to make you feel superfluous."

As the match continued, Elizabeth's foot caught on an uneven patch of ground. She stumbled awkwardly, her arms flailing as she tried to regain her balance. The effort failed, and she fell backwards onto the grass with a thud. A sharp jolt of pain caused her to gasp.

"Elizabeth!" Mr Darcy exclaimed, dropping his racket as he rushed to her side. Kneeling beside her, his brow furrowed with concern, he asked, "Are you hurt?"

Elizabeth winced, propping herself up on her elbows. "I'll be fine," she said, though her voice wavered. "It just... startled me."

Mr Darcy placed a steady hand on her shoulder, his touch firm yet gentle. "Where does it hurt?" he pressed.

"My back," she admitted reluctantly. "It's nothing serious, if anything, I think my pride was injured more."

He frowned but helped her sit up slowly, his arm supporting her. "You ought to be

more careful,” he said softly, though there was no reprimand in his tone—only worry.

“I would never have thought that you cared so deeply for my welfare, Mr Darcy,” she teased lightly, attempting to ease his concern.

His lips twitched into a faint smile. “Of course, I do,” he said quietly. “Now, sit for a moment before you attempt to get up. There is no need to rush.”

By now, the others had gathered nearby, their expressions a mix of curiosity and worry. Mary’s voice rose above the rest. “Elizabeth, are you truly unhurt?”

Elizabeth waved a hand dismissively, already feeling the sharp pain ebbing. “I am perfectly fine, I assure you.”

Mr Darcy gave her a sceptical look but said nothing as he continued to hover protectively by her side. After a few moments, he extended a hand. “Allow me to help you up.”

She took his hand, warmth blooming in her chest as he pulled her to her feet with surprising ease. “I suppose that concludes the game,” she said, brushing the grass from her skirt.

Mr Darcy’s eyes met hers, a mixture of relief and amusement. “Perhaps it is for the best. I should hate to see you injure yourself again trying to impress us all with your daring leaps.”

Elizabeth laughed, the sound carrying over the lawn. “And here I thought you appreciated my solo heroics.”

“Always,” Mr Darcy said with a small smile, offering his arm to lead her back to the others. “But even the most daring heroine requires a moment of rest.”

The group dissolved into chatter as the tension dissipated, and soon they were laughing again, enjoying the waning hours of the summer day. However, Mary suddenly grew quiet.

“Whose carriage is this?” she asked.

Elizabeth looked up and along with her sisters, fell into a collection expression of puzzlement. The carriage was familiar but she could not recall where last she’d seen it. However, when she glanced at Mr Darcy it was clear that he knew it perfectly well. And whoever was contained therein, had to someone he did not wish to see.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Darcy

Darcy's jaw tightened as he recognised it at once. His aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had arrived. He turned to Elizabeth, his eyes apologetic, and then to Georgiana, Kitty, and Mary, but before he could speak, his sister took a deep breath.

"It is Aunt Catherine."

"What does she want?" Kitty asked, staring in the direction the carriage had come from, while Mary simply observed in silence.

"Ladies, please," Darcy said in a low, steady voice. "Head inside for now. It would be best if I dealt with this."

Georgiana hesitated but nodded, gathering Kitty and Mary with her. Elizabeth remained rooted to the spot, her expression thoughtful.

Darcy turned back to her. "Elizabeth," he began, his voice gentle. "I would like to shield you from my aunt, but I suspect that would be a mistake. She needs to see—"

"That our marriage is real," Elizabeth interrupted, her gaze steady. "I understand."

He inclined his head, his eyes warm with gratitude, though his manner remained restrained. Though their rapport had softened in recent weeks, they had not yet reached a place where he felt he could reach for her hand, no matter how much he wished to.

The carriage door opened, and Lady Catherine stepped out, her imperious gaze sweeping over the grounds before landing on Darcy. She marched towards him with deliberate purpose. Darcy squared his shoulders, his expression unreadable.

“Fitzwilliam,” Lady Catherine said sharply.

“Aunt Catherine, we were not expecting you,” he said.

“I would think not, since I decided to call on you just this morning. I was in the area and I thought it would be best that I address your impertinence in person.”

He had to stop himself from grinding his teeth as he watched her.

“We shall have time to converse. But first, let me formally introduce you to my wife, Mrs Eliza—”

“We have already had the pleasure,” she said sharply, and eyed Elizabeth as though she were a stray dog hobbling in from the woods rather than her niece by marriage.

Elizabeth curtsied with flawless grace. “Lady Catherine, how kind of you to visit.”

Lady Catherine acknowledged her with a cold stare but said nothing. Her attention returned to Darcy. “We must speak at once, in private,” she demanded.

“Very well, Aunt,” Darcy replied evenly. “Shall we use the drawing room?”

Lady Catherine swept ahead without waiting for a reply. Darcy offered Elizabeth a faint nod before following his aunt inside. They entered the drawing room, and Darcy closed the door firmly behind them.

Lady Catherine whirled to face him. “Explain yourself!” she demanded, her voice

sharp. “How could you marry that girl? After everything, after I express commanded that you not entangle yourself with someone so beneath your station, you went and married her? When you were already promised to Anne?”

Darcy’s expression hardened. “I am a grown man, Aunt. I owe you no explanation for my choice of wife.”

Lady Catherine’s eyes narrowed. “You owe it to your family! To your name! Your marriage is a disgrace! I raised Anne for this union, groomed her to stand by your side, and now—”

“She deserves happiness too,” Darcy interrupted, his voice firm. “Would you condemn your daughter to a loveless match, simply to satisfy some ambition?”

Lady Catherine stiffened, but her lip curled. “Would I? And yet, it appears you had no qualms about leaving her humiliated. Tell me, Fitzwilliam, did you know?”

Darcy frowned. “Know what?”

“About Anne and Richard,” she snapped, her tone biting. “Did you know they have been harbouring feelings for one another?”

Darcy faltered, the flicker of surprise on his face betraying him.

“So you did know,” she hissed. “And yet you kept it from me!”

“What good would it have done to tell you?” he countered, recovering his composure. “If this is true, they are both of age and free to make their own choices. I see no reason to interfere.”

“No reason to interfere?” Lady Catherine repeated, her voice rising. “How dare you

“speak to me so cavalierly? I am the head of this family, and I will not allow this disgrace to continue!”

“I think my uncle would have something to say about that,” he said, aware he sounded rather too rude for his aunt’s liking.

“My brother may be head of the family in name, but we all know I am the one who keeps this family together and in the ton’s good graces.”

“By making people do things they do not wish?” Darcy’s tone was cutting.

“For the benefit of the family and our reputation. Yes,” she said.

“You have interfered enough,” Darcy said, his tone low and sharp. “What do you intend to do, forbid them from ever seeing one another? How well has such a strategy worked in the past?”

Lady Catherine’s expression darkened. “What did you intend to do, Fitzwilliam? Help them run away to Gretna Green like some common rabble?”

“If that is their wish,” Darcy said quietly, “I will not stop them. I will help them. I will not let you destroy their happiness.”

Lady Catherine let out a sharp laugh, her tone mocking. “Oh, I see. Perhaps you fancy yourself experienced in the art of ruining romances? I’ve heard about what you did with Bingley. It was a wise decision, though it seems the fool cannot let go of the Bennet girl, either.”

Darcy’s face flushed with barely contained fury. “That is quite enough, Aunt.”

“That is enough, Lady Catherine,” he repeated, his voice cutting. “It is time for you to

leave.”

Lady Catherine blinked, taken aback. “Leave? My own nephew is dismissing me?” she spat.

“I will, if you do not depart immediately.”

“But you have not even heard me out yet!” she raged. “I have yet to discuss what brought me here. It is not Anne’s announcement of her matrimonial pursuits. It is your request to help break the entailment. I will never assist you in such a disgraceful matter! You would seek my help to subvert the family’s rightful inheritance?”

Darcy stood firm, his voice quiet but resolute. “I have made my position clear, Aunt. The entailment binds the Bennet estate in a manner I cannot abide.”

Lady Catherine’s face turned a deep shade of crimson. “And you think I would help you? Betray my own dear Mr Collins, all to feed your selfish, ungrateful desires? You will not have my assistance, Fitzwilliam, not now, not ever!”

Darcy met her fiery gaze. “I asked as a courtesy as you are my relation but if you insist upon being difficult then I will find a way to break it without you.

His patience reached its limit. Straightening, he pulled the bell cord by the mantel. “It is time for you to leave.”

“You would dismiss me?” she demanded, her tone incredulous.

“Yes,” Darcy replied. “For the sake of my wife, myself, and what remains of our peace, I will not allow you to stay here and spread such venom. I bid you good day.”

Elizabeth

That evening, the air in Pemberley's drawing room felt heavy with quiet tension, the flickering light from the fire casting shadows against the walls. Elizabeth sat in her usual chair, her fingers idly tracing the edges of a book she had not opened in quite some time. Her mind wandered back to the conversation she had overheard between Darcy and Lady Catherine—an argument that had shaken her more than she cared to admit.

Darcy—she realised now that she thought of him thus, rather than with the cold formality of 'Mr Darcy'. Over the past few weeks something had changed between them.

She thought of his firm words, his defence of his cousin, and how he had stood unwaveringly, even in the face of his aunt's wrath. It had been a rare glimpse of the depth of his feelings for her, for his family, and, she now realised, for what he believed in. Lady Catherine's biting words had been harsh, but Darcy had stood tall in the face of them, his commitment to the truth steadfast. He had, in his own way, defended their union, their shared life, and the dignity of her family, too. Elizabeth felt moved by that, in a way she hadn't quite known how to express.

Yet, beneath her gratitude, there lingered a sharp sense of discomfort. The argument between Darcy and Lady Catherine had cast a shadow over their lives, a shadow she feared would only grow. And she would not help them break the entitlement—making it almost impossible to do so now.

She sat there, lost in her thoughts, when Darcy's voice broke through the silence.

“You seem distant,” he said, stepping into the room, his gaze searching hers. His voice was soft, filled with concern.

Elizabeth looked up, startled for a moment, as though she had forgotten he was even in the room. She gave him a faint, distracted smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “It is nothing,” she began, but the words felt hollow, even to herself. She bit her lip, hesitating, and then finally spoke the truth that had been gnawing at her for hours.

“I was thinking about earlier. The argument with Lady Catherine. I cannot help but feel that the shadow of her words still lingers.”

Darcy’s expression shifted, his concern deepening. He crossed the room slowly and took a seat across from her. His hands rested on his knees, but his eyes never left her face.

“You heard it all, then?” he asked, his voice gentle, though there was a trace of strain in it, as though the memory of the confrontation was still fresh.

Elizabeth nodded, her throat tight. “I did,” she replied, her voice a mere whisper. “And I am grateful, truly. Grateful that you stood up for both yourself and for me. I know it couldn’t have been easy... but I cannot help but feel that it has left a mark. A shadow that will follow us for some time.”

Darcy’s jaw tightened, and he looked away for a moment, as though gathering his thoughts. Then he met her gaze once more, his eyes softening. “I never wanted you to feel caught in the middle of such conflict. But I would do it again, Elizabeth, a thousand times over. For you. For what is right.”

Her heart clenched at his words. She could hear the sincerity in them, the depth of his conviction. And yet, a weight pressed on her chest.

“I know,” she said quietly, “and I am thankful. But it will make things a lot more difficult in terms of the entailment and I... I wished it did not have to be this way. I do not want you and your family to fall out on my behalf.”

Darcy reached out then, his hand hovering just a breath away from hers. “It will pass, Elizabeth,” he said softly, though his voice held a note of uncertainty. “I do not know how she found out about Anne and Richard, but I am certain she has gone to Matlock—that is probably the main reason she travelled to Derbyshire. However, I am sure that my uncle will side with his son over his sister. As for the entailment—I am uncertain what we can do, but I will not rest until it is broken.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened at his words, but she did not pull her hand away. Instead, she allowed her fingers to brush against his, her touch tentative but warm. “I wish I could believe that it is possible,” she said.

He nodded slowly, understanding the weight of her words. “I know,” he said quietly. “I will work to remove it, however long it takes.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath, feeling the warmth of his hand in hers and the sincerity in his voice and for the first time, she did not wish to leave, did not wish for him to let her be. For the first time she felt comfortable—just as they were.

“Elizabeth,” he said. “I want you to know that I disagree with everything my aunt said.” He stepped forward, closer to her, his hands curling into fists at his sides. “She insulted you. She spoke as though you were nothing—an upstart, an interloper. As though I had been ruined by marrying you. It made me furious. And yet, in my anger, I realised something, something I should have seen long ago.”

Elizabeth tilted her head slightly, her gaze questioning.

Darcy let out a slow breath. “Her words—her tone—it was so similar to my own

when I first proposed to you. I see it now, how I must have sounded to you then. How little regard I showed for your feelings. I have regretted it, but tonight, I felt that regret more keenly than ever. I owe you an apology for that moment, Elizabeth. For the hurt I caused you.”

She looked startled, her lips parting slightly as if to respond, but no words came. Darcy pressed on.

“I know that our marriage was not what you envisioned for yourself. It was not born of the affection one hopes for, but rather necessity. I do not wish to press you for an answer now, but I must ask—have you given any thought to our future? Do you find yourself so unhappy that you would prefer, in due course, to seek an annulment?”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “An annulment?” she repeated, as though they had not discussed this at length at the start of their courtship. The truth was, she had not thought of it for some time and so the question surprised her. Did he want an annulment?

“Yes,” Darcy said quietly. “It is as I said. I would not hold you to a marriage you find intolerable. If it is your wish to be free, I would not stand in your way.”

For a moment, silence stretched between them. Then, cautiously, she asked, “And what of you? What do you wish?”

Darcy swallowed, his voice thick with emotion. “I wish to remain married to you. I wish for more than what we have now, but I will not ask for what you cannot give. I only hoped you might consider it. In time.”

Elizabeth studied him carefully, searching his face for sincerity. “It is early days yet,” she finally said, her voice thoughtful. “My sisters are only just settling in, and I have scarcely had time to think beyond that. I do not know what I wish for myself yet, but

I do not believe I would make such a decision lightly.”

He offered her a small, tentative smile. “You may have all the time in the world, Elizabeth. I only wanted you to know how I feel.”

For the first time that evening, Elizabeth felt herself relax. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

And for now, that was enough.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Darcy

Darcy sat at his desk in the library, the fire crackling as the evening had become chilly. He had been working half-heartedly through estate accounts, but his concentration had wavered ever since breakfast. A familiar longing tugged at him—an ever-growing ache to see Elizabeth's face lit with something brighter than guarded politeness. He had scarcely made progress when a knock at the door signalled a welcome interruption.

"Come in," Darcy called, setting his quill aside.

The butler entered, carrying a sealed letter. Darcy recognised the hand at once—Charles Bingley's eager scrawl. His spirits lifted as he took it, his mind already racing with hopes of good news.

"Thank you," he said, dismissing the servant before breaking the seal with uncharacteristic impatience. He unfolded the paper and began to read, his eyes moving quickly over Bingley's exuberant words.

Netherfield Park,

25 th August 1812

My dear Darcy,

I trust this letter finds you in good health and spirits. I write to you with much joy and gratitude, my heart lighter than it has been in months. It is with great pleasure that I

announce I have at last shared with Miss Bennet all that I had kept from her—my thoughts, my fears, and my foolish mistakes. I have these past months done all I could to ease her burden.

I need not tell you, my dear friend, how much it means to me that I was finally able to make myself understood—truly understood. I apologised, as I ought, for my earlier hesitations and for the pain I must have caused her. She graciously accepted not only my apology and we are once more courting.

It is a joy beyond measure to know that she has forgiven me for my previous folly and that she now looks forward to our future together. Of course, I wish to propose as does her mother but I cannot in good conscience do so without first seeking her father's approval, which of course he cannot currently give. He is improving more and more each day but speech is difficult for him and we do not wish to overwhelm him with excitable news. But in a few weeks' time, we feel we shall be able to speak to him and get his consent. And then, we shall set the date. I know Jane is writing a similar letter to Elizabeth, so I ask you not to share this news with Elizabeth just yet.

Until we speak again I remain

Yours sincerely,

Charles Bingley

At the announcement of Bingley and Jane's reconciliation, Darcy allowed himself a rare smile. Relief mingled with satisfaction. Of course, Elizabeth would be delighted by this news, yet the letter reminded him how precariously he had handled the situation in the past.

His first instinct was to seek Elizabeth at once. The news of Jane and Bingley's courtship and impending marriage would surely bring her joy, a lightness he longed

to see return to her features. His Aunt Catherine's visit had cast a dark shadow over the progress they'd made, no doubt having reminded her of the unkind things he had said about the Bennets when he first proposed marriage.

Still, for a moment, he imagined her reaction—the way her dark eyes might brighten and her lips curve into a smile not marred by reservations.

But then he paused. As Bingley had said, Jane was also writing to Elizabeth. Indeed, when he'd looked through the post he'd seen a letter to her from her sister. It was a sister's right, a private joy between them. It was not Darcy's place to interfere, no matter how much he desired Elizabeth's approval.

He rose from his desk and crossed to the window, his hands clasped behind his back as he gazed out over the grounds of Pemberley. The landscape was tranquil, but within him, a storm churned. Why did every decision regarding Elizabeth feel so fraught with risk? A single misstep, he feared, would only confirm whatever reservations she still harboured.

He sighed, frustrated by his hesitation, and resolved to do the only thing he could. He would reply to Bingley, expressing his delight in the news and, perhaps selfishly, seeking advice about his own troubles.

Returning to the desk, Darcy drew out fresh stationery. As he dipped his quill in ink, he forced himself to breathe evenly. His words must not betray his vulnerability too plainly. He began:

My Dear Bingley,

Your letter has brought much-needed brightness to my day. News of your reconciliation with Miss Bennet gladdens me beyond measure. You are a lucky man, though I do not doubt you are fully aware of this truth.

It is equally heartening to hear of Mr Bennet's progress.

As for my own matters, I must admit that not all news is as joyful as yours. Lady Catherine has definitively refused any assistance in the matter of the entail no doubt because she remains upset about my refusal to marry Anne. My aunt had also learned about Anne's fondness for Richard, so you can imagine that news was not well received.

I am certain there will be repercussions sooner rather than later. In any case, Lady Catherine is furious. Her self-righteous indignation was communicated with such vigour that even now, days later, I find myself fuming. It is clear we must find another solution to secure Elizabeth's family's future, but at present, I know not what that may be.

Elizabeth herself remains silent on whether she feels ready to deepen her connection to me. I cannot blame her; I would rather she speak in her own time than feign contentment. However, this waiting is more difficult than I imagined. If there is solace to be found, it is in the hope that her heart might one day mirror the steadfastness of my own.

You have always had the enviable talent of finding light where I see only shadows, so I ask, as my dearest friend, that you write back soon. I value your counsel more than I know how to say.

Yours ever,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Darcy set down the quill and carefully folded the letter. Bingley's happiness and the slow but sure recovery of Mr Bennet reminded him of his place in Elizabeth's life. As much as he loved her, it was not enough to will her love in return. He could only offer

her space and time.

Yet, as he sat there, Darcy could not suppress the faint, foolish hope that Elizabeth might see something more in him than the flaws he had once so unthinkingly displayed. Every day that passed without her declaring her intention to annul their union brought equal parts relief and trepidation. If she left him, it would mean an end to the waiting—but it would also mean the end of any hope for the life he so desperately wanted.

The thought chilled him more than the coolness of the approaching autumn ever could.

Satisfied the ink was dry, Darcy sealed the letter. He tugged on the bell pull to summon a footman, instructing the missive be sent to Bingley at once. As the door closed, he returned to the window, gazing out at the horizon with a heavy sigh. The leaden, grey clouds mirrored his thoughts.

And so, he would wait, as he always did—with patience and a heart full of unspoken hope.

Darcy

15th September 1812

Darcy sat in the breakfast room, perusing the morning newspapers when the sound of approaching footsteps disturbed his thoughts. He looked up at once, anticipating Elizabeth's arrival. It had been a fortnight since their conversation, in which he had avowed his sentiments. Though he had been somewhat disappointed by the reticence of her reply, she had given him reason to hope.

Indeed, in the days following the arrival of letters from Jane Bennet and Bingley, matters had continued to improve. They had walked together more frequently, engaged in conversation with an ease he had never before experienced, and even, on occasion, read the newspapers side by side.

He cherished her opinions, her intelligence, and her keen observations on current affairs. Indeed, he cherished everything about her. They had continued attending church together, comporting themselves as Mr and Mrs Darcy with ease. They dined as a family with her sisters—though, of late, he had noticed that Miss Mary Bennet did not join them as often. The middle sister, once eager to engage in spirited discussion, had begun to withdraw once more into quiet solitude, a melancholy shadow returning to her countenance.

Darcy had meant to broach the matter with Elizabeth, but their newfound harmony had been so pleasant that he hesitated to disrupt it. Yet, as their interactions had become more agreeable of late, he had observed something that filled him with unexpected warmth—he believed he had caught Elizabeth smiling in anticipation of

his company, just as he now found himself awaiting her presence with no small measure of expectation.

However, when he looked up, he found himself momentarily disappointed, for it was not Elizabeth who entered but Mary.

Lowering The Times to the table beside his half-eaten bread roll, he offered his young sister-in-law a polite smile.

She did not return it. Instead, she inclined her head in a brief, perfunctory nod before lowering herself onto a chair.

“Good morning, Mr Darcy,” she said.

“And a good morning to you, Miss Bennet. Is today one of the days you visit the convalescent home?”

She shook her head. “No, I went yesterday.”

“A music lesson, then?” he enquired, eager to show interest in her pastimes.

However, to his mild disappointment, she shook her head once more.

“No. I informed my tutor that I no longer wished to pursue music at present. I enjoyed it, but between the convalescent home and... other matters, it is too much.”

“Other matters?” Darcy prompted, his brow furrowing slightly.

“I do thank you for arranging the lessons, but I believe I shall step away from the instrument for a time.”

Darcy frowned. This was most unusual. While Miss Bennet was by no means a prodigy, she had always shown both diligence and enjoyment in her practice. What had changed?

The more he reflected, the more he realised how greatly Miss Bennet's demeanour had altered of late. She had withdrawn, keeping primarily to herself. It was not only that she absented herself from dinner on occasion—she no longer engaged in the lively conversations she once enjoyed with Elizabeth and Kitty. Had her enthusiasm for music simply waned? Or was it concern for her father that weighed upon her? If that were the case, Darcy was determined to alleviate such distress.

“Miss Bennet, you will be pleased to know that I have received another letter from the physician. He assures me that your father is making remarkable strides. He took several steps for the first time this past week.”

She looked up then, her lips parting slightly before she gave a small smile. “That is good news indeed, Mr Darcy. We did not think it possible. We ought to thank you for your efforts.”

“They were not solely my efforts,” he replied. “I merely provide the means, but the true labour is undertaken by your mother, your father, and, of course, the physician and nurses.”

“You are quite right,” she agreed, reaching for a roll. She cut it neatly with her knife, and for a moment, the only sound in the room was the crunch of bread as she ate in silence.

Darcy observed her with growing concern. “Have you been feeling quite well, Miss Bennet?”

She lifted her gaze and shrugged. “As well as can be expected.”

“I heard from Georgiana that there was a planned trip to Sheffield. Miss Catherine will be accompanying her. Will you be joining them?”

“I should think not. I am not one for shopping excursions, Mr Darcy. You must be aware of that.”

Shopping? Darcy frowned, momentarily perplexed. Then, realisation dawned. She referred to the stipend he provided the ladies each month. It was true that she had spent far less of her allotted funds than the others, at least until recently. Over the last few weeks, however, she had spent considerably more, even requesting additional funds.

“I thought such an adventure might be entertaining,” he offered.

“I quite enjoy solitude, Mr Darcy,” she replied, spreading butter onto another roll.

Darcy hesitated. “Very well. Is there anything I can assist you with? Any interest you wish to pursue? I could make an introduction at the circulating library, if you would like.”

She shook her head and set her knife down. “You need not fret, Mr Darcy. It is as I said. I simply prefer privacy at this moment, that is all.”

He nodded, knowing that to press further might only unsettle her, and he had no desire to intrude. Instead, he picked up his newspaper once more, and they completed the remainder of breakfast in silence.

Later that afternoon, as Darcy strolled along the lake, he spotted Elizabeth and Kitty seated on a bench nearby.

“Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth called out, a wide, warm smile gracing her features. “Will you not join us?”

He did not need to be asked twice. Quickly, he took a seat beside them.

“What a lovely day,” Elizabeth remarked. “Do you not agree? Josephine and Maxwell have returned.”

Darcy chuckled. “Indeed, they have. I saw the geese this morning as well. I already set out to feed them.”

Kitty laughed. “They will be the plumpest in all of Derbyshire at this rate. I have noticed the two of you together by the lake nearly every morning.”

Darcy caught the way she winked at her sister as she said the word together and noticed Elizabeth’s slight flush.

“I would not say every morning,” Elizabeth replied, looking away as if caught out.

Kitty turned to Darcy. “Have you seen Mary?”

“This morning at breakfast, but not since. I believe she took the carriage into town.”

“She has been quieter of late,” Elizabeth mused. “It is rather odd that she has retreated.”

Darcy leaned back, considering. “Do you think she might be homesick? Ought we consider sending her back, at least for a visit?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Mary has never shown fondness for Meryton. Indeed, she has often spoken of how uninspiring she finds it.”

“That is true,” Kitty added. “She always said she wished to live somewhere else—in Scotland, London, or somewhere with more to see and do.”

Darcy inclined his head. “Then perhaps we ought to make a greater effort to engage her. She may enjoy a change of scenery, Matlock, perhaps? Your sisters could accompany Georgiana.”

Elizabeth smiled at him, warmth in her gaze. “An excellent idea. But will they be willing to host them, so soon after Lady Catherine’s visit?”

Lady Catherine had travelled to Matlock directly from Pemberley and informed her brother of Anne’s confession. This he had learned from his uncle, who had been rather exasperated by the whole affair. He’d written to Richard and requested his presence at Matlock at his earliest convenience, something Richard intended to accomplish soon, if his own letter was anything to go by.

Darcy felt rather like a spectator to these proceedings, at once helpless to assist his cousins and glad he was no longer a central player in this particular game.

“I should think they will be happy to see Georgiana, she always brings them much joy. And what is better than one young lady? Why, three of course!” He smiled, and Kitty brightened.

“Oh, a visit to Matlock would be most agreeable! What is Lady Matlock like? Pray, tell me she bears no resemblance to Lady Catherine.”

Darcy chuckled. “Not in the slightest, Lady Matlock is a gracious hostess—you would like her.”

Elizabeth turned to him with a knowing smile. “Such a considerate proposal, Mr Darcy. Or is it that you wish for a quieter house?”

His faint smile betrayed him. "I cannot deny that the thought is appealing."

Elizabeth's smile deepened, amusement flickering in her eyes. The idea of having the house to themselves was indeed thrilling. And if he judged her reaction correctly, she too felt this way. And that in and of itself made the suggestion worthwhile.

"Then it is settled," he announced then. "I will write to my uncle post haste."

And with that, Darcy felt something settle within himself as well.

Elizabeth

3rd October 1812

Elizabeth sat in the drawing room on the chaise longue, a piece of embroidery on her lap. As her fingers worked on the material, her mind wandered to her sister. If her most recent letter was anything to go by, she would soon be Mrs Bingley. Well, just as soon as their father was well enough to consent. It would be wonderful to attend the wedding of Jane and Mr Bingley, of course, though she knew they should not rush things. They had thought she was as good as engaged before, but then it had all fallen apart.

Nevertheless, the news helped lift her spirits. Her father was steadily improving, and Elizabeth noted with relief that her mother's letters began to carry a tone of optimism rather than despair. Mr Bennet had even managed to express a few words, which filled Elizabeth with hope.

Longbourn itself still faced uncertainties. Despite Darcy's attempts, Mr Collins remained obstinate about breaking the entailment. Thankfully, Darcy was shouldering the financial burdens, and, while Elizabeth felt a pang of guilt at relying on him, she was grateful for his generosity. The estate had a steward now, relieving some of the responsibilities, allowing Longbourn to finally turn a profit once more.

Lost in thought, Elizabeth's reverie was interrupted when Mary appeared in the doorway, carrying a book. "I did not know you were here," she said, about to turn away.

“Please, do not go,” Elizabeth urged. “I am merely embroidering. Come, sit with me.”

“I do not wish to disturb you,” Mary said. The solemnity that she had carried during the first few days after their arrival had returned, but there was something else. Something more. Elizabeth was not quite certain what it was, but it worried her. There was a darkness to her sister. But why?

“You will not disturb me,” Elizabeth said. “Come, sit. I know you wish to read, but I wanted to ask, how do you fare? I know we have endured a few difficult months.”

“I am well.” Mary hesitated. “Has Mr Darcy spoken to you about me? He seems much concerned for my welfare.”

Elizabeth tilted her head before nodding. It had been a fortnight since they’d discussed Mary’s change in mood, and while Darcy was arranging the trip to Matlock, they had all taken care to watch Mary more carefully for any hint of reasons for her despair.

Darcy, driven by a sense of responsibility for her, had gone a step further and attempted to engage her in conversation—but to no avail. She continued to claim nothing was wrong while withdrawing into her own world to which none of them had access.

“He has. He is worried about you. In fact, I am also worried. As is Kitty. You have been very quiet. And you have not said anything else about your friends from the convalescent home. You have not gone out with them in some while.”

Mary shrugged. “Margaret and Sarah left three weeks ago.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath. Had she noticed this? She did not think so. In any case, it

would explain her sister's silent mood. "I am sorry to hear it. It is never easy to lose friends."

"They were not friends as such," Mary said. "They were pleasant company, and I shall write to them, but we only knew each other for a few weeks. It is hardly a friendship the loss of which should permanently affect me," she said, pragmatic as ever.

"It must still be difficult. Are there no other young ladies whose company you enjoy?" Elizabeth asked.

Mary shrugged. "Not thus far, but I do not mind. I have never been one for company. You know this. I have always preferred the company of my pianoforte or books."

"I do. That is why I was so surprised that you gave up your music lessons."

Mary placed the book beside her and leaned back. "Oh Lizzy, you do not know me at all. I enjoyed the music, I did. But I do not feel comfortable accepting Mr Darcy's patronage. Everything we have is paid for by him. The very clothes we wear now are paid for by him. I do not wish to feel permanently indebted to anyone."

"But he is your brother," Elizabeth said. "He gladly assists us."

"He assists us because he seeks your good opinion," Mary said.

"He assists us because he cares, which is very kind of him," Elizabeth said, though she knew he did wish to earn her favour or rather show her a side of him she had not yet seen.

"I suppose it is, but I cannot help but wonder what has changed."

Elizabeth blinked. “What do you mean, what has changed? Nothing has changed.”

“But it has.” Mary’s gaze was steady. “Between you and him. When we first arrived here, you could scarcely endure his company, and now I see you walking together often. You appear content. You appear at ease. Could it be that you care for him?”

Elizabeth opened her mouth and closed it again. Was this not the very question she had been grappling with? She did enjoy his company, she appreciated their gentle teasing, their lively discussions. But was there more? She believed so, for she thought of him often when they were apart. Yet, she sometimes wondered if the contemplative, kind man he appeared to be now was the true Darcy or if he merely wished to ingratiate himself to her, as Mary had suggested. And there was more. Something she had worried about but had not voiced to anyone, not even Jane.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said at last, her voice barely above a whisper. “I admire him. He has been so generous, so thoughtful. And yet...”

Mary’s eyebrows rose slightly, waiting for her sister to finish.

“And yet, I wonder if my affections are based on gratitude,” Elizabeth confessed. “He has done so much for our family. Perhaps it clouds my judgement, making me see virtues in him I might not have otherwise.”

Mary placed her book in her lap and folded her hands neatly over it, her expression thoughtfully composed. “Gratitude may sometimes be mistaken for something deeper. When someone acts as a saviour, particularly in desperate times, we cannot help but feel an attachment towards them.”

Elizabeth frowned. “You make it sound as though I am a child swayed by flattery.”

Mary gave a small shake of her head. “I would not diminish your feelings. I believe

you are sincere. But sincerity and wisdom do not always walk hand in hand. You must ask yourself whether Mr Darcy has truly changed... or whether you are simply seeing him differently now.”

Elizabeth stood by the window, gazing out at the gardens. “Thank you,” she said at last, turning back to Mary. “Your honesty is precisely what I needed.”

Mary inclined her head slightly. “You are welcome, Lizzy. I do hope Mr Darcy is as genuine as he seems. For your sake.”

Darcy

15th October 1812

Darcy entered the house, struck by how quiet it was. Georgiana, Mary, and Kitty had departed the previous day for Matlock. Mary Bennet had been notably unimpressed by the idea of the journey, which had disappointed him. He had hoped she would find some cheer in the venture. Yet, he wondered now if her melancholy, which had persisted for the last ten days since he first discussed the trip with her, wasn't rooted in homesickness after all. Elizabeth and Kitty had insisted that wasn't the case, but he couldn't think of any other explanation. Perhaps her time at Matlock would improve her spirits.

Lady Matlock had been more than willing to host the three of them. In fact, Darcy had learned that both Richard and Anne had already announced their intentions to join the gathering. Not so, of course, with Lady Catherine, whose absence was likely to be a relief to all involved.

He shook his head, a faint smile touching his lips, and then paused as he heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the marble floor behind him. Turning, he met Elizabeth's curious gaze.

"What are you shaking your head for, Darcy?" she asked.

He hesitated before replying. "Just thinking about this weekend at Matlock. It will be rather crowded."

“Do you wish we had joined them?” she enquired.

“No,” he said. “I was looking forward to a little peace and quiet.”

Her expression shifted ever so slightly, and Darcy wondered if he had said the wrong thing.

“I did not mean that I don’t enjoy the hustle and bustle of a full house,” he quickly clarified, “but sometimes, it is nice to have a bit of quiet.”

“I thought you were about to say you were tired of us,” she teased, raising an eyebrow.

“Never,” he said fervently. “I could never tire of you.” Darcy looked at her intently, hoping to convey that what he truly meant was her—Elizabeth alone. He could never tire of Elizabeth. She was the one who made him laugh and smile, the one whose presence seemed to brighten even the darkest corners of his life.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” she said, a faint blush colouring her cheeks. “And what will you do with your free time?”

“I should tend to the ledger. I should visit the tenants,” he replied. “I should catch up on my correspondence.”

Elizabeth tilted her head, an amused smile playing on her lips. “Those are a great many things you ‘should’ do. What about the things you want to do?”

He chuckled softly. “There are indeed many things I want. I want to sit and read. I want to ride. I want to play chess.”

Her smile widened. “Such humble wishes. Can you not make them true? You are

master of Pemberley, after all.”

“And you its mistress,” he said without thinking. Her smile faltered for a moment, and though it returned, it seemed a little less bright.

“I suppose I am. For the time being,” she murmured.

Darcy wasn’t sure if she intended the words to cut, but they did. He stepped back slightly, catching his breath.

“You can be mistress of Pemberley for as long as you wish it. As I’ve told you,” he said carefully.

“And I am grateful,” she replied, though her tone suggested otherwise. “But must we speak of this now?”

“Of course not,” Darcy said quickly, chastising himself for pressing her. “Would you perhaps enjoy indulging one of my wants with me? Such as taking a ride? It is quite a lovely day.”

Her face softened into a genuine smile. “I would. I shall change into my riding habit.”

“Very well,” he said with a nod. “I’ll let the grooms know.”

Half an hour later, Darcy and Elizabeth rode side-by-side along the rolling Derbyshire countryside. The crisp autumn air carried a faint scent of damp earth and evergreens, and the rhythmic sound of their horses’ hooves filled the comfortable silence between them. Darcy glanced sideways at Elizabeth, wondering what thoughts occupied her mind. Since their earlier conversation, she had given him no clear indication of her feelings about his more personal admissions. She had not withdrawn from him, which gave him some measure of relief, but neither had she

seemed inclined to move closer. It was a puzzle. For now, though, he resolved to be patient. Perhaps it was best to let her come to him in her own time.

Oh, how he wished he could ask advice from someone. But with Bingley away, there was no one he could confide in. Richard was occupied with his own affairs, which would no doubt involve some kind of confrontation with their formidable aunt, Lady Catherine. Darcy sighed inwardly and tightened his grip on the reins. No, this matter was his alone to resolve.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth rode beside Darcy, grateful that he didn't feel the need to fill every moment with conversation. It was one of the qualities she most appreciated about him now—his ability to simply exist in the moment, content in their shared silence. She thought of the peaceful evenings they spent in the drawing room or the parlour, each absorbed in their own book, enveloped by nothing but the soft crackling of the fire and the occasional creak of the house settling. If she had been with any of her sisters, even Jane, she would have felt obliged to engage in constant conversation. But with Darcy, she could simply be .

It had been some time since they last quarrelled, which was a relief, though she sensed there were still unspoken words lingering between them. Still, to claim she had resolved her feelings entirely would be untrue. In her heart, she knew she wanted to truly be his wife. Not in name only, but in every sense. Yet, Mary's pointed remarks had revived her practical doubts.

What if Mary was correct? What if this affection she felt was merely gratitude? Gratitude for all Darcy had done to protect her family? Worse, what if he had manipulated the situation to ensure she would be reliant upon him? Mary hadn't said it outright, but she had hinted enough to sow a seed of doubt. It was all very convenient, wasn't it? Mr Darcy arriving just in time to save the day.

Elizabeth glanced at Darcy. His profile was serious, his gaze fixed ahead, yet there was a calmness to him that she found reassuring. Could a man so earnest and forthright truly be capable of such machinations? She felt her earlier suspicions begin to slip away. But still, the doubts lingered, faint but persistent.

“You seem far away in thought, Elizabeth,” Darcy said, breaking the silence.

She hesitated, then forced a smile. “Just admiring the scenery. Derbyshire is beautiful at this time of year.”

“It is. Though I find it pales in comparison to the company,” he said.

Her heart fluttered at his words, but she willed herself to stay composed. “You are kind to say so,” she murmured, allowing herself a small smile.

Darcy said no more, seeming content to let the moment speak for itself. And for now, Elizabeth allowed herself to simply ride beside him, the question of her heart still unanswered, but her faith in his sincerity growing with every quiet mile.

The crisp afternoon air bit lightly at Elizabeth’s cheeks as she and Darcy approached Pemberley. The ride had been invigorating, leaving her in a pleasant mood, but her eyes narrowed curiously as the estate’s familiar silhouette came into view. A carriage stood waiting near the front steps.

Darcy reined in his horse beside hers, his brows furrowing slightly. “A visitor,” he observed, his tone edged with puzzlement. “But I was not expecting anyone.”

Elizabeth shaded her eyes with her hand, squinting at the unfamiliar crest painted on the carriage door. “Perhaps Mary and Kitty have returned from Matlock earlier than planned?”

Darcy shook his head, dismounting with his usual ease. “It is unlikely. My aunt would have sent word. Besides, that is not my uncle’s carriage.”

Elizabeth watched as he strode around to assist her. His hands, steady and warm, gripped her waist briefly as he helped her down from her horse. She smiled her thanks but could not help glancing again at the carriage.

“Whoever it is, I expect we shall soon find out,” she remarked as they ascended the front steps together.

The butler was already holding the door open for them, his expression polite yet betraying a touch of urgency. “There are guests waiting in the drawing room, Mr Darcy.”

Darcy frowned faintly but nodded. He glanced at Elizabeth, offering her his arm as they moved purposefully towards the drawing room. As the door swung open, Elizabeth stopped short, her eyes widening.

There, in the centre of the room, stood her sister Jane, a radiant smile lighting her features. Beside her, Mr Bingley looked equally cheerful, while Aunt Gardiner, ever graceful, stood nearby.

“Jane!” Elizabeth gasped, her voice lifting with pure astonishment. She rushed forward, enveloping her sister in a tight embrace.

“Oh, Lizzy, I cannot tell you how much I have missed you!” Jane cried, clinging to her.

Elizabeth stepped back, looking from her sister’s flushed cheeks to the unmistakable joy in her eyes. Looking from her sister to her aunt, and then to Mr Bingley, she asked, “But what brings you here? You did not send word!”

Mr Bingley stepped forward with his characteristic warmth. “We wanted to surprise you—and we have news to share.”

“News?” Elizabeth asked.

“I think your sister had best explain it,” her aunt said with a smile.

“I am eager to hear,” Darcy said. “Though I have a feeling I know.”

“I hope you do not mind the suddenness of our visit,” Mr Bingley said cheerfully as he exchanged a handshake with Darcy.

“Mind?” Elizabeth repeated, her laughter light and incredulous. “Of course not. But Jane—” Her words faltered as she noticed the faint blush colouring her sister’s cheeks. She caught Jane’s hand in her own. “There’s something you haven’t told me.”

Jane glanced at Mr Bingley, her eyes bright. “Lizzy,” she said softly, her voice trembling with barely contained emotion, “he asked Papa for his blessing. And Papa—he gave it.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught, her lips parting as shock rippled through her. “Papa gave his blessing? Jane, are you saying—”

“Yes, Lizzy! Mr Bingley and I are officially engaged!” Jane interrupted unable to suppress her joy. “And Papa was able to speak. Not much, and his words falter a little, but he can make himself understood.”

Emotion surged through Elizabeth, and she embraced her sister again, unable to contain her delight. “Jane, this is—this is everything I had hoped for you. I am so happy!”

Darcy’s calm voice broke through her joy, addressing Mr Bingley. “I am pleased for you both. Mr Bennet’s consent is encouraging—his health must be improving.”

Jane turned to Darcy with gratitude. “Yes. Papa’s health is much improved, though he still struggles. He cannot walk unaided yet, and his speech is slow and slurred, but we believe he will recover in time.”

Mrs Gardiner stepped forward, her expression warm as she added, “Your father has shown remarkable determination, Elizabeth. He insisted that the wedding wait until he is able to walk Jane down the aisle himself.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached with both pride and worry. “He truly said that?”

Jane smiled. “He did. He spoke slowly, but his meaning was clear. Mama was in tears.”

Elizabeth bit her lip, her joy mingling with concern for her father. “It gives me such hope to know he is improving.”

Darcy’s brows knit slightly, and he glanced at Mr Bingley. “If Mr Bennet is well enough to give his consent, why did you feel it necessary to come all this way to inform us? Surely a letter would have sufficed.”

Mr Bingley’s smile faltered only slightly before he responded, “I could not let Jane’s news pass without sharing it in person. Besides, we are on our way to Sheffield—my family is there, and I wanted to introduce Jane to them. Mrs Gardiner has been kind enough to serve as chaperone since her husband is away on business in Scotland.”

Elizabeth turned to her aunt with gratitude. “Thank you, Aunt. I can think of no one better suited to care for Jane on such a journey.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled happily. “It is my pleasure, dear. I also thought I could take this opportunity to catch up with some of my childhood friends in the area.”

Jane reached into her reticule and produced a folded letter. “Mama has written as well.”

Elizabeth took the letter and eagerly read her mother’s words. Her mother had not sounded this joyful in a very long time. The idea that both her daughters would be married to gentlemen—thought Mr Bingley was not a member of the landed gentry just yet, a fact conveniently ignored by her mother—delighted Mrs Bennet as did her husband’s progress. The only thing that continued to stretch her nerves was the entail. But with Darcy and Mr Bingley as part of the family, she was sure this too would be soon resolved.

Elizabeth’s cheeks warmed as she read the letter, her mother’s familiar effusions washing over her in waves. She spoke of her father and his progress, praising him in glowing tones she’d never used while he was well. She spoke of Lydia and her adventures in Brighton—which had come to an end but she’d been invited to return to the Forster’s London residence in November. Most of all, however, she spoke of Jane and the wonderful match she’d made. Not a single word was shared about Mrs Bennet’s previous ill regard for the man.

The postscript was particularly bold.

Mr Darcy has done wonders for Longbourn and the family. You chose wisely, my dearest Elizabeth. He is now one of us, and I cannot think of a better son-in-law and can only hope Mr Bingley lives up to Mr Darcy’s example!

Elizabeth let out a laugh, wondering how Darcy would feel to be classed as a Bennet in her mother’s eyes. His questioning glance suggested he was eager for an explanation, but she tucked the letter away, holding her thoughts close for now.

“We must celebrate,” Elizabeth said brightly, her eyes meeting Jane’s again.

“We must, but where are Mary and Kitty? I wanted to share the news with them as well.”

“Gone to visit my aunt at Matlock, I am afraid,” Darcy said. “Along with my sister. They will be back by week’s end.”

“Ah, we shall miss them then,” Jane said, sounding disappointed. “We will only be here two days at most as we are expected by Mr Bingley’s aunt.”

“We shall all celebrate another time then. When it is official and we are all at Longbourn, we will celebrate as a family,” Darcy said, surprising Elizabeth who hadn’t considered that he would want to come to Longbourn with her again. The idea was both terrifying and delightful. She had trouble picturing Mr Darcy at her parents’ table, breaking bread with his mother of whom he’d thought so little. But on the other hand, the thought was also enticing. She knew Darcy and her father would get along wonderfully once they had a chance to be together, and once her father was recovered as much as he could.

“Well, I, for one, look forward to it,” Mr Bingley said brightly. “Even more so because Darcy and I shall finally be brothers, as I have long secretly wished. Only through marriage could he ever consent to such an association.”

Laughter rippled through the room at his good-natured humour. Elizabeth chuckled softly, though her mind wandered as the moment passed. Mr Bingley’s joy seemed so effortless, so genuine. Yet even as she tried to match it, a pang of unease settled in her chest.

She had been at Pemberley for almost four months, long enough to find comfort in its halls and even familiarity with Darcy’s presence. But the truth remained stubborn in her heart: she was no closer to deciding what she wanted. Could she remain as Mrs Darcy? Would she ever feel wholly at ease in this role?

As her thoughts swirled, she glanced at Darcy. He was laughing with Mr Bingley, his usual reserved demeanour lighter than she had ever seen it. His affection for her was undeniable, as was his care for her family. But that did not erase her doubts.

Elizabeth felt Mrs Gardiner's perceptive gaze on her and quickly composed herself, banishing the traces of turmoil from her features. This was a moment for celebration, for Jane, for their father's small but encouraging recovery. Yet, in her heart, Elizabeth knew her questions remained unanswered.

Darcy caught her eye then, and there was warmth in his expression—an openness that tugged at her resolve. She smiled faintly, hoping it masked her inner conflict. For now, that was all she could manage.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth and Jane strolled leisurely through the gardens of Pemberley. The pretty hues of the late summer blooms now gone, and the gardens were awash with the golden and amber tones of the turning leaves. Autumn had always been Elizabeth's favourite season. It brought her soul rest, as odd as that might appear to some.

Their shoes crunched softly along the gravel paths, while the occasional trill of birds added a melodic backdrop to their conversation.

"You and Mr Darcy seem much more at ease with one another than your letters led me to believe," Jane observed, her voice as gentle as the day itself. She glanced sideways at her sister. "But I can tell something is still troubling you, Lizzy. What is it?"

Elizabeth hesitated, her gaze fixed on the path ahead. "I wish I knew," she said at last, her voice tinged with uncertainty. "I wish I weren't so confused."

"Confused about what?" Jane asked, slowing her pace and turning to her sister with a look of quiet concern.

Elizabeth sighed. "My feelings. For Darcy."

"If I may speak plainly, looking at you, I would never have suspected such inner turmoil. The way you look at him, Lizzy, it is unmistakable. There is affection there—genuine affection. The kind I hope is reflected in my own gaze when I look at Charles."

Elizabeth felt a faint blush rise in her cheeks. It was true, she did look at Darcy often, more often than she realised, and with a softness she had never associated with herself before. And yet...

“It is not that simple,” she said quietly. “I think... I am fond of him, Jane. More than fond. I enjoy his company. When I enter the parlour, I feel a sense of disappointment if he is not there, and when he is there, my heart...” She paused, searching for the right words. “It leaps.”

Jane looped her arm through Elizabeth’s, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Lizzy, that sounds to me like your heart knows what it wants. But something is holding your mind back. What is it?”

Elizabeth hesitated, her thoughts a tangle of emotions. “It is his reasons for marrying me,” she said finally. “You know he proposed to me once before, and I declined.”

“In rather emphatic terms, if I recall,” Jane said with a small, knowing smile.

Elizabeth could not help but chuckle softly. “Indeed. I made my feelings towards him very clear. And yet he came to me again, despite it all. He offered to save our family, Jane. Does that not strike you as somewhat calculated?”

Jane’s expression grew thoughtful. “Perhaps, if that were his only reason. But was it not also true that he needed to marry to avoid scandal with his cousin? You both entered the marriage with some understanding of each other’s circumstances. Besides, you cannot deny that you also married him for practical reasons. It was a mutual arrangement, was it not?”

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “Yes, it was an arrangement. But I worry that I have been manipulated. Not by Darcy, but by my own foolishness. That my feelings now are simply a result of our proximity, of gratitude for what he has done for me, for us.”

Jane stopped walking, forcing Elizabeth to stop with her. She turned to face her sister fully, a rare firmness in her voice as she said, “Lizzy, what has brought this doubt into your mind?”

Elizabeth hesitated again, then admitted, “I spoke with Mary. She suggested that gratitude can sometimes masquerade as love. She believes I am mistaking one for the other.”

Jane frowned, her brow creasing with disbelief. “Mary told you this? Dearest Lizzy, since when has Mary been your guide in matters of the heart? I do not wish to sound unkind, but Mary has always had a rather cynical view of the world, and romance in particular. She has never known love herself.”

Elizabeth bit her lip, recognising the truth in Jane’s words. Mary had always been pragmatic to a fault, her outlook more academic than emotional.

Jane continued, her tone softening. “You are letting fear cloud your judgement. Fear of loving him, fear of being vulnerable, and perhaps even fear of happiness itself. Have you considered that?”

Elizabeth looked away, her mind racing. She could not deny the truth in Jane’s words, though admitting it to herself was a far greater challenge.

They resumed their stroll, the silence between them now one of contemplation rather than unease. After a while, Jane spoke again. “And what of Mary? Mr Darcy mentioned she has been quieter of late.”

Elizabeth’s face fell slightly. “She has not been herself. At first, she seemed to thrive here. Darcy arranged for her to have music lessons and opportunities to volunteer at a convalescent home. She made friends there and seemed to have found purpose. But lately, she has become withdrawn. Darcy thinks it may be homesickness, though I am

not certain.”

“Mary always spoke of adventure and independence,” Jane said thoughtfully. “But I think it was easier for her to dream of it than to live it. Perhaps being away from home is harder than she anticipated. We could take her back to Longbourn, if she wishes it.”

Elizabeth sighed, guilt washing over her. “Perhaps we should. I wonder if I have done enough for her. I wanted so badly for my sisters to find happiness here, and when Mary seemed content, I focused more on myself and Darcy. I should have paid more attention.”

Jane gave her sister’s arm another gentle squeeze. “You have done more than most would in your situation. When Mary and Kitty return from Matlock, we can discuss what would be best for them. Kitty may wish to return to Longbourn as well.”

“Then I would be alone with Darcy,” Elizabeth murmured, almost to herself.

Jane smiled. “And that does not seem to trouble you as it once did, does it?”

Elizabeth returned the smile, a faint blush colouring her cheeks. “No, it does not trouble me at all. In truth, I think I would enjoy it. I have found myself longing for time alone with him.”

“And yet we have come and disrupted your peace,” Jane said with a light laugh. “I told Charles we ought to write ahead before visiting.”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth replied warmly. “I am so glad you are here, Jane. This conversation alone has brought me so much clarity. I would not trade it for anything.”

Jane’s eyes sparkled with affection. “Very well. I shall not feel too guilty for taking

time away from your Mr Darcy. But can you imagine it, Lizzy? You and I, both married. Charles has even spoken of settling here in the North. He is fond of our family, but I daresay the idea of living within three miles of Mama for the rest of his days does not sit well with him.”

Elizabeth laughed, a genuine sound that felt like sunshine breaking through clouds. “I can well imagine it. And I daresay Darcy would not care to take up permanent residence in Hertfordshire either. So, you are thinking of moving here?”

“Perhaps not Lambton, but Sheffield,” Jane said. “Charles has relations there on both sides of his family. They have invited us to visit, and he seems keen to live closer to them.”

Elizabeth smiled softly, glancing ahead to where Darcy, Mr Bingley, and their aunt were seated in the garden, laughing over tea. The sight warmed her heart in ways she could scarcely describe. For the first time, she allowed herself to dream of what could be, a life where she and Jane were neighbours, their husbands as dear friends as well as brothers-in-law, and their families bound together by love and affection. She could almost see it—a future filled with laughter, friendship, and yes, perhaps even happiness.

Jane, Mr Bingley, and Aunt Gardiner stayed for two more days, filling the halls of Pemberley with warmth and laughter. Their presence brought a liveliness that was infectious, and Elizabeth found herself increasingly at ease. The easy camaraderie between her sister and Mr Bingley, so natural and unburdened, painted a picture of a happiness she had long desired for Jane. Watching the way Mr Bingley looked at her, a soft adoration evident in his every glance, reminded Elizabeth of all the blessings that had been bestowed upon them after so much hardship.

For Elizabeth, these two days offered something of a glimpse into what life at Pemberley could truly be—what it ought to be. She envisioned her days filled with moments like these. Intimate gatherings in the drawing room, walks through the gardens where the sunlight scattered softly upon the ground, and animated conversations over dinner.

Darcy, too, seemed lighter during this time. His sense of humour, subtle yet delightful, emerged more often, drawing smiles from all present. Even Aunt Gardiner, often a reserved observer, laughed openly at his dry wit. Watching him in such moments, Elizabeth felt her heart soften further. The reserved, almost haughty man she had once believed him to be, had slowly but surely revealed a capacity for warmth and tenderness that never failed to surprise her.

In the evenings, Darcy insisted on reading aloud to the group, his deep voice commanding attention as he recited poetry that Elizabeth was sure he had chosen with her in mind.

One particularly poignant moment came during an after-dinner stroll. Mr Bingley and Jane walked ahead, their low murmurs a soundtrack to the twilight. Elizabeth lingered behind with Aunt Gardiner, her arm looped through the older woman's as they made their way towards the lake.

“Your husband,” her aunt said softly, “is a very agreeable man, Lizzy. And one who, I think, loves you deeply.”

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment, her gaze fixed on the distant shimmer of the water. “He has surprised me,” she finally admitted. “In so many ways. When I think of how I first judged him...” She trailed off, shaking her head at her own folly.

“That is the mark of growth,” Aunt Gardiner replied. “To re-evaluate and learn. And, I might add, it is also the mark of a good match. You both challenge each other, do

you not?”

Elizabeth could not suppress her smile. “Constantly,” she said.

The two women walked a while in companionable silence, their footsteps on the gravel path the only sound. When they returned to the house, they found Jane and Mr Bingley at the piano, their heads close together as they tried to decipher a piece of music. Darcy was at his desk but looked up immediately when Elizabeth entered. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment, it felt as though the others vanished, leaving only the two of them in the world.

The following day, as Jane and Mr Bingley prepared to depart, Elizabeth felt an unexpected pang of sadness. She had grown accustomed to the added cheer of their company, and the thought of returning to quieter days made her heart ache just a little. Still, she knew she would not be alone. Not truly.

Standing in the front hall, Jane embraced her tightly. “Lizzy,” she said, her voice soft with emotion, “I am so happy for you.”

“And I for you,” Elizabeth replied, her voice catching slightly. “Jane, I hope we can make this a habit. Regular visits.”

Jane smiled. “I would like nothing better.”

Mr Bingley, ever enthusiastic, assured Darcy that they would not be strangers and promised to host them at Netherfield soon, a plan to which Darcy agreed readily.

As their carriage disappeared down the driveway, Elizabeth turned back to Darcy, who offered her his arm. Together, they returned to the drawing room.

“I daresay I shall miss them,” Elizabeth said, a soft laugh escaping her.

“They will return,” Darcy assured her, his tone warm. “And in the meantime, there is much to occupy us here.”

Elizabeth looked up at him, feeling a strange new certainty settle over her. Perhaps she had always envisioned her life here. Not as Darcy’s reluctant bride, but as his true wife—sharing joys, challenges, and the quiet, precious moments of everyday life.

For the first time since their whirlwind marriage, she found herself looking forward to the future with hope rather than apprehension. The life she could see before her was a promising one, and she began to wonder if perhaps her heart had already decided its course.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth resolved to act, her heart beating faster as she made her way to Darcy's study. She had been putting this off for too long, allowing doubts and insecurities to cloud what she now realised was an inevitable conclusion.

The door was slightly ajar, and as she knocked lightly, Darcy's deep voice bade her to enter. Inside, he sat behind the mahogany desk, a scattering of papers before him, though his attention shifted instantly to her.

"Elizabeth," he said, rising. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," she assured him, a soft smile tugging at her lips. "I wished to speak with you."

He motioned for her to sit, but she shook her head, preferring to stand. Something about the moment required the immediacy of it, the intimacy of proximity. She took a step closer, clasping her hands to steady herself.

"About Jane and Mr Bingley's visit," she began, "I... I wanted to thank you."

His brow furrowed slightly, and he tilted his head, as though uncertain what she referred to.

"For doing as you said you would," she clarified. "For righting a wrong, as you put it. It means a great deal to me—and to my family."

He studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "I am an honourable man,"

he said at last. “When I recognised my mistake—what my interference had cost—I knew I must make amends. It was not only for you, Elizabeth, though I hoped...”

She stepped closer still, her heart hammering against her ribs. “You hoped I might see you differently?”

His lips curved into a faint smile. “Yes,” he admitted. “I hoped, given time, that you might come to see me for who I really am, rather than...”

“Rather than the man who insulted me and my family so dreadfully?” she interjected with a teasing lilt.

He chuckled softly. “Yes, precisely.”

Elizabeth’s voice softened, and her gaze held his. “I do see you differently now.”

He stilled, his breath seeming to catch at her words. “You do?”

“I do,” she said again. “I see a man who loves deeply, who acts with integrity even when it is difficult. I see someone who makes me feel safe, valued, and—” She hesitated, her voice breaking slightly. “And cared for. I find myself eager to share my days with you, to tell you what I think, to... be by your side.”

A flicker of something raw passed through his eyes, but before he could reply, Mrs Reynolds appeared at the doorway, her face flushed with an urgency that told them she would not have interrupted without good reason.

“Sir,” she said, her tone brisk. “A carriage has arrived. It is the young ladies—and Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged startled glances, the spell of the moment broken but

the unspoken words lingering between them.

“Thank you, Mrs Reynolds,” Darcy replied.

As the housekeeper withdrew, Elizabeth turned back to him, feeling both frustrated at the interruption and strangely buoyed by his steady presence. “We should go and greet them,” she said, her voice a little breathless.

“Of course,” he replied. Then, with a faint smile that seemed meant only for her, he added, “But this is not the end of our conversation, Elizabeth.”

She felt her cheeks heat and nodded. “No,” she murmured. “It most certainly is not.”

Hand in hand, they left the study together, the arrival of their guests barely registering as her thoughts lingered on all she had yet to tell him—and all she had finally begun to admit to herself.

Darcy

Darcy felt a pang of vexation as Mrs Reynolds departed. He had been so close—closer than ever before—to hearing Elizabeth say in unequivocal terms what he had long suspected but dared not assume. He had waited for this moment with the kind of patience that had tested the limits of his self-control. Now, it had slipped away, at least for the time being, and he could not help the surge of frustration that gripped him.

Still, there was no time to dwell on it, as the hurried footsteps of their returning family echoed through the halls. The parlour door burst open, and Mary stormed past them with neither a greeting nor a glance. Her posture was stiff, her face set in a pinched expression, and she marched towards the stairs with a purposeful air. Darcy exchanged a bemused look with Elizabeth, who merely sighed.

“Mary has always been determined to make an impression, though perhaps not always the most favourable one,” Elizabeth murmured.

In contrast, Kitty and Georgiana were all smiles as they appeared, their arms looped through one another’s. Seeing Elizabeth, Kitty exclaimed, “Oh, Lizzy, how delightful it is to be back! Pemberley feels like home already, does it not?”

Georgiana nodded fervently, her cheeks flushed with happiness. “We missed it terribly,” she said. “The journey to Matlock was pleasant enough, but I daresay the air is sweeter here.”

Elizabeth smiled warmly at them both. “It is good to have you all back,” she said,

noting with affection how Georgiana's disposition had grown livelier since their first meeting.

Darcy stepped forward to greet the girls, offering them a rare smile of genuine fondness. "You're both settled, I trust?"

"We are," Georgiana replied. "Though we have much to tell you about our visit to Matlock. And—oh! Colonel Fitzwilliam is just behind us. He arrived only a day ago with Cousin Anne. They are engaged! Did you know? Oh, there was rather a fuss at Matlock, that is why we were sent back and—"

"Do not exhaust yourself, Georgie, I shall tell it," Richard said as he entered, his bearing as jaunty and self-assured as ever. His red military coat seemed a shade brighter against the muted tones of Pemberley's entrance hall, and his easy grin lit up the room.

"Darcy!" he exclaimed, his voice resonating with warmth. "Good to see you again."

Darcy inclined his head. "And you, Richard. Welcome back to Pemberley."

His cousin's gaze shifted, fixing on Elizabeth with interest. Stepping forward, he took her hand and offered a slight bow. "And this," he said with a touch of mischief in his tone, "must be your new wife. Mrs Darcy?"

Elizabeth curtsied lightly, a polite smile on her lips. "Indeed, Colonel Fitzwilliam. It is a pleasure to meet you again."

He straightened, his expression one of open admiration. "The pleasure is entirely mine, Mrs Darcy."

Darcy, who had been watching this exchange with reserved amusement, added,

“Rightly so.” His gaze went to Elizabeth, and he saw her cheeks flush faintly at the compliment.

Richard, ever attuned to such subtleties, smirked faintly but refrained from comment. “It’s good to see Pemberley so lively,” he said. “It suits you, Darcy.”

Elizabeth caught Darcy’s eye, and they shared a fleeting but meaningful look before the sounds of bustling servants and the prospect of further conversation drew them back to the present.

At dinner that evening, Darcy looked around the table. It was good to be reunited with his sister and cousin, as well as Elizabeth’s sisters. However, Mary had not come down to dine, having instead requested that a tray be brought to her room.

“I do regret that Miss Mary did not enjoy her stay at Matlock more,” Richard said, drawing Darcy’s attention just as they sat down. He blinked, surprised Richard would choose to first speak of Miss Bennet rather than the more dominant news of the day—his engagement to Anne. He’d known it was coming, of course, but he hadn’t expected to happen in so rapid a fashion.

“That is a shame,” Darcy replied. “The trip was primarily arranged to help her overcome her sadness. She has been rather despondent for some time.”

“That certainly continued at Matlock,” Richard added. “Although I think the upheaval was perhaps not conducive to any sort of relaxation.”

“I assure you, cousin, we hardly noticed it,” Georgiana said. “Kitty and I had a magnificent time, even though it was brief.”

“Why did you all return early? Is it to do with your happy news?” Elizabeth asked. She was seated to Darcy’s left, and when he turned to her, their eyes met briefly. A smile touched her lips, which he mirrored at once.

“Well, dear cousin—May I call you cousin now?” Richard asked. Elizabeth nodded. “The truth is, I was sent here to collect Darcy.”

Darcy straightened in his seat. “Collect me? Whatever for?”

“For a family meeting at Matlock. Aunt Catherine has been summoned. My father intended to send an invitation, but I suggested it would be best to call upon you in person.”

Darcy noticed Elizabeth stiffen slightly beside him and he wondered if, perhaps, the thought of his leaving troubled her as much as the idea of being separated from her troubled him.

“I should start at the beginning. By now, you all know that Anne and I are engaged. You see, we had intended to wed for some time but had not found the right time to tell our parents. Then Aunt Catherine’s hasty actions caused even more upheaval. Anne had to confess the truth to Darcy here. Which, of course, is one reason Darcy chose not to marry her out from under me.”

“Fortunately for us,” Georgiana interrupted with a grin.

Elizabeth smiled which made Darcy’s heart beat a little faster.

“Anyhow, Aunt Catherine spent some time interrogating Anne regarding her lack of dismay at Darcy’s marriage and in the end, Anne saw herself compelled to tell her the truth. You know this of course, as Lady Catherine graced Pemberley with a visit before moving on to my father. My father swiftly summoned me for an audience.

Which I granted. But not before collecting Anne from Rosings. Aunt Catherine had not yet returned from her travels.”

“She did not return since she was here? That was weeks ago,” Georgiana said with surprise.

“She stayed at her London house for a time. Anne wrote to me around the same time as my father and so we decided to travel north together to speak to my father. Anne is at Matlock now. In any case, my father supports the match, and my mother, of course, has always adored Anne. However, neither of them was pleased by how matters unfolded. They both feel dreadful for you being involved in all of this, and I believe my uncle regrets giving you such poor advice.”

“What poor advice was that?” Elizabeth said, and Darcy heard the edge in her tone.

“My uncle is the one who pointed out that, unless I had another bride, I should simply marry my cousin,” Darcy said, glancing at Elizabeth.

“Oh, but I do not think it bad advice at all,” Georgiana exclaimed. “It brought you together after all.”

He was grateful for his sister’s enthusiasm, as, apparently, was Elizabeth, who smiled at her younger sister.

“I daresay it was well intentioned advice,” Elizabeth said, her voice softening. “But I can see how, from his perspective, he might feel he pushed you into something you did not want.”

“Indeed,” Richard confirmed. “He does. That is why he has requested your presence at Matlock—to formally apologise. In addition, he has summoned Aunt Catherine.”

“Goodness gracious!” Darcy exclaimed before he could stop himself, causing the entire table to chuckle. “I should not have said it like that,” he added, feeling slightly abashed.

“You are among friends, Darcy,” Richard said. “Nobody will blame you. In any case, I felt much the same. But my father believes the entire family should come together, discuss what occurred, and resolve matters.”

Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “It seems we are going to Matlock, my dear.”

Richard cleared his throat beside him, drawing Darcy’s attention. He saw the awkwardness written plainly across his cousin’s face.

“The invitation is issued to you, Fitzwilliam. Blooded family members only,” Richard said. “I beg your pardon, Elizabeth, I know it may appear frightfully medieval, but that is the way of the Fitzwilliams.”

Elizabeth gave a small shrug. “To tell the truth, I would rather not have gone to Matlock anyhow,” she said. Though her tone was casual, Darcy doubted this was entirely true. In fact, he felt rather uneasy at the thought of going to Matlock without her. What could his uncle intend? To convince him to annul the marriage?

“Elizabeth is family, blood or not,” Darcy said but spotted her shifting slightly from the corner of his eye. Then, she placed one hand on his, sending a flash through his body at the surprise.

“It is a good opportunity to mend what has been broken,” she said gently.

“Indeed,” Richard agreed. “And your assistance will be invaluable. Mother and Father are eager for the marriage between myself and Anne, but as you can imagine, Lady Catherine will oppose it. It will take the entire force of the Fitzwilliam family to

stand firm against her.”

Darcy nodded, and with a heavy heart, agreed to the task.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Richard entertained Georgiana, Kitty, and Elizabeth with tales from his travels. Darcy could not join in the merriment. Now and again, he would add an anecdote of his own, smile when appropriate, or respond to a question, but the impending trip to Matlock weighed heavily on his mind. And there was another matter.

His eyes drifted to the empty chair by the fire where Mary usually sat. They would have to find a solution to this particular problem as well.

“Elizabeth,” Darcy said, stepping into the drawing room where Elizabeth was playing cards with Georgiana and Kitty. “Would you have a moment?”

“Of course,” she replied and stood. Her gown, a pale blue muslin creation, played about her figure in the most pleasing manner, but Darcy forced himself to look away. This was not the time to admire his wife’s form.

“Would you care to take a turn about the gardens with me?” he asked. Elizabeth nodded. They rang for their coats and pelisses, as the evenings had grown chilly, and then stepped out into the gardens together.

“I wish to speak to you about a few matters,” Darcy began. “First of all, my trip to Matlock. I think it is wrong that you are not included. As my wife, you are a member of the family.”

“I am that to you,” she said. “But I believe your uncle sees me as more of a burden. He never wanted this marriage.”

“My uncle Matlock is not a bad man,” Darcy replied. “I imagine he now thinks I was forced into this match through Aunt Catherine’s scheming, and he will want to understand the true nature of our connection.”

“And what will you say to him in this regard?” she asked.

What indeed, Darcy wondered. “I will tell him what I have told you—that I have admired you for a very long time and that I hope our marriage will be a happy, healthy, and long one. However, it is not only my decision that will make it so. And do not fret—I will not tell him anything about our arrangement.” He paused and cleared his throat. “There is one other matter we must discuss. Mary. I spoke to Richard, and he told me that, during her entire stay, she wished only to be left to her own devices. She left the estate but once, with a maid, to visit the local park. Otherwise, she kept to herself, claiming to feel unwell. According to Richard, my aunt believed it to be an ailment of an emotional nature rather than a physical one.”

“I wish I knew what has happened to her,” Elizabeth said. “She appeared so cheerful before.”

“She did,” Darcy agreed. “This melancholy came on rather suddenly.”

“I spoke to Jane about the matter, and she said I was quite mistaken to think that Mary is not homesick. According to Jane, Mary has always been good at hiding her true feelings.”

“Perhaps she does miss your parents more than she lets on. I know that you all miss them, of course, but her longing for home might be stronger than we anticipated. I think it might be best to send her back.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said. “We must soon discuss what will happen in the future anyway. My father is improving, which means the physician and nurses will no

longer need to remain at Longbourn. In fact, my mother wrote that the physician left several weeks ago and now visits only once a week.”

“That matches what I have heard,” Darcy replied. “And we must decide what is to happen.”

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully. “It would help to know whether it will be just Mary returning, or Kitty as well, or...” She trailed off, leaving the thought unspoken.

Darcy gave a small nod but said nothing, the weight of the decisions ahead resting heavily on them both.

“Let us discuss it in detail when you return from Matlock,” Elizabeth said as they strolled along the garden path. “I do think Kitty enjoys her time here. In any case, I believe we should send Mary back sooner rather than later. Jane and Mr Bingley have kindly offered to take her with them when they return.”

“Indeed,” Darcy replied. “I have spoken to your aunt, as well as to Bingley, and they are all in agreement. If Mary wishes, we shall send her back with them. Otherwise, I will arrange the journey for her, with a maid in attendance. Richard may be able to join them as well, as he must rejoin his regiment soon as well, though I am uncertain when exactly that will be. It will depend on what happens at the meeting.”

“Pray, what do you think will happen?” Elizabeth asked.

“I imagine that with the family united against her, my aunt will be forced to relent and consent to the marriage between Richard and Anne,” Darcy said. “But I had another thought.” He smiled, gesturing towards the bench where they had once amused themselves by naming the estate’s geese and swans. “If what Richard has told me is true, my uncle feels remorse for not supporting me during the ordeal. I thought perhaps I could use that to our advantage.”

“You mean the entail?”

“Yes, precisely. I will ask him to side with me in persuading my aunt to help undo the arrangement. As you know, it is more her decision than your cousin’s.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes with a small chuckle. “That is true. My cousin will undoubtedly do whatever his patroness commands. But do you think your aunt will be in the right frame of mind to entertain such a request? She will feel humiliated, will she not, if she does not get her way?”

“She has already not had her way,” Darcy said with a slight smile. “And my cousin is not a poor match. Richard may be a second son, but he has his own house on the estate for when he is in residence, and my uncle has ensured that he is not without means. Just because he is not the heir does not mean he will be penniless. My uncle has made certain of that. Besides, Richard and Anne have known one another since childhood, so there is no concern that he is after her fortune—as some might be, given her inheritance of Rosings Park.”

“But your aunt did not get her way with you.”

“By the grace of God, she did not,” Darcy said earnestly. Almost instinctively, his hand covered Elizabeth’s. He would not have done so had she not herself touched his hand earlier that evening. Still, was he too bold?

To his relief, Elizabeth did not remove her hand. Instead, her fingers shifted ever so slightly beneath his, as though to deepen the contact. Only then did Darcy slowly withdraw his hand.

“I shall miss you, Elizabeth,” he said, his voice quiet but steady. “I know there is much left unsaid between us, and many decisions still to be made, but I will not hesitate to tell you that I will miss you while I am away.”

“And I you,” she said, the words tumbling from her lips so quickly that Darcy suspected her heart had spoken them before her mind could intervene. Yet he was not displeased—on the contrary, her admission filled him with a quiet joy, and he could not help but smile.

“Very well,” he said after a moment, glancing towards the horizon where dark clouds had begun to gather. “I should take you back to the house now. It looks as though it may rain.”

“You are right,” she agreed, rising from the bench. He offered his arm, and she took it, her touch warm and light. Together, they made their way back to the house in companionable silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

Elizabeth

20th October 1812

Elizabeth stood at the window, gazing down the long, winding driveway of Pemberley. It had been three days since Darcy had departed for Matlock, and though he was expected to return in just a few days' time, the house already felt emptier without him.

He had intended to be away for no more than three days, accounting for the four-hour journey by carriage each way. However, the previous morning, she had received a letter from him, explaining that he had been obliged to extend his stay. His aunt, delayed upon the road, had arrived later than anticipated, and his uncle had deemed it proper to request his continued presence. Not only to see Lady Catherine but also to ensure that all remaining differences were settled between them.

Fortunately, Darcy had written that Lord Matlock had proven to be amenable in convincing Lady Catherine to abandon her intentions regarding Longbourn—or rather, persuading her ever-devoted Mr Collins to relinquish them—once he understood that Darcy had entered into marriage with Elizabeth willingly, and had no desire to reverse the decision.

She sighed, leaning against the high-backed chair, her fingers absently smoothing the embroidered cushion upon its seat. The truth had settled upon her over these days apart—despite her doubts, despite her uncertainties, her heart had made its decision. She wanted to be Mrs Darcy in more than name alone. She wanted to tell him. But the time had not yet been right.

And yet, with his absence, her certainty had only deepened.

She loved him.

She could not pinpoint the exact moment when her view of him had shifted—from adversary to something more. Nor could she say precisely when admiration had blossomed into something warmer, something deeper. It had been a gradual thing, unfolding little by little, but there was no denying it now.

A life with him, a true partnership—it was what she wanted. She knew she had hesitated at first, especially after her conversation with Mary, but she knew now that he was genuine, he was good.

“Lizzy!”

Kitty’s voice echoed from the hall, drawing Elizabeth from her reverie.

“I am in the drawing room,” she called, turning as her younger sister entered, her fair curls bouncing about her shoulders.

“Have you seen Mary?”

Elizabeth frowned. “No, not since breakfast. She mentioned wanting to take a walk, but she ought to be in the gardens.”

Kitty shook her head, her expression uneasy. “I have already looked—in the gardens and the parlour. Even Georgiana helped me search, but she is nowhere to be found.”

A ripple of concern coursed through Elizabeth. “Have you checked with the groom? Perhaps she took a carriage into Lambton?”

“I have already enquired. She did not.”

Elizabeth took a steady breath. Mary’s disposition had not improved these past three days. Though she had taken meals with her sisters, she had remained quiet, responding to questions with only the briefest of answers. Elizabeth had hoped that the assurance of returning to Longbourn soon might cheer her, but even that had been met with nothing more than a half-hearted shrug and meek acquiescence.

She did not understand—what was it that troubled Mary so deeply?

“Have you looked in her chamber?” she asked.

“I knocked,” Kitty said, fidgeting with the sash of her gown. “But the door is locked.”

Elizabeth’s frown deepened. “Locked?”

All of the doors locked, of course, but she had never known any of them to lock their doors when absent.

“Lizzy, I think we must go inside. I have a dreadful feeling.”

“We cannot simply invade her privacy,” Elizabeth said, though the unease in her own chest was beginning to mount.

But before anything further could be said, hurried footsteps sounded in the hall.

“She is gone!”

Georgiana appeared in the doorway, breathless, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked sharply.

“I asked Mrs Reynolds to unlock Mary’s chamber,” Georgiana said, gripping the edge of a chair to steady herself. “And—she is gone.”

Elizabeth’s stomach twisted.

“What do you mean, gone?”

Georgiana held out a folded letter, her fingers trembling. “She left this on her pillow.” Her voice faltered. “It says... it says...”

She swallowed, curling her hand into a fist, biting at her knuckle.

Kitty, unable to bear the suspense, snatched the letter and scanned it quickly. She gasped, her face draining of colour.

“Good heavens—she has run away!” Her voice shook.

Elizabeth snatched the letter from her sister’s hands, her eyes flying over the page. The words blurred before her as if her mind refused to comprehend them.

Dear sisters,

By now, I am certain you have invaded my privacy and entered my locked room. It is no less than I expected. But whatever the case, you now know that I am gone.

Do not fret. I am safe. I am with someone who values me more than any of you ever could—someone who truly understands me. My dear George Wickham. He has been as misunderstood by the Bennets and mistreated by the Darcys as I have.

He and I shall be married and settled elsewhere, far away from your influence. I know Mr Darcy will fill your ears with tales of horror about George, but they are as

empty as Darcy's proclamation to care about our family. He is all about appearances, nothing else.

In any case, once we are settled, I shall send you my address, but not before then. I do not wish for you to interfere.

This is my wish to you: Do not. Do not come for me. Do not search for me. I do not wish to be found. Trust that I know what is best for me.

Mary

Elizabeth's pulse pounded in her ears.

"George Wickham?" she whispered. "How is she even in contact with him? She scarcely spoke to him at Longbourn—and when she did, it was never with favour."

"Indeed," Kitty murmured, still pale. "She used to tease Lydia for being so enamoured of him."

Elizabeth turned to Georgiana, whose slippered foot was tracing anxious patterns on the marble floor.

"Georgiana," Elizabeth said, her voice carefully measured. "Do you know something?"

Georgiana hesitated before nodding. "I think I do."

Elizabeth's stomach clenched. "Tell me."

Georgiana exhaled. "I saw him. In Lambton. About two months ago. Do you remember, Kitty? The day we went to town for shaved ice—when you stubbed your

toe and returned home early?”

Kitty blinked, then nodded.

“It was then,” Georgiana continued. “I saw Mr Wickham walking, and Mary... she was watching him. I pointed him out, and she said she had seen him before—at the convalescent home, visiting a friend.”

Elizabeth’s hands clenched around the letter.

“Why did you not tell your brother?”

Georgiana bit her lip. “Because Fitzwilliam loathes him. And things were so peaceful—you and he were getting along, the house was happy... I did not think there could be any harm in it. Mr Wickham has friends in Lambton—he always had. I did not think he and Mary would do more than exchange a few words. And she has heard much about him by now to know what he is ...”

Elizabeth pressed a hand to her forehead. Mr Wickham, again. Always Mr Wickham.

Elizabeth’s breath came in shallow bursts as she stared at the letter in her trembling hands. The words burned into her mind, the finality of Mary’s decision crashing over her like a wave. How had this happened? How had they not seen it?

Her mind raced, sifting through memories, searching for any clue—any indication—that Mary had been capable of such recklessness.

And then, like the pieces of a puzzle slotting into place, she saw it.

Mary’s change in demeanour.

It had begun slowly, almost imperceptibly. A growing detachment. A quiet withdrawal. When they first arrived at Pemberley, Mary had been solemn but composed—at times, even cheerful. But not long after that outing to Lambton, something had shifted. She had become restless, prone to long walks alone, lost in thought. There had been moments when she had seemed almost hopeful, only for that hope to flicker and dim just as swiftly.

Could it have been him?

Elizabeth's stomach twisted. Mr Wickham—that despicable man! Had he sought her out? Had he charmed his way into her heart as he once attempted with hers?

She thought of her own history with him—how easily she had once believed his words, how convincingly he had painted himself as the victim of Darcy's cruelty. He had preyed upon her own prejudices, feeding her carefully constructed lies, knowing exactly what she had wanted to hear. Had he done the same to Mary?

Mary, who had always felt overlooked, who had never quite fit among her sisters.

Mary, who had been uprooted from everything familiar, placed in an unfamiliar house, among unfamiliar people, with no clear sense of her future.

Had she been lonely enough to believe him?

A fresh wave of guilt crashed over Elizabeth. She had warned Mary once, cautioned her not to trust her emotions when it came to Darcy. But now she saw that her sister's words that day had not truly been about Darcy at all.

Elizabeth took a steadying breath. She'd let Mr Wickham influence her again—albeit it not directly. But he had. She pushed the thought aside, aware she had to reckon with it at some point but for now, they had to act. Immediately.

Darcy

“T his is highly improper Mr Collins is the rightful heir. Surely, the Bennet family can reside someplace else?” Lady Catherine said as she glared at him from her seat. She sat upright, as though her back was fixed to the chair, her chin pushed forward and her expression stern.

Darcy took a deep breath, but before he could respond, his uncle stepped forward.

“My dearest sister, be reasonable. It would be unseemly for Darcy’s wife’s family to be thrown out of their home because of an entailment. Besides, by all accounts Mr Bennet will soon be hale and hearty once more.”

“Are not your own lands entailed?” Lady Catherine challenged him, choosing to ignore his statement about Mr Bennet’s improving health.

His uncle, never one to be easily bested, shrugged. Then, he glanced at his wife who served mostly as a spectator during the negotiations. However, Darcy noted the way Lady Matlock nodded her head at her husband and he knew what was coming next.

“In fact, they are not. They were, but we ended the entailment two years ago. Gregory, Richard, and I were in full agreement that it would not be fair for Gregory to inherit both the title and all of the lands, while Richard received nothing but a cottage in which to live. Therefore, we broke the entail and divided the lands.”

At this, Lady Catherine stood abruptly. “You tell me that Richard will inherit part of Matlock?”

Darcy smiled. He had known this was his uncle's trump card, and they had discussed the matter in advance just after he arrived. Richard had never shared this news with him, though not out of deception, but purely because Lord Matlock had wanted to keep the matter between their immediate family.

Now that his aunt had begrudgingly agreed to the marriage between Richard and Anne, she could not argue against the breaking of an entailment—especially when it directly benefited her own daughter.

“Why did you not tell me this sooner?” she demanded.

“And lose out on several hours of spirited debate with you regarding whether my son is worthy of your daughter? I think not,” Lord Matlock said, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Darcy closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he met Richard's gaze. He knew that both of them would have gladly foregone the lengthy debate that had erupted over the union between Anne and Richard. Lady Catherine had fought it for some time before realising she was far outnumbered—the entire family, including Richard's elder brother Gregory, heir to the Matlock title, as well as their mother, Lady Matlock, had stood in favour of the match.

She had eventually given in, but it appeared that, in exchange, she had dug in her heels when it came to the breaking of the entail. Until now, of course.

Lady Catherine exhaled sharply, her fingers drumming against the armrest of her chair.

“I suppose there is no point in arguing now,” she said at last, though her tone was far from gracious.

“It would seem not,” his uncle agreed, amusement still evident in his tone. “Now, as for the entailment on Longbourn, I would appreciate your assistance in the matter. Mr Collins, as I understand, is well settled at Hunsford.”

“He is, and I would be loath to lose his company,” she said, lips pursed. “I shall think on the matter. I think the way you have all acted is quite atrocious, and unseemly for a family of such high regard. To summon me here only to ambush me, it is—”

A quiet cough at the doorway drew their attention. The butler had entered, his posture impeccable as always, his expression betraying nothing of the nature of his errand. In his gloved hands, he carried a silver salver, upon which rested a letter.

“This has just arrived for you, sir,” he announced, inclining his head as he extended the tray towards Darcy.

Darcy took the missive, noting at once the unfamiliar handwriting. A sense of unease coiled within him as he broke the wax seal and unfolded the paper. His eyes skimmed the lines, and almost instantly, the words struck like daggers to his chest.

His breath hitched.

For a moment, he did not move, did not speak. The room seemed to shrink around him, the distant murmur of voices fading into nothing. He read the letter again, as if sheer disbelief might alter its contents. It did not.

Slowly, he exhaled, his fingers tightening around the paper.

“Richard,” he said at last, his voice measured but taut. “Uncle.” He lifted his gaze, schooling his features into composure. “I must speak with you both. Now.”

Lord Matlock straightened, instantly alert. Richard, too, was watching him closely, no

trace of his earlier amusement remaining.

Lady Catherine arched a brow. “What is the meaning of this? Surely, whatever is written there can be shared in present company?”

Darcy slid her a glance. “I fear it cannot.”

Lady Catherine scoffed, tilting her chin upwards. “What possible matter could warrant such secrecy? This is most improper.”

“We should leave the gentlemen to it, Catherine. Why not join me for a sherry?” Lady Matlock said then.

For a long moment, Lady Catherine seemed poised to argue, but something in Lady Matlock’s expression stilled her.

With an exasperated sigh, she waved a hand. “Very well. Go. But I expect to be informed should it concern this family.”

Darcy gave a curt nod but wasted no time in further pleasantries. With a final glance at Richard and Lord Matlock, he strode from the room, the letter still clutched tightly in his grasp.

In the dimly lit hall, Darcy turned to face his uncle and cousin, his grip on the letter tightening as though by sheer force he could will its words away.

“It is Mary,” he said at last, his voice measured but heavy. “Mary Bennet has gone missing. She has—” He exhaled sharply, the very notion an absurdity, yet the ink before him did not lie. “She has run away with Wickham.”

A tense silence followed.

Richard let out a low curse, running a hand through his hair. “Of all the damned fools,” he muttered.

“I never would have guessed,” his uncle said. “She struck me as sensible in the short time she was here. Although they do say it is the quiet ones that one must look out for.

Richard shook his head. “I had hoped no other lady would fall prey to that man, but he has always been charming.”

His uncle gave Darcy a measured look. “I cannot see what your father ever saw in him.”

Darcy stiffened. It was not the first time his father’s judgement had been questioned regarding Wickham, but coming from his uncle, the remark settled uneasily in his chest.

Before he could respond, a voice sounded behind them, sharp and imperious.

“The late Mr Darcy never had very good judgement. The only time he judged well was when he married our sister,” Lady Catherine declared as she stepped into the hall, her eyes gleaming with unmasked satisfaction. “Any fool could see through that scoundrel Wickham, anyone, but your father.”

Darcy turned, genuinely startled by her words. His aunt had never been one to speak ill of his father, at least not so openly.

Richard exhaled in exasperation. “Must you always appear at the most inopportune moments, Aunt?”

Lady Catherine ignored him, her gaze fixed on Darcy. “It is no secret that your father was a man of fine breeding and fortune, but discerning? I think not.” She gestured towards the letter still clutched in his hand. “Had he been, we would not be standing here now, discussing yet another innocent girl ensnared by that rogue.”

Darcy’s jaw tightened. He should have known that their aunt would follow them out. She was, of course, correct, in this regard. His father had been many things—kind, honourable, generous to a fault—but had he been blind where Wickham was concerned? The evidence, painful as it was, had long since spoken for itself.

Lady Catherine sniffed. “Your father let sentiment guide his decisions. A dangerous failing in a man of his position.” She tilted her head, as if in consideration. “You, at least, seem to have inherited a modicum of sense.”

It was, perhaps, the closest thing to a compliment she had ever bestowed upon him.

Darcy inclined his head slightly but said nothing. His mind was already racing ahead, trying to think what he could do to stop this. There was no time for old wounds, no time to lose.

“They must be found at once,” his aunt said, saying what they were all thinking.

Lord Matlock let out a short, dry chuckle, shaking his head in weary amusement. “I must say, Catherine, I am astonished to see you so invested in Miss Bennet’s fate.”

She turned to him with a look of disdain, her expression unmoved by his subtle mockery. “Do not be ridiculous, Henry. I care little for the girl. I have never even met her.” Her tone was clipped, dismissive, as though the very notion were beneath her. “The entire Bennet family is beneath our notice, and I still think so.”

Darcy stiffened, his jaw tightening as anger flared within him. His aunt’s arrogance

had always been insufferable, but to speak so when Elizabeth's sister was in danger—when Elizabeth herself would be devastated—was intolerable. He fixed her with a glare.

Lady Catherine, unbothered as ever, returned his look evenly before continuing, “However, if this foolish girl is not stopped, the consequences will be far-reaching. It will not merely be her own ruin, but that of her entire family. Which means it will affect our family. We will be talked about like common peasants, our good name sullied.” She exhaled sharply, as if the very idea was offensive. “And nobody wants that.”

Darcy forced himself to release a slow, steady breath. Regarding the present situation, she was entirely correct. A scandal of this magnitude would taint not only Mary Bennet but her sisters as well—including Elizabeth. The thought was unbearable.

Richard, who had been watching the exchange with a frown, finally spoke. “I will make enquiries within the militia. If Wickham has taken Mary, someone will have heard something. He was never particularly discreet.” He glanced at Darcy. “If I can track his movements, we may not have to go far.”

Lady Catherine nodded approvingly. “That is well. But it may not be enough. If they mean to marry, they will go to Gretna Green.” She turned to Lord Matlock, her sharp eyes narrowing. “We must send someone there immediately.”

Lord Matlock let out a sigh, rubbing his temple as though he already regretted what he was about to say. “I will send Gregory.”

Richard let out a low chuckle. “I am sure he will be delighted.”

His father shot him a warning glance, but there was no real censure in it. Gregory, as the eldest son and heir to Matlock, rarely concerned himself with family affairs unless

absolutely necessary. This would hardly be an assignment to his liking. Still, Darcy knew he could be trusted and would do it if asked.

Darcy, still gripping the letter, felt his focus narrowing. The conversation continued around him, but his thoughts had already begun shifting towards action. He had no time for further debate.

“I will return to Pemberley,” he declared. His voice was steady, decisive. “Someone there may know something—perhaps a servant, perhaps someone in the village. If Wickham had any previous communication with Mary, there will be traces of it.”

Lady Catherine studied him for a moment before inclining her head. “And I will do what I can to suppress the gossip before it spreads too widely. If we act quickly, we may yet prevent complete disgrace.”

The weight of their task settled upon them. Each had their part to play. The sense of urgency was thick in the air as they prepared to depart, their paths set.

As Darcy turned, already anticipating the long journey ahead, a voice halted him.

“Fitzwilliam.”

He turned back, surprised to see Lady Catherine watching him intently. There was something different in her expression—not quite regret, but something less imperious than before.

“I never meant to harm you,” she said, her voice softer than he had ever heard it. “Though I still think it would have been best had you and Anne wed as intended.”

Darcy stared at her, his body rigid. The memory of her cruel words to Elizabeth, the way she had tried to tear them apart, still burned in his mind.

“Then we will always disagree,” he said evenly, his voice devoid of anger but firm, nonetheless.

Lady Catherine regarded him for a moment, her mouth pressing into a thin line. “I suppose we shall. I only hope that this will not mean we shall never see one another again.”

Darcy hesitated. It was not quite an apology—Lady Catherine de Bourgh did not apologise—but it was, in its own way, an overture of peace. He had not expected it, and though he was still too raw to consider it deeply, he could not deny that it moved something within him.

He gave her a slight bow. “In time, we shall find a way to accept our difference in opinion but now I must tend to this matter. Good evening, Aunt.”

She nodded once before turning away, as composed as ever.

Darcy exhaled and turned on his heel. There was no time to dwell on family discord, no time to consider what Lady Catherine’s words might mean for the future.

There was only one thought in his mind now.

He must return to Pemberley.

He must return to Elizabeth.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Elizabeth

The morning sun had barely risen when Elizabeth found herself pacing before the grand windows of Pemberley's drawing room, her eyes fixed on the winding drive. Darcy was returning today as per the note delivered by messenger the night before and she could hardly wait. She needed him at her side, needed him with her.

She had not slept. How could she, when every second felt like an eternity, stretching between them and the terrible truth of what had happened? Mary was gone.

Elizabeth pressed a trembling hand to her temple. The words from Mary's letter haunted her, each line a fresh dagger to her heart.

Do not. Do not come for me. Do not search for me. I do not wish to be found.

Trust. How could she trust this? How could she trust Mr Wickham when she knew the sort of man he was?

The sound of hooves pounding against the gravel shattered the uneasy silence.

Elizabeth gasped, her breath catching in her throat. He was here.

Without thinking, she turned and ran—out of the room, down the grand staircase, through the open doors of Pemberley's entrance.

The moment she saw him, her feet barely touched the ground as she rushed forward. Darcy had just exited the carriage, his expression grim and resolute.

“Darcy!” she called, her voice breaking.

His head snapped up. The moment he saw her, he closed the distance between them in three strides.

She barely had time to think before his hands caught her arms, steadying her.

“Elizabeth.” His voice was low, urgent. “Are you well?”

“I—” The words stuck in her throat. Was she well? No. None of them were. And yet, seeing him, knowing he had come, knowing she was no longer alone in this— she could breathe again.

“I wish I could say yes,” she whispered, gripping his sleeves.

He nodded, his expression unreadable. “I understand.”

A wave of anguish rose in Elizabeth’s chest, and she clutched at him desperately. “Darcy, I should have seen it. I should have stopped this before it happened.”

His brow furrowed. “Elizabeth, do not blame yourself, nobody could have seen this coming, it was entirely out of the blue—”

“No.” She shook her head fiercely, the truth crashing over her in an unbearable wave. “This was not sudden. It started long before she left. She—she had changed. Withdrawn. You know this. We thought she was sick for home.” Her breath hitched, and she forced herself to meet his gaze. “But I see it now. It was Mr Wickham.” Her throat ached. “If I had only—”

“No,” he said again, firmer this time. His fingers lifted to her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Wickham is a master of deception. You cannot blame yourself for his

wickedness.”

She swallowed hard, searching his face for something—to chase away the gnawing sense of failure.

And she found it. Not in empty words, but in the quiet, steady certainty in his eyes.

“We will find them. Wickham may think he has the upper hand, but he is mistaken.”

Elizabeth nodded, grateful for his strength, even if she felt the weight of it pressing down on her.

Just as she was about to speak again, Georgiana entered the room, her face flushed with an urgency that was unmistakable.

“Fitz, you are back! I am so pleased. Oh, I have so much I want to say but first—” She paused, looking almost embarrassed but determined. “I have read Mary’s diary. I know it is private but I thought there might be something in there. I only read the last few entries and I’ve discovered something. They didn’t go to Gretna Green as we thought. They went to London.”

The words hit Elizabeth like a blow. Her mind raced, trying to process the implications of this new information. “London?” she repeated, disbelief evident in her voice. “But why? Why would they go there? If they meant to elope and get married, they would have gone to Gretna Green, surely.”

Darcy’s expression darkened as he stepped closer, his gaze intense. “If that was his intention, yes. But I fear Wickham never intended to marry Mary. I had time to consider it all on the journey here. It made no sense. He is always looking for a way to one up me. To make my life difficult. He tried it once before...” He paused and waved a hand as if whatever he’d meant to say did not relate to this situation.

“He wants something else,” Elizabeth said. “Money?”

“I suspect it, yes. Or influence, connections. It is something. I would think he has debts and wants them paid off. Or some other arbitrary amount.”

Elizabeth felt a chill run down her spine at the thought. Mr Wickham had never been a man of honour, and she had always known that his motives were often self-serving. But to think he would stoop to extorting Darcy... It was almost too much to bear.

“Do you think... he knew we would find the diary?” Elizabeth asked, her voice small. “He must have planned this.”

Darcy’s gaze darkened, and he nodded. “It seems likely. I am sure he has more than one plan going at once. I feel perhaps he wanted us to follow him to London. If he knew she kept a diary, he likely manipulated her to make a note of it.”

“But for what purpose?” Georgiana asked.

“He would have asked her if she kept one I am certain. If he did not, then he would have made sure she left word some other way. I would not be surprised if he has left us breadcrumbs to make sure that we find out. I suspect he wishes to have us follow him.”

“Follow him, stop him and pay him,” Georgiana said, the disgust evident in her voice. “That is what he wants us to do.”

“I daresay it is so,” Darcy said.

“But what if we do not follow him?” Elizabeth asked. “What if we do nothing and let him marry her? Is that not worse? Then he is connected to the family.”

“That is true,” Darcy said with a sigh. “If we do not follow him and he marries Mary, then he is tied to us permanently.”

“And he thinks he can hold out his hand until the end of days,” Elizabeth said. “So regardless, he will make a pretty penny out of it.”

“It is always about coin with him,” Georgiana said and shook her head.

“Well, he will not get a single coin out of me, not if I can help it,” Darcy said.

Elizabeth turned to see Kitty standing in the doorway, her eyes swollen from crying. She looked fragile, her shoulders slumped under the weight of grief and confusion.

“Kitty,” Elizabeth said softly, stepping towards her, “how are you?”

Kitty looked up, tears still fresh on her cheeks. “I... I cannot believe it, Lizzy. I just cannot. How could Mary have been so foolish? I truly did not know anything about this.”

Elizabeth wrapped an arm around Kitty’s shoulders, offering what comfort she could. “I know, Kitty. But we must focus now on what we can do. We cannot change what has already happened, but we can stop Mr Wickham from causing any more harm.”

Darcy nodded.

“We will leave for London at first light. There is no time to waste. The sooner we arrive, the better our chances of finding them.” The room was heavy with the weight of their decision, and yet, despite the uncertainty that lay ahead, Elizabeth felt a surge of gratitude for Darcy’s unshakable resolve. They would find Mary, they would confront Mr Wickham, and together, they would face whatever came next.

“Then we leave at once,” Elizabeth said, her voice steady. “We will not allow him to win.” Darcy smiled, a rare flicker of warmth in his eyes.

“No, Elizabeth. We will not.” And with that, they gathered their things, prepared for the long journey ahead, knowing that the road would be difficult but that they would face it together.

As the carriage sped through the morning mist, the hours of travel seemed to stretch endlessly before them. The landscape blurred past, a backdrop to the silence between Elizabeth and Darcy. Both were lost in thought, their minds occupied with the same heavy burdens—Mary’s disastrous choice, Mr Wickham’s deception, the looming confrontation in London.

Yet, despite the shared goal of finding and rescuing Mary, there was a quiet sense of distance between them, a tension neither of them seemed to know how to address. The journey had already been long, and as the day wore on, Elizabeth began to feel the weight of the fatigue settling into her bones. She had not spoken much, her mind too occupied with the turmoil of her sister’s situation. But Darcy, who had always been more restrained, sat beside her with a quiet intensity, as though he too were unsure how to bridge the growing gap between them.

Finally, as the evening light began to dim and the carriage slowed for a rest at an inn, Elizabeth found herself unable to remain silent any longer. There was something pressing on her chest, something she needed to say—something that had been bothering her for some time, but she had not known how to voice it.

“Darcy,” she began hesitantly, turning her gaze towards him, “I must make a confession. It troubles me to admit it, but I let Mr Wickham influence me by way of Mary.”

“Oh? Pray, whatever do you mean?”

She took a deep breath. “You see, before this all happened, I—well, I had my doubts about our future. You know this. What you do not know is that Mary, she... she advised me to be cautious. She said that you were not to be trusted, that there was something about you—something that didn’t feel right.”

Darcy’s expression shifted at once. His jaw tightened, his lips pressing together in a way that indicated the words stung. Elizabeth could see it in the deepening lines on his face, the brief flicker of hurt before he concealed it again.

“I am certain,” she continued softly, “that Mr Wickham’s influence must have played a part in that.”

Darcy’s gaze darkened, and he turned away slightly, staring out of the window as if to escape the raw emotion in her voice. His hand clenched at his side, his fingers twitching with the tension of unspoken words.

“I understand,” he said quietly, his voice rough, “and I bear no ill will towards you for your doubts. I am not blind to the fact that I gave you cause to question me. But you must know, Elizabeth, I did what I thought was best—always. It was never my intention to hurt you or anyone you love.”

Elizabeth felt a wave of guilt wash over her. She had, in truth, never fully believed the harsh words Mary had spoken, but hearing Darcy speak of them now, she realised just how deeply they had affected him.

“I never meant to hurt you either, Darcy,” she whispered. “I was only trying to protect Mary. But now... now I see how much pain we both carry because of Mr Wickham.”

“I should have known, Elizabeth,” he said, his tone more vulnerable than she had ever heard it. “I should have known that Wickham would not stop at trying to ruin my family. I knew him too well. But I never imagined he would stoop so low as to target you, to target your sister. He attempted something similar with Georgiana but I realised just in time. I dismissed her companion, Mrs Younge, who was in league with him and chased him out of Derbyshire entirely. Or so I thought.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached at the raw pain in his voice. She reached out, her hand resting gently over his on the armrest. His fingers twitched beneath hers, and for a moment, it felt as though time itself had stopped, leaving only the two of them in that intimate silence.

“Darcy,” she murmured, her voice soft but steady, “you stopped him before he could harm Georgiana. You saved her.” He shook his head, the flicker of guilt still clouding his eyes.

“But I should have seen it earlier. I should have known Wickham was capable of anything. I should have tried harder to make his character known to more people. I should have warned you and them more intensely, but he’d been away so long I did not think it would matter. And now, he has done this to Mary.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached, her chest tightening with the weight of his words. “Darcy, you cannot carry all of this on your own. You have done everything you could to protect those you love. You stopped Mr Wickham before he could ruin Georgiana’s life. And now, we will stop him together, for Mary.”

Darcy turned towards her, his eyes searching hers, as if looking for something—perhaps assurance, perhaps forgiveness. And in that moment, Elizabeth realised that they were not so different after all. They both carried the weight of guilt, the burden of past mistakes, and yet they had somehow managed to find a way back to one another.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice thick with emotion, “I don’t know how I would have come this far without you. Your strength, your courage, it has been the light guiding me through this darkness. I—” Before he could finish, Elizabeth leaned in, her heart pounding in her chest. She placed a hand gently on his cheek, turning his face towards hers.

The carriage seemed to stop moving altogether, the world outside fading away until only the two of them remained, suspended in time.

“You have been my strength too, Darcy,” she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. “I do not know what I would have done without you by my side.” Their eyes locked, and in that moment, the years of uncertainty, of doubt, and of everything that had come between them seemed to dissolve, leaving only the raw, undeniable truth of their feelings.

The guilt, the pain, the fear—all of it faded into the background as they stood on the precipice of something more profound. With a soft sigh, Darcy leaned forward, his hand finding hers once more, his grip gentle but sure. And then, slowly, almost hesitantly, he kissed her—his lips brushing hers with a tenderness that left Elizabeth breathless, her heart racing in her chest. For a moment, there was nothing but the soft, steady rhythm of their breathing and the feeling of his body pressed against hers.

“Elizabeth,” he whispered, his voice husky, “we will get through this. Together.”

She nodded, her gaze softening as she gazed into his eyes.

“Together, Darcy.”

The carriage resumed its journey towards the inn, but in that brief, precious moment, the world outside no longer seemed so daunting.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Darcy

1st November 1812

Darcy House, London

The journey to London had been long and exhausting, yet neither Elizabeth nor Darcy could allow themselves a moment's rest. Mary was still missing, and every second that passed brought the threat of a fate too terrible to contemplate.

As the carriage rolled to a halt before Darcy House, Darcy stepped out first, then turned to offer his hand to Elizabeth. She placed hers in his without hesitation, and for a moment, he forgot the urgency of their mission. The warmth of her touch, the way her fingers fit perfectly against his—it delighted him beyond words.

For two days, since the tender moment in the carriage, they had spoken of the future—a future where Mary was safe, where Wickham was stopped, and where they might finally claim their own happiness. Knowing Elizabeth returned his love had filled him with a quiet, undeniable joy. If not for Wickham's crimes, he would have been the happiest man alive.

But that future could only exist if they solved the mystery before them.

Darcy led Elizabeth up the steps and into the grand entrance hall of Darcy House, where they were immediately greeted by the housekeeper, Mrs Sutton, and the butler, Mr Redford.

“Sir,” Mr Redford said with a bow, “a letter arrived for you just this morning—from Colonel Fitzwilliam. He instructed that you receive it at once.”

Darcy took the letter and broke the seal swiftly, his brow furrowing deeper as he read. Elizabeth watched his expression change, the tension in his stance growing.

“What does it say?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Darcy exhaled sharply. “Richard was able to speak to one of Wickham’s friends, or rather former friends, in Meryton.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “What has happened?”

Darcy turned to her fully, his face shadowed with a mixture of anger and grim realisation. “This fellow, Mr Denny confirmed that Wickham left the militia months ago with intentions to claim what was rightfully his, as he said. Richard confirms that Wickham has been evading capture by the militia where he is wanted for desertion, slipping through every effort to locate him. Mr Denny admits he had a suspicion where he might be, but kept it to himself. However, upon hearing what Wickham has been up to, he has confided in Richard. It seems Denny is fond of your sister Lydia, and felt he needed to speak the truth for her sake.”

Elizabeth frowned. “I remember Mr Denny, he danced with Lydia a number of times at various balls. A decent fellow.”

“With a poor taste in friends. Anyhow, he says that for a time, he was in London. And while he was here, he was living with someone we know all too well.”

Elizabeth felt her breath hitch.

Darcy met her gaze, his voice sharp with frustration. “Mrs Younge.”

Elizabeth's stomach dropped. The name struck her like a blow.

"The woman who helped him nearly ruin Georgiana?" she whispered.

"The same." Darcy's jaw was tight with fury. "She took him in when he arrived in London, provided him with shelter—and possibly more. I am certain Mary was taken there."

Elizabeth drew in a shaky breath. "Then we have no time to waste."

Darcy turned to her, his expression fierce with determination. "We must move quickly. If we hesitate—"

"We won't." Elizabeth took his hand, her fingers tight around his own.

He looked at her—really looked at her—and the moment stretched between them. Despite the urgency, despite the looming danger, there was something undeniable in the way they stood together.

They had started this journey as reluctant allies. Now, they were something far more.

Darcy gave a decisive nod. "I have her address. We will go there at once. Even if Wickham is not there, I am certain she will know where he's gone. Then let us begin."

And together, they stepped forward—into the heart of London, into the depths of a mystery, into a battle they could not afford to lose.

Elizabeth

The narrow streets of London twisted and turned like a labyrinth, each corner offering a new, dimly lit passage. Bloomsbury had once been a bustling thoroughfare, but the houses here were old now, with narrow facades and small, shuttered windows, stacked close together, as though they were crowding the space in fear of the unknown.

It was not the worst part of London—there was no stench of sewage, nor the clamour of the lower classes—that would be further east. Nor was it a wealthy neighbourhood, the stone was cracked in places, and the weathered wooden shutters bore the marks of years of use.

A worn sign hung crookedly above the door, an unremarkable affair that read ‘Younge’ in faded script.

Elizabeth felt a chill settle in her chest as they approached the house. Mary might be here. She might be beyond this very door. Would she be able to convince her sister to come back with them? What would happen if she could not?

Darcy’s gaze swept over the building, his jaw tightening. The windows, though unadorned, were not entirely free from watchful eyes—there was something about the stillness of the place that hinted it had recently been occupied.

“Are you ready?” Elizabeth asked, her voice barely a whisper, though she knew the question was for both of them.

Darcy's lips pressed together in a thin line as he nodded. "Let's be quick."

He reached forward and knocked on the door with a sharp, measured sound that echoed in the quiet street. They waited, the seconds stretching, until finally, the door creaked open slightly, revealing a woman of middling years, her features unremarkable and her eyes cautious. Then, recognition washed over her face.

"Mr Darcy," she said, her voice smooth but with an edge. "What an unexpected visit. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Do not play games with me, Mrs Younge," Darcy replied, his tone icy. "We know Wickham is here. As is my sister-in-law. Where are they?"

Mrs Younge's face shifted, a slight flicker of concern crossing her features before she masked it with an imperious expression. "Mr Wickham?" she said, her voice betraying nothing. "I do not know what you mean. I've not seen him since you dismissed me from Pemberley two years ago."

Darcy's eyes narrowed. "Please do not tell Banbury tales. We know you sheltered him after he fled the militia. And I know you have been sheltering him now."

He knew no such thing of course, but Elizabeth admired the confidence with which he hid this fact.

Elizabeth stood beside him, watching Mrs Younge carefully. There was something about her calm demeanour that unsettled Elizabeth. She had an air of someone who had grown accustomed to lies and deception.

"You cannot be serious," Mrs Younge said, lifting her chin. "You are accusing me of harbouring a man I have not seen in years, Mr Darcy. I have done nothing wrong. I am simply a woman trying to live a quiet life."

“My sister was taken from her home without informing her parents or sisters. She is under the influence of a man I know you understand is utterly self-serving who has no interest in her welfare and I will not stand here and let you lie and deceive us,” Elizabeth hoped that her words would sway the woman, but from the expression on her face she feared they were falling on deaf ears.

“Mrs Younge, I did not take matters further when you attempted to corrupt my sister,” Darcy said his voice now lower than before, almost threatening. “I only did so because I discovered you were in allegiance with Wickham before you had a chance to put your plan into motion. Otherwise I would not have been so forgiving. But if you dare to try and repeat your actions now with my sister-in-law, I will not be so lenient.”

“I do not appreciate being threatened,” she said.

“You do not have to appreciate it, but I will tell you this only once. My family has wide-reaching connections both in the North and in Town. If you wish to keep your employment, or have any hope of working in another great house anywhere you will tell me where Miss Bennet is. And you will do so at once.”

The woman considered this and then, to Elizabeth’s relief, she stepped aside.

“She is upstairs in the bedroom to the right. Mr Wickham is out.”

Without waiting for any further invitation, Darcy moved past her, rushed upstairs, and pushed open the door.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Darcy

As he and Elizabeth ascended the grand staircase, an air of urgency surrounded them. Elizabeth stopped outside the door, her apprehension tangible. Darcy looked at her, gave a single resolute nod, and then reached for the door handle.

Upon entering the room, the sight that met their eyes confirmed their worst fears. Mary seemed distraught, traces of tears glistening on her cheeks.

“Mary,” Elizabeth called gently. The instant their eyes connected, Mary looked up, her composure faltering as she darted forward, seeking solace in her sister’s embrace.

“I think I’ve made a dreadful mistake,” Mary murmured, her voice trembling with a mixture of sorrow and regret.

Darcy could contain himself no longer. “Indeed, she most certainly has,” he grumbled under his breath, frustration simmering just below the surface.

“Darcy, please,” Elizabeth urged, glancing back at him with a firm yet pleading look, “allow me to speak with my sister first.”

Mary could hardly meet his gaze. They settled on a settee, and Mary’s tears flowed freely as she confessed, “I feel like such a fool.”

Elizabeth felt a rush of sympathy for her sister and gently pressed for clarity. “What do you mean, Mary?”

In a trembling voice, Mary shared, “I overheard Mr Wickham and Mrs Young speaking this morning. They thought I was asleep, but I was not.” Her words came rushing forth, recounting how she had woken at dawn, filled with excitement for the new life she envisioned with Mr Wickham. Yet, her dreams had been dashed when she descended to find the two of them seated at breakfast, conspiring.

“Mr Wickham talked to Mrs Young about their plans. We were to remain in London for a few days, ostensibly to afford you and Mr Darcy time to find us, so that he could extract payment from Mr Darcy,” Mary continued, her expression a mixture of disbelief and heartbreak.

Darcy scoffed, unable to keep his opinions concealed. “Just what I expected,” he muttered, his disdain for Wickham clear in his tone.

Mary gave him a fleeting glance before returning her attention to Elizabeth, tears pooling in her eyes. “I thought he loved me,” she admitted, her voice cracking. “I was so foolish.”

Sighing, Darcy took a step closer and sank into the armchair nearby, the weight of the moment pressing heavily upon him. “Mary, it truly was unwise to run away with Wickham,” he said, his tone firm yet measured. “But you are not the first to fall for his charms.”

She lifted her head to look at him quizzically.

“My own father often favoured him. Indeed, sometimes it seems he esteemed Wickham more than he did me. It is a bitter truth I do not care to share often but it is true.” Darcy lamented.

Elizabeth shook her head, unwilling to accept such a notion. “I am certain that is not true!” she protested.

“Wickham was always likable, more vivacious than I,” Darcy shook his head sadly as he continued, his voice tinged with a blend of nostalgia and weariness. “I have always been bound by duty, whilst he projected an air of freedom and joy.”

Mary spoke up, her voice a mere whisper. “Mr Wickham told me the opposite, you know. He claimed he was never important to anyone. That you, Mr Darcy, were the favoured child, loved and admired, while he remained but a shadow, neglected and ill-treated.” Her words hung heavy in the air, a subtle indictment that made Elizabeth’s heart ache.

“That is simply not true, and I wish you would see it for what it is,” he replied sharply. “Wickham may have spun such tales, preying upon your sympathy as he has done with so many others. He attempted it with my sister, Georgiana. Making himself into the poor lad starved of attention and affection. He fancied himself a victim then, just as he likely is now,” he stated, a tense disapproval evident in his voice.

“Unfortunately, I am not as wise as Georgiana,” Mary lamented, her shoulders sagging under the weight of her own feelings of inadequacy.

“That is not what I meant,” Darcy said softly, trying to ease her pain. “You must not feel as if you are lesser than anyone else.”

“No, I always feel like a fool,” she insisted. “I feel like I am merely an afterthought, never special to anyone. I’ve always felt this way and he...” Her voice broke off and Elizabeth’s heart shattered for her sister as she rushed to comfort her.

“Oh, Mary! That is not true at all. If you are sometimes overlooked, it is only because you are so dependable. You are the one we trust to do what is right.” Elizabeth’s voice was soothing, her affection pouring forth. She understood how Mary’s reliability might lead to a sense of being disregarded. “I am truly sorry if I have contributed to that feeling,” she added earnestly.

Curiosity sparked within Elizabeth, and she sought to uncover the truth. “Is this why you allowed Mr Wickham to pursue you?” she asked gently, hoping to understand her sister’s motivations.

“It is,” Mary admitted, her voice small. She then spoke of their first encounter when Mr Wickham visited the convalescent home to see a friend. “I recognised him instantly and was immediately on my guard, yet after his visit, that friend spoke very highly of him. I began to question my initial wariness.”

“When he returned, I made it a point to greet him. He asked me not to disclose his real name, claiming that he had run away from the militia,” she recounted, a mixture of disbelief and regret evident in her eyes. “I was shocked by his audacity, but he spun a tale of mistreatment and hardship, implying that he had no choice but to escape. He claimed his superiors were difficult and treated him harshly.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes, shaking her head ruefully at the extent of Mr Wickham’s deception. “And you believed him,” she murmured, not as a question but as an acknowledgment of the vulnerability that love can instil.

Mary nodded, her voice now barely above a whisper. “At the time, I was infatuated. He came often after that first visit, always using a false name, and before long, he asked me to accompany him on walks.” The memory was bittersweet, and she looked down as she continued, “I welcomed his company, but eventually began to fall in love with him. He would tell me how special I was, how foolish I had been to overlook my own worth.”

“Mary, that is precisely the sort of manipulation Mr Wickham is known for!” Elizabeth cried, feeling a surge of protectiveness for her sister. “He preyed upon your feelings, drawing you into a web of deceit.”

Mary’s expression softened, her gaze dropping to the floor as if she wished to retreat

within herself. “He spoke poorly of your character, Mr Darcy,” she admitted, swallowing hard. “Hearing him lament your presumed shortcomings reminded me of my own misguided feelings towards you.”

Darcy’s features hardened, but he maintained his composure. “I acknowledge I have done things I am not proud of,” he said quietly. “However, I have striven to rectify my past grievances. I merely wished to show you my true character, to demonstrate that I am deserving of your respect.”

Mary’s eyes filled with conflict as she uttered, “He persuaded me that your kindness was merely performative, an act to impress Elizabeth.”

Darcy’s expression softened. “You must understand, Wickham has proven time and again himself to be a cad. I would never wish you to believe that I could orchestrate such nefarious plans against you.”

“But, I thought...” Mary trailed off, doubt surfacing within her.

Darcy reached out, his voice gentle yet firm. “Wickham expressed intentions that were misguided at best. He attempted to manipulate your feelings, and in doing so, misrepresented my own.”

Elizabeth squeezed Mary’s hand reassuringly. “You must see him for what he is—a man unworthy of your trust.”

“I remember our discussions of your childhood.” Mary’s voice quavered. “I believed it echoed the reality of his words. The way he described how Darcy treated people...” She faltered, glancing between the two of them, torn by her conflicting loyalties.

Darcy lowered his gaze, acknowledging the truth in her words. “I admit I have made mistakes, but Wickham’s tales are exaggerations, designed to lure sympathy and

wrath in equal measure.”

Mary appeared to be caught in a storm of conflicting emotions. “I thought I could help him see a different world, one where he could belong and not feel abandoned, and in turn he would make me feel wanted. But now, I feel that I am merely a means to an end for him.”

“You must release that idea from your heart,” Elizabeth urged. “Mr Wickham is not the solution to your feelings of loneliness, he is the cause. You deserve a life free from manipulation and deceit.”

Mary nodded slowly, the fight leaving her. “I do understand now, it was all a fabrication.”

Darcy inhaled deeply. “Moreover, I must inform you that I will reach out to the proper authorities regarding Wickham. He cannot be allowed to continue this ruse. You must not fear him any longer.”

“But what if he retaliates?” Mary questioned, anxiety creeping back into her voice.

Darcy’s expression sharpened into determination. “Wickham’s threats are hollow. If he thinks through manipulation he shall retain power over you, he is mistaken.”

With a newfound resilience, Mary met Darcy’s gaze. “It is still daunting to confront my own naivety. I wish I had seen through him before allowing myself to become so entangled.”

“Regret only serves to cloud the future,” Darcy stated, his tone firm yet encouraging. “Instead, let us look ahead with hope.”

Just then, the ominous sound of a door opening echoed up the staircase, jolting them

from their intimate exchange. Wickham's voice floated through the air, announcing his arrival. The moment of confrontation had arrived, and they braced themselves for the storm that would surely follow.

Darcy

Darcy made his way down the stairs and took a steadying breath at the parlour door before stepping inside. At once, Mrs Younge and Wickham looked up, their conversation ceasing abruptly.

For a long moment, neither man spoke. The silence stretched between them, heavy as lead, until Wickham, ever the performer, broke it with a sardonic laugh. His smirk curled at the edges as he leaned back with feigned ease.

“Ah, Darcy,” he drawled, his voice laced with mockery. “How very predictable. I wondered how long it would take you to find me. It seems you never disappoint.”

Darcy did not respond immediately. Instead, he met Wickham’s gaze, steady and unyielding. The animosity was undeniable, but Darcy had long since learned not to rise to Wickham’s bait. When he finally spoke, his voice was crisp, firm, and left no room for debate.

“Mrs Younge,” he said, his tone commanding, “leave us. I would speak with Mr Wickham alone.”

Mrs Younge hesitated, glancing at Wickham as if seeking direction. But seeing the implacable resolve in Darcy’s expression, she huffed in irritation and swept towards the door, her skirts rustling in agitation. The door clicked softly behind her, leaving the room thick with tension.

Wickham folded his arms across his chest, still affecting nonchalance, though a

flicker of unease betrayed him. “Well, then,” he mused, “what is it to be, Darcy? Have you come to steal away my bride again?”

Darcy’s jaw tightened. “You are quite sure of yourself, Wickham.”

“Oh, but I am. I only seek Mary’s happiness, as do you. She would be rather upset to hear you are trying to stop our wedding.”

“You played upon her insecurities, her loneliness,” Darcy said, shaking his head in quiet disdain. “You are a vile creature.”

Wickham feigned hurt. “Do you not think it possible she loves me for me?”

“No one who truly knows you could love you.”

Wickham’s smirk wavered for the briefest moment before he rallied. “How rude, Darcy. How very ungentlemanly. Your father would be most disappointed. If I recall, he loved me rather dearly.”

It was a low blow, even for Wickham, but Darcy remained unmoved. “What do you want, Wickham? Shall I pay you off so you’ll leave, as I did with Georgiana? Or do you expect my blessing so you might extort me endlessly as a member of the family?”

“Oh, nothing so crass,” Wickham said lightly, though his eyes gleamed with calculation. “I only ask that Mary have the wedding she deserves—a proper affair befitting the sister-in-law of the great Mr Darcy.”

“And had you not intended to see her wed respectably otherwise?” Darcy asked sharply.

Wickham chuckled. “Respectably? Ah, Darcy, you know well I am no Darcy. A man of my station can scarcely afford such extravagance. Indeed, I fear we shall be forced to flee to Gretna Green—unless, of course, you see fit to assist. Naturally, we would much appreciate a proper home, a small cottage perhaps, near Longbourn with a modest income so Mary can be near her family. Otherwise, I may have to seek employment elsewhere. I hear they are looking for miners in Wales, but that would prevent poor Mary from being near her family.”

Darcy’s expression remained unreadable. “I want Mary to be happy, Wickham. If that happiness lies with you, so be it. But do not imagine for a moment you will have a single penny from me.”

Wickham’s confidence faltered, his smile tightening. “Oh, Darcy,” he murmured, affecting a wounded air, “I do not wish to break Mary’s heart. But if you refuse to aid us, I see no way to proceed with this wedding. And at this stage, it might be talked about. It would be such a shame for the scandal to reach the newspapers. Lord Matlock and Lady Catherine de Bourgh would loathe the family being the subject of gossip.”

“You mean you will attempt to sell the story? And what would the headline read?” Darcy’s tone was ice. “Let me tell you. If you attempt such a thing, I will ensure the full truth is made known. ‘Redcoat on the Run Kidnaps Gentleman’s Sister-in-Law.’ Ah, and speaking of the militia, I do believe they would be most interested in your activities since leaving their ranks.”

Wickham blanched. Before he could formulate a retort, the door opened once more, and Elizabeth entered, her expression sharp with purpose. Behind her, Mary followed, her hands clasped tightly before her, but her face set with determination.

Wickham’s surprise was poorly concealed as he turned to Mary, quickly adopting a sorrowful expression. “My dear, I regret to say—”

“Spare me your false regret, sir,” Mary interrupted, her voice steady. “I know everything. I heard you and Mrs Younge speaking over breakfast. I know the truth of your schemes.”

Wickham stiffened, his mask slipping further. “Mary, whatever you think you heard—”

“I was a fool,” she pressed on, her voice growing stronger. “I allowed myself to be deceived. But you, sir, are nothing more than a blackguard. And I am fortunate—so very fortunate—to have escaped your clutches.”

Wickham’s mouth opened, then closed. For once, he was bereft of words. His usual glib defences failed him under the weight of her quiet certainty. He shifted uncomfortably, glancing towards the door as if seeking an escape.

Mary held her head high. “You are a disgrace, sir. And I shall waste not one more thought upon you.”

Wickham could withstand the censure of many, but to be dismissed—utterly discarded—by one he had sought to manipulate was a blow to his pride. He had nothing to say. He turned sharply on his heel and exited the room without another word.

Silence filled the space he left behind. Then, Mary let out a slow breath, her hands trembling slightly. Elizabeth stepped forward and took her hand in quiet support.

Darcy inclined his head towards Mary. “You have shown great strength, Miss Bennet.”

She exhaled, nodding once. “Thank you, Mr Darcy. I only wish I had seen clearly sooner.”

Elizabeth gave her sister's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Come, Mary. Let us leave this place behind."

Together, they stepped out of the parlour, leaving Wickham's shadow firmly in the past.

Elizabeth

As the carriage pulled up to Darcy House, the weight of the past few days seemed to settle more heavily upon Elizabeth. She glanced at Mary, who was barely keeping her eyes open, exhaustion pulling at her every feature. The moment they stepped inside, Darcy instructed the housekeeper to have a room prepared for Mary, ensuring that she would be given the utmost care and privacy. Mary murmured a soft word of thanks before allowing herself to be led upstairs, and Elizabeth exhaled, pressing a hand briefly to her chest.

Elizabeth followed to see her settled. By the time she returned downstairs, Darcy had already begun walking towards his study, his posture rigid with purpose. Elizabeth hesitated for only a moment before following. She found him at his desk, already penning letters in his firm, precise hand. The candlelight flickered against his face, casting deep shadows along his cheekbones. The room smelled of ink and parchment, with the faintest trace of the fire that still smouldered in the hearth.

He glanced up as she entered, his expression softening ever so slightly. "She has gone to bed?"

Elizabeth nodded, stepping further into the room. "Yes, she was quite overcome with exhaustion. I do not think she shall stir until morning."

Darcy set down his quill and leaned back in his chair. "Good. She will need rest."

He gestured to the sheet of paper before him. "I am writing to my uncle and aunt to apprise them of the situation. I have asked my uncle to dispatch men along the road

Mary and Wickham travelled. They will find the innkeepers and ensure that if any of them recall seeing Mary and Wickham together, they conveniently forget such details in exchange for a small incentive.”

Elizabeth blinked at him in astonishment and murmured, “You think of everything.”

Darcy let out a soft, humourless chuckle. “I have had enough experience with Wickham’s deceit to know what must be done. I will not allow him any advantage.”

He turned his attention to another sheet of paper. “I am also sending a letter to Richard via messenger. He will inform his superiors of Wickham’s last known whereabouts. The militia will be looking for him soon.”

Elizabeth folded her arms, her brow furrowing slightly. “You know he will be long gone by now.”

Darcy met her gaze evenly. “Perhaps. But the moment we arrived home, I instructed my butler to send a man to Mrs Younge’s house. He will confirm whether Wickham remains there, and if he has left, he will get the information of where he has gone from Mrs Younge, I am sure. She will want to avoid being in my bad graces. Even if Wickham has not told her, he will have left behind enough in the room he stayed in to find him.”

Elizabeth stared at him, something warm and unfamiliar curling in her chest. She knew Darcy was a man of action, but it still surprised her how swiftly and efficiently he moved to protect those he cared about.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “For all of this.”

Darcy gave a small shake of his head. “It is nothing.”

Elizabeth stepped closer, folding her hands together. “No, it is everything.” She hesitated, then exhaled. “I have been thinking a great deal these past days, and I must confess... I was wrong.”

His brows lifted slightly, but he did not interrupt her.

She pressed on. “I was wrong to doubt you. To think the worst of you. I have been so used to believing my own judgement infallible, and yet, time and time again, you have proved yourself to be a man of honour, of kindness. I cannot fathom how I ever believed otherwise.”

Darcy was silent for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, to her surprise, he let out a quiet laugh. “Elizabeth, you were not wrong.”

She frowned slightly. “How can you say that?”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows upon the desk as he studied her. “Because I was a difficult man. I was proud and reserved and ill-tempered. I expected too much and gave too little in return. You had every reason to think me insufferable.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he shook his head.

“It is true,” he insisted. “I had hoped—foolishly—that this marriage would allow me time to show you who I truly am. To prove myself worthy of you. But in reality, Elizabeth... it is you who has made me a better man.”

Her breath hitched slightly at his words.

Darcy stood then, rounding the desk so that he stood before her, closer than they had ever been. He lifted a hand, hesitated for the briefest of moments, then let his fingers trace lightly along the back of hers. “From the moment I met you, you have

challenged me. You have made me think, made me question myself in ways no one else ever dared. You have made me want to be more than I was.”

Elizabeth swallowed, her heart hammering against her ribs. “You were already a great man,” she whispered. “I only needed to see it.”

His gaze darkened, his hand pressing more firmly against hers. “Then I am glad you finally do.”

Silence stretched between them, charged and heavy. The fire crackled in the hearth, casting warm golden light around them, while the faint sound of carriage wheels on the street outside filled the quiet.

Elizabeth took a slow, steadying breath. “Darcy...” she began, “I do not wish for an annulment.”

His fingers tensed against hers.

She met his gaze, eyes shining with certainty. “I do not want to leave you. I want to be here. With you. As your wife. As Mrs Darcy.”

For a moment, he simply stared at her, as though he scarcely dared to believe what he had heard.

Then, without another word, he lifted a hand to cup her cheek, his thumb tracing a feather-light path along her jaw.

Elizabeth barely had a moment to react before his lips were upon hers.

The kiss was soft at first, tentative, as if testing the reality of the moment. But then he deepened it, his other hand coming to rest at the small of her back, pulling her against

him. Elizabeth melted into him, her fingers curling into the fabric of his coat, her entire world narrowing to the warmth of his touch, the steady strength of his embrace.

When they finally pulled apart, Elizabeth's breath was unsteady, her pulse racing.

Darcy pressed his forehead against hers, his voice hushed and reverent. "You do not know how long I have wished to hear you say that."

She smiled, tilting her chin to look at him. "Then I am glad I said it."

His lips brushed against hers once more, a whisper of a promise.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, letting herself revel in the certainty of it.

There would be challenges ahead, no doubt. But in that moment, with Darcy's arms around her and the fire warming the study, she knew one thing with absolute clarity.

She was home.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Elizabeth

Two Years Later

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

The crisp autumn air at Longbourn carried the scent of earth and harvest, while golden leaves tumbled from the trees in a gentle dance. Elizabeth walked alongside her father, who leaned on his stick, his steps steadier than they had been in months.

“I thought this day would never come,” he murmured, disbelief threading through his tone. “That I would never live to see it. The christening of my first grandchild.”

Elizabeth glanced up at him, warmth unfurling in her heart. “And yet here you are, Papa,” she said, slipping her hand through his free arm. “I am so very glad of it.”

Mr Bennet chuckled and shook his head. “Thanks in no small part to your husband, I daresay. He seems determined to gather the family together, does he not?”

Elizabeth could not deny the truth in that. Darcy had ensured that the best physicians tended to her father throughout his long recovery. “Yes,” she agreed with a fond smile. “He has done so much for us all.”

As they strolled, they reminisced about the past year and a half. Jane’s marriage to Mr Bingley had been a joyous occasion, and Mr Bennet had been well enough to walk her down the aisle. Now, the newlyweds had settled in an estate in the North, conveniently near Pemberley, allowing Elizabeth to visit often.

“She is faring well, I trust?” Mr Bennet asked, genuine concern reflected in his eyes.

Elizabeth smiled at her father. “Very well, indeed. In a few months’ time, she shall have a child of her own. I have no doubt she will be a wonderful mother.”

Her father hummed in satisfaction. “Indeed. Your mother shall finally have the grandchildren she has ever wished for.”

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “Well, two at least. However, I am certain Mary will soon add one more to the count, she speaks of little else these days.”

They were gathered at Longbourn to celebrate the christening of Elizabeth and Darcy’s firstborn son, Charles Lewis Fitzwilliam Darcy—a name honouring not just his godfather, Charles Bingley, and his godmother’s father, Lewis de Bourgh, but their cherished Fitzwilliam heritage as well. The house bustled with preparations, laughter mingling with the scent of simmering delicacies.

Mr Bennet sighed and shook his head with a wry smile. “I see I shall finally have the pleasure of meeting the much-discussed Lady Catherine.”

Elizabeth exhaled deeply, concern knitting her brow. “Yes... I confess, I have some trepidation regarding her interactions with my mother.”

“Lady Catherine had best be prepared, for there is none so formidable as Mrs Bennet,” her father chuckled.

Indeed, her mother had grown steely through the years. Caring for her husband had consumed her, but with Mr Bennet’s health restored, Mrs Bennet had found joy once more, organising escapades with her friends. She, along with Mrs Gardiner, and Mrs Phillips were soon to embark on a delightful tour of northern England, with Pemberley as a highlight.

“Are you quite certain you shall manage on your own, Papa?” Elizabeth asked, concern lacing her tone. “While Mama is away?”

“Manage?” he echoed, amused. “My dear, I am hardly alone. Jane and Bingley remain at Netherfield for another month before returning north, and while Lydia and her Mr Denny may be in London, they visit frequently. And of course, Mary and Mr Baxter are just down the road.”

Elizabeth smiled at the mention of her sister’s husband. Mr Baxter, a young barrister in Uncle Gardiner’s firm, had proven to be both steady and kind-hearted. Their quiet wedding had been a heartening event.

As for their adversary, Mr Wickham had at last been caught out. Under duress, Mrs Younge had surrendered his whereabouts, leading to his swift arrest and the harsh realities of a court-martial.

“Perhaps Kitty might visit, she has not been back since Christmastide until now. She does appear glowing, I must say.”

Elizabeth’s face brightened. “Oh, indeed. Kitty is being courted by one of Darcy’s associates, a gentleman of excellent character. We hope that there shall soon be a proposal. I can see how happy he makes her.”

Mr Bennet laughed heartily. “That will surely ease your mother’s nerves—to think that all her daughters are finally settled in marriage.”

Just then, the rumble of carriage wheels echoed down the drive. The first door opened, and out stepped Lady Catherine de Bourgh, her gaze sweeping over Longbourn with evident disdain. An open carriage followed, containing Mr Collins and his wife, Charlotte, though they remained seated, their uncertainty palpable. Charlotte waved at Elizabeth, only to retract her hand when Mr Collins glared at her disapprovingly. Poor Charlotte. She had helped secure the relinquishing of the

entailment alongside Lady Catherine, something her husband had not appreciated in the least.

As Mrs Bennet emerged from the house, ready to greet Lady Catherine, Elizabeth felt a mixture of anticipation and dread. She could not hear their exchange until they were nearer, but what she heard was quite enough.

“A modest house, to be sure,” Lady Catherine remarked coolly, her eyes narrowing. “It must be a rather challenging task to entertain guests in such... limited quarters.”

Mrs Bennet’s eyes glinted with unyielding resolve. “Indeed, Lady Catherine, it takes skill to manage a home such as this, where one must rely upon wit and charm rather than grandeur alone. I suspect Netherfield may be more to your liking, as it is both grander and rather cold.”

Elizabeth barely suppressed a smile at her mother’s clever retort. Lady Catherine pursed her lips but poised herself to greet Elizabeth directly.

“Ah, Mrs Darcy, how good to see you,” she said, her voice smooth but laced with a hint of condescension as she shifted her attention to Mr Bennet. “And you must be Mr Bennet, I presume.”

“Indeed,” he said with a nod. “A pleasure, I’m sure.”

Lady Catherine’s gaze swept the gathering as she enquired about her daughter. “And has my daughter arrived?”

“She is inside, with Georgiana,” Elizabeth confirmed, careful to keep her tone neutral.

Lady Catherine narrowed her eyes. “And Richard?”

Elizabeth hesitated, studying her aunt's expression. "He is with his father at Netherfield, awaiting your arrival."

Lady Catherine clicked her tongue, irritation sparking in her eyes. "Oh? So my brother has deigned to make an appearance at last?"

Before Elizabeth could respond, Darcy emerged from the house, greeting his aunt with a respectful bow. Their eyes met, and with the slightest quirk of his lips, he conveyed silent amusement at the ongoing encounter.

"Aunt Catherine," he called, his tone a blend of warmth and formality, "how good to see you."

Lady Catherine turned to him with an air of expectation. "I was informed that your son is to bear my late husband's name as one of his, and that my daughter is his godmother," she stated with scrutiny. "A rather magnanimous decision on your part, nephew."

Darcy remained unfazed. "It was Elizabeth's idea," he replied, his eyes flickering with affection towards her.

Lady Catherine regarded Elizabeth thoughtfully, then gave a curt nod. "A good choice."

Elizabeth smiled, her heart swelling with pride. "Anne is a lovely young woman. I have grown quite fond of her, and I have never heard a bad word spoken about Sir Lewis."

Lady Catherine sighed as if begrudging the compliment. "Very well. I shall make my way to Netherfield now. I merely wished to extend my greetings in the proper fashion."

As she departed, Elizabeth locked eyes with Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte smiled brightly while Mr Collins merely nodded stiffly before following his patroness's carriage. She would have to find a time to converse with her later on during their stay. Mrs Bennet escorted Mr Bennet back inside, leaving Elizabeth alone with her husband at last.

“Would you walk with me?” Darcy extended his arm, and Elizabeth slipped her hand through his, relishing the familiar comfort of his touch.

They made their way into the garden and Darcy smiled. “It is rather nice to have a moment's peace,” he mused, glancing around the garden at the gentle play of sunlight filtering through the trees.

Elizabeth chuckled, leaning into him as they walked. “With a child in the house, such moments are indeed rare.”

Darcy's arm slipped around her waist, drawing her closer. “And yet, I look forward to all we will experience as parents. Faith, Elizabeth. I owe you all my happiness,” he murmured softly against her ear.

Elizabeth leaned her head against his shoulder, feeling her heart swell with affection. “And I owe you mine, dear Fitz. Together, we have forged a life of joy.”

Their footsteps led them into the house, where laughter and love enveloped them, a testament to the bond they had nurtured. As they stepped into the warmth of home—their shared sanctuary—Elizabeth felt giddy with anticipation for what lay ahead, knowing their adventure had only just begun.

THE END

Thank you for reading!