

Excerpt “Elizabeth Bennet’s Deception: A Pride and Prejudice Vagary”
Chapter One

Darcy froze in his steps.

“It could not be,” he whispered to his foolish heart. He returned to Pemberley a day early to make the final arrangements for the surprise he meant for his sister. He left Georgiana in the care of his friend, Charles Bingley, and Bingley’s sisters. Darcy experienced a twinge of guilt at his expecting Georgiana to contend with Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst, but Miss Bingley’s effusions sorely wore Darcy’s patience away, and so he made his excuses.

He cut across Pemberley’s parkland to come forward from the road, which led behind it to the stables. Upon his approach, Darcy noted the unmarked carriage before the estate. Recognizing the possibility of visitors in the common rooms, he remained in the shadows, meaning to enter the private quarters through the back entrance; yet, the appearance of a young woman upon the rise leading to the river brought Darcy to a stumbling halt. From a distance, the woman had the look of Elizabeth Bennet, but he did not approach. Darcy acted the fool previously and refused to be found wanting again.

Perhaps a month after his disastrous proposal to Miss Elizabeth at Hunsford Cottage, Darcy spotted a young lady entering Hatchard’s Books, and without thinking, he followed her.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said as he came up behind her, but when the woman spun around to greet him, the lady was not the woman whose being haunted Darcy’s thoughts for almost a year.

The girl’s forehead furrowed in confusion.

“Pardon me, Sir. Do we hold an acquaintance?”

Darcy bowed stiffly.

“It is I, miss, who begs your pardon. From behind, I thought you a long-standing acquaintance.” He stepped back to widen the distance between them. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

The girl’s frown line deepened.

“Yet, you called me by my Christian name.” The tone of the girl’s voice spoke of her suspicions.

Darcy swallowed the blush of embarrassment rushing to his cheeks.

“If you are also an ‘Elizabeth,’ it is purely a coincidence,” he insisted.

“I am.”

Darcy rushed his apologies when he spied a matron marching to the young woman’s rescue.

“Then I am doubly apologetic. My actions placed you in an awkward position. Please forgive me.” He held enough experience with Society mamas to know when to make a speedy exit.

During his return to Darcy House, Darcy silently cursed his inanity for stumbling into what was a more humiliating situation. Later, in his study, he admitted to the empty room, if not to himself, that he missed looking upon Elizabeth Bennet’s animated countenance.

“If it were she,” Darcy warned his conscience, “Miss Elizabeth would have, in all probability, presented me the direct cut. The lady spoke quite elegantly upon her disdain,

and you are imprudent to think your letter would change Miss Elizabeth's mind. Accept the fact the woman is not for you."

And so when Darcy noted another possessing Elizabeth's likeness upon the streets in the warehouse district of Cheapside a fortnight later, he turned away with the knowledge that as a gentleman's daughter, Miss Elizabeth would not be found in Cheapside. He strove to convince himself that he would soon replace Elizabeth Bennet's charms with that of another.

Belatedly, realizing he studied the woman standing upon the rise longer than was proper, Darcy slipped through an open patio door to escape the vision of Elizabeth Bennet at Pemberley, which so often followed him about. It was deuced frustrating to look for the woman wherever he his steps took him.

"Leave it be," Darcy chastised as he crossed the drawing room only to be brought up short a second time by the appearance of his housekeeper.

Mrs. Reynolds caught at her chest in obvious surprise.

"Mr. Darcy," she gasped. "I did not realize you returned, Sir."

Darcy caught her elbow to steady the stance of his long-time servant. Mrs. Reynolds came to Pemberley when he was but three. She, Mr. Nathan, his butler, and Mr. Sheffield, his valet, all knew the Darcy family's employ for over twenty years. "I noted visitors, and as I was not dressed properly, I thought to avoid the necessary greetings," he explained.

"I have just this minute turned them over to the gardener," Mrs. Reynolds assured. Darcy swallowed the question rushing to his lips.

"Very well. Then I am free to seek the privacy of my quarters."

"Yes, Sir." Mrs. Reynolds glanced toward the entrance hall. "Should I have a footman bring up bath water, Sir?"

Darcy nodded his agreement. Again, he fought the urge to ask of the estate's visitors, but Darcy chose not to punish his pride with false hopes.

"Has Miss Darcy's gift arrived?"

"Yes, Sir. As you instructed I had the instrument placed in Miss Darcy's sitting room. It fits perfectly. Miss Georgiana will know such joy."

He smiled with the woman's kindness.

"My sister deserves a bit of happiness. After my ablutions, I mean to view the arrangement personally."

"Very good, Sir." Mrs. Reynolds started away to do his bidding. Yet, despite his best efforts, Darcy called out to her. "Yes, Master William. Is there something more?"

Darcy's eyes searched the staircase where he often imagined Elizabeth Bennet standing. Such yearning swelled his chest that he experienced difficulty breathing. *It is best not to know*, he cautioned his wayward thoughts.

"Would you tell the footman I will require his assistance in dressing. Mr. Sheffield and my coach will arrive later this evening."

"Certainly, Sir."

"And you and I should speak before Mr. Bingley's family arrives. Miss Bingley did not enjoy the vista from her guest room when last the Bingleys were here."

A scowl of disapproval crossed his housekeeper's features. Darcy knew many of his servants prayed he would not take up with Caroline Bingley. He expected if he were to act so foolish, he would receive a large number of notices of leaving from his staff.

“Perhaps before supper, Sir,” Mrs. Reynolds said stiffly.

Darcy nodded his approval, and the lady strode away; yet, he whispered to her retreating form.

“Have no fear. Only one woman knows my approval as the Mistress of Pemberley.” Darcy chuckled in irony. “And it remains unfortunate that even Pemberley’s grandeur could not entice the lady to overlook its master’s shortcomings.”

* * *

Mr. Darcy’s housekeeper consigned Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle over to the gardener, who met them at the hall door. As they followed the man toward the river, Elizabeth turned to look upon the gentleman’s home. For very selfish reasons, she opposed her aunt’s suggestion of the tour of Mr. Darcy’s estate, but Elizabeth was glad she came. In her future daydreams, she would picture him on the grand staircase.

If Elizabeth, when Mr. Darcy gave her the letter he wrote in *clarification* of his actions, did not expect it to contain a renewal of his offers, she formed no expectation at all of its contents. But such as they were, it might well be supposed how eagerly she went through them and what a contrariety of emotions they excited. No one observing her progress could give voice to her feelings. With amazement did she first understand that Mr. Darcy believed any apology to be in his power; and she steadfastly denied that he could possess an explanation, which a just sense of shame would not conceal.

With a strong prejudice against everything he might say, she examined his account of what occurred at Netherfield. She read with an eagerness, which hardly left her power of comprehension, as well as from an impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, so much so she could not attend to the sense of the written lines before her eyes. Mr. Darcy’s belief of Jane’s insensibility Elizabeth instantly resolved to be false, and his account of his real objections to the match brought such anger that she could not declare his actions just. The gentleman expressed no regret for acting upon his beliefs, at least none, which satisfied her. Elizabeth declared his style lacking in penitence, instead of naming it haughty and prideful and insolence.

But Mr. Darcy’s account of his relationship with Mr. Wickham bore so alarming an affinity to Mr. Wickham’s own narration of the events that astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. Elizabeth wished to discredit it, but every line proved that the affair, which she believed beyond the pale, could name the gentleman entirely blameless throughout the whole.

In hindsight, Elizabeth grew absolutely ashamed of her accusations. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling she was blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd.

“I acted the harpy,” Elizabeth whispered as she implanted the image of Pemberley upon her mind.

When her relatives insisted upon touring the estate, Elizabeth convinced herself that viewing Mr. Darcy’s property would prove just punishment for the pain she caused the gentleman.

“Of all this, I might have been mistress,” she reminded herself with each new discovery of how easily she and Mr. Darcy could suit. They held similar tastes in architecture and décor. “So different from his aunt’s ornate presentation at Rosings.”

And so, although Pemberley’s gallery sported many fine portraits of the Darcy family, Elizabeth searched for the one face whose features she wished to look upon again.

At last, it arrested her, and Elizabeth beheld a striking resemblance to Mr. Darcy, with such a smile upon his lips as she remembered to have sometimes seen when he looked upon her. The viewing brought Elizabeth instant regret for she recognized the honor of Mr. Darcy, which led her to consider his regard for her with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than she ever admitted, even to herself.

Elizabeth wished she could tell Mr. Darcy that she found Pemberley “delightful” and “charming,” but she quickly deduced the gentleman would assume her opinions mischievously construed: Mr. Darcy would think her praise of Pemberley a device to elicit a renewal of his proposal.

“Better this way,” Elizabeth whispered as she turned to follow her aunt and uncle further into the woods. “I have memories of Pemberley, and no one else is the wiser of my presence under Mr. Darcy’s roof.”

* * *

Unable to quash his curiosity any longer, after supper, Darcy sent for Mrs. Reynolds.

“Yes, Sir?” The lady curtsied from her position inside the open door to his study. Darcy motioned her forward.

“Would you see there is a vase of yellow roses placed upon the new instrument in Miss Darcy’s quarters.”

Mrs. Reynolds’ countenance relaxed.

“I asked Mr. Brownley for fresh cuttings previously, Sir.”

Darcy nodded his approval.

“I should not think to instruct you on providing for Georgiana’s pleasure. You have been an exemplary member of Pemberley’s staff for longer than I can remember.”

The woman blushed at Darcy’s kindness, but she kept a business-like tone.

“I also aired out the green bedchamber for Miss Bingley’s use. I pray that will serve the lady’s purpose.”

Darcy understood Mrs. Reynolds’ poorly disguised question.

“You may inform the staff I hold no intention of seeing Miss Bingley in the family quarters. The green chamber is close enough.”

Mrs. Reynolds closed her eyes in what appeared to be a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

“Will that be all, Sir?”

Darcy’s heart raced, but he managed to pronounce the necessary words.

“Did we have more than one set of visitors today? Thanks to your efficiency, I so rarely encounter the estate guests, but I would not have you beset upon. Your first duty is to the running of Pemberley.”

“No, Sir. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were the only ones we accepted in well over a week. It is no bother: I am proud of Pemberley.”

“Mrs. Gardiner,” Darcy’s mind caught the name and rolled it through his body like a tidal wave striking a ship. *If the lady he observed was Elizabeth, had she married? Had she thought to compare what she earned to what she lost?*

Darcy’s mind retreated from the possibilities, but he could not quite quash his fears.

“A young couple then? Perhaps on a holiday?”

Mrs. Reynolds shook her head in denial.

“Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner would be the age of your late parents. I overheard Mrs. Gardiner tell her niece a tale of the village oak. It sounded as if the lady spent part of her childhood on the London side of Lambton.”

“Her niece?” Darcy’s mind latched onto the one word in his housekeeper’s tale that rang with hope.

“Yes, Sir. A fine young lady. Very kind to her aunt, offering her arm to Mrs. Gardiner’s support. I believe the lady held an acquaintance with you. She and her aunt had a private conversation when they spotted the miniature of Mr. Wickham on your father’s mantelpiece.” Mrs. Reynolds’ shoulders stiffened. “I am sorry to report, Sir, I could not give Mrs. Gardiner a civil account when she asked her niece how the young lady liked it. In truth, I quickly turned the conversation to your miniature.”

“I appreciate your loyalty,” Darcy said with a wry smile.

“My respect for the girl increased when she admitted she knew you ‘a little’ and that she found you ‘very handsome,’” Mrs. Reynolds continued.

Darcy’s eyebrow rose with curiosity. He hoped perhaps Mrs. Reynolds described Elizabeth Bennet, but he could not imagine Miss Elizabeth’s declaring him handsome: The woman abhorred him.

“And how did this conversation come about?”

Mrs. Reynolds blushed, but she did not avoid his unspoken accusation, a sign of her long-standing position in his household.

“Do not look to place blame, Master William. I respect the late master’s kind heart and his benevolence toward his godson, but I see no reason to display George Wickham’s image in this house. Even the late Mr. Darcy could peer down from Heaven and see Mr. Wickham turned out very wild.”

“We will discuss the future of Mr. Wickham’s likeness upon another occasion. Speak to me of your conversation with the young lady.”

It was Mrs. Reynolds’ turn to raise an eyebrow in interest; however, she swallowed her questions.

“Mrs. Gardiner remarked of your fine countenance when she looked upon the miniature, and then the lady asked her niece whether it was an accurate likeness. I then inquired if the young lady held an acquaintance with you. When she admitted as such, I asked if she found you a handsome man.”

“Then, it was Mrs. Gardiner and you who placed words in the lady’s mouth,” he reasoned. Darcy felt the female likely agreed only to be rid of the conversation.

Mrs. Reynolds blustered.

“The girl’s aunt and I stated the obvious,” she declared with a tone commonly found among upper servants. “But neither Mrs. Gardiner nor I instructed the young lady to search out your portrait in the gallery nor did we lead her to it again and again.”

Darcy’s heart hitched higher.

“I count no one named Gardiner among my acquaintances. Did you overhear the young lady’s name?”

“Her aunt called her ‘Lizzy’ several times so I would assume it is Miss Elizabeth or Lady Elizabeth.”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” Darcy corrected. Remorse at not having met her today filled his chest. A glance to his housekeeper said Mrs. Reynolds wished an explanation. “The young lady’s parents are neighbors of Mr. Bingley’s estate in Hertfordshire. If it is

truly Miss Elizabeth, we met upon several occasions. I believe I stood up with her at the Netherfield's ball."

"Then perhaps you might renew the acquaintance," Mrs. Reynolds suggested. "Mrs. Gardiner was to dine with friends before the family moved on to Matlock. I am certain Mr. Bingley would wish to behold Miss Elizabeth again."

An invisible hand squeezed Darcy's heart. Should he risk an encounter with Elizabeth Bennet? Had his letter softened the lady's disdain for him?

"Miss Bingley took a dislike for the Bennets," Darcy offered in explanation. "Mr. Bingley developed a regard for Miss Bennet. His leaving Netherfield was poorly done."

"I am sad to hear it, Sir, but your confidence explains the halfhearted air, which follows Mr. Bingley about."

Darcy nodded his acceptance: His housekeeper gave voice to what Darcy's pride denied. Darcy sorely wounded his friend by acting in partnership with Miss Bingley in separating Bingley from Miss Bennet. With a second nod, he excused his servant. For several long minutes, Darcy stared off into the emptiness, which marked his life.

"I cannot seek out Miss Elizabeth," he told the rise of expectation climbing up his chest. "Even if the lady might offer her forgiveness, Miss Elizabeth holds no interest in renewing our acquaintance. Furthermore, I do not deserve happiness when I robbed my friend of an opportunity to know it."

* * *

"You are very quiet this evening, Lizzy." Her aunt's friends invited them to dine in the evening, but once they returned to their let rooms, Elizabeth preferred to spend time alone with her thoughts of Mr. Darcy.

"Just a bit tired." Elizabeth made herself smile at her dearest aunt.

"Then you should retire early," her Uncle Edward declared.

Her aunt ignored her husband's lack of intuitiveness.

"Are you certain what the Pemberley housekeeper said of Mr. Wickham did not upset you? I would venture the woman's loyalty to the Master of Pemberley colored her opinions."

Elizabeth expected her aunt to ask of Mr. Darcy, not of Mr. Wickham.

"Not in the least," Elizabeth assured. "While in Kent, I learned more of what occurred between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, enough so to acquit the former of any ill doing."

Aunt Gardiner's interest piqued.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"I promised my source secrecy." Elizabeth would like to confide in her aunt and uncle for she wished someone would give her permission to beg Mr. Darcy's forgiveness, but she dug the pit of regret in which she wallowed. "As I explained in my letter before I departed for Kent, Mr. Wickham bestowed his affections upon Miss King, and I held no loyalty for the man when I arrived on Charlotte's threshold; therefore, I was free to accept other versions of the events." Hers was an exaggeration of what occurred, but it held some truth. "Although I still believe handsome young men must have something to live on, I pity whoever accepts Mr. Wickham's hand." *If only I did not previously express my opinions to the contrary*, Elizabeth thought.

"That is quite a transformation," her uncle observed.

“I am only aggrieved that I behaved with foolish disregard for Mr. Darcy. I treated the gentleman poorly.”

Her aunt’s question came quickly.

“Is this revelation the source of your reluctance in viewing Mr. Darcy’s home?”

Elizabeth swallowed the bile rushing to her throat.

“I rejoiced today when Mr. Darcy’s housekeeper informed us that we missed his return to Derbyshire by a day. I would not wish to encounter the gentleman. Our last exchange of words was far from pleasant.”

“If I knew...” her uncle began.

Elizabeth shook off his regrets.

“I asked the inn’s staff of Mr. Darcy’s being at Pemberley before we came to the place.”

“We should be on to Matlock the day after tomorrow,” her aunt declared. “Even with Mr. Darcy’s presence at Pemberley we are not likely to encounter him. My friends do not travel in the same circles as Mr. Darcy. We shall be gone soon, and the gentleman will know nothing of our coming into his part of the shire.”