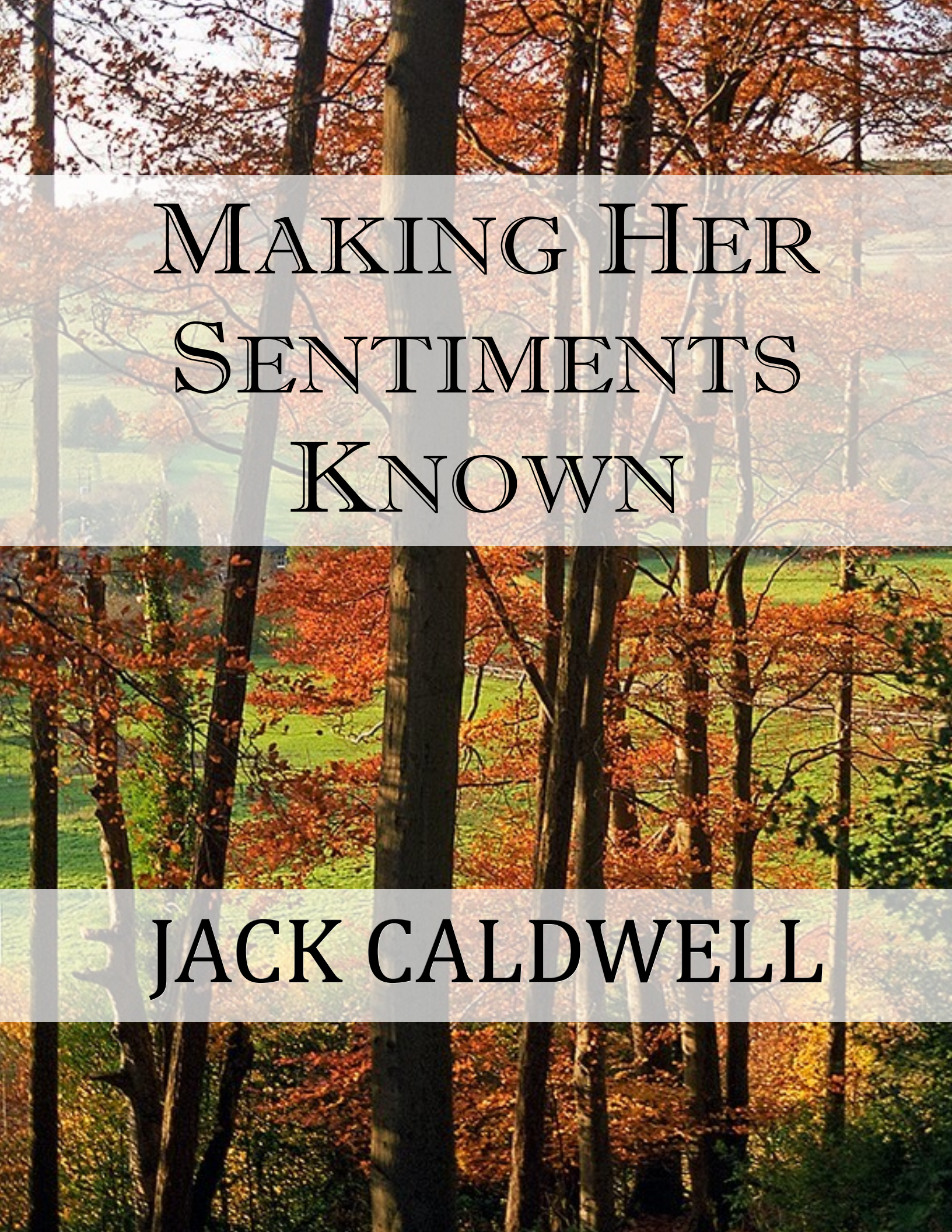

Making Her Sentiments Known

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Blurb: Lady Catherine de Bourgh calls on Elizabeth Bennet, but things do not turn out as expected.
A P&P short story.

October 1812: Longbourn, Hertfordshire

ONE MORNING, ABOUT A WEEK after Mr. Bingley's engagement to Jane Bennet, as Mrs. Bennet and two of her daughters, namely Elizabeth and Kitty, were sitting together in the parlor, the door was thrown open and Mr. Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, strode in, her walking stick banging out a rhythm as she entered.

With an air more than usually ungracious, the tall, large lady made no other reply to Elizabeth's salutation than a slight inclination of the head and sat down without saying a word. Elizabeth had whispered her name to her mother on her ladyship's entrance, though no request for introductions had been made. Mrs. Bennet, all amazement, though flattered by having a guest of such high importance, received her with the utmost politeness.

After sitting for a moment in silence before a stiff introduction to Mrs. Bennet and Kitty, Lady Catherine turned to Elizabeth. "Miss Bennet, there seemed to be a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favor me with your company."

Elizabeth obeyed, and soon the pair proceeded in silence along the gravel walk that led to the copse. Elizabeth was determined to make no effort at conversation with a woman who was now more than usually insolent and disagreeable. *How could I ever think her like her nephew?* thought she as she glanced at her companion's face.

As soon as they entered the wood, Lady Catherine began an unrelenting assault on Mr. Bennet's second daughter. She attacked her parentage, her situation in life, her upbringing,

her relations, her behavior, and her morals. She accused her of seducing Mr. Darcy by *arts and allurements*, forcing him to betray and jilt Miss de Bourgh, with whom, Lady Catherine claimed, he had been betrothed since they both were in their cradles. She claimed that if Elizabeth married Mr. Darcy, the couple would be censured, slighted, and despised by his family and society. She demanded that Elizabeth give up Mr. Darcy and remain in her parent's province. Lady Catherine scarcely paused to breathe during the whole of her tirade.

In the face of this, Elizabeth remained resolute, conceding nothing to the unpleasant woman. She met each of Lady Catherine's wild charges with calm, forceful reasoning, utterly destroying her ladyship's each and every argument.

Elizabeth did so with pain in her heart, for she knew Lady Catherine's fears were unwarranted. She had refused Mr. Darcy months ago, and though she now repented her mistake *there*, it was too late. The events of the last weeks—her youngest sister's elopement with and eventual marriage to Mr. Darcy's great enemy—assured that a union between the Master of Pemberley and a daughter of Longbourn would never take place.

To Lady Catherine's latest contention, Elizabeth responded, "In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting the sphere in which I was raised. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter. So far we are equal."

Lady Catherine nodded easily. "True. You *are* a gentleman's daughter." Then her countenance became earnest. "But who was your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of *their* condition."

"Whatever my connections may be," said Elizabeth, "if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you."

Lady Catherine glanced at Longbourn House before returning to Elizabeth. "Tell me, once for all, are you engaged to him?"

Though Elizabeth would not, for the mere purpose of obliging Lady Catherine, have answered this question, she could not but say, after a moment's deliberation, "I am not."

Lady Catherine narrowed her eyes. "And will you promise me never to enter into such an engagement?"

"I will make no promise of the kind."

The great lady turned away and threw up her hands. "Miss Bennet, I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman. But do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require!"

Unconsciously, Elizabeth's chin jutted out stubbornly. "And I certainly *never* shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable! Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that the arguments with which you have supported this extraordinary application have been as frivolous as the application was ill-judged. You have widely mistaken my character if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in *his* affairs I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in *mine*. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no further on the subject." Elizabeth made to leave.

Lady Catherine raised her voice. "You have no regard, then, for the honor and credit of my nephew? Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?"

Elizabeth stopped and looked over her shoulder. "Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say. You know my sentiments."

"You are then resolved to have him?" There was an intense look on Lady Catherine's face.

"I have said no such thing." Elizabeth faced her tormentor. "I am only resolved to act in that manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness without reference to *you* or to any person so wholly unconnected with me."

The great lady gave a frustrated snort. "You refuse, then, to oblige me! You refuse to obey the claims of duty, honor, and gratitude. You will answer my question! Will you release him, or are you determined to ruin him in the opinion of all his friends and make him the contempt of the world?"

"Neither duty, nor honor, nor gratitude, has any possible claim on me in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family or the indignation of the world, if the former *were* excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn."

"And *this* is your real opinion! This is your final resolve! Very well." Lady Catharine tilted her head, her stern, wrinkled gaze no longer accusatory, but appraising. After a short contemplation, she sat down on the stone bench and nodded.

"You will do."

There was a moment's silence as Elizabeth realized what the lady had just uttered. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, you will do for Darcy. I hoped to find you reasonable and I have. I am pleased. I do not like to be disappointed." Her tone seemed to contradict this, remaining curt and offensive.

It was very rare for Elizabeth Bennet to be shocked silent. This was one of those times.

The grand dame scowled anew. "Well, Miss Bennet, have you nothing to say? Speak up, girl!" she demanded.

"Lady Catherine," she began cautiously, "you *want* me to marry Mr. Darcy?"

"That is a bit of an overstatement, Miss Bennet! It is more truthful to say I shall not oppose your union. You are not what a man in my nephew's station normally would look for as his bride—a lady of neither name nor fortune. But Darcy would have you, and the gifts you do possess are as important to him as to myself."

Elizabeth could not make heads or tails out of this pronouncement. "But your daughter—I believed you wished Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter." Unconsciously, she joined the older lady on the bench.

Lady Catherine grew angry. "Are you merely slow-witted today, miss, or have I misjudged you? Do you wish to marry my nephew?"

"I … I, er … Lady Catherine, that is between Mr. Darcy and me."

"Obstinate, headstrong girl! I am trying to help you, but I will only do so if you are forthright! I shall not waste my time on a fruitless endeavor." She once again slammed her stick against the bricks. "Do you have an understanding with Mr. Darcy?"

Elizabeth could not trust her ears: Lady Catherine, promoting a match between herself and Mr. Darcy! Astonishing! True to her character, however, she instinctively guarded her privacy. "As I said, I am not engaged to him."

"And when he asks, will you accept him?"

Elizabeth could not say the words. "He has not asked me and may not, milady."

"Oh, he will," Lady Catherine responded darkly. "Stubbornness is a fixture in Darcy men—that and steadfastness. His father was certainly an example of that!" She gestured with her stick at Elizabeth. "He has fixed his eye on you. I know it, and pray do not insult me by denying it!"

All of Elizabeth's fears returned in an instant. "Lady Catherine, there are things you do not know—"

"If you are speaking of your youngest sister's infamous elopement, I know all! Darcy spent a fortune to bribe that worthless Wickham to marry her and protect your family's reputation, as I am certain you are aware. What other reason could he possibly have to accomplish that except to be of service to *you*?"

"But … he was here. Why did he say nothing?"

"Unfortunately, Darcy inherited my dear sister's reserve. Do you have any idea how many times George Darcy proposed to Lady Anne before she accepted him? She could not believe a gregarious, outgoing gentleman like George would want a shy wallflower like her. If not for me, the marriage never would have happened!" Lady Catherine narrowed her eyes. "I would suggest, my girl, that when Mr. Darcy returns to the neighborhood, you give him a little encouragement!"

A thousand thoughts raced through Elizabeth's mind, but she settled on one. "I do not understand. You said … expectations. What of your arguments against it? You have spent no little time cataloguing the disaster that would befall a union between us."

"*That*, Miss Bennet, is but a taste of what awaits you from the First Circles. You shall be scorned for your inferior birth and connections and for your presumption to steal away from the *ton* one of England's most eligible bachelors! I came to test your wit and determination, and I am happy to see you possess both. You are capable of withstanding the whirlwind to come. I believe you may become an asset to the family."

"What of Miss de Bourgh?"

A brief look of intense pain flowed over Lady Catherin's countenance. "I suppose this may come as a surprise to you, Miss Bennet, but I love my daughter. She is all I have left of my dear Louis." She paused, gathered herself, and resumed speaking. "I am not blind. I know she can never marry. Anne has none of the talents or accomplishments necessary for a lady of society. You see, she has been ill much of her life, which forbade her learning. Besides, motherhood— motherhood would be her certain demise. It is most painful to me that she will never have children, or I to enjoy grandchildren, but there it is. We have made our peace with it. Anne and I are content at Rosings."

"Then why have you claimed that she was for Mr. Darcy?"

"If you are speaking of my repeated declarations that Darcy was to marry Anne, that was for his protection. Do you have any idea how many young heiresses are thrown at him every Season? I maintain this fiction in an attempt to lessen the machinations of the *ton*, or the dear boy would be overwhelmed. He does not know this, of course. He is too honest to further such a falsehood."

"So, Mr. Darcy believes it is your wish to have him marry his cousin."

Lady Catherine snorted. "Did I not just say that? Upon my word, Miss Bennet, it was your intelligence that first drew my notice! It would be most disappointing to find you as simple-minded as any debutante in the *ton*!" She studied Elizabeth closely. "I demand to know what it is that you are thinking."

Elizabeth hid an incredulous smile. "I recall Mrs. Collins claiming you liked me."

"Humph! There is another sensible young lady. Mrs. Collins is the only reason I tolerate the company of her absurd husband." Lady Catherine arranged her gown. "From the first moment of our acquaintance, Miss Bennet, you have impressed me with your grace, intellect, wit, bearing, and courage." She wagged a finger at her. "Yes, courage! I said you were full young to speak your mind and opinions so freely and forcefully. That, my dear, was a compliment!" She attempted a smile. "You remind me of me."

"I thank you, milady." This was proving the most remarkable conversation!

Lady Catherine eyes narrowed. "You are not perfect, mind! Your looks are pretty enough, but you will need polishing before you enter Society. And you must improve your accomplishments! Your playing, while entertaining, is not up to the quality required in your future station. And your needlework is atrocious!" She sighed. "Someone will have to take you in hand before you make your debut. You have not yet been presented to Her Majesty, have you?" She continued before Elizabeth responded. "I thought not. It is out of the question that your family, as low as it is, present you, so Darcy's must. I would sponsor you myself, except I cannot abide Town. It will have to be my brother's wife, Lady Matlock." Her lip curled in displeasure. "It is to be hoped she does not make a mess of the business as she did with her own daughter!"

Elizabeth brought their talk back to the salient point. "My lady, it seems a settled business with you that Mr. Darcy will renew his addresses to me, but—"

Lady Catherine pounced on that. "*Renew*, Miss Bennet?"

"Oh, dear!" Elizabeth rubbed her forehead as she bit her lip.

"Do you mean to say that Darcy has *already* honored you with a proposal?" Lady Catherine leaned in so close that her nose nearly touched Elizabeth's. "Why would he need to renew it?"

Elizabeth looked away, causing the grand dame to gasp.

"Miss Bennet! Am I to understand that you have *refused* him? That you have rejected a proposal from *my* nephew? Heaven and earth—of what were you thinking?"

Bravely, Elizabeth returned to her interrogator. “As I said, there are things involved in this matter that are unknown to you and should remain so. I will allow I hold Mr. Darcy in the highest esteem *now*. There was a time I did not. The reasons for that are not subject for conversation. I will tell you that mistakes were made—by both of us.”

“And is my nephew aware you have admitted your fault?”

Elizabeth pursed her lips in annoyance. “I cannot say. I do know he has addressed *his!*”

“Answer me this, miss. Did this *misunderstanding* take place before your sister’s tarnished actions?”

Elizabeth would only nod. This seemed to satisfy her companion.

“Very well, then. He will renew his addresses, you may be certain of it! All that remains is to begin thinking of the ceremony.” She surveyed the surrounding countryside. “I suppose you wish to be married in this … wilderness.”

“Lady Catherine, pray desist!” Elizabeth cried, her composure breaking down. “I have no expectation that Mr. Darcy will ever return to Hertfordshire. Let us be honest. In my refusal, I made certain accusations against him, some that have proved to be false. I was more than forthright that day—I was foolish and cruel. And let us not forget who my unfortunate sister married. A brother to Wickham! It is impossible. The degradation—my rebuffs of him—all must destroy every tender feeling! It … it is hopeless!” Elizabeth gave over to her disappointment and wept.

After a time, Lady Catherine awkwardly patted Elizabeth’s knee. “Enough of that, Miss Bennet.” She handed her a handkerchief. “Here—dry your eyes. I cannot abide sentimentality. It is apparent to me that you at last understand Darcy’s worth. That shows a greatness of mind, but do not deceive yourself into believing he is any more perfect than you. Oh, no! Besides an obstinate confidence in his abilities and understanding, he is infuriatingly liberal in his forgiveness of those who misuse him. In that, Darcy is much like his father. Why that scoundrel Wickham has not been imprisoned for debt, I do not know!

“I am certain Darcy has returned to London, but he has not given up. He is doubtless devising a complicated, elaborate plan to win your affections. Stuff and nonsense! I shall inform him of the facts and have him here within the week. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it.” She glared at Elizabeth. “The rest, unfortunately, is up to you. Do not fail me, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth gave her a watery smile. “Lady Catherine, I am grateful, but why are you so set on my marrying Mr. Darcy?”

“As almost his nearest relation, it falls to me to assure his happiness. Darcy needs you, Miss Bennet. He needs your liveliness. He is like my dear sister, Anne—so serious, so refined, and so thoughtful. Anne needed the lively and attentive George Darcy to take her out of herself and to bring her into the wider world.

“Unfortunately, her reserve worked against her happiness. She would not have George. She thought he deserved someone vivacious, someone better. Hah, as though there was anyone better than my dear sister! George was dogged in his pursuit, but it seemed doomed to failure, because of Anne’s stubbornness. A compromise was required. Thankfully, my father’s library and a missing key suited the purpose! The fifteen years they had together were the happiest of dear Anne’s life.” Lady Catherine hid a sniffle.

“In my case, it was the opposite. Sir Lewis de Bourgh was a stately, mature man, but exceedingly quiet and studious. He also trusted people too much. His steward was stealing him blind. Fortunately, Lewis recognized my abilities, and with very little effort on my part, we were shortly wed. We soon had Rosings set to rights, and my little Anne followed after. If not for the pox …” She sighed. “My time with Lewis was short, but I do not repine. He gave me Anne, Rosings, and my memories.”

She turned to Elizabeth. “As I stated, Miss Bennet, Darcy needs you just as Lewis needed me. It is to be hoped that a compromise will not be required in *your* case.” She looked back at the house. “There has been enough scandal about this business as it is.”

Elizabeth blushed. “I could never be a party to such a thing.”

Lady Catherine was very smug as she said, “I doubt it will be required as long as my nephew retains his senses, but it is well to have alternative plans in place.”

“Pray do not!” Elizabeth begged. “I could not do that to him!”

“Will you do your part, Miss Bennet?”

Realizing Lady Catherine wanted proof of her determination, Elizabeth made herself stare the lady in the eye. “I will leave him with no doubt as to my feelings.”

For the first time since she arrived at Longbourn, Lady Catherine truly smiled. “I am pleased to hear it. Darcy is an excellent man, but like all of his sex, he requires a firm hand. I trust you understand my meaning.”

Elizabeth did not but nodded anyway. “Lady Catherine—”

“Miss Bennet, as you are to be soon my niece, you shall address me as *Aunt Catherine*. I shall answer to nothing else.”

With embarrassed difficulty, Elizabeth continued. “Aunt Catherine, shall you step inside? My mother surely has refreshments for your enjoyment.” She made to stand.

Her guest cocked her head to the side. “Not so hasty, if you please. I have by no means done. I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement. I know it all—that the young man's marrying her was a patched-up business. I cannot be easy knowing such a girl will be my nephew's sister, or her husband—the son of his late father's steward—to be his brother. This is *beyond* disgraceful, but it shall be endured if you promise me one thing: the shades of Pemberley shall *never* be polluted by their presence!”

“Lady—Aunt Catherine, I cannot promise you that Mrs. Wickham will never be permitted entrance into my house. Familial affection and Christian charity requires I acknowledge my sister from time to time. But I will not inflict her presence upon my husband without his leave. As for *her* husband, I can give you the assurance you require.”

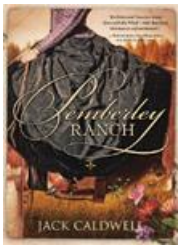
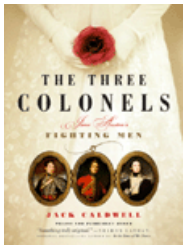
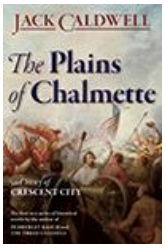
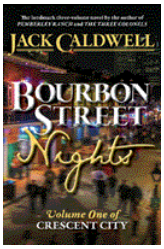
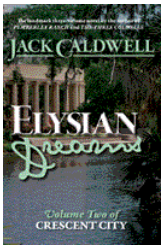
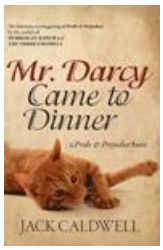
Lady Catherine scowled. “That is hardly satisfactory, but the demands of family are paramount. Few know that better than I. I trust that visits from Mrs. Wickham shall be few and far in between.”

At Elizabeth’s nod, the great lady arose from the bench. “I must now take my leave of you if I wish to be in Town before dark. Trust me, Miss Bennet—I shall know how to act. Do not imagine that your ambition will not be gratified. I came to try you; and with Darcy, I shall carry my point.”

In this manner, Lady Catherine talked on until they were at the door of the carriage she added, “I take my leave of you, Miss Bennet. Send compliments to your mother as she deserves. You and Darcy shall visit at Easter and spend at least a month complete at Rosings. I will hear nothing else. You may kiss my cheek.”

Elizabeth did as she was bidden, and the grand dame ascended into her carriage. As it began to move down the drive, Elizabeth waved. “Good bye, Lady Catherine! Safe journey!”

“*Aunt* Catherine, Miss Bennet!” Lady Catherine cried from the window. “Easter at Rosings, or I shall be most seriously displeased!”

THE END

Jack Caldwell is the author of nine novels, all available from your favorite bookseller: