



WE HAVE
MARY KING
TO THANK

JACK CALDWELL

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A Pride & Prejudice Novella

JACK CALDWELL

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Part 1

April 1812

ELIZABETH SAT STUNNED IN THE PARLOR of the Hunsford parsonage. Had Mr. Darcy just proposed to her? Haughty, cruel Mr. Darcy? Insulting her family! Boasting of separating Jane from Mr. Bingley! Refusing to admit the wickedness of his actions against Mr. Wickham! It was not to be borne! Angry and astonished, she still labored to be civil in the face of the argument that then arose.

“From the very beginning—from the first moment, I may almost say—of my acquaintance with you, your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike. And I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry!”

A red-faced Mr. Darcy raised his hands, as though to ward off her words. “You have said quite enough, madam. I perfectly comprehend your feelings, and have now only to be ashamed of what my own have been.

“Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness.”

With those words, he hastily moved to leave the room. Elizabeth turned away so that he could not see if she wept. But the next sound she heard was not the closing of the door, but Mr. Darcy’s voice.

“Mr. Wickham will not marry you, Miss Bennet.”

Stunned, her eyes flew to him.

“I have known him all my life.” Mr. Darcy wore a pained, haunted expression. “You are a lovely young lady, and Wickham may desire you, but not for a wife. I assure you he would not marry any woman for less than ten thousand pounds.”

“M-Mr. Darcy, get out!”

The gentleman shook his head. “As much as you dislike me, trust me in this. Guard well your heart, Elizabeth.” With that, he quit the house.

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Fortunately for Elizabeth, either the housemaid forgot to tell Charlotte Collins of Mr. Darcy's visit or failed to make the effort to do so. Elizabeth was left on her own in the bedroom to which she fled after the gentleman's exit. It was well, for she could not get his words out of her mind.

*"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."*

Mr. Darcy loved her? How could that be? He had insulted her looks at their first meeting. They had argued constantly at Netherfield. He did nothing here at Rosings but stare harshly at her, looking to find fault. And he was engaged to Miss de Bourgh, for heaven's sake!

But... Mr. Darcy was nothing if not honorable. Even at his haughtiest and most unpleasant, he was correct in his manners. There was not a hint of impropriety at Netherfield. He seemed to seek out her company, both at Rosings and during her morning walks. And he paid Miss de Bourgh no attention whatsoever.

And Miss de Bourgh likewise ignored Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth had never known a couple in an arranged marriage, but she could not imagine such a complete disregard between the parties as she saw at Rosings. Perhaps Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh were not engaged—at least, not yet? That seems at odds from what Mr. Wickham reported.

*"Mr. Wickham will not marry you, Miss Bennet."*

Insufferable man! Mr. Darcy treated poor Mr. Wickham infamously. He denied his childhood friend the living promised by old Mr. Darcy. He condemned his father's godson to relative poverty. How cruel, how terrible! Mr. Wickham was forced to join the militia to earn his bread. Even if she wanted to marry him—and had no desire to marry Wickham—Elizabeth could not. Wickham could not afford a wife.

Unless she had a sizable dowry. Like Mary King.

*"Ten thousand pounds."*

How that phrase echoed in Elizabeth's mind! Ten thousand pounds! The exact amount of Mary King's inheritance. How did Mr. Darcy learn of it? The news was not spread until after he and Mr. Bingley left the neighborhood. Who could have told him? Who was his agent? Why would he care?

*"Guard well your heart, Elizabeth."*

Why would he care? He cared for nothing in Hertfordshire, much less her! Did he not say she was not handsome enough to tempt him? Mr. Darcy strutted around, stone-faced, ignoring all of her friends. None were worthy of his attention.

His proposal was a complete shock. She cared nothing for him, and thought she had made that plain by her words and actions. How could he disregard that? The man must be addle-pated!

No, not addle-pated. Even Elizabeth had to admit Mr. Darcy was a clever, well-read gentleman. His observations and opinions at Netherfield could not be dismissed. He clearly made the most of his time at University.

If only he had learned to better disguise his haughty superiority!

*"Disguise of any sort is my abhorrence."*

What an arrogant declaration! Mr. Darcy must give offense wherever he goes!

*"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."*

*Stop it! Stop it!*

She would not regret him. She would not!

## Part 2

ELIZABETH AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING to the same thoughts and meditations which had at length closed her eyes. She had not yet recovered from the surprise of what had happened. It was impossible to think of anything else.

After breakfast, she decided to indulge herself in air and exercise. Upon proceeding directly to her favorite walk, she recalled that Mr. Darcy's sometimes came there. Instead of entering the park, she turned up the lane, which led her farther from the turnpike-road.

After walking two or three times along that part of the lane, she caught a glimpse of the gentleman within the grove near a gate into the park. Mr. Darcy saw her, and stepping forward, called her name.

Elizabeth meant to leave, but on hearing her name called, she moved again towards the gate. He had by that time reached it also, and holding out a letter, which she instinctively took, said with a mixed look of exhaustion and haughty composure, "I have been walking in the grove some time in the hope of meeting you. Will you do me the honor of reading that letter?" He turned to go the other way.

"How did you learn of Mary King?" she called to his back.

Mr. Darcy stopped, turned, and said, "I beg your pardon?"

"How did you learn of Miss King's fortune?" she clarified. "It became common knowledge weeks after you left the neighborhood." She frowned, anger growing inside. "Do you have an agent reporting to you?"

Darcy shook his head. "I do not recall meeting a Miss King, and I certainly know nothing of her circumstances."

"But you know she has inherited ten thousand pounds!"

"I know nothing of the sort. To what do these accusations portend?" His lips tightened. "You now add spying to my list of sins?"

Elizabeth grew increasingly confused. "But you said—you claimed Mr. Wickham would only marry a lady of ten thousand pounds. That is the exact amount Mary King now has."

"And what of it?"

"Mr. Wickham is courting Miss King, and may be betrothed by now. You claim not to know this?"

Mr. Darcy grew closer to the gate. "Miss Bennet, are you saying Wickham has secured the affections of one of your friends? This is serious indeed."

"Why? What is this hate you have for Mr. Wickham?"

"Hate is earned, Miss Bennet, and Wickham has certainly merited it." He gestured at the letter still in her hand. "I have written you the whole of his connection with my family. It pains me to report that the friend of my childhood has become an infamous libertine, rake, and gamester. He has betrayed my family numerous times—a family that has seen to his education and hoped to promote his chosen profession—and we still suffer from his actions."

Elizabeth said nothing to Mr. Darcy's shocking statement. He continued to pace beside the gate.

"Is there a way?" he said almost to himself. "Is there a way to rescue your friend from the sorry fate that awaits her?"

"He is that dangerous?"

Darcy stopped, his countenance grave. "Wickham has wasted four thousand pounds in less than three years. This I know for a fact! Imagine how quickly he could squander ten thousand."

Elizabeth retreated a step, so great was her astonishment. "Four thousand pounds? How do you know this?"

"It is what he received from my father and me."

Elizabeth's knees felt weak, all of her previously held opinions crumbling before Darcy's stern words. Alarmed, Darcy opened the gate and took her arm. "Forgive me, Miss Bennet! I fear I have distressed you. Come, there is a seat nearby."

Elizabeth allowed herself to be led to a fallen log. Upon sitting, she regained her composure. "You make terrible accusations against Mr. Wickham, sir. I trust you can prove them?"

"I can," he stated coldly. "I have known him all my life. Once we were friends, as I said, but as we grew older, his character changed. I choose to believe this, for the thought that my father's godson was *always* bad is too painful to contemplate."

As Mr. Darcy spoke, his tone became softer, filled with disappointment and regret.

"My father and Wickham's were not only gentleman and servant but friends. My father thought highly of George Wickham and his high spirits. He supported him at school and Cambridge, for his family was in constant distress caused by Mrs. Wickham's extravagance, and he hoped he would make the church his profession."

Darcy shook his head. "It was at school I realized Wickham should never be a clergyman. He eagerly participated in the vices prevalent at school—cards, drinking, and...other things. He also accrued debt, using my family's name to secure far more credit than he could make good. You may understand why we grew apart.

"When my father died five years ago, he left Wickham a thousand pounds along with a request that I see to his advancement in his chosen profession. He particularly mentioned the living in Kympton which is our gift, should he receive orders.

"You may ask yourself why my father was so generous when Wickham had developed habits that I assure you would have horrified any decent gentleman. The reason was that he was unaware of them. My dear mother, to whom my father was intently attached, died ten years ago. In my own grief, I was a poor companion for him. He grew close to his cheerful godson while I comforted my sister, who is more than ten years my junior. I saw how Father mourned my mother—he suffered intently—so I said nothing. I could not take from him his source of consolation. It is why I paid Wickham's debts at school and in Derbyshire. Perhaps I should have allowed him to feel the consequences of his deplorable actions. I own that may have been a mistake.

"Wickham's father did not long survive mine, and within half a year, he wrote to inform me that having finally resolved against taking orders, he hoped I should not think it unreasonable for him to expect some more immediate pecuniary advantage in lieu of the preferment. Wickham had some intention of studying the law, he claimed, and the interest of one thousand pounds would be insufficient to support him in this endeavor. I rather wished than believed him to be sincere, but I was perfectly ready to accede to his proposal.

"The business was soon settled. He resigned all claim to assistance in the church in return for three thousand pounds. All connection between us seemed now dissolved."

Stunned, Elizabeth countered, "He said you refused the bequest."

"I am certain he did. Once Wickham left for London with the funds, I neither knew nor cared how he lived. His claim to study the law was a mere pretense, and being now free from all restraint, his life was one of idleness and dissipation.

"I heard nothing from him for about three years, until the Kympton living did fall open. Wickham wrote me, claiming that finding his studies unprofitable and in desperate straits, he decided to take orders after all and demanded the gift of the living. I refused him, of course."

"I-I can hardly credit it! Such audacity from a gentleman who had already received extraordinary generosity! Is it possible?"

“I am sorry to give you pain, but it is indeed possible. Wickham was unhappy with this turn of events and was as violent with his opinion of me in his letters as I am sure he was with you. I had hoped never to hear from him again, but he imposed upon my family painfully last summer. My sister—”

“No!” Elizabeth cried. “Do you claim Mr. Wickham injured your sister in some way?”

Darcy grew grim. “He did. To protect you, I must do what I failed to do for Georgiana.

“About a year ago, it was my sister’s wish to leave school and set up her own household, as is usual for young ladies in our circumstances. After speaking to Colonel Fitzwilliam, who shares in her guardianship, we hired a companion, a Mrs. Younge, a woman in whose character we were most unhappily deceived. Oh, had I done what I ought! I should have done better, should have examined her references closely. But I did not.

“They left London to visit Ramsgate, and thither also went Wickham—undoubtedly by design—for there proved to have been a prior acquaintance between him and Mrs. Younge.

“I did not share with Georgiana my history with Wickham, for she was recovered from her grief over our father, and the thought that she would meet with Wickham never occurred to me. Her affectionate heart retained a strong impression of Wickham’s kindness to her as a child. Therefore, she proved easy prey for the compliments paid her by him and the encouragements from Mrs. Younge. She was persuaded to believe herself in love and to consent to an elopement.”

“Good heavens! But surely she is safe?”

“She is. By the greatest good luck, I joined them unexpectedly a day or two before the intended elopement. Georgiana acknowledged the whole to me. You may imagine what I felt and how I acted! Regard for my sister’s credit and feelings prevented any public exposure, but I wrote to Wickham, who left the place immediately. Mrs. Younge was, of course, removed from her charge.”

“Thank goodness for that.” Elizabeth frowned. “Your sister...did you not say she is ten years your junior?”

“Yes,” he confirmed gravely, “she was but fifteen years old at the time.”

Elizabeth could only gasp, “Mr. Wickham tried to elope with a fifteen-year-old child?”

“He did. Wickham’s chief object was unquestionably my sister’s fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds, but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me was a strong inducement. By ruining my sister, his revenge would have been complete indeed.”

Elizabeth, in tears, could only shake her head.

“I, of course, feel no doubt of your secrecy,” continued Darcy, “but I hope you can acquit me of cruelty towards Wickham.” He paused. “I know not in what manner he has imposed on you, but his success is not to be wondered at. He is a practiced liar, and I do not use that word loosely.

“You have no reason to trust me. Therefore, I can appeal to the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who is acquainted with every particular of these transactions. If your abhorrence of *me* should make my assertions valueless, you cannot be prevented by the same cause from consulting *him*.”

“Mr. Darcy, please.” Elizabeth placed her hand on his. “I do not doubt you. I am only shocked and mortified. That Mr. Wickham could be so bad! He has every appearance of goodness.”

His face softened. “You must not blame yourself. A practiced liar must appear otherwise to his victims, or he would not be successful in his schemes.”

Elizabeth could not credit his kindness, nor take comfort in his assurances. She thought better of herself, that she had a superior understanding of others, but when brought to the test, she had failed most miserably. How Mr. Wickham must have laughed at her gullibility! She felt a fool.

There was one matter, however, about which she was not wrong. In renewed indignation, she asked, “Why are you so kind to me when you were cruel to my sister?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You admitted last evening you separated my dear Jane from Mr. Bingley. You said you did everything in your power to do so. Are all gentlemen from Derbyshire heartless?”

Darcy drew back, and in a tone haughty yet defensive said, “Heartless? Madam, it was the heart of both Bingley and your sister that drove my actions.”

“What do you mean? Did Mr. Bingley not care for Jane?”

“My concerns were quite in the other direction.”

Elizabeth leapt to her feet. “How could you? You, and you alone, have broken my dearest sister’s heart—perhaps forever!”

Darcy joined her. “You claim your sister loved my friend? She showed no evidence of that.”

“Who are you to determine such a thing for others totally unrelated to you? You could not ascertain *my* feelings, much less Jane’s!” Elizabeth’s fists clenched.

Darcy said nothing; he simply gaped.

“I have nothing more to say to you!” Elizabeth turned to the gate.

“Wait! You cannot say that and leave!” cried Darcy.

“I shall do as I choose,” she threw over her shoulder. “Good day, Mr. Darcy!”

“Miss Elizabeth! Please! We must speak on this!”

At the gate, Elizabeth turned to him. “I do not see we have anything more to say to each other, sir.” She closed it behind her and stomped back to the parsonage.

## Part 3

ELIZABETH SAT IN HER BEDROOM, staring out the window, her face wet with tears, Mr. Darcy's letter still in her hands. She did not recall having slipped it into her pocket until she returned to the parsonage. Its presence was discovered upon reaching her room. Curiosity overwhelmed her anger, and she read Mr. Darcy's words rather than consign them to the fireplace's flames.

What a difference Mr. Darcy's words and actions appeared when written! The first half of the letter was devoted to the matter of Mr. Bingley and Jane. He expressed no regret for what he had done, his style was not penitent, but haughty. It was all pride and insolence. She wanted to dismiss his argument entirely.

Widely different was the effect of a *second* perusal of that section. He declared himself to have been totally unaware of her sister's attachment. She could not help remembering what Charlotte's opinion had always been or deny the justice of his description of Jane. Jane's feelings, though fervent, were little displayed, and there was a constant complacency in her air and manner not often united with great sensibility.

Still, the central mystery remained—*why was Mr. Bingley's happiness any business of Mr. Darcy's?* He claimed Mr. Bingley's great natural modesty led to a stronger dependence on Mr. Darcy's judgment than on his own. Did it follow that Mr. Darcy was *required* to advise Mr. Bingley? A loveless marriage was an evil indeed, but was that his real reason for interference? Was Mr. Darcy as officious as Lady Catherine? Was he keeping Mr. Bingley available for his own sister? The letter gave no clue.

Her sense of shame was severe when she returned to the part of the letter in which her family was mentioned in terms of such mortifying yet merited reproach. The compliment he paid her sister and herself was not unfelt. It soothed, but it could not console her for the contempt which he held for the rest of her family. In fairness, however, she now considered that Jane's disappointment had, in fact, been the work of her nearest relations. Reflecting how materially the credit of both Jane and herself was hurt by such impropriety of conduct, Elizabeth felt saddened beyond anything she had ever known.

The second half of the letter was far more civil but just as horrifying as their interview. The pain the Darcys experienced due to the betrayals of Mr. Wickham and Mrs. Younge was palatable on the page. It was clear Elizabeth had been deceived as to the character of Mr. Wickham, Mr. Darcy, and Miss Darcy. The former, she had grown to loath. For the girl, she had pity. As for Mr. Darcy—

How could she desire to slap and embrace a person at the same time?

*'I will only add God bless you.'*

His charitable closing words joined the others that haunted her. She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. She could think of neither Darcy nor Wickham without feeling she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd.

*How despicably have I acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candor of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blamable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery!*

*Yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned.*

*Till this moment, I never knew myself.*

There was a knock on the door. "Eliza," said Charlotte Collins, "we have guests. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam have called."

For a moment, Elizabeth panicked. How could she face Mr. Darcy now after their awful interview? Just when she resolved to plead illness, her courage reasserted itself. She dashed away her tears.

"I shall be down in a moment, Charlotte."

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Elizabeth entered the room to behold Colonel Fitzwilliam deep in conversation with Maria Lucas while Mr. Collins had cornered Mr. Darcy near the fireplace. As unsettling as Mr. Darcy's presence was to her peace of mind, she could not, in good conscience, leave the poor gentleman to her cousin's pompous pronouncements and absurd opinions. She did not think overmuch why she needed to "save" the gentleman from Derbyshire. She only knew she must. After greeting the colonel, Elizabeth moved to the fireplace to undertake her mission of mercy.

"Mr. Darcy." She curtsied, her eyes never leaving his cravat.

"Miss Bennet." *Was his voice hesitant? Was he as uncomfortable as she? Of course, he must be! How mortifying to be in the company of the hoyden who last evening had with so little attempt at civility utterly shattered his hopes. Who only hours ago utterly dismissed him. Jane—she must remember Jane's pain or she would surely weep.*

“My dear cousin, are you well?” inquired Mr. Collins. “I suspect going out of doors this morning on one of your rambles has affected you most inconveniently! It is as Lady Catherine says—too much sun is a disadvantage to one’s health! Why, your eyes are as red as a beet!”

“No, I am well, truly,” Elizabeth declared. “The spring—sometimes it affects my eyes.”

“Yes,” offered Mr. Darcy quietly. “My cousin Anne suffers from that malady.”

“That cannot be, sir!” cried Collins. “Miss de Bourgh is descended from the august Fitzwilliam line.”

Darcy turned on him, his voice cold. “Mr. Collins, do you claim a better knowledge of my cousin’s health than I? I have known her all my life.” He gave Mr. Collins the same hard stare he did at Mr. Bingley’s ball so many months ago—a look that clearly stated the recipient had crossed the line of polite discourse. At the time, Elizabeth thought Mr. Darcy officious, displaying his overall contempt of all things Hertfordshire. But now, she saw that Mr. Darcy used that look like a weapon, one wielded only against the rude and thoughtless.

Mr. Collins paled. In November, in Meryton, he was impervious to Mr. Darcy’s glare. But in April, in Hunsford, the cleric’s armor against discredit failed. “I-I beg your pardon, my good sir! Of course, you would know the state of your fair intended’s health far better than I!”

Mr. Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, and something strange happened. He shut his eyes, sighed, and straightened his posture. In a far more conciliatory manner, he answered. “Your concern for the health of my cousin does you credit. I tell you my aunt puts on a brave face on such matters, but Anne has never been well, not even as a child.”

“Too true, Darcy,” added Colonel Fitzwilliam from across the room. “The finest physicians in London have attended Anne, and they all say the same. It is a shame, really, but there it is.” He turned to Mrs. Collins. “Her only joy is driving her phaeton about, when the weather and her health allow it.”

“Then,” Collins asked of Mr. Darcy, “you will remain here after you marry?”

The conciliatory Darcy fled, and what remained was the stern Master of Pemberley. “Mr. Collins, you speak of matters that are of no concern of yours.”

“Mr. Collins,” injected a slightly more polite Colonel Fitzwilliam, “Anne will never marry.”

“But-but Lady Catherine—”

The colonel rose. “Cannot a mother have dreams for her daughter? Certainly, my aunt wants for Anne’s happiness.” The look he shared with Mr. Darcy belied that statement, but it

was lost on Mr. Collins. “Unfortunately, things are fated otherwise. My aunt chooses to express her hopes, as fruitless as they are. We humor her. It does no harm.”

Mr. Darcy scowled at Mr. Collins again. “Yes—just as long as others do not spread gossip and false tales.”

“F-far be it from me, my good sirs. But, poor Miss de Bourgh!” Mr. Collins began to wring his hands. “That the fairest flower in Kent should be stricken! We must pray for her—indeed, we must all pray for her! Next week’s sermon—I must include her in next week’s sermon!”

“My aunt would not want her business broadcast in church.”

Mrs. Collins rushed to her husband’s side. “My dear, you know Lady Catherine’s desire for privacy. It would not do to displease her or embarrass Miss de Bourgh.”

Abashed, Collins could only agree.

Colonel Fitzwilliam sided up to the couple. “Subtlety, Mr. Collins. Subtlety is called for here.”

Elizabeth doubted that Mr. Collins had ever been subtle in his entire life.

Mr. Collins stood in indecision, worrying his lip. “You are right, my good colonel. I-I should perhaps study my books—certainly there will be something I can use.”

“That is a wise decision, my dear,” Mrs. Collins soothed as she patted his hand.

“I must begin my work this instant! Forgive me, gentleman, but my study awaits!” With that he dashed out of the sitting room. The others could only watch in various emotions, from astonishment to mortification.

“Ah,” began the colonel, breaking the awkward silence, “we came to farewell you. Darcy and I return to London in the morning.” He looked to his cousin, but that gentleman said nothing. “We hope you have passed your time in Kent not unpleasantly,” he said to Elizabeth and Maria.

While Maria assured the colonel of her delight with Hunsford and Rosings, Elizabeth was fighting mixed feelings. Mr. Darcy’s presence could only remind her of his bad behavior—and hers too. Yet, there was a faint pain in her breast. Would they ever meet again? How was she to apologize?

Elizabeth was abruptly brought out of her musings by Mr. Darcy’s deep voice.

“Is there any service we might render for you, Miss Bennet?” He stared at the top of her head, avoiding her eyes. “I—we would be willing to deliver a letter to your sister in town.”

She was just able to resist asking why he would do such a thing. "I-I have one I have begun upstairs."

"We can stop by as we depart tomorrow, if you like." Yes, there was definitely pain in his voice.

"It will be ready. Thank you."

He bowed. "It would be an honor." Mr. Darcy then took his leave of Maria and Charlotte, and the two gentlemen left the parsonage.

Maria looked over at the tea service, forlornly unused. "Whatever shall we do with the tea?"

"Never mind that," Charlotte declared. "Eliza, what have you done to Mr. Darcy?"

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It took no little time for Elizabeth to assure the others that they did not hear what they heard or saw what was before them. Assured of her indifference, she was allowed to retreat to her room and Jane's letter, only to sit and stare at it.

What could she say? That the unpleasant and stoic Mr. Darcy declared his love and proposed to her, proclaiming his intentions and wishes in a manner only Mr. Collins could surpass in offensiveness? That Mr. Bingley's sisters and friend convinced him to abandon her? That Lady Catherine's wish to unite Rosings and Pemberley was an utter fantasy? That the handsome and charming Mr. Wickham was an absolute scoundrel who almost seduced a fifteen-year-old heiress? That Mary King was in danger of marrying a rogue?

Elizabeth sat back. How *did* Mr. Darcy know of Mary King's fortune? He never said. Instead, he expressed his concerns for Miss King's happiness.

No, he was concerned for Miss King because he believed she was her friend. Elizabeth did not admit that they were only common and indifferent acquaintances. Mr. Darcy did not want Mary King to marry Mr. Wickham because he thought *she was her friend*. After all that had happened, after all they said to each other, he was worried about a person he thought was her friend.

Did that not mean he was worried for *her*? Did he still love her?

*"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."*

Impossible!

Was it not?

## Part 4

ELIZABETH ABANDONED THE TASK of adding to Jane's letter. She sealed it and attempted to put her struggles behind her by reading poetry until dressing for dinner. The party had just taken their seats and sat through Mr. Collins's long-winded blessing, when there was a commotion at the door.

"Out of my way, girl!" demanded a familiar quarrelsome and imperious voice. "I have business here that will not be delayed!"

All were astonished as Lady Catherine de Bourgh swept into the dining room, highly incensed. "You!" One shaking, bejeweled finger stabbed towards Elizabeth. "You jezebel! I would speak to you this instant!"

"Lady Catherine," cried Mr. Collins, "welcome to my humble abode. But what has distressed you? Pray allow me to escort you to a seat where you may take comfort." He called for the housemaid.

"Silence, toad!" shouted the grand dame. "My business is not with you but with *that* young lady!"

"Cousin Elizabeth?" Ashen, he turned to her. "What have you done?"

Elizabeth stood slowly. "Nothing that I am aware of." She raised her chin. "Lady Catherine, you can have no business with me."

"Indeed, I do," she argued. "You plead ignorance, Miss Bennet, but you can be at no loss to understand the reason for my presence. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come."

"You are mistaken, madam. I cannot account for seeing you here."

"Young lady, you ought to know I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere *you* may choose to be, you shall not find *me* so. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it! If you will not step into Mr. Collins' study where we may speak in privacy, I will have no scruple but to reveal all to those assembled here!"

"I have nothing to hide from my friends."

"So be it! A report of a most alarming nature has reached me. I was told that you have been meeting clandestinely with my own nephew Mr. Darcy on Rosings property itself! Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as

to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on making my sentiments known to you.”

“If you believed it impossible to be true,” said Elizabeth, coloring with mortification and disdain, “I wonder you took the trouble of coming here, at such an hour. What could your ladyship propose by it?”

“Cousin Elizabeth, mind your words!” demanded Mr. Collins.

Lady Catherine ignored him. “At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted.”

Elizabeth could not lie to the lady. “I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. You may ask questions which I shall not choose to answer.”

“Elizabeth!” cried both Charlotte and Mr. Collins.

“So, it is true!”

“It is true that I often walk the groves of Rosings—at *your* invitation—and it is true that on occasion I have come across *both* of your nephews exercising the same freedom. Is this your notion of a clandestine meeting? Shall I rudely ignore your relations? Is this your requirement of proper behavior?”

“Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this.”

“It is not my intention to harm you, milady.”

“I insist on being satisfied! Do you believe by such actions, with your arts and allurements, you may, in a moment of infatuation, have made Darcy forget what he owes to himself and to all his family? This is not to be borne, Miss Bennet!” Lady Catherine slammed her walking-stick hard upon the floor, marring the wood. “Has he, has Darcy made you an offer of marriage?”

“ELIZABETH!” cried Charlotte, Mr. Collins, and Maria.

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible.”

“It ought to be so—it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But you may have drawn him in!”

“If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it.”

“Miss Bennet, you will answer! I am almost the nearest relation Darcy has in the world, and I am entitled to know all his dearest concerns!”

Elizabeth's anger was ignited. "But you are not entitled to know *mine*, nor will such behavior as this ever induce me to be explicit."

"Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never! Mr. Darcy is engaged to *my daughter*. Now what have you to say?"

"Only this—that if he is so, you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me."

Lady Catherine hesitated for a moment, and then replied, "The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favorite wish of his mother as well as of hers. While in their cradles, we planned the union.

"All this to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family? It must not be! Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends? Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy? Have you not heard me say that from his earliest hours he was destined for his cousin?"

"ENOUGH!" demanded a booming male voice.

Mr. Darcy angrily strode through the dining room door, followed closely by an anxious Colonel Fitzwilliam.

"Aunt, you forget yourself!" Darcy cried, "How dare you disparage a worthy young lady like Miss Bennet? She is a gentleman's daughter from a respectable family. It is beneath you, madam, and I insist you apologize at once."

"Apologize? I certainly will not!" Lady Catherine turned her ire upon Mr. Darcy. "I know it all! My footmen have observed your assignations in the groves! I know where you were last evening! Instead of taking tea with your family, you were meeting with this *bird of paradise*! It is *you* who has forgotten what is owed to Anne and to me! Throw off this unworthy connection, and pledge that you will do your duty and marry Anne!"

Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped between the combatants. "This is hardly the place for—"

"Silence, boy!" Lady Catherine spat out the words. "This is between Darcy and me."

The colonel's affable demeanor vanished. In a deadly voice, he returned, "'Boy'? Is *that* what you think of me?" Elizabeth trembled as Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed to transform before her eyes from a good natured gentleman to a fearsome warrior.

Lady Catherine was insensible to the change. "Darcy, it is long past time for you to announce your engagement with Anne!"

"I am not engaged to Anne."

"You most certainly are! From your cradles your mother and I planned your union!"

"What you may have discussed with my mother years ago has no bearing on the current situation." Ignoring her outcry, Mr. Darcy continued. "Show me then, madam, the papers arranging our union. Present the marriage articles signed by my father and Sir Lewis. You cannot, for there are none. There is no betrothal."

"Darcy, you and Anne are descended from the same noble line. The Darcys are respectable, honorable, and ancient—though untitled. Your fortunes on both sides are splendid. You are destined for each other by the voice of every member of our houses!"

"And what is to divide you? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune? Is this to be endured? But it must not, shall not be! She is below you. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up!"

"Aunt, take heed. You will cease your denunciation of the Bennets," Darcy proclaimed. "I shall not marry Anne. No one will marry Anne. She is too ill."

"Nonsense! Anne is perfectly well! A delicate constitution is not illness!"

"No, Aunt," said Colonel Fitzwilliam with forced gentleness, "she is not. Please, be seated." He reached for her. "I have spoken to Anne. She knows she cannot marry—"

The sound of Lady Catherine's slap filled the room. "SHE IS NOT ILL!"

Elizabeth held back a gasp, something that neither Maria nor Charlotte could do. Mr. Collins looked on the stupefied horror.

The colonel took a step back, failing to touch his reddened cheek. "Madam, I am done with you. If you were a man—" He turned and moved next to Mr. Darcy.

His cousin's attention was not on his aunt but on Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet..." He stopped and spoke to all in the room. "You must forgive my aunt. She is overwrought."

"There is nothing wrong with me!" she cried.

He ignored Lady Catherine's outburst. "I apologize to each of you. The disturbance of your dinner is inexcusable, to say nothing of the language you have been forced to endure. The colonel and I will escort my aunt back to Rosings and leave you in peace."

"I am not leaving until I am satisfied!" Lady Catherine pointed to Elizabeth. "Are you engaged to that girl?"

Darcy raised his chin, "I am not engaged to anyone."

Lady Catherine seemed to relax. "And will you promise to marry Anne?"

"I will make no promise of the kind."

"Darcy, I am shocked and astonished! Do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not leave till you have given me the assurance I require."

"And I certainly never shall give it," Darcy growled. "I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. Let us leave this place."

"You refuse, then, to oblige me! You refuse to obey the claims of duty, honor, and gratitude. You are determined to ruin yourself in the opinion of all your friends and accept the contempt of the world! Very well. I shall now know how to act!"

Mr. Darcy's calm demeanor broke. "Upon my word, what nonsense you speak! Woman, my tolerance for your foolishness is spent. Fitzwilliam, help me remove our aunt to Rosings."

She recoiled. "What? You would lay hands on me? Help, help!"

"Gentlemen!" Mr. Collins broke out of his stupor. "This...this is outrageous! Lady Catherine is my honored patroness, a lady of exalted rank, a peer of the realm. You cannot treat her in a harsh manner. For shame, sirs!"

"Peer?" snorted Fitzwilliam. "She is no peer, you bumbling fool! She is but the daughter of an earl and the widow of a baronet. My aunt is no more a peer than I, the *son* of an earl and a colonel in the King's army besides. She will do as she is told!"

"I am the mistress of Rosings, and this is my parsonage! Get out!"

"Hah! You are mistress only by the leave of Darcy and my father, as you well know! And this 'boy', as his agent, speaks for the earl!" Fitzwilliam scowled at his aunt. "What say you to that?"

She gave an incomprehensible curse and reached for him, but the colonel was quick, evaded her clutches, and took her by the shoulder. A moment later, Darcy secured her other side, and her walking stick fell to the floor. As they half-dragged the screeching lady to the door, Darcy spoke over his shoulder.

"Again, my most sincere apologies. Good night to all here." They then left the house.

The parties looked at one another in various degrees of shock, disapprobation, and distress. It was left to Maria to break the silence.

“Shall we begin dinner?”

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After a rambling discourse by Mr. Collins, filled with despair over Lady Catherine’s anger and mistreatment at the hands of her nephews and censure over Elizabeth’s attempts to ensnare Mr. Darcy away from his intended bride, Charlotte exerted herself. She demanded silence from her husband and directed all to retire to their rooms. Their dinners would be brought to them to be consumed in peace. To Elizabeth’s surprise, Mr. Collins quietly submitted to his wife’s command.

There was no peace for Elizabeth as she sat on her bed, food untouched, contemplating the events of the evening—indeed of her entire stay at Hunsford. Lady Catherine’s ill-bred attack was shocking enough, but more incredible was Mr. Darcy’s impassioned defense of both her and her family. Mr. Darcy, who had disparaged her family in his insulting proposal, had presented himself as the Bennets’ champion.

How could this be? Who was this Mr. Darcy?

Elizabeth retrieved his letter from her hiding place and read it again. It was all there: his objections to her mother, sisters, and even her father. That she was coming to see some justice to his complaints did not square with his actions tonight. The family that was not good enough for the Bingleys deserved respect from Lady Catherine?

Yet, there it was...

Pardon me. It pains me to offend you. But amidst your concern for the defects of your nearest relations, and your displeasure at this representation of them, let it give you consolation to consider that to have conducted yourselves so as to avoid any share of the like censure is praise no less generally bestowed on you and your eldest sister, than it is honorable to the sense and disposition of both.

So, he deemed her and Jane as well to be above their family, and therefore deserved censure only from him and him alone, and not from his aunt.

How...how arrogant of him! Who did he think he was?

Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Her fingertips traced the letters of his name. How fitting it was. Strong. Regal. Powerful. Pride-filled and standoffish as well!

“My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

“No,” she whispered to herself. “You cannot. How can you say you love me and despise my family in the same breath? It cannot be love you feel.”

She recalled his pain-filled eyes in the parsonage dining room only a short time before. Tears ran down her face. “Why do you torment me, Fitzwilliam Darcy? Teasing, teasing man! Why will you not leave me in peace?”

As she closed the letter, her gaze fell upon his adieu: *I will only add, God bless you.*

She thrust the letter into the bedside table’s drawer and gave herself over to weeping.

Part 5

ELIZABETH AWOKE LATER THAN her usual time, having slept little due to her struggles over the events of the last few days. She quickly dressed and came downstairs. Upon entering the dining parlor, she was struck by the quiet, strained atmosphere. Charlotte was livid, Maria embarrassed and frightened, while Mr. Collins glowered at her. She soon learned the reason.

“Cousin Elizabeth,” intoned a grave Mr. Collins, “you can have no doubt over the cause of the unfortunate scene last night. Indeed, your own heart must be filled with guilt and remorse. That my honored patroness, Lady Catherine, the embodiment of all that is good and proper, should be brought to such a state! It cannot be borne—it must not. Therefore, for the good of the neighborhood, you must return home today.”

“Today?” Elizabeth immediately saw that in spite of the evidence before his eyes, Mr. Collins owned a very different and unique interpretation of Lady Catherine’s violent fit of temper than one should expect. “Sir, I must protest. I am innocent of Lady Catherine’s claims.”

“Indeed, you are, Eliza! Completely innocent!” cried Charlotte. “Mr. Collins, she is our cousin and—”

“My dear,” interrupted the rector, “our honored patroness, the author of all our present advantages of condition, is most distressed with Elizabeth. My situation must not be endangered. I, of course, shall assume our young cousin was unaware of the consequences of her wanton behavior. But sadly, her guilt remains. It would not do for her to stay in Hunsford. It is to be hoped she will contemplate her faults and pray for Our Lord’s forgiveness on her travels home.”

Maria gasped as Charlotte rose to her feet. “Wanton behavior? What proofs have you of this?”

“Is not enticing a gentleman from his promised betrothal with her wiles not wanton? Lady Catherine wants her to leave, and it is our duty to submit to our betters.”

Charlotte meant to continue her defense of her friend, but Elizabeth stopped her. “Sir, how shall I return to my family?” She tried to remain as calm as possible, since reacting to this gross injustice would accomplish nothing. She found it extremely taxing.

“Er...umm...that is not my concern. Perhaps the post-stage.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “Unchaperoned?”

Collins returned to his breakfast. “That cannot be helped.”

“Mr. Collins!” cried Charlotte.

“Wife, I insist you obey me.”

Elizabeth shook with anger and fear but tried mightily not to show it. “I assume you want me to leave today?” Mr. Collins nodded. She turned on her heel and almost ran into the maid who had just entered the room.

“Beg pardon, miss,” the girl said and then turned to her employer. “Mr. Darcy is here, Mr. Collins.”

Elizabeth saw that the man himself was in the doorway, lips white and eyes aflame. She did not know to be relieved or mortified.

Darcy strode into the parlor like a knight errant intent upon slaying a rogue dragon. “Mrs. Collins, I do beg your pardon for disturbing your breakfast, but it is apparent to me that I must have words with your husband,” he announced. “Sir, pray attend me.”

Mr. Collins leapt to his feet, his mouth overfilled with eggs, making his response inaudible. Seizing a serviette, he gestured that Mr. Darcy should proceed him to the study. Elizabeth glanced once at Charlotte, then followed the gentlemen. She was at the study door just as Mr. Darcy was closing it.

“Miss Bennet, I must speak to your cousin, and I fear it will not be a pleasant conversation.” His tone was as gentle as his earlier command was not.

“Does it involved me?” she boldly demanded.

“I would protect you.”

“Thank you, but I must attend. My character demands it.”

Wordlessly, their eyes debated the issue for a moment, then Mr. Darcy capitulated. He sighed and held the door open for her.

Mr. Collins’s study was small and disorganized. Rather than filled with books on subjects like history and philosophy, Collin’s domain boasted only a meagre collection of sermons and a handful of agricultural pamphlets. The rest was a riot of scattered papers. Elizabeth glanced at one. Apparently, Mr. Collins never disposed of any of his drafts.

“Cousin Elizabeth, what business do you have here?” Collins demanded. “Mr. Darcy wishes to speak to me, undoubtedly about the unfortunate treatment Lady Catherine suffered last night.” He puffed out his chest. “This is men’s work.”

“Unfortunate treatment *is* the subject of our talk, sir,” Darcy announced as he shut the door, “but not that inflicted on my aunt, for none was.” He moved remorselessly towards the cleric. “I must protest *your* conduct concerning Miss Bennet.”

“Me? I-I do not take your meaning, my good sir.” Collins stepped back. Both men were tall, and Mr. Collins far stouter, but he seemed to crumble under Mr. Darcy’s baleful look.

“I will make myself clear, Collins. I heard you demand Miss Bennet leave Hunsford today without first providing transportation or companion. Is my understanding correct?”

Mr. Collins took another step back, his complexion chalky white. “Mr.-Mr. Darcy...I can explain.”

“Do so now, Collins.”

He pointed at Elizabeth. “It is *her* fault! She has upset everything and everyone—Lady Catherine, Miss de Bourgh, even my own household! She has seduced you with her arts and allurements, her infamous conduct, leading you to break your engagement and deny the wishes of your most honored aunt! I am acting as her ladyship’s most trusted advisor and servant! She is cast out!”

Darcy turned to her. “Pray, Miss Bennet, I ask that you leave us. It is not right that you should be witness to his lies and slanders.”

Elizabeth stood proud. “And as I said before, my character demands I remain and defend myself.” More gently she added, “But I thank you, sir, for your support.”

Mr. Darcy’s expression clearly glowed with respect and...admiration?

Heavens! Does Mr. Darcy still love me?

“Her very presence is an insult to Lady Catherine! She must go!” cried Mr. Collins

“It is my aunt who is an insult to any right-thinking person,” Darcy declared in a level, forceful manner. “Her wicked behavior last evening proves she is unfit to associate with the honest and upright. You, as a man of God, should stand with the innocent, not the perjurers. There was never any engagement to break. No agreement was signed. As head of my house, I will marry as I choose, and my cousin will marry or not by her own choosing and not her mother’s.”

“But Lady Catherine...she is mistress of Rosings—”

“No, she is not. Miss de Bourgh is actually your patroness.”

“I-I beg your pardon?”

“I will say this once, sir, so that we may end this charade. Rosings Park was left to Anne by her father, Sir Lewis de Bourgh. By law, the property requires trustees, as Anne was both underage and a female. The will named her two uncles, Lord Matlock and my father, to act in Anne’s benefit until she married. The will further states that Anne may assume the

management of the household upon her twenty-fifth birthday, if both she and the trustees agreed. Until then, as a consolation, Lady Catherine was allowed to act as mistress.

“When my esteemed father died five years ago, Lord Matlock could have continued on as sole trustee, but he chose to have me appointed in my father’s place. He and I manage Rosings, and the steward and the housekeeper report to us. As my uncle is often busy in the House of Lords, he sends either the Viscount or Colonel Fitzwilliam with me on our annual visit to act in his stead.

“My cousin Anne is nearly seven and twenty. She is of age; she could have become mistress last year. However, her constant ill-health prevents her from taking on those duties and burdens. We have allowed Lady Catherine to continue on, as my uncle and I have our own estates and business to concern us. So you see, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine was never mistress of Rosings Park.”

Mr. Collins was beside himself in confusion. “But...but she gave me the living. She can take it away. You are wrong sir—she is my mistress.”

“Collins, did you mind *anything* I said? Lady Catherine exercised those duties only by leave of Lord Matlock and myself. *We* allowed her to choose the replacement for her former rector. *We* chose not to reject your appointment.”

Elizabeth added, “And do you not know your canon law? Cousin, a living is for *life*. Lady Catherine cannot dismiss you.”

Mr. Darcy nodded. “Very true, Miss Bennet. The same holds true for my uncle and myself. It is a very serious thing, choosing a vicar. Much good or evil can come from it.”

Elizabeth knew Darcy spoke of Mr. Wickham.

Darcy returned to the puzzled rector. “An incumbent can only be removed from his living by breaking canon law or committing a felony, or by voluntarily leaving it. Lady Catherine has no power over you.”

“I-I suppose it is so—you say it, and I must trust in—”

“Collins! Is anything I stated incorrect?”

“No, no, I recall it from my studies...but she...she is a peer—”

“Oh, good God, I shall waste no more time with you!” Darcy then turned to Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet, you have been mistreated in an infamous manner by my aunt—” he glared at Mr. Collins— “and by your cousin. How may I make this up to you?”

Darcy's continued kindness to her was almost her undoing. "This is not your responsibility, sir."

"I think it is. Had I made it clear that I would never marry Anne years ago, all of this could have been avoided. Pray allow me to be of service to you. Give me an occupation, and it shall be done."

"I thank you, sir. I should like to leave this place and go to my relations in London."

He glared again at Collins. "Pay no attention to the words of fools. You may find refuge at Rosings. There is no reason to leave."

"But Lady Catherine would not like that!" injected Mr. Collins.

"For the last time, Collins, *Lady Catherine has no say over Rosings or Hunsford*. She has been stripped of her duties and restricted to her chambers until my uncle comes from London. Then, we shall decide her future. The concerns of Rosings Park are not for you."

"Mr. Darcy, please," said Elizabeth. "I thank you for your kind offer, but I cannot accept it. I must go. My absence would hopefully be a boon for Mrs. Collins. My presence here does her no good."

Darcy stepped close, and Elizabeth wondered if he would take her hands—and if she would accept such a gesture. As it turned out, he kept his hands at his side. "Again, I feel responsible—"

She offered him a small smile. "Again, you are not. Truly, I long for the peace of my family." *And distance from you, so that I can sort out my confused thoughts.*

"Very well. I recommend that you do not steal away like a thief in the night, or suffer the indignity of riding post-coach. I offer my carriage to your service, to take you where you will."

"Would not using your carriage confirm the rumors rather than dispel them? No—I shall ride post, as I have done many a time and not felt any injury for it."

"I vow there will be no rumors." Darcy looked over his shoulder at Mr. Collins. "Will there?"

"N-no, sir!"

"Excellent. I should inform you one of my uncles is a bishop, and the other a judge. I would not like you to face a slander suit, Mr. Collins."

"O-of course not, m-my most honored sir." That a man so pale did not swoon was a miracle.

Darcy nodded and returned his attention to Elizabeth. To her surprise, instead of triumph, he seemed embarrassed. "I take no pleasure in saying that," he admitted *sotto voce*, "but I must protect you."

Elizabeth could not look at him. "It is not your place to protect me."

"I know," he admitted, "but I must. Whatever you think of me, should you ever have need of assistance, no matter what, no matter when, I offer it freely."

Elizabeth was stunned by the enormity of his words. "Mr. Darcy, no—"

"Please, if it be the last service I perform for you, permit me this. You will not go alone. I shall hire a companion—a reliable maid or a gentlewoman from Hunsford—to act as chaperone. I will not travel with you, for Fitzwilliam and I must remain until my uncle comes." He gave a half smile. "That was the reason for my coming here today—to inform all of you of our change of plans."

To the room at large, he continued. "I must request that you keep the knowledge of the changes at Rosings to yourselves. We will make a general announcement once Lord Matlock and I settle matters." To Mr. Collins particularly, he said, "You may speak to Mrs. Collins, but no one else. No letters. Are my instructions clear, sir?"

Mr. Collins gulped. "Yes, my dear Mr. Darcy."

Darcy rolled his eyes.

"I can be ready to leave in an hour," Elizabeth told him

Darcy sighed. "There is no hurry. My carriage will be here at midday." He raised her hand, but did not kiss it. "Until then, Miss Bennet."

He took leave of Mr. Collins by only offering his best wishes to his wife and Miss Lucas. He then left the study, leaving Mr. Collins in a nervous state, and Elizabeth strangely disappointed he did not kiss her hand.

Part 6

ELIZABETH'S ATTENTION WAS ONLY partly on her packing as she continued to muse over Mr. Darcy's conflicting words and actions and her own unsettled thoughts.

How? How could he still love me after my insults? And how is it I now cannot bear to harm him?

In Hertfordshire, the gentleman exhibited a superiority and reserve bordering on rudeness. He tended to haunt the walls and observe with a critical eye rather than converse with strangers. True, Mr. Darcy admitted he was uncomfortable in large crowds and only felt easy with those he knew well. But how was he to make friends—or even know who was worth knowing—if he did not exert himself to speak?

That brought to mind their quarrels at Netherfield. Except...were they *really* quarrels? Mr. Darcy did not think so, and he did seem to treat her arguments with some respect.

No, it was more than that, Elizabeth recognized. They had *debates*, and he respected her opinions as long as she could defend them. He spoke to her as he did to Mr. Bingley. Not as lightly, true, but they were friends of long standing, while she was a new acquaintance. Yet, he deliberated respectfully with her, just as did her father. Why had she not recognized that before?

Mr. Darcy was far more open at Rosings, as long as they were alone. The one exception was when she reproached him at the pianoforte. At the time, she hardly credited that he admitted his fault before his cousin. Elizabeth knew *she* would never do such a thing. The mortification! But Mr. Darcy took her light scolding in good grace.

She could not like a closed-mouthed man. But then, open and free speaking was in short supply at Rosings. Lady Catherine saw to that.

Mr. Darcy was wrong to separate Jane from Mr. Bingley. Who was *he* to decide who Mr. Bingley should marry? But she recalled her surprise and horror when she learned of Charlotte's betrothal to Mr. Collins. It felt like a betrayal—not that she wanted Mr. Collins, but that she had completely misjudged Charlotte's character. Had she been sure of success, she would have convinced her friend to jilt the pompous fool.

They both wanted to save their friends from unhappy marriages, but Elizabeth's feelings were correct and Mr. Darcy's wrong. Jane was no Mr. Collins!

"In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better show more affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly, but he may never do more than like her if she does not help him on."

Yes, Charlotte had proven herself an oracle. Mr. Darcy did not see what Jane kept hidden.

"In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you."

Charlotte's good advice was for gentlemen as well. Apparently, Mr. Darcy was an ill judge of ladies' feelings—both Jane's and hers.

Was I any better with gentlemen? She had been completely wrong about both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Foolish, foolish girl!

Which brought another thought. Would she have been kinder to Mr. Darcy had she known of his interest and struggles? Might she have discussed his proposal rather than reject it utterly? Perhaps...conditionally...accepted him?

No! No!

Possibly!

Loud footsteps in the hallway interrupted her turbulent thoughts. A moment later, Maria was in the room, followed closely by Charlotte.

"Elizabeth, I am coming with you!"

"No, you are not, Maria!"

"I am! I will not stay another hour in this house! How dare Mr. Collins say those wicked things about Elizabeth? Wanton behavior! Enticing gentleman! You know she is innocent!"

Charlotte was unsuccessful in taking her sister's arm. "Of course she is. But you must understand. Lady Catherine—"

"Lady Catherine! That is another matter! She terrifies me!"

"She is just overwrought."

"If not for Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth would have been thrown out in the dust of the road like a...a common trollop!"

"Maria!" both Elizabeth and Charlotte cried.

"It is true!" Maria jutted out her chin. "If Elizabeth leaves, then so do I!"

Elizabeth took Maria's hands. "Do you truly wish to leave?"

Maria nodded and to her sister said, "I am sorry, Charlotte, but I am very frightened of Lady Catherine. What would happen to my reputation if she should say such things about me as she did to Elizabeth? Her good name is gone!" Maria waved her hands in her distress. "Mama said that our good name is as brittle as it is beautiful. I do not want to end up like poor Elizabeth. I want to marry someday!"

Elizabeth flinched. Was she ruined?

"Maria, listen to me," Charlotte scolded. "Eliza's reputation is undamaged. No one here takes any notice of what Lady Catherine says. You have no worries about Mr. Collins," she said to forestall any challenge, "not after his talk with Mr. Darcy."

Maria's big brown eyes filled with unshed tears. "I-I still wish to go. I do not like it here any longer."

Charlotte bowed her head in defeat. "Eliza, do you suppose Mr. Darcy would have an objection?"

Elizabeth hugged them both. "No, I do not think Mr. Darcy would be ungenerous."

Maria smiled. "Then I shall pack my things!"

When she left the room, Elizabeth approached her friend.

Charlotte turned away. "I should help Maria."

Elizabeth tried again, speaking to Charlotte's back. "I am sorry I brought all this into your house."

Charlotte did not turn. "You have nothing to apologize for. You should return to your packing. Mr. Darcy will be here soon and must not be kept waiting. I shall manage as I always have. Alone."

Elizabeth choked back a sob as her friend slipped out the door.

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Just as the church bell sounded the last peal of noon, Mr. Darcy's carriage arrived at the parsonage. The footmen immediately began securing the trunks while Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam walked over to Mr. Collins and the ladies.

"I understand Miss Lucas will join you." Mr. Darcy remarked to Elizabeth.

"My sister has expressed a desire to join my cousin on her journey," answered Mrs. Collins. "That is, if it meets with your approval."

"Of course, if that is her wish."

“Oh, my good sir, I knew how it would be!” cried Mr. Collins. “Such condescension! It is quite the sacrifice for my dear sister to forgo the pleasures of Rosings Park! But, uh, as my most honored patroness—my honored *former* patroness, Lady Catharine de Bourgh, is indisposed, our usual intercourse with the gem of Kent is sadly suspended. It is hoped that matters will be brought to a happy resolution once your uncle, the esteemed earl, arrives.”

“It is to be hoped,” Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked, arms crossed and glaring at the rector.

Mr. Collins turned to Maria, ignoring Elizabeth. “I hope that you have not passed your time unpleasantly, and that you will report to our dear father the continuation of our superior situation! But who could not be when they live in the shadow of Rosings Park!”

Maria, restored to her usual timid demeanor, could not respond to this statement with more than, “Goodbye, Mr. Collins.” She then gave a more loving farewell to Charlotte.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth’s attention was captured by Mr. Darcy. He said hardly anything, his face grave, but his eyes were locked on hers.

Elizabeth, in her turmoil and weariness, tried to give voice to her conflicting sensibilities. “I must thank you for your unparalleled kindness, Mr. Darcy. It is unexpected and undeserved.”

“Pray do not thank me,” he softly responded. “I do not deserve gratitude for bestowing what is your due.”

“But sir, I deserve nothing from you.”

It was the wrong thing to say, for a pained Mr. Darcy replied, “Madam, you deserve *everything* from me. Would I have the right to give it. Instead, I must be satisfied that you will reach your loved ones in safety and comfort.”

In a louder voice, he said, “Allow me, Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas, to introduce your companion. Mrs. Foxworth is under-housekeeper at Rosings. She has agreed to travel to London with you.” A middle-aged woman smiled from the carriage window as she was presented. “Mrs. Foxworth will return to Rosings with the carriage on the morrow.”

Elizabeth longed to apologize again for harming Mr. Darcy, but Colonel Fitzwilliam’s approach forestalled her.

“It was a pleasure making your acquaintance.” He grinned as he observed his cousin. “I hope we meet again soon. I wish you a safe journey.”

Elizabeth steeled her features and was able to farewell Charlotte with composure. Her response was cool. Elizabeth was certain she had yet to be forgiven.

Elizabeth was handed into the carriage by Mr. Darcy. She hardly noted at the time he held her hand a fraction of a second longer than necessary. The door was shut, the colonel called out a command, and with a jolt, the ladies were off to London.

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Elizabeth leaned back against the soft squabs. Mr. Darcy's carriage was most comfortable. The passengers were hardly inconvenienced by the ruts in the road.

The only inconvenience in this vehicle was reserved for Mrs. Foxworth's endless monologue on the excellence of its owner. If half her words were to be believed, no finer gentleman existed in the kingdom than Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Apparently, for years he spent the majority of his annual visits engaged in the welfare of the tenants, assuring payment to the tradesmen, and seeing to repairs to the roads. Nothing was done that he did not do himself.

"He is not like Lady Catherine, who is generous with advice and demands," she assured her captive audience. "Not that her ladyship's guidance is not excellent. It usually is. But Mr. Darcy takes responsibilities upon his shoulders. He acts rather than decrees." She explained Mr. Darcy often accompanied the steward on his rounds, seeing for himself the condition of the plantation and the village, and speaking directly to the people.

"And if there is a roof to be thatched or a creek to be cleared, why the young gentleman makes certain it is done and done right, and praises the workers afterwards. There is not one of the tenants or servants but what will give him a good name. Some people call him proud, but I am sure I never saw anything of it. To my fancy, it is only because he does not rattle away like the wild young men now-a-days, who think of nothing but themselves."

Elizabeth could not dismiss such praise. There was certainly at this moment in her mind a gentler admiration towards Mr. Darcy than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Foxworth was of no trifling nature. What praise was more valuable than that of an intelligent servant—especially one not his own? There could be no benefit to her giving the gentleman a most glowing character. It must be genuine and heartfelt.

As brother, landlord, and master, Elizabeth considered how many people's happiness were under Mr. Darcy's guardianship. Two estates, perhaps more, and he was not yet thirty! How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! How much of good or evil must be done by him! Every idea that had been brought forward by Mrs. Foxworth was favorable to Mr. Darcy's character, and as she traveled in his carriage, Elizabeth thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before.

His kindness to her and his pain at their parting was something out of a novel. She would never forget it.

Darker thoughts intruded. Mr. Darcy convinced Mr. Bingley to give up Jane—it was there in his letter, kept safe in her reticule. Mr. Darcy censured her family, particularly her mother and youngest sisters. He found her beloved father deficient. While he was a gentleman and of her class, Mr. Darcy navigated the First Circles of London, while she, a mere country girl, had never been presented, never had a Season in town. How could Mr. Darcy expect to make a good marriage with so much between them?

Marriage? How could she even contemplate such an idea? She would *never* marry Mr. Darcy! She *could* never marry Mr. Darcy. She would not cry—she would not.

The travelers rested from their journey at *The Bell* in Bromley. Mr. Darcy's kindness and forethought continued as they were expected by the innkeeper, tea was ready in a private room, and the bill was for their benefactor. Elizabeth should not have been surprised, but she was.

The roads were smoother as they approached London. Mrs. Foxworth's praise of Mr. Darcy was finally exhausted, allowing the ladies to nap in luxury for a time. The lamplighters were out in force when they turned on Gracechurch Street. Minutes later, they stopped before the house of Mr. Edward Gardiner.

The housekeeper greeted Elizabeth before she knocked. "Good evening, Miss Elizabeth! You are expected. Pray come inside."

Expected? Elizabeth could not credit the housekeeper's meaning, but a moment later, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and Jane were in the hall with hugs and happy faces.

"My dear, dear niece," cried her uncle, "how good to see you. And Miss Lucas, too! You made excellent time!" He glanced outdoors. "My, what an impressive carriage! It is no wonder you are before your time."

"Oh! Mrs. Foxworth!" cried Elizabeth. "Our companion is still in the carriage. I must go and thank her." Elizabeth and Mr. Gardiner stepped to the coach, and Mrs. Foxworth lowered the glass.

"Mrs. Foxworth," said Elizabeth, "I must thank you for your trouble."

"None of that, Miss," the servant replied. "It has been a pleasure."

"Will you not step inside and take your ease?" offered Mr. Gardiner.

“Thank you kindly, sir, but we are off to Darcy House once the trunks are down. Oh, I see all is done! Goodbye, Miss Bennet. My best to Miss Lucas and all your families!” She waved her handkerchief as the carriage lurched forward and rumbled into the gathering darkness.

Elizabeth began to return to the house when her uncle halted her progress. “This has been quite a day, Lizzy—expresses and coaches and unexpected guests. We must talk—but after dinner.” His expression was kind but firm.

Elizabeth reluctantly nodded.

Part 7

MR. GARDINER PLACED A GLASS of sherry before Elizabeth before settling back in his arm-chair with his brandy.

“Do you think I will need this, Uncle?” asked Elizabeth.

“We shall see,” was his cryptic response.

Elizabeth took a small sip and allowed her eyes to wander about the room. Mr. Gardiner’s study was orderly and spotless. Affordable mahogany furniture blended with the walls and carpet. Few papers adorned the desk, and those were neatly stacked to one side. The books on the shelves were mostly of a legal or historical bent, with a few volumes of poetry. Well lit, the air was perfumed with the memory of a recently used pipe. In its own way, it was usually as comfortable to her as her father’s riot of a bookroom. But not tonight.

Mr. Gardiner allowed Elizabeth a minute before beginning his interrogation. “When last we met, at Christmas-time at Longbourn, you declared your intense dislike of the haughty and rude Mr. Darcy. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise today, four months later, when I received a most polite express from that gentleman, informing me of your early arrival at my house. I shall tell you my astonishment was doubled seeing you in Mr. Darcy’s carriage in the company of Miss Lucas, who I shall say is most welcome here.

“Now, my dear niece, as happy as I am for your company, I require that you explain yourself. Why have you ended your visit to Kent early, and what is the involvement of one of the wealthiest non-titled men in England?”

Elizabeth suspected her genial uncle had a hard, demanding side, for what successful man of business did not? But this was the first time she witnessed it, and she was distressed it was directed at her. She took a moment. How could she explain what she did not yet fully comprehend?

“Uncle, it is...” She paused. “I suppose it is best to start at the beginning.”

“Yes. The beginning is always the best.”

Carefully, haltingly, she gave a *precis* of the late events at Rosings and Hunsford. She spoke of Mr. Darcy’s better manners, Colonel Fitzwilliam’s friendship, and Mr. Collins’s slavish devotion to the dominating Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The trouble arose over that lady’s misunderstanding of Mr. Darcy’s lack of attachment to Miss de Bourgh, and her false belief that Elizabeth had something to do with it. She was careful to omit Mr. Darcy’s proposal or any hint of Miss Darcy’s near escape.

“Lady Catherine, I fear, is not well. It was thought best that I cut short my visit, and Maria desired to come with me. Mr. Darcy was kind enough to offer his carriage.”

“Is that all?” Clearly, Mr. Gardiner was unsatisfied.

“No sir,” she admitted. “Thanks to Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, I now know we are deceived as to the character of Mr. Wickham. His tale of mistreatment by the Darcy family is false—in fact, it is the other way around. Mr. Wickham is not to be trusted.”

Her uncle nodded. “I thought so. Your aunt thinks well of him, but I had some doubts. Mr. Wickham is far too smooth for a man in his profession, and in my experience, that is a good reason to count one’s spoons when he leaves the house after dinner.”

“Uncle!” Elizabeth laughed.

“So, Mr. Darcy improves upon closer acquaintance.”

That was a subject best avoided! She informed her uncle that by knowing Mr. Darcy better, she liked him better, but while he saw her as a friend, he did not approve of her family.

“It seems he approves of you.” For long moments, Mr. Gardiner studied her, one hand on his chin. Elizabeth feared he could see right through her. What else did he know? What was in Mr. Darcy’s express? Charlotte must have given him her uncle’s direction, for she still had Jane’s letter. She longed to know, but could not for the life of her ask.

“I imagine there is more to this story,” he finally intoned, “but I suppose ladies must have their secrets. We shall leave off for now. Hopefully, this is an end to the matter.” He frowned. “There is no scandal, is there, Lizzy?”

“No, sir.” At least she hoped not.

“Very well. Off with you, my dear.”

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Elizabeth elected to retire early. She had hoped to have some time on her own to ponder Uncle Gardiner’s interview, but she was to be disappointed. Jane, who shared the bedroom, was right on her heels.

“Lizzy, are you well?” Jane began. “Why have you left Kent early? Is it true you rode in Mr. Darcy’s carriage?”

Elizabeth gave over to her dearest desire to reveal all—*almost* all—to her beloved sister. She repeated the tale she told their uncle and added the news that she had rejected a proposal from Mr. Darcy. Jane’s astonishment was great. She was sorry Mr. Darcy should have

delivered his sentiments in an offensive manner, but still more was she grieved for the unhappiness which her sister's refusal must have given him.

“Being so sure of succeeding was wrong and certainly ought not to have appeared. And earning such a condemnation from his aunt! I cannot say when I have been so surprised! Consider how much it must increase his disappointment.”

“Indeed, I am heartily sorry for him, but he has other feelings which will probably soon drive away his regard for me.” Elizabeth hoped rather than believed this. “You do not blame me for refusing him?”

“Blame you! Oh no.”

“But you blame me for having spoken so warmly of Wickham.”

“I do not know that you were wrong in saying what you did.”

“But you *will* know it, when I have told you what happened the very next day.”

Elizabeth then spoke of their meeting and of his letter, repeating the whole of its contents as far as they concerned George Wickham. What a painful stroke was this for poor Jane! Most earnestly did she labor to prove the probability of error that so much wickedness was collected in one individual, and sought to clear Mr. Darcy without condemning Mr. Wickham.

“This will not do,” said Elizabeth. “You never will be able to make both of them good. Take your choice, but you must be satisfied with only one. There is but such a quantity of merit between them, just enough to make one good sort of man. For my part, I am inclined to believe it all Mr. Darcy's.”

“I do not know when I have been more shocked,” said Jane. “Wickham so very bad! It is almost past belief. And poor Mr. Darcy! Dear Lizzy, only consider what he must have suffered. Such a disappointment! And with the knowledge of your ill opinion too! Lady Catherine's outrageous behavior to you both! And having to relate such a thing of his sister! It is really too distressing. I am sure you must feel it so. Poor Mr. Wickham. There is such an expression of goodness in his countenance, such an openness and gentleness in his manner.”

“There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men,” Elizabeth declared. “One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it.”

“How unfortunate that you should have used such very strong expressions in speaking of Wickham to Mr. Darcy, for now they do appear wholly undeserved.”

“Very undeserved! I was very uncomfortable, indeed unhappy. And with no one to speak to of what I felt, no Jane to comfort me and say that I had not been so very weak and vain and nonsensical as I knew I had!

“But there is one point on which I want your advice. Ought I to make our acquaintance in general understand Wickham's character?”

Jane paused briefly and then replied, “Surely there can be no occasion for exposing him so dreadfully. What is your own opinion?”

“Mr. Darcy has not authorized me to make his communication public. If I endeavor to undeceive people as to the rest of his conduct, who will believe me? The general prejudice against Mr. Darcy is so violent! Wickham and the militia will soon be gone, and therefore, it will not signify to anybody at home what he really is. Sometime hence it will be all found out. At present I will say nothing about it.”

“You are quite right. To have his errors made public might ruin Mr. Wickham forever. He is now perhaps sorry for what he has done, and anxious to re-establish a character. We must not make him desperate.”

While Elizabeth was disappointed in her sister's naivety, her mind was calmed by their conversation. She had got rid of two of the secrets which had weighed on her, and was certain of a willing listener in Jane whenever she might wish to talk again of either.

But there was still something lurking behind, of which prudence forbade the disclosure. She dared not relate the other half of Mr. Darcy's letter, nor explain to her sister how sincerely she had been valued by Mr. Bingley.

And she still had no idea how Mr. Darcy had learned of Mary King's good fortune.

The maid soon made her appearance, and it was not long before the sisters were both in bed.

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The next morning brought another interview, this time with her aunt, and Elizabeth corroborated everything Mrs. Gardiner had learned from her husband. She was disappointed that her good opinion of Mr. Wickham had been misplaced, but she recalled her warning in December to her niece to guard her heart and was mollified. A relieved Elizabeth spent the remainder of the morning introducing Maria to the Gardiner children.

The four ladies were gathered in the front parlor for afternoon conversation and sewing when the housekeeper announced a visitor.

“Mr. Bingley, ma’am, to see Miss Bennet.”

Instantly, Elizabeth’s hand was commandeered by Jane, and the violence of her sister’s feelings were revealed in the strength of her grip. By the time the gentleman entered, however, propriety had reasserted itself, and Mr. Bingley was received in perfect equanimity by all.

Mr. Bingley’s object was obvious. He did not remove his eyes from Jane’s person, even as he was introduced to Mrs. Gardiner, until she said, “Mr. Bingley, how nice of you to call. Pray, how are your sisters faring? It has been some time since we have had the pleasure of their company.” Only those who knew her well could detect Mrs. Gardiner’s slight smirk.

“Ah, they are both—What? You have met my sisters?” The gentleman was clearly taken aback.

“Yes, they called on us—when was it, Jane? Late January, about a fortnight after we called on them?”

Elizabeth saw what her aunt was about and took pleasure in Mr. Bingley’s astonishment.

“January?” cried Bingley. “You called at my house in January?” In his shock, the gentleman forgot all propriety.

“Yes.”

“And my sisters called *here*? *Two weeks later*?”

“I believe that is correct. It might have been closer to three. One’s remembrance of such details diminish with time.”

Mr. Bingley flushed with mortification and anger. “Darcy did not—” Fists clenched, Bingley bowed to his hostess. “Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet, forgive me. I cannot apologize enough for my sisters’ insulting behavior. I have only recently learned of Miss Bennet’s presence in town and hastened to call.” He sighed. “I expect you have longed wished for my absence. I should go.” He bowed again, but his farewell was interrupted.

Jane stood. “We should not be judged by any behavior but our own. Aunt, if it pleases you, I would have Mr. Bingley stay.”

“As would I,” added Elizabeth, joining her sister.

Mrs. Gardiner grinned. “Pray, take a seat, sir.”

A stunned Mr. Bingley said nothing; he simply gaped. As quickly as it disappeared, his habitual good humor resurfaced. Smiling, he took the only seat available—surprisingly next to Jane.

The remainder of Mr. Bingley's short visit consisted of an awkward conversation over Jane's stay in London. Only once the quarter hour was done did the subject of Elizabeth's and Maria's trip to Kent arise, and in an enigmatic manner.

"Miss Elizabeth, Miss Lucas, I understand from my friend Darcy you were lately in Kent."

Elizabeth, still wrestling with the implication that Mr. Darcy had revealed Jane's presence in town to his friend, allowed Maria to answer.

"Yes. We arrived here yesterday. It was," she glanced at Elizabeth, "an interesting visit."

Bingley laughed. "Yes, I imagine so. I have not had the honor of meeting Lady Catherine, but her reputation precedes her. Your sister is well, I hope?"

Assured Charlotte was, Bingley eyed Elizabeth. "And would you agree with Miss Lucas?"

"It was a visit I shall never forget."

Mr. Bingley performed another surprise. "Mrs. Gardiner, I take it your husband is at his place of business? If you could provide his direction, I would be grateful."

The requested information was soon produced. "Thank you," he said. "Might I call again?" His eyes were fixed on Jane.

Jane managed an inaudible positive response, and Mrs. Gardiner gave her permission. A moment later, the ladies were alone.

"Well, Jane," observed Maria, "this is a happy surprise. What say you to Mr. Bingley's visit?"

"It was kind of him." said Jane with a cheerful look. "Now that this first meeting is over, I feel perfectly easy. I know my own strength, and I shall never be embarrassed again by his coming. It will then be seen that, on both sides, we meet only as common and indifferent acquaintance."

"Yes, very indifferent indeed," said Elizabeth. "Oh Jane, take care!"

"You cannot think me so weak as to be in danger now?"

"I think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever."

"That is enough of that!" Mrs. Gardiner rose. "Let us go above stairs and lay out what you will wear tomorrow. Jane, we must make sure you have your best day dress ready."

"Oh Aunt, there is no reason for that!"

"Perhaps not," Elizabeth responded with a twinkle in her eye, "but it is wise to be best prepared!"

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At dinner, Mr. Gardiner reported Mr. Bingley visited his office to offer his apologies. "He is a fine gentleman," he remarked. "A little green, to be sure, but nothing matures a fellow like a sensible wife. Eh, my dear?" While all at table laughed at the gentle jest, two of the ladies felt the need to privately discuss the visit.

As they prepared for bed, Elizabeth began. "I believe we have Mr. Darcy to thank for Mr. Bingley's visit."

"What makes you think that?"

"Something Mr. Bingley said under his breath. Did you happen to hear it?" Jane responded in the negative, and Elizabeth continued. "He uttered Mr. Darcy's name."

"I do not understand."

Elizabeth knew she had to be careful. "While in Kent, it came up in conversation with Mr. Darcy that you were in London visiting the Gardiners. He said Mr. Bingley was not aware of that. I am certain he wrote his friend and provided the direction."

"How would Mr. Darcy know it?"

"He asked me for it, but I had no time to give it. He must have received it from Charlotte. I assumed he desired to notify our relations of my early arrival. He must have taken the opportunity to inform his friend, too."

Jane played with the buttons of her nightgown. "That was very kind of him."

"Yes. I did not think him capable of such a service."

Sharply, Jane responded, "I think it well past the time for you to give over your hurt from the assembly! Yes, Mr. Darcy should not have said what he did, but he has been nothing but polite to you since. Can the man not make a mistake?"

Elizabeth was taken aback. "But Jane, he disparaged our family. He is all pride and insolence."

"Was it pride that caused him to see that you and Maria traveled to London in safety and comfort? And what if he scorns our family? You and I have spoken of it. I am certain Mama's actions are why Mr. Bingley went away in the first place." She wiped tears from her eyes. "Yet, you say it was the proud Mr. Darcy who sent him here. You cannot have it both ways, Sister!"

Oh, how that struck home! Elizabeth had been haunted by her own errors with Mr. Darcy, and she yearned to apologize. Should she not forgive him his faults?

Shamed, Elizabeth took Jane's hand. "You are right. I have not been sensible. I have held Mr. Darcy to a higher standard than I hold myself. I shall do better. Should Mr. Darcy and I meet again, I shall treat him as I would any kind and honorable gentleman."

The conversation turned to the next day, Jane dismissing expectations, while Elizabeth hoped for her sister's ultimate happiness.

## Part 8

FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Mr. Bingley proved a faithful visitor to Gracechurch Street. His company was so pleasant and his attentions to Jane so constant, it earned him an invitation to dinner. This he accepted with alacrity, and informed Mrs. Gardiner that the rest of his family would not be attending with regret.

“Caroline and the Hursts are on their way north to visit with Mr. Hurst’s family at their estate.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Jane sincerely, “but this is very sudden, is it not?”

Elizabeth swore Bingley hid a smile. “Yes—very sudden. But business kept me in town, so I am available to join you.” Given his loving gaze at Jane, no one pretended not to know the nature of his business. Elizabeth was happy Maria did not ruin everything and remark about it aloud.

Just before Mr. Bingley left to dress for dinner, he found a moment to speak to Elizabeth. “Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. I am late in reporting that my friend sends his warmest regards.”

For some reason, her throat grew tight. “Will he be joining you, sir?”

Bingley frowned. “I hoped he would, as I have business with him. But Darcy says matters in Kent are such he finds himself unable to leave.” He then gave Elizabeth a knowing look. “He must be in earnest to refuse such lovely inducements as are in town.”

Elizabeth blushed, and tried to turn the conversation. “Miss Darcy—have you seen her?”

“Of course not. *Oh!* You must not give credence to idle gossip. Miss Darcy is the sister of my friend—nothing more.”

Later, Elizabeth and Jane were in their chambers, preparing for the evening. Elizabeth overjoyed to see her sister happier than ever. There was a knock on the door.

“Already?” cried Jane.

“Perhaps Mr. Bingley could not stay away, dearest,” Elizabeth teased as she moved to the door.

“Lizzy,” said her aunt, “your father is here and desires to see you in the study.”

Elizabeth and Jane were stunned. “Papa is here? Why? Is it Mama—is she unwell?”

“No—he says all is well at Longbourn. But he is troubled. Come quickly! Jane, I will remain and attend you. He wishes to speak to Lizzy.”

Moments later, Elizabeth slipped into her uncle's study to find Mr. Bennet standing at the window, sipping a glass of brandy.

"Close the door behind you, Lizzy." His voice was weary.

"Papa, what is wrong?"

"Sit down, and tell me what is the manner of your relationship with Mr. Darcy."

*Mr. Darcy, again!* "Papa, I do not understand. He is an acquaintance, nothing more."

Mr. Bennet set down his glass. "Pray do not dissemble. I expect such behavior from Lydia or Kitty, not you. Are you out of your senses to be encouraging this man? Have you not always hated him?"

"Papa, what is the basis of this?"

Mr. Bennet pulled a letter from his coat. "I have received by express a letter that has astonished me exceedingly. As it principally concerns yourself, you ought to know its contents. Here, read what Mr. Darcy relates."

Trembling, Elizabeth took a seat. Sure enough, it was in Mr. Darcy's fine, close hand.

*Mr. Bennet,*

*I pray you pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention by this letter, given our slight acquaintance. That is a fault on my part. Indeed, I have made more than one mistake in Hertfordshire, but that is not the subject of this missive.*

*Each Easter-time, I journey to Kent to visit with my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park. This year, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was in Hunsford with her friend, Mrs. Collins. Mr. Collins, as you are aware, is rector of the parish that includes Rosings. I was happy to renew my acquaintance with Miss Bennet. Given that she and I both enjoy a morning's constitutional before breakfast, it was probable that we would often meet on our walks. I should stress that at all times, Miss Bennet was the soul of proper, ladylike comportment. She deserves no censure over the events of the last two days.*

*My aunt is a lady of strong opinions and is not given to accept correction. She had learned of our walks and erroneously concocted a most disgusting assumption as to the purpose of those innocent coincidences. Two nights ago, propelled by rumor and innuendo, Lady Catherine accosted Miss Bennet in Mr. Collins' parlor, abusing her in an unforgivable manner. I learned her intentions and hurried to the parsonage in the company of my cousin, Colonel*

*Fitzwilliam, but we arrived too late to stop her haranguing and insults. I am ashamed to report that the colonel and I were forced to physically remove my aunt from the parsonage. I regret giving you pain, but I must report Mr. Collins made no effort to defend your daughter and, in fact, was prepared to dismiss her from his house. Therefore, I placed Miss Bennet under my protection and, by her desire, sent her to her relations in London. Miss Lucas decided to join her.*

*This, sir, is a faithful narrative to the late business in Hunsford that Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas were forced to endure. No blame may be placed on those two young ladies. Indeed, they met the onslaught with grace and fortitude, especially Miss Bennet. If fault remains after the condemnation of Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, it should fall to me. I knew the character of my aunt and should have anticipated her disapproval of my friendship with Miss Bennet. My aunt has long desired that I marry her daughter and has falsely declared we are engaged. This is not the case, but she will not hear otherwise. The attack on Miss Bennet's character was not personal, for Lady Catherine would disparage any young lady she considered a threat to her wishes.*

*I send you my deepest apologies for the event described above, for you will receive no such message from Rosings.*

*One additional matter I must raise. There is a gentleman in the —shire Militia, a Mr. George Wickham. Prudence calls upon me to warn you that his character is uniformly bad. He is the son of the late steward at Pemberley, my estate, and I have known him all my life. He has become a gamester and scoundrel. Surely you have been told I withheld his inheritance of a valuable living, but what he fails to reveal is that he accepted a pecuniary advantage in lieu of the preferment, and at his request. Since then, he has lived a life of idleness and dissipation. I shall not insult your eyes by putting to paper his vicious propensities and want of principle. I only beg you to protect your daughters from him.*

*What I relate above is easily proved. You will find his debts all over Meryton, and I should expect they will be an amount his army pay cannot possibly discharge. Thus it has always been, both in Derbyshire and at Cambridge.*

*I have learned that he has set his sights on a young heiress in Meryton, a Miss Mary King, a friend of your daughter. I urge you, if you care the least bit for her happiness, to do what you can to protect her or, failing that, write me urgently with direction to her family.*

*Your obt. servant,*

*FITZWILLIAM DARCY*

As she read, Elizabeth's respect for Mr. Darcy grew. He went through considerable effort to convey what had happened and justify his actions, all the while shielding her from blame or infamy. That he would so labor to protect the shrew that not a day before destroyed all his hopes! What sort of gentleman does this?

"Well, Elizabeth?" inquired Mr. Bennet impatiently. "Is what Mr. Darcy writes true?"

"Yes, sir." *As far as it goes.*

Mr. Bennet crossed his arms. "And yet, you say you do not like him, or he you."

Elizabeth could not look at her father for the world. "Papa, while Mr. Darcy's behavior in Hertfordshire could be considered rude and overbearing, I must admit he improves upon acquaintance. Knowing him better made me like him better. He is an honorable gentleman who, in my time of need, proved to be a friend and a very good sort of man."

"Come, come. We all know him to be proud and disagreeable. Have you been taken in by his wealth and standing in the world? I warn you, my girl, he is far above you."

"Papa, I tell you there is nothing between us."

"I was not born with white hair. You would have me believe Mr. Darcy writes such a novel to the father of every young lady he meets? Nonsense! He all but *demand*s I forbid Mr. Wickham from calling at Longbourn! The cheek of the man! He implies you know of his opinion of Mr. Wickham. How does this occur between mere acquaintances? And this matter of Miss King? You are practically strangers."

At this, Elizabeth started. "Miss King! Have you done anything for her?"

Mr. Bennet sat back, his usual insolence returning. "There is one embarrassing task I can avoid! Miss King is safe. She is gone down to her uncle in Liverpool. There is no engagement."

"Thank heavens for that!"

Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow. "You believe Mr. Darcy to be truthful?"

"I do, Papa."

"I own myself mystified. Before traveling to Kent, you considered Mr. Darcy the cruelest, most disagreeable man in England. Everyone within ten miles knew of *your* pointed dislike and *his* perfect indifference. Now, it appears he has declared himself your champion and you retract every saucy word uttered against him." He sat forward, staring intently at his favorite. "I must insist you explain yourself."

She longed to tell someone everything. If she could not trust her own father, then who? “Papa, what I am about to relate *must* be kept between us. There are innocent people involved.”

Mr. Bennet grew grim, for he saw Elizabeth was in earnest. “Very well, Lizzy.”

Once she began, everything poured out: Mr. Darcy’s initial affront, their confusing interactions at Netherfield, the painful dance at Mr. Bingley’s ball, Mr. Darcy’s appearances during her walks in the groves of Rosings, his insulting proposal at the parsonage, and his explanation the next day. She spoke of his pride and humility, his reserve and heroism, his firmness and generosity. She revealed all, including Miss Darcy’s near elopement with Wickham, Mr. Darcy separating Mr. Bingley from Jane only to encourage them, Lady Catherine’s madness, and Mr. Collins’s treachery. Lastly, she confessed her swirling emotions regarding the gentleman at the center of all this.

Mr. Bennet listened quietly to Elizabeth’s account, displaying no emotion save the paling of his face at Mr. Wickham’s intentions for Miss Darcy. When Elizabeth was done, he rubbed his brow while she sat, drained. He then started to chuckle.

“Papa?” Elizabeth was incredulous.

“What a farce!” he exclaimed. “It is worthy of the Bard himself! Mr. Darcy is the villain of the piece, until he is not! By his reserve and misplaced honor, he gives offense wherever he goes, including to the lady he loves. He then labors to repair all the damage, and we know why, but the lady involved claims ignorance.” He laughed out loud. “We only have to wait until the inevitable denouement. I have not been so entertained in years!”

“Papa, this is not funny!”

He waved off her complaint. “Oh, come now. You are not going to be missish, I hope, and pretend to be affronted by all this. I did not know before that I had *two* daughters on the brink of matrimony. Let me congratulate you on a very important conquest.”

Elizabeth blushed, but held firm. “Papa, there is no reason to believe that Mr. Darcy will renew his proposals.” She looked down. “He cannot—not after what I said to him.”

“My dear, his actions speak otherwise. Should he disappoint me, I shall dismiss him as a very unworthy fellow.” He then grew serious. “But perhaps, it is *your* feelings and not Mr. Darcy’s that are of the moment here. We all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man, but this would be nothing if you really liked him. My dear girl, if you do not, if you cannot respect him, you should not accept him. I know your disposition—I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable unless you truly esteemed your husband, unless you looked

up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery." Pained, he concluded, "My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life."

"I *do* respect him," she declared, "I do. But I cannot believe my foolish behavior can be forgot. He will not ask again."

"Would you accept him if he did?"

She shook her head firmly, refusing to answer the question. "He will not, that is certain. I cannot speculate over what will never happen."

Mr. Bennet again sat back. "We shall see, my headstrong little Lizzy. Well, I think it time we all returned home. Pray tell Jane and Miss Lucas we shall travel to Longbourn tomorrow."

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At dinner that evening, Mr. Bingley received the news of the Bennets removal to Hertfordshire the next morning with good humor, for he announced he was returning to Netherfield as soon as it could be readied. Jane's unhappiness vanished at his declaration, for it was obvious he would return to Netherfield for *her*. Elizabeth knew Jane could not dismiss Mr. Bingley's interest and intentions now, and her contentment would only be complete if Mr. Darcy would join his friend. How else could she apologize to him?

Apparently, Mr. Bennet had a similar thought, and he inquired if the gentleman from Derbyshire would visit Netherfield.

"He is always welcome, to be sure," Bingley said as he glanced at Elizabeth, "but I do not know his plans or how much longer he remains in Kent."

"He would be very welcome in Hertfordshire," said Jane. "Do your sisters come?"

"I am afraid not. They are quite settled in the North at the Hurst family estate." Bingley smirked as he responded to Jane, and Elizabeth rejoiced at the sight. It now seemed Mr. Bingley knew his own mind, and Miss Bingley had no power to mar Jane's happiness any longer.

Part 9

THE NEXT DAY ELIZABETH and Jane were welcomed back to Longbourn as they expected: Mary was reserved, Kitty was affectionate, and Lydia demanded gifts. Mrs. Bennet was both delighted for her daughters' safe return and distraught at their lack of suitors. It had been decided by the travelers to withhold from their relations Mr. Bingley's intentions until that gentleman returned to Netherfield.

Lydia was full of news. "Mr. Wickham is safe! Mary King has gone away, and good riddance to her!"

"Lydia!" scolded Elizabeth. "You should not speak so."

Jane added, "I hope there is no strong attachment on either side."

"I am sure there is not on his," Lydia boldly declared. "I will answer for it he never cared three straws about her. Who could about such a nasty little freckled thing?"

Mr. Bennet took his daughter in hand. "That is enough, young lady. Into the house—all of you. I have news to impart." He directed his family to gather in the parlor. Standing by the fireplace, he began.

"It has come to my attention that too much notice has been paid by the ladies of this house to the officers of the militia. This will cease. No officer will be allowed on Longbourn grounds without a written invitation from me."

The outcry to this edict was tremendous. Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia wailed and screamed over each other so loudly the servants dashed in to see what disaster had befallen them.

"Stop your caterwauling at once!" Mr. Bennet roared. He was instantly obeyed, for it was rare that Mr. Bennet raised his voice. He sent the servants away just as Mrs. Bennet spoke up.

"You cannot deprive us of the officers' company! They are so dashing and handsome, and so attentive to our girls! Oh, how you try my nerves! How will they ever catch husbands?"

"You would doom our girls to seven pounds a month?" he asked gravely.

The room fell silent. "Seven pounds? What do you mean, seven pounds?"

"Madam, these lieutenants you so admire are paid seven pounds a month. Four-and-eighty pounds per annum! A captain at fourteen, two and six is certainly better, but how

would even he feed and clothe a gentleman's daughter? We manage an entire estate with servants and five girls on two thousand a year and have little aside to show for it."

"It is said lieutenants may not marry, captains might marry, majors should marry, and lieutenant-colonels must marry," Mary recited.

"Oh, be quiet, girl!" demanded Mrs. Bennet. "No one wants your moralizing now! Mr. Bennet, surely some of the officers are younger sons!"

He crossed his arms. "Very well—then tell me their names. Show me your proof. For I will tell you most gentlemen buy commissions for sons of merchants to meet their five-year requirement. There are very few younger sons in the militia."

"Mr. Wickham would have money if Mr. Darcy had not stolen it," declared Lydia.

"Then you would have never met him, child," Mr. Bennet countered, "for he would be at a parish in Derbyshire. But that brings up another matter. None of you are to speak to Mr. Wickham again or even acknowledge his presence. He is a liar, a wastrel, a gamester, and a scoundrel."

The complaints were renewed. "Mr. Bennet, you cannot be in earnest!" cried his wife. "He is the most handsome and charming of the officers!"

"And the most wicked, from what I have learned. Madam, on this I am firm." He glared at his two youngest. "Neither of you will leave the house without being escorted by your older sisters." At the renewed howls, Mr. Bennet threw up his hands. "No more! I shall be in my book room, and I will not be disturbed! Jane, pray tell Mrs. Hill I shall dine at my desk." With that, he quit the room.

Elizabeth and Jane shared an amazed look before they followed—Jane to find the housekeeper and Elizabeth to her room.

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In an unusual happenstance, Mr. Bennet was gone from the house most of the next day. Without her spouse to hear her complaints, Mrs. Bennet let loose her lamentations in the sitting room, her visiting sister Mrs. Philips and her youngest daughters her willing audience.

"How terrible it is, Sister! Mr. Bennet is so cruel! We have no company, no amusements. He says the officers must stay away, and look at my poor girls! The bloom is already gone from Jane. They will all end up old maids, mark my words, and when Mr. Bennet is gone, those grasping Collinses will have us thrown in the hedgerows before he is cold in his grave!"

“Too true, too true. It is a terrible thing!” Strangely, Mrs. Philips did not appear upset at this possibility. In fact, she was clearly enjoying her sister’s alarm. Elizabeth and Jane held hands, silently consoling each other, knowing of Mr. Bingley’s plans to return to Netherfield. Lydia and Kitty joined in their mother’s misery while Mary stubbornly kept to her copy of sermons.

It was then Mr. Bennet walked in the door. “Look, the man returns!” cried Mrs. Bennet. “Mr. Bennet, you must see reason!”

“Good afternoon, Sister Philips. I hope you are well. Good afternoon, my dear, girls.” Mr. Bennet sarcastically kept to the proprieties. “Mrs. Bennet, have you no curiosity in how I have spent the day?”

“I am sure it is of no interest to me if you will not relent!”

“Oh, I should think it will be of the upmost interest.” He held up a scrap of paper. “I have here a list of the vowels of a certain officer of the militia. Would you care to see it?”

“What-what do you mean?”

He handed the paper to her with a flourish. “Mr. Wickham’s debts.”

She began to read. “I do not understand—sixty pounds? What does this mean?”

“It means Mr. Wickham owes at least sixty pounds to the merchants of Meryton. *At least*, I say, for Mr. Roberts of The Pig’s Snout was out, and therefore, I was unable to receive a figure from him.”

“This cannot be.”

“It is, madam, it is. Sixty pounds, almost the entirety of Mr. Wickham’s annual pay, and he has been in the militia only six months. Oh, he was clever about it—five pounds here, three pounds there, but it adds up. He paid back a pound or two every so often, just enough to keep the merchants happy. But, my dear, the man has no hope of settling the total. I admit to being charmed by Mr. Wickham’s imprudence, but audacity on such a scale? It is to be marveled at!”

“Let me see the list, Sister!” Mrs. Philips eagerly requested.

“I do not believe it!” cried Lydia. “It is all lies!”

Mr. Bennet cast a level glare at his youngest. “And that is why you and Kitty are returning to the nursery until the militia leaves.” Ignoring their outraged shrieks, he continued. “You are condemned by your own statements. This list details but a portion of Mr. Wickham’s bad behavior. I am certain he has debts of honor amongst his fellow officers.” He continued in a

disgusted tone of voice, "I shall say no more, but Mrs. Bennet will surely be apprised by her friends of the salacious gossip now surrounding the lieutenant." He paused and gave Mrs. Bennet a pointed look, causing her and Aunt Philips to gasp. Elizabeth could only deduce that Mr. Wickham may have harmed one or more of the girls in the village!

Mr. Bennet took a step closer to Lydia. "Yet, you and your sister would defend this man. And why? Because he looks well in his uniform."

"Brother, I think you are too hard on the girls," injected Mrs. Philips. "There are many other handsome gentlemen in the corps."

"I would remind you that this is my house and these are my children," Mr. Bennet stated coldly. "You can have no say on how matters are arranged."

The doorbell rang. "Ah, Lady Lucas is here already, unless I miss my guess." He turned to Kitty and Lydia. "Off with you two, or you will have a cold supper in your rooms tonight."

With many tears and protests, the two did as they were commanded. Elizabeth was stunned by her father's stern words. She could not remember him being so angry. Oh, if only he had taken Kitty and Lydia in hand before!

But the visitor was not Lady Lucas. It was Mr. Bingley, and he was not alone. He was accompanied by the last person on earth she expected to visit Meryton again.

"*Mr. Darcy!*" Elizabeth could not stifle her exclamation.

The gentleman's eyes flew to hers before bowing to her parents. While Mr. Bingley dominated the greetings, Mr. Darcy stood silent and grave.

"It is a long time since you went away, Mr. Bingley, and I began to be afraid you would never come back again," said an excited Mrs. Bennet. "People did say you meant to quit the place entirely at Michaelmas, but I hope it is not true. A great many changes have happened in the neighborhood. Since you went away, Miss Lucas is married and settled. Did you hear of it?"

"I have," he said, "and I intend to call upon the Lucases to offer my good wishes."

"And here is our Jane, home from London. Does she not look well?"

Mr. Bingley turned openly to Jane. "Indeed. Miss Bennet, I am happy to see you arrived safely. The journey was not too taxing, I trust? But how could it be, in Darcy's carriage?"

"What is this?" cried Mrs. Bennet. "Did you know Jane was in town? Jane, why did you not say?"

Jane, blushing furiously, disregarded her mother, thanked Mr. Bingley for his concern, and bid him to be seated. Meanwhile, after offering the barest of greetings to the ladies, Mr. Darcy turned and spoke softly to Mr. Bennet. Elizabeth was surprised to see her father nod and lead the gentleman out of the room.

“Well!” said Mrs. Bennet. “It is good of your father to take the trouble of relieving us of that man’s company! Any friend of Mr. Bingley’s will always be welcome here, to be sure, but I must say that I hate the very sight of him!”

A mortified Elizabeth saw that Mr. Bingley was completely engrossed in conversation with Jane and did not appear to hear her mother’s ill-bred comment. As for Elizabeth, she could not imagine any conversation Mr. Darcy could be having with her father that did not concern her. It was rude, it was impertinent, but she could not stop herself from fleeing the parlor to seek out the book room. She had to find some way to apologize to Mr. Darcy. Without knocking, she slipped in, to the bewilderment of the gentlemen.

“Lizzy, what are you doing here?” cried her father. “This is a private meeting.”

She did not answer. Instead, she stared at Mr. Darcy.

A small smile grew on his face. “Miss Elizabeth is a lady of decided opinions on what signifies a private meeting,” he said.

She curtsied. “That I do. Papa, I am certain I know the subject of Mr. Darcy’s visit, and I believe I should be here.”

“You do, do you?” Mr. Bennet glared at Darcy. “I do not believe I know everything that occurred in Kent, but I shall before this hour is done.”

Elizabeth quickly said, “Mr. Darcy, you should know that I have shared the entirety of our conversations with my father. I apologize if I have violated your confidence, but I thought he should be made aware of your warnings, and I knew no better way of convincing him.” She blushed and cast her eyes down.

Mr. Darcy paled at first, but recovered quickly. “Quite right, Miss Elizabeth. I depend upon your discretion, and I trust it has not been misplaced.” He turned to Mr. Bennet. “I am willing to answer any questions you have.”

Mr. Bennet raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? Sit down, sir. You too, Lizzy.” Once all were seated, Mr. Bennet spoke again. “Mr. Darcy, I assure you that the account of your sister will, of course, remain in this room as will your perplexing offer to my daughter. Now, I am at my leisure to entertain your request for a private conference.”

“Very well, sir. Some of what I wished to relate today you already know. Allow me to humbly apologize for my offensive words and behaviors, both here in Hertfordshire and in Kent. I have already apologized to Bingley and owned up to my errors there. Pray believe me when I say I respect your family and hold Miss Elizabeth in the highest esteem, despite my actions in the past.” He paused. “No punishment can be worse than what I have already suffered. I know what I have lost.”

During this remarkable statement, Darcy steadfastly refused to look at Elizabeth. Consciously or not, the pain she felt was all the greater. A lump was in her throat. She was happy that she owned a handkerchief to wipe away the traitorous tear that ran down her cheek.

Mr. Darcy continued. “I would never presume to inflict my presence upon you or your family but for this dire matter. I am here to be of service to you and the people of Meryton—to end the danger Mr. Wickham poses to you and your neighbors, particularly your daughter’s friend Miss King, whom I understand Wickham is courting. He is undoubtedly after her fortune. Such has always been his way.”

Elizabeth’s distress grew. First, he reunited Jane with Mr. Bingley, and now Mr. Darcy offered to protect the people of Meryton. Was there a better man in all the world? He was all that she had hoped for in a companion of her future life, and she had rejected him.

Mr. Bennet leaned back in his chair and smiled. “There I can relieve your anxiety, sir. Miss King is no longer in Meryton. Her uncle has carried her away to Liverpool, and I understand there are no plans for her return. Mr. Wickham has lost his victim. So you see, your chivalrous offer is unnecessary.”

“Papa, that is unfair!” Elizabeth cried, upset at her father’s teasing manner. “Mr. Darcy is in earnest.”

“Lizzy, I will conduct this interview as I see fit. Mr. Darcy, is there anything else you wish to relate? I would like to return to my books.”

“Mr. Wickham is still at large, sir. He is sure to cause mischief.”

“On that we agree. I have a partial list of that gentleman’s debts. He is truly an industrious rascal, to be sure! I plan to have it delivered to Colonel Forster—or perhaps you would like to see to it yourself?” He offered the paper to him.

Expressionless, Darcy stood and took the list. Elizabeth somehow knew he was deeply offended. “I pray you accept my apology for my ungentlemanly behavior, sir.”

“I do.” Mr. Bennet began to reach for a book when Elizabeth spoke.

“I do not.”

Both men turned to her.

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Darcy has not apologized to *me*."

"Miss Elizabeth—"

She held up her hand. "Not here, sir. We would not wish to disturb my father's reading." She sent her father a glare. "Perhaps a walk in our gardens would grace the occasion with a proper atmosphere."

A puzzled Mr. Darcy held out his arm. "As you wish." She took it and gestured at the French doors leading outside.

Mr. Bennet smirked. "Begone, the both of you. Caesar's campaigns in Gaul call to me."

The pair left and walked quietly together for a short time among Mrs. Bennet's flowers. Elizabeth labored to gather her wits and say what must be said. Finally, she began.

"I am a very selfish creature and, for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may be wounding yours. It is my most earnest wish to apologize for my cruel words at Hunsford. I know what you have done for Jane and must thank you sincerely for your kindness to my sister and my family. My mother, my sisters, all of Meryton will never know of your unselfish goodness, so you must be satisfied with my gratitude alone."

Darcy stopped suddenly, forcing her to do likewise. In a voice filled with surprise and remorse, he answered, "If you will thank me, let it be for yourself alone. Your family and friends owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of you."

"How can you say such a thing after I abused you so abominably to your face at the parsonage?"

"You have no reason to apologize over the events of that evening. What did you say of me that I did not deserve? My behavior to you at the time had merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence. The recollection of what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it, is inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: 'had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.' You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how it has tortured me."

"Oh! Do not repeat what I then said. I assure you that I have long been most heartily ashamed of it. We must not quarrel for the greater share of blame! Both of us behaved badly."

Mr. Darcy bowed his head. "My avowed object today was to do whatever was in my power to remove Mr. Wickham's bad influence upon you and your friends. I shall not deny it was my only wish. I do desire to show you, by every civility, that I am not so mean as to resent

the past. I hoped to obtain your forgiveness, to lessen your ill opinion, by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended to.”

Mr. Darcy’s dark eyes captured hers. He searched her countenance, for what she knew not. While her feelings remained unsettled, disguise was impossible.

“Tell me, Miss Elizabeth, have I any chance of ever succeeding?”

Elizabeth was too embarrassed to say a word. After a short pause, her companion continued. “You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were in Kent, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever.”

She had to speak! “I-I am not the creature you knew in Hunsford. I cannot be, not after what we shared. My feelings—my feelings *are* different, but to what extent I cannot say.” Her eyes fell to her slippers.

“My presence is not painful to you?”

“No!” she almost cried. In a softer voice, she added, “Not at all, sir.”

Darcy nervously licked his lips. “Would you permit me the very great honor of calling on you?”

“But my family, my situation—they were so offensive to you.”

“Must I fall on my knees to show my remorse, my repugnance of those thoughts and words? I am heartily ashamed of myself. How dare I compare your family to mine! Lady Catherine’s behavior was beyond everything—and she the daughter of an earl. You are loved. I cannot say the same for my aunt.

“I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I was spoiled by my parents who, though good themselves, allowed—almost *taught* me to be selfish and overbearing. To care for none beyond my own family circle.

“What do I not owe you! You taught me a lesson, hard indeed but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you at Hunsford without a doubt of my reception. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased.

More gently, he continued, "I have learned from this. In Kent, I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses. I shall not make that mistake again. Allow me to court you openly, properly. Pray give me an undeserved chance to prove to you I am worthy of your notice."

An irresistible force of wondrous affection drew her eyes to his. She had never thought his expression could be so soft, so humble, so deep and dark and warm. Yes—warm and inviting. She felt herself fall into his ardent look, and only with the greatest of efforts was she able to break away and whisper, "Yes."

Mr. Darcy's anguished expression transformed into the greatest joy. Elizabeth realized she had never before seen him happy. His bright eyes and dimpled open-mouth smile suited him exceptionally well. He was the handsomest man she had ever beheld. A giddiness rose within her, and she began to laugh.

"Miss Elizabeth?"

She found her hands in his. "You must not mind me, sir. I would very much welcome your calls." She felt as light as air. All was right in the world.

He lifted her hands to his lips. "May I?"

She nervously nodded, and Mr. Darcy graced the back of each hand with a kiss. She felt his heat through her gloves. Her joy sobered to a gentle happiness.

"May I go to your father?"

"No! I-I mean, yes, of course—but not now." She offered a soft smile. "I would not so soon lose your company."

Pleasantly perplexed, Mr. Darcy suggested they use a nearby bench for conversation, an idea she readily approved. Once seated, Elizabeth asked of his plans for Mr. Wickham. Almost at once she regretted her curiosity, for her companion became grave.

"I am relieved of some labors, with Miss King gone from the neighborhood and your father inquiring of Wickham's debts. I can buy those, and added to what I already hold, I have a considerable advantage over him. I could have him sent to debtor's prison, but that would still leave him in the country. I cannot be easy with that. So, I shall offer him a choice.

"My cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam has some influence in Horse Guards and, with the permission of Wickham's superior, can have him set up in a regiment outside of England. The selling of his militia commission will help offset the price of a lieutenancy in the regulars.

“Wickham would surely reject joining Wellington in Spain, which is well. Fitzwilliam would not desire an officer of his suspect abilities to serve on an important battlefield. Therefore, his choice will be between the Canadas, India, or Fleet Prison.”

“Are we not at war with the Americans?”

Darcy smiled. “I believe even Wickham could stand before the shopkeepers and farmers that make up their army.”

“For all the evil he has done you, your kindness and generosity are extraordinary.”

Darcy sighed. “Fitzwilliam would agree with you. Wickham deserves punishment, yet I recall the time I called him friend, and he was some comfort for my father in the wake of my mother’s passing.”

“Your father did not turn to you?”

“No, I was poor company, struggling with my grief. It was all I could do to offer succor to my poor sister—she was but six years of age at the time.”

Elizabeth reflected on Mr. Darcy’s revelations. *He must have been seventeen years old when his mother died, and yet he set aside his pain to aid his sister. Where was his father? It was his duty, but he left it to his son while he entertained his favorite. I should not judge the dead, but I cannot help my anger and disappointment with that gentleman. Poor Mr. Darcy! So young, yet so responsible!* She looked at him with renewed affection. *He would not abandon his children! Our children...* She bit her lip.

Mr. Darcy must have noticed the change in her expression. “Miss Elizabeth, I cannot help but wonder at your thoughts.”

Elizabeth blushed and turned away. “Nothing of interest, I assure you.” Changing the subject, she asked, “Is your business at Rosings concluded?”

Some of Mr. Darcy’s joy faded. “It is. Once my uncle the earl arrived, a quick conference settled the business. Lady Catherine has been deposed and is now established at the dower house. My cousin Anne will assume what duties she desires; the rest will be left to the steward and housekeeper.” He paused. “Anne has requested her will be amended, making Colonel Fitzwilliam her heir. My uncle will soon meet with the solicitors.”

He brightened. “Fitzwilliam remains at Rosings, finalizing the changes and helping Anne, before returning to his regiment. I should tell you Mr. Collins has turned his attentions from my aunt to Fitzwilliam, following him about like one of his troopers.”

Elizabeth laughed. “And how is Charlotte?”

“She is happy with the changes and intends to befriend Anne. I am grateful for that—Anne needs a friend. Oh, and Mrs. Collins sends her regards.”

Elizabeth nodded, knowing her she and Charlotte would never have the same relationship as before. It was foolish to believe they could, once Charlotte accepted Mr. Collins’ suit. She looked up at her admirer. So tall, so handsome, so strong of body and character. Suddenly, she wanted everything settled between them. She took his hand with a smile. “Come, sir! It is time you faced the dragon. I hope you brought your sword and shield!”

“I thought we were to see your father, not your mother.” He offered a mischievous grin.

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped in wonder at his teasing. She then laughed delightedly as they walked to the house. This courtship was beginning most agreeably! A few steps from the door, she halted their progress.

“Before we go in, you really must tell me how you came to know of Miss King’s inheritance.”

“Miss King?” Darcy was clearly puzzled. “I certainly do not know any such thing. In fact, I do not believe I have ever been introduced to your friend. Why do you ask?”

“Because you said Mr. Wickham would not marry for less than ten thousand pounds.”

““I did. I take it that is the amount of her fortune. Did you happen to say? I do not recall.” At Elizabeth’s nod, he surprised her with a laugh. “Ten thousand pounds is an amount Wickham holds in great esteem. When he requested money in place of the Kympton living, he initially demanded that sum. Of course, I refused, and we settled at a more reasonable figure.”

“Ten thousand pounds! Why, to my way of thinking, three thousand was too much. I am of the opinion Mr. Wickham took advantage of you.”

Darcy nodded. “Such has been pointed out to me by my relations. I promise you he has done so for the very last time.” He then drew a finger along Elizabeth’s cheek. “That is not to say someone else may capture my liberality.”

Elizabeth shivered. “A fortunate person, indeed.”

Part 10

September

THE DARCYS' CARRIAGE ROLLED DOWN the cobblestone streets of Liverpool. All about were the sounds and dust of construction. New buildings were growing like corn stalks all about.

"My goodness!" cried Elizabeth. "I believe there is more activity here than in London!"

"You may be right, dearest," said her beloved husband. "Even with the wars, trade is booming, and fortunes are being made. There are many a peer jealous of the money in Liverpool."

"I was of the belief most of the trade came from America."

"It did. Thanks to Mr. Madison's War, these ships now sail from the West Indies and other locales." In a more tender voice, he said, "Are you certain the noise about the inn did not keep you from your rest, Elizabeth?"

She blushed. "No, indeed. If I lost any sleep last night, it was not due to unpleasant matters!" Darcy smiled and leaned in to steal a kiss.

"Mr. Darcy, we're coming up to your destination!" called the coachman.

"Excellent, John!"

The pair readied themselves as the carriage slowed. Within moments, Darcy handed Elizabeth down, and they approached the door of a modern brick building.

A butler answered at the first knock and responded upon Darcy's presentation of his card with, "Ah, yes. You are expected. Right this way, if you please."

After handing off their hats and coats to a footman, the butler led the pair up to the first floor. Elizabeth noted that while there were a few fine older pieces, most of the furnishings were new and expensive. One side table had caught her admiring eye when she was interrupted by the butler's announcement at the open parlor door.

"Mr. and Mrs. Darcy to see Miss King, sir."

The parlor was a smallish, well-appointed room. Two windows faced the street, filling the space with sunlight. A gentleman and a lady stood awaiting them. The gentleman was balding and rotund, of medium height. His dress was that of a very prosperous tradesman. The young lady, of seventeen years, was short and somewhat stout, unremarkable in dress

and looks, save for the unfortunate freckles scattered about her nose and cheeks. She stared at the newcomers in curiosity.

“Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy,” said the gentleman after a bow. “I am Mr. King, and this is my niece, Miss King.”

“Thank you for agreeing to our call, sir,” said Darcy. “My wife is eager to renew her acquaintance with Miss King.” He offered the young lady a smile.

Everyone took their seats and Miss King called for tea. They then fell into the usual inquiries of weather, travel, health, and family.

“My mother in Meryton writes of your recent marriage and that of your sister,” said Miss King. “Allow me to wish you joy.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Thank you. Jane and Mr. Bingley are happily ensconced at Netherfield, and we are on our wedding tour.”

Miss King started. “Oh! Umm, it was kind of you to invite my mother to the wedding breakfast.”

“Not at all. Our only disappointment was that you could not come as well.”

Miss King was openly confused. “M-Me? But—pardon me, Mrs. Darcy, I have hardly had the pleasure of your acquaintance!”

Now Elizabeth smiled widely. “That is something we hope to remedy in short order!”

The conversation was interrupted by the maid bearing the tea. Once the girl left and Miss King began to serve, Elizabeth continued.

“I know we do not know each other well, and that is something I truly regret. The purpose of our visit today is to learn if you are amenable to improving matters.”

“I-I do not take your meaning.”

Darcy grinned and turned to Mr. King. “Sir, I would like to speak to you privately about an important matter. Shall we leave the ladies to their tea?”

Mr. King, just as dumbfounded as his niece, reluctantly agreed. The two gentlemen soon departed the room. Elizabeth returned to Miss King.

“Do not be alarmed, my dear. Mr. Darcy is simply requesting your uncle’s permission for you to visit Pemberley next month.”

“Your husband’s estate? But why?”

“We are determined that we shall become good friends, for if not for you, we might never have found our happiness!”

Mary King gaped. “Mrs. Darcy, I still do not understand!”

“I will explain. It all began with Mr. Wickham.” At Miss King’s high color, she quickly continued. “Do not concern yourself! That cad is out of the country, hopefully never to return. Canada can have him!”

“You see, I took an instant dislike to Mr. Darcy upon our first meeting in Hertfordshire, due to my violent reaction to a thoughtless remark by him. Mr. Wickham’s lies only increased my abhorrence. I had no idea Mr. Darcy fancied me. We met again months later in Kent. You may recall that Charlotte Lucas married my cousin, Mr. Collins. I was visiting her at Easter at the same time Mr. Darcy was a guest of his aunt, the patroness of Mr. Collins. Mr. Darcy and I met and fought again, and we would surely have separated forever, save for a remark about Mr. Wickham courting you. Mr. Darcy grew alarmed and vowed to save my friend from that scoundrel.”

A wide-eyed Miss King blurted, “But, we are not friends.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Mr. Darcy assumed we were. This led to a discussion about Mr. Wickham’s true history and all his lies and wicked actions. It helped me see Mr. Darcy in a different light. I was forced to drop all my preconceived notions, and after his apologies for his unfortunate behavior and a rather short courtship—well, here we are!” She smiled brightly as only a lady in love could smile.

Miss King dropped her head. “Mr. Wickham was so handsome. I could not believe that of all the young ladies in Meryton, he chose me.” She looked up. “I admit I was a little envious of you, Mrs. Darcy. When George—Mr. Wickham paid me attention rather than you or your sister Lydia, I was so happy! I never thought that he was only interested in my fortune. I should have known. No man would want me.”

Elizabeth reached over and touched her hand. “Miss King—”

“No. Pray let me finish. My uncle learned of Mr. Wickham’s interest from my mother. His investigations alarmed him, and he rushed to Meryton to save me. He shared with me some of what he learned. Mr. Wickham is a bad man, I now know. H-he never loved me.” She began to weep.

Elizabeth reached over and Miss King fell into her embrace. “Oh, my dear! Shed no tears over that rascal! You are not his first victim, but hopefully, you will be his last!”

“He was the only man to notice me. I shall die an old maid.”

“No, you will not.” She dried Miss King’s face with her handkerchief. “That is why Mr. Darcy and I wish you to visit Pemberley. You will be our honored guest, and there will be those who wish to know you. Miss Darcy is of an age with you, and my sister Kitty will join us as well. Come make merry with us in Derbyshire!”

“You...you really want me to visit your home?”

“We insist upon it!”

Miss King gave her a watery smile. “If my uncle approves, I will come.”

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The next month Mary King was welcomed at Pemberley with open arms. She quickly befriended not only Elizabeth, but Miss Darcy and Miss Kitty Bennet as well. They were soon Lizzy and Georgie and Kitty and Mary to each other. She remained a little in awe of Mr. Darcy, but was far more comfortable with another guest to the estate. Colonel Fitzwilliam had come, and though Mary still bemoaned her freckles, the colonel seemed not to mind them at all.

Upon the end of Mary’s visit, the colonel requested that he write to her uncle. A dazed Miss King gave her consent and Elizabeth quickly invited her new friend to spend the Season with them after the New Year.

Elizabeth’s machinations were wildly successful. By April, Mary was engaged to Colonel Fitzwilliam. They married in June, two months before the heir to Pemberley, Thomas George Darcy, was brought into the world. At Elizabeth’s insistence, the Fitzwilliams stood as godparents to the child.

In the years to come, the Darcys were always on the most intimate terms with the Fitzwilliams. Darcy and Elizabeth were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the lady who, by igniting Mr. Darcy’s noblest instincts, had been the means of uniting them.

**THE END**

## About the Author

JACK CALDWELL IS AN AUTHOR, amateur historian, professional economic developer, playwright, and like many Cajuns, a darn good cook.

Jack is the author of eight Jane Austen-themed historical fiction novels. PEMBERLEY RANCH is a retelling of *Pride & Prejudice* set in Reconstruction Texas. MR. DARCY CAME TO DINNER and THE COMPANION OF HIS FUTURE LIFE are *Pride & Prejudice*-flavored farces. THE THREE COLONELS, the first of his JANE AUSTEN'S FIGHTING MEN SERIES, is a sequel to *Pride & Prejudice* and *Sense & Sensibility*. THE LAST ADVENTURE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL is a sequel to *Northanger Abbey*, PERSUADED TO SAIL continues the story of *Persuasion*, and BROTHER OF THE BRIDE is also a sequel to *Pride & Prejudice*. ROSINGS PARK is the concluding chapter of the series.

In 2015, he released the first four of a series of historical novels about New Orleans, titled THE CRESCENT CITY SERIES. THE PLAINS OF CHALMETTE begins the series, commemorating the Bicentennial of the Battle of New Orleans. Jack marked the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with three modern novels: BOURBON STREET NIGHTS, ELYSIAN DREAMS, and RUIN AND RENEWAL.

When not writing or traveling with his wife, Barbara, Jack attempts to play golf. A devout convert to Roman Catholicism, Jack is married with three grown sons. Jack's blog postings—**The Cajun Cheesehead Chronicles**—appear regularly at **Austen Variations**.

**Rambling of a Cajun in Exile** - <https://cajuncheesehead.com>

**Austen Variations** - <http://austenvariations.com/>

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