



FOUR DAYS in APRIL

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE
VARIATION

MARIA GRACE



A short story by Maria Grace

Four Days in April

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“Grace has quickly become one of my favorite authors of Austen-inspired fiction. Her love of Austen’s characters and the Regency era shine through in all of her novels.” ~*Diary of an Eccentric*



Though Maria Grace has been writing fiction since she was ten years old, those early efforts happily reside in a file drawer and are unlikely to see the light of day again, for which many are grateful. After penning five file-drawer novels in high school, she took a break from writing to pursue college and earn her doctorate in Educational Psychology. After 16 years of university teaching, she returned to her first love, fiction writing.

She has one husband, two graduate degrees and two black belts, three sons, four undergraduate majors, five nieces, six more novels in draft form, waiting for editing, seven published novels, sewn eight Regency era costumes, shared her life with nine cats through the years and tries to run at least ten miles a week.



Four Days in April

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BY MARIA GRACE

April 9, 1812

Darcy stalked from the parsonage in such haste the housekeeper barely opened the front door in time.

The spleen of that woman! The unmitigated impertinence! She painted him a villain ... a vulgar villain!

He mounted his horse and turned away from Rosings. He needed quiet and space to think. Neither were possible in the vicinity of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

... you are the last man in the world I could be prevailed upon to marry ...

His hands quivered and his whole body trembled. The sketch she had drawn of his character! In her eyes, he was no better than...than Wickham! Had anyone ever considered him so low?

Preposterous, utterly and completely preposterous!

He guided his horse to a tree-lined path, deep with shade. The cool air chilled the sweat on his face and neck cold as her words.

... had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner ...

Gentleman-like? Gentleman-like? Never in all his days had his manners been so censured!

He was a gentleman, by his station, by his breeding. Everything about him screamed so.

Everything but her.

How could he correct her views, convince her he was not the unprincipled lout she currently believed? Talking to her was out of the question—she would never admit him.

Fitzwilliam? No—he shuddered—best he never know of this humiliating debacle. No one must know.

Then how?

A letter, it was the only choice. But a lady did not receive letters from a man not her betrothed. A gentleman did not write them.

She already thought him ungentlemanly, so there was little lost there. What choice did he have? She would never marry him, but at least she might not consider him so irredeemable after all.

He turned his horse toward Rosings. He had a very long letter to write.

April 10, 1812

Elizabeth folded Mr. Darcy's letter, hands trembling so hard she could barely follow its sharp creases. She sank down on a tree stump and clutched her waist. How she had abused him to his face, calling into question his character, his motives, his manners—no those were certainly wanting, but that did not signify compared to her abhorrent treatment of him.

Every finer feeling in her bosom demanded repentance, whether or not he would accept it. She must offer it. But how? Surely he would never speak to her again. And this was certainly not information to relay through another party, no matter how trusted.

Heavy boots crunched toward her. Great heavens, he could not be returning to gloat, could he?

"Miss Bennet?"

"Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

He bowed. "I had no idea of meeting you here. How fortuitous. You are far better company than who I thought I might encounter."

"Dare I ask who you expected?"

"Dreaded might be a better word. I thought Darcy might be out here. I do not fancy his company right now. He has been in high dudgeon since yesterday. I am glad to see you though. Are you recovered from yesterday's headache?"

"Yes, thank you." She rose and dusted off her skirt, tucking Darcy's letter up the sleeve of her spencer.

His eyebrow twitched. Pray let him not have seen!

"I am sorry to hear of your cousin's discomfiture. Have you ... have you any notion as to its cause?" What possessed her to say such a thing?

"None what so ever, save it sent him scurrying to his writing table. I imagine he received some unwelcome news in the post." He offered his arm, and they began to walk. "If I had to guess, and since you have asked it seems I should—I expect he has heard from Georgiana. She is only sixteen and prone to such high and low spirits. Most recently some very low ones."

Poor girl, with neither mother nor sisters to confide in after such a trial. Of course she would want to talk, but surely not with a brother, especially one as severe as Mr. Darcy.

"You have younger sisters, three as I understood it. Have you any notion of how one improves a young woman's spirits? I find myself at quite a loss." He scratched behind his left ear.

"It is difficult to say, sir. I believe it would depend upon the reason for her melancholy."

"The reason? Who could know? She has everything a girl could want, and a brother who would move heaven and earth on her behalf." His tone turned a little defensive, and he squinted into a sunbeam breaking through the trees.

No doubt, Georgiana could want for nothing, nothing save a clear conscience. Poor child. "Then perhaps it is not something she lacks, but someone."

"Do you suggest she wishes for a suitor?" He stiffened and glared.

"Not at sixteen, sir. At that age, a young woman is always in need of a wise, mature confidant with whom she may share the secrets of her heart."

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“She has a companion.”

“Although I have never enjoyed the society of a companion, I must imagine they are no different to other women. Is she sympathetic or apt to be critical?”

He pulled up a little straighter and cocked his head as though she had spoken in some strange foreign tongue. “I do not know.”

“Then perhaps it would be worth ascertaining.”

They walked several more steps, across the soft dirt. His brows drew together, rose and fell, carrying on a conversation of their own.

“I would never have considered such a thing, no not at all. A very useful thought I would say. I may just write to her and ask those very questions.”

“I dare say she would be pleased for such a letter.. Surprised, but pleased.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled. “I can only hope—and I dare say with little expectation of it being born out—that Darcy too might soon receive some cheerful correspondence lest he drive our aunt to distraction. I suppose it is indecorous of me to say, but he knows how to do it like no one else, all the while never intending it. I confess, it would be great sport to watch if it did not mean he was so beastly unhappy.” He met her gaze with a raised eyebrow.

She looked away and chewed her lower lip. “I shall hope with you that he might receive just such a communication. You must excuse me, sir. I will be missed at the parsonage for breakfast if I linger any longer.” She curtsied.

“Thank you for a most enlightening conversation.” He winked and sauntered away.

She wrung her hands and paced in and out of a sunbeam between two great oaks. Did she dare? Could she even consider it?

Surely he must hate her now, wholly and completely. No word, written or spoken might change that inevitability, but at least she could try to make things right. Her character required it. There was no choice.

She must write a letter.

April 11, 1812

The first rays of daylight teased her awake, though her head was muzzy and limbs filled with all the strength of sodden blankets. Good sense required she sleep a little longer, but Mr. Darcy often walked the grounds at this hour! Moreover, he would be leaving Kent on the morrow. What better reason to force herself to leave her rooms?

She tucked a tightly folded letter in the sleeve of her spencer, the place she had hidden his not a day ago, and set out. A morning fog obscured the landscape. Not the kind that faded away gently with the rays of dawn, but the kind that fought, clinging steadfastly to trees and grass, begging to be given leave to remain all day. Even if Mr. Darcy were out in it, what possibility that she might actually see him?

Her best chance lay in the place he had met her—was it just yesterday morning?

The grove had seemed so much closer yesterday, but today she was weighed down with the double burden of the fog and her letter. She traced the perimeter, once twice, thrice. The morning haze lost its battle with the sun, but a fourth circuit still failed to yield up her quarry.

Why had she even dared hope? What man in his right mind would chance encountering her again?

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She trudged back to the parsonage. How was she to see her letter reach him?

"Lizzy! Lizzy!" Maria ran from the house. Where have you been? We hoped for your return a quarter of an hour ago."

"What do you mean? Is something wrong?"

"We had callers, from Rosings, intent on seeing you. Come." She grabbed Elizabeth's hand and pulled her into the house.

Charlotte waited for them just inside and led them to her sitting room. "My dear Eliza, we searched everywhere for you. But they would not stay any longer. Mr. Collins has accompanied them back to Rosings."

They sat around the table by the window, already set with things for tea.

Elizabeth took a cup from Charlotte. "What distinguished personages have caused such disarray? Did Lady Catherine and Miss de Bourgh call?"

"La! No, you silly thing, it was the colonel and Mr. Darcy." Maria clasped her hands and bounced. "They waited for you for over half an hour."

"It all seemed as though they had come as a take leave. You know they have already stayed in Kent a great deal longer than anyone expected." Charlotte sipped her tea.

"So they are not yet leaving?" Elizabeth turned aside. She dare not allow Charlotte to catch her eye.

"You will never guess why." Maria leaned forward and nearly upended her teacup. "Lady Catherine has crafted ever so delightful a scheme. A dinner party tonight! And we are all invited!"

"Invited or commanded?" Elizabeth's eyebrow arched. Mr. Darcy would most likely have to be commanded into company.

Charlotte glared.

"Forgive me. I should control my impertinence." But surprise and relief made it difficult. "Is not a single day very short notice upon which to conduct a dinner party? I know Mama requires at least a week and better two."

"When one has a staff the size of Lady Catherine's many thing are possible." Charlotte shrugged and settled back in her seat.

"The colonel and Mr. Darcy are to be in attendance as well." Maria flashed a flirtatious smile, far too reminiscent of Lydia's. "And I am ever so glad for their familiar faces, even if Mr. Darcy still frightens me so. She is inviting three other families whom we have never met."

"I found it odd the gentlemen would take such pains to ensure we knew their plans."

Elizabeth dodged Charlotte's gaze again and smoothed her skirts. "They are all politeness. I am sure they were aware of the anxiety such an event might occasion upon a young lady and wished to set Maria's mind at ease as soon as might be done."

"Perhaps." Charlotte called for the maid to bring more hot water and toast.

She had desired for an opportunity to encounter Mr. Darcy again. What a perverse fate that the opportunity should be in a room full of other company. Somehow, she would face him, with all proper manner and decorum. He deserved at least that much from her, even if her letter never reached him.



Four Days in April

Surely there must be something wrong with every clock in the parsonage. Their hands all moved far too slowly. But the watch on her chatelaine agreed with Charlotte's clocks.

At least that gave her plenty of time to manage her toilette. Tonight when she might say so very little, she had to communicate by every means available to her. She had to appear a gentleman's daughter, fully respectable ... and fully repentant; sincere, but not servile. In short, everything she had not been but should have.

Even with careful preparations, she was ready three quarters of an hour before Lady Catherine's equipage was expected. For her penance, Mr. Collins kept company with her, expounding on the desirable virtues of timeliness.

How very ironic that Lady Catherine's coach was a quarter of an hour late.

Maria's nervous fretting over Lady Catherine's unfamiliar guests filled the carriage the whole way to Rosings. Charlotte tried to insist that people in Kent were no different to those in Hertfordshire, and Maria had no reason for nerves. Mr. Collins, however, took exception and made certain to offer a full and complete correction to her flawed beliefs.

Elizabeth nodded and held the sleeve in which she had secreted her letter to Mr. Darcy very close to her waist. Why she had thought trying to give him a letter in the midst of a dinner party a good idea? Each time Mr. Collins glanced her direction, she feared he might discover her secret impropriety.

The butler showed them to the drawing room already bustling with other guests. Lady Catherine introduced them to the barrister, the knight and the landed gentleman who owned an estate second only to Pemberley, and their wives.

Elizabeth said all the right things, curtsied politely and struggled not to look at Mr. Darcy.

He returned the favor, avoiding even facing in her general direction.

She might have taken that as clear indication she should forget about the letter altogether—linger back as the party made their way to dinner and commit it to the fire. But something in the set of his shoulders, the line of his jaw, the tiny droop at the corner of his eyes spoke less of anger than resignation. Such a man might be willing to accept a letter, even if it were not the hoped for one from his sister.

"Dinner awaits us." Lady Catherine rose to lead the ladies out by rank. Elizabeth and Maria trailed behind, lowest of the party. For once that felt a most desirable position.

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder.

Mr. Darcy dodged her gaze. Had he been staring after her?

"You must walk with me and give me courage for I do not know with whom I will sit tonight." Maria slipped her arm in Elizabeth's and propelled her to the dining room.

An abundance of fragrant dishes graced the dining table, leaving it almost too crowded for guests. Mama's dinners, reputed for excellence, were poor man's fare by comparison. How vexing to face such a first-rate meal with absolutely no appetite.

Dinner dragged on through three courses, her anxiety building through each. After the sweet course, Lady Catherine called for the ladies to attend her in the drawing room. Had that command ever been so welcome?

Amidst a lovely service of tea and biscuits, Lady Catherine inquired after the health of each of her guests, their families, and all of their acquaintances. She offered her

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recommendations on which tonics and apothecaries might serve them best. When the subject at last ran dry, Lady Catherine required entertainment.

"Miss Bennet, play for us. I feel certain you might amuse us sufficiently in the men's absence."

"I...I thank you for your confidence, Lady Catherine."

"Yes, yes, I am sure you are not accustomed to such praise. Do not dither on about it. Go play."

The instrument was far finer than any she had ever played. Though she could not do it justice she might provide sufficient distraction for those attending to Lady Catherine's monologue.

The music distracted her as well. When had the gentlemen returned to the drawing room?

Heavens! Mr. Darcy approached.

Her fingers tangled over a chord.

He stopped several steps away, his every limb rigid and face etched into a mask she had once mistaken for displeasure. "Forgive me, Miss Bennet. Colonel Fitzwilliam suggested you might require someone to turn pages for you. He intended to do the task himself, but Anne required his immediate attention, and he sent me in his stead."

She stammered meaningless syllables.

"I shall go if you prefer."

"I...ah...yes, please...that is I would be pleased for your assistance."

The hard lines on his face eased a mite. He stationed himself beside the pianoforte.

For the moment, just this moment he was near. They had a tiny bit of privacy, perhaps the only one they would ever have.

She came to the end of the piece. Polite applause commensurate with her middling performance followed.

"Please, sir, would you bring me the top sheet of music from the cabinet? I believe it might convey a pleasing sentiment." She forced the words out, but only managed a whisper.

His brows creased his forehead in a little 'v' she had seen many times before. Pray let him not refuse!

He tipped his head and stepped away.

She slipped the letter from her sleeve. It could tuck in just behind the sheet on the music stand. Her hands shook so hard she knocked both to the floor. Gasping, she reached for it, and her hand collided with Mr. Darcy's.

"Pray excuse me, sir." She pulled away and held her breath.

Surely he saw the letter—his name emblazoned across the front was near impossible to miss. Would he take it? He had to. If anyone else found it now and read it—oh what had she done? Bad enough to risk her own reputation, but his as well? Foolish headstrong girl—

He picked up the letter along with the scattered music, only the barest twitch of his brow revealing his complicity. "Allow me to arrange this for you."

He readied the music on the stand, her letter barely visible, concealed in his broad palm. He had not left it behind!

She peeked up at him, but his face was the same impassive mask he usually wore. Then again, that was a good sign. His ire, when raised, was always quite apparent.

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“Was this the music you desired?” He glanced at the music stand.

“Yes...thank you.”

Bother how could she have forgotten to play? She squinted at the music and willed her fingers to the keys. They obeyed, only stumbling over a few bars.

Civil applause reminded her it was finished. She managed to walk back to her seat, though she felt like a wobbly kneed calf taking its first steps.

Mr. Darcy strode to Lady Catherine. What was he saying to her—no, he was leaving! She bit her knuckle. Had she offended so desperately—or perhaps, was it possible?

Did he go to read her letter?

Or maybe to destroy it.



How he hated disguise of every sort, yet the falsehood he told Aunt Catherine was utterly and entirely necessary. If he did not escape the drawing room, he would surely run mad. A brisk walk to the stable to check on his horse, who was most certainly not unwell, would cool his humors and settle his nerves.

He pressed his hand to his pocket. Sharp corners drove into his ribs. Yes, it was still there.

Why did Fitzwilliam send him to her? Had Anne truly waylaid him on his way to assist, or was it some darker plan? What was he about?

Had the lady not sufficiently abused him enough to his face?

Had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner ...

Oh, those words would never leave him. She was right. What sounded so reasonable, so well-considered in the sanctity of his own mind turned cold and unfeeling when spoken aloud.

The night boasted a full moon. While enough to light the road, it would not support reading a lady's hand. He stopped beside one of the torches, flickering and popping beside the lane to the manor. The smell of the heat tickled his nose as he withdrew the letter from his pocket. The light danced across his name, teasing, daring him to open it.

He steeled himself. Surely he had only added to his catalogue of offences by writing to her. Certainly that merited her rebuke. Even so, he had to read it. If for no other reason than to honor the risk she took in writing to him. A gentleman would do that.

Barely trembling, clumsy fingers cracked the wax seal. Bits of it tumbled into the darkness, disappearing into the shadows.

Be not alarmed, good sir, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension that it will contain a repetition of sentiments we both would prefer to forget.

Your thorough and candid communication has not fallen upon deaf ears. I will not soon forget the intelligence you shared with me. I beg that you would therefore pardon the freedom with which I have demanded your attention, but my character requires it.

Her voice, gentle and soft, spoke the words in his mind, barely audible over the deafening roar of blood in his ears. That she did not abuse him at the start was a good

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sign, but no assurance she did not still regard him a bounder. A ragged breath braced him for more.

You willingly acknowledge your errors with regards to my sister's sentiments toward Mr. Bingley. I can do no less.

After carefully weighing the evidence provided me by Mr. Wickham, yourself, and unwittingly by Col. Fitzwilliam, and considering your willingness to direct me to him for further corroboration of your facts, I realize my judgements concerning Mr. Wickham have been gravely flawed.

The manner by which he imposed his falsehood upon me is irrelevant. I am now deeply aware of the true nature of your dealings with him. And his with you.

A breath he did not recognize he had held escaped in a painful rush. His knees threatened to buckle, and he grabbed the torch. Its meager support barely kept him on his feet. That and the knowledge she no longer indicted him for Wickham's misfortune.

Why that should matter so much? He wiped beads of sweat from his brow.

I cannot, though, condone your interference with my sister's happiness. I see now that it was done for genuine concern for Mr. Bingley's welfare, if carried out in pride and high handedness. These are motives which I cannot condemn.

Good motives, though, do not serve to mend ruined hopes and happiness. I fear the recovery from her disappointed affections will be long in coming. For that I struggle to forgive you.

However when I consider what my own behavior has been, I appreciate the hypocrisy of clinging to my resentment.

Acid rose in his throat and burned the back of his tongue. He had expected her rebuke, but not like this. She was right. Right and proper motives did nothing to excuse the damage he had inflicted. Was Bingley as affected as Miss Bennet? He had lost his usual enthusiasm for social engagements after being persuaded of Miss Bennet's indifference.

Perhaps Darcy had been wrong to accept it as a welcome change from Bingley's usual exuberance. Could it be a sign of true despondency?

London should be his next stop from Rosings. Bingley would still be in residence there.

You are fortunate to have so little to repine in regards to the whole affair. I however find several areas upon which I cannot look at my own behavior with satisfaction. Although I have prided myself in good judgement, I failed to exercise it in evaluating Mr. Wickham's representations of your character. This lead to what causes me the greatest grief. I maligned and abused the character of a man who has proved to be very much the opposite of what I believed him to be.

For that I am truly and deeply remorseful.

Zounds!

How neatly her contrition delivered another blow to his pride. He should have better acknowledged his error to her, apologized as freely as she. Her captivating humility put him to shame. Strong and forthright, it only reminded him of his undiminished regard for her.

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In another matter though, I must beg to be acquitted. Please believe me when I tell you, your offer to me came as a complete surprise. I had not the slightest indication of the feelings you proclaimed. Taken by surprise as I was, my character demands that I must have refused.

I do not regret my refusal, therefore. But it will forever pain me that I should have done so in so unfeeling a manner as to render impossible any future friendship between us. I shall always look upon that with regret.

No idea of his regard? How was that possible? Were not his regular visits to the parsonage, his attentions to her conversation, his lingering glances enough to assure any woman of his affections?

He shoved the letter into his pocket and stalked into the darkness.

Willful, stubborn woman, what did she expect from him? Bingley-like declarations and effusions of sentiment dripping about like treacle on porridge?

Or did she expect anything at all?

She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me...

He cringed. What woman would have entertained expectations after hearing herself described thus? Arrogant, stupid fool! He dragged his hand down his face. No wonder Bingley had been so disgusted with him that night.

Of course she would not regret her refusal under such circumstances. But she regretted the loss of his friendship? His heart began beating again and his chest burned.

He sought out the torch light and unfurled the missive.

If your abhorrence of me should make my assertions valueless, I understand and cannot hold that against you. I will only add, God bless you.

She offered him blessings. Of all people, she would not offer such a thing idly any more than he.

Could it be?

He ran for the manor.



Movement at the drawing room doorway caught Elizabeth's eye. Darcy strode in with only a faint trickle of sweat down the side of his face and a lock of hair fallen over his forehead to suggest his state of mind.

Great heavens, he approached! She held her breath as he took a seat beside Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Lady Catherine turned to him with the greatest of condescension. "So, Darcy, you have returned. How is this prized horse of yours that would deprive us of your company?"

"The creature turned up a bit lame, it seems. It would be best to further delay our departure for several more days whilst it recovers."

"Welcome news," Lady Catherine said. "I believe nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do." She raised her hands toward Mr. Darcy and the colonel. "I am

particularly attached to these nephews of mine; and know them to be so much attached to me! I recall you were excessively sorry to go last year! I knew you would feel it even more acutely this year. I know your attachment to Rosings must certainly increase with each visit. And you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, how do you find Rosings? You seem a great deal out of spirits this evening.”

“I thank you for your attentions, madam. I ... I was just reflecting upon my mother’s last letter to me. She wrote to hurry my return.”

Mr. Darcy twitched and looked her way, brows drawn over his eyes.

“But if that is the case, you must write to your mother to beg that you may stay a little longer. Mrs. Collins will be very glad of your company, I am sure.”

“I am much obliged to your ladyship for your kind invitation, but it is not in my power to accept it—I am expected to be in town next Saturday.”

“Why, at that rate, you will have been here only six weeks. I expected you to stay two months complete. There can be no occasion for your going so soon. Mrs. Bennet could certainly spare you for another fortnight.”

“But my father cannot.”

Darcy’s expression darkened further.

“Oh! Your father of course may spare you, if your mother can. Daughters are never of so much consequence to a father. And if you will stay another month complete, it will be in my power to take you as far as London, for I am going there early in June, for a week; and as Dawson does not object to the Barouche box, there will be very good room for you—especially as you are neither of you are large.”

“I...I do not know, madam.” She bit her upper lip and chanced a peek at Darcy.

Darcy started, but recovered quickly. “I am in agreement with my aunt. I cannot imagine it proper for young women to travel post by themselves.”

“Indeed not!” Lady Catherine’s face flushed and leaned forward just a bit. “I have the greatest dislike in the world for that sort of thing. Young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life. When my niece Georgiana went to Ramsgate last summer, I made a point of her having two men servants go with her. I am excessively attentive to all those things.”

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened. Colonel Fitzwilliam sat very straight and Mr. Darcy winced.

He cleared his throat and tapped his pocket. “I am sure it would be most pleasant to ride in Lady Catherine’s barouche. As I understand it is newly sprung. Perhaps even as agreeable as walking the grounds of Rosings on a lovely spring morning.”

The arms of her chair nearly cried out as she clutched them.

“Indeed you are right, Darcy. When the top of the barouche is down, it is quite refreshing and ever so much more amenable to Anne’s delicate health. I do, though, highly recommend walking for one’s constitution. There is nothing like it for strengthening the body and soul.”

He held her gaze, he nodded. “A brisk morning walk is, I believe, one of the best ways to begin a day. Would you not agree, Miss Bennet?”

Something about the way he said her name sent prickles down her back and along her arms. Had anyone else noticed?

“I...yes, of course, sir. You are correct. There is nothing like a footpath through a grove lined with old roses and a scattering of primrose.”

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"Only improved if there were a view of a fine trout stream perhaps?"

"There you go, thinking only of your sport." Lady Catherine sniffed. "Young men are so single minded in their pursuits of amusement."

Lady Catherine continued, but Elizabeth lost track of the conversation. She knew a spot exactly as he described.

April 12, 1812

Pink rays of dawn beckoned at the window sill and Elizabeth sprang from her bed. She donned a plain gown and formed a simple knot with her hair. Entirely appropriate for a morning ramble during which she would see and talk to no one.

Morning mist slapped wetly at her face. In an hour, even half, it would lose its unpleasant thickness and be merely a refreshing reminder of the early hour. But she could not wait that long and perhaps miss—

No, she would miss nothing. No one. This was a typical morning walk, alone.

The footpath leading to the grove of old roses and primroses near the trout stream opened up before her. In her time at Rosings, it had become one of her favorite treks. But today ...

Today was no different than any other day, and she would do as she purposed.

There, in the shadows of a large oak! But it was...yes it was. Those shoulders, hands clasped behind him, the turn of his booted calf. It could be none other.

She froze. Her feet screamed for her to leave, to run. But in which direction? She looked before her and behind.

Too late! Long purposed strides brought him to her faster than she thought possible.

"Miss Bennet." He bowed, stiff and proper.

"Mr....Mr. Darcy." She attempted a curtsy, but nearly stumbled.

His jaw worked but no actual words formed. He huffed and stared at the sky. "I am not an eloquent man."

"Perhaps you should have written another letter."

He chuckled, an utterly unfamiliar, but very pleasing sound. Who would have expected that?

"Would you care to walk?" He gestured down the footpath.

Perhaps he was right. Somehow it was far easier to talk whilst moving.

"I am gratified you read my letter and did not simply burn it." He stared straight ahead, his face obscured by the dappled shade.

"As am I that you have read mine. I would not at all have blamed you for destroying it without a second thought. Pray sir, allow me to say how deeply I regret—"

"What did you say that I did not deserve, and richly so? 'Had you behaved in a more gentleman like manner ...' I cannot tell you how that rebuke has tormented me."

"Had I any expectation my words would be received so—"

"I can imagine you considered me devoid of any proper feeling. You must have believed me capable of ignoring them completely. I shudder to think what else you supposed me capable of."

"I was very wrong to impugn your character."

"Perhaps so, but I recognize my manners are apt to invite censure. I have neither the skills nor the open temper society finds agreeable." He looked up into the trees.

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"I had no idea you found my advice so valuable, sir. I confess my surprise."

"Much as your surprise when I came to see you at the parsonage?" He hesitated for two heartbeats and walked on.

"Pray do not remind me of what I said then. It was entirely insupportable, regardless of my surprise. I must compliment you on your own self-control in the face of my wholly indecorous display."

He cast a sidelong glance her way. "I suppose neither of us has shown ourselves to our greatest advantage, have we?"

"I did not realize you had a penchant for understatement."

"You were truly unaware of my regard for you?" He stopped and looked down at her.

How very tall he was ... and handsome.

"I cannot express my complete shock when you revealed the violence of your feelings."

"You wound my pride, Miss Bennet, but rightfully so, I expect. I considered only myself, my feelings, and the great pleasure I expected such an announcement to occasion."

Was that a note of irony in his very somber tone?

"I suppose you expected a lady to be so excited by the prospect as to ignore the manner of your declaration and possibly her own feelings on the matter."

He kicked a clump of dirt, shattering it into a cloud of dust. "I suppose I did. Much as you relied upon your own superior sense and judgment to sketch my character."

"I must grant you your point, sir."

"You are very generous, madam." He walked on, eyes firmly on the ground.

With each step, the knots in her shoulders tightened. The air turned so brittle, it might shatter, but he continued on in silence.

They approached the edge of the trout stream. Several fat fish swam past, fighting their way around a strong current that would have stranded them in a shallow backwater, an invitation to whatever predator might come.

"So what is there to be done? It seems rather a hopeless cause." He balanced his foot on a largish rock and leaned forward on his knee, peering into the stream.

She crouched and dangled her fingers in the current. "You see that trout, the big one. He is standing sentinel at this place, helping the smaller fish to stay their course. See how he chases some out of this spot, almost as though urging them to begin their journey again."

He moved behind her, a tangible presence, imposing and yet sheltering. Leaning over her shoulder, he hunkered down beside her.

"I see the one you mean. He might be the same wily old fish Fitzwilliam and I dreamt of catching in our boyhood. The one that always outsmarted us."

"I cannot see you outwitted by a mere fish."

"No, I shall not be." He stood and offered her his hand.

She took it. How strong and sure his grasp. With a deep breath, she raised her eyes and stared into the face of a man she had never seen before. His eyes spoke of feelings that matched his earlier declarations. The turn of his lips, just a little shy and uncertain.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Bennet." He bowed. "I understand you are to be staying another fortnight in Hunsford?"

Four Days in April

“Ah, yes, sir, I am. And I am pleased to make your acquaintance as well.” She curtsied, a little off balance.

Mr. Darcy smiled.

Oh, the power of that expression. Perhaps it was a very good thing indeed he did not do so more often. It was a shame though he had not done so sooner. Such an expression she would never have misunderstood.

“I am pleased to hear it. I shall be here a fortnight more before traveling to London to share some important intelligence with a good friend there.”

She gasped.

“Until that time, would you permit me to show you around Rosings Park? You might acquaint yourself with its finer qualities?” He offered her his arm.

She had seen men try to be charming before, and this was not it. It lacked the polish, the sophistication, the genteel veneer. No this was unpracticed, tentative, and so very real, as real as the hard strength of his arm beneath her hand. An offering of peace, and perhaps of hope.

“You are very gracious, sir. I am most anxious to better know the character and sensibilities of this most intriguing landscape.”

She took his arm and they walk off the established path, into the sunrise.



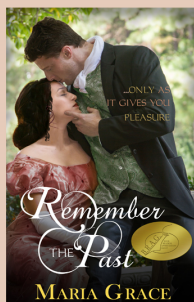
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