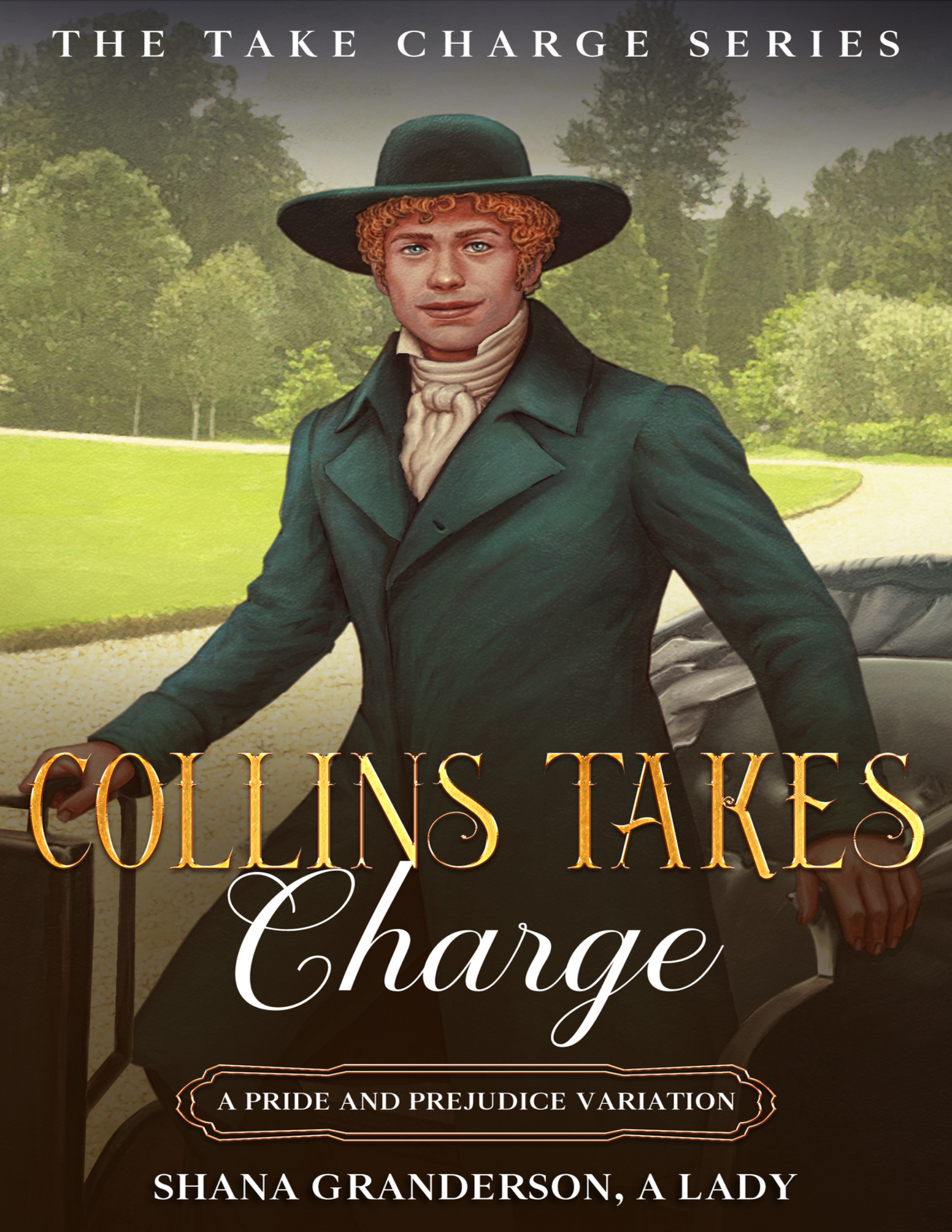
THE TAKE CHARGE SERIES



COLLINS TAKES Charge

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

SHANA GRANDERSON, A LADY

Collins Takes Charge

The 13th Book in the Take Charge Series

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

By Shana Granderson, A Lady

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About the Author

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Dedication

This book, like all that I write, is dedicated to the love of my life, the holder of my heart. You are my one and only and you complete me. You make it all worthwhile and my world revolves around you. Until we reconnected, I had stopped believing in miracles, but now I most certainly do, you are my miracle.

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, thank you E.C.S. for standing by me while I dedicate many hours to my craft. You are my shining light and my one and only.

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Introduction

This is the **13th book** in the '***Take Charge***' series.

For Kindle and KU readers, keep reading after the end of the new story. The 2nd Take Charge tale, '***Lady Catherine Takes Charge***' is *included as a free bonus.*

In this tale there are a few things which 'flip the script' to the way I usually write William Collins and his family.

The main differences are:

1. The Collins family are landed gentry
2. There are two Collins sons
3. They are well off and do not need Longbourn
4. The break between the families is caused by the Bennets

It is well known to the Collinses that there are five Bennet daughters and that Fanny Bennet cannot bear any more children. Once it is certain a Collins will be the next master of Longbourn, when the older brother reaches his majority, the father and son remove themselves from the line of succession in favour of William Collins. The main reason is that William Collins's older brother is the heir to the family estate and has no interest in managing an estate in another county.

Not wanting to rely on something that may be many years in the future, William Collins studies at a seminary after graduating from Oxford. Once he has been ordained and taken full orders, his bishop tells William that he is to apply for a living in Hunsford. He explains that there are some *peculiarities* with the patroness and tells his protégé how to appeal to her.

Lady Catherine appoints William Collins and soon finds out he is not the sycophant she expected. It does not take long before he has a profound effect on the lives of those in the Hunsford parish and beyond.

He writes to Thomas Bennet asking to come visit, but makes the letter appealing to Bennet as William Collins's father has explained what kind of man the master of Longbourn is. He arrives in Hertfordshire around the same time he does in canon, but that is the only similarity.

William’s arrival, the residents of Netherfield Park, the militia being in Meryton, and a certain wastrel joining the militia bring all of the characters together. Some events we are all familiar with in Pride and Prejudice occur, and that is when William Collins decides that he has to take charge. As you read you’ll see how thanks to William Collins’s intervention, there are many changes.

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Prologue

Collins’ estate near Faversham, Kent

Clem and Ophelia Collins, the master and mistress of the medium-to-large-sized estate of Collins Hollow, were as happy as any married couple could be. Collins Hollow was situated some six miles north of the market town of Faversham in Kent.

The Collinses had been blessed with two sons, Clem Bennet, who had been born in October 1779, and William Bennet, who had joined the family in May 1784. The reason that both sons, like the elder Clem himself, had the second name of Bennet was to honour his great-grandfather, the first Collins in their line. William Clem Collins had been a Bennet before marrying a woman with the family name of Collins. She had been the only child of the then master of Collins Hollow and was the heir to the unentailed estate. However, her father had demanded that William Clem Bennet take the Collins name so that the name would not cease being tied to the estate. To that end, Johnathan Collins had an entail written that would be valid for four generations, stating that the master had to have his blood and his family name had to be Collins.

As he was a third son of Clem Collins’s great-great-grandfather, Henry Bennet, had much preferred to manage an estate than seek a profession, William Bennet had changed his name to Collins on marrying Lettie Collins in 1683. As Clem the younger was the fifth generation, once he reached his majority still bearing the Collins name, he would be able to reclaim the Bennet name if he so chose.

The Bennet patriarch, who was the master of Longbourn in Hertfordshire at the time, had not been sanguine with his son giving up the Bennet name. To display his displeasure, with his eldest son’s agreement, he ended the current entail to heirs male on Longbourn. In its place, a new one was written. True to the prevailing attitudes that only a man was able to manage an estate, the new document entailed the estate on heirs male as the previous one had, except there were additional clauses added to state that only one of Bennet blood could ever own Longbourn, among some other

clauses, none of it could be mortgaged, it forbade selling all or part of the estate, and lastly and most importantly to Henry Bennet, the master at that time, an heir presumptive who did not take the Bennet name before becoming the master was disqualified from inheriting the estate. In the then master's thinking, if one of his third son's line was eligible to become the master, the injustice of William abandoning the Bennet name would be reversed. The new entail to heirs male was to be valid for seven generations after Henry Bennet. The rest of the clauses would be enforced for twenty generations.

Due to his pride, Henry Bennet rejected any overtures of reconciliation made by his third son, the great-grandfather of the current master of Collins Hollow. This had led to a breach in the family, which persisted to this day.

None of the Collins men were indolent or inactive. From a young age, the Collins sons each joined their father around the estate, and they were not afraid of getting their hands dirty. As such, all three Collins men were rather fit. The sons took after their father in their looks and height; however, both sons had their mother's dark blond hair and light bluish-grey eye colour. Like his father had taught him when he was the age of six, Clem Collins made sure that both of his sons were able to ride first ponies and then, before they turned ten, horses. More than that, the master of the estate taught the boys how to care for their mounts themselves and not to always leave said care to the grooms.

Even though Clem Collins's father had not seen any value in his son gaining a gentleman's education, the current master of Collins Hollow believed that his sons needed to be educated at university. Hence, first, Clem the younger, and then William, began at Harrow when they were twelve, and upon graduating from Harrow, both sons were to be sent to Oxford. The older brother began his studies at Oxford at the start of the 1796-1797 academic year, while William would begin at university in October 1801.

Over the years, the senior Clem Collins, like his father and grandfather before him, attempted to re-establish contact with his Bennet cousins at Longbourn, but he never received a reply to any of the letters he sent. It was known, thanks to various contacts in Meryton—the market town one mile west of Longbourn in Hertfordshire—that the current master of Longbourn,

Thomas Bennet, and his wife had been blessed with five daughters and no sons. The first one was born in January 1788, a little more than a year after Thomas Bennet married the then Frances—called Fanny—Gardiner. Word had reached Collins that after the fifth daughter was born in April 1796, that due to the size of the babe and some damage done during the birthing process, Fanny Bennet would not be able to carry another child.

Seeing that it was all but certain that Longbourn would become his if he outlived his cousin, Clem Collins knew he needed to make some plans. Thanks to the entail on his estate created by his great-grandfather's father-in-law, he could not take the Bennet name as the entail on Longbourn demanded, and neither could his older son before he inherited. Clem the younger was the fifth generation and had to keep the Collins name until after he reached his majority. Hence, because his eldest son would have an estate, Collins decided to designate William as the heir presumptive of Longbourn.

To that end, in October 1800, days after the older Collins son reached his majority, he accompanied his father into Faversham to see Mr Huntington, the local solicitor used to transact all Collins Hollow legal business.

Per his client's instructions, Mr Huntington's clerk had prepared a document which declared that both Clem Collinses, the older and younger, renounced any claim to Longbourn in Hertfordshire in favour of William Bennet Collins. If one of them were to be the heir presumptive of the Longbourn estate if Mr Thomas James Bennet was called home to God with no male issue, it would be the youngest Collins. The Collins patriarch had his solicitor post a copy of the document to the master of Longbourn.

William Collins was gratified when his sire and older brother told him what had been done, but he swore that he would not count his chickens before they hatched and would continue on his chosen path as if he would never inherit Longbourn. He wisely said that no one knew what God's plan for any of us was. It was why he would keep to his plan of gaining a degree in theology, work the years needed to take his orders, and enter the church as a clergyman once he was ordained.

The younger Collins son had been fifteen when Mr Fergus Davidson was awarded the living at St Peter's Church in Faversham. The new rector,

a man of not yet thirty years, did not say one thing and do another, which impressed young William due to the fact that the man who Mr Davidson replaced was very much a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ clergyman.

Thanks to the positive impression Mr Davidson left on William, he had decided the church was the profession for him. In the summer of 1801, before he began his studies at Oxford, William Collins had sat with Mr Davidson and shared what path he wanted to follow and why. Davidson had been flattered that he had inspired the young man to enter the church and had volunteered himself as a mentor. The clergyman told William Collins he was welcome to call on him and his wife Sophia, anytime they were at home and William was on a term break.

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Thomas Bennet was doing what he did as much as he was able. He was seated in his study at Longbourn, reading a book and sipping a glass of port. He had always been an indolent man and, at best, an indifferent master of his estate. Before Lydia had been born more than four years past, he had not exerted himself because he told himself he was waiting for the birth of a son. However, Bennet had done what he needed to do and always addressed tenant concerns on time. That had all changed when the midwife and Mr Jones, the local doctor and apothecary in one person, told him that Fanny would never be able to carry another child.

That news, combined with his wife wailing and screeching about how, when he passed away, she would be thrown into the hedgerows before his body was cold in the ground, caused Bennet to do the bare minimum to keep his estate profitable. Thanks to the entail to heirs male, one of the Collins cousins would become the master of Longbourn when Bennet went to his final reward. What cared he that his wife and daughters would be left in genteel poverty? He would not be there to see it or hear the complaints about imaginary attacks of nerves.

He cared not that Longbourn was the largest estate in the area around Meryton, and if he took the trouble, his income could be above six thousand pounds per annum. As it was, it had slipped below three thousand pounds annually.
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In his own way, Bennet loved his five daughters, but not enough to exert himself. Fanny's older brother, Edward Gardiner, had pleaded with Bennet to invest Fanny's dowry and any profits from the estate with him. Gardiner, his wife, Madeline, called Maddie by all, and their daughter of two lived at 23 Gracechurch Street in London, less than a mile from Gardiner's warehouse in Cheapside. Gardiner was in the import-export business, but he also had a nose for good investments. Even though Gardiner could return ten percent per annum, and sometimes better, Bennet would not trouble himself and give Gardiner money to invest on his behalf. Besides, he wanted money available to purchase more books and port; and to keep his wife's noise to a dull roar; he allowed her to spend freely. So, the truth was that at the end of the day, there was little or no profit left even if Bennet wanted to invest with Gardiner.

Bennet sat and thought about his family. By October of 1800, Jane was twelve years old and already always seeing the best in everyone, the serene peacemaker in the family. She was a very beautiful young girl who her mother thought was the epitome of beauty because Jane was blonde with blue eyes, just like Fanny. His favourite daughter, Lizzy—Elizabeth Rose named for his late mother—was nine. He favoured her because of her intelligence and quick wit. Bennet had to admit that Mary, who was eight, was also intelligent, but she was not as outgoing as Lizzy and preferred solitary pursuits. Catherine, called Kitty by all, would be six in November, and the youngest and most indulged by her mother, Lydia, was four. Even though it had been Lydia's birth that had ended the dream of birthing a son, Fanny favoured her youngest, even above Jane. That was because Hattie Phillips—Fanny's older sister and wife of Meryton's solicitor, Frank—had told Fanny that Lydia looked exactly like Fanny had at the same age.

Hill, Longbourn's butler, had just delivered the newly arrived post. Hill's wife was Longbourn's long-suffering housekeeper. It was surprising the Hills had not resigned long ago given Fanny Bennet's mercurial moods and screaming for her salts at least once each day.

On seeing that the single epistle was from an address in Faversham, where that uneducated cousin of his, Clem Collins, lived, Bennet was about to toss it into the fire when he noted that the return address was of a Mr Huntington, a solicitor in the town. As much as he wanted to return to his tome and continue reading and sipping his port, Bennet knew that, given

who it was from, he needed to read this missive to determine if it was something important. He hoped not, as the last thing Bennet wanted was to have to exert himself for any reason.

After he broke the plain wax seal, Bennet began to read.

13 October 1800
Law Offices of Guy Huntington, ESQ
15 Main Street
Faversham

Kent

Mr Thomas Bennet of Longbourn:

I represent your cousin, Mr Clem Collins. He is aware that you have five daughters and that your wife will not be able to bear another child.

As such, he would be your heir presumptive to inherit Longbourn on the sad day that your time in the mortal world is at an end. I am not sure if you are aware, but Mr Collins has two sons.

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that in the copy of the attached document, which will be filed with the Court of Chancery, Mr Clem Bennet Collins the father and Mr Clem Bennet Collins, the son, have renounced all claim to the estate of Longbourn in favour of the younger Collins son, Mr William Bennet Collins.

From this day forward, unless you and your wife are blessed with a son, Mr William Bennet Collins is your heir presumptive.

I thank you for your attention to this matter.

G Huntington

Bennet inspected the document; it looked like it was legal to him. He cared not which Collins inherited the estate after him, but he would have Phillips peruse the document and make sure all was legally sound, as Bennet did not want a Collins to pull the wool over his eyes.

He did admit that other than it had been passed down from his great-great-grandfather’s generation, he did not know why the Bennets disdained the Collinses as they did. The thought ended there, as it was too much effort to investigate.

He was aware that his cousin had written to him three or four times over the years, but like his father before him, Bennet never read those letters and consigned them to the fire. There were times he admitted that not reading the missives because of some old grievance was rather petty, but he could not bother to trouble himself to establish, and keep, a correspondence with his cousins. He was an indifferent enough correspondent with those to whom he had no choice but to respond.

It just so happened that Phillips called on Bennet two days after the receipt of the letter from the solicitor in Faversham. He looked over the letter and document carefully and assured Bennet there was nothing underhanded being attempted, and everything was perfectly legal and correct.

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In October 1801, William Collins began his studies at Oxford. Aside from enjoying his classes and excelling in them, he loved being able to sit and read in the massive Bodleian Library, which sported three stories of space for books above the ground floor.

Reading was not William’s only activity outside of lectures. He was a member of the chess and fencing clubs. He was very good in the former and getting ever better in the latter.

Each term break and end of the academic year summer holidays, William took Mr Davidson up on his offer. When he was not assisting his father and Clem at the estate, he was at the parsonage of St Peter’s Church gaining practical lessons about the duties of a clergyman. From Davidson, William learnt that his most important task was serving the parishioners and being an upright spiritual guide for the parish.

William Bennet Collins graduated from Oriel College, Oxford, near the top of his class, with a divinity degree in May 1804, days after he had turned twenty.
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On Davidson’s recommendation, William Collins enrolled in Bishop Lankershim’s seminary in Westerham, Kent, for practical study, as he needed to be three and twenty before he could be ordained as a deacon. Once William was ordained as a deacon, Davidson had promised that he would take him on as his curate. After serving in that capacity for one year, at the age of four and twenty, he would be admitted to full holy orders.

Until May 1807, William studied under Bishop Lankershim. He excelled in his studies and was able to put what he had learnt into practice with compassion and understanding. Said bishop was greatly impressed, opining that young William would make an excellent clergyman. The week after William Collins turned three and twenty, he proudly received his deacon’s orders. His parents, older brother, and the Davidsons were on hand to witness William’s ordination.

Davidson assured William Collins that the position of curate was his, something William accepted gratefully. When he was at Oxford or the seminary in Westerham, he had been distant from his home. However, St Peter’s in Faversham was less than an hour away from Collins Hollow on horseback or little more than one hour in a carriage. This made William very happy, as he would be able to be with his family at his father’s estate far more than when he was studying.

In June 1808, William Collins took his full holy orders and was ordained as a clergyman in the Church of England with all the attendant rights and duties. Knowing that men of his age generally did not receive a living, William was happy to remain as St Peter’s Church’s curate. Mr Davidson was well pleased, as his protégé was a hard-working asset in his parish.

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Even though they were unaware that their cousin had been ordained in June 1808, the Bennets’ lives continued on as they had for some years.

Jane at twenty was a beautiful woman inside and out, and she was still much as she was when she had been younger. She was ever the peacemaker, and no matter what, she tried to see the positive in any situation. However, regardless of how she tried, she could not see anything positive in the way Mamma spoke to Lizzy. The two eldest sisters were best friends as well as
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sisters. Unlike Lizzy, even though she felt it was too early, Jane had not complained when her mother pushed her out at fifteen.

Fanny's logic was that due to the entail, her daughter must come out at fifteen and marry as soon as possible, preferably to a wealthy man. Fanny had berated Jane for losing two suitors, and Jane had not had the heart to tell her mother the men had been chased away by her mother's vulgar effusions as she pushed Jane at them while denigrating her other daughters.

Elizabeth had refused to come out at fifteen, and her father had supported her. She had agreed to come out in March of the current year at seventeen. Mary had also gained permission from her father to wait until she was seventeen. Kitty and Lydia had no desire to delay a minute longer than necessary.

Bennet still hid in his study, only admitting Lizzy regularly. She shared his sardonic sense of humour, his intelligence, and she was willing to debate vigorously with him. Best of all, like him, Lizzy was a bibliophile. Bennet did not stop his wife from constantly berating Lizzy for imagined errors she made, for being a hoyden for liking to walk out, and for being an unmarriageable bluestocking because she was educated. That was not even taking into account that at least twice each day Lizzy was told by her mother that in looks she was nothing to Jane. Having permission to hide in her father's sanctuary, she was able to escape the worst of it. Elizabeth told herself she was inured to the effects of her mother's thoughtless words. She convinced herself she was not pained when her mother denigrated her, but the truth was, it hurt deeply.

Mary, who would turn sixteen in July, also loved books, just not the kind either her father or next older sister appreciated. As she had grown older, her mother began to call her plain. Hence, Mary had begun to dress severely and have her hair put up in a tight bun. She wore spectacles that she did not need, and in the last few years, she had taken to reading moralistic texts.

In addition, in order to stand out, Mary decided she would be the most accomplished Bennet sister. She was the middle, forgotten sister. Jane and Lizzy were very close, as were Kitty and Lydia, which left Mary to attempt to excel in some way. When she was not reading her new favourite tome, *Sermons to Young Women*, a two-volume set written by one James Fordyce

in 1766, Mary was banging away on the pianoforte, determined to become proficient on the instrument.

Kitty was older than Lydia. She was thirteen and would be fourteen in November. Lydia had turned twelve in April. Kitty was largely ignored by Mamma, whereas Lydia garnered as much attention as she desired. To try and come to Mamma's notice, Kitty took to following Lydia in everything. She also developed an annoying cough that her mother said grated on her nerves, and she always commanded Kitty to cease coughing. It was negative attention, but it was attention. As their mother had not seen the need for a governess, the youngest two had not received any education other than learning to read, write, and do some basic sums.

The older two Bennet sisters had a great advantage regarding education. They had spent months at a time with the Gardiners when they were younger, and they had received lessons from the governess who was employed to teach their younger cousins. Also, Aunt Maddie had been teaching them how to comport themselves as gentlewomen. In addition, their father allowed them to learn whatever they wanted, and even employed masters for them from time to time.

Mary had been willing to learn from her two older sisters, but Kitty and Lydia had not been interested in anything beyond the basics they had been taught.

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William Collins worked as Davidson's curate until January 1811. It was then he had been invited to call on Bishop Lankershim in Westerham. He arrived at the seminary on the second Monday of January and was shown into the bishop's office.

"Sit, Collins," Bishop Lankershim indicated a chair. "Not only do I believe you are the right man to set things to rights in this parish, but I have a hearty recommendation from Davidson as well." He saw the younger man's quizzical look. "I see I am putting the cart before the horse. The most troublesome parish in this diocese is the one at Hunsford, which is not far from Westerham."
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“What makes it so? The parishioners, the clergyman, or something else?” William Collins asked.

“Something else. The patroness is one Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who, because she is the daughter of an earl, thinks that she is all-knowing and all-wise. She only wants a sycophant who will do her bidding without question, and more than that, she wants a man who will toady up to her.”

“But, you know better than most that I am not that man.”

“No, Collins, you are not. A newly ordained man went to see her. He very correctly refused to break parishioners’ confidences or allow her input on the writing of his sermons. He left before she could order him out. She had the curate from the neighbouring parish thrown out of her house because he had the temerity to correct her. Either we can take the drastic step of withdrawing the living from Rosings Park’s advowson, or someone like you can make her think you are the type of obsequious man she is seeking. As soon as she awards you the living, I will ratify it. As you know from canon law, once a living is awarded and a bishop, in this case me, ratifies it, the appointment is for life. Regardless of her delusions, she has no power to remove you. Then, once you are ratified, you will manage the parish as you see fit.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would never present myself as anything but who I am; however, in this case when it seems that the patroness is an interfering terma…” William Collins stopped before the word left his lips.

“You may say termagant, Collins. It is apt for Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She thinks that her being the daughter of an earl somehow makes her knowledgeable in everything when the opposite is true.” Bishop Lankershim paused as he gave Collins time to assimilate his words. “The Archbishop approves of this. If we cannot have a clergyman like you installed who will take charge of the parish, then the living will be removed from her gift and never returned as long as she has authority to prefer a man to the living.”

“With the sanction from the Archbishop and yourself, I am willing to act the type of man she believes she can dominate,” William Collins agreed. “However, I will not lie.”

“I did not think you would,” Lankershim averred.

The two men stood and shook hands. Bishop Lankershim handed Collins a paper with the information he needed in order to find the estate and then said, “I will send a note to Lady Catherine to inform her that I am sending her another candidate.”

The youngest Collins left the seminary and made for Rosings Park.

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Chapter 1

William Collins had to admit, if only to himself, that the façade of the mansion at Rosings Park was impressive because of its size and the sheer number of windows glinting in the late spring sunshine. The house was a four-storey structure; it was built in the Gothic style with pointed arches, steep gables, and decorative bargeboards.[1]

Rather than ride his stallion, Vulcan, which Father had presented him when he had graduated from Oxford, William was sitting next to the coachman on the bench of a hired gig, one he had rented in Hunsford, where he had left his mount. He had also made sure that he was about a quarter hour earlier than the time of eleven Lady Catherine had set. He had been told that, to her, being on time was late.

He had chosen to arrive this way after Bishop Lankershim had pointed out that one of the many things Lady Catherine waxed on was the maintenance of the distinction of the ranks. He had opined that had William arrived on a very fine stallion, she would have taken that as him thinking too well of himself, leading to a rejection.

The gig was drawn to a halt in the drive by the single gelding pulling it before the large, dark oak double doors. It stopped under the extended portico, which would shield people from the elements. There were two footmen in red and gold livery in front of the door. William had to smile to himself; Lady Catherine had chosen livery colours which were not dissimilar to those that footmen who were employed by the royals wore. She did not go as far as to have the royal crest added to the liveries. They stood still like statues, not making a move to assist him down. Collins was sure they had been told not to offer any help to a lowly clergyman.

As soon as Collins hopped down from the gig, he straightened his black clergyman’s coat, pulled his sleeves down, and then made sure that his broad-brimmed hat was straight on his head, hiding most of his dark blond curls. With that done, he lifted the large brass knocker, which was in the shape of a lion’s paw, and allowed it to fall against the door. The door was opened almost immediately by an old, very serious-looking butler with stooped shoulders.

“Lady Catherine invited me to see her at eleven this morning. Please inform her Ladyship that Mr William Collins has arrived to enjoy the honour and pleasure of her company,” he intoned. In case the lady questioned her retainer about him, he wanted to be sure that he was described as the kind of man she wanted for the living.

The man took William’s hat, gloves, and coat, handing them to a footman. “Follow me,” the butler commanded, and then led the way along the hall.

William Collins looked about as he walked through the halls. He had never seen such ostentatious and gaudy displays of wealth in any house he had ever entered. Thankfully, Bishop Lankershim had prepared him for this. He had been warned that Lady Catherine needed to prove how wealthy she was to bolster her sense of superiority. All William saw was a display of poor taste and lack of class. He schooled his features, remembering the charge the bishop had given him. The church preferred not to remove a living from a patron, but in extreme cases when there was no other choice, they would do so.

The butler led the way up a grand staircase and then along another hallway full of more gaudy décor. Rather than open the double doors before him, the retainer knocked.

“Enter.” Came the imperious response from within.

The man opened the door. “Mr William Collins,” the butler announced once he had given a low bow as one would to a royal, then he stood aside. He left when the woman sitting in a raised, gilded chair waved him away as if he were a gadfly.

In William’s opinion, Lady Catherine had never been a handsome woman, and as she aged—he guessed she was past the age of fifty—he could tell that time had not been kind to her. Her face was angular; she had a long hawk-like nose and thin lips. Her hair was almost all grey, with a smattering of white beginning in some places, and her beady eyes were a dark brown colour. He could tell that she was a tall woman. She was dressed in heavy silks, which seemed more suited for a dinner in London than meeting a prospective parson in one’s home in the morning. He was no

expert on ladies' fashions, but William believed that the style was from the previous century, just as her pretensions were.

To the lady's right was a younger lady. He had been told that Lady Catherine had a sickly daughter. By the sallow look of the younger woman and the fact that she was buried under a mountain of blankets and shawls while being fussed over by an older lady dressed in plain garb as a servant would be, William assumed the lady was Miss de Bourgh, the heiress of Rosings Park.

As much as it irked him to do so, William bowed as low as he had seen the butler do.

Happy that the man had shown her the deference she deserved, Lady Catherine pointed a bony finger at a chair to her left. "I am the Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and my daughter is the Honourable Miss Anne de Bourgh," she stated imperiously.

Noting that she seemed to be waiting for him to express his gratitude at her condescension of addressing a mere mortal, William bowed to the ladies before he took his seat.

"It is my honour to meet you and your daughter," William responded deferentially once he was seated. It was difficult to play at being subservient to the woman. He reminded himself he was doing this for the church. "Would your Ladyship please inform me of her requirements for the next parson of Hunsford?"

"I know from your bishop that you have taken holy orders, so you have the prerequisite qualification to have a living. However, what is more important to me is that you will take direction from me in all things. Before you deliver a sermon, I must see it so that I may make changes as needed. It is very important that you share with me anything my tenants and those in the area say when they confide in you. I am very attentive to everything that occurs in and around Rosings Park. I will not countenance the peasants who are my tenants trying to take advantage of my generous nature. They will speak to you freely, and then you will report everything to me. I will direct you in your duties, and you will come to my home every day to accept instruction from me." Lady Catherine took a deep breath and ceased speaking for a moment.

“I am very good at following instructions that are helpful, and I will always be open to hearing what my patroness has to say,” William responded as he gave a half bow from his chair. He had not lied to the termagant; he had simply couched his answer in a way that she would assume he agreed with anything she said.

Anne de Bourgh was disappointed. Mother was bringing another sycophant into the fold. She had hoped that a man with backbone, who thought for himself, would be preferred to the living. But no, she should have known that Mother would never allow a man who had thoughts which were not her own to take the living, just as she had run off the previous two men she had interviewed. Neither of those two would bow to her wishes. Mother had ordered one of the men out of Rosings Park for daring to disagree with her, while the other had stood up and walked out before Mother was able to command him to leave.

Her hope was that there would be someone who would be willing to post a letter to her uncle, Reggie Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Matlock, who was her late father’s executor. Mother made sure that any letter Anne wrote or received was sent through her. If Anne wrote anything considered objectionable, her mother would punish her. She had lived under her mother’s draconian rules since Papa was taken home to God some seven years past. Anne was aware that when she turned five and twenty in September of this year, the estate, the house in London, and the de Bourgh fortune would be hers. Mother did not know Anne knew the truth because according to Lady Catherine, all was hers until she died. She was fully cognisant of the fact that Mother’s desire to retain control of the estate was why she had begun the lie about a cradle betrothal between herself and her cousin, William Darcy. Lady Catherine announced this so-called cradle engagement only after Aunt Anne passed away. Uncle Robert Darcy had refuted the claim, refused to sign the betrothal contract Mother had brought, and pointed out that his son and her daughter had never been in their cradles at the same time.

When Uncle Robert went to join Aunt Anne in heaven five years ago, Mother had rushed to Pemberley—the main Darcy estate in Derbyshire—where she had attempted to renew her claims. However, she had been frustrated by a letter Uncle Robert had left in addition to a statement in his will refuting the claims of any betrothal between his son and Anne de

Bourgh. Mother had tried to order Georgiana Darcy, who had only been ten when her father passed away, to pack and return to Rosings Park with her. She opined that two single men could not raise a young girl. Uncle Reggie and Aunt Elaine had commanded Mother to leave, and Andrew—Viscount Hilldale—and Richard Fitzwilliam had escorted their aunt to her coach and watched until it departed.

On her return to Rosings Park, Mother had been in high dudgeon for weeks as she ranted about how seriously displeased she was. Anne was brought out of her reverie as her mother's voice broke through the mists of her thoughts.

"Yes, you will do. I can tell you will be exactly the kind of clergyman I require to serve me…the parish," Lady Catherine stated. "The living is yours."

"If it is not too much trouble, would you condescend to write an epistle of appointment for me to show my bishop? The missive needs to state that I met your criteria to serve as the rector of the Hunsford Church and Parish. It is St Cuthbert's Church, is it not?" William asked to distract the woman.

Seeing the request for a missive as more deference to her, Lady Catherine agreed to write said letter after informing her new parson that he had named the church correctly. She stood and waited for Mr Collins to do the same and bow to her. With that done, Lady Catherine made her way to her study to write the epistle Mr Collins had requested so politely.

William did not look at Miss de Bourgh directly, but he could tell that the lady was troubled. He hoped that once he was resident at the parsonage and had begun to minister in the parish that Miss de Bourgh would feel comfortable enough to confide in him.

It was not too much longer before Lady Catherine returned with the letter. "You may go look at the parsonage. You will see it is very well appointed, all at my direction. I am very attentive to everything," she related.

With the missive placed in his inside jacket pocket and after another low bow to the ladies in the drawing room, William took his leave. After enquiring where the parsonage was, he walked across the park as he was told it was little more than a half-mile from the manse. As he walked, he

noted the beds of flowers which looked more like soldiers on parade than a garden. He had never seen anything so very ordered before. At Collins Hollow, the garden was laid out in a way that pleased his mother, with colours and different types of flowers all mixed together.

He passed an extensive rose garden; one he assumed lent its name to the name of the estate. This too was overly organised. All the bushes were uniform, and no colours were mixed.

As soon as William passed a stand of trees, he saw the spire of the church. As he came closer, he spied the parsonage, which was not more than fifty yards from the church. The house was built from the same grey stone used to construct St Cuthbert's. It was a decent-sized two-storey home. He could tell that the side he approached was the back. After he admired a nice-sized vegetable garden, he made his way around to the front. There was a gravelled circular drive which connected to a lane, the one he had been on when he travelled to Rosings Park earlier that morning. There was a relatively large flower garden in front beyond the drive. From what he could see, the flowers were not organised in the same fashion as those he had just seen at the estate.

What pleased William greatly was that he noticed an apiary in one corner of the garden which had three large hives. He assumed his predecessor—one that Lady Catherine had not liked, as he had been appointed by her husband and never kowtowed to her—who had passed a few months past, had kept bees. It was not just that there would be fresh honey when he wanted it, but William was very interested in the science of beekeeping. He had helped with the apiary at Collins Hollow whenever he had been home from school or university and had gained much experience over the years.

From the drive, he looked across, where he saw some fields with crops growing and beyond that an orchard and vineyard. William would need to confirm his suspicion, but he believed he was looking at the glebe lands.

He walked to the front door where a chain for a bell pull was hanging. William pulled the chain and could hear a bell ringing somewhere inside of the house. It was not too much of a wait before the door was opened by a kindly looking woman who William guessed was closer to fifty than forty. She had her hair in a bun and was wearing a white apron.

“Yes, dearie, ‘ow may I ‘elp you? Mr Belvedere is no more. Lady Catherine is looking for a new rector. If you need the curate, ‘e is at Metcalfe Hall,” Mrs Delorus Bellamy, the cook and housekeeper in one person, stated.

“No, Madam, I think I am seeking you. My name is William Collins, and Lady Catherine just preferred me to the Hunsford living. And you are?”

“Welcome, Sir. I be Mrs Delorus Bellamy, if you want to keep me, your cook and ‘ousekeeper. Since Mr Belvedere went to ‘is final reward, I be the only one employed ‘ere.”

“Well met, Mrs Bellamy. I am not one to make changes for change’s sake, so unless you do not desire to work for me, or I find serious cause to discontinue your employment, I would be more than pleased for you to keep performing your role in this house. May I look around?” William requested.

“Of course, Mr Collins; it be your ‘ouse now, is it not?” Mrs Bellamy asked kindly.

“Thank you. You may return to your duties; I will find you if I have any questions,” William responded. The lady bobbed a curtsy and made her way back into the house. After closing the door, William walked down the short hallway. The first door he came to led to the study. It was a large room with a fireplace on one wall; there were bookcases either side of the hearth. The desk was a good size, made of oak. It was pushed up against the wall, below the windows looking out over the drive and the lane beyond.

William decided that he would sit with his back to the window so that he would not be distracted from his work as soon as a conveyance passed along the lane or entered his drive. As it was, he intended that most of his time would be spent among his flock and not cloistered away in his study. From the study, he turned to the right down the hall and arrived at a large room which had a sitting room on one end and the dining parlour on the other. There was a door in the back wall which led to a nice little sitting room which had windows looking out over the back of the house towards Rosings Park and its park. He imagined that when—hopefully—he found the partner of his future, this room would be a very comfortable sitting room for the lady of the house.

He had not seen any kitchen, but that mystery was solved when William saw a set of stairs going down from the dining area. It seemed the house was three, not two stories. Rather than assume, he followed the stairs into a cellar where the kitchen and scullery were.

Mrs Bellamy had been enjoying a cup of tea and had been very surprised that the new master had lowered himself to come down to the kitchen. She knew what kind of man the so-called ‘great lady’ was seeking as a parson. She had been resigned to this man being of that ilk; but perhaps there was hope and she was wrong. “Would you like a cuppa tea, Mr Collins?”

“No, thank you, Mrs Bellamy, I just wanted to see what was down here. Do not allow me to disturb you,” William assured the woman.

He climbed the stairs up to the ground level and crossed the large room to the set of stairs leading up to the first floor. There, he found four bedchambers. The two largest had an internal door between them. William assumed they were for the master and mistress. The other two were a nice size for guests, where he would have room to host them when his parents and brother came to visit. At the end of the hall was a set of rough steps which led to the attic.

In the attics, there were two small rooms for two maids, and the other half of the area was left for storage. William went back down to the ground level and thanked Mrs Bellamy. He told her he would take up residence in the next few days. After farewelling his employee, he walked the less than two miles to the town where his stallion, Vulcan, was being stabled at the local inn. He had named the horse after the Roman god of fire and volcanos because he could be rather fiery with those with whom he was unfamiliar.

He was soon on his way to see Bishop Lankershim in Westerham with Lady Catherine’s letter in hand.

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“I appreciate you did not enjoy obfuscating, but you did very well, Collins. Now we know the parish will be in good hands and not at the mercy of Lady Catherine’s mercurial moods.” Lankershim paused. “Perhaps we should have removed the parish from Rosings Park until Lady
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Catherine has no more authority there, but you know we are loath to do that if there is another way."

"Does Lady Catherine's letter suffice, even if it does say that I serve at her pleasure?" William verified.

"With the stroke of my pen, I have just ratified your appointment. From this instant on, other than her duty to add two hundred pounds per annum to your wages, she has no more authority over you, regardless of what she believes," Lankershim confirmed. "The tithes you will receive have nothing to do with her nor do the glebe lands. They belong to St Cuthbert's Church and, by extension, to you."

"What do you recommend I do if, regardless of what I say, she tries to interfere in the affairs of the parish?" William enquired.

"You may warn her that the living will be removed from her advowson if nothing else is effective. If it is needed, and there is no choice, we will act. On a different subject, did you meet Miss de Bourgh?"

"I did, although she did not say a word. With a mother who seems so enamoured of her own voice, I am not surprised the daughter says nothing."

"When can you begin there?" Lankershim queried.

"It will be a sennight at the most," William replied. "Davidson at St Peter's knows I was to apply for a living, but I do need to take my leave of the parishioners and then pack my belongings at Collins Hollow."

"Then do not allow me to keep you; go to it," the Bishop stated.

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With the time being later in the day, William did not push Vulcan to cover the almost fifty miles that day. He rode a little more than twenty miles and spent the night at a coaching inn. The next morning, he set out for the final leg of five and twenty miles.

When he reached St Peter's parsonage in the mid-morning, Davidson and his wife, Sophia, were very happy for William. The two clergymen made their rounds of the parish, where Mr Collins was wished well in his new position, even if the parishioners were sorry to see him go.
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Once the farewells were completed, Collins pointed Vulcan towards his father’s estate. His parents and brother were very pleased for him, as was Clem’s betrothed, Miss Bethany Osborne, the daughter of the master of the neighbouring estate. William assured his brother and soon-to-be-sister that he would be back by the final Monday of June to stand up with his brother when he and Bethany married on the Friday following.

William Collins departed Collins Hollow, with promises from his parents they would come visit him at his parsonage when they were able to. His father had allowed him the use of a horsedrawn cart while William rode his stallion. William Bennet Collins arrived at his new home in the late afternoon of that same day.

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Chapter 2

Seeing that the day after his arrival at the parsonage was the sabbath, William did not send the cart back to Collins Hollow once it was unpacked on Saturday evening. Rather, he had the two men use the rooms in the attic and told them to stable the horse in the parsonage's small stables alongside Vulcan. The men were very grateful, but it was not so wholly unexpected given the way the Collinses treated their staff and servants.

On Sunday morning, William sat in the congregation and listened to Mr Keating, the curate from Metcalfe Hall, give his sermon. The theme was about charity and generosity to others, using examples of the Son of God's works in the mortal world before He ascended to heaven to sit at His Father's side. Mr Keating spoke very well, and if the pinched look on Lady Catherine's face was anything to go by, she did not appreciate the message of the sermon. As much as she did not, it was easy for William to notice that the parishioners in attendance heartily approved of the curate's lesson.

Based on the information Bishop Lankershim had shared, the curate was the first candidate Lady Catherine interviewed, the one she rejected, and then expelled from her house, because he had told her that her understanding of church law and doctrine was completely wrong. In William's eyes, it made Mr Keating a man worth knowing.

At the end of the service when the concluding prayer was barely finished, Lady Catherine stood and marched down the aisle. She stopped when she saw the man to whom she had just awarded the living seated in the congregation. "How could you allow that travesty of a sermon to be delivered?" She demanded. "Why were you not in the pulpit delivering an approved sermon?"

"Good Sabbath to you, too, Lady Catherine," William drawled. "As I arrived yester-evening and had to unpack, I will only take up my duties after the Sabbath. Personally, I thought that Mr Keating's sermon was rather good and represented the ideals Jesus espouses rather well."

Lady Catherine stared at her new parson as if he had just sprouted a second head. "I can see that I will have to do much to manage you. Come,

Anne, let us depart.” With that said, her nose high in the air, the mistress of Rosings Park swept out of the church.

Anne de Bourgh followed her mother as she contemplated what she had just seen. Mr Collins had contradicted her mother before all the parish. Perhaps he was not the sycophant Mother thought he was. She felt a little hope.

The congregants who heard the exchange were shocked. They had heard that Lady Catherine had preferred a new parson to the parish, but everyone knew what type of man she was looking for. One who would obey her and ignore their needs. The new parson had been polite, but he had openly disagreed with the self-styled *great* lady. There were many gaping mouths along with hope that the new man could possibly not be as they worried he would be.

William Collins stood back and waited for the congregants to file out of St Cuthbert’s, each family stopping and exchanging a few words with Mr Keating. When the last of the parishioners had spoken to the curate, he walked back into the nave to make sure all was as it should be before he made his way back to Metcalfe Hall. When Mr Keating saw the new parson, he stopped and looked at him.

“William Collins here, the new rector of this church,” he said as he extended his hand.

“George Keating,” the man replied as he shook the proffered hand.

It was easy to tell that the man was from the Newcastle or Tyneside area based on his northeastern English accent. “It seems that my new patroness did not extend an invitation to either of us to take the after-services meal with her. I did not expect she would, so I had Mrs Bellamy prepare a meal before she left yesterday evening. Could I interest you in joining me?” William invited.

“Nothing against you personally, but had you been the kind of man I know, indeed everyone in the area knew, Lady Catherine was seeking to fill the vacancy, then I would not have accepted your invitation. However, after witnessing the encounter in the church, I am happy to have a meal with you. Am I to assume that you are not as Lady Catherine thought you are?”

Keating enquired. “I am almost done here, and then I will be ready to join you.”

“I look forward to speaking to you. I will wait for you at the parsonage. In the privacy of my home I will be pleased to answer any inquiries you have of me,” William stated and then, with a quick bow to the other man, began the short walk back to his new house.

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By the time Keating arrived, William had the platter with cold meats, cheeses, and some cold meat pies on the table. Next to it was a plate with a loaf of crusty bread along with a knife to slice it. He had brought some water to the boil and prepared a pot of tea which he had just placed on the table when the front doorbell jangled.

When Keating saw who answered the door, his eyebrows shot up. “Mr Collins, are your servants too busy to come to the door?” Keating asked surprisedly.

“It would be rather hypocritical of me if I preached about how we are to observe and honour the Sabbath, and then had those employed here work on the Lord’s Day to save me a little inconvenience, would it not? Also, please address me as Collins or William.”

“And I am Keating or George. I am sure Mrs Bellamy appreciates being able to spend the day with her family,” Keating responded. This man kept surprising him in a positive fashion. “Have you employed additional servants for the house yet?”

“That is one of the things I will address on the morrow. Please sit.” William indicated the chairs about the table with his hand. “After we eat, we will have more than enough time to speak. That is unless you have a pressing engagement this afternoon?”

“I do not. Although we do not have a prescribed grace before meals like the papists, do you have a personal tradition?” Keating enquired.

“On the Sabbath at the after-service meal, I simply thank God for the bounty He allows us and for the blessing of His Son who died for our sins. That being done, please eat.”
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During the meal the two men, who were fast becoming friends, spoke of more inconsequential subjects.

After the meal, William poured a small measure of port for his guest and then for himself. They took their wineglasses and retired to the back sitting room. It was there that the host explained that he was the antithesis of the type of person Lady Catherine wanted for the living. William related all about the use of subterfuge as sanctioned by the hierarchy of the church and why it had been deemed necessary. “Thanks to the reports that reached the Bishop and Archbishop, from you and the other man who applied to be the new parson, they decided that they wanted to attempt this course of action before removing the living from Rosings Park’s gift. In my interview with Lady Catherine, I was very careful not to prevaricate; rather, I told the truth, but I worded it in a way I knew that she would only hear what she wanted to hear.”

At first, Keating was silent as he digested the words; other than taking a small sip of port, he did not move. Then, with his glass on the small table next to him, he smiled widely, slapped one knee, and then let out a guffaw. When he had calmed, he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief. “Pardon the outburst, Collins, but I believe this is poetic justice. I will never forget how, in her words, ‘seriously displeased’ Lady Catherine was when I told her she was wrong before she ordered me from her home. She tried to bar me from serving as the curate until she bestowed the living on a new man and said ‘it was not to be borne’ when Bishop Lankershim told her she had no authority over me and that I would continue on until a new rector took over. In short order, you will discover that your patroness hates being gainsaid. That your appointment has been ratified without any delay leaves her powerless. However, she will not recede and will attempt to interfere as much as she can.”

“In that case, she will be relieved of any ability to ever appoint another rector. It does not concern me. I see her as a bully and blowhard. If she thinks she can intimidate me with her perceived power, then she will be sorely disappointed.” William paused. “As my first act, I would like to appoint you curate of this parish. That is, if two parishes are not too much for you? The offer is one hundred pounds per annum.”

“The rector of St Anthony’s Church near Metcalfe Hall will not object. The money you offer is generous in the extreme. Are you sure you want to pay more than double what I earn at St Anthony’s?”

“In this, I am following the example of one of my mentors, Davidson, the rector of St Peter’s in Faversham. In his opinion most curates are not paid commensurate with the amount of work they do. For instance, I will be away for a fortnight in June to attend my older brother’s wedding. At that time, you will manage the parish on your own. Besides, it was easy to see from the services today that you are in the parishioners’ favour. I could not leave them in better hands when I am away.”

“If you are sure it is not too much, then I happily accept,” Keating agreed. “Are you ready for the impending summons to Rosings Park on the morrow?”

“I am. It is time for Lady Catherine to learn that her power over me and this parish is perceived and not real,” William responded. “I am sure that there will be much bluster, cajoling, and threats. However, like all bullies, when she is faced with one who is not cowed by her, she will find some other target for her interference.” He paused as he cogitated for some moments. “The way I react will be largely dependent on what she says and attempts to do. I will not invite open war with my patroness; however, I will not sacrifice the parishioners’ needs to placate her.”

Keating was impressed. He knew that Collins was the man for this job because if it had been him, Keating knew himself well enough to know that he could not be as diplomatic as Collins seemed to be in the face of Lady Catherine’s ridiculous and officious pronouncements.

The two spoke more of their theological philosophies until Keating departed an hour later. On leaving, the curate walked past the parsonage’s stables, and he saw Collins’s horse. He shook his head; Lady Catherine would not be happy.

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On Monday morning, armed with a basket of food and with Master William’s thanks, the two men departed the parsonage in the horsedrawn cart to return to Collins Hollow.
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William Collins did not have long to wait before a liveried footman from Rosings Park delivered a note from Lady Catherine ordering Mr Collins to attend her immediately. He told the man to pass on that he would present himself at the manor house as soon as he was able.

He returned to his meeting with Mrs Bellamy and finished their discussion about the servants she needed to employ. He authorised her to employ two maids of all work and a man servant who could assist with the parsonage when there was heavy work and attend to the glebe the rest of the time. William made sure that Mrs Bellamy understood that she was to choose the servants without reference to Lady Catherine's opinions.

Once the items they needed to discuss were canvassed, the cook-housekeeper left the study happy to have her opinion confirmed. Mr Collins was not some obsequious man who would toady up to Lady Catherine.

As soon as he was ready, William made the short walk across the park. He passed the overly ordered formal gardens and arrived at the front doors. Like they had when he had first arrived at the estate, the two footmen stood still, staring straight ahead. He used the knocker to announce his presence and was admitted by the butler. William did not miss the way the older man's eyebrows were raised, which told him that Lady Catherine was unhappy he had not arrived with, or just after, the footman she sent to convey her orders.

Like before, the butler knocked on the door and entered when bade, bowed low, and announced the caller. Then he withdrew.

"How dare you make me wait?" Lady Catherine screeched. "You said you would come right away! Do you know who I am?" It was then she noted that her parson had given a bow he would to any other nothing, and not the one she demanded was her due. "In addition to that, have you forgotten your manners, Mr Collins?"

"Firstly, your Ladyship, I told your footman I would leave the house as soon as I was able. I happened to be in a meeting when I was given the message. With regard to my bow, I was reading that it can be seen as treason to bow as if to royalty when no royal is present. Surely you do not want to be arrested for treason?"

Lady Catherine was about to scream at the disobliging man when she remembered that the footman had reported the parson had said ‘as soon as I am able.’ She berated herself for not being more specific in her command. Then she remembered something similar Reggie had said about demanding she receive the same bows as Their Majesties. He had told her it could be counted as treason. Try as she might, Lady Catherine saw no way to refute what the clergyman said.

“In future when I summon you, you will attend me with immediacy,” Lady Catherine clarified.

“If I am able to, I will do so,” William returned calmly.

As she was wont to do, Lady Catherine only heard what she expected to hear, which was the second half of the sentence. “I have written the points to be covered in this week’s sermon so that we may counteract the drivel that Mr Keating delivered to the peasants this Sunday past.” She picked up a sheet of paper and held it out for her parson to take.

On perusing the paper, William noted that it was full of nonsensical things about how everyone had to pay homage to Lady Catherine, how those of elevated rank were always right, knew best about everything, and had the right to order the lives of those below them.

“Firstly, Lady Catherine, Mr Keating’s sermon was doctrinally accurate. He took lessons directly from the Holy Bible,” William disagreed. “You are not saying that the word of God is wrong, are you? If you were, it would be very serious and be counted as blasphemy,” William stated seriously. “That would lead to an appearance before the ecclesiastical court, and I am sure that is not what you want, is it?” He paused to allow the import of his words to sink in. “Further, according to canon law, I am allowed to listen to parishioner suggestions regarding content for sermons, but in the end, the sermon must be rooted in a lesson from the Bible. I am afraid that I am not permitted to use your suggestions as written on this paper.” William handed the page back to the reeling woman.

Watching from the side, Anne de Bourgh was silently rejoicing. Mother had inadvertently preferred exactly the right man to the living. She was overjoyed to have her suspicion she had formed when she had seen him speak to her mother and reject her nonsense, confirmed. Anne knew she

needed to be careful, but she had a feeling that Mr Collins would assist her in ending Mother's tyranny.

For her part, Lady Catherine was in a stupor. Blasphemy! Court! Treason! She had been determined to put this lowly clergyman in his place, but instead she felt real fear for the first time since she was a young girl. How could this be? What was happening? How did she lose control of her new parson at all, or so very quickly? She could not grasp what was occurring. For some time, Lady Catherine sat on her throne and stared straight ahead, unsure of how to proceed. Eventually, with the page she had written in her hand, she waved the confounding man away. She would know how to act the next time she saw him.

She was too deep in thought to see her parson leave the drawing room after a normal bow.

Catherine Bertha de Bourgh née Fitzwilliam always got what she wanted! It had been so since she could remember. As the eldest of three Fitzwilliam children—Reggie was two years younger than her, and Anne was six years her junior—she was the wisest, and as such, she made sure her younger siblings always listened to her.

If Lady Catherine were being honest with herself, she would have owned that her brother and sister listened to her, nodded occasionally, and then ignored her words. Also, she would have admitted that as they got older, they stopped listening to her pronouncements all together. In fact, when she railed against Reggie marrying the titled but poor Lady Elaine Scott—she only had a dowry of five thousand pounds—both her late father and Reggie himself had ignored her words. When Anne was being courted by the fabulously wealthy Robert Darcy in her first season while Lady Catherine was in her seventh, Catherine had protested vociferously about Mr Darcy being a mere mister without a title. Again, she had been ignored by Father and Anne herself. Anne had married, and Catherine had been left fuming.

She had accepted Sir Lewis de Bourgh, a lowly knight, to save face. At least he had a title, and although he was not as wealthy as her brother-in-law, he had enough wealth to satisfy her needs. By the time Reggie's wife had delivered two sons, weak Anne managed to deliver one. He was named Fitzwilliam.

Three years later, Catherine had birthed her daughter, who she named Anne in order to get her sister to engage their children. Anne Darcy had refused her every entreaty.

When her sister passed away not long after she delivered her daughter, Georgiana, Catherine had tried to convince Robert Darcy she and his late wife had agreed to engage his son and her daughter. He had known the truth and rejected her request to sign a betrothal contract. Five years ago, Robert Darcy had been taken; and Catherine had made all speed to Pemberley.

She had been certain that Fitzwilliam—she refused to call him a plebian name like William, as the rest of her family, ignoring the fact there had been kings of England with that name—would be too overcome with grief to gainsay her.

Her brother, now the Earl of Matlock, had been there, and that damned Robert Darcy had left a letter for both her brother and his son refuting her claims. If that were not bad enough, he had codified his refusal to engage his son to her daughter in his will. She had been thrown out of Pemberley like some commoner when she had tried to order Georgiana to return to Kent with her.

Now she only saw Fitzwilliam and Richard—he never came without his cousin, so she could never claim compromise—for about a fortnight around Easter each year when Fitzwilliam came to, in his words, ‘fix her errors in estate management’. What folderol; Lady Catherine Bertha de Bourgh did not make errors!

The problem was no matter what she had told her daughter, Catherine was aware that come the thirteenth day of September this year, Anne would be five and twenty, and according to her useless husband’s will, Rosings Park would belong to her. It was not to be borne!

And now if all that was not bad enough, her parson would not obey her blindly. How was she to have him help her do everything, including making entries in the register, to make it seem that Fitzwilliam and Anne were married, if he would not cooperate?

She would not lose Rosings Park, of that Lady Catherine was certain.

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Chapter 3

Lady Catherine de Bourgh, née Fitzwilliam, was facing consternation at every turn. Mr Collins had not come to receive instruction from her every day as she had told him he was expected to do. Rather than wait on her and take her expert advice, the man wasted his time visiting the parishioners. It was not to be borne! She was the daughter of an earl and the sister to the current Earl of Matlock. What was the world coming to when her new rector did not pay her the deference she believed she was owed?

If that was not bad enough, this past Sunday, the first one at which Mr Collins had delivered the sermon, he had not used a single line of what she had written out so clearly for him to incorporate into the lesson—she ignored the inconvenient fact he had refused to take the page with her instructions from her. Instead, he had preached about the so-called parable of the good Samaritan and emphasised how all God's mortal sons and daughters had an obligation to assist those who were weaker and in trouble.

The peasants in the church had all looked on with approbation. Of course they would. They were poor, as God had ordained that they should be due to their being the lowest of the low. Also, it was because of their own laziness they could not provide adequately for their families, and the parson spouting drivel about helping one another only meant they would do less. Lady Catherine had refused all entreaties to repair tenant hovels or assist them when they believed they were in need. Doing so would only make them lazier. Rather, when she became aware of a need, she would scold the tenant for causing the problems. When they were sick because of leaking roofs or cracked windows and walls in their hovels, she lectured them on trying to pull the wool over her eyes so that they did not have to work in the manner she demanded.

Besides, she needed the funds to buy more artwork and decorations for her house. Everything in her house was designed to highlight her rank and wealth with the intention of intimidating anyone who called on her so that she would always have the upper hand. That was far more important than wasting money on some peasant's hovel and family.

The man was nothing like she had believed he would be when she deigned to award him the living. As punishment to Mr Collins, she refused to invite him to Rosings Park for the after-services meal and to bask in the glory of her presence.

She would set things to rights on Monday. Mr Collins would come see her, and she would give him one chance to fall into line, or she would know how to act.

At the same time that her mother was lamenting the way Mr Collins comported himself, Anne de Bourgh was rejoicing. Somehow the new parson had fooled her mother into preferring him to the living. Since he had been installed at the Hunsford parsonage and took over the duties from the curate, it had been obvious that this man was no sycophant. At the first service Mr Collins had attended at St Cuthbert's, the one Mr Keating had conducted, Anne had seen the possibility that the new parson would not kowtow to her mother. She had not been sure until he had come to the house this Monday past. Mother had blustered—as she was wont to do—and Mr Collins had not been intimidated at all.

His not appearing before her mother each day as he had been ordered to do, culminating in his sermon this very Sabbath, had shown Anne that Mr Collins was in fact the man she had hoped would be able to stand up to Mother and assist her to communicate with Uncle Reggie. The late Mr Belvedere had been willing to help her, but before she could get him a letter to post for her, the poor man had gone to his heavenly reward. Knowing that Lady Catherine would be the one to appoint the next clergyman had left Anne without hope. That hope was now renewed.

She had to be careful when she wrote the letter she wanted to pass to Mr Collins because both Mrs Jenkinson, her companion, and her lady's maid reported everything Anne did, or did not do, to Lady Catherine.

Thankfully, Anne had learnt some years ago to deposit the 'cordial' she was given to drink into her chamber pot. At times, she would use a poor unsuspecting potted plant. It was clear that she was being dosed with laudanum to keep her looking listless and sickly. Since that first time Mrs Jenkinson had attempted to administer the vile concoction, when she had tasted the bitterness of the drink, Anne had resolved never to imbibe the so

called cordial. It was prepared by the apothecary from Hunsford who would do anything Mother commanded of him.

When her minders believed she was in an opium-induced sleep, they would leave her alone in her chambers. That was the only safe time to write her letter to her uncle. The letter was written and sealed. Anne had hidden it in a crack in the wall behind her headboard. She planned to put it in her pocket on Monday, and after, that is if, Mr Collins called on her mother, she would go for a ride in her pony-pulled phaeton. It was the only exercise Mother allowed her, and of course Mrs Jenkinson always rode with her, which was why Anne had not been able to take a letter into Hunsford to post. They were followed by a footman and groom for her security, or so her mother said. Anne knew better. They were lackeys there to make sure she did nothing to which Mother would object.

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William Collins did not object to visiting his patroness one morning each week. After all, it was possible, although highly improbable, she would have something of sense to say. His hopes were dashed as soon as he presented himself to her on Monday morning.

“Mr Collins, do I need to call the magistrate to arrest you?” Lady Catherine demanded. She needed to intimidate the lowborn man, and this was an effective way to do so.

“Why would the magistrate need to arrest me?” William asked calmly, not rising to the bait.

“One of my grooms reported you have a thoroughbred stallion in your stables,” Lady Catherine insisted. She would put this uppity parson in his place so he would do her bidding. “You cannot afford such an animal, so you must have pilfered it. Of course, you did! It is not like you can afford eight hundred pounds per chimney piece like I am able. The re-glazing of the windows cost three thousand pounds. Can you afford that? No, so I know that you are not able to afford such a horse.”

“Lady Catherine, are you aware you are accusing me of being a horse thief when it is absolutely not true? As such, I am able to have you charged with slander,” Collins stated firmly. “Not that it is your concern, but the
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Collins family has been at the estate of Collins Hollow, which earns not much less per annum than this one, for longer than the de Bourghs have owned Rosings Park. My father could well afford to purchase stallions for both my brother and me, and he has all the paperwork at his estate which I can send for when I lay a charge of slander against you."

Rather than feeling smug about cowing her parson, Lady Catherine felt real fear. She could not afford to be found guilty of slander. If she was, no one would believe her when she tried to claim that Anne and Fitzwilliam had wed. As he would not bend to her will, she would sack him and then find a man who would do everything she demanded.

"You are sacked, Mr Collins. I will not have my parson thinking so well of himself to threaten me in my own house. Your appointment was at my pleasure, and it is no longer so," Lady Catherine screeched.

William let out a bark of derisive laughter. "You cannot sack me," William shot back. "You may not be familiar with canon law, but I am, and more importantly, so is my bishop. A living is for life once ratified by the local bishop, and there is nothing you can do to remove me. That can only be done by my bishop, and then only for severe misconduct on my part. Not bowing to your desires would not be counted as such."

"How dare you speak to me in that way? Do you know who I am?" Lady Catherine blustered while she was reeling. How was it that nothing she said to Mr Collins was effective? "Of course I can sack you. You have not been here long enough for a bishop to ratify your appointment."

"I must respectfully disagree with you. I went to see Bishop Lankershim in Westerham the day you appointed me, and he ratified the appointment right away. You are free to contact his office for verification," William stated evenly. He paused and decided this was the time to threaten the living being removed from her authority. "Lady Catherine, I was sent to apply for the Hunsford living by my bishop with the express approval of His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury. I will speak plainly. They are very concerned at your attempts to interfere in the ecclesiastical realm, not to mention your poor treatment of the parishioners. If you continue on this path, then the Archbishop will remove the living I hold from Rosings Park's gift for as long as you have authority to appoint a parson."

There was nothing she could say. She was stuck with Mr Collins. How was she to work on Fitzwilliam to marry Anne now? She sat on her throne looking out, but seeing nothing. Lady Catherine did not see when Mr Collins gave a quick bow and left the drawing room. Nor did she notice when Anne soon took her leave as well.

Try as she may, Lady Catherine could not come up with any plan. She needed time to think. She would conquer this!

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“Mrs Jenkinson, I intend to ride out in my phaeton,” Anne stated soon after the confrontation between her mother and Mr Collins.

“Do you not need to rest?” Mrs Jenkinson wondered.

Thankfully, Mother was still in a stupor after the shocks delivered by Mr Collins, so she had not issued any orders for Anne to rest. “Has my mother said that I need to rest?” Anne demanded.

“No, Lady Catherine has not said so. However, this is the time you normally have your next drink of cordial and then rest,” Mrs Jenkinson stated.

“You know that my mother is not in the best of moods after Mr Collins was so disrespectful to her. Would you like to go and ask her whether I am allowed to take a ride in my phaeton?” Anne bluffed. She knew that Mrs Jenkinson was far too timid to go and disturb Lady Catherine.

“It is very thoughtful of you to allow your mother some quiet after the way that man spoke to her,” Mrs Jenkinson said in capitulation. “I will make sure I have your heavy shawl and pelisse. Will you wait here or should we meet near the front doors?”

“I will take a slow walk to the stables to have the ponies hitched to the phaeton. If I do not see you there, then the footman, groom, and I will wait for you under the portico in the small carriage,” Anne stated. She saw the lady about to object, but she thought better of it. Mrs Jenkinson made her way towards the family floor to retrieve the items, and Anne made her way down the stairs. She gave her pocket a single pat to ensure that her letter, wrapped in the additional page for Mr Collins, was where it should be.
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She passed the butler in the entrance hall, who wisely held his tongue when Anne stepped out of the house. As she walked towards the stables, she admired the verdant trees dotted around the park. Moments of freedom like this one were too few and far between for her not to drink in everything around her. Anne loved the feel of the sun on her face while she walked and enjoyed the birdsong serenading her.

On arriving at the stables, Anne issued instructions to hitch the ponies to her phaeton. A groom and footmen led a pair of geldings out and stood by them while the carriage was made ready. At the same time one of the grooms was checking that everything was connected properly, Mrs Jenkinson arrived with the two heavy items in hand.

As much as Anne did not want to don the heavy pelisse and have the equally heavy shawl draped over her shoulders, she said not a word in complaint as Mrs Jenkinson wrapped her up according to Lady Catherine's dictates.

Soon enough they were on their way. Anne guided her ponies to the path that led up towards the gaudy folly in the style of a Greek temple Mother had wasted money on having constructed. She did not want to go directly to the parsonage because that would raise suspicions in Mrs Jenkinson, and they would be reported back to her mother.

When they reached the intersection of a few paths, rather than continue on towards the folly on the hill, Anne guided her ponies into the farther of the two groves so she could stop at the glade.

How she used to love spending time at the glade with her late father. Papa had four benches placed around the pond where, ignoring his wife's objections, he would take Anne to find peace in this little part of natural heaven. There had been a time when Mother had wanted to cut all the trees down in the groves, as they were, in her words 'untidy.' Thankfully Papa had overruled her and had a clause in his will stating that anyone who was responsible for cutting the trees down would be evicted from his estate. Whenever she came to the glade, Anne felt closest to her beloved Papa. If only his heart had not been weak, prematurely sending him to be with God.

It was a year after his passing when Mother had her plans to betroth Anne to William rejected again, and she had begun to demand that the

cordial be administered. Thank goodness Anne only pretended she was being affected by the drugged drink. If Lady Catherine, or one of her minions, suspected Anne was not drinking the laudanum, they would have found a way to force her to do so.

Even though she was quite capable of alighting without assistance, Anne waited until the footman came to hand her down. She had to maintain the fiction that she was weak and feeble. She did not like prevaricating, but if she needed to be a fabulist to protect herself, then so be it.

Mrs Jenkinson offered her charge an arm and escorted her to the bench where Miss de Bourgh chose to sit. Then, as she always did, the companion withdrew. Miss de Bourgh liked privacy to remember her late father in this place.

When she was ready to return to the phaeton, Anne would call out, bringing her gaoler back to her to escort her to the carriage. At least she was left alone on the bench. As soon as Mrs Jenkinson was out of sight, Anne threw off the shawl; the pelisse followed it onto the bench. She undid the ribbons securing her bonnet and placed it on the bench next to her. Anne then stood and walked around the pond until she reached the place where there was a break in the canopy created by the trees. With the sun above her, she lifted her head so she could feel the sun's rays on her face; she then stuck her arms straight out on each side and twirled around.

"Papa, I know you did not chuse to leave me alone with your wife, but I do miss you every day," Anne said in *sotto voce* to the heavens. She did not want Mrs Jenkinson, who would be seated on the phaeton's bench, to hear her. "Mr Belvedere came to join you in heaven before I could ask him to post a letter to Uncle Reggie, but I believe that Mr Collins will aid me in my quest to free myself of the yoke with which your wife has imprisoned me. Papa, I am sure you saw it from heaven, but my mother is so angry that Mr Collins…" She told her father that the new holder of the Hunsford living was nothing like Lady Catherine had expected. "As you can imagine, your wife is seriously displeased."

With her conversation with her dear father complete, Anne returned to the bench where her outerwear was. She tied the bonnet back in place, shrugged into the warm pelisse, and placed the shawl she did not want to

wear on her shoulders. Once everything was as it had been, she called out for Mrs Jenkinson.

The groom was about to lead the ponies around so they would be pointing in the direction from where they had come. “No, do not,” Anne stated. She was prepared for the questioning look from her companion. “We are close to the parsonage. After the way that *man* spoke to my mother, I want to tell him a piece of my mind[2] and let him know that his behaviour will not be acceptable ever again.”

Mrs Jenkinson was pleased that Miss de Bourgh wanted to stand up for her mother in that way. She was certain that her ladyship would be well pleased that her daughter was willing to take up her cause. She nodded, and the groom, who had been looking at her, stepped away from the ponies.

It was about a ten-minute ride through the grove until they exited the trees and reached the gravel-covered drive which ran from the gates to the mansion. Anne guided her ponies onto the drive towards the open gates of the estate. There she turned them to the right for a short distance before they reached the parsonage’s drive. She pulled back on the ribbons, and the ponies came to a halt opposite the front door. The footman handed Anne down while the groom assisted Mrs Jenkinson.

Remembering that she was supposed to be sickly, Anne walked up to the door slowly and pulled on the chain that rang the doorbell.

The door was opened by Mabel, one of the newly employed maids.

“Is Mr Collins home?” Anne demanded as imperiously as she was able.

“Yes, Ma’am, ‘e be in ‘is study. ‘Oo should I says be callin’?” the young maid asked nervously.

“Tell him Miss de Bourgh is here, and it will not do to keep me waiting outside in this fashion. After all, Mr Collins has this home because of my mother’s generosity.”

The maid opened the door wide and showed the two ladies to the sitting room before going back to inform her master he had callers.

William had been working on the outline of his next sermon when Mabel entered, wringing her hands, and told him that Miss de Bourgh was

demanding to see him. He was somewhat surprised, as he had not thought the daughter was of the same ilk as the mother. He stood and made his way to the sitting room, where he found Miss de Bourgh and her companion seated. Neither lady looked pleased to be in his house.

“Miss de Bourgh, Mrs Jenkinson, welcome to the parsonage. How may I be of service?” William enquired.

“I will speak to you about the rude and disrespectful way you spoke to my mother earlier. I suggest we retire to your study unless you want me to berate you before your own servants and mine.” Anne turned to Mrs Jenkinson. “The door will remain open, and you will be very close by.”

The companion agreed with the arrangement while she smirked, thinking about the set down Miss de Bourgh would deliver. Yes, this would please Lady Catherine greatly.

With Mr Collins following her, Anne de Bourgh made her way towards the study with a swish of her skirts. As soon as they entered, Anne turned and looked at Mr Collins. She reached into her pocket at the same time she demanded, “What have you to say for yourself after the reprehensible way you treated my mother earlier?” She pressed the letter wrapped in a sheet of paper into Mr Collins’s hand.

William looked at the first line on the paper, which read ‘*Make it sound good.*’ “Miss de Bourgh, with all respect, if your mother has a complaint against me, she may make it herself. She does not need to send her daughter to do so for her! Now please leave; I do not need to be berated in my own home.”

Anne smiled and nodded her head. Mr Collins was doing exactly as she hoped he would. She walked towards the door and then from just in the hallway where she knew Mrs Jenkinson could see her, Anne looked into the study disdainfully. “I take no leave of you, Mr Collins. I send no compliments to you or your household. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased.” With that Anne spun on her heel. “Come, Mrs Jenkinson, let us leave this unholy abode.” She lifted her nose into the air and marched out, her companion following her, her nose lifted up as well.

Soon, the ladies were in the phaeton on their way back to Rosings Park.

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Chapter 4

Anne de Bourgh was very thankful when her companion relieved her of the heavy pelisse upon entering the mansion at Rosings Park.

Mrs Jenkinson sent a footman up to Miss de Bourgh's suite with instructions to hand the pelisse to her charge's lady's maid. Then, after making sure the heavy shawl was over her charge's shoulders, she offered her arm to Miss de Bourgh and assisted her to walk up the stairs to the first floor and the drawing room where Lady Catherine always sat.

By the time she had returned to the drawing room, Lady Catherine had convinced herself that she still held power over Mr Collins and had written an epistle to the bishop in which she demanded, nay commanded him, that he remove the offensive man from the parish of Hunsford forthwith. She had discounted Mr Collins's words that the church would remove her authority over the Hunsford parish and was certain that the wayward parson had lied to her. As she was ruminating, Anne entered the room on Mrs Jenkinson's arm. The latter curtsied deeply to her as was her due.

"Where have you been, Anne? I am told that you rode out in your phaeton. Have I not told you that you must have my permission before riding out?" Lady Catherine demanded.

"Lady Catherine, just wait until you learn what your daughter did. You will not object to her going out when you hear," Mrs Jenkinson gushed.

"What did Anne do?" Lady Catherine enquired.

"Oh, my Lady, she was magnificent. She drove to the glade, where she sat in silent contemplation. When she returned, rather than return to the manse, she ordered that we make for the parsonage where she insisted on seeing that man who had been so rude to you. If only you could have heard how Miss de Bourgh berated him for his unconscionable disrespect of your person. Rather than own his error, would you believe that Mr Collins had the temerity to order Miss de Bourgh and me out of the parsonage? As your daughter pointed out to him, he only has a home because of your condescension and beneficence," Mrs Jenkinson related excitedly.

Having always thought Anne was meek and mild; Lady Catherine was impressed and gratified that her daughter would take up her cause the way she had. Perhaps this meant that Anne would be a willing participant in gaining Fitzwilliam as her husband. It seemed that her daughter had a little of her mother's strength in her. How could she not when Anne had been born of her noble body?

"That was very well done, Anne," Lady Catherine said condescendingly. "It is good you showed him that his pretensions will not be accepted. I have written to the bishop this very day, and when he reads my epistle, he will remove that horrendous parson forthwith."

As hard as it was not to smile, Anne managed to school her features. She was positive that the letter her mother had posted would have the opposite effect of what she intended. "Thank you, Mother, I could not allow what I saw today to pass without comment. I am sure you know what to write so that the right thing will be done. I am tired now; may I retire to have my cordial and rest?"

"Mrs Jenkinson, you should have taken Miss de Bourgh to rest as soon as you returned," Lady Catherine scolded.

How Anne loved it when her mother contradicted herself. She allowed her companion to lead her up to her suite. She watched as Mrs Jenkinson poured a measure of the vile concoction. As soon as Anne touched it to her lips, the companion turned to return to her own chamber. The liquid was soon poured into the chamber pot. Thereafter, Anne lay down on her bed and feigned sleep.

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William Collins waited to make sure that Miss de Bourgh and her retinue had left the parsonage's land before he returned to his study. He unfolded the page that surrounded a sealed missive and began to read.

Make it sound good.

20 May 1811

Mr Collins,
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I know it is not proper for a single lady to write to a man to whom she is not connected by family nor to whom she is not engaged. However, in this instance there is no choice.

My mother has any post written by me or sent to me delivered directly to her. The reason is simple. My birthday is the 13th of September, and I will turn 25. At that time, the estate and everything my late father owned becomes my property. Lady Catherine will do everything she is able to so that I cannot claim what is mine.

To that end, about a year after one of her schemes to engage me to my Cousin Darcy failed, she had the apothecary (he is one of her sycophants) begin to formulate a cordial containing laudanum in it.

With my first sip, I could taste the bitter drug, and from that time until now, whenever I am given the vile concoction, I make sure it goes anywhere except in my body. I fear that if all her other half-witted plans fail, that she will claim that I am too feeble to manage my property.

This is where I need your assistance.

My uncle, Lord Reginald Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Matlock, is the executor of my father's will. However, he is unaware of how my mother treats me. All he hears are my mother's prevarications, and he has read the letters I was forced to author in which I told him all was well. My uncle does not know I am unable to freely write to him.

I have addressed the enclosed missive to my uncle, and I beg your indulgence to post it for me, but not from Hunsford. I will not take the chance that my mother has bribed the landlord of the Black Bull Inn to return any letter that has been written by me to her.

If you would be willing to post the epistle from Westerham, I would be forever grateful. You have my

thanks whether you agree to assist me or not.

Miss Anne de Bourgh

William had thought Lady Catherine just a blowhard before he read what Miss de Bourgh had written. He had never imagined Lady Catherine would go out of her way to harm her own daughter to further her own avaricious endeavours. Of course, he would assist Miss de Bourgh; there was no question. He called for Vulcan to be made ready.

When the groom led the stallion to the drive in front of the house, William was prepared to depart. The letter was safely in the inside pocket of his coat. He made the less than one-hour ride to Bishop Lankershim's seminary without any trouble.

He was shown into the bishop's study.

"Collins, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?" Lankershim queried. "Is all well in Hunsford?"

"I have the parish well in hand and have not allowed Lady Catherine to interfere. However, I discovered today that she is much worse than any of us expected. I am not at liberty to share all with you, as a communication was made in confidence. However, I ask that you have one of your couriers take this letter," William extracted the epistle from his inside pocket, "to Matlock House in London and deliver it into the hands of the Earl of Matlock."

"As I know you would not ask this of me without an excellent reason, it will be done." Lankershim summoned one of his men, and after instructions had been issued, the man walked to the stables and was soon on his way to London. Once they were alone again, Lankershim turned to his protégé. "Now tell me what you have not written in your missives."

"As we suspected she would, Lady Catherine attempted to sack me. I warned her what the result will be if she does not recede graciously. I do not believe that what she calls her 'forthright' character will allow her to accept what I said without attempting to carry her point," William related. "Other than the noise Lady Catherine makes, I could not be happier with my parish, especially as I have Keating as my curate. As soon as the

parishioners understood I was not one who would toady up to my patroness, I was welcomed with open arms.

“One thing I am certain of is that Lady Catherine does not discharge her duties as landlady as she should. Her tenants have cottages in disrepair, and she believes that the normal assistance every landowner gives his tenants only makes them ‘lazier.’ The lady would not know charity and compassion if it stared her in the face. After seeing the classless way she decorates her house, I can see where the money which should go back into the estate has been spent.”

“Belvedere, the late rector before you, told us the same. Unless she attempted to break church laws as she has with you by demanding to know the content of parishioners’ confidential disclosures and trying to write your sermons for you, we could not move against her. Putting you in charge of that parish was for the best,” Lankershim admitted. “Unfortunately, not all men of the cloth would have the character to stand up to Lady Catherine as you have.”

“I thank you for the high praise, my Lord,” William said as he bowed his head to Bishop Lankershim.

“All deserved, my boy, all deserved,” the older man claimed.

Before he stood to depart, William thought of something. “You have been married for many years, have you not?”

“I have, for more than thirty blissful years,” Lankershim agreed.

“It has been a subject I have thought about for some time. I think that now that I am seven and twenty, I am ready to seek a bride,” William said. “I want what I see in my parents’ marriage and what I have seen of your union. Love, respect, and compatibility.”

“When it is time, He will show you the way,” Lankershim opined.

Farewells were exchanged, and soon, William Collins was on a galloping Vulcan headed back towards his parsonage.

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The Fitzwilliams were still in London, as the House of Commons and the House of Lords would be in session until the final Friday of June. Lord Matlock would not leave while both were still in session. Thereafter, they would leave the odours and heat of Town behind and make for Snowhaven, the main Matlock estate near the town of Matlock in Derbyshire.

“William, you employed this companion for Anna, Mrs Younge, but did you verify her characters?” Lady Elaine Fitzwilliam, the Countess of Matlock, enquired of her nephew.

“Her characters were impeccable, and I have seen nothing in her comportment to make me doubt my judgement,” William Darcy replied without addressing his aunt’s main question. He hated having his judgement questioned, and when someone did, it only made him more certain that he was in the right.

“You know, William, as I am Anna’s co-guardian, you should have involved me in the search for a companion,” Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, the second Fitzwilliam son, stated.

“When I began the search, I was not sure when you would return from the Peninsula,” Darcy defended himself. He was well aware that he could have waited to begin to seek a companion for Anna, but he was confident in his own judgment, so he had decided it was not necessary.

Before Colonel Fitzwilliam could respond to his cousin’s claptrap, the butler entered the room and bowed to the earl and countess. He proffered the silver salver to his master and stood to the side once the earl took the missive.

“It is from Anne,” Matlock boomed. “But I see no franking on the thing. I wonder how it was delivered?”

“A courier from Bishop Lankershim in Kent delivered the epistle, my Lord,” the butler intoned. “The man will ride back in the morning and will be happy to convey a reply should one be forthcoming.”

“Thank you, Ainsley. I will ring if there is to be a reply,” Matlock said in dismissal.

“Why would our cousin send a missive through a bishop?” Lord Andrew Fitzwilliam, Viscount Hilldale, enquired.

“There is only one way to find out,” Matlock said as he broke the seal. He began to read and soon stopped as his anger took over. “Richard, read this aloud. I am too perturbed to continue reading.”

The colonel took the papers from his father. He cleared his throat and began to read aloud.

16 May 1811
My gaol cell

Rosings Park

Uncle Reggie,

I wish that I could assure you that my referring to my accommodation here as a prison is mirth, but it is not. I am kept like an inmate would be.

Any letters you have received from me in the past telling you how happy I am and how good Lady Catherine is to me are false. I have been forced to write what she dictated and then sign my name to the drivel.

I had feared that Lady Catherine would employ a pusillanimous bootlicker like she sought to replace Mr Belvedere. It soon became evident that the man she awarded the living to, Mr Collins, acted as she wanted him to during her interview with him in order to be preferred to the living. He does not kowtow to her, is not intimidated in the least by my mother, and like Mr Belvedere before him, he refuses to allow Lady Catherine to insert herself into any ecclesiastical affairs.

Once I determined he was a good man who would do what was right, I decided that I could trust him to get this letter into your hands.

When I said above that I am held as a prisoner, it was not hyperbole. A year after the last time Lady Catherine’s plans to engage me to William were thwarted, she ordered her lackeys, among them my companion and maid, to administer a ‘cordial’ to me once or twice a day.

Thanks to the time when I was younger and I fell and broke my arm; I recognised the taste of laudanum in the concoction. From that first time on, I made sure to dispose of the drink each time while acting like I would be expected after having imbibed the opium-laced drink. It is my belief that the reason for the drugs is to keep me too sickly to take up the management of my estate if (when) her scheme to marry me to William and have him take me to Pemberley fails.

I have heard Lady Catherine accuse others of being fortune hunters; however, that is exactly what my mother is. I know this is disrespectful, but it is nothing but the truth.

The reason I had to post this epistle to you by a circuitous route is simple. Lady Catherine is handed any post written to or sent from me which she then reads. I suspect that to account for the chance that someone would post a letter for me, she has paid the landlord of the inn in Hunsford to intercept anything to or from me, which is why I have requested that Mr Collins post this from Westerham.

Uncle Reggie, I pray that you will act to assert your will as the executor of my father's Last Will and Testament. Until I reached my majority, you were my guardian. I believe that now that I am older than 21, Lady Catherine hopes that you will not intercede. I pray she is wrong.

I hope to see you at Rosings Park soon.

Your niece,

Anne de Bourgh

"Even for Catherine, this is far beyond the pale," Matlock spat out. "I wonder if she is insane?"

William Darcy was shocked more than any other in the room. Although he would never marry Anne, he had always thought that due to her birth as

the daughter of an earl, his late mother's sister was above reproach. He had accepted her ideas on maintaining the distinction of rank. Well, almost. Aunt Catherine had always railed against his friendship with Charles Bingley, the son of a tradesman from Scarborough.

Although Richard had pointed out the contradiction in the way William treated those socially below him and Bingley, whose money came from trade, Darcy had rejected the premise. But now to discover what his aunt had been doing threw many of his long-held beliefs into question.

"We must make for Rosings Park at first light," Matlock stated. "Andrew, Richard, and William, can you join us?"

"I have no engagements for the next few days, Father," Hilldale replied.

"Same for me, Father. I have leave for the next fortnight, so I will ride with you to beard the dragon in her lair," Fitzwilliam agreed.

"I am afraid I do have a prior commitment," Darcy related. "You all know of my friend, Bingley." He saw nods from the four Fitzwilliams. "I am to join him on the morrow to visit an estate for lease in Hertfordshire, some twenty miles from London. I cannot allow him to go on his own and take the lease without my approval."

None of William Darcy's family members pointed out how arrogant he sounded. This friend was five and twenty, so why did he need William's approval to spend his own money?

"I will not ask you to break a prior engagement. It will be enough having your aunt, Andrew, and Richard with me," Matlock allowed.

"Bingley is a puppy, and who knows what he will do if you slip his leash?" Fitzwilliam jested, well, partially so. "You go be with your puppy, and I will tilt at the dragon and rescue the maiden fair locked away in her tower."

"Richard, have I not requested you stop calling Bingley a puppy?" Darcy demanded.

"Climb down off your high horse, William. I was jesting," Fitzwilliam claimed.

Darcy harumphed. He did not enjoy being the object of laughter. He stood. “I wish you all the best in discovering the truth at Rosings Park.” With that he walked out, his head held high.

“That nephew of mine is too high in the instep. He needs to discover all is not as he thinks it is,” Lady Elaine stated as she shook her head.

The master and mistress of the house issued orders for an early morning departure on the morrow.

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Chapter 5

Bishop Lankershim enjoyed a diversion that caused him to laugh as much as any other man. However, the letter he held in his hand was not amusing because the writer had been perfectly serious. He shook his head as he read it again.

20 May 1811
The Great Estate of Rosings Park

The property of the Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh

Bishop Lankershim,

How dare you ratify the appointment of one who did not show me his true character when I interviewed him to be my parson in the Hunsford Parish?

The man is disrespectful and does not honour the natural order that I, a Peer of the Realm and one of noble birth, have the wisdom to direct him in his duties. He refuses to follow my instructions, he rejected what I commanded him to include in the sermon this past Sunday, and he will not share the concerns of the parishioners with me.

How am I supposed to correct their wrongs and exhort them not to be lazy if I know not what their dearest concerns are?

I hereby command you to remove this man from my parish. A man who will not follow my orders is not fit to be a clergyman, never mind, hold a living. If this is not addressed, I will have no choice but to write to the Archbishop and command him to sack you as well.

While I am writing to you, I want you to order all of the clergymen in your influence to make sure to include, in every sermon given, the absolute requirement

of deference by their parishioners to those above them in rank.

I expect to hear that you have followed my commands without delay.

The Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh

A second reading did not make the writer of the missive seem any less insane than Lankershim had thought her to be at the first reading of the ridiculous letter. It was hard to imagine that anyone would think the drivel, never mind put those deranged thoughts, into writing.

This was not something he would answer with a letter. The bishop rang for one of the clergymen who assisted him and gave directions to prepare his carriage for departure within an hour or two.

He needed to complete a bit of church business first before going to Rosings Park.

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At first light, two coaches departed Grosvenor Square. The Matlock carriage turned in the direction that would take it to Kent, while the Darcy conveyance headed north to Hertfordshire.

To ensure that Miss Caroline Bingley, Darcy's friend's cloying and annoying younger sister, would not try to insert herself when they went to view the estate, he had had Bingley sleep at Darcy House the previous night and set the departure for first light, long before that lady would deign to rise.

Darcy's Fitzwilliam relatives had all pointed out that the way Miss Caroline Bingley behaved would one day result in her own ruin, as well as that of Bingley, especially as her brother refused to check her. Deep down, Darcy knew they had the right of it, and as much as he hated to admit it, he was just too stubborn to openly own the truth of their assertions.

Bingley was the middle child of the three Bingley children. His older sister, Louisa, was married to Harold Hurst, the heir to a minor estate. Charles Bingley was an affable, jovial fellow, but, as his cousin had said the
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previous evening, he was easily led and always willing to substitute another's judgement for his own.

The youngest, Miss Caroline Bingley, was an inveterate social climber and fortune hunter. She was the daughter of a tradesman who put on airs and graces as if she had been born to a duke. If that was not bad enough, she had set her cap at Darcy, the heir to Pemberley, the first time she had met him while her brother was still at Cambridge. That was when she had decided that none but he would do. Her pursuit of Darcy had only worsened after his father had passed away, not long after the grieving son had turned two and twenty, when he became the master of all Darcy holdings. Darcy was aware that had the Fitzwilliams, other than Richard, agreed to be introduced to Miss Bingley, she would have set her cap for Andrew, who was as yet unmarried. A future earl was far better than a mere gentleman.

Any time Darcy had the misfortune to be in Miss Bingley's company, she would grab onto his forearm possessively, and thereby force him to pry her talons from his person. She was not subtle in her hints that she wanted him to offer for her. Given all that, he should have cut her long ago; but for some reason, he had not. He told himself that it was to maintain his friendship with Bingley. However, perhaps the reason he did not was because the Fitzwilliams had all advised him to make sure she knew where she stood, proving once again he was too stubborn to listen to them.

Darcy was so deep in thought he had not heard Bingley speak to him. A kick to his foot woke him to the fact that his friend was attempting to garner his attention.

"Where were you, Darce?" Bingley asked when Darcy finally looked his way.

"I was deep in thought." Darcy did not want to say more because if he told Bingley the truth of his opinion of Miss Bingley, his friend would be wounded.

"Why did we have to leave at this ungodly hour?" Bingley repeated.

"That, Bingley, is quite simple," Darcy responded. As Bingley looked at him keenly, an unbidden image of a puppy with Bingley's head intruded on his thoughts. It was Richard's fault! "By departing at first light, we will

reach Netherfield Park early enough to inspect it and then return to London during daylight hours."

"It is still very early to rise," Bingley replied peevishly.

"Not for me, nor is it for any man who manages an estate as it should be done. This way, we do not waste too much of the daylight hours by leaving London at ten or eleven in the morning as you would prefer," Darcy returned.

"Caroline was not happy she could not join us for dinner yester-evening," Bingley stated.

"My sister who is not out, is not ready to act as my hostess yet. Before you say it, your unmarried sister would never be acceptable to be my acting hostess. If I were to do that, it would send a very wrong message to her and others," Darcy responded.

Rather than push Darcy on behalf of his younger sister as she had demanded before he made his way to Darcy House the previous evening, Bingley said nothing. He was well aware that there was nothing which would induce Darcy to offer for Caroline, including compromise. However, it was not something he could tell his more forceful younger sister and escape one of her tantrums.

The friends rode in silence until they reached a coaching inn where the Darcy horses would be rested and watered.

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Bishop Lankershim did not go directly to Rosings Park. Instead, he made for the Hunsford parsonage. When his coach pulled into the drive, he noticed that another conveyance was ahead of his own. His footman opened the door once the step was in place, and Lankershim made for the front door. As he passed the coach and four ahead of his own equipage, he noted the coat of arms on the door with 'Matlock' emblazoned below it. It seemed that the letter Collins had sent to London for Miss de Bourgh had brought the earl to Kent.

He rang the doorbell, and one of the two maids employed at the parsonage showed him to the sitting room, where, besides Collins, were
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four others; three men and a lady. Lankershim surmised the older man was Lord Matlock.

“Bishop Lankershim, were we to meet today?” William Collins queried.

“No, Collins, we were not. However, your patroness sent me a letter that demands a response from me in person. I was going to ask you to accompany me to the manor house, but it seems there are others here before me,” the bishop drawled.

“What has my sister done now?” Matlock asked exasperatedly. “Before we address that, will you make the introductions, please, Mr Collins?”

William did so without delay.

“This is from your sister.” Lankershim removed the epistle from his jacket pocket and handed it over to the earl.

As Lord Matlock held the paper, his sons read over his shoulders. “This is further proof that Catherine has slipped the bounds of reason. She is a commoner, and yet, she calls herself a peer while ordering you about, when you are in fact the equivalent of an earl in rank. I do not remember seeing you among the Lords Spiritual in the House of Lords.”

“Even though you said our ranks are equal, I am not one of the four and twenty diocesan bishops who may sit in the Lords. I am certainly not one of the two archbishops. As part of my duties, I oversee a number of parishes; the one at Hunsford is among them. As such, I was the one to ratify Collins’s appointment,” Lankershim explained.

“Something that my sister is railing against. As I assume that you are not here to remove Mr Collins, is the church taking action against my sister?” Matlock enquired.

“I am here to inform Lady Catherine that she is no longer the one allowed to appoint a clergyman to the Hunsford living. It is being withdrawn from Rosings Park’s advowson and placed under the direct authority of the Church,” Lankershim revealed.

“That will not be necessary,” Matlock stated. “Based on what my niece wrote to me in the letter your courier delivered, I am about to exercise my power as executor of the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s will. Bishop

Lankershim, if you and Mr Collins would care to join us, I think it is time for us to *call on* my sister."

Thanks to the message Miss de Bourgh had written to him, William Collins was aware of the crimes Lady Catherine had committed against her daughter. He did not mention that he had received a letter from Miss de Bourgh, as the last thing William wanted to do was compromise the lady, no matter how much she was set to inherit.

The two clergymen followed the Fitzwilliams out of the house. While they boarded the Matlock coach, William joined Bishop Lankershim in his conveyance. It was an easy walk for him to reach the mansion, but he decided to remain with his bishop for the short ride.

Before the Rosings Park footmen could move, the Fitzwilliam footmen had the step retracted and the door opened. The bishop's footman had done the same for his coach.

The Rosings Park footmen looked nervous at all the unexpected arrivals. However, they knew better than to get in the way.

Matlock dropped the lion's paw knocker and waited. The old butler's eyes went wide when he noticed who had arrived. He was about to send one of the footmen to warn her Ladyship when he was stopped by Lord Matlock's voice.

"We will announce ourselves. You will wait here with your footmen," Matlock commanded.

Although he knew that Lady Catherine would be seriously displeased to be surprised in this way, the butler thought better of disobeying or attempting to gainsay the Earl of Matlock.

The five men and one lady climbed the stairs to the first floor and made their way to the drawing room, where Lady Catherine 'held court'. She was sitting and stewing in her displeasure at the bishop for not responding positively, or at all, to her orders. She had to be rid of Mr Collins and find a compliant clergyman who would do her bidding. She looked to her side, where Anne was seated next to Mrs Jenkinson on a settee. Her daughter looked as she should a few hours after drinking her cordial. She was in a drug-induced haze. Even though Anne had berated Mr Collins on her

behalf, there could be no let-up in the administering of her *cordial*. Her ruminations were rudely interrupted when the doors to the drawing room were thrown open without warning and the last people she wanted to see walked into the room.

As soon as Anne saw her aunt, uncle, and cousins, she sprang up from the settee, throwing off the shawls Mrs Jenkinson had piled on her shoulders. All of a sudden, the put-on stupor from the opium vanished. “Uncle Reggie, Aunt Elaine, cousins! I am so relieved to see you. My letter reached you?”

“What letter? How dare you write a letter without my permission?” Lady Catherine screeched.

“Miss de Bourgh, you are of age, are you not?” William Collins asked.

“Yes, Mr Collins, I have been, for going on four years,” Anne replied. “Although you would not know it from the way *that* woman treats me.”

“Then, as I understand the law, you need no one’s permission to send and receive post. I wonder why your mother did not want you to communicate freely with those outside of this estate,” William Collins said, all the while knowing exactly why it was that Miss de Bourgh was unable to send and receive missives.

“Mrs Jenkinson, you obviously failed to have my daughter drink her cordial! Do so now, or you will suffer my wrath!” Lady Catherine barked.

“Miss de Bourgh, come, I will give you more of your cordial; you seem to be agitated…” Mrs Jenkinson began to say. She closed her mouth at the thunderous looks from everyone in the room who was not Lady Catherine.

“Mrs Jenkinson, are you aware that you have been attempting to drug my niece for some years? What sort of person are you? Were you not employed to care for her? Instead you have assisted in attempting to harm Miss de Bourgh,” Matlock thundered. He looked to one of his footmen. “Take her to my niece’s suite and hold her there along with the lady’s maid. I still need to decide whether or not to have her arrested for harming the niece of an earl.”

The footman led the shocked companion out of the drawing room.

“How dare you come and interfere in my…” Lady Catherine began. She closed her mouth when she saw the look of fury on her brother’s countenance. How had Anne managed to write to Reggie? Even if she had tried to post it from Hunsford, the innkeeper was paid enough to intercept anything Anne tried to send and turn it over to her ladyship.

“No, Lady Catherine, how dare you?” Anne responded. “For some years you have attempted to keep me on laudanum under the guise of it being a ‘cordial’. You seem to have forgotten that when I was a girl, I took that vile drug after I broke my arm. If you had cared about me and had comforted me as a mother would have, you would have known that I detest the taste. Other than a drop of the *so-called* cordial the first time I was given the drug, that your apothecary mixed for you, not one more drop has ever passed my lips! For my safety, I had pretended to be weak and drugged so you would not attempt something more drastic. Do you know how hard it has been playing a part like that to protect myself from the woman who is supposed to be my mother?

“Everything you have done, including the lies you concocted about Cousin William, me, and that non-existent cradle betrothal, have been part of your attempts to retain control over my estate. Yes, Lady Catherine, I am aware that as soon as I reach my birthday on the thirteenth day of September, Rosings Park, de Bourgh House, and the de Bourgh fortune all become mine. We both know that my father’s will never left everything to you until your death. I thank God on high you were not able to access any of the fortune and most of the annual income; otherwise, you would have fritted it all away on this horrendous, gaudy, and classless décor of yours.”

“Reggie, how can you allow my daughter to speak to me in this fashion?” Lady Catherine blustered.

“Catherine, I am disgusted by you. You deserve that and so much more. You allowed your avarice to drive you to try to harm your own daughter! Yes, I know that you forced her to write letters of fiction to us to keep me away. I know it all! Do you see Bishop Lankershim here?” Matlock pointed to the man who inclined his head. “He did not come to get rid of Mr Collins; he is here to remove Hunsford from Rosings Park’s advowson! I told him that would not be necessary, as your time of having any authority over this estate, or any de Bourgh property, is over as of right now.”

“You cannot do that! This is my estate!” Lady Catherine shrieked.

“I am allowed to do so by your late husband’s will. As you know, this has *never* been your estate! As long as you treated Anne well and did not run the estate into bankruptcy, you were allowed to remain as mistress until Anne turned five and twenty,” Matlock stated. “Otherwise, if those two conditions were not met, there is an addendum to your late husband’s will which now comes into force. It evicts you from this estate and any de Bourgh property. The terms of that same addendum allow you only fifty pounds per annum for two years and nothing thereafter. Now, the only question remaining is whether you are insane and need to be in a place like Bedlam.”

“Anne is too weak; she is not five and twenty yet! You would not cast your own sister out with nothing, would you?” Lady Catherine pleaded.

“There is nothing weak about me. I may never be as healthy as most other women, but I am not the sickly person who cannot fend for herself that you have tried drugging into a stupor. So yes, Lady Catherine, regardless of how you have attempted to steal my estate from me, I will be the mistress here just as my late father wanted me to be. You have failed. However, I must thank you for one thing,” Anne added.

Seeing the confused look on Lady Catherine’s face, Anne smiled and looked at Mr Collins. “Even if you did not mean to do so, you chose the best possible replacement for Mr Belvedere.” Anne paused. “By the by, it was Mr Collins who took my letter to Bishop Lankershim. The bishop sent it to Uncle Reggie. I had a strong suspicion that the landlord of the Black Bull Inn was one of your lackeys.”

“You call yourself a parson! You lied to me when I spoke to you before appointing you,” Lady Catherine spat out.

“No, Lady Catherine, I did not,” William Collins contradicted. “You heard what you wanted to hear. If you remember, my exact words were: ‘I am very good at following instructions that are helpful, and I will always be open to hearing what my patroness has to say.’ Not one word was a prevarication. I am good at following *valid and lawful* instructions, and I was open to listening. I never said I would follow said ridiculous pronouncements, did I?”

She opened and closed her mouth a few times but was unable to refute what the parson said. Between this man and her daughter, she had been played for the fool. Lady Catherine remembered her brother's words. "What do you mean, you may send me to Bedlam?"

"What you attempted with your daughter and the letter you wrote to the bishop were not the actions of a woman who has command of all her faculties. When Elaine, my sons, and I return to London, you will be with us so that you may be evaluated by physicians who will decide if you need to be committed to an asylum." Seeing that his sister was about to protest, Matlock raised his hand. "Before you attempt to place the blame elsewhere, everything that you will reap now has been sown by your own hand."

It suddenly struck Lady Catherine that all her plans had come to nought. All of the fight went out of her as she hung her head and seemed to age before everyone's eyes.

Two Matlock footmen assisted the former mistress of the estate to her chambers. One man would stand guard until the family's departure to Town.

"The process will not be easy, but we need to rid the estate of all Lady Catherine's sycophants," Anne mused. "Uncle Reggie, I know you have the Lords and your own estate, so you cannot remain here indefinitely.

"Annie, I have leave from the army and will request more. When William is free, he can join us here, and we will assist you," Fitzwilliam offered.

"Your aunt, Andrew, and I will be here for a few more days also," Matlock added.

"I will work with Anne to teach her the true duties of a mistress of a manor house on an estate," Lady Elaine volunteered. "Anne, dear, if you need me to return from London for more assistance, please write to me at Matlock House."

Knowing that she would have help to begin to sort through all the problems her mother had caused at the estate allowed Anne to relax.

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Chapter 6

On their return from the manor house, William Collins welcomed Bishop Lankershim as a guest for the night. The latter had been convinced to remain at the parsonage rather than returning to Westerham the same day.

“I am pleased that Lord Matlock’s removal of Lady Catherine has made my need to take the living from Rosings Park’s advowson unnecessary. It is always preferred to find a solution that does not require us to do that,” Lankershim mused as the two men sat in the sitting room, each with a small glass of port.

“It is hard to fathom the depths to which Lady Catherine sank in order to attempt to steal her daughter’s inheritance.” Collins shook his head.

“As the Apostle Paul said, as reported in 1 Timothy 6:10, ‘*for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil*’ and never truer words spoken. Everything Lady Catherine did was driven by avarice,” Lankershim pointed out. “Look what her worship of worldly goods drove her to do, to harm and, effectively, imprison her own daughter. I thank God you took charge of this parish, and you were here to assist her.”

“To borrow from Cowper, ‘God works in mysterious ways,’ does He not?” William responded.

“Indeed, He does, young Collins, indeed, He does.”

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Elizabeth Bennet was doing what she enjoyed, walking out on her father’s estate and being away from the commotion created at Longbourn by her mother and her two youngest sisters.

Walking in nature gave her a sense of peace which was impossible to attain when her mother was screeching about her favourite topic of being thrown into the hedgerows to starve as soon as Papa went to his eternal reward. The fact that her father was fit and healthy and was not yet fifty, far from his dotage, did not factor into Mamma’s thoughts when she allowed herself to succumb to one of her supposed attacks of nerves. When this
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occurred, as it had this day, it was left up to angelic, serene Jane to calm Mamma.

At three and twenty, Jane was as yet single. In and of itself that was surprising, given her beauty. That is, until one factored in Mamma's way of *helping* Jane when the former sniffed out a possible suitor in the area. Jane had begun to be courted by three men. One of them had written her verses of poetry—the poorest attempt Elizabeth had ever read. Thanks to Mamma's vulgar and mercenary effusions, coupled with the way she praised Jane to the skies while denigrating her other daughters' looks, she managed to cause the suitors to turn tail and run. Each of the three men, one when Jane was fifteen, another when she was eighteen, and the last a year past, all escaped as fast as they were able thanks to Fanny Bennet's machinations.

It was not only her own unfavoured daughters her mother insulted, other ladies in the neighbourhood did not escape Mamma's insulting tongue, especially Charlotte Lucas, a best friend to the two eldest Bennet sisters, who Mamma called plain and on the shelf.

It did not help that Kitty and Lydia, who were almost seventeen and fifteen, respectively, were as loud and vulgar as their mother. This gave the men more reasons to make their escapes. Even though Mary, who would turn nineteen in July, behaved far better than the two youngest Bennets, she too had her quirks. She would bang away at the pianoforte for hours each day. Her playing was not bad, though it was pedantic and had no feeling infused into it. Also, she was enamoured of Fordyce's Sermons and worked quotes from them into her speech as much as she could, regardless of how much her family did not want to hear her "pearls of wisdom."

Nor did it help that rather than check his wife and daughters, Papa found amusement in their actions. Rather than correct them, he teased and laughed, calling Kitty and Lydia two of the silliest girls in the kingdom. One time, after noticing Jane's sorrow at losing another suitor, Elizabeth asked her father why he did not step in. He told her that it was good for a girl to be crossed in love now and again.

In Elizabeth's opinion, if the men allowed Mamma and her sisters to cause them to bolt, then they obviously had not loved Jane enough to see

that Jane had more worth than her weight in gold. That being true, then perhaps it was Jane who made a fortuitous escape.

As much as Elizabeth decried Mamma's lack of decorum, she did understand that her mother had not been raised as a gentlewoman and did not know better. As she was her father's favourite, she excluded him from the criticism that he had never insisted his wife learn the ways of the gentry. Also, Elizabeth was well aware that thanks to the war with the little Corsican tyrant, there was a dearth of eligible men in the area around Meryton. She did not like the way her mother behaved and even joined Papa in making fun of her at times. However, Elizabeth had to admit that her mother was driven by the fear of losing her home when Papa was called home. Also, Mamma was scared of being saddled with unmarried daughters that she would have to support on the two hundred pounds per annum her dowry earned in the funds.

Like she often times did, when the frenetic behaviour of her mother and younger sisters got to be too much, Elizabeth made her way to Oakham Mount and took the gently rising path to the summit. Rather than sit below the oaks in the stand on the top of the low hill, Elizabeth sat on a flattened boulder, one she often used when coming to watch the sunrise.

She looked around at the fields of various estates surrounding Meryton, all full of growing crops except for those left to lie fallow or others used to graze sheep, goats, or cattle. This view always made her feel at peace. Just below her to the northwest was the point where the edges of Longbourn and Netherfield Park met. As she looked towards that estate's manor house, more than two miles in the distance, Elizabeth noticed two horses galloping across Netherfield Park's fields. It seemed like they were headed towards the border between the two estates.

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Darcy and Bingley arrived at Netherfield Park before ten that morning. They were met by the local solicitor, Mr Phillips, who was the landlord's agent in Meryton.

From his initial view of the house and what Darcy had seen of the estate, it looked sound. The parts of the roof he could see looked to be in good repair, and the park and gardens spoke of care.
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Mr Phillips introduced them to the butler and housekeeper, a Mr and Mrs Nichols, and stepped aside to allow the gentlemen to view the house without any pressure from him. This surprised Darcy as he expected the country solicitor to try pushing Bingley into purchasing the lease. The tour was extensive, and it was easy to see that the two senior staff members knew the house well. They were able to answer any questions they were asked, mostly by himself, as Bingley did not know what to look for.

A little more than an hour later, the two friends met Mr Phillips in the dining parlour.

“Before we look at a lease, I suggest you gentlemen ride the estate. The lease covers the house, park, and the home farm. Even so, as you are permitted to go where you choose and hunt without restriction, it would behove you to see a good portion of the estate,” Phillips suggested.

Bingley looked at Darcy, who nodded. “We will take your suggestion,” Bingley accepted, “although we do not have riding horses with us.”

“The landlord keeps several geldings here,” Phillips responded. “Two have been saddled and are waiting for you in the drive. The steward will meet you near the horses and give you directions. If you have any questions for Mr Lankford after you have ridden the estate, he will be more than willing to answer them.”

After the steward explained how the estate was laid out, the two men rode first to the home farm. Like the house, it was well cared for and in very good condition.

From there, the friends rode across the fields and past the wooded area where they had been told many undisturbed coveys were to be found. The more they rode, the more Darcy became convinced that this was a good piece of property where Bingley could dip his toe into managing an estate. Perhaps his sisters would be able to learn what it meant to be a true mistress. Darcy was aware that Miss Bingley thought that the only duty of the mistress was to act as a hostess.

They galloped towards the fence near the hill which was part of the neighbouring estate’s property. If Darcy’s memory was sound, Mr Lankford had said it was named Long something and was the largest estate in the area.

The two men reigned their geldings in and stopped next to the fence closest to the hill. They dismounted and leaned on the fence.

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As they came closer, Elizabeth was able to make out their features better. Although she could not see clearly as they rose and fell with the movement of the horses, she could tell they were not old and that both men looked rather handsome.

She watched as they climbed off the steeds, tethering them to the fence, and leant against the boundary between the two estates, right below her. One man was some inches taller than the other. From the top of the hill, she could not see their faces, thanks to their hats, but she was able to tell that the taller one had dark curls protruding from his beaver while the shorter man had what she judged was strawberry blond hair.

“Well, Darce, what do you think? Should I lease the estate?” Bingley asked.

“I have seen nothing that would cause me to say no. It is possible to see that the landlord is diligent in maintaining his property even if he is not resident here,” Darcy responded. “That speaks well of him, as most absentee landlords spend as little as possible on their secondary estates.”

Elizabeth smiled when she heard the words of the man, the shorter one called the taller one ‘Darce,’ as she knew the landlord well, and he would never allow his property to be anything less than perfectly maintained.

“That Mr Phillips said there is either a six-month or a one-year lease available,” Bingley related. “Should I purchase a lease? Which one do you think I should take?”

‘*Hmmmm, the shorter man sounds like he is not resolute and relies heavily on the one he called Darce. Perhaps they are brothers?*’ Elizabeth thought. ‘*If the man who takes the lease is single, Mamma will be beyond pleased and want him as a son.*’

“I think this will be a good estate for you to learn about estate management. A one-year lease with an option to renew makes sense. This
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way you will be able to see if the life your father recommended in his will is for you or if you want to remain active in trade," Darcy responded.

"If I ever tell my younger sister that my money is still made from trade, she will have a tantrum for the ages." Bingley shook his head. "It will be nothing to the one she will have when she finally realises you will never marry her." Bingley paused. "Should we return to the manor house so I can inform Mr Phillips that I would like to take the lease?"

From her perch on her rock, Elizabeth watched the men untether the horses and remount. They wheeled them in the direction of the mansion and were soon galloping over the fields. "They are not brothers," she told the birds in the oak trees as she stood. "That the one who will lease the estate is from trade makes no difference to us. With Uncle Frank as the local solicitor and Uncle Edward in trade, it would be rather hypocritical if we counted that against our new neighbour. I am sure that as soon as Aunt Hattie learns that the estate has been leased out, she will come to share the information with Mamma, and then the effusions will begin, especially if he is single. I will not mention what I overheard and wait for Aunt Hattie's inevitable visit." Elizabeth looked at the birds in the branches of the trees. "I will not prevaricate. I just will not mention anything to Mamma; besides, Aunt Hattie will know the most important information."

Elizabeth stood, dusted off her walking dress and began her walk down the hill and back to the manor house.

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The Matlock courier returned with a reply from General Atherton, the commanding general of the Royal Dragoons, granting Colonel Fitzwilliam as much leave as was needed to assist his cousin.

"Thank you, Richard, I appreciate that you are willing to assist me," Anne said gratefully. "After all, you were here for Easter past with William. At least now you will not have to put up with my mother's ridiculous pronouncements and pestering William to 'do his duty' and offer for me."

"Annie, it is my pleasure to assist you," Fitzwilliam responded.

"Do not forget that you also have Mr Collins to help and advise you," Hilldale reminded his cousin. "Did you not hear him speak of his father's
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estate and how his father made sure that both of his sons knew how to run an estate before he entered the clergy? I have a feeling he is as close to as experienced with running an estate as I am."

As if he knew he was being spoken of, William Collins was shown into the drawing room. He bowed to the Fitzwilliams and Miss de Bourgh.

"My niece is going to need all the help she can get to manage the estate; not to mention many of the staff and servants need to be replaced with those who are able to think for themselves," Matlock stated once the parson took a seat. "My older son, Andrew, was pointing out that your father raised you to be able to run an estate. I must return to the session of the Lords, and I want my sister to be evaluated by London physicians. Andrew is needed at his estate, so he too will depart, while my younger son will remain here. He has some knowledge of running an estate, but I believe between the two of you, you will be able to assist Anne."

"I will help Miss de Bourgh as much as possible," William Collins promised. "If it is not too impertinent to ask, my Lord, if the doctors recommend that Lady Catherine be placed in a place like Bedlam, is that where she will go? I am aware that the treatment of those committed there is not very compassionate."

"If Lady Catherine is judged insane, she will go to a private asylum on the Isle of Wight. The patients are all treated with kindness and dignity there," Matlock replied. "Even though I find what my sister has done abhorrent, she is still my sister and will be treated as such. However, if she is found to be rational, I will have her live in a cottage on the Orkney Islands where she cannot cause mischief to anyone."

"I looked in on Catherine this morning," Lady Elaine reported. "She is a shell of her former self."

"After what Lady Catherine tried to do to me, I cannot find too much sympathy for her," Anne insisted. "I will do my duty as a Christian and forgive her, but not yet. It will take me some time to be able to do so." Anne looked at the parson. "What do you recommend we do first to improve the life of those dependent on the estate?"

"Firstly Miss de Bourgh please know that if you ever need any guidance with spiritual matters, you only need to ask," William Collins offered.

“Thank you, Mr Collins, I will bear that in mind,” Anne replied gratefully.

“Regarding the estate, I assume that the steward, whose primary activity was to express agreement with the former mistress, will be replaced as soon as may be?” William queried.

“Indeed, that is one of the many changes I need to make…” Anne paused as she thought of something. “Uncle Reggie, do I need to wait for my birthday before I implement changes?”

“No, my dear niece, you do not,” Matlock assured Anne. “That was all covered in the addendum I mentioned to your mother yesterday. Your late father was prepared for your mother to try something underhanded. Hence, the addendum gives me the authority, which I exercised by signing the document, making you the owner of the estate and everything else right now. With all the times that my sister tried to harangue de Bourgh into changing his will to make her the primary beneficiary, when he knew that his heart was weakening, he added some clauses and the addendum to his will to ensure you and your inheritance were protected.”

“In that case, aside from employing many new people, what do you recommend I begin with, Mr Collins?” Anne asked.

“Lady Catherine refused to effect repairs to your tenants’ cottages. She also would not extend charity when there was need; instead, she scolded them,” William Collins related. “I have been doing what I am able by continuing the work my predecessor did. However, if you, as the mistress, ride out in your phaeton and allow the tenants to see that you will address their needs and concerns, it will go a long way towards smoothing your way ahead as you work with the tenantry. Of course, they know that it is easy to make promises, so it will be important for them to see actions as well.”

“Aunt Elaine and Uncle Reggie, do you know of someone who is able to come inventory all the useless décor and uncomfortable furniture with which Lady Catherine filled my house? Once it is done, I want it all sold. If there are those with equally bad taste who will purchase the items, so be it,” Anne decided. “Thank goodness, Lady Catherine had no access to the de Bourgh fortune. I will withdraw some funds to be used to make immediate improvements for the tenants.”

“There is a good man I know, I will speak to him and see if he is available to come evaluate everything you want to sell,” Matlock stated.

“Miss de Bourgh, may I suggest that any roofs needing repair or replacement be done with slate instead of thatch? The latter keeps the rain out when it is in good repair, if, heaven forfend, there is fire, it will burn where slate will not,” William Collins proposed. “Over the last five years, almost every cottage at Collins Hollow has been redone with a slate roof.”

“When I ride out to see the tenants, will you both join me?” Anne looked first at Richard and then Mr Collins. Both agreed.

William said that when they did, he would ride Vulcan to maintain propriety.

“Anne, I am confident that between Richard and Mr Collins you will have the assistance you need,” Matlock opined. “I need to make my way back to the Lords. If not, I would have remained as well. If you need me, you only have to send word.”

“Thank you, Uncle Reggie. I agree that I will not be without assistance,” Anne stated. “I will not be timid and ask if I need more. Besides, I no longer have to worry about my post being intercepted.”

“To that end, I will leave one of my couriers here until you employ several of your own,” Matlock decided.

When the discussion was complete, Anne made for the study with her uncle and eldest cousin to review the estate’s ledgers and see how big of a problem had been left by Lady Catherine’s mismanagement.

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Chapter 7

The next day the Fitzwilliam parents and Viscount Hilldale departed the estate in the early morning. In the carriage were also Lady Catherine and Mrs Jenkinson. If the former were not judged insane, the latter would be her companion in the cottage to which Lady Catherine would be consigned.

Not long after they departed, Fitzwilliam gave orders to have the phaeton made ready. He and Anne—accompanied by a maid she trusted—exited the house to find the small carriage and a horse for Fitzwilliam waiting for them. Mr Collins was on his stallion already present, ready to assist them. Soon, they were on their way to the tenant cottage closest to the manse.

After reviewing the ledgers, Anne had been horrified at Lady Catherine's mistreatment of the tenants. She had conferred with her uncle, cousins, and Mr Collins about how to fix all that Lady Catherine had broken. They all had good suggestions, but in her mind, Mr Collins's were best, and she would implement them.

Thanks to the way the former mistress had behaved, the tenants were used to a visit from the great house, but it always meant they were about to be scolded for something that was not their fault. The farmer relaxed a little when he saw that Miss de Bourgh was being escorted by Mr Collins and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Since he had been installed in the parish, the parson had already helped them with money for food. Now, it was the daughter coming to see them and not Lady Catherine.

John Fallstead would have taken a tenancy anywhere else had he been able to afford to move his family. Thanks to the very high rents Lady Catherine demanded, he had been trapped at Rosings Park. As he normally did, the farmer was about to have his wife and children present themselves in a line to bow and curtsey as Lady Catherine used to demand.

"Mr Fallstead, I am not my mother. Hence, there is no need to disturb your wife and children to *present* themselves," Anne said pleasantly.

The farmer was arrested in his tracks. He had believed what had been put about that Miss de Bourgh was sickly, but the woman he saw climbing

down from her phaeton unassisted looked anything but, and she spoke with strength.

“Lady Catherine is no longer the mistress of my estate; in fact, she is not here and will never return,” Anne revealed. “My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Collins will verify my statement.” As each man was named, he nodded his agreement. “I am sorry for any suffering that Lady Catherine caused you and your family. I cannot change the past, but I most certainly can and will change how things are done going forward. On examination of the ledgers, I was able to see that the former mistress demanded double what the rent should be. To make up for that, you will have two quarters rent-free, then two quarters at half of what the rent should be. After that, I will reevaluate the situation. Once that is done, the rents will be set at an acceptable and affordable rate.

“Also, the days of anyone being scolded by the mistress of Rosings Park when they need assistance for things beyond their control, or caused by landlord neglect, are over. Mr Collins has told me what he has observed regarding the repairs needed to the cottages. In fact, he told me he knows what needs to be done per tenant. I promise you here and now that every item will be repaired. In addition, I want you to know that you will never be censured for bringing a problem to my attention.”

Fallstead had to pinch himself to make sure he was not dreaming. After years of suffering under Lady Catherine’s dictatorial ways, could this be true? Before he could move, his wife Betty ran towards Miss de Bourgh, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Thank ye, Miss de Bourgh. Ye be an angel sent from ‘eaven,” Betty Fallstead managed between happy sobs while hugging the new mistress.

Rather than push the woman away, Anne placed an arm around her shoulder. “I am very sorry the former mistress caused you suffering, but those days are past,” Anne promised the crying woman. When she saw the four children standing in the doorway of the cottage, their eyes huge as they watched the scene unfold before them, Anne was sorry she had not brought a bag of sweets with her. She turned to Richard and Mr Collins, both of whom had dismounted. “How do I begin?”

“Miss de Bourgh, there are builders and other labourers in want of work in Hunsford,” William Collins related. “I suggest that you put the word out you need men, and you will have as many as you require. I am willing to liaise with them to make sure the needed work is done as speedily as possible, and that you are not cheated.” He paused. “As I told you, the need is great. How much is done in the initial phase depends on the budget.”

“The money my uncle is withdrawing from the de Bourgh fortune will be used to make my tenants’ health the priority as we near autumn and winter. *All needed* repairs will be made so that they will be able to live in dry and comfortable homes,” Anne insisted. “If you need more help from those who live here, or even from Westerham, I give you leave to employ as many men as necessary.”

With a nod to Miss de Bourgh and the colonel, William mounted his stallion and headed towards Hunsford. There was no time like the present. Thanks to his visits to all the tenants since taking up his post, he had an extensive list of the needed repairs for each and every tenant cottage.

Hearing this, Fallstead’s eyes became moist. His family would live in a repaired cottage, and thanks to Miss de Bourgh forgoing two quarters’ rent, there would be more than enough money to buy food and clothing. He realised that one quarter would cover the autumn harvest when the most money would be earned. If this was a dream, he did not want to wake.

Anne de Bourgh did something her mother had never deigned to do. She accepted an invitation to take tea with Mrs Fallstead. When she saw the conditions a family of six had been forced to live in because of Lady Catherine’s cruelty, Anne was disgusted. The roof was leaking in one corner, leaving water stains on the wall. At least two panes of glass in the window were cracked, and the fireplace did not draw properly. The tea was weak and watered down—apparently it was all the family could afford—but Anne drank it. She complimented her hostess before joining the maid in the phaeton, and she and Richard departed the farm.

By the time Anne and Fitzwilliam reached the next tenant cottage, word of the incredible changes coming to Rosings Park had swept over the tenantry. Evidently, the two eldest Fallstead boys had run across the fields to their two closest neighbours, and the good tidings had spread from there.

As Anne and Richard went from farm to farm, rather than being greeted with trepidation like they had been when they arrived at the first tenant they visited, they were welcomed with cheers.

By that same afternoon, men and materials began to arrive to begin the very necessary repairs to the tenant cottages.

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On the final Monday of June, William Collins departed from his parsonage at first light on Vulcan for the four and fifty mile ride to Collins Hollow near Faversham to attend his brother’s wedding to Miss Bethany Osborne. Keating would care for the parish but would not have to conduct a Sunday service at St Cuthbert’s for William. The latter had preached the Sabbath services just past, and William would return to his parsonage on the final Saturday of June, meaning that he would be in the pulpit for Sabbath, the next day.

As he rode, he felt a sense of accomplishment, one that went far beyond his duties in the parish. Yes, in the month or so he had been the rector of the Hunsford parish, he had been accepted by all his parishioners, and they had not stinted with their compliments to him for the way he conducted himself as a clergyman. More than that, he had gained their trust. That meant they confided in him without worrying he would share what they told him with anyone without their expressed permission to do so.

However, it was so much more than that. Rather than just deliver pretty words to the tenants, Miss de Bourgh had delivered action. Each and every cottage had been repaired so that it was better than the day it had been built. As a majority of them had minor leaks in their roofs, some of the repairs had been major. As a safety measure, all the roofs had been made over with slate instead of thatch. To say that there was palpable joy among the tenants in their newly repaired cottages would have been an understatement. To add to the pleasure of the tenantry, Miss de Bourgh had signed new leases with them assuring them of her promises for six months’ free rent, six months at half, and following that period, a reduction from the first quarter they needed to start paying full rent again.

A new steward, a well-experienced man, had been employed with assistance from Lords Matlock and Hilldale. At the same time, a good
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percentage of the servants at the manor house had been relieved of their positions, while a few had resigned when they saw the writing on the wall.

Lady Matlock had sent an under-butler and assistant housekeeper from Matlock House for Miss de Bourgh to interview. They had been employed. As soon as they were in place, they had been charged with employing those servants who were needed for the house. Within a fortnight of the butler and housekeeper being employed, all servants were in place.

A few days after Lord and Lady Matlock had departed, a Mr Edward Gardiner had been sent to Rosings Park by said earl. He was the owner of a very successful import-export business which also had a subsidiary which was an auction house.

Mr Gardiner and a clerk had inspected all the furniture and décor Miss de Bourgh wanted removed from her house, which turned out to be practically everything.

During the time Mr Gardiner and his clerk had been at the estate, William had opportunities to speak to him. He knew that his own father invested with him, but he had never met Mr Gardiner before. He had found the man to be an intelligent, gentlemanlike individual. In the course of one of their conversations, Mr Gardiner had mentioned that his sister was the mistress of an estate named Longbourn, and he had five nieces. William had not mentioned that he was the heir presumptive, as their conversation had not tended in that direction, and William did not want to seem like he was boasting.

By the time the inventory was completed, Mr Gardiner had opined that he could sell it all and recover most, if not all, of what had been expended to acquire the pieces, even after his commission was paid. Miss de Bourgh had, without delay, authorised Mr Gardiner to sell everything.

With so much done, a few days before William departed for his father’s estate, Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam made for London to be with the Fitzwilliams at Matlock House while the manor house was emptied of everything that needed to be auctioned off. In London, Miss de Bourgh would order new, comfortable furniture from Chippendale’s, and when she redecorated her house at the estate, it would be done with understated

elegance. During the same visit, she intended to inspect de Bourgh House in Berkeley Square to see if it needed a complete redecoration as well.

Thanks to all his ruminations, before he realised it, almost three hours had passed, and it was time to stop and rest his stallion. William allowed an hour and a half to pass before remounting and continuing his ride. It was a little more than three hours later that William saw the gateposts of his father's estate.

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Being back at Collins Hollow felt very comfortable for William. As much as he liked his home at the parsonage, being among family in the house in which he grew up gave him a feeling of familiarity and warmth. His parents and brother had welcomed him home enthusiastically. It had been less than two months since he had seen them and had not realised how much he had missed his family until he saw them again.

On his first day home, there was a dinner at Willow Ridge, the Osbornes' estate. Clem's betrothed, Bethany, was the only child of Paul and Emily Osborne, and thanks to the estate not being entailed, she was the heiress who would one day inherit it. His brother, Clem, had promised that as long as they had more than one child, the estates would be kept separate. However, Mr Osborne had not asked that the future master of his estate take the Osborne name. Willow Ridge was a smaller estate than Collins Hollow, bringing in about two thousand pounds per annum less than the Collins' estate.

The couple was to marry from Willow Ridge, where the wedding breakfast would be held. William was sanguine with not conducting the ceremony, as he was standing up with his brother, and he would not have attempted to insert himself into another man's parish. The church was in the Collins Hollow Village, which was situated between the two estates.

The next day, William made the relatively short ride to St Peter's in Faversham to see his friend and mentor, Davidson. After greeting Mrs Davidson and their three children, William was invited to join Davidson in his study.
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“I hear very complimentary reports about you and the way you are looking after your parish from Bishop Lankershim,” Davidson said once they were seated.

“I thank you, but anyone who had to clear up the mess I found would look good,” William said humbly.

“Come now, Collins,” Davidson responded. “False modesty does not become you. Not only were you able to stand up to your former patroness’s attempt to interfere in the running of your parish, but you assisted her enslaved daughter to free herself from her mother’s draconian rule, and more importantly you have been there as her spiritual guide. If all that were not enough, you have been assisting Miss de Bourgh in undoing all the damage her mother wrought.”

“I did what I felt needed to be done,” William owned. “It is still hard to think that a parent would do that to her own flesh and blood in an attempt to steal her daughter’s estate.”

“Greed makes good people evil,” Davidson opined. “Has Lady Catherine’s fate been decided yet?”

“When we discussed Lady Catherine’s avarice, Bishop Lankershim recited 1 Timothy 6:10,” William remembered. “Unfortunately, He gave us free will but created us weak and susceptible to temptation. Thankfully, most use their free choice to select the path of truth and righteousness. Then there are those like the lady we are discussing who will stop at nothing to gain that which they desire.” He paused as he recalled what else Davidson had asked. “As much as many of us thought her insane, Lady Catherine was not judged so by the three physicians who examined her. The Earl of Matlock decided to kill two birds with one stone. He sent Lady Catherine and Mrs Jenkinson…” William saw his friend look questioningly at the last name he did not recognise. “That lady was supposed to be Miss de Bourgh’s companion, to look after her interests. Instead, she blindly did Lady Catherine’s bidding in trying to drug and harm Miss de Bourgh. They are both on their way to the Orkney Islands as we speak. They will remain in a cottage on one of the islands for the rest of their lives. If either or both try to leave, they will have to face charges in a court of law for their attempts to harm Miss de Bourgh.”

“She is far away from anyone she would attempt to harm. I wonder if either lady has repented her sins,” Davidson mused.

“As Lady Catherine always seemed to think that whatever she chose to do was right, I doubt it. What the companion will do with regard to her immortal soul, only He knows,” William opined. “Let us discuss what is much more pleasant. How are Mrs Davidson and your three children? Are they all well?”

Always happy to speak of his beloved wife, Sophia, and his children, Davidson did so with pleasure, happy everyone was hale and healthy.

During tea in the sitting room with Mrs Davidson, William was asked if he had begun to think of marriage yet. He shared that his thoughts had tended in that direction, especially with the examples of felicitous couples in his life. William would return the next day to have time with Davidson to receive some spiritual guidance of his own. Soon after that had been scheduled, he thanked the Davidsons for their hospitality and began the ride back to his father’s estate.

On Friday morning, William had the pleasure of standing witness to his brother’s wedding. Everything happened as it should, and two hours after the ceremony, Clem and Bethany Collins departed for their wedding trip in Margate.

An hour after his brother and new sister departed Willow Ridge, William accompanied his parents back to their estate.

That evening it was decided Clem and Ophelia Collins would follow William to Hunsford in a few days to visit him at his parsonage. They would have joined him the next day, but they had prior engagements on Monday and Tuesday.

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William was proud to welcome his parents to his parsonage on the first Wednesday in July, in the mid-afternoon.

For their visit, he moved into one of the two guest chambers to allow his parents the use of the largest chamber, which was the mistress’s chamber. He could have locked the door between his room and that one, but knowing
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that his parents were as in love now as they had ever been, he decided that being across the hall gave them more privacy and protected his sensibilities in case he heard something he did not want to hear.

Over the next week, Clem and Ophelia Collins, who could not have thought it was possible to be prouder of one of their sons, discovered it was. The way his parishioners, especially those who were tenants of Rosings Park, sang his praises without any prompting, told them how well he was doing in his role of shepherding his flock.

Although he was gratified that he was well thought of, William was not one who basked in praise about his person.

Even with his parents visiting him, William made sure that between himself and Keating, none of the clerical duties were neglected. Having a curate allowed him to be in his parents' company more than he would have been otherwise.

It was a pity Miss de Bourgh was away, as William would not be able to introduce his parents to her. He was sure, however, that this would not be the only time they would visit, and they would meet her next time. As far as he knew, she would only return once all the new furniture had been delivered. His parents had smiled when he told them how Miss de Bourgh had ordered the throne-like chair Lady Catherine used to sit on to be chopped to pieces and be used as kindling for fires. Ophelia and Clem were not at all regretful that they never got to meet the former mistress of Rosings Park.

On Saturday, the three Collinses were relaxing in the sitting room after partaking in a satisfying and tasty meal Mrs Bellamy had served.

"William, have you tried to contact our distant cousin, the master of Longbourn, Thomas Bennet?" Collins asked. "I know Bennets usually ignore our epistles, but that estate will be yours one day. It would behove you to see it."

"I have been thinking about that," William responded. "Perhaps I will, and ask if I may come and visit the estate."

"If he ignores you, it may take you arriving unannounced. Or perhaps send the missive through his solicitor, Mr Phillips," Collins suggested. "You

could point out to Mr Phillips that under the terms of the entail, you are permitted to view the estate, and more than that, the current master has certain obligations."

"I have read the entail document, so I am aware of what you speak. Perhaps I will try to go there in the autumn," William responded.

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Clem and Ophelia Collins were even more impressed when they heard William deliver the lesson at services on Sunday. Every seat was taken in the church, and neither Collins saw a single congregant nodding off during the sermon.

They remained with their son for three more days and departed for their estate on Thursday morning.

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Chapter 8

Hunsford, late August 1811

William Collins was contemplating taking the step of making contact with his Bennet cousins. He was well aware that since the days of his father's and the current master of Longbourn, Thomas Bennet's, common great-great-grandfather, Henry Bennet, there had been a break in the family thanks to the late Henry Bennet's improper pride in his reaction to his third son taking the Collins name.

Before he began to write to his cousin, William replayed a conversation he had with Father a day before he and Mother had departed the parsonage.

That evening, when Mother had taken herself to bed, father and son sat with glasses of port in the rear parlour. William had wanted to seek his father's advice beyond what they had previously discussed regarding Longbourn and now seemed as good a time as any. "Father, you mentioned that you had men go to Meryton and find out what they could about our cousins and the estate, did you not?" he had asked.

"Yes, Son, I did. With the clauses in the entail, I felt it prudent once it was certain that our cousin's wife would not be able to deliver a son," Father had responded.

"And what, if anything, were the men able to discover?"

"Longbourn should earn more than six thousand pounds per annum," Father had reported. "Thomas Bennet is indolent in the extreme and prefers to hide away in his study and waits for problems to come to him rather than anticipating the needs of his estate and tenants. Due to his lackadaisical attitude, he has lost eight of the eighteen tenants. Because of this, the income is at or below three thousand pounds now. In fact, the men discovered that his second daughter, I believe her name is Elizabeth, manages the estate more than her father does.

"The wife, Frances, called Fanny, was not gently born, and our cousin makes sport of her rather than teaching her the duties of an estate's

mistress. Like many who were not born to estates, she thinks that being a mistress does not go beyond being a hostess. Hence, she refuses to lower herself *to visit the tenants. Thankfully, that is done by the three eldest girls. The eldest is Jane and the middle daughter is Mary.*

"The reports I was given state that the youngest two, Catherine and Lydia, are vapid, silly flirts who will ruin the family if not checked. Like he does with his wife, our cousin laughs at the youngest and calls them silly but does nothing to check them."

"I hope at the very least our Cousin Bennet has been putting something away for his daughters so they will have dowries," William had stated.

"It seems that our cousin has not bothered himself to save for his wife's or his daughters' futures after he goes to his final reward. What makes this worse is his brother-in-law is none other than Edward Gardiner, the same man with whom I invest. Your legacy which began as fifteen thousand pounds when you were born is with him. Yes, the one who was here to assist Miss de Bourgh in selling all the baubles and tasteless furniture her mother collected. Instead, Thomas does not hold his wife, who is a spendthrift, to a budget, and he indulges himself in purchasing books and port."

"Based on what you have told me, both Mr Bennet and his wife are rather selfish." William had paused. "How would you approach him?"

"My men reported that he likes to think himself superior to everyone, even his second daughter, who is supposed to be very intelligent. Hence, unless you make him think that he will be amused by you and you are not very intelligent, I do not think he will respond," Father had opined.

"I can arrive without an invitation to insist that the terms of the entail are being followed without playing the fool for him."

"Yes, you can do that, Son, but that will make things very adversarial, and you will have a hard time garnering any cooperation from my cousin. It will be good when one of our line steps back onto Longbourn's land after the many years there has been a schism in the family due to my great-great-grandfather Bennet's pride."

"Then, I will do what I have to do," William had decided.

William remembered they had gone on to speak of other subjects before they had both retired.

He needed to write a letter to Thomas Bennet giving him the impression that he was much like he had been when he had met with Lady Catherine. He sat down at his desk, the window behind him, and began to write.

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Hertfordshire, November 1811

Fitzwilliam Darcy felt relief as soon as he saw the back of Bingley's coach as it trundled down the drive bearing the two eldest Bennet sisters away from Netherfield Park. His life would be simpler without the constant effort to assure his behaviour did not raise the expectations of Miss Elizabeth Bennet!

After all the years he had been in society, he had not found one woman who excited interest in him. But here, far away from the *Ton*, that he would become infatuated with a country miss, the daughter of an insignificant country squire, was unacceptable. She had no fortune and her primary connections were to trade. She was an inappropriate woman to attract the attention of a Darcy of Pemberley.

No matter how fine Miss Elizabeth's emerald-green eyes were, and they were the most beautiful eyes he had seen, it did not change the facts. Regardless of how light and pleasing her figure was, with her curves in all the right places. No matter the fact that she was rather beautiful—something he had missed that night at the assembly—she could never be more than the mild flirtation he had enjoyed so far. Darcy was aware how much he enjoyed sparring with her when they debated while she had been at Bingley's estate. She had never once deferred to him and always argued her point cogently with logic. He had been impressed by the love and caring she displayed for her older sister by walking three miles through the mud to care for her. Unlike the cloying Miss Bingley, he thought that the exercise had only enhanced her beauty.

For the last two days she had been resident at Netherfield Park, Darcy had withdrawn and not spoken to Miss Elizabeth other than a brief greeting
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here or there. When they had sat in the library at the same time, he had been so tempted to engage her lively mind, but he had fought against his inclinations. It was because of his concerns that he would raise expectations he would never be able to meet.

His duty was to make a brilliant match to a woman of society with connections as good or better than his own, and a large dowry to replace the thirty thousand pounds which would be paid out when Anna married.

Thinking of his sister, Georgiana, called Anna, who was twelve years his junior, made Darcy scowl. His anger was not at his sister, far from it. He held her blameless in the whole sordid Ramsgate affair. The ire was directed at that bastard Wickham, the faithless Mrs Younge, and most of all at himself.

The conversation he had had with his aunt and Richard before the Fitzwilliams had decamped to Kent to assist Anne was still fresh in his memory so many months later.

He had been so sure of his judgement that he had refused to do as his aunt suggested and verify Mrs Younge’s characters. In hindsight, he now knew those characters were all forged by none other than his nemesis, one George Wickham. As yet, he had not been able to bring himself to admit to his aunt that he was wrong.

Only his promise to Bingley had made him come to this estate. He knew he had not been very sociable, but it mattered not when all those about the place were so much lower in society than he was. Darcy ignored the fact that Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley, being that they were the daughters of a tradesman, were in fact lower than the landed gentry in the area. Mrs Hurst, married to one who would inherit an estate one day, was higher than Miss Bingley, but she was the same as Mrs Bennet, whom the sisters loved to disparage. Anyone born into the gentry was higher than Mrs Hurst.

His thoughts returned to the most handsome woman of his acquaintance, with her emerald-green eyes shining with wit and intelligence. He was certain that now she had returned to her small estate, his infatuation with her would die a quick death.

He had forgotten that Lankford, the steward, had told them that Longbourn was considerably larger than Netherfield Park.

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Jane and Elizabeth Bennet were more than pleased to be on their way back to Longbourn in Mr Bingley’s coach.

The former was sad to be away from Mr Bingley, even though she knew leaving today was right and proper. She could not prevaricate and pretend to still be ill like Mamma wanted in order to remain at the leased estate until Tuesday. Jane believed that she had lost her heart to Mr Bingley since meeting him at the Michaelmas Assembly on the final Friday of September past. She had been the only woman he had distinguished with two dances that night. Each subsequent time she and her family had been in company with the party from Netherfield Park—which had been frequent—Mr Bingley would immediately seek her out and they would sit and speak, their heads close together.

Contrary to what Lizzy said, Jane did not believe that Caroline and Louisa—Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst—were against her forming an alliance with their brother. How could that be so? They were her good friends. It was due to their friendship with her that they had invited her to dine with them the evening the men were to eat with the officers. Perhaps Lizzy had been correct when she had told Jane that she should have never agreed to Mamma’s machinations and ridden Nellie to Netherfield Park instead of insisting on the carriage.

Because she had not opposed Mamma, she had arrived soaked to the skin and had all but fainted while Caroline was questioning her about her family so that she and Louisa could come to know Jane better. She had been taken to a bedchamber where she had slept the night while the rain continued to lash the windows.

The next morning, her head, throat, and chest had all pained her, and Jane could tell she had a fever. She had sent a note to Lizzy to tell her she was ill, but Jane had downplayed her sickness so Lizzy would not worry.

She had been secretly very pleased when Lizzy arrived a few hours later. No one nursed her like Lizzy did. When it was time for Lizzy to walk home, Jane had been distressed, and kind Mr Bingley had invited Lizzy to remain, to which her sister had agreed, even if it meant being in the same house with Mr Darcy, the man to whom she had taken a decided dislike.
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Thanks to Lizzy's insistence, Mr Jones had been called—Jane could not understand why her friends had not thought of doing that—and he had diagnosed that she had a bad cold. Due to his tinctures and Lizzy's nursing, Jane had begun to heal.

The day that Mamma came to see her, with Mary, Kitty, and Lydia in tow, she had spent a few minutes with Jane. Then Mamma and her four daughters had gone to pay their respects to the residents of the estate.

Afterward, Lizzy had said she had never been so terribly embarrassed and told of how Mamma had made vulgar statements about the cost of items she had seen at the estate. On top of that, Jane had been told her Mamma had denigrated Lizzy and Charlotte while heaping praise on Jane. Elizabeth also reported that Lydia had demanded a ball, something to which Mr Bingley had agreed. According to Lizzy, before she left, Mamma had said that Jane was far too sick to be moved for some days yet, and Mr Bingley had been all that was solicitous. She also related that Mrs Hurst, Miss Bingley, and Mr Darcy had all looked rather put out. Surely Lizzy was wrong about how bad Mamma and Lydia had been and also about the reactions of her friends.

As it did not fit with how she wanted to see the world, Jane conveniently forgot that this same behaviour of Mamma's that Lizzy had reported to her had chased three of her previous suitors away, never to be seen again.

Feeling well enough to come down to the drawing room the previous evening, Jane had enjoyed her time with Mr Bingley. This morning, as it had been the second day with no fever, Lizzy had sent a note to Papa asking for the carriage to collect them. Mamma had written back saying the horses were needed on the home farm until Tuesday at the earliest. Lizzy had requested that Mr Bingley allow the use of his carriage. He had protested it was too soon, but Lizzy had been adamant.

When they were packing Lizzy opined that remaining at the estate when Jane was clearly well would make her look desperate and grasping. Jane had agreed; hence, they were on their way home.

Elizabeth had never been so pleased to be away from anywhere ever before. Jane had been in bed for all the times Miss Caro Bingley—she

called Elizabeth Eliza, so to her the shrew was Caro—and Mrs Hurst had shot their ill-disguised barbs at her. As they were not very intelligent, Elizabeth had easily deflected them and turned them around on the supercilious sisters in a way which left them wondering whether they were being insulted or complimented. Of course, when she told Jane how the supercilious sisters—especially Miss Bingley—had behaved towards her, Jane had tried to find a positive slant to explain the behaviour away.

She would have borne being with them better had not Mr '*She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men*', hateful, proud, disdainful Darcy also been in the house. As if she needed more proof that he was no gentleman, when Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst had been rude to a guest in their brother's home, Mr Darcy had not said a word to correct them. How could he ignore such atrocious behaviour from the woman supposed to be the hostess? An inconvenient voice spoke up in her head. '*Neither did Mr Bingley, and they are his sisters! Would such a man protect Jane from his pernicious sisters if she became his wife?*' She shook her head to quiet the words she heard but wanted to ignore.

How could he call himself a gentleman and insult a woman within her hearing the way Mr Darcy had done the night of the assembly? The answer was simple; he was not at all gentlemanlike. Even Mamma cared not about his reputed ten thousand pounds per annum. He had insulted one of her daughters, and that was unforgiveable. The fact that Mamma had said as bad and worse herself was beside the point.

Like he did whenever they were in company together, he stared at her to catalogue more of her faults. She had heard him tell Mr Bingley and the sisters that the Bennet girls' fortunes, or lack thereof, and connections to trade would materially lessen their chances of marrying men of any consideration and consequence in the world. Did he forget that Mrs Hurst's —now the property of Mr Hurst—and Miss Bingley's dowries, not to mention all of Mr Bingley's money came from trade?

With Uncle Frank being the local solicitor and Uncle Edward owning his successful business in London, Elizabeth's disdain for the sisters had nothing to do with how their father made his money. Had it been so, she would have been the worst kind of hypocrite. No, her dislike was rooted in

the way they treated those around them, especially the disrespectful way they related to the staff and servants, and how they thought themselves better than others connected to trade. They held themselves above those born on an estate and put on airs and graces like the daughters of nobility.

The previous day, she had gone to sit in the library—if one could call a room with a dozen books on one of the shelves such—where Mr Darcy had been sitting and reading in a wingback chair. Elizabeth had taken a book and begun to read, which she had done for half an hour. Not one word had he said to her, as if she had been invisible. She had come very close to taking him to task for his rudeness, but she decided that the insufferable man was not worth the effort to do so. She had stood, replaced the book, and walked out of the library with her head held high. Not a word had the rude man said, not even a brief farewell greeting! Yes, she could have greeted him, but was it not for the man to do so first?

Returning to Longbourn was the most sensible action, regardless of how much Mamma would rail against their return; and more likely than not she would blame Elizabeth for the early departure. In a way, it had been her decision, but Jane had agreed.

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Fanny was seated in the drawing room with her three youngest daughters. Mary was reading her book of sermons while Kitty and Lydia were making over some bonnets. The Bennet matriarch felt herself nodding off when the crunch of carriage wheels on the gravel of the drive was heard.

“Kitty, look and see who it is,” Fanny commanded as she sat up straight and pulled her lace mobcap on properly.

“Mamma, it looks like Mr Bingley’s coach,” Kitty reported.

“Why would he be coming to Longbourn when my beautiful Jane is at Netherfield Park?” Fanny screeched. “My poor nerves, I hope Jane is not actually sick and is going to die.”

“No, Mamma, Jane and Lizzy are well; it is they who arrived in the carriage.” Kitty watched as the Longbourn footman retrieved the trunk with her older sisters’ clothing, and the conveyance departed. She watched until the two eldest Bennet sisters were out of her view as they entered the house.
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“You must have erred, Kitty! I told Jane and Lizzy to remain at Netherfield Park until Tuesday.” Fanny huffed as the door began to open. “Why are you home?” she demanded as soon as she saw who walked into the room. “You wilful disobedient girl, Miss Lizzy! Why did you force Jane to come home? Mr Bingley would have proposed to her if not for you. You will run him off like the other suitors Jane had,” Fanny wailed.

The caterwauling brought Bennet into the drawing room. “Welcome home, Jane and Lizzy. Jane, I am pleased to see you did not die of a trifling cold in service of your mother’s machinations. It is pleasing to me that my two most sensible daughters are home.”

“I ordered them to remain until Tuesday! Today is but Friday,” Fanny moaned.

“You never commanded us to remain, Mamma. You told us the carriage was not available to collect us until Tuesday,” Elizabeth corrected. “You did not instruct us not to ask Mr Bingley for the use of his conveyance. It would have been far worse for Jane had we overstayed our welcome.” She did not say that, according to the terrible sisters, that one day had been too much.

“That is not true, Miss Lizzy…” Fanny stopped when her husband raised his hand.

“I saw Mr Hill after you told him to send the note to Netherfield Park, Mrs Bennet. He wanted to make sure I had nothing to add. I did not. However, I did read the missive, and it was word for word as Lizzy said. Jane and Lizzy did not disobey you. We will not hear any more talk about *either* of them doing so.” Bennet saw his wife was about to begin to caterwaul. He held up his hand. “Not another word, Mrs Bennet, unless you would like to forego one or two of the next quarter days without your allowance!”

Even though she thought her husband was being very high-handed, Fanny closed her mouth. She could see that her husband was serious in this. Hence, she was not willing to risk her pin money.

Bennet did not like to exert himself. Under normal circumstances, he would have allowed his wife to continue making a cake of herself; however, she was accusing his favourite daughter of that which she did not do.

Besides, he would soon have more sport than he knew what to do with. It was only about a sennight before the entertainment arrived.

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Chapter 9

On Friday, Kitty and Lydia Bennet were doing what they often did since the regiment of the Derbyshire militia arrived to encamp in Meryton. They were walking to the town, ostensibly to purchase ribbons from the haberdashery; but in reality, they—meaning driven by the forceful Lydia—were seeking officers to flirt with.

Lydia was well pleased to see Denny, Saunderson, and Pratt walking along the other side of the street. “Denny!” she yelled out as she crossed the street with Kitty following.

“Miss Lydia, Miss Kitty,” Denny intoned as he bowed, as did the other two lieutenants. “It is a pleasure to see pretty girls in the town.”

Both girls blushed at the compliment. Of course, Lydia thought it was aimed mostly at herself. “Why have you not called at Longbourn of late?” Lydia queried with a pout.

“Unless your mother invites us, it would not be proper for us to arrive at your home,” Saunderson explained.

“Then, I will make sure that Mamma issues an invitation to all of the officers. If she does, then I expect to see all of you at Longbourn for tea on the morrow,” Lydia demanded, her arms akimbo while she batted her eyes at the officers.

“The others will be able to come, but I am afraid I will not be here,” Denny stated with put-on sorrow. Even though Miss Lydia had the hallmarks of a lightskirt, she was only fifteen and the daughter of a gentleman. He would flirt with her but no more than that. He did have standards. Seeing Miss Lydia’s lower lip pushed out, he elucidated. “Colonel Forster asked me to go to London with Chamberlayne to recruit more officers. We depart in an hour from now. Hence, it is not that I would not *like* to visit your estate, but I will be unable to thanks to having to perform my duties. That is until I return.”

What Denny said placated Lydia’s bruised feelings. She was glad the handsome officer had a good reason why he would not be able to call at

Longbourn. Thankfully, there were more than enough officers remaining while the two lieutenants went to London.

They chatted for a while longer. Lydia used all of the techniques of flirting her mother had taught her.

“Lyddie, we must go buy some ribbons,” Kitty said after the officers had bowed and moved off. “You know there will be questions if we arrive home with nothing. After all, purchasing some ribbons was our stated reason for coming into Meryton.”

“I suppose we must,” Lydia huffed. “You will need to pay; I have spent all of my allowance for this quarter already.”

Kitty said nothing. She was used to Lydia claiming she had no money.

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Darcy was troubled. He could not evict the impertinent Miss Elizabeth from his thoughts and dreams, as he had been sure he would once she was no longer before him. She had not been present at Netherfield Park for almost a sennight, and his tender feelings for her had not diminished. He had tried to convince himself it was merely an infatuation and it would fade. It had not. It had strengthened, and as much as he did not want to own it to himself, Darcy had gone and fallen in love with her.

He found that he missed her presence, her pert opinions, and her expert way of politely turning the barbs flung at her by both Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley back towards them without them knowing what was occurring. In addition, he also missed just seeing her magnificently fine eyes.

She was not worthy of a Darcy of Pemberley, so how could he be so weak as to be falling in love with her? It was a conundrum to which he had no answer.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by Miss Bingley’s grating voice.

“Charles, you were not serious about holding a ball for the country mushrooms hereabouts, were you?” Miss Bingley whinged.

“As I have told you before, yes, Caroline, I am,” Bingley replied exasperatedly. “I gave my word that there would be a ball here at
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Netherfield Park, and here a ball there will be."

"Charles, surely you must take your guest's feelings about holding a ball into account," Miss Bingley said, directing a coquettish look at Mr Darcy.

"If you mean Darcy, he is welcome to remain in his chambers during the ball," Bingley returned.

"Tell him, Mr Darcy, how insupportable it will be to hold a ball in this backwater for the country bumpkins." Miss Bingley batted her eyes at the man she wanted to marry. "Surely you would not lower yourself to do such at Pemberley?"

"Miss Bingley, almost all estates are close to market towns, just like this one," Darcy replied. "We have two near Pemberley. Lambton to the south and Kympton to the northwest. My late mother had an annual ball for those in the local area, many of them minor *landholders* like the ones around Meryton. Hence, what your brother is planning is no different from what my late, honoured mother used to do."

It was horrifying that not only did Mr Darcy not agree with her, but he seemed to be intimating that she was denigrating what his late mother did. Caroline Bingley did not know which way to look. "I-I meant n-no disrespect to the late Lady Anne," she managed.

"Given Mr Darcy's preferences, should our ball not feature discussion rather than dancing?" Mrs Hurst interjected to give her embarrassed sister some moments to recover her equanimity.

"That would be interesting, Louisa; except then it would not be at all like a ball but rather an evening at home with friends," Bingley stated. "There will be a ball here in a little more than a fortnight on the final Tuesday of November. That will give Cook more than enough time to prepare all the white soup we need and for you, Caroline, to show us the hosting skills of which you so like to speak."

As she brushed her *faux pas* aside, Miss Bingley allowed her brother's words to wash over her. What better chance would she have to show Mr Darcy her skill as a hostess and how perfect she would be as his wife? "Indeed, Charles, you have the right of it. It is time for these country

mushrooms who are so far below us in society, to see how an event of the *Ton* is organised.

Darcy bit his tongue. Rather than point out that, as the daughter of a tradesman, Miss Bingley was below those she claimed to be above, he said nothing.

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As he prepared to depart his parsonage on Monday morning, William Collins, not for the first time, went over everything that he had put in place for the almost fortnight he would be away from Hunsford. As he ticked each item off from his mental list, he was assured that there was nothing he was forgetting.

The parish was in Keating's good hands until he returned, and the latter would send an express if there was anything that needed William's personal attention while he was away.

His parishioners were all very satisfied with his spiritual guidance. The tenants of Rosings Park were as happy, if not more so, than they had been when the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh had been master of the estate. Miss de Bourgh had learnt with speed, and in the months since her mother had been removed, she had steered the estate with a firm but compassionate hand. On the thirteenth day of September, William had been present at the celebration of Miss de Bourgh's birthday. Even though she had been running the estate since her mother had been banished to the Orkneys, it was significant that she was now five and twenty, the age her late father had listed in the main body of his Last Will and Testament.

So far, the only cousins of Miss de Bourgh William had not met were her two Darcy cousins. If not before, he was sure he would meet them at Easter of 1812, when the whole of Miss de Bourgh's family would be present at Rosings Park.

As far as Miss de Bourgh's health went, she was, in William's opinion, as healthy as any other woman he knew. It was thanks to her own strength of character that she was not dependent on laudanum and very unhealthy because of it. When he had asked Miss de Bourgh how it was that Lady Catherine did not realise she was not imbibing the drug-laced cordial, the
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mistress of the estate had replied that to her mind, Lady Catherine could not comprehend that someone would not obey her. Miss de Bourgh had not received an epistle from her mother since the lady and Mrs Jenkinson had been sent to their new home. When he had asked if she would read a letter from them, Miss de Bourgh had said she would make that decision if and when a missive was received.

William checked the gig he would drive himself. He had purchased it along with a horse to pull it some two months past. When he was not using his gig, the man looking after the glebe lands would use it when needed on the glebe. All was well. His trunk was lashed to the back, and Vulcan was attached to the back of the gig by a long tether. He was aware that his cousin, to whom he had written that ridiculous letter, would be surprised when he saw the stallion. However, if Mr Bennet was as indolent as Father's investigators had reported, he may not see the stallion before he was stabled.

As he departed, William decided that he would see the lay of the land at Longbourn before he revealed his true self. At that point, he would know how to act and whether he needed to enforce certain terms of the entail.

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"Mrs Bennet, you can expect one more for dinner this day," Bennet drawled.

"Is Mr Bingley coming to dine with us? How wonderful that is for Jane," Fanny gushed. "As long as he comes without that hateful Mr Darcy."

"It is not Mr Bingley, nor is it any other man you have ever met. It is someone who I have not met in the whole of my life." Bennet looked at the six expectant faces of his wife and daughters. He had waited with the news until he felt he would have the maximum amount of amusement, and he judged that the morning meal on the day of arrival would be the best chance of sending his wife into one of her supposed attacks of her nerves.

"If the person is unknown to us, then, who is it, Mr Bennet?" Fanny demanded.

Elizabeth, who had always participated in her father's plans for sport, felt somewhat miffed that Papa had not let her in on this joke.
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Jane sitting next to Mamma made sure the salts were in her pocket in case Mamma swooned when Papa deigned to share the news with them. She hated to think that her father would be intentionally cruel to her mother, so, as she always did, Jane sought a positive reason for the way Papa made sport of Mamma.

“Oh la, is it a man in a scarlet coat, Papa?” Lydia demanded. “You know how much I love officers.”

“I was in love with an officer before I met your father,” Fanny mused. “Colonel Millar’s regiment was here, and Lieutenant Kingsford was so dashing in his red coat. But then the regiment moved, and the officer never spoke to my late father before he left the environs of Meryton.” Fanny dashed an imaginary tear from her eye.

The three eldest Bennet sisters looked at one another with raised eyebrows. Their mother did not see the impropriety of speaking so in front of them. No wonder Lydia, and by extension, Kitty, said that only an officer would do.

“As much as I hate to disappoint you, the man is not an officer; in fact, he is a clergyman and a distant cousin of mine,” Bennet added.

“A boring clergyman!” Lydia exclaimed. “It is bad enough we have to listen to Mr Pierce’s sermons at St Hugh’s every Sunday and Mary’s repeating things from that reverend’s sermons. I do not want to hear more of the same in this house. What if he spouts the same nonsense from Fordyce’s sermons as Mary does?” Lydia put her hand over her heart theatrically. “I will die of boredom.”

Hearing that their cousin was a clergyman, Mary’s interest was piqued. She schooled her features, as the last thing she wanted was to give her sisters and parents something else to tease her about.

“Enough, Mr Bennet!” Fanny exclaimed. “Who is this man, and why does he come to our home?”

“It is Mr William Collins, my heir to this estate, and the man who when I am called home to God, may throw you from this home and into the oft-mentioned hedgerows,” Bennet revealed. “I received this letter from him in August, and unlike has been done with any letter from a Collins since my

great-great-grandfather's time, rather than consign the letter to the fire, I read it. I decided, as he is my heir, I should see what he had to say."

"What an odious man! Is he not ashamed to steal this estate from our daughters? What will we do when he throws us into the hedgerows?" Fanny wailed. She turned to Jane and took her hand. "You will marry Mr Bingley and save us. You could not be so beautiful for nothing."

"Papa, why have all letters from the Collinses, other than this one, been consigned to the fire?" Elizabeth enquired.

"It is what my father told me he did, as did his father before him," Bennet responded testily. He did not want an inquisition from Lizzy to distract him from the enjoyment he was gaining from his wife's reaction. He raised his hand, seeing that Lizzy was about to ask another question on the subject. "That is enough about that. As I was saying, I did read his letter, and I responded to it about a fortnight following." Bennet pushed the letter across the table to Lizzy. "Read this for all to hear," he instructed.

Although Lizzy was put out that Papa cut her off before she could ask more questions about never receiving a letter from a Collins, Elizabeth was not of a mind to disobey her father. She picked up the epistle, cleared her throat and began to read.

21 August 1811
Hunsford Parsonage
Hunsford, near Westerham

Kent

Dear Sir,

The disagreement subsisting between yourself and my honoured father always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have left his home, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time, I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to the past interactions between Bennets and Collinses for me to be on good terms with anyone with whom he has been at variance.

My mind, however, is now made up on the subject, for having received full ordination, I was so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards my patroness and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.

As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it is my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being the heir presumptive of the Longbourn estate due to the entail instituted by our mutual ancestor will be kindly overlooked on your side and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch.

I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your daughters, who I assume are amiable, and beg leave to apologise for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends, but of this hereafter.

If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family on Monday the 18th day of November 1811, by four o'clock, and shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday sennight following, which I can do without any inconvenience, as my patroness is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that the curate is available to do the duty of the day.

I remain, dear sir, with respectful compliments to your lady and daughters, your well-wisher and friend,

William Bennet Collins

As much as she did not mind partaking in harmless fun at her mother's expense, Elizabeth did not like cruelty. Telling Mamma on the very day the man, who had written his letter almost three months past, was to arrive, smacked of Papa wanting to humiliate Mamma rather than make sport. She looked at her mother and saw how her pallor had turned ashen.

"How could you wait until the day the man is to arrive to inform me?" Fanny asked with tears running down her cheeks.

Bennet realised that he may have crossed the line from amusement to heartlessness in his desire to make sport of his wife. The looks being directed at him by his daughters, Lizzy included, told him he had gone too far. "Mrs Bennet, I apologise; I should have given you more notice. Be that as it may, the peace-making gentleman will be arriving at Longbourn this afternoon."

"Based on his letter, he cannot be a very sensible man," Elizabeth opined.

"Indeed, my hope is that he will be anything but," Bennet smirked. "I wonder what he means by amends." He suspected that his cousin meant to look for a bride among the daughters of Longbourn, but given his misjudgement regarding the timing of revealing the man coming to his home, Bennet decided not to throw any more fuel on the fire he had already ignited, which had caused an attack of his wife's nerves.

However, Elizabeth was able to discern what their distant cousin was alluding to; knowing how her mother would react, she said nothing aloud. She would wait and see if she was correct when this Mr Collins arrived.

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Chapter 10

As he passed the gateposts marking the entrance to Longbourn, William Collins noted the rusting gates that, if he was correct, had not been closed in many a year. What he saw of the gates fit with what Father had related to him about the indolence of his cousin, Thomas Bennet. It was not anything critical and certainly not something that could be used to trigger some of the clauses in the entail, but if it was indicative of the way his cousin managed the estate, that would be a very different case which would lead to some rather serious conversations.

He drove his gig down the gravel-covered drive with Vulcan trotting comfortably behind him. As he did, William looked at the surface of the drive. It could use some care and added gravel, but there was no blatant neglect he could see.

As he looked around, he noted that the park was well maintained. There was a little wilderness on one side of it, something of which he approved. That reminded him that Miss de Bourgh had ordered her gardeners to undo the rigid uniformity Lady Catherine had demanded. As such, Rosings Park's formal gardens were already far more pleasing to the eye.

During the fifty-mile drive from his parsonage, William Collins had considered his decision of how he should present himself to his cousins. Should he be a simpleton or his true self? He decided to keep to the former, or a version thereof, for at least a few days. His reason was based on his belief that this way he would discover more about his cousins' true characters, formulated on the way they treated one they thought was not as intelligent as themselves.

In his letter, he had hinted at making amends, which he was sure his cousin would correctly interpret as William looking for a bride. That was true to a certain extent. Unless he found one of his cousins compatible with him, one who he could love, respect, and esteem, just like he saw in the example of his parents and now with Clem and Bethany, he would not offer for any of them.

Even if he did not marry one of his cousin's daughters, as a Christian, an ordained clergyman, and a man of honour, William would never allow the widow and any unmarried daughters to be homeless and enter into genteel poverty when Cousin Bennet was called home to God.

As he had said in his conversation with Keating that first Sabbath they had shared a meal, what kind of hypocrite would he be if he ever treated anyone in that fashion, let alone his own family?

When the house came into view, he noted it was a three-storey structure built with beige rectangular stone. There were a fair number of windows he could see. He guessed that Longbourn had enough windows to pay the higher window tax of nine and twenty pounds per annum. He was pleased to see that none of the windows had been bricked over to pay less tax. The façade of the house was not completely covered with ivy, but there was a fair amount growing, all of which had been trimmed away from the front door and from the windows he could see at first glance. Perhaps things were not as bad as he had feared they would be. Only time would tell.

When he stopped the gig, there were no members of the family waiting for him. He supposed part of the reason was he had said he would arrive about four in the afternoon, and he had reached his destination at half after two. There was a groom who held the horse's bridle as the gig came to a halt. William sprang down from the gig and walked to where the groom was holding the carriage horse.

"Please untether my stallion and take him to the stables, assuming you have an open stall?" William enquired. "If not, I will stable him at the inn I saw in Meryton."

"Aye, Sir, we 'ave open stalls," the groom responded.

"In that case, he needs to be rubbed down, watered, and fed some oats. Just a half bucket, please. His name is Vulcan," William instructed.

Just after the groom led Vulcan away, he knocked on the door, which was opened by a man William assumed was the butler.

"May I help you, Sir?" Hill intoned.

"I am your master's cousin, Mr William Collins; he is expecting me to arrive today." He hoped his cousin had not omitted telling the butler to

expect a guest as some sort of jest.

“Welcome, Mr Collins, the master said you would be here at four. I will send the footman to take your trunk to your chamber.” Hill looked around. “Is the driver not here to assist the footman?”

“No, Mr…?” William began.

“Excuse me, the name is Hill, Mr Collins,” the butler revealed.

“As I was about to say, Mr Hill, it is my gig, and I drove myself, so you are looking at the driver.” William remembered the persona he was supposed to adopt here. “Is my cousin unable to afford more than one footman? At the great estate of Rosings Park, my patroness employs more than twenty.”

Hill was confused. At first, the gentleman seemed to be a pleasant man, then suddenly he switched. “I will send the other manservant to assist the footman.”

Just then the groom returned, and before he could tell the gent that his magnificent animal was in a stall, he was told to assist the footman in unlashing the trunk. Once it was lowered to the drive, he was to lead the horse and gig away, unhitch them, stable the horse, and find a place in the carriage house for the gig.

While the groom led the carriage horse pulling the gig around the back of the house, the manservant arrived and assisted the footman to take the trunk into the house.

Before they could move, William’s attention was pulled to the sound of giggling girls who were walking down the drive. He recognised them as the two silly flirts he had seen around some officers as he had guided his horse through the town.

He did not miss the moue of distaste that flitted across the butler’s face before the man schooled his features.

Kitty and Lydia, who had found another excuse to go into Meryton that day, saw the man in a clergyman’s garb. They had expected an older man who was not good-looking. They stopped in their tracks when they saw a man neither old nor homely. He was young, fit-looking, and could be called

handsome. He had dark blond curls protruding from under his broad-brimmed hat. From what they could see, he was a little taller than their father.

Even with all the positives she saw, Lydia could never consider him for her husband, as he was not an officer in a scarlet coat. She whispered such to Kitty, and the two giggling girls skipped into the house.

Fighting hard not to shake his head at the two youngest Miss Bennets' display of bad manners, Hill led Mr Collins into the entrance hall, where he took his hat, gloves, and travel coat from him. Then, he led the guest towards the study where Hill knew the master could be found. He knocked on the heavy oak door and opened it when "enter" was called out from within.

When the butler opened the door, the smell of pipe tobacco, books, and port assailed William Collins's sense of smell. The study was a little smaller than Father's at Collins Hollow. However, it had far more bookcases than his father's study had. Other than where the door, fireplace, and two floor-to-ceiling windows were, the walls were covered by bookcases; none of them were empty. In fact, there were so many books that some were kept in piles on the floor behind the settee in front of the two windows due to lack of space in the bookshelves.

Even before Hill announced his visitor as Mr William Bennet Collins, Bennet knew who was before him. He looked very similar to Bennet's late grandfather, of whom there was a portrait hanging in the small Longbourn gallery. The man before him was not the slovenly-looking clergyman he had hoped to meet; he looked fit and not yet thirty years of age. Not only that, but Bennet did not miss how his eyes took in everything. If Bennet did not know better based on the man's letter, he would have said he saw intelligence in the man's look. "Welcome, Mr Collins. I expected you at four; you are early," Bennet stated.

"Do you require me to leave and return at the time you expected me to arrive?" William Collins asked diffidently.

Bennet was happy; this was the type of thing he expected the writer of the letter he had received to say. He completely missed that the statement could have been making fun of him; after all, no one, outside of Lizzy, was

that intelligent as to subtly make sport of him. “No, Cousin, there is no need for that,” Bennet said condescendingly. “Hill, show Mr Collins to his chamber, and when he is ready, let me know and I will make the introductions to the family.”

With that dismissal, Hill led the guest up to the second floor and the guest chamber he had been assigned. “Would you like water to wash, Sir?” Hill asked when they arrived at the room.

“Please, I need to wash from the road, thank you, Mr Hill,” Collins stated, forgetting not to revert back to his true self.

“Hill, Mr Collins, just Hill.” The man bowed and withdrew.

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“Mamma, we saw our cousin,” Lydia gushed before anyone could greet her on bursting into the drawing room.

“We saw a clergyman but were not introduced, so he may be our cousin. He is handsome, Mama,” Kitty stated. “He is taller than Papa and has dark blond hair. He is well built; we saw no trace of portliness. He smiles very well.”

“Looks are no indicator of a man’s or woman’s character,” Mary interjected primly. “Reverend Fordyce asks: ‘*Are you so very vain, so very ignorant, after all the admonitions you have received, as still to construe flattery into approbation, and smiles into attachment*?’ I agree…”

“Oh, Mary, who asked you?” Fanny cut her middle daughter off.

“Kitty is wrong; it is our cousin,” Lydia insisted.

“I said we do not know,” Kitty responded. “All we know from the way he was dressed is that he is a clergyman.”

“What man of the cloth would be calling if he is not our cousin?” Lydia shot back.

“Lyddie, you may be right, but Kitty is also correct when she says you know not who he is without being introduced to him,” Jane, ever the peacemaker, opined. “There is no need to argue. If it is our cousin, we will meet him soon enough.”
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“Did you two find the additional ribbons you *just had to have* while you were in Meryton? It is not like you did not purchase some on Friday and Saturday past,” Elizabeth asked sarcastically. She was sure she knew why the two youngest girls went into the town, and it was to flirt with officers. She had tried to point out the evils of her younger sisters running around without restraint, especially with Lydia’s brashness and inability to see danger as long as she was having *fun*. Mamma had told her to mind her own business when she had tried to speak to her, saying that Lizzy was jealous because Lydia was lively and pretty. The youngest Bennet emulated her mother in looks and character. Elizabeth had attempted to have her father act, but Papa had refused to exert himself.

Into the wildness, which was the Bennets, their cousin was to come. From the reading of his letter, Elizabeth would have expected a portly or even corpulent man, one who was homely and possibly odiferous. Certainly not the man who Kitty and Lydia had seen. Was it possible that the picture she had drawn in her mind was wrong? She was never wrong, was she? No, even if he did not look as she had thought he would, she was certain he was the unintelligent, pompous, yet obsequious man who had written that letter.

In the middle of the continuing squabble between Kitty and Lydia, the drawing room door opened, admitting the master of the house and the man the two youngest had seen outside.

“I told you so,” Lydia crowed and punctuated her remark by sticking her tongue out at Kitty.

“Mrs Bennet, daughters, I present Mr William Collins, my heir presumptive and the man who will be able to throw any of you from this house when I go to my final reward.” Bennet was well pleased at the way his wife’s face turned ashen. He ignored the reproving looks of his favourite daughter. “Mr Collins, my wife, Mrs Frances Bennet, and my daughters, Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary, Miss Catherine, and Miss Lydia. They are three and twenty down to fifteen years in age.”

William knew from his father’s information that Cousin Bennet liked to amuse himself at others’ expense; however, he had not been aware that the man had a cruel streak. Playing on his wife’s worst fear was not at all funny. He came very close to revealing his true character and taking Thomas Bennet to task.

“It is a pleasure to meet so many pretty and delicate flowers,” William stated as he bowed low in the manner that Lady Catherine used to demand. As he watched, Mrs Bennet preened, Miss Bennet looked away shyly, Miss Elizabeth looked on sceptically, Miss Mary looked away not willing to hold his eye, and the youngest two, the silly flirts, giggled.

“Are you married, Mr Collins?” Fanny probed.

“No, Mrs Bennet, I have not attained that blissful state as of yet. It has been pointed out to me that I am of an age to begin seeking a wife,” William replied honestly.

Fanny decided she would need to make sure he married one of her daughters but not Jane. Jane was too beautiful to be a parson’s wife; and besides, she was soon to be engaged to Mr Bingley. No, she would direct him at Lizzy. With her impertinent hoydenish ways, a clergyman would be the best her second daughter could wish to attract. She would speak to Mr Collins privately as soon as she was able.

“Will you tell us about your patroness?” Bennet queried with a smirk. He was sure this would cause his cousin to sing paeans of praise about the Lady Catherine de Bourgh he had mentioned in his letter.

As William was completely aware of what his cousin was attempting to do, he had to decide how to respond. One thing he would not do was dissemble. Giving ambiguous answers that the listener would interpret through the filter of his or her prejudices was as far as William was willing to go. “I am quite willing to tell you about Miss de Bourgh, if you would like to know about her?” he replied questioningly.

Bennet was surprised. Had Collins not written about some noble lady being his patroness. “I thought you said your patroness was Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” he pushed.

“I believe I said that thanks to her bounty and beneficence, Lady Catherine *awarded* me the living. If I mentioned her as my patroness, it was an error, and I apologise profusely,” William Collins bowed from the waist to his cousin. “Will you retrieve my letter so I may see where I erred?”

“There is no need,” Bennet responded. “My Lizzy remembers anything she has read, so all I need to do is ask her.” Bennet looked at his second

daughter.

“Mr Collins has the right of it, Papa,” Elizabeth said. “It is exactly as he stated. He mentioned that lady’s name as the one who awarded him the living, and after that he referred to his patroness without naming her. It seems that we made an assumption.”

“That was my mistake then,” William Collins owned. “I omitted mentioning the name of my patroness, Miss Anne de Bourgh, the Rose of Kent.” He added the last to soothe his cousin’s bruised feelings after his parry had been so easily riposted.

“This Miss de Bourgh owns an estate?” Fanny enquired.

“Indeed, Mrs Bennet. Miss de Bourgh is the owner of Rosings Park, a fairly large estate in Kent,” William reported. “My parsonage is separated by a lane from the great estate.”

“But how is it Miss de Bourgh is allowed to own her own estate, and my husband may not leave his estate to one of his daughters?” Fanny whinged.

“Mamma, our estate has an entail to heirs male,” Elizabeth explained. “If Miss de Bourgh owns her own estate, I am sure that that estate was not entailed, or if there is one, it did not stipulate to the male line.”

“As far as I know, there is no entail on Rosings Park,” William added.

“It is so unfair,” Fanny whined. “Miss de Bourgh may own her estate, while this one will be stolen from us.” She momentarily forgot about how she was going to have Mr Collins marry Lizzy so that she would never have to leave Longbourn, nor ever have to give up her role of mistress of the estate, even after Mr Bennet went to his final reward.

Bennet was enjoying the spectacle his wife was making. The only problem was that his cousin did not look nearly as uncomfortable as Bennet thought he would be when Mrs Bennet made a cake of herself. Could it be that Mr Collins was not intelligent enough to understand the nuances of what was occurring?

For his part, seeing how Cousin Bennet took pleasure in his wife’s insecurities angered William, although he fought to keep it from showing on his face. It was far too soon after his arrival at the estate to show his

cousin the truth of who he was. William wanted to learn more before he did so. He looked over at Cousin Mary, who was doing her best to be invisible, and saw her nose was buried in a volume of Fordyce's sermons. He was surprised that Cousin Bennet allowed his daughter to read the rantings of a man who was not married[3] and clearly had no love for women. He had not been in her company for long, but William wondered why Cousin Mary tried to make herself invisible.

Granted, as she presented herself, she did not look as beautiful as her sisters; however, William believed, if she allowed herself to dress and wear her hair less severely, she would be a very pretty young woman. He wondered if the spectacles were really needed because from what he could see, she was reading over the top of them, not looking through the lenses.

In the time they had been in the drawing room, William had been able to tell that Miss Bennet, Cousin Jane, was the peacemaker in the family. Cousin Elizabeth, aside from her remarkable memory skill, was very intelligent, but she had not said very much, holding herself back, while, he guessed, she weighed his character.

The dynamic between the youngest two was obvious. Cousin Lydia was her mother's favourite and could do no wrong. Cousin Catherine, or Kitty, as her family called her, followed her younger sister in everything. If, as he was worried that she would after seeing the way she behaved in Meryton, Cousin Lydia was led into sin by one of the officers, the chances were great that Cousin Kitty would follow her younger sister in that as well.

From the little he had seen of Cousin Bennet, the reports Father's investigators had given him were wholly accurate.

It would be difficult to hide his true character for a few days, but it is what he needed to do. William wanted to be certain of his conclusions before he began to assert himself.

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Chapter 11

Some little time before dinner, when her daughters had left the drawing room and Mr Bennet was in his study, Fanny took the opportunity to make her sentiments known to Mr Collins. When she had been overwhelmed by thoughts of the dastardly entail, she had forgotten that Mr Collins meant to make amends to her daughters for being the recipient of the estate.

“Mr Collins, will you remain and attend me?” Fanny requested when she saw her quarry was about to leave the drawing room.

If William Collins was a man who wagered or gambled, he would have put money on the subject of the conversation the Bennet matron wanted to have with him. That conversation being connected to his marrying one of her daughters. Being a polite and gentlemanly man, he deferred his desire for some solitary time before the meal and turned to face his cousin’s wife. “How may I be of service, Mrs Bennet?”

“There is no need to be so formal; please call me Cousin Fanny. Come and sit.” Fanny pointed to the armchair next to hers. She waited until Mr Collins complied. “You wrote of amends to my daughters. What form would those amends take?”

It was not hard to tell that Cousin Fanny’s purpose in life was to marry off her daughters as well as may be. Though in all fairness, was that not the aim of every mother of daughters? His cousin’s wife had the added pressure of the entail, and with her husband fanning her fears rather than alleviating them, it was little wonder that the woman was obsessed with putting her daughters forward. Add to that, he knew from Father’s investigation that this lady was not gently born, and from what he had seen so far, Cousin Bennet had done nothing to educate his wife in the ways of the gentry. Hence, he would listen to what she said and give her the respect she deserved.

“I am not sure yet, but it *could* include marriage to one of your daughters,” William stated evenly.

Ignoring the word ‘could’, Fanny only heard that he was willing to marry one of her daughters. “How perfect that will be,” she gushed. “Jane is

all but engaged to the master of Netherfield Park, but none of my other daughters are spoken for as yet. Lizzy is next in age, and even if she is nothing to Jane in looks, something of a bluestocking, and has hoydenish tendencies, I am sure she would make a good parson's wife."

Knowing that Mrs Bennet would push one of her daughters at him and experiencing it, were two very different things. How she could assume that her eldest was to receive a proposal escaped him when as far as William knew she was not being courted officially. Denigrating her second daughter with one breath, and with the next breath pushing her forward as his potential wife, was not a way to make a man interested in Cousin Elizabeth. Was the woman blind? Although she was not tall, willowy, with blonde hair, and blue eyes, Cousin Elizabeth was as beautiful as her older sister, just in a different way.

That being said, admittedly based on a very short acquaintance, William did not see either of the two eldest Bennet sisters as his wife. Rather than judge too soon, he needed to take his time and get to know them better; perhaps he would discover that his initial impression was incorrect. William realised that Mrs Bennet was waiting to hear his response.

"As I seek a wife, I will take your words into account." What William said was true and did not commit to anything or, more importantly, anyone, but he knew that his cousin's wife would interpret the words as they suited her.

"I knew you would see the good sense of my suggestion," Fanny enthused.

"If you will excuse me, Mrs Bennet, I would like to return to my chamber and prepare for dinner." Collins stood, bowed, and exited the room.

In Fanny's mind, it was a settled thing. Mr Collins would marry Lizzy, and that would save them from starving in the hedgerows. '*It is the least that wilful girl can do after she refused to be born a son!*' she exclaimed in her thoughts. Just as she had never done previously, Fanny did not ask herself why she never thought the same about Mary, Kitty, and Lydia.

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As the guest of honour, William Collins was seated to the right of the hostess at dinner. He noticed that the two eldest daughters sat either side of their father, Cousin Mary closest to him and Cousins Kitty and Lydia on the left of the mother, the younger one closest to Mrs Bennet.

“Lizzy, come sit next to your cousin,” Fanny called out across the room before the footman could place the dishes on the table.

Elizabeth looked at her father plaintively. She hoped this was one time he would intervene and not look on for his own entertainment. She held her breath as she watched while Papa decided what to do.

As entertaining as it would have been to see Lizzy fend off any advances by his cousin, Bennet decided he preferred to have his second daughter close by where he could enjoy some sensible conversation. “No, Mrs Bennet, the food is about to be served, so there is no reason to change where Lizzy is seated, nor do I want the seating changed for subsequent meals,” Bennet commanded.

“But, Mr Bennet…” Fanny began.

“No, Mrs Bennet, I am firm in this,” Bennet interjected. He used his tone of voice, which told his wife that he would brook no argument.

Realising that her husband would not relent, Fanny huffed then nodded to the footman. She watched with dissatisfaction as Mr Collins spoke to Mary instead of the daughter she had planned for him to converse with at the first meal together.

While William was enjoying the well-cooked repast, he heard his cousin address him.

“I am not sure this is the quality that you are used to when you dine at the great estate of Rosings Park, so I hope you are satisfied with our simpler fair,” Bennet stated to see what reaction he could coax from his cousin in order to amuse himself.

“I do dine at Rosings Park at times, and the food is very good there,” William looked to his hostess, “as is the food here.” He had been vague but truthful. He ate the after-service meal at Rosings Park, and at least once a fortnight, he would have dinner there. Miss de Bourgh enjoyed much plainer fare than what she said Lady Catherine used to order. That meant

that the meal here was on par with that served at Rosings Park, but William knew it was not what Cousin Bennet was looking for. He decided to throw Cousin Bennet a bone. He turned to Mrs Bennet. “This meal is excellent; the boiled potatoes are perfect. To which of my cousins is thanks for this meal owed?”

“Mr Collins! None of my daughters work in the kitchens or anywhere else in the house. We can afford a cook.” Fanny sniffed.

Bennet was much happier with what he was witnessing. His wife was making a cake of herself, and his cousin was showing his ignorance. He had a wide grin on his face as he watched the unfolding scene.

“I meant no offence to your wonderful daughters, Mrs Bennet,” William said, making his voice drip with contrition. “I apologise if I gave any.”

“Well, see you do not err in that way again,” Fanny admonished. Yes, she wanted him to marry Lizzy, but that did not mean she would allow him to intimate that her daughters were little better than servants.

William bowed his head to the placated matron. He did not miss the smirk on his cousin’s face.

After dinner, there was no separation of the sexes. Bennet went to his study, having had enough amusement for the nonce while sending his cousin to be with the ladies of the house in the drawing room.

Although his cousin’s actions were insulting to a guest in his house, William said nothing and obediently followed the ladies.

In the drawing room, Fanny called for tea while Mary went to sit at the pianoforte. Kitty and Lydia sat on one sofa with their heads together while they spoke too loudly and giggled now and again. Jane and Lizzy sat on a settee conversing quietly between them.

From what William could see, the two eldest were very close, as were the two youngest, which left Cousin Mary alone. It was little wonder she turned to texts like Fordyce’s Sermons and spent time in solitary pursuits like playing the pianoforte. He wondered if the middle Bennet sister compensated for her loneliness by chasing accomplishments, even if it did not lead to her perfecting what she was learning. He pondered if Cousin

Bennet had taken the trouble of employing a music master for Cousin Mary to learn the instrument.

Once tea was poured and then consumed, Fanny turned to look at the seating arrangement in the room. '*This will not do,*' she thought when she observed that Lizzy and Mr Collins were not near one another. "Jane, I need to speak to you," Fanny said aloud.

Ever the obedient daughter, Jane went to her mother's side. "Yes, Mamma?"

"Just sit in this chair," Fanny hissed as she indicated a chair next to her. "Mr Collins, I am sure you want to sit next to my Lizzy."

"I thank you profusely, Mrs Bennet, but I am happy where I am," William responded. "It is a good spot to sit and hear Cousin Mary play. No offence meant to you, Cousin Elizabeth."

Fanny was about to bite out a retort, but she stopped herself. If she angered Mr Collins, he would not offer for Lizzy. Her face showed her displeasure, but she held her peace. Not many minutes later, she chose to retire complaining of an aching head.

For her part, Elizabeth was happy Mr Collins had not acquiesced to her mother's manipulation. That he resisted her did confuse her. It was not that she was interested in him even though he was a handsome man. Her confusion, however, was due to the assumption she had made about her cousin's character. He was much firmer in not giving into Mamma's machinations than she had believed he would be.

When Mary heard what Cousin Collins said, her hand faltered momentarily before she was able to carry on playing again. Mr Collins had just chosen to sit and hear her play at the instrument rather than sit next to Lizzy.

Even though Mamma said Lizzy was nothing to Jane, she did not call her plain like she did Mary. It was why Mary wore unneeded spectacles as well as why she dressed and made up her hair the way she did. If she was seen as plain, then plain she would be. She felt excluded by both her older and younger sisters. She had found a measure of comfort in the moralistic

texts, like Fordyce’s sermons. At the same time, so she would stand out, Mary decided that she would be the most accomplished Bennet sister.

Men always stared at Jane; in fact, men stared at all of her sisters aside from herself, so why was Mr Collins not doing so? Mamma was clearly vexed that he had not complied with her attempt to push Mr Collins and Lizzy together. If Mary were honest with herself, she would admit that she had always wanted to be the wife of a clergyman. However, always being told how plain she was, coupled with none of her sisters wanting to hear her recitation of pearls of wisdom from the sermons she had read, had eroded her confidence to the point where she had begun to believe that no man would want to have her for a wife.

Perhaps Mr Collins just enjoyed the piece she had been performing. That was it; there was no possibility that he saw her as a prospective wife.

For the rest of the evening until supper, when Mrs Bennet did not join her family, William observed his cousins. His opinions of each of them became more informed. He decided it would be a few more days before he would allow his true character to be seen by the Bennets.

That night before he climbed into the bed in his chamber, William began a letter to his parents.

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Based on the assumptions he had made because of the content and tone of the letter William Collins had written to him, Bennet was not as satisfied with his cousin’s visit as he had believed he would be. He had anticipated his cousin’s manners being deficient, especially at the table, but the man behaved like a gentleman.

Both the previous day during dinner and supper, and again when they broke their fast this very morning, Mr Collins’s table manners were flawless. He did not take too much food and did not speak when he was masticating. Not only that, but the man kept his mouth closed as he chewed his food and would only speak when he had swallowed what was in his mouth. No matter how many times Bennet tried to speak to his cousin while he ate, he would not rise to the bait and speak with food in his mouth.
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The only amusement at dinner was when Cousin Collins made the comment about who worked in the kitchen to prepare the food, which upset Mrs Bennet very nicely.

The way Mr Collins behaved for the most part confused Bennet. Had not his father and grandfather said the Collinses were not worth knowing, as they were uneducated brutes? He remembered that he had heard his father mention the Collinses were nought but farm labourers who could not wait to get their grubby hands on Longbourn. Grandfather had claimed that it was his uncle, William Bennet's, actions which had caused the break in the family when he rejected his family.

Suddenly something hit Bennet. If what he had been told was true, why would this Mr Collins's father and older brother release any possible claim on Longbourn in favour of a second son? Then Bennet remembered that his grandfather and father had claimed that the reason for consigning letters from a Collins to the fire was that they were always making spurious claims on Longbourn.

Indolent he was, but Bennet enjoyed a good mystery, and what his father and grandfather had told him about the Collinses did not fit with that letter from the solicitor in Faversham nor the way Mr William Collins had behaved since his arrival the previous day.

Never once had Bennet seen him cataloguing all of his family's property possessively. Surprisingly, there had been no avaricious looks and no mention about the quality or cost of anything.

Could it be that Father and Grandfather had been wrong?

He would think about the quandary regarding his cousin when he returned to his sanctuary. As much as he hated to leave his study, Bennet made his way to the stables to order his gelding saddled. He had put off meeting with his tenant, who farmed the largest farm that was still occupied, for too long already, and he knew he could not lose him as well as the others who had left.

Arriving at the stables, he ordered the groom to saddle Artimus. He could see the old mare, Nellie, in her stall, then he looked at the next stall, which should have been empty. It was not. Bennet approached the half door and was shocked by what he saw. There was a dappled grey stallion in the

stall; he was at least seventeen hands and was regarding Bennet disinterestedly. Then, he looked at the two empty stalls where his carriage horses were kept when not pulling the carriage or busy on the home farm. However, the next stall was occupied.

When the groom Jack led Artimus out of his stall, Bennet stopped him. “Jack, to whom do these horses belong?” Bennet enquired.

“They be Mr Collins’s, Master,” the young groom replied.

Bennet stared at the stallion. “Is he a thoroughbred?” Bennet demanded.

“Aye, ‘e be that,” Jack confirmed. “I ‘aven’t ridden ‘im yet, but I ‘ope I do soon. I think ‘e can fly.”

“And the other horse?” Bennet pointed at the gelding he had not seen before.

“That be the ‘orse ‘oo pulls Mr Collins’s gig. It be in the coach ‘ouse,” Jack related.

If his cousin was the owner of such a horse, he most certainly was not in want of funds. How could that be? There was nothing for it now; Bennet would have to quiz his cousin when he returned from seeing Peter Jackson.

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William had been missing riding Vulcan, so he saddled the stallion himself and took a short ride to the hill, called Oakham Mount, and back. At the same time he arrived back at the stables; William saw Cousin Bennet approaching on the back of the gelding who was housed in the stall next to Vulcan.

“Cousin, you are full of surprises,” Bennet stated after he dismounted and handed the reins to the groom. “I did not think that you would own such a fine horse, not to mention a second one to pull your gig.”

“Is it so very surprising that I should have a good horse? My father taught my brother Clem and me to ride from an early age. Clem and I used to race across the fields at Collins Hollow.”

“Collins Hollow?”
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“My father’s estate near Faversham. Vulcan here is from a neighbouring estate with a good breeding programme. Father’s and my brother’s stallions come from the same estate.”

“Mr Collins, are you telling me that you were raised on an estate? How can that be? I was told that your family were farm labourers!”

“Cousin Bennet, there are not many labourers who send both of their sons to Harrow and then Oxford, but perhaps I err. I know that from my great-great-grandfather down to my own father, the Collins family have attempted to write to the Bennets of Longbourn, but we have never received replies. For that reason, it is unsurprising that you know not about Collins Hollow.” Collins looked to Vulcan, who he was still holding by the reins. “I want to see my horse back in his stall. May we speak later?”

All Bennet could do was nod. It seemed that much of what his father and grandfather told him about the Collinses was not based in fact. He walked back towards the manor house in somewhat of a shock.

William was not sorry he had allowed his cousin to see some of the truth of who he was. He could not stand idly by and allow Cousin Bennet to speak about his Collins family in that way. William was not sure, but he had a very strong suspicion that his cousin had not read the documents governing the current entail. He still wanted to observe for a few more days before he confronted his cousin about the estate and other things he was noticing.

He made his way back into the house. William climbed the two levels to his guest chamber and changed out of his riding attire, had a quick wash using the bowl of cold water on the dresser, and then dressed in his usual garb of a clergyman. On returning to the ground floor, he entered the drawing room.

“Mr Collins, what good timing. My girls are to walk into Meryton. You can escort them, especially Lizzy, and they will show you the town and introduce you to any of our friends they encounter,” Fanny not so much suggested as commanded.

There was no missing the way Cousin Elizabeth rolled her eyes on hearing her mother. However, she said nothing, and soon the six of them were walking down the drive towards the lane that led into Meryton. As

Cousins Jane and Elizabeth were walking together, as were Cousins Kitty and Lydia, William made no attempt to attach himself to Cousin Elizabeth as Mrs Bennet wanted. Rather, he offered his arm to Cousin Mary.

She gave William a shy but grateful smile and took his arm, resting her hand on his forearm lightly.

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Chapter 12

"**Denny**!" Lydia called out at the top of her voice as soon as the group from Longbourn entered the main street of the market town of Meryton. Before anyone could restrain her, Lydia, who was very pleased that Lieutenant Denny had returned from London, darted across the street.

Seeing his youngest cousin's improper behaviour did not sit well with William Collins, but he was not her father or brother, so he had to bite his tongue and say nothing. There was no missing how embarrassed the three eldest Bennet sisters were at the youngest's impropriety. Miss Kitty, whom William had dubbed 'the shadow', followed her younger and brasher sister towards the group of officers who were standing with a man who was doing his best to look like a gentleman.

"Should we join Cousins Kitty and Lydia?" William suggested.

Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary had been momentarily frozen with mortification at Lydia's behaviour. The sisters' shame deepened when they saw the disapproving looks being directed at Kitty and Lydia by some of their friends and neighbours. Not even Jane could find a positive way of looking at the flirtatious spectacle both of her youngest sisters were making of themselves.

Shaking off the disgust they felt, the three eldest Bennet sisters followed Mr Collins across the road to where the group of four men were standing with Kitty and Lydia.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Mary, it is a pleasure to see you." Denny bowed as did Lieutenants Chamberlayne and Pratt. "I was explaining to your younger sisters that this very day I returned from London with our newest lieutenant, Mr George Wickham."

Elizabeth admired the look of the new man. He was handsome but not quite as tall as Cousin Collins. His hair was dark brown; his eyes were a similar colour. What struck her was the open and honest look on his countenance.

Jane noticed the officers and their friend were looking at Mr Collins questioningly. “Mr Collins, I present to you Lieutenants Denny, Chamberlayne, and Pratt. As you heard, the gentleman is Mr Wickham. Gentlemen, our cousin, Mr Collins.”

“You will look ever so handsome when you are in your scarlet coat,” Lydia said flirtatiously as she batted her eyes at Mr Wickham.

“Lydia, behave!” Elizabeth exclaimed as she pinched her sister’s arm.

“Ow! I will tell Mamma what you did,” Lydia threatened. Once in the past, Lydia had pinched Lizzy, and thanks to Lizzy returning the pinch with far more force, it had been the last time Lydia had done anything physical to her second eldest sister. All she could do was appeal to Mamma, but she knew that Papa would intercede on Lizzy’s behalf, so it only left her the threat and the hope it would work, even if it had never been effective before.

Before Cousin Lydia could commit any further outrage, William noticed two good-looking horses being ridden towards them. One was an almost black stallion save for a white blaze on his nose and white socks on his forelegs. He guessed it was eighteen to nineteen hands high. The other he estimated was less than seventeen hands and more than likely a gelding. Based on their relative heights above the saddle, William could see that the rider of the stallion was a few inches taller than the man next to him.

He watched as the man on the gelding spurred his horse forward and dismounted near the group. The other man was sitting stock still; his eyes locked onto something or someone with a look of pure fury on his face. William turned and saw that the man on the horse had his eyes locked onto the man who had been introduced as Mr Wickham.

That man had turned white with fear. When he saw the man on the horse was not approaching, some of Mr Wickham’s colour returned, and he gave a mocking salute. The man on the stallion wheeled his horse and kicked it into a canter in the direction from whence he had come.

It was then that William noticed that Cousin Elizabeth had been watching the interaction between the two men as he had. His thoughts were interrupted when he heard Cousin Jane speak.

“Thank you, Mr Bingley; as you can see, I am well again. There is no trace of the illness which kept me at Netherfield Park,” Jane said in reply to Mr Bingley’s enquiry about her health. “Mr Bingley, it seems that Mr Darcy is returning to Netherfield Park.” She cocked her head towards the back of the retreating man.

“You are as pretty as ever, Miss Bennet. I will be bringing the invitation to the ball on the morrow. Until then, I bid all of you farewell,” Bingley said as he bowed over the angel’s hand.

“You will invite the officers, will you not, Mr Bingley?” Lydia demanded.

“Lydia!” chorused the three eldest Bennet sisters.

“Yes, all of the officers will be invited,” Bingley responded. He remounted his gelding, doffed his beaver and began to ride after his friend.

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‘*What is that prig Darcy doing here?*’ Wickham asked himself silently. ‘*Will he inform Fitzwilliam where I am? No, he will not because he knows that all it will take are some whispers from me about that little mouse Georgiana and her reputation will be in tatters. I am safe here. That is why the bastard did not confront me and rode away the way he did.*’ Then, Wickham realised something. ‘*The bit of fluff named Miss Elizabeth saw the way I reacted to seeing the prig. I will have to make sure I spin a tale that explains what she saw and make the nodcock the villain of the piece. Then, I will suggest she blacken Darcy’s name in the area.*

‘That will make the proud man quit the town!’

Wickham was still smarting because his plan to elope with Georgiana Darcy, claim her dowry of thirty thousand pounds, and revenge himself on Darcy had been thwarted by the bloody man arriving in Ramsgate two days earlier than he had been expected. The bad luck of it!

He would have tried to parlay his knowledge of the almost elopement into a way to force Darcy to pay him what he was due, but Richard Fitzwilliam’s name had been invoked. Fitzwilliam was someone of whom Wickham was truly petrified.
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Ever since the time they had been boys, the cousins had been eleven and Wickham ten, Fitzwilliam had thrashed Wickham when he had been caught trying to put a bur under Darcy's saddle. How was it fair that because of an accident of birth he had nothing and the prig was fantastically wealthy? All of the time he had dedicated to charming old Mr Darcy had been for nought! It had been a waste of time and effort. Rather than a satellite estate or, failing that, a significant amount of blunt, the old man had only left him one thousand pounds in his will along with a recommendation to the Kympton living when it came open, conditioned on *if* he took orders! George Wickham was meant for more, not making sermons!

Yes, he had given up all claim to the living in return for three thousand pounds. However, it was not his fault the cards had been against him, and he had lost the four thousand pounds and had run up debts for two thousand more in just over three years. How dare the prig refuse to pay him more when Wickham tried to claim the living after the incumbent died?

To punish Darcy, Wickham had enlisted Karen Younge to assist in executing his perfect plan in Ramsgate. Nothing had come of it, no dowry and no revenge!

Now, to escape his creditors in London, Wickham had agreed to join the Derbyshire Militia. Thankfully Denny had believed Wickham's tale about the reputed debts he had left in Lambton. It was fortuitous the man was not aware of Wickham's actions in other locales. The wages were not nearly enough, but there was a town full of naïve merchants who would extend credit to officers without thinking, not to mention all the maidenly flowers he could pluck.

He was sure Miss Lydia, who he had just met, was a lightskirt, but he would have to be careful with the daughter of a gentleman. He would not mind plucking Miss Elizabeth. He estimated she would not be an easy seduction, but that made it all the sweeter.

He snapped out of his reverie and turned his attention back to the Bennet chits and the parson standing with them.

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Darcy had needed to use all of his vaunted self-control not to jump off Zeus and wrap his hands around Wickham's scrawny neck. As satisfying as that would have felt, as a gentleman, it was not something in which he could allow himself to indulge.

What made it worse was that the dissipated wastrel was standing next to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Of course, she was not good enough for a Darcy of Pemberley, but that did not mean that he wanted her to be importuned by a libertine like Wickham. She had looked as beautiful as she ever had, and that just reignited the battle between his heart and his head. Wickham's closeness to her had only made that battle worse.

As soon as he turned Zeus onto the lane leading to Bingley's leased estate, Darcy wanted to give his stallion his head and gallop the nearly two miles to Netherfield Park. He suddenly realised that he had left Bingley behind. He pulled his horse up and waited to see if Bingley had followed him.

It was not many minutes to wait before his friend came cantering into view.

"Darce, I was speaking to my angel, and you disappeared. Is there aught wrong?" Bingley queried as he drew his bay gelding up next to Darcy's mount.

"You have my apologies, Bingley. I could not remain in company with you once I had seen that profligate, Wickham, in the group. Trust me when I tell you that it was better for everyone that I withdrew," Darcy stated.

"Wickham. You mean the one whose late father was Pemberley's steward?" Bingley verified.

"The very same," Darcy confirmed as he urged Zeus forward into a canter.

"I am sure you have your reasons for not wanting to be in his company, so I will not try and force a confidence," Bingley responded. He remembered something. "I just told Miss Lydia that I will invite the officers to the ball. I will not do so if you prefer."

"Do not exclude them for me. If I know Wickham, he will find a reason to keep away. He knows to keep his distance from me," Darcy revealed.

Darcy was disappointed that he and Bingley were on their way back to Netherfield Park. That meant that he would have to be in company with the cloying Miss Bingley. At that thought, Darcy decided that if her fawning got to be too much, he would simply cry fatigue and go rest. Even though he would never gratify a compromise, Darcy had Carstens—his valet—sleeping on a cot in front of the door from the hallway into his chambers.

For the remainder of the short ride, the two friends did not speak.

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As William Collins watched Mr Wickham, he saw that the man was wearing a gentleman's mask, yet he suspected he was anything but. The reaction of both men, his patroness's cousin and the soon-to-be lieutenant, told him that the latter was not a man to be trusted. It was only when Mr Darcy—thanks to Cousin Jane mentioning his name William knew the name of the man—did not approach and turned away that the Wickham fellow had recovered his equanimity.

Add to that, William had heard both Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam speak about Mr Darcy as one of the most honourable men they had met, socially inept but a good man.

Cousin Lydia's voice broke through William's thoughts.

"You must all come to my Aunt Hattie's, Mrs Phillips's, card party on the morrow," Lydia invited.

"Lydia!" The three eldest Bennet sisters chorused again.

The three eldest Bennet chits' reaction to the youngest's invitation stopped Wickham accepting for himself and the other officers.

"You may not issue an invitation to Aunt Hattie's house without her say so," Elizabeth chastised.

"Why do you try to spoil my fun?" Lydia demanded as she stamped her walking boot.

Wickham saw a way to ingratiate himself with the delectable Miss Elizabeth. "I am afraid, Miss Lydia, that Miss Elizabeth has the right of it.
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We cannot accept an invitation without it being issued by the mistress of the house."

Seeing that she did not give a fig about the rules of society which Mamma said made no sense, Lydia was not pleased that Mr Wickham contradicted her. She saw her aunt approaching them. "Aunt Hattie, you will invite these four officers to the card party you are having on the morrow, will you not?" Lydia requested.

"I only see three officers, but they are welcome," Hattie agreed.

"Mr Wickham will be a member of the regiment within the hour," Denny related. "He will be in uniform before we attend your house, Mrs Phillips."

"Then, it is settled." Lydia clapped her hand. "We will see you there."

"I apologise for having to leave you, but I must take Wickham here to meet with the colonel so he will be able to gain his commission," Denny said with a bow.

"Did I not read that the Lord Lieutenant of each county appoints the officers to the county's militia? Or did I err?" William Collins asked innocently. He had seen that the Wickham fellow had been about to ignore decorum and accept Miss Lydia's improper invitation, and he had changed his mind when he heard what Cousin Elizabeth said. It was almost as if the man wanted to impress his cousin. William had no clue as to why, but he was resolved to watch the man carefully whenever they were in company together.

"Your understanding is true," Pratt responded. "It is within the Lord Lieutenant's discretion to allow the commander of each regiment to grant a certain number of commissions if, like in our regiment's case, there is a shortage of officers."

"I thank you for your detailed reply." William bowed to the lieutenant.

With that, the officers bowed and then walked towards Colonel Forster's office in the house he was renting while in Meryton.

"Cousin, why did you question that handsome Mr Wickham's honour?" Lydia screeched as soon as the officers had walked away. "That was not

well done. You are just jealous that he is so handsome and will soon be wearing a scarlet coat."

"Lydia Frances Bennet, that was very impolite of you," Elizabeth admonished.

William inclined his head in thanks for Cousin Elizabeth's defence. "Cousin Lydia, I did not question Mr Wickham's anything. I asked a general question of the three officers based on something I read. I could not ask Mr Wickham, as he is not yet an officer and may not know." William allowed the child, who should not be out of the schoolroom, never mind allowed to roam freely in society, time to consider his reply.

As soon as Lydia realised her cousin was correct, she shrugged her shoulders and went on to chatter with Kitty and Aunt Hattie, without issuing an apology to the parson.

After a little while Hattie took her leave of her nieces and their cousin—Jane had made the introduction—and made for her house.

The five Bennet sisters and Collins walked back towards Longbourn, much to Mary's pleasure in the same groupings as they had walked to the town.

"I wonder what Mr Darcy did to anger that nice Mr Wickham," Elizabeth speculated not long after they left the town. "That man gives offence wherever he goes. What an insufferable man."

William and Miss Mary were not far behind Cousins Jane and Elizabeth, so he had been able to hear what Cousin Elizabeth said.

"Perhaps it was some misunderstanding," Jane suggested.

"That will not do, Jane. The reactions I saw were not from a simple misunderstanding. I am telling you that Mr Darcy said something to upset Mr Wickham. Could it be that I am not the only one he goes about insulting?" Elizabeth mused. "Did you not see how amiable and honest Mr Wickham looked? Mr Darcy must be the one at fault, I have no doubt about it!"

Although she was well aware that Lizzy jumped to conclusions, Jane preferred to have a peaceful walk.

There was no missing the disdain in the tone Cousin Elizabeth employed when she spoke of Mr Darcy. She had mentioned an insult; he wondered what had upset his cousin to that extent. William decided he would need to make some discreet enquiries at some point.

He knew that in another day or two he would have enough information to be able to see a better picture of his cousins, and then he could decide what, if anything, he needed to do before the end of his stay in the area and he returned to Kent.

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Fanny was looking out of the drawing room windows when she saw her daughters and Mr Collins walking on the drive towards the house. She scowled when she saw that Lizzy was walking with Jane and not their cousin.

In her anger, she missed that Mr Collins and Mary were together again. Fanny decided that she would have to work harder to push Lizzy at him.

Before she could issue Lizzy the set down she deserved, Fanny was distracted by Kitty and Lydia—mainly the latter—and their talk of the officers, especially the new one who was particularly handsome. Speaking with her two youngest about how they—mostly Lydia—flirted with the officers distracted Fanny from her purpose.

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Chapter 13

No sooner had Fanny greeted her sister than she sat herself with Lady Lucas and Mesdames Long, Goulding, and Purvis. As much as Hattie Phillips would have preferred to join her sister and the friends they had in common to gossip, she could not, as she was the hostess.

Charlotte Lucas had heard Eliza introduce a cousin who was a parson being hosted at Longbourn. She did not expect the man who had accompanied the Bennet ladies into the room to be as handsome as he was. Miss Lucas was not the only younger woman whose attention had been pulled to the good-looking man who had accompanied the Bennets.

He was not happy to have competition in the room. George Wickham fought to keep the scowl from his face when women and young ladies who had been looking at him admiringly were all now looking at the clergyman instead. The only thing that pleased him was to see Miss Elizabeth here. He needed to find some time to speak to her and use her to begin to well and truly blacken the prig's name.

"Mrs Phillips, I thank you for including me in the invitation," William Collins said as he bowed. "Your house looks far more comfortable than my parsonage."

Hattie blushed at the compliment to her home. "You are my nieces' cousin, so of course, I could not exclude you." She thought of something. "The games are low stakes, but still for coin. Is that compatible with you being a clergyman?"

"As long as it is a respectable place like your home, there is no harm. In fact, I enjoy some games of cards like whist. You have no reason to be concerned for me," William replied with another bow. He looked to Mary. "Cousin Mary, will you introduce me to your neighbours?" Out of the corner of his eye, William noticed the calculating way Lieutenant Wickham was watching Cousin Elizabeth. He decided that he would keep an eye on the man whom he did not trust.

When Jane looked around to see who was attending her aunt's card party, she felt a distinct sense of disappointment on noting that none of her

new friends were present. Having recalled that they always seemed to come late, Jane held out hope that they would remain true to form.

“Aunt Hattie, did you invite the Netherfield Park party?” Jane asked hopefully.

“I did. However, Miss Bingley sent a terse refusal with not so much as a reason for them not attending,” Hattie reported.

The news caused Jane’s serene countenance to fall momentarily before her mask was in place once again. Jane felt a hand on her arm and saw it belonged to Lizzy. She allowed her younger sister to lead her to a quiet corner.

“Jane, you are the sweetest and dearest person I know, but I did try and warn you that Miss Bingley is no friend of yours or to your connection to her brother,” Elizabeth insisted softly so only Jane could hear. “Add to that the influence of that proud, contemptuous, insufferable Mr Darcy. Like Miss Bingley, I am certain that Mr Darcy would never lower himself to grace the house of a country solicitor with his *consequence*.”

As much as she did not want to believe Lizzy had the right of it, Jane was afraid that there could be some truth to her sister’s assertions.

Being close enough to hear Cousin Elizabeth spewing venom aimed at Mr Darcy again, William wondered what the man had done to wound his cousin as deeply as she seemed to be.

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After a plentiful buffet was enjoyed by her guests, Hattie Phillips directed her manservant to open the card tables and set them up in the area which had been cleared of armchairs and the sofa for that purpose.

As soon as the tables and chairs were ready, Lydia grabbed Mr Wickham’s hand and attempted to tug him towards the table where she was about to play lottery tickets. She was not happy the handsome lieutenant was not allowing her to pull him towards the table. “Come, Mr Wickham, you can make up the numbers at my table.” Lydia batted her eyes at him.

“As much as I would enjoy your company, Miss Lydia, I am afraid that I am not in the mood to play cards at this time.” Wickham bowed to the
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little flirt. Getting her to lift her skirt would not be difficult at all.

William Collins did not miss the way Lieutenant Wickham leered at his youngest cousin. The more time he was in the slimy man's company, the more suspicious he became. There was something he could do to protect the town from men the ilk of this Wickham. William sought out Sir William Lucas, who he had met at Longbourn, a man who used to be in trade.

"Sir William, seeing these officers puts me in mind of a regiment that had encamped just outside of Faversham, the town near my father's estate," William began.

"What is it that makes you think of them? I suppose it is because they are also militia," Sir William guessed.

"Your perspicacity does you proud, Sir William," William said and bowed to the man. "My tale is not a happy one. Faversham gave the regiment a welcome like Meryton has extended to this one. Unfortunately, the town was repaid with treachery." Seeing the horrified look on the knight's countenance, William continued. "Sadly, it was only discovered after they had left the area. Many debts were left unpaid at the shops in the town. If the gentry, like my father, had not covered what was owing, half of the shopkeepers in Faversham would have been ruined. However, that was not the worst of it."

"What could be worse than merchants being beggared?" Sir William enquired with horror.

"Several impressionable young girls, and I say girls, were promised marriage if they anticipated their vows. Not a single one was married when the regiment made its departure. The truth only came to light some months later when those *consequences* were obvious."

"Surely that will not occur here?" Sir William queried, panic in his voice.

"I hope not, but would it not be better to take precautions?" William did not miss the beseeching look the knight gave him. "Unless you and your fellow landowners wish to pay off dishonourable men's debts, I would suggest you strongly advise the merchants against extending credit to men who are, after all, transitory in the town. What was discovered in

Faversham was that the worst offenders with the most extensive debts had accounts with practically every shop in the town. At the same time, word should be spread about unscrupulous men who will offer marriage and use some pretty words to have a girl anticipate her vows. I know not if there are any such bad apples in this barrel, but is it not better to prevent the problem before it occurs, than hope it will not and have to live with the results if it does?"

William Collins had embellished the problem in Faversham, but he had a feeling that this Mr Wickham, who was trying to charm one and all, was such a man. If he was wrong, then there would be no harm done; but if he was correct, then many would be saved.

"In the morning, I will speak to the shopkeepers," a greatly shaken Sir William responded. He had a young impressionable daughter; heaven forfend something like Mr Collins spoke of were to occur with Maria.

Just as he left Sir William, he saw Mr Wickham lead Cousin Elizabeth to a sofa which had been pushed back against the wall. William sat in a chair close to them, with his back to them, and well out of the lieutenant's line of sight. All he could hope was that Cousin Elizabeth was as intelligent as he thought she was and would be able to see through what she was about to be told.

"How far is Netherfield Park from Meryton?" Wickham began.

The question pleased Elizabeth since she was not able to ask the handsome officer directly about Mr Darcy and what passed between them. She was happy he seemed willing to raise the subject, and she was more than happy to hear what he had to say. "It is but two miles to the west."

"How long has Mr Darcy been in residence?"

"A few weeks," Elizabeth responded. "He is a man of very large property in Derbyshire, I understand."

"Yes," replied Mr. Wickham, "his estate there is a noble one. It clears ten thousand pounds per annum. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself, for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy."

Elizabeth could not but look surprised, although she had suspected some connection.

‘*Cousin Elizabeth, this is a man you briefly met the previous day and again this night. Please tell me you are more circumspect than to allow him to tell you some personal tale which would be wholly inappropriate,*’ William thought.

“You may well be surprised, Miss Bennet, at such an assertion after seeing, as you probably might have witnessed, the very cold manner of our meeting yesterday. Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?”

‘*Cold meeting! Ha! You were fearful, and Mr Darcy was angry. I see how you change facts to suit your purposes, whatever they are,*’ Collins said to himself.

“As much as I ever wish to be,” cried Elizabeth very warmly. “I spent four days in the same house with him while caring for my sister who was ill. I think him very disagreeable.”

In order to see Mr Wickham’s face, William had turned enough to do so. He did not miss the look of triumph on the man’s countenance as soon as Cousin Elizabeth said the last.

“I have no right to give *my* opinion as to his being agreeable or otherwise. I am not qualified to form one. I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. It is impossible for *me* to be impartial. But I believe your opinion of him would in general astonish—and perhaps you would not express it quite so strongly—anywhere else. Here, you are in the circle of your own family.”

“Upon my word, I say no more *here* than I might say in any house in the neighbourhood, except at Netherfield Park. He is not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody is disgusted with his pride. You will not find him more favourably spoken of by anyone.”

‘*Can you not see he is manipulating you to speak against Mr Darcy? You are more discerning than this, are you not, Cousin Elizabeth?*’ Collins thought silently.

Wickham delayed replying as if he were weighing her words. “I cannot pretend to be sorry that he or any man should not be estimated beyond their

desserts, but with *him* I believe it does not often happen. The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him only as he chooses to be seen."

'*You are describing yourself. I believe you like to present yourself as something you are not,*' William thought. '*For some reason Cousin Elizabeth is blind when it comes to Mr Darcy.*'

"I should take him, even on *my* slight acquaintance, to be an ill-tempered man," Elizabeth cried.

'*I will have to ask Cousin Mary from where this antipathy to Mr Darcy comes.*'

Wickham shook his head. "I wonder whether he is likely to be in this country much longer."

"I do not at all know, but I *heard* nothing of his going away when I was at Netherfield Park. I hope your plans in favour of the Derbyshire Militia will not be affected by his being in the neighbourhood."

"Oh no! It is not for *me* to be driven away by Mr. Darcy. If *he* wishes to avoid seeing *me*, he must go. We are not on friendly terms, and it always gives me pain to meet him; but I have no reason for avoiding *him* but what I might proclaim before all the world; a sense of very great ill-usage and most painful regrets at his being what he is. His father, Miss Bennet, the late Mr. Darcy, was one of the best men that ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had; and I can never be in company with this Mr. Darcy without being grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections. His behaviour to myself has been scandalous, but I verily believe I could forgive him anything and everything, rather than his disappointing the hopes and disgracing the memory of his father."

'*You speak out of both sides of your mouth!*' William thought. '*You claim to revere the late father, but here you are blackening the name that man carried.*'

"I have found the welcome to the militia, and more particularly to myself, very warm here. I am told that not all towns welcome regiments as readily. From what I have experienced since I have been a lieutenant, the society in Meryton is very pleasant." Wickham sighed and affected a look

of sadness. “It was the prospect of constant society and good society, which was my chief inducement to enter the Derbyshire Militia. I knew it to be a most respectable, agreeable corps, and my friend Denny tempted me further by his account of their present quarters and the very great attentions and excellent acquaintances Meryton had extended to them.

“Society, I own, is necessary to me. I have been a disappointed man, and my spirits will not bear solitude. I *must* have employment and society. A military life is not what I was intended for, but circumstances have now made it eligible. The church *ought* to have been my profession—I was brought up for the church, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking of just now.”

“Indeed!”

‘*Cousin Elizabeth, are you blind? This Mr Wickham is the last man who should be allowed to minister to anyone!*’

“Yes, the late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my godfather and excessively attached to me. I cannot do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply and thought he had done it, but when the living fell vacant, it was given elsewhere.”

“Good heavens!” cried Elizabeth. “But how could *that* be? How could his father’s will be disregarded? Why did you not seek legal redress?”

‘Why did you not volunteer to have your Uncle Phillips assist him to get compensation? I will wager had you done so, Mr Wickham would have begun to sweat. He knows that if something is bequeathed in a will, it is not in the heir’s discretion to honour all bequests or not; it is a matter of law.’

“There was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from the law. A man of honour could not have doubted the intention, but Mr. Darcy chose to doubt it—or to treat it as a merely conditional recommendation, and to assert that I had forfeited all claim to it by extravagance, imprudence—in short, anything or nothing. Certain it is, that the living became vacant two years ago, exactly as I was of an age to hold it, and that it was given to another man; and no less certain is it, that I cannot accuse myself of having really done anything to deserve to lose it. I

have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may have spoken my opinion *of* him, and *to* him, too freely. I can recall nothing worse. But the fact is that we are men of a very different sort and that he hates me."

'*What nonsense! Come now, Cousin Elizabeth, ask him if he was ordained. Ask whether or not he served the years before taking his orders. He could not be appointed to any living without first taking orders and then gaining ordination!*'

"This is quite shocking! He deserves to be publicly disgraced."

"Some time or other he *will* be—but it shall not be by *me*. 'Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose *him*."

At that point, William wanted to jump up and shake some sense into his cousin. The man was doing exactly what he had just claimed he could never do. '*Wake up, Cousin Elizabeth!*'

"But what can have been his motive? What can have induced him to behave so cruelly?" Elizabeth had thought Mr Darcy hateful but not dishonourable as well. This was beyond anything she imagined hearing.

"A thorough, determined dislike of me, which I cannot but attribute in some measure to jealousy. Had the late Mr. Darcy liked me less, his son might have borne with me better; but his father's uncommon attachment to me irritated him, I believe, very early in life. He had not a temper to bear the sort of competition in which we stood. He resented me; more than that, he was envious of the sort of preference which was often given me."

'*So you will have people believe that the Darcy heir, the one who now controls all of the Darcy wealth, is jealous of you? Cousin Elizabeth may have intelligence, but when it comes to Mr Darcy, she is wilfully blind.*'

"I had not thought Mr. Darcy so bad as this. Even though I have never liked him, I had not thought so very ill of him. I had supposed him to be despising his fellow creatures in general, but I did not suspect him of descending to such malicious revenge, such injustice, such inhumanity as this." Elizabeth recalled something. "I *do* remember his boasting one day, at Netherfield Park, of the implacability of his resentments, of his having an unforgiving temper. His disposition must be dreadful."

“I will not trust myself on the subject,” replied Wickham; “I can hardly be just to him.”

Elizabeth was again deep in thought, and after a time, exclaimed, “To treat in such a manner the godson, the friend, the favourite of his father! One, too, who had probably been his companion from childhood, connected together, as I think you said, in the closest manner!”

“We were born in the same parish, within the same park; the greatest part of our youth was passed together; inmates of the same house, sharing the same amusements and objects of the same parental care. *My* father began life in the profession which your uncle, Mr. Phillips, appears to do so much credit to—but he gave up everything to be of use to the late Mr. Darcy and devoted all his time to the care of the Pemberley property. He was most highly esteemed by Mr. Darcy, a most intimate and confidential friend. Mr. Darcy often acknowledged himself to be under the greatest obligations to my father’s active superintendence, and when, immediately before my father’s death, Mr. Darcy gave him a voluntary promise of providing for me, I am convinced that he felt it to be as much a debt of gratitude to *him* as of his affection to me.”

“How strange!” cried Elizabeth. “What an abominable man! I wonder if the very pride of this Mr. Darcy has not made him just to you! If for no better motive, he should not have been too proud to be dishonest—for dishonesty I must call it.”

“It *is* wonderful,” replied Wickham, “for almost all his actions may be traced to pride; and pride has often been his best friend. It has connected him nearer with virtue than with any other feeling. But we are none of us consistent, and in his behaviour to me, there were stronger impulses even than pride.”

“Can such abominable pride as his have ever done him good?”

‘*And what, pray tell, Cousin Elizabeth, has blinded you in this way, if not pride? You suffer from the same fault as you claim Mr Darcy does. You refuse to look at what is before you with any objectivity!*’

“Yes. It has often led him to be liberal and generous, to give his money freely, to display hospitality, to assist his tenants, and relieve the poor. Family pride, and *filial* pride—for he is very proud of what his father was—

have done this. Not to appear to disgrace his family, to degenerate from the popular qualities, or to lose the influence of his family is a powerful motive. He has also *brotherly* pride, which, with *some* brotherly affection, makes him a very kind and careful guardian of his sister, and you will hear him generally cried up as the most attentive and best of brothers."

'*Come now, Cousin! Can you not see that the traits this man just described are not ascribed to pride but charity and compassion?*'

"What sort of girl is Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

Wickham shook his head. "I wish I could call her amiable. It gives me pain to speak ill of a Darcy. But she is too much like her brother. She is also very, very proud. As a child, she was affectionate and pleasing and extremely fond of me, and I have devoted hours and hours to her amusement. But she is nothing to me now. She is a handsome girl, about fifteen or sixteen, and, I understand, highly accomplished. Since her father's death, her home has been London, where a lady lives with her and superintends her education."

'*You lie; it is not pain but pleasure it gives you to try and fan my cousin's dislike of Mr Darcy.*'

"I am astonished at his intimacy with Mr. Bingley! How can Mr. Bingley, who seems good humour itself, and is, I really believe, truly amiable, have such a man as a good friend?" Elizabeth questioned. "How can they suit each other? Do you know Mr. Bingley?"

"Not at all."

"He is a sweet-tempered, amiable, charming man. He cannot know what Mr. Darcy is."

"Probably not, but Mr. Darcy can please where he chooses. He does not want for abilities. He can be a conversable companion if he thinks it worth his while. Among those who are at all his equals in consequence, he is a very different man from what he is to those below him socially. His pride never deserts him, but with the equally socially and rich, he is liberal-minded, just, sincere, rational, honourable, and perhaps agreeable—allowing something for fortune and figure."

‘*What twiddle-twaddle! Think Cousin Elizabeth! Use that incredible memory of yours and remember that Mr Bingley is from trade. Mr Wickham says whatever he needs to say so that he can weave his tale of woe for you. And you, cousin of mine, have blindly taken in every word.*’ All William could do was to shake his head.

Seeing that the conversation was concluded, William slipped away. He watched as the disingenuous man bowed over and kissed Cousin Elizabeth’s hand. Mr Wickham collected his friends, and after thanking their host and hostess, they took their leave.

Once all the other guests had departed, Fanny called for the carriage. While they waited, Lydia turned to her second eldest sister. “Why did you not allow Mr Wickham to play cards? Rather, you kept him to yourself!” Lydia demanded peevishly as she stamped a slippered foot. “I saw him first! Leave him alone.”

“He was free to go where he wanted. He was in the company he preferred. You are a child!” Elizabeth shot back.

“Enough! My nerves will not stand for fighting,” Fanny screeched.

Before any more could be said, the Longbourn footman came to inform the mistress that the carriage was ready. They were soon on their way back to Longbourn with Cousin Collins seated on the box.

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Chapter 14

Sir William did not procrastinate the next morning. He rode his gelding into Meryton. His first stop was at the general mercantile, one of the two concerns he had owned in Meryton prior to his knighthood.

The owner was very much shaken by what Sir William had to say and said that there were a few officers to whom he had granted credit, but the most so far was two pounds owed by Lieutenant Wickham. The merchant's eyes got large when Sir William pointed out that the officer had only been in the town for a few short days. The merchant swore he would close all credit accounts for individual officers and demand payment forthwith.

When Sir William shared what he had been told regarding younger ladies, that too hit home, as the man had daughters of thirteen and fifteen. He resolved to speak to them, his sons, and his wife as soon as may be.

The scene was repeated at every shop in Meryton as well as at the Red Lion Inn. A small number of officers had accounts at two or three merchants, but only one, Lieutenant Wickham, had credit at practically every store in Meryton. The total he owed was already close to twenty pounds, and that was after only two or three days!

Each person Sir William spoke to swore they would protect their daughters and make sure that the information about what some officers had been known to do to gain the virtue of unsuspecting maidens would be disseminated far and wide.

What he had discovered perturbed Sir William so much that he decided there was a need to confront Colonel Forster. He made for the man's office.

"How may I assist you, Sir William?" Colonel Forster said as he extended his hand to the knight after his adjutant, Captain Carter, showed him in, leaving the door open.

"It is more like how I am able to stop you and your regiment from being told to move on from Meryton." Ignoring the outraged look on the Colonel's face, Sir William continued. "What would you say if I told you that one of your officers has credit accounts with practically every merchant

in the town, and since he has been here only a few days, already owes twenty pounds, or close to it?”

“Who would that be?” Forster demanded.

“Lieutenant Wickham. Before you ask, I verified the existence of the debts myself. I am unsure if you are aware, but I used to be a tradesman, and I, more than most, understand what unpaid debts can do to a business.”

“Wickham warned me about this. He said that to blacken his name, Mr Darcy did the same before, that he had opened accounts in his name…” Forster stopped when Sir William guffawed.

“So a man with ten thousand per annum and likely more, needs to open accounts in a penniless officer’s name? Colonel Forster, that does not sound likely to me. Besides, all you need to do is join me and come see the merchants for yourself. They will be able to tell you to whom they gave credit.”

Suddenly, Forster felt less sure of himself.

“Also, the merchants demand all accounts be paid in full immediately, and no further credit will be extended. If you, in the name of the militia, need to purchase on credit, that will be allowed, but payment will be expected within ten days.” Sir William sat back and waited.

“What made you check what my officers owed? Was that because of Mr Darcy?” Forster guessed.

“On my word as a gentleman, it was not Mr Darcy. I spoke to one who related what had occurred in the town he lived in when he was a lad. On that basis, I went to see the shop owners. Colonel, this is after two or three days! If unchecked, what would he owe by the time your regiment moves on in March of the coming year? From what I remember, lieutenants are paid about five pounds per month; is that not so?”

Forster allowed that was so.

“Unless this Wickham fellow has another source of income, how will he pay what he owes now, never mind what it would be if he were allowed to continue in this vein?” Sir William paused. “Before we go to verify who opened the accounts and made the purchases, you must be aware that if the

debts are not settled right away, your regiment’s welcome in Meryton will be revoked.”

The Colonel accompanied Sir William to several stores. At each one he received the same answer. As much as Forster was praying that it would not be his lieutenant who was identified as opening and making purchases on the accounts, it was a vain hope. He pledged regimental funds to pay anything any of his officers were unable to pay of their current obligations. He would deduct what was owed from their wages.

As Sir William rode back to Lucas Lodge, he owned that he, and the whole town, owed a large debt of gratitude to Mr Collins.

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After his ride and then breaking his fast with his cousins, William Collins retired to his chamber. He wanted to finish the missive he had begun to his parents, and after the tale Mr Wickham had spun, he needed to write to Mr Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. He felt the need to write about more than just the profligate man but also what had occurred between Mr Darcy and Cousin Elizabeth.

With his letter to Collins Hollow sealed, William was about to write to Colonel Fitzwilliam when he decided he first needed to speak to Cousin Mary and ask if she could enlighten him about the source of the animosity her next older sister had for Mr Darcy. He had heard Cousin Elizabeth speak of an insult. If that was what it was, it must have been a very serious slight for her to disdain him the way she did.

William walked down to the ground level and placed the epistle to his parents on the tray for outgoing post. He heard the sounds of the pianoforte, telling him his cousin was where he suspected she would be. Thankfully the section of wall between the drawing room and music room had been drawn shut, so he would not be importuned by Cousin Fanny about spending time with Cousin Elizabeth. His cousin was seated at the upright pianoforte, concentrating on the score before her.

“Cousin Mary,” William said as soon as she lifted her hands from the keys. He had made sure to leave the door all the way open to observe propriety.
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Mary's body shuddered with surprise. "I was not aware anyone was in the music room with me," she said. "Yes, Cousin Collins, how may I assist you? Would you like me to play something particular?"

"Would you take a turn in the garden with me?" William invited. "It is unseasonably warm for autumn today."

"I cannot unless we are chaperoned, Cousin Collins," Mary said as she twisted her muslin square nervously. "That is because the loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable; that one false step involves her in endless ruin; that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful; and that she cannot be too guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex."

"Do you think me undeserving, or that us walking in the garden in full view of the house will somehow threaten your virtue?" William enquired. "Cousin Mary, there is a reason that I, and any clergyman of good sense, do not use the sermons Reverend Fordyce wrote as a reference. I know you read them, but I must tell you it is not just my opinion that they are, for the most part, nonsensical. My bishop and the Archbishops of Canterbury and York agree as well. If you will walk with me, your honour and virtue will remain unblemished. If you would feel easier to have a maid sit outside where she can see us, I would welcome that."

Feeling relief that her cousin had not demanded there be no chaperone, Mary relaxed. "I will request that Mrs Hill send a maid," Mary said as she stood from the bench where she had been seated in front of the instrument. She was pleased he had suggested a maid. That way she would not have to have Mamma try to make Lizzy walk out with Cousin Collins instead. Having a man, especially a good-looking parson, pay attention to her made Mary feel warm all over.

It was not many minutes before Cousin Mary joined William in the entrance hall, a maid in tow.

"This is Sarah, the upstairs maid who assists my sisters and me as needed." Mary did not say that it was very seldom she saw Sarah. Mamma made sure that Jane was helped first, then Lydia, and after her, Lizzy and Kitty. She was always last, so more often than not, Mary dressed herself without anyone's help.

When they reached the drive, William offered his cousin his arm, and they walked into the park. “Cousin Mary, if you agree, I think Sarah can sit on this bench close to the side of the house. That will give her an unobstructed view of the park. Just remember, as long as you can see her, she will be able to see you.” Cousin Mary nodded that she was satisfied, and they set off on their first turn about the park.

As soon as he was certain the maid could not hear them, William indicated a bench. He helped his cousin sit first, then took a seat at the opposite end of the bench from her with more than enough distance between them to satisfy propriety.

Mary was very pleased that rather than mocking or dismissing her concerns, Cousin Collins took them seriously and was doing what he needed to do so she would feel comfortable with him. Unless she was blind, he was paying all of his attention to her and not to her much prettier sisters. She could not understand why this was, but whatever the reason, it made Mary feel very good.

“I need to ask you something about Cousin Elizabeth…” William did not miss how her face fell. He understood what she thought. “Cousin Mary, what I want to ask has nothing to do with a shared future. It is something your sister said and an observation I made.”

Hearing what her cousin said made Mary relax. “You are not a simpleton or a buffoon, are you?”

“No, not at all. You want to know why I wrote the letter I did in the manner I did?” William saw his cousin nod. “You know there has been a break between our branches of the family for a few generations, do you not?” Another nod. “Until I wrote to your father, no Collins, no matter how many letters were written, had received a reply from a Bennet of Longbourn. My father made some enquiries once we learnt that your mother would not be able to bear another child, as he knew that one of us would be the master of Longbourn one day. I am sorry if this pains you, but based on what was reported about how your father likes to make sport of everyone, I decided that in order to ease my way in coming to visit, he needed to think he was my intellectual superior. I will not address it now, but by the terms of the entail, I could have demanded access to the estate

and the records. However, I preferred to be allowed to visit in a non-confrontational manner. It worked, did it not?”

“There was nothing you said in your missive that was not true, was there?”

“Not a word. I did write some things in a way that allowed the reader to interpret them as they chose, but that was all.”

For a few moments, Mary considered her cousin’s words. Knowing her father as she did, she could understand why this man employed a level of subterfuge. She was sanguine with what he had done. “You answered my questions honestly, so now I will do the same for you, if I am able.”

“First, why do you use spectacles you neither need to read nor see?”

“How did you know?” Mary was used to being dismissed by everyone in the house, so making them believe she needed reading aids had been easy.

“You read over your spectacles. When you walk or play the pianoforte, they are positioned down your nose so you are able to look over them.” The answering smile told William he had been accurate in his assessment. “Now, if I may, I have a question regarding your next older sister. If it is something confidential that you feel you are not able to answer, I will understand.”

“Go ahead and ask; if I am able, I will respond.”

“What happened between Cousin Elizabeth and Mr Darcy that has made her dislike him with such intensity?”

A little chortle escaped Mary before she covered her mouth with her hand and blushed. “I would say hate, not dislike.” She paused; what she was about to repeat was well known in Meryton and the environs, so it was not confidential. “The first time any of us met those residing at Netherfield Park was at the Michaelmas Assembly. Due to the war, there are many more ladies than men at the dances. All of us ladies—except for Lydia and Kitty—sit some sets out voluntarily to ensure that anyone who wishes to dance will have an opportunity to do so. Mr Darcy danced a set with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst each, and then he stalked the side of the dance floor. This was after he had refused to be introduced to almost everyone.

“Mr Bingley was dancing with Jane when, during the break between the first and second dances of the set, he made his way to Mr Darcy, who was standing right next to where Lizzy was sitting out her first set. They were no further apart than you and I are now. Mr Bingley demanded that Mr Darcy dance and suggested Lizzy as a partner, saying that Jane would make the introduction. Mr Darcy looked at Lizzy and back at Mr Bingley and said, ‘*She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me*.’ If for all of her life, had Lizzy not had to hear Mamma tell her that her looks are nothing to Jane, she would have ignored him, but I believe that what he said made Mamma’s words real.

“Each time thereafter we were in company with those from Netherfield Park, Mr Darcy would stare at Lizzy. She claims he is doing so to find more faults with her. Thanks to Mamma’s machinations, Jane rode to Netherfield Park in the rain and was sickened with a very bad cold and needed to remain there. The following day, Lizzy walked the three miles to see what ailed Jane. Our eldest sister had played down her illness. It ended up that Lizzy was invited to remain to nurse Jane.

“Lizzy says that Mr Darcy was insufferable while she was there, always staring at her and vacillating between arguing with her and ignoring her. Hence, she has a thorough dislike of the man.”

It was as William had guessed. Cousin Elizabeth’s vanity and pride had been injured by Mr Darcy’s words combined with what her mother always said. That had led to her suspending her logic because Mr Wickham’s tale of woe justified her feelings about Mr Darcy, confirming what she wanted to believe about him—that he was the worst kind of man.

He had never met Mr Darcy, but he was very familiar with Colonel Fitzwilliam. After speaking with Cousin Mary, William knew what he needed to write in his letter to Fitzwilliam.

“Cousin Mary, before we return to the house, I will admit that I am intrigued by you. I hope that before I leave, we will enter a courtship; however, I have no desire to rush you before you are prepared to take that step. My aim is to come to know you much better and allow you the opportunity to do the same.” William saw she was about to interject. “Your

mother has no say over who *I* decide to court. Why she is trying to push Cousin Elizabeth at me, only He knows. If she speaks to me again of it, I will make it clear that neither of us wants that sort of connection, as we do not suit. You and I do suit, but as I said, I will not rush you. If we do arrive at the point I offer for you, I will not accept you unless I am sure it is your choice and no one has pressured you into making it."

It was a glowing Mary, her useless spectacles in the pocket of her day dress, who returned to the house with her cousin, the maid Sarah trailing them.

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Wickham sauntered into the taproom at the Red Lion Inn in Meryton and sat down at his usual table. Rather than the regular serving wench, one he was sure he would be able to bed with no problems, he was approached by the landlord.

"Good day to you, Mr Paulson. Is Margorie not working today?" Wickham asked, exuding charm.

"Unless you can settle your account right now, you will not be served here again. If you are not able, I am told that Colonel Forster will do so. Pay up now; you owe me one pound, eleven shillings, five pence, and a ha'penny. If you are not able, leave the inn now and do not return unless you can pay what you owe. No more credit."

As Wickham really wanted the ale and some food, he forked over almost all of the rest of his blunt to pay his debt and the cost of what he wanted now. He could not understand why he would no longer be allowed to buy on credit here. Just after his bowl of stew and the ale were delivered, Denny flopped down in the chair next to him. "You will not believe it! Mr Paulson closed my account and demanded immediate payment," Wickham whinged.

"It is not only for you. All shops in Meryton have done the same for all of us. I just returned from paying the money I owed for four accounts." Denny sighed. "Captain Carter told me that one of the denizens of the town heard some tale of how a regiment left a town with many debts owing. So now we must all suffer."
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“Someone from the town? Not that prig Darcy who keeps on trying to blast my prospects?” Wickham demanded.

“No. Carter heard the colonel ask the man that. He said he did not speak to your *friend*, and then Colonel Forster went to the shops to make sure it was we officers and not someone impersonating us who opened the accounts. He found that it was us. Do you know that one of us already amassed twenty pounds of debts in less than a sennight?” Denny reported.

Knowing very well it was he who owed that amount, Wickham said nothing. “Denny, what happens if an officer slips away?” Wickham enquired.

“You mean if he deserts? In a time of war, like it is now, he would be hunted down and shot as a deserter. The army, and that includes the militia, take any desertions very seriously,” Denny revealed.

He knew he was trapped. Wickham’s contract was for a full two years, as his lieutenancy had been without any cost to him. How was it he was having so much bad luck? Wickham so much wanted to blame Darcy for this, but from what Denny had told him, it did not sound as if his enemy had a hand in this. To make sure, Wickham went to the colonel’s offices and asked Carter what had occurred.

The captain confirmed it was the knight who had come to speak to the colonel, and he had not aimed his investigation at any one man, in fact, he had not named any officer. Rather, as Denny had said, the man had been told of a town somewhere and what had occurred there. Further bad news was that Carter mentioned that everyone in the town had been warned to be on their guard against false promises of marriage and young girls being asked to *anticipate* their vows. If that were not all bad enough, Wickham was called into the Colonel’s office.

When he was asked how he would pay what he owed, Wickham mentioned that he had paid what he owed at the inn. That left more than eighteen pounds. He tried to say that he would be able to pay if Darcy paid what he was owed, but Colonel Forster had scoffed. The colonel had told Wickham the regiment would pay, but his monthly wages would only be one pound to him until his debt was paid in full.

When Wickham left Colonel Forster’s offices, he was reeling. Of late, including games of chance between the officers, the only luck he had was bad.

Later that day, an order was issued by the colonel saying that all debts of honour had to be settled right away and that debt markers were no longer to be used. As he had no money to pay what he owed, it meant that Wickham would be excluded from all games.

If only whoever told that damned knight the tale of the other town had not done so!

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Chapter 15

As Richard Fitzwilliam sat in his quarters in London, he mused about the fact that he had not expected to fall in love with his cousin, Anne de Bourgh. Nevertheless, it is what had occurred during those months they had worked together to undo Lady Catherine's mismanagement of Rosings Park.

The last thing he wanted anyone to think, much less Anne, was that his only interest was in her fortune. Fitzwilliam was sorry that Collins was away from Hunsford visiting his relatives in Hertfordshire. Had the parson been at his home, Fitzwilliam would have ridden the less than thirty miles to seek guidance from the extremely sensible clergyman. His advice, both regarding the estate and as Anne's spiritual guide, had been excellent.

As if thinking of Collins had caused a letter from him to arrive, Fitzwilliam took the epistle his batman offered him. When he looked at the return direction, he saw it was from the man himself, posted from Hertfordshire.

He wondered if William Darcy had met Collins yet, and if where his cousin was being hosted with Bingley was close to Collins's cousins' estate.

He hoped that nothing was wrong at Rosings Park, prompting Collins to write to him. Fitzwilliam knew that surmising would tell him nothing, and there was only one way to know. He had to break the seal and begin to read.

> *22 November 1811*
> *Longbourn*
> *Near the market town of Meryton*
> *Hertfordshire*
>
> *Fitzwilliam,*
>
> *Do not be concerned; the reason for my letter has nothing to do with Rosings Park, Hunsford, or any of the residents of that area. I am seeking your advice and possibly assistance with an issue which has come to the fore where I am currently being hosted.*

Like I had told you I would, I played the fool the Bennets expected, to a certain degree. One of them, however, was able to see through my veneer in short order, but that is not the subject of this missive.

Although I have not met your cousin, Mr Darcy, I have seen him briefly. I have, though, heard much about him, or more to the point, much about his behaviour since he has been in the area.

Fitzwilliam pinched his eyebrows together. “What have you done this time, William?” he asked his room aloud. He needed to keep reading for the answer.

I have five female cousins, daughters of my cousin, Thomas Bennet. A few times I heard the second in age speak in a very disparaging way about your cousin. Then, the morning two days ago, I observed something between your cousin and a man who was to join the militia (there is a regiment of the Derbyshire Militia encamped in the market town for the autumn and winter), and again, Cousin Elizabeth automatically blamed your cousin.

Last evening, Mrs Phillips (sister to my cousin’s wife) had a card party in her home. Mrs Bennet, her daughters, and I were in attendance.

I noticed that the man I had observed in Meryton, who had at first reacted with fear when seeing Mr Darcy, marked Cousin Elizabeth for special attention. I am not proud of eavesdropping, but I felt I would be remiss had I not. The man told my cousin, whom he had met only briefly the day before, a tale of woe with your cousin painted as the blackest of villains. I will not give you details in a missive.

“**Damned Wickham**!” Fitzwilliam thundered. Even before Collins listed the name of the man, just from what he had said so far, Fitzwilliam

was certain it was that libertine to whom Collins was referring. He went back to the letter.

> *I hope you know the name of the man, George Wickham. As all my senses were screaming that the man was not being truthful (he kept contradicting himself), I sought out a knight who used to be a tradesman. I told him an admittedly embellished tale of what occurred when the militia was encamped near Faversham (the town near my father's estate), and he said that he would warn the tradesmen and fathers based on what I told him.*
>
> *This morning, before writing to you, I asked Cousin Mary (the one who saw through my act and who I hope to one day make my wife) to take a turn in the park with me.*
>
> *When we were out of earshot of the chaperone, I asked her why her next older sister seemed to dislike your cousin. She corrected me and told me the word was 'hate', and told me why. The first time your cousin was seen in the area was at an assembly. When his friend suggested he dance with Cousin Elizabeth, rather than just send Mr Bingley on his way, he uttered a vile and ungentlemanlike insult, well within her hearing. (I will not put the words in writing here.)*
>
> *You must know she is a very intelligent young woman, but his slight wounded her deeply. Hence, when Mr Wickham wove his tale, she believed everything because she was looking for anything to confirm her very poor opinion of your cousin. Had she not already felt so negatively about him, she would have been able to see the contradictions and lack of logic in Lieutenant Wickham's tale.*
>
> *If you can spare some time, I would appreciate you coming to call on me here. I think my cousin needs to hear the facts about Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham from*

one who knows the truth of the situation. I remember that you told me that Mr Darcy is more brother than cousin; hence, I suspect you know everything about this matter.

In case you are unable to come hither, I will ride to London to see you.

I trust it was not an impertinence writing to you.

William Collins

"Barker!" Fitzwilliam bellowed for his batman.

"Aye, Colonel," Sergeant Barker responded as he entered the room where his colonel was seated.

"As soon as I see General Atherton, we will be leaving London. I would think we will be away for at least a sennight," Fitzwilliam instructed. "I will ride to my cousin's house and *borrow* his older, spare carriage for us to use. There are also some other things I must take from Darcy House. Once the general approves my leave, and I take what I need from my cousin's house, I will return to collect you with the conveyance. It will be two hours at the most until we are on our way.

As he suspected, the general gave Fitzwilliam up to a fortnight away, with the option to extend the time if needed. From regimental headquarters, Fitzwilliam rode to Darcy House.

Mr Killion, the butler, knowing that Colonel Fitzwilliam had almost as much authority as the master, stood aside and allowed the colonel to enter. When he was told to have the spare coach made ready for travel, the butler conveyed the orders without question.

Fitzwilliam made for his cousin's study and retrieved the spare key for the safe behind his desk from the secret place where it was hidden. He opened the safe, and thanks to his fastidious cousin's way of organising everything, he soon had the items he had come to collect. With that, he locked the safe, replaced the key, and exited the house. He found the carriage with its two matched greys ready before the house. He instructed one of the footmen to tether Invictus to the back of the conveyance, and they were off to his barracks.

Barker had everything ready by the time Fitzwilliam arrived. It was not long before the trunks were lashed to the coach, and they were on their way to the town of Meryton. The batman was grateful he was sitting in the cabin with his colonel and not on the box with the coachman.

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Clem and Bethany Collins had moved to the dower house at Collins Hollow soon after returning from their wedding trip. Most days, they came to the manor house, where Clem the younger would work with his father, and Bethany would assist her mother-in-law with the duties of the estate's mistress.

On this day, the four Collinses were seated enjoying the midday meal when the butler entered the dining parlour, an epistle on his salver. He proffered it to the master.

Collins took the missive and thanked the retainer who withdrew. "It is from William," he informed his family members.

"Clem, we all know you want to hear about how William was received at Longbourn, so if you would like to read it now, go ahead; none of us will be insulted," Ophelia said with a smile.

The younger Collins couple nodded their agreement.

"It is addressed to both of us, my love. Should I read it aloud? I am certain there is nothing within that Clem and Bethany cannot hear," Collins suggested.

"That is a good idea," Ophelia agreed. "I do not know about any of you, but I am already sated. If that is true for everyone, we can retire to the family parlour and listen to you read William's letter."

The plan was agreed to by all. The members of the family stood and made their way up to the first floor, where the family parlour was located.

As soon as everyone had taken their seats, Collins began to read.

19 November 1811
Longbourn

Hertfordshire
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Mother and Father, and to Clem and Bethany if they are with you, I send you all my greetings from Longbourn.

Father, your investigators were very close to the truth of the characters of the Bennets. As such, I do not need to describe them beyond that.

One thing that I have discovered is that Cousin Bennet, while he enjoys his amusement, is either unaware he is so, or he is intentionally cruel to his wife and daughters. I say this because it seems that he only told his wife and daughters of my arrival on the day I was to come! I wrote to him close to 3 months past, and he responded a few weeks later. As such, he has no excuse for waiting until the day of my arrival, (the previous day) to inform his family of my coming.

It is very hard for me to play the fool for Cousin Bennet. and there are times when I slip. I then have to say something he expects from one not nearly *as intelligent as himself.*

Today, before putting pen to paper, I went to the stables to ride Vulcan. I met Cousin Bennet there, who was amazed that not only did I have a thoroughbred stallion, but also a carriage horse and my own gig.

It seems that the tale successive Bennet men have been told since my great-great-grandfather William became a Collins is that we Collinses are nothing but nasty, bullying, illiterate farm labourers. Hence, when I told him about Collins Hollow and the fact that you, Father and Mother, gifted both Clem and me stallions, he was greatly surprised; so much so that there was no sarcastic comment made. (He really thinks that most people do not understand what he is about.)

I have given him much on which to cogitate. I know he is questioning why the myth about us, from his father on back through the generations, was perpetuated.

He is indolent in the extreme, and without even seeing the estate's ledgers, I would estimate that the income has fallen below even the £3,000 per annum level. When I rode about the estate, it was sad to see almost half of the tenant farms standing empty.

On a personal level, even though the eldest two Bennet sisters (Jane and Elizabeth) are great beauties (according to their mother, that only applies to the eldest because she looks like Cousin Fanny) and the two youngest (Kitty and Lydia) are very pretty, it is Mary Bennet, the middle sister who has caught my attention. It is far too early to think of forming a lasting bond with her, but I would like to explore the possibility.

Before I forget, the day I arrived I saw two young ladies flirting with officers (a regiment of the Derbyshire Militia is encamped in Meryton), and other than knowing it was inappropriate, I thought nothing of it. That was until the two self-same girls walked into Longbourn. It was the two youngest Bennets. It seems that rather than being checked and educated, their mother encourages them, and their father ignores them. Speaking of the mother, she has put Cousin Elizabeth forward as my possible wife. We would never suit, so I will be ignoring Cousin Fanny's machinations in that area.

I will stop here and add more when I have been here a little longer.

W

22 November 1811- My letter continues.

Cousin Mary and I are spending as much time together as possible. Cousin Elizabeth and I ignore any attempts by Cousin Fanny to push me together with her second daughter.

Even had I not known this already and seen how stubborn and blinded by pride and prejudice Cousin

Elizabeth is, it would have been more than enough to convince me that she is not for me. Do not mistake me; I think she is basically a good person, but she has been her father's favourite and apes his sarcastic and sardonic humour. She is intelligent in the extreme and has perfect recall. Anything she reads, sees, or hears once is stored in its entirety in her memories.

That being said, thanks to being insulted by Mr Darcy (Colonel Fitzwilliam's cousin) at the assembly the first time she saw him, she has an intense dislike of him (hatred according to Cousin Mary), and in her mind he is the worst of men.

As far as I can see, she is so sure in her conclusions that she only seeks information that confirms what she already believes. I guessed, and Cousin Mary confirmed, that Cousin Elizabeth is very slow to forgive and even slower to change her opinions regardless of the facts.

I will not go into why here (if you ask, I will relate some of this in person), but I have written to Colonel Fitzwilliam and asked him to come to Hertfordshire. If he is unable to come here, I asked if I may call on him in London. All I will say is that it is connected to a snake in the grass who has a commission in the regiment. On that subject, I effectively spiked the guns of every dishonourable officer (I hope there are not too many like that) by taking the minor issues Faversham experienced when the regiment of the Devonshire Militia was encamped nearby and exaggerating them greatly. Thanks to some words in the right ear, no more credit is being extended to officers, and all debts were called in. In addition, the girls and young ladies in Meryton are very sceptical of flattering and promises from the officers. Unfortunately, Cousin Lydia (and by extension Cousin Kitty, who blindly follows her) refuses to hear a bad word said about any officer.

Cousin Bennet was told of the danger by Sir William Lucas, his closest neighbour, but he laughed it away and did nothing. I will keep a close eye on my cousins and step in if needed.

As far as my stay here goes in general, I am very close to allowing all the Bennets to see my true self.

There are many reasons why I need to do so. Not the least of them is Cousin Fanny's blindness to my attentions to Cousin Mary, who welcomes them, while Cousin Fanny still attempts to push Cousin Elizabeth and me together. She is very frustrated because neither of us will gratify her machinations. Does she not see that if things proceed to their natural conclusion one of her daughters will be my wife? She is also wilfully blind.

Given that Cousin Bennet tries to lock himself in his study with his books and port rather than tending to the estate, it is not long before I will need to confront him with certain clauses in the entail.

From my discussions with various tenants, Cousin Bennet's father was a good, diligent landlord, so I wonder what caused the son to become what he is.

When there is more news to share, I will.

With my warmest regards to you all at Collins Hollow,

William

"Well, if nothing else your cousin knows that what he was told about us is all wrong," Ophelia remarked.

"True, but if he is as stubborn as William says Miss Elizabeth is, perhaps he will ignore the inconvenient truth," Collins opined. "Given how indolent he is, I think he may cleave to the past lies about us because it is easier than having to admit the Bennets have been wrong."

"Only time will tell," Clem mused.

“Now we will wait to hear from William again. I wonder what the parts are he feels he cannot put in a letter,” Collins pondered.

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The twenty miles took a little less than four hours of travel time. There had been a break at an inn for about an hour or so—with such a short distance Fitzwilliam was not fearful of the horses being pushed too hard. With that break, the coach arrived at Netherfield Park in the latter half of the afternoon.

Darcy had been looking out of the drawing room window, his back to the room, hands clasped behind his back, ignoring the prattling of Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley as best he could.

At first when he saw his spare carriage from Town being driven towards the manor house, he had thought he was imagining it; but on shaking his head, he could see it was very real. He panicked. Why should someone come in his conveyance? Had something terrible happened to Anna?

He turned to the room, and his stricken look caused even the pernicious sisters to stop speaking. “Bingley, will you accompany me?” Darcy requested.

“Mr Darcy, you do not look well; I will accompany you…” Miss Bingley began.

“No, thank you, Miss Bingley. I only need your brother in this,” Darcy said curtly, leaving no room to gainsay him. “Bingley, let us go.”

In the shock of being so spoken to, at first, Miss Bingley did not hear the crunch of carriage wheels in the drive. She sat with a pinched, outraged look on her countenance. Mrs Hurst did not hear anything either as she tried to soothe her sister’s bruised feelings.

Bingley stood and followed Darcy to the drive without stopping for outerwear.

Darcy practically ran to his coach as one of his footmen retracted the step and opened the door. His worry increased when he saw his cousin begin to alight. “My God, Richard! What happened to Anna?” Darcy demanded.
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“My presence here is unconnected to our ward. When I saw her last, which was yester-evening when I had dinner at Matlock House, she was well. We do need to speak, and soon.” Fitzwilliam looked at the puppy who was with William. “Bingley, may I impose on your hospitality for a few days?”

“Of course, you are welcome for as long as you wish to remain here, Colonel,” Bingley agreed. “If you have your trunks brought in, I will have the housekeeper prepare the second bedchamber in Darce’s suite.” With that, he was off.

Fitzwilliam walked around the other side of the coach, where they would not be seen by those in the house. He had not missed the social climbing sisters staring out of the one window. As he had expected his cousin would, Darcy followed Fitzwilliam to the other side of the carriage.

“Richard, why are you…oof.” Darcy felt his cousin’s fist connect with his belly. “What the bloody hell was that for?”

“For being a rude, insulting, unmannered man. How could you insult someone at that assembly the day you arrived?” Fitzwilliam growled. He planted another fist to his cousin’s belly just after the latter was standing straight up again. “That is for my having to hear from another that the wastrel is here and in the militia no less!”

“How?” Darcy managed as he fought to recover his breath.

“That is immaterial. The salient fact is that you did not tell me. We will not discuss this here; we will speak in the suite. I assume there is a sitting room?” He saw his cousin nod while he grimaced from the two blows he had received. “Come, we need to go thither.”

As he followed Richard, Darcy could not imagine when he insulted anyone. He stopped on the veranda just before the front doors as he remembered his words to Bingley at the assembly. If it was that, how the devil did Richard know?

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Chapter 16

Even though he disliked them intensely, Fitzwilliam entered the drawing room to greet Bingley's sisters. Unsurprisingly, Hurst was asleep, snoring on a chaise longue.

"Colonel, how good it is to host some more people at our level of society," Miss Bingley cooed. She saw his arrival as an opportunity. She would never marry a poor second son, even the son of an earl. However, if she let Mr Darcy think she had transferred her affections to his cousin, the man she truly wanted to marry would become jealous and finally do his duty and offer for her. Miss Bingley was about to begin her campaign when the colonel spoke.

"Come, William, we have *family* business," Fitzwilliam said firmly. He hoped that the harpies would understand that did not include them, especially the younger shrew.

It was as the two men walked out without another word to her that Miss Bingley noticed that Mr Darcy was a little hunched over. He always stood up tall and proud, but he and his cousin were gone before she could ask him about the way he was standing.

"I assume you have not met Mr Collins, Anne's parson, have you? He is a cousin to the Bennets, I believe he said," Fitzwilliam enquired once the door from the hallway into the sitting room was securely closed. As an added precaution, he posted Sergeant Barker in the hallway in case one or both of the sisters decided to try to listen at the door.

"So that is how you heard about the assembly," Darcy concluded. "Miss Elizabeth should not have been eavesdropping on a private conversation between Bingley and me, and she certainly should not have repeated it to anyone."

Fitzwilliam walked up to his cousin and shot his left fist forward into his cousin's belly. He hated hitting William, but his far too high in the instep cousin needed to be brought down to earth. Fitzwilliam had spoken to him many times, but it had done no good. Now it was time for his cousin to feel.

Darcy dropped onto one knee; this punch had been harder than the other two. He felt he was going to cast up his accounts, so he stood and grabbed the nearest vase and retched into it. “What was that for?” Darcy moaned after wiping his mouth.

“You do not deny insulting a lady; all you can say is that our lord and master, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, should be able to slight whomever he wants with impunity?” Fitzwilliam shook his head. “Had Aunt Anne and Uncle Robert been alive, they would have been ashamed of what you have become. I know being hunted like a prize stag is not pleasant, but you have somehow come to think that you are better than everyone. You have become a mixture of Aunt Catherine and the Bingley sisters. Perhaps you have been around them too much so that you ignore their behaviour. I will wager that Miss Bingley spouting hogwash about her being at your level of society was not the first time since you have been here, yet you say nothing to her.” Fitzwilliam realised he needed Collins to be present before he continued with his recalcitrant cousin.

For his part. Darcy knew that defending his actions had been asinine, but he just could not admit he was wrong; so he had come up with nonsense and tried going on the attack. It had cost him another punch from Richard. He had heard about this particular Mr Collins, how he had helped save Anne and assisted in putting things at Rosings Park to rights. According to what his aunt and uncle said, he was as good, if not better, a spiritual advisor to Anne specifically and to the Hunsford Parish in general than the late Mr Belvedere had been. And he remembered that Richard liked the man very well.

“I am sending one of your footmen to the Bennets’ estate, which is Longbourn, according to Collins. How far is it from here?”

“About three miles to the east.” As Darcy said the last, a vision of Miss Elizabeth as she had looked the day she had walked to come care for her ill sister invaded his mind’s eye. He had not been speaking anything but the truth when he had told Miss Bingley that Miss Elizabeth’s fine eyes had been greatly enhanced by the walk. Why could he not evict her from his consciousness?

“Barker,” Fitzwilliam called out after he wrote a note.

“Aye, Colonel, sir,” Barker responded when he came as soon as his name was called.

“This note is to be taken to the estate of Longbourn, and the Darcy footman is to put it into the hands of Mr William Collins and no one else. If Mr Collins is riding or away making calls, the man is to wait; and further, he must wait for a reply from Mr Collins,” Fitzwilliam instructed as he handed the note over.

“Now what?” Darcy asked as he rubbed his aching belly. After three of Richard’s hammer blows, Darcy was aware that he needed to think before he spoke, especially once the parson arrived.

“Now we wait, and you recover from your pummelling.”

Darcy called for his valet, Carstens, and requested that some ice be retrieved from the icehouse and placed inside a towel and brought to him.

Carstens knew better than to ask. All he did was raise his eyebrows before leaving the room to follow Mr Darcy’s orders. He knew that if the master had something to tell him, he would.

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William Collins was seated in the drawing room speaking to Cousin Mary while ignoring Cousin Fanny’s not-so-subtle hints that he should be paying attention to her second daughter. Said daughter flashed him a grateful look when he did not acquiesce to her mother’s attempted matchmaking. As it was, he was close to asking Mary for a courtship, but he knew that before he did, he needed to drop the façade of the fool and be himself.

“Poor Mr Wickham,” Lydia sighed. “He has been denied credit and forced to pay everything he owed already.”

Elizabeth was about to lay the blame for any further misfortune Mr Wickham was suffering at Mr Darcy’s door. Two things held her back. The first was when she had told Jane what Mr Wickham had told her, after her older sister had claimed it was a misunderstanding; she had pointed out that making such a disclosure to one newly met was highly improper. The second thing was Mr Collins spoke before she could.
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“As I understand it, Miss Lydia, the embargo on credit is against all officers, not just Mr Wickham. Hence, nothing was done to Mr Wickham, as it applies to everyone in the regiment. And pray tell, what is wrong with paying what one owes?” William asked.

There was truth in what her cousin said. She had wanted to blame Mr Darcy without knowing any facts. Something struck her; other than one or two silly things he said, Cousin Collins had shown a depth of intelligence she had not expected. How was she to reconcile the man who wrote the letter to Papa with the one she was seeing before her? Before she could consider the conundrum that was her cousin further, Hill entered the drawing room.

“Mr Collins, a footman has arrived with a message for you,” Hill intoned as he bowed.

“Well then, hand it to me, Hill; I will pass it to our cousin,” Fanny said.

All William could do was shake his head. The impertinence of the woman to try and take a message for him so she could peruse it while he was seated ten feet from her. Had Cousin Fanny never heard that care[4] killed the cat? “You may hand it to me, Hill,” he stated.

“The man was told to place the message in your hand, Mr Collins, so he refused to hand it to me,” Hill explained.

Understanding this was from Fitzwilliam, as he was the only man William knew who would issue such an instruction, William stood and followed the butler out of the drawing room before Cousin Fanny could say anything.

The liveried footman was standing under the small portico at the front door. Once William identified himself, the man handed him the note.

Collins,

I am at Netherfield Park. Please tell the footman when you are able to come see me. The sooner the better.

RF

“Please inform Colonel Fitzwilliam that I will be following you as soon as I change and have my horse saddled,” William told the man who bowed and then mounted his horse.

Once he was changed, he took his leave of the ladies in the drawing room. Cousin Fanny wanted to know where he was going, but he had not replied.

Within a quarter of an hour, William was on Vulcan riding for Netherfield Park.

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Thomas Bennet was unsettled. His perturbation was directly connected to his cousin, who would be the next master of Longbourn.

He was too intelligent to not be able to see that Cousin Collins was anything *but* the fool he had assumed he was when Bennet had read the letter from him. That was nothing to the revelations about the Collins family being landowners; they were the same as him, landed gentlemen.

Why had Father and Grandfather related things about the Collinses he now knew to be false? They were both long gone, so it was not as if he could ask one of them, could he?

Based on the quality of Cousin Collins’s stallion, the Collins family were well off. From the size of the estate his cousin had described, Bennet estimated that the income was between five and six thousand pounds, about what Longbourn should be at… No, he was not sorry about that. Why should he exert himself so that his cousin would have a more profitable estate one day?

Discovering the truth of the Collins’ situation, that they owned a profitable estate and said estate would go to the firstborn son, explained why the Collins father and older brother had renounced their claims on Longbourn in favour of the second son, William Collins.

Trying to discover what had occurred so many years past, Bennet opened the family bible and traced his history back through the generations. He came to the entry for his great-great-grandfather, Henry Bennet, who had three sons and a daughter. There were entries for each of Henry’s
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offspring except for his third son, who had been named William Clem Bennet. Next to his name someone had scrawled ‘betrayal’, but there were no entries for William Bennet aside from his birth. If he died without issue, there was no date of death listed, as there had been for every other member of the Bennet family through the years. Only his own name, date of his birth, the date of his marriage to Fanny, and the dates of his daughters’ births were recorded without additional information. Obviously, as all were still living, no dates of passing were noted. So why did William Bennet have nothing? No marriage, no children, no date of death. Bennet had a feeling that the answers to his questions lay with the Collins family.

It was enough wasting good reading time thinking about this, so Bennet pushed it aside, took a sip of his port, and picked up his book.

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Mr Nichols had been informed that a Mr Collins would be calling, and he was to be shown directly up to the suite being shared by Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy.

William Collins followed the butler up to the third floor, the guest floor, and knocked on the door leading into the suite in question.

“Welcome, Collins, your prompt reply and coming here are greatly appreciated,” Fitzwilliam said as he shook the parson’s hand vigorously. “Collins, this is my cousin, Fitzwilliam Darcy; William, Mr William Collins, the rector of the Hunsford parish.”

Now that his belly was feeling somewhat better, Darcy was able to give a creditable bow in response to the one from the parson.

“Would you like something to drink, or should we get to the reason for our meeting here today?” Fitzwilliam looked at his sullen cousin, “even if one of us does not want to be here because he hates to have his faults pointed out. We can speak freely because my batman is stationed in the hallway in case anyone attempts to listen at the door. Darcy’s valet is sitting on a chair at the servant’s door so it cannot be opened. Hence, we will not be overheard.”

As much as Darcy wanted to retort, stand, and march out of the sitting room, three punches to his belly were enough to hold him in place.
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“What was it my cousin did that ignited your cousin’s hatred of him?” Fitzwilliam asked Collins.

“Who hates me?” Darcy demanded.

“My cousin, Elizabeth, the second Bennet sister. I think hate is too strong, but she certainly dislikes you with a passion,” William stated.

“But she flirted with me when she was at Netherfield Park to care for her sister, Miss Bennet,” a flabbergasted Darcy said. “She debated with me like no one has ever done before.”

“Mr Darcy, you claim to be a gentleman, do you not?” William enquired.

“Of course I am a gentleman; my manners and character are above reproach,” Darcy claimed petulantly.

“Mr Darcy, I know from Fitzwilliam that you have a sister of about sixteen, do you not? One with whom you two share guardianship?” William queried. He saw Mr Darcy nod that it was so. “Then, Sir, allow me to ask you this. How would your sister have reacted if some man said what you said about my cousin in your sister’s hearing, the man not caring for the feelings of any other, nor lowering his voice? In addition, what would you have done to that man had you been told what he said?”

As soon as Darcy exchanged Miss Elizabeth for Anna, he could see that the words he spoke would have destroyed her. She would have never wanted to be in society again, and he would have called out the man. He turned white as the realisation struck him like a runaway cart barrelling down a hill.

“I can see that the image of your sister in my cousin’s place has caused you to feel sick to your stomach. Perhaps each time before you are about to speak in anger, you should ask yourself how your sister or someone close to you would react to the words you were about to speak. Now, allow me to address why I asked if you consider yourself a gentleman. You do know that the realm is at war, do you not?” William pressed.

Not trusting himself to speak as he was already feeling like the worst kind of cad, Darcy only nodded.

“If you had paid attention to anything but your own concerns, you would have seen that ladies outnumbered the men by almost two to one at the assembly you attended. As a gentleman, was it not your duty to dance with some of the ladies due to the dearth of men? My cousin was not being slighted. She and every lady *chose* to sit out two sets each to allow anyone who desired to dance to have a chance. As to giving her consequence, just who are you, as the guest of one leasing an estate here, to give consequence to one whose family has been on the land in the area for generations?”

Fitzwilliam sat back and smirked as Collins demolished his arrogant cousin. If anyone could cut William down to size, it was the man before him.

“There are unintended consequences to everything we do. Some good and others bad. Because my cousin believes you dislike her, that you stare at her to find fault, coupled with your insult and the hot and cold way you treated her when she was a guest in this house…” Collins stopped when Mr Darcy spoke in a shaky voice.

“I think she is one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance, and I thought she was flirting with me. I did not want to raise expectations I could not fulfil, as she is so far below me…” Darcy started to explain but closed his mouth when Richard stood.

“This is what I mean by arrogant! William, you are nothing but a gentleman farmer, a wealthy one, but a farmer nonetheless,” Fitzwilliam barked. “Yes, you have connections to my family, but you are nought but a gentleman. I do not know the lady, but I would posit that the question ought to be, are you good enough for her?”

“Mr Darcy, the three eldest Bennet sisters do not have a mercenary bone in their bodies, so if, as her feelings are today, you attempted to offer for Cousin Elizabeth, she would run you off with a flea in your ear and tell you that you are the last man in the world she could be prevailed upon to marry. Cousin Mary tells me that as much as Mrs Bennet wants her daughters to make good matches, you are one she has told her girls to ignore! What does that tell you, when a woman who wants nothing more than to marry off her daughters does not want you as a husband for any of them?” William allowed his words to linger.

“Now, as I said, there are consequences. Cousin Elizabeth and I saw the interaction between you and Mr Wickham in the street the day we met him. I could tell you were furious, and he was scared. However, thanks to her bad opinion of you, my cousin wanted to know what you did to incur Mr Wickham’s wrath. She is one of the most intelligent people I know, man or woman, and has perfect recall, but as to anything to do with you, at this point, she is blind. She looks for any reason to think worse of you than she already does.” William paused as he took a breath. “A few days ago, there was a card party at Mr and Mrs Phillips’ house…”

William told the cousins the gist of the conversation he had overheard between Cousin Elizabeth and Lieutenant Wickham, as well as his own observations.

“Did that bastard mention my cousin, his,” Fitzwilliam cocked his head to his cousin, “sister?”

“He did. All he said was she too was proud like her brother, and he would not know her anymore.” He saw the cousins relax. “While I could see the contradictions and inconsistencies, not to mention the impropriety of such a disclosure made to one who was not a close connection, Cousin Elizabeth only heard confirmation of what she already felt about you.”

“We can tell him about Ramsgate. Collins would not mention it to a living soul without our permission,” Fitzwilliam suggested.

Darcy nodded.

Between the two men, they informed the parson what had occurred in Ramsgate and how close they had come to losing their charge forever.

“My question then is simple. Why is Mr Wickham free to ply his trade here, or anywhere for that matter?” William demanded. “Why did you two not excise the blight that he is from society?”

“That is what I wanted to do, but William here interceded,” Fitzwilliam hissed.

“He is my late father’s godson. I cannot move against him, as it would dishonour Father’s memory, and he holds my sister’s reputation in his hand,” Darcy claimed.

“Excuse me for saying this, but that is pure twiddle-twaddle. Mr Darcy, what would your late father have done had Mr Wickham moved against his daughter when he was alive?” Collins enquired. “Who would take the word of a disgraced son of a steward against yours and that of the Fitzwilliams? I assume he is a profligate who leaves debts behind him? And let me guess, Mr Darcy pays the debts?” William watched as both cousins nodded. “Then, why is he not in debtor’s prison?” He paused as he cogitated for a minute. “You will not want to hear this, Mr Darcy, but by paying his debts and cleaning up his messes all you are doing is enabling him to hurt more people.”

“I have told you this before, have I not?” Fitzwilliam reminded his stubborn cousin.

“You are both right. It is time for me to do what I should have done years ago. I did not tell my father what his protégé had become because I did not want to hurt him, but I see now I damaged my father and his legacy more by trying to hide the truth than by dealing with it,” Darcy owned. “Perhaps I was protecting myself as well.”

“I have the debt receipts from London as well as this,” Fitzwilliam handed Collins a document.

“We have to show this to Cousin Elizabeth, and you two need to tell her the truth. No matter what she feels about Mr Darcy, she will not be able to refute written proof,” Collins recommended.

“I need to apologise to Miss Elizabeth for many things, it seems,” Darcy acknowledged.

“Tomorrow is the Sabbath. I suggest you two come to Longbourn at ten on Monday morning,” William proposed.

The cousins accepted.

When Fitzwilliam opened the door, Barker informed his colonel that Miss Bingley had attempted to approach the door more than once and was most put out that he had refused to abandon his post.

“It is time to deal with that shrew,” Fitzwilliam said after they saw Collins to the drive where he mounted his stallion.

“Damned fine horse, that,” Darcy observed. “Yes, I need to kill her delusions.”

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Chapter 17

After farewelling Collins, Fitzwilliam and Darcy requested that Bingley meet with them in his study. By the time they arrived, Thompson, one of Darcy's large footmen, was in the hallway outside of the room.

"I say, Chaps, why is Darcy's footman outside the door?" Bingley enquired.

Fitzwilliam looked at his cousin, sending him the silent message that it was Darcy who needed to speak plainly with Bingley.

"Bingley, please tell me you are not unaware of your sisters', especially Miss Bingley's, penchant to eavesdrop at doors when we speak, especially if I am with you? It seems that no matter how many times I have told you I will never offer for her, your sister is still under the illusion that I will," Darcy stated.

"My sisters would not," Bingley defended half-heartedly.

"Surely you are not so naïve to believe that? You know better than anyone how your sisters thrive on gossip and dig for any information that they feel will somehow advantage them. They use methods fair and foul." Darcy paused as he collected his thoughts. "I must tell you that I will no longer remain silent when your sister spouts her high-in-the-instep pretentions."

"W-what do y-you m-mean?" Bingley stammered.

"You have heard when your sister claims that she and I are at the same level of society, have you not? She did the same when my cousin arrived today," Darcy pointed out.

"She means nothing by it," Bingley said weakly, knowing it was not factual as soon as the words passed his lips.

"You know that is not true," Darcy shot back. "I bear some responsibility for the brazen way she acts as if she, the daughter of a tradesman, is above the gentry. I should have corrected her. However, I allowed our friendship to stop me. Also, when she latches onto my arm

possessively without being invited to do so, it was up to me to set her down the first time. It has recently been indicated to me that when we do not act to stop something that is wrong, we enable the behaviour. I will no longer do that."

"Is Caroline really so very bad?" Bingley asked hopelessly.

"She is, and you and I both sat back in this very house and allowed her, and to a lesser extent Mrs Hurst, to act in a way no hostess ever should," Darcy responded.

"Me? What did I do?" Bingley whinged.

"Do you remember when the Misses Bennet were hosted in this very house?" Darcy reminded his friend.

"Of course I do; Miss Bennet is a beautiful angel," Bingley replied dreamily.

"Miss Elizabeth was a guest in your house, yet your younger sister, with aid from Mrs Hurst, constantly attacked Miss Elizabeth. You had the primary responsibility to check your sisters, as it is your house while you lease the estate, and you are the head of the Bingley family. As a gentleman, it was my place to call the behaviour what it was, but I will admit that I was fascinated by the way Miss Elizabeth was able to deflect your sisters' barbs back at them in such a way that your sisters were not aware of what she was doing. My behaviour towards that lady has not been admirable starting with my slight at the assembly, of which she heard every word. When she was here I very much enjoyed our debates, or that is what I thought they were."

"Debates! Miss Elizabeth argued with you at every turn. I think she dislikes you," Bingley returned.

"Yes, you have the right of it. I was too puffed up by pride and arrogance to see that," Darcy admitted.

Fitzwilliam was pleased to hear his cousin own that about himself. There was hope for him yet.

"That is not the topic of discussion at this time," Darcy stated firmly. "The way Miss Bingley behaves towards everyone and me is beyond the pale and wholly unacceptable. As her brother and head of the Bingley

family, I am informing you that I will no longer remain silent when your sisters misbehave. The next time either Mrs Hurst or Miss Bingley claim they are above the gentry, I will correct them in terms they will not be able to misconstrue. If Miss Bingley sinks her talons into my arm again, I will not only remove her hand from my arm, but, in no uncertain terms, I will tell her what I think of her doing that.

“Your sisters try running as far from their roots in trade as they can, but they do not realise that their behaviour paints them squarely as members of the *nouveau riche*. I will point out to your sisters that it is birth and not the size of one’s dowry or what seminary they attended which elevates them. On the subject of Miss Bingley’s dowry, which she boasts about every opportunity she has, besides that being extremely crass, on the scale of dowries among the *Ton*, hers is on the lower end.

“I want to keep you as a friend, but I will no longer tolerate your sisters’ behaviour, and that includes them calling uninvited at Darcy House. Even if my sister liked their company, and she does not, she is not out yet. Those calls are something I should have stopped immediately as well. If your sister attempts a compromise, I will not gratify it, and if you attempt to support her dishonourable action, you will be ruined along with her. I know this all sounds harsh, but it must be said before I give your sisters the cut direct.”

“You have told me you would never offer for Caroline even if she entrapped you; however, until now I never understood your resolve,” Bingley related as he shook his head. “What am I to do? I have always placated Caroline so that she would not unleash one of her tantrums. It seems that was not the best way to deal with her, was it?”

“No, it was not,” Fitzwilliam said as Darcy nodded his agreement with his cousin.

“Do you think my angel is aware of how my sisters treated Miss Elizabeth while she was here?” Bingley wondered.

“Bingley, what do you think?” Darcy questioned. “Did you not note the sisterly affection between Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth the day the latter walked three miles to come check on her sister?” Before the meeting with Collins, Darcy would have spoken against Miss Bennet, but based on what

he had been told, he knew that Miss Bennet would not accept anyone for whom she did not feel an inclination.

Before Bingley could repeat his question regarding what to do to take his sister in hand, there was rather loud screeching coming from the hallway outside the study door.

Fitzwilliam and Darcy looked at one another, knowing that a certain harpy had been thwarted from her attempted eavesdropping by Thompson.

With some trepidation, Bingley opened the door.

“Charles, you must sack this man without a character. He would not allow me to listen at…I mean, knock and offer you beverages,” Miss Bingley screeched with anger to try cover up her slip-up.

“You call yourself a lady, Miss Bingley, yet you attempt to abuse *my* footman, a man positioned by my orders to ensure that you could not attempt to eavesdrop as you have done anytime I have met with your brother at Hurst House. Did you never wonder why I began to insist that we meet at White’s?” Darcy said calmly. “As Thompson is employed by me and was acting on my orders, he will most certainly *not* be sacked.”

“Well, I never,” Miss Bingley blustered. She waited for her weak-willed brother to defend her. When he did not, she stamped a slippered foot and marched away.

“I am indebted to your sister for making my point about herself so eloquently,” Darcy drawled once the door was closed again. “You did notice that she never denied my charge about her listening to our private conversations, did you not?”

“As I have never attempted to check her before, how do I begin?” Bingley enquired.

“In her reticule,” Fitzwilliam suggested. He saw Bingley’s confused look. “I have heard William say how much she overspends her allowance. Is that true?” Fitzwilliam saw the younger man nod. “Make her live within her allowance; and refuse to cover overages. Having heard how your sister likes to change entire wardrobes like most of us change clothing, I would suggest you send a note to all the shops she patronises telling them that unless she has coin, you will not pay the bills.”

“I dare say you have the right of it. I will write to my man of business in London…” Bingley began.

“I suggest you dictate what you want to say to me, and I will be your scribe. Then, when you are satisfied, you may sign the final draft. That way there will be no misunderstanding about what you are trying to say,” Darcy proposed.

That is what Bingley did, and an hour or so later, a letter was on its way to his man of business in Town.

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As she was wont to do, by the time Miss Bingley calmed herself, she had put anything which did not fit with the way she wanted things to be out of her mind. With her head held high, she returned to her sister’s side in the drawing room.

“Louisa, I have given Mr Darcy more than enough time to offer for me. I have lost my patience. It is time for me to take the bull by the horns and compromise him.”

“Caroline, you know I have always supported your pursuit of Mr Darcy, do you not?” Mrs Hurst asked.

“As well you should because you will be elevated in society along with me,” Miss Bingley responded condescendingly. “It is not like that sot of a husband of yours would ever do anything useful and raise us in society.” Miss Bingley sneered towards the sleeping Mr Hurst.

“He is my husband; you should not…” Mrs Hurst began half-heartedly.

“It is not like he can hear us; after all, he is in one of his drunken stupors,” Miss Bingley sneered. “I was going to make Mr Darcy jealous by allowing him to think I had transferred my affections to his cousin, but I am no longer of a mind to wait. I told all of our friends I would return to London as Mr Darcy’s affianced, so I *will* be engaged to him!”

“What if Mr Darcy refuses to offer for you?” Mrs Hurst enquired. “If that is the case, you would be irrevocably ruined.”
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“My Mr Darcy is far too honourable; he will do his duty to me,” Miss Bingley insisted. “If he does not, I will make sure that his dishonour is known far and wide. I am certain that it will never come to that.”

Although she would not say no to her younger and more forceful sister, Mrs Hurst believed that Caroline was wrong. If she spread word that there had been a compromise and Mr Darcy refused to gratify her, he would be almost unscathed while Caroline would be forever ruined. How would that redound on her and Harold? She would have to think about whether she would assist Caroline because Mrs Hurst was certain her husband would be seriously displeased if she did something that led to their ruin.

“If he had not been distracted by that hoyden Eliza Bennet and her *so-called* fine eyes, my Mr Darcy would have offered for me already,” Miss Bingley claimed. “It was, after all, his whole reason for joining Charles in this benighted place.”

“I am sure you have the right of it, Caroline,” Mrs Hurst said aloud. ‘*My sister is deluding herself. Has she always been so bad?*’ she thought.

Neither Mrs Hurst nor Miss Bingley noticed that Mr Hurst’s eyes were cracked open. They did not pay attention to him when he woke with some grunts and groans and then, staggering as he walked, left the drawing room.

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Hurst found his brother-in-law seated in the study, seemingly deep in thought. “Where is Darcy?” he enquired.

“In his suite. Why do you ask, Hurst?” Bingley queried.

“You need to come with me. What I have to tell him is for your ears as well,” Hurst related.

Bingley stood and followed Hurst out of the study. He wondered what had changed. Unless there was to be hunting, Hurst was normally in his cups at this time of day, and when he walked about, he was a touch unsteady on his feet. However, his brother-in-law was climbing the stairs with purpose and showing no trace of being foxed.

Hurst knocked on the suite’s sitting room door, which was opened by Colonel Fitzwilliam. “Gentlemen,” he greeted.
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“May we enter? We need to speak,” Hurst stated.

Fitzwilliam stood aside and allowed the brothers by marriage to enter. He closed the door but called for Barker and stationed him in the hall again. With Miss Bingley in the house, one could not be too careful.

“Let me begin by making an admission,” Hurst said. “I am never in my cups, and what I drink is almost always watered down, or I will empty the contents of my glass unobtrusively. Before you censure me for my obfuscation, remember who my sister-in-law is. It began as a way to not have to be in her company, but over the years I have discovered that, when my wife and her sister think I am in a drunken stupor, they will speak freely while I *sleep*.”

“Why are you revealing this to us today?” Bingley queried.

“Because your younger sister is ranting and raving about compromising Darcy here this very evening.” Hurst cocked his head towards the mentioned man. “Louisa wisely warned her that Darcy would refuse to offer for her even if she entrapped him. However, Caroline, being Caroline, seems to believe that by some miracle, she has enough social sway to force his hand. Her plan is to threaten to spread word of the compromise and his refusal to offer for her to one and all in polite society.”

“Ha! I believed Miss Bingley more intelligent than that. All she will do is ruin herself, and I am sorry, Hurst, but if your wife assists her, she will partake in her sister’s ruin,” Darcy stated unequivocally. “As I have told Bingley, I will not offer for Miss Bingley under *any* circumstances and my family, and I, will ruin anyone who supports her spurious claim.” Darcy looked directly at Bingley as he said the last.

“I had hoped you were wrong that Caroline would lower herself to attempt a compromise. It seems that was a vain hope,” Bingley said sadly. “What do you suggest we do to head her off before she ruins herself?”

“If it did not have the potential to affect anyone else, I would say allow her to make her attempt and see her ruined,” Fitzwilliam opined. “However, that is not the case. Her actions, especially if she means to try and force William’s hand by acting the town crier about what occurred, will redound on Bingley and the Hursts no matter how much we would not want them to.”

“Hurst, where are they?” Bingley asked.

“In the main drawing room on the first floor,” Hurst responded. “Why, what are you thinking of doing?”

“I, well, that is, Hurst and I, need to confront Caroline and kill her delusions once and for all. She must be sent to Scarborough. My late father’s younger brother, Uncle John, and his wife, Aunt Hildebrand, will take Caroline in hand,” Bingley decided. “Louisa will be my hostess, like she should have been had I not given into Caroline.”

Even though he had always called Bingley a puppy, Fitzwilliam was pleased to see him stiffen his spine and begin to take responsibility for his family.

Following Bingley, the men filed out of the sitting room.

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Try as he might, not a single girl in the damned town would give George Wickham the attentions he believed were his due, especially if he were to pluck some of the newly blooming flowers he had seen around the town.

It looked like his only chance would be with light-skirted Lydia Bennet. She was the perfect age at fifteen—he discounted the fact that no other girls of that age were interested in him—and she would be an easy flower to pluck. The problem he had to take into account was that she was gently born.

Unlike some of his past seductions when he was able to use threats to intimidate the girls into not speaking of their surrendering their virtues to him, Miss Lydia was loud and brash and would crow of her *conquest* and their impending marriage. Had Wickham been able to slip away from the militia without committing a capital offence, then, bedding the flirt before he absconded and disappeared would have been just the thing. That avenue of escape, however, was closed to him, so he had to explore other ways to gain that which he desired.

Each time Miss Lydia and her sister, Miss Kitty, the one who followed her about like a lamb does an ewe, was in his company, they expressed deep
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sympathy for the unfair way Wickham had been treated.

The first thing he needed was blunt. How was he to survive on one pound a month when he had to pay coin for anything he wanted? It would be close to five months until the Colonel would cease garnishing his wages. That was when Wickham had an idea.

Seeing that the two youngest Bennet chits were sympathetic to his cause, he would hint how short he was of coin. He was sure they would give him some blunt. How they acquired it, he cared not.

He knew that Miss Elizabeth had swallowed his tale of woe; however, he had not heard the fiction repeated in the town. It was for that reason Wickham decided that trying to get money from Miss Elizabeth would not be a good idea. Unlike the youngest two sisters, Wickham being certain that she believed him notwithstanding, Miss Elizabeth was too intelligent to hand over any of her coin to him.

Even though Miss Elizabeth was older than he preferred them—he had learnt she was twenty—Wickham was still thinking of ways to seduce her. First, he needed some funds; nothing else was as critical to him.

If he did not succeed in having the Bennet chits bring him blunt, he would have to *borrow* some from his fellow officers.

Wickham's mind drifted to Darcy. Luck had been on his side insofar as he had not been in the prig's company since that uncomfortable meeting in Meryton. The only problem was the ball, which would be at Netherfield Park in less than a sennight. He would not want to spend a whole night hiding from the bastard. There was only one thing for it. He would have to manufacture a reason not to attend and place the blame at Darcy's door.

At least, Fitzwilliam was not in the area.

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Chapter 18

Miss Bingley had just been whinging to her sister that none of the men were spending any time in their company—she did not count her lout of a brother-in-law being soused and sleeping as male presence—when the drawing room door opened, and the men entered the room.

She sprang up and headed towards Mr Darcy intending to take his arm as she did often when they were in company together. Miss Bingley wanted to guide him to the settee to sit next to her. She froze when Mr Darcy spoke.

“Have I ever offered you my arm?” Darcy asked frostily.

“No, but you have never objected. As we are such good friends, why would you?” Miss Bingley cooed as she tried to ignore Mr Darcy’s tone of voice, which was decidedly not friendly.

“Let me be rightly understood. My only friend with the name of Bingley is your brother. You have never been my friend. Nor will you ever be more than my friend’s sister, whom I am forced to tolerate for politeness’s sake. Well, no more. You have gone too far, Madam,” Darcy responded firmly.

“I do not know to what you refer? I have impeccable manners, and my behaviour is as good, if not better, than any other at *our* level of society,” Miss Bingley claimed.

“What level is that, Miss Bingley?” Darcy shot back. “My cousin and I belong to the first circles; Mr and Mrs Hurst are part of the third, or perhaps lower second circles. Your brother, if or when he purchases an estate, will join the lowest level of the landed gentry. However, you are the daughter of a tradesman. The first time you spouted that pretentious drivel about us being of the same level of society, I should have corrected you firmly. In deference to your brother, I did not. I own that was an error on my part.

“You took it as a sign that there was a level of intimacy between us which did not exist. It is also my mistake that I did not tell you to release the death grip you held on to my arm the first time you took it without my offering. In any polite society, a lady places her hand on the man’s forearm *gently* only after said man *offers* his arm to said lady.”

As she looked around the room for some support, Miss Bingley found none. Louisa was not looking at her; instead, she was playing with her bracelets and bangles. Charles did not look happy. That must be because of the way Mr Darcy was speaking to her. She ignored the looks of disgust from Colonel Fitzwilliam and her sot of a brother-in-law. Regardless of what he said in this moment of insanity, Mr Darcy *would* marry her or her name was not Caroline Maleficent Bingley. There were more than enough witnesses in the room.

To effect the compromise, Miss Bingley threw herself forward at Mr Darcy expecting him to catch her.

As soon as she began to move, Darcy knew what the shrew was about. He simply sidestepped her and watched as she fell forward onto the rug-covered floor. Her body hit before her head connected; luckily for her the rug was thick.

“Charles, Mr Darcy has compromised me; he must marry me!” Miss Bingley screeched once she had sat up. The fact she was sitting on the rug was beside the point.

“Firstly, Miss Bingley, I never caught you. You are not compromised, and even had I decided to save you from your own folly before you fell, as I have told your brother repeatedly, I will never offer for you. If you think I will give in to an attempt to entrap me, then you are more delusional than I thought,” Darcy barked. “We came in here to tell you that your plans to compromise me would only result in your ruin. You will *never* be Mrs Darcy of Pemberley and Darcy House.”

“Then, I will ruin your name in London when I make it known you are no gentleman and refuse to do your duty after you compromised a lady,” Miss Bingley shrieked as her sister assisted her to stand.

“She is amusing, you know,” Fitzwilliam stated with a smirk. He turned to the shrew. “Does this daughter of a tradesman think she has any power in London if she attempts to go against the Darcy and Fitzwilliam families? Miss Bingley, if you run about Town screeching about a compromise, you will only ruin yourself more than my mother and her friends will. You really do not think things through, do you?”

“My cousin’s mother, the *Countess of Matlock,* already has a very low opinion of you as a social climbing fortune hunter, and your habit of imposing your company on my tender-hearted sister has only lowered you further in her eyes. She will take pleasure in making it known you are *persona non grata*,” Darcy revealed.

Doing her best to ignore that which she did not want to hear, Miss Bingley grasped onto the mention of Miss Darcy. “But dear Georgiana and I are the closest of friends…” Miss Bingley attempted to claim.

“Neither I nor Colonel Fitzwilliam, as her guardians, nor my sister herself, have ever granted you leave to address her informally. That you, a woman almost ten years her senior, would arrive uninvited and unwanted at Darcy House to call on my sister, who is not yet out, only emphasises your lack of understanding of the mores of the upper ten thousand,” Darcy stated unequivocally. “You constantly break two basic rules of society. Firstly, one does not call at the house of one above you in society unless you have been invited. Secondly, unless there is an invitation issued, you do not call on one who is not yet out.”

“You must marry me; I told all my friends I would be engaged to you before I return to London…” Miss Bingley demanded.

“Then, Caroline, in a roundabout way, you have told them the truth.” Bingley held up his hand when he noted his sister was about to rejoice. “What I mean to say is that you will soon be on your way to Uncle John and Aunt Hildebrand. What you told your ‘so-called’ friends is immaterial, as you will not be returning to London. From this moment on, I will no longer cover any of your overages. You will live within your means or face debt collectors. My man of business is in the process of closing all the accounts you have, and he is telling the proprietors that if they sell to you without you paying with coin, I will not pay any further invoices sent to me. I suppose it is immaterial now, as you will not be returning to London.”

“**You may not banish me to Scarborough**!” Miss Bingley screamed.

“If you refuse to go, your dowry will be released to you, and you may go where you chuse,” Bingley said. “That will be a bad choice given that you will be irrevocably ruined in Town. In the case that you were wondering, had you done as you were planning with Louisa and

compromised Darcy this night, he would have refused to give into it, and I would have completely supported Darcy's refusal."

"Louisa, you would not allow Charles to be so treacherous as to betray his own sister, would you?" Miss Bingley pleaded.

"Charles is right in this. Caroline, did I not attempt to warn you that this path you were on would lead to your own ruin? I agree with Colonel Fitzwilliam; it is laughable for you to think that anyone in Town would give credence to your word over that of the Fitzwilliams' and Mr Darcy's," Mrs Hurst responded. "I am always so worried about you unleashing that foul temper of yours that I did not tell you that had you done what you were planning to do, it would not have gone well for you."

"How could you go and tittle-tattle on me?" Miss Bingley screeched at her sister.

"Caroline, I did not think you so much of a simpleton as that," Hurst stated derisively. "Louisa has been in this room with you since you began speaking of your vile plans. So pray tell, how could she be in two places at once? I have news for you; I am never foxed and only feign sleep to have some peace from you. I heard what you said, and I was the one to inform your brother and his friends."

Now that she had someone to blame, Miss Bingley raised her hands, her nails extended and charged at her brother-in-law. Hurst stepped back, and, in her rage, she did not stop before she slammed into the wall. Nails broke against the hard barrier, and before she stopped, her face connected with it as well. Luckily for the crazed woman, by the time her face connected with the wall, she had slowed down considerably. She wailed from the pain of her nails snapping, and the shock of her face hitting as well.

Bingley rang for the housekeeper. "Mrs Nichols, my younger sister is not well. Please have two footmen confine her to her suite. Miss Bingley is not to exit her chambers until or unless I say so," he commanded as soon as the housekeeper arrived.

The housekeeper bobbed a curtsy, left the room, and summoned two of her husband's footmen. Soon enough the stupefied woman was led from the room.

“I think that Caroline needs to be under the care of a physician,” Mrs Hurst opined. “If I did not know better, I would say that she has had a break with reality. I blame myself for always indulging her fantasies.”

“As do I,” Bingley owned. “However, I cannot imagine Caroline in Bedlam. Surely, we need not consign her to that horrendous place.”

“Bingley, there are private, humane asylums in the realm. I recently heard of one that a well-to-do family had made some enquiries about and discovered some other options where their family member would be housed in comfort and compassion.” Fitzwilliam looked at Bingley. “I can make some enquiries to acquire the information for you.”

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam. That would be greatly appreciated,” Bingley responded. “As soon as you have the information for me, I will decide what to do. Whatever it is, my sister’s days in society are over.”

“If I may use your study, I will write an epistle and ask for that information,” Fitzwilliam responded.

“Please, go ahead,” Bingley allowed.

“Richard, why are you being so circumspect about who was to go to an asylum and who you are to ask?” Darcy queried once the study door was closed.

“It is Father I need to ask. It was a place he would have sent Aunt Cat had she been judged insane and not just criminally avaricious,” Fitzwilliam replied as he wrote. “I am sure you can see why I was careful in what I said.”

Darcy nodded and raised his hands in surrender. He agreed wholeheartedly that there was no reason to chance a scandal for their family.

When Fitzwilliam completed the missive and had sealed it and written the direction, he requested that William send it with his courier to place in the earl’s hand. That way they would not chance it falling into the wrong hands.

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“Are you and Darcy not joining us at St Alfred’s Church for services this morning?” Bingley enquired as he and the Hursts prepared to leave the house for Meryton and the church in the town on Sunday.

“We are remaining here so that Wickham does not see my cousin,” Darcy explained. “He is petrified of Richard, and if the bounder sees him, he will run before we can deal with him permanently.” Darcy saw the way Bingley’s eyebrows shot up. “Legally. Neither of us will break the law.”

The previous evening Richard had suggested this course of action to Darcy. To be honest, he had not thought about what the wastrel would do if he spied Richard. He had agreed with them remaining at Netherfield Park. He supposed they could have attended the smaller church in the Longbourn Village. However, there were reasons that would not be a good idea. Primarily, he did not want to see Miss Elizabeth again before he made his apologies, and she learnt the truth about Wickham. Darcy hated the fact that she thought he was a blackguard. For some reason, Miss Elizabeth’s opinion was very important to him. Perhaps Richard’s words about his arrogance had found fertile ground. The secondary reason was that he would not be rude and not introduce Richard to the Bennets and others. Given some of the residents of the area and their penchant for gossip, word of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s presence would reach the man they wanted to keep the information from before they were ready to confront him.

As Darcy was speaking to Bingley, his cousin spoke quietly to the Hursts.

“Hurst and his wife will not mention that I am here. If asked where you are, which is doubtful given your unpopularity in these parts, they will say you are spending the morning in private prayer and contemplation,” Fitzwilliam related with a smirk as the cousins walked back into the house after farewelling those on their way to church.

The two made their way up to their shared sitting room. With Miss Bingley restricted to her suite a floor below them, the cousins did not see the need for either Barker or Carstens to be stationed in the hallway outside the door.

“I feel great trepidation for the meeting we are to have at Longbourn,” Darcy admitted once he and Richard had taken their seats. “How did I

misread Miss Elizabeth so badly that I thought she was enamoured of me, and I was raising expectations I would not meet?"

"Because thanks to the way you are hunted in London, and anytime Miss Bingley was near you, you believed that all you had to do was snap your fingers and any woman you deigned to *bless* with your attention would fall at your feet. In my humble opinion, the years of believing yourself the darling of the *Ton* have given you an extremely overblown opinion of your self-worth. As I see it, as soon as you hear your putative income being discussed, which by-the-by is thanks to the shrew, you put the forbidding Darcy mask in place. That leads you to judge all females as being the same, and far below your notice, which led to your insult of Collins's cousin. Collins never told me what you said, so what was it, or do you not remember?"

"Unfortunately, I do. Until you used fisticuffs on me, I had forgotten. It is not an excuse, because there is no excuse for what I said. However, I was very concerned about Anna's low spirits, and I wanted to remain here instead of attending the assembly. It was then that Miss Bingley threatened to stay here to keep me *company*. Hence, I was in a foul mood at the assembly. After I had danced the obligatory sets with Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley, I was trying to keep away from the latter when Bingley…" Darcy told his cousin about the conversation and what he had said so that his friend would cease importuning him.

"Even for you, that was a horrendous insult! If I did not believe that you are truly remorseful, I would demand you meet me at Gentleman Jack's, where I would proceed to thrash you. Luckily for you, I can see that you know you erred, and you intend to do what you should have that very night and apologise to Collins's cousin," Fitzwilliam stated.

"I have a problem. I am in love with Miss Elizabeth, but I may have done irreparable harm to her opinion of me, and she will never see me as anything but, what did Mr Collins say?"

"The last man in the world she would be prevailed upon to marry."

"Yes, that. Richard, how do I overcome my massive blunders?" Darcy questioned plaintively. "I was the simpleton who thought she was not worthy of me when it seems I am not worthy of her."

“See how she reacts to you begging her pardon and the truth of Wickham’s tale of woe. Before you tell me that she will not believe a word from your mouth, you will be able to provide proof. What did Wicky give her to back up his lies? Nothing! He does not have anything. If this Miss Elizabeth is half as intelligent as you and Collins say, she will not refute solid evidence of the truth. Between your apologies and us refuting Wicky’s lies, you may have a chance to improve her opinion of you.”

Speaking to Richard had given Darcy a sliver of hope.

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William Collins offered his arm to Cousin Mary for the short walk to St Hugh’s, the church in the Longbourn Village.

“But, Mr Collins, you need to escort Lizzy so you may sit next to her in the church,” Fanny demanded. She was very frustrated because Mr Collins was not spending any time with Lizzy. As she was sure her second daughter would never receive an offer of marriage, she was determined to have her most troublesome daughter marry Longbourn’s heir.

The two Fanny Bennet was attempting to push together, were determined not to allow anyone to decide their futures for them.

For Collins’s part, it was not that he disliked Cousin Elizabeth. He liked her well enough, but only as a cousin. She was too stubborn for him, and he felt nothing for her beyond the familial. On the other hand, he was beginning to lose his heart to Cousin Mary. When he had arrived, she always had her nose in the nonsense Reverend Fordyce wrote. Thankfully all she lacked was some guidance, and through their discussions, he had shown her why he did not ascribe to what Fordyce said, and when she saw the logic in what he was saying, she had been willing to revise her opinions. It was not that Cousin Elizabeth was not pious, but unlike Mary, she did not live her piety.

Since he had been paying attention to her, William had seen Mary bloom, not that her mother or sisters had noticed. She had ceased wearing the useless spectacles as she gained confidence. She was also willing to believe him that she was just as pretty as her sisters. On the morrow, after
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his meeting with Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy, William intended to ask Mary for a courtship.

He saw Cousin Elizabeth force Cousin Jane to walk faster to put some distance between them and Cousin Fanny. “Come, Cousin, let us walk faster as well,” William said softly so only Mary would hear. She gave him a warm smile, and they both increased their speed.

“I do not know why Mamma keeps trying to match me with Cousin Collins when he obviously prefers Mary,” Elizabeth complained to Jane.

“If he did not prefer Mary, could you see yourself with him?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth cogitated for some moments. “No, I could not see myself as his wife. Yes, Cousin Collins is handsome and is not the buffoon his letter seemed to indicate. That being said, I need a man who will challenge me and is not scared to debate with me on any subject.” The face of a man for whom she had an intense dislike—she could say hate—jumped into her mind’s eye. Elizabeth shook her head to evict the unwanted image from her head. ‘*Where did that come from?*’ she asked herself silently.

Before Jane could say anything more, they arrived at the church.

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After the very enjoyable service, and a good and educational sermon, William Collins took some time to speak to Mr Pierce, the rector of the church. He was a man in his late sixties who had been in his post for over thirty years, having been preferred to the living by Cousin Bennet’s late father. His style was similar to William’s, and he also wrote his own sermons and did not use the ones that were prewritten.

Mr Pierce told William that normally he and his good wife joined the Bennets for the after-services meal. This Sunday, thanks to the presence of their children and grandchildren, the Pierces would not be at Longbourn.

Although he understood why, William was sorry Mr Pierce would not join them so that the two clergymen would be able to continue their interesting debate on ecclesiastical matters. He could not be too disappointed though, because William was able to escort Mary back to the
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manor house; once again ignoring Cousin Fanny’s fumbled matchmaking attempts.

As Bennet walked, he was happy at being amused by his wife’s inept attempts at matching their cousin with Lizzy. Not only that, for a lady whose sole purpose in life was to marry off her daughters, Bennet could not grasp why his wife was blind to Collins’s interest in Mary and hers in him.

He would have his fun when a request for a courtship or engagement was made to him. What fun it would be when Fanny finally saw the writing on the wall.

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Chapter 19

One of the many benefits of Miss Bingley no longer being the mistress of the house was that, since Saturday afternoon past, the house was operating on country hours thanks to Mrs Hurst making it so with her first decision as the hostess. Since Miss Bingley had been locked in her suite, the whole house seemed to breathe easier. The servants were far more relaxed, an attitude they had never known when Miss Bingley was mistress. She would scream at some of them and, in some cases, slap one near her. On the whole, the atmosphere was far more pleasant than it had been.

The Darcy courier returned to Netherfield Park early Monday morning, before Fitzwilliam and Darcy departed for Longbourn. The cousins were in the dining parlour breaking their fasts when the man entered the room. As he had been instructed by Lord Matlock, he placed the epistle directly into Colonel Fitzwilliam's hands. He bowed to the master and his cousin after the latter thanked him. Then the man withdrew.

Fitzwilliam broke the seal on the missive. While he was perusing what his father had written, Bingley and the Hursts entered the dining parlour.

Bingley went to the sideboard to make selections for his plate. The reasonable amount of dishes and the quality were also advantages of his younger sister's removal as mistress. In Miss Bingley's attempt to impress Darcy, she wasted the kitchen's time and her brother's money preparing far more than was needed. She had never grasped that her displays of bad taste had the opposite effect than she had intended.

Bingley owned that there was none to blame but himself. In order to try keeping peace, he had placated Caroline and given in to her, regardless of how unreasonable her demands used to be. That had only made her worse.

Once Bingley had his plate filled, Hurst took his place and did the honours for his wife and then himself. If one man was as happy as, if not happier than, Darcy with Caroline's banishment, it was Hurst. At long last he could be himself and not have to act the drunken, lazy lout to avoid the shrew.

“I hate to say this because Caroline is my sister, but our meals, everything in fact, are more enjoyable without her in our presence,” Bingley opined.

No one said a word in opposition, not even Mrs Hurst.

“I received the information I requested, that I promised to pass onto you. The asylum is called ‘The Quiet Place’, and it is on the Isle of Wight,” Fitzwilliam reported. “My source confirms that the accommodations are comfortable, and those who are resident there are treated well and with compassion. If your sister is accepted, she will be well cared for and will live in comfort.”

“What do you mean ‘if’, Colonel?” Mrs Hurst enquired. “Is it reserved for those related to members of the first circles?”

“No, Mrs Hurst, there is no connection to rank and status,” Fitzwilliam clarified. “The asylum has offices in London. I will scribe the direction for Bingley to write to them for an appointment. Miss Bingley will be evaluated by physicians. If they judge that your sister needs to be committed to their institution, they will accept her. As long as Bingley is able to pay, they care not who her antecedents are.”

“Louisa, will you write the letter for me so it will be legible?” Bingley requested.

“Of course, I will,” Mrs Hurst agreed. “Charles, what of the ball? It is supposed to be on the morrow, and although she scribed all of the invitations, Caroline lied to you. She never sent them out. I should have said something sooner.”

“I must wait for a reply from London. Hence, the ball will proceed as planned. I am sure that her not sending out the invitations was a tactic of Caroline’s to ensure that my neighbours did not attend the ball. She will fail in that as well. Have footmen take the invitations and deliver them at once. I am very thankful that I mentioned to so many that we are having a ball and all my neighbours would be invited. That way, everyone is aware, so the late invitations will not be too disconcerting to them. Please give me the one for the Bennets, I will deliver that one in person,” Bingley decided. “It has been brought to my attention how terribly Caroline behaved towards

Miss Elizabeth when she was hosted here. I need to beg both Miss Bennet's and Miss Elizabeth's pardons for not checking Caroline."

"You are not the only one who did not oppose her, Charles. Like you, I did anything I could to placate Caroline, and that included following her in being rude and dismissive to our neighbours, especially Miss Elizabeth," Mrs Hurst owned. "I need to come with you when you go to Longbourn so I too can offer my apologies." She thought of something and turned to Mr Darcy. "I am not sure if you realise it, but you caused Caroline to change from disdain of Miss Elizabeth to pure hatred." Mrs Hurst saw Mr Darcy looked confused. "Until you made that comment at Lucas Lodge about admiring '*a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman*', and naming that woman as Miss Elizabeth and not Caroline, as she expected you to say, my sister hardly thought of her. From that moment on, she became a mortal enemy."

"Good Lord, I forgot I said that. I did not consider my audience before I blurted that out," Darcy admitted. "She had just grabbed my arm again, and I had to pry her talons from my person, so perhaps I did so to try to show her how futile her attempts to attract my attention were." He sighed. "I have even more for which to beg forgiveness. I caused the attacks Miss Bingley unleashed against Miss Elizabeth, and I did nothing to point out the rudeness of a hostess behaving in such a manner towards a guest."

"I failed in that as well. As the master of this estate, it was my duty to check Caroline," Bingley acknowledged openly.

"William, we have an appointment," Fitzwilliam pointed out.

Darcy looked at the clock on the mantel. It was time to go have a quick wash and then begin their ride to Longbourn.

On his way up to his chambers, Darcy realised that what he was about to do was a wholly new experience for him. In the past, even when he was wrong, he had not been quick to own it, and certainly not publicly. After the almost debacle with Anna, all because he had been too proud and obstinate to check Mrs Younge's characters, as had been suggested to him, he had yet to beg his aunt's and uncle's pardons. What, in Andrew's and Richard's words, an arrogant horse's arse he had been.

After changing, the cousins met in the sitting room. “William, I did not want to say so in the dining parlour as it would have revealed the source of my information, but Andy will arrive with Anne later today. If we see Bingley at Longbourn, I will tell him I received a note from my brother. Do not look at me like that; it is nothing but the truth. I just will not say when the missive arrived,” Fitzwilliam stated.

By the time they arrived in the drive, Zeus and Invictus were saddled and being held by grooms, ready for the cousins to mount.

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“Cousin Elizabeth, may I have a word with you?” William Collins asked after they had just completed breaking their fast on Monday morning.

“Of course, Lizzy will speak to you. Come everyone, we need to allow our cousin time to say what he desires to Lizzy.” Fanny jumped up in anticipation, sending her chair flying. Finally! She knew how it would be.

“Cousin Fanny, I am not requesting a private interview with Cousin Elizabeth. In fact, unless Cousins Jane and Mary remain in the dining parlour with us, I will not be able to speak to Cousin Elizabeth. I will not remain alone with her and put her reputation in jeopardy,” William said firmly. It was a pity Cousin Bennet had already escaped to his library. Then again, his cousin would have made sport of his wife and more than likely not checked her. At least from today on, William would be his true self.

“My nerves! No one knows how I suffer,” Fanny screeched. What did she have to do? Mr Collins was almost as headstrong as her second daughter. Fanny stomped her way out of the dining parlour, her youngest two following.

“I thank you for considering my desires and reputation, Mr Collins.” Elizabeth inclined her head from where she sat. Jane and Mary remained in their seats.

‘*This man is nothing like I thought he would be*,’ Elizabeth told herself silently. ‘*Not only is he intelligent, but he is very much aware of the thoughts and feelings of those around him. I believe he will make Mary very happy.*’
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“Of course, Cousin Elizabeth. I believe that I do not speak out of turn when I say that we do not suit, and we would not have made one another happy,” William responded with a slight smile. “Now, to the reason I requested that you attend me here. Allow me to ask you something.”

Elizabeth inclined her head and extended her hand palm up to tell him to proceed.

“In a general sense, do you believe it is fair to hear one side of a tale and make judgements without seeing evidence to refute what you have been told or heard from the other party?” William enquired. “In the time I have been a guest at Longbourn, I have seen that in most cases you are fair. Am I wrong in what I have observed?”

“I like to think I am just in my judgments,” Elizabeth returned.

“So then, you would not listen to one side of a story,” William postulated, “let us say, from one who you have only just met and know nothing of their history, and because it feeds a prejudice you already have, you would not take what you were told as fact without seeking the other side, would you?”

“Are you referring to what Mr Wickham told me?” Elizabeth asked hotly. “I told you everything he said, and how I saw honesty in his looks.”

“So that precludes looking at both sides before you make a judgement? I heard the same conversation, word for word, and I did not detect honesty or facts. All I heard were many contradictions, and that was in addition to the impropriety of a disclosure of that sort to one newly met. Not only that, but it was also done in a public place where anyone could have overheard,” William shot back. “With your perfect recall, tell me, Cousin, how many times did Mr Wickham say his feeling for the father would not allow him to expose the son, or words of that meaning?”

As she went over the discussion in her mind, Elizabeth was unhappy she had perfect recall. “Four times in different ways,” she admitted.

“Exactly! My request to you, Cousin, is to join your two sisters present in the parlour when Mr Darcy and his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam arrive. I ask you to listen to them and review the proof they have. Remind me what proof Lieutenant Wickham offered you to back up his claims.” William

waited for Cousin Elizabeth to reply, but she just turned away. “I am aware that Mr Darcy insulted you, but is that reason to blindly believe every word that Lieutenant Wickham told you?”

“How will I know that this colonel is not just saying what his cousin wants him to?” Elizabeth asked stubbornly.

“Firstly, I have known Colonel Fitzwilliam since shortly after I was preferred to my living, and I can attest to his honour and the fact that he is scrupulously honest,” William replied. “Secondly, did you miss the fact that I said that they have *evidence* with them? I have seen said documented proof, but do not take my word for it; wait until you have reviewed it with your own eyes.”

“I think I preferred you when I believed you to be a buffoon,” Elizabeth jested. Whenever she was uncomfortable, she turned to humour. “I suppose I would be rather missish, not to mention grossly unfair, if I refused to meet with them, hear what they have to say, and review what they have as proof.” She paused as she thought of something. “However, I will not be sanguine with Mr Darcy looking at me to find fault.”

“For an intelligent woman you are slow at times,” William stated as he shook his head. “Cousin Elizabeth, if you disliked someone, thought them tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt you, would you look at that person every time you were in company with them?”

“Er…I…no, I would not; I would avoid them,” Elizabeth responded.

“Exactly,” William answered smugly. He had the pleasure of seeing a look of confusion on his cousin’s countenance and then seeing her eyes become wide as the realisation of what he was alluding to hit home.

‘*Surely not!*’ Elizabeth thought. ‘*It is impossible that Mr Darcy admires me*.’

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As he waited for Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy to arrive, William heard Cousin Lydia speaking of how she and Cousin Kitty were soon to walk into Meryton to go see the officers.
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Although he knew he needed to speak to Cousin Bennet in the near future, William decided that he must do something in the meanwhile. He would never forgive himself if something were to happen and all of his cousins were to be ruined along with the youngest Bennet. He would still offer for Mary, but would the shame be too much for her to accept him?

What was needed were men to guard the girls and step in to save them from themselves if need be. He did not know where to find such men on short notice. However, he remembered that Fitzwilliam knew many former soldiers.

That decided it. William would speak to Fitzwilliam as soon as he and Mr Darcy arrived.

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Darcy was nervous as he and Richard arrived at Longbourn. Just a few days past, he had been so sure of his place in the world and his worth as a gentleman to be admired and desired. Knowing that his behaviour and manners caused the woman he now knew he loved to dislike him to the extent that her sister described her feelings as hatred had shocked him to his core. That realisation had hurt more than all three times Richard had struck him combined. Now he was not at all sure of himself.

He saw Mr Collins waiting for them in the drive, and he looked rather serious. Darcy worried that Miss Elizabeth had refused to see him.

“Welcome to Longbourn, Fitzwilliam, Mr Darcy,” William said as he bowed.

The cousins dismounted and allowed the waiting groom to lead their stallions away before turning to face the parson and returning his bow.

“Collins, you look well. Before I forget, my older brother and our cousin, your patroness, will arrive at Netherfield Park later today,” Fitzwilliam related. “It is kind of you to wait for us outside in the cold, but there was no need. We are not so very high and mighty, are we, William?”

“No, indeed,” Darcy agreed. “Is all well? Are we *both* welcome here?”

“Yes, you *both* are,” William Collins replied. “I wanted a chance to speak to Fitzwilliam before we enter the house.”
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“I will stand aside so you may speak,” Darcy volunteered.

“No need; your advice may be helpful,” William allowed. “Mr Darcy, I am sure you have seen that my two youngest cousins’ behaviour is not what it should be.”

All Darcy could do was nod.

“I am worried they will be led astray by some of the officers, even if that Wickham fellow is excised from the area soon,” William stated.

“Should they not be taught better?” Darcy enquired judgementally.

When William saw Fitzwilliam make a fist and Mr Darcy quail, he placed his hand on his friend’s arm to restrain him. “Yes, they *should* have been taught. The truth is that their father is rather indolent and sees everything as a good joke, and their mother does not know the ways of the gentry. She did teach the two youngest how to behave, and they are doing what she imparted to them, and that, gentleman, is the problem. I want them protected first, and then I will try to work on their parents. The eldest three sisters abhor the way the youngest two behave, but without parental support, there is nothing they can do to rein them in.”

“I know of some good men who have been discharged from the army. All they have is their half pay, and they would jump at the chance to get good work,” Fitzwilliam stated. “How many men do you think?”

“Six should be enough,” William estimated.

“I do not want Wicky to see me yet, so may I write a note inside and send someone to the inn to engage an express rider?” Fitzwilliam requested. He saw Collins’s questioning look. “I call that miscreant Wickham, Wicky. He hates that appellation, which makes it all the better to use.”

“Are you sure that Miss Elizabeth is sanguine with me being in her home?” Darcy verified.

“As long as you behave as a gentleman and do not slight her again,” William responded. “She is willing to hear what you two have to say and see what you have as proof. I hope she will be able to move past her prejudices.” William Collins led the two men into the entrance hall, where

Hill divested them of their outerwear. Then, he led them to the parlour where the three eldest Bennet sisters were waiting for them.

Inside the west parlour, Elizabeth was feeling almost like she was having one of Mamma's attacks of nerves. She had been so certain of her opinion of Mr Darcy, and with a few words, Cousin Collins had thrown her firmly held beliefs on their head. He said there was proof to refute what Mr Wickham said, but that was not why she was discombobulated. It was the assertion that Mr Darcy admired her.

How could that be, as she did not even tempt him enough for him to dance with her? '*He did ask you to dance twice, and you refused him both times,*' her annoying conscience whispered in her head. It was fact she could not refute. He had asked her at Lucas Lodge; yes, Sir William had prompted him, but he had insisted it was what he wanted. Then at Netherfield Park he had asked her to dance a reel with him. No one had prompted him there, and Miss Bingley had almost turned purple with rage when he did so. Again, Elizabeth had refused him. Was his comment about extensive reading to improve one's mind a compliment to her? Surely not.

Any other thoughts were chased from her head when the door opened and Cousin Collins led Mr Darcy and a second man into the room. Elizabeth assumed that the other man was Mr Darcy's cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. The officer was not as handsome as his cousin or Mr Collins for that matter, but neither was he homely. He was a little shorter than Mr Darcy, about the same as her cousin's height, but he had a barrel chest and his shoulders seemed far broader than the other two men.

"Collins, will you introduce this bevy of beauties to me, please?" Fitzwilliam requested. His compliment caused all three to blush in varying degrees.

Everyone stood when the men entered the parlour.

"Fitzwilliam, I present three of my cousin's daughters. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Mary. Cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam," William said in introduction.

Each lady curtsied when her name was mentioned, and Fitzwilliam bowed to them.

“Ladies,” Darcy greeted as he bowed, his eyes fixed on Miss Elizabeth’s.

Never had Elizabeth been so unsure of herself in the insufferable man’s presence. She did not enjoy the sensation.

“If I may be so bold, I need to send an urgent communiqué to some soldiers in London,” Fitzwilliam stated. “Would any ladies of the house object if I used the *escritoire* in the corner so I may write what I need?”

“Please, Colonel, do what you need to do,” Jane agreed.

While Richard wrote, Darcy fought to not do what he usually did when he was nervous, which was to stand at the window and stare out at nothing. Instead, he sat and did not miss the way Miss Elizabeth seemed to be weighing him.

Using his ring to seal the letter, Fitzwilliam then handed it to Collins, who took it to Hill with the relevant instructions. Inside of a half hour, it was on its way.

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Chapter 20

With Colonel Fitzwilliam's missive taken care of and the door from the west parlour to the hallway closed, Elizabeth looked at Mr Darcy expectantly. According to her cousin, he had requested the meeting, so now it was time for him to state his business.

Elizabeth did what she could to not prejudge Mr Darcy again, like she had at the assembly and again when Lieutenant Wickham had told her what he did. In hindsight, she thought that making such a personal disclosure to her was not proper. Now that she truly considered that night, she saw that Mr Wickham had sought her out, almost like he was determined to speak to her about Mr Darcy. And yes, there were far too many inconsistencies and pure contradictions. As much as she disliked admitting that she was wrong, she had to be open to that possibility in this case.

The Mr Darcy sitting opposite her did not look like the arrogant, proud, self-assured man she was used to seeing. He seemed worried and not a little nervous.

As soon as Richard sat next to him, Darcy took some deep breaths to centre himself. '*Do not make a cake of yourself*,' he admonished himself silently. '*After all, it is only your future happiness in the balance here.*'

Darcy cleared his throat. "There is much I need to say and many pardons I need to beg. If I say the wrong thing, I ask for your understanding before I begin. My cousin here," he inclined his head towards Richard, "will attest that although I am very articulate when I write my thoughts on paper, there are times when I speak that I insert one of my hessians into my mouth." Darcy was encouraged when he saw Miss Elizabeth's lips quirk upward as she gave a ghost of a smile.

"Allow me to begin by addressing you, Miss Elizabeth. Although at the time, I did not see how my behaviour was seen through the eyes of others, I was not in a mood to be at the assembly for numerous reasons; however, there is no way for me to excuse the vile words which passed my lips when Bingley urged me to dance. Not asking anyone outside of my party to dance when I could see there were many more ladies than men was far beyond the

norms of polite behaviour. That my words were factually inaccurate is neither here nor there. In fact, they were the opposite of reality."

"What are you saying Mr Darcy?" Elizabeth did not want to misinterpret his words. Surely, he did not think she was pretty? That thought was nothing to the shock of Mr Darcy standing before her and asking her to pardon him for his insult. If she had thought of things that would never happen, Mr Darcy owning his own faults would have been the very first item on that list.

"What I mean, Miss Elizabeth, is that you are more than handsome enough to tempt me; in fact, you happen to be one of the handsomest women of my acquaintance." Darcy was pleased to see that Miss Elizabeth's cheeks pinked up significantly. "But it was not only that about which I was wrong. As was eloquently pointed out to me," Darcy looked at Collins, "that as I am the guest of one leasing an estate in the area, how could I give consequence to one who had lived here the whole of her life?" He looked at Richard. "My cousin *forcefully indicated* to me, about three times, how rude I had been and how far I had strayed from the principles my late honoured parents taught me."

While Mr Darcy spoke, Elizabeth remembered what Cousin Collins had said about the reason a man would stare at a woman. Did he have the right of it? And if so, did she want Mr Darcy to be attracted to her? Even if Lieutenant Wickham's disclosure had been improper, that did not make it untrue.

"My next apology is to the Bennet family as a whole. My behaviour when we have been in company, beginning with the assembly, has not been that of a gentleman. I cannot undo the past damage I did to my reputation in the neighbourhood; however, I can behave as a man of gentle upbringing going forward. I intend to make my amends to all the residents of the area.

"Next, I must ask Miss Elizabeth's, and to a certain extent, Miss Bennet's, forgiveness for the way I seemed to ignore the atrocious way that Miss Bingley, and to a lesser extent, Mrs Hurst, behaved towards you at Netherfield Park. What makes this doubly hard is that it was my words that caused Miss Bingley to behave as she did."

Elizabeth looked at Mr Darcy questioningly with an arched eyebrow.

Darcy explained what had occurred that night at Lucas Lodge and what he had said when Miss Bingley had come to importune him. “I am sorry that my thoughtless words caused her to attack you, Miss Elizabeth; however, the words are true.”

As much as she fought it, Elizabeth felt heat rise in her cheeks.

“Lizzy, I did not want to believe that the women I thought were my friends would act as you described,” Jane said as she tried to swallow a sob. “I have been so blind.”

“I did not hold anything against you, dearest. You always want to see the best in everyone,” Elizabeth said as she pulled her older sister into a warm hug. “I am sorry that you had to discover they are not the friends you thought they were. How will I face them at the ball on the morrow? That is, if we are invited to it.” She knew Mr Bingley had said they were invited, but Elizabeth did not know if Miss Bingley would allow it; after all, she had seen the way his younger sister imposed her will on her brother.

“Your whole family, including Collins is invited,” Fitzwilliam clapped his friend on the back. “The invitation will be delivered soon. The invitations were ready days ago, but the hostess made a choice not to send them out. Miss Bingley has been removed from society. It is up to my cousin to inform you about her removal if he chuses.”

“No! She did not attempt a compromise to force your hand, did she, Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth asked. She was horrified at the thought a woman would lower herself thusly.

“At first, Hurst, who is not a drunken sot, by the by…” Darcy began to say.

“I knew it!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I noticed that he never imbibed close to the amount that he wanted people to think he did. Also, several times I saw that he had his eyes cracked and was not in a drunken stupor.”

“You were more observant than those of us who have known him far longer,” Darcy complimented. “You realised what I was about to say about Hurst. As I was saying, he warned us that Miss Bingley was planning a compromise. We confronted her, and she attempted to jump into my arms right after I told her I would never offer for her, even with a compromise.

Her ensuing actions convinced Bingley that she needs special care. He is waiting to hear if he may take her to London for evaluation. Mrs Hurst is the mistress of the estate now. She is vastly different now that she is out from under her sister's influence."

William Collins was impressed with how things had gone so far. It seemed that Mr Darcy had looked in the mirror, and he had not been happy with what he saw in his reflection. William had hoped the man would be willing to make some changes; however, he had not expected so much so soon. Mr Darcy must be deeply in love with Cousin Elizabeth to go this far to court her good opinion. The contentious subject of Mr Wickham was yet to be canvassed. It would be interesting to see if Cousin Elizabeth would be willing to revise her relative opinions of both men.

"As soon as we are complete here, I intend to make my apologies to your mother for the way I walked away from her at the assembly. However, first, we must speak of a subject that is most distasteful to me and my family, that of George Wickham. Mr Collins related what that miscreant told you at Mr and Mrs Phillips' house the other night."

Elizabeth almost snapped at Mr Darcy for using the disparaging words about Lieutenant Wickham, but she bit the inside of her cheek and held her peace.

"Before Mr Darcy addressed the subject of the lieutenant, you must know that I have not spoken to your parents about the danger Mr Wickham poses to your younger sisters. As he did when Sir William attempted to warn him, your father would think it a joke. Your mother would tell me I was trying to restrict her favourite's fun. Writing to Colonel Fitzwilliam, and then with the Colonel and Mr Darcy deciding to act against the libertine, was an effective way of removing the danger of Mr Wickham; however, something still needs to be done about their fascination with, and the way they behave around, officers," William Collins interjected. "I am taking other steps to protect them which will come to light soon enough."

Much to their chagrin, none of the Bennet sisters could refute their cousin's words regarding their parents or their younger sisters. The sisters turned their attention to Mr Darcy.

“I will not address the impropriety of his sharing what he told you after barely having met you. I know his memory is not as good as yours is, but your cousin did relate what he remembered of the overheard conversation. I believe the bones of it are that he was my father’s godson, that he was ill-used by me when I refused him a living left in my father’s will, that I hate him, that I am jealous of him, and that I vindictively blasted his prospects. Also, he claimed that my sister is proud and unpleasant. Does that accurately summarise what he told you?”

“It does,” Elizabeth replied tersely.

“There were only two things he told you that were absolutely true. My late father was his godfather, and I did refuse him the living when it was available,” Darcy stated plainly.

Hearing what Mr Darcy said, Elizabeth shot a triumphant look at Cousin Collins. She was disconcerted by the smile on his face.

“However, what he did not tell you is that the bequest was conditional…”

“Are you saying it was a bequest, not a recommendation?” Elizabeth asked as she remembered the way Mr Wickham had described the ambiguous language regarding the living when she had asked why he had not sought legal redress.

“It is in my father’s will. Therefore, it is a legal and binding bequest. As I said before, it was conditional,” Darcy confirmed. “As Mr Collins can tell you, before a living may be awarded, the recipient needs to have been ordained and taken holy orders. That, Miss Elizabeth, was the condition.” Darcy handed over a copy of his father’s will, opened to the relevant section.

Elizabeth read the passage aloud. “*To my godson, George Lucas Wickham, I leave the sum of one thousand pounds and the Kympton living, when it becomes available, dependent upon said godson being ordained and taking his holy orders.*” She looked at Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. “He was never ordained, was he? And you gave him the money left him in your father’s will, did you not?” Elizabeth saw the nodded heads, that of her cousin’s as well. “What a silly girl I was. Wait, why did he try and claim something your father’s words excluded him from?”

“Before I answer that, you need to see this.” Darcy handed her a document.

“Oh, good Lord.” Elizabeth looked at her cousin. “He played me for a fool, did he not?” She handed the document to her two sisters in the room.

“Mr Darcy, you did not need to pay him three thousand pounds to give up the living. Mr Wickham refused to take orders!” Mary exclaimed after she had read the document a visibly shaken Jane had passed her.

“Legally, you are correct, Miss Mary. I did not need to give him anything, as he refused to comply with the condition. I did so in part in a misguided sense of what my father would have wanted me to do. Also, it was to have him sign away his rights to *any* living in my gift so that he could not claim I had refused him what was in my father’s will. You will note that I also made him sign for the amount that my late father bequeathed him. I did that for the same reason.”

“You paid Mr Wickham a total of four thousand pounds! How long ago?” Elizabeth enquired.

“From now, less than four years ago. I am sorry to be indelicate, but I feel you need to know what kind of man he truly is. My father thought him the best of men, but he never saw him the way I did. I witnessed his dissipation, profligacy, seductions, and more. I made the mistake of first, trying to protect my father, and then another in my family, by not telling them the truth about Wickham. Those days are past; I will not allow him to hurt others with impunity any longer,” Darcy related. “Thanks to your cousin’s quick thinking, he will not be able to do so here. Wickham likes to run up debts with the tradesmen in the town where he happens to be. However, he dislikes paying his debts and disappears before he can be forced to pay.

“He ran through the money I gave him in a little more than two years, which is why he attempted to gain more from me by claiming the living. I refused to give him an additional penny! However, another mistake I made was cleaning up after him. To that end, I have over three thousand pounds in vowels he signed.” Darcy nodded to Fitzwilliam, who removed a thick stack of debt receipts from a satchel by his side. “This does not count debts of honour he has never paid. Your cousin said some words in Sir William’s

ear, which led to all debts for officers being called in and any further credit denied. Mr Collins was also sufficiently perspicacious to warn Sir William that there are men who offer marriage to ladies barely out of girlhood, and then manipulate them into anticipating their vows. Thereafter, they abandon them to face the consequences alone. I wish it were not true, but this is one of Wickham's tricks. He does not take refusal well."

"I tried to ignore the evil in the world, but that does not make it go away, does it?" Jane cried.

"You need to begin to see the world as it is, Cousin Jane. If you need to discuss this more, I am happy to do with you another time, however," William Collins stated. "I always try to be honest, but I suspected that Lieutenant Wickham was one of the men I told Sir William about; hence, I embellished the small problem we had in Faversham some years ago. I knew he was a former merchant with deep ties to the owners of businesses in Meryton. He did what I hoped he would and more."

"As Mr Collins pointed out, the combination of me not taking action against Wickham and my willingness to clean up after him enabled his bad behaviour. I helped those he would have otherwise beggared and have provided homes and work for not a few of his seductions who have borne the consequences of allowing him to have his way with them," Darcy revealed. "I thought I was being so good in assisting his victims after the fact when I would have assisted them far better and so many more had I spiked his guns long ago." He shook his head. "Had your cousin not contacted my cousin, and had Fitzwilliam not come and *pointedly* reminded me how remiss I have been in dealing with the wastrel, who you will hear my cousin call Wicky." Darcy paused when he saw the three Bennet sisters look at him quizzically. "It is a name my cousin gave Wickham. He hates it, but as he is more afraid of Richard than any other, he has never had the gumption to tell Richard not to call him that. As I was about to say, as soon as I saw him in Meryton, I should have been the one to warn the shopkeepers and fathers. I was held back by two things."

Darcy looked at Richard, and they communicated silently. Richard nodded.

"The first thing that caused me to remain silent was my pride. It would not allow me to lay my private actions open for others to see, and the

second is far more personal, and I must ask that none of you ladies repeat this to any other," Darcy requested.

The three eldest Bennet sisters swore they would not tell another soul.

"Due to my improper pride, and not being willing to have my judgement questioned, I employed a faithless companion for my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, whom that seducer claimed was proud and aloof. I did not verify her characters and allowed her to take my sister to Ramsgate this June past. At the time, I was not aware she was a paramour of George Wickham. After I left for London, my sister met the libertine by *chance*, or so she believed. He began to call often, encouraged by Mrs Younge. Between them, they convinced my tender-hearted sister, who had turned sixteen two months earlier, to elope with him. As long as I live, I will give thanks to God that I decided to return a few days before I had initially planned. My sister, thinking I would be pleased she was to marry my *good* friend, told me all. They planned to elope the very next day. Mrs Younge was out for a short while, according to my sister. I was in the sitting room when, bold as brass, in walked Wickham with Mrs Younge trailing him. She fainted dead away, and I ran the libertine off after he admitted he never loved my sister. He only wanted her large dowry and to avenge himself on me. I sacked Mrs Younge and ordered her out of the house forthwith.

"Now he has the gall to describe my sister as he did when he was the cause of her state. She has lost the little confidence she had gained in her own judgement and has retreated into a crushing shyness. She is in London with my aunt, the colonel's mother, and her new companion as they try to assist her to recover."

Even had Mr Darcy not shown her the proof of his dealings with Mr Wickham, Elizabeth would have believed him. "It seems that you have all the goodness," she said looking at Mr Darcy, "while he has only the appearance of it."

"I thank you for saying that, Miss Elizabeth. Do I dare to hope that you will be willing to begin again with me?" Darcy asked beseechingly.

"It is the least I can do. However, are you sure you want to know one who was so silly as to believe Mr Wickham's lies so readily?" Elizabeth

wondered. “It makes me feel as silly as my father accuses my two youngest sisters of being.”

“Miss Elizabeth, that man has the ability to pass himself off with credit, at least when one first meets him. He is very good at making friends but not at all accomplished in keeping them once they see who he truly is,” Darcy stated comfortingly. “Besides, had I behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner at that assembly, then you would not have been looking for things to confirm your poor opinion of me. If there is blame to be apportioned, I deserve the lion’s share.”

Even though Mr Darcy was generous enough to acquit her of culpability by first allowing Mr Wickham, as his cousin called him, Wicky, to unfold his web of lies to her and by blindly believing him, Elizabeth could not excuse herself so easily.

She had accused Mr Darcy of pride and prejudice, but was that not the thing, combined with a healthy dose of stubbornness which had driven her? Until Cousin Collins took charge of the situation and forced Elizabeth to look at her own beliefs and actions, she had been the one to refuse to consider any other possibility than the beliefs to which she was clinging. Yes, she was very intelligent, but all this had proved was that she was not very clever at times.

Once she had excoriated herself, Elizabeth knew she would need to examine the new facts. Mr Darcy thought her pretty! No, he had called her the *handsomest woman of his acquaintance*, and he knew Jane!

William Collins was very satisfied that what he had intended—to make Mr Darcy and Cousin Elizabeth reflect on their behaviour—had succeeded beyond his wildest imaginings. It was not the worst thing that Cousin Jane had been exposed to some realities of life. He may still have to speak to her, but William was confident the eldest Bennet sister’s eyes were far more open now than they had been before the meeting.

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They heard Hill welcome the Hursts and Mr Bingley as soon as the six who had been in the parlour opened the door.
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“Misses Bennet, Fitzwilliam, and Darce, it is good to see you all.” As Bingley spoke, his eyes were locked onto Miss Bennet. He was not sure who the other man, who was a little taller than himself, standing with the Bennet sisters, was. As he did not know who was higher socially, he held his peace.”

“Will one of you introduce your guests to me?” William Collins requested.

“Cousin, I present the residents of Netherfield Park to you. This is Mr and Mrs Hurst, and next to them is Mr Bingley, the master of that estate. This is our father’s cousin and the heir presumptive of Longbourn, Mr Collins of Hunsford in Kent,” Jane introduced.

“Where are your youngest sisters and your mother? After all, the ball was at Miss Lydia’s insistence, so she must be present when I hand the invitation to her mother,” Bingley stated. “Mr Collins, you are of course included in the family party.”

“I thank you, Mr Bingley. Dancing is an exercise I enjoy,” William stated as he gave a half bow.

Jane and Elizabeth led the rest into the drawing room.

“Where have you three been?” Fanny demanded upon seeing her three eldest daughters file into the drawing room. Anything else she was about to say was lost when she saw the proud Mr Darcy, and a gentleman she did not recognise. Mr Collins followed them, and behind him were the Hursts and Mr Bingley. Fanny did not see Miss Bingley, but she cared not as long as Mr Bingley was present. “Does my Jane not look good?”

Her mother putting her forward in this manner only caused Jane to blush furiously. She did not know where to look. Thankfully, Lizzy gripped her hand and squeezed it which calmed Jane down considerably.

Seeing that his angel was embarrassed, Bingley knew he needed to distract the matron. “Mrs Bennet, I have the invitation for your family to the ball to be held on the morrow. I am very sorry it is so late, but I am afraid my younger sister was taken ill, so the invitations were not sent out in a timely fashion. I told Mr Collins that he is more than welcome as part of your party.”

Fanny was about to ask for an introduction to the other man. However, he asked for an introduction first. She soon learnt that he was the second son of an earl and a colonel in the Royal Dragoons.

“If you are a colonel, why are you not wearing your scarlet coat?” Lydia demanded rudely.

“Because, Miss Lydia, I am not on duty. That does not make me any less of an officer. Unlike the militia officers I saw in your town, I do not have to pretend to be an officer, as I am in the regulars,” Fitzwilliam responded with a grin. The girl was exactly as Collins had described her. Brash, forward, and silly. The one next to her, Miss Kitty, looked on with a silly smile.

Lydia did not like the reply. The officers she liked were real, not pretend officers. What did this man know? He was not even in his scarlet coat!

“Miss Bennet, and especially Miss Elizabeth, I must beg your pardon for not checking my younger sister while you were my guests at Netherfield Park. She was unpardonably rude, and it was made worse by virtue of the fact that she used to be my hostess,” Bingley stated.

“I would like to add to that by begging your pardon as well, Miss Bennet, and as my brother said, especially Miss Elizabeth. In trying to placate my sister, I behaved in an unacceptable way,” Mrs Hurst added.

“It must have been Lizzy’s fault with her impertinent ways…” Fanny began.

“I hate to disagree with you, Mrs Bennet, but the fault belonged to my younger sister. Miss Elizabeth’s manners were impeccable,” Bingley replied firmly.

Fanny huffed and looked away. Then, she almost fainted dead away when the proud and rude Mr Darcy apologised for his behaviour at the assembly and beyond. What was the world coming to?

As the guests began to leave, William leaned towards Mary. “Will you take a turn in the park with me, please?” He was happy that Mary blushed and agreed.

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Chapter 21

Mary walked out into the park on Cousin William's arm, with Jane and Elizabeth following. The day was cold but not freezing; all three sisters and William Collins were wearing heavy outerwear and fur-lined gloves.

Jane and Elizabeth found a bench in the weak sun from which all the park was visible. The former bent her head towards the latter. "Who would have ever thought that Mary would be the first of us to have a serious suitor? She deserves her happiness as much, if not more, than any of us," Jane opined.

"I agree," Elizabeth responded. "Have you noticed how Mary has come alive since our cousin has been paying her unofficial court?"

"Indeed, I have. However, I am confused. How is it that Mamma does not see how well suited they are and still uses every opportunity to push you and Cousin Collins together?" Jane asked.

"Unfortunately, Mamma and I share the trait of stubbornness. I always tried to tell myself that I am nothing like Mamma; however, thanks to our cousin forcing me to reevaluate my former opinions, I have been able to see that error in my character. I so much wanted to paint Mr Darcy as the villain that I disengaged all logic when I listened to the tale Mr Wickham spun for me. Had I not been driven by my pride and prejudices, I would have been able to identify all the inconsistencies in his speech. This is a long way of answering your question. Like I have before, when Mamma makes up her mind, she will not allow facts in front of her nose to sway her. She has decided that I am for Mr Collins, so that is all she is able to think about, which makes her blind to the truth." Elizabeth shook her head. "It is humbling to realise that I share stubbornness and wilful blindness with Mamma."

In the past, Jane would have tried to excuse both people Elizabeth had mentioned, but since the meeting in the parlour, and Mr Bingley and Mrs Hurst apologising for the way Miss Bingley behaved, she was trying to see the world as it was and not as she wanted it to be. "I dare say there is truth in what you said, Lizzy."

She raised her eyebrows at Jane who was not looking for the best explanation, but Elizabeth chose to carry on without comment. “Seeing how Mary has reacted to receiving attention from our cousin, do you think that perhaps we did Mary a disservice by excluding her from the circle of our friendship?” Elizabeth queried. “By the by, Lydia will not be happy that Mary is first in an area she has long claimed would be hers.”

“I always thought that Lydia’s claim that she would be the first of us to marry was a hollow one. She is clearly not ready to be a wife to some man,” Jane replied. “As far as Mary goes, yes, I think we did her a disservice by not including her.”

“All we can do is not repeat the same errors in the future,” Elizabeth mused.

“Lizzy, how do you feel after all the revelations about Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy’s apologies? Did you find them sincere?” Jane enquired.

“As to sincerity, yes, I do believe Mr Darcy was. Mamma was so fixated on Mr Bingley and the Hursts, I wonder if she even heard what Mr Darcy said when he apologised to her. You know how single-minded Mamma gets when she thinks she is *helping* you catch a suitor. Add to that she was distressed that I had somehow upset the *elegant* Miss Bingley, which would cause Mr Bingley to leave you,” Elizabeth responded. “After discovering how easily Mr Wickham pulled the wool over my eyes, I almost feel like I do not know myself. I was wrong about Messrs Darcy and Wickham, and I am happy that Mr Darcy proposed that we begin again. I can scarcely credit that he has felt an attraction to me from almost the moment of our meeting.”

“It just shows he has good taste,” Jane stated. “Have I not always told you that no matter what anyone says, you are as pretty as I am purported to be? At least now, I am willing to own that Mamma only sees those of us who look like her as pretty.”

“Enough about us. What do you think Mary and our cousin are discussing?” Elizabeth cocked her head to the other side of the park and the seated couple.

After a few circuits of the park, during which time they had spoken of nothing of consequence, William Collins led Mary to a bench. He waited

for her to be seated before he also sat, allowing enough space between them to satisfy propriety.

“Cousin Mary…Mary, even had we not spoken of it on this bench, you could not have missed the marked attention I have been paying you,” William began.

“Fortunately, I am not wilfully blind, as it seems my mother is,” Mary responded lightly. “Yes, Cousin William, I have noted and welcomed your attention.”

“Since we met, my heart has been leading me towards you. My feelings for you at this moment are very tender,” William stated, “I do not believe it will be a long time before I am in love with you; however, I am not quite there yet. I will not be precipitous and propose marriage to you before both of us are ready for that step. You, Mary, are everything I ever imagined I would find in the partner of my future life. If we end up marrying, which is my hope, then you will be the mistress of Longbourn one day, but until then, you will be a parson’s wife, something I believe you are eminently suited to be. As such, for now, until we both feel we are ready for the next step, I humbly request a formal courtship.”

“Like you say you have been to me, Cousin William, I have been drawn to you since the day we met. I believe it will be a short time before I am in love with you. My feelings for you are already very tender. When I imagine my future life, I cannot see any man as my husband other than you. I believe that is a sign that we are meant to be together. May I ask you a question before I reply to your offer?” Mary requested.

“Of course, Mary, you may ask me anything you desire,” William responded warmly.

“When you arrived, I was dressing and doing my hair severely, trying to be the plain Bennet sister my mother, ever since I can remember, has told me I am. I know you told me why you and Lizzy would not suit, but why, as I was when you arrived, did you think that I could be the one for you?” Mary asked.

“It is simple. I saw past the mask you donned and saw the real person under the façade you presented to the world,” William replied. “Unlike your mother, I have never held that beauty is the only, or even an important,

attribute that one needs in the partner of his future life. Do not mistake my meaning. Even then I could see that you were no less pretty than your sisters regardless of how you attempted to hide your light under a bushel. When I saw that the Bible and Fordyce's Sermons were your preferred reading, I knew you were a pious woman, even if misdirected by giving Fordyce's work much more weight than it deserves. I decided then that of all the five Bennet sisters, *if* I were to marry one, it would be you. However, I first had to know that you were not so rigidly entrenched in the sermons that you were unwilling to see another point of view. To my delight, I discovered that you are able to consider other points of view, and you were inclined to change your opinions when presented with proof and cogent arguments. From that point on, I knew that if you were disposed to be pursued by me with an eye to a future union, then that is what I would do.

"Why your mother has been blinded to our possible match is beyond me. I care not what her opinion of it is or will be. It is from your father I must seek permission, not her. If you accept my offer of a courtship and Cousin Bennet gives his consent and your mother still attempts to direct me to Cousin Elizabeth, I will have no choice but to tell her that her interference is not appreciated and will never succeed."

Mary glowed with pleasure at William's speech. It was a new and very pleasant experience to be someone's first choice. "In that case, yes, William, pending my father's permission, I will happily enter into a formal courtship with you."

"You have made me the happiest of men. Only when, if, you accept my proposal of marriage will my happiness exceed what I feel now." William took each of Mary's hands in his own and bestowed a kiss on one and then the other. He would have preferred to have done so without her wearing gloves, but it was too cold outside for him to remove her gloves for his own pleasure. "I think *we* need to go to your father."

All Mary could do was smile in a way that lit up the whole of her face.

"Mamma must be blind if she thinks Mary plain. She looks so much like you, Jane, just with different coloured hair and eyes," Elizabeth opined when she noted the beatific smile Mary was displaying. "I get the feeling that whatever question Cousin Collins asked was met with a positive response."

“As much as I dislike criticising Mamma, I will own that I do not agree with the way she sees who is and who is not beautiful,” Jane said.

“That is the most unforgiving speech that I have ever heard you utter. Good girl! It would vex me, indeed, for you to be unable to see that, like all of God’s children, Mamma too has faults. There is hope for you yet, Jane,” Elizabeth stated jokingly.

Jane swatted playfully at her younger sister’s shoulder.

Before either could say more, they stood as Mary and Cousin Collins reached them. “Well?” Jane asked when she saw the pleasure radiating from both her sister and cousin.

“I have accepted a courtship, and we are to go to Papa for his permission and hopefully his blessing,” Mary enthused.

Elizabeth was impressed that their cousin had not been precipitous and proposed to Mary after only knowing her for about a sennight. It bolstered her opinion that Cousin Collins was a man of good sense and honour.

The two eldest Bennet sisters linked arms as they followed the now acknowledged couple into the house.

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Colonel Forster was seated in his office staring at a note he had just been handed.

25 November 1811

Netherfield Park

Colonel Forster,

You do not know me, but I am a fellow colonel. However, I am in the regulars.

For reasons I will explain when we meet, I am not using my name, and rather than come see you in your office, I request that you come see me at your earliest convenience at the above estate.

It is about one of your officers—one I am led to believe you know was able to gain debts in the area of
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£20 in a few short days. There is a lot more you do not know about that man, things that if they were to come to light and you ignored them would bring your regiment into disrepute.

Rather than tell you a tale, like I am sure the man has done regarding one Mr Darcy, I have proof to bolster my words. Search your memories; what evidence did the lieutenant offer you?

If you respond to my request in the affirmative, please bring any document the man in question signed in your presence. Again, you will understand why as soon as we speak.

The man who conveyed this missive to you will wait for a reply.

I hope to meet you soon.

As the epistle was unsigned, at first, Forster had wanted to consign it to the fire. However, if this was a colonel in the regulars and had the proof he claimed, it would redound on him badly if Forster ignored the request to meet.

“Carter,” Forster bellowed.

“Sir.” Carter snapped off a neat salute. “You summoned me?”

“Is the man who delivered this message still in the offices?” Forster enquired. He saw his adjutant nod. “Tell him to inform his master that you and I will follow him within minutes, as soon as our horses are saddled. Send a soldier to the stables with instructions to have them in front of the offices for us as soon as may be. While we wait for our steeds, retrieve the contract Lieutenant Wickham signed; we will take it with us.”

The captain did not question his colonel; he saluted again and went to carry out his orders.

The Netherfield Park groom was on his way as soon as the captain repeated the message from the colonel. He untethered the gelding from the hitching rail, mounted, and was soon on his way back to Netherfield Park to deliver the message to the colonel.

Wickham was walking with Denny when he saw the man ride away from the colonel's offices. The two entered the Red Lion Inn, where, thanks to his lack of funds, Wickham had to rely on the charity of his brother officers. That lightskirt, Miss Lydia, had promised she would have some coin for him soon. Wickham was already in the inn when the Colonel's stallion and the adjutant's geldings were brought to the front of the offices. Hence, Wickham did not see the two men gallop away in the direction of Netherfield Park.

It took the two officers only five minutes to reach the manor house of the estate. There was no missing all the preparations underway for the ball to be held at the estate on the morrow.

The militia officers were relieved of their outerwear by the butler and a footman, and the former showed them to a parlour on the first floor.

Fitzwilliam had donned his uniform for this meeting. He and Darcy stood when Colonel Forster and Captain Carter were shown into the room. The four men kept standing until the butler withdrew and pulled the door closed.

"Darcy, will you introduce me to these men, please?" Fitzwilliam requested.

"Certainly. Richard, this is Colonel Forster, the commander of the regiment of the Derbyshire Militia quartered in Meryton. With him is his adjutant, Captain Carter. Colonel and Captain, my cousin, Colonel *the Honourable* Richard Fitzwilliam of His Majesty's Royal Dragoons," Darcy stated. After that, he would remain silent unless Richard spoke to him, just like his cousin had advised.

"You are the Colonel Fitzwilliam who was the hero at the Battle of Roliça, are you not?" Forster asked with reverence. "And you distinguished yourself at the Battle of Elviña."

"I would not call myself a hero, but yes, I was at the Battle of Roliça and the one at Elviña," Fitzwilliam acknowledged. "As willing as I would be to speak of my experiences on the Peninsula, as my note intimated, we invited you here to address the parasite you have in your ranks." He looked at the two officers. "I am sure he has vilified my cousin by telling you how a living meant for him was denied."

Forster and Carter both nodded.

“Did anyone ask him why he did not seek another living? Or even whether he had ever taken holy orders? That is, after all, a prerequisite to gain a living in the church,” Fitzwilliam stated evenly.

Both militia officers had the decency to look embarrassed. They had been taken in by Wickham’s looks of sincerity and had not questioned his tale.

“You are not unlike many others that man has beguiled. Now to the reason I made my requests of you. I said I had proof. Before I show you the first piece, do you have something Wickham signed in front of one of you?” Fitzwilliam queried. He saw two nods. “The reason I requested that you bring it is that I am about to show you a document that your lieutenant signed. Rather than have to prove the signature is genuine, you will be able to see it for yourself.” Fitzwilliam nodded to William.

Darcy stood and handed a document to Forster. Then, without saying a word, he took his seat again.

The two officers who had been taken in by Wickham’s lies lost their colour as they read the document. Captain Carter retrieved Lieutenant Wickham’s contract from his satchel. There was no question that both documents had been signed by the same man.

“So, he was not denied the living but rather received three thousand pounds in lieu of it because he signed that he would never take orders,” Forster summarised.

Seeing a nod from his cousin, Darcy spoke for the first time. “This was soon after my late father was called home to God. He was also given one thousand pounds bequeathed to him in my father’s will. A little more than two years later, the incumbent who had held the Kympton living passed away. Wickham wrote to me demanding the living, telling me his situation was quite desperate. He had still not taken orders and had signed the document in your hands two years previously; hence, I refused his application. He did not want the living; what he wanted is what he always seeks—to be given funds without lifting a finger to earn them.”

“There is more,” Fitzwilliam told the stunned officers. “Tell me Colonel, does your regiment have officers sign an honour pledge like many others in the militia do?”

“Yes, Wickham signed ours,” Forster acknowledged.

“Is there a question about the man having left unpaid debts behind him?” Fitzwilliam questioned.

“Yes, Colonel, that is one of the explicit things a new officer must swear he does not have,” Carter revealed.

“Wicky, as I call him, may have *fibbed* just a little. Although he owns that he perhaps should not have cleaned up after the profligate, my cousin here, the same one Wicky painted as the worst kind of man, has over three thousand pounds in Wicky’s debts he has paid,” Fitzwilliam informed the reeling officers. “I was thinking why one who abhors work like Wickham does would join the militia. I am sure it is too much like work for him. May I ask where he was when he was recruited? Or did he arrive in Meryton and request a commission?”

“Two of my lieutenants found him in London and brought him back here to join the regiment,” Forster related.

“Then, I would wager that Wicky had to escape his creditors in London, and joining your regiment was the most expeditious way of running out on more debts,” Fitzwilliam opined. “Bear in mind, please, that I am not a gambling man. I am surprised that after he found that he was to be denied more credit, and the womenfolk hereabouts had been warned about the tricks he uses that he did not slip away like he always does when things get tough.”

“I am able to tell you why not,” Carter interjected. “One of the other officers heard a conversation between him and Lieutenant Denny. Wickham asked about the penalties for desertion and was told that in time of war, it was death. It seems that has kept him with us.”

“That is why I did not want my name being used, or for Wicky to see me before we had this meeting. He is a coward, and when we were much younger, I put the fear of God into him. He fears me still. Had he seen me before he was apprehended, he would have run regardless of the potential

penalties.” Fitzwilliam looked at the two militia officers. “I assume, as he lied when he signed the honour code, that you will strip him of his rank?”

“I will! I do not want such a miscreant in my regiment,” Forster insisted. Then he thought of something. “Did either of you ask Mr Collins to warn Sir William, which led to credit for my officers being revoked?”

“No, it is the other way around. Mr Collins acted on his own, but it was him who wrote to me and informed me of Wicky’s presence,” Fitzwilliam responded. “My cousin here used to believe that if he moved against the bastard that he would be dishonouring his late father who was Wicky’s godfather. After I arrived, he was finally convinced that was not true.”

“Do you know why Mr Collins involved himself in all this?” Forster asked.

“Yes. He is a cousin to the five Bennet sisters, and he saw the lecherous way Wicky was looking at the second oldest and two youngest Bennet sisters.” Fitzwilliam saw William tense up at reference to Miss Elizabeth. “He would have had no chance with Miss Elizabeth; however, the youngest two are a different story. You need to know that Wicky has left ruined girls and young ladies in his wake across the country. Darcy is supporting several scorned women, and the bastards Wickham gave them on promises of marriage.”

“Every time I think I have heard the depths of his depravity, I am proved wrong.” Forster shook his head in disgust. He turned toward the colonel’s cousin. “Mr Darcy, I must beg your pardon. I believed the tale Wickham wove without question and thought that you were a dishonourable, blackhearted man. I was very wrong.”

“I accept your apology, Colonel Forster,” Darcy granted. “The miscreant is very good at pulling the wool over decent people’s eyes for a while. That is, until his vicious propensities are on display. I should have sent him to debtors’ prison long ago. As my cousin said, better late than never.”

“I will send word to you as soon as I have him in custody,” Forster promised.

The two severely chastened militia officers were soon on their way back to Meryton. The cousins felt satisfaction in the knowledge that Wickham would soon be excised from society.

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Chapter 22

Bennet was sitting doing what he did most of the time when he was in his study, reading a book with a glass of port on his desk close enough to reach whenever he wanted a sip.

There was a knock on his study door, and the person waited for his response, which meant it could not be his wife. She knew he wanted her to knock, but she had never grasped that she was to wait for him to call out before entering his sanctuary after knocking.

“Come,” Bennet called out. Perhaps, it was Lizzy, wanting to discuss a book she had read recently.

William Collins opened the heavy oak door when he was bade, entered the study with Mary on his arm, and then pushed the door closed. He did not miss his cousin’s raised eyebrows when he saw who had walked into his study.

Although he had a good idea why the two had come to see him, Bennet decided to wait until one of them spoke first. As Collins had Mary with him, he would not be able to have any sport asking which of his daughters was being sought as his potential wife.

“Cousin Bennet, Mary and I have realised that we suit each other very well. However, as neither of us feels we know the other well enough to enter an engagement, I have requested a courtship with Mary, and she has agreed, pending your approval, of course. We hope that we will gain your blessing as well as consent. Do you have any questions for us?” William enquired.

No matter how he tried to, Bennet could not find any reason to make sport of the request. It had been exact and to the point. The man opposite him was no simpleton. “Mary, I assume by your presence, this is what you desire?”

“It is, Papa, very much so,” Mary confirmed firmly.

“As such, I see no reason to deny your petition. You have my permission and blessing,” Bennet allowed.

“You are aware that I will return to Hunsford on Friday upcoming, are you not?”

“I am. What of it?” Bennet asked. “Knowing when you are to depart has led me to believe that you would ask for Mary’s hand right away, not a courtship.”

“As I said, neither of us wanted to jump into anything before we were sure. I would much rather that we take our time, and once, if, we are both sure, then, we will proceed. It is far better this way than to decide in haste and repent at leisure, do you not think?” William queried innocently. He was aware that having been captivated by a pretty face, Cousin Bennet had proposed to the then Frances Gardiner before he ever came to know who she was. William supposed that although his cousin wished he would have acted differently, if he had not married Cousin Fanny, they would not have their daughters, and he would not have come to know Mary. God worked in mysterious ways.

“Papa, what William wanted to request is that we be allowed to correspond by letter. We are both more than willing to submit to your authority and have our letters to each other go through you so you can read them to make sure all meets with your approval,” Mary explained.

Mary speaking distracted Bennet, who had been about to ask his cousin what he was trying to say about the marriage between him and Fanny. Perhaps Cousin Collins was not aware how precipitous Bennet had been in offering for Fanny within days of beginning to court her. He had been worried he would lose the local beauty to another. Unfortunately, it had not been long before he learnt that beauty was indeed only skin deep.

Realising that Mary and her suitor were awaiting his reply, Bennet shook the thoughts of his past folly from his head. “I know Mary to be a pious and moral daughter. As such, I do not believe I need to read her letters. From what I know of you, Cousin, I do not see you as one who would stray from the bounds of propriety.” He cogitated for some moments. “Who will inform your mother that her dream of matching Lizzy with my cousin has turned to dust?”

“Excuse me if I speak out of turn, Cousin,” William began. “Is it not the duty of the father to announce something like this?”

As much as he hated that his probable future son-in-law was correct, knowing he needed to do his duty meant that Bennet would need to exit his sanctuary and accompany the couple to the drawing room. “Come, now is as good a time as any for my wife to caterwaul about her plans for Lizzy marrying my cousin coming to nought.”

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There was nothing for Fitzwilliam and Darcy to do but wait for a message from Colonel Forster to inform them that Wicky had been arrested.

As he had planned when they departed Longbourn, once Bingley and Mrs Hurst had made their amends, Fitzwilliam told the Hursts that his brother and his and William’s mutual cousin, Anne de Bourgh, had decided to stop at Netherfield Park while they were in the area. Bingley had, as expected, extended an invitation for Anne and Andrew to be hosted at his leased estate and that they would be welcome to attend the ball on the morrow.

Even though he and William were as close as brothers, Fitzwilliam had not mentioned his feelings for Anne to him. The plan was to first speak to Anne and see if she was sanguine with the statement that his dancing the three significant sets would make to everyone. Fitzwilliam had never canvassed Anne’s feelings for himself. Her decision regarding the sets at the ball would make that clear to him. He also wanted Anne to be assured that his feelings for her had nothing to do with her fortune.

The crunch of carriage wheels from the drive ended Fitzwilliam’s woolgathering. He and William stood to go outside to greet their family members.

As she watched the two men exit the drawing room, Mrs Hurst could not but feel a little sadness for her younger sister who was restricted to her suite upstairs. Caroline needed to be dosed with laudanum a few times each day to keep her calm. Louisa Hurst could only imagine the airs and graces her sister would have put on had she still been the mistress. Then again, she wondered if Viscount Hilldale would have attended them had Caroline been in that position. She had always made excuses for Caroline’s benefit as to why she had never met any of the Fitzwilliams other than the colonel; however, Louisa knew the truth. The rest of that family simply refused to
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know Caroline. Her sister would have crowed about hosting a noble in *her* house from one end of society to the other. In the end, she had to admit that the peace without Caroline was preferable to the way it was when her sister was among them. She heard the crunching of the wheels cease as the conveyance came to a halt.

By the time the Hilldale coach and the trailing older carriage halted, Fitzwilliam and Darcy were standing in the drive just in front of the steps leading up to the veranda above them. They watched as Andrew leaned in to hand someone out. It was not Anne as they expected. It was Mrs Annesley! Next out was Anna, and last was Anne.

Her two guardians stood gawping at their charge while her eyes dropped to the drive as she nervously moved a bit of gravel about with the toe of one boot. Fitzwilliam surged forward and pulled Anna into a hug.

He guessed that his and William's silence made the insecure young lady think she had done something wrong by surprising them. When Andy said he was coming with Anne, Fitzwilliam had known there would be a chaperone; he just did not think it would be his ward and her companion. "It is very good to see you, sprite," Fitzwilliam told Anna.

"You are not angry with me for coming unannounced?" Georgiana asked quietly, not making eye contact.

"Angry? I am very pleased to see you, is that not true, William?" Fitzwilliam glared at his cousin, who had stood there like a stupid statue, his mouth open. No wonder Anna thought them angry with her.

Darcy shook the surprise at seeing Anna and Mrs Annesley alight from the coach from his addled mind. "Sweetling, Richard, for once, has the right of it. What you noted was surprise but never anger," Darcy assured his sister. "Seeing you is a great treat. The truth is I am more than pleased to have you join us here."

"Truly?" Georgiana relaxed as soon as she realised she had not disappointed her brother again. "When Anne and Andrew told us that Miss Bingley is no longer mistress here, I asked if I could join them."

"And as we needed a chaperone, we decided two was better than one. Anna and Mrs Annesley rode with us while my maid, Anna's, and Andy's

valet rode in the carriage carrying our trunks," Anne informed her cousin. She was looking at Richard as she spoke and was very happy to note how pleased he looked to see her now that his surprise at seeing Anna was past.

While the local footmen assisted the Hilldale footmen to remove the trunks, the four arrivals followed their two family members into the house. Once they were relieved of their outerwear, they all climbed to the first floor and entered the drawing room, where Bingley and the Hursts were waiting for them.

"Miss Darcy!" Bingley exclaimed. "We were not aware you would join us, but you are very welcome at Netherfield Park. Lord Hilldale, you are also welcome."

"Richard, will you make the introductions, please?" Hilldale, who had never met the Hursts, requested.

It was the matter of a minute for all those who had never met to be introduced. "Miss Darcy, would you like to share a suite with your cousin, Miss de Bourgh, or do you prefer to share with Mrs Annesley?" Mrs Hurst enquired after the introduction had been made. Chambers were ready for the viscount and Miss de Bourgh, but it would be easy for another set to be made ready for the unexpected guests.

Georgiana looked to her brother and Richard for guidance.

"It is up to you, Anna. I know you have become used to sharing a suite with Mrs Annesley. If that is what you prefer, Anne will not be upset," Darcy stated gently.

"William speaks the truth; you chuse what is better for you," Anne added.

"In that case, as long as Anne is sanguine with it, I will share with Mrs Annesley," Georgiana decided.

Mrs Hurst rang for the housekeeper and issued instructions to prepare the suite next to Miss de Bourgh's. It was not long before Mrs Nichols reported that the set of rooms for the additional guests were ready.

While Mrs Hurst and the housekeeper led the newly arrived ladies to their chambers, Hilldale remained in the drawing room.

Hilldale looked at his younger brother and cousin questioningly.

“Bingley, may we use your study?” Fitzwilliam requested. “Darcy and I need to speak to my brother.”

“Go ahead; I will wait here with Hurst,” Bingley allowed.

“Well, what is being done with that profligate blackguard Wicky?” Hilldale demanded as soon as the door had been pushed closed.

The two younger men informed Hilldale about everything that had been put into place to clip Wickham’s wings. “We are waiting for word from Colonel Forster that Wicky has been apprehended. As soon as we know that, then we will go to see the bastard,” Fitzwilliam related.

“In that case, I will join you. I want to see the downfall of that libertine who attempted to harm my young, innocent cousin,” Hilldale insisted.

No one gainsaid him. With that, he made for his chamber to wash and change.

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When Wickham was summoned to Colonel Forster’s office, he thought nothing of it. It was not an uncommon occurrence for one or more junior officers to be needed to complete some task or other for their commander.

On arriving in the adjutant’s office, Captain Carter told Wickham to wait, as the colonel would see him forthwith.

As he was about to lower himself onto one of the chairs where those waiting for the colonel sat, Wickham was grabbed roughly by two large privates. “Oy! Take your hands off an officer before I have you court-martialled,” he blustered.

“You are no longer an officer,” Forster boomed as he ripped the epaulettes which held the insignia of his rank from his former lieutenant. “Did you think that the honour code you signed did not mean anything? Did you not see where it said that you would be stripped of your rank if you contravened it?”

“But I have done nothing wrong! It is Darcy! Stealing my future income from me was not enough…” Wickham tried to say.
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“Stop, *Wicky*!” Forster mocked.

“H-how d-do y-y-you know t-that n-name?” Wickham stammered. He did not want to hear the reply he was certain he would hear.

“You claimed Mr Darcy opened credit in your name when the truth is that is what you did in his name. You owe more than three thousand pounds in debts Mr Darcy paid for you so that honest tradesmen would not be beggared by you. And that tale of yours about the living denied is pure fiction. We have seen the document you signed giving up any rights to it for three thousand pounds. Besides, it was not Mr Darcy who told us the truth about you. It was his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, who is very keen to see you again,” Colonel Forster revealed. “Not only has your rank been stripped from you, but you have been expelled from the militia thanks to your breaking our code of honour. Honour—now that is something you do not possess.” Forster turned to his two soldiers and Lieutenant Saunderson. “Take this former officer to the brig where he will wait for Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy.” He turned to his adjutant. “Have Sir William join us. He will have to swear out a writ of arrest for that excuse of a man.” He paused. “Carter, have Denny and Chamberlayne come see me. It was them who recruited this miscreant.”

Carter saluted and left to find the two officers.

As soon as he heard confirmation that Fitzwilliam was in Meryton and coming to see him, Wickham soiled himself. He was half dragged and half carried to the brig and thrown in. The door was slammed shut and securely locked. His former friend, Saunderson, said not a word to him. He just watched coldly, and then once he made sure the door was secure, he marched away, leaving one of the soldiers to watch over the prisoner.

As he sat there blubbering on the cold floor of his cell, Wickham could not understand how things had gone so wrong for him.

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Lieutenants Denny and Chamberlayne saluted their colonel as they stood at attention before his desk. They waited for their commander to speak. Both felt somewhat concerned as they saw the hard look on the normally affable colonel’s face.
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“What did you know of Wickham before you brought that viper among us?” Forster barked out.

“I remembered his name from the area around Lambton. When I asked him about tales of debts he left, Wickham told us that Mr Darcy did that to blacken his name. I should have mentioned this to you and investigated further,” Denny looked down, feeling chagrined. “I apologise, Colonel, but we were taken in by his act and the way he seemed to be so sincere.”

“Unfortunately, I too was taken in by him. Hence, I cannot punish you for something I did as well. You both swear that until now, when everything has come to light about him, you were not aware of the truth about that wastrel,” Forster demanded.

Both men swore on their lives. As they left the offices, breathing a little easier that they would not be punished for recruiting Wickham, they saw four men arrive on horses, three from one end of the town and the fourth from the other. They knew who two of the men were, but the colonel in the uniform of the regulars and the other man were unknown to them.

Sir William arrived at Colonel Forster’s office at almost the same time as Hilldale, Fitzwilliam, and Darcy.

As soon as word spread as to the colonel’s identity, whispers of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s exploits in battle began to spread among the extremely awed militia officers.

After greeting Sir William and introducing him to his cousins, Darcy led the other three men into the offices. He noticed that soldiers were rolling up a rug and then carted it away.

“Wicky, as you call him, had a *reaction* to hearing that Colonel Fitzwilliam wants a word with him,” Carter shared.

With a wide grin, Carter showed the men into Colonel Forster’s office.

On entering, Fitzwilliam introduced Colonel Forster to his brother. The former bowed, and the latter inclined his head.

“Lord Hilldale, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Sir William, and Mr Darcy, welcome,” Forster boomed. “We have that blackguard in the brig. He is no

longer an officer or a member of His Majesty's Militia, so you are welcome to him."

"We asked for you to be present in your capacity as magistrate, Sir William," Darcy explained. "As you can see, the former lieutenant owes me more than three thousand pounds, and I am calling in those debts to be paid in full. As he has no ability to pay, I am requesting a writ of arrest to give to the bailiff who arrests debtors so that Mr Wickham will be consigned to one of the debtors' prisons."

"Is this stack all of his vowels?" Sir William asked after he perused the stack of debt markers.

"Only what I own. I understand that he still owes money in Meryton, although thanks to Mr Collins speaking to you, not nearly as much as it would have been. I will pay that amount as well and add it to the rest I hold," Darcy volunteered.

"We allowed him to join our ranks and believed his pack of lies, so my regiment will pay what he owes," Forster insisted.

"If we want to see who is more at fault, I should have stopped the libertine long before he became a member of your regiment. The fault is mine, Sir; therefore, the remedy must be mine as well. I will pay what he owes," Darcy said firmly. "I will not pay his debts of honour, but if you canvass your men you will find that he likely borrowed money from several of them before he was exposed. I will repay those loans and add to what he owes me."

"I will swear out the writ of arrest; there is more than enough here," Sir William agreed. "If he leaves prison alive, he will be an old man by then."

The knight agreed to have the writ in Colonel Forster's hands within the hour and took his leave to swear out the arrest warrant.

"You wanted to see the prisoner?" Forster verified.

"We do," Fitzwilliam confirmed. Forster summoned his adjutant to show Lord Hilldale, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Darcy to the brig.

"I always knew you would end up behind bars one day," Fitzwilliam mocked once the soldier guarding Wickham left them alone. "It has been a

long time coming, and now, you will finally pay for your misdeeds."

"It is nothing less than you deserve for what you attempted with my young cousin," Hilldale snarled.

Wickham felt a certain amount of bravado, as there were steel bars between him and the man who so scared him. "If I were you three, I would get me out of here unless you want me to begin telling one and all how I compromised little Georgiana. I am sure…" He closed his mouth when he heard the sound of a sabre being drawn from its scabbard.

In a flash, Fitzwilliam reached through the bars, grabbed Wickham by his shirt and pulled him hard against the cold metal. There was a cracking sound as some of Wickham's teeth broke against the bars. Just as fast, the tip of the sabre was at Wickham's throat. "Mention my ward again, even think of her, and I will end you. No gaol will protect you, as you can see now," Fitzwilliam growled menacingly. "No one will believe you, and who will you tell in prison? Never forget what I said; not one more word about my cousin."

The cold, sharp steel tip against his neck was more than enough to convince Wickham that Fitzwilliam was deadly serious. The abject terror he felt caused him to relieve himself in his pants again.

"I will always regret that I did not allow my late father to see proof of who you really are. Perhaps had you been stopped early enough, you would not be here now," Darcy mused. "You always look to blame others, but it has always been you, Wickham. You are, and always have been, the author of your own misfortune. We will leave here and never think of you again. I am sure; however, you will think about us every day for the rest of your miserable life."

Fitzwilliam withdrew his sabre and threw Wickham back towards his straw pallet. The three cousins turned and walked away, never looking at the prisoner again.

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Chapter 23

Fanny was holding court with her two youngest daughters while she extolled their methods of flirting with officers. Jane and Elizabeth were seated on a settee as far from their mother and youngest sisters as they were able to. They burnt with embarrassment at the impropriety of what their mother and sisters were discussing.

When the door opened and her husband entered, followed by Mary and Mr Collins, Fanny was confused. Why would Mr Bennet be in the drawing room at this time of the day? Also, why was Mary's hand resting on Mr Collins's arm?

"Mrs Bennet, and daughters, I am happy to inform you that Mr Collins asked our Mary for a courtship, and she has accepted said offer. I have given my permission and blessing," Bennet announced. "I am sure you will all join me in wishing the courting couple well."

"No! I said he was to marry Lizzy! I do not agree to this match! Mary is far too plain!" Fanny screeched.

Bennet was highly amused as his wife's reaction was even more than he had hoped it would be. He said nothing, as he wanted to see how much more of a cake his wife would make of herself.

William Collins did not miss the mortification on the two eldest sisters' countenances. He saw the pain on Mary's face as well. "Mrs Bennet, pray tell, whatever gave you the idea that you had the right to direct me to anyone? I, Madam, am my own man, and as such, the choice of who will be my wife one day is between me and the lady involved. Also, Mrs Bennet, are you in need of spectacles?"

"Spectacles? Of course not, how could you say that?" Fanny spluttered shrilly.

"Because, Mrs Bennet, for you to claim Mary is plain, there must be a deficiency in your eyesight," William asserted. "If you paid attention, you would see that Mary and Cousin Jane have the same face and features, only different hair and eye colour," William shot back. "Thanks to your constant

deriding of Mary's looks over the years, she dressed and did her hair severely to try and fit into what you called her. She is anything but plain." He turned to his cousin. "And you, Cousin Bennet, rather than protect your daughter, you revelled in the pain your wife was causing."

Suddenly things were not so amusing for Bennet. He did not expect to have his own behaviour scrutinised.

"Mary is a warm, intelligent, compassionate, and pious woman," William insisted. "She will be the ideal parson's wife. Cousin Elizabeth and I do not suit, and we both know it. So, tell me, Mrs Bennet, when it has been obvious to everyone else in this house that I have been unofficially courting Mary almost from the day I arrived, how is it you did not see it? You still tried to push Cousin Elizabeth and me together, ignoring that you failed each and every time. Now, rather than be happy for one of your daughters, you cry that I have not chosen the daughter you think I should have."

"Lizzy is too hoydenish to marry, and men are frightened off by her intelligence. I thought this was her only chance to make a match, as no man wants a clever wife," Fanny bemoaned.

"I would have liked an intelligent wife," Bennet mumbled.

"Cousin Elizabeth will find the partner of her future life when the time is right, and God ordains it should be so," William opined. "Let me ask you something, Mrs Bennet."

"What is it?" Fanny sniffed, putting on a hurt look.

"You hoped I would marry Cousin Elizabeth so that you would be able to remain at Longbourn after Cousin Bennet is called home to God—which we all pray is many years from now—did you not?" William enquired.

"Yes, and I would remain mistress…" Fanny began.

"Firstly, Mrs Bennet, whether or not you remain in the manor house will be my future wife's choice," William explained as he cut her off. "*If* she accepts me *when* I offer for her, that wife will be Mary. Now ask yourself if Mary will be disposed towards allowing you to remain in the house she will be *mistress* of from the first day I become master? After the way you have treated her over the years, what reason would Mary have to want you living

in the house with us? Secondly, let me be rightly understood, you will *not* remain the mistress of this house after your husband goes to his eternal reward."

Fanny fell back into her chair. If she was being honest with herself and if Lizzy had been Mr Collins's choice, she doubted whether she would have been allowed to remain at Longbourn. Why had she not seen that Mr Collins was Mary's suitor? Had she been completely blinded by her own plans and desires? Was not one daughter married to Mr Bennet's heir as good as another? As Mr Collins's words about it being his wife's choice if Fanny would remain at Longbourn sank in, Fanny began to feel somewhat panicked. She knew she had not treated Mary well, and now it would be this daughter who held Fanny's future security in her hands. As the panic increased, Fanny swooned and promptly fainted. Thankfully, she was sitting in an armchair at the time.

Mrs Hill and the salts she carried with her at all times were summoned. The housekeeper placed the vial under her mistress's nose. The effect was almost immediate.

"Mr Bennet, you cannot allow Mary to turn me out to starve in the hedgerows," Fanny wailed.

Before his cousin could make some remark to cause his wife more distress, William spoke. "Mrs Bennet, Cousin Fanny, even if you do not remain in this house, I swear to you as a gentleman and a clergyman that you will never be without a home of some sort. In addition, neither you nor any unmarried daughters will starve. You are family, and I will ensure that you are cared for."

Bennet closed his mouth as he was about to add some fuel to the fire of his wife's insecurities. Mr Collins was spoiling all of his fun.

Lydia was not happy that it looked like plain Mary was going to marry before her. She wanted to be the first of her sisters to marry. Her hope was to gain the handsome Mr Wickham as a husband. He had already requested a private interview with her. It would be their secret as she was to meet with him the morning after the ball at the old hunting lodge no one used any more on Longbourn's land. "We must go out and see the officers," Lydia

insisted. She wanted to confirm that her Mr Wickham would meet her as planned.

“Do you not need to prepare for the ball on the morrow?” William asked innocently. “Surely you want to look your best? Have you chosen your gowns for the ball yet?”

Suddenly Lydia forgot about her desire to walk into Meryton. She needed to select her best gown so that she could dance three sets, and perhaps more, with her Wicky. She would speak to him at the ball; that was what she would do. “Come, Kitty, we need to go select my gown for the morrow.” Lydia grabbed her older sister’s hand and pulled her towards the door. The two were soon on their way up to Lydia’s chamber.

Mrs Hill assisted Mrs Bennet to her bedchamber so she could rest and recover from her attack of nerves.

This was the second time Cousin Collins had stopped him having fun. Bennet was about to return to his study, as he was not enjoying himself the way he thought he would.

“Cousin, do you have time to meet with me on Wednesday morning, the day after the ball?” William queried.

“I will be at my leisure; come to my study when you want to see me,” Bennet said. He exited the drawing room and headed back to his study. Reading his book and sipping port would make up for his lack of entertainment.

Before he exited the drawing room to leave the three eldest Bennet sisters to speak, William secured the first, supper, and final sets with Mary.

Jane waited until their cousin left the room and pulled the door closed. “Mary, I think you will be a very happy woman with Mr Collins. You suit one another so very well,” Jane said as she squeezed Mary’s one hand. “He certainly was able to take charge of Mamma in short order. I believe he gave her much to think on.”

“That he did. Even at this stage, William is very protective of me,” Mary responded with a wide smile.

“I agree with Jane. Notwithstanding Mamma’s wrongheaded opinions, you two were formed for one another,” Elizabeth added. She looked at Jane with raised eyebrows. Jane nodded. “Mary, we want to beg your pardon for not being better sisters to you. We left you alone between Jane and me and Kitty and Lydia. We should have paid more attention to you and assured you that Mamma has always been wrong in calling you plain.”

“I am so sorry, Mary. It was my duty as the eldest sister to make sure that none of my sisters were lonely. Will you forgive us?” Jane begged.

“Of course, I do. William has helped me reclaim my self-worth and confidence. I no longer need to quote passages from Fordyce or the Bible to gain attention, as I have captured the affections of a wonderful man,” Mary granted. “It would have been pleasant to be part of your circle of friendship. However, you two were never derisive to me like Mamma, Kitty, and Lydia have been.”

The three eldest Bennet sisters hugged as a few tears were spilt as they released the past and looked to the future.

“Jane, how do you feel about Mr Bingley?” Mary asked.

“On the one hand, he is everything a gentleman should be, and it impressed me that he came to apologise for not checking Miss Bingley,” Jane replied. “On the other hand, now that I am looking at the world with a clearer eye, I wonder if Mr Bingley is mature enough to be seeking a wife. Also, I am not comfortable that all he wants to speak of is my beauty and calling me an angel. When I attempt to change the subject, he always ignores my effort and continues to speak of my looks. I am more than my face!”

“I did not want to mention something to you, Jane, but with your comments, I think I should,” Elizabeth stated.

“What is it, Lizzy?” Jane queried.

“The day that Mamma came to Netherfield Park when you were ill, Mr Bingley spoke of how he was fixed in Hertfordshire now, but when in London, he liked it there just as much. When he said that he would decide to leave in a moment, I got the idea he may be capricious. Or it is, as you said, immaturity,” Elizabeth reported.

“I will have to see how to proceed with Mr Bingley,” Jane mused.

“What will you do if he requests more than one set, especially if they are significant sets?” Mary asked.

“If Mr Bingley requests two or more of the first, supper, or final sets, then as kindly as I am able, I will indicate that unless we have an understanding, I cannot dance more than one significant set with him. If he wants a second set that is not one of the three I mentioned, I will grant it to him. After all, I already granted him two sets at Meryton. That is, of course, if he requests even a single set from me.”

“And what of you, Lizzy? If Mr Darcy requests a set, will you finally agree to dance with him?” Mary questioned.

“I will grant him a set if he asks me,” Elizabeth allowed. “We did decide to begin again; it would not be in the spirit of our agreement if I were to be churlish and refuse him. Besides, I would not want to sit out the rest of the dances.”

“And if Mr Darcy asks for more than one set?” Jane pushed.

“As that will not happen, I need not think about it,” Elizabeth insisted. As she said this, she remembered that it was possible Mr Darcy admired her. She decided to confront the situation *if* it came to pass.

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On Tuesday morning while the ladies of the house were busy with earnest preparations for the ball that evening, William Collins was reading in the west parlour when Hill brought him a note. The butler told him the groom was waiting for a reply.

William broke the seal and unfolded the page.

26 November 1811

Netherfield Park

Collins,

The men you asked me about arrived here yester-evening.
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Inform the groom when you are able to come meet them and see if they are the kind of men you had in mind. If it can only be after the ball, I will understand.

If that be the case, we will keep them occupied here at this estate until Wednesday.

RF

After asking the butler to tell the groom he would be on his way to Netherfield Park within twenty minutes, William asked that Vulcan be saddled and went up to his chamber to change into riding clothes. He saw Mary in the hall on the first floor and, in *sotto voce*, explained where he was off to and why.

Mary's eyebrows shot up, but she said nothing.

Once he was dressed in his riding attire, William made his way down stairs. He felt a tinge of sadness at not seeing Mary on the first floor again. Mr Hill was ready with his hat, coat, and gloves. When William exited the house, the groom was holding Vulcan's reins. In one fluid motion, he mounted his stallion and was off to Netherfield Park.

It took less than ten minutes to reach Mr Bingley's leased estate. He handed Vulcan's reins to a groom and was soon at the front door. The butler, Mr Nichols, relieved him of his coat, hat, and gloves and reported that Colonel Fitzwilliam was waiting for him in a parlour on the ground level.

On entering, William Collins stopped in his tracks. Fitzwilliam was grinning at his reaction to seeing two of the biggest men he had ever beheld. They were some inches taller than Mr Darcy and broader in the shoulders than Fitzwilliam. The other four men were not small, but nothing like the two giants. If these were the men who would guard his cousins, no miscreant would dare approach them. In Cousin Lydia's case, they would be protecting her from herself.

"Welcome, Collins," Fitzwilliam boomed. "I present former Lieutenant Biggs and former Sergeant-Major Johns. The four *small* men are some of those who used to serve under them when we were all in the dragoons together. Gentlemen, the Reverend Collins of Hunsford in Kent."

“We understand you have some females in your family who are a touch too liberal with their favours around members of the militia,” Biggs said. “I think Johns, the men, and I are able to discourage any man from meddling with them.”

“I do not doubt you can do that,” Collins agreed. “For now, you work for me, but on the morrow, I intend to speak to my cousin, the master of Longbourn, and convince him he needs you in his employ to make sure none of his daughters ruin themselves and the rest of her sisters.

Biggs conferred with Johns and the rest of the men.

While the six men were speaking softly, Fitzwilliam leaned towards Collins. “They are all excellent men,” he stated in *sotto voce*. “There are too many like them who have served king and country to return home on half pay and find it is not enough to live on. There are far more men than there is work available.”

“Then, we should work together to try to find employment for those who want it,” William responded. He said no more as he noted the men had completed their discussion.

“We accept, but will this be for a few days or weeks or a longer term of employment?” Biggs enquired.

“Whether it be at Longbourn, my parsonage in Hunsford, or at the estate of Rosings Park, you men will have stable and constant employment,” William promised. “Not only that, but Colonel Fitzwilliam and I will work together to try to find employment for as many returning soldiers, navy men, and marines as we are able. I am not sure how many we will be able to assist, but we will do what we can.”

The looks of gratitude from the six hardened soldiers were easy to see.

“I think we can begin this evening at the ball. The officers of the local militia have been invited. Unfortunately, my two youngest cousins run after officers without restraint,” William related. “You gentlemen have your uniforms with you, do you not?”

There were nods all around.

“Perfect!” William exclaimed. “With the way these two youngest Bennets chase after officers, you men will be able to ensure they do not get into trouble. I understand from the older sisters that the two youngest like to partake of the punch more than is good for them. If several of you can distract them before they have too much to drink and thereby embarrass their family, it would be appreciated. If one of you will station himself in the drive at the foot of the stairs leading up to the veranda, when I arrive with the Bennets, I will indicate who the two are who you are to watch tonight. That man will identify them for the rest of you.”

As soon as he saw nods of agreement from his men, Biggs told Mr Collins they would be happy to assist at the ball. With the business complete, the butler led the men to chambers used by senior staff and personal servants of guests.

“Are they big enough for you, Collins?” Fitzwilliam smirked once the former soldiers had left the parlour.

“I would say so.” William shook his head.

“Biggs and Johns were both sergeants when they fought at Roliça,” Fitzwilliam relayed. “Biggs received a battlefield commission after his fool of a lieutenant was killed when he refused to follow his sergeant-major’s advice during the battle. Like so many, the fool thought that he did not need to pay heed to one of a lesser rank because, of course, he knew better than men who had been in the army for five times longer than himself. Unfortunately, the sergeant-major fell trying to save the lieutenant. Johns was battlefield-promoted to sergeant major. Those two and their families are as close as any by blood.”

“I look forward to seeing how my two youngest cousins behave with these men inhibiting their actions. The truth is neither of them should be out, but that is a fight for another day,” William said.

Fitzwilliam and Darcy led William up to the drawing room, where he greeted his patroness and was introduced to Lord Hilldale and the timid Miss Darcy.

On Fitzwilliam walking him down to the drive, William shook his friend’s hand and then mounted Vulcan. “Until later, Fitzwilliam; I will see

you when we arrive," William called out over his shoulder as he began to ride away.

On his return to Longbourn, William shared what he had put in place for the ball with the three eldest daughters of the house. Rather than thinking him presumptuous, the three sisters were very appreciative that he was doing something to curtail their youngest sisters' behaviour that their parents should have done a long time past.

William asked for Cousin Jane's second set and Cousin Elizabeth's third. Both happily granted his request.

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Chapter 24

“We have been invited to arrive about an hour before the time listed on the invitation to enjoy an aperitif with the residents of Netherfield Park,” Collins stated to those in the drawing room who were relaxing from their preparations for the ball. All that was left to do was to actually don their ball gowns.

“Jane, did I not tell you how it would be?” Fanny flapped her lace-edged square furiously. “Mr Bingley wants us to join them early so he may propose to you before the ball. Not even your wilful sister forcing you to leave Netherfield Park before I told you to return home has deterred that dear man.”

“Cousin Fanny, as much as I *dislike* disagreeing with you, we are to meet my patroness and one of her cousins. This note was sent by Mr Fitzwilliam and not Mr Bingley,” William Collins corrected.

“Mamma, on that subject, I do not know if Mr Bingley and I suit. I certainly do not know him well enough to accept him if he does offer for me,” Jane stated.

For some moments Fanny’s mouth hung open. “You have been in company with Lizzy far too much! Her impertinence is rubbing off on you,” Fanny accused. “You have never tried to gainsay me before. When he offers for you, I insist that you accept him!”

“I am sorry if you think I am being disrespectful, Mamma, but what I said are my own thoughts and have nothing to do with Lizzy. I told you this when we returned from Netherfield Park, that I agreed with Lizzy that it was time to come home. She did not have to convince me of anything,” Jane stated firmly. “Do you think that I am not able to think for myself?”

“Cousin Jane, how old are you? Please pardon me and do not reply if it is an impertinent question,” William asked.

“I am three and twenty; I do not object to owning to it,” Jane replied.

“As such, Cousin Fanny, you understand that Cousin Jane is of age and can chuse for herself, do you not?” William pointed out. “Even Cousin

Bennet, whose right it is to approve of engagements before your daughters reach their majorities, cannot direct Cousin Jane to make a choice she does not want to make." William was very impressed that the eldest Bennet sister was seeing things with a clear eye. He would not need to speak to her more about how she related to the world, as she had made changes on her own after the meeting they had with Fitzwilliam and Darcy.

Even better was the fact that Cousin Jane had recognised that Mr Bingley was not right for her without regard for the fact that the man was reasonably wealthy—that is, if the amount of his income Cousin Fanny touted was close to accurate. William was interested to see how Cousin Fanny would react when they were introduced to Viscount Hilldale. He hoped she would not attempt to push one of her daughters at him.

"Well, I never," Fanny blustered. She sniffed and looked away. First, Mary had found a suitor before any of her sisters, and now Jane was gainsaying her. Add to that, Jane and others had insisted that Lizzy was not at fault for the things Fanny had been certain she was. What was the world coming to? At least, her Lydia listened to her. Her favourite would not say who or when, but had hinted she would soon be engaged, not just courting. Fanny could not wait to see which officer was to become her son-in-law. It was good to know one daughter would follow her directions on how to catch a man.

With no good cheer, Fanny told her daughters to go and finish dressing for the ball, seeing that they had to be there earlier than planned.

William took it upon himself to inform Cousin Bennet of the new departure time.

Bennet was not overjoyed that he would have to leave his study an hour earlier than he had expected. However, he placated himself with the knowledge that his wife and youngest two daughters would have that much more time to make cakes of themselves. The additional time was worth the extra amusement he would enjoy.

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As they waited for the Bennets, Fitzwilliam was beyond pleased. When he had requested the significant sets, Anne had not hesitated before
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responding in the affirmative. When they had spoken, she had assured him that she was very confident he was not dangling after her for her property and money. The cat was out of the bag now. Andrew, William, and Anna were aware that he and Anne planned to make a match. He would have liked to have offered for her as soon as she accepted his request for the dances, but that would have meant he would have had to move out of the house.

Two days after the ball, Bingley was to take Miss Bingley to be evaluated by the physicians from The Quiet Place. Fitzwilliam, his brother, and Anne would make for London. As soon as they arrived, he planned to propose, as Anne would be hosted at Matlock House. He had the option to reside at either Hilldale House in Portman Square, or Darcy House, which was also in Grosvenor Square, across the green from his parents' house. He chose the latter, as it was far closer. William and Anna would remain in Hertfordshire as the former tried to woo Miss Elizabeth. His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of horses' hooves and wheels crunching on the gravel in the drive.

When the Bennet carriage came to a halt at Netherfield Park, William jumped down and nodded to the man in uniform, one of the six he had employed, standing at the foot of the stairs leading up to the veranda. It seemed like Mr Biggs had chosen to send one of the average sized men to see who the two youngest Bennets were so that his own size would not be a distraction.

William assisted Cousin Bennet to hand the ladies out of the cabin of the conveyance. Even with both men riding on the box, six women dressed in ball gowns overfilled the interior. He made sure to be the one to hand down the two youngest Bennets. He looked at each one pointedly and nodded.

The soldier nodded back and made his way up the stairs and into the house. The rest of the men, including Biggs and Johns, were standing on the landing between the ground level and the first floor with a clear view of the entrance hall. By the time the Bennets and Mr Collins had been relieved of their outerwear, the man was with the other five. He pointed out the two their new employer wanted watched and protected without making it

obvious he was doing so. As soon as all of the men had identified the two, they made their way up to the first floor.

Biggs and Johns joined Colonel Fitzwilliam in the drawing room. They nodded to him to let him know they had seen those they were to protect.

As soon as the butler stood aside after announcing the Bennets, they entered the drawing room. The Bennets were taken aback when they saw the two huge men in army uniforms. Even the three who William Collins had told about the men were not prepared for the size of them. As soon as the surprise passed, Kitty and Lydia began to giggle, as there were three men in scarlet coats. The colonel looked far better to them in his uniform.

The older three sisters knew that they were to meet the viscount, but they did not know who the tall, blonde, shy looking younger lady standing next to Mr Darcy was. There was an older lady just behind her. Based on Cousin William's descriptions, they were able to identify Miss de Bourgh, who was seated next to Colonel Fitzwilliam.

As Mr Bennet had never been introduced to him, Fitzwilliam asked to be introduced. With that done, he introduced his brother, Anne de Bourgh, his ward, his two comrades, and Anna's companion to the Bennets. Fitzwilliam did not miss the way his brother's eyebrows shot up when he was introduced to the three older Bennet sisters. Andrew had been made aware that Miss Mary was spoken for and that William was in love with Miss Elizabeth. He had been told about Bingley's infatuation with Miss Bennet, but as far as anyone knew, there was nothing official between them.

Andrew Fitzwilliam had never seen a lady to match Miss Bennet, not only in beauty but also in serenity. At the same time, she looked like a lady who did not lack resolve. He hoped he would be able to speak to her and discover if she was more than a pretty face. His thoughts were interrupted when the Bennet matron addressed him. He had been forewarned that this may occur.

"Lord Hilldale," Fanny simpered. "Is my Lydia not pretty? You will not find a prettier or livelier girl; I am sure she will make you an excellent partner for the first, and possibly the supper sets." If Jane rejected her assistance, then she would put Lydia forward. Jane would be sorry that she had not listened to her mother! Fanny ignored the fact she knew not if the

viscount was married. At the same time, she ignored, or chose to ignore, the looks of disgust directed at her by many in the room.

For his part, Bennet could not have been happier. His wife was already exposing her vulgar behaviour; it was most diverting. Bennet was blind to the looks aimed at him for not checking and correcting his wife.

“Mrs Bennet, it is not my habit to offer any dances to one who, I believe, is younger than my cousin, Miss Darcy. Besides, in *polite* society it is still the prerogative of the man to request a set from one with whom he desires to dance,” Hilldale responded. He could have said more, but he chose not to at this time.

Fanny was shocked to be rebuffed in such a fashion. Perhaps the ill-tempered viscount was already married.

Lydia was not upset that the stodgy old viscount did not want to dance with her. She had reserved the three important sets for Wickham, and the rest she would dance with other officers. Perhaps even Colonel Fitzwilliam. Now that he was wearing his scarlet coat, he would be graced with her hand for a set. She dragged Kitty to a settee where they soon had their heads together and were giggling.

Bingley approached his angel once port and sherry had been distributed by two footmen. “Miss Bennet, may I reserve your first, supper, and final sets?” he requested.

“Mr Bingley, I am afraid I am not willing to dance more than one significant set with you because that is tantamount to a declaration that we are engaged, and that is not the case. At this point, only my second set is spoken for, so you may chuse one of the three sets you mentioned, as they are all unclaimed,” Jane replied softly.

He was not trying to overhear, but Hilldale did hear Miss Bennet’s response, and it impressed him. He was interested to see how Bingley would react.

Jane thought that for a moment Mr Bingley looked like a puppy someone had kicked. She did not want to cause him pain, but she was not willing to push her principles aside to sooth his feelings.

As shocked as he was to be refused by his angel, Bingley rallied. “In that case, may I reserve the first set?” At her nod, he scrawled his name in that space on his angel’s dance card. He turned first to Miss Elizabeth and then to Miss Mary and wrote his name on their cards after they each agreed to dance a set with him.

Darcy approached Miss Elizabeth; it was now or never. “Miss Elizabeth, will you allow me to dance with you at this ball?” Darcy requested. “If you chuse not to, as you have in the past, I will not insist that you do not dance tonight.”

Elizabeth had no intention of refusing him a set, but the fact that he made it a true choice for her was impressive. He was not forcing her hand, and for that she was grateful. “Even had you not been so gracious as to give me freedom of choice, I would not deny the man with whom I had agreed to begin our acquaintance anew. I am not some sort of ogre, you know.” She said the last in jest.

Hearing her now, Darcy could tell the difference between true teasing and the way she attempted to needle him before, when in his blindness, he thought she was flirting with him. “You are generosity personified.” He bowed to the lady he loved. She extended her wrist, the one which had her dance card tied loosely to it. Darcy held the card and attached pencil and saw she only had two sets reserved. “Do I tax our new understanding to reserve the opening set?”

Even though she had not expected to have Mr Darcy request significant dances, Elizabeth found that she did not object to the idea of dancing those two dances with him. “I would be happy to have you partner me for that set,” she said and found she meant it.

This was not the time to be timid. “Do I ask too much to claim your supper set as well? Before you refuse, consider this: it will give us time to sit together during the meal and come to know one another better.”

There was no doubt in her mind that Mr Darcy was in earnest. Judging by the look of hope and longing he was giving her, Elizabeth finally accepted that Mr Darcy was in fact attracted to her. Unlike Jane’s decision regarding more than one significant set with Mr Bingley, Elizabeth decided to be bold. “I will cede those two dances to you as well, Mr Darcy.”

He wrote his name in the space for supper before she changed her mind, or he discovered he had not heard what she actually said. As Miss Elizabeth smiled warmly when she looked at her card, Darcy decided it had not been in his imagination.

Elizabeth had to hold her breath when Mr Darcy smiled and revealed his dimples for the first time. '*Oh my*!' she thought as her heart rate sped up.

While his cousin was asking Miss Elizabeth to dance, Hilldale approached her older sister. "Miss Bennet, I know we have only just met, but may I have the favour of your supper dances?"

Jane did not care what rank the man held, but he was very pleasant-looking, and she thought, irresolute was not something this man was. "They are yours, Lord Hilldale," Jane agreed as she extended her wrist with the card tied to it. She watched as the viscount wrote his name in bold strokes.

"Is it too forward of me to write my name in for a second set, not the final one?" Hilldale enquired. "I do not want to place you in an awkward position by asking for two significant sets."

"Lord Hilldale, are you sure you want to dance a second set with the same woman?" Jane verified.

"I am, as long as you are willing," Hilldale confirmed.

As she had granted Mr Bingley two sets at the assembly when they first met, Jane saw no reason to refuse the viscount. She offered him her card, and he took her third set, the one after Cousin Collins's.

Elizabeth and Mary both agreed to dance a set each with Viscount Hilldale and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mary spent most of her time next to her suitor while Elizabeth circulated around the room. They had technically been introduced when the Bennets arrived, but Elizabeth had not spoken to Miss Darcy yet.

It had taken Elizabeth all of a few moments to be able to tell that Miss Darcy was crushingly shy, as her brother and Colonel Fitzwilliam had stated, and was nothing like the creature that other man had claimed her to be. She saw Mr Darcy join his sister and her companion. Elizabeth approached the group. "Miss Darcy, it is a pleasure to meet you beyond the introductions your cousin made. I have heard that you are a great talent at

the pianoforte," Elizabeth said warmly. She did not miss how appreciative Mr Darcy was for her paying attention to his sister.

"I do love to play the pianoforte, but I am no great talent. I practise for many hours," Georgiana responded humbly. "I have been looking forward to knowing you, Miss Elizabeth. It has been ever since William wrote about you in his letters," Georgiana added, barely above a whisper.

"Mr Darcy wrote about me!" Elizabeth exclaimed with an arched eyebrow. "And you still want to know me?" she jested. She knew her joke had not hit the mark when the younger girl looked horrified.

"William said very good things about you," Georgiana managed before her eyes dropped to the rug again.

"Anna, dear, you will soon learn that Miss Elizabeth loves to tease," Darcy explained. "If I am not mistaken, she only teases those she likes. Is that not true, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Your brother will expose all of my secrets, and then you will not trust a word out of my mouth," Elizabeth teased. "However, what he said is true."

Georgiana relaxed as she understood that Miss Elizabeth was being playful. If only she could gain a measure of the confidence that seemed to pour off Miss Elizabeth in waves. "How old are your youngest two sisters?" Georgiana managed. "I long to know young ladies of an age with me."

"Catherine, or Kitty, as we call her, is very recently seventeen, and Lydia is fifteen. I love my sisters, but I must warn you that they are very exuberant and, at times, indecorous," Elizabeth stated honestly.

Darcy was very appreciative that Miss Elizabeth had been the one to warn Anna. She said it more diplomatically than he may have.

"Are all of your sisters out?" Georgiana enquired timidly.

"Indeed, they are. My mother put some of us out at fifteen, and wanted to with all of us," Elizabeth owned. "You are not out, are you?"

"No, I am not out yet, and I am pleased about it," Georgiana replied softly.

“I envy you. None of us three older sisters wanted to come out so early. Mary and I applied to our father and he agreed we could wait until we were seventeen. The youngest two did not want to delay as they think it is great fun to be out. I assume that, like most in London, you will not enter society before you are seventeen or eighteen?”

“The earliest will be when I am eighteen, and possibly later,” Georgiana stated.

“Anna, dear, you know that Richard and I will not insist that you come out before you are ready to do so, do you not?” Darcy assured his sister.

The warmth, love, and tenderness with which Mr Darcy spoke to his sister impressed Elizabeth greatly. Not that she needed more proof of how wrong her former opinions of this man were, but now she had it.

The way Miss Elizabeth drew his sister out without pushing her warmed Darcy’s heart. He had just found more reasons to love her.

William Collins felt great satisfaction in the way most of his Bennet family were behaving. He knew he needed to give Biggs some instructions to pass onto his men, so William looked towards an unoccupied corner of the room and saw the big man’s answering nod. “Mary, I need to speak to the lieutenant,” he said so only she could hear.

Mary nodded and walked towards where Jane was speaking to the viscount, the colonel, and Miss de Bourgh.

While Biggs stood against the wall so he could see those in the drawing room, William faced him and made sure the big man was the only one who could hear him. “Have all but one of your men outside until the militia officers arrive. You and Johns should be with those outside; the one man inside will keep an eye on the two girls until all of you return to the ballroom. I want you to make sure that the officers understand that they are to ignore my two youngest cousins completely. Not one offer to dance, not a conversation, nothing. They are especially not to mention Mr Wickham and his fate. Speak to Colonel Forster; he is a good and reasonable man, and will reinforce your message. It is time for the girls to learn of their insignificance in the world.”

Biggs nodded and signalled Johns to follow him. Within moments, one of their men entered the drawing room.

Just before he was to return to Mary, William saw Cousin Fanny practically dragging her youngest to the side, not far from him. He did not move and made it look like he was looking out of a window.

“Lydia, how can you give up attracting the attention of a viscount? Do you know how rich he is? Are you aware of what luxurious carriages, jewels, and pin money you would have? I will not have him pay attention to Jane after she refused to heed me and capture Mr Bingley,” Fanny hissed without lowering her voice too much.

“Mama, I am not interested in some boring man. You know only an officer will do for me, and on the morrow I am to meet Mr Wickham and he will propose to me. I *will* be married before Mary and her stuffy parson.” Lydia covered her mouth. She had not meant to inform her mother who she was to meet or when. “You must not mention a word, Mamma! My Wicky said that if anyone knows, even Kitty, he will not be able to offer for me.”

“I still say that a viscount would be better, but I know how you want to marry an officer, just like I dreamed of doing. I will not say anything. I will make sure you have the best wedding Meryton has ever seen,” Fanny enthused.

Mother and daughter linked arms and returned to where the rest of the guests were mingling.

‘*I must speak to Fitzwilliam. We need to arrange for Cousins Fanny and Lydia to learn the truth for themselves. Cousin Kitty needs to be present as well. In fact, so does Cousin Bennet!*’ William thought.

He walked to the group Fitzwilliam was part of, which included Mary, and asked his friend to join him on the one side, away from the others. The two men spoke; Fitzwilliam agreed that Collins’s plan was sound. They would implement it on the morrow.

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Chapter 25

Ten of the thirteen officers—three remained on duty and there had been fourteen until one had been stripped of his rank—in the regiment of the Derbyshire Militia were to attend the ball. As it was cold and he did not want his men arriving smelling of horse, Colonel Forster rented carriages to convey his officers the two miles to Netherfield Park. The carriage he was in came to a halt.

The door was opened by a lieutenant in the uniform of the Royal Dragoons. In and of itself that was remarkable, but the man was mountainous.

“Colonel Forster?” Biggs verified as he snapped off a smart salute.

“Yes, Lieutenant, I am he,” Forster confirmed as he returned the salute. “What is it I can do for you?”

“I am Lieutenant Biggs. If you will indulge me, Sir, I would like to address your officers off to the side there, where my men are waiting.” Biggs indicated the four men waiting for him, one of them as large as he was.

As he was curious about what the lieutenant wanted, Forster agreed and ordered his officers to assemble where the huge man had requested.

Once all of the officers had alighted and were standing where the colonel had instructed, Biggs cleared his throat. “My men and I, there is one more inside, have been employed to make sure that no one takes advantage of Misses Kitty and Lydia Bennet.” Biggs held up his hand to stem the forming protests. “We are fully aware that the two in question flirt outrageously and that none of you would take that which is not freely offered. Hence, you may think of us as being here to protect the two *girls* from themselves. To that end, we request that none of you ask them to dance, speak to them at all, or mention the former lieutenant by the name of Wickham. This will help keep them safe and ensure that your regiment’s good name is not besmirched.”

Most nodded in agreement; however, a few men grumbled.

“Allow me to reinforce Mr Biggs’s words and make them an order. What the lieutenant said is no longer a request. We almost had a man, the one the lieutenant mentioned, blacken my regiment’s name. Hence, I will not stand for any of you doing so by taking advantage of silly girls who do not know how to behave as they should.” Forster looked at his officers sternly.

“Yessir!” was chorused by all in one voice.

“Much appreciated, Colonel.” Biggs saluted again. When Colonel Fitzwilliam had told him the militia commander was a good man, he had been correct.

Biggs, Johns, and their men slipped back into the house to take up positions in the ballroom while the officers filed in behind their colonel and joined the line of those to be received by Mr Bingley, and Mr and Mrs Hurst.

Elizabeth walked into the ballroom on Mr Darcy’s arm; his sister was on his other arm, with the companion right behind her charge. They stood close to where the Fitzwilliam brothers, Miss de Bourgh, and Jane stood. “Miss Darcy, is this the first ball you are to attend?” Elizabeth enquired of the younger lady.

“It is. I am only allowed to dance with my cousins, brother, and Mr Bingley, who is like another brother to me,” Georgiana replied. “Mrs Annesley and I will retire after supper.”

“Mr Darcy, do you not want to dance the first set with your sister?” Elizabeth asked in *sotto voce*.

“When she comes out at her ball, wild horses will not stop me from having that honour. Because she is not out, Anna, in consultation with Richard and me, decided she will sit out the first, and I will have the pleasure of dancing the second with her.” Darcy paused and looked into Miss Elizabeth’s magnificent emerald-green eyes. “If you would prefer not to dance the…” He stopped when she placed one of her dainty gloved hands on his forearm.

“Oh no, Mr Darcy, that was not the genesis of my question. I wanted to make sure I had not usurped your sister’s place to open the ball with you,”

Elizabeth explained. “After all, this is her first one.”

“I thank you for considering Anna’s feelings. However, she is completely sanguine with sitting out the first two dances,” Darcy assured. “We discussed this before your family arrived. Hence, by the time I made my request of you, I knew what my sister desired. Before you ask about the supper set, although I will not dance those dances with her, Anna and Mrs Annesley will be seated with us for the meal. She will not exhibit, as she hardly feels enough confidence to play for close family members, never mind a room full of those she does not know.”

Elizabeth noticed arriving guests begin to file into the ballroom after they traversed the receiving line. One of the first families to arrive was the Lucases. Sir William and Lady Lucas went to stand with Mamma and Papa while Maria headed to where Kitty and Lydia were watching the door longingly for officers. Charlotte, Franklin, and Johnny Lucas joined Elizabeth and Mr Darcy.

Just after the three Lucas siblings joined them—Elizabeth was impressed that Mr Darcy was conversing with the Lucas sons as equals—she knew the moment the officers arrived. Lydia squealed and, with Kitty in her wake, ran across the room to welcome her favourites.

Knowing that Cousin Collins had taken steps to protect Kitty and Lydia and seeing it were two very different things. Kitty and Lydia stood calling out officers’ names, and not a single one acknowledged them. They kept walking as if the two youngest Bennets were not there. Rather, they began to circulate around the room. Elizabeth watched as Lydia grabbed Mr Denny’s arm. The man speared Lydia with a look of disdain, cut her, and went on his way without saying a word to her. Both of her youngest sisters stood there, their mouths hanging wide open. Lydia turned and ran back to where Mamma was speaking with Lady Lucas, Aunt Hattie, and Mrs Goulding.

Lydia complained about her ill use by the officers, forgetting that she had not seen the man she intended to marry. Mamma told her and Kitty to wait, and then she marched over to where Colonel Forster was standing and speaking to plain Charlotte Lucas.

“Colonel, your men have used my daughters very ill,” Fanny screeched, ignoring, or not caring, that Colonel Foster had been speaking to Charlotte.

“And how have they done so, Mrs Bennet?” Forster drawled.

“None of them will speak to my girl, and not a single one has asked her to dance,” Fanny complained. “After all the time she has spent flirting with them, how can they ignore such a pretty and lively girl?”

“Mrs Bennet, it was I who commanded my officers to keep away from your daughters. I do not need my regiments’ welcome being rescinded because your daughters have not the first idea of how to behave like gentlewomen. If I were you, I would be more concerned that they are seen as lightskirts because of the indecorous way they carry on in public. Now if you will excuse me, I was having a discussion with Miss Lucas.” Forster bowed to the matron and then turned back to Miss Lucas.

Forster was pleased when the pretty and sensible Miss Lucas granted him the first and supper sets.

Fanny Bennet was shaken to her core. How dare the colonel call her Lydia a lightskirt? Now her problem was how to tell her youngest that not only would none of the officers dance with her or even speak to her, but that she could do nothing about it. That Kitty had been included in the colonel’s assessment was ignored by Fanny, as was the fact that Kitty was also being ostracised by the officers.

There was no little caterwauling when Fanny returned to her two youngest daughters and conveyed the bad news to them.

Bennet had watched with amusement when his wife harangued the colonel about his men ignoring his silly daughters. The smile had vanished when he had heard what Colonel Forster had said to Mrs Bennet about Kitty and Lydia. Surely that was not how all their neighbours saw his youngest daughters. Could it be that they needed more than to be told they were the silliest girls in the land and to be laughed at? While his youngest daughters complained loudly, Bennet was too caught up with his thoughts to enjoy the spectacle they were making of themselves.

When the first set was called, Fanny, Kitty, and Lydia were fuming. The two youngest Bennets were the only two unmarried females without a

partner for the dances. As far as Fanny was concerned, it was a personal slight to herself that two of her daughters had not been asked to dance. Jane was dancing with Mr Bingley. The high and mighty viscount, who had refused to ask Lydia to dance, was seated speaking to Miss Darcy and her companion. How was it that Lizzy was dancing with Mr Darcy? Had she not said she would never dance with him? Mary was being squired by Cousin Collins. At least that was expected. From what Fanny could tell, her husband's cousin was a very accomplished dancer.

Even after wiping the lenses of his spectacles, the picture of Lizzy dancing with the proud Mr Darcy, whom Bennet thought she hated, had not changed. Not only was his favourite daughter dancing with the man from Derbyshire, but she was smiling at him!

Was up, down, and down up? He watched as Lydia stalked up to two officers who did not have partners for the first set. Bennet was certain that his uncouth, brash daughter was commanding one of them to dance with her. They said nothing to her, cut her, and walked away, leaving Lydia standing, staring daggers at their backs. It seemed that Colonel Forster had been serious when he had told Mrs Bennet that he had embargoed his officers from contact with the youngest Bennets.

The couple who had confused Bennet were enjoying their first dance together immensely. Elizabeth was sure that, had she still believed the drivel that terrible man had fed her about Mr Darcy, she would not have been enjoying dancing with him the way she was. He was a tall man; however, he was very light on his feet and danced very well. If she still disliked him, Elizabeth was sure she would have found ways to needle him with conversation on the dance floor; and more than likely she would have made comments in support of the man who had fooled her. As it was, the silence between them was companionable.

Darcy could not think of a time he had enjoyed a dance more than this one. What made it all the better was that he could tell that Miss Elizabeth was savouring dancing with him. She was dancing with him because she wanted to, not because it was an obligation.

He saw Bingley with Miss Bennet in the line close to him and Miss Elizabeth. Bingley looked like he always did when he was with his angel, but Miss Bennet did not look like she was enjoying the set.

“Miss Elizabeth, may I ask something?” Darcy enquired when the dance brought them back together.

“You may, but the first dance is almost over, and we will have a five-minute break before the next one. I suggest we speak then when we are not concentrating on the figures of the dance,” Elizabeth responded.

As he saw sense in her suggestion, Darcy nodded his agreement.

Even though she thought Mr Bingley was an affable man, and he did dance well, Jane was ready to scream! All he ever spoke of was her superficial beauty. No matter how many times she attempted to redirect the conversation, he always came back to her outward looks.

The truth was that had not Cousin Collins opened her eyes to the realities of the world, she would have made excuses for Mr Bingley’s immaturity and followed her mother’s instructions to catch the man she knew was not right for her.

Jane felt relief when the first dance of the set ended, and Mr Bingley went to fetch a glass of lemonade for her. It gave her some breathing space.

Darcy had not been the only one to notice that Miss Bennet was fighting to keep her features schooled. William Collins and Mary saw it as well. William wondered if he had to ask Biggs to have one of his men stand on Mr Bingley’s foot before he requested a second set with Cousin Jane. That way, she would not be forced to refuse him if she so desired. He would wait and see. He did note that Mr Darcy was leading Cousin Elizabeth to the side of the room where no one was close to them. As they could be seen from anywhere in the ballroom, he was not concerned.

“What is it that you wanted to know, Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth queried quietly once no one was near them.

“I hope you do not take offence at this question because I know as well as any how close you and Miss Bennet are,” Darcy began with a lowered voice. He would not make the same *faux pas* he had at the assembly by speaking where he could be heard and not lowering his voice. “I have observed that your sister does not take pleasure in my friend’s company like he does in hers. I worry if he offers for her…” Darcy felt a little indignant that Miss Elizabeth was giggling at his concerns for his friend.

“I am sorry. I am amused because Jane does not feel that she and Mr Bingley are compatible. It is why she would not grant him more than one significant set tonight, although he asked for three. Jane does not enjoy being judged on her beauty alone. She is looking for a resolute man who is mature. The man she bestows her heart on will have to see all of her, not just her façade,” Elizabeth explained. “None of us three eldest sisters will marry without love and respect, regardless of financial considerations.”

Hearing what Miss Elizabeth said dispelled his worry for his friend. Miss Bennet would not accept him if she were not so inclined. She was not wrong that Bingley needed to become his own man and mature. What gave Darcy hope he had never had before was that Miss Elizabeth had granted him two significant sets, especially after what she said about her sister’s reasons for not granting Bingley the same.

For the first time since Mr Collins had revealed his cousin’s dislike of Darcy’s person, he had hope for a future with the lady he loved. When he led her back to the line before the commencement of the second dance, there was a spring in his step.

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Since she had come out, Lydia was used to dancing every set. Unlike her other simple sisters, she did not sit out some sets like they did. What did she care if there were some ladies who did not have an opportunity to dance? If they were as pretty and lively as her, they would not be wallflowers. However, this ball, the one she had demanded that Mr Bingley hold, was not unfolding as she desired it should.

The first set she danced was the fourth of the ball, and that was with Johnny Lucas. His brother had partnered Kitty, and now she was waiting for Franklin Lucas, not an officer but a regular man, to come collect her for the two dances before the supper set. How embarrassing that she, Lydia Frances Bennet, had not been asked to dance by a single officer, nor did she have a partner for the supper set? Lydia tried to ignore the fact that it was only because Mamma had almost ordered the two Lucas sons to dance with her and Kitty that she had danced at all. This night was supposed to be a triumph for her.
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Why was her Wicky not here? When she met him in the morning on the morrow, she would make her displeasure known before she allowed him any kisses or to touch her in her special place again.

How was it fair that mousy Maria Lucas had danced with three officers and she, not one? Even that timid Miss Darcy had danced with Colonel Fitzwilliam. Thinking of that girl, Lydia could not believe that at sixteen she was not out yet. Thanks to being able to manipulate Mamma, Lydia had come out a month before her fifteenth birthday.

None of that helped when she was having such a miserable time. She had told the huge lieutenant that he needed to dance with her. Unlike the militia officers, he had not cut her, but he had snickered and walked away without asking her to dance.

Something else Lydia could not understand was how it was that each time she asked for punch, she ended up with lemonade. No, things were not going according to her plans.

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Fanny did not know how it happened, but at supper, she, her husband, and two youngest daughters had ended up at a table as far from her three eldest daughters as possible. Every time she had aimed for a table in the centre of the dining area, a soldier had been in the way. At least Hattie and Frank Phillips were seated with them, so they did not look like they were being ostracised.

She shared Lydia’s anger when she looked across at the tables where the Lucases were seated. The sons had each escorted a Long niece to supper, while plain Charlotte had Colonel Forster next to her, and Lieutenant Denny, who had always paid such attention to her Lydia, was seated next to Maria Lucas.

Sir William and Lady Lucas were with the Longs and Gouldings at the next table. Fanny was sure that her friend, Sarah Lucas, was well pleased that her two daughters were accompanied by officers when Fanny’s Lydia, who deserved their attention far more, was not with any man as her escort, never mind an officer. This was not right! What had happened to turn her world on its head?
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William Collins could not have been more pleased that his men had made sure that the rest of the Bennets were seated as far away from them as possible. He had very much enjoyed his two sets of dances with Mary and looked forward to the final set as her partner. He was not flattering himself when he opined that Mary had liked dancing with him as much as he did with her. She was glowing with happiness, and William had been amused at the looks Mary had received from her neighbours. They had never seen her as she was this night. She was herself without hiding her beauty away. After Lord Hilldale, Fitzwilliam, Darcy—he had been asked to call him that—and Mr Bingley had reserved sets, there were very few remaining for the local men who clamoured to dance with her. He looked around the table.

Cousin Elizabeth was chatting away with Miss Darcy, who looked far more relaxed than she had when they had met her and her companion before the start of the ball. Darcy was seated next to Cousin Elizabeth, watching the interaction with his sister and looking like the cat who got the cream. On Miss Darcy's other side sat Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh, lost in one another's company. The final couple was Lord Hilldale and Cousin Jane. William would not speculate about the future, but he could see that they were enjoying their discussion.

He saw Mr Bingley, who did not look pleased, stand and head towards the table where he and the others were seated. He approached and stood near Cousin Jane, ignoring the fact she was conversing at that moment.

"I thought you were only granting one set to anyone tonight. I suppose if I were a viscount and not the son of a tradesman, I too would have had a second set," Bingley said bitterly. He was disappointed, and he had given into that emotion before thinking about what he was to say or do.

"Bingley!" Darcy and Fitzwilliam chorused.

Hilldale was about to set the spoilt puppy down when Miss Bennet rested her hand on his arm to stay his words.

"Mr Bingley, I did not say I would not dance a second set with you. What I said was that I would not dance two or more *significant* sets with any one man. You will note that Lord Hilldale was not granted two of the three sets I mentioned," Jane stated firmly, but calmly. "Neither your status

nor Lord Hilldale's is material to me. As you know, both of my uncles are in trade, and I could not love them more."

It was then Bingley saw the looks of censure being shot at him from everyone else at the table, including Miss Darcy. He was about to speak again when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw it was Darcy.

"Bingley, go back and join your partner and the Hursts. We *will* speak about this in the morning," Darcy hissed next to his friend's ear.

Realising he had done himself no credit, Bingley returned to his seat.

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At the end of supper, Darcy escorted his sister and her companion up to the suite they were sharing. He was overjoyed at how easily Anna had taken to Miss Elizabeth. In his mind, it boded well for the future. After seeing his sister safely to her suite, Darcy returned to the ball. He had danced almost every set, and found that it was not the chore he always thought it would be.

Thankfully the rest of the ball passed without any major incident and was enjoyed by everyone except Fanny and her two youngest daughters. Requests for the three of them to be returned home had been rebuffed by her husband.

At one point, Lydia stamped her foot and demanded that her mother force an officer to dance with her. After being rebuffed by Colonel Forster earlier, Fanny did not gratify her youngest. For the rest of the ball, Lydia sat with her arms crossed and scowled. She was not used to being ignored and not getting anything she asked for. Kitty sat next to her looking just as unhappy as her younger sister.

Neither Jane nor Elizabeth accepted anyone for the final set. Instead, they sat with Lord Hilldale and Mr Darcy and spoke with them while they watched Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mary and Cousin Collins, amongst the couples dancing the last dances of the evening.

At the end of the ball, rather than linger as would have been her preference in the past, Fanny and her two youngest could not leave soon enough. Hence, the Bennet carriage was one of the first to depart.
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In the carriage on the way home, the three eldest listened to the shrill complaints of their mother and two youngest sisters without comment. They envied their father and Cousin Collins, who were on the box and were not forced to listen to the caterwauling in the carriage.

On arriving home, Fanny began to complain to her husband about her and Lydia's ill usage, with vocal support from the latter. Kitty added her complaints as well.

Bennet was tired, so he ignored his wife and youngest daughters, turned, and made his way up the stairs to his chamber.

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Chapter 26

Even though Wicky had not attended the ball, and not a single officer had paid her even scant attention, Lydia was certain that her beau would be at the hunting lodge at the agreed-upon time.

It was her wont to sleep well into the afternoon when there had been a ball the previous evening, even one as dissatisfying as the one at Netherfield Park had been. Ignoring her desire to remain abed, Lydia was up before ten that morning and got dressed with the assistance of the maid, Sarah. She would break her fast, and then she would claim she needed to go for a walk into Meryton.

Mamma would support her, and Papa would not care. She would walk in the direction of Meryton until she was certain she could not be seen from the house. At that moment, she would strike out towards the hunting lodge, where her soon-to-be betrothed would be waiting for her with open arms.

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It was a chagrined Bingley who joined Lord Hilldale, Fitzwilliam, Hurst, and Darcy in the dining parlour the morning after the ball. He was to depart with Caroline the next day, and that could not come fast enough given how much of a cake he had made of himself at the ball during supper.

As much as he had wanted to run and hide, Bingley knew he needed to face the men at the table. Thankfully, his sister and the rest of the ladies in residence were not there to witness his humiliation.

Darcy waited until the footman poured his friend a cup of coffee. He nodded to the man who withdrew, pulling the door closed behind him. “Bingley, what on earth caused you to harangue Miss Bennet at supper yester-night? That was not the behaviour of a gentleman. I should know, as I did not behave as one either until recently.”

“I so much wanted to dance the three main sets with Miss Bennet, and I was not ready for her to refuse me; she did it in such a sweet way. To make things worse, I misheard her; she did only refer to those three sets,” Bingley admitted.
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“Bingley, you have bestowed your attentions on more than a few *angels*, have you not?” Fitzwilliam queried.

“I suppose I have,” Bingley owned.

“How many of them have done what Miss Bennet did? In other words, how many of your previous *angels* ever refused to grant you the sets you asked of them? I propose that the fact that Miss Bennet has never fawned over you like others has only increased your desire to *win* her,” Fitzwilliam opined.

“My anger was driven by the knowledge that she seemed to enjoy her sets with many others more than the one she danced with me. Why was that?” Bingley enquired plaintively.

“I am able to answer that; however, are you prepared to hear something that will not make you happy?” Darcy verified.

“Yes, I am,” Bingley confirmed as he took a gulp of his cooling coffee.

“In case you did not notice it, I was fortunate enough to dance the first with Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy related. “In the interlude between the first and second dances of the set, I quizzed her about Miss Bennet’s feelings as I too saw what you experienced. Bingley, are you certain you want to know?”

“I think I must hear this,” Bingley replied, his eyes pointed at the table.

“She thinks you are amiable but immature. The three eldest sisters care only for love and respect, not money, connections, or rank. In Miss Bennet’s mind, one who only sees her beauty or one who will speak of nothing else even when she tries redirecting the subject of the conversation, does not respect her,” Darcy revealed. “She cannot think of being courted by one who does not see beyond her outer shell. Beauty eventually fades, so if you have no admiration for a woman beyond the superficial, then you are left with nothing. She has seen that in her own home, so it is not what she will accept for herself.”

“Did I really never speak of anything but her beauty? She is physically beautiful after all,” Bingley said dreamily as he saw Miss Bennet’s prodigious beauty in his mind’s eye.

“Yes, you only ever spoke of her beauty,” Darcy said while Fitzwilliam and Hurst nodded.

“Bingley, you are my brother-in-law, and I like you, but do you not see that even as you were asking if all you see is Miss Bennet’s beauty, you comment on the fact that she is a great beauty?” Hurst pointed out.

“I think I enjoyed it more when you were playing at being a drunken sot,” Bingley shot back sardonically. “Yes, I do see that all I saw were her looks.”

“When do you make for London with your younger sister?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“On the morrow, first thing in the morning,” Bingley responded. “I heard from my Uncle John and Aunt Hildebrand. They will take Caroline in the unlikely event the physicians judge her sane. If that comes to pass, I will be travelling directly to Scarborough. Hurst and Louisa will be here, so you are all welcome to remain as long as you chuse to.”

“Anne, Andrew, and I are going to London on the morrow,” Fitzwilliam related.

“Actually, little brother, I may remain here for a while longer,” Hilldale drawled. “I find the *area* very interesting.

Even though he was sure why the viscount wanted to remain, or more precisely for whom, Bingley said nothing. He had lost Miss Bennet because of his own deficiencies, so he should not be surprised she had interested another.

“So, Rich, how long before you sell out and resign?” Darcy smirked. He remembered when his cousin had said he would never marry and leave the army.

“I will begin the process as soon as I am back in London,” Fitzwilliam stated. “Now Andy and William, you remember what we are to do to help Collins this morning, do you not?” He saw his brother and cousin nod. “As soon as Collins sends word, we will make for Meryton.”

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Biggs and Johns were huge, but they were fleet of foot and could blend into the background if the task called for them to do that. On this day, they sent three of the other men out. They were dressed like farm labourers so their quarry would not notice them.

The men were watching when the youngest Bennet slipped out of the front door and walked down the drive to the lane where she turned towards Meryton. After about two hundred yards, she struck out across the fields to her right.

The girl obviously did not expect she would be followed, which explained why she never looked behind her even once. It took about twenty minutes before she reached a rundown hunting lodge. The three former soldiers took up positions in a large triangle where they had a clear view of the structure and could see one another as well in case they needed to signal each other.

“Wicky, I am here,” Lydia sang out as she skipped into the dilapidated one-room lodge. Not immediately seeing her love, she stopped at the door and looked around.

“Wicky, where are you? This is not funny if you are teasing me. I am not amused! You are supposed to propose to me today. You also said something about our vows; what was that? Where are you?” Lydia stomped her booted foot. The force caused the rotted floorboards below her foot to crack.

Lydia waited for a half hour before she gave up and began to stomp back towards Longbourn. She was so preoccupied with her pique that she never noticed the three farm labourers who were following her.

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“It is good that the seducer is under lock and key. Hopefully, after today, things will change here,” William Collins said to Biggs after hearing the man’s report about Miss Lydia’s adventure and return, stomping her feet all the way. William thanked the man and made his way to Cousin Bennet’s study. He knocked on the door and waited.

Bennet knew his wife was not up yet, so he called out for whoever was at his study door to enter. “What can I do for you, Cousin?” he said
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disinterestedly when he saw who entered the room.

“It is the other way around. It is what I can do for you to make sure your family is not ruined,” William responded evenly.

“Ruined? You exaggerate and overstep. Do not concern yourself with my family beyond the daughter you are to marry,” Bennet barked. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he calmed himself. “I assume that you mean the two youngest? How are they to accomplish ruining themselves when none of the officers would look at them? With them sitting on the side for most of the night, I had very little amusement at the ball. It was hardly worth going.”

William knew that his cousin needed a great shock before he would be willing to listen to reason. “What if I can prove what danger your youngest two present to your family by running wild?” he questioned.

Before he dismissed his cousin’s words as maundering, Bennet saw the look in Collins’s eyes, and he saw resolve. “What can you prove?”

“You will discover how close your daughters came to ruin,” William promised. “To really have the effect that is required, your wife and two youngest daughters need to be with us. May I count on you to order their compliance?”

Either he was going to be amused, or a disaster would be averted. As such, Bennet agreed to have the three women his cousin mentioned accompany them. Bennet nodded.

“We still need to have a much longer conversation, but this needs to be dealt with first,” William added. Let him come to grips with his failures as a parent before he was shocked with the terms of the entail William could enforce if he chose to do so.

Bennet sent Mrs Hill to rouse his wife and two youngest daughters from their beds. He had not a clue that Lydia was already up and about and in a very bad mood after her unsuccessful attempt to see the man she thought would marry her. If any of the three refused, Bennet told Hill to tell them that refusal would result in one-year’s loss of allowance.

While two of the three Bennet ladies were being waked, Collins wrote a note to Fitzwilliam and sent it to Netherfield Park with one of the former

soldiers who was riding Vulcan.

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“It is time to depart; I have the missive from Collins,” Fitzwilliam told his brother and cousin. “He asks that we have Wicky be very candid.”

“Will the miscreant know that he will have an audience?” Hilldale asked.

“No. He will be unaware and think this is all for his benefit. We will make sure he knows which prison he is to go to will depend on his being absolutely honest,” Fitzwilliam responded. As he had notified the stables they would need three horses ready, they rang for the butler. “Mr Nichols, have the grooms bring our horses to the drive in front of the house.”

The butler bowed and left to execute the colonel’s orders.

A few minutes later, the three were galloping towards Meryton.

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The Fitzwilliam brothers and their cousin were seated in Colonel Forster’s office when the prisoner was led in. Wickham looked nothing like the suave, self-assured man who manipulated others at will. He was dirty, still had the stench of urine about him, and thanks to his brush with Fitzwilliam, he had missing teeth, some of which used to form that winning smile of his.

“Have you come to gloat?” Wickham demanded. He was in irons, so there was no hope of escape, even without the men in the room.

“Well, I cannot be honest and say it is not good to see you finally having to pay the piper, but that is not why we are here today,” Fitzwilliam taunted the wastrel. “You have one chance to help yourself.” There was no missing how Wickham’s face lit up. “No, Wicky, you are not escaping your responsibilities. What I am about to propose will mean the difference between King’s Bench[5] and Marshalsea.”

“You would not send me to King’s Bench, would you?” Wickham cried. “I have heard that it makes Marshalsea seem like a paradise.”

“And that is true,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “All it will take to be placed in the latter prison and not the former is for you to do something you almost never do—tell the truth. We will ask you questions. As long as you are as detailed as possible and do not lie, even in the smallest measure, then to Marshalsea you will go. Do you understand me?”

Wickham nodded. He would do anything not to be thrown into King’s Bench.

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Bennet looked at his cousin quizzically when his carriage halted at the entrance to Colonel Forster’s rented house that abutted his regiment’s offices. Collins looked annoyingly stoic.

As perturbed as she had been to be taken somewhere without being told where, Lydia was delighted with where they had stopped. Perhaps Mamma had done this so she would be able to see Wicky and ask why he had not met her as he had promised he would.

Fanny and Kitty were flummoxed as to why they had been dragged out of bed and why they were now in the middle of Meryton.

William and Bennet assisted the three females to alight from the carriage.

Colonel Forster was waiting just outside of his door. “Welcome Mr Collins, Mr and Mrs Bennet, Miss Kitty, and Miss Lydia. Please follow me into the house; you are expected,” Forster stated. He turned and walked back into the abode.

The four Bennets were led into a sitting room. Inside were the two huge men, one officer and one sergeant-major, whom the Bennets had seen at the ball the previous evening. The four took seats, while surprisingly their cousin did not sit but rather turned towards them. The two enormous men stood behind him.

“All of us are about to hear a conversation between some men. The men are Viscount Hilldale, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Darcy on one side and *former* Lieutenant Wickham on the other…” Collins stopped when the expected words erupted from Cousin Lydia’s mouth.”
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“My Wicky! What do those men have to do with him…? Wait, did you say *former* lieutenant?” Lydia demanded.

“Indeed, his rank was stripped, and he was expelled from the militia,” Forster stated. “I would not have such a dishonourable man in my regiment. Now he is plain *Mr* Wickham.”

“Noooo! I wanted to marry an officer. How will I be the first to marry now?” Lydia lamented.

“Did you really believe that he was going to marry you when you snuck off to that old hunting lodge this morning?” William asked. “How about when you allowed him liberties on previous occasions?”

“Where did you go? And you did what?” Bennet thundered.

For once, the brash and fearless Lydia Bennet was afraid. How on earth did the parson know that she had been to the hunting lodge? Also, how did he know that she had allowed Mr Wickham more than just kissing?

“Cousin Bennet, there will be time for all of those questions afterward,” William said. “There are some rules, which, if needed, will be vigorously enforced. No matter what you hear, you may not speak or allow those speaking to know we are here. For now, these men and four others work for me. If they even suspect one of you is about to break the rule I laid out, they will gag you first and then bind you. Do you all understand? I do not want anyone to claim ignorance after the fact.”

“I agree, as do my wife and daughters, do you not?” Bennet insisted.

Fanny was about to complain, but her husband’s look silenced her. She nodded, as did her two youngest girls.

Forster showed them to a parlour with a door in one wall. He indicated chairs, all of which were facing the closed door where the four Bennets sat. One of Collins’s men took up a position behind each one. Seeing a nod from Collins, Forster opened the door and stepped into his office while leaving the door cracked open by a few inches.

Wickham’s back was to the door, so he had no idea it was partially open.

“I need my office back, so let’s get this over with soon. I want this libertine back in the brig where he belongs,” Forster said as his eyes slid to the door, telling Fitzwilliam that the audience was present.

Lydia was wondering which of the men other than her Wicky the Colonel was speaking to in that fashion.

“Alright, Wickham, this is your one chance to not end up in King’s Bench,” Fitzwilliam began. “We know about your debts you were able to amass in Meryton. Those were added to the more than three thousand pounds of your debt markers Darcy is holding. Do you deny that this is true, that you left unpaid debts wherever you went?”

“You know it is true, but if I must say it, then yes, I left those debts behind me,” Wickham admitted. He wanted to add that it was only right Darcy paid his debts, but he knew it was a bad idea.

“Why did you seduce so many girls by promising to marry them before telling them that if they truly loved you, they would anticipate their vows? Did you not care that you ruined them? Of those who became with child, do you know some were called home to God? Do you know or care that Darcy here is having five of your by-blows cared for?” Hilldale enquired.

As if hearing Wicky admit to leaving debts in such sums behind him was not enough, now Lydia was praying that he would not admit to being a seducer of girls—girls like her.

“Yes, that is all true. And why should I not take what is freely given? How they would believe I would ever marry some penniless nobody is beyond me,” Wickham responded. He did not know where these questions tended, but if they saved him from King’s Bench, so be it.

As soon as she heard the reply, Lydia wanted to gasp, but she placed her hand over her mouth. She who never cried, had tears in her eyes.

Fanny had turned white, a similar colour to her husband.

Kitty was crying silently. Was this why Jane, Lizzy, and Mary always warned Lydia and her about the way they behaved around the officers?

“I know the town was warned against your type of seductive arts,” Fitzwilliam drawled, “but tell me, Wicky, have you been able to bed an

unsuspecting local girl? Failing that, were you working on one?"

"I have not had luck in this damned town, and had I not been arrested, I would have plucked a flower from the stupidest, most flirtatious girl in the area," Wickham revealed. He understood that Fitzwilliam wanted details and that his future was tied to his answers. "It is Miss Lydia Bennet; not only is she a lightskirt, but can you believe that she told me it was her own mother who taught her how to *catch a man* by flirting and even allowing him to kiss her? She allowed more than kissing."

"Did you bed her?" Darcy demanded.

"No, but she allowed me to touch her breasts and between her legs. She thought I was to propose marriage today. I would have said what she wanted to hear just so she would have allowed me to take her virtue without hesitation," Wickham told.

"What of the older one, Miss Kitty?" Hilldale queried.

"Too much of a prude," Wickham replied. "She would not allow me to kiss her even when I told her she was so much better than her younger sister. The one I really wanted was Miss Elizabeth, but she seemed to become cold towards me. That younger one is a slattern, and doing what her mother…"

"**No, no, no, no**!" Lydia screamed as she jumped up from her chair before the man behind her could move. She reached the door between the parlour and Colonel Forster's office and threw it open before one of the men caught her and lifted her off the ground as if she weighed nothing.

Inside the colonel's office, Wickham turned as much as he was able while still clapped in irons on hearing the shouting and the door being flung open. His face expressed shock at seeing the girl he had planned to bed. She was white with fury and he could see she wanted nothing more than to scratch his eyes out. Thankfully, a huge man held her back. Wickham did not miss the looks of disgust on the faces in the office with him.

"Lord Hilldale, Colonels Fitzwilliam and Forster, and Mr Darcy, thank you. I think we have heard enough," William Collins stated. "You may return the prisoner to his cell."

Hearing the sound of retching behind him, William turned to see Cousin Bennet casting up his accounts into a vase. Cousin Fanny looked as white as a sheet. She was sitting and shaking. As soon as the door to the office was closed, Johns released Cousin Lydia who fell into her older sister's arms. The two youngest Bennets held one another tightly and cried piteously.

As much as he hated to cause anyone pain, William knew that a shock had been necessary.

Now he had a very good chance of the Bennet parents and the two youngest daughters listening when he attempted to suggest some changes they should make. William believed that this trauma, showing them how close their family had come to ruin, would end up being something good.

He hoped it would lead to the Bennets repairing their broken family. William lifted his eyes to the Father and prayed it would be so.

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Chapter 27

Due to the fact that the information about what was to occur at Colonel Forster's house had been imparted to them, Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary had an idea of what was to follow there. The three eldest Bennet sisters had been aware that Mr Wickham was a bad man. However, after Cousin Collins, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Darcy returned looking very grave, combined with the wailing of their mother and two youngest sisters, that awful man was far worse than they had imagined.

The change to Papa was shocking. He walked into the drawing room before turning and leaving again without a word to anyone. It was as if he were in a stupor; his face was drawn and not the normal colour as he made for his study.

"Mamma, what happened?" Jane enquired.

"Everything I taught Lydia about catching a man was wrong," Fanny cried. "She took my advice too far, but it was me who set her on the path to ruin."

"Cousin Fanny, Lydia is not ruined," William Collins insisted. "Did she allow the man far more liberties than any gently born lady should have? Yes, she did. However, we have it from the seducer's lips that he planned to complete his seduction today, and he has been in the militia's brig since before the ball."

"What did that terrible man say to overset Papa, Mamma, and our sisters so completely?" Elizabeth enquired.

"As you know, Cousin Elizabeth, you are not the only stubborn Bennet. I contacted…" William told of his request to his friend and the choice given to Mr Wickham. He told of how their parents and the two youngest had heard what had been said candidly. He was careful to point out that Kitty had refused to allow the libertine anything, not even a kiss. "Wicky, as he is called, will never repeat a word about your sister because he knows it will buy him a transfer from Marshalsea to King's Bench Debtors' Prison. As Hamlet said to his mother, Queen Gertrude in the Bard's play, '*I must be*

cruel, only to be kind.' I felt I had to follow that maxim, as it was the only way to open the eyes of those who refused to see."

Jane walked to her mother who was sitting in her favourite chair staring straight ahead but not seeing. She took her mother's hand closest to her. "Mamma, do you understand why we, well mainly Lizzy, have begged you to rein in our youngest sisters?" Jane asked. "Mamma, I beg you see this as the chance it is."

"How can I see this as anything but a disaster? I did not know any better," Fanny lamented.

Elizabeth came to her mother's other side and took her other hand in her own. "As Cousin Collins said, there has been no ruin. The only way there will be any ruin is if you, Kitty, or Lydia repeat anything of Lydia's actions to *anyone*. As much as I love Aunt Hattie, surely you see that you can never tell her what you have learnt today?" Elizabeth looked at her second youngest sister. "All is not lost. Kitty did not allow that libertine any liberties, and as much as you and Lydia have been shocked today, is it not time for us all to learn how to behave as gently born ladies?"

"Cousin Fanny, if nothing else, surely you can see that Cousin Lydia does not have the knowledge or maturity to be out in society?" William prompted. "Even though Cousin Kitty did not allow Mr Wickham to do anything to her, her behaviour would lead men to think that she would. I think that she too should be back in."

Not trusting herself to speak yet, all Fanny could do was nod. She would do anything she had to in order to make sure that nothing that had almost occurred to her two youngest daughters had a chance of ever happening again.

William knew that there was no better time for him to confront Cousin Bennet. Confident that the three eldest sisters would guide their mother and youngest sisters towards amending their ways, he made his way to the study. This time when he knocked, he did not wait for his cousin's invitation to enter the room.

Before him sat his cousin, elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. William understood that everything had been fun and games for Cousin

Bennet until the reality of what almost occurred intruded upon his world in a way that was impossible to ignore.

“I thought myself so superior, but I did not see what was happening under my nose,” Bennet said when he saw who had entered the study. “I mocked where I should have educated, and I laughed when I needed to check behaviour. I have made a complete mull[6] of it.”

“Yes, Cousin, you have. It is not only your family you have neglected but your estate as well,” William stated firmly. “Are you aware that under the terms of the entail that if the current master allows the income to fall to, or below, half of what is expected, his heir, or in this case, heir presumptive, is permitted to become the new master? Do you know that you are *obligated* to make sure that the dower house is in good repair so that your wife will always have a home?”

All Bennet could do was shake his head. He had never read the document that governed the entail. It was sitting gathering dust in the safe. Given how he had failed his family, it was only right that a Collins could evict him from Longbourn. He admitted that rather than play on his wife’s fears of the future, had he repaired the dower house, he would have been able to assure her she would never be in the hedgerows. He had rather made fun of her.

“You have lost eight of your eighteen tenants; among them, the three largest farms are not being worked. More are ready to leave. Longbourn should bring in more than six thousand pounds per annum, and thanks to your mismanagement, it is what, only about two thousand five hundred pounds a year now?”

Again, Bennet nodded. He had allowed his cousin to peruse the ledgers, but he had convinced himself a Collins would not understand them, all evidence to the contrary. That ridiculous prejudice against the Collinses could cost him his estate.

“It is not my intention to kick you when you are down after the great perturbation you experienced today with regard to your daughters. However, in my mind the two go hand in glove. The same indolence which keeps you in your study and not running your estate as it should be is what makes you ignore your duty to your wife and children. Let me ask you

something, Cousin. When you married your wife, were you aware that she was not gently raised?”

“Yes, but what has that to do with anything?”

William ignored the petulant whine. “You knew that, but you never took the time to educate her. Instead, you mocked and laughed at her, and you did the same with most of your daughters. How can you act surprised when your wife did not teach your youngest daughters how to behave? I know from the three eldest sisters that you were aware of the advice that Cousin Fanny gave to them, but you said not a word. As badly as Cousin Lydia behaved, she did not know better. I am afraid that is a direct result of the abrogation of your duties as head of this family.”

Bennet wanted to refute his cousin’s words, but he could not and still remain honest.

“Do you know that it was men I employed who spoke to Colonel Forster and the officers before the ball to make sure that none of them would approach your two youngest daughters? It was my men who followed your youngest to the overrun hunting lodge where she expected to meet Mr Wickham. Even if you cared not for your family, I would not allow the family of the lady I intend to marry to be ruined.”

“You take too much on yourself,” Bennet said weakly.

“Someone has to, and you were not doing your duty. Would it have been better to allow your daughters to partake in Cousin Lydia’s ruin?” William shot back.

Needing some time to consider what his cousin was saying, Bennet decided to change the subject. “Do you know where the animosity between our two sides of the family originated?”

“I do. My great-great-grandfather was William Clem Bennet…” William filled in the family history. “Even though each man in the Collins line honoured the Bennet name by taking it as their second name, Henry Bennet, your and my father’s great-great-grandfather, would not move past his pride. I have mentioned my father’s estate, Collins Hollow, have I not?”

Bennet nodded it was so.

“The entail stating that the family name must be Collins ends when my father is called home. The first thing my brother will do as master is to reclaim his Bennet name. If you read the entail, you will see that as the master after you, I must take the Bennet name, something I have no objection to doing. In fact, if Mary accepts my hand in marriage, I will make the change to my name before we marry.

“That you and Bennets before you blindly carried the prejudice against the Collinses forward without knowing the truth makes me question the intelligence of all the Bennets along the way.” William looked at his cousin to tell him he was included in that statement.

“I have faults aplenty; I own that,” Bennet stated honestly. “The truth is that I am not one who is a good estate manager. Hence, if you want to use the clause in the entail to become the master now, I will not oppose you.”

“You will not be able to avoid your responsibilities so easily. I have a proposal; will you hear it?”

Knowing it would not be as easy as he had envisaged, Bennet nodded.

“First thing, you and I will ride out to each tenant and assure them that things are going to change, and we will proceed to make changes. You will employ a steward; I will assist you to find a good man. When your tenants see that you are taking concrete actions and not just saying what they want to hear, they will become content to remain here. Word will spread, allowing you to fill the other tenant farms.

“You will employ the six men who assisted to keep your youngest daughters safe as footmen-guards. And lastly, you will employ a governess and companion, or both in one person, who will be able to teach your youngest two as well as gently educate your wife in the ways of the gentry.”

“As you pointed out, my income has fallen below three thousand pounds per annum,” Bennet reminded his cousin.

“Initially, it will take both you and Cousin Fanny being far more prudent with money. On your side, book and port purchases will need to be deferred. Your wife will have to learn to live within a budget. The clothing, fripperies, and food budget will be reasonable and not excessive like they are now.”

Even had he wanted to, Bennet could not refute his cousin's words.

"I suggested this to your wife, but I think that your first act in taking an interest in the lives of your daughters should be to put Kitty and Lydia back in. Although I suggested the lady you employ, if you employ only one, could educate your wife, her primary concern will be Cousins Kitty and Lydia. All I can say is thanks to on High that Cousins Jane and Elizabeth were educated and influenced by Mrs Gardiner and that Mary was willing to have them teach her what they learnt. Before I forget; Mary needs a music master. She has done very well on her own, but she, and for that matter, her two older sisters, need some instruction from an expert."

"And what of you becoming the master here?" Bennet enquired.

"Let us see how things proceed. We need to look forward and not back." William paused to cogitate. "Cousin Bennet, I suggest you read the entail document so you will know there was nothing I said which was not based in truth."

Bennet stood and retrieved the document from his safe.

"We will speak more once you have read it," William said as he stood. "After you get past the reverberations of today, you will see it will be a very good thing for both you and your family."

"I pray God hears you and makes it so." Bennet began to read as his cousin exited the study.

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Not long after they returned to Netherfield Park from the distasteful duty of being in Wickham's company, the three cousins almost felt like they needed to take a bath to wash off the stench of their former friend. It was not just the physical smell emanating from the miscreant but also, how dirty they felt hearing him speak of a planned seduction of a fifteen-year-old girl as if it were nothing.

"Richard, do you believe that it is best to tell Anna that the bastard is in the area, even if only for one more day, and that he will never bedevil her, or any other, again?" Darcy verified.
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“I absolutely do,” Fitzwilliam confirmed. “You know my opinion that knowledge is strength. How can we expect her to make good decisions without information?”

“For what it is worth, I agree with my *little* brother,” Hilldale added.

Based on the sweet music coming from the music room, the cousins deduced that Anna was practising at the pianoforte. She was. Mrs Annesley was sitting and working on some darning as she watched over her charge.

“Anna, sweetling, will you join Andrew, Richard, and me in the library? There is something we need to share with you, and it would not do to speak in a public room,” Darcy requested. He did not miss the trepidation in his sister’s countenance no matter how gently he had spoken. “It is nothing you have done. No one will be censuring you. In fact, Mrs Annesley, will you join us as well?” Darcy was pleased to see his sister relax.

“Of course, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Annesley replied as she stood.

Even though Miss Bingley was locked in her suite, Darcy had Thompson posted in the hallway outside of the library door. He would not take any risks while discussing this subject.

“What we have to tell you relates to the reprobate who attempted to take advantage of your soft heart in the summer,” Darcy began.

Georgiana Darcy gasped and covered her mouth as tears rolled down her cheeks. George Wickham was the last person she wanted to hear about. Had he begun to spread her name about to ruin her?

“Remember, Anna, I told you it is nothing bad for you,” Darcy assured her as he pulled her into a hug. “I did not want to repeat an error of the past and leave you uninformed. To that end, I must tell you the truth of what has been going on since I arrived in Hertfordshire. Anna, I know you think me without faults, but I am as frail a human as any of God’s children. On my first night here…” Darcy revealed all from the assembly until the Bennet sisters left Netherfield Park. He did not miss how Anna’s eyes grew larger the more he spoke. Then, he spoke of seeing the miscreant and how, rather than expose him, he rode away. When he related what Mr Collins did to hobble Wickham, his sister looked pleased. Darcy next explained that he, at

Richard's urging, had taken steps to permanently remove the seducer from society. At this Anna smiled widely.

Then he told her what occurred during the meeting at Longbourn and that he and Richard had told the three eldest Bennet sisters about Ramsgate. Anna lost all her colour.

"Sprite, you remember meeting the Bennet sisters before the ball, do you not?" Fitzwilliam asked. He saw Anna give a nod. "At the ball, before and during supper, were not those same sisters very welcoming of you?" Another nod. "They already knew what that bas…blackhearted libertine had attempted with you. Did they treat you with scorn or disdain for even the smallest measure of time?"

She shook her head. "They must think me very silly," Georgiana said softly.

"Did I not tell you that Miss Elizabeth, who is anything but silly, was taken in by the wastrel's tale of woe?" Darcy queried.

After thinking for some moments, Anna dried her eyes and sat up straight. "They treated me like someone they wanted to know," she said. "Had you not told me they knew I would not have known they did. William, thank you for telling me that Miss Elizabeth also was taken in by him. She is such a strong and intelligent lady. I was hoping I would meet her when I came to Hertfordshire."

Georgiana felt far more relaxed now that her brother and Richard had spoken to her. Now she hoped to further her friendship with the Bennet sisters. She wondered if she would spend time with the youngest two sisters, who, other than a greeting when she met them, Georgiana had not conversed with.

"You must know that had that man been free in the area, Andy would have never brought you here," Darcy told his sister. "As we speak, our late father's former godson is on his way to Marshalsea. If he ever leaves that place alive, he will be an old man."

"Mrs Younge would never say anything about Ramsgate, would she?" Georgiana worried.

“She will not, because she knows that if we even suspect that your name has crossed her lips, she will end up being arrested and tried for fraud,” Fitzwilliam assured his ward.

“If she did, I would make sure she is transported in the most squalid conditions possible,” Hilldale promised.

Now that Georgiana was aware that not only could that man neither hurt her nor anyone else ever again, she knew that she was finally ready to move past what had occurred at Ramsgate.

The three cousins and Mrs Annesley all saw the moment that a veil of peace settled over Anna. She would be well.

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“Was my reading of the entail correct?” William Collins asked his cousin.

He had been sitting with Mary and the other ladies in the drawing room. Not only was Cousin Fanny subdued, but so were her two youngest daughters. It was the calmest that room had ever felt when the three had been present. William was brought back to the present when his cousin spoke.

“I have, and your interpretation of the entail is sound. Would you object if we take the night, sleep, and then meet here in the morning?” Bennet requested.

“I have no objections to that.” William made his way back to Mary’s side.

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Chapter 28

The next morning Bennet was prepared to talk to his cousin when said cousin knocked on his study door and entered when bade to do so.

Bennet, who was seated behind his wide oak desk, began to speak as soon as his cousin had taken a seat opposite. He eschewed the normal morning greeting. “As I said, there is no question regarding what the entail documents allow you to do, if you so chuse to do so. Most men in your position would have evicted us without a thought. You are giving me a chance to correct my wrongs of the past. Why?”

“We are family, and when I marry Mary, we will be even more closely aligned. The only way I will enforce that clause of the entail, is if you do not live up to what you commit to do in our agreement,” William responded. “Do you agree to all the terms I laid out when we met the previous time?”

“I do. I will not prevaricate. At my age, change will not be easy, but I will do everything in my power to make the adjustments needed,” Bennet promised.

“No more making sport of your family rather than checking and correcting them?” William asked pointedly. “If I am candid with you, there have been some instances where you have teased Cousin Fanny and preyed on her fears which seemed to me more cruel than amusing.”

“I am aware of the way I have treated my wife and daughters, and I shall endeavour to change how I act towards them,” Bennet vowed. “When I think of my inaction and indolence it makes me sick to my stomach. Had it not been for your taking charge of the situation, my family would have been ruined. On the one hand, I am eternally grateful that you averted that disaster. On the other hand, I burn with shame that it was you and not me who saved my family. However, thankfulness outweighs my bruised pride that I was not the one who acted.”

“In that case, I will write to my father and brother to see if they know of a good man to be Longbourn’s steward. I will also ask Darcy,” William

related. “What about a governess and companion, either in one lady or two?”

“For that, I will write to the Gardiners.” Bennet paused. “Am I correct that Miss Darcy has a companion with her?”

“Indeed, Mrs Annesley? Why do you ask? If your plan is to employ her, do not attempt it. Darcy will not allow you to steal her away,” William jested.

“I would not dare do that to one of Mr Darcy’s employees. I only meant to ask her if she knows anyone she would recommend for the roles of governess and companion? I have decided to employ both.”

“Aside from Mrs Annesley, you may want to ask Fitzwilliam and Darcy if there are any names they have of candidates they looked at before Mrs Annesley.”

“That is a good suggestion.” Bennet cogitated for some moments. “I am sorry that you felt like you had to portray yourself as a buffoon in your letter to me. I now realise that you could have arrived and demanded I vacate this estate based on the terms of the entail, but you did not. By the by, I have considered why my father never mentioned the terms of the entail as they relate to the income of the estate. He never considered that I would allow things to decline as they have. Hence, there was no reason to speak of it, and of course, I never took the time to read the document.”

“That Cousin…”

“Will you not call me Bennet without cousin before my name?”

“I will. You may call me William or Collins. The latter as long as my brother or father are not present,” William responded. “As I was about to say, *Bennet*, that is in the past, and there is nought you can do to change it. All you can do is make sure that today and the future are better.”

“It is good to know the Bennet name will live on here after me,” Bennet mused. “When you write to your family, will you let them know I know the truth now, and no unread letter from a Collins will ever be consigned to the fire again? Also, please pass on my contrition for how I, and Bennets before me, acted towards them. In fact, please inform them that it would be my pleasure to welcome them to their ancestral home if they chuse to come.”

William was impressed that Bennet was willing to attempt to change and honest enough to own that he may err along the way. He would definitely have a newsy letter to post to Collins Hollow. It was good to know that after so many years the discord between the two branches of the family was at and end and the breach would finally be healed.

“Collins, unless you are otherwise engaged, would you ride out with me to begin speaking to the remaining tenants and note all their needs?” Bennet requested.

“I would like that,” William responded.

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The carriage bearing Bingley and his sedated sister left Netherfield Park just ahead of the coach with Miss de Bourgh, her maid, Fitzwilliam, and his batman, Barker.

The Hursts were on hand to farewell Bingley and wish him well on his mission to settle Caroline.

Hilldale, Darcy, and Georgiana stood and waved to those in the de Bourgh conveyance until it was no longer visible. It was a cold day, thankfully without precipitation, so both groups made their way back into the house with speed.

Once they had been relieved of their outerwear, Mrs Hurst went to meet with Mrs Nichols. Anna and Mrs Annesley—the latter had waited for her charge just inside the front doors—made their way to the music room. The three men headed towards the billiards room.

Hilldale walked a little slower, causing his cousin to match his pace. “William, do you think that Rich will keep his word and not mention to Mother that I am interested in a woman?” Hilldale worried.

“Come now, Andy, would it be so bad if Aunt Elaine were aware a lady has caught your eye?” Darcy ribbed.

“You know very well that Mother would insist Father convey her here as soon as she heard that. Not even Anne and Richard getting engaged will distract her. She has lamented my disinterest in any woman, and since I turned thirty in June, it has only become worse. At least, they would not
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care what level of society she is from, as long as she is a gentlewoman," Hilldale related. "I would like to come to know Miss Bennet without Mother trying to hurry me along."

"Richard gave his word. His word is his bond, and besides, if he dares to break his promise, Anne would be very unhappy. The last thing your brother wants is to upset his lady love," Darcy opined.

A similar conversation was happening in the de Bourgh barouche at that very moment.

"No, Richard Hampton Fitzwilliam, you will not even hint that Andy is interested in a lady. You vowed you would not, and I expect you to keep to your word," Anne scolded.

"I promised I would not tell, but I said nothing about hinting…Ow, what was that for?" Fitzwilliam complained when the toe of a travelling boot connected with his shin. He was sitting opposite his Anne, and he could feel her kick through his boot. Her maid was next to her on the forward-facing bench, and his batman was alongside him.

"Just to let you know what you will suffer, and more, if you say anything that sends Aunt Elaine running to Hertfordshire," Anne said firmly. "We will keep her attention on us, and the fact that one of her bachelor sons is to marry."

"I will obey you, Annie," Fitzwilliam agreed as he gave a half bow from the seated position.

"As soon as you tell your parents you have already written to General Atherton, announcing your intention to resign from the army and sell your commission, your mother will not even think of Andrew," Anne predicted.

"You win, Annie. I will not even hint that Andy is seeking to know a woman better. I will simply say that he decided to remain at Bingley's estate with William and Anna. Speaking of Bingley, I hope for him that his sister's sedation does not wear off before he reaches London." Fitzwilliam suspected he would discover the answer to that question sooner rather than later, as it was likely that both carriages would stop at the same rest stop on their way to London.

Fitzwilliam knew that Anne was absolutely correct. Even though other than expressing their opposition when he first announced his intention to make the regulars his profession, his parents had done nothing to dissuade him or influence anyone in the army to keep him safe in England. He was aware that they disliked his choice, and when they discovered he would never be sent to another battlefield, there would be paroxysms of happiness. At least, he would not lose Barker when he resigned. His batman would leave the army as well. He had no interest in remaining without his colonel. Barker would become his valet, and Carstens, William's man, would teach Barker everything he needed to know.

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Even though he knew what he was doing was necessary, it saddened Bingley that all his younger sister's delusions and pretentions had led her to slip the bounds of reason. Caroline was leaning against the side of the coach, slumbering; her maid was next to her. The girl was more nurse than maid since Caroline had been consigned to her suite. Next to Bingley sat a footman. There were two more on the bench and a fourth one seated on the box next to the coachman.

If his sister woke from her drug-induced sleep before they reached London, and the doctors waiting there to evaluate her, Bingley wanted to be sure he had more than enough men to restrain her.

Thankfully, Caroline Bingley did not awaken before Bingley reached the offices of The Quiet Place in Town.

The Bingley footmen carried the unconscious woman into the offices and placed her on a bed where one of the physicians had instructed. Bingley signed some documents and was then released and told to return on the morrow in the morning.

From there, Bingley made for Hurst House in Curzon Street. As his older sister had written to inform her housekeeper that her brother would be residing at the house for a few days, Bingley was expected. He did not miss the relief displayed on the faces of the senior staff and servants that it was only him and Caroline was not with him.
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He was able to own that for far too long he had given in to Caroline in all things. As such, he bore a large part of the responsibility for the way she behaved.

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The other coach took the passengers directly to Matlock House. The four who had been in the cabin alighted, with Fitzwilliam handing Anne out and allowing his hand to linger holding hers for far longer than needed. The footmen unlashed and removed Miss de Bourgh's trunks. Barker re-entered the cabin, and the carriage went around the green and stopped in front of Darcy House, where Fitzwilliam's trunk would be offloaded.

While Anne's maid followed her mistress's trunks to the suite she always used at Matlock House, Anne and Fitzwilliam made for the parlour, where the butler informed them the master and mistress of the house could be found.

"Anne, Richard! It is very good to see you." Lady Elaine was expecting to see her eldest as well. "Where is Andrew?"

"After we dealt with that wastrel, he decided to remain with William and Anna a little longer," Fitzwilliam stated. "It was a great pleasure to remove that blight from the body of society. All thanks to Mr Collins who did not trust Wicky."

"Anna is well?" Lady Elaine worried. Her niece was the closest thing she had to having a daughter. Ever since Anne Darcy passed away, Lady Elaine acted as a surrogate mother to her niece. William was almost like a third son, but it was not the same as Anna. She had always dreamed of having a daughter, but in His wisdom, He had not granted her desire.

"Yes, she is," Fitzwilliam assured his parents. "We shared what was being done so she is aware that he would never bother her or any other again. Knowing that he could never harm anyone again helped with Anna's recovery."

"How long will you be home, Richard?" Matlock enquired.

"To that. I have initiated the process of resigning from…" Fitzwilliam got no further before his father pulled him into a bear hug. His mother
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joined in, tears of joy flowing freely down her cheeks.

“Why now?” Lady Elaine enquired after she dried her eyes. “Not that I am complaining, mind you.”

“I am about to propose to a lady who insisted she would not marry a man who was still in the army,” Fitzwilliam jested. He took Anne’s hand. “There is a reason that I am residing at William’s house and not here.”

“You and Anne are to be married!” Lady Elaine exclaimed.

“I need to propose first, but it is my fervent hope that Anne will want to join her life with mine. I love her, and not as a cousin,” Fitzwilliam stated emphatically.

“Yes, Richard, I will marry you,” Anne stated.

“But, I have yet to propose,” Fitzwilliam said confusedly.

“I do not need more flowery words than the ones you just shared about me with your parents. Hence, I accept. Unless, of course, you want to recant?” Anne looked at her betrothed challengingly.

“Anne, you have made me the happiest of men.” Fitzwilliam kissed his affianced, and he would have repeated the action many times had his father not cleared his throat. In his euphoric joy, Fitzwilliam had quickly and completely forgotten his parents were in the parlour with him and Anne. The tips of his ears burnt dark red.

“I need to speak to Cook; there will be a celebratory meal for dinner.” Before Lady Elaine left the room, she pulled her niece, now daughter-in-law-to-be, into a tight, but warm, hug. “I am forever in your debt, Annie. Now I can leave the nightmares that my son would die in battle behind me,” she continued in *sotto voce* right next to Anne’s ear. “Aside from gaining you as a daughter, my boy is leaving the army.” She turned to her beaming son. “Go to Darcy house, wash off the road dust, and change clothes. As soon as you are presentable, return.” With that, Lady Elaine bustled off to see about dinner.

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The next morning Bingley arrived at the London offices of the asylum at the time he had been instructed to do the previous day. He was shown into the senior physician's office. The Good Place itself was located on the Isle of Wight.

Mr Halverson asked Mr Bingley to take a seat. "Your sister is on her way to her new home," Halverson revealed. "When she woke and was no longer under the influence of the laudanum, she insisted she was Mrs Darcy and her husband would be very angry if she was not allowed to leave. Then, she began to rant about an Eliza and her *fine eyes*. Finally, she became violent, and some of the men we employ had to subdue her. She has no grip on reality and is a danger to herself and others. That is why we acted with speed. One of the documents you signed when you delivered her here allowed us to act and not wait to see you."

"I did authorise you to do this if you felt it was needed, and obviously it is." Bingley sighed. "Before she became obsessed with rising in society, she was a good and pleasant girl. I wonder if my late mother's pressuring her contributed to her ultimate slide into insanity."

"As things are today, we do not know enough about the kind of illness of the mind your sister has. Perhaps in the future doctors will know much more about the mind and its workings. Hence, it is only speculation, and as you surmised, the items you mentioned may have contributed to your sister's state," Halverson opined. "In rare cases, a patient has recuperated to the extent they were able to return to the life they had before coming to The Quiet Place. However, I do not want to raise your expectations. Remember that most will not make such an improvement. You will be sent monthly reports about your sister and her care. If there is a reason for something to be sent to you outside of the monthly communications, we will do so." Halverson paused. "Do you have any questions, Mr Bingley?"

"Only one; is there any reason you require me to remain in London any longer?" Bingley queried.

"There is not. Do you have the draft for the first year's payment?" Halverson enquired.

"I do," Bingley replied as he reached his hand into his inside jacket pocket, extracted the draft, and handed it to the doctor. "That is the amount

I was told would pay for a year; is that correct?”

“Yes, this is perfect.” Halverson stood and extended his hand. The two men shook hands.

With that, Bingley left the offices and told his coachman to make for Hurst House. There he informed the senior staff he was departing for Netherfield Park. There was more than enough time to reach his estate, and he had nothing else he needed to do in London.

As he had not slept well the previous night, Bingley slept most of the way back to his leased estate.

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Bennet felt not a little shame at the surprise he saw on the faces of his ten remaining tenant farmers when they saw him at their farms. There was ill disguised scepticism when he apologised and promised he would do better.

With his cousin’s help, Bennet noted anything that required attention at each farm.

When Mr Collins confirmed that Mr Bennet was to employ a steward, some of the tenants began to be a little hopeful that things were changing at Longbourn. After so many years of the master doing as little as he was able, they would judge by actions and not pretty words.

By the time the two men returned to Longbourn’s stables—many hours later—Bennet, who had not spent so much time in the saddle for many years, felt the pain in his posterior.

That notwithstanding, he was determined to become a good master.

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Chapter 29

“Mother and Father, Bethany and I have some news to share,” Clem Collins told his parents. “However, before we share the news, there is a question I need to ask.”

On Friday, the younger Collins couple, who resided in Collins Hollow’s dower house, had arrived to visit as they did some days except Sunday. On the Sabbath, they were either at Collins Hollow or Bethany’s parents’ estate, Willow Ridge. They usually stayed from after services until after dinner. Weekdays, they alternated between the Collins and Osborne estate. They dined with either Bethany’s or Clem’s parents for at least one meal a day, usually the midday meal. Some days they also remained for dinner. The only break in the routine was when the younger Clem’s assistance was needed on the estate. The Collinses were often hosted for meals at Willow Ridge, and the Osbornes were invited to the Collins’ estate just as often.

“What is it you want us to know, Son,” Collins enquired.

“Father, the entail on Collins Hollow ends with you, is that correct?” Clem verified. “Are William and I not the first generation to be born beyond the entail?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Collins confirmed. “To what does this tend?”

“Just this. You need to remain a Collins for your lifetime; however, were we wrong when we thought that meant I could not reclaim the Bennet name before God calls you home?” Clem asked.

“That is what I thought. However, if you truly want to know, I suggest you go into Faversham and speak to Hampton. He is well versed in the stipulations of the entail. Before he was our solicitor, his father served the family faithfully, as did his father before him. If we were wrong, Hampton will be able to tell you definitively,” Collins stated. “May I ask why now?”

“We would like to have this question settled now for a good reason. Bethany and I are to be blessed with a child. She felt the quickening one day ago,” Clem revealed.

“I knew it!” Ophelia enthused. “Did I not say so, Clem?”

“You did, my love,” Collins agreed. “Before you ask, we did not mention your mother’s suspicion to you, but we were sure that you would tell us when you were ready. Your mother predicted you would share your news after the quickening. As in most things, she was quite right.”

“You are not sad that I told my mamma yester-afternoon, are you, Mother?” Bethany worried.

“Not at all, Beth dear. Of course, you wanted to speak to Emily first. She and Paul must be overjoyed to be grandparents next year. Emily and I will have to begin making garments for a babe,” Ophelia responded.

“Clem, after the meal, if you like and you have no other plans, you and I can take the curricle and drive into Faversham to visit Hampton,” Collins suggested.

“We have no previous engagements, so yes, Father, I will join you. The sooner we have clarity the better. I would prefer not to have any possible confusion of a child being born with one family name only to have to change it later. I pray that would be much later if it is tied to you going to your final reward,” Clem replied.

So it was that father and son rode into Faversham that afternoon. Thankfully, Guy Hampton had no other client meetings when they arrived. Hence, they were immediately shown into his office by his clerk.

“Hampton, we appreciate you seeing us without an appointment,” Collins said gratefully as he and his son sat.

“Mr Collins, you know if I am able and free, I will see you,” Hampton returned.

“Due to upcoming changes in his family, my eldest son has a question for you concerning the entail,” Collins revealed.

“In that case before Mr Clem asks, allow me to have my clerk bring the entail documents to me.” Hampton called for his clerk and told him what he required. It was not very long before the young man returned with the papers. The clerk left the office, pulling the door closed behind him.

“What is it you need to know?” Hampton enquired.

“My question is…” Clem made the enquiry about when he was allowed to reclaim the Bennet name.

Hampton read through all the relevant clauses. A half hour later, he looked up. “As you know, Mr Collins, you must remain a Collins for the remainder of your time in the mortal world. However, Mr Clem, you are free to change your name to Bennet, or anything else whenever you chuse. You are past your majority, and the documents stipulate that as the first generation after the end of the original entail, you only had to keep the Collins name until you turned one and twenty.”

“Are there any legal steps to my changing my name?” Clem questioned.

“No, Mr Clem, there are not. You would change your name pursuant to informal assumption, or as it is more commonly known, common law. Hence, if you decide to change your name, all you need do is begin to use your new name. You are free to publish the fact in the newspapers, but it is not required that you do so. If that is indeed your choice, I will have my clerk change your name on any legal documents, like Last Will and Testaments and the like. I assume you want to be known as Bennet?” Hampton verified.

“Yes, from today on my name is Clem Collins Bennet. I am switching my second and last names,” Clem Bennet stated happily.

“Is it as simple as this for William who does not have a choice because the entail on Longbourn requires him to have the Bennet name?” Collins queried.

“It depends when he makes the change. Because his taking the name Bennet is a requirement in an entail or will, if your second son waits until he inherits to change his name it will be under Royal License. At that point, I would submit an application through the College of Arms, also known as the Heralds’ Office, where the request will be drafted in the correct form. From there the petition would go to the Crown which will issue the Royal License. There is a fee. It can be up to fifty pounds, especially if a coat of arms is being changed. It would take a month to six weeks. However, if Mr William changes his name of his own accord before the current master of Longbourn is called home to God, the process is simple, as I just explained

to Mr Bennet, the former Mr Clem Collins the younger," Hampton explained.

"In that case, as Clem is now a Bennet, I will advise William to make the same change now and avoid the process you just enumerated," Collins decided. "Thank you, Hampton. We will take our leave."

Hampton stood. "Please let me know if Mr William also decides to adopt the Bennet name now. That way I will be able to change all relevant documents at once, rather than now and then again when he does so." Hampton paused. "Mr Collins, Mr Bennet, it is always a pleasure to be of assistance." The solicitor bowed to the men as they left his office after Mr Collins promised to notify him as soon as he heard from his younger son regarding his name.

The journey back to Collins Hollow passed quickly. It did not take long for father and son to relate all they had learnt to their wives. The newly named Bennets left shortly thereafter to return to the dower house.

"Clem, I know that you, like several generations of Collins men before you, would have preferred to be the one to reclaim the Bennet name," Ophelia sympathised with her husband. "That being said, I am happy for our sons. Will you write to William and tell him what Mr Hampton said?"

His dearest wife had the right of it; he would have liked to be a Bennet as well. However, he was pleased that from his sons on, all his line would have their original family name once again. Now if only William would be able to make their Cousin Bennet see that no reason existed for the two branches of the family to be at odds.

"We wrote to him a few days ago. Hence, I expect a letter from him soon. Once we receive it, I will reply and advise him to change his name now," Collins responded.

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Just before the Bennets, how well that sounded, arrived from the dower house, the butler handed the master of Collins Hollow an epistle.

"It is from William. Did I not say we would receive one soon?" Collins crowed.
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“You did, my dear. I suggest we wait for Clem and Bethany to arrive, and at that time you can read it to all of us at the same time,” Ophelia proposed. As if speaking of them had summoned them, the aforementioned couple walked into the sitting room seconds after the words had been uttered.

“Welcome, Mr and Mrs *Bennet*,” Collins said warmly. “There is a new letter from William,” he held up the missive. “Unless you object, I will read it to everyone now.”

There were no objections.

29 November 1811

Longbourn

Mother, Father, Bethany, and Clem,

There is so much to tell since my previous letter. I will begin with news I am very happy to share.

In my last epistle, I mentioned that I was close to asking Mary for a courtship. Well, I did, she granted it, and Bennet gave his permission and blessing.

Only one complained, Cousin Fanny. She wanted me to offer for Cousin Elizabeth. Thankfully neither of us agree with her. It took her some time, but she has come to accept that she has no say in who I do, or do not, connect myself with.

To that end, I will not wait until I inherit to reclaim the Bennet name. Unless any of you object, I would like to change my family name as soon as I receive word that you are all sanguine with my doing so. No one has asked or pressured me to do this; it is my choice.

Now to the changes. There are many, and the reasons for some I will not write about. When we are in company again, I will share what I am able.

Allow me to begin to say that the rift between our families is no more. Bennet asked me why there had been one, and I explained the history from when Father’s

great-grandfather took the Collins name. Not only did he repent for the way the Bennets have treated the Collinses, but he has also issued an invitation to Longbourn if, or when, you desire to visit.

"Any further missives will be read and not ignored as they have been in the past!

"I am sorry my father did not live to see this day," Collins lamented, his voice gruff with emotion. "So much lost time as a family because of pride." He shook his head and returned to the words on the paper.

Thanks to a great shock (not anything I will write here) Cousin Fanny has realised that she was not raising her youngest two daughters as gentlewomen. They are back in, and Bennet is seeking a governess and companion to educate them, as well as assist his wife to learn the ways of the gentry. He admits that he should have educated her rather than mock her over the years.

Thanks to my friend, Fitzwilliam, I was able to employ 6 former soldiers to protect my cousin's daughters. They did an estimable job at the ball I mentioned would be held at Netherfield Park. By the by, regarding that estate, Mary tells me it belongs to her uncle, Edward Gardiner. Yes, the same one you invest with.

I did raise the issue of the entail and the clause that would allow me to take Longbourn now. Bennet has pledged to change, which will include employing a steward. To that end, if either Father or Clem have any recommendations for a steward who is able to manage a mid to large-sized estate, please ask if they would work in Hertfordshire. If so, please forward the name(s) to me here. Bennet is also aware that the entail demands he maintain the dower house in good repair. It is not in good condition; however, he has pledged to change that.

The miscreant I spoke of previously has been permanently dealt with. No, he was not killed; he is a guest at Marshalsea thanks to the over £3,000.00 in debt receipts of his that Darcy was holding.

The libertine was not able to work on anyone in the area, which is very pleasing. You will not believe it, but said reprobate, unintentionally mind you, actually assisted with the 'great shock' I referenced above.

Before any of that, Mr Darcy apologised to Cousin Elizabeth, and the two started over without their pride and prejudice as a barrier this time.

Cousin Jane, very politely, told Mr Bingley that she was not interested in a man who needed to mature first.

In my humble opinion, another man's eye has fallen on Cousin Jane, and he is anything but capricious, irresolute, or immature. It is very new; hence, I have nothing more to say about it at this juncture.

Thanks to my curate, George Keating, for agreeing, and my patroness adding her permission, I will be able to remain at Longbourn for another sennight or so. It is both to further my courtship with Mary and to assist Bennet to make the changes he needs to on the estate.

The tenants are sceptical that Bennet is going to be an attentive master. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. I believe that we will be able to attract tenants to fill the vacant farms, and within a year, Longbourn will have an income much closer to what it should be. As you know, with me it is not the money I care about, but the health and welfare of my family and the dependants of the estate. For Longbourn to be able to do so adequately, it must be returned to a sound footing.

Our cousin has committed to begin to save for his daughters' futures, and he will finally (after Gardiner begged him to do so more than 20 years past) send his

wife's dowry and any profits to his brother-in-law to invest for him. I suppose late is better than never.

Other than what I need to relay in person, there is nothing more to report.

Your son and brother,

William

"Well, this is all very welcome, and based on what we knew of Cousin Bennet, wholly unexpected," Collins stated. "When I reply, I will also give him the name of Mr Jennings as a candidate for the post of Longbourn's steward. In the past, he has let it be known he would have no objections to moving to a different county."

"I agree. Jennings is a very good man," Ophelia added. "I knew how it would be! William could not be as good and intelligent a man for no reason. I am very proud of all that our son has accomplished." She looked at her husband. "Will you write and ask if we can at long last spend Christmastide as one family as it always should have been? Do not forget to mention Mr Jennings's name in your letter."

"I think I will. I will write a reply to William and an epistle to our cousin. By his response, if there is one, we will see how genuine this change is," Collins related. In order that the missives could be posted today, he went to write them without delay. "And no, love, I will not forget to mention Jennings."

Ophelia and Clem both wrote notes to be included with the patriarch's to William.

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Word spread in the environs of Meryton that Kitty and Lydia Bennet were back in. Many in the neighbourhood approved while a few were resentful. As Longbourn was the largest estate in the area, there were some who were disappointed that the youngest two had not done anything to, at the very least, embarrass the Bennets, or even ruin themselves.

When the two youngest Bennets had been told that they would no longer be allowed to wear clothing and colours meant for those who were
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out, there had been hardly a peep of opposition. The same was true when they learnt how their hair would be styled until they were allowed out in society again. Their father informed them that he had written to Aunt Gardiner and was to speak to Mrs Annesley. He further related to them that a governess would be employed to teach them which caused a little token grumbling from Lydia, but nothing significant. Almost ruining herself, coupled with learning that the way she had behaved in the past made men believe she was a lightskirt, had transformed the girl into one who was willing to learn how to behave like a young lady of gentle birth was expected to comport herself.

Two days after the ball, Miss Darcy, who the two youngest Bennets had derided because she was not out, had come to call at Longbourn with her brother and cousin, the viscount. It was the first time that Kitty and Lydia had actually spoken to her. When she shared what Mr Wickham had attempted with her, and how he had tricked her into believing herself in love with him, it had outraged the two youngest Bennets. At the same time, Lydia began to feel a kinship to the slightly older girl. They were soon given leave to call her Anna and she was addressing them informally.

Darcy hoped that his sister would lose some of her shyness and learn to be more outgoing, while the three eldest Bennet sisters wanted their two younger sisters to follow Anna’s example of behaviour.

At the same time as there were many changes happening within the family, the tenants who had doubted anything would change were very pleasantly shocked by the master’s continued attention. They were further surprised when men employed by Mr Bennet began arriving to make the needed repairs to their cottages, barns, and fencing. Even more shocking was that Mr Bennet employed men to make sure all fields drained as they should.

As Bennet became used to his new way of managing his time and his estate, each day he also became more used to spending a lot of time seated in the saddle on Artimus’s back.

The tenants’ wives were not shy in sharing the changes happening for them at Longbourn to one and all. When it became known that Mr Bennet was actively involved in addressing his tenants’ needs, there was shock

expressed in the area. That was nothing to the reaction to the news that Mrs Bennet was joining her three eldest daughters in calling on the tenants.

Fanny had always considered calling on the *peasants*, as she used to call them, far below her. Thanks to her husband never bothering to teach her what the true duties of an estate's mistress were, she had thought she was being teased when he had suggested she should call on the tenants.

Although they knew not what had caused the changes, the Bennets' friends in the neighbourhood could see that things were very different. One of the biggest things that Fanny's friends noticed, aside from her calling on tenants, was that she no longer boasted, did not extoll some of her daughters' beauty while denigrating other daughters, theirs and her own, and had ceased gossiping.

When Lady Lucas and Charlotte came to announce that Colonel Forster had offered for the eldest Lucas daughter, as expected the three eldest Bennet sisters had been beyond pleased for their friend. Fanny had added her full throated approbation and wished Charlotte a very felicitous union with a good man. The Lucas ladies enjoyed being in company with this new and pleasant Fanny Bennet. Charlotte could see how much more relaxed Jane, Eliza, and Mary were without all the vulgar effusions which used to flow like a river from Mrs Bennet's mouth.

By the time the Bennets and their cousin attended St Hugh's Church on Sunday, the neighbourhood was beginning to accept that the changes in the family were not transitory.

A few comments were made about the fact that Viscount Hilldale, Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and her companion attended the church in the Longbourn Village and sat with the Bennets rather than attend St Alfred's in Meryton with the rest of the party from Netherfield Park. It was noted that the viscount sat next to Miss Bennet, while Mr Darcy found a seat next to Miss Elizabeth.

It was known that Mr Collins and Miss Mary were courting, so there was no surprise they were seated together.

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Chapter 30

“Jane, are you willing to admit that Viscount Hilldale is interested in you?” Elizabeth asked on Sunday night.

The three eldest Bennet sisters were under the covers of Jane’s bed, with the latter in the centre between her younger sisters. Even with only one candle lit, there was no missing the way Jane blushed.

“I concede that he enjoys speaking to me,” Jane admitted.

“And how do you feel about his attentions?” Mary enquired. “You seem to welcome his company.”

“When I first met Mr Bingley, I thought he was everything that a young man should be. As you know, his inability to speak of anything but my looks, and even though he and Mrs Hurst apologised for it, the fact he would never check Miss Bingley until it was too late, did not speak well of his character,” Jane began. “When I am with Viscount Hilldale, I feel like he sees all of me, not just my outward façade. Unlike Mr Bingley did, he does not just speak of what interests him. He asks me questions to discover my interests, and then, we discuss things that we have in common. He is never afraid to learn about things I enjoy that may not be something he had considered before. In the time I have known him, even before the ball, he has mentioned my beauty twice. And neither time did he go on about my looks as if that is all I am.”

“If I did not know better, I would say that you enjoy your time with Lord Hilldale,” Elizabeth teased.

“And what of you, Miss Lizzy,” Jane jested back. “Mr Darcy speaks to you as much as the viscount does me. Not only did he offer sincere apologies to you, the rest of our family, as well as our friends and neighbours, did he not call someone we know and love the *handsomest woman of his acquaintance*? So I ask you the same question you asked me; do you own that Mr Darcy admires you?”

“If he does not, I will eat any bonnet you choose for me to consume,” Mary added.

“It was so much more fun when I was the only one who used to tease,” Elizabeth huffed. “Do not forget it was not very long ago that I believed that I hated the man.”

“Are love and hate not different sides of the same coin?” Mary suggested.

“Lizzy, could it be that you had such a strong reaction to Mr Darcy’s slight because you felt an instant attraction to him?” Jane surmised. “Others have slighted you before and you laughed at them. You never reacted the way you did to Mr Darcy’s inadvisable, rude, and incorrect words when Mamma spoke of your lack of beauty, even though I have always told her she was wrong. Why do you think it was so different? Do not forget, you painted him as the blackest hearted of men and ignored the things Cousin Collins pointed out that proved Mr Wickham was manipulating you.”

“You may have the right of it, Jane,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “When I first saw him, I thought he looked as well as Adonis, but then his behaviour was as ugly as Thersites.[Z] Perhaps my disappointed hopes drove me to look for anything negative about him.”

“William opined that you suspended your faculty for logic because you so much wanted to believe the worst of Mr Darcy,” Mary reminded her next older sister. “Lizzy, that was then, but you have not said if you enjoy his attentions now.”

“I should have known you would not allow me to obfuscate.” Elizabeth took a moment to order her thoughts. “I suppose I prefer Mr Darcy’s admiration to when I believed he disdained me. Neither of you need to say it, I know he never did, but I believed he scorned me at the time.”

“As yet, not a direct reply,” Jane pointed out.

“Ugh, nothing is succeeding to redirect either of you. You are like dogs with a bone. If you must know, yes, I am pleased that Mr Darcy admires me and is not afraid to let others see that he does. I do not miss the arrogant, taciturn man he was when I first came to know him. Before they departed for London, Anne and the Colonel told me that what we are seeing is the Mr Darcy they know. The one he was before he became inured to all the huntresses pursuing him.”

“Lord Hilldale has also been hunted like a prize stag,” Jane mused. “Add to that, his mother has been pressuring him to find a wife.”

“Is that not the aim of every mother? To see their children well disposed of in marriage?” Mary enquired. “We can hope that the Countess of Matlock is more subtle than Mamma used to be before she calmed and her fears were put to rest.”

Jane remembered something. “Lizzy, did Mr Darcy tell you that Anne and the colonel are engaged?”

“He did mention that,” Elizabeth replied. “He reported that as happy as his aunt and uncle are about that, Colonel Fitzwilliam resigning from the army was the best of news.”

“I cannot imagine their worry every time he went into battle,” Jane sighed.

“Anne must be pleased that she will not have to share Colonel Fitzwilliam with the army,” Mary opined.

“What of you, Mary?” Elizabeth queried. “How goes your courtship?”

“Very well,” Mary responded dreamily. “William is so kind and considerate. He is also a very good person and so well educated. I think I may be falling in love with him. If he were to ask me to marry him, I would accept him.”

Jane and Elizabeth considered the men who were unofficially courting them. They both admitted to themselves, without the other knowing, that they had begun to develop tender feelings for the respective man who was showing interest in them. With these pleasant thoughts, each sister fell asleep in Jane’s bed, neither returning to her own bedchamber.

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On Monday morning when Bingley saw the three cousins and Mrs Annesley preparing to depart for Longbourn, he considered requesting that he accompany them, but he decided against it. It would be too hard to see his former angel being courted by another man, even if it was not official yet.
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As he watched the Darcy travelling coach rumble down the drive, Bingley was fully aware that he had no one but himself to blame for losing Miss Bennet's esteem. If he were completely honest with himself, he was not ready to marry. Miss Bennet's assessment had been accurate. He needed to mature and become his own man before he could consider taking a wife. Also, he needed to stop only looking at women who fit a physical type. As Miss Bennet intimated, being attracted to someone's looks tells one nothing about their character.

Bingley supposed that part of his disappointment was rooted in the fact that Miss Bennet was the first of his angels not to return his feelings. At that moment, Bingley wondered if he ever had anything aside from an infatuation for any of his previous angels.

It was then he had an uncomfortable thought. Did he raise expectations only to disappear without fulfilling them? It was at that moment that he realised that he had much growing to do before thinking of attaching himself to any one woman.

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The cousins and Mrs Annesley arrived at Longbourn just after ten. It was before acceptable calling hours in the country, but they had been invited to arrive at that hour.

After Mr Hill and one of the new footmen took the callers' outerwear, the butler directed them to the drawing room. All seven Bennets were within, along with Mr Collins. The latter was sitting next to Miss Mary. Greetings, bows, and curtsies were exchanged.

Bennet was about to leave to go to a tenant's farm to evaluate how the work to fix all the problems he had neglected for far too long was progressing. Before he could, Mrs Annesley approached him.

"Mr Bennet, if you are still looking for a companion, my younger sister, Mrs Marion Crawford, worked for the Duke and Duchess of Bedford for the last five years. Lady Marie, their daughter, just married a few days past. She would be more than happy to meet you to interview for the role of companion you mentioned," Mrs Annesley related.
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“Thank you for that, Mrs Annesley. Please write to her and tell her that my wife and I would be very pleased to meet with her,” Bennet responded gratefully.

Yes, it was less than a sennight, but William Collins was impressed so far that Bennet was being very diligent in performing his duties as the master of the estate and the head of his family. By Saturday, applications to fill the three largest of the eight available tenant farms had been received. Word had travelled beyond Meryton that things had changed at Longbourn.

As happy as he was that Bennet had made changes, it was nothing to the contentment he felt when he was with Mary. He knew he was falling in love with the wonderful woman sitting next to him. He suspected that her feelings mirrored his own or were close to that point. Yet he was determined not to rush her by making a hasty proposal. William decided that, in the next few days he would try to determine if Mary was ready for that step.

He looked at the settee opposite where he and Mary were. Hilldale sat there, deep in conversation with Cousin Jane. She was giving him all her attention; this was no polite listening to some inane chatter.

Out of the corner of his eye, William saw some movement. Mrs Annesley was escorting Miss Darcy and the two youngest Bennets from the room. He knew not if they were on their way to the music room or to look at something to do with fashion. What impressed him was the way that Cousin Lydia no longer demanded to be the centre of attention. She had much to learn, but the girl he was seeing now bore no resemblance to the one she had been when he first arrived at Longbourn.

His eyes settled on Cousin Elizabeth who was seated next to Darcy. There was no missing that she received his attention with pleasure. She was leaning towards him, not away. William gave thanks to God that all her former prejudices seemed to have been washed away.

As for Darcy, his overweening pride had been brought under good regulation. He was not as affable as either Hilldale or Fitzwilliam, but he was nothing like he used to be when he insulted Cousin Elizabeth. The truth was that now he was a perfectly sociable and pleasant man. Since making his apologies to the neighbourhood, he had attended all events to which he was invited, including a card party at Mrs Phillips’s house. The whole time

William’s future aunt had demanded his attention; Darcy had allowed her to prattle on without trying to withdraw. He was no longer thought of as the rudest and proudest gentleman anyone knew.

Thinking of his friend, William was more than pleased that Fitzwilliam and Miss de Bourgh were engaged. Two such good and honourable people deserved one another. When they married, Fitzwilliam would become his patron for as long as William remained in Hunsford. If William gave up the parish, he was determined that George Keating would be preferred to the living with his hearty recommendation. He was certain that Bishop Lankershim would approve of Keating without delay.

As far as he could see, it was not if, but when, all three eldest Bennet sisters would be married.

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On the first Tuesday of December, letters arrived from Kent. There was a rather thick one addressed to William Collins and an unremarkable one for Bennet. In addition, there was one for the latter from the Gardiners.

Bennet was seated in the study and opened the one from the Gardiners first. The other one was from the Collins patriarch. He would not ignore it.

2 December 1811
23 Gracechurch Street

London

Bennet,

I am writing on behalf of Maddie as well. Let me cover what she asked me to tell you first.

She has three candidates for the post of governess you desire to fill. They are Mmes Swanson, Taylor, and Nedrick. It is up to you if you would like me to bring all three, but Maddie says you only need to interview Mrs Taylor.

Maddie informs me that the lady has worked with older girls, like Kitty and Lydia, very effectively. My wife knows the lady personally as well as at least one of the
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families she worked for. Mrs Taylor is gently born, married an officer, and was left a widow with few resources within 6 months of her wedding. She used her intelligence and education to find work as a governess. She has close to 15 years of experience and will not allow your girls to work on her.

I know Mrs Taylor and second Maddie's recommendation.

Both of us are very pleased that Mary has finally emerged from under the cloud where my sister had driven her. You write of your observations that the couple are very compatible. By the by, I will not speak of my clients to others, but as young Collins told you, I am able to confirm that his family invests with me. We look forward to seeing Mary very happy with her suitor. Our four children are keen to meet their possible cousin-to-be.

Now to what I want to say. I received Fanny's dowry and have invested it. I will happily invest your profits each year as well.

I do not want to sound condescending, but Bennet, the fact that you have been willing to make positive changes makes me very proud to call you Brother. *You said it took a shock.*

Perhaps so, but you still had to make the decision to act. I will be interested to speak to you when we come for Christmastide and discover what the 'great shock' that you cannot put in writing, was.

Write to me if you would like to interview Mrs Taylor, or all three ladies. (We believe you will be wasting your time to see the other two candidates.)

Gardiner

Knowing that his in-laws would not recommend Mrs Taylor without good reason, Bennet would write back to the Gardiners requesting that they

send the lady they both recommended. Next, he picked up the letter from Collins Hollow and broke the seal. After smoothing the paper, Bennet commenced reading.

30 November 1811
Collins Hollow
Near Faversham

Kent

Cousin Bennet,

I cannot tell you the pleasure I feel that the past disagreements between our families are now put to rest.

When my great-grandfather took the Collins name, he tried—many times—to inform his father, Henry Bennet (our common great-great-grandfather) that he made the change to be able to marry the woman he loved. The estate was her legacy and she would not give it up if William Bennet refused to change his name.

No matter how many Collinses reached out to reestablish the family connection over the years, they were rebuffed.

When my William wrote that you would welcome the connection, and further we are welcome at Longbourn, my wife (Ophelia) and I were very excited. It has been a dream since we married to have the <u>whole</u> of the family together to celebrate Christmastide. Would we ask too much to accept your invitation and be with you for the holy season? We are four: my wife and me, and my older son and his wife. If you do not have space for us, we will make alternate plans so we may reside in the area.

William asked me about a candidate for steward. I highly recommend Mr Kenneth Jennings for you to interview for the position. He has been the under-steward of an estate here abouts and is more than ready to be steward at an estate of similar size to Collins

Hollow or Longbourn. He has let it be known he would not object to move for the right position. If I was not so well pleased with my own man, I would employ Jennings myself. Let me know if you want to meet with him.

Please write back and inform me if you and your wife are sanguine with our joining you for Christmastide.

Your cousin,

Clem Bennet Collins

He would write back and ask that this Mr Jennings come as soon as he was able to interview. Darcy had sent for a man by the name of John Kildare, an under-steward at Pemberley, who he had full faith and confidence in. Bennet and Collins would speak to both men before deciding on the one who was most suited.

Bennet pushed his chair back from his desk and walked to the drawing room. He was not surprised to see the two Darcys and Lord Hilldale present. Mrs Annesley approached him.

“Mr Bennet, I wrote to my sister, and I expect to receive a reply telling me she is on her way to Hertfordshire any day now,” Mrs Annesley reported.

“I thank you for your assistance. Please inform me when she arrives.” Bennet turned to his wife. “Fanny, will you join me in the study, please? There are some things I need to discuss with you.”

Fanny stood calmly and joined her husband when he offered her his arm. In the past, had she been summoned to his study, she would have had an attack of her *nerves* and made a great hullabaloo before ever discovering what Thomas wanted to discuss with her.

As soon as the study door was closed, Bennet relayed the Collins’ request to his wife. “My inclination is to invite them, but if you think it will be too much with the Gardiners here, I will respect your judgement.”

“We have enough guest chambers. Thankfully, my younger niece and nephew are still in the nursery, and Eddy will not object to sleeping there. Lilly can share with one of our daughters. That way, no more chambers will

be needed. I assume Cousin William will return from Hunsford before his parents arrive. His presence will use the last chamber for guests." Based on what Cousin William had said about the relationships between his parents, and his brother and sister-in-law, Fanny was certain that the two couples would not object to a single bedchamber for each of them. Thankfully Edward and Maddie never needed more than one chamber for themselves. "I see no reason for us not to meet the rest of our Collins family."

"In that case, I will write the invitation for them to join us for Christmastide," Bennet agreed.

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William Collins read the missive from his mother first. She expressed her great joy that he had found the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. She wrote of her hope that Mr Bennet would extend the invitation to them so she would be able to meet her future daughter-in-law.

Clem's note extended his and Bethany's congratulations on William's courtship. Then, he went on to explain that he had changed his name to Bennet and why he had wanted to do so now. This confirmed William's resolution to change his name and he adopted the same pattern as his elder brother. He decided that he too would swap his middle and family names like his older brother had.

As soon as he decided what he would do about his name, William concentrated on the important news. His brother and sister-in-law were to make him an uncle in March or April of the coming year!

Lastly he read his father's epistle. Like had been expressed in the other two letters, Father wrote of his happiness that William had found the lady he wanted to walk life's paths with. Next, Father complimented William on the changes he had been able to initiate for those who needed it in the Bennet family. He acknowledged what William had written about the impeccable manners of the three eldest sisters.

Father mentioned he had sent a recommendation to Cousin Bennet about a candidate for steward, Kenneth Jennings. William knew the man and agreed he would be a good fit for Longbourn. Like Clem had, Father endorsed his son's decision to change his name now as Clem had done and
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explained why he would have recommended William do so even had he not asked permission. What Mr Hampton had told Father and Clem was laid out in detail.

Had he not already desired to change his name now, what Father passed on from the solicitor would have caused William to do so.

He decided to make for the study to discover what Bennet had decided about the proposed visit and to inform him of his name change. He knocked and when he opened the door, William saw that Cousin Fanny was also present.

“Thomas is writing to your family at Collins Hollow to invite them to join us for Christmastide,” Fanny related.

“I am also requesting that your father send this Jennings to come see me,” Bennet stated as he looked up from the missive he was scribing. “You know the man, do you not?”

That answered the question about his family coming. “Yes, I know Jennings; he has more than ten years of experience. Hence, I heartily endorse my father’s recommendation.” William was about to tell his cousins about his name when Cousin Fanny spoke again.

“Your brother’s wife…” Fanny began.

“Bethany,” William supplied.

“Does she not have family? If so, it will be hard to be away from them at that time of the year,” Fanny pondered.

“Mr and Mrs Osborne own a neighbouring estate. Bethany is their only family.”

“If we had one more guest chamber, then we would be able to invite them as well,” Fanny lamented.

“That is simple to solve,” William stated. “Mrs Pierce told me that their children will not be able to come to the parsonage this year. They offered to host me if Mary and I are engaged by then. If I were there, would you be able to host the Osbornes?”

“Yes, that is perfect.” Fanny turned to her husband. “Include the Osbornes in the invitation.”

“Your wish is my command,” Bennet jested. Now he laughed with her, not at her.

“While you write, there is something I need to relay,” William stated. He explained about the entail on Collins Hollow with regard to the family name. “As my brother and I are of age, we are the first generation not bound to keep the Collins name. Hence, Clem is now Clem Collins Bennet, and as of this moment, I am William Collins Bennet. It has been a dream for many years to reclaim the Bennet name.”

“Even without the stipulation in the entail, a Bennet will be at Longbourn after me,” Bennet mused.

“If there is nothing else, I would like your permission to address Mary privately,” William requested. It was sooner than he had planned, but when one knew, one knew. In addition, Mary had given him hints that she was ready.

“The west parlour is unused and is warm,” Fanny volunteered.

“You may have a private interview with Mary and the door will not be closed all the way. I will have Hill place one, or both, of those *small* footmen-guards at the door. You have no more than ten minutes,” Bennet allowed.

With a bow to his future in-laws, William made his way to the drawing room to ask Mary if he could address her.

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Chapter 31

Mary was keen to hear anything William had to say. Hence, she agreed to his request for a private interview without delay.

William Bennet led Mary to the parlour, where Johns was standing sentinel in the hallway next to the door. He guided Mary to the sofa and returned and pushed the door until it was almost closed, leaving a gap of an inch or two. He returned to stand before the lady with whom he had fallen in love.

“Before we proceed, I must tell you that I am no longer William Bennet Collins.” He saw Mary’s quizzical look. “Just before I came to speak to you I changed my name to William Collins Bennet. I was thinking of doing it for some time, and I had already decided I would before I married. If, hopefully, when, you accept me and we marry, your family name will not change.”

“As this was your choice, I am happy for you, William.”

He took a deep breath and looked into Mary’s beguiling hazel eyes with the flecks of green and gold. “There is a particular question I desire to ask you, Mary. However, if you are not yet in love with me, or are not ready to hear me speak, tell me now, and I will not proceed. As I told you when I requested the courtship, I had intended to give you more time. My heart has led me to this point where I feel I must speak,” William stated. “I must tell you that I very much love you.”

“Ask your question, William. I also love you, and I am more than ready to hear you speak.”

On hearing what Mary said, William took each of her hands into one of his own and dropped down onto one knee before her. “Mary Eloise Bennet, when I requested permission to court you, I thought that it would be far longer before you captured my heart. It was not. A day or two after the ball I suspected I loved you. I did not speak then for fear of overwhelming you.

“You are everything and so much more than I ever imagined finding in the woman who would be my partner in all things while sharing life’s

journey with me. You are intelligent, pious, compassionate, generous, and willing to accept other points of view if you see the merit in the other position. For as long as I serve as a rector, I am positive that you will be the ideal parson's wife. When that day comes, which like you I pray is decades in the future, that your father is called home to God, I have no doubt that you will be an excellent mistress of Longbourn.

"There is so much more I could say about my reasons for marrying and your many attributes, but rather than cheapen this moment with too much speechifying, allow me, Mary to tell you that I love and respect you more than I have words to express. Will you do me the great honour of accepting my hand in marriage?"

"William Collins Bennet, you are the man who saw who I truly was before I was ready and willing to see it myself. As such, how could I not love and respect you? My love for you is most ardent, and it is not that of a cousin. So yes, William, yes, yes, yes! I will absolutely accept your hand in marriage."

Knowing that Johns was just outside of the door and counting the time, William knew he needed to be circumspect. He rose and pulled Mary up to stand opposite him. He looked at her questioningly and received a positive response when she tilted her head up towards him and closed her eyes, her long lashes resting on her cheeks. William lowered his head until their lips brushed. The touch of Mary's lips, even though the kiss was chaste, sent frissons of pleasure shooting throughout his body.

Mary felt bliss as William gave her the first kiss from a man not her father or an uncle. She felt warm all over and felt her heart rate increase. William was about to be honourable and draw away. She was having none of that. Mary threw her arms around William's neck and pulled his head down until their lips met again.

There were a series of kisses, each one deeper than the one before. None were chaste.

It was only when they heard the clearing of a throat from the hallway that the newly engaged couple drew back one from the other. Mary pulled the door all the way open so that Brian would know nothing untoward was occurring.

“I need to go see your father, but before I do, allow me to ask you something,” William stated.

“Ask away,” Mary returned saucily.

“For my part, I do not desire a lengthy betrothal. My parents, brother, and his wife have been invited to pass Christmastide at Longbourn. What do you say to us marrying on the first Friday in January of the coming year? All the family will be together and it will give us about a month between engagement and marriage. As far as I am concerned that is more than enough time so no one can claim we married in a hurry for some nefarious reason.”

“That day would be more than acceptable to me as the day I become your wife,” Mary replied shyly. She was aware of the double meaning and could not be sorry about it.

“In that case, I will go speak to your father,” William stated.

The engaged couple walked arm-in-arm to the drawing room where with a look of longing before he left her, William helped Mary into a chair next to her two older sisters.

“Well?” Elizabeth questioned as soon as Cousin Collins left the room.

“I know patience is not one of your virtues,” Mary teased. “In this case, you will need some for a few minutes.”

Elizabeth huffed and playfully swatted at, and missed, Mary’s shoulder.

Bennet called out for whoever was knocking on his door to enter as soon as he heard it. He had very little doubts about who would be entering the study. He was correct. “I suppose now that your name is Bennet that I will have to address you as William. Please be seated,” Bennet invited.

“I will not beat around the bush. I offered for Mary, and she has accepted me. We seek your permission and blessing,” William stated forthrightly.

“My middle daughter would not have accepted you had she not been so inclined,” Bennet mused. “Are you aware that all she will have for her portion is one thousand pounds when my wife goes to her final reward? Until then, she will receive fifty pounds per annum. As you know, I am

doing now what I should have begun more than twenty years past and working to increase my daughters' dowries, but that will not help Mary."

"I am familiar with all those facts," William acknowledged. "The last thing I considered when offering for Mary, was her fortune or lack thereof. She is worth a thousand times her weight in gold. Hence, I care not if she is impecunious when we marry. In addition to one day being the master of Longbourn, I earn around five hundred pounds each year as a clergyman. Add to that, at the time of my birth, my father gifted me a legacy of fifteen thousand pounds which has been untouched and first in the funds and then growing with your brother-in-law. After five and twenty years of the dividends being reinvested, I have more than one hundred and fifty thousand pounds. I intend to settle thirty thousand pounds on Mary, and that will leave more than enough to dower any daughters He grants us with very respectable dowries."

As his future son-in-law spoke about his fortune that had started far more modestly, Bennet felt shame all over again that he had not invested Fanny's dowry with Gardiner. Had he done so, and added the yearly profits to it instead of wasting the money, Bennet calculated the capital would be close in amount to what William had just mentioned. Dwelling on his past failures would, as the man opposite him had pointed out, not change anything. All he could do was to attempt to do better.

"I see no reason not to give you my consent and blessing to marry Mary. Pierce will begin to call the banns this Sunday. Do you have a date for your marriage in mind?"

William Bennet stood and looked at a calendar on one of the shelves. He sat back down. "We have chosen Friday, the third day of January of 1812. My family will be here as well, so in my mind, it would be the perfect date."

"My wife may assert that she does not have enough time to organise the kind of wedding she would like, but for my part, I have no objection. It is just under a month from today; therefore, propriety will be observed." Bennet stood and extended his hand. "Welcome to becoming a closer part of my family."

The two men shook hands warmly. They both made their way to the drawing room.

“Mary, please join us,” Bennet requested when he and William entered the room. As soon as she joined them, Bennet turned to those in the drawing room. “William proposed to Mary, she accepted him, and I have added my consent and blessings. They will marry on the first Friday in January upcoming. Please join me in wishing them a long and felicitous married life.”

“Only a month…” Fanny began shrilly and then stopped herself. “Congratulations Mary and Cousin Bennet, you will do very well together. I will plan the wedding you desire.”

“Cousin Bennet?” Four Bennet sisters chorused.

“I was just told. William’s name is now William Collins Bennet,” Mary explained.

Mary’s sisters surrounded her and conveyed their sincere congratulations. Even Lydia. Her dream of being the first Bennet sister to marry became dust in the wind, just like many of her other wrongheaded ideas.

In the middle of this celebration Hilldale, the Darcys, Bingley, and the Hursts arrived in the drawing room. Bows and curtsies were given, and greetings were exchanged. As soon as the joyous news was shared with the new arrivals, there was a fresh round of wishes for a felicitous union bestowed.

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Darcy suspected that since they had agreed to begin again, and he had been paying such marked attention to Miss Elizabeth, that she was not indifferent to him. However, he was not sure if she was willing to advance their relationship beyond friendship. That morning before coming to Longbourn, he had looked at himself in the mirror and admonished himself not to be a coward. If he did not offer her a courtship, he would never know one way or the other.
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To that end, once the good wishes for the newly engaged couple had been given, he approached Miss Elizabeth. “Are you willing to allow me to address you where we can speak privately?” Darcy requested.

For a moment, Elizabeth did not move. Her feelings for this man were very different than they had been when she thought him the worst of men. However, she was not ready to accept a proposal of marriage from him. She immediately stopped her thoughts. She was making assumptions again, and those had not boded well for her with regard to this man in the past.

Waiting for her to respond seemed like an eternity to Darcy. Was she thinking of a polite way of refusing to even hear his request?

“If Mrs Annesley is willing to accompany us to the west parlour where I know it is warm, I would be happy to hear what you have to say. There is enough room so that if we and she sit at opposite ends of the room, she will not hear us,” Elizabeth allowed.

Seeing that she would not refuse to speak to him made Darcy smile widely.

Elizabeth had a similar reaction to the previous time she had seen the dimples on Mr Darcy’s extremely handsome face. Her heart sped up, and her breathing became more rapid. She waited while Mr Darcy spoke softly to Mrs Annesley. Elizabeth saw said lady nod and stand. He returned to her, offered her his arm, and then, they, with Mrs Annesley trailing, left the drawing room.

Hilldale watched enviously. That emotion was soon tamped down when he realised there was nothing stopping him from declaring himself to Miss Bennet. He was not in love with her yet, but he was well on his way. He was aware that if she accepted him, he would have to write to Mother and Father.

He leaned over so his mouth was close to Miss Bennet’s ear. “When Darcy and Miss Elizabeth return, would you do me the honour of allowing me to have a private interview with you?” Hilldale requested.

Jane already had very tender feelings for Lord Hilldale. He treated her like an intelligent person and not a possession to be placed on a pedestal, admired, or displayed. She knew he enjoyed her company as evidenced by

his presence at Longbourn every day. He did not ignore everyone else like Mr Bingley used to when he was attempting to pay court to her, but he did spend the majority of his time in company with them being attentive to her. Mr Bingley had paid her more attention, but there was no comparison with the quality of the viscount's time with her. They spoke of their common interests, hopes, and dreams. Other than her family members, Jane could not think of another with whom she was so relaxed and open. As such, there was only one reply she could give. "It would be my pleasure to grant you an interview, Lord Hilldale."

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Darcy led Miss Elizabeth into the parlour she had indicated. Mrs Annesley followed them. She took a seat in the far corner while he led the lady he loved to the opposite corner where there was a sofa against the wall. He helped her to sit and then sat as well, making sure to leave more than enough room between them.

Seeing that Mr Darcy was not down on one knee enabled Elizabeth to visibly relax.

There was no missing her reaction. "You did not think I would be so precipitous as to propose to you so soon after we have managed to get beyond our misunderstandings and my atrocious behaviour, did you?" Darcy asked.

"I jumped to a conclusion before I knew what you were about, so yes, I was concerned that that would be what you wanted to ask me," Elizabeth admitted.

"Before I proposed that we begin again, I was fully aware that we were in very different places, with respect to our feelings. I had already fallen in love with you, and you disliked me intensely." Darcy raised his hand when he saw she was about to speak. "Thanks to my improper pride, I hid my admiration for you, telling myself that your lack of fortune, connections, and consequence would not allow me to offer for you. It was a battle royale between my heart and my head. It is why I was so changeable while you were a guest at Netherfield Park. When my heart governed, I was open, almost affable, with you. When my head was leading, you saw the taciturn,
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sometimes silent man. As I said when I apologised, I thought you were being flirtatious when in fact you were trying to needle me.

“Since the meeting I had with your Cousin Collins…” Darcy continued.

“He is now Cousin Bennet. He, and his brother, have reclaimed the Bennet name,” Elizabeth revealed.

“At that time, he was still Mr Collins,” Darcy clarified. “Since then, when I realised how bad my behaviour had been and how wrong my ideas were, my heart and head have been in accord. It is for the reason that I know that our feelings are unequal that I ask you to grant me a courtship. If you agree, I want you to come to know the true me. My hope is that you will come to love me as I love you and when you are ready to do so, you will accept me as your future husband.”

“If I accept, I want you to promise you will cease berating yourself for your past errors. Lord above knows, I made enough of my own,” Elizabeth said. “You must learn from my philosophy. Learn from the past, but then only remember the past as that remembrance gives you pleasure.”

“I will endeavour to do that, but you have not answered my question.”

“Then, I will now. Since you apologised and we began again, I have seen a man I am able to admire. Hence, my answer is yes, pending you applying to my father, I will enter into a courtship with you.”

As much as Darcy wanted nothing more than to kiss her plump, rosy lips, he restrained himself and took first one, then her other hand. He gently turned each one over and kissed her above the pulse on each wrist. He was happy to see the way her eyes got large, and she made no attempt to withdraw either hand while he held it and kissed each one.

Elizabeth could hear her heart thundering in her ears. If this was how she reacted to a kiss on her wrists, what would it be like if, *when*, he kissed her lips?

“I need to go to your father,” Darcy stated as he stood.

It took Elizabeth a few minutes before she was able to command her legs to move.

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As soon as he saw Miss Elizabeth and Mrs Annesley return to the drawing room, Hilldale requested that the companion accompany him and Miss Bennet to the same parlour.

Walking out of the drawing room, they could hear someone down the hall knocking on the door of Bennet's study.

Bennet was working on his ledgers. He looked up and saw a nervous looking Darcy before him. As much as he knew it was inevitable, he had not thought someone would be asking him for a second daughter on the day Mary became engaged. He pointed to the chairs before his desk, and the tall man ceased his pacing and sat.

"Mr Bennet, I requested that Miss Elizabeth grant me a courtship, and she has done so. I am asking for your permission and hopefully your blessing." Darcy was about to launch into a soliloquy about how changed he was and the improvements he had made when, in his head, Elizabeth's voice told him to concentrate on the future.

"I am aware that you two did not have an auspicious beginning, however, I am also cognisant of the fact that you apologised, Lizzy accepted your apology, and since then you two have enjoyed each other's company. I know my second daughter's character. If she had any serious doubt about your compatibility with her, she would have refused to grant even a courtship. As such, you have my consent and blessing to court Lizzy," Bennet agreed.

"Thank you, Mr Bennet," Darcy offered.

"Bennet. Please call me Bennet. If Lizzy accepts you when you propose, I believe you two will be happy."

"Before I leave, I have written to Kildare and told him that you would like to interview him for the position of steward here. I did not want to tell you before we spoke of my request to Miss Elizabeth as I did not want it to seem like the one was connected to the other," Darcy explained.

"That is good because I have written to my cousin near Faversham to send me a man he put forward," Bennet stated.

Darcy stood, shook Bennet's hand and left the study only to find a grinning Andrew in the hallway outside the door. He stood back and

allowed his older cousin to pass him and walk into the study before he pulled the door closed.

Before Bennet could return to his ledgers, another suitor was before him. Even though Jane was of age, Lord Hilldale was requesting a courtship and for his blessing. “Lord Hilldale, I understand that you are serious in your admiration for my Jane. However, she is the daughter of a minor country squire with connections to trade. Will your noble parents accept your choice and, just as important, how will the *Ton* treat my daughter?”

“Jane, Miss Bennet, asked the same before she accepted my offer of a courtship,” Hilldale revealed. “I will tell you what I told her. My parents will love her. Their only requirement was gentle birth. My mother is part of a group of ladies who are leaders in society. Once they make it known that Miss Bennet has their approbation, none will want to commit social suicide by crossing them.”

“In that case, you have my blessing. Thanks to Jane’s age, you do not need my permission.” Bennet shook the viscount’s hand. He was asked to call his possible future son Hilldale.

The two men walked to the drawing room where Bennet announced the two courtships.

Anna was ecstatic that Lizzy would become her sister, if and when William was accepted by her, and along with her, the other four Bennet sisters as well. There were many effusions of good wishes. Even Bingley was able to offer Miss Bennet and the viscount begrudging, yet sincere, congratulations.

It took Fanny some minutes before the shock wore off, and she was able to add her voice to those imparting their well wishes. One daughter engaged and two being courted. God was being good to them.

Hilldale requested the use of an escritoire. He sat down and composed an epistle to his parents; one for which they had been waiting an eternity to receive.

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Chapter 32

Lady Elaine Fitzwilliam, the Countess of Matlock was beyond pleased that not only was one of her sons—whom she had believed were confirmed bachelors—engaged, but said engagement had led to Richard's resignation from the army. Her happiness would be complete if only Andrew would fix on a woman as his future wife.

She knew that the earldom would continue as long as Anne and Richard had a son, even if her eldest never married; but each and every night in her prayers of thanksgiving to God, she added a request that He would allow Andrew to find a lady.

Even though she was not certain, Lady Elaine believed that there was something Anne and Richard were not telling her. She had not had time to contemplate her suspicions too much, thanks to her accompanying Anne to purchase her clothing and other items she needed to complete her trousseau. The countess had always dreamed of assisting a daughter to shop so she revelled in the experience with her future daughter-in-law.

Her thoughts drifted to her sister-in-law and her banishment to the Orkney Islands. Had she not been ruled by her selfish and avaricious desires, it would have been Catherine assisting her daughter to prepare for her wedding. The last report that Reggie had received some three months past told that Catherine and Mrs Jenkinson were still bemoaning their fate, but no one in the small town near their isolated cottage paid them any heed. It was fitting that Catherine who used to demand attention and obedience was ignored and thought of as nothing more than an annoyance.

She pushed thoughts of her sister-in-law from her head. There was more than a month to make the purchases and then hie to Rosings Park where the wedding would be held on the seventeenth day of January 1812. After hearing that her parson was to marry on the third day of January, Anne chose the day almost a fortnight later to make sure he would be back in Hunsford to perform the marriage rites.

Anne refused to have the wedding ceremony performed by any other, and Richard agreed with his betrothed in this.

Lady Elaine looked up when the butler entered, a salver in hand.

“Yes, Ainsley, did someone need me?” Lady Elaine asked. The retainer bowed and proffered her the salver. There was a letter addressed to her in Andrew’s hand. She dismissed the butler and broke the seal. Since Andrew had been in Hertfordshire, he had only written once to announce his, Anne’s, Anna’s, and Mrs Annesley’s safe arrival at the estate named Netherfield Park. She smoothed the paper and began to read.

> *6 December 1811*
> *Netherfield Park*
> *Near the market town of Meryton*
>
> *Hertfordshire*
>
> *Mother,*
>
> *I pray that you are sitting when you begin to read this epistle as I am sure the contents will shock you. I have not written to Father on this subject as I am certain you will convey the news to my sire.*
>
> *There is no way to say this other than plainly: I am courting a woman…*

“**REGGIE**!” Lady Elaine yelled in a very un-countess like manner.

“Elaine, what ails you? Are you being accosted in our home?” A very concerned Lord Matlock demanded when he quickly entered his wife’s parlour followed by two footmen.

“Nothing ails me, Reggie. It is the best of news. Andrew is courting a lady. My prayers were heard by Him and He has granted them!”

First Matlock dismissed the footmen. Then he took the letter his wife thrust into his hand. “Have you read it all?”

“No, I read to this point,” Lady Elaine pointed to the place with a dainty bejewelled finger. “Read to yourself up to that point and then read the rest aloud.”

It was the work of seconds to read the part his wife indicated she had read. “I can see why you got so excited. Should we not wait until you are

calm again before I continue reading?" Matlock teased his beloved wife.

"Unless you want to sleep in your own chamber from now on, read!" Lady Elaine commanded.

"Yes, Dear." He began as his wife had instructed.

> *… by the name of Jane Bennet. She is the eldest of 5 sisters and no brothers. Her father's estate, Longbourn, is entailed upon Anne's clergyman who is to marry the middle daughter, Miss Mary Bennet.*
>
> *If the clergyman has not done so already, inform Anne that he has changed his name from William Bennet Collins to William Collins Bennet.*
>
> *I mention the above so you know that Miss Jane Bennet is gently born. She has no fortune of which to speak.*
>
> *Until recently the father was rather indolent; his wife was a touch vulgar (Mrs Bennet was not gently born); and his younger two daughters were rather badly behaved. Thanks to intervention by William Bennet (ask your younger son and his affianced; I will not write what occurred here) there has been a great change in all the aforementioned family members.*
>
> *The Bennets have no connections of note. Jane has two uncles. One is the local solicitor in the above town and the other is none other than Edward Gardiner with whom we all invest. Gardiner is Mrs Bennet's older brother and the solicitor, Mr Phillips, is married to my future-mother-in-law's older sister.*
>
> *Personally, I would not have cared if she had enough uncles to fill up Cheapside because I know she is the only woman for me.*
>
> *When you meet her, you will see that she is a great beauty, but it is her inner beauty which drew me to her. She has impeccable manners, and I am sure that with*

your assistance, she will become an excellent future countess, which I pray is long in the future.

Jane is 23, but it is not because of a lack of suitors that she is not married. She, like her next two younger sisters, refuses to marry without love and respect regardless of financial considerations. If she decides she cannot find that with me, she will not accept me when I offer for her. However, I am very hopeful that will not be the case.

Her next younger sister, Miss Elizabeth, accepted a courtship just today with your taciturn nephew. Darcy has been dangling after Miss Elizabeth since he arrived in the area, but his sense of duty was interfering with his desire to court her. He also made a rather poor showing of himself (again, ask Rich, he can elucidate the details of William's poor behaviour) so he is fortunate Miss Elizabeth looked past that and accepted his offer of a courtship. As I said about Jane, unless she is truly inclined towards William, Miss Elizabeth will not accept him.

It seems you will have two daughters and possibly a new niece to introduce to the Ton.

I must beg you not to remonstrate with Anne and Rich when I inform you that they were aware I was interested in a lady. I swore them to secrecy because I wanted to come to know Jane without her feeling undue pressure with your presence here before I declared myself.

"I knew they were keeping something from me!" Lady Elaine exclaimed. "Based on what our son wrote, I cannot be upset with them for keeping their word to him. Read on, Reggie."

I have requested leave for you and Father to be hosted at this estate from Bingley, even though he is a little miffed about the lady chusing me (Anne and Rich

will be able to inform you as to why). Hence, if you two decide you cannot wait to meet your future daughter, you need only send a note.

With respect,

Andrew

"Reggie, you must send a note forthwith. I must meet this paragon who has managed to entice our eldest son from the state of being a confirmed bachelor," Lady Elaine enthused.

"I will write to that Bingley fellow right away. At the same time, I think there is much Anne and Richard have to tell us," Matlock agreed.

While her husband composed the missive, Lady Elaine made for the drawing room where she knew Anne and Richard were sitting. When she entered, she nodded to the maid who had been unobtrusively chaperoning the engaged couple. The girl bobbed a curtsey and left.

Lady Elaine sat and smiled at her son and future daughter. Her husband joined them in a matter of minutes and nodded to tell her a courier was soon to be on his way to Meryton.

"We understand there are some things you have hidden from us…" It took a while for them to hear about each of the things Andrew indicated they should ask about.

Fitzwilliam and Anne told his parents all. The former was pleased that once his parents were made aware that he and Anne had been sworn to secrecy about Andy's news, they did not censure him. His parents valued honour too much to hold it against them.

"Only William could insult the woman with whom he fell in love," Lady Elaine said as she shook her head. "I am pleased that apologies were made and accepted and, from what you say, our nephew has been knocked off his high horse. It was very well done by the younger Mr Bennet to force the parents and younger daughters to look at their actions and behaviour without the family being ruined."

"If all clergymen were like that man, there would be very little sin in this country of ours," Matlock opined.

“Will you two join us for a few days in Hertfordshire?” Lady Elaine asked.

Anne looked at Richard and nodded. “It seems like we will accompany you. I will be able to make hay of the fact that I will marry before Andy,” Fitzwilliam stated.

“Boys will be boys,” Lady Elaine said lovingly as she shook her head.

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Mrs Marion Crawford arrived to see her sister at Netherfield Park. She reached that estate on Friday shortly after noon. Once the sisters had some time to speak in person rather than by epistle, they along with Lord Hilldale and Mr and Miss Darcy, entered the Darcy coach to convey them to Longbourn.

After the introductions were made, Bennet asked Mrs Crawford to join him and his wife in his study. One of his past errors that he was correcting was now including his wife when anything affected her directly.

By the time the Bennet parents and Mrs Crawford left the drawing room, Darcy was seated next to Miss Elizabeth, Hilldale was next to Miss Bennet, Anna was speaking to Kitty and Lydia, and Mrs Annesley was watching the latter three indulgently. William Bennet and Mary were already sitting next to one another, their heads close together.

For propriety’s sake, William had volunteered to move to the parsonage in the Longbourn Village the day of the engagement, taking Mr and Mrs Pierce up on the invitation they had extended to him.

The conversation in the study was not too long. Thanks to the information gleaned from Mrs Annesley, the Bennet parents were already well aware of Mrs Crawford’s qualifications. They knew that one of her posts had been as governess to a royal princess, but based on what Mrs Annesley told them, that was not something Mrs Crawford would discuss as she was sworn to keep the royals’ confidence. Both Mr and Mrs Bennet asked questions which were answered to their satisfaction. At the end of the interview, Bennet requested that the lady return to the drawing room and join her sister. He told her she would be summoned as soon as he and his wife spoke.
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“Well, Fanny, what think you? Will you be comfortable allowing Mrs Crawford to teach you the ways of the gentry? Please remember, it is not a demand I am making for you to take any sort of lessons. It is entirely up to you.”

“It will only assist me to learn more about the way to behave as a gentlewoman, so yes, Thomas, I would enjoy having her as a companion,” Fanny agreed. “With Mary soon to marry and Jane’s and Lizzy’s courtships proceeding well, the older three will not need a companion for very long. When all three are married she can be my companion and also help Mrs Taylor, the lady Maddie is sending, to us to educate Kitty and Lydia.”

Bennet rang for Hill and asked him to have Mrs Crawford join them. The position was offered and the lady accepted it.

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On Saturday, the Gardiner carriage arrived after conveying Mrs Taylor from Gracechurch Street to Longbourn. Seeing that the Gardiners would be arriving at Longbourn on the Friday before Christmas Eve, none of them accompanied the lady into Hertfordshire. One of the Gardiners’ maids and a footman travelled with her.

As they trusted Maddie and Edward Gardiner implicitly, Bennet and Fanny decided there was no need to interview the lady. They offered her the position on the strength of the glowing recommendations from the Gardiners, and Mrs Taylor happily accepted. She was introduced to all the Bennet sisters and her two charges were pointed out to her. She specialised in hard-to-reach children which was the reason the Gardiners had been sure she was the right lady for the task at hand. She also met Mrs Crawford. She knew of that lady by reputation and was happy they would be working together.

With Mary leaving the home in less than a month, her chamber would soon be open. It also seemed like Jane and Elizabeth would not be far behind her. Hence, when their parents requested it, Mary agreed to share a chamber with Elizabeth, and Lydia with Kitty. This opened up the two chambers needed to house the two ladies. Kitty and Lydia were assured that as soon as their sisters married, they would once again each have a chamber to themselves.
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The lessons would begin for the two youngest Bennets on Monday upcoming, and Mrs Crawford would accompany the eldest three sisters whenever they left the house.

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On Saturday evening when William Bennet arrived at the parsonage in the Longbourn Village, his hosts asked him to join them in the sitting room.

William felt very comfortable in this house as it was not very different in size and layout to his parsonage in Hunsford. Add to that, Mr Pierce was a clergyman who acted like William tried to act; that is, living his faith and not preaching one thing and doing another.

“You asked me to join you?” William enquired. Normally, the old couple was in bed by the time he returned from Longbourn.

“Indeed, young man, we did. Hester and I have been speaking of my time in the church more and more of late,” Pierce stated as his wife nodded her agreement. “My Hester is still a spring chicken who will only reach the age of sixty next year, but I am soon to be seventy. It seems that our Lord God has indeed agreed to grant me at least three score and ten in the mortal world. This, William, my boy, is a long way of telling you that I want to retire. We have three sons and two daughters, all of whom are married, and at last count, fourteen grandchildren; and in the next year, we will be great-grandparents. I would like my last years He grants me to be surrounded by my beloved family.”

“You have served God as well as any of us for many years; you deserve to rest and to be with your children and grandchildren,” William responded. “Why tell me before you speak to my cousin?”

“Because when I meet with Bennet, I would like to recommend you as my replacement; that is, if you agree,” Pierce replied.

“I am not one of those clergymen who collect livings to increase their wealth and status. I will only hold one living at a time,” William revealed. “Is there no one else you could think of to try and fill your shoes?”

“Did you not tell me that your curate, a man named George Keating, deserved to be preferred to the Hunsford living, but the former patroness
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would not accept him because he was not the pusillanimous bootlicker she was seeking? You also told me that the parishioners are very comfortable with him," Pierce pointed out.

"Yes, I did say that," William owned.

"I honour you for not wanting to be one of those clergymen who have multiple livings and leave all the work to a curate while they count their pieces of silver. That is why I am suggesting you recommend Mr Keating to the living in Hunsford, and you take the one here. It will allow you to keep an eye on your inheritance, and you will be aware if Bennet falls back into his old ways," Pierce added slyly.

"There is much logic in what you propose," William acknowledged. "Allow me a few days to speak to Mary and write to my patroness. I will give you an answer forthwith. Certainly before I return to Hunsford on Thursday upcoming."

Pierce extended his hand and he and William shook. When the Pierces went to their bed, they were close to ebullient as they were almost certain young William would be the next parson at St Hugh's.

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At Church on Sunday, Mary informed William that Mr Bingley had sent a note with the news that the Earl and Countess of Matlock, former Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Miss de Bourgh would arrive on Monday, negating the need for William to write to his patroness.

After the midday meal, William asked Mary to join him in the west parlour, with Mrs Crawford chaperoning them. She agreed without delay. The couple, with the companion trailing them, made their way to the parlour. Mrs Crawford took a seat as far from the couple as possible and commenced knitting. Mary and William sat on the sofa on the opposite side of the room.

William Bennet shared what the Pierces had discussed with him and asked Mary's opinion.

"I pray that Papa has made permanent changes to his character. That being said, I agree with Mr Pierce that there are myriad advantages to being
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close to Longbourn," Mary stated. "Did you not say that the parsonage and the glebe lands are comparable in size to what they are in Hunsford?"

"Indeed, I did. Also, Pierce was correct that Keating deserves to have the living. I am certain that if I recommend him, Miss de Bourgh will prefer him to the parish," William related.

"Had Mamma, Papa, Kitty, and Lydia remained as they were before you took charge of things, I would not have wanted to live too close to Longbourn; but that is no longer the case," Mary added. "Anything we can do to allow Mr Pierce to retire will be a blessing."

"When I return to the parsonage this evening, I will impart our decision to Mr Pierce. I still need to speak to Miss de Bourgh and Keating. Also, your father has to agree to prefer me to the Longbourn Village living."

"My father will agree; if he does not, he will face my wrath," Mary said firmly.

"Now that is my Mary, roaring like the lioness she is. I do not doubt your father will agree, but I do not want to assume."

That evening when William told the Pierces, they were overjoyed. They understood he needed to speak to his patroness first. Both men agreed that Keating was a formality, but William would speak to him if Miss de Bourgh agreed to his plan.

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On Monday morning when the Fitzwilliam coaches arrived, William Bennet was present to speak to Miss de Bourgh. He had ridden Vulcan across the fields.

Both Miss de Bourgh and Fitzwilliam agreed that if William Bennet was preferred to the Longbourn Village living, that Mr Keating would be an excellent man to take over the Hunsford parish.

William rode to the parsonage and informed Pierce that he was free to speak to Bennet.

The two men met with Bennet who agreed that Pierce well deserved to retire. Preferring his cousin and future son-in-law to the living was done
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without any hesitation. William would have his house packed well before his own wedding and have everything transported to Hertfordshire. He did not have very much furniture that did not belong to the parsonage, so what he did own would be stored at the parsonage until the Pierces moved on Boxing Day. That way, when Keating accepted the living, he would be able to take up residence in the parsonage next to St Cuthbert's Church as soon as he was able.

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Chapter 33

Knowing that those from London would arrive that morning kept the two suitors at Netherfield Park. Once greetings were accomplished and Bingley and the Hursts had been introduced to the Fitzwilliam parents, the latter couple had gone to wash and change while Anne and Fitzwilliam met with Mr William Bennet. As soon as that meeting was over and the parson had departed, separately, the engaged couple took some time to wash and change.

Hilldale was ready for the inquisition to begin as soon as he was summoned to his parents' suite's sitting room.

"Is there anything you did not tell us in your epistle?" Matlock questioned. "We spoke to Anne and Richard, and we are aware of all the things you would not commit to writing. They also gave Miss Bennet a glowing character."

"Mother and Father, there is nothing more to tell you about Jane, except that I believe she owns my heart already; but I intend to court her until, at the very least, her younger sister, Miss Mary, and Bennet marry in January. You do not object to her because of her humble beginnings or the almost scandal, do you?" Hilldale enquired. "I must tell you that the only way I will walk away from Jane Bennet is if she sends me away!"

"Calm yourself, Andrew. We have no objections to Miss Bennet at all," Lady Elaine assured her eldest. "It would make us the worst kind of hypocrites to censure the Bennets for the same thing that Anna almost did. She is gently born, so we have no objections on that front."

"Before we meet the Bennets, I wanted to make certain there was nothing else. It is telling how quickly you jumped to her defence," Matlock declared. "We already share the connection with Gardiner, so I have no complaints."

Hearing what his parents said allowed Hilldale to relax significantly. He would sooner give up his title than Jane. One thing he already knew was that if Jane decided to accept his offer when he made it, whether he was titled or not, would not change her response.

“Do we need to remonstrate with William for his past behaviour or do you believe that he has truly moved past his improper pride?” Lady Elaine asked.

“No, Mother, William has learnt his lesson. It would not hurt if you were to remind him you are fully aware of his foolishness. No more than that would be needed. He is completely besotted with Miss Elizabeth, and I begin to believe that she is beginning to feel the same for him. You will see a mooncalf at Longbourn today. William is interesting to watch,” Hilldale revealed.

“Seeing that I will wager you are the same with your Miss Bennet, how were you able to notice William’s feelings for Miss Elizabeth?” Matlock ribbed.

“Ehrm, Jane told me what she had noticed,” Hilldale admitted sheepishly.

Matlock dismissed his son. “That boy is as lost as he claims William is. At last, we will have both of our sons married, and it seems, our nephew as well.”

“I began to thank God in my daily prayers after I read Andrew’s letter. I will continue to do so until both of our boys are safely wed,” Lady Elaine averred. “Come Reggie, we should join the rest in the drawing room. The sooner we do, the sooner we will meet our future daughter and, possibly, niece.”

The earl and countess made their way out of the sitting room and down the stairs.

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Once they were in their coach on the way to Longbourn, Matlock addressed Darcy. “William, your aunt and I will not take you to task over the way you behaved when you first arrived in the area, because we accept what Anne and our sons have told us about the very real changes you have made to amend your character.” He had requested that Andrew and William ride with him and his wife while the rest followed behind in the Darcy conveyance. “All I will do is reiterate what Richard told you; it is something with which I wholeheartedly agree. My late sister and brother-in-
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law would not have approved of your behaviour. However, the way you have changed since then would have made them very proud of you."

Darcy felt a lump in his throat at his uncle's words. There was nothing he could hope for more than his parents looking down on him from heaven with pride. No one commented on his moist eyes. He went on to apologise for not listening with regards to Mrs Younge.

"We accept your amends, now tell us about your Miss Elizabeth," Lady Elaine requested.

"She is magnificent and has the most mesmerising emerald-green eyes. She more than tempts me and is the handsomest woman of my acquaintance. However, her most attractive feature is her mind…" Darcy waxed eloquently about Miss Elizabeth.

Lady Elaine and Matlock looked at one another with knowing looks. William was even more besotted than Andrew had mentioned.

When the coaches halted at Longbourn, Fanny and Bennet were standing just in front of the door to receive their noble guests. The former was fighting to maintain her equanimity while the latter knew this was not a time to make sport of anyone. Remembering her lessons with Mrs Crawford, Fanny calmed herself and waited for the earl to request an introduction.

Matlock handed his wife out and turned to the Bennets. "We thank you for receiving us in the cold, but I think we should wait for introductions until we are in the warmth of the house," Matlock suggested. He did not miss the enormous footman standing off to the side of the Bennets.

Richard had told his father about the men he had found for the clergyman. He had also harangued his father about the sorry state many returning sailors and soldiers found themselves in and argued that Parliament had a duty to assist them. Matlock planned to raise the issue in the next session of the Lords. Meanwhile, he would always look to employ former soldiers when he needed additional men, and he would encourage others to do the same.

The Bennet parents led the arriving guests into the entrance hall, where Hill and three footmen—two of them the former soldiers—were waiting to

relieve every one of their outerwear.

As soon as they entered the drawing room the Fitzwilliam parents identified the three eldest Bennet sisters, even before they saw the way their son's and their nephew's eyes locked onto the face of the sister of his choice. Miss Mary was easy to identify as she was standing next to the former Mr Collins. Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth looked just like their sons, nieces, and nephew had described them; except they had not done the actual beauty of the sisters justice.

Matlock requested that Mr William Bennet introduce his cousins to him and his wife. During the course of the introductions, it was explained that the youngest two Bennets were at lessons with their governess. With the formalities completed, Mmes Annesley and Crawford sought out one another.

As she spoke to the Bennet sisters, Lady Elaine was pleased to see that she did not intimidate any of them. Something else she noticed was that Mrs Bennet was nothing like the vulgar and uncouth woman she had been told the lady used to be. After Lady Elaine had spoken to her future daughter and niece, she walked over to where Mrs Bennet sat quietly observing the goings on in the room.

"Mrs Bennet, would you object if I sit here so that we may speak?" Lady Matlock requested.

"Not at all, please join me, your Ladyship," Fanny replied warmly.

"As it seems that I will be mother to one of your daughters and aunt to the rest, I think you should address me as Elaine. If you are uncomfortable to do so in public, Lady Elaine will suffice," she allowed.

"In that case, please call me Fanny," she responded.

Soon the matriarchs were chatting away like long lost friends while Bennet led Lord Matlock to his study.

"Please sit, my Lord…" Bennet ceased speaking after seeing a held-up hand.

"I am Matlock. We are to be family; hence, I will not have you stand on ceremony with me," he allowed. "How do you feel about your three eldest

daughters preparing to leave your house? The closest will be in Kent."

"Please call me Bennet. Did Miss de Bourgh not tell you?" Bennet saw the earl give him a quizzical look. "It was only decided less than an hour before you and your party arrived. William Bennet is resigning his place in Hunsford and will take up the living in the Longbourn Village. It is less than a mile from where we sit. Although Mary will no longer live in this house until God calls me home, she will be close by. Jane in Staffordshire and Lizzy in Derbyshire will be much farther away. However, I have been assured there are good libraries for me to visit at both estates."

"My nephew's collection is one of the best private libraries in the land," Matlock revealed.

Bennet imagined he would have to find many reasons to visit his daughters in the north if and when they married the men who were courting them. After that, the two men got to know one another better and spoke of many subjects of mutual interest. When it was discovered that they were both chess champions at Cambridge in their day, the board was set up, and the battle joined.

By the time those residing at Netherfield Park departed Longbourn, which was after dinner, they had been invited to join the family's Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations.

Anne de Bourgh issued an invitation for everyone to come to Rosings Park to attend her wedding to Richard in mid-January.

William Bennet already had Keating's agreement to conduct the Christmas services in his stead at the Hunsford church. Now he was waiting for a letter regarding his curate accepting the living. He was certain Keating would not object that Miss de Bourgh wanted William to be the clergyman at her wedding.

Two days later, a letter was received from Keating in which he gratefully accepted the Hunsford living and told the now Mr Bennet to take as much time as he wanted to move his possessions out of the parsonage. William decided he would depart for Hunsford in his gig on Friday. That would give him time to supervise the packing. On Sunday, he would deliver his final sermon from St Cuthbert's pulpit where he would take his leave of

the parishioners and introduce Keating—who was very popular in the parish—as their new spiritual guide.

Miss de Bourgh, now his former patroness, informed William that she too had received a letter of acceptance from Mr Keating. The next day, letters from Bishop Lankershim were received expressing his approbation for the appointment of Keating and conveying his wishes for William Bennet to do very well in his new parish. In his letter, Lankershim accepted an invitation to his former protégé's wedding.

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The Collinses, Bennets, and Osbornes arrived at Longbourn on Friday before Christmas Eve. There were suddenly more families of Bennets at Longbourn than had been there for a very long time.

The meeting between the group from Faversham and the Bennets of Longbourn would have been far more awkward had it not been for William Bennet being able to act as the bridge between the two branches of the family. He had arrived from Hunsford two days previously. Thanks to that common bond, it did not take long for Collins and Bennet to become close.

Even though William had informed them of his engagement via the post, and they had responded with joy, his parents, brother, and sister-in-law were well pleased to be able to offer their congratulations in person. Almost from the time they met Mary, William's family was able to see how well suited the two were. Due to the fact that the Pierces were impatient—they were originally to depart on boxing day—to begin their retirement; they had left the Monday after the service introducing William Bennet as the new rector. The final banns were called at that service by Mr Pierce. Hence, he had taken up residence as the master of the parsonage. To relieve any pressure on Longbourn, he invited Clem and Bethany—who was visibly with child by this time—to be hosted at the parsonage with him.

Mrs Pierce had not redecorated the parsonage since her children were all young. Mary visited several times in the company of her mother, a sister, or Mrs Crawford, and together with her William, she decided what rooms needed to be made over. She was hesitant to expend capital until William reminded her of his rather large amount of savings.
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On Monday morning, the day before Christmas Eve, Collins and Clem joined Bennet and William to ride part of the estate. Longbourn no longer looked like an estate in decline; five of the eight empty tenant farms had been filled, the three largest among them, and there were more applicants than available farms for the remaining three. Collins was very proud of the change his William had wrought as neither the estate nor Bennet bore any resemblance to the report the investigators had delivered to him more than a year past.

To Collins and Clem Bennet, it was as if a circle had been completed now that their branch of the family was reunited with the Longbourn Bennets after so many wasted years of estrangement caused all because of a common ancestor’s bruised pride.

By the time the four men returned from their ride, not only were those from Netherfield Park present—which included a subdued Bingley—but the Gardiners had just arrived. Bennet was aware that Collins and his sons invested with Gardiner, but he had not realised that all three Fitzwilliam men and Darcy were among his brother-in-law’s investors as well.

When Bennet thought back to the day William Bennet shared how much his legacy had grown over the years, it made him feel shame all over again that he had not done the same from the day he married Fanny. As William had told him, he could not change the past.

That Christmas was a very special one at Longbourn. Not only was the Christmas message delivered by William Bennet in St Hugh’s, but for the first time since 1682, the whole of the Bennet family was at Longbourn to celebrate the Lord’s birth.

On Boxing Day, those residing at Longbourn, the parsonage, and Netherfield Park attended the wedding of Miss Charlotte Lucas to Colonel Jackson Forster, solemnised at St Alfred’s Church in Meryton. There was a lavish wedding breakfast celebrated at Lucas Lodge. The newlywed Forsters left for a short wedding trip to Brighton. They would be back in Meryton in a sennight, on New Year’s day.

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Rather than go to London to have her trousseau and new clothing made, Mary had requested that Uncle Edward send bolts of fabric, before he came to Longbourn. She then took the fabric to Mrs Nash, the dressmaker in Meryton, and had the lady make Mary's wedding gown and other needed items.

Mary had decided that as she would soon be a parson's wife that she needed to support the local businesses. Besides that, she was more than pleased with the quality of what Mrs Nash produced.

Thanks to the completion of the calling of the banns a fortnight prior, before Mr Pierce left the parish, when the first Friday in January dawned, there was no legal impediment to Bishop Lankershim conducting the wedding service to join Mary Bennet to William Bennet in matrimony. William would have asked his original mentor, Mr Fergus Davidson, to do the honours; however, the latter's wife was nearing the end of her confinement, and he was not willing to be away from her for three or four days.

For the two days before the wedding William's parents had joined Bethany and Clem in being hosted at the parsonage so they could be near their son for his last few days as a single man.

Mary had the *talk* from her mother and Aunt Maddie the previous evening. Mamma had left her nervous, but Aunt Maddie's words had done the opposite.

The night before the wedding, William Bennet's father and brother had offered some *friendly* advice. It had mortified William, but he had borne it well. Clem was to stand up with him while Mary had requested that Lizzy do so for her.

At just before nine that morning, William and Clem made their way to the front of the church to join Bishop Lankershim, while the Collinses, the Osborne parents, and Bethany Bennet took seats in the first pew to the right of the altar.

The Gardiners and their three eldest children took their seats next to the Phillipses in the second pew on the left of the altar.

The Lucases, which included Colonel and Mrs Forster were in the next pew back.

Those from Netherfield Park filed in soon after. They split their party and each group sat on opposite sides of the aisle. The only one who did not take his seat was Hilldale who was waiting for Miss Bennet. Darcy had no such luck as the lady he loved would be standing behind the bride.

The church filled quickly. It was not only those invited by the Bennets, but many of the other parishioners as well. In the short time William had been the rector of St Hugh's, they had discovered the same thing those in Hunsford had. Their new parson was an excellent man and an even better spiritual advisor. The last one to enter before some of the Bennets was George Keating who had come to see his good friend marry.

Hilldale's face lit up when Jane followed Mrs Bennet in. The two youngest Bennets were behind Jane, with Mmes Crawford and Taylor following them. The latter sat herself next to Kitty and Lydia while the former, by prior agreement, sat with her sister. Fanny left one seat open next to the aisle for her husband while Jane and Hildale sat next to her.

Darcy did feel envious that he could not do what Andrew was doing, but he would be able to see Elizabeth for the whole of the ceremony. Once the newly married couple left the celebration, he planned to propose. He was fairly certain his Elizabeth was expecting him to do so. As far as he heard, Andy planned to propose to Miss Bennet as well. It was only right they should propose to their respective Bennet sister on the same day as they had each asked for their courtships on the same day as well. He looked at Anna who was waving to Miss Kitty. She was beyond pleased that he intended to gift her five sisters. His thoughts were interrupted when the bishop signalled the congregants to stand.

The vestibule doors opened, and Bennet stepped into the nave of the church with Mary on his arm. Darcy had never seen her look better. Behind them Elizabeth followed, holding the bridal bouquet.

William was transfixed. Yes, his Mary was a beauty, but much more than that, she was the perfect woman to be his wife.

Elizabeth did not miss the smouldering look, laced with longing she was receiving from her William Darcy. Now, if the man would stop dilly-

dallying and propose!

As soon as the couple was before him, after Mr Bennet had handed his daughter to William Bennet, Lankershim gave the signal for everyone to be seated. He had been right about William Bennet, or Collins as he was then. He was an excellent clergyman, a credit to the church, and a man of honour. Lankershim opened his *Book of Common Prayer* and began, “Dearly beloved…”

There were no objections, and in due course, Lankershim had the pleasure to announce Mr and Mrs William Bennet.

Upon signing the register, Elizabeth and Clem Bennet exited the registry. Once the newlyweds also signed the register and were alone, they shared some deep kisses. Mary’s hair was put to rights before they exited the registry and joined their respective parents to walk back to Longbourn.

Elizabeth accepted Mr Darcy’s arm so he could escort her to Longbourn’s manor house, where the celebratory meal would be held. Fanny had exceeded anything she had ever done before, in the planning of the meal. She had made many changes, but some things remained the same; she still set an excellent table.

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By the time the newlyweds were ready to leave their wedding breakfast, Collins and Ophelia, and Clem and Bethany had moved to Longbourn. Mary and William would not take a wedding trip now, other than the next few days when they would be alone at the parsonage. Even the housekeeper, cook, and servants had been given two days off. There was food prepared so Mary and William would have complete solitude.

After receiving more wishes for felicity from their friends, their family members accompanied Mary and William to Longbourn’s front door where some tears were shed by Fanny and Ophelia.

It took a few minutes, but the newly married couple was soon on their way to their own house.

Mary knew what William had done to improve the lives of all the Longbourn Bennets, and she would be forever grateful that he came to see
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them. He had taken charge in many ways, and she was hoping he would soon take charge again, when she became his wife in all ways.

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Chapter 34

Not long after Mary and William left the wedding breakfast for the parsonage, Hilldale and Darcy arrived in front of Bennet at almost the same time.

“May I have a private interview with Miss Bennet with an eye to proposing marriage to her?” Hilldale requested before his cousin could speak. He would not allow William to ask first this time like he did when they had begun courting their respective Bennet sister.

“Darcy, I assume that you have the same question for me with regard to Lizzy,” Bennet guessed.

“Yes, Bennet, I do,” Darcy agreed.

“It will have to be my study as there are guests in every room on this floor. I will have one or two of the *small* footmen outside in the hallway, and you know about not closing the door. You each have ten minutes,” Bennet allowed. “As Jane is the eldest, Hilldale, you may address her first. Then, it will be your turn Darcy. I know that you and Lizzy share a trait of not being very patient, but in this case, you will have to wait no more than ten minutes.” He turned to Hilldale who was smirking at his cousin. “I will be available to speak to you after you have *both* paid your addresses. How many I speak to will depend on the replies my daughters give you.”

Now it was Darcy’s turn to smirk at his cousin whose face had fallen, when Hilldale realised permission would be granted at the same time. He, Richard, and William had been competitive among themselves since they had been old enough to compete.

Hilldale found Jane in the drawing room speaking to Charlotte Forster and one of the Long sisters. “Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of joining me in your father’s study?” Hilldale requested. He did not miss the way his beloved lit up with pleasure at his question. He offered her his arm and led her out of the room with the sounds of Mrs Forster’s and Miss Long’s speculation wafting behind him.

Elizabeth watched as Andrew—they had all been asked to address him thusly—led Jane out of the room. She did not miss the pleasure on the countenances of Lord and Lady Matlock—Uncle Reggie and Aunt Elaine—as they watched the couple leave. She felt envious, not because she begrudged Jane her happiness, but rather because she had fallen deeply in love with William—he was no longer Mr Darcy in her thoughts—and was hoping he would not wait too much longer before proposing to her, if he intended to.

Darcy had re-entered the room behind Andrew. If he had any doubts about his dearest, loveliest Elizabeth's desire for him to speak, they were washed away when he saw the look of longing as she watched Andrew and her older sister leave the room.

"If you are amenable, may we speak in the study after Andrew and your sister? I have a very particular question I would like to ask you," Darcy said next to her ear as he came up behind her. There was no missing the look of pure pleasure which came over her face.

"I would be happy to hear anything you desire to ask me," Elizabeth responded breathily. She was sure that William could hear her heart beating wildly. Elizabeth wondered if Jane was engaged already.

In the study, Hilldale had made a succinct proposal, and Jane had responded in the affirmative without wasting words. The bulk of their ten minutes was spent expressing their love with their lips. By the time either John or Brian cleared his throat—they were standing either side of the door—Jane was breathless and wished they did not need to cease kissing one another.

Jane pulled the door open, and after the minute it took to put things to rights, she accepted her betrothed's arm and walked back to the drawing room next to Andrew. She knew her lips were red and swollen, but she cared not who knew she had been kissed by the man she loved.

There was no missing the ethereal glow of pleasure surrounding Andrew and Jane when they returned to the drawing room. As happy as Elizabeth was for Jane, the fact that William was about to propose to her had her overjoyed and feeling like she could walk on air. She did not remember William offering, or her accepting, his arm. Before she knew it,

she saw John and Brian standing sentinel in the hallway as they had entered Papa's study. She watched as William pushed the door until it was closed, except for two or three inches.

Darcy stood in front of his beloved Elizabeth after setting the door. It was not his imagination; he saw love and tenderness in her looks directed toward him. He needed no further encouragement. He took each of her dainty hands into his. She offered no resistance. Had it not have taken some of the far too precious time he had been allowed, he would have kissed the inside wrist of each like he did when they first began courting. Instead, he lowered himself onto one knee, never releasing either of her hands. "Elizabeth Rose Bennet, you must allow me to tell you how ardently I love, admire, and respect you. It is a miracle we are at this point given my behaviour when we first met."

He continued speaking before Elizabeth could protest. "I know that I need to move forward and remember the past only as it gives me pleasure. I mention this to illuminate the fact that I have learnt from my past errors. Elizabeth, I loved you when I asked for a courtship with you. In fact, I was already in love with you the day you walked to Netherfield Park to care for your sister. The difference then was that I was fighting my inclination. As soon as I stopped, the only question became whether I was good enough for you. I pray that is so, and if it is, I beg you to be my partner, my confidant, my lover, and my wife. Elizabeth Rose Bennet, will you marry me?"

"Fitzwilliam Alexander Robert Darcy, I love you with the intensity of a thousand suns. It has been some weeks now that I have known that you are the *only* man I would ever agree to marry. Not only did I come to love you, William, but I respect you too. The more I learnt about you, what an excellent brother, friend, master, and landlord you are, the more my respect for you grew. With that said, there is only one reply I can offer you. Yes, William, I will marry you, and only you."

William stood and as if by prior agreement, they each took a step one towards the other. His head tilted down and hers up. His arms snaked around her waist and hers held onto his shoulders. The instant their lips touched, Elizabeth closed her eyes, and she took a sharp intake of breath.

Elizabeth's lips tingled where William's had brushed hers. He had pulled back after the chaste kiss, looking at her to assure himself that she

was sanguine with what he had done. Her answer was to release one of his shoulders and allow her fingers to run through his wavy dark hair. Then, she gently applied pressure bringing William's face back to hers. This time their lips crushed together, and all attempts at chaste kissing was abandoned.

Darcy was delighted that Elizabeth had wanted, no demanded, more kisses. It was not long before his tongue flicked against her lips. Rather than pull away, her mouth opened, and soon, their tongues were exploring one another as they danced together.

There was a knock on the door. Evidently, they had missed the clearing of throats when they had been lost in their mutual passion. They each took a step back, and Darcy pulled the door open as he was closest to it. He returned to where he had been standing and with the door open, they stood panting, their foreheads touching. They jumped apart when Elizabeth's father entered with Hilldale in tow.

"Given the evidence I see before me, Lizzy, you accepted Darcy, did you not?" Bennet asked.

All Elizabeth could do was nod, and certainly not look her father in the eye.

"Then, I suggest you return to our guests and seek out Jane. The gentlemen and I have things to discuss," Bennet said.

As embarrassed as she was, Elizabeth did not need to be told twice.

"There is no need to make this a protracted conversation. I know from each of my two eldest daughters that they accepted the man who proposed to them. Hilldale, you do not need my consent as Jane is of age, but you do have my blessing. Darcy, you have my blessing and also my permission." Bennet shook his head. "In a short span of time, I have gone from having no sons to having three, and one of them is named Bennet. Do not dare ever mistreat my daughters." He looked at Hilldale and then Darcy squarely in the eye.

"I would sooner die," Hilldale swore.

"As would I," Darcy agreed. "Elizabeth's happiness will be my life's main concern."

“Why did you two wait so long? It has been obvious to me for some days that my daughters would accept you.”

Hilldale looked at William who nodded. “We did not want to take away from our soon-to-be brother’s and sister’s celebration,” Hilldale said for both. “For myself, as much as I wanted to have Jane as my affianced, a few more days hurt nothing in the scheme of things.”

“I agree with everything he said,” Darcy added.

“Well then, welcome to the family, sons.” Bennet extended his hand. “There is no need to call me ‘father’ or some-such, Bennet will be perfectly adequate.”

Bennet led his future sons-in-law into the drawing room, summoned his two eldest daughters, and announced their engagements. He then stood aside as the cacophony of well wishes were showered on the newly engaged couples.

The formally shy Anna was as voluble as any other in the room when expressing her congratulations to her brother and cousin, especially with the realisation that with the official announcement she would be gaining five sisters. She also understood that once William and Andy married their Bennet sisters, she would have Anne as a sister as well as Andy and Richard for brothers. Their family of two was about to expand greatly.

A little later and once the furore over the betrothals had calmed and many of the guests had departed, the couples went to look at a calendar in Bennet’s study.

Rather than compete for who would marry first, a double wedding was decided upon and it would be held on Friday the fourteenth day of February, on St Valentine’s day[8]. With the large crowd expected, Bingley offered Netherfield Park as the location for the wedding breakfast because Longbourn had no ballroom.

Bingley would give up the lease when the one year lease ended. Mr Gardiner, who he had learnt was his landlord, had told him he was not interested in offering an extension of the lease as he, his wife, and children would occupy the estate.

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As time is wont to do, it marched on.

Anne and Fitzwilliam departed the area of Meryton on the Monday after Mary and William Bennets' wedding. They were joined by the Fitzwilliam parents. Lady Elaine had been corresponding with her niece's housekeeper so that the arrangements for the wedding at Rosings Park would be well advanced before she arrived to take charge.

Also on Monday, the Collins parents, the Osbornes, and Clem and Bethany Bennet departed to return to their estates near Faversham. As it was already uncomfortable for Bethany to travel, none of them would be able to attend the double wedding in mid-February.

By the time they left the area, the relationship between the branches of the Bennet family was so good that, unless one knew there had been a rift of several generations, they would never have suspected it.

In the blink of an eye, the rest of the family and invited friends began to arrive in Kent for the wedding. The Bennets, Darcys, and Hilldale reached Rosings Park on the Tuesday before the wedding. Darcy was to stand up for his cousin as they had always been as close, if not closer, than Hilldale and Fitzwilliam.

As soon as they washed and changed, William and Mary made the short walk to the parsonage next to the Hunsford church. The two parsons discussed the upcoming wedding while Mary listened and watched her husband lovingly.

Keating had no qualms with his patroness wanting Bennet and not himself to conduct the marriage service. He shared that he had just proposed to the woman he loved, Miss Kathy Ainsworth. Had he not gained the living, he would not have been able to propose for some years. He was doubly grateful to his friend.

Lady Elaine and Matlock were very pleased the morning their niece resigned the name de Bourgh and became their daughter-in-law.

Never once did the new Anne Fitzwilliam miss her mother's presence. Not the night before the wedding when Mamma—the appellation for Aunt Elaine—gave her the talk. Neither when she dressed for her wedding, and

especially not when she walked up the aisle towards Richard on Father’s arm. Papa would always be the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh.

After the rather lavish wedding breakfast, Anne and Richard Fitzwilliam departed for the area of Brighton where they would honeymoon at Seaview House, Darcy’s house on a bluff near the city.

On Saturday, Mary and William Bennet, escorting Kitty, Lydia, and Mrs Taylor and four of Biggs’s men as outriders, began the journey back to their parsonage in the Longbourn Village. The youngest two Bennets would be hosted with their sister and brother-in-law until their parents and two older sisters returned from London.

As much as Bennet always decried spending time in London, he did his duty and escorted his wife and two eldest daughters to London. Biggs and Johns remained with them.

Since he had a competent steward, Bennet could leave the estate without all his good work being undone now that all his tenant farms were filled again. Bennet had employed Mr Kenneth Jennings after interviewing him and the man from Pemberley. His new son-in-law had agreed, and it was not because Jennings came from the area he grew up in. Both men had strengths, both had been good men, but in the end, Jennings was a better fit. Kildare did not repine not getting the post as Darcy had offered him the position at his largest satellite estate, Rivington in Surrey, when the incumbent decided to take a position at a much larger estate.

In London there was much shopping, after first perusing the bolts of fabric at Gardiner and Associates’ warehouse in Cheapside. Both Jane and Elizabeth accepted that they would acquire far more than Mary had, based on the stations their soon-to-be husbands inhabited.

While they were in Town, Jane toured Hilldale House in Portman Square with Mamma and Mother to advise her. The staff and servants were very pleased to meet their future mistress and impressed that she chose to change hardly anything in the furniture and décor of the house. Similarly, Elizabeth was later shown Darcy House by Darcy and Anna with her mother escorting her. Like Jane, Elizabeth was very pleased with those employed at the house and other than in the mistress’s suite, she asked for no changes.

On Monday, the day before leaving London, during a family dinner at Matlock House, Gardiner shared that his tenant at Netherfield Park needed to travel to Scarborough, while the Hursts were to travel to Winsdale, also in Yorkshire. Bingley had asked if he could give up the lease early. Of course, Gardiner had agreed. He related to the family that nothing would change with regard to the wedding breakfast, only that he and his family would make the move to their estate sooner than they had expected.

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On the final Tuesday in January, the group who had been in London arrived back at Longbourn and Netherfield Park. Lady Elaine would be the hostess at the latter until the Gardiners arrived on the Monday before the wedding.

With Mrs Crawford chaperoning, there was almost no opportunity for the two engaged couples to steal kisses, although occasionally they did manage—just occasionally.

Rather than run wild organising a spectacle like she would have in the past, Fanny made sure to take her daughters' desires into account while planning the wedding.

Both brides had increased nerves from the day the Gardiners arrived as it meant there were only a few days until the wedding. The two engaged couples had agreed they did not need a pre-wedding ball. Fanny and Lady Elaine had tried to change their minds but gave up on the idea when they saw that none of the four would agree to have one.

Like it had been for Mary, the night before the wedding, Fanny gave her two eldest daughters the *talk*. Thankfully Aunt Maddie followed her and made the brides' apprehension flow away.

Fitzwilliam gave his cousin, William Darcy, some advice because he was aware that William had never experienced lying with a woman. Thanks to the books the latter had read on the subject, he felt well prepared before Richard's mortifying speech. That night neither groom got foxed; they both wanted to be wide awake and unimpaired when the women they loved walked towards them in St Hugh's Church on the morrow.

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William Bennet looked out over his packed church as the two grooms paced next to him willing their brides to arrive. His friend, Fitzwilliam, was standing up for both men. He remembered the day, a little more than a month ago he had stood in the same place next to Bishop Lankershim as he willed Mary to arrive.

Each day they were together proved to William that it had been God above who had ordained that he and Mary should find one another. Every day that passed he thought he could not love her more, but he did.

The curate he had employed, Oliver Unger, closed one of the vestibule doors and nodded to his employer. Seeing that, William gave the signal for the congregation to stand. He smiled down to Mary seated between her mother and Aunt Phillips. The younger girls were all busy. Jane had Kitty and Lilly Gardiner—recently thirteen—and Elizabeth had Lydia and Anna as their bridesmaids. That way none of the younger girls felt left out.

Darcy almost forgot to breathe when he saw his Elizabeth enter on Bennet's arm. He was aware Jane was on her father's other arm but he only saw his beloved. Her ivory-coloured satin wedding gown suited her so well and offset her raven-coloured tresses beautifully. She was wearing the emerald *rivière*[9] and matching earrings he had gifted her. She was magnificent and her incredibly fine eyes were shining.

Hilldale only saw his Jane. Her satin gown was a powder blue and made her eyes glow. She was wearing the sapphire *rivière* and earrings he had presented her as a betrothal gift. There was a matching tiara as well but she would not wear it before six in the evening as dictated by protocol.

Bennet stopped at the head of the aisle and lifted their veils and kissed the forehead of each of his two daughters in turn. After he replaced the veils, he handed Jane to Hilldale and Lizzy to Darcy. He would not have been able to part with his precious girls to men less worthy. With a lump in his throat, he joined Fanny in the Bennet pew. Gardiner leaned forward and rested his hand on Bennet's shoulder for support, understanding it was not easy to give three of his daughters away in such a short time.

William Bennet gave the signal for the congregants to be seated. He looked at his sisters by marriage and their grooms and opened his *Book of Common Prayer* and began the liturgy of the wedding ceremony.

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Fanny and Bennet hung back when all the other friends and family returned into the house after the newly married Darcys and Fitzwilliams had departed.

“God has been very good to us. Three daughters so well married, I can scarce believe it,” Fanny enthused.

“Yes, He has been good to us. That, and William Bennet taking charge was one of His best blessings,” Bennet stated.

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Epilogue

Longbourn, summer of 1825

William and Mary Bennet and their four children, a son and three daughters, stood in the drive before the renovated and enlarged manor house to welcome the first of their relatives to arrive at their estate.

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They had become the master and mistress of Longbourn more than nine years past when Bennet and Fanny handed the estate to them and retired to the repaired and enlarged dower house with the one daughter who remained unmarried. Lydia had been so put off by men in general and officers in particular that she had abandoned her desire to marry first among her sisters. Rather, she had vowed never to marry. Instead of attempting to convince her otherwise, her parents had been happy they would still have one daughter at home with them.

Since taking over the estate, William's role as the master had become official, although he had worked closely with Bennet and Jennings over the years and had been involved in all decisions affecting the estate's future.

He had used money from his legacy—which had only grown in the more than thirteen years since he and Mary married—to buy any available land adjacent to Longbourn. In the years since he became master, the estate had added half as much land as it had had before as well as five additional tenant farms. From the time Bennet had changed his ways, not a single tenant had left Longbourn. In fact, there was a list of those who would snap up a farm if one became available.

At the same time as these changes were made, William and Mary had decided to renovate the house. It was practically torn down and completely rebuilt with plumbing to bring hot and cold water to where it was needed. In addition, there were flushing chamber pots installed. When all was said and done, the new structure was about double the size of what the previous one had been. There were more than enough suites and chambers for family and guests. Aside from much larger public rooms, a large and separate library
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and study, a ballroom was added. The construction had taken a little more than a year. During that time, Mary, William, and their children resided in the manor house at the former Purvis Lodge. William had purchased the neighbouring estate when it had become available for sale and annexed the land to Longbourn. Even though he could have pushed for a much lower price seeing that Mr Purvis was desperate to sell thanks to the huge debts of honour he had to discharge, William had paid the amount at which the estate had been valued.

With changes which had been made since Jennings had come to Longbourn, the income was above seven thousand five hundred pounds per annum before William Bennet had added the land. Now it was above eleven thousand per annum. The amount they were able to save each year only added to the very large legacy William had. He and Mary had agreed that they would settle five and twenty thousand pounds on each of their daughters. Their son, Thomas Clem Collins Bennet, would have Longbourn and a legacy of fifteen thousand pounds.

When Tommy was born almost a year to the day after his parents married, both grandfathers had been honoured that he was named for them. William’s brother Clem Bennet, as would be expected, claimed that his nephew was named in his honour.

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The first coaches to arrive were those conveying the Darcys, the Derbyshire Fitzwilliams, and Smythes. Elizabeth and Darcy had six children, four sons and two daughters. Jane and Andrew Fitzwilliam had three offspring, two sons and a daughter, While Anna and Harry Smythe boasted two sons so far.

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Elizabeth had become enceinte within a month of the double wedding. Evidently, she and Darcy hardly ever left the master suite at Seaview House for the six weeks they had been there. On the return from their wedding trip, Elizabeth had made Jane blush furiously when she had shared that she would need to visit the place again to see the sights.

The first child had been a daughter. The next four were sons. Bennet, called Ben, was the firstborn son; he was followed by a set of identical twin boys and then, the youngest Darcy son. Almost three years after him, Elizabeth had delivered her second daughter, the baby of the family.

Darcy could not contain his joy that even though his second daughter had golden-blonde tresses like her Aunt Anna, she had her mother's eyes, would have her mother's stature, and was showing signs of the same character as her Mamma. The oldest Darcy looked and acted very much like her mother. Grandmama Fanny always took delight in pointing out that Bethanne looked just like her mother had at the same age. Grandpapa Thomas agreed that his eldest granddaughter was a faithful facsimile of her mother.

The love between Elizabeth and William Darcy had only grown over the years. Yes, there were occasional disagreements between two such strong-willed people, but they both loved the making up. There was speculation that the two would adopt positions contrary to their own opinions to spur an argument, so that they could make up afterward.

Jane and Andrew's first son was born two years after the wedding, almost three years later their daughter arrived; and another two years later the second son was born.

The two were no less in love today than they were when they married. If anything, they were more so.

In October 1822, the Earl of Matlock had been called home to God. Lord and Lady Hilldale had become Lord and Lady Matlock. Thanks to years of learning about her future role from Mother, Jane was more than prepared to take on her new position. They had not joined London society again until the Little Season of 1823. They, along with Anne and Richard, had joined Lady Elaine in mourning the beloved patriarch for a full year. Darcy, Anna, and their families had observed six months of mourning for the late earl.

Since rejoining society, Jane had joined Anne, Elizabeth, and Anna as one of the leaders of the *Ton*.

Lady Elaine was not allowed to move to the dower house at Snowhaven. Rather, Jane and Andrew insisted she remain in the manor

house. She divided her time between the houses of her two sons, the Darcys, and the Smythes. She was a surrogate grandmother to the children of the latter two families.

When Jane and her family had lived at Hilldale, it had been a little over thirty miles between the estates the two eldest Bennet sisters lived at. Hence, the closeness between Jane and Elizabeth was maintained easily with much time spent at each other's estates and the cousins growing up more like siblings than cousins. As there was less than ten miles between Snowhaven and Pemberley, they saw one another even more when in the country.

As much as Darcy had not wanted his sister to ever leave his house, she had married the young Earl of Granville, Lord Harry Smythe, in April 1814. What made losing his sister to the protection of another man slightly more palatable was that Granville was just across the border between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. From one estate's mansion to the other was just shy of fifteen miles. As much as Anna loved her sons, and she did, she was hoping that the child she had just felt quicken would be the daughter she hoped for. She prayed that God would make it so.

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The coaches had just been moved to the carriage house and stables—also greatly enlarged—when the conveyances with the family from Kent arrived. The lead carriage contained Anne and Richard Fitzwilliam and their three daughters and son. Next one was the one carrying two sets of grandparents, Collins and Osborne. The final family coach was the one that Bethany and Clem Bennet and their two sons rode in. Their daughter and youngest son had ridden part of the way with their grandparents.

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The Rosings Park Fitzwilliams could not have been happier if they tried. Contrary to how she might have been had Anne ever taken the *cordial* her mother and former companion had attempted to feed her, Anne was as healthy as anyone. She had carried her children and birthed them without even a minor complication. Their son, the second child born, was named

Lewis de Bourgh Fitzwilliam. Thanks to there being no entail on Rosings Park, he did not need to change his family name.

Except for the year of mourning when the late earl was called home to God, the whole of the extended family joined the Fitzwilliams at Rosings Park each year to celebrate Easter. The summers were spent in Hertfordshire or Derbyshire, and they met with their family members in London when they were all in Town.

Collins Clem Bennet had been born in early March of 1812. He had been followed by a sister, a brother, and the youngest, another son. While Bethany and Clem's older son would have Collins Hollow one day, his younger brother would be the master of Willow Ridge after Grandpapa Paul went to his final reward. As the boy was only seven, the last thing on his mind was his future estate.

Ophelia and Clem Collins had never regretted their decision to move to the dower house at Collins Hollow and allow their son and daughter-in-law to take over the reins as master and mistress of the estate.

Collins and Bennet had become very close friends over the years. The latter was delighted that the former enjoyed books almost as much as he did. If that was not enough, his cousin was a very good chess player. When Matlock had been alive the three had always challenged one another. Now, it was only the two of them of that generation. They did play against the younger men from time to time.

Bethany's parents had essentially retired as well, and Clem Bennet managed both Collins Hollow and Willow Ridge, working closely with the steward of each.

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The last group were those who lived closest to Longbourn. The Gardiners, Falmouths, and Hattie Phillips arrived from Netherfield Park. Last of all were the Ungers who had walked from the parsonage in the Longbourn Village.

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After he completed his time at Oxford, Eddy Gardiner moved to London to assist in managing his father's business concerns. Lilly was married to the son of Gardiner's partner, a man named Falmouth. Falmouth held five and twenty percent of Gardiner and Associates, and his son was training to work with Eddy, his brother-in-law, to manage the business. May and Peter were still at home.

When Frank Phillips had been called home some four years past after contracting a bad case of influenza, the Gardiners had invited Hattie to live with them. She could have joined Fanny at Longbourn's dower house; however, Hattie chose the Gardiners as their offspring were younger. She had never been blessed with children of her own, so she looked forward to watching them grow. She called on Fanny, and Fanny on her, a few times each week.

Unger had been William Bennet's curate. When Bennet shared his plan to move to the dower house and turn Longbourn over to William Bennet, the latter, with his Mary's agreement, had given up the living and recommended his curate. Bennet had preferred the man to the position.

Unger and Kitty, now called Kate, had been in love for some time, but it was understood he would not be able to offer for her until he had a living of his own. Hence, as soon as Unger received the living in 1814, some months before Bennet turned Longbourn over to William and Mary, after the latter couple had moved to the manor house, he proposed to and was accepted by Kate. She was just twenty at that point. It had been expected that Mary would marry a clergyman, but not Kate. Hence, everyone had been vastly surprised.

In their eleven years of being blissfully wed, they had four children, three sons and a daughter.

While all the family was present, their children would reside at Longbourn with their cousins while Unger and Kate would sleep in their own bed.

Fanny, Bennet, and Lydia would be with their family members every day. Lydia would sleep at the mansion while Fanny and Bennet would return to the dower house each night.

Lydia was a favourite aunt to all the children in the extended family. She taught the girls all she knew about fashion.

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Charles Bingley remained in Scarborough working in the business his father had built. He married a local lady the year he turned thirty. She looked nothing like the angels he previously chased. To date, they had two daughters and a son. Although he maintained his connection to Darcy, Bingley only saw him once every year or so.

After Hurst's father passed away, he took over as the master of Winsdale. Thanks to what she had learnt when she was the mistress of Netherfield Park, Louisa Hurst was a very good mistress of her husband's estate. They had been blessed with two sons.

Miss Caroline Bingley lived in her fantasy world as an inmate of *The Happy Place* for ten years. One day, she had a flash of lucidity and tried to escape by climbing out of her window. She was almost thirty feet up; hence, she fell to her death.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mrs Jenkinson left their cottage to try and walk to the little town near their abode during a terrible winter storm. No one ever knew why they did so. As the two did not survive the elements, they could not explain what they had been thinking. When news of their demises reached Anne Fitzwilliam, she was sorry any lives had been lost, but that was all the thought she gave the subject. Anne had not wasted time considering her mother and former companion for many years, and the news did nothing to change that.

George Wickham was still languishing in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. To his way of thinking based on his suffering, hanging would have been easier than the years he had been in prison.

He never received a response to any letter to Darcy begging him to facilitate his release from this living hell.

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Two days after everyone arrived, the whole of the extended family were in the much-expanded park for a picnic. There was a summer breeze that

was just strong enough to move the leaves on the trees. Some branches swayed a little.

The children who were old enough were playing exuberant games while the adults were seated in clusters; the older sat on chairs which had been carried out for them. The younger ones were on blankets; some of the mothers were entertaining their youngest offspring, who could not join their older siblings and cousins.

Mary and William were very gently pushing their youngest, a girl of not yet three, on the swing suspended from the ancient oak tree in the centre of the park. William had the ropes and seat replaced some years ago to make sure everything was safe for their children. The little mite was giggling with pleasure. As she pushed Hester—named for the late Mrs Pierce—Mary looked around at their family spread out in the park.

“You know, William, all the joy and most of the prosperity I see before me is a direct result of you taking charge when you first came to Longbourn,” Mary opined as she looked at her husband lovingly between soft pushes.

“Perhaps I had a role in it. However, I believe that He was the one who took charge of me. I think that He was using me as a vessel to carry out His will,” William stated. “Either way, many of our family members made changes in their lives and now look at all the joy surrounding us.”

As much as he loved managing the estate, William Bennet still missed preaching from the pulpit and being the parishioners’ spiritual guide. He was not employed as the curate; however, when the Ungers were away from the parish, William substituted for his brother-in-law and was able to be a parson, in the way he enjoyed so much, for a little while. When the Ungers returned, he returned to his life as master of Longbourn.

“Amen to that, William. Amen to that,” Mary agreed.

~~~The End~~~

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Book 2 of The Take Charge Series

Lady Catherine Takes Charge

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

By Shana Granderson, A Lady

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Prologue

July 1804

Lady Catherine de Bourgh's world had just come crashing to a halt. She had always prided herself on being able to control everything around her including her daughter, Anne de Bourgh, who was nineteen, and her husband, Sir Lewis.

She had a forceful personality and had been known to demand, harangue, and cajole those who had the temerity to disagree with her or her point of view. Occasionally, her husband resisted her for a short time, then invariably capitulated so he would have some peace and quiet at Rosings Park, the estate the de Bourgs purchased when they emigrated from France two generations ago.

Theirs had been a forced marriage. After four seasons, Lady Catherine Fitzwilliam could not fathom why she had not a single suitor when her younger sister Anne was being courted by Robert Darcy—untitled, but fabulously wealthy. His line went back to William the Conqueror, when the then D'Arcys were awarded a large swath of land in Derbyshire, which they had named Pemberley.

Catherine could not, would not, countenance her younger sister marrying before her, so she compromised Sir Lewis de Bourgh. Although he was only a baronet, he had a title whereas Anne's Robert did not. He too was wealthy but not at the Darcys' level—he would have to do.

After Catherine became *enceinte* with Anne, she locked her door to her husband. She did not care whether she bore a son or daughter, as Rosings Park was not entailed on heirs male. Anne was born in January of 1785.

Catherine had been a disinterested mother at best, but Lewis had doted on his daughter. Unbeknownst to his wife, Lewis drew up a will naming Anne his heir, not her mother. He added a contingency that if his dear Anne were not alive when he passed, or died before she was married, his nephew Richard Fitzwilliam, the second son of Catherine's brother Reggie, the Earl of Matlock, and his wife Elaine would inherit Rosings Park, de Bourgh

House in London, and the entirety of the de Bourgh fortune. All his wife would receive was her dowry, her possessions she brought with her and a settlement from the estate.

Richard had always spoken of a career in the military, which Lewis knew worried his parents, so it was the least he could do as he was the last of the de Bourgh line. His nephews Andrew Fitzwilliam and William Darcy were both heirs to vast estates and wealth, making Richard his logical choice.

To make sure his wife could not claim otherwise with a forged will, Sir Lewis gave copies of his will to both of his brothers-in-law. Lord Reginal Fitzwilliam, Robert Darcy, and Sir Lewis all used the legal services of the same firm of barristers and solicitors, Norman and James, where the third copy of his will resided.

When Anne was six, she took ill with scarlet fever, notwithstanding all of her mother's assertions that she was too highborn to fall ill like a commoner. Anne's case was severe; it was the first time Lady Catherine knew true fear.

The truth was she loved her daughter, even if she did not know how to show it. Anne recovered, but the doctors opined both her heart and lungs had been damaged. At first Lady Catherine dismissed their opinions as so much drivel, but when she saw how quickly Anne tired from a minimum of exertion, she knew in her heart the doctors were correct.

Mrs. Jenkinson, the governess her husband employed for Anne, became more of a nurse than a governess to her young charge, who she loved dearly. Lady Catherine realised mayhap locking her door to her husband and begetting only one child had not been her wisest choice, but she was not one to admit she had erred. Seeing Anne continue to be affected after she had recovered as much as she likely would, she decided in order to protect her daughter, her nephew Fitzwilliam—William to the rest of their family—would marry Anne so she would be protected.

Before her sister Lady Anne died, she began to work on her to gain her agreement for her plan. Lady Catherine had always intimidated her younger sister, so when Lady Anne declined to agree to a betrothal between Lady Catherine's Anne and her Fitzwilliam, Catherine had not been happy.

The older sister had browbeaten her younger and far frailer sister until she gained an agreement—of sorts. The problem was that Lady Anne's husband, Robert Darcy, would not be dictated to by anyone. His wife told him how Catherine had harangued her, causing her to appear to agree with her only to gain some peace.

After Lady Anne passed due to complications from giving birth to Georgiana Darcy in April of 1794, Catherine descended on Pemberley, thinking her brother weak as he had loved her sister. In her mind she would be able to exert her will on the weak-minded fool and get him to sign a betrothal agreement.

She was faced with most unwelcome facts. Robert Darcy was not weak-willed, and she could not work on him to do her bidding. He told her he would never sign a betrothal agreement until and unless William was in love and his love was returned. Catherine was appalled at hearing him consider love to be important. Again, this love nonsense!

Love—such a plebian concept and emotion. The first circles, especially the very top which included the Darcys, Fitzwilliams, and de Bourghs, married for dynastic advancement, fortune, and connections. There was no room in Catherine's world for love; it was all about power, control, and money.

When Robert Darcy died, she again hoped she would be able to carry her point; she would demand her nephew bow to her assertion that his parents had agreed to a betrothal between him and Anne. To Pemberley she had hied, only to be thwarted once again.

Catherine's nephew, like his father, was not weak-willed. Far worse, her late brother-in-law had the temerity to put his wishes in writing, refuting her claims of an agreement and exposing her lie. She returned to Rosings Park in high dudgeon, determined to find a way to work on her nephew.

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Due to her inability to exert herself physically, Anne had taken to driving a small phaeton her loving father gifted her when she was twelve. It was pulled by two ponies so it could not attain high speeds, and Mrs. Jenkinson always accompanied her when she drove out in the park.
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Often times, when he was not busy with estate affairs, Sir Lewis would ride his horse alongside his daughter’s phaeton. One day, Mrs. Jenkinson had been enjoying her day off and Anne had wanted to drive out in her little vehicle. Sir Lewis, unable to deny his daughter, agreed to ride with her.

With great pride, Anne drove her father out that fateful day in July. They were on a circuit of the park, a path which Anne had driven many times before. On the left was a forest; on the other side was a rocky culvert with a river flowing through it.

A fox bolted out of the trees and between the ponies’ legs. They panicked, which in turn caused the fox to try and bite at their legs as he perceived danger. The ponies bolted, and before father or daughter could react, the phaeton careened over the steep edge of the culvert.

Sir Lewis, Anne, and the two ponies were killed instantly as the phaeton crashed onto the rocks below. A tenant farmer was ploughing his fields near the crash site when he heard a commotion followed by the sickening sound of a crash. He rushed to the edge of the culvert and was met with a horrendous sight, a smashed vehicle and the bodies of the master, his daughter, and two ponies. He freed his horse from the plough and rode to Rosings as fast as he was able. When he arrived at the stables and told the stablemaster what he had witnessed, grooms were dispatched to the crash site, while the stablemaster ran to the main house and informed the butler.

The butler found the mistress on her *throne* in the main drawing room, the room which looked as though it should be in Buckingham House with all its gaudy and ostentatious decorations, and supremely uncomfortable furniture.

When she was informed of the news, Lady Catherine refused to believe it. This was not something that could happen—that she would allow to happen—to her family. She and her family were supposed to be above such things.

The great lady had shouted "it is a lie!” and kept repeating those words like a mantra, as if the more times she spoke them, the less likely it was to be true. She continued to deny the truth until the broken bodies of her husband and her daughter were brought to the manor house.

What had her control, all the wealth of the de Bourghs, and all the power in the world achieved? Nothing! Lewis and Anne were dead. Lady Catherine wailed inconsolably as the tentative nature of life and just how little control and actual power she had was brought home to her forcefully.

Mrs. Jenkinson, who mourned her charge as much as Lady Catherine mourned her daughter, was a rock for her mistress. She coaxed Lady Catherine into her chambers and assisted her maid to change the lady into her night attire. Next, she gave Lady Catherine some tea laced with laudanum.

Once the mistress fell into a troubled sleep, Mrs. Jenkinson went about the task of informing the Fitzwilliams and the Darcys of the tragedy, who were all in London at the time.

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Their mourning period for their father had just ended. William Darcy and his sister Georgiana, called Gigi, were in London for the first time since Robert Darcy had gone to join his beloved Anne in heaven.

Killion, the Darcy House butler, knocked on Darcy's study door, and was bade enter. With a grave look on his countenance, Killion proffered a salver to the master. Darcy saw a black-edged missive and picked it up, with trepidation.

'*Please God, do not let this be about Richard*,' Darcy looked to the heavens beseechingly. Richard Fitzwilliam, his cousin, the brother of his heart, and co-guardian of Gigi, was two years is elder. Richard joined the Royal Dragoons as a Lieutenant right after he completed his studies at Cambridge, more than four years ago. In May of 1803, England declared war against the self-styled emperor of France—dubbed the 'little tyrant' in the kingdom.

Darcy did not know if Richard, now a major, was still in England, but it was with that concern in mind he broke the seal without looking at it and missed the fact it was the de Bourgh seal.

14 July 1804

Rosings Park, Westerham, Kent
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Sir,

It is my sad duty to inform you that both your Uncle Lewis and Cousin Anne were taken in an accident today.

Lady Catherine is sedated and sleeping.

With my deepest sympathies,

Mrs. Thea Jenkinson

Darcy was shocked and could not move for a few moments. Although he would never have married the sickly Anne, he did love her as a cousin. Like his Uncle Lewis, he had always appreciated her dry wit and ability to observe that which most did not. He had loved his Uncle Lewis as well.

"Killion, I must to Matlock House immediately. Have Carstens pack my trunks and tell Miss Smithson to have Miss Darcy ready to travel; we depart for Kent as soon as may be," Darcy barked as he ran out of the door.

He met Richard in the middle of Grosvenor Square, on his way to Darcy House. "You know?" the Major asked simply, and Darcy nodded. "Father wanted me to tell you we will depart within the hour. Will you join us?"

"Carstens is packing as we speak, and I left instructions for Gigi's governess to do the same for her," Darcy informed his cousin. After a brief handshake, the cousins turned and returned to their houses.

Less than an hour later, their coaches were on their way to Kent.

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The Bennets of Longbourn, near the market town of Meryton in Hertfordshire, were typical of many lower gentry who had small estates and limited wealth. Their estate was entailed upon heirs male, which did not bode well for the family's future as the Bennets had no son and five daughters.

The master of the estate, Thomas Bennet, was intelligent, but indolent. As each year passed, his wife, Francene—Fanny—grew sillier, consumed with fear of being thrown into the hedgerows when her husband invariably passed away. She had borne only daughters. Her husband, rather than assure her, correct her, or increase his daughters' portions, made sport of her in
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front of his daughters and others, and did nothing to plan for his family's future.

Mrs. Bennet was of mean understanding, interested only in gossip and fashion. Her husband had been attracted by her beauty and vivacity and had married in haste and was now repenting at leisure.

Too late he realised that Fanny was like her older sister, Hattie, the foremost gossip in Meryton. Both sisters were of similar temperament, interested only in frivolities. Hattie was married to Frank Phillips, who had taken over the Gardiner patriarch's law practice in Meryton twelve years previously. Hattie and Frank had not been blessed with children.

The daughter of a solicitor, Fanny had not been raised as a gentlewoman and did not know how to behave as one; rather than teach her, her husband continued to mock her.

Bennet and his wife married in 1787. In May of 1788, Jane Bennet had been born. Fanny had been certain their next would be a boy, but Elizabeth was born in March of 1790. Her mother could not fathom how she was not the boy she had expected. No matter how many times her husband tried to explain the babe had no control over its gender, Fanny always resented her second daughter for being a girl.

In June of 1792, Mary joined the family, followed by Kitty in January of 1794, and Lydia in October of 1795. There had been complications with Lydia's birth which led Mr. Jones, the apothecary—Meryton did not have a large or wealthy enough population to support a physician—to tell Mr. and Mrs. Bennet they would not be able to have more children.

Bennet's daughters would have fifty pounds per annum on his death and an equal share of his wife's fortune of five thousand pounds on his wife's death. Thanks to the entail, they would essentially be forced into genteel poverty unless the girls married well, which made marrying off their daughters his wife's obsession. Because of this, Jane was pushed out at fifteen, as had each of her daughters when they reached that age.

Jane was a classic beauty, tall, willowy, blond, and blue-eyed. She did not like that all her mother went on about was her beauty, but she was not one for confrontations so she held her peace. Jane's way of protecting herself was to see everyone and everything as innately good—like she was

—and ignore any negativity—it was this which led to her being naïve when it came to the way she saw others.

Elizabeth was her father's favourite, due in large part to her mother's ill treatment of her because she was not born a son. Elizabeth loved to walk, climb trees, ride, swim and spend time with her father reading and discussing books.

As soon as Jane and Elizabeth were old enough to do so, they had taken on the duties of looking after Longbourn's tenants; their mother was not interested in tenant concerns. The master should have visited them each quarter to see if there were repairs needed or other concerns, but Bennet was too indolent to bestir himself from his study. When the sisters told him what needed to be done, he would authorise it, as long as he himself did not have to expend energy to help.

From her early years, Bennet had discovered his second daughter was intelligent, so she was the only one he routinely welcomed into the sanctuary that was his study. He educated her as he would a son so she could speak, read, and write Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and German.

He brought in masters when needed, but rather than set an agenda for his daughters' education, he let them decide, so other than Elizabeth, and to a certain extent Jane, none of the others availed themselves of the opportunities offered. Mary decided to be self-sufficient, and the youngest two were not interested in anything that was not fun.

Thanks to her education, by 1804 Elizabeth was running the estate more than her father, whose involvement was limited to signing the documents she placed in front of him when needed. The estate brought in just over two thousand pounds per annum, but thanks to Bennet's refusal to rein in his wife's wasteful spending, much to Elizabeth's frustration, there was nothing left unspent to save for the future.

Edward Gardiner was Fanny's younger, and only, brother. He had a highly successful import-export business, Gardiner Trading Company. Gardiner had tried to convince his lazy brother-in-law to allow him to take Fanny's five thousand pounds and grow it, but it had been too much effort for Bennet to put down his port and book to deal with.

A few years ago, Gardiner married the then Madeline Lambert—Maddie, the only daughter of the rector of the church in Lambton, Derbyshire. They had two children thus far, Lillian—Lily—four, and Edward Junior—Eddy—just two.

The Gardiners, although in trade, were as genteel as any in town, and it was thanks to them that the older two Bennet girls were educated in their duties and had learnt to behave as ladies. Unfortunately, once Lily was born, Maddie Gardiner did not have the time needed to teach the younger three Bennet sisters.

Because Lydia was the daughter who most resembled Mrs. Bennet, both in looks and character, she could do no wrong in her mother's eyes. The result was Lydia was spoilt rotten. The Gardiners stopped trying to help the younger girls when their efforts were spurned.

Mrs. Bennet told Mary she was plain; both her mother and father ignored her, so she turned to moralistic texts in an attempt to stand out. Unfortunately, though she read the words, she never quite plumbed the meaning, and so was wont to spout meaningless moralistic platitudes.

Although she spent a great deal of time practicing on the pianoforte, her playing was pedantic at best. She played the notes correctly, but with a decided lack of feeling. Mary wore her hair in severe styles and chose dark-coloured dresses and gowns which did not suit her complexion.

Kitty was led by the younger Lydia. She was weak willed and had decided the only way to garner attention from her mother was to emulate Lydia —her mother's favourite, even over the beautiful Jane. Jane was their mother's second favourite daughter.

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As it was July, it was still daylight when the Darcy and Matlock coaches halted under the portico at Rosings Park. "Where is my sister Jarvis?" Lord Matlock asked the butler.

"She is still sleeping, my Lord," Mrs. Jenkinson informed the Earl.

"Where are the bodies?" Lady Elaine Fitzwilliam asked.
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“They are in the ice-house given the temperature, my Lady,” Mrs. Jenkinson replied. Tears started to fall as she thought of the broken body of her charge who she considered more a daughter than a duty.

“Thank you for notifying us Mrs. Jenkinson. Surely you need to rest as well. We are here now. I will act as mistress until my sister is able to do so,” Lady Matlock stated.

“We need to bury Lewis and Anne soon,” Lord Matlock opined.

“What do you need us to do Father?” Lord Andrew Fitzwilliam, Viscount Hilldale, six and twenty, and the heir to the Matlock earldom asked.

“Please Uncle, give us an occupation,” Darcy requested.

“In the morning, you three should see the parson. As Catherine picked him, I am sure he will need a great deal of direction, but we need the funeral to take place the day after tomorrow,” Lord Matlock instructed.

“It will be done,” Lord Hilldale returned, and the other two younger men nodded.

“Reggie, will you proceed even if Catherine is not lucid?” Lady Matlock asked.

“I believe we must Elaine. I will go view Lewis and Anne. Will you sit with our sister?” Lord Matlock requested.

Lady Matlock headed to Lady Catherine’s bedchamber while the four men made for the icehouse. It was a grim business, seeing the damage which had been done to the two crash victims.

When they returned to the drawing room, the stablemaster was summoned after Jarvis informed them he had led the party to recover the bodies. When asked if he knew what the cause was, the man explained they found a dead fox trampled by the ponies, and there were bite marks on the forelegs of one pony.

“It was obvious that the fox spooked the normally docile ponies, which led to the horrendous accident. When Lord Metcalf, the local magistrate, arrived the following day, after hearing from those who has seen the crash site and visiting it himself, he ruled it an accident.”

By the next afternoon, Lady Catherine was lucid, but unable, or unwilling, to speak a word. She was silent as she contemplated her former actions and beliefs about her ability to control everything and everyone around her. Regardless of the way she had treated them, the family was with her to offer their support.

The following day, with her sister-in-law holding one hand and Mrs. Jenkinson the other, Lady Catherine sat crying while her late husband and daughter were laid to rest. Many ladies from the neighbourhood, led by Lady Metcalf, sat with her to offer additional support.

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Mrs. Jenkinson was hired as a companion for Lady Catherine, but after serving for a little over two years, the companion's sister's husband passed away, leaving her with four young children. Mrs. Jenkinson had noted the changes in Lady Catherine since her nephew became master so she hoped the lady would not object too vociferously to her resigning her position.

The opposite had happened. Lady Catherine understood and accepted Mrs. Jenkinson's need to go to her sister. After making a request to her nephew, Richard, Mrs. Jenkinson was sent on her way with a lumpsum payment of five thousand pounds to indicate the gratitude for the way she used to take care of the late Anne de Bourgh coupled with her companionship to Lady Catherine during her mourning period.

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Chapter 1

Easter 1808

For the last three years, the two Darcys and three Fitzwilliams had visited Richard's estate for Easter. This year there were four Fitzwilliams in the party which arrived; Lord Andrew Fitzwilliam had married Lady Marie De Melville, the daughter of the Earl and Countess of Jersey, in January of 1808.

Lady Catherine was not the same person she had been before her husband and Anne were taken from her. Her days of trying to control everything and everyone were behind her. She had learnt a hard lesson—that she could only control how she behaved and the way she treated others.

For the one year of her deep mourning, she was rarely seen. After the funerals, at the reading of her late husband's will, she had sat in silence without a single objection to any of its terms.

Richard was the heir. His aunt had been willing to move to the dower house, but Richard told her that she was welcome to live with him as long as she desired, until the day he took a wife. He told her to choose any suite in the house; she chose her late daughter's suite, for it was where she felt closest to Anne. Mrs. Jenkinson remained as her companion until she left to go help her sister.

At first, the family thought she was ill. Not only had she not objected to the will, but she no longer dominated conversations around her, did not offer advice on subjects she knew nothing about, and stopped writing sermons for the parson, and interfering in the lives of the estate's tenants and the citizens of Hunsford.

What the family did not yet realise was Catherine had become deeply introspective during her deep mourning and had finally learnt to value love. Her greatest regret was she had loved her daughter but had never told her so.

Lady Catherine had never loved her late husband, but she admitted to herself he was a good man and an even better father. Yes, they married due to a compromise, but she had grown to esteem him.

Belatedly, she realised her husband was not weak, he had just preferred peace to confrontation. When she was wrong about the estate—which she now knew was quite often—the steward would go to her husband who would issue the correct instructions quietly.

The late Sir Lewis might have left her nothing but the income from her dowry of twenty thousand pounds. Instead, he settled a further thirty thousand pounds on her, so her jointure was fifty thousand pounds. In addition to the two thousand pounds per annum her money generated, Sir Lewis willed her a further one thousand pounds per annum in his last will and testament.

She appreciated Lewis's logic in choosing Richard as the beneficiary if Anne died unmarried and childless, as neither Andrew nor William needed an estate. Yes, that was another change; she called her nephew "William," a name she had previously eschewed as too common.

William and Gigi became almost like surrogate children to her. Once she had changed her outlook on life, Catherine was welcomed with open arms by her brother's family and the two remaining Darcys.

She had watched as William acquired some of her old attitudes, among them feeling superior to those not of his circle, but there was a contradiction on which she pinned her hopes of improving his attitude. William had befriended the son of a tradesman, Charles Bingley, two years younger than himself.

They had met at Cambridge where William helped Bingley when some lordlings bullied him for no reason other than his roots in trade. The two remained close even after William left school two years before his younger friend.

Before the deaths of her husband and daughter she would have condemned, loudly and vociferously, William's friend's connection to trade. Although she found nothing to object to in the man, his sisters were a different story.

There were two. The eldest, Mrs. Louisa Hurst, was married to Harold Hurst, a gentleman whose family had a small estate in Yorkshire named Winsdale. On her own, Mrs. Hurst was innocuous, but when her younger and much more forceful sister, Miss Caroline Bingley, was with her, she allowed the younger one to lead and followed her blindly.

Lady Catherine had been visiting Pemberley the previous summer when William invited his friend, and only his friend, to visit for the warm months. Somehow, Miss Bingley had convinced her brother the invitation included her and her sister. Rather than the expected guest, four guests arrived.

As she was acting as her nephew's hostess, Lady Catherine was with him when the Bingley carriage arrived. There was no mistaking the avaricious look on Miss Bingley's face as she was handed out. She looked like Catherine imagined a lion would when it spied its prey.

The woman fawned over her niece, nephew, and herself, dropping many not-so-subtle hints about how the estate needed a permanent mistress and about how her first-class education had prepared her for such a role.

Lady Catherine had been unable to understand why the brother allowed his sister to behave as she did, especially when it had been made clear to him the invitation to visit Pemberley was extended to him alone. It did not take Lady Catherine long to take the man's measure; he had no spine, and she was ashamed of ever having thought the same of her own late husband. His sister had him twisted around her finger and could manipulate him with little effort. It seemed his aim in life was a conflict-free existence.

It soon became evident to her the relationship between her nephew and his friend was not that of equals, but more akin to a father-son relationship. Bingley, it seemed, was willing to defer to her nephew and allow him to make decisions for him, and for some reason William allowed things to proceed in that fashion. More puppy and master than equal friends.

No matter how much Miss Bingley fawned over him, or how many hints she dropped, it did not take much perspicacity to see that her nephew did not like the woman and would not offer for her if she were the last available option on earth. The woman herself was wilfully blind to his disdain.

Catherine was surprised when the shrewish harpy—there was no more delicate way to describe her—held herself far above her station and denigrated others who were above her in all ways. Neither her brother nor William said or did anything to correct her.

Had she been the Lady Catherine of old, she would have given both brother and sister a set down for the ages and sent them packing with a flea in their ears. She decided to hold her peace unless her nephew asked her opinion. He did not.

Poor Georgiana hid with her aunt as much as she could. The objectionable Miss Bingley fawned over the shy Gigi, thinking it was a means to attract the brother. It was not. Catherine saw him seethe every time the harridan called his sister ‘dear Georgiana’ but he never corrected her, even though no one had granted her permission to use Gigi’s familiar name.

It was a great relief to the residents of Pemberley when the Bingley party departed, especially the servants—from the housekeeper and butler on down. Lady Catherine departed for Rosings Park a month later, still shaking her head as her nephew had not stepped in to rid his house of the woman before she departed voluntarily.

Now she stood with her ex-army officer nephew, Richard, waiting for the coaches bearing their family to arrive. According to a letter from William in February, the Bingley woman had hinted many times that she would like an invitation to Rosings Park for Easter. When Richard asked her advice, Catherine shared her observations with him and no invitation had been forthcoming.

Both Richard and Catherine perked up as they spied the first of the coaches approaching the portico.

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“How could you allow my—I mean Mr. Darcy to leave for Easter at his cousin’s estate and not invite me—I mean us?” Miss Bingley continued to harangue her brother.

“Caroline, Darcy explained to me it is a family event. Not only that, but how do you expect him to extend an invitation to a place where he himself
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is a guest?" Bingley whined. "I am his friend, but I hardly know his cousin. Mr. Fitzwilliam had already left Cambridge before I started and we never met. I only know what Darcy has told me."

"Then you should have convinced Mr. Darcy to invite us to Snowhaven so we could meet the Earl, Countess, and the Viscount," Miss Bingley demanded.

"Caroline, be reasonable. Mr. Darcy could no more invite us to his uncle's estate than he could to his cousin's," Mrs. Hurst attempted to placate her sister.

"Why should that be Louisa? I—we—deserve to be with those of our standing, but yet we languish in the lower circles to which your drunken husband belongs," Miss Bingley spat out nastily. "Why you could not marry someone higher, I do not know. Do you not remember how Mother used to tell us it was our duty to raise the family from our roots?"

Rather than provoke an argument with her sister, Mrs. Hurst stood up and left the room. "Caro, you should not have said that to our sister," Bingley said, weakly.

"And what about you?" Miss Bingley rounded on her brother. "You continue to fall in love with your *angels*, but none of them are good enough to help raise us in society. Also, you are supposed to promote me to Mr. Darcy, but even in that you are failing. You should be aiming for that insipid Miss Darcy as a bride."

"She is only thirteen, Caroline!" Bingley exclaimed. "Darcy told me on several occasions he will not consider a courtship for his sister until she comes out when she is eighteen, perhaps even the year after." Darcy had told Bingley on multiple occasions he would never offer for Caroline, even if she compromised him in front of witnesses. In order to try to keep the peace, Bingley did not dare tell his sister the truth.

Even had he told her, Miss Bingley only heard that which fit her desires.

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Longbourn was in an uproar, brought about—as it normally was—by the mistress having an attack of nerves. Netherfield Park had been let a year earlier by a wealthy gentleman and his wife from Cornwall.
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They were considering purchasing the estate for their second son so he would not have to enter a profession. Mr. Lloyd Gravelle was four and twenty and had been taken by Jane Bennet, who was twenty—from the moment he met her.

His father, Nigel Gravelle, owned Gravelle Springs, an estate which cleared over eight thousand pounds per annum. From the instant Jane and young Gravelle met, Fanny Bennet pushed the two together. Even worse, every time the young man visited Longbourn, she forced her other daughters out of the room so Jane and Lloyd would be alone.

Elizabeth begged her father to check her mother, but he only laughed and told her it was good for a young lady to be crossed in love at least once. As much as Elizabeth loved her father, she was starting to become critical of his faults; the scales had long fallen from her eyes.

Yes, her mother was loud, vulgar, inappropriate, and more, but as much as she would have liked to lay the blame solely at her mother's feet; the fact her father laughed when he should teach, sat back when he should check, and did nothing to discipline his unruly youngest daughter opened her eyes to his faults and made her realise there was more than enough blame to go around.

It became so bad Jane—dear Jane who would make an excuse for anyone regardless how egregious their behaviour—was waking up to the fact their mother was driving suitors away, not helping her to marry and assist her family in a way that would allow her sisters to find happiness in their own time.

When Jane was sixteen, Stuart Jamison, the son of a gentleman from an estate in Bedfordshire, started to court her. He wrote her poetry, but he had been unwilling to tolerate Mrs. Bennet's machinations and vulgarity.

He had apologised to Jane then left the area in all haste. While he was calling on Jane, he had been introduced to Charlotte Lucas, four years Jane's senior, and who Mrs. Bennet called plain. Charlotte and Stuart became well acquainted over six months; Stuart requested and was granted a courtship, followed by a betrothal, and the two married early in 1805. Three years later, Charlotte presented her husband with a son, and she was with child again. Jane bore no resentment towards Elizabeth's best friend.

Her ire was directed at her mother, who had managed to run off another suitor.

The Gravelles—without warning—abandoned Netherfield Park, informing the agent, Mr. Frank Phillips—Jane's uncle—they would not remain and allow their son to join a family which had Fanny Bennet as a member. They could not countenance being forced into the company of such a vulgar woman.

Jane's resentment against her mother grew; she had liked Lloyd and was well on her way to falling in love with him. The one good outcome of losing him was that Jane Bennet was no longer as naïve as she had been, and now saw the world more realistically. Elizabeth had always seen it so.

Thomas did not leave his study, not even when his brother Phillips berated him for not checking his wife. He continued to find amusement where there was none and lost more of his second daughter's respect in the process.

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"Richard, Aunt Cat, Brother" Georgiana—very recently fourteen—exclaimed as she approached them for hugs. In the years since Sir Lewis and Anne had been lost, Georgiana had become close to both her aunts—Ladies Elaine and Catherine—so much so as to view them as surrogate mothers.

"Welcome Gigi," Catherine hugged her niece to her. Each time she saw the young girl, the more she resembled her mother, her late sister, Lady Anne Darcy.

There had been so much loss in their family. Catherine shook off maudlin thoughts as she hugged her nephew, William. Richard clapped his cousin on the back. "Good to see you, William; your lessons on estate management have been paying off. After almost four years, I believe I am getting the hang of it."

"Do not forget, I was trained from the time I was out of leading strings," Darcy replied, missing the fact his cousin had been jesting with him. Over the preceding years, Darcy had become a dour man who wore a mask in public to discourage those who would try to connect themselves to him or
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view him as a target for their matrimonial aspirations. Even worse many wanted him to invest money with them in schemes sure to fail. He hated being hunted by the ladies of the *Ton* for his fortune and connections. Ironically, as much as he hated predatory, social climbing, fortune-hunting behaviour, he seemed to turn a blind eye to Miss Bingley's behaviour, which smacked of all three. He continued to tolerate her.

Darcy had always found it difficult to catch the tone of others' conversation and was useless with small talk. He was shy, but hid that fact behind taciturn, and sometimes downright haughty and rude behaviour.

His Aunt Catherine despaired as she watched her nephew continue to adopt many of her old attitudes toward those below his status. She had come to realise how wrong they were long ago, but William had not. It was difficult for her, but she would not interfere unless William asked her a direct question—or she felt there was no other choice—and they had not reached that point yet.

"Mother, Father, Marie, and Andy, welcome to Rosings Park," Richard stated warmly. Richard was a sociable man, and although he loved his Aunt Catherine, he was happy there would be additional company for the next three or four weeks.

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After all the guests returned from washing the dust off and changing from their travel attire, they met in the main drawing room, the one that *used* to be Lady Catherine's throne room.

All of the gaudy, uncomfortable furniture had been sold. Gone were all of the baubles, dour artwork, and other ostentatious pieces which had littered Rosings Park in an attempt to impress visitors with the wealth of the estate owners.

About a year after Richard had become master, once his aunt was out of deep mourning, they travelled to de Bourgh House in London. Lady Catherine remembered a warehouse she had discovered near Cheapside, the Gardiner Trading Company, which had the finest bolts and the best selection of fabrics she had ever seen. As much as she had then disdained lowering herself to shop in such a place, the old Lady Catherine had done so because she had an eye for quality, and that warehouse had the best.
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She remembered the genteel owner, Mr. Gardiner, sold everything—furniture, artwork, decorative pieces, in short anything worth buying. Lady Catherine asked her nephew to join her when she met with Mr. Gardiner. Gardiner came to de Bourgh House with a clerk, who inventoried everything the master wanted sold. Two clerks returned to Rosings Park with them for the same reason.

In the end, even after his commission, Mr. Gardiner had sold it all for a little more than it cost when purchased. Richard used the proceeds to refurnish and redecorate both of their homes. The *throne,* which used to be in the drawing room, was one of the first pieces to be sold, and Lady Catherine inwardly winced for the new owner, hoping they too would soon have an epiphany.

A year later, Richard and his Aunt visited Gardiner Trading Company to purchase fabrics for curtains. On this visit, they noticed a lady and two very pretty young ladies. Richard requested an introduction, and Mr. Gardiner proudly introduced his wife and two nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Both were very pretty, but Richard was especially taken with the older young lady, a blond with blue eyes.

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The drawing room at Rosings Park, along with all public and private rooms, were now decorated much like the Fitzwilliam and Darcy homes, with understated elegance and an eye to comfort.

“Next year, I will find a companion for Gigi. Her governess will be leaving at the end of the year,” Darcy informed his family.

“Do you not mean *we* will, as we *share* guardianship?” Richard questioned.

“Well, of course I will consult you Richard, but you must own I am the one who is with Gigi most of the time,” Darcy replied dismissively.

Darcy did not see most of his family members shake their heads. Some would call him proud, and the way he thought his own counsel infallible only bolstered that impression. ‘*What has become of you William?*’ Lady Catherine asked herself silently. ‘*One of these days, this pride will lead to your downfall.*’
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Chapter 2

October 1809

“William, I do not have a good feeling about Mrs. Younge, the woman you employed to be Gigi’s companion,” Lady Catherine shared with her nephew at Darcy House in London.

“You know I am not happy you excluded me from the process,” Richard told his cousin with no little asperity. “When we discussed this at Rosings last Easter, I thought we agreed I would be involved in the decision as Gigi’s joint guardian.”

“If you recall, I never agreed,” Darcy replied haughtily. “I am, after all, the one who is with her most of the time. You know I am a good judge of character, and she had excellent references from some well-placed families.”

“Did you talk to any of these families Nephew?” Lady Catherine asked.

Darcy waved away their concerns. “I observed Mrs. Younge, and she was exactly as I expected her to be, and *my* sister is doing very well with her.”

“Does that mean if, heaven forbid, there is a problem with the woman, the responsibility would be yours alone?” Richard shot back angrily.

Like his aunt, his parents, his brother, and his sister, Richard had no idea why William had become almost insufferable. He thought his Aunt Catherine had been close to the truth when she had shared her worry with him one evening, that Darcy seemed to have adopted some of her former poor behaviour.

“Gigi has become very accomplished in the pianoforte,” Lady Catherine observed to change the subject to a less contentious one.

“For the last year whenever she was in Town, she had been studying with *Signore* Alberto da Funti, the acclaimed *maestro* from Italy. She has excelled under his direction,” William reported proudly.

His relatives did not contest the fact William loved his sister and would never knowingly do anything to hurt her. What they were worried about was that his pride and belief in his own infallibility might blind him to some dangers, as in the case of Mrs. Younge.

“Has Wickham been by with his hand out recently?” Richard asked.

George Wickham was the son of Pemberley’s late steward. As good a master as Robert Darcy was, he had a blind spot when it came to his godson, Wickham. It was not entirely his fault, as William hid many truths about his godson from the late Robert Darcy.

It was another one of William’s failings. He believed he knew the best way to protect those he loved, and in this case, it was by keeping his silence, not by telling his father the truth about Wickham’s vicious propensities, his debts, and his ruination of young women and girls. When Richard wanted to inform his young cousin and ward about Wickham, Darcy forbade it, certain his way was the best way to protect his sister, and completely ignoring Richard’s opinion that knowledge was strength.

“Since I refused him the living, to which he had resigned all claims, he abused me abominably and went on his way swearing revenge as he always does,” Darcy told them calmly.

“Be careful Nephew. A wounded animal is often the most vicious,” Lady Catherine opined.

“What can that wastrel do to me? He is all bluster, and even more, he is a coward,” Darcy stated assuredly. “He likes going after those who are not able to protect themselves, and I am not one of those.”

None of the three noticed Mrs. Younge, about to walk into the room with her charge. If they had, they would have seen the almost feral look on her face when they mentioned Wickham so dismissively. In an instant, she schooled her features and plastered a fake smile on her face.

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There had been no improvement at Longbourn. In Elizabeth’s opinion, things had grown worse. As she had done with her three older daughters, Fanny Bennet pushed Kitty out at fifteen. This precipitated a tantrum from her favourite—Lydia, who was but fourteen.
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She objected vociferously to being the only daughter not out. Lydia threw some epic tantrums from time to time, but those paled in comparison to this one. Finally, Mrs. Bennet agreed to let Lydia come out in August of the following year, two months before her fifteenth birthday.

This seemed to placate Lydia, as she loved to think she would come out at a younger age than any of her sisters. “Will it not be a lark if I am the first of my sisters to marry?” Lydia crowed after her perceived victory.

“You are pretty and lively enough; I do not see why it would not be so,” Mrs. Bennet stated supportively. “If only those artful Lucases had not stolen the Jamison boy away from Jane for Charlotte. I always thought with her being so plain, she would be an old maid.”

“Mama!” Jane and Elizabeth chorused.

“What? It is nothing but the truth,” Mrs. Bennet sniffed.

“How can that be, Mama? If what you said had merit, would she be married and expecting her second child now?” Elizabeth asked, knowing full well her mother hated to hear about Charlotte being married to one of the men she had intended for Jane. “It was not Jane who caused Mr. Jamison and Mr. Gravelle to run for the hills.”

Jane gave her sister a warning look to keep quiet; although she agreed with Lizzy wholeheartedly, it was not worth it. “Well, I am sure I do not know to what you refer, impertinent miss. At least Jane has her looks; no man will ever want you with your dark hair and coarse skin. You are a bluestocking to boot,” Mrs. Bennet stated nastily. Elizabeth was used to her mother denigrating her, but it did not lessen the blow when the Bennet matriarch spoke thusly.

Her relationship with her father had become more strained as his teasing of his family had only worsened. Even though her mother did not understand one jest in ten made at her expense, Elizabeth did and she felt it was not the way a father and husband should behave.

Elizabeth was certain had her mother given into Lydia and allowed her out at fourteen, her father would have done nothing but comment that Lydia was one of the silliest girls in the realm.

Jane and Elizabeth had long discussions about their younger sisters. They believed with a little attention and redirection, Mary could be corrected easily, but that Kitty was too dependent on Lydia, who they were sure would ruin all of them one day.

At fourteen, Lydia's womanly curves were those of a much older lady, but her mind was that of a girl younger than fourteen. Both Kitty and Lydia were obsessed with officers after Mrs. Bennet told them a fanciful story of a Colonel Millar's regiment and the officers she used to flirt with before she met their father.

To Jane and Elizabeth, the scariest thing was that Mrs. Bennet and her two youngest daughters all seemed to have the same low level of maturity.

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At first, when her two older sisters started to take notice of her, Mary thought they were making sport of her, but it soon became evident they were in earnest. Mary had always felt like no one in their family loved her, which led her to strike out and forge her own path.

At first, she would not give up reading Fordyce's sermons, but within weeks Elizabeth began to expand the scope of Mary's reading to include some Shakespeare. Jane would take time to talk to Mary—really talk to her. Jane also started to help Mary with her manner of dressing.

Before the end of the year, Mary was wearing dresses in colours that became her, and no longer wore her hair in the severe bun as had been her wont. The last thing Jane and Elizabeth coaxed their sister to change was to discard the glasses she wore but did not need. It had been part of the persona she hid behind to protect herself from the feeling of being alone. Now that she was included in activities with Jane and Lizzy, she no longer needed them.

Although her beauty was not as great as Jane's or Elizabeth's, she was pretty in her own right. At the December assembly in Meryton, Mary found herself in demand for dances although she had been a wallflower sitting with a book in the past.

So it was that the three oldest Bennet sisters forged a new group within the household. The changes in Mary confounded both parents, for different
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reasons. Mrs. Bennet had to admit to herself her middle daughter was not plain—even if she would not admit it publicly. Mr. Bennet admitted he now had only two of the silliest girls in all of England as his daughters.

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“What do you mean we are not invited to Pemberley for Christmastide,” Miss Bingley demanded stridently. “Are we not Mr. Darcy’s particular friends?”

Even her older sister had tried to tell Miss Bingley that it was only Charles who Mr. Darcy called a friend. “Caro, the Darcys are to be at Snowhaven, the Earl and Countess of Matlock’s estate. How can I demand he invite us to Pemberley, never mind to his uncle’s estate?” Bingley whined.

“If you let him know we would be quite on our own for Christmastide, I am sure he would have requested the Countess invite us, as is my—our—due!” Miss Bingley insisted.

“We have covered this on many occasions before Sister.” Mr. Hurst, who was usually silent, had reach the limit of his patience. “There is no polite way for a guest to invite other guests to another’s home.”

“What do you know? Are you even sober enough to contribute to this conversation?” Miss Bingley shot back at her brother-in-law.

The truth was that Mr. Hurst did not over imbibe. He often gave that impression, or pretended that he was asleep, so he would not have to deal with the harpy that was his wife’s sister. “May I remind you, *Sister*, that I am the only one here who was raised on an estate by a landed gentleman. No matter how much you deny it, you are, and always have been, the vulgar daughter of a tradesman.”

Bingley and Mrs. Hurst cringed, as they were aware how much their sister hated the truth of her roots being pointed out to her. She thought her dowry of twenty thousand—that she was vulgar enough to mention at every turn—trumped her birth, when it did nothing of the kind.

Miss Bingley picked up a figurine from the mantle and hurled it at Hurst’s head. Hurst, for someone supposedly in his cups, deftly evaded the missile, which broke into shards as it hit the floor. “Are you going to allow
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this damned man to talk to me in this way?" Miss Bingley demanded of her sister. Rather than answer her, Louisa looked away and played with the bracelets on her arm.

As was her wont when she was in a snit, Miss Bingley stormed out of the drawing room and soon the sound of her bedchamber door being slammed reverberated throughout the house. That sound was followed by the sound of porcelain figurines being smashed by the irate woman who was having a tantrum any child of five would have been proud of.

"Bingley, I am sorry, but it needed to be said. Neither you nor my wife do her any good feeding her pretentions," Hurst stated firmly. "Have you ever told her what Darcy asked you to?" A chagrined Bingley shook his head.

"I do not want to deal with her anger," Bingley admitted.

"You will have to deal with it one way or another. How long do you think it will be before Darcy, or one of his family, give her a richly deserved, *public* set down?" Hurst asked pointedly. "When we were at Pemberley, I watched Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine. I swear she came close to taking your sister to task but restrained herself at the last moment."

His brother-in-law did not tell Bingley anything he did not know, but was not the preservation of peace more important? Charles Bingley hated confrontation.

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"Darce, would you ride with me into Hertfordshire, just over twenty miles from Town," Bingley requested of his friend not long after Twelfth Night in 1810, a few days after the Darcys returned to London from Snowhaven.

"What is in Hertfordshire?" Darcy asked.

"An estate by the name of Netherfield Park. You advised me to lease an estate before purchasing one," Bingley stated, seeking his friend and mentor's approval.

"It is convenient to Town; what do you know about it?" Darcy quizzed the younger man.
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“It clears around five thousand per annum. The owner, Mr. Morris, is a man who inherited it but has a much larger estate in Scotland where he prefers to live. The house, I am told, was rebuilt less than ten years ago before he inherited it, and it is the preeminent estate in the area. It is two miles from the market town of Meryton,” Bingley informed Darcy.

“Is there a local agent?” Darcy inquired further.

“My man of business brought this to me knowing I was looking for something to lease, and yes, the local agent is a solicitor, Mr. Phillips. He will meet us there once I notify him when I would like to view the property. The current tenant is with family until March. If I take it, would you join me there to help me learn about estate management?” Bingley asked enthusiastically.

“It sounds like a place worth viewing. As for me, I would only be able to join you in late August. I have family obligations, including Easter at Rosings Park. My sister’s companion has asked if she may take Georgiana to Ramsgate in the summer, so I will escort them there in June. I will be spending part of the summer with my sister after completing business in London,” Darcy averred. “Who will be your hostess?”

“One of my sisters, Caroline more than likely,” Bingley admitted.

“Bingley, I have tolerated your sister for our friendship, but if it gets too much living under the same roof, you must know that I will depart. You remember that I told you there are *no* circumstances—including a compromise—under which I will offer for Miss Bingley, do you not?” Darcy reminded his friend pointedly.

“Yes, I do remember that Darce.” Bingley chose not to mention the message had never been passed onto his sister.

After Bingley departed Darcy House, the master made his way to Matlock House, where his uncle and two aunts were located. “Welcome William,” Lord Matlock said in a jovial manner.

“Next week I will be in Hertfordshire for two days and one night. I would be happy if you could host Gigi and Mrs. Younge for those two days,” Darcy requested.

“William! For shame that you think you need to ask. Of course, our niece will be welcome,” Lady Elaine exclaimed.

“If you choose to, you may give Mrs. Younge two days off, as I believe my brother, sister, and I will be able to look after our niece without losing her,” Lady Catherine teased. None of the three sitting across from Darcy liked Mrs. Younge, but their stubborn nephew would not hear any word against her without concrete proof, so they stayed their tongues on the subject.

“Thank you, Aunt Cat; that is a good suggestion. I am sure Mrs. Younge would enjoy a few extra days for herself,” William agreed.

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One of the Darcy travelling coaches pulled up under the portico at Netherfield Park the third week of January. Bingley and Darcy were met by Mr. Phillips. After greetings, they entered the manor house.

Darcy saw a solid structure and had seen nothing negative in the Park. The house had been well built, and he did not notice any problems inside that might indicate the estate had been neglected. After a tour of the house, the two men met with the steward and toured the home and tenant farms.

The two visiting men had been supplied horses from Netherfield’s stables. Mr. Phillips explained the landlord owned a half dozen horses stabled at Netherfield. Just as with the park and house, Darcy was impressed by the way the farms were maintained.

All tenant dwellings were in good repair and looked reasonably comfortable. With his experienced eye, Darcy could see someone was taking good care of the tenants and their needs.

“Darcy, do you see any reason I should not lease this estate?” Bingley asked as the two friends hung back on the walk back to the manor house.

“No Bingley. It looks like a good place for you to learn,” Darcy replied.

“So, I may lease it?” Bingley verified enthusiastically.

“It seems so,” Darcy permitted.
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Before they departed, the two men met Mr. Phillips in Meryton, and Bingley signed a one-year lease commencing on the first day of October. The current lessee would leave by the middle of September at the latest.

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The friends parted ways when they arrived back in Town after an enjoyable night at the Red Rooster Inn in Meryton. On his return to his town home on Curzon Street, Bingley decided discretion was the better part of valour and did not mention the estate he had leased to his sisters.

He was well aware Caroline’s desire was for him to take an estate near Pemberley.

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Chapter 3

March 1810

Hunsford was a small market town adjacent to Rosings Park, and the living attached to the parish of Hunsford was under the patronage of the master of that estate. As he had with many things that he counted inconsequential, the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh deferred to his wife when appointing a new rector some eighteen years previously.

The man, Mr. John Branch, was in his fifties when he was awarded the living. He was not the best clergyman Sir Lewis had ever encountered, but he knew his wife chose him for the deference, bordering on sycophantism, the man had shown her.

Until the tragedy six years ago, Lady Catherine had been intimately involved in the running of all aspects of Hunsford Parish, including the text of sermons. The one thing her husband had drawn the line at, however, was when he found out Mr. Branch shared confidences of parishioners with his patroness.

Lady Catherine had been taken aback by the vehemence with which her husband objected. He made clear to his wife that he would inform the Bishop of Kent a clergyman in his diocese was breaking canon law. The disclosure would lead to Mr. Branch being defrocked, which caused the great lady to relent.

At first, after the change in his patroness subsequent to the death of her husband and daughter, Hunsford's parson had been lost until he again started to discharge his duties without detailed instruction from Lady Catherine.

His wife had been most pleased, as for the first time since they had moved into the parsonage, she was able to manage her own household without any officious interference from her husband's patroness. They had two sons and a daughter, all of whom were married and living in their own homes, so Mr. and Mrs. Branch had the parsonage to themselves—when their children and grandchildren were not visiting.

In February, Mr. Branch had passed away in his sleep. Richard allowed his widow as much time as she needed to move out of the parsonage. By mid-March, a grieving Mrs. Branch had left to live with her daughter, son-in-law, and four grandchildren in Surrey.

Not far from Westerham—where Hunsford was located—was the town of Chilham. The town was on the Pilgrims Way leading to Canterbury. St. Mary's, the old church in the town, had employed a curate for the last six months, a Mr. William Collins.

When Richard applied to the rector at St. Mary's, with Mr. Collins agreement, he released his curate from his duties to serve at Hunsford. He would either be gifted the living himself or would serve until another took up the living. It was the habit of some to sell the livings within their purview, but no one in Richard's extended family believed in that practice.

Lady Catherine allowed Richard to decide who would fill the living on a permanent basis, and never tried to insert her unasked-for opinion. Richard loved his aunt dearly, and he did solicit her opinion whenever he felt the need; he wanted her comfortable and her preferences to be considered with his own.

He asked for her opinion of the curate from St. Mary's after the first service he led, on the last Sunday of March. Both had been impressed by the curate's attention to the congregants. He did not ignore them to bow and scrape to the master of Rosings or his highborn aunt.

As the mistress of the estate, Lady Catherine extended an invitation to Mr. Collins for their after-church meal. "From where do you hail Mr. Collins?" Richard asked when the three were sitting in the drawing room enjoying some tea after a satisfying meal.

"My late parents had a small cottage in Crickdale, Wiltshire. My mother passed twenty years ago, and my father while I was in the seminary before I took orders," Collins shared.

"Do you have any other family, Mr. Collins?" Lady Catherine enquired.

"Yes, I have a distant cousin in Hertfordshire. The family name is Bennet; his estate, Longbourn is entailed away from the female line. My

cousin has five daughters and no son, so I am the heir presumptive," Collins explained.

"It would be a terrible thing to be displaced from the home one grew up in simply because they are of the incorrect gender," Lady Catherine opined.

"Unfortunately, there was a breach in the family due to a disagreement between my grandfather and the Bennets of Longbourn," Collins admitted.

"We will not try to force a confidence Mr. Collins," Richard interjected. "I must tell you we were both impressed by your way of conducting the service, and your sermon spoke to everyone."

"Thank you, Mr. Fitzwilliam. I thank you both for your hospitality. I am invited to dinner at one of the parishioners, so it is with appreciation I take my leave," Collins bowed to both and made his exit.

"What do you think Aunt Cat?" Richard asked after they heard the butler close the front door.

"We have only seen him perform his duties once—with aplomb I must say. In my opinion, however, we need to see how he executes his duties over the next few weeks. The opinion of the Hunsford parishioners will be most important."

"In that case, we will wait and see. There is no need to make a hasty choice," Richard agreed.

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"How pleasant it would be not to be alone for Easter," Miss Bingley said, dropping a none too subtle hint as she and her older sister were visiting their *dear friend*, Miss Georgiana Darcy.

The fact that the girl was but fifteen made no difference to the insincere woman. Darcy knew full well the harridan thought he would take notice of her if she fawned over his sister. It seemed she would never learn. "Bingley told me you were invited to spend the holiday with your family in Scarborough," Darcy averred, not taking the bait Miss Bingley so liberally spread around for him.

"That is so far, and there are no people of fashion there. It would be better if we were invited to visit a place closer to Town," Miss Bingley
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cooed as she batted her eyelids in what she believed was a coquettish fashion.

Rather than attract him, it made Darcy's stomach turn. He could see his sister wanted nothing more than to be rid of the cloying woman as well. "We have an appointment, Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst. Have a good day," Darcy stated in dismissal. Even Miss Bingley could not mistake that they were being asked to leave. With as much good grace as she could muster—which was not much—the woman, who looked like she was dressed for a ball at St. James, and her sister departed reluctantly.

An hour later, Bingley was shown in. Darcy had no doubt he had been sent by his sister to solicit an invitation to Rosings. He held up his hand before he allowed Bingley to speak. "If you are here to plead for an invitation to Rosings Park, save your breath to cool your porridge. Even *if* I desired to invite your sisters and Hurst, it is not my place to do so. How many times must your sister be told the same thing?"

"She was so disappointed I had to…" Bingley started, "I do not want to prevaricate, she demanded I not return without an invitation."

"You have my sympathy, my friend, but unless you are willing to stand up to your sister, you will never achieve the peace you desire." Darcy was sure his friend would not do so, but he needed to say it, nonetheless.

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"What do you think Aunt Cat?" Richard asked after Mr. Collins third Sunday in the pulpit at Hunsford.

"Let me ask you nephew, what have you heard from the parishioners?" Lady Catherine answered with her own question.

"You know I liked it more when you took charge and just told everyone what to do Woman," Richard jested.

"No, you did not." She smiled, as he helped her laugh at her former faults and attitudes.

"The reports from the parishioners are all positive," Richard informed his aunt as he became more serious. "That, coupled with his manner of conducting services, leads me to think he is the man for the job."
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“Then it seems you know what to do without my input, do you not?” she replied serenely.

“Collins will be joining us for the meal after services. I will offer him the living then,” Richard decided.

“Richard, are you concerned—like the rest of us are—about Mrs. Younge not being what she seems?” Lady Catherine asked worriedly.

“My thoughts and feelings have been expressed to William, but he insists his judgement is sound. If I try to bring up the fact we are supposed to be co-guardians, he is dismissive.” Richard paused for a thought. “I am worried about him Aunt Cat. The proud, haughty man he is now is not the one I knew before Uncle Robert passed away. He is almost rude to those he thinks below him.”

“Except to the Bingleys,” Lady Catherine pointed out. “He does not see the contradiction in his treatment of others, while he is seems blind to their status as children of a tradesman. Personally, I think Bingley is a good man, just without any backbone and too easily manipulated by his sister—who he refuses to take in hand—and abrogates his responsibility for decisions by deferring to others, especially William.”

The butler announced Mr. Collins, so discussion of their concerns about Darcy ceased. After the meal, Richard asked Collins to meet him in his study where he offered the living to the clergyman.

Collins accepted gratefully and asked for a few days to move his possessions from his little cottage near St. Mary’s church, which Richard readily granted. In addition, a cart and trap were placed at the new parson’s disposal to assist with his move.

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“Your new rector seems to do a credible job,” Darcy announced after Easter services at the Hunsford Church. “He is mayhap a little young to have a living, but from what I can tell he is well liked by the congregants.”

“As your approval is hard to earn,” Richard jested—only partly, “it is that much more appreciated when granted.” Richard gave his younger cousin a bow with a flourish.
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“Do not be facetious Richard,” Darcy returned. He did not miss that his cousin’s jest was a disguised criticism.

After Easter dinner, Georgiana sat with her aunts and cousin Marie while the three men enjoyed their drinks. “Do you think I have done something to upset William?” she asked the three older women.

“Why on earth would you think that Gigi?” Lady Catherine asked concernedly.

“I hardly see him. He created an establishment for me, where it is only Mrs. Younge, other servants, and me. He is always busy, and I see him less than once a week. I must have done something to anger him because he hardly has time for me.” The young girl was crying softly by the end of her speech.

“He obviously has a lot of business to attend to Gigi,” Lady Matlock tried to think of a reason for her nephew’s change in behaviour.

“When I asked if I was allowed to come visit Rosings to be with Richard and Aunt Cat, he told me I have too many lessons,” Georgiana shared.

‘*Could it be my nephew is punishing us for questioning the companion he selected? Is his pride so great he cannot accept anyone disagreeing with him? I worry William has turned inward far too much. I do not know how much longer I will be able to remain silent. William needs to be woken up. It will take some patience, as I do not want to push him away so he withdraws even further into himself.’* Lady Catherine mused silently.

By the time the men entered the drawing room, Georgiana had dried her eyes and put herself to rights so her brother did not notice anything amiss. Georgiana agreed to play for her relations. It was something new for her as she had always been too shy to exhibit in front of others, even her family members.

In mid-May, the Fitzwilliams departed for Snowhaven and Hilldale, and the Darcys for Town. Darcy had business to see to before he transported his sister and her companion to his house in Ramsgate.

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In mid-June, Mr. Collins was a dinner guest at Rosings. “Mr. Collins, may I ask a question?” Lady Catherine opened after she poured three cups of tea as they relaxed in the drawing room. “If you feel it is not something you wish to answer, please tell me so.”

“Please ask, your Ladyship,” Collins allowed.

“We only have so much family in this world, and if I understood what you told us when we first met, your only family are these Bennets, from whom you are estranged.” Collins allowed it was so. “Do you have any personal issue with them?”

Collins considered the question for a minute. “No Lady Catherine, I do not. In fact, I have never met them,” he admitted.

“Do you know what caused the breach?” Lady Catherine prodded gently.

“I do. My late grandfather used to be named Bennet. Some generations before a younger Bennet son had moved to Wiltshire and over the years the Wiltshire Bennets became estranged from the Hertfordshire family. The reason for the estrangement is not known. My grandfather compromised the current master of Longbourn’s aunt thinking it would somehow gain him access to Longbourn’s coffers. He never received anything besides a fraction of his wife’s dowry as there was a stipulation about compromise and only allowing ten percent of the dowry to be released in that circumstance.

“The Bennets refused to acknowledge him after that, so he changed his name to Collins—his mother was a Collins—and passed his hate of that branch of the Bennet family onto his son—my father,” Collins revealed.

“And I assume your father did—or tried to do the same with you? Did he succeed in turning you against your unknown cousins?” Lady Catherine asked.

“He tried, but I have always kept my own counsel on the subject; he merely assumed I felt as he did. One of the tenets of our faith is forgiveness. I feel as a clergyman it is my humble duty to offer an olive branch and heal the breach. I am not sure, however, that if I make an overture it will be welcomed by my Cousin Bennet,” Collins said contemplatively.

“It sounds like a laudable aim,” Richard opined.

“Unless you reach out to him, you will never know. I have heard it said, nothing ventured, nothing gained,” Lady Catherine prompted.

“It is a good suggestion. I am not willing to leave the congregation yet. Mayhap I will write to my cousin later in the year and see if he would agree to my visiting Longbourn. Would you be willing to allow me a sennight if he is receptive Mr. Fitzwilliam?” Collins asked.

“Up to a fortnight will be acceptable, as long as we have a clergyman able to fill your place while you are away,” Richard granted.

So it was that Collins resolved to write to his cousin near the end of the summer.

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Chapter 4

July 1810

Rosings Park was hosting Richard's parents, his brother Andrew, and his sister-in-law Marie, who was with child and who had felt the quickening a few days past. The family arrived at the end of June, bearing a letter containing the news that William had decided to visit his sister earlier than planned as his business had concluded unexpectedly.

On the second day of July, the family spied a coach approaching the portico while they were in the gardens, enjoying a cool breeze. Richard stood to get a better look at the carriage. "Why, that is William's; I did not think he was to visit us. Did he not go to Ramsgate to spend time with Gigi?"

"That is what his letter said," Lady Catherine confirmed.

Everyone in the garden walked over to greet their cousin as his vehicle came to a halt. What they saw inside it caused them to stop in their tracks. Darcy was sitting hunched over with his head in his hands, looking like the world was ending. What frightened them was that Gigi was crying and would not look at any of them. Of even greater concern, Mrs. Younge was conspicuously absent.

The ladies, shocked at the level of despair within the carriage, and that no one extended a happy greeting, made their way to where the men stood. "Come Gigi," Lady Catherine said as she reached into the coach and coaxed her niece out.

"You will all…want to…cut me when…" Georgiana attempted to speak while sobbing. She spoke no further as she was quietly shushed and tucked tightly into her aunt's embrace.

"Elaine and Marie, let us help this poor girl into the house," Lady Catherine said. She turned to her brother. "Reggie, find out what happened so we are able to help." She and Elaine led the distraught girl inside; Marie followed closely behind. "Marie, please have Mrs. Toppin have water sent up for a bath for Gigi."

“William. WILLIAM!” Richard demanded his cousin’s attention when the ladies were inside. “What in the blazes is going on? Why is Gigi weeping, and why were you not comforting her? Why are you sitting there doing nothing, looking like there has been a disaster?”

“There has been one,” Darcy returned weakly.

“Not here,” Lord Matlock interrupted abruptly. “Let us go inside to a sitting room. There is no need for anyone else to hear whatever it is that William needs to tell us.”

It was when Darcy stepped out of the coach—as if in a stupor—his tear-stained cheeks were visible to his uncle and cousins. “Have my cousins’ trunks unloaded and brought up to their suites,” Richard instructed Mr. Toppin, the butler.

The men made their way to a sitting room; the Countess and Lady Catherine were but a few minutes behind them. “Gigi is bathing and Marie is with her, after that she will be given a calming draught to help her sleep. Once she has drifted off, Marie will join us,” Lady Catherine reported. “What happened?”

“That is what we want to know,” Lord Matlock stated, staring down at his nephew sitting in a chair and holding his head in his hands again.

“My arrogance and pride almost caused my sister to be lost forever,” Darcy stated in a barely audible voice. None had ever seen William looking this close to being broken before.

The family members present all had a strong suspicion that whatever had happened was connected to the missing companion. There was no point in his family reminding him he had been unwilling to listen to any criticism of Mrs. Younge, because they understood he was berating himself more than any of them could.

“Here William, drink this,” Lady Catherine handed him a snifter of brandy—two fingers high. “All of it,” she insisted when he was about to put it down with half still in it.

“I was so sure of my own judgment, I ignored you all, especially Aunt Cat, when you told me you saw something which did not add up regarding Mrs. Younge,” Darcy stated, his voice now a little louder.

“William, tell us what *happened*,” Lord Matlock insisted.

“May I have some more brandy pleas Aunt?” Darcy held out the snifter.

“One finger this time,” Lady Catherine said, handing her nephew the brandy.

“Gigi is asleep, although it is a fitful slumber,” Marie reported when she joined the rest of the family.

Darcy gulped the brown liquor down. “As you know, I decided to visit Gigi in Ramsgate a few days earlier than expected.” There were nods from the six members of his family. “Thank God I did.”

“Whatever it is, we will address it as a family; there is strength in numbers,” Lady Catherine attempted to assure her nephew.

“If I had listened to you about Mrs. Younge, *none* of this would have happened; it was all my fault,” Darcy rasped plaintively.

“Now is not the time for recriminations William,” Richard attempted. He knew the family’s imaginations were running as rampant as his own.

They were now sure whatever had happened was connected to Mrs. Younge and had caused Georgiana to regress greatly. She had been blooming and shedding her shyness when last they saw her, the girl who arrived at Rosings was unable to speak.

“When I arrived, I did not see a footman on duty at the door, so I opened it myself and entered my house. I saw Mrs. Younge looking through a slightly open door into the drawing room. She heard me behind her and spun around to chastise one she assumed was a footman—I found out later she had given all of the servants the night off. When she saw me, she blanched and almost fainted. I ordered one of the footmen who had arrived with me to detain her, as my suspicion was aroused.

“It was then I heard Gigi giggle inside the drawing room followed by *his* voice!” William’s look went from despondent to fury in an instant. “Wickham was in the drawing room with Gigi, unchaperoned! When I threw the door open, he turned white, and then recovered enough to tell me smugly we were to be brothers as he was betrothed to my sister. Gigi saw my look of absolute fury and all happiness vanished from her countenance

as she realised, contrary to whatever her *suitor* told her, I was anything but happy."

"Did that libertine ruin our girl?" Lady Catherine asked the pertinent question, one she dreaded to hear answered, as they all did.

"No, I do not believe so. From what I was able to gather from her, the most they did was kiss. I informed the blackguard that without the *prior* approval of both her guardians, not one penny of her dowry—not even the interest—would be released until she was five and thirty. As you can imagine, that placed a dent in his plans. He wanted money as soon as he crossed the border with her, not twenty years later.

"When he learnt he would receive nothing of her dowry, Wickham became most abusive, telling Gigi the only attractive thing about her was her fortune. Then the libertine told my poor sister he would not wait twenty years with one so unappealing and made to leave. It was not until his disdainful and hurtful words in the drawing room that Gigi realised her supposed protector had assisted a snake to manipulate her and her tender loving heart from the beginning," Darcy related to his family.

"Gigi started to cry and reminded him that he told her he loved her. The bastard, sorry ladies, laughed! When he did, I planted a facer, and I do believe I broke his nose. In my fury, I told him if he breathed one word about this escapade to anyone, I would call in the over two thousand pounds of his vowels I hold and have him in Marshalsea for the rest of his miserable life." As he continued the story some of his anger dissipated, while it increased for the other men in the room. Unlike them, Darcy had some time to face the facts, and now thought only about his sister, who had believed herself in love and was nursing a broken heart.

"What about Mrs. Younge?" Lady Catherine enquired.

"She is one of Wickham's paramours. Her characters were counterfeits." Darcy hung his head in shame. How many times had his relatives urged him to check her characters in person, not just accept them at face value? "The two of them planned to isolate my sister from me. Wickham met Gigi *by chance* one day as she and Mrs. Younge were walking on the boardwalk near the beach. After that, he seemed to be wherever they were. Gigi thought it providence that they met each day. After a few days, Wickham

was calling on her at the house, and Mrs. Younge would contrive to leave them alone.

“When Gigi asked her companion if it was proper for her to be alone with Wickham, Mrs. Younge assured her no one would object to an old family friend calling on her. Thanks to my neglect, she was lonely, and in but a few days believed herself in love with him. She agreed to an elopement, which would have taken place two days after I arrived. She was convinced it would be a pleasant surprise if they could greet me as man and wife when they arrived at Darcy House.

“If she is not ruined, why is Gigi so devastated?” Richard asked.

“She feels shame as she knew better. She knew that the family would never accept a steward’s son as her husband and she should never have agreed to an elopement. When I asked why, given her awareness of those two salient points, she told me she was lonely and wanted to feel loved,” Darcy stated sorrowfully. “I have made so many errors. It started with my arrogant thinking that I the son, was protecting my father by not telling him about Wickham, and then trying to protect and shelter my sister in the same manner. You were correct Richard; I did her no favours by hiding the truth about Wickham from her.”

“William, all you can do is learn from your mistakes. There is no way to change the past. Self-flagellation will not help you, and it certainly will not heal Gigi,” Lady Catherine told her nephew gently. “The question is, what do we do going forward?”

“I will cancel my visit with Bingley at his new estate at the end of next month,” Darcy stated.

“Before you do that, let us see how Gigi is first. It may be better for her recovery if you are not here to hover over her constantly. You wear that damnable mask of late, even around us. I wager if she sees it, she will think you are angry with her,” Lady Catherine proposed. “My suggestion is she remain here so I will be able to help her. And Richard is, after all, her *co*-guardian.”

“William, I agree with my sister,” Lady Elaine added. “It may be better for both of you to separate while she recovers here with us.”

“Will you and Uncle Reggie remain in Kent if I agree, and leave her to recuperate here?” Darcy asked. ‘*Mayhap time with her aunts and Richard will be good for her. It certainly cannot be worse than my actions,’* Darcy reproved himself silently.

“We must return to Hilldale, so we are not able to remain,” Andrew informed the family as he looked lovingly at his Marie.

“In that case, I will remain with all of you here until I meet Bingley in London next month.” Seeing his Aunt Cat’s raised eyebrows Darcy added. “I promise I will not inhibit Gigi’s recovery.”

The rest of the family agreed it would achieve nothing to point out all of William’s errors, so they moved forward and concentrated on trying to repair the damage to Gigi’s psyche.

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“What do you mean by leasing an estate in the wilds of Hertfordshire? Did I not tell you we needed to find one near Pemberley?” Miss Bingley screeched. “How could you take an estate without allowing me to inspect it first? What will Mr. Darcy say about this estate in the middle of nowhere?”

“Actually Caroline, Darcy was with me when I inspected the estate. He heartily approved of it as a good situation for me to learn about estate management, and it is only a one-year lease after all. I have not purchased the place and will not do so unless Darcy advises me to,” Bingley explained.

As soon as he mentioned Mr. Darcy’s approval, Miss Bingley’s mouth shut with a clack. One thing she would never do was gainsay Mr. Darcy. Therefore, if he approved of the estate Charles leased, she was satisfied.

“Why did you not tell me that right away?” Miss Bingley demanded.

“You were too busy berating him,” Hurst added. It amused him how easy it was to make his wife’s sister change a position merely by mentioning Mr. Darcy.

“Have some more brandy,” Miss Bingley sniped.

“If you do not want to be my hostess, then I will ask Louisa to fill the office for me,” Bingley gave his sister the choice.
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“It may be worth my while to stay in town with Miss Hampton-Jones.” Miss Bingley thought about how many times she would be able to call on her *dear friend*, Miss Darcy.

“In that case, Louisa will be my hostess. Lulu, you know Mr. Darcy’s preferences, do you not?” Bingley slyly asked his older sister.

“Why would Louisa need to know about my—err—Mr. Darcy’s preferences?” Miss Bingley demanded.

“Did I not mention Darcy will join us about a week after we take up residence? He plans to remain until a few weeks prior to Christmastide,” Bingley informed his sister nonchalantly.

“I will be willing to forgo my *best* friend’s company to be your hostess,” Miss Bingley made another about face.

“You will not disappoint Miss Hampton-Jones?” Hurst asked. “I am sure she will be bereft of your scintillating company.”

Miss Bingley glared at her lout of a brother-in-law and flounced out of the drawing room; her nose high in the air.

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Darcy planned on leaving Rosings Park for Town and continuing to Hertfordshire a day later. He felt more like himself again, and although he admitted in *this* case he had erred, he continued to feel he was generally correct in his judgements.

He had been chastened, and was still worried about his sister, but in essentials he was the same haughty man—quick to judge and believing most others were below him in consequence. His Aunt Cat had hinted at the contradiction between how he thought of most people, and how he related to the Bingleys; like much else, Darcy dismissed what she said as it did not square with what he believed of himself.

He was unable to see how similar his thinking was to that which had led him to reject others’ opinions about Mrs. Younge before Ramsgate. At least he had been open to his family’s input in finding a new companion.

A good friend of his Aunt Elaine had a daughter who was about to marry. A Mrs. Annesley had been her companion for over five years; she
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was a lady who had been widowed at two and twenty and left with little in the way of funds. Her current employer, the Countess of Ridley, gave a glowing report, as did three other employers whose daughters she had shepherded for some years each.

This time, he spoke with everyone providing the characters in person. Unlike Gigi's previous companion, Mrs. Annesley was all that was good, so although she was older—in her forties—she was employed as Miss Darcy's new companion.

Since Mrs. Annesley joined his household, his sister had begun to recover more than she had with only her two aunts for support. Lady Catherine opined that, as Mrs. Annesley was an outsider, her niece saw her as objective. Regardless of the reason, Darcy was pleased his sister was improving, so he decided to keep his appointment with Bingley at his friend's leased estate.

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A few days subsequent to the new tenants of Netherfield taking up residence, Mr. Bennet had called on Mr. Bingley, after telling his wife he would not, he sat in his study with a letter in his hand. It was from Mr. William Collins.

Bennet had no idea if the man was different from his grandfather or father, both of whom had been anathema to his family. He thought if the son was as ignorant as the father, he would be amused by the letter, so he read it; he would never turn down an opportunity to laugh at someone.

> *1 August 1810*
>
> *Hunsford Parsonage, Westerham, Kent*
>
> *Cousin Bennet,*
>
> *The disagreement existing between you and my late father always made me wonder why said disagreement survived my grandfather—who was the one who offended your family.*
>
> *Moreover, as a clergyman I feel it my duty to promote and establish peace in all families within the reach of my influence; how am I able to do so credibly if*
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I ignore the breach in our own? You and your family are all the family I have left in the world, and as far as I can tell, the reverse is true as well.

I pray you will not reject this offered olive-branch. I am sure the entail hanging over the heads of your family cannot be easy. Neither you nor I were party to its creation, so all we can do is to live with the consequences of our great-grandfather's decision. I beg leave to apologise for the actions of my grandfather, as I am sure no one in my family has ventured the same before.

This past Easter, I was gifted the living at the parish of Hunsford by the Honourable Mr. Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of the Earl of Matlock. His aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, resides with him and is the mistress of his estate of Rosings Park. She suggested that unless I attempted to reach out to you, I would never know if you might be open to a reconciliation. Hence, my letter to you is long overdue.

If you have no objection to receiving me into your home and are willing to extend an invitation, I propose the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, 19 November, in the afternoon.

I trust you have enough time to consult with your wife and let me know if you are willing to invite me to Longbourn. Among the many topics I am sure we would find to discuss as strangers are wont to do, I would like to discuss all the ways we may be able to alleviate the stress of the entail on your family.

If you are amenable to inviting me, I shall probably trespass on your hospitality for about a sennight. Again, this would depend on your convenience and agreement.

I look forward to meeting you and your family and placing the disagreements of the past where they belong —squarely in the past.

Sincerely,

William Collins

'*How am I able to make sport of a sensible, well written, and thoughtful letter*?' Bennet asked himself, astounded that it was the farthest thing from what he expected when he broke the seal.

Bennet agreed with his cousin's sentiment neither of them should be beholden to a disagreement that began over forty years in the past. Still shocked by how different William Collins seemed from his father, Bennet sought out his wife and wordlessly handed her the missive.

"Why would I want to read a letter from that disagreeable man who will steal my home from me when you die," Fanny Bennet sniffed with disdain.

"Mrs. Bennet, read the letter and then make your pronouncements," Bennet suggested.

After complaining about how the man's name would cause her to have an attack of her *nerves*, Mrs. Bennet read the letter. To her own surprise, she too was not unhappy. "Oh yes, Mr. Bennet, please invite your cousin for as long as he chooses to remain. Mr. Bingley will marry Jane, and mayhap he will want a lively wife like my Lydia." Fanny jumped right to making matrimonial plans. After all, getting all her girls married—well married—was her life's work.

"In that case, I will reply to my cousin forthwith and extend an open-ended invitation." Bennet was not sure if his cousin would look for—never mind find—a wife among his daughters, but he would not pass up a chance to laugh at his wife's inept matchmaking attempts.

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Chapter 5

November 1810

“Welcome home Mr. Collins. I understand from what Richard told me of your letter that you are courting one of your cousins?” Lady Catherine enquired as she poured tea after dinner.

“Yes, I am. That was not my aim in visiting my cousins, but Miss Mary Bennet, Mary, and I are very compatible. She is a studious young lady. I understand from my cousins Jane and Elizabeth—Jane is the eldest, and Elizabeth next before Mary—that she is always helping Longbourn’s parson with good works, not to be seen doing them, but for the correct reasons. While all five of my cousins are very pretty, in my opinion none were more so than Mary.” Collins was not normally so verbose, so it was telling that he was so voluble about his cousins in general and Miss Mary Bennet in particular.

“Did you happen to see my nephew while you were at your cousin’s estate?” Lady Catherine asked.

“If you did, I would like to know how William acquitted himself with the locals,” Richard said. Both wanted to hear the parson’s impressions, as on several occasions Gigi had innocently mentioned how her brother had written of a Miss Elizabeth Bennet in his letters. Normally, Darcy would not give attention to any particular lady, so for him to mention any lady once, never mind multiple times, was exceptional.

“If it is all the same to you, I would prefer not to speak ill of your relative,” Collins stated diplomatically.

“What has my nephew done?” Lady Catherine asked exasperatedly.

“Are you sure you want to know?” Collins asked. “It was very surprising that a close relative of yours would behave in such a way, regardless of his position in society.”

“We must know. If we are to address his behaviour, it will not do to be ignorant of what is attributed to him,” Lady Catherine confirmed. ‘*I think it*

is time for my nephew to be addressed regarding his manners and mannerisms. I thought what happened to Gigi due to his blockheadedness regarding the companion he chose for her would have made him look at himself critically. Unfortunately, he did not apply what he learnt in that case to the rest of his life.' Lady Catherine shook her head sadly then returned her attention to Mr. Collins.

"Let me start from when I arrived. My reception was all that was gracious and welcoming, and both my Cousin Bennet and I agreed the past belonged in the past. It must be said my cousin is an indolent man, and it takes much to bestir him from his study. There are five daughters. The oldest is Jane—considered the prettiest girl in the neighbourhood. She is tall and willowy, blond with blue eyes. Next is Elizabeth—or Lizzy as most call her. She is also very pretty—wavy mahogany hair with the greenest of eyes one can imagine—just not in the same way as her older sister. In addition, she is intelligent and possesses a wit as quick as any I have seen.

"After Elizabeth is the sister I am courting, Mary. She has Jane's height and Elizabeth's colouring, but her eyes are hazel with flecks of green and gold, and in my humble opinion is no less pretty than her older sisters. The youngest two are Kitty—Catherine—and Lydia. They are rather undisciplined and wild.

"Catherine, who is almost two years Lydia's senior, follows the girl of fifteen who is brash, flirtatious, and has a head full of officers only. The three older girls are mortified by the behaviour of the younger two. Unfortunately, Lydia is her mother's favourite, so rather than check her, she encourages her outrageous behaviour. I have learnt her youngest is just like she was as a young girl. In my observance, in many ways Mrs. Bennet still is young in mind, and I wonder at my studious cousin's choice as they are quite mismatched.

"The mother's main, or rather only concern, is to see her daughters married, regardless of their inclination. I have spoken to my three oldest cousins, and they are adamant they will only marry for the deepest love, regardless of their mother's desires.

My cousin does nothing to discipline his youngest two no matter how much Lizzy—his favourite—begs him to do so. He merely laughs at them and calls them the silliest girls in all of England. He mocks and teases his

wife in company. That she does not understand she is the butt of his jokes makes it no less objectionable.

One could believe the three older sisters were unrelated to their mother or their younger two sisters. They are poised, observe propriety at all times, intelligent, and act just as gentlewomen should. The older two were taught by their Aunt Gardiner in London, and they took my Mary under their wing. They tried with the two youngest, but neither was interested in changing their ways." Collins completed his picture of his cousins.

"Gardiner? Is this Aunt Gardiner married to an Edward Gardiner who owns Gardiner Trading Company near Cheapside?

"Yes Your Ladyship; he is their uncle," Collins confirmed.

"We briefly met the two eldest Bennet sisters some years ago. Do you remember Aunt?" Richard asked. He had never forgotten the blond who had caught his eye.

"Yes Richard, I do. Please continue, Mr. Collins; I assume we will hear about William—my nephew Darcy—soon."

"There is a bi-monthly assembly in Meryton, one of which was held not long after Mr. Bingley took possession of Netherfield Park. He and his party, including your nephew, attended. I was not in the area yet, but it would be an understatement to say the Netherfield party in general, and your cousin and nephew in particular, left a strong impression, and it was not positive, other than Mr. Bingley.

"I am told there are many more ladies than men at the assemblies, so the local ladies choose to sit out two to three sets each to allow everyone the chance to dance. Your nephew and friends arrived late, I am told, because of Miss Bingley's belief one should always be *fashionably late*.

"Sir William Lucas, a knight and neighbour to my cousins, who acts as host at the assemblies, was introducing the Bingley party to my cousins, when your nephew refused the introduction and stalked off. He ignored the number of women without partners, and only danced a set each with Miss Bingley and her older sister, Mrs. Hurst.

"Bingley became fixated on my Cousin Jane immediately and danced with her. Before his second set with my cousin, he tried to convince Mr.

Darcy to dance. Mr. Bingley told his friend there were many pretty girls; then Mr. Darcy told him he was dancing with the only pretty girl in the room. My cousin Elizabeth was sitting out one of her sets for the reason I described earlier, and Mr. Bingley suggested her as a dance partner, asking if his friend wanted to be introduced.

"My cousin Elizabeth told me she will never forget his words: '*She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me*.' She told me he looked directly at her before uttering those ungentlemanly words loudly enough for others to hear.

"I am sorry if this pains you," Collins stated.

"It is not the hearing of it that pains me Mr. Collins, it is that my nephew has not learnt yet. We had hopes after… Let me say only there was almost a disaster after a serious lapse in his judgement and we hoped it would have lessened his pride, but I see it has not," Lady Catherine replied sadly.

"Is there more Mr. Collins?" Richard asked, even though he feared the answer would be in the affirmative.

"Yes, there *is* more. At gatherings in the neighbourhood, I am told your nephew would stare at Lizzy. Her interpretation is he looks at her to find fault. My opinion is quite the opposite, although I would not chance her sharp tongue to express my opinion to her directly," Collins explained.

"Do you believe my nephew is fixated on Miss Elizabeth?" Lady Catherine asked.

"Yes, Your Ladyship, I do," Collins averred.

"If I know my nephew, due to his wrongheaded pride, and his belief in what honouring the Darcy name means, he is fighting an inclination for Miss Elizabeth, as he feels she is too far below him. In that he is wrong. She is the daughter of a gentleman and he the son of one; in that they are equal," Lady Catherine opined. "He has mentioned Miss Elizabeth at least once in each of his letters to his sister. I would wager he is not doing so consciously."

“Just before I arrived, Miss Bingley invited Jane to Netherfield Park for dinner on an evening when the men had been invited to dine with the newly arrived Derbyshire Militia. Her mother, in a misguided attempt to ensure my cousin would spend more time at Netherfield, sent her on horseback even though it was about to rain. Jane was soaked to the skin, took ill, and had to spend the night. The next day, Lizzy walked three miles—if I have not mentioned it, she loves to walk and can cover great distances on her own two feet—to Netherfield Park and ended up residing there to nurse Jane for four days. I arrived while my cousins were at Mr. Bingley’s estate.

“Mr. Bingley decided to hold a ball which was held two days before I was to return to Rosings. He invited the whole neighbourhood, and all of the officers. But I get ahead of myself. Lizzy reported that although Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst—who she calls both the superior and the supercilious sisters—styled themselves Jane’s friends, they were looking for anything they could to separate her from their brother. By then he had shown a strong inclination to my cousin, and she was falling in love with him. In addition, Lizzy told me when Mr. Darcy was not looking at her with disdain or ignoring her—they sat in the library on one occasion and he never acknowledged her and left without a word after a half hour—he argued with her and seemed to bait her.

“Their mother did not want to send the carriage to collect them until the following week, but after services that Sunday, Jane and Elizabeth took matters into their own hands and borrowed Mr. Bingley’s equipage to return home. My cousin’s wife was most put out, yet she harangued only Lizzy. I did not mention this, but for a reason I cannot fathom she seems to dislike her second daughter. When I asked my cousin, he thought it was a great joke, explaining that his wife blames Lizzy for being born a girl, but not any of the three subsequent daughters she bore.” Collins paused to drink some tea in order to lubricate his throat.

“As a mother who lost her daughter, I will never understand a parent who does not treasure their children,” Lady Catherine stated. She sorrowed anew whenever she thought of all the years she would not have with Anne.

“The next day, we walked into Meryton and that is where we had the distinct *pleasure* of meeting a man who was about to purchase a lieutenant’s commission in the militia, one George Wickham.” Collins reported.

“WICKHAM!” Richard fairly shouted, “what is that wolf in sheep’s clothing doing in the militia?”

“I take it you feel no easier about him than your cousin?” Collins asked. “My cousins and I were talking to Mr. Wickham and another officer when Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy rode up. Mr. Bingley made a beeline for Cousin Jane. Both Lizzy and I saw the moment Mr. Darcy and Wickham saw one another. The former had a thunderous look of fury while the latter went white and appeared fearful. Mr. Darcy wheeled his stallion around and took off at a gallop from whence he came. Mr. Bingley soon followed after he handed the invitation to the ball to Jane.

“That night there was a card party at Mrs. Phillips’s house. She is sister to Mrs. Bennet, and her husband is the local solicitor. Lieutenant Wickham attended with a few other officers. When he found out how much my cousin disliked Mr. Darcy, he spun a yarn which I could tell was full of contradictions, not to mention the impropriety of such a disclosure to a new acquaintance. Lizzy, who is normally an intelligent lady, absorbed the tale without question as it fed her need to dislike Mr. Darcy.

“Both Jane and I tried to point out the impropriety of such a disclosure, never mind the contradictions I identified, but she had closed her mind on the subject. Rather it was that she felt vindicated in her complete disdain and dislike of Mr. Darcy, who she calls ‘*that insufferable, haughty, hateful man’*. She felt with Mr. Wickham’s open and honest—her words—countenance he could not have possibly lied.” Collins relayed with a smile as he remembered the moue of distaste his cousin would affect whenever anyone mentioned Mr. Darcy in her presence.

“How did my cousin behave at the ball?” Richard asked. “He did not insult anyone that night, did he?”

“As far as I know, he did not. In fact, much to Miss Bingley’s distaste, he danced with none but my Cousin Elizabeth. I was close to them in the line, dancing with Mary, who had agreed to a courtship that morning. I noticed they argued for part of the dance, and if I were to hazard a guess, I would say the subject was Mr. Wickham.

“Lizzy still does not see it. Lieutenant Wickham claimed he would not allow Mr. Darcy to chase him away, yet he made your nephew’s presence at

the ball his excuse for not attending. The next day, the entire Netherfield Party unexpectedly closed up the house and departed for London. Mr. Bingley let it be known that he had business in Town and would return in—at the most—a sennight. This leads to a delicate question," Collins informed his listeners.

"Do not stop now, Mr. Collins. Knowledge is power, so we need to hear what the question is," Lady Catherine informed the parson.

"As your niece is in residence with you at this estate, I know part of what Miss Bingley wrote was a lie, but is there some sort of understanding between Miss Darcy and Mr. Bingley?" Collins enquired.

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" Richard emphasised. "My cousin is not yet out; she just turned sixteen!"

"The reason I ask is Miss Bingley wrote a letter to Jane, implying an understanding between her brother and Miss Darcy and claiming she would soon be her sister." Collins waited as the two opposite him seethed.

"It has always been my opinion that Miss Bingley is vulgar, but this is beyond the pale. The woman is naught but a *liar*. Without going into the whole story, you should know that *Mr.* Wickham is a liar, seducer, libertine, profligate, degenerate wastrel. There are other words I might use, but I will be a lady," Lady Catherine informed the parson.

"Wherever Wickham goes, he leaves debts and trifles with maidens. He left a string of ruined girls across the country; he is the worst kind of blackguard," Richard spat out.

"Mr. Darcy knows about Mr. Wickham, does he not?" Collins asked. Both nodded. "But why did he not warn anyone in Meryton? If Mr. Wickham leaves debts, he will ruin some of the merchants."

"Do you happen to know the name of the colonel commanding the Derbyshire Militia?" Richard asked.

"A Colonel Forster," Collins replied.

"Good, I know him well," Richard returned.

"By the time you left, had Miss Bennet heard from Mr. Bingley?" Lady Catherine changed the subject.

“No Your Ladyship. Jane’s plan is to return to London with the Gardiners, who will travel to Longbourn for Christmastide. She hopes to make contact with her *friends* while in London,” Collins informed them. “If you are agreeable, Mr. Fitzwilliam, I will be travelling to Longbourn as much as I can to further my courtship with Mary.”

“As long as there is someone to conduct services as needed, go to it,” Richard permitted.“ Make sure you secure her, for it seems she is your perfect match.”

After Mr. Collins departed, Lady Catherine turned to her nephew. “You know we cannot allow that dastard to wreak havoc on the people of Meryton, do you not Richard?” It was not a question, but a command. “What was William thinking? Is it some warped sense of protecting Gigi that he left the entire town at that wastrel’s mercy?”

“We are going to Meryton, are we not?” Richard asked, and Lady Catherine gave an emphatic nod of her head. “I know Colonel Forster as he and I were captains in the Dragoons together. He was injured, and rather than resign, he took a post in the Militia.”

“Have a good night’s sleep Richard, for we depart for Meryton early in the morning. We will go via London to drop off Gigi with Elaine and Reggie for the day,” Lady Catherine decided.

“I heard my name,” Georgiana said. She had completed her lessons for the day and joined her aunt and cousin in the drawing room.

Without telling her why—as neither thought she was ready to hear the name Wickham yet—Georgiana was informed of their trip to London the next day. She did not ask about her brother, for she was unaware he left Hertfordshire and could be in Town.

Later that day, a letter from her brother arrived. He told his sister he was for Pemberley to meet with his steward and would see her at Snowhaven for the Christmastide holidays.

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Chapter 6

“Fitzwilliam! Welcome to my humble militia office! Are you no longer with the Dragoons?” Colonel Forster indicated chairs for his guests to sit.

“Richard, will you introduce me please,” Lady Catherine requested.

“Aunt Catherine, this reprobate is Colonel Leonardo Forster; Forster, my aunt, the Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh.” Richard made the introductions. “I inherited an estate, resigned, and sold my commission, so I am no longer in the army.”

“Your Ladyship, Fitzwilliam, how may I be of service?” Colonel Forster was wondering what the two were doing in his office. Richard was always welcome but bringing a lady with him meant there could be a serious matter to discuss.

“It is more like what we can do for you Colonel,” Lady Catherine informed him.

“Excuse me if I seem deficient, but how is it that you could help me?” A confused Forster asked.

“Colonel, if I am not mistaken, if you want to be allowed back into a neighbourhood where your unit has been, the goodwill of the citizens is crucial, is it not?” Lady Catherine asked.

“That is so, Your Ladyship,” the Colonel agreed.

“If, hypothetically, you had a cur in your ranks, one who meddles with maidens and runs up debts he has no intention of paying, would you be welcome again in that location?” Lady Catherine challenged.

“No, we most assuredly would not; such a man would blacken the name of the whole battalion, not just this unit,” the Colonel stated. He became concerned, for never had a woman asked him such questions; he was sure there was a pointed purpose for them.

“You have one such man in your midst Forster,” Richard informed his acquaintance.

“Who is he, and how do you know?” Forster asked sharply.

“Lieutenant George Wickham,” Richard replied concisely.

“Wickham? How can that be? He is very popular with both his fellow officers and the residents of the neighbourhood,” Forster exclaimed.

“He is very good at making friends, but whether he is able to retain them is another thing altogether,” Lady Catherine stated plainly. “He has been known to my family since his birth and has intruded on our peace more times than I care to remember.”

“Wait, are you related to that proud, unpleasant man, Darcy?” Forster had been warned by his Lieutenant that Darcy might attempt to blacken his name out of jealousy. “Has Mr. Darcy put you up to this so he may injure Wickham’s prospects again?”

“You know me better than that Forster; Darcy is back in Derbyshire at his estate and has no idea we are here. Until a day ago, we did not know he had run into Wickham until my pastor returned home and informed us,” Richard replied with some asperity.

“Let me guess, the libertine has been spreading his lie my nephew denied him a living at Kympton my late brother-in-law recommended be proffered to him?” Colonel Forster allowed it was so. “As all good liars do, they build their web of deceit on a kernel of truth. My nephew Darcy did deny Wickham the living—a more unsuitable man to be a clergyman I have never known—but that was *after* the wastrel refused to take orders and demanded a pecuniary preferment in lieu of the living.” Lady Catherine looked directly into the Colonel’s eyes so he could see the truth in hers. “Some four years ago, Wickham signed a release of all claims to the living and received a payment of three thousand pounds from my nephew for doing so. That was in addition to one thousand pounds my brother left him in his will. Did your officer tell you that he lived a life of debauchery and dissipation, and then tried to claim the living to which he resigned all claims? He wasted four thousand pounds in but two years.”

“No, he most certainly never told us that.” The Colonel began to think he had been played for a fool and started to feel anger.

“He told you my nephew is jealous of him, did he not?” Lady Catherine continued. The Colonel nodded slowly, guessing this too was a lie. “The reverse is the truth. That individual has always been jealous of my nephew. He thinks he should be handed a fortune just because he wants it. If you check, you will see he has debts with almost every local merchant and has trifled with some young girls, for it has long been his habit to leave debts and a string of ruined girls behind wherever he has resided.”

“My cousin, Darcy, the one whose name this bastard blackens—sorry Aunt Catherine—holds more than two thousand pounds worth of Wickham’s vowels,” Richard revealed.

“Sanderson!” The Colonel called for his adjutant; the captain entered and saluted his commander. “Take some officers and go to every merchant in Meryton, but discreetly. I want to know how much Wickham and the rest of my men owe on credit. Also, find out what his debts of honour and outstanding loans from his fellow officers are. Before you leave, have Wickham brought to my office. Do you know where he is?”

“He is trying to charm one of the Bennet sisters on the High Street.” Saunderson was gratified it was finally time to address this dastard, as he was one of the officers who had not been taken in by Wickham’s slick ways. “I will tell him you have a special task for him.”

“I suggest you two wait in my residence.” The Colonel indicated a door. “I will call you when I am ready for you to join us once again, but you will be able to hear every word.”

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Lieutenant George Wickham was speaking with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, oozing charm, when Captain Sanderson found him. “The Colonel needs you Lieutenant,” the Captain informed the man.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, honour and duty call. I hope I will see you charming and beautiful ladies later,” Wickham bowed over both ladies’ hands.

“Until later, Mr. Wickham,” Elizabeth returned for both sisters.

As the officers walked away, Jane asked, “Lizzy, do you have a tendre for the Lieutenant?”
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“No Jane. He is only a friend,” Elizabeth owned. “I have no tender feelings for the man. Sometimes he seems to try too hard to be charming.”

“Do you still discount the opinion of Cousin Collins concerning Lieutenant Wickham?” Jane probed.

“I do. I saw honesty and openness in his countenance; one who looked so open and pleasant would not prevaricate,” Elizabeth insisted.

“You know I try to see the best in everyone, do you not Lizzy?” Jane tried again to open her sister’s eyes. Elizabeth nodded. “What does it say to you that I tend to agree with Mary’s suitor?”

“It is my belief Mr. Wickham was being truthful,” Elizabeth insisted stubbornly.

Jane dropped the subject. She knew as long as her sister was being wilfully blind, there was no point in talking to her about it. “I heard from Caroline today—finally. She tells of all the time they are in Mr. Darcy’s company and how Mr. Bingley cannot tear himself away from Miss Darcy’s side.” A tear ran down Jane’s cheek. She believed she had fallen in love with Mr. Bingley and now he was gone. Her journey to London could not come fast enough.

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When Lieutenant Wickham arrived at his Colonel’s office, he was shown directly in without waiting. “At ease Lieutenant,” the Colonel ordered after Wickham gave his version of a salute. “Lieutenant, I want to verify everything you told me about Mr. Darcy denying you a living is true, as I have a connection in the Archbishop’s office and we can have this injustice corrected.

“Err…I mean…ahem…” Wickham spluttered.

“Guests, please enter,” the Colonel said with raised voice.

Wickham was confused—until his worst nightmare walked in from the Colonel’s residence with a malevolent look on his face, followed by his aunt who looked no less malevolent than her nephew.

“W-what a-are t-they d-doing h-here?” Wickham stammered.
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“Are you not happy to see us, Georgie boy? Or is our being here inconvenient to all of the lies you have been telling?” Richard leaned toward the cowering man who shrank back from him until he could go no further as a wall blocked his retreat.

“You are lucky your Colonel is here to protect you, you snivelling coward,” Lady Catherine stated menacingly. “If I had my way, you would disappear and never be heard from again, and I doubt there would be anyone who would miss you.”

“It seems you omitted many—actually all of the—facts from your tale of woe Wickham. Just so you know, Captain Sanderson and a contingent of your fellow officers are canvassing the merchants of Meryton to discover your debts. Your penchant for leaving them behind you has been explained to me, but I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt until it is proven otherwise,” the Colonel told Wickham, watching the man become decidedly unsteady as if he could hardly hold himself up by his own power.

How could it have gone so bad so fast? Darcy had left some days earlier, and there was no one in this little nowhere town that knew him, was there? “I s-should g-go to m-my quarters…” Wickham tried to say.

“Do you think your Colonel a simpleton boy?” Lady Catherine asked incredulously. “Go to your quarters indeed. You think you can escape this as you have so many times before? Let me tell you, you ingrate, there is no escaping this time. My nephew Darcy is not here to cover your debts out of some warped sense of honouring his father. You will feel the consequences of your actions for once in your miserable life.”

“W-what a-are you g-going to d-do w-with me?” Wickham asked in a tremulous voice.

“For now, we will wait,” the Colonel told the milksop. “It should not be too long before we know the truth of your debts in Meryton.”

Wickham blanched. He had always been able to make his escape before he was held to account. Darcy would pick up after him, as was only right, for he had so much. Even after ingratiating himself with old Mr. Darcy, what he was given had been an insult! One thousand pounds was all he was left, that and a promise of a living. Wickham never had any intention of

taking orders, but it was a story he could tell that never failed to gain him sympathy.

He had been beyond happy to weave his tale for Miss Elizabeth after she expressed her disdain for Darcy. The added bonus was that Wickham believed Darcy might have tender feelings for the lady, so he had stoked her hate, thereby injuring his nemesis. Being able to blacken Darcy's name was one of the greatest pleasures in his life. All of that was worthless now. The doors were blocked and Wickham did not fail to notice the soldiers guarding the window even if he were willing to risk his face by diving out of it.

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Jane and Elizabeth were watching the officers. "Why do you think that group of officers seem to be visiting every merchant in Meryton?" Jane asked.

"My dearest sister, I have no more knowledge than you," Elizabeth returned. Having a thirst for knowledge, she hated not being able to solve a mystery. "Here comes Captain Sanderson; mayhap he will be able to enlighten us."

"Good afternoon ladies," Sanderson gave the two Bennet sisters a crisp bow.

"Captain, do you mind if I enquire why you and your fellow officers are visiting all of the merchants?" Elizabeth asked.

"It has come to our notice that a certain officer has been running up debts in the town, far more than he is able to cover," Sanderson informed the sisters.

"Is that officer Mr. Wickham?" Elizabeth asked as she had a suspicion based on the man being ordered to the Colonel before the other officers started their enquiries. "Has Mr. Darcy not blasted Mr. Wickham's prospects enough? Is he now casting aspersions on the man's name? It cannot be very much; I am willing to cover his debts with my pin money."

"Do you have upwards of five hundred pounds in pin money, Miss Elizabeth?" Sanderson asked.
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The colour drained out of Elizabeth's face, robbing it of her normal healthy colouring. "How is half such a sum to be repaid?" she gasped in horror.

"Mr. Darcy had nothing to do with this; it was brought to our attention by another man and lady altogether. It seems the man had fooled many of us. The debts I mention pale in comparison to his debts of honour and loans he owes to his fellow officers." Sanderson bowed again and led his men back towards the Colonel's office.

"At some point, Lizzy, you are going to have to start being objective. Not every ill in the world can be laid at Mr. Darcy's door. I fear we may have been misled about Mr. Wickham's character." Jane led her sister back towards Longbourn, as the latter looked to be in shock.

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"Welcome back Sanderson. What did you discover?" the Colonel asked his adjutant.

"The merchants are owed roughly five hundred and twenty pounds," Sanderson reported.

"How did one man accumulate that much debt in two months? It is more than most men earn in several years," a flabbergasted Colonel asked.

"The three biggest are to the cobbler, the tailor, and the inn. He told the former two he was days away from receiving a large inheritance, which he had won from Mr. Darcy in court after the man tried to cheat him out of it. With the poor impression Mr. Darcy made and Mr. Wickham's charming ways, they accepted his order for a large new wardrobe," the Captain clarified.

"And this libertine would have run as soon as he had received the items. The merchants would have been ruined. He has done this before; the only reason there are not a larger number of bankrupted merchants is thanks to my nephew buying up his debts," Lady Catherine informed the militia officers.

"The amount of his debts of honour combined with funds borrowed from his fellow officers is just under one thousand pounds," Sanderson concluded his report.
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“Wicky, why do you bother gambling? You are terrible at it. I suppose when you never intend to pay your debts it makes no difference to you, does it?” Richard barked at the now sullen man.

“I will cover his debts on condition you punish him, and then make sure he cannot harm anyone again. If he steps out of line one more time, to debtor’s prison he will go. I will purchase his vowels from my nephew Darcy. The over two thousand pounds worth he holds combined with those I am to acquire today will put him in debtors’ prison for the rest of his natural life.” Lady Catherine turned to the squanderer, who would not meet her eyes. “If you had used the education my late brother provided you, you could have been a well-off man. When you took the three thousand for the living—which in my opinion once you refused it you should not have received a ha’penny—you told my nephew you were to read the law. You have wasted every chance you were given in order to chase a fortune by dishonest means.”

“You will be flogged and receive twenty lashes. Thereafter, you will remain in the brig until we arrive in Brighton. The merchants in Brighton will be warned not to issue you *any* credit. As lady Catherine stated, if you step out of line I will transport you to Marshalsea, or whichever debtor’s prison she prefers myself,” the Colonel pronounced to the officer who was now shaking with fear.

“Keep an eye on that one Forster, he is as slippery as an eel,” Richard warned.

“He will be under watch at all times once we arrive in Brighton,” the Colonel assured them as he looked at Wickham disdainfully.

Once a bank draft had been provided for all of the debts, Wickham signed the vowel to Lady Catherine and was led away to the brig.

“Again, I must express my thanks for your timely intervention. We would never have been allowed back in this town—if it had survived Wickham’s perfidy—and the honour of the Derbyshire Militia would have been irreparably tarnished.” Colonel Forster bowed to Lady Catherine, who inclined her head in acknowledgement, and then he shook Richard’s hand. The two left for London to prepare for their journey north to Snowhaven for Christmas.

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A few days later, Mr. Bennet returned home after meeting with Colonel Forster and most of the men in the Meryton area. “It seems my cousin was correct in his conclusions about Mr. Wickham’s tale of woe Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet told his second daughter after asking her to join him in his study. “The entire story about being denied a living was a lie built on one tiny truth. Mr. Darcy did deny him the living,” Bennet paused as his daughter interjected.

“I knew he was not lying,” Elizabeth crowed triumphantly.

“Elizabeth Rose Bennet! Allow me to finish,” Elizabeth lost her feeling of vindication as quickly as it had come, for her father never called her by her full name unless he was displeased with her. “It was refused *after* Mr. Wickham refused to take orders and gave up all claim to the living—in writing—and received *three thousand pounds* in lieu of it. That was in addition to a one-thousand-pound legacy Mr. Darcy’s father willed the man.”

Elizabeth felt like casting up her accounts. How had she been so wilfully blind? Unfortunately, it was easy to see the how. As much as she had laughed about Mr. Darcy’s slight at the assembly, it had wounded her pride and vanity very deeply, and she had actively sought any information to confirm her growing disdain for the man.

How many, Jane included, had warned her she only knew one side of the story, only for her to ignore them? She wanted the story to be true to justify her estimation of Mr. Darcy being a black-hearted, proud, haughty, insufferable man. Only now, hearing the bald truth, were her convictions shaken; she hung her head in shame.

“Mayhap in future you will not be so quick to judge and be more open to the opinions of others if they contradict your beliefs.” With that, Mr. Bennet waved his daughter away and returned to his book and port.

Later, when Mrs. Hattie Phillips arrived to share the gossip about Mr. Wickham with her sister’s family, it was with the added information that the blackguard had meddled with at least three merchants’ daughters with a promise of marriage.
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Mrs. Bennet swooned and had an attack of her *nerves*, calling loudly for her salts. Lydia had loudly and vociferously proclaimed that she did not believe one word spoken against Mr. Wickham. Mr. Bennet had already lost good reading time that day by having to attend the meeting so he did not share the information he could have imparted, other than telling Elizabeth.

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Wickham passed out by the fourth of his twenty lashes. As he lay on his stomach—his back on fire with pain—in the brig, he stewed, imagining ways to revenge himself on those who had wronged him. Whatever he did would need to be subtle as the threat of a lifetime in debtor's prison hung over his head.

The last thing he wanted was an angry Richard Fitzwilliam on his trail. Fitzwilliam's leaving the army had in no way diminished the fear Wickham felt for Darcy's cousin. A man as deadly as Richard was the type of man he always steered well clear of, as they were the type that seemed immune to his charms.

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Chapter 7

February 1811

Mr. Collins had proposed to Mary Bennet before Twelfth Night, and she had happily accepted him. The wedding was to take place on the last Friday in February. Mary would be attended by both of her older sisters.

All three ignored their youngest sister, who was acting out and pouting constantly because she would not be the first of her sisters to marry. For once, Kitty did not enter the fray to support Lydia. It seemed Kitty had the decency to know it was Mary's time, and that Lydia's attention demanding behaviour was not acceptable. Lydia, angered, verbally attacked Kitty loudly.

Lydia's behaviour pushed Kitty out of her younger sister's orbit and into that of her three older sisters. As for the older sisters, they were pleased at the result, inasmuch as they abhorred Lydia's behaviour. They had long hoped to be able to assist as least one—if not both—of their younger sisters to become gentlewomen.

As usual, Mr. Bennet found amusement in his youngest's behaviour and did nothing to restrain her. While her father laughed at her antics, Mrs. Bennet—as pleased as she was to have one of her daughters marry the heir to Longbourn—refused to discipline her youngest daughter.

No one who cared to notice missed the anger bubbling below the surface of Jane's serene countenance. Elizabeth, Mary, and Kitty did what they could to change the subject when either Mr. or Mrs. Bennet brought up Mr. Bingley yet again, which caused Jane to lose her equanimity. The former thought himself amusing and joked about Jane being crossed in love, while the latter berated her daughter for *allowing* dear Mr. Bingley to escape before securing him.

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The night before the wedding, Mrs. Bennet had given Mary the *talk* as she saw it, which frightened her middle daughter so much she was nearly ill. Thankfully, Aunt Maddie had spoken to Mary when the four older
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Bennet sisters travelled to London to purchase Mary's trousseau. Aunt Maddie had warned her that her sister Bennet would talk to her before the wedding and told her to forget everything her mother might say. As Mary remembered her aunt's words and talk, it undid the damage done by Mrs. Bennet, as Aunt Maddie had given her niece information which actually would be useful to her. By the time Mary remembered all her aunt had told her, she was only slightly nervous and far more in anticipation of her wedding night than she ever imagined she might be.

Once their mother left her chambers, Jane, Elizabeth, and Kitty joined Mary to spend time with her on her last night at Longbourn before she resigned the name Bennet. They knew this was the last time they could claim her exclusively; during all future visits her husband, and hopefully their children, would require most of her attention.

"Jane, how can you still think Miss Bingley is not playing you false given the way she treated you when you called on her?" Elizabeth asked pointedly. "Would you make a *friend* wait three weeks for a return call? And Aunt Maddie told me of her rudeness."

"You may have the right of it, Lizzy, but that does not change the fact that Mr. Bingley is paying court to Miss Darcy. It seems Mama is correct about one thing; Mr. Bingley used me ill," Jane responded.

"Jane, Miss Bingley lied to you," Mary asserted. "We are not talking about a misunderstanding, but absolute prevarication."

"How can you say that with certainty Mary?" Jane enquired sceptically.

"You know my betrothed's patron is Mr. Darcy's cousin Mr. Fitzwilliam, do you not?" Her three sisters nodded. "When he returned to Hunsford in November of last year, he met with his patron and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy's aunt. They asked about Mr. Darcy and how he behaved in Hertfordshire. William was reluctant to speak negatively about Mr. Darcy, but his cousin and aunt encouraged him to tell all, which he did," Mary reported.

"Are you telling me they know of my folly in believing that blackguard Mr. Wickham?" asked a mortified Elizabeth. "Mr. Fitzwilliam and Lady Catherine will be at your wedding; how can I face them? If only I had not

been so prejudiced and had not given into my vanity and pride and listened to what all of you were telling me."

"Lizzy, the man is an accomplished liar, libertine, profligate, and seducer. You are not the first young lady who has believed his web of lies. Further, William specifically told me that neither Mr. Fitzwilliam nor Lady Catherine think worse of you for it. My fiancé added that many women have fallen victim to Mr. Wickham's silver tongue, and far worse than just believing his lies." Mary tried to soothe her older sister.

"What do Mr. Darcy's relatives have to do with your knowing Miss Bingley lied?" Kitty asked, redirecting the group back to the main topic of conversation.

"Yes, back to that. He asked them if there was some sort of understanding between Miss Darcy and Mr. Bingley. Mr. Fitzwilliam is one of Miss Darcy's guardians, and both were angry at there being such a suggestion. In addition, Miss Darcy was at Rosings Park with her family since before Mr. Darcy had arrived at Netherfield Park, so she was not in Mr. Bingley's company as Miss Bingley had written.

"Miss Darcy is just sixteen and will not be out for two or three years. William was very forthright when he reiterated that no one in her family will entertain her being called on, never mind a deeper attachment, until a *season after* she comes out." When Mary completed her recitation, a number of emotions crossed Jane Bennet's face, none of them was sorrow. In the end, anger won out.

"You did not listen to me about that scoundrel, and I ignored your warnings about Miss Bingley. It is probable poor Mr. Bingley was never told I was in London," Jane said angrily.

The lying harpy was lucky she was not near Jane at that moment as she would not have left the room unscathed. As serene as Jane could be, once angered, one did not want to be around for the explosion that would surely follow. Her sisters well knew the fastest way to anger her was to lie to her. '*Mayhap there is a chance Mr. Bingley will come back to me,*' Jane told herself hopefully.

"Lizzy, have you changed your opinion of Mr. Darcy now that we know about Wickham's perfidy?" Mary asked.

“Of cruelty to Mr. Wickham I have fully acquitted the man,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “However, his bad behaviour, not only toward me while here, shows disdain directed at those he thinks below him. He is still insufferable.”

“Had he not slighted you as he did at the first assembly he attended, would you still feel the same way about him?” Jane asked.

“I believe so, yes. There is no reason for him to treat our neighbours in the rude, disdainful, and dismissive way he did while he was here. I have no interest in someone who is so arrogant in their treatment of others,” Elizabeth asserted.

“That is a valid objection against the man,” Mary agreed. “William told me that Mr. Darcy’s cousin and aunt are all that are good and affable, and even though they are the offspring of Earls—the current Earl of Matlock is his father and her brother—they do not treat those below them with disdain.”

“Then I look forward to meeting them, and most especially if, as you say, they will not think less of me for being taken by the libertine’s lies,” Elizabeth declared.

The four then talked about their childhood for another hour or so, and after many hugs and kisses, her three visitors left Mary’s chambers to return to their own. Mary, who had fallen in love with her soon-to-be husband, stayed awake for some time thinking about her William, who was being hosted by their close friends the Lucases at Lucas Lodge for the night. She finally succumbed to sleep as she counted the many blessings in her life, which included her friends, her sisters, and the man who fell in love with her regardless of the attempts of her mother to persuade him to another of her sisters.

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The night before Mr. Collins’s wedding, Lady Catherine, Richard, and Georgiana Darcy spent the night at the renamed Fitzwilliam House. Darcy was still hiding at Pemberley, licking his wounds from the discussion he had been subjected to. His family could only hope he would finally wake up to the way others saw his behaviour. As Lady Catherine sat in her sitting room, she thought back to December of last year at Snowhaven.
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When the family had gathered at the main Matlock estate for Christmastide, Darcy had boasted how he had saved his friend Bingley from a woman who was unsuitable. She had no fortune, connections, and no feelings for Bingley. He was proud of how he and Bingley's sisters had separated his friend from the lady before he had made for Pemberley.

He went further, crowing about how when Miss Bingley wrote—ostensibly to Gigi—and told him Miss Bennet had called on her and Mrs. Hurst how he had agreed they should not tell her brother.

The smug man had not been prepared for the reaction of his family, from the Earl down to his mild-mannered sister. Lady Catherine had led the charge, asking him—a man who did all he could to hide his true feelings from everyone—how he could determine what another felt.

His aunt wanted to know when he was to marry Miss Bingley, as allowing her to write to him meant she would be able to claim a compromise, even given the thin excuse of the letter being for Gigi. She could state everyone knew his sister was not at Pemberley.

Darcy had shrunk back from the harsh reaction of his family. He had been so sure of himself, and yet his family was talking to him as if he were in the wrong. He had only tried to help his friend, had he not?

But that had been nothing to the mortification he felt when Lady Catherine informed him that she and Richard had done what he had failed to do, warn the citizens of Meryton about the wolf in sheep's clothing in their midst. He had started to feel the burn of shame when he was asked why he felt the people unworthy of being warned, especially as he enabled the problem by cleaning up after Wickham and paying his debts, rather than preventing him from harming others. When Lady Catherine told the rest of her family the amount of debts the wastrel had accumulated, the disdainful looks Darcy received from all of his family, including Gigi, had hit him hard.

The family judged his sister had recovered enough to be told of Wickham's perfidy in Meryton. Gigi had been unhappy with her brother for not protecting the locals, in the same way he had not protected her and their father by deciding they did not need to be told the truth about the blackguard. When he used the excuse he did not want to expose her, he was

met with a chorus of condemnation. Lady Catherine asked him if he thought when she and Richard stepped in and protected the merchants in Meryton that they mentioned Gigi's name.

Lord Matlock told him he should be ashamed of himself. As Wickham had done in other places, he had ruined at least three girls that the family knew of, so far. The Earl demanded to know if his nephew thought those people too far below him to lift a finger to protect them.

Lastly, Lady Catherine broached the subject of her nephew's hypocrisy with regards to the Bingleys. She wanted to know how one who was so cognisant of his position in society could overlook Miss Bingley's vulgarity. The question was asked whether Bingley was his friend, or merely a puppet for him to direct and control.

Darcy had been dumbstruck. He had never been called to account like this before, and it finally started to sink in; his behaviour was seen as wanting by all of his family, even though he still believed them wrong on a number of points. He had left Snowhaven right after Christmas Day, telling his family he had a lot to think about.

Lady Catherine's thoughts returned to the present. On the morrow, they would leave for Hertfordshire to attend Mr. Collins's wedding. After all she had heard of the Bennet sisters, she was keen to meet the two older ones again and make the acquaintance of the others. She wondered if the two eldest sisters would remember meeting her and Richard at their uncle's warehouse a few years ago.

Georgiana's willingness to accompany her and Richard to the wedding was a positive sign. With the aid of her two aunts and Mrs. Annesley, the girl continued to recover. She was still shy, but far less than when she returned from Ramsgate. She did regress at times, but on the whole her progress was positive. To their great relief, the days of her spontaneously bursting into tears were behind her—for the most part.

The three older ladies had not absolved Georgiana of all culpability, but they had helped her see the lion's share of the blame rested with the lying libertine and his paramour who manipulated a young girl's tender heart. They did not whitewash William's part in not listening and properly vetting

Mrs. Younge as he should have, nor of not sharing the truth about Wickham and his banishment from any Darcy residences.

The name Wickham no longer sent her young niece into tears and wailings, and that, coupled with the fact that the brigand would be locked in the brig until after his unit moved to their summer quarters near Brighton, made the decision to bring her along an easy one.

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“Charles,” Miss Bingley berated, “why have we not seen Mr. Darcy since your escape from that fortune-hunting hussy?”

“As you have been told often, he is at Pemberley, and will make the journey directly from there to Kent without a sojourn in Town as he normally does,” Bingley explained—again.

“Then you must press him for an invitation to Pemberley. I need to plan the changes I will make when I am mistress there anyway,” Miss Bingley demanded.

“You are delusional Caroline,” Mr. Hurst piped up. “Do you not think if Darcy ever intended to offer for you, he would have done so long ago? It is not as though you have been subtle in your desire to be his wife. Mayhap your brother has some relevant information on the subject.”

“What do you know you useless, drunken lout?” Miss Bingley hissed.

She did not notice her brother blanch at the suggestion of his having information to share on the subject of Mr. Darcy offering for her. Darcy had wanted him to inform his sister that he would never offer for her—even if she engineered a compromise—but Bingley had chosen the path of least resistance by not saying anything. “Whatever I am, I was *born* a gentleman. You, Sister dearest, were born the daughter of a tradesman, and for all of your pretentions and vulgar utterances about the size of your dowry, that will *never* change,” Hurst shot back.

Hurst was concerned his sister-in-law would have an apoplexy given how many colour changes her countenance went through, from white to a shade of red, and lastly to a deep shade of purple, which denoted her fury.
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Mrs. Hurst knew her younger sister was about to erupt like a volcano, so she quickly stood and led her infuriated sister out of the drawing room with a look to her husband that seemed to ask why he antagonised Caroline so. Mrs. Hurst led Miss Bingley to her bedchamber, and not long after the door closed the expected tantrum erupted. Her screeching could be heard by the men in the drawing room.

Hurst knew he should not provoke Miss Bingley as he was wont to do, but she made his life, and his wife's, miserable, and it was an outlet for his frustration. He was close to deciding that he and his wife would return to his family's estate in Yorkshire, a place where Miss Bingley had worn out her welcome some years earlier. However, he was aware his wife felt a responsibility for her younger sister. He had indulged her long enough; it was time to do what his brother-in-law Bingley was not able to do—assert his will.

"Bingley, I know you do not want a confrontation with your sister, but are you really willing to risk your friendship with Darcy by sustaining her delusion? How many times now has Darcy responded to your letters when Caroline demanded an invitation, informing you that you were welcome, but only *without* your sister?" Hurst laid out the truth for Bingley, who seemed to cocoon himself from the truth and live in an almost delusional state, not unlike his younger sister.

"Darcy will not break with me," Bingley replied weakly.

"What do you think will happen if you show up with your sister in tow again when the invitation does not specifically include her? You know Darcy as well as I do. When he makes a decision, he sticks by it." Hurst looked at his weak-willed brother-in-law with something akin to pity.

"Let us hope you are wrong," Bingley returned half-heartedly.

Hearing his brother's non-committal response, Hurst firmed his resolve and stated further, "One more thing Bingley. I have decided that Louisa and I will be returning to Winsdale. As your younger sister is no longer welcome there, she will be with you alone,"

"How am I to manage Caroline without Louisa?" Bingley almost burst into tears.

“Mayhap it is time that you exert yourself in your role as the head of the family.” With that, Hurst stood and made his way to his and his wife’s chambers. Louisa would complain a little about being separated from Caroline, but they would both reap the benefits soon enough.

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Chapter 8

Mary woke up early the morning of her wedding. She felt no apprehension; she was looking forward to becoming Mrs. Collins with true anticipation. She believed—and her sensible sisters agreed—she was meant to be a clergyman's wife.

Although she did not spout moralistic quotes and had not touched Fordyce's sermons since her older sisters included her in their circle of friendship and care, she was a devout woman, one who would see helping her husband's parishioners as a pleasure rather than a duty one needed to be seen doing.

As she watched the sun creep over the eastern horizon, Mary remembered with pleasure the conversation she had with her elder sisters the previous afternoon.

"Janie and Lizzy, will you both come visit me at Hunsford in March and remain until after Easter?" she requested.

"My plans are to return to London to be with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner," Jane had replied. "Papa will send me in the Bennet carriage with Sarah and Mr. Hill to escort me."

"As I have no fixed plans, I will be glad to, dependant on Papa permitting me to visit—and he will, as long as it will not require him to exert himself," Elizabeth had said.

"Lizzy, that is not a nice thing to say about our father," Jane had admonished. She then added, "even if it is naught but the truth." Jane had smiled to reinforce the fact she was teasing.

"Jane, must you return to London to visit our aunt and uncle?" Mary had pressed.

"I think I must. If Mr. Bingley never exerts himself to seek me out, then at least I will know for sure he never loved me as a man should love a woman," Jane had rationalised. "I must know or I will be driven to distraction."

“For my part, I am looking forward to seeing your and my soon-to-be brother’s home,” Elizabeth had stated. “In addition, I suspect I will enjoy walking around the paths of Rosings Park. Mr. Collins has excited my imagination as he has made it sound like a good place to walk, especially in the untamed forest land they have.”

Elizabeth had since shared that she requested permission from their father, who had granted it willingly as long as he would not be required to bestir himself from his study and his books and waved her away.

Lizzy would join her in just over a fortnight, giving the newly married couple time to become better acquainted, without having to entertain guests. Just then there was a light knock on Mary’s bedchamber door, and she was joined by the same three sisters who had been with her the previous night.

“Is it not sad the Gardiners are unable to attend with Aunt Maddie not feeling well?” Jane lamented.

“They will be missed,” Mary stated sincerely. From the time she had become close with Jane and Lizzy, she had joined whichever one went to visit the Gardiners and had been the recipient of the same teaching bestowed on her older sisters. She had become very close to her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and wished they could be there to witness her marry but understood the reason for their not attending.

Even though Mary did not eat much, the four had trays brought up to Mary’s bedchamber to break their fasts. After the small meal, Sarah, the upstairs maid who served the five Miss Bennets, informed Miss Mary her bath was ready for her. Jane and Lizzy would return once Sarah called them after Mary was bathed to assist their sister to don her wedding gown and veil. It was no surprise to any of them Mrs. Bennet had not stirred from her warm bed to be useful to her daughter on the day she would leave Longbourn, nor was the absence of the youngest Bennet unexpected—or missed.

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The Rosings barouche departed London before sunup. The wedding would commence at ten that morning, and Richard did not want to chance a delay on the road that might cause them to be late. Lady Catherine agreed wholeheartedly, and being used to country hours, both she and Georgiana
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were ready and waiting for Richard in the Fitzwilliam House's dining parlour—Richard had renamed the house with his aunt's blessing. It warmed Richard's heart how often he heard her saying how proud of her nephew she was and how well he had taken to his new role in life.

It was not hard to see Georgiana looked nervous. "Gigi, what bothers you?" Lady Catherine asked an hour into the trip, having given her ample time to bring up whatever was concerning her of her own accord. "The way you are contorting your face will produce premature lines on your forehead," she added; the tease immediately lightened her niece's expression.

"The lady who is marrying Mr. Collins has four sisters," Georgiana verified.

"Yes, what of it?" Lady Catherine enquired.

"What if they can tell of my disgrace when they see me? I am afraid they will rightfully scorn me for my folly," Georgiana expressed her fear. It was one of the times her fears caused her to regress.

"First, how would someone know anything about your past by simply seeing you? From what Mr. Collins has told us, all five Bennet sisters are regular girls, not a coven of witches, for that is what they would have to be to look at you and know what you have done in the past," Lady Catherine stated.

"Gigi, I believe you are worrying needlessly," Richard interjected. "If I remember what Mr. Collins has told us, especially about the three older sisters, they are everything that is good and proper. Even *if* they knew what happened in Ramsgate, they would not hold it against you."

"I can only second Richard's wise words," Lady Catherine stated in support of both her nephew and niece. "Let he among us who has never erred cast the first stone. What you did was to make a mistake. As we have discussed, it was an error in judgement. However, do not forget you were but fifteen and wholly unprepared to deal with a reprobate like that man. At the same time, your companion, who was supposed to protect you, was working against you."

“Even though I feel somewhat better, I still feel a deep and abiding shame over my actions.” Georgiana looked down at the floor of the equipage.

“Georgiana Ellen Darcy! Enough self-indulgence. Let me ask you something. No matter how much shame you feel, no matter how much you take yourself to task for your *past* errors, will that change anything that has happened?” Lady Catherine asked stridently.

“No, nothing I do now can change the past,” Georgiana admitted.

“Then I suggest you accept a philosophy I have adopted in the years since my husband and my Anne were taken from me. Only remember the past as that remembrance gives you pleasure.” Lady Catherine held up her hand as her niece was about to object. “I am *not* saying forget the past, and I am most *certainly* not saying do not learn from past mistakes, but what I *am* saying is to dwell on the past and use it as a crutch to stop yourself moving forward is meaningless. It is the very height of selfish self-indulgence.”

“Listen to Aunt Cat, Gigi. Her words are very wise,” Richard enthused.

“Would you fall for a silver-tongued devil again?” Lady Catherine pushed further.

“No, I would not,” Georgiana replied indignantly.

“That is the spirit I want to see, and you yourself have just proved my point. You *have* learnt from your errors, so please, niece of mine, elucidate this for me. What are you achieving by constantly living in the past?” Lady Catherine asked the salient question.

Georgiana was silent for a little while as she cogitated on her aunt’s sage words. “I see now I was hiding behind the past, in the same way William hides behind his mask. That is not the way I want to be,” Georgiana acknowledged.

“As you are the master of how you relate to others, it is up to you,” Lady Catherine told her niece.

“William said I was never to talk to anyone else about Ramsgate,” Georgiana informed her travelling companions. “However, I do not know if I agree with him. Is not an omission a lie just the same?”

“I disagree with your brother,” Lady Catherine stated. “It is not something to tell new acquaintances as soon as you meet them; however, once you become true friends, then if you *choose* to inform others, it would be appropriate as it will save them from a similar mistake. Then your lesson would be valuable to more than yourself and your family. Possibly talking to Miss Elizabeth earlier than others would be appropriate as she was taken in by the same blackguard as you.”

Lady Catherine and Richard could not help but see Mrs. Annesley’s smile as she *slept*. It seemed the lady knew her charge needed to speak with her relations, and her feigning sleep would make that easier. Their suspicions were borne out when the companion *awoke* but a few minutes after the conversation was completed.

All three adults felt a sense of satisfaction at the change in the way Georgiana Darcy carried herself; she had gained some much-needed confidence.

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William Collins attempted to remain calm as he spoke to Charlotte and Stuart Jamison in the dining parlour at Lucas Lodge. When he had followed Lady Catherine’s good advice to reach out to his cousin, the most he had hoped for was a reconciliation in the family and to allow disagreements of the past to reside where they belonged.

He had always wanted to marry, but he did not want the type of marriage he had seen at home. As thankful as he was for being born, he could never understand why a kind, compassionate, and intelligent woman like his mother had married his father. The man was illiterate, and, if Collins were honest, not an intelligent man in any facet of his life.

By the time he was old enough to inquire of his maternal grandparents why they agreed to match their only daughter with his father, said grandparents had left the mortal world.

His mother, who he loved beyond reason, had become ill with influenza, and rather than recover as most do, there had been complications. Knowing she would never leave her sickbed while still living, Collins’s mother told her son how his father compromised her when she was but sixteen. She extracted a promise from her son that he would never compromise anyone
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like his grandfather and father before him had, and, furthermore, he would only marry for love and respect.

Armed with the knowledge his mother shared with him, William Collins started to question everything his father told him, and as he had inherited his mother’s intelligence and good sense, it did not take long for him to see how ridiculous his father’s pronouncements had been.

His mother left her son a legacy which consisted of her dowry and the funds her parents had received when they sold their farm. Rather than give his father access to these funds, William Collins asked the executor of his grandparents' and mother’s wills to release some money for him to attend a seminary.

Mr. Collins senior was an extremely bitter man when he passed away not long after his son began at the seminary. After his reconciliation with the Bennets, William Collins found—as if he needed further proof—additional evidence of his late father’s wrongheaded opinions.

Like many men of good sense, he was troubled by the Bennet parents. He was able to put that aside because he had found a gem of the first order in his Mary. They had connected on many levels from the first time they met. They could discuss anything from literature, to politics, the war, as well as theology and religion. Some men might have been intimidated by a wife as intelligent as his Mary, but William Collins considered it a boon. It was one of the many things he loved about his wife-to-be.

“Mr. Collins, Mr. Collins,” Charlotte Jamison again attempted to gain the man’s attention.

“You have my sincere apologies, Mrs. Jamison, and you too Sir. I was wool-gathering, thinking about how lucky I am to be marrying my Mary in a few short hours,” Collins explained.

“As I remember I was also thinking of my Charlotte the morning before we married; I fully understand your preoccupation,” Mr. Jamison grinned as he winked at his wife who rolled her eyes at his tease, further proof of their wedded bliss.

“And I was sitting at this table doing the same thing as I considered how fortunate I was to be marrying my Stuart,” Charlotte Jamison smiled at her

husband.

“Is one of your classmates from the seminary standing up with you Mr. Collins?” Mr. Jamison asked.

“Yes, Mr. Gilcrest will meet us at the church…oh, in less than an hour. I did not notice the time. It is time for me to make myself ready and head for Longbourn’s church.” Collins stood and bowed to the Jamisons and the Lucases who entered the room as he exited.

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“Collins,” Richard caught the attention of his pastor who arrived at Longbourn’s church just a little after he, his aunt, and his cousin had alighted from the barouche.

“Good morning, Mr. Fitzwilliam, Lady Catherine, and Miss Darcy.” Collins bowed to the group who returned his courtesy. “You are most welcome, and I again thank you for coming to witness this, the most important day in my life—so far.”

“We are honoured you thought to invite us Mr. Collins,” Lady Catherine inclined her head.

Just then Collins spied Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, with Lydia and Kitty, walking towards the church. “Would you permit me to introduce my cousin and part of his family?” Collins asked his patron quietly. After looking to his aunt, Richard nodded.

Bennet was about to make some inane comment he thought amusing when he noticed three people in very fine clothing standing with Cousin Collins. “Please introduce us to your family,” Lady Catherine requested.

“Lady Catherine, Mr. Fitzwilliam, and Miss Darcy,” he did not miss the looks the four Bennets gave when they heard the name Darcy, “it is my pleasure to introduce my cousins. Mr. Thomas Bennet, the master of Longbourn, Mrs. Francene Bennet, Miss Catherine Bennet, and Miss Lydia Bennet. Cousins, my patron’s Aunt, the honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, my patron, the honourable Mr. Richard Fitzwilliam, and my patron’s cousin and ward, Miss Georgiana Darcy.” Mr. Collins completed the introductions.
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Luckily, Mrs. Bennet, awed by the highborn personages she had been introduced to, did no more than curtsy. Her daughters followed her lead and Mr. Bennet bowed. Without further conversation, the Bennets entered the church.

“The mother is not attending her daughter?” Lady Catherine asked quietly with raised eyebrows.

“It was my Mary’s choice,” Collins informed the Rosings Park party softly. “For the whole of her life, Mary was either ignored by Mrs. Bennet or told she was plain. With the strong bond she had with her older sisters, she asked them to attend her, and, as politely as she could, told her mother she could be seen at the church rather than arrive just before the services.”

“It is time for us to sit,” Richard stated after looking at his timepiece.

“And for me to take my position. Ah, here is Gilcrest now.” Collins made quick introductions and then he and his best man followed Lady Catherine and her party into the church, taking their positions next to the vicar in front of the altar.

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“Mary, you look gorgeous,” Elizabeth exclaimed just as her father entered the front door after escorting his wife and younger daughters into the church.

For once, Bennet found no fodder for teasing. His oldest three daughters were all as pretty as pictures, especially Mary who had so often been called plain by his wife. The young woman in front of him was anything but plain.

“It is time girls. I must say all of you look extremely well today, Mary, you more than any,” Bennet stated.

Mary was stunned; she could not remember a previous time her father had complimented her. “Thank you Papa,” she managed.

Jane and Elizabeth followed behind Mary and their father, and the four reached the outer vestibule doors in mere minutes. Elizabeth opened one of the inner doors and nodded to Longbourn’s rector, Mr. Dudley. After pausing less than a minute, she entered the church and made her way up the aisle. Once she arrived at her position, Jane followed her.
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Richard Fitzwilliam felt his breath hitch as he spied the oldest Bennet sister. She was far more beautiful than the first time he had met her at the Gardiner Trading Company; today she was ethereal. Was this the woman William found not good enough for a tradesman's son? What an arrogant arse his cousin could be!

As soon as Jane took her position, the rector gave the signal for the congregation to rise, and this time both inner vestibule doors opened wide and Bennet entered with Mary on his arm. As they walked up the aisle, all those who had heard Mrs. Bennet denigrate her middle daughter as plain over the years had evidence to give lie to those words.

Just below the marble steps that led up to the altar, Bennet halted, kissed his daughter on her cheek, replaced her veil, and placed her hand on her betrothed's arm. Once his duty was discharged, Bennet joined his wife and two youngest daughters in the family pew.

Mr. Dudley opened the Book of Common Prayer and began the liturgy that had married countless couples from the first days of the Church of England. As expected, there was no one who objected, and soon he pronounced them man and wife. All that was left was to sign the register, which they did in the company of their three attendants, and Mary penned 'Bennet' for the final time.

After a brief moment of privacy, the couple joined the Bennets in the church. They were wished well by all of the family, including the Phillipses. The most effusive wishes were from the current mistress of Longbourn to its future mistress.

As much as Fanny had ignored her middle daughter, she was not so deficient of mind to be unaware that her future comfort would be controlled by Mr. and Mrs. Collins. She was vociferous in her explosion of good wishes and compliments for her middle daughter, and Mary smiled inwardly at her mother's transparent display.

For all of Mary's life until the beginning of her courtship with Mr. Collins, Fanny had denigrated her middle daughter as plain. She had not changed her attitude publicly even after Jane and Elizabeth took Mary under their wing and changed the way she dressed and wore her hair.

Many times Fanny Bennet verbalised how Mary would be a spinster firmly on the shelf one day. She had not even noticed the quiet courtship between Mary and Mr. Collins, exclaiming her surprise when it had been announced. Mary had no illusions as to the reason for her mother’s sudden approbation.

The newlyweds were congratulated sincerely by everyone except Lydia, who was still miffed that she had not been the first to marry. The six who still bore the name Bennet walked to Longbourn, and the Collinses followed but a few minutes later.

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Chapter 9

“Mr. and Mrs. William Collins,” Mr. Hill announced which led to cheers and a slew of congratulations interspersed with wishes of happy. Mary and her husband were beaming with happiness as they made the rounds to thank their friends and neighbours for attending their nuptials.

As Jane and Elizabeth walked past the three from Rosings Park, they stopped when the older lady beckoned for them to join her. “Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, I do not know if you remember, but we were introduced at your Uncle Gardiner’s business a few years ago.”

A memory stirred. “I do remember. You were there with Mr. Fitzwilliam, were you not?” Elizabeth asked.

“Your memory is correct, Miss Elizabeth,” Richard bowed to both.

“Kitty,” Jane caught the second youngest Bennet’s attention. “May I introduce my sister to you?”

“We were introduced prior to the ceremony. Please allow me to introduce my niece.” The two sisters who had not been introduced nodded. “Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, my niece Miss Georgiana *Darcy*. Gigi, Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and you remember meeting Miss Catherine Bennet—for some reason I do so like your name—before church,” Lady Catherine watched the second Bennet daughter’s reaction as she emphasised her niece’s family name.

Elizabeth, whose eyebrows had shot up at hearing the young lady’s name, looked at Miss Darcy. She had deep blue eyes and blond hair and was tall for a young lady of her age. If she had not known what a liar Wickham was already, she would have known it upon meeting Miss Darcy, who mumbled a greeting while not looking directly at the sisters.

From what Elizabeth could tell, since the girl did not talk much, it seemed Miss Darcy had no pride about her, only a deep shyness. Elizabeth then tried to draw the young Darcy out. “We have heard much of you, Miss Darcy, from an *unimpeachable* source.” Elizabeth, as did her sisters, did not miss the look of panic that overspread the young girl’s face. “From Miss

Bingley; she sang your praises to the heavens. If she is to be believed, then you are a virtuoso on the pianoforte, and the most accomplished young lady who ever was," Elizabeth teased. As soon as Georgiana heard who Miss Elizabeth was referring to, she relaxed considerably, for she had been terrified that Wickham had spread stories about her abroad.

Seeing her niece's relief, Lady Catherine made to answer the jest. "My niece is accomplished and loves to play the pianoforte, but, as I am sure you are aware, anything Miss Bingley says must be taken with a grain of salt. You could not have missed how she has her cap set at my nephew and refused to see clear indications of his disinterest. I understand from Mr. Collins you ladies had the *pleasure* of her acquaintance."

"We learnt from Mary that the lady has been less than truthful with our Jane," Elizabeth observed.

"Would the three of you agree to accompany us to that little wilderness I noticed on the side of the house? There is some information I would like to impart, but in this crowd it would not be appropriate." Lady Catherine looked at the Bennet sisters.

"Jane, you and Lizzy go; I will stay to attend Mary if she needs one of us," Kitty volunteered. Her older sisters were very proud of her, for Mary had grown close to Kitty as they both were disregarded by their mother; Kitty would not leave Mary this day of all days.

Leaving Mrs. Annesley to enjoy the feast, the five walked to the natural garden, where they seated themselves on some benches. Jane and Elizabeth sat on one; Lady Catherine and Miss Darcy sat on another, and Mr. Fitzwilliam sat on a third.

"Miss Elizabeth, on behalf of my family, I wish to apologise for my nephew Darcy's poor behaviour while he was in your neighbourhood, starting with his slight to you at the assembly," Lady Catherine opened.

"It is difficult for me to comprehend William behaved in such an ungentlemanlike manner," Georgiana stated softly, speaking barely above a whisper as she shook her head.

"He had good reason for being disinclined to join in a festive occasion, but once he decided to attend, there was no excuse for his behaviour to you

and the rest of the neighbourhood," Lady Catherine stated.

"It is forgotten your Ladyship," Elizabeth stated.

"Lizzy!" Jane admonished. "You still resent the unjust slight Mr. Darcy delivered at the assembly."

"To tell the truth, it still bothers me, but I am *attempting* to forget it," Elizabeth clarified. "I am heartily ashamed that I allowed myself to believe Mr. Wickham's lies. For that I must apologise; I have recognised my wilful blindness and so am trying to move past how I allowed him to manipulate me."

"At least you did not agree to elope with him," came a soft voice.

Jane and Elizabeth looked at one another, unsure if they had heard the same thing from Miss Darcy. "Did you say elope with him?" Jane asked gently.

"Oh Aunt, it slipped out," Georgiana put her head in her hands and allowed the tears to flow, worried her aunt would be angry with her.

"If I am not mistaken Gigi, the Miss Bennets will be the very souls of discretion; do you notice neither have fled from your company?" Lady Catherine soothed her niece.

"May I tell you what occurred?" Georgiana asked as she dried her eyes, relieved her new acquaintances agreed. "I used to have a companion, Mrs. Younge…" She told them the whole of the tale in a voice which became steadier and grew stronger as she told it.

When she was finished with her recitation, she saw abhorrence reflected in the looks of the two Bennets—exactly as she feared—until Miss Elizabeth spoke. "What a waste of a man. Miss Darcy, we are so very sorry you had to suffer the manipulation and lies of those two criminals."

As soon as Georgiana realised none of the anger and disgust was directed at her—just like Aunt Cat had told her it would not be—but only at her erstwhile suitor and his paramour, she started to feel more self-assured.

"If he were not in the militia's brig, I would love to see that man dealt with—permanently!" Jane stated angrily. That so much evil was

encapsulated in one man who thought nothing of hurting someone, regardless of their age, infuriated Jane Bennet.

“You are a woman after my own heart Miss Bennet,” Richard stated approvingly. The woman was magnificent, and Bingley was a complete fool. ‘*Let us see if his loss will be my gain,*’ Richard watched her reaction to his approbation.

“How could your nephew leave the area and leave us at the mercy of that man?” Elizabeth asked incredulously. “Did he not care that without your intervention half of the merchants in town would have been put out of business by the cad?” All of the righteous indignation she felt towards the insufferable man was rekindled.

“His excuse is if he had warned anyone it would have put Gigi here at risk of exposure,” Lady Catherine raised her hand as Elizabeth and Jane were both about to protest vehemently. “He was wrong. We—Richard and I—were able to deal with the man without a hint about Gigi being raised. I purchased the vowels my nephew held in Wickham’s name—over two thousand pounds worth—and added them to the thousand-pound vowel I had him sign while I was here. I own over three thousand pounds’ worth of his debts. If he pushes his nose over the line, I will call them in and the man will spend the rest of his wasted life in Marshalsea, Coldbath Fields, or the Clink Prison.

“He may have wasted four thousand pounds in two years, but he will not be able to pay back half of what he owes in a lifetime,” Lady Catherine stated malevolently. None of those listening to her said a word in opposition.

“Mary told us how Miss Bingley lied about her brother’s supposed understanding with Miss Darcy. There was hardly a word in any of her letters which was the truth,” Jane reported.

“Miss Bennet, may I request those letters if you still have them in your possession?” Lady Catherine asked.

“You may your Ladyship,” Jane allowed, glad she did not cast them into the fire as she had been inclined initially.

“Please call me Lady Catherine, not Lady Kitty,” she smiled, “even if my irreverent nephews and nieces call me Aunt Cat.”

“In that case, please call me Jane,” Jane granted.

“And I am Elizabeth or Lizzy,” Elizabeth added.

“It will please me if you address me as Georgiana, or Gigi,” Georgiana requested.

“May I ask what you need the letters for?” Jane probed.

“It is no secret, my dear. The family has all pointed out to William—Mr. Darcy—the contradiction in the way he relates to the Bingleys versus others of his acquaintance. I do not believe he will be so sanguine on the subject when he sees her lies in her own hand,” Lady Catherine explained.

“You told me Miss Bingley was praising me to the skies?” Georgiana asked to verify she had heard them correctly, and both Bennets nodded. “The truth is I do not like her at all. When Mrs. Hurst is not with her sister, she is pleasant, but when together she is more like her younger sister. They talk down to me as though I were a child in leading strings, and Miss Bingley fawns all over me as she holds the mistaken belief that doing so will garner William’s notice. Like Aunt Cat, I do not understand why he tolerates the woman; he cannot stand her either.”

“He stood by while she attacked me and my family verbally. Surely he knows a tradesman’s daughter is below a landed gentlewoman—regardless of fortune—but he never once corrected her. He seems most fastidious, so I could not reconcile his behaviour regarding the pretentious, vulgar woman,” Elizabeth mused.

“I believe it is for the brother he puts up with her. We will see how her pretentions hold up after I next speak with that woman,” Lady Catherine indicated. “You are due an apology as well, Miss Bennet. In addition to the lies Miss Bingley told regarding my niece, my nephew acted to separate you from Mr. Bingley as well. From what I now know, the man was never informed you were in London. You already know he was not spending time with my niece and nephew, which is what you were told. However, the former was at Rosings Park and the latter was at Pemberley.”

“So he may still love me?” Jane surmised, hopefully.

“Miss Bennet—Jane, please allow me to ask you some questions, and please let me know if you do not feel it is my place to ask and I will cease. I promise not to take umbrage if you tell me so,” Lady Catherine enquired.

“It would be good to talk to someone who is objective,” Jane allowed.

“Do you believe that his sisters locked Mr. Bingley away or chained him to a chair so he could not seek you out on his own?” Lady Catherine asked bluntly.

“No, I do not suppose they would have done that,” Jane admitted.

“If it were you, and you loved someone, truly loved them, could you be persuaded away from the other person so easily—or at all? Jane, would you allow anyone—no matter who or how many—to talk you out of your inclination so that you would disappear without a word?” Lady Catherine asked gently.

“I would not. Capriciousness is not part of my character, but we do not know…” Jane tapered off what she was about to say as she heard her own words and realised how hollow they rang. At the same time she truly heard what Lady Catherine was driving at. “It does not speak well to his strength of character or the love he professes if he allows others to direct him in that way. If he truly loved me, no one would have been able to dissuade him from returning to me, would they?” Jane concluded. “If he is like that now, would he be resolute enough to make decisions when he is married, or would he defer to others as he seems to now? When I look at Mr. Bingley in this light, his image becomes quite tarnished.”

“You are too intelligent not to know the answer to that question Jane. Let me tell you a little more about Mr. Bingley.” Lady Catherine requested permission and was relieved when Jane nodded. “He does not like to make his own decisions. He prefers to rely on others so that if things do not go well, he is able to claim it was not his fault, stating that he was but following advice.”

“In other words Janie, he is weak and irresolute. That is *not* the kind of man you would be happy with. You, my dearest sister, need a man and not a puppy.” Elizabeth paused to cogitate. “When I heard Mr. Darcy assisted in separating Mr. Bingley from you, I was angrier with him than I had ever been for myself. But now—and I know it was not his intent—I believe he

has done you a favour. How would it have been if Mr. Bingley had returned, offered for you, and you had accepted him? You would have discovered his lack of character only after you were married; you would have been trapped in a marriage and lost to us. I am sure it will be but the work of a moment for you to get over him, and I believe this knowledge will assist you in that endeavour," Elizabeth opined.

"And I will add Jane, you would not have been mistress of your own home; Miss Bingley would have ruled it as she does now. Mr. Bingley does not have the strength to stand up to his sister from what we have observed, and will not gainsay her," Lady Catherine pointed out.

"Jane, if you see this now, then why not join me in March to visit Mary? She did invite you as well," Elizabeth suggested.

"You will be at Hunsford Lizzy?" Georgiana asked excitedly. "I am so pleased there will be young ladies near my age in the area."

"Are we so easily thrown over?" Richard jested with his ward.

"Do not tease my niece Richard," Lady Catherine swatted toward her nephew playfully even though his bench kept him out of range of her arm. "Jane, it would be a pleasure to have you in the area with Elizabeth. How old is your sister Catherine—Kitty you call her?"

"She turned seventeen in January," Jane replied.

"Mayhap she will make the journey with you. I am recently sixteen so we are very close in age," Georgiana suggested enthusiastically.

"The *whole* of the family will join us for Easter," Lady Catherine looked at Elizabeth as she stated the last.

"Who else besides your nephew Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

"My brother and his wife, the Earl and Countess of Matlock, and Richard's older brother Andrew and his wife Marie, who are the Viscount and Viscountess Hilldale. Of course, little Reggie, who is not much more than six months old, will be with his parents. The rest of the family are *not* like my nephew Darcy, so I am confident you will like them as much as they will like you," Lady Catherine opined.

“If Papa does not object, I will join the party who will be visiting Mary and our new brother. I am sure Mary would invite Kitty to join us,” Jane decided.

“The parsonage should have enough room, but if not, any of you will be more than welcome to stay at Rosings Park,” Richard offered. “I have a feeling it would make our Gigi very happy to have one or more of you at the manor house with her.”

As they walked back to the house, Jane hung back a little when Elizabeth placed her hand on her sister’s arm. “I am so glad I did not jump to conclusions about Mr. Darcy’s relatives; they are none of them like him. I believe I like his aunt very well indeed,” Elizabeth told her sister.

“I agree completely with you Lizzy. You must allow that people can change, just as you are learning to. I am relieved you were open to seeing what his family was like before jumping to conclusions.” Jane looked at her sister with an eyebrow arched in challenge, causing Elizabeth to raise her hands in surrender.

“That snake in the grass called Gigi proud and disagreeable. As if I need any more, it is further proof of his lies,” Elizabeth stated. Jane refrained from pointing out which of them had believed that man blindly.

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By the time they returned to the wedding celebration, Mary was ready to change out of her wedding gown and into her travel attire. Jane, Elizabeth, and Kitty accompanied her. Before they arrived at Mary’s chamber, Jane delayed Kitty and asked her if she would like to join them when they went to visit Mary, and Kitty excitedly agreed.

“Mary, you remember I turned down your invitation in order to return to London?” Jane asked as they entered the room and Mary nodded. “I have at last decided that Mr. Bingley is not worth my time, so if your invitation still stands, I would like to join Lizzy when she comes to visit you,” Jane informed a beaming Mary.

“Of course it does. What about you Kitty? Would you like to join us?” Mary asked hopefully. Kitty nodded vigorously; her days of being Lydia’s shadow were over.
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“Oh yes, I would love to. Thank you!” Kitty agreed.

They helped Mary change and organise the last few things she needed to take to the carriage that, generously, Mr. Fitzwilliam had placed at the newlyweds’ disposal.

They joined their parents and a surly Lydia to see the Collinses off. Just before he was to return indoors, Mr. Bennet was waylaid by Jane and Kitty, who asked if they could join Lizzy and visit Mary in March.

On the one hand, he felt there would be no sensible conversation at Longbourn. However, it would save him money with fewer mouths to feed, More importantly to him, there would be relative peace and quiet. That trumped all else for Bennet, so he consented to Jane and Kitty joining Elizabeth for as long as they desired.

Rather than send his carriage to Town, he would send it to Kent to convey his three daughters. Now if he could only send his wife and youngest daughter away…

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Fitzwilliam Darcy began to examine his character after his family took him to task at Snowhaven. After reaching Pemberley, at first he allowed his indignation full reign and scoffed at their assertions. By the middle of January, alone at his estate, he started to look at his behaviour through the eyes of others.

The thing that hit him hardest was when he realised that his parents would have been disappointed, no more than that, ashamed by his actions. Aunt Cat was correct; he *had* turned into a version of how she used to be.

For the first time in a very long time, the mighty Mr. Darcy, a powerful and wealthy member of the *Ton*, started to look at his character and behaviour critically. The more he looked, the less pleased he was with what he saw.

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Chapter 10

“Welcome sisters,” Mr. Collins said, greeting his wife’s sisters warmly.

“My goodness Mary, you look so very happy,” Jane noted.

“That is because I am,” Mary responded with a shy smile as she looked at her husband.

“In that case, I will not have to take our brother to task, as I can see he is ensuring your happiness, which is his most important task, after all,” Elizabeth said with a wide smile as she hugged her glowing sister. “Marriage looks good on you Mary. Brother, you look just as happy, which portends a felicitous marriage.”

“Kitty, welcome to our home.” Collins made sure to include the youngest sister present who was standing quietly in the background.

“It is good to see you Kitty,” Mary seconded her husband’s welcome.

Before they could talk further, Mr. Hill told them their trunks had been off-loaded, placed in the charge of the Collins’s man, and asked if he and Sarah could begin their return to Longbourn. After making sure Mr. Hill had enough coin for any needs during the trip home and a basket of food, Jane wished them well for the return journey.

“If you are agreeable, we have been invited to Rosings Park for dinner to welcome you to the neighbourhood. It is but a ten to fifteen minute walk to the great house,” Collins informed his sisters.

“I cannot speak for Jane and Kitty, but for my part it would be good to see Lady Catherine, Gigi, and Mr. Fitzwilliam again,” Elizabeth stated.

Jane looked at Kitty who nodded. “Kitty and I have no objection. We are not tired, for we all slept for more than half of the journey into Kent.”

Mary led her sisters into her home. It was a multi-level grey stone building abutting the church. On the ground level there were a sitting room, the mistress’s parlour, the master’s study, and a dining parlour. From the dining parlour stairs led down to the kitchen and scullery in the cellar.

Mary explained she had a housekeeper and cook in the person of Mrs. Ethel Cookson, a maid of all work, an upstairs maid, and a man of all work. The housekeeper had a room off the kitchen, while the two maids had rooms in the attic. The man lived with his wife, their children, and his parents in a cottage on the outskirts of Hunsford.

The floor above the ground floor had the mistress and master chambers and one guest chamber; there were three guest chambers on the floor above that. Given that Mary and her husband had been married less than three weeks, the Bennet sisters decided to avail themselves of the three chambers on the floor above those of their sister and brother to give them as much privacy as possible.

After they changed from their travel attire and washed up, they joined Mary in the sitting room, leaving the maid to unpack their trunks. The man employed at the parsonage had placed them in the chambers according to the mistress's instruction.

"Where is our brother?" Jane asked.

Mary asked the maid of all work to tell Mrs. Cookson she was ready for the tea service, then said "He is in his study working on his sermon for this Sunday. Unlike many of his fellow clergymen, William does not like to use sermons written by others; he prefers to write his own. He will let me read it at some point to give him my opinion. If he feels I raise a valid point, he will adjust his sermon. If he disagrees with my interpretation, then we will debate it. More often than not, he convinces me of the rectitude of his point of view—but not always."

"I don't like to trouble you, but there is something occurring at home that worries all three of us considerably," Elizabeth informed Mary.

"What has Lydia done now?" Mary asked, guessing the source of her sisters' vexation.

"Nothing—yet," Jane replied. Mary looked at her sisters questioningly.

"You know the Derbyshire Militia will decamp for Brighton at the end of March, do you not?" Elizabeth verified.

"Yes, I remember how bereft Lydia said she would be without all of her *precious* redcoats," Mary frowned.

“You met Mrs. Forster, did you not?” Jane took up the telling.

“Yes, she was at the wedding, and not much older than Kitty, I believe,” Mary stated. “Almost as silly, brash, and flirtatious as Lydia.”

“That is the very one. Since your wedding and with plans to visit you without her, Lydia has been spending a great deal of time with Mrs. Forster and now calls herself Mrs. Forster’s *particular friend*. Rather than discouraging the connection, Papa is only too happy for Lydia to be out of the house as it gives him more peace and quiet. With Mama spending most of her time gossiping with Aunt Hattie, Papa feels it is *nirvana*,” Jane explained.

“If it were not bad enough that Lydia, who is not mature enough to be out of the schoolroom, spends so much of her time with her equally silly and vapid friend, our sister has been invited to travel to Brighton to be hosted by the Forsters. How that girl will be able to chaperon Lydia, I do not know,” Elizabeth continued. “I begged Papa not to grant his permission, but he said if he did not allow her to go, there would be no peace at Longbourn. When I pointed out she would ruin us all, he waved away my concerns and told me that Lydia would not be happy until she exposed herself in some public place. He says she will find out her own insignificance, and it could not be done with so little expense and trouble to himself. All he cares about is that he is left alone with his port and books; he would not care if Rome burned around him!”

“Jane and Lizzy had an idea. They suggested I become closer to Lydia again,” Kitty joined the recitation. “I made her believe I was jealous of her and I would much rather have been joining her in Brighton instead of going on a *boring* holiday to a parsonage. You know Lydia; she loves nothing more than lording it over others, so she condescended to write and tell me about her wonderful times with officers and balls while I *languish* here.”

“That was clever of all of you. Let us pray we will have some warning if she is planning something irrevocable. Brighton is but three or four hours from here,” Mary told her sisters.

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“Mr. Collins sent a note,” Lady Catherine informed her niece and nephew. “Mrs. Collins’s sisters arrived safely. They are not too tired and
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happily accepted our invitation to dinner."

"Three friends in the neighbourhood," Georgiana gushed. "I am so pleased. When do my aunt, uncle, and other Fitzwilliam cousins arrive, and what about William?"

"My parents, brother, and sister-in-law are in Town, and will arrive here the first Wednesday in April. William is still at Pemberley. He plans to arrive here after spending a single night in Town. That will put him here the Saturday following the arrival of the party from London," Richard explained everyone's plans as he understood them to be.

"I have an idea how to put Miss Bingley in her place once and for all. Would you be willing to issue an invitation for the Tuesday after Easter, the sixteenth of April?" Richard nodded still not seeing the whole plan. "I think the invitation should be issued through William," Lady Catherine decided. "I do not want to take William unawares or embarrass him, so we will make sure he understands everything before issuing the invitation."

"What do you intend for the harpy?" Richard asked, pre-emptively grinning. He loved it when his aunt took others to task for their offensive natures, just as she had done for herself.

"She will be taught just how insignificant she is and her pretentions will be put to rest," Lady Catherine stated with purpose.

"Do you think William will agree?" Georgiana asked.

"If I know your brother, he went to Pemberley after he left Snowhaven believing we were all in the wrong. I believe, however, that soon after he took a good, long, hard look at himself. The whole family's opposition to his arrogance would have given him pause," Lady Catherine supposed. "In addition, I have a feeling once he sees that vulgar woman's letters, that Jane gifted me, he will have no objection to my plan."

"What will you do if he has not learnt his lesson yet?" Richard enquired.

"Then he will not be consulted about the reason for the Bingleys' invitation. However, I pray that course of action will not be needed. Regardless of how William behaves at times, he is a good and honourable man. He looks after all who depend on him. He is considered the best of

masters, and if he were beyond redemption he would not be such a liberal estate owner," Lady Catherine expressed. She had not been certain he would accept what was said to him at Snowhaven. What gave her the hope she had was based on his last letter. From its tone she suspected William had been looking at himself in the mirror.

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"The park is so pretty," Elizabeth exclaimed as the parsonage party walked toward the manor house. "I cannot wait to walk the path from the parsonage into the forested area. I will be up with the sun on the morrow."

"As long as you do not expect any of us to join you at such an ungodly hour," Jane teased Elizabeth.

"We know how much sleep you need to maintain your beauty Jane," Elizabeth returned playfully.

Just then, as they transitioned from the trees into the formal gardens, the three Bennet sisters got their first view of the great house at Rosings Park. Even in the twilight it was easy to see the gardens were a riot of colour. They were more ordered and formal than Jane and Elizabeth preferred, but notwithstanding, it was an extremely pleasing vista.

Mr. Toppin showed them to the drawing room. As they walked, the sisters looked around in wonder. The house was light and airy with artwork on the walls; all the pieces selected added to the house's warmth.

As they were shown into the drawing room, Georgiana could no longer restrain herself and approached Jane and Lizzy with evident pleasure. She had met Kitty at Longbourn, but they did not then have much time to talk.

"Jane, Lizzy, and Miss Kitty, you are all most welcome," the young girl gushed.

At that moment, Georgiana realised she usurped her aunt's role as mistress and blushed profusely. She was about to apologise to Lady Catherine but her aunt waved it away, letting her know she took no offence and understood her niece's exuberance at the Bennet sisters' arrival, for she too was glad they were present.
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“We thank you for the honour of an invitation to Rosings on the first day of our arrival,” Jane spoke for herself and her sisters.

“It is we who are honoured by your presence,” Richard stated sincerely. “It is good to see you do not think all of us are *insufferable*.” Richard looked at Elizabeth who blushed deeply.

Kitty went to sit with Georgiana while Elizabeth joined the Collinses in talking with Lady Catherine. That left Jane, who took a seat the master of the estate indicated in a bid for her company.

“It is a *pleasure* to see you again Miss Bennet—you and your sisters,” Richard told Jane as he looked at her steadily.

Jane had been thinking about Mr. Richard Fitzwilliam quite a lot since Mary’s wedding. It was far too soon to consider if she might develop tender feelings for the man—that was the operative word—man. He was all man, no boy or puppy about him. What she was sure about was *no one*, no matter who or how many, could direct him away from one he loved. For that matter, he was not a man who could be directed away from his inclinations once he was set on a course.

He was not as handsome as Mr. Bingley, but that had never been important to her. Character was far more important than some arbitrary physical attribute, and as far as Jane could tell, Richard had character in spades. She trusted Lady Catherine’s opinion after their conversation, and she obviously loved and respected her nephew.

Regardless of anything that might or might not develop between her and Richard Fitzwilliam, Jane knew one thing for certain, if Mr. Bingley had in fact been in love with her, it was not a strong love. Jane had considered Lady Catherine’s questions after their talk at Mary’s wedding, and she had reached a resolve.

Any man who could be redirected by his sisters or a friend, and who substituted their judgements for his own, was not the man for her. It was not a discussion she could have with her mother. She felt she could talk to Lady Catherine about anything, and when the lady had time she hoped to have that conversation.

“From what I can see, your sister is no longer pining for Mr. Bingley,” Lady Catherine observed.

“It is my belief you have the right of it, Lady Cat,” Elizabeth replied playfully, watching to see if the lady would let her impertinence pass.

There was no remonstration. Lady Catherine leaned her head back and let out a hearty laugh, which caused her eyes to water. “I knew I would like you when I heard about you from your newly-acquired brother,” Lady Catherine stated as she dried her eyes. “I wish my Anne was still with us. She had a weak constitution but was in possession of a dry wit, so she would have loved you.”

“It would have been an honour to have known the late Miss de Bourgh,” Elizabeth inclined her head.

“I am looking forward to your meeting my brother and his wife, as well as Richard’s brother and sister-in-law,” Lady Catherine told Elizabeth as she patted her hand.

“You mean the Earl and Countess?” Elizabeth verified.

“Indeed. As we mentioned at Longbourn, they do not look down on those below them as some do,” Lady Catherine confirmed.

“Like your nephew, Darcy,” Elizabeth let the words escape before she had considered her intimation.

“Lizzy!” Mary admonished even as her husband looked away and bit back a smile.

“No Mary dear, I am not offended. Elizabeth only spoke the truth. We hope after his set down at Christmastide my nephew has amended his character,” Lady Catherine told them.

“Set down?” Elizabeth stated quizzically.

“Yes…” Lady Catherine gave them a synopsis of the family pointing out certain deficiencies of his character to Mr. Darcy. “It is my fervent hope that he has addressed the reproofs which were laid at his door. We will not know until he arrives next week.”

“As much as I hope your confidence is not misplaced, I do not have a high level of expectation the man who behaved as he did in our neighbourhood is able to amend his character and behaviour. He may take your reproofs as insults, for I remember what he told us when I was at Netherfield Park nursing Jane. He told us his good opinion once lost is lost forever. A man who holds implacable resentment may not be able to make the changes needed.” Elizabeth wanted to believe he would, but her confidence was low.

She blushed as she remembered her own faults, how her pride and prejudice had led her to believe Wickham. The fact was that she shared an unattractive trait with Mr. Darcy. When she believed she was right, it was very hard to get her to change her position, even in the face of mounting evidence. If she was able to recognise her faults and determine they needed amending, surely it was arrogant, even hypocritical, of her to pre-determine that Mr. Darcy would not be able to do the same?

“It would be wrong of me to pre-judge. I will wait until he arrives and see how he is now rather than see him through the filter of the past,” Elizabeth conceded. “For one who says only remember the past…”

“As that remembrance gives you pleasure,” Lady Catherine completed. “It seems we share a philosophy. It is one I adopted after Lewis and Anne were taken from me.”

The butler announced dinner. No precedence was observed as the group ambled into the small family dining parlour to enjoy the abundant repast and pleasant company.

It became evident that Georgiana and Kitty were well on their way to becoming firm friends. That impression was cemented when Gigi requested that Kitty stay at the manor house, in the second bedchamber of her suite.

And so it was the very next morning one of Rosings Park’s coaches collected Kitty and her trunk and moved her to the great house.

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Chapter 11

Each morning since arriving at the Hunsford parsonage, Elizabeth walked paths among the trees, invariably finding her way to a glade. The wooded areas had silver and downy birches, ash trees, and Lawson cypress trees; wildflowers and shrubs grew between the trees and alongside the pathways. There was nowhere Elizabeth felt more at home than walking in the midst of untamed nature.

Elizabeth rose before the sun, washed and dressed herself, donned her half boots, and was on her way as the sun started to peek over the horizon. After visiting Mrs. Cookson in the kitchen to be gifted with an apple, a warm roll, or a muffin, she would commence her ramble.

Jane was not one to while the day away in bed, but she did not enjoy walking as much as Elizabeth and did not join her younger sister on her rambles. Jane would wake a little after the sun started its climb into the morning sky. After performing her morning ablutions, she would join Mary and her brother Collins in the sitting room. When Elizabeth returned after her walk, the four of them would break their fasts together.

It was easy for Jane and Elizabeth to see the felicity that Mary enjoyed in her marriage. Mary and Collins took any opportunity for contact between them as if by *chance*; there was no missing the loving looks that passed between them.

Both of her older sisters prayed they would have such felicity in their own marriages as they saw at the parsonage. They hoped they would be fortunate enough to find a man who would love and respect them, and to whom they could returned the same sentiments in equal measure.

After their fasts were broken, Collins would retire to his study to work on any outstanding parish business and then visit his parishioners on a rotation. He met with his patron once a week, unless a pressing need to meet before the next scheduled meeting arose unexpectedly, which was rare.

After Mary dealt with the household needs, she would make her own visits to parishioners. Some visits were to the sick or those needing extra

assistance, but the bulk were social calls just to make sure all was well. Having learnt about caring for and visiting Longbourn's tenants from Jane and Elizabeth, Mary was able to apply those lessons in the Hunsford Parish.

While the Collinses were attending to their duties, some days Kitty and Gigi—always escorted by Richard—would visit the parsonage. On other days, Jane and Elizabeth would make the short walk to the manor house. Whenever in company together, Jane and Richard would soon find a reason to talk.

In little more than a week after the sisters' arrival, when in company Richard and Jane seemed to be gravitating one to the other more and more. One particular morning, just before Jane and Elizabeth were to depart for the great house, the post was delivered.

Elizabeth had written to her father, making one more attempt to convince him not to allow Lydia to go to Brighton, so she was apprehensive when she spied a letter addressed to her in her father's hand. She broke the seal and read the short, curt missive.

> *23 March 1811*
>
> *Elizabeth:*
>
> *Please do not importune me on this subject again. I made my decision and I am, I believe, still the father and parent.*
>
> *Lydia will soon learn her insignificance at no trouble or expense to myself.*
>
> *Leave my bailiwick to me and worry about yourself,*
>
> *TB*

Elizabeth felt the rebuke jump off the parchment at her. '*Papa, you are so worried about having peace and quiet you cannot see the danger in letting her go. Lydia will be the ruin of us all. Thank goodness Mary is well married already, but I am afraid you are going to consign the rest of us to lonely spinsterhood by your wilful blindness and refusal to take your youngest in hand. You neither know nor care what an outrageous flirt Lydia*

is, nor how she makes her family look ridiculous.' Elizabeth prayed she was wrong but was almost certain she was not.

"Lizzy, why do you look so distressed? Is there bad news from home? Is everyone well?" Jane asked, concerned as she watched the emotions play across her sister's face.

Wordlessly, Elizabeth handed Jane the offending note from their father. "Oh Lizzy, I am so sorry. But you know Father has long been wilfully blind to the danger which Lydia's unrestrained behaviour poses to all of us," Jane commiserated.

"That is the most unforgiving statement I have ever heard you make Janie. In the past you would have made excuses and tried to explain our father's lack of action in some positive light. I am relieved you are seeing things the way they are rather than how you might hope they could be," Elizabeth stated.

"Come Lizzy, it is time to walk to Rosings, for we do not want to cause Kitty and Gigi to wait for us too long." Jane stood to prepare herself for the short walk.

"Is it just the girls you are keen to see, Miss Jane Eloise Bennet?" Elizabeth asked archly. "It seems to me you are just as happy to see a certain ex-soldier who happens to be the master of the estate we are visiting." Elizabeth raised her eyebrow in question and was rewarded with a deep blush from her sister.

"Lizzy!" Jane exclaimed as she playfully swatted her younger sister's arm, never denying her assertion.

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"You will be sorely missed Lydia," Fanny Bennet shrilled as her lace handkerchief waved up and down with the excited movements of its owner. "Oh, how I wish your father would have agreed we all could travel to Brighton. Some sea bathing would have set me up for life!"

Although she was her mother's favourite and professed much love for the woman—but only to the extent that it gained her what she desired—Lydia was pleased her father had refused to bring his wife to Brighton or allow her to travel there without him.
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Lydia aimed to flirt and have fun with the officers; she was sure she would catch one, as who could resist her abundant charms? An added incentive for being free of much supervision was that the handsome Mr. Wickham would finally be released from the brig after having been so falsely accused and unjustly punished.

The man was everything she desired in a husband, a handsome officer in a scarlet coat. The other thing that drove Lydia's desire to catch an officer as soon as might be was her desire to wed before any of the rest of her sisters.

That plain Mary had destroyed her plans to be the first of the Bennet sisters to marry, but to marry before her other three sisters would be most satisfying. At least Kitty had realised that she was nothing without her and had started to pay her deference before being dragged off against her will to boring old Hunsford. Lydia would take pleasure in writing many letters to rub Kitty's nose in how much fun she, the youngest and prettiest of the Bennet sisters, was having.

Mr. Bennet had not bestirred himself from his study to see his youngest off. He felt a momentary pang of guilt over the rebuke in his missive to Lizzy, but he consoled himself with the fact that with Lydia out of the house there would be absolute peace and quiet.

He was not worried about his wife interrupting him while there was no one else in the house with them, as she would spend her time with her equally senseless sister, Hattie Phillips, to indulge in gossip and talk of lace and other fripperies all day long.

Bennet knew he should feel guilt at having manipulated his wife to go to her sister's, thereby imposing on his brother Phillips. She should have invited her to their home, but regret was one of the emotions on which Mr. Bennet did not waste time. Like so many other things he did not do, it was too much trouble to expend thought about his behaviour and inaction towards his family and how it impacted them. He was sure—or at least had convinced himself—that Lizzy's assertions were so outlandish they could not but be wrong.

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George Wickham was seething with anger, for he was still stuck in the bloody Derbyshire Militia. Everything had been set up: he was to have a new wardrobe, shoes, boots, everything he needed to present himself as a gentleman, when that damned Lady Catherine and Richard Fitzwilliam had spoiled his plans.

In the weeks since his flogging, his back had begun to heal at last. There was still pain, but not as great as it had been right after the lashes had been administered. Luckily, the wounds had not become infected—much. There had been some nights with fever, but thankfully, the unit's doctor had applied a salve which protected his open wounds.

Since all his wounds had at last closed, he was finally able to wear a shirt again. There were scabs; those would drop off soon enough but would leave him with scars for the rest of his life—a reminder of what Darcy's relations' interference had cost him.

The only positive for the former lieutenant—now demoted to ensign—was the fact that once they arrived in Brighton, he would be released from the brig. After all, riding in the wagon to Brighton—even with the bars—was preferable to marching for miles each day towards their new encampment, as most of his unit would be required to do.

He had not yet determined how he would get back at his tormenters. He was sure after he was set free he would settle on an infallible plan to exact his revenge. As always, he was confident in his abilities.

If only Darcy had not arrived two days early and spoiled his and Mrs. Younge's plans with mousy Georgiana! Wickham was now certain that Darcy had lied about the restrictions on his sister's dowry and believed her thirty thousand pounds could have been his.

He still smarted from the facer Darcy had planted on his person. At least his nose had set at an almost normal angle so his greatest asset, his looks, had not been materially affected. Although he needed to exact revenge on Darcy, his priority was the de Bourgh woman, and her nephew Richard Fitzwilliam.

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As much as he hated to admit he was deficient, the more Darcy looked at his behaviour, the more he found it wanting. Was Aunt Catherine correct in her assertions about his contradictory—even hypocritical—behaviour with regards to the Bingleys?

After weeks of thought, Darcy now saw that Bingley, rather than being a friend, was a dependant, one who Darcy could easily control. The enjoyment of being able to direct Bingley led to him turning a blind eye to the abhorrent behaviour of Miss Caroline Bingley, and to a lesser extent, Mrs. Louisa Hurst.

He had sworn to protect his sister, yet there were multiple times he failed her. Yes, Mrs. Younge was his biggest failure, but he was well aware that Gigi disliked Bingley's sisters. In order to maintain his control over their brother, he ignored Gigi's discomfort and did nothing to alleviate her suffering when she was imposed upon by the fawning sisters.

He had heard Miss Elizabeth—the woman who unknowingly owned his heart—call Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst the *supercilious sisters*. Looking back on their behaviour with a critical eye, he could not but agree with her.

No wonder Lady Catherine said Miss Elizabeth disliked him. Not only had he insulted her in the most ungentlemanlike fashion at the assembly where they had met, but he had been insufferably rude to all of her family save Miss Bennet, and to all of her neighbours. Then he had hurt her sister while convincing himself he was protecting his *friend*.

He was ashamed; he claimed to abhor deception but had practiced it. He admitted to himself he had no understanding of what Miss Bennet had felt for Bingley but had issued an opinion which fit his needs so he would be removed from the temptation that was Miss Elizabeth.

He hung his head as he remembered Bingley rejected his sisters' arguments and had only agreed to separate himself from Miss Bennet when he, *Mr. High and Mighty Darcy*, had told him the woman was indifferent to him and would only accept an offer to appease her mother.

The arrogant disdain for the feelings of others he had displayed mortified him. As he thought about Miss Elizabeth with his new understanding, he could hear Miss Bingley's pernicious attacks against her, and how Miss Elizabeth had with both wit and class deflected and turned

those attacks back on their source without becoming rude. He smiled—a ghost of one—when he remembered how the harridan, harpy, and hoyden all wrapped up into one that was Miss Bingley had always been dismayed when she could not discompose Miss Elizabeth, and he guessed she had often been unsure if she had been insulted by any of Miss Elizabeth's arch replies.

What had he, a gentleman, done while a tradesman's daughter tried to denigrate the daughter of a gentleman? Nothing! He had even agreed with some of Miss Bingley's paltry attacks! Another error he made was on the day after the assembly. Miss Bingley had commented on *Miss Eliza's* reputed beauty, even as she denigrated the woman's looks.

What had he done? Staying silent would have been better than uttering '*She* a beauty!—I should as soon call her mother a wit.' He had known his words at the assembly were untrue as soon as they passed his lips, just as he had known how false this statement was. Miss Bingley had preened, and seeing his mistake, Darcy had hidden from her for the next two days.

Miss Bingley's attacks against Miss Elizabeth had escalated after he confessed his attraction to Miss Elizabeth while replying to Miss Bingley at Lucas Lodge. How selfish he had been. Even though he was the cause of the intensified vitriol, he remained silent and allowed the shrew to keep attacking the woman he loved.

He shook these melancholy thoughts from his brain and realised that he had many amends to make. He was thankful all of his family would be in one place so he would be able to beg their pardon for his offences at one time.

Darcy would have desired the chance to apologise to the Bennets, especially Miss Elizabeth, but only the middle sister was in the area as she had married Richard's parson. In her letters to her brother, Gigi had *forgotten* to mention the presence of the Miss Bennets to him.

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“Elizabeth, you seem out of sorts today,” Lady Catherine noted after the two Bennet sisters had been welcomed into the house. “Should I have Mrs. Toppin prepare a chamber for you to rest in?”

“No, Lady Cat, I am well. I am only disappointed by a response I received from my father. I should not be, because he has been this way for as long as I can remember. It was foolish of me to think that he might change now.” Elizabeth sighed resignedly.

“In my experience, a problem shared is a problem halved, but I will not force a confidence if you choose not to,” Lady Catherine told Elizabeth gently.

“You have met my parents and have seen how they behave. You also met Lydia, my youngest sister, at Mary’s wedding,” Elizabeth stated.

“Yes, and I remember all of them,” Lady Catherine agreed.

Elizabeth told Lady Catherine of her worries about Lydia being allowed to travel to Brighton where she would be chaperoned only by an equally silly girl—Colonel Forster’s wife, who was not much older than Lydia. She explained how she had advised against it before she and her sisters departed for Hunsford, and how she was opposed by both parents for very different reasons.

After explaining about the beseeching letter she posted to her father, begging him to reconsider allowing Lydia’s trip, Elizabeth withdrew the curt, chastising response from her father and handed it to Lady Catherine.

“And this is all the answer you can expect to receive from your father? I wonder at his dismissing your concerns with such incivility. Are his peace and quiet worth his daughter’s possible ruin?” Lady Catherine asked incredulously.

“As much as it pains me to say so, yes. So long as my father can sit in his study sipping his port while he is reading, the world could come to an end outside the door and he would not bestir himself,” Elizabeth replied dejectedly.

“In my opinion, what you and Jane did with Kitty, having her ingratiate herself with her younger sister, will be a saving grace. I believe Mary told you how close we are to Brighton, and having seen and heard about your

youngest sister, we can rely on her to boast to Kitty, who will keep us informed of any intemperate actions she might plan to take." Lady Catherine turned to where Kitty was sitting with Jane and Gigi. "Kitty dear, please attend us."

"Yes Aunt Cat?" Kitty said as she obediently joined her sister and Lady Catherine.

Lady Catherine did not miss Elizabeth's questioning look at Kitty's form of address. "It was my desire that Kitty address me as Aunt, and I would be most pleased if you," Lady Catherine looked to where Jane sat, "and Jane would address me thus." Both older Bennet sisters inclined their heads in acceptance.

"Kitty, you must make Lydia believe you are jealous of how much fun she is having, and to highlight what a boring time you are being subjected to here. Ask her to tell you of her fun so you may live vicariously through her. I am sure that if you tickle her ego, she will keep you informed of what she is up to. I believe that if she plans something scandalous, she will not be able to stop herself from boasting about it to you," Lady Catherine suggested, then waited while Kitty digested her speech.

"Now that I understand how brittle a lady's reputation is, and how fully her family will be tainted by association, I will do exactly as you suggest Aunt Cat," Kitty promised. Lady Catherine kissed Kitty on the cheek, and the beaming girl returned to her friend and sister, who had waited for her before continuing their conversation.

Elizabeth and Jane could see the attention Kitty was receiving was helping her to gain in confidence and improve her manners. Elizabeth felt guilt for the years when she ignored her sister, writing her off as *one of the silliest girls in all of England*, as her father would say while he made sport of Kitty and Lydia.

Her father was unable to see it, but Elizabeth was aware there was only one silly Bennet, and she was currently on her way to Brighton.

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Chapter 12

The Earl and Countess of Matlock, along with the Viscount and Viscountess Hilldale, arrived at Rosings Park on the first Wednesday in April. The occupants of Rosings Park and the Hunsford Parsonage welcomed the adults, but the babe Reginald Andrew Fitzwilliam

—little Reggie—was the centre of attention.

He had a mop of sandy blond hair that looked just like his father's hair colour, and after six months he still had the Fitzwilliam blue eyes. Although his mother had blue eyes, they were not the deep blue the Fitzwilliams were known for.

Marie's parents, the Earl and Countess of Jersey, had been invited to join the family for Easter, but declined as they had accepted an invitation from their son's, Wesley De Melville, Viscount Westmore, in-laws and family.

After they changed from their travel attire, washed off the dust of the road, and saw little Reggie settled in the nursery, the Matlock party met Lady Catherine and Gigi in the largest of Rosings Park's drawing rooms.

Lady Elaine, the Countess of Matlock, looked across the room in wonder, happy beyond words at how her niece had recovered. Gigi and Marie sat chatting easily. "Cathy, you have worked wonders with our girl," Lady Elaine told her sister.

"As much as I would like to claim the credit, the truth is that the greatest improvements Gigi made were after she attended the Collins wedding in Hertfordshire with Richard and me," Lady Catherine revealed.

"What happened in Hertfordshire to be such a catalyst?" Lady Elaine enquired.

"Our Gigi met the Bennet sisters. The middle sister is the new Mrs. Collins. Some of her sisters joined her in March," Lady Catherine informed her sister.

“Are you referring to the sister William insulted and the older sister he separated from his friend Bingley?” Lady Elaine asked with raised eyebrows.

“The very same. The eldest, who holds the interest of your second son, is Miss Jane Bennet. She is a classic beauty, a willowy blond with blue eyes. She was hurt by our nephew’s officious interference, but now she feels he did her a favour.” Lady Elaine inclined her head as Lady Catherine continued. “I hope I helped her see that a man who loved her would not allow anyone to talk him out of his inclination.” Lady Catherine waited, her happiness at having been so helpful evident while her sister assimilated the information.

“In other words, you helped her see that the man is capricious and is merely a boy. If she and Richard reach an understanding, they will have our full support, no matter what her connections or dowry may be,” Lady Elaine stated resolutely. “What about this Miss Elizabeth?”

“She is a spitfire. Elizabeth is shorter than Jane—Miss Bennet—but no less pretty. Evidently, the mother has told her for years that she is nothing to her older sister because she has mahogany tresses and darker colouring. She is blessed with the greenest eyes you have ever seen and is extremely intelligent with a rapier wit. You will see for yourself soon enough when the Collinses and their three sisters arrive for tea. Anyone who thinks she is less than Jane in looks is blind or stupid, likelier both,” Lady Catherine informed her sister.

“And they get along well with Gigi?” Lady Elaine verified.

“All of them do; they are very solicitous of our niece, but unlike that harpy Miss Bingley, they never fawn over her. She is treated like another sister by all four Bennet sisters,” Lady Catherine explained.

“I thought from your letters that there would only be three? Do you mean there are three sisters here in addition to the parson’s wife?” Lady Elaine asked.

“Correct. Mrs. Collins is Mary, the middle Bennet sister as was. Catherine Bennet—called Kitty—is the next youngest after Mrs. Collins; she turned seventeen this January past. She is residing at the manor house so Gigi is not alone. Gigi is close to all four of the sisters present, but more

so with Kitty as they are closest in age. Kitty was a little shy at first and decided she would visit her sisters so as to not intrude on our reunion." Lady Catherine took a sip of her tea before it became cold.

"Is there not a fifth sister?" Lady Elaine asked, remembering what she learned at Christmastide.

"There is. She is but fifteen, a little girl in a woman's body. I also met her at the wedding. She is spoilt and has to be the centre of attention or she acts out badly. Unfortunately, she is nothing like her older sisters." Lady Catherine went on to explain the family dynamic. "The mother spoils her and encourages her pursuit of officers. The father ignores her, and never checks her. As if that were not enough, they allowed such a girl to go to Brighton to be around an encampment of militia officers, one of whom is that libertine Wickham!"

"You did say the father is supposed to be intelligent did you not Cathy?" Lady Elaine was amazed and disgusted at the same time that two such parents could be found in the same household.

"Now you will understand why the sisters who are here are worried that the youngest one will be caught up in scandal and ruin herself, and her family along with her. I will do anything within my power to stop that from happening." Lady Catherine vowed.

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By the time Darcy entered his coach on Wednesday morning, he was feeling better about himself. He had accepted much—most—of what his relations had pointed out to him and now they would be able to judge how he had changed, based on his behaviour.

Would he be able to put away his mask? What about relating to people who were not of his station or those he was not acquainted with? Darcy had no problems interacting with his servants and the tenants at his estates; he treated them all well, so he firmly believed he was capable of both.

The question he had to answer for himself is why he treated other members of the gentry, from lower circles, with such disdain at times. He also had to reconcile his words about the Bennets' connections to trade with
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his own. Yes, he was uncomfortable in crowds, especially when he did not know the people, but that was no excuse; he was a gentleman after all.

It was not just his friendship with Bingley; he actively invested with some tradesmen. Not only that, but some of the businesses he owned, a grist mill, a brewery, and his shipping interests, were by very definition trades. Part of his introspection had been trying to answer that question for himself, though as of yet, he had not done so fully.

Darcy knew that he often had a problem when talking. He would make nonsensical statements and lose sight of the point he was trying to make. At other times, such as at the Meryton assembly, he might say something rude and inappropriate without meaning it. So, before he departed from Pemberley, he began writing down points that he would use when he made his apologies to the family. As his coach travelled south, Darcy studied his notes, adjusting or adding words that reinforced what he wanted to say to each member of the family.

He knew he needed to beg the Bennets' pardon as well, but he did not know when, or if, he would see them again, Mayhap he could write a letter, which would be a relief, as he was far more eloquent with his pen than his conversation. He would request that the sister who married Richard's parson post it along with hers. He felt it would be presumptuous of him to write to Mr. Bennet on his own; it was not as if they were intimates.

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Both Bingleys were slack-jawed. Their normally mild-mannered brother Hurst had meant what he said. This very day, the Hursts departed for Winsdale, and when Caroline tried to inveigle an invitation, Hurst told her in no uncertain terms that she was not welcome—ever.

"Who will accompany me when I make visits and shop?" Miss Bingley whined.

She would not miss her sister; she would miss all the things that Louisa used to do for her. This was too much! Mr. Darcy remained at Pemberley, and now her sister was gone as well.

"We will have to hire a companion for you," Bingley suggested weakly.
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“A companion! I am not a young ignorant girl like Miss Darcy. If I were to suddenly have a companion, all of my friends would think me on the shelf,” Miss Bingley stated dismissively. “As I will soon be Mrs. Darcy, what need have I for a companion?”

It would have been the ideal time to inform his sister what Darcy had told him, but Bingley was too cowardly to anger his younger sister, since he did not have his older sister to mitigate the effects of a Caroline Bingley tantrum. He would have been hesitant to do so even were Louisa still present.

“Without a companion, how will you call on your friends, go shopping, or engage in the other activities you enjoy? If only my angel had loved me, we would have had someone to be with you when you needed,” Bingley stated wistfully.

For a moment, Miss Bingley considered her brother’s words. If he married, it would help alleviate her problems, but nothing was worth *her* family being aligned with those awful country mushrooms, the Bennets. “I dare say you do need to find a wife, an appropriate one for our station, not some fortune hunter from the wilds of Hertfordshire.”

As was his wont, Bingley said nothing to refute his sisters’ ridiculous statement. Without Louisa to help him, keeping Caroline happy was imperative. “Would you like to go visit Uncle Paul in Scarborough for Easter?” Bingley asked meekly.

“I do not want to spend Easter with our tradesmen relatives. We do not need the stench of trade around us. I am sure we will see Mr. Darcy soon,” Miss Bingley stated assuredly. Her brother was unaware that she paid men to watch Darcy House.

Bingley was not so sure they would see his friend in the near term, but he hoped for such a happening as it would distract his younger sister and make his life easier. He wondered how badly his sister would explode in anger if she ever discovered he was still active in trade.

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It did not take many minutes after the Hunsford party arrived for tea that the Bennet sisters saw the rectitude of Lady Catherine’s words regarding
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her brother and his family. The Earl was a jovial man who exuded intelligence. The Countess was as pleasant and as welcoming as Lady Catherine, especially towards Jane. Lord Andrew and Lady Marie Fitzwilliam rounded out the party, and they were extremely affable as well.

'*Mayhap there is hope for Mr. Darcy, as all of his nearest relations are so pleasant. Gigi says he is the best brother, master, and landlord. Yes, she is his sister, but I have heard the same from Aunt Cat and Mr. Fitzwilliam, and they have no reason to exaggerate. If he has truly taken the reproofs of his family to heart, mayhap I will enjoy Mr. Darcy's company for the first time since the day I met him and he slighted me so rudely,*" Elizabeth mused as she watched the interactions between her family members and the newly-arrived Fitzwilliams.

"Elizabeth," Lady Catherine called.

"My apologies Aunt Cat, I was wool-gathering," Elizabeth replied contritely. "Did you say something?"

"Do you want some more tea my dear?" Lady Catherine smiled.

"No, thank you, I am no longer thirsty after my first cup," Elizabeth replied.

"Aunt Cat?" Lady Elaine asked in amusement.

"Yes, with the Bennet sisters counted as Gigi's older sisters it made sense, did it not Sister?" Lady Catherine responded, her eyes gleaming with pleasure.

"In that case, you may call me Aunt Elaine, if and when you feel comfortable doing so," Lady Elaine granted.

Upon the arrival of the Bennet sisters, another of Lady Catherine's statements was proven true, for none of his arriving family missed the marked attention Richard was paying to the eldest Bennet sister. They observed that tender feelings seemed to be developing in both directions.

"Miss Bennet," Richard leaned closer to the lady so as to not be overheard.

"Yes Mr. Fitzwilliam," Jane said softly.

“Hypothetically, if one were to request a formal courtship with you, would he have to ride to Hertfordshire to ask permission of your father?” Richard enquired. As it always did when Jane Bennet was near, Richard’s heartbeat faster as he breathed in her intoxicating scent.

“No Mr. Fitzwilliam. The hypothetical man would not have to address my father for two reasons. First, I am of age, and second, our brother Collins has permission in writing to act in our father’s stead in all matters if needs be,” Jane informed him, relieved her answer caused such a beaming smile from Richard.

Richard had both met and heard more than enough about the Bennet parents. He did not relish the thought of having to meet with the indolent man or coping with the effusions of the vulgar Mrs. Bennet. He would as soon ride into battle again.

“In that case, Miss Bennet, will you take a turn in the gardens with me?” Richard requested.

“It would be a great pleasure to take some air with you Sir.” They both stood.

“We are taking a turn in the gardens,” Richard informed the room. There was no missing the looks of pleasure on Richard’s and Jane’s faces as they departed, leaving little doubt as to Richard’s purpose.

“Kitty, you and Gigi join them,” Lady Catherine instructed. Then in a softer voice—still loud enough for all to hear, she said “As long as you can see them, you do not have to be close enough to hear them.”

After the three ladies donned their shawls, the four made for the front gardens.

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Chapter 13

“Miss Bennet, you can be at no loss why I requested you to walk out in the garden with me,” Richard stated.

“I am not sure of the reason for this great honour, although I find myself hopeful,” Jane replied shyly. “After my last experience with a man, I would rather not make assumptions even after being given a strong indication of your intentions.”

“Surely Jane, you must know I am nothing like the man who hurt you. No one, not even my parents, could turn me away from you—not that my parents would try to do so. I do ask advice when I feel I need it, but I do not rely on others to direct my actions or make decisions for me. I weigh advice with what I know, and if I am convinced that there is a better way, I will make a change, but it will *always* be my decision. You will find—if you have not already—that capriciousness is not an element of my character.” Richard paused to assess his walking partner, the lady he hoped to make his partner in every facet of his life.

“If there is one thing I know about you Mr. Fitzwilliam,” Jane began to answer.

“Richard, if you please,” he interjected.

“Then you must call me Jane,” Jane replied. She had missed the fact he had already done so. Her blush was caused by the pleasure from the deepening intimacy between them. “As I was saying, *Richard*, I had not known you very long when I understood that you were *nothing* like Mr. Bingley. As much as he seems to lack character, you have it in spades, so no, I would never think you like him. To make sure I do not allow myself to be misled a second time, I will make no assumptions.”

“It warms my heart that you know I am nothing like anyone else. I am not in love with you yet, but I do have a tender regard for you, and I would like to see if—as I suspect it will—love develops between us. Jane Bennet, will you grant me a formal courtship?”

Both Jane's heart rate and her breathing sped up as Richard declared his regard and intentions. How happy it made her to be valued by such a man. "I find my feelings mirror yours. There is no love—yet, but I believe between us there is very fertile ground where love may sprout, blossom, and thrive. I have tender feelings for you, so yes, Richard Fitzwilliam, I most definitely accept your offer of a formal courtship."

Richard lifted both of Jane's hands, gently turned them over, and bestowed a tender kiss on the underside of each wrist. If Jane's heart had been beating fast before, now it felt like a drum was being played at great speed in her chest.

Kitty and Gigi, sitting on a bench on the other side of the garden from Jane and Richard, exchanged knowing looks as they saw Richard kiss Jane's wrists. "So romantic," Kitty sighed. "I used to think that only a man in regimentals would do for me, but now I hope to win the love of a good and honourable man regardless of his occupation."

"We will find such men; we just need to be patient and careful. No one wants to make the mistake I almost made," Georgiana stated introspectively.

"Come, you two," Richard called, "we are for the drawing room." He turned to Jane. "I have a very important question to ask of your brother," Richard told Jane softly.

"My brother will not dare to refuse you anything you ask," Jane smiled beatifically. "Mary would never allow him to impinge on my happiness, and even should he dare, I am of age. Just in case you needed reminding," Jane teased light-heartedly.

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Though Wickham relished his regained freedom, there were a few major inconveniences. He could not run up any debts, nor could he trifle with any maidens. He was aware he was being watched, so he was forced to tamp down his inclinations.

It was one more sin he had to lay at Darcy and his family's door. Who were they to restrict his ability to live as he felt he deserved? From the day he had been flogged, he had attempted to formulate a plan of revenge, but
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so far nothing in his reach could be used to gain their attention or cause them to beg for that which only he could give.

Then, like a sign from the gods, he had been gifted with the person of Lydia Bennet. She was as stupid a chit as he had ever encountered, and he knew it would not take long to have her eating out of his hand.

Earlier that day, he had encountered her and the equally silly Mrs. Forster near the shops. How he would like to pluck Mrs. Forster before he scarpered to repay Colonel Forster for flogging him.

Lydia Bennet had batted her eyelashes at him and told him she knew what was being said about him in Meryton were lies spread by those who were jealous of him. Even Wickham, who lied with the best of them, could hear how ridiculous the chit's statement was, but of course he played along with her.

What made her even more attractive as a tool for revenge was the fact she had twenty pounds with her, which she boasted that her mother had given her without her father's knowledge. When he needed to make his escape, he would need her funds. Then she had revealed that her sisters were all at Hunsford.

Out of her inane chattering, he gleaned that one sister was married to the parson at Hunsford and the other three were visiting her. Mayhap he should pluck her or take her with him and abandon her in London; it would even the score with that uppity Miss Elizabeth who had snubbed him when he had been sure she was his for the taking.

A plan started to form. If he could convince her they were to elope, he could sell her to a brothel in London. As long as he did not despoil her, he could get an additional fifty pounds for a maiden, mayhap more for a gentleman's daughter. It was disappointing he could not enjoy her himself, but she would fetch so much more as a virgin and he desperately needed the funds.

Wickham knew he would have to be careful to avoid the watchers who seemed to be taking their duty seriously, day or night. It would force him to exercise patience and would require a longer-term plan than he would like, but he knew he would succeed. From the first assembly they both attended in Brighton and all those thereafter, he requested Lydia's first and last sets.

Lydia was flattered that the exceedingly handsome Mr. Wickham singled her out from among all the ladies available to him. She thought the slight crookedness in his nose made him even more handsome and was amused that Mr. Darcy had done him an unintended service in such a way. '*Yes,*' she told herself with glee, '*I was not the first to marry, but I will be the next before my older sisters. I must write to Kitty; she will be so jealous that he prefers me,*' Lydia thought spitefully. In her opinion, Kitty deserved to be jealous, as she had not been as obedient as she should have been. Lydia forgave Kitty for her momentary disloyalty, but that did not mean she would not take pleasure in retelling of all her fun as she knew Kitty would likely cry again for being left behind.

One thing she was sure of was that Kitty would keep her secrets, as her next older sister would not want to lose her favour again. If she did, Kitty had been warned that her regard would be lost forever and she would never be allowed to visit so she too could dance with all the officers, save the ones she wanted for herself.

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"Mr. Collins, may I have a word with you in private?" Richard requested as the four returned to the drawing room.

"Of course Mr. Fitzwilliam, please lead the way," Collins replied. Seeing his sister Jane's countenance when she returned from the garden, he had a fairly good idea what his patron wanted to discuss.

"My, my Jane, I have never seen you look this happy before, not even when…" Elizabeth stopped herself before she said the irresolute man's name. "Not even when another was calling on you did you ever look this happy."

"Which only proves that not only was he not in love with me as a man should be, but neither was I in love with him as I thought I was," Jane opined. "Yes, Lizzy, you are perceptive, and I am as happy as could be."

"Are you betrothed Jane?" Elizabeth asked as Mary joined them.

"Is the subject of the discussion our incandescently happy sister?" Mary asked.
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“It seems so,” Jane responded drolly. “And no Lizzy, I am not betrothed. We have not known one another long enough for that step…yet. Richard requested a courtship, and I accepted with much pleasure. We do not yet love one another, but we both have tender feelings for the other.”

“Oh, I knew how it would be,” Mary exclaimed louder than she intended, causing the older persons and Lord and Lady Hilldale to look at her quizzically while Kitty and Gigi giggled into their hands.

“Please allow us to inform everyone officially, which will clear up any question anyone might have about the grins you are seeing,” Collins announced as he returned to the drawing room with a beaming patron in tow. Collins nodded to Jane, who joined the two men. “Mr. Fitzwilliam has requested a formal courtship from my sister Jane, and she has granted it. As I was given the authority by my cousin Bennet, I have conferred my consent and blessing.” As Collins completed the announcement, Lord Andrew leapt from his chair and wrapped his brother in a bear hug.

“Everything of the best, *little* brother,” Andrew clapped his brother on the back after he released him from the hug. “I am not sure you are good enough for Miss Bennet, but I wish you well, nevertheless.”

“Andrew!” His mother swatted his arm playfully. “Let me hug my younger son.”

Meanwhile, Lady Marie reached Jane and took both her hands. “I think I will enjoy having you—and the rest of your sisters—as my sisters,” Marie stated.

“Please call me Jane,” Jane requested as she accepted good wishes from Richard’s sister. “You too My Lord,” she addressed the Matlock heir.

“In that case, please call me Marie and my husband is Andrew,” Marie averred.

While all the good wishes for future felicity were being conveyed, Lady Catherine rang for the butler and asked him to open some bottles of champagne. “Is she as good as she seems Cathy?” the Earl asked as he assisted his sister up from her chair.

“Better,” Lady Catherine replied succinctly.

Lord Matlock knew his sister was not one prone to hyperbole, so he accepted her word without question. “In that case, I can see my younger son is to be very happy,” he surmised.

By the time the hugs and wishes for the future were done, all of the younger set had agreed to address one another by first names, or, among the men, by last name or title, including Mr. Collins. The Earl and Countess also insisted that all of the Bennet sisters, including the one who had resigned that name, call them Uncle Reggie and Aunt Elaine. Mr. Collins was given leave to address both ladies with the appellation ‘aunt’ as well.

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Later that evening, when the four residing at the parsonage returned home, the three sisters sat together in the sitting room while Collins read the day’s correspondence. The tea became tea and dinner, and no one repined as a joyous time was had by all.

“Jane, when do you want to write to Mama and Papa?” Elizabeth asked.

“It is prudent to wait, I believe,” Jane stated resolutely. “Papa will only make silly jokes, but Mama will invite herself here. You know she will.”

“As much as I would like to tell you I disagree, I cannot,” Mary agreed.

“I know you are correct,” Elizabeth added.

“It is not that I think Richard will be discouraged by Mama’s outrageous comments or her vulgar behaviour, but I would rather not put my hopefully soon-to-be family through that exhibition if I can help it,” Jane told her sisters.

“We support you fully Janie,” Elizabeth spoke for both younger sisters after receiving an emphatic nod from Mary.

Just then, Collins returned to the sitting room. “Will it be strange for you that your patron will become your brother if Jane and Richard wed?” Elizabeth asked.

After cogitating for a few moments Collins shook his head. “No Lizzy, it will not. I will not be the first clergyman who served a parish where a brother or another close relation is the patron, and I am sure I will not be the
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last. Fitzwilliam and I have an excellent working relationship, so I do not envisage that changing regardless of the familial connection."

"William and Richard have worked well together from day one, according to what my William told me while we were courting," Mary reported. "Nothing I have seen since we have been married has contradicted that. There are patrons and patronesses who try to interfere in the parish under their gift, thinking their wealth and position give them the right to do so. William would not stand for that, and from the beginning of his tenure it was never an issue."

Each of the residents drank a cup of tea and then retired for the night. Once Elizabeth had washed and changed, she knocked on Jane's bedchamber door and joined her when summoned to enter. "You will be a very happy woman, I believe," Elizabeth stated as she sat down on the bed next to her older sister.

"Yes, I dare say I will, if things progress to their natural conclusion," Jane replied.

"Jane, you cannot doubt it. Richard is an honourable and resolute man," Elizabeth insisted. "He would not take the step he did tonight if he did not mean to propose to you at some point."

"Lizzy, I do not worry about that. I just refuse to anticipate a proposal until Richard addresses me," Jane explained. "Do you remember how Mama was proclaiming my wedding to Mr. Bingley to one and all before he had even requested a courtship? I never want to have expectations raised beyond reality again. Richard is courting me. When—if—he addresses me with his proposals, then, and *only* then, will I plan for the future."

"Mama's proclamations are part of the reason you do not want our parents notified, are they not?" Elizabeth guessed.

"They are. I know we are to respect and obey our parents, and I used to obey and respect blindly. I would never contravene an instruction from our parents if they gave a direct one, but Lizzy, am I a bad daughter to need some distance from them?" Jane wondered.

"If you are, then all four of us sisters here are the same as we all feel as you do," Elizabeth averred with certainty. "I was talking to Aunt Cat, and I

agreed with her when she told me that respect should be earned and not merely expected. We can respect the roles of parents that Mama and Papa have, but as people, it saddens me to say that neither have done anything to earn our respect. In fact, the opposite is true."

"It must be hard for you to see Papa thusly, as you were always his favourite," Jane stated.

"At first it was. It has been some time now that I have seen Papa as he truly is," Elizabeth said with a sigh. "The fact that he places his own selfish desires above the welfare of his family was the last straw for me. I still love him as my father, but I cannot look at him any longer with the same admiration and respect I once did."

"If Richard proposes and I accept him, I will inform our parents then. If Mama cannot control her effusions and outbursts, then I will ask Richard if we can marry here or at his parents' estate in Derbyshire. I love Mama too Lizzy, but I will not allow my wedding to become about her and her desire to impress the neighbourhood. Does that make me selfish?" Jane asked sadly.

"No Jane, it does not!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "I would not want that if I were to find a man to marry. The only reason Mary was spared Mama's behaviour was Mama was so used to ignoring her that she did little or nothing to counter Mary's requests. She did not boast about the union far and wide in the neighbourhood, which was indicative of her lack of interest in Mary's marriage. It did not make sense, as the marriage secured Longbourn for our mother.

"Mary and I have discussed this very subject, and she was not sorry to be spared Mama's machinations and effusions. A wedding is supposed to be about the bride and groom. We know that in many ways Mama is an older version of Lydia, who is never happy unless she is the centre of attention," Elizabeth assured Jane.

"Speaking of our youngest sister, I hope Kitty receives a letter soon. I am sure Lydia is not behaving as she should. I will rest easier if I am proven wrong, but it pains me to say that I do not believe I will be," Jane stated.

"With her belief in Kitty's renewed subservience, coupled with Lydia's desire to make Kitty jealous, I am sure it will not be long before Kitty

receives a letter," Elizabeth estimated. "Off to bed with me. Good night, and I wish you happy again. You deserve everything good that comes to you, my dearest sister."

"Thank you Lizzy. You deserve happiness too. Sleep well." Jane wished her sister a good night as they hugged, and thereafter Elizabeth made her way to her own bedchamber.

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Chapter 14

The following morning the three sisters who still bore the name Bennet, Mary, and Gigi were taking a turn in the gardens. This was, Elizabeth's second walk of the day, for she could not resist her early morning ramble. Far from objecting to walking again, she relished the additional exercise—for what others would call a hike she called a mere ramble.

"Still no letter from Lydia?" Mary asked.

"Nothing yet. I would have thought she would have been crowing about her *fun* from the first day, relishing the thought that I am languishing in Kent," Kitty replied.

"You know how careless Lydia can be. It is possible—if she wrote a letter—that she wrote the direction most ill," Jane guessed.

"What if Kitty wrote a letter to your youngest sister," Gigi suggested.

"That is a fine idea," Elizabeth affirmed. She turned toward Kitty. "You should write to our sister telling her what a terrible time you are having here. You need to make it sound like you are envious of her and beg for some news to relieve the monotony of your boring life without her."

Jane and Mary nodded their agreement. "I will write to her as soon as Gigi and I return to the manor house," Kitty said. "We will be ready to chaperone you and Richard this afternoon Janie."

"If you and Gigi would rather do something else, I am sure Mrs. Annesley would not object to filling the office," Jane offered.

"Kitty and I will be there gladly. Even were we busy, other than Mrs. Annesley there are more than enough chaperones between the parsonage and Rosings," Georgiana noted.

"If you like, I will volunteer. I want to discuss Richard's opinions on the war," Elizabeth teased.

"No thank you very much! Kitty and Gigi will be fine chaperones," Jane returned with mock afront.

Elizabeth loosed her tinkling laugh. It made her warm inside to see how happy Jane and all of her sisters were. Jane had exorcised the ghost of Mr. Bingley; Mary was as happy as Elizabeth had ever seen her, with a husband that was her match in every way; Kitty was joyful to have escaped from Lydia's influence.

The sad truth was Lizzy realised how much happier they all were away from their parents and youngest sister. This was not how things were supposed to be. In Lady Catherine, they had found a kindly aunt, much like Aunt Maddie. She was sure when Aunt Maddie met Lady Catherine the two would get along well.

"It is time for us to return to the parsonage to take tea with William," Mary stated. "He will be home from visiting parishioners soon."

"Come Gigi, you may assist me with my letter to Lydia." Kitty took their friend by the hand, and after saying their farewells, the two skipped off towards the manor house while the other three turned and started the short walk to the parsonage.

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"Did you complete all your estate business Richard?" Jane asked as the two sat on the terrace in the shade of an enormous ancient oak, sipping fresh lemonade.

Jane and Richard were at one end of the terrace, while Kitty and Gigi were on the other, so they could be seen but not heard. Kitty had reported her letter had been posted, and she had remembered to write her direction as the Hunsford Parsonage.

"Yes, I met with my steward and completed all of my correspondence. I am able to return letters faster than my fastidious cousin Darcy, who likes to fill his missives with four-syllable words," Richard gave a wry smile.

"After talking to Aunts Cat and Elaine, I am convinced what your cousin did was not malicious. He was trying to save his friend heartache from what he thought was a match of unequal affections. I have been told I am too serene and I do not show my feelings for all to see plainly," Jane stated.
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“Then my cousin was blind, for I am able to read your affections plainly.” Jane blushed deeply at Richard’s statement, for it told her Richard had no doubt her feelings were just as engaged as his. “You will not feel awkward with William—Mr. Darcy—here, will you?” he asked, changing the subject to allow them both to relax.

“No Richard, I will not, but thank you for being so solicitous of my feelings; it is greatly appreciated,” Jane replied. “If one of us were to feel uncomfortable, it would be Lizzy.” Jane placed her hand on his arm to stop what he was about to say. “She will feel that way for believing Mr. Wickham’s falsehoods and repeating them to others. She knows she is not the first to fall victim to his lies and machinations, but she had always prided herself on her ability to read the character of others. Getting it so wrong for both men was quite a shock to her.”

“We will keep an eye out when he arrives on Saturday. I am hopeful he has examined his actions critically. It will be clear soon enough after he arrives,” Richard stated thoughtfully.

“Will you please tell me about your time in the army before you became master here Richard?” Jane requested.

Unable to deny her anything, Richard told her a sanitised version of his time in the army. He told her about his experiences on the Peninsula, and she thanked God he had not been seriously injured, or worse, before his return to England.

The more time the two spent together, the more they wanted to spend in each other’s company. Neither had fallen in love with the other, but they were much closer than the day their courtship began. Without realising it, both were fast coming to the realisation that the other was his or her perfect fit.

For Jane, being with a man who valued her, all of her and not just her physical attributes, was much more fulfilling than her time with the men who had made inept attempts at courting her before Richard. The men who tried to court her complimented only her looks, and none of them had treated her as an intelligent being who was more than her physical attributes.

When she was with Richard, they spoke about anything and everything. He would occasionally allude to her beauty, he was not blind, after all , but it was seldom. Jane was interested in the history of the Kingdom, especially the Wars of the Roses, and discovered it was one of many interests they both shared.

Jane was not a bibliophile like her father or Lizzy, but she did read, and not only Gothic novels. She would read a novel occasionally but gravitated towards books of history and poetry.

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“It seems my younger son has met his match,” Lady Elaine said to her sister. The two older ladies were with Marie in the nursery, watching little Reggie try to pull himself up as he gripped the side of the cot.

“I had a feeling it would be so,” Lady Catherine smiled.

“Catherine, have you been matchmaking?” Lady Elaine asked with raised eyebrows.

“Not really,” Lady Catherine allowed.

“Aunt Cat!” Marie exclaimed, not too loudly as she did not want to frighten her son with a raised voice.

“All I did was give them the opportunity to know one another,” Lady Catherine acknowledged. “I am not the one who caused that spineless Bingley man to abandon Jane.”

“No, you were not Cathy,” Lady Elaine agreed. “However, I did hear you encouraged her to come to Rosings Park with Lizzy rather than go to London.”

“You make my point for me Elaine. I but gave them a chance; everything else was and is up to them,” Lady Catherine pointed out. “Richard did not confer with me before requesting a courtship and I did nothing to push him at her or her at him.”

“The old Catherine would have simply ordered them to do her bidding,” Lady Elaine teased.
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“Do not remind me how ridiculous I used to be. Thankfully, I learnt discretion,” Lady Catherine owned.

“It was noted at Snowhaven that you were taking a more active role in pointing William in the right direction. I was only surprised you waited as long as you did. Reggie wanted to take the boy in hand, but he deferred to your judgement in the matter. I am glad he did; it would not have gone well if William were not ready to hear what we needed to tell him,” Lady Elaine opined.

“If he were not such a great, big, tall thing, I would have bent him over my knee,” Lady Catherine revealed. It did not take long for all three ladies to laugh at the vision of William over his aunt’s knee as she paddled him.

“He has always been polite to me,” Marie added.

“Your rank is greater than his, so you would not have seen the disdain he used to—we hope used to—direct at those he considered below him in consequence while out in society. It was always a conundrum, as he treats his servants and tenants well, even warmly. Additionally, his close connection with the Bingleys never squared with his other behaviour,” Lady Catherine explained.

“On Saturday, we will see if the boy has learnt anything from the richly deserved set down he received at Snowhaven,” Lady Elaine stated.

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“La, Harriet, Kitty is bored and sad in Kent,” Lydia told her friend as she read the letter from Kitty. “After the way she treated me, she deserves no less. She says she has not received any letters from me, but I did send one…” Lydia tapered her speech off as a memory stirred. “Oh my, I sent it to Longbourn. I forgot to write her direction at the boring old parsonage. I am sure Mama or Papa will send it on one of these days.”

“What does she say for herself?” Harriet Forster asked, glad she had Lydia with her rather than the too-innocent Kitty as she and Lydia were peas in a pod.

“Here, let me read from this point,” Lydia found the first paragraph after Kitty’s greetings.
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I am so sorry I was not solicitous of your feelings in Hertfordshire. Of course you deserve to be the first of us to marry. You are, as you say, the prettiest and liveliest of us all.

"You see Harriet, she has realised my superiority," Lydia preened and then returned to reading.

You were correct Sister! It is so boring here at this dingy old parsonage. No balls, assemblies, or fun of any kind. Worse, there is not a single officer anywhere to be seen. How I wish I were there with you and having fun with all of the officers. I envy you so very much Lyddie.

There is one way I can feel like I am there. If you tell me all about your fun and adventures, it will irk me that I am not there with you, but at least I will get some enjoyment in hearing what you are doing.

If I hear Mary moralise, or her husband read from Fordyce's Sermons again, I will pull all of my hair out, but Papa will not hear of me returning home early. If Jane or Lizzy asked, he would allow it, but you know how he is with us.

"How can I not send her all of my news?" Lydia asked. "Will I not be a perfect sister to entertain mine?"

"Yes, you will Lydia," Harriet agreed.

'*I will be able to tell Kitty about my Wicky. He said to tell no one here, but he did not tell me I cannot tell Kitty. How jealous she will be that I will be the next to marry, and such a handsome man in a scarlet coat. I was willing to anticipate our vows, but my honourable Wicky wants to wait until we are married. Only another sennight and we will start our life together. How I love him!*'

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'*How stupid that Bennet girl is. Not only did she not believe what was put abroad about me in Meryton, but the emptyheaded doxy thinks I will marry her. As hard as it was, I resisted her offer to take her virtue. I have at least managed to convince her not to spend her money so I will have her twenty pounds, and then I will get at least another fifty pounds when I sell her.*
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Mrs. Younge will help me. That foolish woman still thinks I love her. At least it is useful to me as she will know the best place to sell the chit. Mayhap she will be able to help me auction her to some lordlings, and who knows how much I will get that way.' Wickham's brain was actively engaged in planning.

It was a pity that his first liberty would not be until the next Wednesday. He would make his watchers believe he was asleep and then slip out and collect the ridiculous twit. He hoped she would be able to follow directions to Humboldt Square to meet the small, hired carriage that would take them to London. It would burn one or two pounds, but it was an unavoidable expense.

What a pity he would not be able to remain in England to exact his revenge on Darcy and his family as he wanted, but he would not risk spending the rest of his days in a debtor's prison. Knowing Lady Catherine, she would have him consigned to the Clink Prison, the worst of them all, and Wickham was not about to let that happen.

So far it seemed the silly girl had not mentioned a word to the Colonel's bit of fluff. He had relaxed more each day which passed since Lydia Bennet agreed to *elope* with him without Colonel Forster flogging him and throwing him back in the brig. At least she had not been so stupid as to blurt out their plan.

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Darcy arrived at Darcy House on Grosvenor Square Friday afternoon as planned. He would leave for Kent at sunrise on the morrow. He instructed his butler to keep the knocker off the door, and that he was at home to *no one*!

It was well the master issued this instruction, because not an hour after arriving, Mr. and Miss Bingley arrived at the front door. Killion shook his head at the lack of class shown by banging on a door with the knocker down.

Darcy looked out of the side window in his study. '*Damn it, Miss Bingley must have paid someone to watch my house! Will that harpy never learn? My family was completely on point. I have overlooked her atrocious*
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behaviour far too long.' Darcy shook his head as the woman kept beating on his front door with her parasol's handle.

He opened his study door and beckoned Killion over to him. Darcy closed the door, as he did not want the orange monstrosity to hear his voice. "Killion, my order stands. Open the door—only a crack as she will try and push her way into the house—and have Thomson and Smithers behind the door so it will not open more than you want. Tell her if she does not remove herself, you will send a groom to summon the constable, as I am not home," Darcy instructed.

Killion bowed and left the study to execute the master's orders. He positioned Thompson and Smithers, two of the burliest footmen employed by Mr. Darcy, and then looked to the master. Darcy nodded once before closing his study door all but a crack.

Miss Bingley was about to strike the door again with her now-broken parasol handle when the door cracked open but not very far. She pushed with her shoulder with all of her might—which was not much—while her brother stood in the background not saying or doing anything.

"You hurt me, you oaf! Open the door immediately, Mr. Darcy will sack you as soon as he hears how you have treated his close friends," Miss Bingley shrieked at the top of her voice.

"Madame, if you do not vacate the premises, a groom will be sent to summon the constable and you *will* be arrested for trespassing. My master is not at home," Killion stated succinctly, and then nodded at the two footmen who pushed the door closed.

Miss Bingley had been trying to push the door again, so when it shut with the footmen's forceful push, she fell backward on the stones at the top of the steps leading from the street to Darcy House's front door, right onto her *derriere*.

She was about to have a tantrum sitting in front of Darcy House when her brother finally acted. He pulled her up, down the stairs, and bundled her into the Bingley coach. A group of watchers had gathered to view the spectacle; he realised they were all members of the *Ton*.

“My first action as Mrs. Darcy will be to sack that disrespectful man. Just wait until Mr. Darcy hears how one of his underlings treated me—us!” Miss Bingley raged as the carriage was driven back towards Curzon street.

Bingley had a sneaking suspicion the butler was under orders from his master but did not dare mention that to his sister, who was as angry as he had ever seen her.

Darcy decided to leave earlier than he originally planned. He did not want to take a chance the harridan would return early in the morning to try again.

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Two letters for Kitty were delivered on Saturday morning. The older of the two had been addressed to Longbourn. From the dates on the franking, it seemed it had sat there for some days before someone—their father, perhaps—bothered to look at it.

As the parsonage party was breaking its fast, a large coach turned into the drive leading to Rosings Park. It seemed Mr. Darcy was about to arrive. Jane and Mary both looked at Elizabeth, who merely raised a questioning eyebrow.

“The past is behind us. There have been many misunderstandings between Mr. Darcy and me. I am responsible for several of them, so I will wait to see how he behaves and reserve judgement. I know my fault has been to judge too quickly and then stubbornly hold onto my opinions, to the point of defying logic at times. I will try to not repeat that error. My mind is open,” Elizabeth claimed.

Her sisters hoped that was the case. Both were happy she was willing to acknowledge her faults. That in itself was a welcome change.

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Chapter 15

Darcy alighted from his travelling coach and a blond streak launched herself into his arms. “I have missed you so much William,” Georgiana informed her stunned brother.

“Who is this wild woman who attacked me? What have you done with my shy sister?” Darcy asked in amazement. His sister was not merely back to how she had been pre-Ramsgate; she was far better. She looked him in the eye without flinching, something she had done rarely, even before Ramsgate.

“Come William,” Georgiana tugged her brother’s hand to lead him inside the house before Richard was able to say anything.

“Good to see you Cousin,” Richard managed as Gigi pulled her brother past him.

“You too Richard,” Darcy returned as he turned his head towards his cousin.

Darcy allowed his sister to lead him to the drawing room where his aunts, uncle, and other cousins awaited him. “William, it is good to see you. How are you Nephew?” Lady Catherine welcomed him first.

“Much better than I was at Christmastide and thereafter,” Darcy stated to all in the room after his sister relinquished his hand. “Allow me to wash and change, and I will return to talk to all of you.”

“Go, we will be here when you return,” Lady Catherine allowed. “You are in your normal chambers.”

Darcy walked forward and kissed his Aunt Catherine on the cheek, then repeated the same for his Aunt Elaine. He shook hands with his uncle, Richard, and Andrew, inclined his head to Marie, and then made his way to his suite, where Carstens was ready for him.

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‘*I wonder if Kitty has received my letter?*’ Lydia Bennet asked herself. ‘*How she will envy me when she finds out that my Wicky is in love with me,*
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and that we will elope on Wednesday next. Mrs. Wickham, how well that will sound! I will be married before Jane and Lizzy. What a joke! I wonder why my Wicky does not want to anticipate our wedding vows, for I know the girl that Captain Carter intends to marry has done so.'

Lydia imagined how much fun her future would be as the wife of her handsome husband. She had turned her twenty pounds over to the man for —as he stated—safe keeping, and she was gratified to have been able to prove that she trusted him as well as loving him.

She did not understand why they had to be so secretive, but she had obeyed his request and not mentioned their attachment to anyone in Brighton. Even Harriet, who was a kindred soul, had not been told a word of her attachment to Ensign Wickham.

It was another thing that angered Lydia on behalf of her soon-to-be husband. He had been demoted from Lieutenant to Ensign because of those slanderous lies told about him in Meryton. Even her mother, who usually supported her unquestioningly, had believed the defamation of her poor Wicky's character.

How was it that no one other than herself believed the stories were planted by that vile Mr. Darcy and his family? Had not everyone heard how ill Mr. Darcy had used his former friend? Mayhap it was one of the reasons her Wicky loved her; she was the only one who seemed to see the truth of the matter.

Not built for melancholy, Lydia returned to her gleeful thoughts of how jealous Kitty would be when she read the letter she had posted. If Kitty had been more loyal, she would have asked Harriet to include her in the invitation. Perhaps it was for the best, as Kitty would have taken away attention that was hers, though it would have been but a small amount as Kitty was so plain.

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"I wonder how long Lydia's first letter sat at Longbourn before our father bestirred himself to redirect it to Kent?" Mary asked as the four sisters gathered in the sitting room to read the inane chatter they were sure would fill the pages of their youngest sister's missives.
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“Let me start with the one that was sent to Longbourn,” Kitty informed her sisters as she broke the seal. She cleared her throat and began to read.

26 March 1811

Indigo House, Kindle Street, Brighton

Kitty,

How much fun you are missing while you are stuck with only our older sisters’ company and let me not forget Mary’s husband. Does he read from Fordyce’s Sermons to you every day? If so, you deserve no less for ignoring me for our fun-killing older sisters.

Mary may have been first to marry, but it was to our father’s heir so there is some solace in that. It was necessary for one of us to marry him so our mother would cease spouting about being thrown into the hedgerows. I never really listened as I knew I would marry before our father passed, and so I will, and before even Jane and Lizzy. La, what a joke it will be when I will go higher in order than my older sisters.

Oh Kitty, I have never seen so many handsome officers in one place. There has been one assembly so far, and guess what? Never mind, you will never guess. I danced every single set.

It was the first time I danced with Ensign Wickham. He is free from his unjust imprisonment based on the lies of that hateful Mr. Darcy. If I ever see that horrid man again, I will kick him as hard as I am able.

But I digress. I allowed three officers to kiss me at the assembly when they escorted me outside for some fresh air. One’s hands started to wander most scandalously, but I told him I had to know him better before I would allow such. How glorious it was! Even better, there are dances almost every week! Can you imagine how much I will enjoy flirting freely with the officers in their scarlet coats?

Harriet and I visit the soldiers' encampment every day, and we spend time looking in shop windows and imagining all of the things we could buy. The street where we have been staying is the last one before the beach which lines the sea.

I have not gone sea bathing yet, but Harriet has convinced her husband to rent a bathing machine for us soon.

Do not be too jealous Kitty, for when you are able to visit me, I will find you a husband after I have secured mine.

Yours etc,

Lydia

"It is worse than we feared," Jane worried. "What a thoughtless girl, to boast of her inappropriate behaviour and place all of our reputations at risk with her selfishness and stupidity."

"Lydia is far more wanton than I imagined her to be," Elizabeth stated as she shook her head in disgust at their youngest sister.

"Let us pray the next one is not worse than the first," Mary added.

Kitty broke the seal on the second letter and began to read:

4 April 1811

Indigo House, Kindle Street, Brighton

Oh Kitty,

I am bursting to tell you all, as I am not allowed to share my good news with anyone in Brighton. You are not here so I may tell you.

I am in love with the most amiable and handsome man! Let me start at the beginning. If you received my first letter you will know of the first assembly I attended. At the ball the following week, the man of my dreams asked to dance with me twice. Twice, Kitty! He singled me out for such notice.

You may be wondering who this paragon is, so I will tell you, it is Mr. Wickham, the one on whom all in Meryton—even his former favourite Lizzy—turned their backs so unjustly.

"How can that girl be so blind?" Elizabeth asked exasperatedly.

"She is like Mama in that way. She only sees that which she chooses to see," Kitty stated, demonstrating perspicacity her sisters had never before credited to her.

"Read on Kitty," Mary instructed.

He loves me too, but he has told me I am not allowed to mention our connection to anyone in Brighton, given how unfairly his Colonel and the men he had counted as friends treated him in Meryton. He tells me I am his only true friend.

We are to be married! On Wednesday coming, we will elope. Oh how romantic it will be! He has duty until Wednesday morning, and so we will not be able to leave until Wednesday night. How I would love to see Harriet's face when she finds the note I will leave. As much as I want you and my other sisters to attend my wedding and to bask in the glow of your envy for my catching such a man, it will not be possible.

Do you know he is such a gentleman he refused to anticipate our wedding vows when I offered? My Wicky looks after me so well; he is protecting me by keeping my twenty pounds safe until we leave.

I know well Mama will be in raptures when I return home as Mrs. Wickham. How well that sounds! I am sure you are green with envy by now Kitty.

"Lydia offered to find me a husband. For my part I have no interest, as I do not like her way of finding a husband," Kitty spat out as she broke from reading the offensive letter.

“Please finish her drivel so we may decide how to proceed,” Elizabeth requested. “Her thoughts fly from one subject to the next with no connection—stupid, stupid, thoughtless girl.”

> *We are to London first. My Wicky tells me that nasty Mr. Darcy has finally agreed to pay him the money he cheated him out of. I will stay with a kindly aunt of my Wicky’s while he goes to collect his money from that dreary man, and then we will make for Gretna Green.*
>
> *At least I experienced sea bathing with Harriet. It was wonderful Kitty. The machine is pushed out into the seawater by two horses. There was a servant who helped us dip in the sea. You cannot be seen from the shore thanks to the barrier built onto the machine. What a joke! We were as naked as the day we were born! I am sure you would have loved to bathe in the sea.*
>
> *Wish me happy Kitty, as the next time you see me, I will be Mrs. George Wickham.*
>
> *Yours etc,*
>
> *Lydia*

“What is that girl thinking? That is the problem—she does not think!” Elizabeth answered her own question.

“At least she believes she is in love with him and he with her,” Jane stated.

“We need to make for Rosings now. Lady Catherine has the means to deal with him. Her assistance is needed,” Mary opined.

“Will she not be disgusted and dismiss us because we are her sisters?” Kitty asked in concern.

“No Kitty, she loves to be useful, and she and her family hate Wickham for the way he has imposed on them and others over the years,” Mary averred.

Kitty folded the letters and the four donned their outerwear. Mary left a note for her husband on his desk before they departed in case he returned

home from parish business and found his wife missing.

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Darcy had returned to the drawing room and was about to extend his apologies to his family when the butler announced Mrs. Collins, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Catherine.

It astounded him to see the four sisters. He knew one was married to Hunsford's parson, but no one had informed him that her sisters were visiting, especially not the enchanting Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Upon seeing her, all of the feelings for her that he had tried to tamp down returned with full force. While soaking in the sight of her, he noticed the looks of distress on all four women.

"My goodness," said Lady Catherine, who also noticed the looks of consternation on the sisters' faces. "What has happened? Is someone ill?"

"Were that the case, Aunt Cat, it would be far better than the reality," Elizabeth replied as a single tear ran down her cheek.

Darcy's head snapped around, for Elizabeth had just addressed his Aunt in a very familiar way. He was about to open his mouth and insert his hessian into it when he saw his aunt open her arms and enfold all of the Bennet sisters in a hug.

"Do you need privacy to discuss what has happened?" Lady Catherine asked.

"No thank you Aunt Catherine, it concerns one well known to all of you," Jane Bennet replied.

Darcy was thankful he had held his peace, for there was a level of intimacy between his relations and the Bennet sisters of which he had previously been unaware. The irony of his almost action when he wanted to apologise for his officious and prideful behaviour of the past was not lost on him. He acknowledged to himself he had work to do yet on his attitudes and judgmental ways. If only he were the one who was allowed to offer succour to Elizabeth. In his mind—for some time now—she was Elizabeth, not Miss anything.
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Lady Catherine urged the sisters to sit, which they did on a sofa next to her. Darcy did not miss his cousin Richard's moving to stand protectively behind Miss Bennet, nor how his action seemed to comfort her.

"I finally received letters from Brighton," Kitty informed the group. "The first one is almost a fortnight old as Lydia posted it to Longbourn, where it was not forwarded for some time. The second is the troubling letter."

"May I read it?" Lady Catherine requested gently. Kitty handed over the letter. Richard moved to stand behind his aunt to read over her shoulder. He was soon joined by his father and Darcy.

Before anyone else could react, Darcy spoke. "This is my fault. If I had not remained silent about Wickham's propensities while I was in Meryton…"

"You take too much on yourself Sir," Elizabeth responded. Darcy's head swung toward Elizabeth, and his eyes locked with hers. "Lydia was informed about Mr. Wickham after Aunt Cat and Richard visited Colonel Forster."

"She refused to believe the facts about the man," Mary continued. "No matter what we, or anyone else in Meryton, pointed out, she clung to the stubborn belief it was all lies. You read her words, so you can see for yourself the depths of our youngest sister's descent."

"Most to blame are our parents, especially my father…" Elizabeth explained all to those in the room who were unfamiliar with their father's lackadaisical way of parenting and their mother's indulgence of her *baby*. "We understand why you were reticent to anger Mr. Wickham, given his actions against Gigi."

Seeing the thunderous look on her brother's mien, Georgiana stepped in. "*I chose* to tell them Brother. They are all my particular friends, sisters of the heart. In fact, Kitty is resident at the manor house so I have someone of my own age with me."

"I am not the vapid girl you met in Meryton Mr. Darcy," Kitty stated challengingly as she saw the hint of distaste forming on his countenance.

Her statement rocked Darcy. He shook his head, wondering if he would ever learn to stop judging others before acquainting himself with the facts. “Please accept my apology Miss Catherine. It is the first of many I owe. If I may before we proceed?” Darcy looked to his Aunt Catherine and Richard.

“Go ahead William,” Lady Catherine granted.

“My plan was to apologise to all of the family,” Darcy indicated his family members. “I knew I needed to make my apologies to the Bennets as well, but I just did not think it would be at the same time.”

Elizabeth shook her head. Was she dreaming? Was the proud, insufferable Mr. Darcy humbling himself before all of them? She caught herself and remembered she had promised to be less judgemental. She needed to listen first, and then she would decide how to act.

“When I departed Snowhaven, you can well imagine how angry I was. I tried to reject everything out of hand for which you, all of you, had called me to account. Once the anger dissipated and I was able to consider what you actually said, I reviewed my actions as they might be viewed by a third-party observer. The deeper I delved, the more I saw how wanting my behaviour was.

“I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, and indeed 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. Unfortunately, as an only son—for many years an only child—I was unintentionally spoilt by my parents, though they themselves were good. My father, in particular, though all that was benevolent and amiable, allowed me to become selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; to devalue their sense of worth compared with my own without correcting me,” Darcy admitted.

“When my sister passed away and my late brother withdrew into his grief, he never had the conversations he intended to have with you William,” Lady Catherine shared. “When we have time, I will tell you more, but we have pressing issues to address.” Lady Catherine inclined her head to the four sisters.

“Then allow me to apologise to all of you for my *insufferable*,” he looked directly at Elizabeth, “and wrongheaded behaviour. When we have more time, I will apologise to each of you individually.”

“Thank you William,” Lord Matlock replied for his family. “We are relieved you have been able to come to these conclusions.”

“On behalf of my sisters and myself, we accept your initial apology,” Jane spoke for her sisters.

“If you knew all I have done, you would not be so quick…” Darcy started to reply to Miss Bennet in particular.

“We do know *all* Mr. Darcy, but now is not the time nor the place to discuss it,” Jane stated firmly, and Darcy inclined his head in acknowledgement.

“Now, back to the issue at hand. On Monday, Richard and I will make for Brighton and put this libertine where he belongs—in the Clink Prison for the rest of his wasted life,” Lady Catherine stated, brooking no opposition should one have been so inclined.

“Elizabeth and I will accompany you to take charge of our sister,” Jane stated. Her statement was not up for debate, either.

“If you would allow me, I would like to join the party. If I had not enabled him for so long, we would not have to deal with this situation now,” Darcy requested.

And so it was decided, on Monday two carriages would make the three-hour journey to Brighton. Mrs. Annesley would accompany the Bennet sisters as a chaperone.

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Chapter 16

“Mrs. Collins, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Catherine, may I beg a moment of your time before you return to the parsonage?” Darcy requested.

The four looked to one another and Jane nodded.

“You may use the parlour opposite William,” Lady Catherine said, guessing he was about to ask which room he could use. “To observe propriety, you will keep the door semi-open, and Mrs. Annesley will sit in the hall.”

The sisters sat together on a settee while Mr. Darcy paced back and forth for a little while. Elizabeth suspected it was not a manifestation of his pride or disdain as she had thought in the past, but that he was trying to order his thoughts.

Once he had a good idea of what he wanted to say, Darcy took a seat opposite the four sisters. “It takes me a while to find the words I want to use. When I talk without thought, it often comes out nothing like I intend.” Darcy paused, and Elizabeth had the decency to feel some shame for her past misjudgements of him and his motives. “A prime example was the first night we met. When Bingley was trying to cajole me into dancing, rather than consider my words, I unleashed a vile and untrue insult against you Miss Elizabeth. All I was trying to do was make Bingley leave me be, but rather than say what I actually meant, I insulted you in the worst of ways. For my intemperate and false words, I beg your pardon Miss Elizabeth.”

“Thank you, both for the explanation and the apology Mr. Darcy. I do forgive you fully,” Elizabeth granted. “I need to ask your forgiveness for allowing that blackguard with the silver tongue to pour poison in my ear about you and repeating his lies when I should not have,” Elizabeth returned.

“There is nothing to excuse Miss Elizabeth. As you now know, he has manipulated and fooled many young ladies, including Gigi, and I had given you no reason to be suspicious of his words against myself,” Darcy allowed.

“Although I told my friends and family, your words did not harm me, it was a lie. My vanity was wounded, and it led me to suspend my good judgement. I was looking for anything to confirm my bad opinion of you.” Elizabeth looked at Jane, who inclined her head. “There were not a few, one of whom is in this room, who told me how improper it was for Mr. Wickham to share confidences with me on so short an acquaintance. In addition, there were glaring contradictions which, had I not refused to look at them, I should have seen.”

“There is nothing for me to forgive, but if you will feel easier, then I forgive you unreservedly,” Darcy inclined his head towards Elizabeth. “Speaking of contradictions, it has been brought to my notice how contradictory, hypocritical even, my behaviour was towards the Bingleys versus the rest of society. I derided your connections along with Miss Bingley, all the while not pointing out to her that she is below you in society. All of her pretentions cannot change the fact she is but the daughter of a tradesman.

“That fact is not the crux of the matter. It is her behaviour. That I—a supposed gentleman—stood idly by as she denigrated you and your family was beyond the pale. I am sorry if my silence gave the impression I agreed with her, for I most certainly did not. That leads me to the apology I owe to you Miss Bennet,” Darcy bowed his head to Jane.

“Before you go into details Mr. Darcy, I am well aware you did what you thought was best for your friend. *Like you*, I do not wear my heart on my sleeve.” Darcy coloured at Jane’s statement, remembering how Lady Catherine and others had made that exact point to him. “Do not make yourself uneasy Mr. Darcy; in the end you did me a favour.”

“I do not understand your meaning. How was I of service to you?” Darcy asked in confusion.

“I will ask you the same question Aunt Catherine asked me. If you truly loved someone, would *anyone* be able to talk you out of your inclination?” Jane challenged.

Darcy’s gaze immediately shifted to Elizabeth, who blushed deeply. That moment of clarity forced her to understand he was not looking at her to find fault; he *admired* her! “No Miss Bennet, no one would be able to

turn me away from one I truly loved," Darcy stated, his gaze never breaking away from Elizabeth's.

"There is your answer Mr. Darcy. As has been pointed out to me if I had discovered Mr. Bingley's capriciousness after we married it would have been too late. Once I realised he does not have the backbone a man should, it did not take long for the love I thought I felt for him to dissolve," Jane stated emphatically.

"It is good you know my intention was not malicious. That leads me to the apology I owe all of you, the rest of your family, and your neighbours in Meryton. I behaved like a prig while visiting your shire. As Aunt Cat pointed out, I live in a similar neighbourhood, and interact perfectly amiably with the denizens of Lambton.

"I am not trying to excuse my actions, but to give you some insight into my character. I believe my actions were a defence mechanism. As soon as I hear people discussing my wealth, my estate, or my connections while ignoring me as a man, I put my mask in place. I freely acknowledge how incongruous my behaviour was for a long time. I treated you all as if you were fortune hunters, though you never gave me reason to believe that—while I said nothing to Miss Bingley who *constantly* demonstrated that she was." Darcy summed up, then went still as he waited for the sisters' verdict.

After receiving nods from her three sisters, Jane addressed Mr. Darcy. "We forgive you for all of your transgressions, real and perceived, and hope as we move forward, we may all start again. We feel very close to your family, so it would be pleasing to have a similar connection with you," Jane granted on her behalf and that of her sisters.

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"Wicky," Lydia cooed. She did not notice how the man winced when she called him that. "How jealous Kitty will be when she receives my letter."

"**WHAT**!" Wickham grabbed Lydia's arm. "I told you to tell no one about us," Wickham roared.

"Wicky, you are hurting me," Lidia cried. "You said to tell no one in Brighton, and I did not. Kitty will tell no one, she has *always* kept my
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confidences.” Wickham released the chit’s arm. “She is bored and upset in Hunsford and will be relieved to have something to entertain her. She will be happy for us and will tell not a soul.”

“You told her we would leave Brighton on Wednesday night?” Wickham asked.

“Yes, it is what you told me,” Lydia confirmed.

Wickham was forced to reconsider his options. It would be far more risky, but he would slip away in the early hours of the morning during his Monday to Tuesday duty. By two in the morning, his fellow officers would all be asleep. He had a few drops of laudanum he had been saving to use when he could suffer this piece of fluff’s inane chatter no longer. He would put a drop in each of his fellow officers’ tea. Even if it did not put them to sleep, they would be too groggy to stop him.

“I find that I am unable to live without you, Lydia my love. I am moving the elopement to Monday night, or rather early Tuesday morning. Do you remember my instructions for Wednesday night?” Wickham asked.

“Yes Wicky,” Lydia confirmed excitedly.

He explained she was to be in the square near the Forster’s house a few minutes before two on Tuesday morning. “Do you understand the new instructions my dear?”

“I do, my darling Wicky. I am so excited.” Lydia would have liked to have Kitty know ahead of time, but she would write, and Kitty would receive her letter on Tuesday when she and her love were already on their romantic journey.

Wickham had to use all of his self-control to not hit the stupid girl. If he did not need the money he would get for her, he would take her money and leave her behind in Brighton. Wickham had written to his other hanger-on, Mrs. Agnes Younge, asking her to make some discreet enquiries about how much a brothel would pay for a maiden.

To his relief, Agnes had written to say a maiden who was not a gentlewoman would net him about fifty pounds. An unspoiled gentlewoman might gain him a hundred pounds or more.

He would have liked to organise an auction, but time was not on his side. He would negotiate for as much as he could, then start his journey to leave the shores of England forever. He was sure there would be rich pickings for one such as he in the Americas.

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On Sunday morning before church, not long after the sun peeked above the eastern horizon, Andrew, Richard, and Darcy took an early morning ride. “Richard, may I ask you something without giving offence?” Darcy asked.

“Go ahead, out with it,” Richard agreed.

“Is there something between you and Miss Bennet?” William enquired.

“And what if there is?” Richard replied with asperity. “Do not mistake me for your puppy Bingley who you are able to direct and have him follow your whims. I would be very careful what the next words out of your mouth are about the lady I am courting and who will be my wife one day!”

“I have no intention of trying to interfere in your relationship with Miss Bennet,” Darcy assured his cousin who visibly relaxed. “As much as I understand your thinking thusly based on my past behaviour, I have learnt I am the last one to advise on matters of the heart. The question was but for me to confirm my suspicion based on observing the two of you reacting to each other yesterday.”

“Given the vehemence of your reaction to William, am I to infer that my *little* brother is finally ready to admit he is in love with Jane?” Andrew asked as he grinned widely.

“Younger brother, yes, but I am not smaller than you Andy,” Richard returned. “And yes, that is what it means. How could one not fall in love with her? She is so much more than her beauty. Do you know I have been thinking about her for some years now?” Andrew and Darcy looked at Richard in question. He explained how he and their aunt had met the two older Bennet sisters at the Gardiner Trading Company a few years back. “As you can see, Bingley never stood a chance with *my* Jane.”

“You said you were courting; when did it commence?” Darcy asked.
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“Only a few weeks ago, but when you know you know,” Richard explained. “I intend to pay my addresses after we rescue her youngest sister. On that subject, before I forget, Aunt Cat wants to depart this evening. She would not travel on the Sabbath unless she felt it was imperative.” Darcy nodded, indicating his understanding of the change.

“I wish you all of the best, truly Rich. I think Jane will make a wonderful wife for you,” Andrew stated as he slowed his mount so he could ride next to his brother. Darcy took up station on the other side of Richard’s horse.

“William, if I did not know better, I would say I am not the only one in love with a Bennet sister,” Richard challenged.

“You are not wrong. I used to worry about raising her expectations, but it seems I only raised my own as she dislikes—disliked—me intensely. We have all begun again, so I can only hope she will see I am not the same man she met in Hertfordshire last year. If I had proposed to her, she would have refused me. I was so blind,” Darcy acknowledged.

“William, if I may change the subject. Aunt Cat wants to invite Bingley and his sister here for a *chat*,” Richard informed his cousin. There was no missing the look of confusion on his cousin’s face, and Richard grinned. “When we return to the house—well after church—Aunt Cat will explain everything.”

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After an enjoyable Sunday service conducted by Mr. Collins the week before Easter, everyone walked back to the manor house as one large group, as the Hunsford party had accepted an invitation for tea and dinner.

Kitty and Gigi walked ahead. Elizabeth found herself last, not a normal position for her when walking, and it did not take long before she sensed a presence next to her. Based on the smell of sandalwood and spice, Elizabeth guessed it was Mr. Darcy.

“Do you object if I walk with you Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy enquired.

“I have no objection Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth granted. He offered his arm, and she gently laid her delicate gloved hand on his strong forearm. Neither said anything for a little while.
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“Are you usually silent when you are walking?” Darcy asked with a grin, twisting her words from their dance at the Netherfield Ball.

“I am at your disposal Sir. I will talk about any subject you desire,” Elizabeth returned playfully. She had just made two important discoveries. Mr. Darcy had a sense of humour, and he did not mind jokes at his own expense.

“I could comment on the number of trees, and you could say something about how pleasant nature’s décor is,” Darcy smiled fully, revealing his dimples to Elizabeth for the first time.

“Please Mr. Darcy, let us talk about something that does not remind us of that unpleasant dance,” Elizabeth asked quietly.

“It was not wholly unpleasant for me as I was dancing with you. It only became such when *his* name was mentioned.” Darcy realised he had just made an overt declaration of his feelings and hoped he had not pushed her away.

Unbeknownst to him, Elizabeth was not willing to consider his statement at that moment. “It is to my shame I ever defended that scoundrel,” she stated.

“We have already canvassed that subject, and you have received my unreserved pardon as you have granted me yours, so let us move beyond the unpleasant past,” Darcy suggested. “My aunt tells me you enjoy walking along the paths in the wooded area near the parsonage, most especially the area around the glade.”

“Aunt Cat is correct; it is my favourite morning walk,” Elizabeth acknowledged.

“Would you object if I were to join you from time to time?” Seeing her surprise, he rushed to clarify his request. “I have no nefarious purpose. I think if we are to become comfortable with one another and move past the misunderstandings that plagued our time in Hertfordshire, we need to come to know one another better.”

“In that case, I have no objection,” Elizabeth allowed.

A little ahead of them, Jane and Richard were walking together. As soon as Jane placed her hand on Richard's arm, it felt right. She no longer had any doubt that she was in love with Richard Fitzwilliam.

With the depth of feelings Jane felt for Richard she was more certain than ever that she had not been truly in love with any other. She never could commit her life to anyone other than Richard. If Richard asked, she would accept him as long as she knew he loved her in return—which she already suspected. She and Lizzy had sworn they would only marry for the deepest love, and no amount of wealth would sway either from their course. They did not talk; words were superfluous. He did not miss the way she lit up when she placed her hand on his arm, nor did she miss the loving looks directed at her.

Once everyone had seated themselves in the drawing room and Marie returned from checking on little Reggie, Lady Catherine served tea and cakes to her family and friends. After the last crumbs of cake were consumed and the final drops of tea drained, Lady Catherine rang the bell, and two maids cleared the tea service away. She nodded at a footman posted by the door and he closed them behind him as he exited.

"William, Richard mentioned on your ride this morning about my wanting to invite the Bingleys to Rosings Park, but he did not explain my reasoning." Lady Catherine verified and Darcy nodded in confirmation. "I think these will explain much." Lady Catherine handed Darcy the letters Jane had permitted her to share.

As Darcy read, his visage went from calm to thunderous fury in but seconds. "How dare that shrew make claims about Gigi like this! Now I am doubly pleased I did not grant her access to Darcy House," Darcy spat out angrily.

"Explain William," Lord Matlock commanded. Darcy told them about the ill-fated mission Miss Bingley had undertaken to Darcy House the Friday he had stopped over. His telling led to not a little laughter at the picture of the woman sitting in front of the closed door.

"Are you telling me the harpy had people spying on your home?" Lady Catherine exclaimed in disgust. "Are there no depths to which the woman will not sink? It makes putting her in her place all the more imperative."

“You have no idea how angry I was when Jane informed me of that woman’s absolute temerity in using my name to further her lies,” Georgiana stated pointedly. “Please tell me I will never have to endure her company again.”

“You will not Gigi,” Lady Catherine assured her surrogate daughter. “When Aunt Elaine is done with her, she will not bother you or anyone else in society again.”

“Now, if you are able to work on our youngest sister and parents, we,” Elizabeth indicated her sisters who were nodding in agreement, “will all be most pleased.”

“Give me time,” Lady Catherine returned, only half in jest. “Jane and Lizzy, you will be ready to depart at five?”

“Yes Aunt Catherine, we will be,” Jane confirmed.

“Mr. Collins, you understand the reason I feel we need to depart this evening, do you not?” Lady Catherine asked.

“I do and have no issue with it,” Collins assured her. “It has always been acceptable to travel on the Lord’s day when there is cause, and the good name of Lydia and her family is an excellent reason.”

Darcy asked Richard if he could avail himself of his study to write a note to Bingley, and Richard did not hesitate to grant his cousin’s request. Darcy penned an invitation to the Bingleys for the Wednesday after Easter. Darcy pointedly noted to Bingley they were not welcome to arrive before then and requested a note of acceptance or rejection to be sent back with the messenger who would carry the note to Curzon Street.

Just after five that evening, two coaches—neither with coats of arms on the doors—departed Hunsford for Brighton.

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Chapter 17

The two carriages arrived at the Blue Parrot Inn in Brighton at about eight that evening. The drivers had slowed once daylight began to wane, but the full moon cast enough light for them to drive safely.

At his Aunt Catherine's suggestion, Richard had sent a rider out that morning to secure lodgings at the Inn. Much to the landlord's pleasure, they rented all of his rooms.

Lady Catherine, Mrs. Annesley, and the two Bennet sisters were on one floor, while Darcy and Richard were on another. Lady Catherine and Mrs. Annesley shared one of the suites, while Jane and Elizabeth shared the other.

The first thing Lady Catherine did was to direct the landlord to send a runner to Indigo House on Kindle Street with a note for Colonel Forster. If Lydia were to observe the boy, he would not arouse her suspicion, as he was not someone she would have seen before. In addition, it was not out of the ordinary for the commander of a unit to be summoned from home late at night.

Little more than an hour later, an unhappy Colonel Forster arrived at the Blue Parrot. He was shown to a private sitting room, where he was welcomed by his friend Richard Fitzwilliam. He looked around, surprised, and greeted Lady Catherine, Mr. Darcy, and the two older Bennet sisters.

"This must be about Wickham," the Colonel assumed correctly. "What has he done now? He has raised no suspicions in the men I have watching him."

"It is not what he has done Colonel, but what he is about to do and with whom," Lady Catherine informed the commander of the Derbyshire Militia. By way of explanation, she simply handed him Lydia's letter.

The more the Colonel read, the redder his face grew. "I will flog him within an inch of his life this time!" Colonel Forster exclaimed.

"As much as he deserves such, I believe if we act prematurely, he will simply claim it was all in Lydia's head and disavow any connection to her,"

Elizabeth opined.

“Elizabeth has the right of it. He needs to be caught in the act,” Lady Catherine stated.

“If Wickham finds out she wrote to her sister, he may very well advance his timetable,” Darcy surmised.

“In that case, we need to keep both of them under surveillance, unobtrusively, at all times,” Richard stated. “We must take care that Wickham not see any of us, but I understand my old unit is here relaxing after deployment on the continent. The Colonel is a good friend of mine, and while it will make for a late night, I will send a note to him asking for his assistance.”

Within minutes, the messenger boy, who had never seen a guinea before, never mind two, was on his way to the encampment of the Royal Dragoons. Just before eleven, Colonel Grant Atherton walked into the sitting room and slapped his former comrade-in-arms on the back.

“Only for you would I leave my wife and a warm bed at this ungodly hour. You know I would do anything for the man who saved my sorry hide in battle, so tell me what you need Fitzwilliam.” Colonel Atherton pre-emptively vowed his assistance.

Colonels Forster and Atherton, acquainted from the time they served together with Richard, greeted each other affably. They had been reunited some days after Atherton and his unit had arrived in the area. It did not take long for Richard to explain the problem. “Do you have men who could do what we need Atherton?” Richard asked.

“I do, and they will enjoy sharpening their skills without anyone shooting at them,” Colonel Atherton assured his friend. “As soon as I return to the encampment, I will send a group dressed as labourers to watch each of the two. They will be inconspicuously dressed. It will be my pleasure to help rid our army of one so unworthy of the uniform.”

The two colonels departed, and the weary travellers finally made ready for bed.

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On Monday morning in London, there was a loud screech from Miss Bingley as she recognised the writing on a missive to her brother. She *accidentally* opened the note and read it.

“I knew how it would be! Look Charles, Mr. Darcy was *not* angry with us, for we are invited to Rosings Park for Easter. I am to be introduced to his family before he offers for me!” Miss Bingley gushed.

“Have I not asked you to refrain from opening letters addressed to me? Please, hand it over.” Bingley asked tiredly, and Miss Bingley handed the note to her brother reluctantly, because she now knew she would not be able to manipulate him into going earlier. “This is an invitation for Wednesday, the seventeenth day of April. In fact, Darcy is unambiguous in his statement we are not to arrive early.” Bingley would have liked to call his sister to account for lying to him, but he chose peace and quiet over correcting his irascible sister.

“Oh, I am sure Mr. Darcy would not mind…” Miss Bingley was shocked when her brother cut her off. It was not something he did very often.

“Caroline, it is *not* his home. As you see, the invitation is from his cousin who is the master there. We cannot, and will not, arrive before the day we were invited,” Bingley affirmed.

“Well, I suppose it must be that way. I need to go shopping, for I cannot allow my, err, Mr. Darcy’s family to see me in something old.” With that, Miss Bingley collected her outerwear, summoned her maid, and had the butler call for the carriage.

This was her chance, and she would not waste it. Her Mr. Darcy’s family would have no doubt of her suitability to become the mistress of Pemberley, Darcy House, and his other properties.

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A messenger arrived with a note for Mr. Fitzwilliam from one of the dragoons trailing Wickham not long after midday. “It seems it is to be tonight. The presage you felt was correct Aunt. The message says Wickham hired a carriage, and it is set to meet both he and Miss Lydia at the northwest corner of Humboldt Square at two in the morning. That is a little
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over twelve hours from now. I will send a message to Forster. Humboldt Square is close to his house," Richard said.

Richard found the rest of his party in their private sitting room at the Blue Parrot. Elizabeth was pacing nervously; she would be unable to feel easy until Lydia was safe and the blackguard on his way to debtors' prison.

"It is tonight, or rather at two in the morning tomorrow that Wickham will attempt to escape with Miss Lydia," Richard informed his party.

"Thank goodness we came earlier," Lady Catherine exhaled the breath she had been holding since he had entered with a note in his hand.

"You mean, thank goodness *you* insisted we depart Kent last night Aunt Cat," Elizabeth pointed out.

"Why we are here in time is unimportant," Lady Catherine demurred, "only that we are here and are in a position to save Miss Lydia from herself."

"I have an idea. William, Wickham has never seen your new driver, has he?" Richard asked.

"No, I do not believe so." Darcy agreed, though was confused as to what Richard's question heralded.

"We need to offer the hired driver money to *get sick* tonight and send his *trusted friend* in his stead. Then we will have both Wickham and Miss Lydia under surveillance the whole time. Let them enter the carriage, and your man can drive them right to Forster's house where we will be waiting for them," Richard suggested.

"What if Wickham sees they are not going the way he expects?" Jane asked.

"He will have the shades drawn. As he will be leaving his duty post without permission, he will not want to take the chance—no matter how small—of being spied by someone in the militia while he makes his getaway," Richard explained. "Do not forget our men will be close to the conveyance from the second they enter it until it halts on Kindle Street."

"Do you have an occupation for me?" Darcy asked.

“No William. We all should remain indoors until we leave tonight. It is not worth risking tipping off the libertine to our presence in Brighton,” Richard informed his cousin.

“Like you, Mr. Darcy, I hate being confined indoors,” Elizabeth shared. “I would have liked nothing more than to take a ramble this morning, but I understand today it is impossible.”

“Will you not call me William?” Darcy invited. “I am the last member of my family you do not address by a familiar name.”

“In that case William, you may call me Elizabeth or Lizzy,” Elizabeth allowed.

Darcy was pleased at being allowed to call her by her familiar name—he tried to school his features, but unsuccessfully. Seeing his pleasure, Elizabeth decided she quite enjoyed the company of this new Mr. Darcy—William.

“Please call me Jane Mr. Darcy,” Jane requested.

“It will be my pleasure to do so Jane; please use William when addressing me,” Darcy granted.

Lady Catherine could not be more pleased by what she was seeing. It had not taken her long observing Elizabeth and William together to see they would best suit one another—though she was aware at least one of them would be unwilling to admit it at this time. She was amused to know it was Lizzy who would be the naysayer if pressed, not her reserved nephew.

When William had proffered his apologies to the family on Saturday night, they were full, complete, and sincere. Lady Catherine had at last seen William begin to transform into the man her sister and brother Darcy had hoped he would become.

She watched as Jane and Richard spoke quietly, their heads closer than propriety allowed. She was pleased and sure it would be but days before Richard paid his addresses to the eldest Bennet sister.

On the other side of the room, Elizabeth and William were debating the latest offering by the scandalous poet, Lord Byron. For the first time, there was no rancour or antagonism in their debate. As far as Lady Catherine

could see, the two were enjoying one another's company. She also knew both were very stubborn and might yet need a little nudge.

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At a little after one in the morning, Wickham volunteered to make tea for the three fellow officers on duty with him. The men were surprised that the sullen Wickham would volunteer to do anything for others, and gratefully accepted.

Wickham had just enough laudanum left for one drop in each cup, so he stirred in additional sugar to mask the bitter taste of the drug. He first removed his own cup and settled it next to his seat and held the small tray out for each of them to take one. Wickham watched the three men begin to drink their warm beverage. One of the men remarked it was sweeter than he usually preferred, but he appreciated the warmth of the drink.

It took less than ten minutes before the three were asleep, or close enough to it. Even if they were not asleep soundly, at least they would not be able to raise the alarm for hours. He slipped out of the encampment, and, keeping to the shadows, made his way towards Humboldt Square.

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Lydia Bennet had not allowed herself to go to sleep. It was too important a date to miss due to sleeping. Instead, she sat and composed letters. One was to Harriet, informing her of the elopement.

When that letter was completed, Lydia folded it and placed it on her pillow, where her head would never rest again. She wrote to Kitty next, telling her of the great romantic adventure she was embarking on and announcing that when next she saw Kitty, she would be Mrs. Lydia Wickham.

Each time she said her soon-to-be new name, she told herself how well it sounded. She expected her sisters—other than Kitty—might scold her for eloping, but she would be married and her unmarried sisters would be expressing their jealousy that their youngest sister had married before them. Kitty's letter was placed on the pillow next to Harriet's, for she was sure Harriet would post it for her.

Wanting to make sure she was in Humboldt Square with time to spare, Lydia crept down the stairs, valise in hand, at twenty minutes before two. She closed the front door quietly; the only sound it made was a dull click.

At the end of the short drive, she turned left on Kindle Street. The walk to the square took less than ten minutes. Lydia was focused only on her goal and did not notice the half dozen men following her.

When she arrived in the square, she crossed to the northwest corner to wait as instructed. The men tracking her movements melted into the shadows, joining the others already posted in the square.

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Wickham arrived a few minutes later, relieved to see the airheaded hussy waiting for him. The thought of the silly girl forced to serve in a brothel gave him pleasure. Only a few more hours of suffering her company, and he would be well paid for his efforts. To keep her from seeing his true thoughts, he plastered a false smile on his face as he approached her.

“My love, you are here.” The words stuck in Wickham’s craw, but he needed her relaxed and pliable until he sold her to the brothel.

“Wicky! I am so excited. The day for us to become man and wife has finally arrived,” Lydia gushed.

“Do not forget you will be with my family until I receive the money Darcy owes me, then we will be off to Gretna Green, so it will be a few days before we become man and wife.” As he finished his speech, and before Lydia could reply with whatever whining plea she intended, the hired carriage pulled to a halt near them.

Wickham was about to follow Lydia into the conveyance when he noticed the driver was not the man he hired. “Who the hell are you?”

“Wicky, such language before your lady love,” Lydia cooed.

“Quiet Lydia!” Wickham growled.

“Me good mate Thatcher be take’n sick. ‘E asked me to make the trip fir ya so ya can still reach London as planned,” Darcy’s carriage driver told Wickham.
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“Just get us there with all haste. The moon is still full; you will be able to see the road,” Wickham bit out, hating any change to what he had planned. However, he felt the driver was, in the end, the least consequential part of his plan.

“Aye Sir,” the driver retorted. Satisfied, Wickham entered the coach and slammed the door.

“Wicky, I want to open the shades,” Lydia whined. How could this be romantic and fun if no one could see her triumph?

“Do not touch the shades,” Wickham barked. Seeing Lydia shrink back, he spoke in a seductive voice, “If I want to be romantic with my wife-to-be, how can I when the shades are open?”

When the carriage came to a sudden halt, Wickham leaned over giving Lydia a kiss to placate her, as distasteful as it was to him. “Wicky, what is wrong?” Lydia asked nervously.

“Georgie boy, the game is up! Step out unless you would rather I drag your worthless body out of the carriage.” Wickham froze in fear as he heard Richard Fitzwilliam taunt him.

He moved the shade on his side slightly and saw armed soldiers outside. In the vain hope there was an avenue of escape on the other side, he leaned over the girl, and what he saw there was even worse.

Not only were there more soldiers, but he saw Richard Fitzwilliam, Lady Catherine, Darcy, and the two eldest Bennet sisters standing outside of Colonel Forster’s house. It was then he noticed the murderous look on his militia commander’s visage. How could all of his careful plans have turned to dust?

“Why are we not moving Wicky?” Lydia whined.

“Just shut up,” Wickham spat as he opened the door. He did not want to get out, but it was preferable to Richard Fitzwilliam dragging him out.

Once her erstwhile suitor exited, Lydia saw her sisters and the hateful Mr. Darcy standing outside. She left the carriage, intending to berate her sisters. “You are jealous of me! You could not stand it that I was to

marry…” Lydia shut her mouth in shock as a hard slap was delivered to her face.

“That will be all for now *Miss* Lydia!” Lady Catherine hissed. Seeing Lydia was about to protest again, Lady Catherine drew back her arm, which was enough to convince the girl that now was not the time to speak. “Jane and Elizabeth, is your sister’s valise out of the carriage?”

“Yes Aunt,” the two chorused.

Lady Catherine summoned two large footmen to her. “Make sure this,” she pointed to Lydia, “enters the carriage with her sisters and remains there *quietly*.” Lady Catherine gave the cowering girl a withering look as she spoke the last words.

Lydia did not miss that the lady who hit her was holding the two letters she had written. Silly she might be, but she was not as stupid as people thought; the one thing Lydia knew for sure was now was the time for compliance, not defiance. She allowed herself to be led to the carriage with no sound passing her lips.

Jane and Elizabeth joined their youngest sister in the carriage, but both were too angry to say a word to her, so all sat in silence for disparate reasons.

For his part, Wickham found himself in irons and again facing an irate Colonel Forster. There was a colonel in a Royal Dragoon uniform standing next to his colonel, along with Lady Catherine, Richard, and Darcy. “Wickham,” Colonel Forster barked. “Not only were you deserting during wartime, but you drugged three fellow officers and left your post without permission. You have much for which to answer.” Wickham was reeling. He prayed this was a nightmare from which he would awaken, but he had no such luck.

“I am greatly displeased to see you again so soon after Meryton,” Lady Catherine addressed him. “We will speak of your punishment at a decent time in the morning, during which we will see if you cooperate enough to earn yourself any sort of commutation.”

Wickham turned to his former friend. “Surely to honour the memory of your late father you will…” Whatever he was about to say was cut off when

Darcy drove his fist into the man’s stomach.

“Do not dare to mention my father or *any* member of my family again if you want to live, you miserable cur,” Darcy spat angrily.

“He will be in the brig, in irons. If you need to talk to him before he receives military justice, please let me know,” Colonel Foster offered.

After thanking all the men who helped, the three joined the Misses Bennet in the carriage and departed for the Blue Parrot Inn.

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Chapter 18

After only a few hours' sleep, Lady Catherine, Richard, Darcy, Jane, and Elizabeth met in the private parlour to break their fasts. "Lizzy and I have spoken to Lydia, but she will not believe anything we say about her favourite. She just repeats we are jealous of her and do not want her to marry before us," Jane reported. "Mrs. Annesley is with Lydia, and there are footmen outside the door as well as a few under the window, just in case the wilful girl tries to run."

"The only way we convinced her to speak calmly was to ask her if we should summon you to come address her Aunt Cat," Elizabeth added.

"Then she will need to hear the truth from Wickham's lips," Lady Catherine decided.

"How will this be achieved?" Darcy asked.

"Richard, you and William can join Colonel Forster to interrogate the man, can you not?" Lady Catherine asked. Richard nodded. "The Bennet sisters, Mrs. Annesley, and I will be in an adjoining room with the door cracked so we can hear what is said."

"How will you keep Lydia quiet?" Jane asked.

"Jane dear, if the threat of me is enough to calm her, what will she do if I am sitting next to her, gag at the ready if needs be?" Lady Catherine stated matter-of-factly. Both Jane and Elizabeth agreed it would be an effective way to keep their brash sister quiet. "As sad as I am to say it, what she will hear will occasion her much pain, but if it aids in teaching her a lesson and helps her to mature, then it will be a good thing," Lady Catherine opined.

Jane and Elizabeth returned to the room where a sullen Lydia was sitting, refusing to look at either of them when they entered. "Lydia, prepare to leave; we are to Colonel Forster's offices," Elizabeth informed her surly sister.

"Are you taking me back to my Wicky?" Lydia perked up. Conveniently she had forgotten how Wickham had spoken to her in a dismissive and

downright nasty manner, both before they entered the carriage and while in it for their extremely short journey.

“You will hear him but not see him as we discover his true motives,” Jane informed Lydia.

“Good. All of you will have to eat humble pie when you hear my Wicky tell everyone how much he loves me, and how cruel that Mr. Darcy is to have lied so,” Lydia crowed.

“Take this as a fair warning Sister. While we are in the room next to the office you may not say a word,” Elizabeth held up her hand to stop the protest which was forming on Lydia’s lips. “Before you think of making a sound, Aunt Cat—Lady Catherine—will be seated next to you.”

Lydia’s jaw closed with a clack. She would not risk the lady punishing her again.

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After a return note from Colonel Forster agreeing to help, the group, with a sullen Lydia in tow, departed the inn for Colonel Forster’s offices. The Colonel’s adjutant met them outside, then led them to a parlour just off his Colonel’s office. Richard and Darcy followed Captain Sanderson into the office, and the door was left open a few inches so those in the parlour could hear the words being spoken clearly.

Lydia, who would have normally fawned over Captain Sanderson, punished him by not recognising him. He, like so many others, was a traitor to her dear Wickham. She would not have felt as good about her action had she noticed that the Captain cared not a whit if she paid him attention or not.

Lady Catherine turned to Lydia and admonished her to be quiet silently with a finger over her lips. Lydia flushed with anger but nodded her agreement as they heard Wickham being led into the Colonel’s office.

Colonel Forster, Captain Sanderson, Richard Fitzwilliam, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, his foremost nemesis, were seated in the office waiting for him. The Colonel nodded to the soldiers who escorted the prisoner, the signal to leave him standing with the manacles still attached to his ankles.
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“Do you know what the penalty for desertion during war is Wickham?” Colonel Forster asked. “Let me tell you,” he proceeded before Wickham had a chance to reply. “It is death by hanging.”

“S-surely t-that i-is o-only f-for t-the r-r-regular a-army,” Wickham stammered, overcome with the need to cast up his accounts.

“No. In time of war it includes the militia,” Richard informed the quaking man.

In the adjoining parlour, Lydia suddenly became less sure of herself as she listened to the conversation taking place. She could not have been wrong about Wicky, could she? He had worked hard so he could have the leave needed to marry her, did he not?

“There is one way you can save your miserable neck, and that is to answer our questions absolutely truthfully,” Darcy informed the cowardly man, amused Wickham simply nodded, for once out of sarcastic replies.

“Where is Miss Lydia’s twenty pounds?” The Colonel asked.

Wickham briefly considered lying, the money was not worth his neck. “In the lining of my pocket. There is fifteen pounds left. I paid for the carriage and a courtesan or two over the last week,” Wickham admitted. A soldier who had walked him in removed the money and placed it on the Colonel’s desk.

Lydia put her hands over her mouth to stop herself from crying out. She had trusted him with her money, yet he had used it to visit *those* women while professing his love for her. Jane, sitting on her other side, took her free hand and rubbed it gently.

“According to the letter she wrote, Miss Lydia thought you were going to marry her after a stop at family while you collected money from me,” Darcy stated. “As I owe you no money and I know you have no family in London—or anywhere else—what was your plan? Were you going to sell her to a brothel?”

“That is what it sounds like to me. When have you ever turned down a maiden’s favours when she offered them freely? It cannot be her age; it has never stopped you before,” Richard stated with disgust.

“I would never have married that hussy! I was tempted when she all but threw herself at me, but I needed her intact. She has no fortune and is the silliest girl I have ever met. I was using her money to get us to London, and then yes, I was going to sell her to a brothel because I needed funds for passage to the Americas. I knew it was only a matter of time before your aunt would call in my debts and send me to the Clink, as no one can live so cleanly as she demanded.” Wickham looked away when he saw the looks of disgust on the four men with him in the office.

He heard a commotion behind him as a door flew open and slammed against the wall. Wickham half turned, just in time to see a feral Lydia Bennet running at him with pure hate in her eyes, her nails extended. The screeching girl flew into him, scratching his face with all of her pent-up fury, and sending Wickham flying back against the desk as she continued to sink her nails into his face, scratching him deeply and wildly.

Wickham collided with the corner of the desk with his right arm; the sickening crack was unmistakable as the bone in his upper arm shattered. Lydia would have jumped onto him as Wickham writhed in pain on the floor had Richard not restrained her with the help of her sisters, who had followed their youngest sister into the office.

“I want to kill him! Let me go!” Lydia screamed madly as Richard held her.

The fallen man was rolling on the floor crying out in pain. Blood poured from his face, around his eye where Lydia’s talons had found their mark, and a piece of bone was protruding from his arm.

As Jane and Elizabeth, with Lady Catherine’s help, shepherded Lydia, sobbing as her sisters had never seen before, back to their carriage. She often used crocodile tears to get her way, but these tears expressed a real pain, a deeper pain than they could imagine. Lady Catherine offered Lydia a handkerchief to wipe the blood from her hands and pulled the sobbing girl into a hug as the conveyance was driven back to the inn. Once the four ladies exited, the carriage returned to Colonel Forster’s office to wait for Richard and Darcy.

Lydia’s sobbing had not lessened, so Lady Catherine suggested some wine with a drop of laudanum. Jane and Elizabeth agreed, and the landlord

was applied to. He kept a small bottle of the narcotic on the premisses for just such a case.

Soon after drinking her wine, Lydia fell into a deep, restless sleep.

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After the apothecary had seen the prisoner, he made his report to the men in the Colonel's office. "Mr. Wickham has deep lacerations around his eye and on his cheek and has lost an eye. In addition, his right arm is so badly broken, I suggest the military surgeon be summoned, as it may need to be amputated if the bones cannot be set again," the man reported.

After the apothecary left, Colonel Forster ordered his adjutant to request the Royal Dragoons' surgeon attend his man. "It seems Miss Lydia's punishment may be sufficient. It has cost him an eye, his looks, and possibly an arm. When he is able to be moved, he will be sent to the Clink on your aunt's behalf. Considering his inability to work while injured, with the size of the debt, he will never leave the prison alive," Colonel Forster stated.

"He has none to blame but himself, although he will try to do so. He has always been one to concoct schemes he believes infallible, but his confidence is greater than his abilities, and his schemes invariably fail," Darcy told the Colonel.

"When do you return to your estate Fitzwilliam?" the Colonel enquired.

"As soon as Miss Lydia is in a state to travel, we will depart; I would guess the earliest will be on the morrow," Richard told his friend.

Not long after, the Colonel accompanied the cousins to their waiting coach.

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The laudanum knocked Lydia out until about three in the morning on Wednesday, when she woke up screaming. She had slept fitfully for more than four and twenty hours. Jane and Lizzy held her and rocked her when she started to cry again as she came to terms with the fact the world as she knew it had been shattered.

“He never loved me, did he? Everything I denied about him was all true, was it not?” Lydia asked between sobs.

“No Lyddie,” Elizabeth replied gently as she wiped her sisters tears away. “That man loves none but himself.”

“Mama’s lessons about how to catch a man are all wrong, are they not?” Lydia asked as she at last attempted to control her tears.

“Yes dearest. Mama is not correct in her instructions,” Jane agreed. “Are you able to eat a little Lyddie?”

“I will try if it makes you happy Jane,” Lydia replied.

“Let me see if Aunt Cat is up,” Elizabeth informed her sisters. “The sooner we depart for Kent the better.” Jane nodded as she continued to comfort their sister.

After seeing light under Lady Catherine’s bedchamber door, she knocked and was given leave to enter.

“How is Lydia?” Lady Catherine asked.

“She is upset, understandably so, but I think she finally understands how bad her behaviour has been,” Elizabeth opined.

“Would it be forward of me to send an express to your father *inviting* him and your mother to Rosings Park? It is, after all, their failings which have led to your sister being in this situation,” Lady Catherine stated. Elizabeth had long known this confrontation was coming.

“I believe I can speak for Jane in saying we would not object. It is high time my parents were faced with the results of their decisions,” Elizabeth stated bitterly.

“They have both disappointed you and your sisters, but they are still your parents. I will take them to task; that way you need not worry about an irrevocable break in the family,” Lady Catherine declared, and Elizabeth could not but be grateful.

They decided to depart for Rosings Park by seven. Not many minutes later, an express rider was on his way to Hertfordshire.

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Mr. Bennet felt most vexed on Thursday morning. He had received an express from the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and the rider was waiting in his kitchen for an answer. As much as he would have preferred to continue reading his book, he broke the seal and read his letter.

> *10 April 1811*
>
> *Rosings Park, Westerham, Kent*
>
> *Mr. Bennet,*
>
> *You need to rouse yourself from your study and join us at Rosings Park, with your wife, as soon as possible.*
>
> *Your daughter Lydia has just been saved from ruin, and along with her, all of her sisters. I am writing this from an inn in Brighton. We depart for Kent within the hour.*
>
> *I cannot impress upon you the seriousness of this situation enough,*
>
> *Lady Catherine de Bourgh*

Bennet's first reaction was to consign the missive to the fire, but then he remembered Lizzy begging him not to allow Lydia to go to Brighton in the letter she had written from Kent.

Could it be Lizzy's warning had presaged events that had come to pass? Fear gripped Bennet, fear he had not felt for many years, that he had failed in a father's primary responsibility—to protect his children.

He wrote a quick note informing her Ladyship he and his wife would arrive at Rosings Park on the morrow. He issued instructions to Hill to pack his trunk and have the carriage made ready for immediate departure, then went to find his wife.

As was her wont, she was late in rising and was only now breaking her fast, thinking she would be off to visit and gossip, as she had since they had been without daughters at home.

"Mrs. Bennet," Bennet called her attention to himself sharply. "Mrs. Hill is packing your trunk. We will depart for Kent via London within the hour."

“Oh, Mr. Bennet, what has happened?” Mrs. Bennet asked as she fanned herself furiously with her lace handkerchief. “Is it that Lizzy? What had she done now?”

“It is most certainly *not* Lizzy! It is your favourite, Lydia,” Bennet stated without any further information.

Mentioning Lydia was all Bennet had to say to motivate his wife into making haste to be ready for departure.

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The two carriages came to a halt under Rosings’ portico, where they were met by the residents of the manor house. When Lydia saw Kitty, she fell into her arms, crying. “Thank you for telling our sisters about my folly,” Lydia told her surprised older sister.

Within minutes, the Collinses were seen walking briskly through the gardens toward the group returning from Brighton. Collins had been working in his study when he spied the two carriages and had informed his wife of their sisters’ return, so they had set out for Rosings immediately.

“It is good to see everyone, but can we go inside the house please,” Lady Catherine suggested. Soon all were ensconced in the largest drawing room.

Lydia was seated between Kitty and Jane, with Gigi next to Kitty and Elizabeth next to Jane, and introductions were made between those who had previously not met. Lydia looked around the room and then she leaned over to Jane.

“Does everyone here know what almost happened to me?” Lydia asked bashfully.

“Yes, but only those of us who were in Brighton know what that terrible man planned for you,” Jane replied softly.

“It is my opinion that Lydia should stay at the manor house with Kitty and Gigi,” Lady Catherine stated.

Seeing that Lydia did not recognise the second name, Gigi touched Lydia’s arm softly. “Gigi is the name my friends and family call me, you are welcome to do so as well,” Georgiana told the youngest Bennet.
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“Lydia dear, although you showed an inordinate amount of bad judgement, none here will judge you. You are not the only one here who has almost been ruined by that wastrel. You will, however, be the last one as he will never be free to ply his seductions and manipulations ever again,” Lady Catherine told Lydia gently.

“Thank you for rescuing me,” Lydia said to all of them. She looked to Richard and Darcy, forcing herself to ask the question she had been afraid to hear the answer to. “I did not kill him, did I? Even if he deserves it, I do not want to take another’s life.”

“No Lydia, he is very much alive—worse for wear, but alive,” Richard shared. She did not ask how badly he had been injured, so no one told her.

“Hopefully, you will soon be able to move on from this experience. Do not forget it, but start down another path, for it is critical we learn from our mistakes or we are doomed to repeat them,” Lady Catherine declared. “I suggest we all rest and reconvene here for dinner. Mary and Collins, you have no prior commitments, do you?”

“No Aunt Cat, we made sure our evening was open as we were sure our sisters would be returning. We would be happy to join you for dinner,” Mary accepted.

Lydia hugged her three departing sisters tightly, and for the first time she hugged her brother Collins. Before they could start their walk, Richard called Jane aside. “Jane, when you are here this evening, will you grant me a private interview?”

“Yes Richard, it would be my pleasure to hear anything you may have to say,” Jane replied as she blushed deeply. With her heart racing, and feeling like she was floating on a cloud, Jane walked back to the parsonage with her brother and two of her sisters.

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Chapter 19

The Hunsford party arrived within a few minutes of the designated time. Once everyone was served sherry, orgeat, or port, Lady Catherine cleared her throat. “It is good to have.

all of the Bennet sisters with us at Rosings Park. Jane,” Lady Catherine turned to the oldest Bennet present, “it is my understanding that you have granted my nephew Richard an interview.” Jane blushed scarlet as she nodded, not expecting it would be so openly discussed beforehand.

“Your help is always appreciated Aunt Cat,” Richard grinned at his aunt, then stood and approached Jane. “Shall we?”

“It is unavoidable now,” Jane teased.

“About time brother, rather slow in my opinion,” Andrew ribbed. The Earl and Countess beamed as their younger son left to ask for the hand of a woman worthy of him in every way.

“Mrs. Annesley is seated outside the parlour opposite,” Lady Catherine stated matter-of-factually.

Elizabeth bent toward Darcy, “You know William, without your help in highlighting Mr. Bingley’s character, Jane may not have been open to another. Now I believe she will be the happiest woman in the world.”

“The more I see her and Richard together, the more convinced I become that they are a perfect match. Besides, my days of matchmaking, or whatever the opposite office is, are done,” Darcy told Elizabeth. She laughed, again impressed how the man was able to make fun of his own past foibles. Darcy loved to hear the lilting, tinkling sound of Elizabeth’s laugh.

“I heard a reply from Mr. Bingley was waiting for you when we returned,” Elizabeth noted.

“Indeed there was, and to no one’s surprise, he accepted. If I were a wagering man, I would bet Pemberley that Miss Bingley tried to convince him to arrive at Rosings earlier than the date of the invitation,” Darcy

informed Elizabeth. “I am so ashamed of how blind I was to the behaviour of that woman for so long.”

“We promised to move forward, remember? As Aunt Cat says, learn from the past, but do not live there,” Elizabeth prompted.

Ladies Catherine and Elaine were sitting together on a settee. “I see that our William is truly interested in Elizabeth, does she return his regard?” Lady Elaine asked her sister.

“I believe he loves her, although he has a long road to travel to earn her affection. It was not long ago she thought him insufferable,” Lady Catherine replied, her amusement evident.

“These girls are not impressed by wealth, connections, or rank from what I have noted,” Lady Elaine said.

“As far as I can tell, unless they esteem and respect their partner, and receive the same in return, they will not be tempted into marriage regardless of the pecuniary advantages,” Lady Catherine relayed.

“If William can win Elizabeth’s heart, then the dream that Richard and William hold of being brothers will become a reality,” Lady Elaine opined as she watched the two peripherally so they would not be aware of her scrutiny enough to cease talking.

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“Bennet, Fanny, what caused you to leave Longbourn and travel to London?” Edward Gardiner asked. “You are welcome, of course, but this is unexpected.”

Madeline Gardiner looked at both Bennets and, like her husband, was curious about what had happened to separate their brother from his books and port. She suspected it had to do with Lydia. Her three oldest Bennet nieces had written to her and informed her, and by extension her husband, of their fears regarding their parents allowing Lydia to be close to so many officers without substantial supervision.

“We are only asking that you host us overnight,” Bennet said. “We will leave for Kent and Rosings Park after we break our fasts in the morning.”
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“What has happened? Does this relate to Lydia?” Gardiner asked the question both he and his wife most wanted answered.

“How do you know?” A flabbergasted Bennet responded.

“We were not sure until you just confirmed it,” Gardiner stated.

“What has happened? What do you know?” Madeline asked, gravely concerned.

“Not as much as we would like to.” Bennet handed the express he had received to his brother Gardiner.

Neither of the Gardiners missed the almost catatonic state that Fanny Bennet was in. Given the situation concerned her favourite and baby, they could understand her reaction. Her reaction was alarming, but better than one of her contrived attacks of her so-called nerves.

Madeline guided Fanny out of the room so she could change and rest a little before dinner. As soon as the door was closed, Gardiner turned to his brother. “What were you thinking, allowing a girl—who you yourself call the silliest in England—to go to a place teeming with officers, under the care of one no older or wiser than she?”

“It…I…I was not thinking clearly. In my quest for peace, I ignored the pleas of both Jane and Lizzy. When Lizzy wrote to me, rather than listen to what she was saying, I scolded her. Now my family may be ruined,” Bennet confessed shakily.

“Let us pray it has not come to that. The fact you have been asked to journey into Kent may not bode well, but you will not be certain until you arrive on the morrow,” Gardiner opined.

“Would you and Maddie join us?” Bennet asked hopefully.

“My business is running smoothly, so I would be able to take some days. Let me speak to Maddie as I am not sure she will want to leave the children, but mayhap for a few days only, she will agree,” Gardiner replied.

Before dinner, Gardiner requested his wife join him in his study. He relayed Bennet’s plea that they travel into Kent with them on the morrow. His wife stated as long as it was no longer than four or five days, she was amenable.

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Leaving the door slightly ajar, Richard joined Jane in the centre of the parlour. Taking her hands in his own, he sank to one knee. “Jane Eloise Bennet, when I requested a courtship, I told you I was not in love with you *yet*. Though only a short time has passed since then, I find I have fallen irrevocably in love with you.

“You are the one I want to fall asleep next to each and every night for the rest of my life. I want to have the pleasure and honour of waking up next to you each and every morning. I lost part of myself on the battlefields of the Peninsula, but with you Jane, I am again whole. I do not want to experience the joys of life with anyone but you at my side.” Richard looked at Jane, relieved to see her love for him in her eyes, her expression, in her very essence.

“I am not looking for someone to decorate my arm so we can live separate lives and come together to impress the *Ton*. What I want, what I need, is you. A woman I love, respect, and esteem—one who will be my partner in all things. You are compassionate, charitable, and one of the kindest people I know; however, I know you will defend the ones you love with all that you are. Yes, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld, and for that I cannot but add it to the list of blessings that are part of you.

“Jane, will you make me the happiest of men and agree to marry me?” Richard remained on his knee, looking up hopefully at the woman he loved.

“Until I met you, I did not know what true love was. It was not many days after our courtship began that I knew I loved you. I am convinced you are the ideal man for me, so yes Richard. Yes, I will marry you—the man I love and respect above all others,” Jane replied happily.

Despite his racing heart, Richard’s hand remained steady as he withdrew a ring from his pocket. It was a gold band with a grouping of sapphires around a diamond. Jane proffered her left hand as Richard stood and slid the ring onto her finger.

They moved toward one another in mutual, but silent, agreement. Jane closed her eyes and lifted her chin as Richard closed the distance until their
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lips met. Both felt a tingling sensation, and Jane let out a soft moan as she experienced her first kiss.

The first kiss was chaste, but then Richard captured her lips and deepened the next one. Without any hesitation, Jane's arms snaked around Richard's neck while his arms wound around her slender waist. Jane felt her heart race as Richard's tongue explored her mouth.

If it were not for Mrs. Annesley clearing her throat outside the door, their interlude would have continued, but they each took a step back, feeling bereft at the loss of the other in their arms. "My brother Collins will be here shortly," a flushed Jane informed her betrothed.

Jane waited a moment for the heat she was feeling in her face to subside, then she gave Richard a kiss on the cheek and exited hastily before she was tempted to kiss him more intimately. She had been surprised, pleasantly, at how soft and welcoming his lips had been when they were against her own.

When she entered the drawing room alone, all conversation stopped and all eyes looked at her expectantly. It was the Countess who noted her maternal grandmother's ring on Jane's finger.

"William, Richard is awaiting you in the parlour opposite," Jane managed as she smiled with the warmth of a rising sun.

Collins made his way to the parlour while Jane was surrounded by her family, both current and soon-to-be. The Earl reached her first, showing how spry he was even though he was the oldest person in the room, enfolding his daughter-to-be in a hug.

"It pleases me more than I can say to welcome you to the family. I hope you will call me Father Reggie as Marie does." Lord Matlock beamed with pleasure, as did his wife.

Privately, he and his wife had begun to doubt Richard would find a woman worthy of him, one who would love him for himself rather than his estate. Now, having met this perfectly sweet young woman, they were sure he had found his true match in Jane.

After the Earl moved to the side, Jane was surrounded in a group hug consisting of three sisters and Gigi. "Jane, the only time I was happier than

I am for you now was when my William proposed to me," Mary gushed.

Elizabeth turned and saw Lydia watching the joy unfold before her. "Lyddie, are you not one of our sisters?" Elizabeth invited warmly.

"You are not angry with me?" Lydia asked tentatively; for her sisters it was odd to see the normally brash and outgoing Lydia so unsure of herself.

"We still have much to discuss, but this is a time for all of us to be happy for Jane, and you are one of us Lyddie. You will always be our sister," Elizabeth clarified.

Lydia stood, relieved at the welcoming looks as she joined the circle of hugs. When the five young ladies stepped back, they were replaced by Ladies Catherine and Elaine.

"You will call me Mother Elaine, will you not?" Lady Elaine invited, her smile growing even wider when Jane nodded, and received a kiss on the cheek from her future mother-in-law before Lady Elaine stepped back.

Lady Catherine drew Jane into a fulsome hug. "Oh, I knew how it would be. You and Richard will do very well together. When you marry, I will move to the dower house so you may establish yourself as mistress."

"You will do nothing of the sort Aunt Cat! You will *always* be welcome, nay expected, to stay in this house. How will I bedevil you with questions all day long until I learn my duties?" Jane teased her lovingly. Jane had come to love her Aunt Catherine as another mother, and it was obvious the love was returned. She was certain Richard would not hear of her moving to the dower house.

"I love you and your sisters too Jane," Lady Catherine emoted. No one would ever replace Anne in her heart, but as she kept adopting surrogate sons and daughters, her heart swelled to make room for her new *children*.

Darcy was about to step forward and wish his soon-to-be cousin happy —one he hoped he would be able to call sister one day—when Collins and Richard returned to the drawing room. Collins went directly to Jane, took his sister's hand and placed it in Richard's. The ex-officer was sporting a stupid grin of absolute joy.

“Even though it seems redundant, it is my pleasure to inform you of the official betrothal of Jane and Richard. I join everyone in wishing them happy for decades to come,” Collins announced.

Darcy slapped Richard on the back in congratulation and wished Jane happy. “Welcome to the family,” he stated sincerely.

“Thank you William. I assume you will be able to join Andrew in telling me stories of how my betrothed got into trouble as a young boy,” Jane suggested with a teasing smile.

“We were always well-behaved lads,” Richard prevaricated.

“Are you telling me Aunt Catherine was inaccurate about the three of you and the mud?” Jane challenged.

“Well, besides the day we involved Anne in the mud bath with us, we were perfectly well behaved,” Darcy claimed.

“Yes, I am sure that was the *only* instance,” Jane replied playfully.

“Kitty,” Lydia spoke softly as she sat next to her sister to watch their eldest sister’s welcome by her new family. “Thank you for helping to save me from my terrible decisions.”

“Let us just rejoice you are safe and he will never be able to harm another,” Kitty offered as she squeezed Lydia’s hand in return.

Once all the congratulations and wishes for felicity were bestowed, Lady Catherine rang for the butler to request celebratory champagne. To her surprise, Mr. Toppin arrived with the silver salver in hand. “An express, your Ladyship.”

Lady Catherine thanked the butler and asked him to return with the sparkling wine. As soon as the butler withdrew, Lady Catherine broke the seal. It was a short note. “Mr. and Mrs. Bennet will arrive on the morrow,” she announced. “It seems they will overnight with your aunt and uncle in Town, then depart early in the morning.”

“If I know my father, he will request that my aunt and uncle accompany him to help with whatever he imagines he will have to exert himself over,” Elizabeth stated pointedly, and none of her sisters said a word to contradict her.

“Then Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner will be most welcome,” Richard insisted. “Not too far in the future, they will be my aunt and uncle too.”

Toppin returned with two footmen and handed out champagne. Once everyone held a glass, Lord Matlock raised his. “To Jane and Richard. May their happiness and companionship only grow.” There was a universal response of “hear, hear,” and then, after much clinking of glasses, they enjoyed the French libation.

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In Brighton, the surgeon had just completed his work. He had tried to save the man’s arm, but the break was too severe, and the bone was shattered. The Dragoon’s battle surgeon, Mr. McLamb, explained that he had no choice.

He informed his Colonel and the commander of the Derbyshire Militia it was amputation, or the man would surely die from infection. Also, many stitches had been required on the man’s face, where his left eye had once been.

“How soon will I be able to transfer Wickham to the Clink?” Colonel Forster asked.

“It could be as soon as a sennight or as long as a fortnight,” Mr. McLamb explained.

Before Wickham had succumbed to the laudanum, he wished he had never heard the name Bennet in his life. He wondered again how everything had gone so very wrong. He had not only lost an eye and his looks but was about to lose an arm. If that was not bad enough, he would live out the rest of his life in the Clink, for he was being sent to the most notorious of all of the debtors’ prisons in the Kingdom.

As the laudanum had taken hold before the amputation, he had been asking himself why he had not let things be. As his eyes closed, he finally realised who his worst enemy was—himself!

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Chapter 20

Friday morning, by prior agreement, Mr. Collins and the three sisters residing at the parsonage arrived at the manor house to break their fast. After the morning meal, the Bennet sisters and Gigi met with Lady Catherine in her private sitting room.

“Lydia dear, you understand the necessity of this talk before your parents arrive, do you not?” Lady Catherine asked gently, for she did not want the youngest Bennet to feel as if she were being attacked.

“Yes Lady Catherine, I understand,” Lydia replied, her voice quiet and subdued.

“Tell us what you think you did wrong,” Lady Catherine prodded.

“In my determination not to heed anyone but myself, and my absolute belief that good looks meant good character, I wilfully believed *that* man, despite so many telling me the truth about him. I allowed my romantic notion of marrying young to override my ability to think about the impropriety of what I was about to do. I never gave a thought to the consequences for my sisters or myself. I should not have offered the seducer my virtue before being married.” In a more self-aware fashion than her sisters had ever seen, Lydia enumerated her follies dispassionately.

“It seems that the moniker of silliest girl in England is undeserved.” Lady Catherine raised her hand to stop any protests. “I am not saying that your *behaviour* was not silly, stupid, and immoral; do I need to go on?” Lydia shook her head. “The fact you are able to look back so soon after the event and highlight the chief issues shows you are an intelligent young lady, but you *chose* not to show it. Kitty, what did she miss?” Lady Catherine turned to the second youngest Bennet.

“Chasing after officers, or any other men,” Kitty offered.

“And?” Lady Catherine prodded.

“Flirting with any man who looked in her direction, like I used to do; never listening to anyone else; allowing them to kiss her and possibly more

and thinking that at fifteen she was ready to marry and it would be a good joke; thinking she should be the first to marry," Kitty added.

"Yes, and all of these things are related. Thank you Kitty." Lady Catherine turned back to Lydia. "Why do you think your three oldest sisters know how to behave, both in private and public? And tell me why Kitty is so very different than she used to be?"

"Jane and Lizzy have spent much time with the Gardiners…" Lydia trailed off. "Mama and Papa did not teach us how to behave. Jane and Lizzy learnt from Aunt Maddie, and they passed what they knew onto Mary to help her change a few years back. Then, more recently, Kitty opened herself to learning from them which has occasioned the changes in her."

"You made terrible choices and decisions, and your behaviour was atrocious." As Lady Catherine spoke Lydia's head dropped until her chin was pressed against her chest. "Lydia, look at me dear. As I have said more times than I care to remember, there is no need to live in the past, but if we are to move on we *must learn* from our past mistakes. I have no doubt you have begun to do so and I believe you will continue on this new path."

"Why did Mama encourage me to chase after men to *catch a husband*? Should Mama not have been the one to teach us what Jane and Lizzy learnt from Aunt Maddie?" Lydia struck at the crux of the matter.

"Remember Lyddie, Mama was not born a gentlewoman as we were. She did not know better, and Papa, rather than correcting and educating her, made sport of her—he still does," Elizabeth stated coldly. "Papa—if he had so desired—could have started saving for the future as soon as he married Mama, but he left it to his future son rather than trouble himself. By the time he realised there would be no son, he decided it was too late to bother with the effort it would require."

"What Elizabeth just mentioned is the central problem. Much blame lies with your parents, but that does not change the horrific decisions *you* made," Lady Catherine added truthfully. "Did you not revel in the fact your mother spoilt you to the detriment of your other sisters—except Jane, who was praised to the skies for only her physical beauty? Did your mother not praise your liveliness and womanly looks? My dear, you may have a woman's body, but you are still very much a child. Your mother should

never have pushed any of you out at fifteen; no girl is ready for society at that age."

"Yes, I very much enjoyed being spoilt by Mama," Lydia owned.

"You could not control how your mother treated you or your sisters, nor could any of you force your father to take his responsibilities seriously or not to find amusement where he should have corrected. However, all of this had a profoundly bad effect on your behaviour. It will sound harsh, but all of it combined with a rather selfish and brazen streak led to the near disaster we put a stop to in Brighton." Lady Catherine sat back and allowed her words to sink in.

"How can I go back to Longbourn if my mother and father will be the same?" Lydia asked.

"Lyddie," Jane called her youngest sister's attention to herself. "Elizabeth and I are going to extend our stays until I marry Richard, at the very least." You are welcome to stay at the parsonage with us, and Kitty? We think it would be best if you remain as well."

"You will all move to the manor house. We need to give the Collinses a modicum of privacy," Lady Catherine stated. Mary blushed but did not dispute her words.

"Will Papa, and especially Mama, allow us younger girls to stay?" Lydia worried.

"You leave that up to me. You may call me Aunt Catherine, or Aunt Cat, as a certain impertinent sister of yours does," Lady Catherine granted as she smiled warmly at Elizabeth.

After her aunt nodded, Gigi cleared her throat. "Lydia, you are not the only girl to be manipulated by that libertine."

"I am now aware there were some in Meryton and other towns across England," Lydia owned.

"And there is one in this very room…" Georgiana told Lydia about Ramsgate and her own narrow escape.

"Was there anything he ever said that was true?" Lydia asked rhetorically. "Nothing he said about your brother was true either, was it?"

“Do not forget I too was taken in by him on that score,” Elizabeth reminded her sister. “As much as I pride myself on being able to sketch characters, I failed abysmally with both William—Mr. Darcy—and the profligate liar.”

“What I think I need is to go to a school, a strict one,” Lydia stated.

“That may be best. Let us see how the meeting with your parents goes this afternoon,” Lady Catherine declared.

“Aunt Cat, are you sure all of us staying at Rosings Park is not an imposition, and what about Jane, as she is betrothed to Richard?” Elizabeth enquired.

“Propriety will be observed. The master suite is on a different floor and at the opposite end of the house from the guest chambers. In addition to myself, Richard’s parents, his brother, sister, and William are in residence. If that were not enough, with Gigi there will be four young ladies and Mrs. Annesley. I will assign double the footmen on duty in the halls at night. I will suggest to William that Mrs. Annesley become Jane’s companion temporarily, and she will sleep in the second bedchamber in the suite with Jane. Each of you will be assigned a maid; Jane’s will sleep on a cot in her room.” Lady Catherine paused as she saw Elizabeth’s eyebrows elevate as high as possible as each additional layer of protection was listed. “None of this is because I—or any of us—suspect that either Jane or Richard would do anything inappropriate or dishonourable—quite the contrary. It is to make sure there can be no question of propriety being fully observed.”

“It seems my wise aunt has thought of everything,” Elizabeth conceded.

“It is what I do,” Lady Catherine winked at Elizabeth. The two chortled as they linked arms and followed the rest out of the sitting room.

Lady Catherine did not mention to Elizabeth that the same precautions would suit when her nephew Darcy worked up the courage to request a courtship.

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As the Bennet carriage approached Rosings Park, Bennet was grateful his wife was awed into silence. The biggest house she had ever seen was at Netherfield Park, and that dwelling was dwarfed by this manor house.
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Bennet felt a great deal of trepidation, as if massive consequences from his poor choices and disinterest as a father were about to be revealed. It made him feel no easier to see his two oldest waiting with the Collinses and two other people he did not recognise under the manor's portico. Bennet forgot he had been introduced to Lady Catherine and Richard Fitzwilliam at Mary's wedding.

No one could miss the warm welcome the Gardiners received from both Jane and Elizabeth, or the tepid one afforded their parents. When one of the regal-looking ladies requested introductions, Jane performed the office calmly.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, welcome. I do not know if you remember, but we met a few times at your warehouse off Gracechurch Street in London." Lady Catherine put the aforementioned couple at ease, as they had been worried they would be imposing on the master of Rosings with their unexpected presence.

"Lady Catherine, Mr. Fitzwilliam, I do remember," Madeline Gardiner averred. "One of the times was when Jane and Lizzy were visiting us."

"They are now counted as part of our family," the master of Rosings stated ambiguously.

The two Bennet parents looked on in silence, but given Mrs. Bennet's disposition, it could not last too long. "What have you to say for yourself Miss Lizzy?" Fanny Bennet demanded. "What trouble have you got my dear Lydia into. She is too good a girl to…" Whatever additional nonsense Mrs. Bennet was about to spew was cut off by an annoyed Lady Catherine.

"This is neither the time nor the place for that discussion. Suffice it to say, Elizabeth was part of the solution, *not* part of the problem!" Lady Catherine stated in a tone which brooked no opposition. "Our housekeeper, Mrs. Toppin, will show you to your suite, and we will meet in the main drawing room in an hour.

Bennet half-guided, half-pulled his wife into the house where the housekeeper was awaiting the two couples to show them to their suites. As soon as the door to their shared sitting room closed, Bennet rounded on his wife.

“Are you out of your senses to attack our second daughter so? Did I not tell you that Lizzy warned me not to send Lydia to Brighton? If I had listened, none of this, whatever it is, would have happened,” Bennet shot at his wife.

“Lizzy was only jealous…” Mrs. Bennet was cut off for the second time in a short while.

“Not another word Fanny Bennet. When we go to that meeting you will sit in silence and will not make any more ridiculous pronouncements until I give you leave to talk. Defy me, and you will lose your allowance for a year. Do I make myself clear?” Fanny Bennet stood slack-jawed at her husband’s ultimatum.

Of mean understanding she was, but she was not willing to lose a year’s worth of pin money, so her teeth came together and her mouth shut with a clack.

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The Gardiners had just changed when there was a soft knock on their sitting room door. Gardiner opened it to reveal their three oldest nieces. As soon as they entered and the door was closed, Aunt Maddie noticed the ring that Jane’s mother had not when they arrived.

“Jane, you have been very sneaky, you did not tell us you were being courted, never mind that you are betrothed,” Madeline stated with pride.

“I did not want you in the position of having to hide information from Mama,” Jane admitted. She then told her aunt and uncle everything in abbreviated form, as they were expected in the drawing room in less than a half hour.

“You are betrothed to Mr. Fitzwilliam, the master of this estate?” Gardiner verified.

“The very same,” Jane confirmed. Both uncle and aunt hugged Jane and wished her happy.

“Do not be angry with me, but we will marry from this house, the seventeenth day of May, a little more than a month from now,” Jane revealed. “I love my mother, I know she is your sister Uncle Edward, and I
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understand if you call me selfish, but I want my wedding day to be about me, not her."

"Jane, my dear niece, I do not blame you. I know my sister and love her, but I am not blind to her deficiencies." Gardiner looked at his wife, who nodded as they communicated silently. "We will support you fully. I know we will hear everything soon, but please tell us, is Lydia well? Was she ruined?"

"It was close, but we retrieved her before that happened," Elizabeth informed her aunt and uncle.

"Lizzy, I am so sorry you had to hear your mother's spiteful words. I will never understand how she places the blame on your shoulders for anything that goes wrong," Madeline told her niece as she hugged her.

"Mama never forgave me for being born a girl. I was supposed to be her son, and somehow that was my fault. As if I could magically control my gender while in her belly," Elizabeth stated stoically. "It used to hurt me. It no longer does, as I have learnt there is very little truth or rectitude in any of Mama's utterances."

"Mary, you are glowing," Madeline observed. "You must be extremely fortunate in your marriage."

"That I am Aunt Maddie. I will forever be grateful for what you told me when we met the last time before my wedding. If I had only had the wrongheaded *information* my mother imparted, I would have been a truly panicked bride," Mary thanked her aunt.

A few minutes later, the group made for the drawing room. The five of them had just descended the stairs when the Bennet parents walked out of their suite.

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"Caroline, what are these massive bills from your modiste and nearly every shop on Bond Street?" Bingley demanded.

"Charles, are you addlepated? Do you not remember I told you I was to go shopping to prepare to meet my future family at Rosings Park?" Miss Bingley replied condescendingly.
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“We are to be there for two days. You purchased an entire new wardrobe,” Bingley replied, aghast.

“Come now Charles, you know as well as I do when they see what people of quality I—we—are, we will be invited to stay longer so my wedding to Mr. Darcy can be planned as it should be for one of my status,” Miss Bingley preened.

Bingley knew he should tell his sister the truth of his friend’s opinion on the matter, but he could not take that chance. Questioning her about the obscene amount of money she was spending on clothing was the extent of his gumption.

“Did my intended amend the invitation for us to arrive earlier as I said he would?” Miss Bingley asked hopefully.

“No, he did not. He reiterated that our hosts will *not* receive us under any circumstances before the date we are expected,” Bingley relayed.

As was her wont, Miss Bingley only heard that which she wanted to hear, so what she heard was how Mr. Darcy could not wait to see her again but their separation was being forced on them.

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Chapter 21

When the Bennet parents were shown into the drawing room, all five of their daughters, Mr. Collins, the Gardiners, and Lady Catherine were present. “Lydia, my darling girl,” Mrs. Bennet gushed, “who led you into trouble?” Fanny Bennet threw an accusatory look at her second daughter as she asked the question.

“Please be seated and stop spouting nonsense,” Lady Catherine ordered.

Bennet sat, as did his wife, though not graciously, as she took exception to the lady’s tone. However, she decided that the best way to learn how Elizabeth had allowed something to happen to Lydia would be to hold her peace—for now. “What has occurred?” Bennet asked what he most needed to know, though he did not want information revealed that would highlight the deficiency in his parenting, or more correctly, his failure to do anything whatsoever.

“Lydia, the floor is yours,” Lady Catherine indicated.

“I agreed to elope with Mr. Wickham,” Lydia owned, not looking at her parents directly as she informed them of her folly.

“Oh, how wonderful! You are to be married, and at only fifteen too! How is this a problem? Where is dear Wickham?” Fanny Bennet prattled on.

“Mrs. Bennet, are you completely witless?” Lady Catherine asked pointedly.

“I have never been insulted thusly in my life,” Mrs. Bennet responded with asperity.

“Somehow, I find that difficult to believe,” Lady Catherine shot back. “You are pleased that your daughter of fifteen, who should not have been out of the schoolroom let alone out in society, was about to elope with a seducer of woman, a libertine of the first order, and a blackguard such as you have never met before?” Fanny was about to interject when Lady Catherine proceeded before she was able. “Do you not care the scandal

would have touched your three remaining daughters—not to mention your family name—which would ensure no man would have them as wives?"

Whatever retort was on her lips, it was lost as the vision of her other daughters becoming unmarriageable struck the matron. "I, that is to say, ahem." Mrs. Bennet was, for possibly the first time, at a loss for words.

"Mrs. Bennet, I hope you understand you have lost your allowance for a year," Bennet reminded his wife. He held up his hand as she was about to protest vehemently. "Would you like it to be for two years?" Fanny Bennet shook her head as tears of anger and frustration rolled down her cheeks.

"Lydia, would you inform your parents of the rest of the story please?" Lady Catherine prompted.

"In my stubbornness and zeal to marry before the rest of my sisters, I dismissed all that I had been told about Mr. Wickham's actions in Meryton. Once he was free from his confinement, the man heard me boast I had twenty pounds with me," Lydia began to relate.

Hearing the amount she had, and well knowing he had only given her five pounds, Bennet turned an accusatory gaze on his wife, who had the decency to look away in shame. "How much of that money is left Lydia?" Bennet asked.

"Most of it Papa. I stupidly turned my funds over to the ex-officer because he claimed he would ensure no one relieved me of so large an amount. Now I know that he needed the money for himself. He instructed me to tell no one in Brighton of our planned *elopement*. I did not, but I did write to Kitty to boast of my *good fortune*. I did not know it at the time, but that letter saved my life," Lydia related.

Bennet felt as though he had been punched in the gut at his daughter's words, while his wife almost swooned but held her tongue. "When you could not be reasoned with to hold Lydia back at Longbourn, Lizzy and I urged Kitty to pretend she was once again Lydia's minion." Jane informed him; her mild tone held layers of rebuke aimed at him. Bennet felt his shame increase as his eldest daughter held his gaze, hers distant as if nothing he could say or do could make up for his failures. "As we expected she would, Lydia was only too happy to boast of her upcoming *romantic* elopement."

“As you may remember, I covered all of the worthless man’s debts in Meryton and purchased his vowels held by my nephew Darcy. The amount is well over three thousand pounds combined. When Kitty reported the contents of Lydia’s letter, we planned to hie to Brighton as soon as may be, for Wickham had contravened my conditions for his continued freedom from debtors’ prison,” Lady Catherine added.

“Rather than waiting for Monday as we originally planned, Aunt Cat—Lady Catherine—had the feeling we needed to arrive sooner. We arrived in the area this past Sunday night,” Elizabeth took up the story. “Thanks to Richard’s—Mr. Fitzwilliam’s—contacts within the military, both Lydia and *that* man were watched, and we soon ascertained Wickham had advanced his plans to leave after midnight Monday night.” Bennet looked to his eldest daughter, his most forgiving one, but found no forgiveness there. He did not miss the look of pleasure suffusing Jane’s face when the estate’s master’s name was mentioned.

“And so, I went out to meet the man I thought I loved, and who I believed loved me. We entered a carriage, and a few minutes later the conveyance stopped at Colonel Forster’s house, which was close to where I boarded the carriage, at Humboldt Square,” Lydia took up the tale again. “I was angry when I saw Jane and Lizzy, and immediately accused them of being jealous and not wanting me to have fun. I was, after all, the only one following my mother’s teachings about catching a man.”

Fanny Bennet preened then looked at her two eldest daughters, disgusted that they had stopped her Lydia from marrying. All of this talk about Mr. Wickham’s wickedness could not be true, and surely it was not so very bad to elope. Once they married, there would be no scandal, so the high and mighty Lady Catherine did not know of what she spoke. She was determined to have words with her daughters, condemning their interference, especially Miss Lizzy, who was sure to have been the ringleader.

“My sisters, Richard, Mr. Darcy, and Aunt Catherine tried to tell me, again and again, that he had no good intentions toward myself, but I refused to believe them, declaring they were wrong as my dear *Wicky* loved me. So, Aunt Catherine offered me an option: I could accept their words and all that would come, or I could accompany her, Richard, and Mr. Darcy to Colonel

Forster’s office in the morning where I would be able to hear Wickham’s interrogation. I was sure I would be able to crow about how wrong all of them were so I agreed to the latter. I was told if I made a sound while we listened, I would be bound and gagged.” Lydia related the last with a half-smile directed at Lady Catherine.

Fanny Bennet was sure Lydia was about to relate how she had been vindicated by what she heard. She would have to admonish her daughters’ so-called ‘aunt’ for threatening her dearest girl before this interview was over. And what was this *aunt* nonsense anyway? From the rest she expected treachery, but from Lydia it was inexcusable.

“What I heard was the opposite of what I expected.” As Lydia finished this statement, all colour drained from her mother’s face. “He was told if he was honest, *completely* honest, he would escape the hangman’s noose for desertion during wartime, which was the penalty he would face when coupled with dereliction of duty.” Lydia took a deep breath, glancing at Lady Catherine who nodded encouragingly that she should continue.

“It *is* hard to relate, but you are doing well Lyddie,” Kitty said in support of her younger sister.

“Thank you.” Lydia offered a small smile, reaching for and finding Kitty’s hand extended for her to take. She was relieved to have her sister’s support. What she had to say would be humiliating, even more so than when she heard it from Wickham’s own mouth. She had seen nothing to indicate his intentions then, but looking back, she saw plenty now. “He admitted he never loved me; he said he did not even like me. I had offered my virtue to him in anticipation of our wedding vows, which he refused. I thought he was being a gentleman, but instead I learned he needed me to remain a maiden so he would get as much money as possible when he sold me, a gently-bred maiden, to a *brothel*!”

Fanny Bennet started to howl in pain and then collapsed. But a moment after Fanny heard the man’s vile plans for her baby, she felt a pain like none she had experienced before. It was easy to see it was not one of her swoons contrived to garner attention, but a genuine fall, her world going black the same time as the tremendous shock of her baby’s words penetrated her understanding. Her family assumed she had fainted.

Two footmen were summoned to assist Mrs. Bennet to her chambers, where a maid would attend her with salts if she did not recover her senses quickly. Bennet sat still and watched his wife being carried away; his pallor white as a sheet as he began to understand the complete ruin that had come close to befalling his family.

“When I heard his disgusting plans for me, something inside of me snapped. I shot into the Colonel’s office and attacked the man. I drove him into the desk, which shattered his right arm; I understand it had to be amputated, as the break was too severe to fix.

“I do not remember it at all, but evidently I scratched him deeply around his left eye, which cost him that eye, as well as other deep scratches on his face.” Lydia dropped her head; thankful Kitty was on one side and Mary on the other. They held her hands firmly, each applying pressure to assure her of their support.

“Mr. Bennet,” Lady Catherine addressed the shaken man. “Was your peace and quiet at your estate worth what almost happened? From what I am told, Elizabeth is your favourite daughter, yet you dismissed her concerns as if she never before had a sensible thought. Did it not pierce your consciousness when she wrote to you to plead again that there might be more at play here than you thought?”

Had Bennet not been so thoroughly ashamed of his inaction, he might have resented Lady Catherine’s words. However, he realised he deserved it all—and more. “There is naught I can say in defence of my failure to act as I should have. I am beyond chagrined at the man I have become. I am pleased Lydia was saved from this situation; she should never have been put in it in the first place. I abrogated all of my parental responsibility and traded it for books and port.” Bennet hung his head in shame.

“Lydia dear, is your virtue truly intact?” Madeline asked, and to her aunt, uncle, and father’s great relief Lydia nodded in the affirmative.

“It will not change the past, but we have begged you since Jane was born to take an interest in your family. My sister is vulgar and of mean understanding. She was not born to the gentry, but you were Bennet. Why did you not teach her rather than ridicule her?” Gardiner asked his brother pointedly.

“What do you suggest going forward?” a defeated Bennet asked.

“Your girls—all of the unmarried ones—would like to remain at Rosings Park, and I would like them to remain. Lydia wants to go to school—in her own words, to a strict institution—and so it shall be. I think you and your wife have much to think on and will need time without your daughters dividing your attentions.” Lady Catherine allowed her words to sink in.

“Is this what all four of you desire?” Bennet asked, hoping they would not wish to remain away from him and his wife. But he was sure they would, thereby forcing him to deal with his failure as the halls of Longbourn would be filled with nothing but silence. If they were to come home, they would remonstrate with him in their every look and their every word.

“Yes Papa, it is,” Jane spoke for her three unmarried sisters who all nodded in agreement. “Papa, you may tell Mama later, but I also wanted to inform you I am betrothed to Richard Fitzwilliam, the master of this estate. We will marry in mid-May—here.”

“As you are of age, you do not need my consent. I am sure your Brother Collins granted his. I gave him my authority so I would not be bothered by anything that would distract me from my books.” Bennet felt his shame burn hotter than before as he admitted the last. “Although you do not need it, I hope you will accept my blessing for your match.”

“I am happy to accept it. I hope you will attend and walk me up the aisle,” Jane requested. Bennet nodded with all the relief a man on the verge of losing his family feels when he learns he will not. “I hope you understand why I will not allow Mama to parade me around the neighbourhood or take over my wedding?”

“No more need be said on that subject.” Bennet turned to Lady Catherine. “As to my daughters remaining here, they have my leave to do so for as long as all of you desire the arrangement. I can only hope I will be worthy of their respect in the future.” Bennet looked toward his daughters. “You know Longbourn is still your home, and you are welcome whenever you feel ready to return.”

“Thank you Papa,” Elizabeth responded as she wrapped him in a hug which he returned in full measure.

“Based on the outcome, you showed some greatness of mind. I am sorry for dismissing your concerns Lizzy. I beg all of your pardons for my faults as a man and a father,” Bennet addressed all of his daughters.

“As someone very wise told us, as long as you learn from your past errors, there is no reason to dwell in the past,” Jane stated as she accepted a hug from her father.

Mary and Kitty also received a warm hug from Bennet. Lydia was the last daughter to approach him, tentatively. “Please do not hate me for what I almost did Papa,” Lydia requested in a tremulous voice.

“No Lydia, I could never hate you, I love you. It is I who needs to beg your pardon. I failed you because I never curbed either your mother or you. It is my fault, and I should feel the pain of my failings. Now I will do what I am able to correct my past mistakes.” Bennet hugged his youngest tightly as she cried tears of relief in her father’s arms.

Once he released his youngest child, Bennet turned to address Lady Catherine. “You have my deepest gratitude for the care you have given my daughters. I take no umbrage at the fact they found the support outside of their family circle they should have received from me.”

“We will be related soon enough,” Lady Catherine averred. “And more, it has indeed been my pleasure. Your daughters have joined my nephews and nieces to claim a part of my heart reserved for my surrogate children.”

“Nothing has changed for us,” Gardiner spoke up. “*Any* of you will be welcome anytime with us at Gracechurch Street.”

“Including me?” Lydia wondered aloud.

“Most certainly, yes, including you,” her uncle responded without hesitation.

“You have met Richard before Papa, but not as my betrothed. Will you wait while I request him to join us?” Jane asked hopefully.

“I would love to become acquainted with my future son,” Bennet agreed.

Jane departed to find Richard, accompanied by Elizabeth. Kitty and Lydia went to locate Gigi. By the melodious sound from the direction of the music room, they had a good idea where she was.

“Lady Catherine, my only concern…” Bennet started to say.

“Is the propriety of Jane living in the same house as Richard.” Lady Catherine completed his sentence, and Bennet nodded. Lady Catherine explained the extraordinary steps which had been undertaken to ameliorate the issue.

“It seems my worry was without merit,” Bennet acknowledged. “I am thankful and appreciate the lengths you have gone to avoid any speculation about something untoward occurring. You are protecting my daughters far better than I ever did.”

Just then, Jane and Elizabeth returned with not only Richard, but his parents, brother, sister, and cousin Darcy. Introductions were made to the Earl and Countess, as well as the Viscount and Viscountess. When Mr. Darcy greeted Bennet civilly, the man arched his eyebrows, for it seemed the surprises would never end.

To his further astonishment, Gardiner was acquainted with Lords Matlock and Hilldale, as they had transacted business, and Madeline Gardiner was familiar with their wives, seeing that they served together on some of the same charitable committees.

Darcy watched as he saw another of his assumptions dissolve before his eyes. Mr. Gardiner might be in trade, but he was as gentlemanly as any man Darcy knew. He ruefully smiled to himself as he remembered the way Miss Bingley had denigrated the Bennets’ connections when they spoke one evening at Netherfield Park, after Jane and Elizabeth had returned to Longbourn following the former’s illness.

The Bennet connections he had believed his family would decry were accepted warmly by all of them. What a fool he had been! If he had proposed as he planned, he would have told her what a degradation her family and connections were. He decided to talk to Aunt Cat before he made a bigger fool of himself. He did not doubt her advice would be invaluable yet again. As Darcy gazed at the woman he loved, he was

grateful he had not proposed to her yet, as he was sure she would have rejected him out of hand.

Bennet welcomed his future son to the family, then informed his host he and his wife would depart in the morning. To save them from his wife's vulgar effusions that were sure to ensue, Bennet decided he would inform his wife of their daughter's betrothal an hour into the journey back to London.

To reinforce the saying 'men plan and God laughs,' the butler entered the drawing room and summoned Bennet to his wife's chambers. Mrs. Bennet was very ill and the local physician had been sent for.

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Chapter 22

When Bennet walked into his wife's chambers, he suspected she had feigned illness to garner attention for herself. The sight that met his eyes almost caused him to cast up his accounts.

The left side of his wife's face was drooping—noticeably. When she tried to call out to him, the sound was unintelligible. When Gardiner and Madeline joined him, they noticed that Fanny's right arm and leg were thrashing, but her left side was not moving at all.

"This is an apoplexy, I believe," Madeline Gardiner opined. "I have seen something like this at one of the homes where I am on the committee."

"Is there anything that can be done?" Bennet asked, very much concerned. Yes, he made sport of his wife, but he could not imagine his life without her.

"The doctor has been sent for," Gardiner stated. "Rather than making uneducated suppositions, let us wait for the professional to examine Fanny. We will know how to proceed after that." Bennet calmed down to a certain extent as there was irrefutable logic in his brother's statement.

'*Why are they talking about me as if I am not here and talking to them?*' Fanny Bennet asked herself. As far as she could tell, she was speaking as she always had and was unable to grasp why her husband, brother, and sister-in-law would not answer any of her questions. '*They said I cannot move my left arm and leg, of course I can…*' But no matter how much Fanny tried to move those limbs, they refused to cooperate. She also noticed that when she closed her right eye, she could see nothing.

The sounds emanating from the stricken Mrs. Bennet increased, as did her obvious concern. The sounds became louder, but not clearer, than they had been before. Her right arm and leg began to move alarmingly, so wildly that Bennet asked a footman to help immobilize his wife.

"Belay that," came a voice from behind them. An unknown man entered the bedchamber carrying a physician's bag; it was the doctor.

“Mr. Bennet, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, may I introduce Dr. David Burnett to you?” Richard, who had accompanied the man upstairs, asked. Bennet nodded and the introductions were made.

“Mrs. Gardiner, may I request your presence while I examine your sister-in-law?” Dr. Burnett asked after the relationships had been explained to him. Maddie Gardiner nodded her acquiescence. “Gentlemen, if you will wait in the adjoining sitting room, I will be with you as soon as I have completed my examination of Mrs. Bennet.

‘*No, Thomas, do not leave!’* Fanny thought she had said out loud, but no one could understand what she was trying to say. ‘*I am so scared Thomas!’*

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Not long after Bennet and Gardiner were consigned to the sitting room, they were joined by the Collinses, Richard, Jane, and Elizabeth. Kitty and Lydia remained with Gigi and the rest of the party in the drawing room.

“Papa, will Mama be well?” Mary asked the question all of Fanny’s daughters wanted answered.

“Mr. Burnett is with her now,” Bennet informed his daughters. “He promised to let us know as soon as he finishes his assessment. Aunt Maddie is with him and suspects it is an apoplexy. She has seen the same in another before.” Bennet went on to explain the symptoms he and the others had observed.

“Our poor mother,” Jane lamented. “We will pray that she recovers.”

“Just tell us what we can do to help Papa, and it will be done,” Elizabeth stated as she took her father’s hand. He gave her a wan smile in return.

“Bennet, you know you are welcome to remain at Rosings for as long as you need,” Richard invited.

“Thank you Son,” Bennet responded almost absently.

About half an hour later, Mr. Burnett entered the sitting room. Richard quickly introduced his betrothed, her sisters, and their brother. “Mr. Bennet, do you wish me to disclose my findings to everyone here?” the doctor asked.
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“Please do, we are all family,” Bennet allowed.

“It is my sad duty to inform you your sister’s estimation was correct. Your wife has suffered a massive apoplexy that has paralysed the left side of her body.” Burnett paused when the patient’s three daughters began to sob. “The drooping you saw on the left side of her face is due to the loss of control of the muscles that normally hold things in place. It is the same reason she can no longer talk.”

“What a trial for Mama not to be able to express herself,” Elizabeth empathised. All of her mother’s mistreatment was forgot, and all she now wished for was some miracle recovery for her mother.

As if reading Elizabeth’s thoughts, Mr. Burnett proceeded, “There is, I am sorry to say, no cure. As far as I know, there has never been any sort of recovery from an apoplexy of the severity that Mrs. Bennet has suffered.” The three sisters’ sobbing increased after his pronouncement. Tears ran down both Bennet’s and Gardiner’s cheeks. Even given the distance between him and his sister, seeing her thus and remembering the girl she used to be affected Gardiner greatly.

“Lydia will blame herself,” Jane managed between sobs.

“What do you mean Miss Bennet?” the doctor enquired.

“My wife had just received some terribly distressing news…” Bennet gave the doctor a short, sanitised version of what happened before his wife was stricken.

“From everything we understand in medicine regarding apoplexies—granted it is not as much as we would like—we believe they are the result of a fault in a blood vessel in the area of the head. Such a fault could not have been caused by anything any of you did or did not do. The best analogy I can give you is to think of the vessel as a truss on a bridge that has an unknown weakness in it. It may support the bridge for years, but each cart or carriage that crosses will weaken the fault a bit more until it gives out. It may be a fully laden cart that triggers it, or a man walking.

“The salient point is, it was inevitable, and no one person or factor is the cause. I fully believe it is the same cause in Mrs. Bennet’s case. It was going to happen, and now was the time. That is a long-winded way of

telling you that Miss Lydia had as much to do with the event as she does the rising and setting of the sun each day."

Burnett's explanation made everyone feel a little easier, as they were sure Lydia would blame herself. With the explanation the doctor gave, it would be simple to convince her she was not the cause of her mother's illness.

"How will my wife communicate her needs?" Bennet asked.

"Does your wife write with her left or right hand?" Burnett verified.

"She uses her right hand," Bennet confirmed.

"In that case, I suggest you give her a slate and some chalk. I do not believe she is in pain, but it is more than likely she is frustrated because no one seems to understand her. In her own mind, I am sure she thinks she is speaking perfectly clearly. Being able to make her wishes known will reduce her frustration level." The doctor paused as he cogitated. "There is something else of which you must all be aware. Once a patient has suffered an event as severe as Mrs. Bennet has, it greatly increases the chance of subsequent attacks. I must caution you the chance of her surviving another apoplexy is minimal."

The sisters who had almost ceased crying sobbed anew, and Bennet looked as if he had been punched in the gut over and over again. "We need to summon Phillips and Hattie," Gardiner pointed out, and he turned to Richard and explained, "They are my older sister and her husband."

"Anyone who needs to be here is more than welcome," Richard assured them, "for as long as needs be."

"Did you explain all of this to my wife?" Bennet asked.

"No, your sister is doing so now, but only with respect to her physical limitations," Mr. Burnett clarified. "I leave it to you if you want to make her aware of the possibility of a relapse and the probable outcome."

"The knowledge will not enhance her life, regardless of how long she has left with us," Bennet stated resignedly.

"It is more likely it would make it more difficult. If you require me to stay and attend Mrs. Bennet for a few days, I am at your disposal; however,

there is naught I can do," Mr. Burnett explained. "If she is unable to sleep, or in discomfort, then administer laudanum. Even fitful rest is better than none."

"No Doctor, there is no cause for you to remain. If there is a change, we will call on you if we may," Bennet extended his hand to the physician.

"I am at your disposal Sir," Burnett stated, as he first bowed and then shook the proffered hand.

Before Bennet was able to return to his wife's room, his son Collins pulled him aside, and they had a short but animated discussion. Bennet seemed to stare with disbelief but Collins nodded vigorously.

Elizabeth could not fathom what the conversation had been about. She was sure—based on her readings on the subject—it was too early to know if Mary was with child, so she was at a loss.

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Jane and Richard entered the bedchamber with Bennet, and there was no mistaking Mrs. Bennet's agitation. Although Jane tried not to, she gasped when she saw the sagging on the left side of her mother's face.

"Mama, Richard and I have some news for you." Jane saw her mother relax slightly. "While I was here, Richard courted me. The day before you arrived, he proposed to me, and I accepted him. It is as you always said, I could not be so pretty for no reason, and now I will become the mistress of this great estate." Jane cared not a whit for any of the things she told her mother, but she knew her mother did, and she would do *anything* to comfort the stricken woman. Using her mother's oft proclaimed words was the way she attempted to provide her some small measure of pleasure.

A single tear rolled from Fanny's right eye, and the right half of her mother's face smiled. She reached for Jane with her right hand. Jane took it and squeezed gently, then Richard leaned down and kissed his mother-in-law-to-be on the right cheek, and as Jane had done, squeezed her right hand.

"We will marry from Rosings on the seventeenth day of May Mother Bennet," Richard shared. "You *will* be at our wedding."
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“Fanny my dear, did Maddie explain everything to you?” Bennet asked solicitously. Fanny moved her head in what was assumed to be a nodding motion. “We will provide you with a slate and chalk so you may make your wishes known.” With her good hand, Fanny made like she was clapping.

“Mama do you remember what we were discussing before you became ill?” Mary asked, and again, Fanny nodded as well as she could.

“Lyddie was never touched Mama; we arrived in time to save her,” Elizabeth informed her mother as she took her mother’s good hand, and no one missed how Fanny relaxed at the knowledge that her baby was well.

“The girls are being circumspect Fanny,” Bennet stated with a grin. “They did not tell you that the libertine lost an arm and an eye for his trouble, thanks to angering our Lyddie.”

Her daughters were not sure, but it seemed their mother approved of the outcome. “As soon as he is fit to be moved, he will be taken to the Clink Prison in London, and he will not be a free man for the rest of his wasted life,” Elizabeth informed her mother.

“Fanny, I have some more news for you. I spoke to our son just before I re-joined you in your bedchamber. There will continue to be a Bennet at Longbourn, even after I leave the mortal world.” Everyone looked at Bennet with question and his wife squeezed his hand urging him to carry on. “William and Mary have had discussions, and William has decided that he will change his family name back to Bennet.

“I do not know if you know this, but his grandfather changed their family name from Bennet to Collins after the dispute that arose when he compromised my aunt. He has decided he will be known as William Bennet from this day forth. Our Mary is once again a Bennet!” Bennet announced.

Obviously approving of the decision their son had made, Mrs. Bennet cried tears of joy. She was finally looking at what she had, rather than what she wanted.

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“Richard has the right of it; the Bennet parents will remain as long as they need,” Lady Catherine agreed. “What of Longbourn? If you are to be here, who will manage your estate? Do you have a steward?”
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“My suggestion would have been that my son and daughter take over the estate, but I know Mary wants to remain close to her mother, so I am not sure how to manage the estate from here, as I will not leave my wife’s side.” Bennet replied honestly.

“May I make a suggestion Mr. Bennet?” Darcy asked.

“Please do so Mr. Darcy,” Bennet averred.

“As we are soon to be family, will you not call me Darcy?”

“I will as long as you call me Bennet. You were saying Darcy?”

“At Pemberley I have three under-stewards. I have known for some time now that Mark Brandson, who is not yet thirty, has been ready to take the helm of an estate on his own. I was waiting for one of the stewards at a satellite estate to retire, but none have yet done so. As he is unmarried, it would be no hardship for him to run Longbourn in your absence. If you would like, I will send him a letter asking if he would accept the position at your estate,” Darcy offered.

“If Mr. Brandson is willing, I would be most appreciative. Thank you,” Bennet responded gratefully.

“That man is known to me,” Lord Matlock added. “If my nephew had been willing to part with him before now, I would have hired the man away some time ago.”

“It is good to know he has your endorsement, your Lordship,” Bennet inclined his head to the Earl.

“Matlock will do just fine,” Lord Matlock offered. Before Bennet returned to his wife, he was on familiar terms with all of the Fitzwilliams.

Elizabeth was amazed. She started to change her opinion of Mr. Darcy —William—significantly after they decided to begin again, but this level of solicitude to her family was wholly unexpected. Unexpected, but most welcome. Even though her father was an indifferent estate manager at best, he would not leave Longbourn indefinitely. If William’s under-steward agreed to take up the post of steward at his estate, then her father would be able to remain at their mother’s side without worry.

Elizabeth had not missed the long intent looks William gave her, or how his eyes sought her out as soon as they neared one another or how they followed her whenever she moved around. It was the first time Elizabeth admitted to herself that Jane and Charlotte might have been correct; William was not indifferent to her and the looks he gave her were of admiration, not aversion. Now was not the time to consider it, but she admitted to herself that, if true, she would not be unhappy about it.

“When may we see Mama?” Lydia asked.

As predicted, when her older sisters broke the news of what had befallen their mother to her and Kitty, Lydia tried to take the blame on her shoulders and became inconsolable for a short while until Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary explained to her what Mr. Burnett had told them about the causes of an apoplexy.

Once Lydia quieted, it did not take her long to understand she was not the catalyst for the apoplexy, and that there mother did not need maudlin daughters visiting her.

“After dinner, you and Kitty will have some time with her,” Jane informed her youngest sisters. “Are you prepared for the altered looks of our mother?” Both younger Bennets nodded.

“As difficult as it will be, try not to stare at Mama; it will make her self-conscious,” Elizabeth added. “Papa sent an express to Aunt and Uncle Phillips, so we can expect them to arrive in a few days.”

“Aunt Phillips needs to be well prepared before she sees Mama, or she will start to wail,” Kitty pointed out.

“I will make sure my sister is informed what to expect before she sees your mother,” Aunt Maddie told her nieces.

“And I will assist my wife,” Gardiner stated. “We will do what we can to help.”

“When do you need to be back in London Uncle Edward?” Mary asked.

“We will wait until my sister and Phillips arrive. Once Hattie is settled, Maddie and I will depart.” Gardiner turned to Lady Catherine. “As long as it is not an imposition, we will try to visit at least every fortnight.”

“Edward and Maddie, you are welcome any time for as long as you need to be here,” Lady Catherine assured them. “You came in the Bennet carriage, did you not?” Gardiner nodded. “Richard, you would not object sending your soon-to-be aunt and uncle home in one of your coaches, would you?”

“You know I would not; I would place any of my coaches at the Gardiner’s disposal with the greatest of pleasure,” Richard offered.

“As I need to be in Town on Tuesday after Easter,” Lord Matlock stated, “the Gardiners may travel with your mother and me. We have more than enough room.”

“Thank you Matlock; that would cause the least upheaval and ensure the driver would not need to make a roundtrip to get us home,” Gardiner accepted.

“Should I write to Bingley and rescind the invitation for next week?” Darcy asked.

“No William, that harpy needs to be taught a lesson. You do not want her damaging Gigi’s reputation with her outlandish lies, do you?” Lady Catherine asked pointedly.

“You have the right of it,” Darcy acknowledged.

“I have instructed Toppin to retrieve the bath chair from the attics and have it cleaned and painted if needs be,” Lady Catherine informed the group. “That way, when Mrs. Bennet feels up to it she will be able to have some society outside of her bedchamber.”

The five sisters were most appreciative, though unsurprised, that their Aunt Catherine was thinking of their mother’s wellbeing and comfort. She was an example of a woman they could all hope to emulate.

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Chapter 23

The first time all of her daughters visited her together, Fanny Bennet cried. Her husband had explained what she had missed after she was stricken—no thanks to them as parents, Lydia was safe because of the care their daughters took to insure there would be no scandal attached to the Bennet name.

With her slate and chalk, Fanny was able to communicate in a rudimentary fashion. When Elizabeth took her turn to sit with her mother, Fanny wrote but one word on her slate: *'SORRY'*. "All is forgiven Mama," Elizabeth told her mother between her tears. She hugged her mother tightly, something she had not done for many a year. "Do not worry about the past, your only job now is to get as well as you are able to."

Bennet sat in a corner of the room. Other than to care for his personal needs, he had not moved from his wife's bedchamber. When Mr. Burnett came to check on his patient, Bennet asked if they could return to Longbourn, as he knew his wife would prefer to be in her own home.

Jane assured him if they were able to move her mother, she would marry from Longbourn so her mother would see her and her new son on the day they married.

The doctor had recommended against it, most strenuously. He explained that any sudden movement from a bump or rut in the road could prove fatal for Mrs. Bennet. His judgement saddened them but was accepted.

Bennet did not wish to impose, but he was informed that he and his wife were welcome for as long as they needed to be at Rosings Park. Knowing his wife would feel better with someone familiar caring for her more intimate needs, Bennet requested and was given an affirmative answer to having the Hills travel to Kent.

Darcy had informed him a letter had been sent to Brandson by courier, and that he expected an answer before the end of the week. Knowing a solution to look after Longbourn was in process, Bennet was given one less thing to worry about.

The previous day was Easter, but all of his unmarried daughters wanted to remain with their mother and miss church services. Bennet had shooed them all out, telling them he was quite capable of sitting with his wife.

His future son had sent a carriage the day before Easter to collect the Hills. The driver carried a letter of explanation from the master and instructions to make Sarah, the upstairs maid who served all Longbourn's ladies, the interim housekeeper until such time as Mrs. Hill returned to Longbourn. Unless there was a problem on the roads, the Hills would arrive on the morrow.

When he told his wife he had sent for Mrs. Hill to help her, Fanny tried to smile and wrote a large '*Thank You'* on her slate.

For his part, Bennet could not thank Lady Catherine enough. She would look in on Mr. and Mrs. Bennet a few times each day. On his way to Rosings Park, Bennet had been sure there would be, justifiably, a pointing out of their deficiencies as parents. There had been some little remonstration before his Fanny was struck down, but since then nothing. The focus was on making his wife as comfortable as possible.

Bennet felt the weight of his lackadaisical, almost non-existent, parenting style bear down on his shoulders. He had never felt contrition—until now. There was no overlooking the warmth of feeling between his daughters and Lady Catherine and all of her family, even the proud and disagreeable Mr. Darcy, who seemed neither proud nor disagreeable any longer. Unless his eyes deceived him, the very man who had called her only tolerable was interested in his second daughter.

Bennet snapped out of his reverie as he watched his youngest curled up on the bed next to his wife. The change in her was almost too great to believe. It was unnerving to observe just how much of a sea-change Lydia's character had undergone in so short a time.

If it were not for the left side of his wife's face, it would have been hard to tell there was anything wrong with her, for an air of peace had settled over his wife. Bennet was unsure if it was acceptance, or a result of the apoplexy. Whatever it was, she was almost as serene as Jane used to be.

He had been informed about the Bingleys' upcoming visit in but two days, on Wednesday. In a way, he was sorry he would not be present to see

Miss Bingley put in her place, but his place was with his wife, and there he would remain.

There was no missing the light in his wife's right eye whenever Jane and Richard visited her together. Mr. Burnett opined the attack had robbed her of sight in her left eye as it no longer reacted to light, and it seemed one had to stand on his wife's right for her to see them.

As helpful, gentle, and caring as the maids who were assigned to his wife were, he would be anxious until the Hills arrived. It was not just that his wife would feel more comfortable with Mrs. Hill, but Bennet would have Hill to attend him, the man who had been attending him for over thirty years.

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The coach conveying the Hills to Rosings Park arrived a little after three on Tuesday afternoon. All five sisters waited for the carriage to come to a halt. There was much hugging and not a few tears shed as each of the sisters welcomed the woman who had been more aunt than servant since the day each was born. Mr. Hill was not spared the same warmth that was accorded his wife.

"Is my mistress very sick?" Mrs. Hill asked after the excitement of the welcome subsided.

"It *is* bad Mrs. Hill," Jane informed Longbourn's housekeeper.

"Papa will be very happy to see you Mr. Hill," Elizabeth informed their long-time retainer. "It is not that he does not have help here, but it is not the same as having you with him."

Just then, Lady Catherine exited the house. "Jane, will you make the introductions please," she requested. It took but a moment for Jane to perform the office. "Mrs. Hill, we have converted the dressing room in your mistress's chambers into a bedchamber for you. It is not much smaller than Mrs. Bennet's bedchamber, and a comfortable bed has been moved there."

"You have my deepest appreciation, your Ladyship. I prefer to be close to my mistress," Mrs. Hill responded gratefully.
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“Mr. Hill, you have a room reserved for senior visiting male staff. If either of you need anything, please communicate your needs to Mr. or Mrs. Toppin, our butler and housekeeper.” Both Hills were pleasantly surprised at the way the mistress of the house treated them, rather than eschewing contact as they were but servants.

The sisters then showed the Hills to their parents’ suite. As expected, though they had been forewarned, seeing the mistress for the first time was a shock for both of Longbourn’s senior servants, but they schooled their features as they had done thousands of times before.

The right side of Mrs. Bennet’s face lit up when she saw Mrs. Hill, and her good hand reached for the woman. After spending some time with the master and mistress, the Hills were taken to the Toppins so they could familiarize themselves with anything they needed to know to perform their duties.

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Normally, one could not bestir Caroline Bingley from her bed before midday—at the earliest. On Wednesday, the seventeenth day of April in the year of our Lord 1811, Miss Bingley was up before dawn.

As the sun’s rays broke above the horizon one minute after five that morning, Miss Bingley banged on her brother’s bedchamber door to roust him from his bed so they could begin the journey to her destiny as early as possible.

“Caroline, what are you doing up? I planned to depart at eight or nine. It is just past five!” Bingley whined from inside his chambers.

“The sun is up; let us leave. The sooner I—we—arrive, the sooner my dream will come true,” Miss Bingley declared in her high-pitched, grating voice.

“It will be at least an hour before I am ready; go break your fast,” Bingley stated. Mayhap Caroline was correct and Darcy intended to offer for her, regardless of what he had said in the past. There was no other reason he could fathom for the invitation. Perhaps once Darcy was settled, he would permit him to pursue his angel, Miss Bennet, once again.
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Bingley was seated in the breakfast parlour forty minutes later as his sister stood with crossed arms and her foot beating a staccato on the floor as she tapped it impatiently. He was tempted to remind her that every other time they needed to be somewhere, she kept him waiting. In the end, he did what he always did, avoided confrontation.

By half past six, the Bingley carriage left Curzon Street on its journey to Kent.

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“Once they have alighted from their coach, the Bingleys will be shown into this drawing room,” Lady Catherine directed. Jane, Lizzy, and Gigi will be in the adjoining parlour and will know when to join us. I am sure the shrew will take every opportunity to denigrate you and your family. We will see if she even recognises Mary and Collins.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would feel badly for someone about to be excised from society, but I find I have no sympathy for Miss Bingley,” Jane said evenly. “Everything that happens to her will be by her own hand. It took me a little longer than Lizzy to see her for who she is, but my eyes are wide open now.”

“Their coach has passed the gatehouse,” Richard informed those in the drawing room after he read a note from the gatekeeper, just handed to him by a groom.

While the three young ladies made their way into the adjoining parlour, Kitty and Lydia went to sit with their parents. They had asked Gigi if she wanted them to wait in the parlour with her—she thanked them but told them to spend the time with their mother.

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Miss Bingley expected the whole family to be waiting to greet her, but the butler was the only one there to welcome her to her soon-to-be family’s estate. “Show us to my—the—family,” Miss Bingley sneered at Toppin.

The man’s mien did not change at all. “As you wish Madam.” Toppin walked at a sedate pace, and Miss Bingley’s avarice peaked as she followed the man. All this obvious wealth! If only the place had been left to her

Fitzwilliam, then they would have had *two* of the grandest estates in the land.

The butler led the Bingleys into a large drawing room. The Viscount and Viscountess of Hilldale, Lady Catherine, Mr. Fitzwilliam, Mr. and Mrs. Collins, and Mr. Darcy were present. The Earl and Countess of Matlock had returned to London the day before, conveying the Gardiners home. Lady Matlock was busy sealing Miss Bingley's fate in society.

"Charles Bingley and Miss Caroline Bingley of the Bingley family that owns Bingley Carriage Works in Scarborough." Toppin made the introduction as he had been instructed to by the mistress.

Everyone in the drawing room was amused, watching the woman attired in her signature burnt orange gown, looking as though she had dressed to attend the queen—not to travel—show signs of building fury at having her roots in trade be the first thing the people she wanted to impress heard. She did not know who these Collinses were, so she ignored them. Other than Richard, the rest of the Fitzwilliams had never deigned to be introduced to Miss Bingley.

"Miss Bingley, you seem upset," Lady Catherine noted in a saccharine-sweet voice. She turned to Mr. Bingley. "Did my nephew misinform me that you are still a partner in the carriage works your father and uncle founded?" Lady Catherine asked innocently. "If he did, I would be surprised, as William does not speak anything but the *truth*."

"Ahem, I mean yes, your Ladyship, your nephew's report was accurate." Bingley almost squeaked as he watched his sister's thunderous visage build.

"I had no knowledge my brother still sullied his hands with trade; you cannot hold that against me," Miss Bingley simpered and moved slightly away from him, as if that would distance her from the truth.

"Unlike you Miss Bingley, we judge people on character, not how they earn their money," Lady Catherine stated. Miss Bingley spluttered, not knowing how to react to such a statement.

"Hello Darcy; how are you," Bingley tried to change the subject.

“I understand congratulations are in order Mr. Bingley,” Lady Catherine baited her trap.

“For what your Ladyship?” Bingley responded in confusion. Miss Bingley seemed to be looking anywhere but at Lady Catherine.

‘*The old bat could not possibly know what I wrote to that bumpkin Jane Bennet!*’ Miss Bingley assured herself, relieved at the distance between Kent and Hertfordshire.

“It seems someone has claimed you have an understanding with my niece, *Miss* Georgiana Darcy,” Lady Catherine revealed.

“It is not true. I know not who would claim something so clearly a falsehood,” Bingley stated. He turned to Darcy for support, but the man was annoyingly inscrutable.

Miss Bingley began to feel the meeting might not be about the subject she had long dreamed of and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot as she tried to determine how best to change the subject. As they had not been invited to sit, there was nothing she and her brother could do but stand where they were.

“I could not have said that better myself Mr. Bingley,” Darcy spoke for the first time. “Who do you think would have been classless, grasping, and delusional enough to claim such a thing?” Darcy looked at Miss Bingley with a look of true disdain.

“Caroline, how could you?” Bingley turned to his sister. Even without Darcy’s pointed look, he knew she was the only one who might make such an outlandish claim.

Miss Bingley thought quickly and came up with an idea to move suspicion away from her. “It seems that fortune-hunting Miss Jane Bennet has spread lies about me. I broke off our friendship, as we are not from the same circles, and she must have suspected I stopped her from sinking her claws into my brother.”

“So, you are saying on your *honour* that you never made that claim about my niece and your brother in any form to anyone?” Lady Catherine sprung her trap.

“As a member of our circles, I would never do such your Ladyship. Anyone who says so is a liar and should be excised from society. I would never do anything to harm dear Georgiana’s reputation…” A chill ran down Miss Bingley’s spine as she heard a voice behind her.

“When, may I ask, did either my brother or I give you leave to address me by my familiar name? Do you think I ever believed your friendship was genuine? All you wanted was to recommend yourself to my brother,” Georgiana stated pointedly. “Then you had the temerity to attempt to blame something you did on people who have no motive to use my name thusly?”

“It was either the ‘I act all innocent’ Miss Jane Bennet or her loose sister Miss Eliza who spread the lie. Do you not know how they spread their favours around to the regiment quartered in Meryton, not only to the officers, but the enlisted men as well?” Miss Bingley spewed her vitriol as she continued to dig her hole deeper.

“What proof do you have to back up such vile accusations Miss Bingley?” Jane asked. The woman went white; both ladies she had just slandered were standing in Rosings Park’s drawing room.

She felt her only option was to attack. “I did not realise you and your brown-skinned sister Eliza had taken positions as maids here,” Miss Bingley sneered with false bravado.

“Us? We are guests here, and one of us will soon be the mistress of this estate,” Elizabeth informed the woman sweetly. “What estate did you live on as a child Miss Bingley?” Elizabeth paused as the woman’s face turned purple, a shade that clashed with her orange outfit. “I forgot that you are a tradesman’s daughter, and the only time you lived at an estate was your brief sojourn at Netherfield Park, your brother’s leased estate.”

Bingley looked from one Bennet to the other. Miss Elizabeth said one of them would soon be the mistress of Rosings Park; surely she could not mean his angel! Just then, his worst fears were confirmed when Richard Fitzwilliam stepped forward.

“Mr. and Miss Bingley, please meet my betrothed, Miss Jane Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire,” Richard said, proudly.

“How did this social-climbing fortune hunter sink her claws into you?” Miss Bingley asked, derisively.

“I see only one social-climbing fortune hunter here, Miss Bingley,” Lady Catherine said firmly. It was time to bring this to a close. “It is you, and you alone. You are a liar, have no fashion sense, and lack intelligence, rounding out the list nicely.”

“Charles, how can you allow that old woman to talk to me so?” Miss Bingley screeched.

While Miss Bingley was fuming, Jane handed Mr. Bingley the letters his sister had written. Miss Bingley realised what her brother held in his hand and tried to snatch them, but at a nod from Lady Catherine, a footman restrained the woman.

“Caroline, how could you stand here and lie, while making vile and unfounded accusations at the same time?” Bingley demanded.

“They are not at our level of society and that one,” she pointed a bony finger at Elizabeth, took *my* Mr. Darcy’s attention from me!”

“Are you insensible or merely delusional, in addition to all of the rest of your myriad faults,” Darcy stated angrily. He turned to Bingley in an accusatory fashion. “Do you mean to tell me in the more than a year since I told you I would *never* offer for *her*,” he pointed at a scandalised Miss Bingley, “even if she compromised me, you never told her?” Bingley hung his head in shame and shook it.

“Why *not* me? I am the ideal woman to be Mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House,” Miss Bingley shrieked.

“I would *never* marry one who I dislike like the plague, one who my sister cannot tolerate having in the same room? One who is so vulgar she talks about my wealth and her dowry at every opportunity? No Madam! If you were the last woman in the world, I still would not be with you, even if it meant the end of the human race!” Darcy spat out.

“You boast about your education at Miss Hathaway’s Seminary for Proper Young Ladies, yet you clearly learnt nothing there,” Lady Catherine drew the shrew’s attention. “If you had actually studied and not attended

merely to claim you were educated at a prestigious institution, you would know it is *birth* that sets the social order, *not wealth*!

"As amusing as this has been," Lady Catherine stated sarcastically, "it is time for you to go. I would suggest Scarborough or further. My sister, the Countess of Matlock, is in London making sure you will be *persona non grata* Miss Bingley. Your so-called friends, who kept you around for the entertainment you provided, will not receive you again; no one will. Let me warn you—if you attempt to use my nephew's name, or that of anyone in this family again—this will be nothing compared to what I will bring down on your head. The same warning applies should I hear of any spite directed at my *nieces*, the Bennet sisters." Lady Catherine nodded to the footman, who escorted the shell-shocked woman to her brother's coach to wait for him.

"Mr. Bingley, you looked shocked to hear I was betrothed. Did you think I would pine for the man who did not have enough backbone to follow his own inclinations?" Jane asked pointedly.

"B-but my sisters and Darcy told me you did not care for me," Bingley spluttered.

"So what? Did they lock you away so you could not try to discover the truth for yourself? Do not answer that, as it is immaterial," Jane directed. "When you abandoned me without a word, and never came to see me after I called on your sisters in London. At the time, I thought my heart was breaking. It was not. I learnt with time I never loved you; I was infatuated. I am now in love with a *man*, one who will do anything for me, as I would for him. One who does not require permission from anyone else to do what he believes is right for him—for us. Before you tell yourself it is because he is the master of Rosings Park, understand this; I would have married Richard no matter his prospects."

"Bingley, I was wrong to advise you on matters of the heart, but I was also wrong to allow our relationship to become that of father-son instead of equal friends. I can no longer be your *de facto* parent. If and when you grow up and take control of your life—including your sister—I would be happy to have you as a friend in an equal relationship. Until then, we must go our separate ways. This time, make sure your sister understands that not only will there be nothing between us, but she will not be admitted to any of my

homes or those of my family. If she dares approach any of us in society, she will receive the cut direct.” Darcy looked at Bingley with a measure of pity. “I wish you good luck, Mr. Bingley.”

Bingley turned without a further word. Once he joined his sister in their coach, he knocked on the ceiling with his cane. There was not a word spoken between brother and sister. She was in a state of shock, as all of her dreams and pretentions had turned to dust before her eyes; he was thinking, finally, about what he needed to do to take charge of his own life.

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Chapter 24

By the time they reached London, Miss Bingley decided she would soon prove that which she had been told would befall her in society was so much hot air. Brother and sister arrived at Curzon Street in time for dinner. Even though the servants were surprised to see them return on the same day they left, none of them showed it.

Miss Bingley dined without her brother, as he declared he wanted to be alone; he took his tray in his study. Charles Bingley knew he had much to consider. If he wanted to keep Darcy's friendship, he was aware he would have to make significant changes in his life.

Miss Bingley rose earlier than was her wont, intent on visiting some of *her* friends to prove she was correct that the old bat had spoken so much nonsense. She was told at every house she visited that no one was at home to her—despite seeing others of their acquaintance enter.

She dismissed it as immaterial, because those she attempted to visit were not the *best* of her friends. She took herself to Gunter's, where she was sure some of her other acquaintances would be found. Breathing a sigh of relief, she noticed Miss Jackson-Hamstead seated with two other ladies. Miss Bingley could not recall their names readily, as she had always considered them below her.

"My dear Wilamena, how I have longed to spend some time with you, it has been far too long!" Miss Bingley was struck speechless and said nothing further when Miss Jackson-Hamstead stood and glared at her, disdain written on her face.

"Come, ladies, suddenly there is a foul odour in this establishment," the lady said, picking up her reticule. All three turned their backs on a slack-jawed Caroline Bingley, giving her the cut direct in public.

What Caroline had not accepted, and had ignored, was the fact that the Countess of Matlock was in London—as Lady Catherine had warned her—and she had spread word about Miss Bingley's atrocious behaviour and lies. Lady Matlock had made it clear that Mr. Darcy had broken with Miss Bingley and would not recognise her ever again. Just as Lady Catherine had

informed her, Miss Bingley had become a *persona non grata* before she even returned to London.

Less sure of herself, she walked along Bond Street with her maid following behind her, passing but a few shops. Within twenty paces she was cut three more times; now she had no doubt of what had occurred. She was ruined in the eyes of the society of which she so desperately wanted to be a member. Miss Caroline Bingley turned tail and ran back to the waiting carriage, demanding to be returned to Curzon Street with all speed.

On arriving back at her brother's townhouse, Miss Bingley burst into his study without knocking. "Those despicable Bennet chits have ruined me!" she spat out, neither noticing nor caring her brother was meeting with his solicitor.

"Caroline, I am in a meeting, and I will not have you enter my study without knocking and being bade enter. That is the right only of my wife alone, to whom I would have been joined with happily but for you," Bingley stated flatly with an edge to his voice his sister had never heard before. He returned his attention to the solicitor. "Please excuse my sister's behaviour, Mr. Jakobe. If you will agree to wait in the parlour, I will have my housekeeper bring you some refreshments while I speak with my sister." Bingley pulled the bell cord and gave his housekeeper instructions, and the solicitor followed her out of the study.

"How dare you humiliate me so in front of…" Not for the first time that day, Miss Bingley was cut off.

"Shut up Caroline! I have allowed you free rein to manipulate me for far too long, but no more." Miss Bingley was about to interject; however, she closed her mouth when she saw the malevolent look her brother directed at her. "I assume you did not have a good day in society today. Let me guess —no one was at home to you, so you attempted to approach some of your so-called friends in public and were cut?"

Miss Bingley gave a sullen nod. "It is all the Bennets'…" she tried again to repeat her nonsensical claim, and she was once again cut off.

"Did the Miss Bennets force you to lie about Miss Darcy? Did they cause your delusions about Darcy and your position in society? Did they

make you behave in a reprehensible way that makes no one want to be around you?" Bingley asked pointedly.

Miss Bingley was seething, but also confused. This was not the brother she could manipulate as she previously had, even as she had yesterday morning. There was steel in his look and his back was ramrod straight.

Unfortunately for Miss Bingley, her brother had taken the time since their return from Kent to look at himself, and he did not like what he saw. He decided to take his life into his own hands, to accept responsibility for his own actions, and to stop relying on others, namely Darcy—to make decisions for him. Given Darcy's final words of warning, he knew he had to start by taking his sister in hand.

"Caroline, you walk around with your nose in the air like royalty, yet you are the daughter of a tradesman," Bingley pointed out. "Socially, we are below *all* landed gentlefolk, *including* the Bennets. Your dowry, education, and your pretentions change none of that. The *only* reason we were accepted into some higher society was due to Darcy's patronage, and that is ours no more."

"What are we to do?" the dejected woman asked.

"Mr. Jakobe will find someone to lease this house, and we will move back to Scarborough. Be forewarned, I will no longer cover any of your overspending. You will live within your allowance. I am of a good mind to make you pay for most, if not all, of your extravagant spending before we travelled to Kent; to my chagrin, I did not put my foot down before this." Bingley paused to look his sister in the eye so she could not mistake his resolve. "As long as you live with me you *will* obey the rules of my house, which includes treating *all* others with kindness and respect—including our servants!"

Miss Bingley's face had a pinched look; she wanted to object, but for once controlled her sharp tongue. She simply nodded.

"If you flout my rules, I will have Jakobe release your dowry to you, after which you will live in your own establishment and I will not assist you financially at all. I suggest you find a husband at our level of society, or if anyone will have you, to a member of the third circles like Hurst. Your time

of living in a delusion is over. Do you understand me Caroline?" Bingley waited for his sister to react.

"Yes Brother, I do. What time do you require me to be ready to depart in the morning?" Miss Bingley was keen to escape from London. She never again wanted to suffer the humiliation she had that day.

"We will break our fast at eight and be on the road no later than nine. As you demonstrated the day we travelled into Kent, you are able to rise early when you choose to," Bingley informed his sister. She nodded, then left his study without further response to supervise her packing.

The following morning, Miss Bingley was in the dining parlour at the specified time. Brother and sister departed Curzon Street ten minutes before the time Bingley had set for departure.

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"How is your mother?" Lady Catherine asked.

"She is as comfortable as can be expected, given her situation," Elizabeth reported. "It is understandable that there are times when she gets frustrated by her limitations. Papa has been very good with her; he still spends most of his time in her chambers."

"Your father is learning the lesson I learned much too late," Lady Catherine said wistfully as she looked to the heavens. "You do not appreciate what you have until it is no longer there. I loved my Anne, but I treated her more as a possession than a beloved daughter. My Lewis was always good to me, which I saw only after he was gone."

"At least Papa has some time left with Mama," Jane opined. "Yes, she is infirm, but there is no mistaking the love and caring Papa has demonstrated since Mama was stricken."

"You have the right of it Jane," Lady Catherine agreed. "I would have given anything for more time with Lewis and Anne. Enough maudlin thoughts! Where are my nephews and other nieces?"

"Richard and William are visiting tenants this morning. Mary is at the parsonage enjoying some richly deserved time alone with our brother. The three youngest girls are having lessons with Mrs. Annesley.
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“It is less than a month until you marry, Jane. What are your plans to shop for your wedding gown and trousseau?” Lady Catherine enquired.

“How can I go to Town and shop when Mama is lying in bed?” Jane lamented. “Mr. Burnett ruled out the bath chair for the same reason she should not be in a carriage. I just do not know if this is the appropriate time to travel to London.”

“Jane, your feelings do you credit, but they are fallacious,” Lady Catherine told the eldest Bennet.

“How so Aunt Cat?” Jane asked. Like all of her sisters Jane had finally begun to use the shortened version of Lady Catherine’s name.

“If your mother were able to speak as she used to before her apoplexy, is there anything that would convince her to tell you not to shop for your wedding gown and trousseau, other than the death of a close family member?” Lady Catherine challenged.

Jane cogitated for a little while. “No, I dare say she would not. I will ask her. She is getting better at communicating her needs,” Jane decided. She turned to Elizabeth, “You will accompany me to Town, will you not Lizzy?”

“For you, Jane dearest, of course I will. Where will we stay?” I am sure Uncle and Aunt Gardiner would be happy to have us stay with them,” Elizabeth opined.

“Richard’s mother was hoping you would stay at Matlock House so she can spend some more time getting to know you Jane,” Lady Catherine informed them.

“Lizzy, you will not be intimidated being hosted in the house of an earl and countess would you?” Jane teased her sister, well knowing how false her joke was.

“You know me Janie, my courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me,” Elizabeth returned her sisters jest. “If Aunt Elaine has invited us, I would be happy to reside there while we are in London. Aunt Maddie will understand, I am sure.”

“You will be able to see your Aunt and Uncle Gardiner,” Lady Catherine relayed. “Elaine will invite them to dinner at least once while you

are there; in fact, they have dined at one another’s houses since returning to London. Unless there are pressing needs at home, I would wager that your Aunt Maddie will join your shopping party. I would recommend you go to your Uncle’s warehouse before your appointment at the modiste. That way you can select bolts of fabric that have not been seen by anyone in Town yet.”

“You took the words out of my mouth,” Elizabeth informed her aunt. “Should we go talk to Mama?” Jane nodded.

The two sisters each kissed lady Catherine on the cheek and then proceeded to their mother’s chambers.

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Hattie Phillips was a fixture at her sister’s side. Other than to sleep and for her personal hygiene, Fanny’s eldest sibling had refused to move from her position next to her sister’s bed. She read to her sister, fed her, and did anything else Fanny needed.

The decision of the Gardiners to wait for the Phillipses to arrive before they departed had been an excellent one. With the support of her husband, the Gardiners, her nieces, and Lady Catherine, Hattie had been prepared to see her sister.

As anticipated, her initial reaction when informed what had befallen Fanny was extreme. There had been wailing and an almost-swoon, but after a half hour with Lady Catherine, Hattie Phillips pulled herself together, straightened her back, and decided she was here for her sister. It was not about her sadness but helping her stricken sister.

Her reaction on seeing Fanny was muted compared to what it would have been without being as prepared as she was. That first visit, she had been accompanied by her sister Maddie, Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary.

Since then, Hattie had been a balm to her sister, and there was nothing that was to be done for Fanny that she did not do herself. If her husband had not put his foot down, she would have tried to remain with her sister four and twenty hours per day.

Frank, Hattie's husband, sat with Bennet for an hour or two each day to discuss the legal issues that needed to be dealt with during Bennet's absence
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from Longbourn. An express had arrived from Pemberley indicating Mr. Brandson's acceptance of the post of steward of Longbourn.

Phillips took copious notes each day, so when he met with his brother's new steward he would be able to pass on information in the absence of the master. The brothers had discussed how difficult it would be for his wife when the Phillipses had to return to Meryton in a few days.

"Jane and Lizzy, it is good to see you again so soon," Bennet welcomed his two eldest back to their mother's chambers after his brother's departure. "You just missed the youngest three. Gigi played the upright while Kitty showed your mother some new sketches she is making, and Lydia lay next to my Fanny talking to her."

Lady Catherine had some footmen move an upright pianoforte into Fanny's chambers. It had been gathering dust in Mrs. Jenkinson's old room, just off of the late Anne de Bourgh's suite. It had been cleaned until it shone like new, moved, and then tuned.

When Fanny desired it, either Elizabeth, Mary, or Gigi would play soft music for her. Lydia started learning from Gigi, but so far she had only mastered her scales. She looked forward to the day she could surprise her mother by playing a basic tune.

Lydia's misadventure had not been mentioned in company since the Phillipses arrival. Even though she was sure her Aunt Hattie would not spread word abroad of her near ruin in Brighton, Lydia was pleased the tale had not been told to her mother's sister.

"We need to ask Mama about Jane travelling to London to shop for her clothing needs," Elizabeth informed their father. "Do you think it will upset her if we go?"

"Not nearly as much as if you did not go. When we spoke last night, she made it clear to me that she wanted life to carry on—she would agree Jane needs to shop for her trousseau and wedding gown. I dislike discussing lace, but I know what will be needed before Jane marries Richard," Bennet assured his daughters.

Lydia had an ingenious suggestion. She wrote all of the letters on a large slate as well as a goodly number of commonly used words and phrases on

another. Fanny Bennet was given a shortened stick such as gardeners would use to support a plant, and she would point at a word or letters. If all else failed, she had her own slate on which to write. Due to Lydia's brilliant idea, Bennet announced to one and all he no longer had *any* silly daughters.

The system had proven most effective and had eradicated much of the frustration Fanny had due to being unable to communicate normally.

With her eldest nieces attending their mother, Hattie Phillips made for her chambers to take a short rest. Jane and Elizabeth sat on the bed near their mother, each holding one of Lydia's slates. "Mama, would you object if Lizzy and I travelled to London for less than a sennight to find a wedding gown and to order my trousseau?" Jane asked.

Fanny pointed first to '*No'*, then to '*of course not'*. "Are you sure Mama? If you want I will remain here to be with you," Elizabeth offered.

'No, you go too', Fanny pointed to with her stick. Then she pointed to the one Jane was holding with the letters. '*A-s-k M-a-d-d-i-e b-e-s-t f-a-b-r-i-c'*.

"Yes, Mama, I will go to Uncle Edward's warehouse before I go to the modiste. Aunt Cat reminded me we will be able to find fabric no other has seen before," Jane told her mother. Fanny's head moved vigorously which by now they knew was her way of nodding agreement. Jane wanted to tell her mother how much she wished she was well enough to join the expedition to London, but she refrained, not wanting to occasion her mother more pain, having to think about one more thing she was unable to do.

'*Where you stay'*? Fanny pointed to words on the slate her second daughter held.

"We have been invited to stay at Matlock House Mama," Elizabeth informed her mother. "Richard's parents' house."

'*Good tired now'*, Fanny indicated. Both of her older daughters kissed her cheek, then their father's, and made their way back to the drawing room to plan for their journey to London. Per their father's instruction, they did not inform Aunt Hattie they were no longer with their mother, allowing her some well-earned rest.

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When the two sisters entered the drawing room, both Richard and Darcy had returned and were talking to Lady Catherine. Based on the melodic tones emanating from the music room, the three younger girls were there.

As soon as Jane spied her betrothed she lit up with pleasure, as did he on seeing her. Elizabeth blushed lightly at the intense approving stare she received from William. Jane sat next to Richard after greeting him, while Elizabeth sat next to her sister, opposite William.

The sisters informed Lady Catherine of their mother's agreement with their plan to go to London. "I will send a note to my sister. When will you depart?" Lady Catherine asked.

"Lizzy, as today is Friday, what say you to Monday?" Jane asked.

"I am at your disposal Sister; I have no prior engagements," Elizbeth agreed.

"As much as I wish to accompany you both, I am in the middle of the spring planting," a disappointed Richard informed his ladylove.

"Richard," Darcy called his cousin's attention to himself. "We are at the end of the process. If you choose to, you could make the trip without any negative consequences." Both Jane and Richard were happy at Darcy's statement.

Marie entered the drawing room after spending some time with little Reggie. "Andrew and I need to return to London for a few days; we would be more than happy to convey you two to London. I will be available to assist my soon-to-be sister with her shopping," Marie offered.

"They will be going to the same house as you," Lady Catherine informed her niece.

"You will be staying at Matlock House? How much fun—the more the merrier," Marie gushed.

As the Bennet ladies stood to leave the drawing room, Darcy called Elizabeth aside. "Elizabeth, do you intend to walk your favourite route tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes, William I do," Elizabeth averred. "Why do you ask?"

“Would you object if I walk with you?” he asked, hopefully.

“You will hear no objection from me,” Elizabeth replied. She then turned to Lady Catherine. “Who will escort me on the morrow?”

“Jeffers will be ready for you when you depart,” Lady Catherine informed them. The pleasant footman was Elizabeth’s escort when he did not have other duties to perform.

As far as Darcy was concerned, her verifying her escort so as to avoid any possible impropriety elevated her in his mind. Before this, he could not imagine Elizabeth could rise any higher in his estimation, but now she had reached the pinnacle of his approbation.

Jane and Elizabeth collected the three younger girls, then the five walked toward the parsonage to have tea with Mary and William Bennet.

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Chapter 25

A few minutes after sunrise, Elizabeth, accompanied by the footman, waited for her walking partner to arrive. She did not have to wait for long. “I apologise for being tardy,” Darcy gave a half bow.

“Seeing as I did not have to wait for you for more than a minute, I find there is nothing to forgive; I do not consider you tardy,” Elizabeth granted.

“In my mind, I should have been waiting for you, not the other way around,” Darcy insisted.

“If there is reason to do so, you are forgiven. Shall we?” Elizabeth led off and Darcy offered her his arm. She placed her delicate hand lightly on his forearm causing a fission of pleasure to shoot up his arm and into his chest.

Darcy was certain his walking partner was the only woman he would ever want to marry. There was no doubt he loved her, and he was sure, given his marked attentions to her since his arriving in Kent, she would be expecting him to pay his addresses.

He was confident there would be an opportunity on their walk to propose. He knew from the times he had met her walking in the morning that the glade was a favourite spot of hers. Yes, that would be the perfect spot to declare his love and become betrothed to *his* Elizabeth.

As she walked, Elizabeth surreptitiously stole glances at the man who had offered her his arm. Yes, he was no longer insufferable, and yes, she did enjoy his company. She appreciated that he treated her as an equal when they debated and was not in any way condescending.

She was just starting to know the real William, and could imagine tender feelings developing for him, but she needed to know him better first. She had accepted that he admired her, and now she was beginning to admire him.

He was loyal; he treated Gigi as well as, if not better than, any brother could. She was aware his pride had allowed him to overlook the faults in Gigi’s former companion and he still berated himself for that lapse to this

day. It had impressed her when the Gardiners were in residence how respectfully he interacted with them.

Elizabeth had not missed his surprise at the gentility of her aunt and uncle. She was sure he had expected Uncle Edward to be a male version of his sisters.

Since her arrival, Aunt Hattie had been subdued, given her sister's health. To Elizabeth's relief, her aunt had not indulged in gossip, there had been no vulgar effusions, and she had been calmer than was her wont in Meryton.

Upon further consideration, she realised not even Lydia's near ruin had caused William to revert to the haughty, disdainful, and insufferable man he had been in Meryton. He had tried to take the blame for Lydia's actions onto himself. It was one of his faults; he tried to assume responsibility for that which was not his.

There was much to admire about the man, but she did not have tender feelings for him quite yet. There were perhaps the beginnings of them, so she hoped she would have the time to sketch his character correctly.

Elizabeth realised in that moment if he were to offer a courtship she would accept gladly. She was reasonably confident that, given more time in his company, her feelings would develop until she came to love him. That thought brought her pleasure.

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"Richard, did I hear Frank Phillips saying he must return to Meryton to take care of his law practice?" Lady Catherine asked as the two sat in the master's study, going over the schedule for the coming week.

"You did. You miss nothing. Although he knows his wife would like to stay with her sister, he feels their return cannot be delayed any longer. He has taken on a clerk, but the man is not yet ready to do the more complex work needing to be completed," Richard informed his aunt.

"I will issue an invitation for Hattie to remain as long as she wishes; hopefully she will, unless her husband requires his wife to travel home with him," Lady Catherine decided. "Her comfort is a balm to Fanny, so there is no question of her departing unless she desires it."
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“William hopes to be the recipient of our best wishes for the future when he and Lizzy return from their walk,” Richard observed.

“Is that boy finally going to request a courtship?” Lady Catherine asked.

“Courtship, no; he intends to propose.” Richard’s confusion was plain to read when he saw the look of dismay on his aunt’s face.

“Elizabeth is not ready to hear a proposal from him! Based on what she has told me she wants to get to know him better,” Lady Catherine related. “I am sure *he* is in love with *her*, but she is only getting to know him and will not accept a proposal if she feels she is not ready. I am afraid William will assume her feelings equal his. We will see what his demeanour is when he returns from their walk.”

“William, I hope you control your anger if she refuses you,” Richard beseeched, eyes towards the heavens.

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“Would you like to sit on the bench in the glade?” Darcy asked hopefully.

“Yes, I think I would enjoy that,” Elizabeth responded as they branched off the main pathway onto the one that led to the glade.

It was already a warm day with nary a cloud in sight, but the glade was cooler from the shelter the trees ringing it provided. The pond in the centre of the glade was not large, and the sounds of frogs and toads could be heard along with the hum of insects. A little breeze caused the leaves on the highest branches to sway gently, but at ground level very little air movement could be felt.

The wildflowers were plentiful and in full bloom, making a carpet of riotous colour. There were two benches in the glade, one near where the path entered the peaceful, verdant area, and the other on the opposite side of the pond.

Darcy led Elizabeth to the farthest bench to create some distance from the footman, who remained at the end of the path. The servant would be able to see them at all times but would not be able to hear unless one of them raised his or her voice.
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“Jeffers,” Elizabeth addressed the footman. “There is no need for you to stand the whole time; there is a perfectly good bench near you.”

“Thanks ya, Miss,” the footman returned as he made for the bench and took a seat.

“It is so beautiful here,” Elizabeth sighed as her arm swept from left to right in front of her, indicating the area. “Nature has been given free rein, and no one has imposed the awkward tastes of man on this wonderful place.”

“Anne used to love this glade,” Darcy remembered. “She would drive her phaeton to the beginning of the path that leads here, walk the short distance, and then she would sit and drink in the beauty of the place. She was usually accompanied by Mrs. Jenkinson—her former companion—or her father, or sometimes both. One time she told me she was never more at peace than she was when she sat and ruminated here.”

“It has been more than six years since your cousin and uncle were taken, has it not?” Elizabeth verified.

“It will be seven years in July,” Darcy confirmed. “As much as I miss my cousin and uncle, it is the future I would like to discuss, not the past.”

“What is it you would like to discuss?” Elizabeth asked, her head cocked to one side as a beam of early-morning sunlight shone behind her head creating the effect of a halo of light.

Darcy paced back and forth for a minute or so. Elizabeth had learnt that rather than a sign of disdain, as she had thought it to be in Hertfordshire, she knew it was what he did when he was considering a weighty issue.

“It will not do, in vain I have struggled, my feelings will not be repressed. I must tell you how ardently I love and admire you,” Darcy began, forgetting to get down on one knee as he intended. “When I thought you below me, your connections non-existent and the behaviour of your family, except for you, Jane, and Mary of course, was unacceptable, I fought against my inclination, thinking an alliance with you would be a degradation to the Darcy name and my family.”

Darcy was so intent on making his speech that he did not notice the look of dismay on Elizabeth’s face. She was wondering how he expected to

request a courtship after telling her how unsuitable he had thought her to be.

“After my family humbled me at Christmastide, I came to realise many of my former scruples were fallacious. When I look back on my former behaviour, I cannot but view it with abhorrence.” Darcy paused as he walked back and forth some more.

He stopped in front of the object of his desire. “Having found all of my former arguments to be specious, I came to acknowledge there was nothing about you or your family which is objectionable. After meeting the Gardiners here at Rosings, I could not but own they are among the most genteel persons I know.”

“William, I am still not sure where all of this is going,” a confused Elizabeth told Darcy. “You are saying a lot and not asking anything, if that was indeed your intent to do so.”

“It is so much easier for me to order my thoughts when I write. When I speak—unless I have rehearsed at length what I mean to say—what I am attempting to say will often times come out all wrong as I become disconcerted. An example was my reaction to Bingley at the assembly when I was attempting to stop him from trying to coerce me into dancing. Instead, I insulted you,” Darcy explained.

“Just speak plainly,” Elizabeth prompted.

“What I have been attempting to do was ask for your hand in marriage. Elizabeth will you honour me and be my wife?” Darcy asked, relieved and pleased he had finally managed to ask the question uppermost in his mind.

Elizabeth gasped. Marriage! She was not ready to make that commitment! Darcy, hearing her gasp thought it was in response to the pleasure and honour of his proposing to her.

“You have bestowed a great honour on me, but I am sorry, I am not ready to become betrothed to you,” Elizabeth said gently. “It was a different question I was hoping for.”

All Darcy heard was that she was refusing him, the second half of her statement was lost to him. “Is this all the answer I can expect as you reject me out of hand?” Darcy asked, as he allowed his anger to rule. Before he

said something he would truly regret, Darcy turned on his heel and stormed off without so much as a by-your-leave.

Elizabeth was stunned. She was willing to enter into a courtship with William, but how could she when he was not willing to listen to her words? Would he ignore her opinions and show her no respect? One thing Elizabeth knew is she did not want a marriage such as the one her parents used to have; she wanted a partnership.

She stood, in a daze, and with the footman trailing behind her, Elizabeth began the walk back to the manor house. She noticed that the sky had begun to darken as heavy clouds were scudding across the sky.

The change in weather represented the change she felt in her mood.

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Darcy walked like a man possessed; he neither knew nor cared in what direction. He did not see that the weather had changed, the wind increasing and dark grey clouds invading the formerly blue sky. Before he knew where he was, he was at the folly on a hill overlooking Rosings Park, a replica of a small Greek temple his late uncle had built for Anne.

By the time he arrived at the folly, his anger had abated to a degree; it was replaced by shame. Elizabeth had been trying to say something to him, and what had he done? He had turned and run away like a petulant child who had been told he was not allowed to play with his favourite toy.

What must she think of him? Had he just destroyed any chance he had of winning her hand? He made circuits of the folly trying to regulate himself. After ten minutes he was no less confused as to what his next step —if any—should be, so he sat down with his back against the wall of the structure, his head in his hands as despair fell on him.

Without warning, the sky opened and rain poured down with such force it seemed to fall horizontally. Earlier, he noticed there were few clouds in the sky, but in his distraction, he had not noticed the changing weather. Darcy barely reacted; the weather was merely a reflection of his mood. Given the angle at which the rain was falling, he was not well protected and was becoming soaked, but he did not care; it was no less than he deserved, after all.
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All he hoped was that Elizabeth had been able to return to the house before the heavens opened.

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Lady Catherine visited Fanny before she went to break her fast. She found Hattie feeding her sister with Mrs. Hill's assistance, and Bennet was with Mr. Hill preparing for the day. As agreed, Frank Phillips met his wife in Fanny's bedchamber.

"Hattie, I need to return to Meryton. I am sorry, but there is much I need to take care of, so I pray you will understand," Phillips relayed to his wife.

"I do understand, but I am loathe to leave Fanny's side," Hattie stated as she held onto her sister's right hand.

"That is why I am here. In my capacity of mistress of this estate—as temporary as the title now is—it is my pleasure to invite you to remain at Rosings for as long as you choose," Lady Catherine explained.

"Frank, you do not object if I remain with Fanny, do you?" Hattie asked hopefully.

"Not at all," Phillips assured his wife. "I need to get Longbourn's new steward situated, and there are a few matters Gregson does not have the experience to deal with. As soon as I have completed all I need to do, I will return. Fitzwilliam and Lady Catherine have assured me that, like you, I am welcome any time. Remember, the Gardiners will return with their children in a sennight."

"Thank you Catherine, for inviting me, and Frank for agreeing to spare me," Hattie said appreciatively. She felt Fanny squeeze her hand and give her half smile, indicating her pleasure at not being deprived of her sister's company.

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Elizabeth looked at the change in the weather as she walked briskly back to the manor house. She hoped she and Jeffers would gain the house before the skies opened up. '*Insufferable man! I was right about him; he has not changed,*' Elizabeth told herself, then she checked her emotions.

‘*No, that is a prevarication. He has changed and is not the same man I disliked so intensely in Hertfordshire. Did he not tell me how he can become flustered when he tries to speak if he had not practised or made notes to assist him? Assumptions were the problem when we first met; I cannot make that same error again. When he returns, we must speak. I hope he is sheltered from the hard rain!*’

When Elizabeth entered the breakfast parlour, Lady Catherine saw that her equanimity had been disturbed. “Elizabeth, be a dear and accompany me to my study. I would like to show you something.”

Richard and Jane were intent on talking to each other between bites of their fast-cooling meal, so they hardly noticed. Kitty, Gigi, and Lydia looked up from their plates, but soon lost interest in whatever Lady Catherine and Elizabeth were up to, while Mrs. Annesley sat across from them eating quietly.

“What happened Elizabeth, if you do not mind my asking?” Lady Catherine asked after she closed her study door. “Did William do something to upset you?”

“Yes—no—yes!” Elizabeth stammered.

“Are you willing to share what happened with me?” Lady Catherine requested.

“It was such a pleasant walk, and we ended up sitting on one of the benches in Anne’s glade, and then he *proposed*! I refused him as I do not know him—the true him—well enough as yet. I tried to tell him it was not the question I had expected, but he stormed off before I had a chance to explain,” Elizabeth related.

“It is as I feared. William has had, for some time now, the deepest feelings for you,” Lady Catherine stated. “He assumed your feelings equalled his. Will you allow me to talk to him about this? Not on your behalf—you and he need to have that conversation—but to try to help him understand he needs to talk to you and truly *listen* rather than be ruled by his desires alone.”

“I almost slipped into my old way of thinking about him, but thank goodness I caught myself,” Elizabeth answered. “Yes, you may talk to him

on the subject. I do care for him, but I am not in love with him yet, and I will not marry without *mutual* love and respect."

"Well I know that. Let us return to the breakfast parlour. You have yet to break your fast, am I correct?" Lady Catherine surmised. Elizabeth nodded.

The two were about to re-enter the breakfast parlour when Darcy, soaked from head to toe, arrived in the hall. The butler was trying to dry what he was able as the man came to an abrupt halt, suddenly facing both his aunt and the woman who owned his heart as he stood in a pool of water.

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Chapter 26

Elizabeth and Darcy stared at one another, neither knowing what to say. Before the silence became uncomfortable, Lady Catherine took charge. “William, you look a sight,” she stated, breaking the tension. “Go have a warm bath, change, and then seek me out.”

“Yes Aunt Cat,” Darcy responded, relieved that he was not the one who had to break the silence first. “Did you make it back before the rain Elizabeth?”

“I did. Thank you for asking.” Both knew their conversation was stilted, and both hoped they would soon be able to move past the awkwardness.

“William, why are you soaked?” Georgiana asked as she, Kitty, and Lydia were departing the breakfast parlour.

“It is what happens when one is caught in a sudden downpour Gigi,” Darcy replied drolly. “You should try it sometime,” he jested.

“Very droll William,” Georgiana remarked as she joined the two youngest Bennets on their way up to see their mother.

“Off you go,” Lady Catherine shooed her nephew. “At this rate, you will leave more water in the entrance hall than will be in your bath.”

“*Yes* Aunt Cat. I will see you both later,” Darcy stated, leaving a trail of water on the marble floor and up the grand staircase. He was thankful Richard had not finished his meal yet, as the teasing from that quarter would have been merciless.

“Please notify Mrs. Toppin there is some water to dry up before someone slips in it,” Lady Catherine addressed the nearest footman, who gave a bow and left to deliver the mistress’s message to the housekeeper.

Lady Catherine and Elizabeth proceeded into the breakfast parlour.

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“Sit,” Lady Catherine instructed as her nephew entered her study freshly bathed, shaved, and wearing dry clothes.
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“You wanted to see me?” Darcy asked, even though he knew the answer, and why his aunt wanted to talk to him.

“Do you think that we all think and feel the same way?” Lady Catherine began.

“Of course not,” Darcy returned with a quizzical look.

“Then why did you assume Elizabeth would be at the same point you are?” Lady Catherine asked pointedly. “It was not many months ago she thought you insufferable, haughty, proud, and disdainful of anyone you deemed lower than yourself. Need I go on?”

“No Aunt, I think I understand what you are saying,” Darcy said as he hung his head.

“It would take a blind man not to be able to see that Elizabeth has changed her thinking about you, but this is all new for her; that is not so for you,” Lady Catherine explained.

“I was so hurt when she refused me, I did not listen,” Darcy related with shame.

“Did she just reject you, or did she also try and tell you something else?”

“The latter, but all I heard was she would not accept me. And what did I do? I stormed off without listening to her. Will I never learn?”

“You are eight and twenty, by no means an old man; however, the formation of your character was the work of many years while your desire to change has been of much shorter duration. It will take time,” Lady Catherine soothed her nephew.

“If she will hear me, I would like to talk to Elizabeth,” Darcy stated with a little hope.

“It is my belief she would like nothing more than to remove this latest misunderstanding between you. But, William,” Darcy looked up and met his aunt’s eyes, “listen to her. Truly *hear* what she tells you, rather than filter her words through your interpretation of what you expect her to say.”

“And stop thinking because I feel one way others do as well?” Darcy offered.

“You see William, you are not too old to learn,” Lady Catherine teased her surrogate son.

“I obviously have your blessing to proceed,” Darcy observed.

“Even were Jane not betrothed to Richard, I could not imagine anyone of good sense objecting to Lizzy. You do not need my blessing William; you are a big, tall fellow and your own man,” Lady Catherine stated lovingly. “You have seen how I esteem the Bennet sisters, so you must know how I feel.”

“I would like your blessing, all the same,” Darcy stated warmly. His conversation with his aunt had him feeling much better as he now believed there was still hope for him and Elizabeth.

“Then you have it. Go to it,” Lady Catherine said with motherly affection.

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Darcy waited in the drawing room until Elizabeth returned from visiting her parents and Aunt in her mother’s bedchamber. When she and Jane entered, the three younger ladies quit the room for the music room.

“Elizabeth, may I talk with you?” Darcy asked, tentatively. His aunt had told him Elizabeth was amenable to speak with him, but until he heard it from her, he would feel some trepidation.

“Yes, I would like that,” Elizabeth returned in a friendly tone, which put Darcy at ease.

“Mrs. Annesley, please accompany my niece and nephew to the parlour opposite. I will remain here with Jane and Richard until you three return,” Lady Catherine instructed.

“And here I thought you would leave us alone,” Richard jested saucily, earning him a light slap on the arm from his betrothed and his aunt’s gimlet eye.
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Mrs. Annesley found a chair as far from the couple as possible so she could not hear what they said. The two principals sat on opposite ends of a settee on the other side of the room.

“I need to apologise for childishly walking away without listening to what you were trying to say to me,” Darcy opened. “Try as I may, I still revert back to my old way of expecting everyone to grant what I wish, without taking their desires into account.”

“You are not the only one who needs to apologise for falling back into old attitudes,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “I think rather than each of us trying to argue over who was more at fault, let us move forward rather than living in the past. For my part you are forgiven in full measure.”

“Not being sure you have anything for which to beg my pardon, I give it none the less,” Darcy allowed. “Aunt Cat pointed out that I have always had a tendency to assume if I feel strongly about something, or someone, as in this case, the other person’s feelings must match my own.”

“William, let me speak plainly.” Darcy nodded. “I am attracted to you. In fact, I may be starting to develop warm feelings for you, but that does not mean I am ready to accept a proposal of marriage from you quite yet,” Elizabeth explained. “Like Jane, I swore I would only marry for the deepest of love, regardless of rank, connections, or wealth. We grew up in a house where we were subjected to daily examples of the evils in a match of unequal affections, one devoid of respect. It is sad that only now, after my mother has been stricken with an apoplexy, we finally see there is affection between them.” After a moment Elizabeth added, “If only they had treated each other this way when Mama was healthy!” It was a wistful wish, as Elizabeth knew there was no way to correct the errors of the past.

“On the other hand, I grew up seeing the depth of love and respect my parents had one for the other, and I still ended up being the man you despised in Meryton,” Darcy stated contritely.

“Did we not agree to move forward?” Elizabeth asked archly.

“Yes, we most certainly did,” Darcy acknowledged.

“In that case, let us concentrate on today and on the future. Do you want to hear what I tried to say after I told you I could not accept a betrothal

yet?" Elizabeth asked one eyebrow arched.

"Please," was Darcy's succinct reply.

"What you did not hear was the following: I would have gone on to say although I was not ready to accept a proposal *today*, there was another question I was expecting you to ask," Elizabeth informed Darcy. "In fact, I was *hoping* you would ask *that* question."

"Are you telling me that you are willing to enter into a courtship with me?" Darcy asked. His heart sped up. He felt the staccato in his chest and the sound of his rapidly beating heart in his ears.

"As the man, you must ask the question before I may answer it," Elizabeth teased. How he enjoyed being teased by this impertinent woman he loved beyond all reason.

"Elizabeth Rose Bennet, will you do me the honour of entering into an official courtship with me?" Darcy asked. How she enjoyed the sonorous sound of his deep baritone voice. It did not hurt that he was the most handsome man Elizabeth knew.

"Most certainly yes. That is *exactly* what I would like so I can get to know you better," Elizabeth replied happily.

Darcy took each of her dainty hands in his large ones, turned them over, and bestowed a kiss on the underside of each wrist, his lips lingering over each one for longer than strict propriety would allow. Even better, Elizabeth did not seem to object to his taking such a liberty. Now it was Elizabeth's turn to experience a racing heart, as the pleasurable sensation of his kisses caused her to draw in a deep breath.

"As your father is in residence, I will go see him to ask his consent for our courtship," Darcy stated, almost giddily. '*If I had not rushed things this morning, I would have known this joy for some hours already,*' Darcy admonished himself. '*I never thought I would attain this level of happiness again; she is my world.*'

"Let me accompany you, as my father may have questions for me. That way we will be able to give my mother joy at the same time," Elizabeth stated.

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When Elizabeth and Darcy entered her mother's bedchamber, they were not surprised to see Lady Catherine, Andrew and Marie, Jane and Richard, and the younger girls had decided it was time to visit Mrs. Bennet as well.

"Bennet, may we have a word in *private*?" Darcy requested.

"Yes, you may court my second daughter," Bennet granted. There was no mistaking the look of joy which suffused both of their faces when they heard his words. Lady Catherine had apprised Bennet of the morning's happenings, and it was obvious Darcy finally had asked the question his Lizzy was expecting.

"Thank you, Papa," Elizabeth threw her arms around her father's neck and kissed his cheek. Darcy approached after Elizabeth went to her mother's bedside after receiving the well wishes of those assembled.

"If you kiss me, I will call you out," Bennet admonished Darcy in jest—mostly in jest.

With a wide grin on his face, Darcy extended his hand to the man he hoped would become his father-in-law. Darcy took Bennet's hand and lifted it towards his lips. The action, combined with the look of horror on Bennet's face, led to a round of raucous laughter.

Bennet was usually the one making sport of others, so becoming the butt of a joke was new to him, but he found he could not repine it. It seemed his Lizzy had met her true match. Who would have thought so after the ignominious beginning between the two in Hertfordshire?

Darcy joined Elizabeth at her mother's side, after being waylaid by his hopefully soon-to-be Aunt Phillips. After wishing their brother and sister joy, Gigi and Lydia held up the big slate with all the words on it. There was a sentence prepared which Fanny pointed to: '*I am very happy for you both.*'

"Thank you Mama," Elizabeth said, squeezing her mother's right hand.

"I look forward to being allowed to call you Mother Bennet, as my undeserving cousin Richard does," Darcy ribbed.
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Fanny pointed to two words on the slate being held by the girls. '*Can*' and '*Now*'. Now, they all understood why Fanny seemed so happy at that moment.

"It seems you asked the correct question this time William," Jane teased after she congratulated him. "If you ever hurt my sister, you will have me to contend with."

"Is no one here unaware of my humiliating behaviour this morning?" Darcy asked.

There was a chorus of "no," and Fanny jabbed at the word '*no*' on the slate as she made a sound everyone recognised as laughter. Darcy just shook his head.

"Buck up William," Lady Catherine said softly near her nephew's ear so only he could hear her, "it could have been worse—she could have refused you again."

Darcy did not even want to imagine the depths of his despair if she had done so. He thanked God he did not need to know such pain. "I have a suggestion," Darcy announced.

"What is it?" Lady Catherine asked.

"Jane and Elizabeth are to London on Monday, are they not?" he asked. That was quickly verified as fact. "Might I join the trip with Kitty, Gigi, and Lydia? That is, if Aunt Cat will be my hostess," Darcy stated. "If you come, Aunt Cat, then Richard may as well. Before you object, Richard, the planting is all but over so you could choose to do so."

"In that case, I will consult with my steward, and if all is well," Richard responded looking into Jane's eyes as he spoke, "I will be happy to join the party travelling to London."

Lady Catherine and the youngest three girls looked uncertain about leaving some of the guests plus the patient alone in the house. "Catherine, you and the girls should go. You have all been waiting on us hand and foot, and it is high time you took some time for yourselves. Hattie will be here with Fanny and me, not to mention the Hills and a house full of servants," Bennet insisted.

“You will hear no disagreement from me,” Hattie stated emphatically. “Thomas is correct, you all deserve some time without worry.”

“That being the case, we will accompany you,” Lady Catherine pronounced.

A little later, Mary and William Bennet came for tea, and were both delighted with the news of the courtship. William Bennet did not feel it was a good time to be away from his flock, and Mary declined an invitation to join the trip to Town, stating she had too much to do in the upcoming weeks. Even if she had nothing planned, she would not have considered going without her beloved husband.

She did not inform anyone that she had recently started to be sick most mornings, and that some foods she used to love, she could not stomach any longer. Mary also did not mention she needed to rest in the afternoons, something she had not done since she was a little girl in the nursery.

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Sunday was a quiet day. Come Monday morning, four carriages, one of which was for the servants, stood ready to depart for London as soon as everyone boarded.

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Chapter 27

As if being ruined in society were not punishment enough, her traitorous sister Louisa agreed with her brother Charles that it was no one's fault but her own.

Miss Bingley's sister and brother-in-law had come for a short visit to Scarborough. She was living in the home of an uncle and her traitor of a brother, both publicly active in trade, but the Hursts refused to invite her to live with them.

Louisa had reminded her of the number of times she had been warned Mr. Darcy was not interested in her and had tolerated her only because of his friendship with Charles. She also pointed out the occasions she had warned Caroline her behaviour would only end in her ruin because they were not members of the first circles—no matter her pretentions. Members of the first circles would not excuse her bad behaviour as eccentric, as they would for one of their own.

Louisa and that lout Hurst told her—as they had previously—she would *never* be welcome at Winsdale. Louisa also told her younger sister how much happier she was with her husband since Caroline was no longer around to cause trouble between them.

When Louisa and Hurst departed for the Hurst estate, Caroline Bingley finally understood she had managed to alienate everyone in her life. She wrote to some of her so-called friends, and without exception, every letter was returned unopened.

To her vexation, her brother was no longer malleable. He had warned her he would not cover her overspending, and she had ignored him—as she had in the past. To feel better about herself, she went to the local mantua-maker and ordered a completely new wardrobe—she would be the one to show the locals true class, after all.

When the proprietor, who had never received such a large order before, asked how the bill would be paid, Miss Bingley presented her brother's card. She had not counted on the owner being a sharp-witted steward of her

business. The owner dispatched a note to Mr. Bingley, asking for his acquiescence to cover the bill. He had returned a short note of refusal.

It was soon made known throughout the town that unless Miss Bingley had funds on her person to pay for her purchases, those extending her credit not authorised by him beforehand, in writing, would not be able to collect from her brother; he would refuse to cover any of her bills not approved ahead of time by himself.

Returning from an embarrassing trip to the mantua-maker—where she was informed her order had been cancelled—Caroline discovered none of her stratagems worked on her brother any longer. All her effort produced was the loss of a quarter's allowance.

Even though Miss Bingley had lived in the lies she told herself for some time, she was not devoid of intelligence. It took some time, but she finally accepted she had been the author of her own expulsion from society, and it was not something that would be forgotten.

Watching her brother ignore her made it clear he did not appreciate her company, she had an epiphany—unless she wanted to be alone for the rest if her life, she needed to make real changes, including addressing her inappropriate airs, graces, and pretentions.

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"Welcome to Matlock House, Jane and Lizzy," Lady Elaine received her guests enthusiastically. "It is good to see you again, Andrew and Marie. Marie, please let me hold little Reggie; I have missed him so since we left Kent."

Lady Marie, who had been holding her son when they entered the house, handed the babe over to his grandmother. "I understand my parents are in Town," Lady Marie observed. "I will take little Reggie to visit them tomorrow morning. Would you like to come with me Mother Elaine?"

"That will depend on Jane and Lizzy, and what they have planned," Lady Elaine replied.

"In the morning, Aunt Elaine, we are to visit with our sisters, Aunt Cat, Richard, and the Darcys at Darcy House, and then we will go to Uncle Edward's warehouse to look at fabric in the afternoon," Jane responded.
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“Jane dear, did you forget I gave you leave to call me Mother Elaine?” Lady Elaine reminded.

“I beg your pardon. Yes, you did,” Jane said in apology.

“Think nothing of it.” Lady Elaine turned to her daughter, “I will accompany you to Jersey House in the morning, but I will return in time to join the party travelling to the Gardiner warehouse,” Lady Elaine stated. She would not miss seeing the new fabrics.

“We will return in time, as I too am looking forward to seeing what new bolts the warehouse has,” Lady Marie stated.

“My Reggie will be home from the Lords after four, so I think it will be good to have a family dinner tonight. I suspected we might have a few more to dine, so I warned cook ahead of time,” Lady Elaine relayed. “I will send a footman with a note to Darcy House and invite them to join us. Jane and Lizzy, how is your mother?”

“She is as well as can be expected under the circumstances. Thank you for enquiring after her,” Elizabeth responded. “She is very pleased her older sister remains with her, and I know she is looking forward to the Gardiners returning with all of us to Kent. Aunt Elaine, I have news.”

“Did William finally speak?” Lady Elaine asked perceptively. “It was not a state secret Lizzy dear; there was no difficulty noticing that William is besotted with you.”

“He did, and we have commenced an official courtship,” Elizabeth confirmed with a light blush.

“You are on the family floor,” Lady Elaine informed the sisters. “My housekeeper,” she indicated the grandmotherly looking lady standing off to the side, “will show you to your chambers. When you have changed and rested, if you so desire, just request any servant you see to direct you to the family sitting room on the same floor.”

Lady Elaine accompanied her daughter-in-law to hand little Reggie to the nursemaid in the nursery while Jane and Elizabeth were shown to the suite they would share.

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Elizabeth was up at sunrise the next morning, as was her wont. She had been informed of the proximity of Hyde Park the previous evening during the family dinner, which everyone enjoyed.

Darcy, who knew her love of walking, had told her of Hyde Park's wonders for one who enjoyed the exercise. She had mentioned her intention to take a ramble at sunrise, and he had informed her that he might very well feel like an early morning walk himself.

It was not surprising that Darcy was waiting outside Matlock House when Elizabeth emerged with a maid and footman. "Good morning William," Elizabeth greeted Darcy cheerily. "Did you sleep on the doorstep last night?" Elizabeth teased.

"There was no need," Darcy returned with a dimpled smile. "Like you, I do not sleep past the rising of the sun."

Elizabeth had to force herself not to give into the weakness she felt in her knees when she noted how devastatingly handsome William was when he smiled. He offered his arm, and she gratefully curled her arm around it, steadying herself.

"So, this is the infamous Rotten Row," Elizabeth observed after the two had entered Hyde Park.

"The only time I enjoy it is when it is empty, as it is now," Darcy revealed. "I do not do well in large crowds of people with whom I am unfamiliar, as you know. I find the so-called fashionable hour a trial. I avoid this place at that time as if it were where the plague could be found."

"In that we agree," Elizabeth acknowledged. "When I walk, it is for the enjoyment of nature and the exercise. I care not one whit to see or be seen."

"That is one of your many attributes I enjoy and love," Darcy informed Elizabeth.

"You talk of love, not for the first time." She noted quietly and Darcy nodded. "How is it you fell in love with me when I was so combative and revelled in arguing with you? When did it begin?"

"As to when, it was when I truly looked at you the first time. No, that is not true. I was attracted to you, but not yet in love," Darcy divulged. "You

began to invade my dreams first, then my waking hours. The night I first heard you play the pianoforte at Lucas Lodge, when your friend Mrs. Jamison urged you to play, I could not take my eyes off you. When you refused to dance with me, it only raised you in my estimation. You should know your refusal of my inept proposal showed your strength of character —showing me beyond all doubt that you would not accept a man for anything but the right reasons.

“I fell in love with you during your sojourn at Netherfield Park, while you were nursing Jane. Unlike Miss Bingley, who would agree with me if I said the sky was red, you always rebutted my assertions. You never fawned and did not attempt to flatter me, instead you constantly challenged, disagreed, and debated with me; it was exciting to have such conversations.”

“You had the right of it when you said I sometimes express opinions not my own. I despised you so much I thought I was hurting you by arguing—what you call debating. There were times I honestly disagreed with you, but when I did agree, I would take the other side of the argument so we would have a reason to fight,” Elizabeth owned.

“I did not know you did it every time, but I suspected you did espouse that which you did not believe on occasion. It was at Netherfield I decided you had no interest in my fortune, or any of the things society deems important. I could not help but fall in love with you.

“Imagine the blow to my ego during Christmastide at Snowhaven, when I was informed that you disliked me intensely. I thought myself so superior and then was forced to realise I was not. Worse, I was made to see I did not behave as a gentleman should.” Darcy ceased talking and placed his other hand over Elizabeth’s gloved one.

They reached the Serpentine and continued to follow the path next to it as it snaked through Hyde Park. “When you left after the ball with the Bingleys, you knew you loved me?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes, I did,” Darcy admitted. “Although I erroneously believed Jane indifferent to Bingley, I knew I needed to be away from you before I offered for you, which at the time, was anathema to me. Even though I knew I loved you, I fought my inclination for the reasons I blurted out at the glade.

I allowed that need to drive me to be much more forceful in convincing Bingley."

"Jane and Richard thank you. We all thank you for exposing Mr. Bingley's weak-willed character," Elizabeth stated.

"After I arrived at Rosings Park and proffered my apologies, it was easy to see you were no longer indifferent to me," Darcy said. "Then I made unwarranted assumptions—as I have explained—which led to my ill-fated, and horribly worded proposal. When I am nervous, I spew nonsense, which accounts for all of the words that escaped my mouth when I attempted my proposal."

"Here is my promise to you—when I feel I am ready to hear your proposals, I will give you a sign," Elizabeth offered. "I will tell you we are closer to that point now than we were in the glade."

Her admission caused another face-splitting dimpled smile from her walking partner. For the rest of the walk, they discussed their favourite books.

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"All of the bolts not yet consigned to shops are in the back room," Gardiner informed the group of intrepid shoppers.

Kitty, Gigi, and Lydia were joined by Lilly Gardiner. At almost thirteen, she was the eldest of the four Gardiner children and the most excited to have girls close to her in age present. The four decided to explore the main area of the warehouse as a group under the watchful eyes of Mrs. Annesley, the head clerk, and two Darcy footmen.

Ladies Catherine, Elaine, Marie, and Sarah—Marie's mother, Lady Jersey, who had been invited—joined Madeline Gardiner, Jane, and Elizabeth as they all made for the back room. There they discovered a cornucopia of bolts of Indian muslin, silk, satin, and many more fabrics. The shades, textures, and colours were unique, which made the ladies keen indeed as they touched the bolts reverently.

"This is the one for a wedding gown," Jane told her sister. It was a shimmering ivory Indian muslin with interwoven gold thread.
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The rest of the ladies stopped examining their bolts and joined the sisters. “Oh Jane, that suits you perfectly,” Lady Catherine opined. There was unanimous agreement from all of the ladies.

An hour later, Jane had selected more than enough bolts of fabric to be taken to Madame Chambourg’s, some of the new fabrics and some from the main warehouse. The ladies had an appointment at Madame Chambourg’s shop on Bond Street on the morrow.

Each lady selected fabric for herself, except for Lady Catherine. “As I intend to continue to wear half mourning and am blessed with more than enough gowns and dresses, I see no need to purchase more,” Lady Catherine explained when asked why she had not chosen anything for herself.

Besides fabric, the three youngest ladies selected other items of interest. Lydia chose things that would be of use to her when she went to school. It had been decided, with Jane’s wedding in mid-May and the school year ending weeks after, Lydia would commence school in August. Although none said so to Elizabeth, they suspected Lydia would attend another wedding before she started the school chosen for her in Bedfordshire.

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Darcy and Elizabeth had managed to meet and walk in Hyde Park three mornings in a row, thanks to the good weather. The previous night, their party, except the three young ladies not yet out in society, went to see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—one of Elizabeth’s favourites—at a theatre in Covent Gardens.

Once the absolute approval of the Matlocks, Hilldales, Mr. Darcy, and the Jerseys was known, no one dared denigrate the unknown country lady who had ‘stolen’ the master of Rosings Park from under the noses of the daughters of the *Ton*.

In clear view of the gawkers, at the start of the first intermission the Duke and Duchess of Bedford, accompanied by the Marquess and Marchioness of Birchington, visited the Matlock Box. It became obvious that Mr. Fitzwilliam’s fiancée and her sister both had the approbation of Queen Charlotte’s cousins, since they paid the compliment of visiting them in their box and not vice versa.
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Seeing leading doyens of the *Ton* offer their unreserved approval dampened any plans of the few spiteful ladies who thought to snub the upstarts. Knowledge of the way Miss Bingley, a lady who had crossed these very ladies, had been ostracised was enough to cause all who came in contact with the Bennet sisters to treat them with every arrear of civility.

Each successive day the two walked together, Elizabeth discovered more about William. The more she learned, the more she liked. She admitted to herself he had wormed his way into her heart and she had developed tender feelings for him.

Elizabeth had no doubt William respected her. She was certain off his love for her and realised she was close to being in the same state. She had yet to admit to herself she had fallen over that particular precipice.

She remembered how impressed she had been when visiting Darcy House the first time. She was not given a tour but had paid attention to how the master of the house interacted with his servants. What Elizabeth saw warmed her heart. William treated his servants with respect, not like nobodies.

It was easy to see the servants had genuine affection for their master. Seeing him thus convinced Elizabeth that Gigi's opinion that William was the best master and landlord was not hyperbole; it was nothing more than the truth.

Dinner had been held at Darcy house after the play, and Elizabeth had seen William in candid moments talking to one or two of his servants, discovering he was the same even when he did not know he was being observed. William's belief that everyone deserved respect regardless of their station, was a major plus in Elizabeth's eyes.

On the fourth day, Friday, the day they would all return to Rosings Park, Darcy and Elizabeth met as they had on the previous three days. They walked together in companionable silence for a while, enjoying one another's company. They needed no words, as they felt entirely comfortable with one another.

While they were walking, Elizabeth's head admitted what her heart already knew; she loved the man whose arm she held. He was her perfect

match in every way. She had needed time to know him better, but not as much time as she had thought.

Any doubts she thought she had, had been erased. All that was left was the surety she wanted to be his wife. That realisation made her lightheaded, almost giddy with happiness. Once she was able to regulate her breathing she stopped, causing Darcy to stop. He looked at her with concern, for when they walked Elizabeth never wanted to stop.

“Elizabeth, are you well?” Darcy asked.

“Why yes William. Never better. I just realised something, and the realisation stopped me in my tracks,” Elizabeth stated cryptically.

“Should we continue?” Darcy asked, still confused.

“I would like to walk to the glade tomorrow morning. Will you join me?” Elizabeth asked saucily.

“It would be my pleasure to do so,” Darcy averred.

“This time try to ask your question without getting tongue-tied,” Elizabeth stated innocently as she strode forward, leaving behind a man with a silly grin on his face. It took a moment before he could command his feet to move to chase after the woman he loved who was walking ahead of him.

‘*I need to retrieve something from my safe before we depart for Kent,*’ Darcy thought to himself as wave after wave of pleasure washed over his body.

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Chapter 28

The line of carriages approaching Rosings Park was considerably longer than the one that made the journey to Town on Monday—by three additional vehicles. The entire Fitzwilliam family joined those returning to Kent from London, as did the Gardiners.

Lady Catherine rode in the Darcy coach with Darcy, Georgiana, and Kitty Bennet. The three ladies looked at each other questioningly during the journey, wondering why William, whose face sported a huge grin, seemed so distracted.

Lady Catherine was sure there was no betrothal between him and Elizabeth; she surmised, correctly, that neither of them would have been able to keep such news secret. William was somewhere in his own world and seemed perfectly happy to remain there. No one knew what had occurred to affect him so. Lady Catherine was sure his mood was connected to Elizabeth somehow—perhaps the courtship was proceeding in a way which gave him hope for the future.

When the convoy stopped so everyone could refresh themselves and stretch their legs at Bromley, Elizabeth and William met in full view of all to maintain propriety, walking together deep in private conversation.

Jane and Richard were applied to for an explanation, but they were not sure what had affected the two so. After Bromley, Jane left the Matlock carriage and rode with Lizzy in one of the Gardiner conveyances.

Jane quizzed Lizzy and she was given the same answer as the Gardiners had received: “All will be revealed on the morrow.” As soon as her sister made that statement, Jane had a very good idea of what would happen.

As the carriages turned into the estate, Mary and William Bennet waved to their returning family and friends from their garden. As soon as the equipages were brought to a halt, they were swarmed by footmen placing steps and removing trunks.

Jane’s purchases, including her wedding gown, would be delivered in the middle of the coming week, along with the gowns and dresses the other

ladies had ordered. Two of Madam Chambourg's seamstresses would accompany the delivery to make final adjustments. Jane could not wait to preview her gown for her mother, knowing it would bring her great pleasure.

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After a quick wash, Darcy sought out his Aunt Catherine. Because she was the closest person he had to a mother, he felt the urge to tell her what had happened to give him so much joy. He thought she might think something was afoot, but that did not lessen his desire to share his happiness with her. He did not know why he said nothing to her in the carriage; mayhap he did not want to temp the fates.

"I am sure what you want to talk about is Elizabeth," Lady Catherine stated as her nephew seated himself in her private sitting room.

"It is," Darcy owned. "Before our departure this morning, we walked in Hyde Park, as we did each morning in London. She told me to ask her the question I tried to ask so poorly last time on the morrow. I am beyond happy, but I am worried I will again become tongue-tied and say the wrong thing."

"William, my dear boy, just keep it simple," Lady Catherine advised. "Sometimes an idea can be conveyed more effectively in few words rather than many. With the former, there will be less opportunity to ramble or have your meaning misunderstood."

"That is sound advice," Darcy accepted, "I will eliminate any four-syllable words I was considering using."

"My other suggestion is you inform Thomas first; request his permission to propose to his favourite daughter. It will show respect for his position as Elizabeth's father," Lady Catherine recommended to Darcy.

The suggestion was a good one, and after kissing the proffered cheek, Darcy set off with determination towards Mrs. Bennet's chambers.

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Darcy found Bennet sitting with his wife and sister Hattie. The four just-returned Bennet sisters, Gigi, and Lilly Gardiner followed him into the

room. “Bennet, can you spare me a few moments?” Darcy asked.

“Thank you for rescuing me. I needed an excuse to escape the talk of lace and fripperies.” The two decided to use Darcy’s sitting room, as it would be quieter. “How may I assist you?” Bennet asked as soon as they each had seated themselves with a glass of good port.

“I am seeking your consent to propose to Elizabeth,” Darcy informed the man he intended to call “father” soon.

“Your courtship has been of a short duration. I am aware you were precipitous once before; what makes you think Lizzy will be amenable now?” Bennet asked pointedly.

“Because she instructed me to ask the question again, only without placing my hessian in my mouth this time,” Darcy revealed. In the past, he had been loath to lay his private dealings before anyone—that had changed.

“That certainly sounds like my Lizzy,” Bennet shook his head. “What do you think made her change her mind so soon?”

“We spent many hours walking and talking…” Darcy informed Bennet about their morning walks, and the goodly number of other times they had found chances to talk while in Town. “She asked me many probing questions and in turn told me much of herself and all of your family. I suppose she has decided she knows enough about me now. More importantly, I know she would not marry unless she could love and respect her partner,” Darcy stated. “If she were not secure in her feelings for me, she would not have prompted me to ask my question again.”

“Has she declared her love for you?” Bennet enquired.

“Not yet, but the looks she has given me with her fine, excuse me, expressive eyes have spoken volumes,” Darcy stated.

“Since I know Lizzy would never say what she did without wanting you to propose, you have my consent to address my daughter. I know your honour is impeccable, so I have no qualms about your accompanying her on her rambles.” Bennet sat back and drained his port.

After he left his meeting with Bennet, which could not have gone better, Darcy counted the minutes until he could see Elizabeth again. He was too

excited to sleep that night. It would be a long night as the minutes ticked away until he could offer for the woman he loved beyond all reason.

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After all of the young ladies exited Fanny's bedchamber, Elizabeth returned to her mother's side and sat on the bed facing her, taking her good hand in her own. "Mama, I have signalled William I am ready to hear his proposals to me in the morning. If he renews his addresses, I will accept him," Elizabeth shared with her mother, whose face radiated joy at the news.

'*Very Happy for you'*. Fanny told her second daughter as she pointed to words on the large slate her sister held for her.

"Thank you Mama. I love him so very much," Elizabeth said out loud for the very first time.

"We are so happy for you Lizzy," Aunt Hattie said quietly. Fanny nodded in agreement—as well as she was able to.

"You remember that the Jamisons—Stuart and Charlotte—will arrive today for a week, so they will have some time with us before the wedding," Elizabeth stated.

Her mother pointed to '*Yes.*' Then Fanny thought to herself, '*I made both of Jane's early suitors run away. My behaviour was so embarrassing! The way I used to denigrate my poor Lizzy, as if she had the power to determine her gender before she was born. In a way, like William and that spineless Bingley, I did Jane a favour. There is no mistaking how well-suited Jane and Richard are.'* Fanny realised.

She wished she was able to speak, if only for a few minutes, so she could beg her daughters' pardon. '*How did I ever think Mary plain? I was blind! She is anything but, and she is happy in her marriage. The fact that her husband is to inherit Longbourn played no part in her decision to marry him; she fell in love with the man.*'

No matter what happened to her, Fanny could rest easy now, knowing her family members were all happy and closer to one another than any other time she could remember.
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Darcy stood ready outside the manor house's entrance a few moments after dawn on Saturday. The early morning light revealed an almost cloudless day. He hoped the day would be like his mood: bright.

Darcy patted his inside pocket and felt the ring box securely where he had placed it. It was the fifth time he had made sure it was there, perhaps the sixth if he were to count when he checked it on the stairs on his way down. He heard a sound behind him, turned, and saw the most welcome sight in the world, Elizabeth. She was wearing a pale-yellow walking dress with short sleeves that revealed her arms. She had beige kid leather gloves on her hands, and a light bonnet covered most of her mahogany locks, although some had escaped her coiffure.

"I see you were determined I would not be the one to wait for you this time, unlike our last walk to the glade," Elizabeth teased with arched eyebrow. How he enjoyed her teasing!

"There is much about *that* walk which I am resolved to correct," Darcy returned.

"In that case, should we proceed?" Elizabeth prompted. Darcy offered her his arm, which she accepted gladly, and they walked towards the woodlands. This time she did not rest her hand lightly on his proffered arm —she wound her arm around his.

When they arrived at the glade, Jeffers stopped a little before it to allow the couple privacy for the interview Darcy had been granted, instead of sitting on the bench opposite. Thankfully, there was a tree stump for the man to sit on so he would not have to remain standing. Bennet had instructed him to allow the couple ten minutes of privacy.

Just as they had the previous time, William led Elizabeth to the bench on the far side of the pond. In contrast to his earlier, rather inept attempt, Darcy remembered to drop to one knee as soon as Elizabeth was seated.

"Elizabeth Rose Bennet, I must tell you that you have bewitched me body and soul, and I love you most ardently. I never wish to be parted from you from this day forward. I need you to bring the joy to my life that has been absent for many years. I have been living a half-life, going through the
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motions. Materially, I have much, but I have not had the love between a man and a woman. Not just any woman, only you. I have not experienced life as I should; I merely existed and tried to do the best I could for Gigi. Please end my suffering and loneliness and agree to become my wife," Darcy proposed.

"Fitzwilliam Robert Darcy, it is only recently I admitted to myself that I love you with all that I am. You are the *only* man I could ever agree to marry. So yes, William, yes, yes, yes, YES! There is nothing I desire more than to become your wife," Elizabeth answered, speaking the words he dreamed of hearing from her for so long. Yes, she had hinted it was time to ask her, but he thirsted to hear the words from her lips and he only allowed himself to believe fully after she accepted him.

Darcy reached into his pocket and withdrew a velvet-covered box. He opened it and removed the most beautiful ring Elizabeth had ever seen. It was gold with one large emerald surrounded by a ring of alternating, very small diamonds and emeralds.

As she watched, he gently removed her gloves, then slid the ring slowly down her finger until it was in place. "I have never seen a more beautiful ring," Elizabeth gushed.

"It belonged to my paternal grandmother. She told me to place it only on the finger of the lady I loved. That, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, is you." Without further words, Darcy stood and gently drew Elizabeth to him. She knew—hoped—she was about to experience her first kiss.

Their heads moved closer together and, closing her eyes, Elizabeth felt the gentle pressure of his moist lips on hers. She grasped the lapels of his coat and felt his hands rise to the sides of her head, then slowly slide down to her shoulders, finally stopping at the small of her back. He pressed her body a little closer to his before breaking their kiss gradually; then he rested his forehead against hers. Her body tingled all over and her heart raced like never before.

Had they not been holding onto each other, she felt as if she might float to the heavens, for she was drunk with love. His kiss had sent her normally sharp mind reeling. She smiled even as she blushed; he was staring intently at her, seeing into the depths of her soul. Their eyes locked as she silently

granted permission for more, and then his lips once again captured hers. There was a certain fervour to their movements, an urgent need to become closer. He sat on the bench and drew her onto his lap, and she twined her arms about his neck.

In his wildest dreams, Darcy had not thought her kisses would be so sweet, like the nectar of the gods. As a sudden shock gripped Darcy's body, he thought '*The poets were right, it is like being struck by lightning*.' Elizabeth was soft and welcoming, and it felt as though his entire being was concentrated on where their bodies touched.

She was as passionate as he had dreamed she would be, and he realised with a soaring heart that although unpractised in the art of kissing, she learned quickly, holding nothing back. She was calm until the moment his tongue slipped between her parted lips.

He opened his eyes and noted her initial look of surprise as he explored her mouth. He paused in case she did not want him to proceed. Gratified by her little mewl of frustration, he proceeded with renewed urgency. The taste of her was overwhelming, and he growled from the depths of his throat as he pulled her tightly to himself with the hand he had on the small of her back. Heat poured off him in waves and into her as she answered his daring attempt by sliding her tongue over and about his.

He pulled back, intending to end the interlude, knowing they would be out of time soon, but she pressed closer and he was lost again. His kiss was hot and wet, and her arms wound more tightly around his neck when he tried to separate from her. Then she removed a hand from his neck and raked her fingers through his curls. Ever since the first blush of an attraction, she had longed to do just that, to feel if they were as soft as they looked. They were.

In response, Darcy pushed her bonnet off and ran his fingers through her mahogany tresses, sending pins flying every which way, but he cared not. For months he had been nearly desperate to thread his fingers through her hair. How he could not wait to see her with her tresses free from all restraints.

Her legs trembled as she seized his lapels to draw him as close to her as possible. Luckily, they were seated, as she did not believe her legs could

have supported her at that moment. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and she was conscious of the press of her breasts through the thin layer of muslin against his waistcoat; the contact only increased her arousal.

Neither wanted to separate, but they knew they did not have much time before Jeffers made an appearance. By mutual agreement, the newly betrothed couple drew apart. As gently as he could, Darcy slid Elizabeth off his lap onto the bench just as the footman made his presence known.

Both felt bereft of the warmth of the other's body. Now they had committed one to the other, they were desperate to explore the depths of their shared passion. They suspected, privately, that they would never be able to get enough of each other.

"Unless you object, I suggest a short betrothal period," Elizabeth stated saucily.

"Either that or we can make for Gretna," Darcy jested. That statement earned him one of her tinkling laughs he loved to hear.

Darcy tried to gather up her hairpins, which had flown everywhere, but Elizabeth laid her hand on his arm. "Do not bother; I have many more," she told him as she gathered her tresses into a makeshift bun, which she secured by tying her bonnet in place.

Just then, Jeffers cleared his throat tentatively. Elizabeth was about to stand when Darcy placed a restraining hand on her arm. She turned to him in concern, but when he met her eyes and remained silent, she looked downward and she noticed a distinct bulge in his breeches and understood his need to remain seated a while longer.

Not too many minutes later, Darcy gave his fiancée an imperceptible nod and they both stood. With her arms wrapped around his forearm, and his other hand covering hers, the couple started their return to the great house.

"William, may we go by way of the parsonage first?" Elizabeth asked as they reached the main path.

"You must know I would never refuse you anything it is within my power to grant," Darcy averred.

“I want to inform Mary and William first,” Elizabeth stated. “When the two of you are in the same room, we will have to find some way so you both do not answer whenever ‘William’ is spoken.”

With Jeffers following, the newly betrothed couple turned in the direction of the parsonage.

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Chapter 29

“Lizzy, I am so very happy for you!” Mary exclaimed. “What a fine brother you are gifting us with.”

Mary and her husband conveyed profuse wishes for the future felicity of the newly betrothed couple, then Mary had a thought. “Have you told Mama yet? Do you have Papa’s consent?”

“You are the first we informed,” Elizabeth replied. “I did tell Mama there was a high probability of William proposing to me today.”

“Your father gave me permission to pay my addresses to Elizabeth, so it will be no surprise to him when I make my request,” Darcy reported.

“You requested Papa’s permission to address me before you proposed to me?” Elizabeth asked, and he nodded. The fact William showed her father the respect and deference to make such a request spoke well of him. “Thank you; that pleases me.”

“In the spirit of honesty, Aunt Cat suggested I do so.” Darcy revealed, “You know disguise is abhorrent to me, so I will not take the credit for the initial inspiration.”

“Regardless of who made the suggestion, you still decided to follow their advice and talk to my father,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Please do not sell my betrothed short,” she teased.

“What are we to do with my William and yours in the family? We cannot call mine Bennet when Papa is near, and with two Williams it will be confusing.” Mary asked after Elizabeth’s reply

“There is a simple solution,” Darcy offered as he shook his soon-to-be brother’s hand again. “When we are together, your husband will be William and I can be called Darcy. As I am the only one, it will reduce any confusion. I would have suggested Fitzwilliam, which is my Christian name, but with Richard in the family, that would be just as problematic.”

“Then Darcy it will be,” Mary decided.

“It will take me a while to get used to calling you Darcy when we are all together. I apologise in advance for the times I might forget,” Elizabeth stated contritely.

“Do not trouble yourself Sister, I will know which William you mean,” William Bennet stated with a grin.

“As will I,” Darcy added with a grin of his own.

“William, do any of your parishioners need you this morning?” Mary asked.

“No my love, they do not,” William Bennet replied.

“In that case, we will join you on your walk to the manor house,” Mary stated. “Lizzy and Darcy, you must know how much I—we—appreciate that you told us first.”

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“Bennet, may I please have a word in private,” a beaming Darcy requested.

Bennet watched his second daughter as she practically floated to her mother’s bedside. “We can do so in private Son but given the look of unadulterated joy I see on both your faces, I assume she accepted you,” Bennet said.

“Yes Sir. Elizabeth accepted me as her betrothed,” Darcy confirmed.

“Then you have my consent and unreserved blessing. Just make sure I never repine bestowing my permission and strive to make her happy all the days of her life.” Bennet looked his future son in the eye.

“Her felicity will be my priority for the rest of the time I am granted on this earth,” Darcy assured Bennet.

“Mama,” Elizabeth took her mother’s hand. “We are officially betrothed with Papa’s blessing; I am to be married. He did indeed ask and I did not refuse him—this time.”

Fanny pointed to the slate with the words on it and Elizabeth held it up for her and handed her mother the stick. ‘*Happy for you*’ Fanny indicated.
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Elizabeth bent down and kissed her mother as a tear of happiness rolled down her mother's cheek, leaving a salty taste in Elizabeth's mouth.

Elizabeth extended her left hand so her mother could admire the elegant ring she had been gifted by her betrothed. Fanny's good right eye grew wide, then she pointed to '*Very nice*'.

"God has been good to us," Elizabeth told her mother. "With me, there will be three of your daughters well married, all to men we love."

Just then, Mrs. Phillips returned to her sister's bedchamber. When she saw the joy reflected on the right side of her sister's face and the ring her niece was displaying, she knew what had occurred. "Lizzy, you could not have been so intelligent for nothing. You caught such a wealthy man! He is as good as a lord. He has an estate in Derbyshire, a house in Town, and ten thousand a year—likely more. What pin money, jewels, and carriages, you will have; you will have even more wealth than Jane!" Hattie effused.

Elizabeth simply hugged her aunt, sure the words she had just verbalised would have been spoken by her mother before her illness struck. The only thing she worried about was whether her fiancé would take exception to the rather vulgar outburst.

A concerned Elizabeth looked over to where her betrothed and father sat next to one another and was relieved to see rather than take offence, William seemed amused. Her father was shaking his head and sporting a large grin.

"William," Elizabeth reached out her hand. Darcy stood and joined his beloved next to her mother.

Darcy kissed the hand of his mother-in-law-to-be. She pointed at the slate with the letters and Elizabeth held it for her.

'*A-l-w-a-y-s t-r-e-a-t m-y g-i-r-l w-e-l-l*' Fanny spelled out.

"You have my most solemn promise Mother Bennet. I will make it my life's mission to respect and love your daughter," Darcy promised.

Fanny turned her head as much as she could to expose her cheek, and Darcy bestowed a kiss on it. "Now that your betrothal is official, are there

not some people you would like to tell?" Bennet asked. "You will need to see Mary and my son at the parsonage."

"Mary and William already know," Elizabeth informed her father. "We stopped there on the way back to the manor house."

"They are with the rest of the family waiting for us in the drawing room," Darcy explained. Before the happy couple made their way downstairs, they explained the method they would use so there would be no confusion about the same names being in use when they were in company with Mary and her husband.

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When the beaming couple entered the room, Lady Catherine saw William's grandmother's ring on Elizabeth's finger. She remained quiet to see if anyone noticed the ring before the newly betrothed couple made their announcement. The parsonage Bennets had not said a word, not wanting to steal the newly betrothed couple's thunder.

"Elizabeth!" Georgiana squealed as she noticed the ring, "You accepted William!"

"No, Gigi, I did not accept William as he is happily married to my sister." Elizabeth teased. At first Gigi was flummoxed. "However, *Darcy* proposed to me and I did accept him." She clarified as Gigi's face lit up with absolute joy. There was a brief explanation of the use of the names "William" and "Darcy" to avoid confusion.

Within seconds there was a cacophony of well wishes, many hugs, and not a few kisses.

"It is about time," Lady Elaine stated as she hugged her nephew.

"Your parents would have been very happy for you," Lord Matlock said as he clapped his nephew on the back. "My sister and brother would have loved your Lizzy."

Gigi did not say a word, she simply hugged her brother with all of her might, as did Kitty and Lydia, while Elizabeth was wrapped in Jane's arms.

"I am so happy for you Lizzy. I saw that you loved Darcy when I looked into your eyes in London, even before you admitted it to yourself," Jane
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shared. Then in a soft voice Jane added, “We need to talk as soon as possible.”

Her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner pulled Elizabeth into a joint hug, and each kissed her on a cheek. “You will be a very happy woman,” her Aunt Maddie told her.

“Yes, I believe I will,” Elizabeth agreed.

Richard pulled both members of the newly betrothed couple into a bear hug. “You two are almost as perfect for one another as my Jane is for me,” Richard exclaimed.

Lady Catherine held back, knowing she would have her turn. Andrew and Marie were the last two to wish the betrothed couple happy before Lady Catherine. As she stood up, the two approached her and opened their arms, enfolding their aunt in the cocoon of their love.

“This is a glorious day,” Lady Catherine stated after she kissed each of them on the cheek. “Even though I knew how it would be, there were times I thought one or both of you would not be able to get out of your own way and come together. But all of that is in the past now. You do not understand how much joy I will find in your union. You are so well suited one to the other.

“I have considered you another surrogate daughter for some time now Elizabeth, so nothing has changed for me.” The lady turned to her nephew, “She is the only one for you William. Cherish her for the rest of your days, and make sure there is always respect between you. If you ever disagree, let it be in private and not in front of any other,” Lady Catherine advised.

“We will always keep your advice in mind,” Elizabeth promised. “You have long been a surrogate mother to me, and I love you.” Elizabeth leant forward and kissed Lady Catherine’s cheeks once again.

Elizabeth’s declaration caused more than a few tears to run unchecked down Lady Catherine’s cheeks. “I second that Aunt Cat,” Darcy added. “You have been a mother to Gigi and me since father died.”

“Away with you two now, before you turn this old lady into a watering pot,” Lady Catherine admonished playfully.

“Lizzy do not forget I need to speak to you,” Jane reminded her. Elizabeth nodded. “Please join Richard and me in the parlour opposite, with your betrothed, of course.”

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“You requested we join you?” Elizabeth asked, after both couples chose settees across from one another with a low table between them.

“Yes I did. I have not yet mentioned to Richard what I am about to suggest,” Jane opened.

“Now you have piqued my curiosity,” Richard stated.

“You all remember that Mr. Burnett said that Mama may—no, probably will—have another apoplexy and the chances of her surviving a second attack are close to naught,” Jane stated.

“Yes, I was in the meeting with him. Are you about to suggest that William and I marry with you and Richard in a double ceremony?” Elizabeth deduced.

“That is exactly what I am suggesting,” Jane confirmed. “I know it may be much quicker than either of you planned, if you have even yet discussed wedding dates.”

“We have not yet,” Darcy informed the other couple. “Although we agree we do not wish for a long betrothal.” Elizabeth nodded her concurrence.

“If by the Grace of God Mama survives like this for a long time, then you will have married sooner than you might have otherwise. However, if the worst happens after our wedding, marrying earlier will be a good thing, will it not?” Jane enquired.

Seeing the consternation in his betrothed, Darcy made a request of Jane and Richard. “Will you give us a few minutes to talk? Please, wait for us in the hall and leave the door partially open.”

Jane and Richard stood and exited, pulling the door three quarters closed on their way out. “What is your opinion?” Darcy asked gently.
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“My hesitation is not because I object to marrying you in just over a fortnight; it is the spectre of my mother’s mortality that grips me. I found the mother I had always hoped she would be since she was stricken. All life is tentative, but Jane is correct, Mama’s life is threatened more than most others’ are,” Elizabeth explained. “You lost your mother when you were young, did you not?”

“Yes, I was but twelve, and Gigi was a few weeks old. I at least knew my mother; Gigi never did,” Darcy replied.

“Enough melancholy,” Elizabeth decided. “Do you object to Jane’s plan?”

“Not at all. As long as you do not object to marrying with Jane and Richard, the sooner I am married to you, the better,” Darcy stated.

“Jane’s suggestion could not please me more, as it always has been a childhood dream of mine that Jane and I marry in the same ceremony,” Elizabeth relayed. “I do think we need to request Papa join the four of us and allow him to advise us.”

Darcy called the other couple back in and explained what they had decided. Richard sent a footman to request Mr. Bennet’s presence.

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“What trouble are you four cooking up now?” Bennet asked with a sardonic smile as he joined his betrothed daughters and their affianced.

Jane and Elizabeth explained what Jane had suggested and why. They informed him Elizabeth and William had agreed to the plan, pending his consent. “Darcy, are you sure you do not object?” Bennet asked.

“I do not, not at all,” Darcy replied.

“As much as I would prefer the situation were, otherwise, there is no denying the wisdom of your decision. It will give my Fanny a great deal of pleasure to see you both marry,” Bennet agreed. “Do you have any thoughts on how we might ensure your mother will be able to witness the ceremony? You know she would love to see you marry, not just see you before and after the service.”
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“Would anyone object if I ask Aunt Cat to join us?” Richard asked, and when no one did, he went to find her.

A few minutes later, Richard returned with Lady Catherine, and she was quickly informed of what the two couples had decided, and the problem they were wrestling with. “The family sitting room,” Lady Catherine stated after cogitating for a little while. “It has not been opened since Anne and Lewis were taken from me, but it is large and close to Fanny’s chambers. We can move her in the bath chair with a minimum of jostling since there are no stairs to negotiate.”

“Are you sure you are ready to reopen the family sitting room?” Richard queried. “We are all aware it was a special place for the three of you before the accident.”

“Yes I am, it is time,” Lady Catherine assured her nephew. “There can be no better affirmation of continuing life than a wedding.”

“As long as you are sure,” Darcy verified. “We would not want you to be pained for any reason.”

“If I were not ready, I would never have suggested it,” Lady Catherine confirmed. “All will be well.”

“Papa, will you inform Mama?” Jane asked.

“Yes my dear daughter. I thank you both for trying to give your mother as much pleasure as possible,” Bennet replied warmly.

“Thank Jane. I agreed to the plan but it was her idea,” Elizabeth owned.

“I am on my way to see your mother,” Bennet relayed as he stood to return to his wife’s bedchamber. “Catherine, thank you for all the accommodations you are making in order to assure Fanny is comfortable.”

“It is my pleasure,” Lady Catherine demurred.

“What dress should I wear?” Elizabeth asked after her father had departed.

“Did you not choose some Indian muslin similar to mine?” Jane asked her sister.

“Yes! You are brilliant! Mine is cream, interwoven with light yellow silk thread. It will be perfect,” Elizabeth gushed. “How lucky the seamstresses will be here in a few days.”

“Do not concern yourself with your trousseau now Elizabeth,” Darcy interjected. “When we return from our wedding trip, we will make a stop in London and you may order everything you require or desire. Lambton does not have a Madame Chambourg, but the dressmaker there is excellent. She makes most of Gigi’s gowns and dresses.”

With their decisions made, the two couples and Lady Catherine returned to the drawing room to inform the rest of the assembled party of the upcoming double wedding.

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As was her wont, Miss Bingley read the society pages when they were delivered to Bingley House in Scarborough. The Saturday papers were delivered to Scarborough each Tuesday following.

When she read the announcement of the betrothal of Mr. Fitzwilliam Robert Darcy to Miss Elizabeth Rose Bennet, she was, for a moment, fit to be tied. When she cooled down, she reminded herself the man had never been interested in her.

If he had looked at her the way he had looked at Eliza Bennet even once, Miss Bingley admitted to herself she would have ordered her wedding clothes the very same day. With her new self-awareness, she acknowledged she had never had a chance and closed the paper. It was the last day she scanned the social announcements.

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Chapter 30

Charlotte and Stuart Jamison and their three children arrived, as scheduled, on the tenth day of May 1811. Two years after their son was born, Charlotte had birthed a daughter, then three years later the newest Jamison arrived. He was a little more than a year old, and his looks seemed to favour his grandfather, Sir William Lucas.

“Eliza, I was shocked to hear about your mother,” Charlotte told her as the two walked arm in arm into the manor house. She then turned to Jane. “And you are to be mistress of all of this in eight days?”

“Yes, I am, but Miss ‘*Mr. Darcy does not admire me’* will be the mistress of a far larger estate, not to mention several satellite estates,” Jane teased her younger sister.

“You two are invited to remind me how wrong I was in my estimation of William at your leisure,” Elizabeth sighed.

“There is no need, Eliza dear, you know I was correct. That is more than enough for me; after all, you are the one who is *never* wrong when she sketches characters,” Charlotte jested with her friend.

“It seems we must rethink our invitation,” Elizabeth teased back. “Charlotte, your children are darling. How old is Stuart Junior now?”

“He will be six in July. Yvette Sarah will be four in November, and this little man, Jacob, was one in January,” Charlotte shared. “After I settle them in the nursery with their nursemaid, I would love to visit with your mother.”

“You know that Eddy, May, and Peter Gardiner are here do you not? Your two older children will have children of similar ages with whom to play,” Jane informed their long-time friend. “I want to make sure you are prepared to see Mama. She is much altered, especially her left side, including her face.” Jane went on to give their friend a detailed description so she would be prepared when she saw their mother.

“She will be pleased to see you, as will our father and Aunt Hattie,” Elizabeth added. “We just want to make sure seeing Mama as she is now will not be a shock to you.”

“I understand,” Charlotte responded.

“Mr. Jamison, after you change, you can find the rest of the men in the billiards room. Any servant will be able to direct you. Charlotte, ask to be directed to the main drawing room where you will meet our soon-to-be relations, and then Lizzy and I will accompany you to see Mama,” Jane offered.

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As Elizabeth waited in the drawing room for Charlotte to join them, she was lost in her reverie as she remembered what Mary told her the day she and William had informed everyone about their betrothal.

Mary had requested she accompany her to see their parents. “Mama, Papa, Lizzy, I have news for you,” Mary had said. “I am including you Lizzy, as you told me about your betrothal first.” Mary paused for a few seconds. “I am with child.”

*Mama had Papa hold her word slate. ‘*How long*’ Mama indicated.*

“This month was the third time I have missed my courses,” Mary blushed as she looked at Papa. “Sorry Papa.”

“My dear daughter, if I were to run for the hills every time anything feminine was discussed, with a wife and five daughters in the house, I would never have been home,” Papa had stated sardonically. “Do not forget I was with your mother through five confinements.”

Mama had begun to cry and make the sound she would when happy at the same time. With her slate, she asked if Mary had seen a doctor regarding her suspicions yet.

“No Mama, I have not, but Mr. Burnett will pay me a call on the morrow and hopefully he will confirm my state,” Mary explained. “No, I have not felt the quickening, and no I have not been ill—yet. I cannot abide fish any longer, and you all know how much I love it. I must rest in the afternoons or I become too tired.” Mary gave as much information as she could to satisfy Mama’s curiosity and pre-empt possible questions.

“Our first grandchild,” Papa had exclaimed. “Between that and the weddings, our cup runneth over.”
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“Thank you for including me Mary. You know it will be hard to keep this from our sisters. I will have to share the news with my William, as I do not want secrets between us. When will you inform the rest of the family?” I asked.

“Of course you may tell Darcy. As to the rest, after Mr. Burnett confirms my state, I will inform everybody, so you only have to keep the secret for a day,” Mary replied.

As Mary and her William had expected, the doctor confirmed her state on Monday morning. Mary had forgotten the next day was Sunday—Aunt Cat told me it happens to ladies who are with child. We had a family dinner that night, and Mary and my brother William informed every one of their wonderful news.

Elizabeth snapped out of her reverie when Charlotte entered the drawing room. “Elizabeth, will you introduce us to Rosings Park’s new guest?” Lady Elaine requested as the highest-ranking lady in the room.

It was Elizabeth’s distinct honour to introduce Charlotte to those whom she was unknown, the three older ladies and Gigi. After introductions were made, Charlotte, Jane, and Elizabeth made for Mrs. Bennet’s bedchamber.

“Never did I imagine I would meet such pleasant members of the *Ton*,” Charlotte commented as they exited the drawing room. “Mary!” Charlotte exclaimed as she saw the middle Bennet sister arriving to visit for tea. “Are you comfortable and fitting into the area as Mrs. Collins?”

“It is Mrs. *Bennet* now, and I am well. Yes, I have become comfortable in my new role,” Mary returned with an eyebrow arched just as her next older sister was wont to do. Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary explained the former William Collins had changed his name back to Bennet, as it had been before his grandfather changed it. The news had not yet been shared with their friends, so Mary took no offence at Charlotte using her previous married name.

“Mary, are you with child?” Charlotte blurted out before she could stop herself. “I am sorry; I should have asked you in private. Since I have been in that state three times, I find it easy to spot another who is *enceinte*.”

“Do not make yourself uneasy; everyone in the family knows I am increasing,” Mary assured Charlotte. “Are you three going to see Mama? If so, may I join you?” As would be expected, Mary was welcome to join them.

Jane led the ladies into her mother’s bedchamber. “Welcome Charlotte,” Bennet said as he looked up from the book he was reading.

Charlotte was pleased her friends had prepared her before seeing their mother. She had not wanted to believe it was as bad as Jane and Eliza had told her, but on seeing the Bennet matron, she felt they might have understated the truth of the matter.

Charlotte greeted Mrs. Phillips, who then took her leave, as the four ladies would keep her sister entertained. “Mrs. Bennet, I am sorry you are afflicted so,” Charlotte greeted her friends’ mother.

Fanny pointed to three words ‘*Not your fault’*.

Charlotte spoke to Mrs. Bennet as she would have had she not been afflicted. She told her about her three children and her husband. In the past, Fanny Bennet would become angry, feeling that Charlotte had *stolen* Jane’s suitor.

With so many hours trapped in her own head, Fanny now knew the truth. It was she, and she alone, who had chased Stuart Jamison into Charlotte’s welcoming arms. The fact that life was too short for petty recriminations had been driven home for Fanny Bennet in the starkest terms. She now intended to look at the positive for whatever time God allowed her until she was called home. She had adopted the philosophy she had heard both Lady Catherine and Lizzy espouse: Think only of the past as those thoughts give you pleasure.

Charlotte told Mrs. Bennet her mother and all of the ladies of Meryton sent their love and were praying for her. She shared how much her mother, Mrs. Long, and Mrs. Goulding were looking forward to seeing their friend, and that they would arrive on the Tuesday before the wedding.

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Lady Catherine requested a family meeting the day after Charlotte arrived. Bennet and Lydia were asked to attend also; Kitty and Gigi were
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sent to entertain the younger children, with Lilly Gardiner's assistance.

"I requested you meet with me today, especially you, Lydia dear, because I wish to discuss George Wickham with you." Lady Catherine saw the look on Lydia's face and moved to reassure her. "He is very much in the Clink; he is not free and cannot harm you or any other." Lydia visibly relaxed.

"What about the wastrel?" Richard asked.

"We aimed to punish the man, and punished he has been," Lady Catherine stated. "Before any of you protest, I am not suggesting he be given leave to walk out of the Clink."

"I am confused," Darcy verbalized what most of them in the room were thinking.

"The man is without his right arm and his left eye; his greatest asset, his looks, are no more," Lady Catherine enumerated. "I would like to make him an offer—either leave for Australia with two hundred pounds and a one-way ticket with the understanding if he ever sets foot in England again, he will be returned to the Clink, or he can remain where he is."

"That seems to be a fair offer," Elizabeth opined. "He will be unable to work his charm on anyone ever again."

"Even though he does not deserve it, he was my father's godson. I would not oppose making him that offer," Darcy stated.

"Lydia, what do you think?" Lady Catherine asked. If Lydia did not agree, she would leave well enough alone and the man would stay where he was.

"I care not, one way or the other," Lydia stated with no emotion. "As long as he can never hurt another again, whether it be in the Clink or on the other side of the world, it will make no difference to me."

"Does anyone object? Reggie? Thomas?" Lady Catherine asked.

"I agree with Lydia, Catherine; as long as he can harm no one, I do not object," Bennet stated.

"I am with Bennet on this," Lord Matlock added.

“In that case, the offer will be extended to him,” Lady Catherine informed them.

Ten days later George Wickham boarded a ship and left the shores of England forever.

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A betrothal ball had been discussed, but with Fanny lying stricken upstairs it was deemed an inappropriate time for it. On her husband’s orders, nothing was mentioned to the Bennet matron, as he was sure she would have urged them to proceed.

Lady Matlock offered to hold a ball in both couple’s honour at some time in the future. What was left unsaid was there would likely be a mourning period for the sisters to observe beforehand.

Each morning, Elizabeth and Darcy walked out, usually to the glade, with the ever-faithful Jeffers following behind. Once or twice, they walked to the folly where Darcy had gotten soaked that day and they both laughed at their former behaviour. Some days, rather than return directly to the manor house, they would stop at the parsonage to break their fasts with the Bennets.

A few days ago, Jane and Richard had joined their walk to the glade, but only that one time. With the positioning of the benches, each couple was afforded a modicum of privacy; neither could hear what the other couple was saying.

On this particular morning, Elizabeth and Darcy sat on their favourite bench. “Elizabeth, have you ever been sea bathing?” Darcy asked.

“No I have not. I have never seen the sea,” Elizabeth revealed.

“Then how would you like to spend our wedding trip at a house overlooking the sea, on a bluff near Brighton?” he asked.

“Like it? I would love it. Is there enough time for you to reserve such a place?” Elizabeth wondered.

“There is no need to reserve it, I—and soon we—own it. It is called Seaview Cottage. My parents enjoyed part of their wedding trip there, and my mother liked it so well Father purchased it for her,” Darcy explained.
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“Cottage, however, is a misnomer. The house is a little larger than Longbourn’s. There is a private cove with a small beach which cannot be seen from the sea and can only be accessed from our property.” Darcy waggled his eyebrows at his now-blushing fiancée.

“It sounds ideal. I would like it very well if we were to spend our wedding trip there,” Elizabeth gushed, giving her betrothed a quick peck on the cheek. She was reminded they were not alone when Jeffers cleared his throat.

“My preference would have been to take you to the continent, but thanks to the little tyrant, that is not possible,” Darcy stated.

“I am perfectly happy to go to Seaview Cottage. Once the French dictator is dispatched, you will be able to show me the wonders of the continent. Do you know where Jane and Richard plan to go?” Elizabeth wanted to know.

“Our aunt and uncle own a house in the Lake District, Lakeside House. I believe they will go there,” William informed his betrothed. “At some other time, we can return to Seaview as a group. It is very peaceful there. I find I sleep better than normal with the sound of the sea to lull me.”

“As long as you do not sleep too much,” Elizabeth stated and then blushed scarlet at her wanton statement.

“Trust me, sleep will be the last thing that will interest me when you are there with me,” Darcy told her, causing her blush to deepen. One of her tinkling laughs Darcy loved to earn burst from Elizabeth to cover her embarrassment.

“We will visit the Lake District at some time will we not?” Elizabeth asked. Her betrothed nodded vigorously.

Not long after, the couple walked back to the manor house. Darcy did not want to tarry long as his and Richard’s solicitors were bringing the final draft of the settlements. Luckily for Bennet, Frank Phillips had returned a few days earlier so he would be able to review the documents with both of his brothers.

As they neared the house, they noticed three carriages traveling down the drive. The friends from Meryton were arriving.

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Chapter 31

When Jane and Elizabeth were included in the reviewing of the settlements, they finally realised just how wealthy their soon-to-be husbands were. Richard had been left a sizable fortune in addition to Rosings Park, as well as Fitzwilliam House in London.

In spite of Jane's protests, he had settled fifty thousand pounds on her. She protested vociferously that it was far too much, but Richard was unwilling to bend on this point. It was nothing to the protest her sister made when she saw the amount Darcy had set aside for her.

"One hundred thousand pounds? William, that is far beyond the pale!" Elizabeth insisted.

"Did you note of the actual state of my—soon to be our—wealth?" Darcy asked calmly, having expected she would resist. "The income from all the estates and investments is more than thirty thousand pounds per annum. It is not known that Gigi's dowry is the same amount as I have settled on you, and it will not be revealed until she has found a man worthy of her. We can have ten daughters, and there will still be enough for each to have a large dowry. It is the same for me as Richard told Jane, it lifts a worry from my shoulders to know my wife will always be taken care of if I am called home to God early."

Just as it had halted Jane's objections when Richard applied the same logic, Elizabeth ceased her opposition—her vocal opposition. She still felt that the enormous amount was three or four times what she would need, but she remained silent on the subject.

"There is nothing I would recommend changing," Phillips informed Bennet and Gardiner concurred.

"Jane and Lizzy, you have no further objections, do you?" Bennet asked.

"None Papa," the two chorused.

Each of the grooms signed their four copies, and Bennet signed all eight. Darcy and Richard set one aside for their solicitor, gave a copy each

to Bennet and his brother, who was his solicitor, and retained one for their wives to keep.

Richard poured a finger of the best cognac he possessed for the six men and a small glass of sherry for the two ladies. Everyone present toasted to the felicity of the two betrothed couples.

When the rest had vacated his study, Richard placed Jane's copy of the marriage contract in his safe. His soon-to-be brother, Darcy, sent Elizabeth's by express to his steward at Pemberley with instructions to leave the document on the master's desk.

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Lady Lucas, Mrs. Long, and Mrs. Goulding had to catch themselves before they gasped when they first saw Fanny Bennet. Even though they had been warned and thought themselves prepared, the reality of seeing the woman who had been very pretty for her age—as well as vivacious and so full of life—was a shock.

Sarah Lucas always considered Fanny Bennet as much a rival as she was a friend. When Charlotte married Stuart Jamison after he had first courted Jane Bennet, Lady Lucas crowed about her daughter's success to Fanny Bennet whenever she could.

Seeing her friend as she now was; all thoughts of their petty rivalry dissipated. Instead, she thought about how tenuous life was, and how much time was wasted on inconsequential nothings.

When Kitty and Lydia came to visit their mother, accompanied by Gigi, and after the introductions were made to Miss Darcy, the three ladies shook their heads to be sure they were not imagining the well-behaved young Bennets they saw before them. Kitty had always been a bit boisterous and a follower of her younger, brash, and flirtatious sister Lydia. The Kitty they saw in front of them was a confident, mature, well-behaved young lady.

If they were shocked to see Kitty's transformation, the three ladies were completely taken aback when they noted the astounding change in Lydia. There was no brashness, no evidence of her devil-may-care attitude, and not one word about officers or any of the other inane subjects she used to speak of.
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When Lydia informed her mother’s friends she was to attend a school for young ladies in Bedfordshire at the start of the new school year, and it had been *her* idea to attend, the three almost fell from their chairs, so complete was their surprise.

All three regretted their decisions to leave their younger daughters, or in the Longs case their wards, at home. In the past, they had discouraged contact with Kitty and Lydia due to their behaviour. If the behaviour they saw today continued when they left Mrs. Bennet’s sickroom, there would no longer be need of such discouragement.

Another change they noted was neither Fanny—with her slates—nor Hattie mentioned one word about how fabulously wealthy Jane’s and Lizzy’s betrotheds were. All either would discuss was how happy they were the two had found men who loved and respected them.

Mr. Bennet was present almost the whole time the ladies visited with their friend. It was another major change they noted, as in times past he would remain in his study reading when his wife had visitors; if he did enter the room, it was to mock or make sport. This was a very different Bennet family than the ladies had known before.

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Lord and Lady Jersey arrived the day before the wedding. Lord Jersey joined the men on a hunt, while his wife, after greeting all of the ladies, made for the nursery to spend time with little Reggie. The De Melvilles were the only ones who were not extended family or close friends invited.

Jane and Elizabeth had met the Countess on their shopping trip to London and liked her very well. While there, they became close to Marie’s mother which led to the invitation to the wedding.

After visiting her grandson, Lady Sarah joined Catherine, Elaine, and Marie in the mistress’s private sitting room. “Are you moving to the dower house Catherine?” Lady Sarah asked.

“No, I am not, but not for want of trying,” Lady Catherine revealed. “Jane will not hear of it, but by tonight I will move to the Rose Suite. I had been living in my Anne’s old chambers, but it is time to move on.”
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“Your two nephews were most fortunate to be accepted by Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. I find I like them both very well,” Lady Sarah stated.

“Sarah, thank you and Cyril for helping when we were in London. The vipers of the *Ton* have been defanged after the overwhelming show of support when we were at the theatre together. The Rhys-Davies bestowing their approval was the thing that drove home the futility of attacking them,” Lady Catherine stated with satisfaction.

“I, for one, am most pleased to be gaining another wonderful daughter,” Lady Elaine said as she squeezed her daughter-in-law’s hand.

“It should come as no surprise to you that I am very partial to your current daughter-in-law,” Lady Sarah teased.

“For me, in addition to the fact I like Jane and her sisters very well, I am happy I will no longer be the only daughter in the Fitzwilliam family,” Marie told the ladies.

“The only change for me will be on paper,” Lady Catherine stated. “They have been my family of the heart for some time already.”

“Is it sure that Mrs. Bennet’s prognosis is so dire?” Lady Sarah asked.

“As much as I wish it were not the case, it is,” Lady Catherine replied. “I have asked Thomas, Mr. Bennet that is, if he preferred we bring in some London experts, but he is happy with Mr. Burnett and accepts there is little or nothing to be done.”

“I applaud you holding the ceremony in the family sitting room so their mother will be able to witness the wedding.” Lady Sarah stated.

“It was the only good solution. According to Mr. Burnett, moving her is fraught with danger, but her husband agrees it is worth the risk as she would become upset were she unable to attend,” Lady Catherine related.

“Were the banns read?” Lady Sarah asked.

“For Jane and Richard, yes. However, due to the location of the ceremony, both grooms acquired special licences so they could marry outside of a church.” Lady Catherine responded.

“Will the rector from Hunsford marry the couples? If I remember correctly, his name is Collins is it not?” Lady Sarah asked.

“The Parson, William Bennet, who will conduct the ceremony is married to the middle Bennet sister, Mary.” Lady Catherine explained how his name had been changed.

“Is what I heard true Sarah? Is your daughter-in-law increasing with her fourth child?” Lady Elaine asked.

Lady Sarah confirmed it was a fact, and the ladies discussed the wonders of childbirth. Lady Catherine looked forward to a time when her *girls and boys* became mothers and fathers, and she, too, would be surrounded by surrogate grandchildren.

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That night there was a family dinner, a loud and carefree event. Given the weddings in the morning, Bennet and Hattie Phillips gave in to Fanny’s urging them to join the festivities. Mr. and Mrs. Hill would stay with their mistress, and before leaving his wife’s bedchamber Bennet extracted a promise from Hill to send for him if there was the slightest reason to do so. His man swore he would—but only if needed.

As it was the night before the wedding, Mary, who would stand up with Jane and Elizabeth, would remain at the manor house, while the two grooms would stay at the parsonage for the night, as would Viscount Hilldale, who would stand up for both his brother and cousin.

Lady Catherine did not repine the fact it was the last time she would preside over a dinner at Rosings Park as the mistress. While Jane and Richard were on their wedding trip she would be the acting mistress, but as soon as Jane and Richard signed the register she intended to take her lead from Jane. Lady Catherine was determined to see Jane become the best mistress the estate ever had and would do anything she could to assist.

She knew how important it was for her to step back so Jane would not hesitate to assert herself as the new lady of the manor. It would not be a difficult transition, as the servants already loved her. Lady Catherine smiled to herself, thinking no one should mistake Jane’s serene countenance for
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weakness. If anyone tried to take advantage of that perceived weakness, they would find out just how much steel there was in Jane's spine.

She turned her head; hearing Elizabeth's tinkling laugh fill the dining parlour. It warmed Lady Catherine's heart to see the way William stared at his betrothed, the love he felt for her obvious to any who cared to look. He seemed to light up whenever he earned one of her laughs.

Yes, Elizabeth would be the making of her nephew. She had the intelligence and quickness to learn what was needed in order to take charge as mistress of Pemberley, Darcy House, and their satellite estates. Lady Catherine was sure she would charm the housekeepers in each location, especially Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley. Once the long-time housekeeper—who had been at her post since William was four—saw how happy the master was with his wife and how much Gigi loved her, any reservations she might have would be lost.

Lady Catherine shook her head as she remembered the nonsense she used to spout about the distinction of rank being maintained. Before her were two peers of the realm sitting with men active in trade, and they were all one big happy family.

She looked to the heavens, hoping her husband and Anne were looking down on her with pride. She missed them, but she had been gifted a second chance with such a wonderful family as this. As she looked at the joy on all sides, Lady Catherine decided after almost six years it was time to put aside her half mourning clothes.

Before the sexes separated, William Bennet stood and claimed everyone's attention, announcing that Mary had felt the quickening that day, informing those from Meryton who did not yet know of their happy news that his Mary was with child.

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As it would have been too hard for Fanny Bennet to use her slates for the talk before the wedding, Jane and Elizabeth were joined by Mary and by their Aunt Maddie, who would provide the truth sensibly. Had the three sisters not been so close, it might have been awkward that their younger sister was present.
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“Your mother wrote a short note to you,” Aunt Maddie said as she handed the note to Jane. Jane opened it as Elizabeth read over her shoulder.

16 May 1811

My dearest daughters, Jane and Lizzy,

I am well aware of my faults, and I am sorry for anything I ever did to hurt either of you, especially the way I used to treat Lizzy. A mother could not be prouder of her daughters than I am of all *of you.*

It is obvious when I see you with your young men how much each of you love and respect each other. Love and respect are the most important things in a true marriage. Do not give into stratagems as I did with my nerves and flutterings; all that earns you is distance from your husband.

Listen to what Maddie and Mary have to tell you as they are both in loving, felicitous, and respectful unions. They are far more qualified to talk to you on this the eve of your weddings, than I, even were I able.

Please tell Mary when I think back to what I told her before her wedding, I cannot but think on that drivel with abhorrence.

Do not make the error your father and I did by allowing yourselves to go to bed angry. I am sure you will succeed where I failed, as you both will understand your husbands so much more than I ever understood my Thomas.

Keep love alive, my darling daughters.

With all my love and wishes for long and felicitous marriages for both of you,

Mama.

Jane and Elizabeth had tears in their eyes as they completed their mother’s missive. Her handwriting used to be flowing and steady, nothing

like the shaky, uneven script on the parchment. The change in her handwriting was but another reminder of their mother's precarious health.

Aunt Maddie and Mary allowed the two brides to dry their eyes. "You both have a good idea of the physical act of joining after having grown up on a working farm, do you not?" Aunt Maddie began. Both nodded with blooming blushes. "There is far more to it…"

Between their aunt and married sister, Jane and Elizabeth learnt much useful information, the most important being, that the taking and giving of pleasure between a married couple in private was never wrong or wanton. Their formerly quiet, pious sister imparted some enlightening tips, including laying to rest the fallacy one should lock their door to their husband when with child.

After their aunt and sister departed the bedchamber, Charlotte Jamison knocked on the door and asked if her friends had any questions, but as they did not, and after sharing her own advice that occasionally being the one to initiate intimacy was never remiss, the three friends talked for an hour.

Eventually, after Charlotte returned to her husband, the sisters fell asleep, unintentionally, in the same bed as they had often done at Longbourn.

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"No thank you, Andy and William, *I* certainly do not need any tips and pointers from either of you," Richard exclaimed. The four were sitting in the parlour at the parsonage with snifters of brandy, and it was inevitable the two grooms would be subjected to some good-natured ribbing from the married men.

"Although I did not experience as many ladies as Richard did, I do not need any of your so-called help, thank you," Darcy stated.

"I did not experience that many—well I suppose there were several more than you. And, unlike you, I never had them running in the opposite direction," Richard returned the jest from whence it came as he waggled his eyebrows. The truth was although Richard had some experience, he had been just as careful as his more serious cousin, the difference being he had loved to flirt—now he would only flirt with his Jane.
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“In all seriousness, here is to brothers, as it is what we will all be after I conduct the rituals on the morrow,” William Bennet stated as he raised his snifter.

“To brothers,” the other three chorused and then all four drained their glasses.

“No more for me,” Darcy insisted when their host offered. “I want to be bright eyed and aware when I marry Elizabeth.”

“Same for me,” agreed Richard. “I cannot wait to start my married life with Jane.”

“Then we should retire for the night,” Andrew suggested.

The four made their way to their bedchambers. For the two married men, it was a foreign experience sleeping in a bed without their wives, and as for the two grooms—bachelors no more after this night—both were looking forward to never sleeping alone again.

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Chapter 32

The maid assigned to Elizabeth almost panicked when she discovered her charge's bed had not been slept in. Remembering the sisters sometimes slept in the other's bed, she had the presence of mind to check with her counterpart, who was serving the soon-to-be new mistress.

That is where the maid found Miss Elizabeth, curled up asleep in Miss Bennet's bed. Each maid woke her lady as gently as she was able. "Good morning Jenny," Elizabeth greeted as her sleep laden eyes flickered open.

"Good morning Lizzy," Jane offered as she forced her eyes open. "What do you think we should do today?"

"My intention is to meet the man I love and marry him. What you plan, I know not," Elizabeth teased her sister in return.

"Come now, you two, it is time to get ready," Mary commanded as she breezed into Jane's bedchamber. "Lizzy, you caused poor Jenny here worry when she went to your bedchamber to wake you." Mary turned to the maids, "Are their baths ready?"

"They are Mrs. Bennet," the two girls chorused.

"I will assist Jane to dress, and Charlotte will help you Lizzy," Mary informed her sisters who had risen from their shared bed.

"What is that divine smell?" Elizabeth asked as her nose detected an aroma she loved.

"It is hot chocolate and pastries which await both of you in the sitting room. I suggest you have something to eat and drink now, as it will be a while before the wedding breakfast," Mary informed her sisters. Both donned a robe and made for the sitting room.

"Clotted cream on top of the hot chocolate, just as we like it," Jane exclaimed happily as she munched on a strawberry pastry.

Elizabeth took a big sip of her drink as it was her absolute favourite decadent treat, resulting in a moustache of cream as she lowered the mug to seek out a raspberry pastry. "Lizzy dear, you need to shave," Mary pointed

out. Without embarrassment, Elizabeth used her tongue to remove the cream from her upper lip.

With the cups drained and two pastries each consumed, the brides made for their bathing rooms to luxuriate in warm baths.

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Lady Catherine reviewed the family sitting room one more time to make sure all was as it should be. It had not been as difficult as she thought it would be to enter the room, though it was the first time she had after suggesting it be the location of the wedding.

Rather than being overwhelmed with sadness, she found it was a relief to be back in this sitting room. Instead of grief, the good memories she had of her late husband and daughter flowed through her.

The room was perfect and would accommodate the number of attendees for the ceremony without issue. There were five rows of chairs separated by an aisle, and the maids had decorated the walls with flowers from the gardens. Her footmen had placed a raised platform in the front of the room where the couples and their attendants would stand in front of the rector. To one side of the platform was a bookstand where the register sat open to the relevant page for the two couples to sign at the appropriate time.

On the wall that faced the gardens, fabric was draped to make sure the windows were covered and the morning sun would not shine directly into the eyes of those seated, which would have made it hard for the guests to view the ceremony. There was a space for Fanny’s bath chair in the front row, allowing her a clear view of her daughters binding their lives to the men they loved.

Pleased everything was as she wished, Lady Catherine left the makeshift wedding chapel to seek out Mrs. Toppin and to thank and compliment her for a job well done.

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At the parsonage, Darcy was awake before the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. He had slept for only a few hours. In his dreams, Elizabeth had been in his arms. He was still marvelling at the fact that after all of his missteps, he was being rewarded with Elizabeth as his wife, partner, and

helpmeet in a few short hours. From tonight onward, his dream would become reality.

It was less than four hours to Seaview Cottage, unlike Richard and Jane, who would travel for more than three days. As soon as Elizabeth agreed to his proposed wedding trip venue, Darcy had dashed off a missive to Mrs. Agatha Spencer and Mr. Riddell Burrows, the housekeeper and butler at the cottage, so the house would be opened, aired, and ready to receive its new mistress.

In the next bedchamber, Richard was just waking. Due to his days as an officer, with his combat experience, he could sleep anywhere. He woke imagining the vision of beauty he would wake up next to on the morrow.

They would spend the night at Fitzwilliam House in London which would be ready to receive his wife when they arrived. There would be three days of travel from London to the house above Lake Windermere. The largest suite had been reserved at the three inns where he and his wife would spend their nights during their journey north.

Richard hoped he was right in thinking his Jane would be happy to travel with the shades lowered in their coach so they could enjoy one another's company without being seen. He knew from their stolen moments together that Jane's serenity hid a deep well of passion.

He still marvelled at the fact that such a woman had accepted him, and he would do anything within his power to make her happy for the rest of their mortal lives together. Richard was snapped out of his reverie by William Bennet knocking on his door to inform him a repast would be served in the dining parlour shortly.

The grooms met in the hallway outside their bedchambers, and when they arrived at the dining parlour they found their host and Andrew seated at the table. "That is not what you are wearing to get married in, is it?" Andrew ribbed his brother and cousin.

"No *Andy*, it is not. I am sure Darcy plans to change after we have broken our fasts. My bath will soon be ready, and Darcy has already availed himself of one," Richard responded with mock indignation.

The four men made short work of the meal, then Richard made his way up for his bath while Darcy returned to his bedchamber where Carstens assisted him into the suit he had chosen for the day. He chose a light-coloured waistcoat to match his beloved's dress.

Less than a half hour later, the four men made the short walk to the manor house.

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Once the two brides had bathed, each was assisted by her designated helper. "Eliza, for someone who had such a short betrothal, your dress is perfect," Charlotte proclaimed once Elizabeth's gown settled over her.

"Thank you Charlotte…" Elizabeth explained how she had selected the fabric when they were in London and added it was merely good luck the dress had been ready in time for her wedding. Thankfully, the seamstresses who had accompanied Jane's gown and trousseau had not needed to make any adjustments to the garment.

Jane and Elizabeth eschewed wearing a bonnet and instead each wore a gossamer veil. Once they were dressed, the two brides met in the sitting room they had shared since moving into the manor house.

"Jane, how beautiful you look!" Elizabeth exclaimed when she spied her sister. "How well the gown looks on you!"

"The same is true of you, in both cases," Jane returned serenely.

"You both look wonderful," Mary stated as Charlotte nodded her agreement.

"It is time to see Mama," Jane reminded them. Charlotte left to join her husband in the makeshift wedding chapel as the three older Bennet sisters made their way to their parents' suite.

"You two look like princesses," Lydia exclaimed as she, Kitty, and Gigi were exiting the Bennet parent's suite.

"Thank you Lyddie," Jane answered for both brides. "Is Mama in the bath chair?"
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“Yes she is. The footmen and Mr. Hill were so very careful when they placed her in it,” Kitty reported.

As much as they wanted to, the younger girls knew it was not the time to hug their sisters. As far as Gigi was concerned, she was already sister to all the Bennets and the wedding would merely formalise that fact.

When Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary entered their mother’s bedchamber, their father and Aunts Cat, Elaine, Maddie, and Hattie were there already. “How well you look,” Aunt Hattie exclaimed when she saw them. She arrested herself knowing it was not the time to hug her nieces.

“My sister has the right of it,” Aunt Maddie agreed.

“My boys are very lucky men,” Lady Catherine informed the group.

“Richard has found the perfect lady in you, Jane,” Lady Elaine added.

“Thank you Mother Elaine,” Jane averred.

Bennet stood next to his wife, holding her right hand. Both had tears at seeing the magnificence of their daughters in their wedding dresses. Without relinquishing his wife’s hand, Bennet used his handkerchief to dry her eye. “It is time,” he stated as he unwillingly released his wife’s hand. The footman, Jeffers, was standing by to push the chair. Before he did, Bennet gently lowered the darkened veil his wife had chosen to wear.

Everyone other than their father and three daughters followed the bath chair out of the room. “I could not be prouder of you girls if I tried—indeed, I am proud of all five of you,” Bennet informed his daughters. “I believe Jane and Elizabeth you will be as happy as Mary, or more so.” He lifted each veil as he gave each bride a kiss on her offered cheek and then bestowed a kiss to Mary’s as he hugged her.

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When Fanny was wheeled into the makeshift wedding chapel, everyone spontaneously stood. Once she was in position, the congregants sat. The back of the room was lined with some of the servants of the estate, including the steward, housekeeper, and butler.

Richard and Darcy, who had been talking quietly to Reverend Bennet and Andrew, approached their mother-in-law-to-be. First Richard, then
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Darcy, lifted her veil and bestowed a kiss on her cheek, and a look of pleasure suffused the right side of her face. After Darcy lowered her veil, he took his place on the platform opposite Richard with the pastor between them.

With a huge smile directed at her husband, Mary made her way to the raised platform to take her place opposite Andrew. When Mrs. Toppin nodded to Reverend Bennet; he gave the signal for the witnesses to stand.

Bennet, with Jane on his right and Elizabeth on his left, made his entry. Although their gowns were similar, each bride looked like the only woman in the world to her groom. No one missed the way each bride's eyes locked with her groom's as they seemed to glide down the aisle on their father's arms.

Bennet stopped just before the dais. He lifted Jane's veil, kissed her cheek, and then placed her hand on Richard's arm as he stepped forward to meet her. He then repeated the same sequence for Elizabeth and Darcy.

Once Darcy led her to their place, Bennet stood to the right of his wife and took her hand. His son-in-law then gave the signal to sit.

As had been discussed two days before, when the betrothed couples had gone over the order of service with William Bennet, he conducted one ceremony, addressing both couples rather than first one and then the other.

When it came to the vows, Jane and Richard recited their vows first, followed by Elizabeth and Darcy; they did the same for the giving and receiving of rings. Defying convention, each bride presented her groom with a ring after she had received hers from him.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," William Bennet intoned.

"Forasmuch as Richard and Jane, and Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth have consented together in holy wedlock and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and thereto have given and pledged their troth either to the other and have declared the same by giving and receiving of rings, and by joining of hands; I pronounce that each couple be man and wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

“God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you; and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. *Amen”*

“You may kiss your brides,” was the final statement from the clergyman.

Darcy saw the mischievous glint in his new brother’s eye. “Do not even think about it, Richard. We are not swapping wives; you kiss Jane and I will kiss my Elizabeth.”

Each groom did just that, albeit with a quick, chaste kiss—but with the anticipation of far more when they were in private. Before signing the register, and amidst cheering from the other witnesses, each newlywed couple stopped to hug and kiss Fanny Bennet again.

After they signed the register where Jane and Elizabeth signed the last name Bennet for the final time, the next hugs and kisses were for Lady Catherine, who had played such a positive role in their arriving at this point.

“Aunt Cat,” Elizabeth said softly to her as she grasped her hand. “Please promise you will spend part of each year with us at Pemberley. I am told that the winters are much harsher, but I understand we have milder summers. I want to make sure when we are blessed with children, they will know their Grandmother Cat well indeed.

With tears of gratitude in her eyes, Lady Catherine simply hugged her niece and nodded with both promise and joy. “Thank you Lizzy. I love you too.”

“Jane cannot be selfish, she is not the only one who needs to learn from you,” Elizabeth teased.

Darcy and his new brothers were standing back watching their wives and sisters hugging. All of them were amused and warmed as they heard Gigi exclaim how she had always wished to be part of a large family.

All the witnesses to the ceremony spent a moment with Mrs. Bennet to congratulate her on having three daughters so well married before they made their way to the ballroom, where the wedding breakfast was being held.

Once only the two newly wed couples and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet remained, Bennet pushed his wife back to her chambers himself. As the Hills, in addition to both maids and footmen, would be in attendance with his wife, Bennet felt easier about joining the celebrations in the ballroom.

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Rosings Park's butler announced the Honourable Mr. and Mrs. Richard Fitzwilliam and Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy to the assembled guests, which resulted in another round of cheering. It was not a large crowd, but those present were vocal in their joy for the two couples.

Just before Jane and Richard completed their circuit of the room, they came to where the rest of the Fitzwilliams and the De Melvilles were seated. "Welcome to the family Jane," her father-in-law said, hugging her yet again.

"Thank you Father Reggie, I could not be happier about becoming part of your family," Jane returned.

"When you all return from your wedding trips, we will plan your wedding ball," Lady Elaine insisted.

"Please call on me to assist you as needed," Lady Sarah offered.

"Although my *little* brother does not deserve a wife such as you, welcome to the family Sister," Andrew offered as he ribbed his brother.

After greeting everyone, the new Mr. and Mrs. Darcy found a seat near Mary, her husband, and Charlotte and Stuart Jamison. They were soon joined by the newly minted Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam. Although the four newlyweds were excited beyond what words could express, they did manage to eat and drink.

"What if Mama has another attack while we are on our wedding trips?" Elizabeth asked.

"If it is serious, we know how to contact you. Let us pray it is not necessary to summon you. Just enjoy yourselves," Mary advised.

"At least you will be less than four hours from here," Jane stated. "Richard and I will be days away."
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“There is little your worrying can accomplish except to spoil your honeymoons,” Charlotte opined. “If you were here, sitting with your mother every day instead of on your wedding trips, would it change anything? Would your mother want you not to go?”

Jane and Elizabeth looked at one another and shook their heads. Good, practical Charlotte—she took charge when needed. “You are correct Charlotte,” Jane responded quietly.

“In fact, if Mama knew we were worrying about her now, I believe she would not be happy,” Elizabeth added.

“Then, my love,” Darcy said as he took his wife’s hand and kissed it, “we will honour her and have the best time we can.”

“And so shall we. Jane, are you ready to say your goodbyes?” Richard enquired.

“Allow me to change,” Jane told her husband. “Are you coming Lizzy?”

Elizabeth rose to follow Jane, as did Mary and Charlotte to assist the same bride they had before the ceremony.

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Two coaches stood ready under the portico while the brides were hugging their father. “Your mother and I want you to enjoy yourselves and not spend your time worrying what might happen here. It is in God’s hands and He will call your mother home in His own time. It is her fervent wish you two have as good a time as possible,” Bennet conveyed to his newly married daughters.

“Charlotte advised us the same, as did Aunt Cat when we spoke to her after changing,” Elizabeth revealed.

“Wise women, those,” Bennet quipped.

Lady Catherine stood with her two nephews as they watched their wives talk to their father. “Each of you have married the best woman for yourself. Do not make me come and paddle either of you if you ever think of mistreating them,” Lady Catherine jested.
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She had no doubt her nieces would be treated like the queens they were. There was so much love and respect between them, it was not something she would ever have to concern herself with.

“I second my wife’s invitation to you. You know you have been far more than an aunt to me and Gigi.” Darcy hugged his aunt tightly.

“We will consider giving Aunt Cat up for a few *weeks* at a time,” Richard jested.

Once all the aunts, uncles, sisters, and brothers made their farewells, the two couples boarded their coaches. The Fitzwilliam conveyance led off and turned north out of the drive, while the Darcy carriage turned south.

The group of farewellers returned to the house after the Darcy coach was no longer visible.

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Chapter 33

On their second day at Seaview Cottage, Darcy introduced his wife to the wonders of the private cove. There was only about fifty yards of beach, but as her husband had described, it was completely private. The clifftop protruded some yards out from the cliff face, so if someone were willing to risk life and limb to attempt to see the beach below, they could only see the water.

As it was private property, well-guarded by footmen—one of them the ever-faithful Jeffers who Richard had agreed to release if he wanted to work for the Darcys, which he did—and outriders, no one would wander onto their land, either in error or by design.

On this day about a sennight after they arrived, Elizabeth reclined on an enormous blanket her William had spread on the shaley beach. Like her husband who was cooling off in the water, she was as naked as the day she had been born.

From the first night when she had become his wife in every way, there was no shyness between them. Aunt Maddie’s and Mary’s words had been proven over and over again during the days Mr. and Mrs. Darcy had been in residence.

The first time they had joined, there had been some little pain, but William had been so solicitous of her. She had not required it of him, but he had waited until all traces of the pain were gone, and not long after he continued he had attained his release.

It had taken several more times, but as they learnt from one another, both being fast learners, her husband routinely brought her to release before they joined, and at least once, she had achieved a second wave of bliss as her husband reached his own climax.

Between love making, when they had a little time, Elizabeth wondered at the beauty of the house. The ground-level drawing room had large windows facing the sea, while at the same time giving an unimpeded view up the coast towards Brighton. The master suite was above the drawing

room and had similar windows. At night, they could see the lights of Brighton along the shore.

So far, on this day, they had joined in the sea once and on the blanket a second time, which had led to Elizabeth's husband's need to cool off in the green water of the cove. Elizabeth allowed her eyes to rake over her husband's statuesque form as he returned to her.

"William, I thought the cold water would inhibit that," she stated as she looked at the growing evidence of her husband's arousal.

"It is all your fault, minx. How can I look at a naked nymph lying on a blanket and not be in this state?" No more words were needed as the two again enjoyed the physical manifestation of their love.

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On the fourth day after their wedding, Jane and Richard Fitzwilliam arrived at Lakeside House. During their days of travel, the shades had been lowered many times as both found it nearly impossible to keep their hands off one another.

Much to his delight, the night of their wedding Richard discovered his supposition about the depths of Jane's passion, had been underestimated. When she had cried out softly as her maidenly barrier was breached, Richard tried to stop to give her time to recover, but Jane had urged him on instead.

They had slept mayhap an hour the first night, and not much more each of the following three nights at inns along the way. And as for their activities in the conveyance, one need never count the hours of a drive when so pleasurably occupied. Luckily the driver, his assistant, and the two footmen on the rear step never let on they heard any noises from within the coach.

As the coach came to a stop, Richard, who needed to stretch his legs, had the door open before the footman could move, turning to assist his wife to alight. "Richard, what a view," Jane exclaimed as she looked down on Lake Windemere.

"We will explore the area, my Jane—in a few days," Richard added as he waggled his eyebrows at his wife.
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“If you expect me to complain that we will be *confined* to the house for a few days,” Jane replied saucily, “you will be waiting until the Second Coming.”

“You are a woman after my own heart,” her husband replied contentedly.

The house was on a hill near the summit, allowing a magnificent view of Lake Windermere and some of the smaller lakes as well. Husband and wife stood with fingers intertwined, drinking in the beauty of the view laid out before them before making their way into the house where the housekeeper and butler awaited them.

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Almost ten days after the wedding, the only ones left in residence at Rosings Park were Thomas and Fanny Bennet, Hattie Phillips, the two unmarried Bennet sisters, Gigi, and Lady Catherine.

As Lady Catherine approached Fanny Bennet’s bedchamber, she heard the wailing of Fanny’s sister. Lady Catherine knew immediately that Fanny Bennet had been called home to God and no longer inhabited the mortal coil.

Even before she entered the bedchamber, Lady Catherine instructed a footman to make haste to summon Mr. Burnett. Her supposition was confirmed when she entered the bedchamber. Thomas Bennet was holding his wife’s hand and crying silently, while his sister Phillips lamented.

“Please accept my condolences, Thomas and Hattie,” Lady Catherine offered softly as she approached the new widower.

“She is no longer suffering,” Bennet managed. “She was able to witness her daughters marry, and I believe—notwithstanding her physical limitations—she lived some of the happiest days of her life. We fell in love all over again. She passed away knowing her family’s future is secure and all of her daughters will do well for themselves. How much time I…”

“This is not a time for self-indulgence,” Lady Catherine admonished gently. “As you said, Fanny is at peace and there is nothing *any* of us can do to change the past. Do you think your wife would want you to berate yourself when you had just proven these last weeks you did indeed love her,
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or would she want you to take care of yourself and the two daughters still under your protection?”

“Thank you Catherine, I needed a kick to the…head to wake me up. You are absolutely correct; there is much to do. I must inform my daughters who are here,” Bennet stated as he started to stand. “Would you mind sending for my daughter and son at the parsonage?”

“Of course I will,” Lady Catherine waved off his even having to ask.

“We must send for Jane and Lizzy,” Hattie Phillips interjected between her sobs.

“No!” Both Bennet and Lady Catherine replied simultaneously.

“Hattie, Fanny and I discussed this eventuality while you were resting one day, and she wrote—I have the letter for you to see if you desire—under no circumstances are we to call the newlyweds back from their wedding trips.” Bennet raised his hand before his loquacious sister could reply. “And, under no circumstances will I go against Fanny’s wishes in this, as I know she would be very upset if we did.”

“I suppose if you put it like that, it must be so,” Hattie thankfully capitulated quickly.

“Telling them now will change nothing. Allow them some peace, and when they return, they will begin their mourning for their beloved mother,” Lady Catherine soothed.

Bennet gave Lady Catherine a look of appreciation for her intervention and for calming his sister on the subject. “May I use Richard’s study after I talk to my family? I have many letters to write,” Bennet requested.

“Of course you may. Let me know if I can be of assistance with anything,” Lady Catherine replied.

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As soon as Mary and William arrived at the manor house, they were shown into a parlour where Bennet awaited them. Just after the two sat, Kitty and Lydia were shown into the room.
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“Mama is gone,” Lydia stated as her tears begun to fall, for there was no mistaking their father’s sadness.

“As much as I would love to refute your supposition Lydia, I cannot,” Bennet responded. “Mr. Burnett arrived a few minutes before I joined you and he surmises your mother passed away while she slept. She is at peace now, with no pain or further suffering.

“Aunt Hattie discovered your mother this morning. She was already gone,” Bennet explained. “We will all miss her, me more than anyone, but she is with God now.”

By now all three girls were crying quietly. Bennet sat between Kitty and Lydia and hugged them to himself, giving each a shoulder to cry on. Mary was in her husband’s arms as he whispered soothing words to her.

“What about Jane and Lizzy?” Mary asked. Bennet explained what their mother wanted and how he agreed, and none of them could find it in themselves to disagree with Mrs. Bennet’s preference.

After informing his daughters, Bennet sat down and wrote a number of expresses. One to his brother Phillips, one to the Gardiners, one to Mr. Dudley—Longbourn’s parson—and the final one to Sir William Lucas to ask him to make the news known in and around Meryton.

By the next day, Rosings had been closed, and the whole party left accompanying Fanny Bennet on her final journey back to Longbourn.

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Fanny Bennet was in her final resting place alongside generations of Bennets who had come before her. The funeral was well attended, men from each of the four and twenty families in the neighbourhood were at both the service and the graveside. The service itself had been led jointly by Mr. Dudley and William Bennet.

Mr. Bennet asked Lady Catherine to be acting mistress, thus allowing Mary to be free to mourn with her sisters rather than worry about the running of the house. Additionally, she made sure to involve the three ladies who had attended the double wedding. They were grateful they had been able to see Fanny in person one more time.
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Any questions about Jane and Elizabeth ceased once word circulated that it was one of Mrs. Bennet's final wishes that her daughters were not to be informed of her death or be recalled from their wedding trips if she succumbed in their absence.

Gigi, having lost her father six years previously, was able to empathise with Kitty and Lydia and comfort them in their grief. In addition, the two subdued and mourning girls were surrounded by all of their peers in the neighbourhood.

Once the three families who had attended the wedding returned and reported how calm and well behaved the two youngest Bennet daughters were, especially Lydia, the parents who had warned their daughters away from the two lifted any embargo they had formerly put in place on associating with the youngest Bennets.

After a few days, the number of callers returned to a normal level. The Gardiners chose to stay with Frank and Hattie Phillips so they would not crowd Longbourn. Later in the week, the Phillipses and Gardiners joined their family for dinner at Longbourn to discuss how best to notify the Darcys and the Fitzwilliams once they returned. They expected the couples would be angry and hurt, but it was necessary to discuss this now, because the Darcys were to return in three days, and the Fitzwilliams a few days afterwards.

"If it were me, as much as you do dislike travel, I would meet my daughters in Town and tell them. It would be best coming from you," Lady Catherine suggested to Bennet.

"I know you are correct Catherine. Gardiner, you and Maddie return to London on Saturday, do you not?" Bennet asked. Gardiner allowed it was so. "In that case, as you came with only Lilly, would I be able to ride with you?"

"Of course you would be welcome," Gardiner spoke for his wife and himself.

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The second Monday in June, on the tenth day of that month, Elizabeth and William Darcy returned to Darcy House after a most enjoyable sojourn
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at Seaview Cottage. They had promised themselves they would return there for at least a month each summer, with any family members who wanted to join them.

“If only Mama could travel to the cottage! She always wanted to bathe in the sea,” Elizabeth told her husband as they walked up the steps.

After greeting the lined-up servants warmly, the master and mistress were about to go to their suite when Killion handed his master a note addressed to both of them. “William, it is in Aunt Maddie’s hand,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “What does it say?”

“It asks us to visit the Gardiners as soon as we are able, nothing more,” Darcy told his wife as he handed the short note to her.

“Can we leave right away?” Elizabeth asked, a feeling of foreboding growing in the pit of her stomach.

Within minutes, the two Darcys were back in their coach and on their way to Gracechurch Street. When they arrived, Elizabeth saw the black wreath on the door and went weak at the knees.

“Surely, it is not your uncle,” Darcy surmised.

“No, I am sure it is Mama,” Elizabeth stated as her tears began to flow.

When the door opened and the first person she saw was her father standing there with a black armband, she was certain. As she had done so many times when she was a young girl, Elizabeth ran into her father’s outstretched arms.

Once they were all seated, Bennet told them Fanny had passed almost a fortnight previously. Not unexpectedly, Elizabeth turned to her father while she held her husband’s hand tightly. “Why were we not notified when Mama passed?” she asked accusingly.

“I prefer to let your mother answer that,” Bennet said as he handed his second daughter a letter in her mother’s shaky script.

18 May 1811

Jane and Elizabeth,

Yesterday was one of the best days of my life. I saw two of my beautiful daughters marry men worthy of them.

If you are reading this on your return from your honeymoons, then I am now with God and at peace. Please understand I made your father and Cathy promise neither of you would be notified of my passing before you returned.

For me it is too late, but you, my darling daughters, will only have one wedding trip. It was my decision, and mine alone you were not summoned, so please, if you want to be angry with anyone, let it be with me.

I love you, my girls,

If I may make a last demand of you, go live the best lives you are able.

Your mother.

Elizabeth fell against her husband as great, wracking sobs emanated from her chest. What her mother said resonated with her, and any anger she felt at not being notified drained from her body. Her mother had wanted her and William to have as good a time on their trip as possible, and they had honoured that wish.

The next day, Elizabeth had two of her dresses died black and ordered additional mourning dresses and gowns. By early afternoon, the two Darcys were on their way to Longbourn to be with their sisters.

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Two days later, when Jane and Richard arrived at Fitzwilliam House, they were met with a note identical to the one handed to the Darcys. They also turned around and made for Gracechurch Street immediately.

The scene that played out was similar to the one two days previously. Jane felt a great deal of guilt, which was assuaged when she read her mother’s wishes penned in her own hand.
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Just over four and twenty hours later, the Fitzwilliam coach, with Bennet as one of the passengers, was on its way to Hertfordshire.

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As it can be imagined, the reunion of all five Bennet sisters and their newest sister, Gigi, was bittersweet. So they could all be together for their three months of deep mourning, Richard and Darcy signed a short-term lease for Netherfield Park. After a few weeks in residence, the two decided to make a joint purchase of that estate, so they would always have a place close to London and next to Longbourn to stay at when needed.

Mary and William Bennet accepted Bennet's offer for them to move to Longbourn so William could learn the running of the estate; the new steward had already made improvements which would lead to higher yields and profits.

The acceptance was made after a discussion with his patron, who happened to be his brother. Richard accepted his brother’s recommendation that his curate would be an excellent candidate for the Hunsford living. Mary and William sent a note to their housekeeper, asking the parsonage servants to pack their belongings as they would not return during their deep mourning period and send everything to Longbourn.

One afternoon, Bennet was sitting next to Lady Catherine in the park, watching the *youngsters*—as they called everyone younger than they—spending time in the park. “How did you move on after your husband and daughter were taken from you?” Bennet asked.

“I do not believe I ever did, not fully. It is only around the time of the weddings I finally put aside my half mourning and dared enter the family sitting room. You would not have liked to know the person I was before I re-evaluated my life,” Lady Catherine shared.

“I understand that, and I know I am not the same man I was before Fanny was stricken. I have a feeling you were about to berate me before the tragedy struck, and it would have been well deserved,” Bennet observed.

“We both have pasts we are not proud of,” Lady Catherine pointed out.

“How did you do it? How did you point your nephews and my daughters in the direction they needed to travel without seeming to do so?”
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Bennet wondered.

“Once I thought all it took was an imperious command and my will would be done. I learnt to ask questions, questions which would make the person think, to make their own decisions, to allow them to choose their path,” Lady Catherine explained.

“Catherine, you were in charge the whole time, even though they did not know it,” Bennet realised.

“I was not in charge, just nudging those who needed to find their correct paths,” Lady Catherine clarified. As she looked around, she saw part of her much-enlarged family. She would miss her late husband and daughter until her dying day, but she had much to live for.

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Epilogue

March 1823

“Thomas, it is time to depart for Rosings Park. I do not want to miss any time with our grandchildren,” Lady Catherine Bennet insisted.

“You know I hate to disappoint you, my dear we will leave on time,” Bennet assured his wife. “I know how important punctuality is to you.”

Bennet had mourned his Fanny for more than a year. It was three more years before he convinced himself there was a chance for happiness with another woman. If that lady had offered him one or two hints along the way, he had not objected.

They married a little after four years from the date Fanny passed away. The wedding took place at Snowhaven, as Lady Catherine, who had not married the first time from her childhood home, requested of her brother and sister to have the ceremony at Matlock Church and the wedding breakfast at the estate.

This time Lady Catherine married for love. For the first two years after his late wife passed, Thomas Bennet spent most of his time between Pemberley and Rosings Park, allowing Mary and William to establish themselves at Longbourn.

The two saw each other only briefly during that time, though they maintained the friendship they formed during Fanny’s convalescence at Rosings Park. Much of the time Bennet was at Rosings, Lady Catherine had been with one of the Derbyshire or Staffordshire families. Bennet had not believed he would marry again, and he certainly had not expected to fall in love.

They had seen each other occasionally at Rosings Park, such as when the family met in Kent for Easter each year. Lydia split her holidays from school between Longbourn, Rosings Park, and Pemberley.

Kitty and Gigi became even closer, and for most of the year Kitty lived wherever Gigi was. Even though Kitty would be twenty and Gigi nineteen,

the two decided to wait until Lydia was eighteen so the three of them could come out together.

Mary safely delivered Thomas Collin Bennet—Tommy—the heir to Longbourn, in October of 1811. Elizabeth and Darcy were gifted with Francene Anne Darcy—Franny—in November of 1812. Johnathan Fitzwilliam—Johnny—was born in June of 1813.

By the second Easter visit after the double wedding, Jane was heavy with their first child, a son an heir. When the family assembled for the birth of Jane's first child, Bennet started to allow the attraction he had felt for Lady Catherine for some years to progress beyond friendship.

After the birth of Jane's and Richard's babe, Lady Catherine and Bennet began to gravitate toward one another whenever they were in company. In July of 1815, while the two walked around the lake at Pemberley, Bennet proposed and Lady Catherine accepted his hand.

The wedding was held at the end of August. Tommy Bennet, almost four, was the page, and the nearly three-year-old Franny Darcy was the flower girl. By the time the two married, Mary and William had added two more children to their family, twins_ a boy and a girl born a year and a half before the wedding. When Thomas and Catherine lived in Hertfordshire, they resided at Netherfield Park to avoid intruding on their son and daughter at Longbourn.

Elizabeth gave birth to Bennet Robert Darcy—Ben—six months before the wedding. Jane was with child again, about five months along. Richard was not shy about telling one and all he wanted a daughter just like her mother.

Lydia completed two years at her school. She loved the education she received and became an extremely accomplished young lady. If one had never known Lydia as she used to be, one would have thought they were being teased if told about the old Miss Lydia.

Kitty worked with a drawing master for just over a year. He had honed and developed her innate abilities. She had a prodigious talent and found pleasure in sketching her growing brood of nieces and nephews.

The three girls made their curtsies before the Queen and came out during the season of 1814. All three had suitors in their first season, but none captured their interest. During the little season of 1815, Gigi met Lord Mark Creighton, Marquess Hamworthing and heir to his Grace, the Duke of Devonshire. After a month-long courtship, followed by a three-month betrothal, the two were married in March of 1816.

When the Duke of Devonshire was felled by a heart attack less than a year after she married, Lady Georgiana Creighton became a duchess when her husband ascended to the dukedom. It was at her sister Georgiana's wedding that Lydia Bennet met Lord James Carrington, Viscount Amberleigh. He was heir to the Earl of Holder, whose seat was Holder Heights in Staffordshire.

When the Viscount requested a courtship, Lydia first told him all about her youthful indiscretion and allowed him to withdraw the offer without his honour being engaged. He only cared who Lydia was currently, not who she had been when she was a gullible girl of fifteen. Lydia married her viscount from Longbourn in November of 1816.

Although she had given up her childish desire to marry before her older sisters long ago, Kitty could not help pointing out Lydia had married before at least one of her older sisters. In December of 1816, when the family met at Pemberley for Christmastide, Kitty renewed her acquaintance with Mr. Patrick Elliot, the clergyman holding the livings of Pemberley, Lambton, and Kympton.

One day, Kitty was sketching when the rector was walking the grounds of Pemberley, his not yet two-year-old daughter Grace in his arms. She had known, along with the rest of the family, that his wife had died after birthing the pretty little girl.

Grace had demanded her father allow her to see what the pretty lady was doing, and not able to deny his little angel anything, he had requested permission, which Kitty had granted.

Kitty had fallen in love with Grace first, and not long after with the darling girl's father, who returned the sentiment in full measure. By February of 1817, the two were married, and for the first time in her almost three years, Grace had a Mama.

After her son, Elizabeth became with child four more times. A son was followed by a daughter, and then by a miscarriage before she felt the quickening. Both Pemberley's doctor and a well-noted accoucheur opined she would not be able to become with child again. Both were proven wrong when identical twin Darcy girls—to their father's delight, as they grew they became exact replicas of his beloved wife, in looks and character—arrived in February of 1821, just before the couple's tenth wedding anniversary.

Jane and Richard's second child had been another son. After him the couple were gifted with two daughters, the first of whom was the splitting image of her mother—to her father's pleasure. The couple had no more children but did not repine the fact given how happy they were with their four offspring who were each an enjoyable mix of their father's affability and their mother's serenity, strength, and sweetness.

Andrew and Marie Fitzwilliam had five children after little Reggie, four daughters and then a second son. The two were happy at Hilldale and hoped Lord Matlock would remain as spry as he was for many years to come, as Andrew was in no hurry to inherit his father's title.

The Earl and Countess of Matlock spent much of their time visiting grandchildren, grandnieces, and grandnephews. By 1822, Lord Reggie had turned over the running of the Matlock holdings to his son Andrew and effectively retired.

Three years after their twins, the Bennets of Longbourn were gifted with another daughter; two years after that, yet another girl arrived. William Bennet became a conscientious landlord and master, who worked hard with his steward and was never uninvolved in the running of his estate. He was never indolent like as father-in-law used to be before his first wife's illness.

As parcels of land abutting Longbourn became available, he purchased them, thereby expanding Longbourn's land and the number of tenants. His holdings doubled when he purchased all the land his brothers owned at Netherfield other than the home farm and park. He suspected the land was sold for a fraction of its real worth. Nothing he said moved his brothers to raise the price, and they threatened they would lower it further if he did not accept graciously.

The expanded estate earned around eight thousand pounds per annum. In consultation with his wife, William Bennet decided to rebuild the manor house, more than doubling its size. The family lived at Netherfield until the new manor house was ready for occupation in August of 1818.

Gigi and her duke had two children; a son followed by a daughter when she fell with child again. Her brother, who had always dreaded the day he would have to give over protection of his sister to another, could not have been more pleased his sister lived less than three hours from Pemberley.

Lydia and Jamey had a daughter, born two years after they married, and a son three years later. The Earl and Countess of Holder had been good friends of Lord Reggie and Lady Elaine, which helped them integrate seamlessly into the large extended family.

In April of 1818, Kitty Elliot bore her husband a son. As happy as Grace had been to have a Mama, she was even happier when she became a big sister. Grace loved that she suddenly had a plethora of family members, because her birth mother was the last living member of a very small family. Patrick Elliot did have family in Shropshire, but they were estranged as his family had felt he should not have chosen the church as a career.

By the time the families converged on Rosings Park for the Easter holiday of 1823, Kitty and Patrick had two sons and three daughters. Grace felt herself the luckiest of girls to have four younger siblings to help look after.

Even before her wedding to Thomas Bennet, Lady Catherine had been a grandmother to the children born to their family. The greatest change was that rather than Aunt Cat, she was now called Mother Cat by all of her former nieces and nephews, save for Andrew and Marie.

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As for the Bingleys, Charles Bingley ran and expanded his carriage works. Two years after Darcy and Elizabeth were married, Darcy bumped into Bingley, who was in London on business.

After a few meetings at their club and a number of conversations, Darcy was happy to see Bingley had matured and grown a spine of his own. They would occasionally see one another over the years, but their relationship
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was never as close as it had been. In 1815, Bingley married the daughter of one of his business partners.

The Hursts were happy together. After five childless years, Louisa Hurst was granted a son, followed by a daughter two years later. They lived at the estate in Yorkshire, and when the elder Mr. Hurst went to his final reward in 1820, Hurst became the master of Winsdale.

After her epiphany, Miss Bingley never reverted to her former self. When she was five and twenty, she met a man with a small estate in Scotland while he was visiting her brother's business. The two courted briefly, were betrothed, and married within a month.

The irony was the new Mrs. McTavet lived with her husband and three children on their small estate, only twenty miles from the Darcys' Scotland holding. The former Miss Bingley saw the Darcys in the town near the estate on one occasion, but wisely never approached them.

Of George Wickham, nothing was known except he arrived in Australia. He was never heard of or from again.

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"Look, Mama and Papa," a ten-year-old Johnny Fitzwilliam exclaimed excitedly. "I see Grandmama's and Grandpapa's carriage."

"Good eyes Son," Richard stated proudly. Jane, Richard, and their four children, the youngest now three, waited under the portico to welcome the arriving family members.

The Darcys, Elliots, Creightons, and Carringtons had all arrived earlier that day from London. The Longbourn Bennets and the rest of the Fitzwilliams were expected the following morning.

"Mother Cat and Papa, you are very welcome," Jane hugged and kissed the cheek of each in turn.

"I second that," Richard stated. He was soon drowned out by the excited voices of their four children, each wanting their grandparents' attention for themselves.

"We are very flattered at the welcome," Lady Catherine stated warmly. "We saw your other grandparents recently and they will arrive on the
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morrow.”

“We know Grandmama, but we have missed you and Grandpapa,” Johnny, the eldest, explained. “We missed Grandmother and Grandfather just as much and will be happy when they arrive.”

“Where are all of your cousins?” Bennet asked as he ruffled the boy’s hair.

“Our sisters, brothers, and their children are washing and changing,” Jane reported. “As much as the children all wanted to play, their parents insisted they get settled first.”

“Thomas, will you take a turn with me in the gardens before we see the horde?” Lady Catherine requested with a smile.

“Of course Cathy; it will be my pleasure,” Bennet offered his wife his arm, and she wound hers around it.

They walked in silence for a little while, and then Lady Catherine indicated a bench under an extremely old oak. “All those years ago, after Lewis and Anne were taken from me, if you had told me I would be part of the family I have today, married to a man who I love with all that I am, I would have had you consigned to Bedlam.”

“Just as I never imagined I would find love again after Fanny died,” Bennet stated. “At least from the time she was stricken until she passed, Fanny and I rekindled the love we had when we married.” Bennet paused. “This is the place where we both lost parts of our family, but it is also the location you and I found love for one another.”

“True. Just look at the magnificent family we have,” Lady Catherine said softly. “I do not wish the pain either of us suffered on anyone, but without events happening just as they did, we would not be here now, and it is likely some of our children would not have found each other.”

“Except it did happen, and as I told you some years ago, you, my darling Cathy, had a hand in all of it,” Bennet challenged.

“Be that as it may, it is time to make for the house,” Lady Catherine informed her husband. “Are you prepared to face the mob of children waiting for us there?”

“Yes Wife, I am more than ready to be with our beloved grandchildren and children,” Bennet owned.

“In that case,” Lady Catherine teased with a sparkle in her eyes, “into the breach once more we go.”

Catherine and Thomas Bennet stood. They kissed languidly, and then made for the house and their waiting family, arm in arm.

~~~The End~~~

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About the Author

My website is live at www.shanag-author.com. I have three children and after finally leaving a disastrous first marriage, a few years later, I found my soul mate—we had been together in our late teens—who I believed I had lost forever over 25 years ago when we separated over a youthful, and stupid, misunderstanding. We miraculously and unexpectedly reconnected about 4 years ago. It was written in the stars because the chances of our meeting again as we did were billions to one. We are now married. I live with the love of my life, and our animals, in Australasia.

Pride and Prejudice was assigned to me in an English literature class when I was 15. It was not my favourite book, as I was forced to read it. I did read it, but under protest in order to pass the class. I forgot about the book until I was in my 30's when in 2004 I discovered and watched, and then fell in love with, the 1995 6 part Pride and Prejudice version made in England for TV. I purchased a copy of the DVD which has been watched more times that I care to count. The tipping point was seeing the 2005 big screen adaption of P&P. In my humble opinion, Colin Firth is my preferred Darcy.

Not long after seeing the movie I acquired and read the complete works of Jane Austen on my Kindle. I read them all starting with Pride & Prejudice, it is my favourite by far of Miss Austen's great works, in fact my favourite, full stop. After I read it three of four times over, I wistfully said to myself: 'it is a great pity that she never wrote a sequel to P&P.'

I was searching the Kindle Store for books and for the fun of it I entered "Pride and Prejudice Sequel' into the search bar not expecting any results. The rest is history. I discovered the myriad of JAFF books. Once I devoured all of the sequels and continuations that I could find, I reluctantly tried a variation. I had the wrong-headed belief that I would not enjoy a variation as much as sequels. Boy was I ever wrong!

The more that I read, the more I started thinking of scenarios and heard stories in my head. I decided to start writing, something that I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would ever do. Today I am the proud owner of well over 1,500 JAFF novels that I have acquired on Amazon.

Although I never thought in my wildest dreams I would ever write a novel, I decided to try with my first offering, ‘A Change of Fortunes’ and I thought that would be it. Then other plot bunnies jumped into my head. Writing had become a full-time occupation for me. It seems that the more I write, the more I want to write. How many of us can say they truly love what they do for work? It is not work for me but a great pleasure.

I write under a penname as I value mine and my family’s privacy highly. Part of my reasoning stems from some years ago I was relentlessly attacked online which is also the reason I do not have any social media presence under my penname or my real name. To call what I suffered bullying would vastly understate what happened. Let me ask you to imagine the worst kind of cyber stalking and cruelty and then multiply it by a factor of 100, or more!

It is the reason I am very sensitive to non-constructive and nasty criticism. I have no issue with criticism as long as it is in fact constructive. Especially after my experiences when I was attacked, I have a deep distrust of those who hide behind anonymity to hurl cruel and nasty comments. Please stay well, happy, and safe.

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[1] A bargeboard or rake fascia is a board fastened to each projecting gable of a roof to give it strength and protection, and to conceal the otherwise exposed end grain of the horizontal timbers or purlins of the roof.

[2] The original form of ‘I want to give you a piece of my mind.’

[3] Artistic licence. Reverand Fordyce was married to Henrietta Cummyng in 1771, but they had no children.

[4] The original version of curiosity killed the cat.

[5] I am taking artistic licence here, it was not the worst of the debtors’ prisons

[6] Regency England way of saying ‘I messed up’ or ‘I screwed up’.

[7] Described in Homer's Iliad as the physically ugliest man who fought in the Trojan War

[8] . As the latter was not a religious holiday, there was no impediment with the Church of England with regards to marriages on the day.

[9] Riviere is a French word that means river. It can also refer to a style of necklace or bracelet as it does here.

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