Things Are Looking Up

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

Busy Lizzy meets grumpy Darcy one sloppy April day; pride once again butts heads with prejudice.

Short story written to March/April Playground prompt at another site.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Her view was shaped by the position in which she found herself that afternoon: left foot hovering in the air above her boot, right foot in its boot, newly purchased plants scattered about her, and her back in full contact with the soupy, ponding clay of the cafe’s unplanted front yard.

The early April sky above was a mottled grey, though it wasn’t easy to tell at first given the amount of rain falling into her face and flooding her eyes as she sprawled there.

*What did I do to deserve this?* she wondered, before considering further the best method by which she could pry herself out of this mess.

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The greenhouse opened at 9:00 am that Saturday morning. Lizzy arrived just as the front doors were being unlocked. Her mission was to purchase perennial herb plants for a potager or kitchen garden for soon-to-open Cafe Bené.

While she was still in high school, Lizzy decided she wanted to become a chef. She took every cent she’d earned from babysitting jobs and put it in an investment account. Her uncle Edward Gardiner, a financial advisor, taught her the ins and outs of the stock market along with financial planning. Their combined efforts, in addition to continued investments of summer and after-school paychecks earned working as an assistant for her uncle, created a substantive nest egg Lizzy planned to use to pay for culinary school.

But after several years of investing, it became clear that Lizzy was an even bigger whiz with money than she was in the kitchen. Her uncle persuaded her to get her bachelor’s degree in business, and rethink cooking school.

It was Lizzy’s older sister Jane who ended up in culinary school, though she backed into it in the same way that Lizzy backed into business. Jane, the sweetest and most socially adept of the five Bennet girls, sought a degree in hospitality management. Her classes in restaurant management had included hands-on work in the school’s commercial kitchen — and lo, a new career path emerged. She’d always been an eager baker at home, ever ready to whip up a batch of cookies in a heartbeat, but Lizzy’s drive to be a chef and her assumed role as the family’s cook meant that Jane had less opportunity to explore.

In the end it all worked out. Jane earned her BA in hospitality management, with a certificate in culinary arts. She interned as a sous chef at a local high-end restaurant. Lizzy had just wrapped up her bachelor’s degree when her uncle had a real estate investment opportunity drop in his lap.

A diner located near Ed’s office went on the market at distressed pricing; Ed knew the owner well and made an offer. The older gentleman needed to exit quickly due to age and mounting health care bills for his ailing wife. The business had served him well for years, but it was simply time to get out and enjoy life. Because Ed had ready cash and made no efforts to try and finagle alternative financing, the diner owner sold to Ed in a flash.

Presto, Cafe Bené was born — the name was a play on their family name, Bennet. Lizzy would be the business manager and sous chef, Jane would be the chef and assistant manager, and they’d buy the cafe from Ed using terms favorable to both the Gardiner and Bennet families. The bonus: all the girls of the Bennet family and the growing Gardiner family would have jobs with the cafe if they chose.
Unfortunately, that Saturday morning all of the family save for Lizzy had other commitments. Jane was at work prepping food for the afternoon and evening. Mary was tied up with orchestra practice, while Kitty and Lydia were at track practice. Tom and Fanny Bennet were visiting friends in Florida, and the Gardiners were dealing with a household-wide case of the flu.

Only Lizzy was available to check the completed remodeling work at the former diner, buy the plants for the potager garden, and plant them.

Which is why no one was immediately on hand to help Lizzy off the cold, wet ground in front of the cafe hours later…

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The air inside the greenhouse was lush, the dense scent of moist soil and mossy pots enfolding Lizzy as she entered the front door.

“Good morning! Can I help you?” A tall young blonde woman wearing a canvas work vest sporting a ‘GiGi’s Greenhouse’ logo patch embroidered with name Georgiana greeted Lizzy.

“Yes! Good morning! I’m looking for your perennial herb plants. I need quite a few this morning.”

“Right this way, though you’ll have to step back outside behind this greenhouse. All our herbs are outside so they are acclimated to the cooler air.”

“Ah, makes perfect sense. Your basil, though—”

“Indoors, yes, as well as our lemon and chocolate geraniums. You’ll want to keep those indoors for a few more weeks.”

“I’ve got a cold frame for them. They’ll be safe from the last frost.” The two women smiled at each other; they recognized a gardener in each other.

Lizzy selected a dozen each of the geraniums on the way through the greenhouse. Georgiana put them in trays and set them in the reserved orders area while Lizzy picked her way through the rows of herbs outdoors.

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The heavy commercial grade hose leapt as the tall man grasping the nozzle-end yanked it toward the end of the bed. Darcy was crotchety from a lack of sleep and the cool wet weather. He’d been fighting a cold all week and filling in on short notice for one of the greenhouse assistant managers didn’t help matters.

Ordinarily Darcy was willing to do anything for the family business. No job was too menial; if it needed to be done, he’d do it. It didn’t matter that he was top dog at F-D Architecture, vice-president at F-D Landscape Design, or that he was merely the silent partner at GiGi’s Greenhouse. All of these businesses rolled up under Darcy Group holdings and nothing bearing his family’s name would want...
for his effort.

The same bug that bit Darcy had run amok among the greenhouse employees. Georgie had only one other employee healthy enough to work the outdoor bedding plant area at a time when contractors were in and out frequently buying new shrubs and trees. Darcy took some over-the-counter cold medication, bucked up and went to work, wishing he was back in his warm bed as he shoveled mulch and burlapped root balls.

The hose wouldn’t come any further, though he knew there was more slack around the screening over the tenderest flowering shrubs. He yanked on the hose again, this time a little harder and with yet a bit more snap.

“Argh!” A feminine squawk made Darcy’s head snap up to look at the end of the hose.

A dark-haired petite woman, eyes bright, lips pursed, wiped mud spatter off her face. The hose had slapped a puddle in the aisle between beds as Darcy had yanked on it, throwing a spray of soil and water into the woman’s face and over her barn jacket.

“How did this woman manage to load up a cart with plants and end up here in the most remote part of the plant yard so early? Darcy wondered if Georgie hadn’t seen her come into the yard; had she bypassed the greenhouse and gone through the contractors’ gate?

The woman pulled her cart over the hose, then reached down and freed a kink caught on the end of the raised bed. The hose then pulled freely.

Darcy nodded his thanks. He did nothing else in acknowledgment, as head was too fuzzy from the cold medication he’d taken. I don’t have time to deal with some lonely suburban housewife before contractors get here to pick up some trees, he thought.

He looked up as he finished coiling the hose. Oops — had he grumbled out loud? The woman was smirking, an eyebrow raised as if taunting him. She was a rather pretty thing, wavy chestnut hair, full pink lips set in a heart-shaped face, intelligent dark eyes now narrowed in his direction.

Ugh. What had he done now? This cold was kicking his ass. He already felt dopey before the medication, and now he felt even worse knowing he must have done something to cause this woman to look at him as if he were annoying her.

Whatever. He finished reeling in the hose, coiling it on the hose cart, then pulled the cart to the contractors’ gate. After the contractors’ orders were loaded, he could go lie down in the office and take a cat nap. Maybe he’d be less groggy and not so grumpy once he slept off the worst of the cold medication’s effects.

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Lizzy pushed back her jacket’s hood and peered into her vehicle’s visor mirror, checking her face for any more mud. What was that jackass thinking when he yanked that hose? Did he not see her there? Granted, he may have been a damned fine looking jackass who filled his jeans and his GiGi’s Greenhouse vest rather nicely, but he was a jackass all the same.
A lonely housewife? Is that what he saw? She was stunned at first that an employee would mutter something like that within earshot of a customer, but then her pride felt the sting. Lizzy looked more closely in the mirror; she only saw a twenty-something woman of what she thought was rather ordinary features. Nothing in the mirror said desperate housewife, or an aging one for that matter.

_Lonely. Housewife. Hmph. What an ass. Whatever_, she thought as she pulled away, the cafe’s new herb plants in the back of the SUV. She had far too much to get done without wasting any more time on some arrogant if good-looking yard monkey. She needed to stop at the bank, swing by the restaurant supply house, chat with Jane while getting some lunch…

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“Will! I can’t believe you sometimes! Why do you have be such a curmudgeon?”

Georgie’s dander was up; her pale blonde hair fluttered around her pinkened cheeks as she raised and waved a fist in his general direction.

“What’d I do? I’ve been minding my business, tending the yard for Lucas while he’s out sick. How could I possibly upset anyone?” Darcy flopped into his office chair, a bit dizzy yet from head congestion and cold medication.

“It was Liz Bennet,” she said, checking the receipt in her hand as she parked on the edge of Darcy’s desk. “She’s the owner of that new Cafe Bené on Main Street. She just bought a bunch of herb plants for the cafe’s entrance.”

“Oh—” Darcy’s eyes widened as he recalled the one woman other than Georgie he had seen that morning.

“Yeah, oh, you pompous dork! She said you called her a ‘lonely housewife’ while you were mulching the perennials.” Georgie emphasized the negative label with fingers held like quote marks.

“I didn’t call her that to her face. Damn.” Darcy rubbed his forehead, feeling the pressure of a dull sinus headache and now added tension. “I must have said something out loud I meant to keep to myself. She must have heard me.” He sighed in frustration.

“Hmm. What exactly did you think you said?”

“I thought I didn’t say, just thought, that I didn’t have time to deal with a lonely suburban housewife. I really hadn’t looked at her very closely. But I thought that to myself. I must have lost control of my filter after the last dose of cold medicine and actually said that out loud.”

“Ugh, Darcy, you’re bad enough as it is without grumbling, too. Leave it to you to annoy one of the few new, cute, smart, and single clients I have. I’ve heard good things about her from friends who have investment accounts at Gardiner and Son.”

“Gardiner’s?”

“She worked there for her uncle as an assistant while she was going to business school. She’s nice, very funny. Even laughed about your ‘lonely housewife’ comment.” Georgie waved her fingers in the air again, her digits this time looking a bit more like a large bug’s mandibles.
Darcy chuckled at the sight, being a little loopy yet.

“Go ahead and laugh, buddy, but you’re going to fix this. If she’s opening a new business at—” Georgie checked the receipt again, “5411 Main Street, she’s going to have a lot of my potential customers walking through her doors. Fortunately she couldn’t fit all her plants in her SUV, and you can deliver them to her.”

“Main Street?” Darcy managed to look a little sheepish.

“Yes, the old cafe that closed. She’s remodeled it and reopening soon. Take her plants and apologize while you’re there. Make this right, Mr. Grumble-buns.”

“Fine, Georgie. Let me get cleaned up and I’ll fix this along with the delivery.”

“Thanks, Will. I hope you feel better soon. Don’t take any more of that over-the-counter stuff until bedtime.” Georgie’s blonde hair tickled Darcy’s nose as she leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek before spinning on her heels and walking back to her greenhouse.

Darcy sneezed into his sleeve, then sighed, shutting his eyes for a moment. He thought again about the woman whose cart the yard hose had spattered when he yanked it. Damn. At the time it hadn’t registered that he’d caused the mud spatter she’d been wiping away from her heart-shaped face, but he must have done it. And she had been quite attractive.

He would have to grovel. Flowers are good for groveling, he thought.

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“5411 Main Street,” Darcy muttered to himself as he pulled up in front of the café’s address to park at the curb. The entrance to the café was set back 20 to 30 feet from the sidewalk, leaving a small courtyard fronted by a crisp white picket fence with an arched gate. Young rose bushes had recently been planted next to the arch; Darcy imagined pink or red blooms trailing over the fence and arch in a few years.

Just beyond the fence a flash of color near the ground inside the fenced courtyard caught his eye as he stepped down out his truck’s cab.

There was a woman lying flat on her back with one foot in the air; her wavering foot had caught his attention. It was the same woman he had seen in the greenhouse plant yard.

“Miss Bennet?” Darcy ran inside the courtyard. “Are you okay?”

Lizzy shut her eyes. Of all the luck. Of course she would be found by one of the most attractive men she’d seen in a while, one that thought little of her, while she was flopping in the mud.

“Miss?” Darcy crouched closer to her. He noted the sloppy, muddy condition of the yard, its recently-tilled soil now soupy with rain.

She opened her eyes to find him staring back intently. “I’m fine, really. If you would be so kind as to lend me a hand, I would greatly appreciate it.” Nuts, but he’s attractive even from this angle, upside down and in the mud, thought Lizzy as she stared back at him.
“Don’t move, I’ll be right back, I promise. You need something solid to step on when I pull you up.”

“Okay, thanks.” She sounded a little skeptical, but what could he expect?

Darcy ran back to the truck, opened the tailgate and pulled out the plants he was to deliver and set them on the sidewalk. Beneath them was a sheet of plywood he used for loading materials and protecting his pickup truck bed from damage. Now it had another use.

Lizzy watched as he hefted the board through the gate and then laid it down right next to her, snug under her arm on her left side. “If you roll to your left onto this plywood, you’ll be able to stand up without sinking into the mud. If you leave your boots and your jacket right where they are, you’ll be less muddy.”

Stepping onto the plywood, Darcy kneeled down then reached over to help her free her arms from her jacket before helping her roll on to the plywood. She stood up in stockinged feet, wet but quite a bit less muddy than she expected. It was a good thing she’d had her hood up or her hair would have been a mud pie.

“Thank you so much for the help. I might have been stuck in that slop for a bit longer and been a lot messier by the time I got out.”

“It’s my pleasure. I owe you anyhow, as an apology for being an ass earlier. My sister Georgie told me I wasn’t very nice earlier. I didn’t mean what I said at all. It was cold medication talking.” Darcy realized he was rambling a bit as he stared into her wide eyes.

“Georgie?”

“Oh, GiGi. Georgie is GiGi, as in GiGi’s Greenhouse. She’s my sister.”

“Ah, the very helpful girl who knows her herbs. She’s a sweetheart.”

“Yes, I’m very lucky to have her for a sibling.” Darcy felt a little bashful at this point, realizing they were standing in a steady mist and Liz was still in stockings. “Is there someplace I can take you to get dried off and cleaned up?”

“Oh, no, I can go into the cafe. I have several changes of clothing here in my office. Is there something I can do for you? I can’t believe you just showed up out of the blue to rescue this hapless awkward turtle lying on its back in the mud.” It was Lizzy’s turn to be bashful; she blushed as she spoke.

“I’m here to deliver the rest of your plants at Georgie’s order. Why don’t I do that while you get cleaned up?”

“Okay, maybe I can give you a tour of the cafe when you’re done?” Lizzy looked along the walkway toward the front door, realizing she’d have to walk in her stockings. Darcy’s eyes followed hers.

“Um, allow me?” Darcy held his arms out to her. “I can carry you to the door.” He looked at her expectantly with big puppy eyes.

“No, it’s okay, really, I can just—” She had pinkened even more and looked away, but he sensed the moment she caved as her voice trailed off.

Darcy bent slightly, swept his right arm beneath as he wrapped his left arm around her shoulder, lifting her cleanly off her feet. Lizzy gasped slightly with surprise, unable to do more before she
found herself on the step directly in front of the cafe’s front door and then quickly and gently on her feet again.

A wide, smug grin split Darcy’s face. He’d never had a chance to sweep a girl off her feet before, except for Georgie. Lizzy’s eyes were bugging out of her head; he’d lifted her as if she were nothing at all. The look of surprise on her face made Darcy smile so hard his two rarely-seen dimples erupted, one on each side of his face.


“Do you have your keys on you, or are they back in the mud?” Darcy’s smile dampened a bit as he grasped the possible complication.

“Uh, no. Nope. They’re right here in my pant’s pocket.” Lizzy patted herself, fishing out her keychain before opening the door. She led him into the reception area, which smelled of fresh paint and sawdust. “I’ll be right back if you want to take a peek by yourself.”

Lizzy ran into her office through the kitchen, shutting the door and peeling off her clothes as fast as possible. She donned the first change of clothes she could pull together. For a number of reasons she didn’t want to leave Darcy out in the dining area alone for too long, the first of which was a good-looking man left unattended where a family member might run into him if they happened along unexpectedly. And a good-looking man — *hello, get back to him right way, Lizzy,* she thought as she ripped a comb through her damp locks.

Darcy was roaming around the dining area floor when she returned wearing dry clothes and freshly applied lip gloss. “Wow, this looks really nice,” Darcy said, awe clearly reflected in his voice as he looked around.

“Thanks. I’m pretty happy with the way the design turned out. All inspections have been passed. We’re ready for business. We just need carpeting and that’s coming in two days.”

Darcy looked a little sheepish. “Who did you use for your design work, if you don’t mind my asking? I know you didn’t use F-D Architecture.”

“Oh! I didn’t use any architect. I did this myself, with some assistance from my sister, Jane.”

“Really? This is a great layout! Even the lighting looks like it will be both attractive and efficient. Did you have any training in architecture or interior design?” His face showed his surprise; his mouth hung open in an O as he continued to look around.

“No, no training. I used to come here as a kid a lot as my uncle’s business office is just up the street. I knew the previous owners, too. The gentleman told me freely about the shortcomings of the building and site which I was sure to fix with the remodel. I also spent a lot of my free time researching energy efficient design, which in turn helped shape the layout.”

“That’s incredible. So you are well-versed in LEED*, then?”

“Yup. Restaurants have a very high rate of failure. If we’re going to make a nice profit let alone stay in business, I have to make sure energy costs are well managed. Applying LEED standards helped dictate a lot of the design. Almost designed itself.”

Darcy gave her another one of his megawatt, bedimpled smiles. *Damn,* he thought. *Georgie was right, she’s smart as well as pretty.*

“I’m really impressed. I can’t wait to come in with Georgie for dinner one evening. Speaking of
which, can I take you out to dinner one evening, when you’re not tied up with the cafe? I’d love to talk more about your work here. You’ve got natural talent. It’s a shame I can’t hire you to work for me at F-D Architecture.”

Lizzy’s eyes lit up, appreciating the compliment to her abilities and the opportunity for a date. “Yes, I’d love to go to dinner with you.”

Darcy smiled again, then realized he’d left something undone. “Let me get a business card out of my truck for you and grab my tablet.”

He was back in a flash with a beribboned hibiscus topiary in full bloom, big pink blossoms covering the plant. “For you, in apology for my grumpy comment earlier today. I’m afraid you overheard the effects of my cold and cold medications. I’m really sorry.”

“Wow, flowers delivered days before a dinner date? You’re pretty impressive—” Lizzy paused, realizing she hadn’t caught his name even though he’d rescued her out of the mud. She’d written him off in the greenhouse plant yard, not bothering to see if he wore a name tag like Georgie did.

“Will. Fitzwilliam Darcy, but you can call me Will.” Darcy beamed again, feeling much less dopey from his cold and cold medications. In fact he was feeling great.

“Well, Will, thank you so much for this spectacular plant. Apology accepted.”

The two of them stood and stared at each other for a moment longer, then realized to their chagrin they were acting like goofballs. If they only knew that they were on the same wavelength, thinking the same things.

After exchanging business cards and phone numbers, Darcy promised to call her to pick a date and time for dinner. He said goodbye and rushed back out to finish delivering the cafe’s plants in the courtyard. Lizzy watched from the front of the cafe, laughing as he picked up her sodden jacket and boots. He offered to take them back to the greenhouse and hose them off along with the plywood, returning them when they had their dinner.

Waving as he drove off, Lizzy was giddy with excitement. This was the first time she’d met a guy who was smart, kind and generous, and appreciated her for herself and her abilities. This was the first time she felt something click naturally into place with a man, too, no effort required to draw his beautiful smiles. And this, in spite of the rocky start in the greenhouse plant yard.

What did I do to deserve this? she wondered, smiling as she looked up into the clearing April skies.

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End Notes

* LEED — acronym for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a set of standards on which environmentally-friendly design, construction, operation, and maintenance is based and measured.

Author’s note: This is really just an extended meet-cute written to April Showers Playground
prompt at another site. Thanks to my betas, Andrew and Nathan, for once again slogging through a JAFF short. Get busy writing so I can return the favor!

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