



MR. DARCY'S

P&P POV

(the abridged version)

JACK CALDWELL

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by Jack Caldwell

Blurb: What was Darcy *really* thinking during the events of *Pride and Prejudice*?

Let's cut out all the speeches and get to the nitty-gritty!

A *P&P* short story.

Author's note: All chapters below correspond to the chapters in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

VOLUME I

Chapter 1 -

RELIEVED THAT I AM returned to Town from Ramsgate. Good God, what was Georgiana *thinking*? That is just it, she was *not* thinking.

No, no, that is unfair. Youth must be her excuse. The fault lies with Mrs. Younge and Wickham. *Wickham!* How I hate that name! Well, I have seen the last of him. He now knows better than to cross my path again, no matter what my cousin Fitzwilliam says.

Hmm, a note from Bingley. Lord, cannot a man of wealth and education write a blasted letter without smudging half the words? So, he has found an estate for lease in Hertfordshire, but wants my approval before he signs the final papers. I suppose I can help him with that. I certainly am useless with Georgiana. I hope I am not deceived in the character of her new companion, Mrs. Annesley, as I was with Mrs. Younge.

I must make preparations to join Bingley in—where is it? Meryton.

Chapter 2 -

I CANNOT GET ANY work done, yet I must. I am for Netherfield in the morning. But, I cannot but dwell on how much I am to blame for Georgiana's distress. If only I told her of that ungrateful reprobate's manifest deficiencies as a gentleman. If only I had better investigated Mrs. Younge's credentials. If only I spent more time with my dear sister.

I must shake off this black mood. But I doubt I will be successful in Hertfordshire. After all, Caroline Bingley will be there with the Hursts. How tiresome.

Chapter 3 -

A COUNTRY ASSEMBLY? WHAT was Bingley thinking? Just look at the bumpkins—a collection of people with little beauty and no fashion. The men hopped up on their supposed importance; that is, them that are not already half-way into their cups. And the mothers! Each one sizing up my fortune, and Bingley's too, I shouldn't wonder. We will both of us be married off in many a matron's mind before this evening is through.

Miss Bingley making a cutting remark. Now *there's* a rare occurrence. I feel a headache coming on. Chin up, old boy. Do not make eye contact, and the locals will not bother you.

Oh God, Bingley is trying to impress every family in town. Lucas, Golding, Long, Bennet. Not a name among them. Gah!

All I want is peace and quiet. Let Bingley make a fool of himself if he wishes. Hmm, he's found another angel, I see. Miss Bennet, if I recall correctly. Very pretty, I must admit, but she smiles too much.

What's that? Ten thousand pounds? Gah, I hate being the subject of such speculation, especially as the locals are unable to moderate the volume of their speech! Good thing they have undervalued me; if they knew my true worth, the mothers themselves might try to compromise me! If I wanted to stand about in a pit of vipers, I could have remained in London. My headache is getting worse.

Leave off, Charles! I'm not to dance tonight! I only danced with Louisa and Caroline because they are among my party. I am done. I do not care if it is with your new angel's sister. I just want to leave. Besides, the music stinks.

Chapter 4, 5 -

A LETTER FROM GEORGIANA. She asserts better sprits, but I do not know. Mrs. Annesley claims progress; I hope she is right.

Gah, Miss Bingley again. Only my good breeding prevents me from setting the baggage in her place. I must get out—a ride; the very thing. At least the countryside is handsome.

Chapter 6 -

A PARTY AT THE Lucases—how wonderful. If I were a lessor man, I would drink myself into oblivion. Hold—there is Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You know, she has quite grown on me. At first, I scarcely allowed her to be pretty, but now I find her face rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. Yes, there is no perfect symmetry in her form, yet her figure is light and pleasing. Her manners are refreshingly easy and playful, far superior to those of the fashionable world. I cannot keep my eyes off her.

Ah, there is a sauciness to her tone, asking me about balls. I could listen to her for hours, instead of the insipid sycophancy I hear from Miss Bingley. Her performance on the pianoforte, while not technically proficient, is very pleasing.

Oh God, Miss Mary Bennet is a different creature altogether. I wonder the dogs outside do not howl. Hmm—her younger sisters demand that Miss Mary play music for dancing.

Well, it certainly cannot be worse. Oh, here is Sir William Lucas. *Again*. How's that—dancing?

“Certainly, sir; and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world. Every savage can dance.” There—that ought to shut him up. Oops, no joy. Enough about St. James's Court, man! Just tune him out Darcy; you can do it. You've done it before—

What? Dance with Miss Elizabeth? Badly done, Sir William—you're trapped her, but I can do the gentlemanly thing and accept—

Whoa. She extracted herself from that very well. She needs no help from me. Extraordinary woman.

Gah! Miss Bingley, making a catty remark. You wish to know the subject of your reverie, do you? “Your conjecture is totally wrong, I assure you. My mind was more agreeably engaged. I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow.” Now, be quiet.

All right, Miss Bingley, you asked for it. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet.” Now tune her out, Darcy, and drink in your fill of the surprising Miss Elizabeth.

Chapter 7 -

BINGLEY'S QUEST TO MAKE himself the most agreeable man in the county continues, and he, Hurst, and I are to dine with Colonel Forster and the other officers of the militia. I understand that the ladies have invited Miss Bennet to dine with *them*. Probably to size up her dowry. Hateful women.

Well, *that* was an agreeable dinner—*not*. I fairly despise mutton. The way Forster was raving about it, you would think it was the finest lamb prepared by French cooks. Gad! I'm for my chair in Bingley's barely adequate library and a glass of port to dry off from this cold rain—

WTF? Miss Bennet rode here—on a horse—in the rain? No surprise that she fell ill. What was Mr. Bennet thinking? A blind simpleton could tell it was to rain today! Is he trying to kill off his daughter?

This whole county is crazy. I wish I was back at Pemberley.

Extraordinary thing. Miss Elizabeth walked up from Longbourn before breakfast. Three miles across country in the mud to minister to her ill sister. I cannot see how such a trifling cold could justify her coming so far alone, but I must admire her affectionate behavior towards Miss Bennet. As well as how the exercise added brilliancy to her complexion. She impresses me more and more.

Just as I thought, Miss Bennet's illness has worsened. I trust the apothecary knows his business. Miss Elizabeth will stay—as she should. If only Georgiana had such a sister, Ramsgate would never have happened.

Chapter 8 -

GAD! MISS BINGLEY GOING on again about Miss Elizabeth. Of course, I would not want to see Georgiana traipsing about the countryside in the mud on a mission of mercy. That is what a carriage is for, you know. Now she asks if my admiration of Elizabeth's eyes has been diminished.

“Not at all—they were brightened by the exercise.” *Sigh* No joy, she keeps talking. Now it is about the Bennet family's situation, particularly their relations in trade.

“If they had uncles enough to fill *all* Cheapside,” cried Bingley, “it would not make them one jot less agreeable.”

Oh, Charles, do not be a fool. You are trying to escape your roots in trade, remember? Mr. Bennet might be a landowner, but you have twice his income, very likely more. What sort of man is Mr. Bennet, anyway? No carriage for either of his daughters? It shows a lack of feeling, I am sure. Almost as much as Caroline and Louisa, indulging their mirth at the expense of their *dear friend* Miss Bennet's vulgar relations. I shall go to the billiards room.

Evening coffee and the interrogation of Miss Elizabeth continues. I do not know what is more troubling—Bingley's good-natured but embarrassing gallantry towards our visitor, Miss Bingley's ill-bred and embarrassing attacks against her, or the presence of the lady herself. For the life of me, I cannot make her out. She accepts Charles' foolishness and deflects Caroline's barbs with equal aplomb, but there is a marked gleam in her eye. Is she amused or teasing?

Now Caroline is trying to capture my attention. *Again*. Her cloying compliments to me and Georgiana are as tiresome as they are obvious. Stop it, woman!

Bingley: "It is amazing to me how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are."

I must set him straight. "Your list of the common extent of accomplishments has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse or covering a screen. But I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished."

Miss Elizabeth: "Then you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman."

"Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it."

Caroline elaborates to excess about what she believes are the extent of an accomplished lady's talents. It is just a coincidence that it coincides with hers. *Not*. Showing off is not attractive, woman.

"All this she must possess, and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." I say this with an eye on Miss Elizabeth's book. Heh, heh.

Miss Elizabeth: "I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*."

Are you serious? Oh, right. You could not have been much in Town. "Are you so severe upon your own sex as to doubt the possibility of all this?"

"I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity and taste and application and elegance, as you describe united."

Strange. I thought Miss Elizabeth understood me. Is she playing some game, or is she that modest?

As soon as Miss Elizabeth left for Miss Bennet's side, Caroline started up again. "Eliza Bennet is one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But, in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art."

Is this not the pot calling the kettle black! "Undoubtedly there is meanness in all the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable."

Good, that shut her mouth.

Miss Elizabeth returns to say her sister is worse. Bingley is distressed. Certainly the apothecary should be sent for in the morning should there be no improvement, but there is no need for a London physician, Caroline! Your phony concern sickens me.

Yes, Miss Elizabeth agrees with me. What a sensible woman.

Chapter 9 -

GOOD LORD, MRS. BENNET has descended upon Netherfield with her two youngest daughters—the two most foolish ones! She makes herself at home, and after the barest of comments about Miss Bennet’s health, she sets herself to charming Bingley—as transparent a match maker as I have ever met! The two children say nothing and sit bored.

Hah! Miss Elizabeth calls Bingley out on his foolish boast. She is a quick study, a surprising ability here in the middle of nowhere, but it is still nothing compared to London. Oh, here is Mrs. Bennet again—apparently she cannot live without Bingley’s complete attention.

“I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country, for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr. Bingley?”

“When I am in the country, I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town, it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either.”

“Aye— that is because you have the right disposition. But that gentleman,” Mrs. Bennet turns to me, “seemed to think the country was nothing at all.”

How dare she insult me so!

Miss Elizabeth, her face flushed, tries to smooth things over and points out there is not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in London.

“Certainly, my dear, nobody said there were. But as to not meeting with many people in this neighborhood, I believe there are few neighborhoods larger. I know we dine with *four and twenty families!*”

I have more than four and twenty families working for me, you silly woman! Explain to me again how is it that Mrs. Bennet can walk and breathe at the same time? *Sigh* The brilliancy in Miss Elizabeth’s eyes are somewhat diminished by her mother’s lack of understanding of the world.

What is that Miss Elizabeth is saying? Poetry?

“I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”

Now that is amusing! “I have been used to consider poetry as the food of love.”

“Of a fine, stout, healthy love it may. Everything nourishes what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, I am convinced that one good sonnet will starve it entirely away.”

Only my good breeding stops me from laughing out loud! If I did not know better, I would think Miss Elizabeth is flirting with me! If only her family were not so ridiculous, I—

Stop that kind of thinking right now, Darcy!

Chapter 10 –

I MUST WRITE TO Georgiana to see how she is getting on, but prowling Caroline gives me no peace! Cease the complements, woman! Gad, does she think me so shallow and vain that veneration for my handwriting will establish her as Mistress of Pemberley? If she was not Charles’ sister, I would have nothing to do with her.

Take Miss Elizabeth’s example. She is barely of gentle birth, yet knows how to comport herself in company. If you wish to leave your roots in trade behind, Caroline, learn from Miss Elizabeth.

There goes Charles again with his indirect boasting. Now I have lost my train of thought, blast him! Miss Elizabeth takes his side.

“To yield readily—easily—to the persuasion of a friend is no merit with you.”

Of course not. “To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either.” We fall into a nice little discussion until—

“By all means,” cries Bingley, “let us hear all the particulars, not forgetting their comparative height and size, for that will have more weight in the argument, Miss Bennet, than you may be aware of. I assure you that, if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference. I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy on particular occasions and in particular places, at his own house especially and of a Sunday evening when he has nothing to do.”

Well, *excuse me* for disliking idleness! The lives of many people depend on my diligence! *Sigh* Do not get upset, Darcy. Let it go; Bingley means nothing by it. Find your happy place and get back to your letter.

I am in a better mood. My duty to my sister is done, and the music from the ladies is very fine. An exhilaration takes me.

“Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?” Why in the world did I say that?

Miss Elizabeth smiles but makes no answer. Perhaps she did not hear me.

“Oh, I heard you before, but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say 'Yes,' that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste, but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have, therefore, made up my mind to tell you that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare.”

Her answer is so sweet and arch, I cannot take offense. “Indeed I do not dare.” I barely hide my smile. Truly, I have no idea why I would make such an outlandish request. I hate exhibition. In fact, I think Miss Elizabeth has done me good service and saved me from my own folly.

I must remember her connections are awful! Miss Elizabeth will never do!

The next day proves to me that Caroline is jealous of Miss Elizabeth. Her catty comments in the garden were evidence of this. She is wasting her time; I shall not marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet. But because Miss Elizabeth is lacking, it does not follow that Miss Bingley is suitable. Even if I was agreeable to a connection with a woman of such inferior birth as she, her character would destroy utterly any tender feelings.

Oh, there is Louisa and Miss Elizabeth. Hmm, this path is not wide enough for all of us. We had best go by the avenue—

“No, no, stay where you are,” Miss Elizabeth laughs. “You are charmingly grouped, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth. Good-bye.”

Sigh That lady has more good breeding in her little finger than Caroline and Louisa have in their bodies combined.

Chapter 11 -

DINNER WAS TOLERABLE, BUT afterwards is better. Miss Jane Bennet is recovered sufficiently to come down. She looks well enough, if a bit wane. Miss Elizabeth his bursting with happiness. How lovely is a sister's affection!

I am amused that Caroline chooses a book over cards this evening. Whom does she think she is fooling? I cannot stand the artfulness of ladies!

Well, as I expected, the book did not last long. She is trying to talk Bingley out of his offer of a ball. Wretched things, balls, but I shall not attempt to talk him out of it. Bingley has made a commitment.

Now Caroling tries to catch my attention by walking with Miss Elizabeth. Ah-ha! Now comes an invitation to join them. No, woman, I shall not fall into your trap. "I can imagine but two motives for you ladies to walk up and down the room together, with either of which motives my joining would interfere."

Heh, heh! Miss Elizabeth takes my meaning, but my friend's stupid sister does not. Time to have some sport.

"You either chose this method of passing the evening because you are in each other's confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking. If the first, I should be completely in your way, and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire."

Score! Miss Elizabeth blushes. So does Caroline, but there is nothing for it. What is that—I cannot be laughed at? "Miss Bingley has given me credit for more than can be. The wisest and the best of men—nay, the wisest and best of their actions—may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke."

"Certainly," replied Elizabeth, "there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without."

There she goes—teasing again. "Perhaps that is not possible for anyone. But it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule."

"Such as vanity and pride."

"Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation." Something I have always strove to do.

“Your examination of Mr. Darcy is over, I presume,” said Miss Bingley, “and pray what is the result?”

“I am perfectly convinced by it that Mr. Darcy has no defect.” Miss Elizabeth smiled. “He owns it himself without disguise.”

“No, I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding.” I feel an urge to admit something. “My temper I dare not vouch for. It is, I believe, too little yielding—certainly too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offences against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. My good opinion once lost is lost forever.” I wonder why I said that.

“That is a failing indeed!” cries Miss Elizabeth. “Implacable resentment is a shade in a character. But you have chosen your fault well. I really cannot laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

Who wants to be safe? “There is, I believe, in every disposition a tendency to some particular evil—a natural defect, which not even the best education can overcome.”

“And your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.”

You cannot possibly mean that! “And yours is willfully to misunderstand them.” I try to hide a smile; her playfulness is dangerous to my clear thinking.

Of course, Caroline misunderstands and changes the subject. She thinks we were arguing. Silly woman.

Still, it would be best to pay Miss Elizabeth much less attention.

Chapter 12 -

MISS BENNET SEEMS RECOVERED enough, but she and Miss Elizabeth are to stay until after Sunday services. Another night! Just one more night of resisting the beguiling Miss Elizabeth. Good! She is most unsuitable for a Darcy. I must endeavor to always keep that maxim foremost in my mind. I must not excite hopes that could never be fulfilled.

Of course, Miss Elizabeth must be as attracted to me as I am to her. Why else would she tease and banter with me? I cannot hurt her. That would be insupportable.

Besides, I am full to overflowing with Caroline’s jealousy over the matter. Hopeful, with Miss Elizabeth gone, Caroline will revert back to her less obnoxious behavior towards me.

There, I shall be steady to my purpose. I shall show Miss Elizabeth no special attention. Better yet, I shall show her no attention whatsoever.

Gad! I did not know how difficult my resolution would be to carry out, with Miss Elizabeth sitting alone with me for a half-hour. I shall not look at her, I shall not. Good lord, this book is boring!

At last they are gone. Caroline was at her gratuitous and insincere best taking her leave of the Misses Bennet. She hugged Miss Bennet and was even cordial to Miss Elizabeth. I am only happy that a source of bother and unsettlement has been removed. I can now enjoy the country in peace. Miss Elizabeth left in the liveliest spirits.

Why does that disappoint me?

Bingley looks like a wounded puppy. Buck up, man!

Chapter 13, 14 -

I AM STILL UNSETTLED. Something seems missing in the empty halls of Netherfield. Everything is the same—Bingley is sighing, Caroline is complaining, Louisa is gossiping, and Hurst is drinking. How boring! There is a spark absent in the air.

Stop it, man! You DO NOT regret Miss Elizabeth! You do not!

I still cannot believe that Bingley will actually host a ball on the twenty-sixth. Perhaps I can avoid it. I can always return to Town and have a tooth pulled.

Deuce take it! I am almost as bad as Bingley.

I just wish I knew why I am so unsettled.

Chapter 15 -

WTF? WICKHAM? Wickham is in Meryton? What the devil is *he* doing here?

When I rode up with Bingley to greet the Bennet party, I almost fell off my saddle at the sight of that reprobate! Looking at his snide expression, the vision of Georgiana's devastated face came directly to my mind. Oh, how I wish I had throttled that bastard in Ramsgate! I could not stand to be in that degenerate's presence another instant, for if I did not ride away, I should have leapt off my horse and gave that deceitful disgrace of a man a piece of my mind. No—better yet, a kick in the bullocks.

Charles, of course, berated me for my behavior in Meryton, and I was forced to put him off with an abrupt apology. He knows I dislike that weasel, but he knows nothing about of how that scoundrel damaged my family in Ramsgate. And I mean to keep it that way. Charles cannot keep a secret to save his life.

Blast it all! Did Wickham know I was here? Is he after more of my money? Blackmail—is that his scheme?

No. He knows if he even *breathes a word* about Georgiana, Colonel Fitzwilliam will hunt him down and skewer him with his sabre. And it will not be in a duel, either!

Well, if my father's good-for-nothing godson knows what is best for him, he had better stay out of my sight!

Chapter 16 & 17-

I AM IN A black humor. Even Charles has remarked upon it. Everyone at Netherfield believes it is because I dread the upcoming ball. I know it is beneath me to allow my friends and acquaintances to persist in that erroneous belief, but it is done for the best. I cannot disclose that it is because of Wickham's presence in the village. That might lead to uncomfortable questions, and Georgiana must be protected at all costs.

The only thing that will make this ball bearable will be Miss Elizabeth's charming presence. Perhaps she can tease me to better humor. I can only hope.

Chapter 18 -

WELL, THE NIGHT OF the ball is here, and all of Bingley's neighbors are parading in their finery. Miss Bingley should be in ecstasy—so much ammunition for gossip and derision. It seems that my useless former acquaintance did not have the gall to attend along with the rest of the officers. If one did not know better, one would think the man owned some little conscience. I am not deceived. He is cowardly avoiding me, as he should.

Ah, the Bennets have arrived, and Charles is making an absolute fool of himself over Miss Bennet. She does look lovely, if a bit reserved.

Oh, what is wrong with me? I cannot take my eyes off Miss Elizabeth. Her dress is tolerable, her carriage nothing out of the common way, yet the room seems brighter for her presence.

Stop it, man! You are acting no better than Bingley.

My plan is in shambles. I cannot stop watching Miss Elizabeth. I wince each time her fool of a cousin nearly stepped on her dainty little foot, and I thought I would grind my teeth to dust as she laughed dancing with that officer. I cannot stand it; I cannot control my feet. I walk towards her and Miss Lucas, and the words fly from my mouth unimpeded. "If you are not otherwise engaged, would you grant me the honor of the next set?"

I barely confirm that she agreed, so quickly did I depart to gain control of myself.

I escort the lovely siren to the line as the music starts. I try to focus on the steps, but her teasing voice stirs me from my concentration. She demands conversation, and I attempt to answer her impertinence in the same manner, allowing my body to follow the instructions imparted to me by my dancing master so many years ago.

She continues, "I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the éclat of a proverb."

"This is no very striking resemblance of your own character. How near it may be to *mine*, I cannot pretend to say. *You* think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly." Is this a tease or not?

"I must not decide on my own performance," she says, giving me no clue.

We work the figures of the first dance, bow, and start the second, one much slower. I try to think of a subject. Meryton? That should be safe. I enquire as to how often her family visits there. She speaks in a low tone now.

"When you met us there the other day, we had just been forming a new acquaintance."

My gut clenches. That no-good—! Overriding my reluctance to give that cur any notice is a desire to warn her about the rake. But I must be careful for Georgiana's sake. "Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his making friends. Whether he may be equally capable of retaining them is less certain."

"He has been so unlucky as to lose *your* friendship," replied Miss Elizabeth with emphasis, "and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life."

What? Does the girl believe Wickham? Come, young lady, you are smarter than that! Just as I think of a retort, Sir William Lucas interrupts us. The silly man tries to flatter me on my dancing and... What's that about Bingley? Expectations? Oh, no, not again!

Miss Elizabeth's flashing eyes are upon me as the corkbrained knight moves off. "Sir William's interruption has made me forget what we were speaking of."

She dismisses the former subject, and we banter of books. I begin to relax when I see she is preoccupied. "The present always occupies you in such scenes, does it?"

She agrees, and then in a moment of some passion, she says, "I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave, that your resentment once created was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its *being* created."

Of course I do, I assure her, but she presses on. I am a bit irritated. "May I ask to what these questions tend?"

"Merely to the illustration of your character. I am trying to make it out."

I try to pretend I am not insulted, although I am deeply offended. "And what is your success?"

She shakes her head. "I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you as puzzle me exceedingly."

Wickham again! "I can readily believe that report may vary greatly with respect to me." I know my voice is harsh, but I cannot help it. "And I could wish, Miss Bennet, that you were not to sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either." Perhaps tomorrow I can explain.

"But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity."

Headstrong, obstinate girl! Will you not listen to me? "I would by no means suspend any pleasure of yours," I growl, for I can barely restrain my temper.

She said no more, and we part in silence as the dance ends.

Gad! What is *wrong* with her? I thought Miss Elizabeth intelligent! Can she really believe Wickham over me?

Of course she can. That bye-blow was able to make Father believe almost anything and convince Georgiana to run away with him. I really should do something permanent about that cretin.

What the devil is Miss Lydia doing, running about like that? Cannot Mr. Bennet control her *at all*?

The ball is over, and I have much to ponder. Two issues, actually.

Positives about Miss Elizabeth Bennet: lovely, charming, intelligent (mostly), witty, loyal, modest (in deportment, not dress—thank goodness), accomplished, and owns the most enchanting eyes.

Negatives about Miss Elizabeth: her family. She sometimes expresses opinions that are not her own just for argument's sake, which can grow tiresome, but that is the exception, not the rule. Her manners could use a bit of polishing for the *ton*, of course, but that is easily remedied. What cannot be improved is the condition *and* behavior of her relations.

She is a gentleman's daughter, true, but Mr. Bennet does not act like one. Besides, two thousand a year barely makes the scratch in my circle. The mother's relations in trade almost make any union with Miss Elizabeth unpardonable, but what tips her over the edge is her family's indefensible behavior.

Mrs. Bennet's abuse of me I can overlook, however, her boasting about Miss Bennet "catching" Bingley is highly offensive. She ignores, nay, *encourages* the wild behavior of her two youngest. And as for the middle girl, Miss Mary, her sanctimonious pronouncements set my teeth on edge as completely as her horrendous performance on the pianoforte. Mr. Bennet's unfortunate "correction" of his daughter was poor form and mortifying. The less said about the ridiculous Mr. Collins the better.

If anything, Mrs. Bennet's ignorant sister is worse. I shudder to think about her brother in London. He must be truly awful. I cannot see myself introducing that lot to my uncle the earl.

Miss Elizabeth simply will not do!

The second problem is Bingley. Never have I seen him in such a state. I truly believe he cares for the lovely Miss Jane Bennet, but Bingley is trying to enter high society, and Miss Bennet cannot help very much. She is almost as admirable as Miss Elizabeth, but owns many of the same disadvantages. It is a harder decision for Bingley, or would be, if Miss Bennet loved him, but to my eyes, she does not. She *likes* him well enough, but that is all. My affable friend would be devastated by a marriage of convenience, I know. Should he seek my counsel, I must be honest with him.

It is well Bingley has decided to leave tomorrow. I shall join him. We both must put Hertfordshire behind us.

How ironic that I once dismissed Miss Elizabeth as not tempting enough for my attentions. In reality, she is extremely alluring and appealing. She is altogether too tempting. I must remember my duty to my sister and family. I must forget the charming Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

VOLUME II

Chapter 19-23 -

WELL, THE DEED IS done. I have saved Bingley from a most imprudent match.

I traveled to London from Netherfield with Bingley. For me it was to escape the snare that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was becoming, and for Bingley, it was to see to some business. As I feared, part of Bingley's business was to make inquiries as to the settlement that would be expected for a man of his means to the daughter of a country squire. My friend was indeed infatuated by the charming but otherwise inadequate Miss Jane Bennet. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, who unsurprisingly followed us to Town, were beside themselves and petitioned me most passionately to talk sense into Charles. I agreed, and the disagreeable interview was done directly.

Bingley was at first quite put out by my questioning his intentions. However, when directly interrogated about the state of Miss Bennet's affections, he could make no answer. Apparently, he owned some uncertainty about the level of her feelings, thinking her regard sincere but unequal. His doubts increased when I honestly could not alleviate his fears of her indifference. I pointed out the certain evils of choosing a lady with undesirable connections and intolerable relations, especially without any corresponding assurance of offsetting affection and love. Bingley's disgust of making a marriage of convenience (which mirrors my own) and his reliance on my guidance made the unpleasant task of persuading him against Miss Bennet but the work of a moment.

I know I have done a great service for my friend. I just wish I did not feel so filthy.

Georgiana is somewhat improved. I think it is because of my return to Town. She misses me so, and I delight in her company, but she is so altered from the enchanting child who danced and sang throughout Pemberley—the girl I cherished, before Younge and... *him*. How dare he attempt to harm me through my sister! If there is a man on this Earth I hate, it is *He Who Shall Not Be Named!*

I fall back into gloomy thoughts, even as Advent begins. If only Miss Bennet loved Charles! Then, I could have no real objection. If only her connections were better. If only Mr. Bennet was a baronet. If only Elizabeth—

Gad, I must stop thinking about her!

Chapter 24-27 –

CHRISTMAS AND THE New Year have come and gone, but London remains the same—cold, dark, and unpleasant. Oh, how I wish I had returned to Pemberley, but the snows prevented such a journey. Besides, my Fitzwilliam cousins have demanded Georgiana and my attendance quite often. The earl and countess mean well, but their constant inquiries into the state of Georgiana’s well-being have taxed my powers of civility. I know I have offended my Uncle Matlock more than once, and I came near to insulting my dear aunt. Thank God Colonel Fitzwilliam was in residence! He was able to smooth the feathers my black humor ruffled.

I must admit that I am happy Fitzwilliam is home from the wars. There is no talk of his rejoining Wellington in Spain, thank the Lord. I can only hope that the troubles with colonies do not require his attention. Fitzwilliam has done his duty. My uncle, the earl, agrees with me and is using all his influence to protect him, despite Fitzwilliam’s protests. Ah, Fitz! Courage is a fine thing, but one can tempt fate once too often! Besides, Georgiana would be destroyed should misfortune befall my cousin.

As if the dismal weather was not enough, I was unsettled to learn that Miss Jane Bennet was in London and had called on the Bingleys. Fortunately, Bingley was not home at the time, and we were able to keep knowledge of her visit from him. What can Miss Bennet mean by it? She does not care for Bingley and she cannot be friends with his sisters (as if anyone could). Throwing herself in Bingley’s way is most unseemly. I had thought such arts and allurements were beneath her. Perhaps she was put up to it by her mother. Yes, that must be it. Bingley is well rid of that family.

Gad—another ball! The Season does not begin until March, but nothing stops the matchmaking mothers of the *ton!* I go to please my aunt, but all the ladies there pale in comparison with a certain lovely maiden in Hertfordshire. How I wish— *Stop it, Darcy.* That page has turned.

I must endeavor to persevere. How did the Bard put it?

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.*

Chapter 28 & 29 –

THE ONLY GOOD THING about my annual Easter visit to Rosings Park is that it takes me out of London right when the Season begins in earnest. I am glad to be done with it.

Apparently, so is Bingley. I have not seen much of my friend. He is in the north, in Scarborough, visiting family. I had thought he would lose himself in parties and balls in Town, in search of a new angel. That is certainly Miss Bingley's idea, assuming that he does not fulfill her great desire of a match between her brother and my sister. I have no great opposition to such an eventuality, but only after Georgiana has been presented, and that is years away. By then, surely Bingley will be settled, and there is an end to all of Miss Bingley's scheming. I know her true desire is to make Georgiana her sister by *other means*, and that shall never happen!

Still, a visit to Rosings is a high price to pay for escaping the clutches of the *ton*. My Aunt Catherine is sure to continue her campaign for a union of Rosings and Pemberley. I grow weary of the battle. Fitz says I should just declare my intention of never marrying my cousin Anne. One day I shall, though I dread my aunt's reaction. I do own some affection for the old battle-axe. Sigh! Weeks of boring conversation lie before me.

Fitzwilliam is in a talkative mood, and we spend the hours in my carriage in conversation. He asks of Bingley's dark mood, and I detail the service I performed for him, leaving out all names, of course. I know I have done right by my friend, but I wish no harm to the Bennets. It would be unfortunate indeed should word get back to them.

Ah, Rosings is in sight. Buck up, old boy. Let us be thankful for what we are about to receive.

Chapter 30 –

MISS ELIZABETH IS *HERE*? At Rosings Park? I cannot believe it!

For the last four months, I have struggled to rid my mind of the memory of her light and pleasing figure, refreshingly pretty face, amusingly impertinent remarks, and enchanting eyes. She is too low for Pemberley, I reminded myself time and again. Her family is beyond ridiculous. Just when I believed myself successful, just when she stopped haunting my dreams, I am thrust into her company again.

Miss Elizabeth's idiot cousin, Mr. Collins, was exceedingly thankful that Fitzwilliam and I would condescend to call upon the parsonage. Fool—as if anything could stop me! Like a moth to a flame, I am drawn to Miss Elizabeth's fiery gaze.

Miss Elizabeth was surprised to see me; that is certain. In my turn, I was surprised to learn the identity of Mr. Collins's wife. I thought Miss Lucas to be a sensible lady, but one can never tell. As usual, my wits failed me in Miss Elizabeth's company; I am too captivated by her. I make a couple of inane comments to Mrs. Collins about the cottage and gardens before falling silent. Fitzwilliam, blast him, has no impediment and is his usually charming self. I could throttle him.

Finally, I collect myself sufficiently to inquire of Miss Elizabeth about her family. She assures me they are well and asks whether I have seen Miss Jane Bennet in Town.

I nearly swallow my tongue, but I reply in a reasonably calm manner that I never had the opportunity to meet her there. Oh, I hate lying, but there is nothing for it! I certainly cannot injure Miss Elizabeth by telling her I kept the knowledge of Miss Bennet's being in Town from Bingley. I am satisfied that what I said is entirely truthful—although not the whole truth.

Gad, my stomach pains me. It must be my breakfast.

Chapter 31 -

MISS ELIZABETH HAS COME to Rosings for dinner along with the Collinses. Once more I am struck dumb in her presence. How can it be that a mere country miss can so discombobulate me?

No, that cannot be. It is my aunt's attendance that stays my tongue. Yes, that is it. Aunt Catherine is on again about my marrying my cousin Anne. Gad! Have I not dropped enough hints and clues in the last ten years that I shall never marry my sickly cousin? My aunt hears nothing but what pleases her. She is relentless and would be most unpleasant to any young woman who caught my eye. I must protect Miss Elizabeth from her wrath.

Unfortunately, Fitzwilliam feels no such restriction. Look at him, shamelessly flirting with Miss Elizabeth! If I did not know that his style of living—which I help augment—precludes him from making her an offer, I should be worried. But it is exceedingly irritating to watch.

What's that, Aunt—music? "Yes, Lady Catherine. Georgiana is enjoying her music, and I have the very great pleasure of listening to her performance." Of course Georgiana practices, Aunt! How should she become so proficient if she did not? Thank God her music helps her with her distress.

“I have told Miss Bennet several times that she will never play really well unless she practices more,” says my aunt, “and though Mrs. Collins has no instrument, she is very welcome, as I have often told her, to come to Rosings every day, and play on the pianoforte in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room. She would be in nobody’s way, you know, in that part of the house.”

What? Oh, good Lord, how can you so cavalierly insult a guest, Aunt? Only a lifetime of good breeding prevents me from making a scene!

Over coffee, Miss Elizabeth takes to the instrument with Fitzwilliam’s assistance. Aunt Catherine is talking over her performance. I shall go to her.

The minx smiles as she plays. “You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed, though your sister does play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.”

You are brave, Elizabeth, and clever. I hide my grin from the others. “I shall not say that you are mistaken, because you could not really believe me to entertain any design of alarming you, and I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know that you find great enjoyment in occasionally professing opinions which in fact are not your own.”

Elizabeth laughs heartily—a sound as pretty as her playing—and turns to Fitzwilliam. “Your cousin will give you a very pretty notion of me and teach you not to believe a word I say! I am particularly unlucky in meeting with a person so well able to expose my real character in a part of the world where I had hoped to pass myself off with some degree of credit.” She turns her fine eyes to me. “Indeed, Mr. Darcy, it is very ungenerous of you to mention all that you knew to my disadvantage in Hertfordshire—and, give me leave to say, very impolitic too—for it is provoking me to retaliate, and such things may come out as will shock your relations to hear.”

I can never be afraid of her and tell her so.

“Pray let me hear what you have to accuse him of,” cries Fitzwilliam. “I should like to know how he behaves among strangers.”

So you would, would you, Cuz? Shall I tell her how *you* behave among tavern girls in Spain?

A mischievous glint is in her eyes. “You shall hear then—but prepare yourself for something very dreadful. The first time of my ever seeing him in Hertfordshire, you must

know, was at a ball—and at this ball, what do you think he did? He danced only four dances! I am sorry to pain you—but so it was. He danced only four dances though gentlemen were scarce, and to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner.” She turns to me. “Mr. Darcy, you cannot deny the fact.”

I am a little wounded at this. “I had not at that time the honor of knowing any lady in the assembly beyond my own party.” I am not given to exhibition, Elizabeth!

“True, and nobody can ever be introduced in a ball room.” Ouch, that hurt. “Well, Colonel Fitzwilliam, what do I play next? My fingers wait your orders.”

I try to justify myself. “Perhaps, I should have judged better had I sought an introduction, but I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers.”

“Shall we ask your cousin the reason of this?” says Elizabeth, still addressing Fitzwilliam. “Shall we ask him why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?”

Fitzwilliam grins, blast him. “I can answer your question without applying to him. It is because he will not give himself the trouble.” Thank you, traitor. Perhaps I ought to charge you for drinking my port in the future.

I explain to Elizabeth, “I certainly have not the talent, which some people possess, of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.” I glare at Fitzwilliam. There is nothing wrong with being reserved. More gentlemen should follow my example, particularly those who wear the king’s uniform!

Elizabeth looks down as she continues to play. “My fingers do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women’s do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then, I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I would not take the trouble of practicing. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman’s of superior execution.”

Touché. “You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you can think anything wanting.” I smile. “We neither of us perform to strangers.”

Blast it, I have tarried too long by the siren’s side. Lady Catherine calls me over, and I can tell she is suspicious. While I cannot have any designs on Elizabeth, I must not give my aunt any cause to disparage her. I must be content to enjoy Elizabeth’s performance from afar.

Whoa. When did she become “Elizabeth” to me?

After our guests leave, I consider this long into the night.

Chapter 32 –

I ARISE EARLY, AS is my wont, and have an abbreviated breakfast in peace—thank heavens Fitzwilliam sleeps late during his visits to Rosings. I am in no mood for his jests today. I am on the edge of a momentous decision, and I must focus all my faculties to that resolution.

As usual, Anne remains above stairs, and I take this opportunity to speak with her. Aunt Catherine only arises at fashionable hours, and as Anne’s companion knows to keep silent, this interview should escape my aunt’s notice. I find my cousin in her private sitting room, attended by her companion, but besides a short greeting she says nothing. I attempt to engage her in conversation and am awarded with little more than monosyllabic responses. I soon take my leave, to her palpable relief. This is consistent with her behavior on all of my previous visits, and I am satisfied Aunt Catherine has failed to raise her expectations. I do not know what Anne wants, but I am secure in the knowledge that it is not marriage with me.

I am outside, the day is fine, and I should enjoy a ride about the park, but I spy the parsonage. Hmm...I really must call upon the ladies. Riding can wait.

Well, that went well—*not*.

I admit I was taken aback to find Elizabeth alone, but more surprising was my reaction—how strange that her mere presence can so discombobulate me. All I could manage for the first half of my call was polite inquiries about her family in Hertfordshire and some inane observation about the parsonage! Gad, I attended Cambridge! Top marks for logic and debate! One look at Elizabeth’s pretty face, and I am a blubbering idiot. I am no better than Bingley!

I got my footing back when we spoke of the expectations of marriage—when a lady must leave her father’s home for her husband’s. Ah, her saucy look when she said, “I do not mean to say that a woman may not be settled too near her family. The far and the near must be relative, and depend on many varying circumstances. Where there is fortune to make the expense of travelling unimportant, distance becomes no evil.”

I could not help myself. “*You* cannot have a right to such very strong local attachment. You cannot have been always at Longbourn.” I caught myself—at least I did not smile. But a surprised Elizabeth took my meaning, I am sure she did.

I changed the subject to safer topics, using the newspaper to hide my heightened emotions. By the time Mrs. Collins and Miss Lucas arrived, I was tolerably composed. I stayed for a few minutes more before excusing myself.

On the walk back to Rosings, I wrestled once again with the subject that has preoccupied me since I arrived in Kent: *Should I offer for Miss Elizabeth Bennet?*

Chapter 33 -

OVER THE REMAINDER OF the week, I haunt the woods of Rosings, hoping to meet Elizabeth as she rambles about. More often than not, I am successful, and we stroll about in companionable silence. What good fortune to find a lady who does not demand constant conversation! We talk intermittently about seemingly inconsequential things—the woods, the weather, things of that nature. What is *not* said is how comfortable we are in each other’s company. Occasionally, Elizabeth flirts a bit, making one of her delightfully ridiculous statements. Her teasing is music to my ears. I know I could be happy forever with her by my side, hand-in-hand, walking the grounds of Pemberley.

I sometimes make to speak to let her know my feelings, but I catch myself in time.

I know, and she must know, that a union between us would not be without consequences. Managing Pemberley is a hard business, but I am confident that Elizabeth could learn her duties in short order. After all, I shall be there to guide her. That is better instruction than could be gained at Longbourn!

And therein lies the problem. Her family—her ridiculous family—must be considered an evil. How in Heaven’s name can I introduce them to London society? My family would be rightly scandalized— and that is *before* they learn of the mother’s roots in trade! Mrs. Bennet is one of the silliest women I have had the misfortune to meet. The middle girl—Mary, I think—is a sanctimonious bluestocking. The two youngest children are spoiled and juvenile. But worst of all is Mr. Bennet, for he has allowed his wife and children to run wild.

Then I think of Elizabeth and her sister, Miss Bennet. Both are every inch a lady. No shame can be fairly connected with them, save their unfortunate relations. They both must possess great presence of mind—Elizabeth certainly does. The masterful way she handled

my obnoxious aunt speaks well of her ability to withstand the slings and arrows sure to come our way.

The advantages to Elizabeth are manifold. She grows more beautiful in my eyes every day. Her laughing, dancing eyes, her wavy, rich tresses, her plump, luscious lips, her light and pleasing figure—gad, it is a wonder I can sleep at night! I want to hold her, possess her, love her—

My God, I am in love with Elizabeth.

Now what do I do?

It is tea time, and the Collinses and their guests are expected. I make my valet brush off my blue coat—silly, I know, but I cannot help but want to show myself to best advantage. Elizabeth deserves no less.

I go below stairs, nervously tugging at my lapels. Is everything in place?

Calm down, man! It is not like you are going to offer for Elizabeth right in the middle of Aunt Catherine's parlor!

Just as I sit down, I jump up. The Collinses have arrived. I look for my dearest. *There is Miss Lucas, but where is Elizabeth?*

What did Mrs. Collins just say? She remains at the parsonage? She is ill? *My Elizabeth is ill?*

Before I know it, I am out the door, heading for Hunsford Parsonage.

Chapter 34 -

WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?

I remember walking into the parsonage's modest parlor. There was Elizabeth, pale but sitting upright. She was *not* at death's door. I recall the enormous relief I felt along with annoyance that I had walked out of Aunt Catherine's tea for no purpose.

Purpose. I remember thinking of my purpose. Suddenly, all became clear. *I loved her. I loved Elizabeth.* Pride, status, expectations—they were as *nothing* to me. *I must* surrender to her. *I must* have her.

"In vain have I struggled! It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." Yes, I said that. I meant that.

She gave me such an unreadable expression. I thought her overwhelmed by my declaration. My thoughts seemed to tumble out of my mouth. She deserved—she needed to know of my struggles. To comprehend what I had thrown away and rejected for her sake. I had to have her! And then...

Rejection. She rejected me. She did not expect my declaration. She was surprised—shocked—disgusted. *Disgusted with me.*

I remember feeling stunned then angry. I do not know whether I had ever been that angry before. Not even with Wickham had I been that angry. *I offered her my heart, and she spit on it!*

She talked of Bingley and Miss Bennet. How did she come to know of that? And why was she so angry? Her sister did not love my friend! There was nothing in her actions that showed anything of it!

And then—Wickham. She believed Wickham. The woman I loved, the woman I thought above all others, believed *Wickham* over me. *Me!* I do not know how I did not rail at her. And then...

“You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.”

That was a punch to the gut.

“From the very beginning—from the first moment I may almost say of my acquaintance with you—your manners, impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that groundwork of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike. And I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.”

Good God, she hated me.

I had to hold on to my pride. I said something; I know not what. I had to leave her. I had to leave the woman I adored before I broke down.

Somehow I got back to my room undetected. I had to think. I had to understand.

What the hell happened?

How could I have been so wrong about her? I could not have. The vixen was flirting with me, here and at Netherfield!

Except she was not. My Elizabeth would not lie. Then if it was not flirting...

Oh, good God! It was right in front of me. She hated me. She always hated me.

But why? I had shown her great respect! She, alone of all the women of my acquaintance, I showered with my attentions. She could not have misunderstood.

But misled? Yes, that must be it! I will write her, and...

No. Fool, she hates you! No letter can overcome that!

But I can save her from Wickham. *Yes*. I will not allow that reprobate to continue to deceive my Elizabeth—

No, she is not *my* Elizabeth. She is *Miss Elizabeth*.

But I will save her anyway.

Chapter 35 & 36 -

IT IS DONE. IT took me most of the night, but I have finished the letter. I explained why I acted the way I did in Bingley's service. Miss Elizabeth loves her sister, and because of that she could not see, or failed to see, what was evident to me. Miss Bennet, while open and pleasant, showed absolutely no symptom of love. Perhaps I was wrong to try to separate my friend and her sister, but if I was, Bingley would not have acted on my advice. If he loved Miss Bennet the way I loved Eliz—Miss Elizabeth, nothing and no one could convince him otherwise.

Except the lady in question, of course.

As for my dear former friend, he will have no power over Miss Elizabeth. I told her everything. How Wickham deceived my father, tried to steal my money, and attempted to ruin my sister. Miss Elizabeth *must* be warned. If my honest recollection of my dealings with that no-good piece of scum holds no value for her, surely she would believe Fitzwilliam.

Miss Elizabeth will be safe, but only if I put this letter in her hands. As painful as the interaction must be, I shall not waver. I shall perform this last duty for her.

I paced about the park early in the morning, looking for Miss Elizabeth, wondering if she had abandoned her usual walk. Had she remained inside in an attempt to avoid me? Was she sorry for her refusal? Did she regret her words? Perhaps she was mortified and could not bear to see me. Or, more likely, she avoided me because she could not stand the sight of my face. Back and forth my feelings battled between angry satisfaction and depressed sorrow. As I took in the prospect, usually striking but now pale and lifeless, I heard a movement behind me. I looked and there she was by the gate, turning away.

“Miss Bennet.”

She stopped. I made my way to her, studying her expression, trying to catch a clue to her state of mind. But I could not tell whether her blush was from anger or regret. I steeled myself; I would not let her know how much she has hurt me.

“I have been walking in the grove for some time in the hope of meeting you. Will you do me the honor of reading that letter?”

She took it without a word, I gave her an automatic bow, and I walked away and out of her life as steadily as I could.

Chapter 37 -

LAST NIGHT WAS NO more restful than the night before. Thank God, I am leaving this wretched place.

Fitzwilliam is quiet today, thank goodness. I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head last evening when I asked him to answer any question Miss Elizabeth might pose about Wickham.

“Any question?” he responded.

“Any and all,” I said.

“You cannot mean *Ramsgate*?”

I nodded, and all hell broke loose. My education is deficient. I did not know the meaning of half the curses Fitz threw at me. It took me a quarter-hour to calm him down.

“Why on Earth did you tell her?” he demanded. “Do you mean to marry her?”

“No,” I lied.

“Then why?”

Because I love her. “I cannot have her be Wickham’s victim.”

That seemed to satisfy him, which is well. I no longer want to talk of Miss Elizabeth. I no longer want to think of Miss Elizabeth.

I only want to forget.

Chapter 38-40 -

DAMN, DAMN, DAMN, DAMN, DAMN.

Chapter 41 -

I AM FINALLY PULLING myself out of my depression. There is no use regretting Elizabeth Bennet. She is gone, eternally out of reach, and it is my entire fault.

I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was *right*, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Perhaps I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves, allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing. I was an only son, heir to a great estate, but cared for none beyond my own family circle, thought meanly of all the rest of the world, *wished* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own, was beyond everything. My father was not such; indeed, he was all that was benevolent and amiable. My mother, though proud, was kind. I have been a fool.

Elizabeth Bennet. The first woman I have ever loved. The first I ever considered marrying. She turned me down. Flat. She does not love me. She despises me, and rightfully so. Yes, many of her accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises. That is no excuse. My behavior at the time merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable.

The recollection of what I said, of my conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of our acquaintance, is now, inexpressibly painful to me. Her reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget:

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

How those words have tortured me.

Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a modest gentleman farmer in out-of-the-way Hertfordshire, a lady who had spent little time in London and had never gone to school or had masters, was the first person to see me as I truly am. She thought me devoid of every proper feeling. And she is right. I came to her without a doubt of my reception. She showed

me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. I shall never forget the turn of her countenance as she said that I could not have addressed her in any possible way that would induce her to accept me.

Elizabeth Bennet. The first woman I have ever loved—perhaps the *only* woman I shall ever love—is forever lost to me. And it is my own damn fault.

You taught me a lesson, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I am properly humbled. Thank you for this gift. Now I must build a life without you. To be the man I should be. A man you could admire, befriend, even be proud of. A man who might deserve you.

Even though we will never meet again.

Poor Georgiana. The sweet girl has been daily witness to my anguish. She thinks that she is the cause.

Oh, Darcy, you selfish fool! I must console her, ease her worries, lift up her spirits. She needs my support, and I shall not let her down. She will smile again. I am determined.

I had a conversation with my valet—a real conversation. Once I got him to talk—a mighty task, as he was shocked that I would condescend to speak to him—the man had some interesting observations about the staff. There may be a footman who should be replaced; I cannot have anyone mistreat the maids. I am only sorry I had not asked his opinion about things before. I must do better. Rank is rank, but I have a responsibility to my people. All people have worth. I would do well to remember that.

Chapter 42 -

BINGLEY HAS RETURNED FROM the North, just as we plan to escape the summer heat of London. I shall invite him to travel with Georgiana and me to Pemberley. That means Caroline and the Hursts will have to come as well, but I can bear their company for Charles's sake. I need about me what few friends I have.

My attempts at practicing better behavior has had decidedly mixed results. True, I have found the matchmaking mamas of Town and their daughters more tolerable; a small smile and some inane conversation seems to suit. They go away happy, and I am left at peace. On the other hand, I do tire of biting my tongue.

Does this make me misanthropic? I should be cautious of that. Indeed, foolish is not the same as malicious or insulting. Of all the unpleasant people I must tolerate, few are as disagreeable as my Aunt Catherine, and she is not wicked—only misinformed and unaware of how misinformed she is.

I mocked—despised—the people of Meryton as fools, gossips, and bumpkins. But there is no wickedness to them. They are who they are. They work hard, love their families, and help their neighbors. For this they deserve scorn? No! The only things that deserve scorn are my own pretensions.

Georgiana has been an absolute angel these weeks, putting up with my black humor. I think I shall order a new piano-forte for Pemberley as a surprise. The dear girl deserves every good thing in the world. I only wish she could meet Elizabeth Bennet—

Stop it, Darcy! That ship has sailed.

On the road back to Pemberley. Knowing I am drawing closer to my home raises my spirits—and Georgiana's, too. Unfortunately, Caroline is worse than ever. I had better lock the door to my room at the posting inn. Ha, Ha.

Hmm, maybe that is not a joke, after all.

Gad, enough! I shall ride on ahead tomorrow. I must have peace.

VOLUME III

Chapter 43 –

PEMBERLEY! AH, HOW GOOD it feels to ride the grounds of Pemberley! Nowhere on Earth am I more at ease than here. I can be myself again—once I clean up, that is. I am coated from head to toe by the dust of the road. I pass the pond and think a moment about it... and the moment passes. I am far too old to be swimming in a pond!

I stroll to the house from the stable, beating the dust from my coat. Mrs. Reynolds will surely be beside herself if I foul the front hall with dirt. I will just pop round to the back—

*** (*Mind goes blank*) ***

Elizabeth?

Elizabeth?

Good Lord! There, less than twenty yards away, is Miss Elizabeth Bennet! Here! At Pemberley!

I. Must. Move. Towards. Her. Tip your hat, you fool!

“Miss Bennet.” There, I said something. “I am pleased to see you.”

Wonder of wonders! Elizabeth is not fleeing. She is blushing! She says something—I cannot recollect what it is—and I do not give a particular damn! *Elizabeth is here at Pemberley!*

“How long has it been since you left Longbourn? Your family—they are well, I trust.”

She is more beautiful than ever. She talks of travel and houses and Matlock. *She has seen Matlock?* I wonder if the earl or countess were there. *She likes Pemberley?*

“Thank you. And your family, they are well?”

She smiles and I realize I had just repeated myself. I should feel a fool, but I do not care. She smiled. Not that teasing grin I saw at Hertfordshire and Kent, but a gentle, genuine smile. Does she smile at me or for me?

Her eyes study my attire, and I recall that I look a mess. I have to go clean up! “Pray excuse me.”

Moments later, I am barking orders for hot water and clean clothes like a madman, but I do not care. *Elizabeth is here at Pemberley!*

In record time I am washed and changed, and I go charging out the door again. I had realized that my abrupt leave taking might have been misunderstood. That cannot stand. I must see Elizabeth before she leaves! A footman directs me to the usual path from the gardens to the woods taken by visitors. Good, faithful man! I must remember to raise his pay!

Within moments I spy my quarry. Higgins, the gardener, is showing a small party about, and Elizabeth is with them. Half-way there, I note that the group had stopped by the stream, and Elizabeth's eyes are on upon me. I grow closer, but it gives me no more insight into her feelings. Pain or of pleasure in seeing me, I cannot tell, but certainly she had not met me with composure. A bit of brush blocks my view, and suddenly I am before her.

Elizabeth speaks of the delight of the woods and the house. Words like "delightful" and "charming" float in the air, but all I can see is that she looks everywhere but at me. Is my presence painful to her? Does my past bad behavior haunt her still? Her companions, fool! Remember your manners! Ask to be introduced, you simpleton!

To my surprise I learn that this fashionable couple is actually her relations from Gracechurch Street. I knew that tradesmen were moving up in the world, but—oh, stop it, you prig! Mr. Gardiner seems a sensible fellow. I have vowed to change my ways, and here is a perfect opportunity to prove to Elizabeth that I have taken her reproofs to heart. How to start? Hmm, the way he is looking at the stream...

"Mr. Gardiner, do you have any interest in fishing?"

Ah! It seems I have found a fellow angler! It has been so long since I had company fishing my lakes and streams. Fitzwilliam is bored with the whole exercise, and Bingley cannot sit still. I have not fished with anyone since Father died and Wick—since Useless and I did as children.

"Please, sir, you must fish here as often as you chose while in the neighborhood," I tell Mr. Gardiner. "The fish have been undisturbed far too long. I can provide whatever tackle you require."

"Sir, this is too much!" the gentleman exclaims. "I cannot take such advantage of you."

"It would be my pleasure. In fact, I would enjoy joining you, if you would allow it."

"Allow it?" Mr. Gardiner looks wondrously at me. "Mr. Darcy, I would be honored to fish with you."

"Then I take it matters are settled." I realize a smile has grown on my face.

Just then, Mrs. Gardiner, begging fatigue, requests her husband's attention. They assure me all is well, and I find myself in Miss Elizabeth's presence. We walk for a time in silence, all the time I castrate myself for ignoring Mrs. Gardiner. Why, I hardly said two words together to the poor woman! Is this how a gentleman acts? What will Elizabeth think of me?

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth says. I look over, but her gaze is firmly on the path before us. "I must apologize for disturbing your peace. We all thought you gone from Derbyshire. We would never have intruded otherwise."

Oh, Elizabeth! How right and proper you are! Visitors never came to houses of their acquaintances without an invitation if the owners were in residence. Still, if anyone in Britain can come and go to any of my houses anytime they wish, it is you. Do you not know this?

"I must say your arrival was unexpected," she continued, "for your housekeeper informed us that you would certainly not be here till tomorrow. And indeed, before we left Bakewell, we understood that you were not immediately expected in the country."

"That is so," I assure her, "and I would not have disturbed you, but that I had business with my steward and rode ahead of my party. They will join me early tomorrow, and among them are some who will claim an acquaintance with you." I pause. "Mr. Bingley and his sisters."

I await her reaction with anxiety. Did she read my letter? Does she credit my explanation? She bows her head. Oh, how such a small movement can sooth a man's soul!

"There is also one other person in the party, who more particularly wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay at Lambton?"

I had not planned to request a meeting between her and Georgiana, but the words leapt from my lips before I could think better of my presumption. A few months ago, Elizabeth said she hated me. Now I beg her to meet my sister. What will she say?

She is surprised—there is no mistaking that. But she does accept, in a rather rambling way. Might she be as uncomfortable as I? I think she is, but I do not think she is displeased. At least, I hope not.

We walk for a time, my steps sharp, but my mind stupid. There seems an embargo on every subject. Finally, she talks of her travels. We fall into an easy conversation of Matlock and Dove-Dale, again proving her breeding better than mine. Here I am, a man she must

despise, yet she goes out of her way to put me at ease. Oh, but if only I was worthy of such a woman!

We are far too soon at the house for my pleasure. I hope they will extend their visit to partake of refreshment in the house, but the offer is kindly declined. The politeness of their leave-taking is great, but it is with mixed feelings I watch them depart. Everything has gone better than I ever dreamed, but does Miss Elizabeth think better of me?

Hold—did Elizabeth just look back at the house? At me?

She did.

I smile.

Elizabeth has visited Pemberley.

Thank you, God.

Chapter 44 -

I SIGH AS I make myself comfortable in my curricle as we return to Pemberley, astonished over the events of the morning. How one's life could change for the better in less than a day!

Less than two hours ago, Georgiana, the Bingleys, and the Hursts arrived at the mansion. No sooner than I could get Georgie alone did I broach the idea of calling on Miss Elizabeth, and doing it directly. Her surprise was great, but her happy agreement instantaneous. We had just turned to collect her bonnet when we saw Bingley behind us. Apparently, he was escaping Caroline's obnoxious raptures over Pemberley and came upon us on his way to the library—not to read, of course; he knew that was a room never haunted by his sisters or brother. Having overheard our intention, he invited himself along, and I, having no great objection to his presence, agreed to suffer his company. I had my curricle prepared already in anticipation that Georgie would be agreeable to my scheme, and once Bingley picked out a horse, we were on the road in no time at all.

I was a little embarrassed over our rapturous reception by the innkeeper. One would think I had never been to Lambton before! True, I had not stepped foot in the inn in my life, but I would have no call to. It is not my fault that Pemberley boasts of two and ten fully furnished bedrooms. Why would my guests need to stay in the village?

Stop it, Darcy. Your Fitzwilliam pride is showing again.

Georgie and I were shown to the Gardiners' room in quick order. Elizabeth's relations proved that their superior manners were not of short duration, and Elizabeth greeted my sister with quiet kindness. It was just the thing to bring Georgie out of her shyness.

I stood back and let the two ladies most dear to me become acquainted. I drank in the happy sight, subject of many of my dreams, before I put myself forward and alerted Elizabeth to Bingley's intention of calling. I was just in time, for a moment later the man himself was in the room. I admit to a bit of uneasiness; would his presence remind Elizabeth of my role in separating my friend from her sister? It seemed not; Elizabeth's smile was easy as she listened to Bingley's inquiry of her sisters.

Elizabeth did not often look at me, but when she did there was no censure in her expression. It seemed rather to be searching—for what I do not know. I decided my time was better spent in something more useful than staring like a love-sick cow, so I crossed to Mr. Gardiner to talk of fishing. I could tell he was uncertain that my invitation to enjoy my lake and streams was sincere, and I cursed my countenance. Elizabeth certainly had the right of my hauteur! If I wish people to rightly understand me, I must drop my dratted armor and look my words. I insisted Mr. Gardiner come to Pemberley tomorrow, saying an expedition was planned for Bingley, Mr. Hurst, and me. He readily agreed to join us.

Note to myself: I must remember to inform Bingley and Hurst of my plans.

It was time to depart, and I whispered to Georgiana to invite the Gardiner party to dinner. She knew it was her duty, and rose above her timidity to pronounce the request. The Gardiners were surprised but agreed to the day after tomorrow.

I was disappointed with Elizabeth, however. I wanted to see her response, but she turned away. Was I wrong about her? Does she despise me still? I was a little hurt and fearful as we walked to the door, Bingley's farewell ringing in the air, when Elizabeth said,

“Thank you so much for coming. It was delightful meeting you, Miss Darcy.”

That sweet voice! It would be easier to transform into a goat than stop my head from turning to behold that lovely face again. I caught her eye, and she blushed.

Blushed at *me*.

The weight of the world fell from my shoulders. I felt as light as a feather. I successfully tapped down an insane notion of throwing myself at her tiny feet, begging that she forgive all and allow me a chance of earning her favor. Instead, I nodded and escorted Georgiana to the curricule. We left and Georgie turned to me.

“Miss Bennet is so kind and pretty, brother. I hope she likes me.”

I smile. *I hope she likes me too, Georgie.*

Evening. I sit in my study, a stupid grin on my face, with a little note in my hand—a most wondrous note. It is from Mrs. Gardiner, but I am not fooled. *This is a message from Elizabeth.*

The note is a simple notice of Mrs. Gardiner's and Miss Bennet's intention of calling upon Georgiana tomorrow morning. Mrs. Gardiner wrote it, but *this* is from *Elizabeth*. Mrs. Gardiner would not dare come if Elizabeth were set against me.

I hold the note as if it were made of gold. This is the first tangible, physical evidence I have that Elizabeth does think better of me. No guesses, no opinions of looks and blushes. Objective, solid proof. Elizabeth wishes to visit my home and become friends with my sister while I am in company.

Damn! I have my chance!

I better not blow it.

Chapter 45 -

GAD! I WONDER—CAN I kill Caroline Bingley and not hang for it?

The day started out well enough. Mr. Gardiner proved himself to be an excellent angler. By that, I do not mean his skill with tackle, which was excellent. No—the man knows when to be quiet.

It is a lesson Bingley should learn. I do believe in the two hours we spent in pursuit of trout I can put together a full ten minutes that Bingley was not talking. Talking about the weather, talking about the water, talking about Miss Elizabeth, talking about Hertfordshire... always talking, blast him! How we caught anything is a wonder. Oh, well, at least Hurst was silent—mostly—when he was not complaining.

Truly, I did not need Bingley or Hurst to distract me from my fishing. My mind was more anxiously occupied by what was happening in my house. Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner were to call on Georgiana, and I longed to be there. Drat my duty to my guests! Still, I was reserved to do right by them until Mr. Gardiner sighed.

“Mr. Darcy,” said he as he lowered his rod, “forgive me, but I cannot help but notice that your attention is not fully engaged in our sport.” He gave me a most amused yet penetrating look. “Perhaps you are distracted by unfinished business? I for one would not be offended if

you excused yourself to see to pressing matters—indeed, your hospitality exceeds any measure of what is usually extended to common and indifferent acquaintances.” He studies me closely.

Good God, does he know? Did Elizabeth tell him of Hunsford? No—she would not, I am sure of it. I must be more transparent than I thought. This realization is only scarcely less mortifying.

However, I grasp this opportunity like a drowning man a life ring. I make hurried excuses to Bingley and Hurst, quickly turn over my tackle and creel to the footmen who attended us, and make my way to the house. I redden, remembering Mr. Gardiner’s words and glances. My anticipation and anxiety increase with each step, as I fight for self-control of my expression. Only Elizabeth’s sweet presence can rescue me from this humiliation of discovery.

Once I reach the house, I make a beeline to my study. A quick change of dress and I am at the saloon’s door. I draw a deep breath and indicate that it be opened.

The ladies were gathered about the table, enjoying the fruits of Pemberley’s gardens, orchards and conservatory. Georgiana smiled at my entrance, but I admit I hardly noted it. My eyes were full on Elizabeth.

Her dress, of pale yellow, set off her light and pleasing figure without being vulgar. The skin of her arms and cheeks held a most becoming glow of health. Her full lips were parted in surprise. And her eyes—her mesmerizing eyes, wide in surprise—held me captive. Oh, but if I could properly claim her as my own!

The moment passes and I recall myself. I greet Mrs. Gardiner first, as I should, before turning to Elizabeth. My eye catches Caroline’s pinched expression and I resolve not to embarrass Elizabeth before her. My greetings to her and the rest of the ladies is all that is proper, and if I allow my gaze to linger an instant more on Elizabeth than the others, so be it.

To keep myself safe, I sit by Georgiana, keeping her between Elizabeth and myself. This way I can take my fill of her without raising suspicion, I thought at the time. I also wanted to promote Georgiana to Elizabeth’s close acquaintance and forwarded as much as possible every attempt at conversation between them.

“Pray, Miss Eliza,” came Caroline’s sneering comment, “are not the ——shire militia removed from Meryton? They must be a great loss to your family.”

WHAT? That damned harlot dares raise the specter of *He Who Shall Not Be Named* in my house? In front of Georgiana? What does she know? How does she know about Ramsgate? Why does she attack Georgie?

In the next instant, I see more clearly. Caroline's target is Elizabeth, not Georgie. She means to promote herself by reminding me of Elizabeth's partiality for the ingrate. Apparently, Georgiana's secret is safe.

Stupid, selfish girl! In this, as in all matters, Caroline's aim is misguided. Instead of injuring Elizabeth, her bolt strikes Georgie. Blast her! I will toss the baggage out the front door myself!

Elizabeth, for her part, shows her superiority. I have no idea whether she believed me about Useless, but in her actions and words, she quickly, calmly, and effectively deflects Caroline's ill-judged and ill-bred attack. My respect, approbation, and affection for Elizabeth grow. I will no longer hide my feelings and care not who knows it. If Caroline is unhappy about my now-and-forever undisguised admiration for Elizabeth Bennet, why she can go to the devil!

The visit does not long continue after this incident. As the ladies rise, I step quickly to see them to their carriage, probably making an earnest fool out of myself. But I would slap a false nose on and call myself a clown if it meant I could be in Elizabeth's presence a moment longer. Perhaps I did hold her hand longer than necessary to hand her up. No complaint does she utter—only blushes—and that is capital with me.

When I return to the saloon, Caroline is holding court. "How very ill Eliza Bennet looks this morning, Mr. Darcy. I never in my life saw anyone so much altered as she is since the winter. She is grown so brown and coarse! Louisa and I were agreeing that we should not have known her again."

Damned bitch! I will hold my temper, though. "I perceived no alteration to Miss Bennet, save she was rather tanned. No miraculous consequence of travelling in the summer."

Caroline does not take the hint. "For my own part, I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin, her complexion has no brilliancy, and her features are not at all handsome. Her nose wants character; there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable but not out of the common way. And as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I never could perceive anything extraordinary in them. They have a sharp, shrewish look which I do not like at all, and in her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion which is intolerable."

I bite my tongue, but not out of any respect or deference to Caroline Bingley, for she deserves none. Georgiana, however, is perplexed and offended. Elizabeth had left her mark on *her* as she has on me, and I can tell she cares not to hear any ill of her new friend. Oh, Elizabeth, you have such power over us Darcys!

Caroline continues on, like the wicked witch she is. "I remember, when we first knew her in Hertfordshire, how amazed we all were to find that she was a reputed beauty. And I particularly recollect your saying one night, after they had been dining at Netherfield, 'She a beauty!—I should as soon call her mother a wit.'"

She laughs a little at this, and Georgiana throws an accusing look my way. I am at my limit.

Caroline clears her throat. "But afterwards she seemed to improve on you, and I believe you thought her rather pretty at one time."

I contain myself no longer. "Yes, but that was only when I first knew her, for it is many months since I have considered her as one of the *handsomest* women of my acquaintance!"

I cannot stand to be in that witch's presence a moment longer and stalked out of the room.

Chapter 46 -

THE NEXT DAY I am on my best charger, riding to Lambton. It is not too early to call—surely Elizabeth and her relations have had their breakfast—and I must apologize personally for their treatment by Bingley's sister yesterday.

My own breakfast was pleasant, as it usually is when I share it with Georgiana. She reports that she slept well. I hope that my explanation for my outburst yesterday did something to soothe her delicate feelings.

As for my feelings, I own that is a difficult thing. Hope and caution war in my breast, and I know not which will triumph. I tell myself I only go to Lambton to beg their pardon, but that is only half the truth. I long to see Elizabeth again, to see whether her opinion of me is better, and learn whether I do have a chance with her. I must guard my tongue; I cannot blurt out another proposal as I did in Kent—

Proposal? Fool! You must court her first! Have I learned nothing about how to please a woman worthy of being pleased?

I take a breath before I dismount at the inn. Steady, man! Once inside, I ask to be shown to the Gardiners' room. The Gardiners' man shows me up. We make our way upstairs, and I am announced—

WHAT? Elizabeth is crying!

"I beg your pardon, but I must leave you. I must find Mr. Gardiner this moment, on business that cannot be delayed! I have not a moment to lose!"

"Good God! What is the matter?" Calm down, Darcy! She needs a man, not a maniac. "I will not detain you a minute, but let me, or let the servant, go after Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. You are not well enough—you cannot go yourself."

Elizabeth hesitates, but agrees to my calling back the servant. In a breathless, almost unintelligible accent she commissions him to fetch his master and mistress home instantly. Once he quits the room, she almost falls into a chair. I am beside myself with worry.

"Let me call your maid. Is there nothing you could take to give you present relief? A glass of wine—shall I get you one? You are very ill."

"No, I thank you. There is nothing the matter with me. I am quite well." She gulps. "I am only distressed by some dreadful news which I have just received from Longbourn."

She bursts into tears and for a few minutes cannot speak another word. In wretched suspense I stand, helpless and powerless. I can only watch her in compassionate silence while my guts turn inside out.

Finally, she says, "I have just had a letter from Jane with such dreadful news! It cannot be concealed from anyone. My youngest sister has left all her friends—has eloped—has thrown herself into the power of—of *Mr. Wickham*."

Say again?

Elizabeth continues, "They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to—she is lost forever!"

WTF? WICKHAM! That bounder! That scoundrel! That no-good, two-faced, egg-sucking, inadequately-endowed piece of pond scum! He has hurt Elizabeth's family! Something must be done!

"When I consider," Elizabeth adds in a yet more agitated voice, "that *I* might have prevented it! *I* who knew what he was. Had I but explained some part of it only—some part

of what I learnt—to my own family! Had his character been known, this could not have happened. But it is all, all too late now.”

Her words strike me like a hammer. Stunned, I manage, “I am grieved, indeed—grieved—shocked. But is it certain, absolutely certain?” Meanwhile, my stomach is trying itself into knots.

Elizabeth nods. “Oh yes! They left Brighton together on Sunday night and were traced almost to London, but not beyond. They are certainly not gone to Scotland.”

My mouth is as dry as ashes. “And what has been done—what has been attempted to recover her?”

“My father is gone to London, and Jane has written to beg my uncle’s immediate assistance, and we shall be off, I hope, in half an hour.” She shakes her lovely head. “But nothing can be done. I know very well that nothing can be done. How is such a man to be worked on? How are they even to be discovered? I have not the smallest hope. It is every way horrible!” She begins to cry again. “When my eyes were opened to his real character—Oh! Had I known what I ought, what I dared, to do! But I knew not. I was afraid of doing too much. Wretched, wretched, mistake!”

I make no answer. Her words are more painful than at Hunsford. I know of what she speaks. Who was it that opened her eyes to Wickham’s capacity for perfidy but practically swore her to secrecy? Who was too proud to share his family’s shame with those he called his friends? Who let a monster run free in Hertfordshire? *Me*—Fitzwilliam Arthur George Darcy.

This is my fault. She all but said it. There is nothing I can do to wipe my shame from her memory. She can never forgive me; indeed, I do not deserve her forgiveness. Elizabeth is lost to me forever. But I can do her one last service.

“I am afraid you have been long desiring my absence, nor have I anything to plead in excuse of my stay, but real, though unavailing, concern. Would to Heaven that anything could be either said or done on my part that might offer consolation to such distress! But I will not torment you with vain wishes which may seem purposely to ask for your thanks.” Thank goodness my voice is level, that it gives no hint of my disappointment. This is not about me, but about Elizabeth! “This unfortunate affair will, I fear, prevent my sister’s having the pleasure of seeing you at Pemberley today.” And me, as well.

“Oh, yes,” she readily agrees. “Be so kind as to apologize for us to Miss Darcy. Say that urgent business calls us home immediately. Conceal the unhappy truth as long as it is possible.” She sobs. “I know it cannot be long.”

She is leaving. I will never see her again.

I manage some inane parting comment—expressing sorrow for her distress, wishing a happier conclusion than there was at present reason to hope, and leave compliments for her relations. My heart is breaking as I take one last, long look at her lovely face, committing to my memory. She is trying so hard to be brave, to behave like the lady she was born and raised to be, all the while knowing that this event puts her reputation and that of her family in peril.

This will not stand, I vow. Fear not, my love. I know you are lost to me forevermore, Elizabeth, but I will not allow Wickham to ruin your family! No matter the cost!

I leave before I embarrass and distress her further. I have planning to do.

Chapter 47 –

I LOCK MYSELF IN my study, reviewing old correspondence, refreshing my mind as to Wickham’s habits and acquaintances in London. Several hours pass and I am interrupted by a knock on the door. It is Georgiana.

“Brother,” says she nervously after she takes a chair by my desk. “Why did the Gardiners and Miss Bennet beg off coming to Pemberley today? Was it—was it something I said?”

I cringe. Here is more evidence of my thoughtlessness, my selfish disdain for the feelings of others. “No, sweeting. I apologize for my abruptness to you, the Bingleys, and the Hursts when I returned from Lambton. I saw Miss Bennet, and she was very sorry not to come. She received news from home, and it was necessary for the entire party to depart as soon as could be.”

Georgiana paled. “Nothing terrible, I hope!”

Bad enough. “I was assured of her family’s good health.”

Just then, the butler stepped in. “The express rider is here, sir.”

“Excellent.” I stand and hand over the letter I prepared for the housekeeper at Darcy House in Town. As I return to my chair, I see a suspicious look in Georgiana’s eye.

“Why are you sending a note to Town? Are you leaving, too?”

Blast, Georgie saw the direction! “Yes. Urgent business calls me away.”

Georgiana gives me a hard look, one I remember seeing on my mother's face. "Fitzwilliam, you are hiding something. I can always tell."

I make a decision. "I cannot share the particulars, but I go to help a friend."

A bright smile breaks over her face. "Then I shall ask no more." She stands. "I will see to your packing and play hostess to our guests. How long shall you be away?"

My sister is growing up. "I do not know. It could be several weeks."

She nods. "Very well." She then gives me a knowing look. "Give my best regards to 'your business' when you see her." With that she leaves the room.

She certainly did not see the despair that I am sure was clearly written on my face. *I wish I could, Georgie.*

Chapter 48 –

AS IT TURNED OUT, finding Wickham was ridiculously easy. A few words and a few coins to his former confederate, Mrs. Younge, were all that were required to determine his address. The boarding house was not as bad as it could have been, but it was no place for a gentleman's daughter.

Unfortunately, Miss Lydia proved as stubborn and foolish as she was lovely. She utterly refused to leave her lover. She was sure they were to be married, and it did not particularly matter when. She went on and on about her wedding, how many of her sisters would stand with her, and how jealous all would be when she could sign her name "Mrs. Wickham."

As for Useless, he was truly in desperate straits. What he owed to barmen and shopkeepers were as nothing compared to his gambling debts and other matters of honor among his comrades in the militia. He saw no other recourse but to flee, even though desertion in time of war was a capital offence—we were fighting Napoleon, after all. His plans were, as usual, half-thought out. He was to escape to the Continent where, as an English gentleman of easy manners and comely looks, he was sure to secure his future with a lady of large dowry. I sighed. Only an idiot who had never gone on a tour could believe such nonsense.

It seemed he had no intention of running away with Miss Lydia. The baggage had invited herself along, and Wick-head, typically thinking with the wrong head, offered no discouragement. I could see why he was so weak, for Miss Lydia was just the way he liked

his ladies: young, well-formed for their age, immature, and easily led. *Like Georgiana*, I recalled sadly. Wickham never stood a chance with a lady of sense and maturity.

Which gave me some comfort. Elizabeth might have been taken in by his words, but she did not, could not care for him.

Miss Lydia was well and permanently ruined and, according to Pond-Scum, perfectly happy about it. When I informed him he should then marry her, he laughed. “Darcy, I admit she’s a jolly and *generous* girl, and pleasant to look at to boot—there’s no doubt about *that*—but she has nothing! How does that help me?”

“Wickham!” cried I. “You claim to be a gentleman, yet you refuse to do the gentlemanly thing!”

“Certainly! We’ll just pop over to St. — and have the priest make everything nice and proper,” he sneered. “And when the militia drags me off to the guardhouse, what good does that do me—or her?”

She would be your widow. That should give her some measure of respectability, I thought at the time. “You cannot abandon her.”

To my surprise, he actually blushed. “I would rather not, but what can I do? She has no dowry, does she?”

Money. It always comes down to money. “Grant me a couple of days, and we will see.” My former friend brightened, and I added, “But you must keep Miss Lydia safe. Allow her to come to harm, and I will inform the army of your whereabouts. Understand?”

My anger gave my threat weight. Straw-For-Brains blanched. “Never fear, Darcy. I will protect her with my life!”

“Strange you should say that, Wickham,” I growled as I rose to leave. “*Your* life indeed depends upon *her* safety.”

Chapter 49 -

IT IS PASSING STRANGE that the most difficult part of rescuing Miss Lydia was speaking to her relations. I did not want to do it. I wanted no thanks or gratitude for doing my duty, for patching up what never should have happened had I been open about my history with Wickham. But there was nothing for it. Elizabeth’s relations had to be told. I was thankful I had to bargain with Mr. Gardiner and not Mr. Bennet, though. Elizabeth must never know of it.

My secret might be safe, but I paid a heavy price for it! Not the money I settled on Useless and his bride. I can surely afford it. No—the interview with Mr. Gardiner was one I should never like to experience again.

I first stopped by Gracechurch Street and learned that Mr. Gardiner was unavailable, as he was meeting with Mr. Bennet, who was leaving in the morning. I left straightaway, not leaving my card, thanking my lucky stars. I did not think Mr. Bennet was in any mood to be reasoned with, and I did not trust him not to tell his whole family about my involvement.

The next day I returned. Mr. Gardiner was surprised to see me—you would think I had never traveled through Cheapside before. His astonishment was doubled when he learned that I not only knew of his family's troubles, but had found his nonsensical niece and her dubious lover. He had despaired of finding them and was overjoyed at my success. Mr. Gardiner threatened to shake my hand off.

"This is wonderful!" said Mr. Gardiner. "My brother left for Longbourn only this morning. I shall send an express straight away, begging his immediate return. Where is Lydia?"

I told him that she was with Pond Scum in a disreputable part of London, and she was not willing to leave him. As a precaution, I had left men watching the establishment. "Not that it is truly necessary," I told him. "Wickham is awaiting my return; he has nowhere to go. I must regretfully inform you marriage is the only proper option, and Miss Lydia's dowry is ... insufficient to be an inducement."

Mr. Gardiner darkened and said, "So the scoundrel will have to be bribed, eh? Well, so be it. Give me the direction, and I shall see to it."

"Do not concern yourself over that."

"What do you mean? You just said arrangements must be made."

I said as evenly as possible, "I will see to this matter."

"Are you saying *you* will pay the money for the marriage?" demanded Mr. Gardiner incredulously. "What are you about, sir?"

I had hoped to avoid this explanation. "Mr. Gardiner, there are reasons I feel I must inject myself into this, your family's matter. I know Mr. Wickham very well—far more than I would like. I knew of his dishonorable habits and behaviors, and this is not the first time I had to make right what he has done. He has injured my family and friends before. I am reserved by nature and feel it beneath me to share such information. That is why when I was in Hertfordshire, I failed to let the residents, including the Bennets, know what sort of

man Mr. Wickham is. It was very wrong of me. Had I done so, Mr. Bennet would never have allowed his family to cultivate any sort of acquaintance with Wickham. There would have been no need for an elopement. My false pride is the root cause of this calamity, and I must make amends."

Mr. Gardiner considered my confession for a moment. "Mr. Darcy, I think you take too much upon yourself. This is not your doing."

"I think it is. The fault is mine, and so must the remedy be. I shall not be moved."

"You shall," vowed Mr. Gardiner. "This is *my* family, not yours, and you will give way!"

For the better part of an hour we talked and argued, firmly and reasonably, as gentlemen do. I was forced to give details about The Shiftless One's past, but I never spoke of Ramsgate. Mr. Gardiner proved to be as obstinate as I; I think the better of him for it. In the end, we had made no progress except to agree to meet again the next day after church.

"I must meet with Wickham later today in any case," I said as I rose to leave. "I hope to have final details for you tomorrow."

"Then I will know the exact cost," said Gardiner.

"Which shall be nothing," I responded with a slight smile.

"By thunder, Darcy, you are hardheaded!" he cried as he extended his hand. By common agreement we had moved on to a more familiar manner of speaking to one another.

"You are as well, Gardiner. I can see why you are so successful."

"Will you not stay for dinner?"

My smile faded. "Thank you, no. My business with *him* cannot wait."

On Sunday, Mrs. Gardiner greeted me as I entered, her knowing look indicating that her husband had shared what had happened the previous day. We three enjoyed a bit of tea before Gardiner and I retired to his study. For an hour we again battled—politely, respectfully, but it was a battle, nonetheless. The honors were divided, and all we could agree to was to meet again on Monday. As I took my leave, I made a request of both of them.

"I must ask, most firmly, that you do not reveal to Mr. Bennet my involvement in this matter." At their incredulous looks, I added, "I know this is extraordinary, but I must insist. Look at it as an apology for my bad behavior in Hertfordshire."

They looked at one another and agreed, reluctantly.

On Monday, Mrs. Gardiner was a witness to the negotiations. Perhaps Gardiner thought her presence might help his cause; it did not. In the end, he would not capitulate until I told them of what that reprobate had attempted with Georgiana. Mrs. Gardiner gasped while Gardiner held his head in his hands.

“And my niece is to marry such a man,” he said.

“I am sorry.” I knew of nothing else to say.

Gardiner sighed, looked up and said slowly, “You win. It shall be as you request. We shall pay Wickham’s debts in Meryton, and my brother shall guarantee one hundred pounds a year for Lydia, as well as her share of her mother’s dowry when the time comes. As for your part—”

“I shall see to his debts in London and Brighton, including what is owed to his fellow officers. My cousin, the colonel, has learned of a lieutenant’s vacancy in a regiment in Newcastle. I shall purchase that and provide a little more to augment their income.” I relaxed for the first time in three days. “There is no victory here, Gardiner, save that the Bennets’ honor remains intact.”

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner shared an unreadable look before he rose and extended his hand. “You know, Darcy, I would have given way to no one but you.”

A suspicion was planted in me as I shook his hand, one that grew when Mrs. Gardiner kissed my cheek. “Now that all this disagreeable business is done, you shall stay for dinner,” she said sweetly and firmly, “I insist this time!”

I think she suspects my admiration for Elizabeth, not that it matters. She is utterly lost to me.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” I tell her.

She left us to work out the details of the settlement.

Chapter 50-51 -

I SIT ALONE IN my study, contemplating the wreckage of my life.

Oh, everything with Straw of Brains and his intended went smoothly. It was as fine a wedding as could be expected for an elopement-turned-proper marriage between a foolish bride and a bribed seducer. As least some good came out of it—my friendship with the Gardiners, for one, and the Bennets are still a respectable family.

Elizabeth can marry—someone else. She will never forgive me foisting Wickham on her sister. Meanwhile, I must find a way to live without her. Damn it!

I am roused from my unhappy ruminations by the butler. “A letter for you, sir.”

I take it and see it is from Bingley. It takes no little time to translate his blotches. He is returning to London and wants my opinion about Netherfield.

Netherfield. That is how this whole mess started. How can I go there and see Elizabeth again?

Drat it, man. How can you not go?

Chapter 52 -

A FORTNIGHT AFTER BINGLEY’S invitation, I find myself in my coach bound for Hertfordshire, a bundle of impatient nerves. My avowed purpose in traveling to Netherfield was to see whether Jane Bennet is still partial to Bingley. If she is, I shall relate all I know to him, confessing my part in separating him from his “angel.” He deserves to know all if he is to move forward. I hope it does not cost me my best friend.

But I fool myself. I know the real reason—to see Elizabeth Bennet again.

My head battles with my heart. Surely, Miss Elizabeth would want nothing to do with me, now that her sister is married to Useless—a marriage I could have prevented if only I had been more forthcoming. Lord knows what she would think if she knew I had actually arranged the blasted event!

That was just the point. Elizabeth does *not* know. Might I have a chance to engage her tender feelings if she remains ignorant of those facts for a short time? I know I have often said that disguise of any sort is my abhorrence, but for once, can I keep my big mouth shut long enough to earn Elizabeth’s affection? I want neither her gratitude nor her disgust. I want—*need*—her love.

But no matter what my desires are, it is *Elizabeth’s* that are paramount. I will not impose myself on her. She taught me a hard lesson and properly humbled me. How insufficient are all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased! I am a thousand times a fool! I shall do nothing, say nothing, unless Elizabeth makes it clear that she welcomes my company. Then, I shall act. Otherwise, I must accept my defeat like a gentleman.

I can scarcely dream to hope.

Blast! Cannot this carriage move faster?

Chapter 53 –

I STRAIGHTEN MY JACKET after I dismount before Longbourn. My stomach is sick due to my nervousness. I must steel myself to my duty. I am here for Bingley, not myself.

Bingley, of course, is trembling with uncertainty. It took him three days to work up his courage to visit. I half-feared he was going to turn back to Netherfield during our ride. Pale, he swallows hard, blinks, and knocks on the door. The servant answers immediately, no doubt alerted to our arrival, and shows us to the parlor without delay.

I fight mightily not to look for Miss Elizabeth as we are announced to the ladies. My efforts are so all-consuming I fail to say more than a few syllables. At Mrs. Bennet's cold welcome, the only thing that comes to mind is to inquire about the Gardiners. I start at her puzzled expression. Of course she has no idea of the level of acquaintance I enjoy with her relations. *Stupid man! Shut up! Do you want Elizabeth to know what you have done?*

Bingley is hardly better. He mumbles and stumbles, his eyes all the time focused on Miss Bennet.

I give in to the siren's call of my beloved and glance at Elizabeth. My heart sinks. She is bent over her work, her eyes never leaving her needle. Is she as nervous as I, or is it that she cannot bear to look at me? I cannot tell.

Mrs. Bennet is saying something about her youngest daughter and Straw for Brains.

"It is a delightful thing, to be sure, to have a daughter well married! But at the same time, Mr. Bingley, it is very hard to have her taken such a way from me. They are gone down to Newcastle, a place quite northward, it seems, and there they are to stay; I do not know how long. His regiment is there, for I suppose you have heard of his leaving the ——— shire and of his being gone into the regulars." Her tone darkens. "Thank Heaven he has *some* friends, though perhaps not so many as he deserves."

I cannot help flinch at the insult and turn to the window. I must control my temper. In a moment, I return to the company and focus on my resolution to observe Jane Bennet. At first, she seems the same—quiet, calm, receiving my friend's attentions with pleasure but without any particular warmth. She is rather pale, though.

Then I see it. Her fingers are nervously working at her needlework. I observe further and note she is blinking more than I have ever noticed her do before. She is nervous, affected by strong emotion, I am certain of it. But what does it mean? Is it love or anger?

Mortification or relief? Hope or despair? I am well versed with all of those emotions. It could be any or all or none. Further study is warranted, but I will say this: Jane Bennet is not indifferent to Bingley.

Mrs. Bennet is continuing her nonsense.

“When you have killed all your own birds, Mr. Bingley, I beg you will come here and shoot as many as you please on Mr. Bennet's manor. I am sure he will be vastly happy to oblige you and will save all the best of the covies for you.”

Poor Elizabeth! I hope she does not suffer to hear such transparent matchmaking! But she will not look at me. My hopes are fading as fast as Bingley's are rising.

I cannot leave this house soon enough.

Back a Netherfield, I am increasingly thankful that Bingley's relations did not come to Hertfordshire with us. I must think, and that is best done alone in Bingley's mostly bare library.

Mrs. Bennet invited us to dinner on Tuesday. Three more days before I see the Bennets again. The first part of my mission here is going well. The second part is not.

I am coming to the conclusion that I was wrong about Jane Bennet, and Elizabeth was right. While that lady gives no overt clue as to her feelings, some little gestures and signs are there, if one takes the time to look for them. A light blush to the cheek. A widening of her eyes when Bingley is talking. She leans slightly forward, towards him.

On Tuesday, I expect to settle the matter once and for all.

As for Elizabeth, how am I to know what she is thinking and feeling if she will not speak to me, or for that matter, even *look* at me? Where is the courageous young woman who teased my fearsome aunt to her face? The charming, kind lady who graced Pemberley for too short a time?

I must have my wits about me.

Chapter 54 -

I Sit In My room at Netherfield, brandy in hand, and bemoan the events of the day. The Bennets' dinner was a disaster—a complete disaster.

I had hopes that I would have the opportunity to speak to Elizabeth, to learn whether she holds me responsible for her poor sister's predicament. If she would give me half a chance, I would begin wooing her in earnest. I also planned to further my observations of Jane Bennet.

Nothing worked out as I hoped.

First, there were far too many people there. Apparently, Mrs. Bennet desired to prove her boast of knowing "five and twenty families" in the district, for it seemed she invited all of them. I could hardly move about the room.

Then, I found myself seated next to Mrs. Bennet, which was as far from Elizabeth's side as could be arranged! At least she hardly spoke to me except for the occasional caustic remark. As for myself, I wondered whether my placement was by fate or design. Had Elizabeth engineered it to save herself from my company?

The separation after dinner dragged on and on. I barely said ten words together, so occupied was I by my thoughts. I settled that I would give myself one last chance. I would seek out Elizabeth once we rejoined the ladies. I would see now and forever whether she desired my company or not.

There she was, pouring the coffee. It was my opportunity! I moved towards her to refill my cup—only to be thwarted by a young lady, one of Elizabeth's friends, who deliberately stepped into the only opening.

"The men shall not come and part us, I am determined," she said in a loud whisper that I was clearly meant to hear. "We want none of them, do we?"

I made my way to the fireplace, sharing some meaningless conversation with Sir William Lucas, wondering whether Elizabeth agreed with her friend. Then, the crowd parted, and while there was still no chair near her, I could speak to her without seeming a demanding, arrogant popinjay. I walked over.

She greeted me. "Is your sister at Pemberley still?" *Oh, Elizabeth! Is Georgiana your only interest?*

"Yes, she will remain there till Christmas."

"And quite alone? Have all her friends left her?"

Good Lord, she reproaches me! "Mrs. Annesley is with her. The others have gone on to Scarborough these three weeks." *Say something, please! Say you are happy to see me!*

She says nothing else to me. She only whispers to the other ladies, and my hopes die.

During whist, my eyes sought her lovely form across the room so often that my playing suffered. Even Mrs. Bennet decried my stupidity. We did not stay for supper, and Bingley and I left for Netherfield.

Now, in the quiet of my room, I come to the summation of my trip here. On the pleasant side, I now am convinced that Jane Bennet likes my friend very much—might even love him. The few times I watched them, there was no mistaking her pleasure in his company and her withdrawal the few times he was not beside her.

As for Elizabeth, my thoughts are bleak. While there were not many opportunities for Elizabeth and me to converse, on the few occasions we were in company, she was grave and silent and gave no encouragement. I can only conclude my hopes are in vain.

I throw the rest of my brandy down my throat. There is hard work before me. I will confess all to Bingley tonight, which could well cost me my best friend. And in the morning, I must return to London, see to business, and try to forget Elizabeth Bennet.

Chapter 55 -

“DARCY,” SAYS BINGLEY AS I climb into my carriage the next morning, “you shall return, shall you not?”

I look carefully at him. “Do you wish for me to return?”

“Of course, you are my friend!”

“An ill-serving friend. You should be angry with me.”

Bingley shakes his head. “Nonsense! I thought about what you said last night, and while I am disappointed in you for not telling me that Miss Bennet was in London last spring, I believe you when you say you did so under a mistaken understanding of her feelings. I would be a hypocrite indeed if I held that against you, for I had the same doubts. You have confessed your errors and deeds, and that is the sign of true friendship!” His open, pleasant countenance darkened. “That is more than I can say for my relations!”

As there was nothing I could say to exonerate Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst, I kept silent.

“Ten days,” Bingley insisted. “You say it should not take more than ten days to settle your business. I will hold you to that, Darcy!”

The last thing I want to do is return to Hertfordshire. “I shall do my best, Bingley. Farewell and good hunting.”

He frowned. "The hunting has been awful—oh!" A bright smile broke out. "Yes! Hunting, ha! Good hunting, indeed! Safe journey, Darcy!"

Chapter 56 -

I SIT IN MY study, my papers before me, and think of her.

Almost a fortnight has passed since I left Hertfordshire. I know I told Bingley I would return to Netherfield in ten days' time once my business in London was completed, but now I wonder if my presence is needed or desired. Bingley writes that he has secured Jane Bennet's tender feelings and is engaged to be married. His mission has been successful, and I wish them both well from the bottom of my heart. My help is unnecessary.

How can I bear to be in Bingley's happy presence, fearing my heart's desire is forever lost to me? Could Elizabeth be generous enough to pardon my failure to warn her family and friends about Wickham's true nature? She is the most excellent woman I have ever met, but how can anyone emphatically forgive and forget? I cannot bear to hope.

In my dreams she sometimes welcomes me with open arms and warm lips. Other times, she slaps my face. She is unattainable, just out of my reach. I get no rest, no comfort.

What is that noise from my front hall? *Good heavens, it is Aunt Catherine!*

I rush out of my study and see she is standing by the parlor door, berating my butler. "There you are, Darcy!" she exclaims. "I demand you dismiss this man straightaway! He dared to lay hands on me!"

A few moments' questioning reveals that my butler refused to allow Lady Catherine to barge unannounced into my study and was forced to restrain her physically. I assure my aunt that I will take the proper steps later. My nod to my butler lets him know that those *proper steps* involve a bonus to his pay. Once the parlor's door is shut, Aunt Catherine begins directly.

"Darcy, I journey to London to be immediately satisfied. You must throw off forever all acquaintance with that unsuitable family in Hertfordshire!"

What? "Hertfordshire? Are you perchance speaking of the Bennets?"

"Yes, yes, that is their name. I have just come from there and never have I been so rudely treated! Such ingratitude for my remarkable attentions last Easter! But what can one expect from someone with such low connections?"

"You were in Hertfordshire—at Longbourn?"

“What is the matter with your hearing, Darcy? You are not usually this slow! Yes, I condescended to call upon that tiny estate, and out of the goodness of my heart warned that impertinent creature that all her plans were for naught. Instead of gratitude for my kindness, I was practically thrown off the place!”

I cannot make sense of what she is saying. “Aunt, forgive me, but I must ask. You went to Longbourn and spoke to—?”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet, of course!”

My mind goes blank. “What on earth for?”

“Why? To put an end to her schemes, of course!”

What schemes? Somehow, I keep my mouth shut as I guide my aunt to a chair. She rages on, chattering of insult and slanders, of arts and allurements, of engagements real and imagined. All I can truly focus on is that Lady Catherine confronted Elizabeth, and she seemed to defend me to my aunt!

“She is a wicked, wicked girl, false from first to last. She had the audacity to claim that your position in the world meant nothing to her, but she revealed herself all the same! How did she put it? Ah! ‘The wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.’ You see? Your money and your house is what she desires! Hateful girl!”

It is passing strange how one’s mind works in times of extreme distress. I am deeply offended on Elizabeth’s behalf, and yet, I am amused at the irony of my aunt’s logic. Is not my fortune and Pemberley at the center of her desires for marriage between myself and Anne?

“You must be on your guard, Darcy! I demanded that the baggage promise to leave you in peace, and do you know what she said? She refused to refuse to marry you!”

She rants on, but my attention is transfixed by my aunt’s awkward statement: *She refused to refuse to marry you.* I know Elizabeth’s character, and if she was as decided against me as she was in Kent, she would not hesitate to tell any and all. Instead, she practically stated that she welcomes my suit! Can it be true? Was she only confounding my deluded relation, or is there a message here? I must know!

Lady Catherine stares up right into my face. “Now, I demand that you tell me the truth! I know it to be a scandalous falsehood, but I must be satisfied. Are you engaged to Miss Bennet?”

I must answer truthfully. “No, Aunt, I am not.”

“Of course, you are not,” she says with a relieved smile. “You are engaged to Anne.”

“No, Aunt, I am not.” As I said, I must be truthful.

She turns white. “What? But—”

I hold up my hand. “You wanted the truth, and you shall have it. I am not engaged to *anyone*—not to Anne and not to Miss Elizabeth. When I am engaged, I shall inform you of the fact. Do not presume such things, for it is beneath you.”

“This is not to be borne!” She raps her cane violently for emphasis as she rises from the chair. “Your mother and I planned the union between Pemberley and Rosings while you were in your cradles.”

I must have the housekeeper see to any marks that may remain on my floor.

I answer calmly. “As you have said before.” I do not know if her oft-told tale is true, and at the end of the day, it matters not. I shall marry not to please my relations but myself. “Still, it is the expected practice for the gentleman to propose and the lady to accept before there is an actual betrothal.”

“Mere details.”

“Perhaps. Still, I will follow with the usual custom.”

Lady Catherine’s tone moderates. “Then I will expect you to come back to Rosings soon. You are not getting any younger, and Anne grows impatient. You must marry.”

I allow myself a small smile. “I hope it gives you comfort that I am beginning to come around to your way of thinking.” At her elation, I continue. “But I shall act in my own good time.” Yes, I wish to marry, but you will not like my choice of bride.

“Oh, you just like your father! There was no moving him when his mind was made up!”

I do not recall my mother having any such complaint with my father, but I am sure she had means of persuasion unavailable to other people.

It takes me a few more minutes to placate Lady Catherine enough for her to take her leave. She returns to Rosings and Anne without delay, her farewell a demand that I soon follow. It just so happens that I do plan to leave London, but my direction is not south into Kent but north to Hertfordshire.

Chapter 57 –

I SIT IN MY carriage, a bundle of nerves. I hope as I have not allowed myself to hope before. Elizabeth's disavowal to Lady Catherine is the sign I thought I would never see. She *must* have changed her mind about me! She might not hold Wickham's seduction of her sister against me. With that courage I have so often admired in her, she stood up to my Gorgon of an aunt.

"The wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine." That is what she said. She never would have uttered those words if she still despised me.

But that does not mean she likes me enough to marry. Liking is not love, and I must have her love.

Bingley, for once, quickly responded to my express, begging his hospitality in Hertfordshire. Still, I have been in agony for three days! Three days of packing and waiting and traveling. And by the time I reach Netherfield, it will be too late to call on Longbourn. I must wait until tomorrow.

Another dreaded night looms before me—another night of hoping and despairing, of dreams and nightmares. Added to my anxiety is the knowledge that my fate shall be finally decided tomorrow. Tomorrow shall settle whether my future is full or empty.

Chapter 58 –

"LIZZY, MAY I GO on my own to the Lucases'?" asks Miss Catherine Bennet. "Maria has a new kitten, and I so wish to see it."

"Of course," says Elizabeth. "Do not linger too long."

We continue on in silence, the fallen leaves crunching agreeably under our steps. Bingley and Miss Bennet have allowed us to outstrip them, caught up as they are in their conversation. I suppose they are talking of their upcoming wedding, a subject that has apparently commanded the complete attention of the Bennet household. It is a clear October morning, cool and calm—which does nothing to relieve the tension between my beloved and me.

Bingley was in a mind to be obliging this morning, and we found ourselves before Longbourn's front door at an hour almost too early for callers. I am surprised I slept as well as I did last night; I supposed that knowing I would be in Elizabeth's most welcome

presence was the cause. No matter what happens today, any interaction with her must do me good.

Mrs. Bennet was not as unwelcoming as she was when last I called. The anticipation of a daughter well married must be her excuse. Elizabeth said hardly a word; in fact, she appeared slightly alarmed until Bingley proposed a walk to Merton. Her obvious relief at his suggestion told me it was not my company that distressed her. Oh, if I could but know of her troubles, so that I might offer comfort! But I have no right to do that—yet.

Miss Mary proclaimed she would remain at Longbourn to practice her instrument, but Miss Catherine was agreeable to the scheme. Now, she has abandoned us, and Elizabeth and I are virtually alone as we walk along the road.

Elizabeth has said nothing since I arrived in her family's parlor not a quarter-hour before. My courage begins to fail as my confidence fades. Have I misjudged my aunt's report? Does Elizabeth truly look favorably on me? Liking is not loving. Respect is not affection. Does Elizabeth feel all, some, or none of those emotions? How can I learn the truth? How do I start?

Elizabeth breaks the silence. "Mr. Darcy, I am a very selfish creature, and, for the sake of giving relief to my own feelings, care not how much I may be wounding yours. I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how gratefully I feel it. Were it known to the rest of my family, I should not have merely my own gratitude to express."

During the whole of this extraordinary speech, her eyes are downcast. I can only see the top of her bonnet.

Damn! I never wanted Elizabeth to know of my dealings with Wickham! Why did the Gardiners not keep my secret? I react without forethought. My feelings will not be repressed. "I am sorry—exceedingly sorry—that you have ever been informed of what may, in a mistaken light, have given you uneasiness! I did not think Mrs. Gardiner was so little to be trusted."

"You must not blame my aunt," Elizabeth cries. "Lydia's thoughtlessness first betrayed to me that you had been concerned in the matter. And, of course, I could not rest till I knew the particulars." Finally she turns her fine eyes to me. "Let me thank you again and again, in the name of all my family, for that generous compassion which induced you to take so much trouble and bear so many mortifications, for the sake of discovering them."

"If you will thank me," I blurt out in relief that I had not been betrayed, "let it be for yourself alone. That the wish of giving happiness to you might add force to the other

inducements which led me on, I shall not attempt to deny. But your family owes me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of you.”

Good God, did I really say that? Oh, to the Devil with caution! I must know all *now!*

“You are too generous to trifle with me! If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever.”

Her eyes go wide, her cheeks redden. I have shocked her.

We stand still as statues in the middle of the Meryton Road, alone in the world.

I wait in dreadful anticipation for her response.

She accepted me! She loves me!

My dearest Elizabeth forgave me and accepted my suit. She will be my wife and helpmate and lover and mother of my children and—most importantly—my best friend. Life will never be any sweeter than the moment she confessed her love for me.

How did she answer me, you ask? *Ah, ah, ah*—a gentleman never tells. Let me say my response was affectionately effusive and left Elizabeth with absolutely no doubt of my esteem and constancy.

After everything was settled between us, I told her of Lady Catherine’s visit to me after her own interview with her. Elizabeth laughed when I said that her refusal to refuse me gave me hope like never before.

“Yes, you know enough of my frankness to believe me capable of that. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to all your relations!”

Delightful woman! We entered into a small disagreement about who was most at fault at Hunsford. I, of course, took the lion’s share, for what did Elizabeth say that I did not deserve? For her part, she denied it all, blamed herself for blindness and prejudice, and owned herself heartily ashamed. I could not have that, and detailed in full all of the faults of character she inspired me to overcome. There were tears in her eyes at the completion of my recital.

Our conversation turned to my involvement with her sister and Straw for Brains. The proud gaze with which she gifted me, when I admitted that my gravity at Lambton was solely due to my instant resolution to hasten to London in quest of her sister, made me feel like one of the Knights of the Round Table.

"What could become of Mr. Bingley and Jane?" Elizabeth laughingly speculated. I knew not, although I suspected that Bingley used the opportunity of finding himself alone with his intended to good purpose. As we strolled on the public road, I could not do likewise, no matter how much I hungered for Elizabeth's sweet lips. (And yes, her lips are sweet indeed, as I have verified numerous times since.)

We next talked of Bingley, and Elizabeth's archness returned when I admitted I had guided Bingley back to Netherfield. We continued to speak uninterrupted, until we returned to Longbourn.

Chapter 59 -

DINNER AT LONGBOURN WAS a dull and frustrating experience. Jane and Bingley, as the acknowledged lovers, talked and laughed and were talked and laughed about. Elizabeth and I, however, remained silent, for I had yet to speak to Mr. Bennet. It did not help that my physical distance from Elizabeth was as great as the dinner table would allow. I had Mrs. Bennet on my right and Miss Mary on my left. Neither was of a mind to converse with me, a wish I echoed. Elizabeth was of a like mind, for she was unusually quiet. Her blushes when she glanced in my direction were the saving grace of the evening. Only my self-control prevented me from staring at Elizabeth the whole time like a love-sick puppy.

When we parted, Elizabeth whispered that she planned to tell Jane of our understanding, and I said I would do the same with Bingley.

As I suspected, Bingley had no idea of how things stood between Elizabeth and me.

"*Miss Elizabeth?* My word, are you in earnest? You are to marry Miss Elizabeth? I declare, you have entirely surprised me! I never saw a thing of it!"

"Bingley, my friend, have you seen anything but your *angel* since Miss Bennet accepted you?"

Bingley laughed. "Too right, there! Is not Jane perfect? But Miss Elizabeth? I thought she disliked you!"

My mirth faded a touch. "She did. But she changed her mind."

Bingley grinned, a knowing look in his eye. "Or perhaps you changed it for her. I know there is no stopping you when your mind is intent upon its purpose."

“Bingley, you have no idea!” I told him of Hunsford and my determination to change my ways. His astonishment grew and we talked on into the night.

As we retired, Bingley patted my shoulder. “Darcy, you are the most humbling friend. I wish I knew of your struggles, that I could have been of service to you. But you did it all on your own and won the prize. Congratulations. Ha! You will be my brother in truth! Wonderful!” He paused, suddenly thoughtful. “Caroline...”

“Yes... Caroline,” I said.

“She will not be happy.”

“I expect not.”

Bingley shrugged. “I suppose we will just have to get her married.”

“Gad! Leave me out of this!” I protested, but Bingley would have nothing of it.

“She will be your relation, too, and I know you like nothing more than to be of service to your family.”

Blast! He knows me all too well.

The next day verified I am lump-headed idiot. One look at Elizabeth’s dear face when Bingley and I walked into the Bennet’s parlor proved that I knew nothing of ladies—nothing at all. How could I have confused Elizabeth’s saucy looks before with the clear adoration in her eyes now? I was a hundred times a fool. I hope I have improved since.

Mrs. Bennet suggested that Elizabeth, Miss Catherine, and I walk out to Oakham Mount. Fortunately, Miss Catherine demurred. During our walk, Elizabeth confided that she was instructed by her mother to suffer the inconvenience of walking out with me and keep me out of Bingley’s way.

“She trusts you alone with me?” I smiled. “She may yet become my favorite Bennet.”

Elizabeth’s laugh held more than a little of nervousness and I vowed not to take too much advantage of the situation. I behaved myself until we reached the summit, where we shared our first kiss. It was all I ever dreamed about.

We did talk, too. It was decided that I should approach Mr. Bennet after dinner. I think Elizabeth wanted to spare me her mother’s raptures of joy at news of our engagement. I agreed to her request, but I also let my beloved know that I would bear anything to be by her side.

She smiled. "Well, sir, with my mother, it seems you shall have a lifetime to prove it!"

To say Mr. Bennet was surprised by my petition would be an understatement. The gentleman was flabbergasted.

"You... you wish to marry Lizzy? My Lizzy?"

"Indeed, sir." Having learned my lesson from my first proposal, I dealt with only the pleasant aspects of our proposed union. In short, succinct sentences, I assured Mr. Bennet of our mutual affection and my intention that Elizabeth would be well-cared for.

"And... she has accepted you?"

I thought I had made that clear. "Yes, sir."

He blinked. Obviously such an idea had never occurred to him. "Very well, young man. You have my permission and my blessing." Perhaps it was my imagination, but I think he hesitated on the word *blessing*.

"Very good, sir. I shall have the marriage articles drawn up for your approval straight away." I bowed.

Just as I made to leave, he asked, "Pray tell Lizzy I would like to talk to her, Mr. Darcy."

"Of course."

After my interview with Mr. Bennet, I tried to relieve Elizabeth's anxiety with a small smile. I approached the table where she was sitting with Miss Catherine, I whispered her father's request, and she was gone directly.

With nothing else to do, I took Elizabeth's seat, to her sister's surprise. I pretended to admire her needlework. "That is lovely, Miss Catherine," I observed.

"Kitty," she said timidly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I prefer Kitty. Catherine sounds so... *serous*." She laughed nervously. "I should hate to be called serious. Papa says I am not serious at all."

Too right, there.

"Serious is so *boring*. None of us are serous, except Jane and maybe Lizzy. Not that they are boring, of course! No one would call them boring."

“No, I would not.”

“Oh! Mr. Darcy, I do not mean to call *you* boring, even though you are so serious!”

I cannot take offense at her foolishness. She is young, after all. “No, you have the right of it. I am afraid I am very serious and, therefore, boring at times.”

She looked at me with wide, surprised eyes. “I think you are teasing me.”

I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. “Do you think a serious man like me is capable of teasing, Miss Kitty?”

I could see her mulling over my statement. She finally brightened. “I think so, yes.”

I nodded, sat back and pulled from my pocket a book of poetry to read. For the next hour, I lost myself in the verses of Scott until Elizabeth returned. Her relaxed smile was all I needed to assure me all was well. There was no announcement, no celebration—that was for another day. The time passed tranquilly away until Bingley and I made our exit.

“I tell my mother tonight,” was Elizabeth’s whispered farewell. Her apprehension of the upcoming interview was transparent.

“*That* should be eventful,” I replied.

“That is remarkably easy for you to say, sir!” she returned with mock severity. “Off with you!” As I began to turn, she added softly, “And be all the sooner tomorrow, I pray.”

“You may depend upon it, my dear.”

Chapter 60 –

THE WEEKS OF OUR courtship were delightful. My lovely Elizabeth became again the intriguing, impertinent imp I fell in love with almost a year ago. Was it a year ago? I do not know for certain. Elizabeth even asked me when I had fallen in love, and I could not answer. I was in the middle of it before I knew what I was about.

“My beauty you had early withstood,” she claimed soon after our engagement, her enchanting eyes twinkling, “and as for my manners! My behavior to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now be sincere—did you admire me for my impertinence?”

“For the liveliness of your mind, I did.” I did not add her light and pleasing figure had haunted my dreams for months. She would learn of *that* soon enough.

“You may as well call it impertinence at once!” she laughed. “It was very little less. The fact is you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking, and looking, and thinking for your approbation alone. I roused and interested you because I was so unlike *them*.”

How very true.

“Had you not been really amiable, you would have hated me for it,” she continued, “but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just. And in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There—I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it! And really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me—but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love.”

Fall in love. I kissed her heartily for that.

The Bennets were very surprised at our news. Mrs. Bennet could not utter more than a polite request as to my opinion of what to serve at dinner for almost a week whole! It did not last, of course, but I began to see her silliness in a more understanding light, particularly when I compared her behavior to my aunt’s.

Lady Catherine took my engagement as a personal affront. She wrote to all her relations and friends, demanding that they renounce their acquaintance with me for as long as “*that scheming baggage pollutes the shades of Pemberley.*” My uncle, the Earl, shared his sister’s message with me, you see. As I hoped and expected, my remaining Fitzwilliam relations were far more reasonable, withholding any opinion about the matter until Elizabeth was introduced. The countess was instantly charmed, and by the end of the evening the earl privately admitted that I could have done far worse. It did not hurt that Georgiana and my cousin Fitzwilliam were strong supporters of Elizabeth. As for the Viscount and his wife, they agreed not to oppose the match. That is the best I can hope from *that* quarter.

“*The treason of the family,*” (Lady Catherine’s words, not mine) sent my aunt into a rage. She has refused to communicate with any of us. Small loss. I am sorry for Anne, though.

Elizabeth’s family and friends were far less taxing. Oh, Mrs. Bennet struts about Meryton, crowing over her “clever Lizzy’s good fortune” as if she herself had anything to do with our engagement. If she drops one more hint about throwing Elizabeth’s remaining sisters into the path of rich men, I think I will drink myself into a stupor. Mr. Bennet has exerted himself to actually emerge from his library—I swear he acts like a bear with a cave—and speak with me. We get along pleasantly, as long as I let him occasionally win at chess. Miss Kitty has taken pains to know me, which is more than I can say for Miss Mary.

As for Elizabeth's other relations in Hertfordshire, the less time I spend with Mrs. Philips, the better.

Compared with *her*, I can tolerate the parading and obsequious civility of Mr. Collins and the inane comments of Sir William Lucas with reasonable ease. I just nod at the appropriate moments, keep my face as neutral as possible, and shrug only when no one sees me.

I do not spend a moment's time thinking of Useless or his bride.

The true joy at our happiness from those closest to us—Georgiana, Fitzwilliam, Bingley, Jane, Mrs. Collins, and the Gardiners— were all I could hope for. They made the time between our betrothal and wedding pass as pleasantly as one could wish.

However, I must admit Elizabeth's behavior during our season of courtship was a trial. Not that she was anything less than a delight. *That* was the problem. Elizabeth made it her purpose in life to shield me from the ridiculousness of her acquaintances by stealing away with me as often as could be managed. The temptation she offered! As my darling girl had no true understanding of the effect her intoxicating presence had on me, I was forced to exercise great willpower by reminding myself I am a gentleman, and thereby should resist the innocent inducement of my intended. It was a very great struggle, particularly since Elizabeth took prodigious pleasure in kissing me when least expected.

The trials of being me.

Chapter 61 -

AS I LOOK BACK on events, I am relieved that everything is over and done. Marriage to my dear Elizabeth is more pleasing than I ever hoped for. We are of one mind about almost everything, and when we are not, we find the most delightful way of "convincing" one another of the validity of our opinions. I find losing such arguments not distressing in the least.

I recall very little of the marriage ceremony, except how beautiful Elizabeth appeared descending the aisle on her father's arm. As for that evening, I will only say I shall never forget the breathtaking sight of her coming to me with her hair down about her shoulders. Other memories are mine and mine alone.

I am elated that Elizabeth wishes to spend most of our time here at Pemberley. I think sometimes she loves the dear place more than I. Chief among its manifold charms is its remoteness, particularly from Hertfordshire! I will not say I do not get along with my new

family, but distance makes my heart grow fonder when it comes to Longbourn, principally for my new mother. It is a relationship that should not be endangered with close intercourse. Happily, Elizabeth agrees with me.

If only Mr. Bennet would stop appearing at my doorstep at the most inopportune times! Drat the man! At least he loses himself in my library; if we are fortunate, we only see him at dinner.

I wagered that Bingley and Jane could only last a year at Netherfield, and I was right. Elizabeth forgave my smugness over the prediction when I found an estate for the Bingleys not thirty miles from Pemberley. Now, there is good company and no mistake!

To be honest, my sister Catherine—no, *Kitty*. I must remember that she wants to be called Kitty—my sister *Kitty* has been good company, too. She spends the majority of her time visiting us or the Bingleys. She and Georgiana have had a good influence on each other and are now as thick as thieves.

I cannot say the same about my other sisters. Mary remained at Longbourn, and I see no material improvement *there*. As for Lydia and He Who Shall Not Be Named, the less I hear about those two, the better. I wish I could say they did not have their hands in my pocket, but I can afford a little occasional generosity and make Elizabeth happy, as long as Straw for Brains never sets foot in any of my houses. So I grumble and make a show, help Useless in his profession, and make sure I am at Matlock or on a shooting trip with Bingley when Lydia comes to visit.

I never thought I could change so. Elizabeth even convinced me to forgive my Aunt Catherine for her intolerable interference and invite the old hag to Pemberley. Wonders of wonders, she came! To this day, I do not know if it was to see if Elizabeth could bear up to the responsibility of managing Pemberley (my thinking) or if the irritating battle-ax actually owns some affection for me (Elizabeth's insistence). Elizabeth is probably right. She usually is.

Ah, guests are at the door! The Gardiners are here for the summer. Excellent!

The End