The Good Brother

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Summary

A reworking of Pride & Prejudice. After the events of Ramsgate Darcy makes a choice that has a drastic effect on his life before the events of Hertfordshire.
Chapter 1

Part I.

Fitzwilliam Darcy had always thought himself to be a good brother. It was something that he prided himself upon. Responsibility had been thrust upon him at an early age; he was barely three and twenty when his father departed from the world, leaving his son a large estate and a sister more than ten years his junior to raise.

Few expected such a young man to deal with this, but those who knew Mr Darcy saw in him what society did not; a profound sense of familial duty, combined with compassion, and gentleness. All these qualities made him address the task he had been left with most seriously, determined to do his late father proud.

Five years later however, tragedy struck. His sister Georgiana, now but fifteen, had been taken from the establishment formed for her in London to Ramsgate; under the chaperoning of a Mrs Younge. A woman in whom that Mr Darcy found later he had been most heavily deceived. For she had made the acquaintance of a man by the name of George Wickham, a person whom had long been known to Darcy, as the godson of his late father, and a close childhood companion before his character grew reckless at Cambridge.

A man of ill repute and disgraceful conduct, he had tried to persuade Georgiana to fall in love with him and consent to an elopement. By chance, Miss Darcy wrote to her brother, and her words, although only containing a slight mention of Mr Wickham and not by name, induced Mr Darcy to go down to Ramsgate.

He arrived just in time. Georgiana, fearing to disappoint a brother that she looked up to almost as a father, told him the entirety of Wickham's scheme at once. Mr Darcy only needed a brief audience with the man to set him straight and send him on his way. Mr Wickham left the next day, leaving a broken hearted Georgiana, and an ashamed Fitzwilliam Darcy.

It was after this terrible event, that Darcy came to the following conclusion. His sister needed a sister, an ally to confide matters in, when she felt she could not discuss it with him. Determined that such a failure would not happen again, and having no other sibling but her, he began to look for a wife.

But society did not possess a woman that he could trust with himself, let alone with Georgiana, leaving him only one option. That was to seek a wife in his close family. He had two such possibilities; in the form of cousins, from his mother's side of the family. The first, Lady Eleanor Fitzwilliam, daughter of his Uncle, was only ten years old, hardly a suitable choice. So he settled upon the second.

Anne de Bourgh was the only daughter of his mother's older sister, Lady Catherine. She stood to inherit her father's estate; Rosings Park in Kent. She was but one and twenty, an young enough age to find intimacy with Georgiana and old enough to be a suitable wife. But these were not the only reasons that made Mr Darcy chose her as his bride. Anne's mother had sheltered her from much of society, causing Anne to be pronounced as sickly, when in truth, all Miss de Bourgh needed was some freedom under which to thrive.

Having been friends from childhood, Darcy learnt of this from Anne herself, and she in turn had learnt of his trouble with Georgiana. She agreed to his proposal and Lady Catherine's consent was applied for accordingly. As the match had been a favoured wish of this lady, she accepted immediately, but the rest of the family took the news differently.
The Earl of Matlock, Darcy's maternal Uncle, urged caution to his nephew, determined in his opinion that marriage to Anne was not the way to prevent another 'Ramsgate tragedy' and his wife was likewise opposed. Their eldest son and family also disagreed. Only the younger son, a colonel in the army and thus perhaps more willing to understand a marriage of convenience than others who had the luxury of choice, accepted his cousin's decision.

Thus it was to the surprise of most of his family and all of society when Fitzwilliam Darcy married Anne de Bourgh on the ninth day of August, in the year of grace, 1811. The wedding took place at Pemberley, Mr Darcy's country estate, where he and his sister had spent nearly all of their lives. As the day faded into evening, and the newly wedded couple retired for the night, they kept their agreement of not consummating a marriage that was purely of convenience and friendship.

The next day, a Dr Dawson, family physician to the Darcys for many years came as agreed to examine the new Mrs Darcy and determine the real cause for her sickly constitution. Much to their surprise, her worse suspicions were confirmed. Anne had consumption. The word sent dread to both their hearts, worsening when the doctor pronounced her to not survive over a year.

Darcy was all prepared to blame himself, when Anne brought him to realise that the year she had would help the both of them to better cope when she did pass away and leave him eligible once more. Her husband vowed to keep the illness from the rest of their family, informing only Georgiana, and to make Anne's last year the happiest she had ever experienced.

And thus this is where our story begins, one evening in London, in Grosvenor Square, where the Darcy family have been residing to enjoy the Season approximately one and forty days.
Chapter 2

Part II.

Grosvenor Square, Late evening, 25th September 1811.

"Darcy, what a joy it is to find you still in London!"

The gentleman in question had risen from his chair the moment the speaker had been announced. Now he shook hands and replied, "Bingley, what brings you back so soon?"

Charles Bingley inwardly smiled at his friend's unusual exuberance. He had made the acquaintance of Mr Darcy at Cambridge and had remained his friend ever since. Two years his senior, Darcy had proved to be an excellent friend, offering Bingley the best advice when it came to investing his inheritance in property.

Until his marriage Charles had always thought his friend too reserved, but the influence of Anne had done much to alter his outward manner, making him easier in society, whatever its consequence. He still had a reserve, but it was less displayed.

"I think I have found a house," Bingley replied after he had sat down. "Netherfield is located in Meryton, in the county of Hertfordshire. I looked over the place as you suggested and I believe it to be suitable, but I would like your opinion before I set residence."

"How is the neighbourhood? Is it of good repute?" Darcy asked him.

"Netherfield is the largest estate I believe. The solicitor mentioned two families of consequence; a Knight of the Realm and a gentleman with family. Other than that it seems to be your typical country village."

"Like Lambton?" Georgiana asked, referring to the village that was but five miles from the boundaries of her brother's estate in Derbyshire.

"Yes, it reminded me very much of Lambton," Bingley replied. "That I must admit is my only disagreement with the place; that it is some distance from Derbyshire."

"Yes, I am sorry I could not find anything suitable in its neighbouring counties," Darcy remarked.

"It is no matter," Bingley assured his friend, "but keep looking. I intend Netherfield to be only a temporary residence. Get me used to managing something of that size, so my future home is not much of a trial. Speaking of homes, how is Pemberley?"

"Reynolds gives me his assurances that everything is progressing smoothly," Darcy answered. "The key to a good home, Bingley, is not just your management, but a good steward as well. And I think that's what you have found in Wilkins. Someone who can almost run the place in your absence."

"Yes his references spoke highly of him," Bingley agreed, pleased that his friend approved of his newest servant, employed purely for his new house. "So will you come and see the place? And if I take it, join me and my sisters when we settle there for a while?"

"I would be happy to do so," Darcy replied to his first question, before turning to his wife. "Anne, what do you think? Would you and Georgiana like to join us if Bingley settles?"
"Yes," Anne replied, after glancing at Georgiana, who quietly nodded her acceptance. "Netherfield sounds just the thing to come to after a London Season."

With Mrs Darcy's agreement, the conversation soon turned to other things, until dinner was announced. Mr Bingley stayed for the meal, and then accepted his friend's kind invitation to stay over, as there seemed little point in returning to his residence in town, when they would be both departing for Hertfordshire on the morrow. Thus, it was not until the Darcys had retired for the night that Fitzwilliam had a chance to get Anne's true opinion on the matter.

"Anne, have you enjoyed this time here?" Darcy asked her when she had joined him in the small anteroom that divided their chambers. He had become concerned by her particular phrasing upon her acceptance to his friend's scheme.

Anne saw her cousin's- she could rarely think of him as her husband, for to her they were more two friends living together than a married couple -concern, and replied at once. "It was a wonderful amusement at first. All those Society belles and their mamas looking decidedly disgusted at the news of our match. I took great delight in observing them all. The balls we have attended have been very enjoyable. However, as the days have gone on, I must confess that I found myself missing sensible conversation. Our days at Pemberley after the wedding has made me value intelligent converse, and there is very little to find at St James."

Darcy chuckled. "Yes indeed there is. I was concerned it had worn you out, but I am thankful to learn the contrary."

"You must stop worrying yourself over me," Anne gently remonstrated. "Despite my affliction- I will not call it illness, that will give it too much power -I feel quite well. Distance from my mother, combined with amusing society and the good company of you and Georgie, has done wonders for my constitution. I am also quite determined to enjoy myself before.... circumstances prevent me from doing so."

Darcy could not refrain from flinching at the last. He tried not to think of the fate that would shortly befall her, that was not how he wished to remember her; ill. He wished to remember her as his good friend and cousin. Hurriedly he spoke to cover the motion. "And what do you think of Georgie joining us? She is not out, and you know her feelings about Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. I would love her to come, but I am concerned about her enjoyment being affected by them."

"I will ask her about it tomorrow, but I'm sure she will find their company preferable to remaining in London without us." Anne rose and walked over to her companion. "And now, sir, with regards to the morrow, I suggest you retire, for you and Bingley have a long ride ahead."

"How can I refuse a suggestion from the daughter of Lady Catherine de Bourgh? Whose advice as you know, can never be refuted," Darcy teased in reply.

"Not just her daughter, but also your wife, sir, and capable of ordering you even further," Anne retorted back, the slight smile at her lips betraying her amusement.

"And here was me thinking that the wife was supposed to submit to her husband's rule, but I can see I was deceived." With that Darcy rose from his chair and kissed Anne on the cheek in true 'cousinly' fashion. "Goodnight Anne. I'll see you in twelve days."
Two horses- one white, one black, and both with the fine figure and grace which implied a thoroughbred ancestry -raced across the fields of the quiet village of Meryton, in the county of Hertfordshire. Their destination; a point where it was suitable to view the country estate that one of their riders was hoping to rent for a time.

The white stallion was the first to come to a halt. Its rider gazed straight ahead for a moment at the prospect, then turned to his companion. "There, what do you think?"

The black stallion was slightly more restless than his white friend, causing his rider to walk him in a circle while he answered the question. "It seems established enough. If you can tolerate the savage society," he added jokingly, "I think you should take it."

"Country Manners?" Bingley queried. "I think they're charming. And take it I shall. I'll settle it with the attorney directly." He then flicked the reins and began the gallop back.

Darcy's stallion was still walking in circles when the rider caught sight of a figure some distance away, watching them. He could glance at the figure only for a moment, as his horse still refused to settle. With one final glance at the house, Darcy reared the stallion and set off to join his friend.

Even though the figure was no horse woman, she could not fail to be impressed by the unconscious display of horsemanship she had just witnessed.

Elizabeth Bennet had stopped to watch the riders from the moment they had first emerged upon the fields of Oakham Mount. A new tenant for the Netherfield estate had been rumoured for quite some time, and this was the first confirmation of it. But which of the riders was it?

Elizabeth guessed the first, he seemed more focused on the building. She smiled as her eyes rested on the racers, watching as the black soon outpaced his white companion. Its rider had hesitated before joining his friend. Had he spotted her? At this distance, it was difficult to tell.

Just then, the chimes of the church bells announcing the beginning of a new hour in the day could be heard. Realising the time, Elizabeth followed the motion of the horses she had just witnessed, running down the path to the gate that would lead her home.

Only later was she to recognised the significance of this event.

Upon their return to the pebbled drive of Netherfield Hall, the riders saw not one but two personages waiting for their arrival. One they identified immediately, for he had been with them from the moment they arrived in Meryton. The other remained a stranger to them.

Bingley, the last to reach their destination, dismounted first. His friend followed suit some seconds later, his cautious and habitually reserved nature evaluating the stranger before them.

"Thank you, sir, for letting me view the place one more time. I agree to your previous offer of letting the residence from Michaelmas with the fixed price," Bingley announced once he was by the Solicitor.
Darcy smiled at his friend's obvious good cheer, before returning to his observation of the stranger who was now observing the both of them. A man several years his senior, judging by his appearance, and of lower occupation than himself but superior than the solicitor he stood next to, at least Darcy presumed so by his apparel. He wondered if the man was one of their immediate neighbours.

Bingley soon answered his friend's silent wondering by introducing himself to the stranger, after his conversation with the solicitor had completed itself. "Charles Bingley, sir."

The stranger took the hand. "Andrew Bennet. Please to meet you, Mr Bingley. Netherfield has been neglected for some time. It is welcome news to see that you have taken it up. It is a very good estate."

"Yes, it appeals to my needs." Bingley gestured to his friend and Darcy joined them just as he began the introduction. "May I present my friend Mr Darcy. Darcy, this is Mr Bennet."

Mr Bennet took his hand as they both privately observed each other. "And how do you find Hertfordshire, Mr Darcy?"

"As much as anyone does, by directions," Darcy replied back, his appraisal of Mr Bennet convincing him that the gentleman would understand the witticism.

Mr Bennet did indeed chuckle at the reply. "I see you are of my humour sir. Have you come to prevail an estate, or do you already have one?"

"The latter," Darcy replied. "It resides in Derbyshire, much to my satisfaction. And your own?"

"I see you are very perceptive like myself. Longbourn is but three miles from here. You may take the opportunity to visit if you wish. There, I have done my duty."

"Your duty?"

"I would never hear the end of this from my wife if I did not invite you to return my call. However, since as I am the only one who knows of your arrival here, I shall repeat this visit and give a more formal request later. Until then I bid you adieu." Mr Bennet winked at the gentleman and bowed before departing from all.

When the gentleman had departed, Bingley chuckled and turned to his friend. "It never ceases to amaze me Darcy how you manage to encourage wit from just a simple phrase."

"And it shall never cease to amaze me Bingley how you are always mystified by it," Darcy replied before returning to the horses. "I'm going for a ride, Zeus is still a little restless. I'll see you this evening."

After Darcy had worn the restlessness out of his stallion he returned to Netherfield to find that his friend had sorted everything regarding the letting of said estate and had bade the Solicitor, who happened to be Mr Phillips of Phillips & Avery Solicitors, and brother in law to Mr Bennet, farewell.

The two friends sat down to a companionable supper then retired to the Library. While Bingley ensconced himself in a book about the history of the estate, Darcy seated himself at the bureau to write to his wife.

The letter ran as follows;
Anne,

Have arrived at the above safe and well. Bingley finalised the arrangements and has let the estate to his original agreement. I myself find Netherfield to be very satisfactory, although it could do with a larger and more cultured library.

I know that the Hurst and Miss Bingley intended to join us here on the seventh and I would be most pleased if you and Georgie would be able to do the same. The countryside surrounding here is very beautiful and has many paths for walking and good ground for riding.

So far we have met two inhabitants of the neighbouring village, Meryton, a Mr Phillips and a Mr Bennet. The latter owns Longbourn, an estate about three miles from here, while the former is the solicitor for this estate.

Both stuck me as amiable gentlemen, Mr Bennet possessing that keen wit that you and I have found wanting in London Society of late.

Give my regards to Georgie and let her know that I was most pleased that her Aria has turned out as well as she wished it to.

Adieu, till your arrival
Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Anne received the above missive from her husband some four days later. Three days later, she and her sister in law had arrived at Netherfield, just after the arrival of Mr Bingley's relatives, the Hursts and his unmarried sister Caroline.

Although the family's presence in the neighbourhood was known, they managed to remain relatively undisturbed by the inhabitants of Meryton and its environs for many days. Finally, upon the twenty-first day of October, they found themselves obliged to attend an assembly at the rooms in the village.

Bingley was the only inhabitant that was glad to go. His sisters thought the neighbourhood to be inferior to themselves and thus not a society to interact with. Mr Hurst could not be imposed to agree either way, for as long there was enough food and wine with which to occupy him.

Georgiana, not being out was required to remain behind and the Darcys would have happily stayed with her, had not Mr Bingley pressed for their attendance and company.

The evening came, and the carriage departed from the drive to the village.
Part IV.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that timing is important. To arrive too early at one's required meeting place is seen as too eager and to arrive too late is considered unseemly. Thus, one must judge one's timing as carefully as a juror decides which verdict to deliver on a murder case. The slightest mistake could place one person's life in danger, or completely damage another person's reputation forever.

The party from Netherfield did not arrive too early, nor did they arrive too late. Instead they came at the fashionable time that lies between these two states. Their destination seemed to have anticipated such a plan on their part for a musical flourish to signal the end of the first dance set had just played its last note when the doors opened to admit them.

Naturally, all eyes turned to observe them. A hush came over the room, occasionally emitting a few murmurs as occupants whispered their opinions to their companions beside them. Their new arrivals returned the stare, but not the murmurs.

Sir William Lucas walked forward to welcome them. The Netherfields had made his and his family's acquaintance a few days previously, and judged him to be something of an oddity- at least this was the opinion of certain superior sisters -but still felt obliged to indulge the gentleman.

Said gentleman made his greeting, and Darcy soon found himself following his friend and wife to an introduction that said friend had been wanting for some days, after learning of the renowned beauty of Mr Andrew Bennet's five daughters.

As they came upon Mrs Bennet, Darcy noted the stark contrast that existed between the woman and the two younger standing beside her. All three had been in conversation until their inevitable arrival was described, and now the eldest woman happily fawned and bowed over his friend, eagerly introducing her companions.

"This is my eldest, Jane. And Elizabeth. And Mary sits over there. And Kitty and Lydia are my youngest you see there dancing. Do you like to dance yourself, sir?"

Darcy resisted rolling his eyes with the greatest of difficulty as his he listened to his friend's reply. "I am quite happy to dance. And if Miss Bennet is not engaged, I would be honoured if she accepted to dance the next?"

"I am not engaged, Sir."

"Good." Bingley looked like he had just won her hand for life rather than the dance and his friend hid his amusement once more. Bingley was known for falling in love at almost every occasion, and the feelings were usually of short duration. His friend paid as much mind to this one as he had done in the past.

"And do you like to dance, sir?"

Darcy looked up with surprise as he found himself being introduced to Mrs Bennet, along with his wife. "I thank you madam, but I rarely dance."

Mrs Bennet, as soon as she had heard the words 'Mrs Darcy,' refrained from hinting to the gentleman any longer. Married men were of no consequence to her present state of mind, no matter what their
estate in Derbyshire was. Casting her eye about the room, she made an excuse and moved to seek Lady Lucas, leaving her second daughter to the company of the new arrivals, certain in the hopeful knowledge that her eldest was secured for life.

The next dance rapidly followed, leaving Anne to begin anew. "I apologise for my husband's friend's eagerness to dance. He shall no doubt monopolise your sister for most of the evening."

Elizabeth laughed. "Is he not your friend as well then?"

"I am not as familiar with him as my husband is. I have only recently made his acquaintance."

"You have not been married long then?"

"Since August, though it is not widely known. I am afraid it has damaged his reputation most dreadfully, has it not, my dear?"

Darcy momentarily hesitated before replying. "So much so I do not know how I will bear it, Anne."

"Your repute does not seem to me as wholly damaged sir." Elizabeth gestured to a spot behind them. Darcy turned and instantly saw Miss Bingley. "Oh, joy," he muttered in reply, loud enough for the two women to hear. "Anne, can you spare me?"

"I am afraid so, my dear. You will have to endure her at least once this evening. Best it is over and done with soon enough."

Darcy bowed and turned to meet the woman halfway, leaving Anne to turn to her new friend with a smile. "Now all the men have deserted us we can have a chance for real conversation. Caroline will endeavour to entrap him for most of the evening."

"There are some exceptions then?"

"Only Miss Bingley to my knowledge, but then she has always considered Darcy destined for her. What his opinion on the matter is, I shall leave for you determine. For my own sake, two days in her company was all I could stomach."

"And how have you found Hertfordshire?"

"Positively delightful. A wonderful reprieve from London."

"Yes, London is a town one tends to enjoy more if they only spend little of their time there. Anything more than a month and one yearns for the country."

"Precisely," Anne remarked and the two drifted into a companionable silence, watching the performance of the dancers in front of them. Anne observed Mr Darcy's forbearance of Miss Bingley for a moment, before following Miss Bennet's gaze and fixing on Mr Bingley and her sister. Already the two seemed at ease with each other. Elizabeth had high hopes that this sign carried the potential for something more, providing her mother's exuberance did nothing to interfere. "I hear you reside in Derbyshire?"

"Yes, indeed we do," Anne replied. "Do you know of the county?"

"My Aunt hails from it, a little town called Lambton."

"You don't say!" Anne replied in joy. "Why that is not five miles from where we live, at Pemberley."
She paused, as a sudden coughing fit seized hold. Fortunately for Anne its effect was only brief, enabling her to continue as if nothing of significance could be attached to it. The importance of such circumstance thus did not occur to her friend until later.

The Netherfield party returned to the house in better frames of mind than when they had left it, save perhaps for a few exceptions. Miss Darcy was there to greet her brother, eager to hear of his and Anne's enjoyment, as well as anything they had learnt about the neighbourhood surrounding them.

Anne and Darcy were happy to relate to her the events of the evening without prejudice, though the same could not be said for Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst. The two were determined to find fault with every article of the evening, from their new acquaintances, to the dance choices. The Bennet family in particular were dealt the blows of their dislike.

"I declare I do not know when I have found so little to like in an evening," Miss Bingley remarked in conclusion to the whole room. "The Bennets were reported to be local beauties, yet neither I nor Lousia saw anything particular in their countenance. Miss Bennet is a sweet girl, but her mother..."

"I myself have never met with such prettier girls and pleasanter people in my life," her brother began after Caroline had seen fit to pause.

"Charles, you astonish me," his sister replied. "I saw little breeding and no beauty at all. Would you not agree, Mr Darcy?"

Darcy inwardly groaned as he tried to reply. The better part of his evening had been spent trying to escape Miss Bingley's company in favour of his wife's and her new friend, the last thing he wished now was to be drawn into agreement with her. "No I would not."

Miss Bingley tried not to huff in disgust at his words. Certain she once had been - and still was - that she would have caught him if he had not rushed off to parts unknown earlier in the year, she hated the now unwelcoming news that he possessed an opinion contrary to her own.

There was a time when he would have agreed with her every word upon the evening, but now he deferred to another, and for Caroline it was not to be borne. Desperately she hoped that the marriage of Mr Darcy and his cousin would not last for long.
Chapter 5

Part V.

The next day opened with the family at Longbourn's reflections upon the assembly, the opinions of the two eldest in particular, as they had had very little time to talk the night before. Conversation naturally began on Mr Bingley.

"He is just what a young man ought to be, Lizzy. Sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!- so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!"

"He is also handsome," Elizabeth replied, "which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete."

"I was very much flattered by his asking me to dance a second time. I did not expect such a compliment."

"Did you not? I did for you. But that is one great difference between us. Compliments always take you by chance and me never. What could be more natural than his asking you again? He could not help seeing that you were about five times as pretty as every other woman in the room. No thanks to his gallantry for that. Well, he certainly is very agreeable, and I give you leave to like him. You have like many a stupider person."

"Dear Lizzy!"

"Oh you are a greet deal too apt you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life."

"I would wish not to be hasty in censuring any one; but I always speak what I think."

"I know you do; and it is that which makes the wonder. With your good sense, to be so honestly blind to the follies and nonsense of others. Affection of candour is common enough; one meets it everywhere. But to be candid without ostentation or design- to take the good of everybody's character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad -belongs to you alone. Yet you must admit, the manners of his sisters are not equal to his."

"Certainly not; at first. But they were pleasing women when you converse with them. Miss Bingley is to live with her brother and keep his house; and I am sure we shall find them to be very charming neighbours."

"One of them maybe."

"No, Lizzy, I am sure. And what of the Darcys? Did you find them like their friends?"

"As far as Mr Bingley goes, certainly. I confess I liked Anne very much. She has excellent candour, though untempered it is by a desire to improve the good in people. Her husband is a little reserved perhaps, but lively enough when you converse with him."

"Do you think they make a good match?"

"Not an excellent one to be sure, but the potential of a good, considering how recently they have married. There is an easy banter between them, and a willingness to laugh at oneself on either side."
Yes I like them both very much indeed."

Elizabeth found little to change her opinion of the new arrivals over the course of the next thirteen days, during the dinners and events that followed the assembly. The sisters were still calculated in their outward manners, retaining their real opinions for when they thought no one was listening.

Mrs Darcy fast became a friend, and her husband thought to be still reserved but worth knowing. As for Mr Bingley, Elizabeth was determined that in her eyes he would do nothing wrong in his continued preference for her sister.

His attention to her was markedly increased upon every occasion, and his feelings for her could be by display nothing resembling dislike or sufferance. As for her sister's feelings, Elizabeth was certain that it was evident by her manner and behaviour that if he continued to be as he was, she would be in a fair way of falling love with him.

Her desire to think well of all people and her easy friendly manners assured Elizabeth that nothing would alter in the future, and she lay in the happy hope that she would soon see Jane happily settled. During an evening at the Lucases, she made her opinion known to her other great friend, Charlotte.

Miss Lucas however was inclined to be of a different opinion. "Oh, to be sure," she began, while they had a moment alone in the company of all their acquaintances to witness the furtherance of the match, "it is evident that he likes her, but I do not think it is so noticeable that Jane likes him."

"Charlotte, how can you say such a thing! Is it not discernible by her manner and preference for his company above all others?"

"It may be to you and me, Lizzy. We know Jane for the wonderful person that she is, but to others it is best perhaps to display more evidence. She should show more affection, even than she feels, not less, if she is to secure him."

"Secure him! Charlotte!"

"Yes, she should secure him as soon as may be."

"Before she sure of his character, before she is even certain of her own regard for him?"

"But of course. Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance you know. There will always be vexation and grief. And it is better to know in advance as little as possible about the defects of your marriage partner."

Elizabeth laughed. "Charlotte, that is not sound. You know it is not. You would never act in this way yourself."

"It seems that Jane will not," Charlotte replied, neatly avoiding both disagreement and acceptance of her friend's view of herself. "So let us hope that Mr Bingley will."

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head, just in time to see her new friend pass near them. "Anne, what do you think? Should a person show more affection than they chose in order to secure early their partner in life?"

"I do not see what would be the point, one learns soon enough if they like or dislike them anyway."

"And what was your method, Mrs Darcy?" Charlotte asked.

"My preference has always been for love above situation, but then I was always assured of the latter,
so I am a bad example I fear."

"Do you think Mr Bingley will act differently then?" Elizabeth queried.

Anne laughed. "Oh, never, I believe. Unless his sisters persuade him otherwise, he will always chose preference. My husband believes Charles falls frequently in and out of love, but I am sure that this time will different. He has seen the improvement marriage has made in his friend, and so shall be agreeable to settling soon. But I beg you to change the subject, as I espy Darcy within our hearing and I do not wish him to hear us talking of him."

Anne's husband and cousin if asked, would not be able to even discern by their manners that they were talking about him, for quite a different subject occupied his mind at present. He found himself to be in the imminent throws of a mental and emotional battle, one which his mind and body had neither expected nor prepared for, given his recent emergence into the marriage state.

In short, Mr Darcy was attempting to fight off the clutches of early attraction. At first he had scarcely allowed the woman in question to be pretty; he had looked at her without admiration at the assembly, his mind more on the conversation rather than the appearance; and when they next met, he looked at her only in an attempt to discount his former memory.

But no sooner had he made it good to himself that she was not a local beauty he found her to be rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.

To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure in her form; he was forced to acknowledge to himself that her figure was light and pleasing and was caught by her easy playfulness of manners as much as his wife was.

Indeed this was where therein lay the problem;- that he should be thinking such thoughts when he was so recently married. A match of convenience it may be, but Darcy had believed that he would be able to control himself if it ever came that he would find a woman that he liked.

So in-built was his concern for family duty, love and honour, that he had determined to stay as true to his marriage vows as he possibly could- with regards to fidelity. He was convinced that any feelings would in some way betray Anne, and that could not be borne by either of them. It had the potential to disrupt a year together that he was determined to make her favourite.

Thus Darcy felt he had no right whatsoever to feel the things he was beginning to feel for Miss Elizabeth Bennet. No matter how fine her eyes were.
Chapter 6

Part VI.

The occupants of Netherfield found little cause after the party at Lucas Lodge to trouble themselves with the company of their Meryton neighbours for several days.

Mr Bingley made the occasional- as far as one can count that definition for almost daily -visits to Longbourn and others, while the Darcys spent their time showing Georgiana the surrounding countryside, but the superior sisters chose not to deign their acquaintances with their company until a week and more had passed.

Only then did they decide, conveniently while the gentlemen had made plans to dine with the officers of the regiment that had encamped Meryton some days previously, that a dinner invitation to the eldest Miss Bennet would be most tolerable.

Unfortunately for them Mrs Bennet had seen through part of their design by sending her daughter to Netherfield on horseback, causing Jane to catch a cold as a result of a rather wet ride and the inquisition styled questions of Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.

Mrs Darcy tried her best to lessen their frequency, even managing to obtain her shy sister in law's assistance, but alas, it was not to succeed. Overwhelmed by all the attentions of Mr Bingley's sisters, Jane only managed to survive the fish course before succumbing to blissful unconsciousness.

While Caroline and Louisa mortified themselves over the fragile nature of women and how it served to upset their plans for their brother, Anne did her best to ensure that Miss Bennet was escorted to the most comfortable guest bedchamber.

Once she had her established therein, she sent out a footman to fetch the doctor instantly and a note to Longbourn for Miss Elizabeth, knowing that Miss Bingley's similar page to her mother would do nothing to lessen the fears of a close sister.

Indeed Mrs Darcy had made the right move for Elizabeth could do naught but walk the three miles to Netherfield the next morning, determined to be by her sister's beside. Mr Darcy was there to meet her, as per his wife's instructions, and coped admirably with the task of escorting Miss Bennet through the formal gardens into the house and up to the bedroom where Jane lay, answering the questions concerning her welfare to the best of his ability.

Once inside Elizabeth rushed to her sister's beside. "Oh Jane I am sorry!" She cried, feeling fully the dreadful injustice of their mother's designs. "Thank you, Anne, for the note, its assurance was most welcome."

"No need for thank yous, Lizzy, I felt it only my due. After my failure to lessen the trials of the dinner....." Anne paused. "How are your family?"

"Oh we are well, Mama is coping admirably well with the knowledge that one of her daughters is ill. Forgive me, but is that music I hear?"

"Yes it is, I had quite forgot. The music room is below this bedchamber and Georgiana is most likely practising there right now. Do you wish us to move your sister so she is not disturbed by it?"

"Oh no, how could anyone be disturbed by such wonderful playing. Pray who is this Georgiana?"
"My sister in law and cousin, Miss Darcy. She is but recently sixteen, and therefore not yet out in society, which is why you have not yet met her. She is quite the gifted musician, is she not?"

"Undoubtedly," Elizabeth replied as her ears strained to identify the tune that was being played at the moment, smiling as she realised it was Jesu, joy of man's desiring by Bach, a favourite of her own. "She must love it very much to be so well trained while so young."

"Yes, she adores it. Almost everyday you will find her at the pianoforte or the harp. I often wish I had had the time to learn, but it is well that I have perhaps not, since Darcy is so enamoured of his sister's accomplishments. My mother always believed it would put too much of a strain on my constitution to allow me to even try. Do you play?"

"Yes, but not very well. Mary is the only one of us who had the patience and time to further it. I more often than not chose to walk or read."

This immediately led on to a conversation about books and the friends indulged themselves well in the discussion until Anne's husband popped his head round the door to inquire if they wished for luncheon.

Elizabeth instantly made known plans to leave, a notion which was quickly discounted by her host who had rapidly followed his friend upstairs, and turned into one to stay until her sister had recovered, brooking no refusal. Thus the three left Elizabeth alone with her sister until the evening, when she was required to attend dinner.

Jane had woken during this time and managed to assure her sister that she could attend said meal without worrying about her welfare. Elizabeth thus reluctantly changed into a dress that had been sent along with others from Longbourn after her stay was confirmed, and bade her sister farewell for the evening.

After answering faithfully to their inquiries during the meal, Elizabeth was both relieved and disappointed to see her host's sisters revert to their former calculated appearances, satisfied that they had asked enough about the well-being of their friend. When the ladies departed to the drawing room, Elizabeth was glad to attend upon Anne, who instantly introduced her to Miss Darcy.

Miss Georgiana was indeed everything her friend had laid out to be, an incredibly shy but well-mannered young girl, and extremely mature for her age, at least compared to her own sister that was only a year younger, Elizabeth mused.

At first she could obtain nothing beyond monosyllables from her, but persistence and assistance via Anne eventually obtained Georgiana's conversation, proceeding so well that when the gentleman entered, all were surprised to witness laughter rising from the latter.

Darcy himself was particularly surprised and pleased. Since his marriage to Anne Georgiana still remained affected by the incident at Ramsgate, however much he and his wife had tried to change it. Even now, the slightest mention of Wickham or anything to do with men and holidays by the sea would reduce her to silence and the speaker to the deepest self-mortification that she or he could ever devise upon themselves.

The effects had spread to her social skills and as a result, she would rarely speak to any person outside their immediate family, Charles Bingley being only the one notable exception. Added to this, she was not yet out, due to a stipulation in her father's will concerning her guardianship which was divided between himself and their cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam.
Those who had the privilege to know her, thought Georgiana to be a dear sweet girl, while distant acquaintances believed her to be too much like her brother; reserved and proud. It was the hope of her brother, her cousin and Anne that the latter opinion would soon fade away under their care.

Until now, that hope had been slim and Darcy was now gratified to see it had not been in vain. His sister's laughter was rare in the extreme and he had not heard it in almost a year. He could not help but smile at it.

Elizabeth saw this, and wondered. It was not the appearance of it that mystified her, but the circumstance that produced it. Why would he smile thus at a motion of his sister's, a motion which to her seemed relatively commonplace. Would this emotion indicate that it was in fact the opposite, perhaps?

Scarcely had she brought this question to her mind that she was obliged to abandon it, for the arrival of the gentlemen commanded the whole attention of herself and her group of friends, thus securing the conversation for the rest of the evening, until she felt she must return to her sister.
Chapter 7

Part VII.

Elizabeth returned to Jane's room with a sigh, sinking down into a chair with no other feeling than that of relief. Her mother in public was a trial to bear at the best of times, but this particular occasion there had been no excuse for her to expect any different as, after all, she had invited her over herself. And she had brought over Lydia and Kitty into the bargain.

The trio had stayed but half the hour with Jane before deciding to attend to their host, forcing Elizabeth to be witness to her mother at her worst, with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst snickering at the sight of it. The only end was their departure, a prelude to her retreat to Jane.

In this room she could be certain for a chance of solitude, however brief. And solitude she needed desperately at this moment; the respite that usually acted as a restorative to her peace of mind. Here she felt allowed to dwell upon the chaos the visit had caused, seek a method to lessen its aftermath and find a way to better cope with its possible consequences.

Her moment of peace however was soon cut short by a knock on the door, followed a second later by the form of her friend appearing in the open gap and an enquiry as to her welfare.

"You have heard then?" Elizabeth remarked in reply, as Anne and Miss Darcy had both been elsewhere when Mrs Bennet and her daughters had walked into the drawing room.

"I did and believe me you have it easy. You should see mine." She stepped forward and took her friend's hand in hers. "Come, Georgiana is in the music room. You need some distraction."

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment. "That does not usually help."

"Believe me when I say that solitude only works for so long," Anne remarked in reply. "Come, I shall tell you why yours are a blessing in my estimation on the way."

Lizzy felt she could do naught else but comply and followed her friend out of the room and into the corridor. As they walked along the well-lit hallway, Anne began to prove her point.

"My mother, Lizzy, is nothing like your own, yet she is worse. She comes from a ancient lineage, a fact that she reminds everyone of daily and uses it as a device to control everything and everyone around her. As the oldest surviving member of her family and a widow in control of a large household she feels it her duty to pass on her opinions and advice to all her relatives and acquaintances and expects it to be obeyed without question, no matter what they think of the advice themselves."

Anne paused to gather breath and then changed her voice and manner, proceeding to display to her friend her best imitation of her mother. "You will never speak French, Anne, unless you practice more. I always believe in the good practice of speaking another language. I would have spoken fluent French if I had had the time to practice it and I will not see my daughter neglect it when she has the time."

Elizabeth smiled and laughed, she could not help, her friend's mimicry had worked perfectly. "She sounds a very forthright woman."

"Oh indeed she is. You are fortunate to not have her in your acquaintance, any opinion other than hers is considered scandalous to her ears. For example she had the rest of my family afraid for years
to express theirs and my own opinion that I was in the best of health, and did not need to be paraded around as an invalid."

"I am surprised she allowed you to marry, if this was the case."

"Well mine and Darcy's union has always been a favourite wish of hers, so when we announced it to her, she was far too pleased to worry about anything else that might pose a threat to it. And I myself was too relieved to bring the matter up."

They entered the music room at that moment and thus Elizabeth was unable to inquire further into the matter. As already attested Miss Darcy was present, standing by the pianoforte, sorting through the musical material provided for one of her favourites. She looked up at Anne and Elizabeth's entrance. "Miss Bennet! You succeeded then, Anne?"

"In part I did, Georgie," Anne replied.

"And it is Elizabeth or Lizzy, Miss Darcy," Elizabeth added, "if you do not mind my addressing you by your own given name in return."

"Not at all, I would be glad of it," Georgiana replied as she came away from the instrument. "And how fares your sister?"

"Improving every moment, despite the visit from our mother."

"I was just telling Lizzy how grateful she should be for such a mother, compared to mine," Anne added, causing her sister in law to laugh for the second day in a row.

"Dear Aunt Catherine!" She exclaimed in reply, before producing a similar mimicry to her cousins. "All this laughing it is not to be borne!"

"What is this? What are you talking of? I insist on having my share in the conversation," produced a different voice entirely, causing both Anne and Georgiana to jump before following their friend's suit to turn and identify the source. Unlike Elizabeth however, they were not surprised; or indeed if they were, they kept it to themselves.

"William!" Georgiana exclaimed as she moved to embrace her brother where he stood just inside the room, having just entered it. "You do that too well sometimes," she added in praise of his imitation.

Elizabeth watched in silence as she witnessed a very different Mr Darcy to the one she had come to know over the multitude of days since his arrival in the shire. Her previous judgement of him had been reserved, and hard to coax out of such reserve. Now to see him laughing and teasing his sister; it was an intriguing contrast and one to be studied much.

Of all the new characters she had met since Michaelmas, his was the most complex. The majority of the time he was silent; the observer. When he did speak it was succinct but sensible and always intelligent. Rarely had she seen him display wit, although she suspected him of being capable of humour, but reluctant to draw attention to himself.

He appeared aloof, and yet was not. Most intriguing of all was that there were times when she found him looking at her, and with such intensity that she knew not what to make of it.

*I shall endeavour to have the measure of him before this visit is out,* she vowed silently, returning her attention back to the music. Her movement caused an entreaty from one of her companions.

"Please favour us with a display, Elizabeth," Georgiana entreated, turning from her brother as she did
"Oh no, I would not have those who are in the habit of listening to the best performers hear me muddle through," she replied good-humouredly.

"Please, Lizzy," Anne begged.

Eventually at the further persevering of her two friends, Elizabeth yielded and seated herself at the instrument, selecting a composition from the pile that she felt she could play with sufficient mastery, while the Darcy trio availed themselves of the best seats upon which to listen and observe.

*Her performance is pleasing, but by no means capital,* Darcy observed critically to himself within the first five minutes, before forcing his mind to admit that this was another talent of the woman before him which he could not dislike, that while she had not the expertise of his sister, she had yet the artistry to perform wonderfully.

He had tried, since his previous mental battle at Lucas Lodge to restrain himself from paying any attention to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but had abandoned the attempt within moments of taking it up, finding it impossible. Never had a woman so bewitched him before. How had it happened so quickly? Darcy chose not to ponder on this point, trying to focus instead on keeping the display of what he felt to a bare minimum.

Anne glanced at her husband and cousin briefly, the motion leaving her instantly puzzled. She had known him almost all her life, cheered his success in accomplishment, seen him through the deaths of both his parents, bore witness to the frequent attempts of society women and their Mamas to capture him the moment he gained his inheritance, yet never had she seen him show the slightest evidence of surrender, nor stress at being forced to make such a gesture. Never had she seen him as conflicted as he appeared now.

*If music be the food of love, she mused silently, play on.*
Chapter 8

Part VIII.

Two days passed in much the same fashion as the ones before her mother's visit had. Jane continued to improve, the superior sisters continued to visit with their caring facade and the ladies of the Darcy family attended both Bennet sisters with their usual sincerity, kindness and generosity.

On the evening of the second when the ladies departed to dress for dinner, Elizabeth ran up to her sister's, and, seeing her well guarded from cold, attended her into the drawing room. There Jane was welcomed by many declarations of pleasure, as Elizabeth witnessed Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley at their most agreeable. They could describe an entertainment with accuracy, relate an anecdote with humour, and laugh at their acquaintance with spirit.

When the gentlemen entered however, Jane was the first object no longer. Miss Bingley immediately seized upon Mr Darcy, addressing him with a comment. Brushing her aside Darcy politely paid Miss Bennet a congratulation; Mr Hurst made the same to a lesser degree, leaving their host to deliver diffuseness and warmth. Mr Bingley was full of joy at her part return to health. The first half hour was spent piling up the fire, lest she should suffer from a change in climate, and then he remained seated by her and talked only to her for the rest of the evening. Elizabeth, from her seat across the room, could not help but triumph at seeing it.

After tea Mr Hurst made a request for cards but was denied, causing him to stretch out upon the nearest sofa and go to sleep. Mr Bingley and Jane continued to converse, while Elizabeth engaged herself in a discussion with Anne and Miss Darcy. Mr Darcy took up a book, Miss Bingley did the same and Mrs Hurst involved herself with playing with her adornments and bracelets, occasionally joining in the conversations of either her brother and Jane, or the Darcys and Lizzy, for her seat was in the middle of them.

Both book readers soon found great difficulty in keeping their attention focused on the volumes in their hands. Miss Bingley, who had only picked up a second volume of Mr Darcy's, was continually trying to gain his view or opinion upon the first and occasionally resorting to leaning over to read a page or two, an attempt which instantly failed, for Darcy always seemed to have reached the end of a page or found he needed to adjust the book's position.

As for his attention, despite having chose the book by interest rather than imitation, it was constantly drifting to his wife's lively converse with Miss Elizabeth and the lady's comments and opinions that she expressed. He longed to join in, but found himself unable to summon the courage to do so; his unease in social gatherings winning through. Instead he found himself almost the constant listener, for to observe would instantly give him away.

As a result he again found himself admiring yet another of Elizabeth's virtues. Her opinions were always well-informed and brilliantly expressed, often with a quote or two which bespoke a varied education. Often he found himself silently agreeing with most them, and if he did not, he saw her point, thus causing him to view many of his own opinions with fresh perspective and with a view to adjust them to include parts of hers.

Miss Bingley, having soon tired of not being the centre of attention, laid down her book with a loud sigh, and glanced around the room. Fixing upon her brother she instantly interrupted him with, "by the by Charles, are you really serious in meditating a dance at Netherfield?"

"Indeed I am," Mr Bingley replied. The plans had been in discussion for some days now, brought on
by Lydia's question during her visit. "Why do you ask?"

"I believe there are some here who would find it more of a punishment than a pleasure. I myself should like balls infinitely better if they were carried on in a different manner; but there is something insufferably tedious in the usual process of such a meeting. It would surely be more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day."

"Much more rational, my dear Caroline, I dare say but it would not be near so much like a ball," her brother replied, causing the majority of the room to turn away and hide their smiles, and Miss Bingley no other option but to retreat into her book.

Darcy was glad of the return to the relative silence that had existed before Caroline's speech. He risked a glance at Miss Elizabeth before returning to his book, trying to awake within him all the criticisms of his youth, of his views before Ramsgate; trying to convince himself that she was beneath him in every respect. It was the only argument he had left, the only tool he had yet to use in his mental battle against his attraction to her. Since her arrival at Netherfield he had felt the danger of paying her too much attention. The longer he tried to resist that inclination, the better hope he had of none discovering him.

The next day, as a consequence of an agreement between sisters, Elizabeth wrote a note to her mother, requesting that the carriage was made available for their return to Longbourn during the day. Their mother however, had a very different idea of when they should return, and sent reply that she could not possibly send it until Tuesday, a duration which would make Jane's stay at Netherfield a full week, adding in postscript that if their host wished them to stay even longer, she could well spare them.

Elizabeth, wild to be home, persuaded Jane to speak to Mr Bingley, who after many entreaties that they should stay, that it was too early after Miss Bennet's recovery to depart, sadly donated them use of his own carriage. To all but him, Mrs and Miss Darcy, their departure was welcome. Miss Bingley's dislike of one sister exceeded much her affection for the other, and thus was quite pleased to learn Jane's view of being firm where her desires lay.

Thus after services Elizabeth and Jane were seen to the carriage, where the former witnessed a fond parting display between Mr Bingley and her sister, causing her to awake the hope that Jane would soon be happily settled for life.

From the first floor his friend watched the carriage leave the grounds silently, feeling relief that Elizabeth was no longer a guest at the house. This distance would serve, he hoped to strengthen his determination to fight her allure, an notion that Darcy was now firmly resolved to succeed in. The moment the drive was empty, he turned from the window and involved himself wholly in the tedious conversation of Miss Bingley, closing a door in his mind upon Elizabeth and all that he felt for her and turning the key in the lock.
Chapter 9

Part IX.

Darcy passed the first day of Miss Elizabeth's absence from Netherfield tolerably well. He awoke with no feeling of discomfort and when he breakfasted, her empty place at the table was dwelled upon not.

He found himself perfectly able to focus on correspondence and direct his steward- who had sent him his monthly report on his master's estates -with clarity and forethought.

In the evening he attended to his wife and his sister with his customary consideration and heeded not an ear to his host's distracted murmurs about how sorely felt Miss Bennet's absence was.

The second day however he was not so lucky. For upon seating himself at his bureau and sorting through his correspondence, he found a letter addressed him by his cousin. This was not a rare event in itself, indeed he regularly received letters from his cousin, but usually these had a military seal as postscript, the cousin in question being Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.

The only occasion when they did not, was when Richard was on leave and that he usually spent in Matlock, not in London, which was where this letter had been sent from. It was therefore with a mild trepidation that Darcy opened the letter. He pursued the wording thoroughly once.

His features paled. He repeated his actions a second time, his thoughts instantly drifting to her, wondering what the possible consequences of this news would have on her. Then a third. At the end of this read-through, his features darkened. Almost at once he rose from his chair and left the room.

A few moments later Anne was quite surprised to receive her husband. She was alone, having only just risen from her bed, the fact apparent by her being still attired in her dressing gown. This instantly caused a concerned inquiry from the gentleman.

"Believe me, William, I am perfectly well," Anne replied, as he came to stand by her post at the window. As she saw him admiring the prospect, she added, "but I observe quite clearly that you are not."

Darcy sighed, his eyes still focused on the view. "I received word from Richard this morning," he began, not turning to face her, "he has heard from his army contacts that Wickham has obtained a lieutenancy in the militia, which is camping around Meryton this very moment."

"Oh," was all Anne felt able to say. The subject of George Wickham was a tense one for her husband and she knew all too well the reason why. "But surely he will refrain from doing anything once he learns that you are in the neighbourhood?"

Darcy laughed harshly. "On the contrary I believe my very presence will make him tread the waters all the more. And if he is to hear that Georgiana is with us as well...." he trailed off at the thought of it. "We must make arrangements to depart at once."

Anne laid a hand upon his arm. "No! Why should we leave? It is he who has committed the fault, not you. Why do you not mention something to his commanding officer?"

"What?" Darcy asked. "You know I cannot, Anne. That will ruin Georgiana's reputation far more than anything he can spread about himself."
"Well we cannot leave. You know how much she is looking forward to the ball." The date had been decided upon the night before; 26th November, just over a month away. At sixteen she was too young to attend, but Anne and Darcy had promised to show her a room where she could observe everyone and not be noticed doing so.

It had appealed greatly to her shy nature. A nature that had before...... Anne willed the thought away, her anger at Wickham rising once more. "What day is he to arrive?" She asked softly.

"Today."

"Then you rouse Charles and push him to accompany you for a ride through town, with the excuse of seeing Jane. The officers will be about the main streets and you can deliberately catch his eye. If he has enough sense he will leave the neighbourhood at once."

Darcy refrained from mentioning that Wickham rarely had sense, let alone enough, and instead took her hand and kissed it in gratitude. "Where would I be without you, Anne?"

Able to display openly attraction to a woman I know you like, Anne silently mused, before replying with a banter of wit to keep the affection for what it was; friendship.

She turned to watch him leave, stopping him at the door, as a thought suddenly occurred to her. "I think you ought to tell Bingley, so he can limit the invites for the ball. And if you feel the need to warn anyone else, I am sure Georgie will understand. You need not go into specifics."

Darcy nodded and with a final glance at her, departed from the room.

Not more than an hour later did Darcy find himself trotting his stallion through Meryton, Bingley slightly in front. Keeping a careful eye upon every redcoat, he had almost fooled himself into thinking that his cousin had been misinformed, when his friend came to a stop and alighted from his steed.

Darcy followed the movement and halted his own, bowing his head in agreement of the general greeting that his friend bestowed upon all of the Bennet party, before focusing solely on Jane. Darcy observed their converse for a few moments then passed his gaze on the rest of the family.

He passed Lydia, Kitty and Mary without thought, stopping briefly on the oily gentleman next to them. It was with difficulty that he managed to conceal his reaction at seeing the newest servant of his Aunt de Bourgh's patronage, the reverent Mr Collins, and had just determined himself not to fix his eyes upon Miss Elizabeth when the person standing opposite her caught his attention.

This time he completely failed to conceal a reaction, turning pale, a contrast to redness of his nemesis. After a long minute of staring at the face of his once childhood friend, Darcy finally managed to bow his head in acknowledgment, before riding off, causing his friend to follow some moments later.

"I say Darcy, what on earth sent you so suddenly from the Bennets?" Bingley began the moment he had levelled with him. "Was it the sight of their cousin?"

"He's their cousin?" Darcy questioned incredulously, before sobering. "No, it was the other stranger that made leave. Charles, can I confide something in you?"

Bingley stopped his horse immediately, both being fortuitously well passed the outskirts of the village and into the fields beyond. For Darcy to call him by his first name meant something serious was bothering him. "Of course you can. Our long friendship should have assured you of that."
"Do not mistake me, I do trust you," Darcy reaffirmed. "This matter is very complicated however and extremely delicate. You cannot not even let on that you know of it to anyone else, including those involved." He paused and dismounted, choosing to lean against a nearby tree before continuing.

His friend followed suit with the horse, standing opposite him. Slowly Darcy told him everything; from the moment he had first known Wickham, until the occasion of his marriage to Anne, and the circumstances that had led him down that path.

After expressing his anger at Wickham and his concern for not only Georgiana, but his friend and Mrs Darcy as well, Bingley added, "if you wish it, I shall refrain from delivering a general invitation to the officers for the ball."

"Thank you," Darcy replied, "but I cannot let you do that. Give me time and I shall come up with something that Richard can do to get him to town for that day. If you refuse to invite all officers, it will alert him that you know and attract notice far more from the general populace than just his absence would."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Woo Miss Bennet and achieve all the happiness you deserve is all I require of you," Darcy stepped away from the tree, his good humour and faith in close friends restored. "Seriously if you can keep an eye on Georgie and Anne for any signs of distress when I cannot and alert me to it....."

"Done, all three," Bingley declared with his usual inane grin and together they remounted and returned to Netherfield.
Chapter 10

Part X.

Afternoon drifted into early evening and the Bennet family ensconced themselves en masse upon the Phillipses for drinks, dancing and whist—though not necessarily in that order—along with any officers that happened to be passing by Mrs Phillips’ sitting room window that day.

Among this group of upstanding gentlemen was also the new friend of Captain Denny, Mr Wickham, who within a minute of arrival had entranced almost every female in the room,—except perhaps for Mary Bennet, whose eyes were confined either to a book or to Mr Collins, whichever was nearer—and, after scouting around, choose to dignify the second Miss Bennet with his ‘delightful’ company.

Elizabeth naturally, had discerned the glance of recognition between said gentleman now seated opposite her and the tenant of Netherfield's friend early that morning. Equally naturally, she had deduced from the redness and paleness of each gentlemen's features respectively that neither were on the best terms with each other.

However, curious as she was, she could not ask either of the gentlemen herself about the nature, the very question being rude and improper. Fortunately for her however, Mr Wickham began the matter himself. He inquired quite casually how far Netherfield was from Meryton and after receiving her answer, asked in a hesitating manner how long Mr Darcy had been staying there.

"About a month," Elizabeth replied, and then, unwilling to let the subject drop, added, "he is a man of very large property in Derbyshire, I understand."

"Yes indeed he is," Wickham agreed, "his estate there is a noble one. A clear ten thousand pounds per annum. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself - for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy."

Momentarily did he pause, enough to just catch Elizabeth's gasp of surprise before he continued, "yes, Miss Bennet you may be surprised. No doubt you noticed the cold manner of our greeting. Are you much acquainted with Mr Darcy?"

"With Mr Darcy, no," Elizabeth replied, startling the gentleman not, "but I am acquainted very much with his wife. Have you met Mrs Darcy?"

"So, he did bring her along, I am surprised," Wickham murmured in reply; more to himself than his companion, but Elizabeth heard him nonetheless. "Yes, I was once acquainted with all of Darcy's cousins, she was no exception, no matter how much her mother strove to keep her from becoming ill by confining her to the house. It does not startle me that you know her better than her husband, but I have no right to give my opinion as to he being agreeable or otherwise.

"I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. Mr Darcy can please where he chuses. Among his equals and consequence he can be liberal minded, witty, and amiable. As for the world in general, it is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high imposing manners and sees him only as he chuses to be seen."

Mr Wickham paused, letting that thought be digested before embarking upon another trail. "I wonder, whether he is likely to be in this country much longer."
"I do not know," Elizabeth replied. "But I hope his plans do not affect your own."

"Oh no, it is not for me to be driven away by Mr Darcy. If he wishes to avoid seeing me, he must go. We are not on friendly terms, but I have no reason for avoiding save one." Here he paused and leant forward, lowering his voice.

"His father, Miss Bennet, was the best man that ever breathed. My father was his steward and when he passed on, old Mr Darcy cared for me, loved me, I believe, as if I were his own son. He raised myself and his heir together, ensured both of us had a good education. He intended me for the Church. And it was my dearest wish to enter into that profession. But after he died and the living he had promised me fell vacant, the son refused point blank to honour his father's promises."

"Good heavens!" Cried Elizabeth, her astonishment profound. "I had not thought him as bad as this. Reserved, perhaps, yes, but not resentful, not disposed to malicious revenge. Certainly not of his father's protégé."

"Oh, I am afraid a resentful temper is not his only fault. As far as I am concerned he has a far greater one, but.... perhaps it is not place to mention such here, particularly in this company. Better I just say that the outward appearance of his marriage differs entirely from reality."

"You mean it is of a convenience only?" Elizabeth questioned quietly, too absorbed by the tale to dwell on the impropriety of the direction that it was taking.

"Not uncommon a reason for marriage among the Ton, I know, and it eminently fulfills all other requirements of familial honour and duty. Indeed family pride and filial pride, matters much to him. Not to appear to disgrace his family, to degenerate from the popular qualities, or lose the influence of the Pemberley House is a powerful motive.

"In fact his marriage to his cousin not only obeys an agreement between his mother and hers, but also allows him a certain freedom to indulge in society's other inducements."

Had Elizabeth been able to comment upon his words, disgust would have been added to her opinions of Mr Darcy, but their party two was enlarged by the breaking up of the Whist table and Mr Collins devoted attention to her enabled to keep her from Mr Wickham for the rest of the evening.

Later, as she retired to her bedchamber at Longbourn was the only time Elizabeth had to review the conversation without distraction. Wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, she rooted herself upon her window seat, allowing the prospect to give her a needed objectivity.

She begun with her previous impression of Mr Darcy, comparing it to the one Mr Wickham had delivered hours earlier. The contrast was great indeed. Elizabeth could not reconcile herself at all with the view Mr Wickham had given her.

All her encounters with Mr Darcy had left her believing him to be a respectable man, if a little reserved amongst strangers. His relationship with Anne, and the easy humour that existed between them had given her no hint that the marriage was anything other than recent and affectionate.

Yet, as she continued to reflect upon Mr Wickham's words, Elizabeth found herself coming to believe them. His story had been delivered without ceremony and most privately, as was due such a matter of indelicacy.

This, taken into account with Mr Darcy's reaction upon seeing him, and Anne's confirmation of her mother's self-belief in her fragile disposition along with all that Mr Collins had conveyed of the history of his patron and her familial connections, were points in favour of his story being the truth.
Mr Darcy can please where he chuses. Among his equals and consequence he can be liberal minded, witty, and amiable, those had been Wickham's words and at the moment, Elizabeth could well see their authority.

But the tale was so very shocking! Elizabeth was not naive of the ways of the world in the highest circles of society, nor had she had an censored education in any of the subjects that sometimes referred to those sins and pleasures, but for one of the Ton's scandalous examples to be living amongst her neighbourhood and to be a friend to a man that her sister was coming to care very much for, seemed rather suspect.

Thus, it was with this conclusion in mind that she chose not to reveal what Mr Wickham had relayed to her sister, and to not take it as certain as her final judgement of the character of Mr Darcy, resolving to look for further proof that could be determined by herself.
Elizabeth Bennet entered the Ballroom of Netherfield upon the evening of the 26th of November with an open mind. In vain she looked for Mr Wickham among the cluster of red coats there assembled, assigning his absence at this event to be another reason for his story to seem suspect.

The thought that he might have been omitted from the general invitation to the officers for the Darcys' pleasure did occur to her, but immediately she was forced to discount it upon hearing Mr Denny's report that Wickham had been obliged to go to town on a matter of business. His further comment of his friend possessing a wish to avoid a certain gentleman, added further to Elizabeth's suspicions that Mr Wickham was not to be trusted.

Thus, with only the prospect of Mr Collins as dance partner for the first two, Elizabeth felt she had little to look forward to. Indeed, she only had time to make her presence known to Charlotte- whom she had not seen for a week -and introduce her to the oddity that was her cousin, before being led away for these said dances.

Mr Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the mortification which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was ecstasy.

Seeing that Charlotte was occupied by her mother, Elizabeth went to Anne, whose amusement at hearing her description of Mr Collins sufficed as a cure to her good humour.

"Do you believe he means to attach himself to you?" Anne asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," Elizabeth replied laughingly. "But I know I can count on my father to refuse consent, so it is of no special worry. He would do for Mary, if indeed his choice was limited to only my sisters, but I hardly think he will consider her."

"Do not discount so soon, Lizzy," Anne replied, a wicked smile forming upon her face. "I am sure that the approval of the heiress of Rosings will matter a great deal."

And with that Mrs Darcy disappeared, leaving Elizabeth only to watch as her friend located Mr Collins and put her notion into motion. She witnessed the conversation, but was too far away to hear the words; her cousin's excessive gesturing was only thing for her to judge as to point to a conclusion.

Anne returned in less than ten minutes. "There, Elizabeth, I have succeeded. Mr Collins is now entranced completely with talents of Miss Mary Bennet and is only to happy to press his advances to her."

"Anne, I did not mean for you to change his mind...."

"Oh, have no fear for your sister, Lizzy. I have seen her frequent gaze upon him and her constant quest for his opinion, she shall be quite happy to accept him. And as for him, he loves the idea of love. I only had to assure him of Mary's suitability and affection for him and he was transformed."

Elizabeth looked upon her sister to see that her friend had indeed accomplished everything she had just described. "Then all that is left is for me to say thank you."
"Oh, it was no trouble, I assure you."

They drifted into companionable silence, pausing to observe the dance. Elizabeth smiled when she saw Jane dancing with their host. They had not left each other's side from the moment of the Bennet's arrival and to Lizzy the happiness of both was readily apparent upon both their features.

Anne saw her smile and instantly inquired for the cause. Elizabeth's reply gave her instant happiness. "Oh, Darce will be pleased. He and I were both concerned that this would turn out to be another unrequited affection for Charles. I am so happy that is not the case. Oh, by no means do I tend to insult your excellent sister, Lizzy, it is just that the women of the Ton are so very contrary in their ways that we learn to be cynical of any woman that our host attaches to."

"Your concern for Mr Bingley does you credit," Elizabeth replied distractedly, her thoughts preoccupied with Wickham's story once more.

Anne was instantly contrite. "My dear Lizzy, I mean no insult to you or to Jane. I am ashamed that I brought it up. Can you forgive me?"

"It is not that which distresses me," Elizabeth assured her friend.

"Then what does?"

"I met a gentleman a few days ago who claimed to have once been intimately connected with your husband."

Anne's face solemnised instantly. "You mean Mr Wickham. What did he tell you?"

Elizabeth quietly related all the particulars she had received, from the evening at the Phillipses to the last time she had seen and talked with Mr Wickham before the ball.

Anne's features grew more and more serious at each sentence. When her friend had finished, she remained silent awhile longer, wondering how best to reply. "I wish that I could tell you the entire history, Lizzy, but it is not my place. I can only warn you that Mr Wickham is not a man to be trusted."

Elizabeth would have pressed her friend more, but she suddenly found herself addressed by Mr Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand in the next dance, that without knowing what she did, save for a desire to not injure her friend his wife, she accepted him.

The dancing recommenced immediately, leaving her no time to fret over her own want of presence of mind as he claimed her hand.

Despite the nuances that the addition of many other characters has brought to this work, the author shall refrain from commenting upon the event of the dance between our hero and heroine. The author does not mean to disappoint any readers by doing this, indeed quite the contrary.

Such an account has been rendered excellently many times before, thus any description of it here shall no doubt in some way lessen the feelings that arise from reading the original source. Therefore she shall only comment that their dance passed the same as it has done so in the masterpiece that first brought alive our hero and heroine, and then continue with her own variation.

They finished the dance with much dissatisfaction on both sides, though not to an equal degree, for in Darcy's breast- despite all motions to conquer it, for the key to that lock had long been lost -there was a powerful feeling towards her, which soon procured her pardon and directed all his anger
against another.

Upon his exit, Darcy found himself accosted immediately by Anne and led away to the far wall, where he was speedily acquainted with all of the conversation that had passed between her and Miss Bennet before he had surrendered to the temptation of asking her to dance, antecedent to being then led through a door into a small library that was connected to the ballroom.

Scarcely did he have time to accommodate this new location into his mind and form a question to ask his wife for her reasons, when she exited the room, to return a moment later with Miss Bennet, locking the door behind her.

Holding a hand up to forestall the both of them, Anne once more took command of proceedings. "Before either of you begin to speak, let me. I have brought you both here because I have no desire to see either of my two greatest friends in all the world at odds with each other and all because of a certain person. Darcy, you shall now tell Lizzy the truth of Mr Wickham, after which I shall expect an avowal for friendship from both of you towards each other for the future."

Darcy listened to all of this with astonishment. The discovery of Mr Wickham's new deceptions was of no surprise, indeed he had gathered as much by his conversation with Miss Elizabeth Bennet during the dance.

He had hoped however that the truth would not be needed to be told to anyone other than Bingley, whom stood acquainted with it from the moment of Wickham's arrival.

A single glance at Anne convinced him that this could no longer be the case. Running a hand through his hair, he motioned silently for them to sit. Leaning against the desk he began the sorry tale, recounting everything and embellishing nothing.

Elizabeth listened silently, her shock increasing at every moment. Each glance at her orator assured her of its truth. Mr Darcy spoke with seemingly calm tones, belied by features that revealed for the first time in their acquaintance with each other that he was suffering under great emotion.

His sadness at the betrayal of his childhood friend was equally apparent. When his tale reached the events concerning Georgiana, Elizabeth's disgust, which had been previously directed at the brother, now turned with all force upon Mr Wickham, of whom she could no longer think of without abhorrence.

Immediately she offered her apologies to both, feeling entirely ashamed at ever having suspected him of the foul treachery that Wickham had attributed to being existing.

Darcy shook his head in reply, his mind too occupied with trying to re-establish his control to reply with eloquence to her. Rapidly he sought the comfort of the window as an excuse to turn his back upon them, while he struggled to regain his equilibrium.

The room sank into silence. Only the occasional notes from the music played out next door strove to break it. Finally, Anne rose from her chair, gesturing for her friend to do the same, knowing that her husband would recover faster if left alone. Unhappily they had not walked more than a few steps towards the door when another calamity befell.

"Anne, are you alright?" Her friend anxiously asked as she saw her suddenly falter.

Her friend was insensible to the enquiry. She could not stop. The coughs racked her throat, making speech impossible.

Darcy rushed towards her. Holding a handkerchief to her mouth, he waited until she had regained
her strength. Slowly he took the cloth away, unable to even look at it, knowing the truth with horrible certainty that he was not allowed to prevent it. Anne, seeing the emotions flicker briefly upon his features, smiled sadly at him and then departed from the room.

Darcy sighed aloud, swallowing a cry of sadness and frustration at his wife's lot in life. Suddenly he heard a gasp and he turned from the closed door to the woman that he loved. He accepted that now. He could no longer fight it. The feelings had overwhelmed all his defences. He loved her with every breath, every heartbeat, every fibre of his being.

He saw her gaze fixed upon the handkerchief, his visible monogram now stained with Anne's blood. Her fine eyes betrayed her thoughts. She knew the truth now, as did he. She knew it with that same horrible certainty. "How long?" She softly whispered.

"Less than a year." Darcy looked away, not able to see her grief. "Only Anne and I know this," he added in a low voice, hoping his meaning was clear.

"I won't say a word. You may be assured of my secrecy."

"I never doubted it for a second." He folded the cloth away into his pocket. "So what Wickham told you was true, at least in some part. Ours is a marriage of convenience. But not for my sake. It is for Anne's and Georgiana's alone. The former is released from the possessive care of my Aunt and the latter is given constant and trustworthy female intimacy."

"Did your Aunt know of Anne's indisposition?"

"No, but she always protested that she was of sickly constitution. Myself and my family always suspected the contrary. It was a terrible blow when Anne told me the truth. I had hoped our marriage would make her stronger. To learn that it would do the opposite...." Darcy trailed off and turned to the window.

As his eyes glanced upon the flickering lights that emanated from the carriages, he spoke once more, his voice thick with emotion. "Forgive me, I have no right to burden you with my troubles."

Elizabeth smiled and came to rest beside him. "You must burden someone, lest you wish to remain conflicted. The longer such feelings stay in your mind, the more strength one requires to keep up a calm facade."

"Yes, you are right. I have been struggling. Thank you, Miss Bennet."

"It is nothing. I would never be a good friend to your wife if I did not help you." She laid her hand on his in a comforting gesture. "You must not blame yourself. You could have no way of foreseeing that Anne had this disease."

Darcy could only nod in reply, the effect of her comforting hand producing feelings within him that could almost make him forget that he ever had a wife. He returned his eyes to the window, hoping the scene outside would restore his previous balance. Why was it he lost all rationale in her presence?

He took a deep breath, her scent assaulting his senses. Closing his eyes he focused upon the silence which held reign over the room, regaining his calm collectedness but a moment or two later. He returned to her and held out his arm for her to take. "Miss Bennet."

She noticed the difference instantly. The mask was back. Elizabeth could not help but feel disappointment at it. Yet she understood now the reason for its existence. His past had given him many trials, far more than most men his age, taking away his willingness to trust anyone but family
and close friends.

Added to this was the stress that must be caused by running such an expansive estate from an unusually young age. He needed to appear in control, to protect his true self from those that could damage it. She accepted his arm.

"We must return to the ball before we are missed."
Chapter 12

Part XII.

Darcy approached breakfast the next morning with a grim countenance. For him, this late dawn repast was nothing more than an ordeal to endure in order to obtain the marrow upon which he needed to live. His thoughts and spirit were waylaid elsewhere; his wife’s apartments— from which she had not emerged since her early exit from the ball last night -and a certain young lady that occupied the building that was barely three miles away from his present location.

Both troubled him greatly, so much so that not even his sister dared to disturb his disquiet. With the former it was an old worry, one that he had long been used to, no matter how fresh the torment appeared in his mind each day. These were the worse times; when he knew full well that there was nothing he could do, when his uselessness in this matter weighed upon him heavily.

Anne, he knew, disliked letting him know how badly things lay with her and last night had been no exception. She knew his tendency to jump to the worse possible conclusion, she had known of it from their first meeting many years ago. Therefore she had entrusted to his valet a note which he had received this morning saying that she was perfectly well, but would remain in her chambers for the day just as a precaution.

Darcy had taken this with an outward appearance of calmness, but with an inward feeling of remorse, guilt and concern. The first, because he wished he could do more, the second, for he felt that he was the fault for her illness and the third because for her to retreat to her room meant her condition was worsening without a hope of recovery.

Now as he consumed his meal without care for taste or fulfillment, he tried to resign his mind to the prospect of the day, knowing that he could not visit her, for his fear would undoubtedly make her worse.

As for the latter, the one that lay a mere three miles from his form, Darcy was also concerned about her. Her features upon the conclusion of his tale had occupied his mind from the moment he had first laid eyes upon them. He wondered how she had borne it, in what light she looked upon them now. How she would regard them when they next met. How she would regard them when they next met.

His desire to close a door on those feelings for her had not succeeded; in truth his mind had barely attempted the motion. Last night the depth of them had shown him for the first time that any escape was impossible, and had been from the first moment he had laid eyes on her. The devotion he felt for her was such as he had never experienced before and doubtless he never would again. Love like this he had never known and never expected or hoped to know.

His life so far had convinced him that such feelings only existed in the imagination, that reality could not fulfill them. His only desire now- and a selfish one at that -was to learn if she felt them same, a development that he had no right to even wish for. He was married and both of them knew that!

The circumstances of it mattered not; nor did the inevitable future of it. He was a gentleman, she was a gentleman's daughter, to express such desires and expect her to return them would not only go against propriety, but it would also go wholly against his character.

Every experience life had thrown upon him had convinced him that nothing but faithfulness in marriage was acceptable. The very notion of anything else as well as the display of such disgusted him. Although every disguise of sort was his abhorrence, he could do naught but strive to conceal
these feelings for the rest of their acquaintance.

While her husband strove to rise out of his conflicted feelings, Anne, from her position of recluse in her bed in the guest apartments on the first floor, struggled in vain to concentrate upon the volume of literature that lay in her hands. She had no energy; only desire for other occupations and the effect of this upon her concentration was proving to be long lasting. She longed for company, but had no wish to inflict the now obvious appearance of the severity of her condition upon the few personages that knew of it.

These were the worse times; when she could not escape the true nature of her illness and when the inevitable end seemed nearer than it had been before. Last night had by no means been unexpected, only the lengthy awaited release of symptoms that were soon to prevent her from concealing this illness any further. The end was definitely nigh, had been so for quite some time. She could not hide it from herself.

A ray of light landed upon the bedspread; causing Anne to gaze at the prospect from where she lay. The sunshine weather which christened everything with bright, miraculous colours, lay waiting, calling to her to take such joy in it as many would this fine day and was a complete contrast to her presently gloomy state of mind. It was time, she realised, to focus upon what life she had left and to strive to get as much delight as she could out of it.

Three miles away, Longbourn awoke to a tremendous state of activity. Mrs Bennet and her nerves could not be contained nor escaped- except perhaps for those that followed Mr Bennet's example and retreated to the library for the day, coming out only for meals. Her long desired wish of having one of her daughters settled was about to be fulfilled. Its source lay in the surprising form of Mr Collins, and the daughter in question, equally surprisingly, was Mary.

The former had sought her approval for such an endeavour by addressing her that very morning soon after breakfast with the request that he might humbly hope for her interest when he solicited the honour of a private audience with her fair daughter Mary in the course of said morning.

If Mr Collins had wished to take Mrs Bennet by surprise, he had certainly achieved thus, for the good lady had assumed that her second daughter Elizabeth was to be the receiver of his hand. However, whatever little regret she might have contained within her concerning, was soon done away by the prospect of his actual choice.

In retrospect, Mrs Bennet now perceived that Mary would do extremely well for Mr Collins, in fact few could do better. Her preference for the Christian works and her concern for the moral behaviour of others and herself would compliment his profession and serve to be the foundations of what she was sure would be a happy future together.

Thus she dawdled about in the vestibule to watch for the end of the conference, and no sooner than she saw Mary open the door and with quick step pass her towards the library, did Mrs Bennet enter the breakfast-room. She congratulated both Mr Collins and herself in warm terms on the happy prospect of their nearer connection.

Mr Collins received and returned these felicitations with equal pleasure, and then proceeded to relate the particulars of their interview, with the result of which he trusted he had every reason to be satisfied, since the quiet acceptance which his cousin had steadfastly given him would naturally flow from her bashful modesty and the genuine delicacy of her character. Her consent and blessing she now happily bestowed upon him and desired that he informed Mr Bennet of it at once.
Ten minutes later, Mr Collins exited the library in the search of his intended, the reaction of his host clearly displayed upon his inanely smiling features. Mrs Bennet spared him a joyful glance of her own and then entered the library herself.

Barely however did she have time to express her joy when Mr Bennet began thus; "my dear, I have two small favours to request. First, that you will allow me to express merely that I am satisfied at the outcome of Mr Collins endeavours, and secondly, the free use of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be."

Mr Bennet's words did nothing to disrupt Mrs Bennet's joy; indeed she remained distracted for most of the day, rousing her voice to congratulate her daughter and future son in law once more, before sending for the carriage to travel to town in order to inform her dear sister Phillips, Lady Lucas and Mrs Long and triumph over the prospect of having a daughter married before all three of the ladies.

While the family attempted to rise out of this state of affairs Charlotte Lucas came to spend the day with them. She was met in the vestibule by Lydia, who after flying to her delivered the news of the morning events with laughter. Charlotte hardly had time to answer before they were joined by Kitty who came to tell the same news and then left to find Elizabeth and Jane by herself as the two young Bennets rushed outdoors towards Meryton in quest of the officers.

Miss Lucas soon found her friends in the grounds, and once there gratefully entered into conversation with them. Jane's mood was almost as joyous as her cousin's for her recollections of the ball served only the time she had spent with Mr Bingley, a passage that had passed so agreeable as to leave her in all hope of a happy future. Elizabeth however dealt few remarks to the discourse, being much preoccupied.

Unlike her sister, Elizabeth had seen all the idiocy that her family had fallen into the rest of the evening after she had exited the library with Mr Darcy. Their temporary absence had been noticed not, nor had their studied avoidance of each other for the rest of the evening. Such an avoidance had been a necessity; for he needed to keep up his mask and she needed time to reflect upon all that she had just learned.

Such reflection had quickly become impossible however, for upon their move into the supper-room, the actions of her family had served to occupy most of her attention. To her they had seemed to have developed a mutual agreement to embarrass all and sundry by making complete fools of themselves.

First there had been Mary and her performance on the pianoforte, a display which had been stopped not before time by her father, but in such a way as to make Elizabeth wish he had not interfered in the first place.

Then Mr Collins spoke the praises of such talent and his long held desire to possess such a gift himself before the whole room, finishing with a bow to Mr Darcy, upon whom Elizabeth had been unable to prevent him making his introduction in the course of the evening.

According to Mr Collins it had gone well, but Elizabeth had seen the truth by the reaction of the other gentleman, as she watched him exit the conversation as quickly as he could, returning to his table, his outward expression speaking quite clearly of the disgust that he obviously felt at having such an acquaintance.

Then it had been the turn of her mother who had remarked loudly and constantly to Lady Lucas about the future prospects of two of her daughters and their intended. All attempts to quieten her had been made by Elizabeth in vain; she could only listen in silence and pray that no one gave concern to them.
Lastly Lydia had then made the *La Morte d-Bennet* complete by rushing into the supper-room carrying a sabre of an officer who was chasing her. Collapsing into a chair before finally giving it up, she exclaimed to the entire room that she was 'so fagged' before downing a glass of wine.

Elizabeth had therefore greeted this morning with relief. She now retreated fully into her thoughts as Jane occupied the whole attention of Charlotte. For the first time since she had heard the story did she now focus fully upon it. With great concern and distress did she recall the torment of emotions displayed upon Mr Darcy's face as he relayed the true tale of the history of Mr Wickham.

With further worry did she recollect her friend suddenly coming to halt and experiencing a coughing fit, along with the horrible realisation that she made when seeing the bloodstain upon Mr Darcy's monogrammed handkerchief. To have it confirmed was even more horrible.

She had only known Anne for a short time, but already she was an excellent and close friend. To learn that she was soon to leave this world had been and still remained a terrible blow. Elizabeth could not bear to think how Anne herself bore it.

Mr Darcy's torment seemed considerable and she could not help but feel greatly for such a kind man whose lot in life had been so hard. She felt that he had had too many troubles in such short a time. Most of all she admired how bravely he had borne each one of them.

From this moment on she vowed to help him in his quest for control. Such a desire was the mark of the depth of her friendship with Anne, and she felt he deserved nothing less. Once she had established this vow firmly upon her mind, Elizabeth returned to the conversation of Jane and Charlotte, focusing upon them for the rest of the day.
Chapter 13

Part XIII.

I do not pretend to regret anything I shall leave in Hertfordshire, except your society, my dearest friend; but we will hope at some future period, to enjoy many returns of the delightful intercourse we have known, and in the mean while may lessen the pain of separation by a very frequent and most unreserved correspondence.

I depend upon you for that.

Yours
Caroline Bingley.

With a sigh of dramatic proportions, the author of this note surveyed once more all the words she had written. She came to the end with a feeling of great satisfaction, having decided that it was sufficient enough for her plan.

Yes, Caroline Bingley had a cunning plan. She had formed its foundations yesterday, having been forced do so by the most disagreeable of events. Upon arriving at Netherfield from an afternoon walk- spent following Mr Darcy's horse and the rider upon it, in the vain hope that he would halt and accompany her back.

When this figure did finally stop this chance turned out to be very definitely a slim one, for it was not Mr Darcy at all, but his stable hand, who had been ordered by the gentleman to exercise his steed upon a regular basis when he himself could not see to it,- but the author now realises she has digressed from her point and so shall immediately return to it forthwith -she found her brother gone, with only a note- if you can call a piece of blotting paper such -as explanation to his present whereabouts.

Fortunately for Caroline,- though perhaps unfortunately in Mr Bingley's case -the letter, despite resembling something which a spider had crawled across, still contained enough that was legible as to ascertain his reasons for so hasty a departure. In short, it was to obtain a suitable ring with which to grace Miss Bennet's hand in marriage.

Naturally, this left Caroline in shock. After standing about in the staircase hall looking stupid- though she believed intelligent and sophisticated -for ten minutes, she escaped to her sanctuary- otherwise known as the East Drawing Room -to think. By morning, her mind had formed a solution, to which this letter above was the starting point.

With a graceful flourish- her words, not mine -she finished the direction and sealed the note. After ringing the bell for a footman, Caroline sat back in her chair, her mind picturing the scene that this note would induce. She hoped that her point had been understood. Charming as Miss Bennet had been, she was not at all the woman that Caroline had had in mind for her brother's wife. Looks and charm she may have had, but no money or class for Caroline to attach herself to.

The footman entered the room, bowed, took the proffered note, bowed once more, and left the room. Caroline rose from her chair to stare out the window, awaiting his return. When he had, she turned to face him, addressing him with the following: "Inform my dear sister and her husband that we shall be departing Netherfield this very day for London, then return to me."
When the click of door that served as the signal for this servant's exit, Caroline resumed a seat at her desk once more. Retrieving several sheets of paper from it, she picked up her pen and began another letter.

When the Darcys returned to the East Drawing Room—having been for a drive about the country in a low phaeton—they found the house in the same state that its previous occupant had, with only a small sealed letter for explanation. Anne was first to descry its presence, and after picking it up and surveying its contents produced a cry of disgust and anger that served to echo around the room. "Darcy," she exclaimed immediately afterwards, "we must leave for London at once!"

Naturally her cousins stared back at her in astonishment and incomprehension. In reply Anne merely handed the letter to her husband. Determining at once that it was Caroline's handwriting, Darcy chose to refrain from reading it and waited instead for Anne to calm down sufficiently enough to tell him why.

"Caroline and the Hursts have departed for London in order to dissuade Charles from marrying Jane Bennet."

To her surprise, Darcy exhibited none of the same emotion. "I suspected as much. However, we do not need to follow. Bingley will not be dissuaded from his course by them."

"Darcy, you are forgetting just how malicious and devious Caroline can be. She will not stop until Charles is convinced that Jane cares nothing for him. You and I both know that the opposite is the case. We must open up your townhouse as a sanctuary for him. For neither of his sisters will allow him to return to Netherfield."

Had Anne done naught but finish this speech with a coughing fit, Darcy would have continued to debate. As it was, he helped her to a chair and supplied her with a glass of wine before any words came forth from his lips.

"Very well," he began solemnly, "to London we will go. Before we make arrangements to do so, however, do you not think that a note should be sent to Longbourn in order to reassure Miss Bennet that whatever Caroline may have said to her is not the case?"

"You think Miss Bingley would stoop that low?" Georgiana asked her brother, who nodded in the affirmative.

Anne sighed, her fit having taken much of her past energy. "I do not see how we could phrase it without revealing Charles' intentions. We shall just have to depart, and hope that Elizabeth will see to restoring Jane's faith in her suitor."

While the Bennets said farewell to Mr Collins as he left for Hunsford to inform his Ladyship of his success, Mr Bingley came home to his townhouse from the jewellers to face the English equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition.

After seeing to it that he had a chair, Caroline and Louisa towered over him, torturing him with words for as long as they had breath. They did not desist until it was time for them to retire, by which time Bingley was exhausted and disgusted. He slept not at well and awoke to the dawn, a changed man.

But not however in the manner that his sisters had hoped for.

Unusually for him, he rose and sent for his valet. An hour later he was out the door and down the
street without so much as a word to anyone. Moments later did he arrive at whose house he had sought, and to his immense relief, the owners were at home.

Darcy and Anne welcomed him with open arms, supplying him instantly with drink, nourishment and comfort. After he had communicated all his woes, they made him avail himself of the guest apartments, seeing that he rested while they sent a note to his house for his valet and belongings to be transferred to their establishment.

Bingley did not emerge from his rooms till dinner. His usual good humour however, did not return with him, an sign that was evidently discernible from his gloomy features. The ladies of the house immediately left the gentlemen to themselves, whereupon Darcy set about restoring his friend’s faith in his plans for the future.

One evening though, soon proved to be insufficient for this venture. For while Bingley was still certain about Miss Bennet and all that was connected with her, he was uncertain that he should proceed while his immediate family objected to the match. To make matters even worse, Anne did not come down for breakfast, her condition being so particularly severe that next morning as to precipitate sending for the doctor.

While they waited for him to finish examining Anne, Darcy launched into the next stage of arguments as to Bingley still offering his hand to Miss Bennet, that of family objections meaning nothing where love was concerned, even though he felt his words and experiences inadequate to the task, given the present situation. As he had long suspected, only his assurance that he would accompany his friend, gave Bingley the confidence to proceed with his desires.

It was then that the physician returned. Having known the family for as long as he could remember—his father having served the later Mr Darcy and his wife—Dawson hated the news that he had to bring to the present Mr Darcy at this moment.

Indeed if he knew of any cure he would traverse the ends of the earth to find it. "I am so deeply sorry, sir, but there is very little I can do for your wife. The illness is in its last stages. I can only ease her suffering, not make it disappear."

Darcy rose up from his chair and escaped to his sanctuary; a window. Only there did he discard his mask and let the grief that this news brought show. "How long?" He asked, in a voice of heavy emotion.

"I am not certain. Perhaps four, maybe five months. This much is sure. She will not see out the summer."

Darcy inclined his head in acknowledgement of this, remaining at the window while Dawson departed from the house. His friend, seeing the distress that was plain from his reflection, silently left him alone. Only then did Fitzwilliam relax, his entire form beginning to shake as the tears fell from his eyes.
Chapter 14

Part XIV.

Upon the second day of the first month in the year eighteen hundred and twelve, the carriage of Mr Edward Gardiner and family came to a halt in the driveway of their London home, situated in Gracechurch Street. The owner stepped out, gave a hand in assistance to his wife, then to his children, and finally to the young woman that would be their guest for the next few weeks; their eldest niece, Jane.

Both adult Gardiners were very concerned about her, and hoped that this stay in town had not been accepted by all parties just in the vain hope of a chance encounter with a certain gentleman during it. Indeed, their primary motive for Jane staying with them was that she might find the peace and reflection needed to recover from this recent disappointment.

The Gardiners had never met the gentleman himself, but they knew their eldest niece's disposition well enough to believe him to be a very good sort of man, else she would never have attached herself to him. Thus like her, they were mystified at his continued absence from Netherfield and the report of his changed affections by his sister. Unlike Jane however, they held that Elizabeth's view of Miss Bingley deceiving her beloved sister had some measure of truth in it.

Jane herself knew nothing of the Gardiners' opinions. She was grateful for their offer of spending a few weeks with them in town, and held no other expectations. Longbourn, despite the presence of her sister, had driven her almost to breaking point since the departure of the Netherfield tenants.

Miss Bingley's explanation and her further letter in the weeks that followed had done nothing to lessen this. Her mother continued to lament his absence, all the while offering advice to her daughter, having no idea of the effect it had had upon Jane herself. Her father had done nothing but keep to his library, engaged in the matter of preparations for Mary's wedding. Even Elizabeth's advice had done nothing to reassure her.

Unlike her sister, Jane could not believe that Caroline was capable of deceit, and could only be persuaded that she was deceived herself. He- she had not quite reached the stage where she could pronounce his name without a loss of composure -would remain in her memory as the most amiable man of her acquaintance, but that would be all. He would be forgot, and she was determined that they would all be as they were before.

Thus she looked upon this stay with her Aunt and Uncle as the perfect thing to distract her and make the task of forgetting all the more easier. She would involve herself with satisfying the whims of her cousins, walk about in the parks, write to her sister and attend the theatre with the Gardiners. She would from this moment on, not think about that gentleman at all.

Several miles away, in what was considered among those of consequence and influence to be the fashionable part of London, that gentleman whose name she could not speak was at present taking stock of the past few weeks.

After Dr Dawson had departed the Darcy townhouse, Bingley had tried to comfort his friend as best he knew how. Scarcely however had he begun to speak, when the butler entered the room, with the news that a Miss Caroline Bingley was outside the front door and wanted to see her brother.

This news had caused said brother to lapse back into silence, leaving his friend to follow the butler
back out into the hall, confront Miss Bingley with the report that firstly, her brother had no desire to see her, secondly, that he would not be returning to either his house in town or the Hursts within the near future, and thirdly that if Miss Bingley came to visit the Darcys again, she would not be admitted inside the hall, let alone the house.

All this was accomplished in the space of ten minutes and his host, after telling his friend of the event in clear brownstudy, shut himself in his business study,- known to his friends and family as the room that you never disturbed him from unless on pain of death -and did not re-emerge from it until later that day.

Thus Charles Bingley was left to sit about in the drawing room feeling very much the inadequate friend and totally at loss as to what to do about it.

The next day events returned to normal in the Darcy townhouse. Bingley found his friend and host, although quieter than usual, more like himself, and thus spent most of the remainder of the week and the days that followed placating to his every whim while Anne recovered from her attack.

The four celebrated a subdued but welcome Christmas, and an equally peaceful new year. Now, for the first time since their return to London, they were to venture out into society.

Anne, now almost returned to health- or rather good spirits, as that word was a relative term -had a great desire to see the new production of Shakespeare's A Winter's Tale, which was to perform its last night that very evening. Darcy had secured tickets and his family's usual box so they could all attend, Bingley included.

It was be the first test for Anne since the onset of her illness, to judge if she could cope with a social evening once more, before returning to Netherfield.

Charles felt extremely guilty about wishing them to accompany him back to the neighbourhood, but in this motion his friend was firmly obstinate; securing the hand of Miss Bennet must be done before any more time passed; else risk losing her altogether.

Charles himself was doubtful that he would succeed in this task. Not only did his prolonged absence stand against his favour, but also, knowing his sister, this absence would have only confirmed her assertions- that she had no doubt written to Miss Bennet about -that he was paying court to Miss Georgiana Darcy.

This match, Mr Bingley begs the author reassure her readers, is entirely of Caroline's making. Nothing has been further from Charles’ mind than a match with a young woman, that he looks upon solely as a sister.

Also, since her inquisition upon him, Charles was determined to never speak to his sister ever again, let alone be in her company. He was sick of her constantly ordering him to fulfil her dreams obtaining a rank of life in the highest circles of society. From this moment on, she would have to rely on the goodwill of her sister and Mr Hurst.

Darcy noticed first. He happened to have raised his eyes from the stage just before the end of the first act, only to blink in surprise. A second glance confirmed his first and instantly he tapped his friend on the shoulder.

Bingley turned his gaze from the play to his friend and then in the same direction. Within seconds, a wide smile spread across his face. For sitting in the box opposite them, was none other than Jane Bennet.
From that moment on, Bingley remained oblivious to the rest of the play. It was not until intermission, when Darcy shook his shoulder vigorously in order to get his attention, that he became sensible of anything but the vision that lay in front of him.

"Darce!" He cried upon their exit to the social rooms, "is it not....."

"Yes," he replied with an bemused look upon his face.

"She is......"

"Yes."

"Can we....."

"No.... at least not yet." Darcy scanned the crowd, locating the group that had accompanied Miss Bennet in the box. For some moments his eyes remained fixed upon the gentleman, as he tried to recall where he had seen him before. Suddenly the memory came over him and he pulled his besotted friend over towards the trio. "Mr Edward Gardiner, I presume?"

"Yes, I am he, but forgive me, sir, I do not recollect....."

"There is no need to apologise, sir, except on my part for bringing business into a social evening. I only know your name by reputation. My solicitor recommended you some weeks ago when I was looking for a reputable contact for the East India Company. I was to have visited your offices next week....."

"Only to see me here, correct?" Mr Gardiner finished, pleased already by his new acquaintance. "And your name, sir?"

"Fitzwilliam Darcy at your service, sir," Darcy replied, shaking the proffered hand, his gaze drifting to the two ladies, noticing Miss Bennet's surprise and blush as she encountered the eyes of his inanely grinning and nervous friend. He now offered his hand to her. "Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to see you again. I had no idea you were in town."

It was the most words Darcy had ever said to her, yet Jane could summon only enough courage to take his hand in greeting, while he explained their prior acquaintance, greeted Mrs Gardiner and then introduced his friend.

It was at this moment that his presence, and indeed her that of her Aunt and Uncle's was forgot, as Mr Bingley took her hand and raised it to his lips for the sweetest of salutations.

Days passed, scarcely noticed by either. Each lived, breathed and supped upon the other's company. Neither felt that they had experienced happier days in their life.

Immediately after the play, the Gardiners and their niece attended dinner at the Darcy townhouse. Both spent most of it in the same fashion as they had done the rest of the play, gazing at each, oblivious to anyone or anything else.

The Darcys and their guest returned the dinner with a call at Gracechurch Street the next morning, followed by dinner there and on the third day, Mr Bingley called alone.

While Mrs Gardiner provided a discreet but present chaperone, he began the task of restoring their acquaintance to the state that it had been on the night of the Netherfield Ball.

Firstly, he apologised for his unexplained departure from Netherfield the day after said ball, relating the events that delayed his planned return- save for the onset of Mrs Darcy's illness, for it was still to be kept secret for as long as possible -and then his activities until their meeting at the theatre.

"Believe me, Miss Bennet, I would have returned as soon as was possible. I do not wish to lay blame on my friend for keeping me here, indeed the delay is solely my own. I felt that to abandon him in his time of need would be remiss of me and our long standing friendship. I also feared that my sister had done too much to ruin any hope that you- forgive my presumptiveness -may have harboured of me."

Jane herself knew not what to say. The surprise of meeting him at the theatre and the events of the day before were still too fresh in her mind, preventing her from completely absorbing anything else. Just as she had resigned herself to never seeing him again, he had met with her once more.

Now, only two days later, she was sitting beside him, listening to his confirmation of her sister's judgement of the situation, her hand still tingling from the tender kiss that he had laid upon it that evening.

As it had been for him, it was for her, the rest of the play but a blur; along with Mr Darcy's townhouse and the meal she ate inside it. All she could remember was Mr Bingley; his words, his gestures and his looks. Each had been solely directed at her.

Not once had there been any sign of truth in his sister's assertion. That Caroline had indeed lied to her, hurt Jane deeply. She had thought her to be a good friend, to approve of her and Mr Bingley. Now to hear the contrary..... it was distressing.

Just as these words were laid aside in her mind, she gathered the next, and her astonishment increased. Had she heard him correctly? Did he truly meant what he was hinting at?

"Mr Bingley," she began to reply, the words coming slowly, "I must confess I was hur....... disappointed when you did not return for the winter. But I do not wish any continued acquaintance of ours to come between you and your family."

"You may not wish it, and indeed I would do anything for your comfort," Bingley responded, "but it is inevitable. I have long grown tired of my sister's desires for me to advance myself through....... in a certain manner. I am determined to be master of my own actions. Miss Bennet, tell me to go and never come back, and I will, but only if it is just your will, and not the claims of anyone upon you. I
only wish to seek your happiness."

Jane blushed, but managed to accept. "Mr Bingley, I do not wish for you to go away."

"Thank you," he replied.

Days passed, each one of them turning to be more idyllic than the rest. Jane and Bingley spent every one of them in the company of each other. They walked and talked, seated and talked, walked and were silent, seated and were silent.

Every moment that was spent apart, they immersed themselves in thoughts of each other. And every second assured them both that they had never been more happier.

Soon the date came for Jane's departure from Gracechurch Street to attend her sister's wedding to Mr Collins. With great reluctance did she bid farewell and with the same emotion did Mr Bingley return it. He handed her into the carriage himself, and only left the house when it was gone from his sight.

When he arrived back at Darcy's house, Charles witnessed a most pleasant sight. Mr Darcy's carriage, complete with baggage- a few pieces of which he identified as his own -stood in front of the house, with four fine horses, impatient to be off. Barely had he arrived at the open door, when his friend emerged from it.

"Well, did you expect anything less?" Darcy replied when Charles had asked about the sight before him. "You have been a most excellent friend to me Bingley, during these weeks, and I would not be the same if we did not depart for Netherfield at this moment."

"But how did you know Jane..... I mean Miss Bennet was to depart today?"

"I thought you had noted not. While you spent most of your time with her, I have spent it her Uncle's company. Mr Gardiner is really a most valuable contact for what interests I have in India...... and during our business talks, I managed to ascertain from him when Miss Mary Bennet's wedding was."

"But what about Anne's health?"

"Do not worry, she is well enough," Darcy assured his friend, trying not to look in the least concerned. Anne herself was the only one that knew the truth of her predicament and feared telling him, his present torment was enough.

Nevertheless, Darcy still worried. But right now that was not important. He had promised Bingley that he would accompany him back to Netherfield and accompany him he would. One lifetime of happiness had to be enough for both of them.
Chapter 16

Part XVI.

When Jane arrived at Longbourn and greeted her family with quiet solitude, Elizabeth was all prepared to give up any former feelings of admiration and like for the Darcys and the Bingleys. She perceived her sister to be the worser for her trip to London, a circumstance confirmed by the lack of letters that she had received from that quarter.

Therefore having only Miss Bingley's last letter to go on, she was fully persuaded that she along with the Darcys had forced the brother to court Miss Darcy.

Despite the telling points which stood against this match, the fact that Miss Darcy was not yet out and Anne had assured her that she and Mr Darcy were all for their friend offering his hand to her sister -Elizabeth's view of her sister and the lack of information from town convinced her that Miss Bingley's hopes were the case, and thus was ready to deliver all feelings of dislike against them.

She was fully justified in doing this, or so she believed, by her sister's quiet and pensive manner. Affection for Jane she placed paramount to all else and, any that caused her unhappiness, no matter what their connection to her, must feel the dissatisfaction of losing her favour as well.

Scarcely had she begun to feel this dislike, when all of Meryton came alive with the news that Netherfield was open once more. Barely had she time to wonder at this when a carriage drew up at Longbourn, and Mrs Hill announced into the presence of herself and the rest of her family Mr Bingley, Mr, Mrs and Miss Darcy.

It being but a day before the marriage of Mary to Mr Collins, this new event put Mrs Bennet into even more of flutter than she had displayed already, which was only increased when Mr Bingley sat immediately by Jane, and revealed his joy at seeing her so soon after their acquaintance in London.

Only after the visit was Elizabeth able to converse with her sister. "Jane," she began the moment they were left alone by all, "you have been very sly. Not once did you reveal that you had met Mr Bingley in London. How on earth did it come about?"

Jane immediately related all that had passed during her short stay in town, and Elizabeth was able to attribute Mr Bingley's delay and continued stay at Mr Darcy's house to what her sister could not; the health of Mrs Darcy. All the while that Mr Bingley conversed with Jane, Anne, Georgiana and Darcy had entered into conversation with her and the rest of her family, leaving Elizabeth only able to observe rather than ask after her friend's health.

Anne had appeared to her to be very well, but hearing now Jane repeat the words of Mr Bingley's excuse, Elizabeth realised this was not the case. The phrase 'abandon him in his time of need' could not point to anything else. Instantly now did she regret ever determining to dislike them all for Mr Bingley's absence. Most guiltily did she feel that her hate had been quickly applied, all because she misunderstood her sister's quietude upon her return.

So heavily did this guilt prey on her mind that Elizabeth thought nothing of refusing her mother's request that she visit Mary in March, after she and Mr Collins had settled themselves at Hunsford.

When she had enough presence of mind to realise what she had done and think of ways to withdraw herself from such an obligation without upsetting anyone, she was tied to a continued acceptance of it by her friend.
Anne, upon hearing Elizabeth mention the visit in passing, requested that she honour the agreement, as she herself was to be in Kent that month with Darcy and Georgiana, in an attempt to tell her mother of her inevitable fate.

It was with all this upon the air that the day of Mary's marriage to Mr Collins finally arrived. The ceremony took place; the bride and groom set off for Kent from the church door, and everybody had as much to say or hear on the subject as usual. Then, but two days after this happy event,- in Mrs Bennet's judgement it was, the rest of Meryton viewed it with varying opinions -this good lady found another reason to laud it over the neighbourhood.

Jane had been seated in the drawing room since morning upon the second day after Mary's wedding, occupied in a volume from her father's library, when she had call to lay it aside and welcome Mr Bingley into the room. A blush and a smile followed his arrival and kind inquiry after her health before she resumed her seat, with an offer that he took one also.

Mr Bingley however, had no desire to do this. Instead, he placed himself at her feet and immediately began to speak to her in terms of the deepest emotion. All Jane could do was wonder at the circumstance, and listen with ever rising happiness in her heart as he related to her feelings which heretofore he had only hinted at.

With bliss in her breast did she witness him place his hands over hers, asking to make him the happiest man in the world by accepting his proposal. Unable to gaze anywhere but into his dear face and eyes, Jane felt that entire worlds had ended and begun anew before she could shyly assent that his affections and wishes were returned.

He took her hands in his trembling own, and lifted her up. In union did they stand by the fireplace, expressions of the profoundest joy displayed by both their features. Only then did he lean forward to catch her lips in his own.

Evening had long given way to night when Mr Bingley returned to Netherfield, his joy evident by every facet of his usual happy nature. With laughter in his voice and heart did he proclaim to his friends the news and receive their congratulations in return. Merrily did he describe the event to all, praising his 'beloved angel' at every turn. In only one matter did his disposition lean to seriousness, when he thanked his friend for accompanying him to Netherfield and convincing him to remain steadfast in his plans to marry.

Darcy himself could not be more happier for his friend's success, an emotion that he assured Miss Elizabeth Bennet of when her and her family stayed to dinner the next evening. "I am just sorry that it did not happen sooner," he finished. "You must learn some of my philosophy; think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure," was her reply. "Although I believe neither of us can heed that of late. Tell me true, it was for Anne was it not that your return was delayed?"

"Indeed it was," Darcy replied, as a particle of the grief that he felt concerning this washed over his features for the briefest of moments. "It is for that why we are going to Kent. Lady Catherine can remain in the dark no longer." He paused to glance at Anne, who was helping his sister overcome her shyness to talk to Miss Kitty. "I wish I had her strength in coping with this."

"You are doing better than I know that I would in your position," Elizabeth assured him vehemently. "Yea, I am sure," she added when he uttered a protest, "and it is much to your credit. Indeed it is. There is not more you could have done."
"I wish I had your faith on that. Recently I have begun to regret my actions, concerning all that I have done for Anne. What was previously put to generosity I now regard as selfishness."

"Such as?"

"Our marriage. I have prevented her from the probability of finding anyone to love in what little life she has. At the time it never occurred to me, but now I realise just how important love can be to live. Especially if one has the freedom to express and receive it."

"I see your point," Elizabeth acknowledged, "but let me remind you that frequently, happiness is entirely a matter of chance."

Too true, Darcy thought as he gazed upon her, too true.
Chapter 17

Part XVII.

Happy for all her maternal feelings was Mrs Bennet on the day she got rid of the daughter that was in her opinion, most deserving. With delight did she refer to 'dear Mrs Bingley,' declaring that she would visit them the very day after their wedding, causing Mr Bennet to reply most forcibly that she would not and that, if she left them alone for at least a month, she would be doing a great favour for the peace of all concerned. Mrs Bennet however refused to listen, vehemently insisting that visit she would and with frequency.

As this argument and the repercussions of it- such as Mrs Bennet retiring to her room with an attack of nerves -took most of the day after said marriage, Mr Bennet felt his mission had been accomplished and promptly retired to his library. His good lady however, he had underestimated, for upon the morning of the second day was Elizabeth to be seen pleading with her mother, who paid her no mind and went.

No more than a fortnight had passed in this manner, when Jane announced to Lizzy, during her first dinner as Mrs Bingley at Longbourn, that Charles was considering giving up Netherfield as soon as may be. Despite the prospect of losing her sister, Elizabeth completely agreed.

It has often been said by many, how little a couple, if quite properly enamoured with each other, recollect the events of their marriage ceremony. This was certainly true in the Bingley's case, indeed considering the state of affections between them and their mutual dispositions, how could it be otherwise?

Frequently did they find themselves seeking friends and relations views upon the details of how the ceremony went. Indeed, as far as they were concerned, a carriage might have run into the church and they would not have noticed. It was perhaps with luck therefore, that they managed to note the timing to kiss at the end.

Elizabeth often found herself an observer of events and people during the ceremony and the wedding breakfast, despite her recent reunion with the Darcys, who could have involved her in conversation, if she had displayed any enthusiasm for the occupation.

More oft to be the occasion that she would be watching her friend's husband rather than her friend, whose lack of well-being was more known to her. His appearance was a shock to Elizabeth, as indeed it had been since his return to Netherfield. Until now, however, she had been too concerned about Jane's wedding to dwell properly upon it.

In short, Mr Darcy looked quite ill. His usually exquisitely tailored clothes, which had set the gossips of Meryton chattering about his wealth, seemed to emphasise a thinness quite unhealthy, and when one glanced at his face, the evidence to support this conclusion was only intensified, as he gazed back at the speaker with haggard eyes.

A great sadness seemed to hung about his form. He seemed to be almost on the verge of crying aloud the grief that lay inside him. Elizabeth noted all with increasing concern and a sense of helplessness as to what she, or anyone, could do about it.

As for the man himself, Darcy remained insensible to the idea that his state of health was visible to those who knew him behind the mask of reserve. He knew he was doing himself a ruin, but felt little desire to alter it. He was doing the only thing he knew would keep his mind from worrying
incessantly, throwing himself into estate work without thought or care for an substance or rest, choosing to ride and walk himself into exhausted oblivion over enduring nocturnal nightmares.

It was a state of affairs his body was well used to; having delved into this during the illness and death of his father five years ago. He knew nothing of Elizabeth's concern over him, indeed even if he did, such knowledge would only increase his desire for oblivion.

It was all right for him to care for her, to love her, he at least knew what he was getting himself into, but for her to love him in return, much less care about him, was unthinkable. He would not wish that upon her, could not bear the reality or even the idea that she cared about him as deeply as he had begun to care about her. It was bad enough that he had allowed himself to fall in love with her, he would not let her torture herself over feelings for him.

After this it was somewhat with relief that the rest of February passed with nothing more remarkable than walks to Meryton that were sometimes dirty and sometimes cold. Elizabeth spent most of it writing to Anne and Georgiana, both of whom had asked her for correspondence before they met again in March, at Hunsford.

Lizzy worried for the welfare of her friends, especially when 'Georgie' would write of her cousin not coming down from her room, or experiencing a coughing fit.

Anne, as were her wont, left this out in her letters, describing instead the brief time in London after the wedding of Jane and Bingley, the journey they took to Derbyshire, where they were to spend some time at Pemberley before travelling to Matlock to inform their cousins of her illness.

Nine days of March passed, and Elizabeth arrived at Hunsford. She found herself no longer disgusted at the prospect, for absence of Mr Collins had decreased her dislike of him, and awakened her more to the novelty of the trip, and the wealth of character follies she could study.

The only pains were of course Jane, and her father, who when it came to the point, so little liked her going, that he told her to write to him and almost promised to answer her letter.

Certainly when she arrived at the Parsonage Elizabeth found much to marvel over. She witnessed her previously piously bookish sister in full charge of a moderate household with a confidence and ease that she had never see before, and not only that, manage Mr Collins, who seemed to regard his wife with an almost reverent devotion, so expertly that both of them saw very little of him except for meals and sermons.

Mary seemed truly happy, not only with her married life, but also to have her to stay, and the weeks that Elizabeth had expected to spend alone exploring the woods and hills of Rosings Park, she instead passed bonding with her sister.

By the time of her second week at Hunsford Elizabeth received a letter from Jane, announcing that they had found a house and were to take possession of it in July. Time and her absence had done nothing to alter their mother's daily visits, causing Mr Bingley to nearly lose his usually unflappable good humour.

Their new estate had been found by Mr Darcy, whom Bingley had instantly applied to. It was in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire, and only thirty miles from Pemberley itself. Jane took pleasure in describing all the beauties of Pearlcoombe Abbey as it was called, enchanting Elizabeth with the place so much, that she found the future prospect of her sister's distance not so much a sadness than she would have expected.
Indeed, as long as her sister was happy, Elizabeth vowed that she would bear the miles between them very well.

The third week, as had been expected by Elizabeth, was to bring four additions to Rosings Park, that of Mr, Mrs and Miss Darcy, and their cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Lady Catherine, whom Elizabeth had had the pleasure of dining with at least twice a week, was most displeased to learn of their previous knowledge and acquaintance of her dear daughter and nephew.

Her displeasure increased when she discovered that Elizabeth was the same Miss Bennet Anne had written of in her letters, for Lady Catherine saw Elizabeth as too impertinent in her opinions and manner to be a suitable friend for either her daughter or her niece.

Elizabeth took little notice of this judgement, having found her hostess to be all that her friends described her to be.
"And how fare you, Darce?"

Darcy looked up from his stallion to face his cousin and actually appeared to consider the question. "I am well, Rich."

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam highly doubted that reply to be truthful, but refrained from commenting upon it. He had known his two years younger cousin for nearly thirty years, and this experience had taught him exactly which questions not to ask. Darcy would choose to tell him when and if he wanted advice, and since Darcy chose not to admit he was far from well, Colonel Fitzwilliam could not press him further, even though the reality was a clear contradiction to his cousin's reply.

Darcy looked far from well. He had looked far from well since his arrival at Matlock, and in the Colonel's opinion, his condition had only worsened. Richard had witnessed his cousin in this state before, five years ago.

Somehow, between himself and Charles Bingley, they had managed to pull him out of it. Both had hoped their friend would never experience sadness again and when Richard had learned of Anne's fate, he feared the worse. He had not expected however, that Darcy's slide would begin before Anne's demise.

His cousin brought his horse to an abrupt halt, making Colonel Fitzwilliam sharply pull up. Startled, Richard watched him dismount and greet the woman who had crossed their path. Even from this distance he noted her singularity, her remarkable beauty. Preferring to stay mounted for what was no more than a brief salutation, he observed his cousin smile for the first time in weeks. When he rejoined Richard five minutes later, the Colonel instantly inquired as to her identity.

"She is Miss Elizabeth Bennet," Darcy replied as they resumed their ride around their Aunt's estate, "of Longbourn, Hertfordshire. Anne and her have become great friends since Bingley let the estate of Netherfield last Michaelmas. Bingley has just married her elder sister."

"This is all very interesting, Darce," his cousin replied at the end of the narrative, "but what is she doing here?"

"Oh, her younger sister has lately married their cousin and heir to Longbourn Mr Collins, who as you will remember, is Aunt Catherine's new parson. Miss Elizabeth was obliged by her mother I believe to stay with them awhile, and Anne when she heard the news requested her to come as well."

"So this is the same Miss Elizabeth I have heard of from Anne and Georgie for weeks?" Colonel Fitzwilliam confirmed. "She must be an extraordinary woman to have such an effect on you all."

"She is not wealthy, Rich."

"Meaning?"

"I will not have Anne's best friend fall in love with the second son of an Earl who has only the half pay of a Cavalry Colonel to live on, and has frequently reminded me of that fact, as well as his wish to be rich."

"I was not even thinking of that, Darce!" Richard quickly assured him, the state of affairs having
become clear to him now. The only reason he wished to meet Miss Bennet, was because of the effect she had on his cousin, who was still smiling.

By the evening, when Lady Catherine had invited over the Hunsford party for dinner, conversation, supper and cards, Colonel Fitzwilliam had discovered the reason for his cousin's first display of emotion in weeks.

Observing the interaction between Miss Bennet, Anne, Georgiana and Darcy, he concluded what his cousin had only admitted to himself. Instantly, Richard's concern for everyone grew.

His cousin had been raised to regard loss of honour and propriety as sins, therefore would treat his marriage of convenience with Anne as a marriage of affection, and stay faithful to it, no matter if he fell in love with some else along the way. And fallen in love he had, Richard could determine that from a single glance.

The lady herself cared for his well-being, and had no idea of that she was loved. Richard doubted that she ever would, especially if Darcy's slide continued after Anne's eventual death. In their society where mourning was rarely concentrated on, Darcy would chose the opposite of the norm. He would feel guilty for falling in love while married, even though Anne knew perfectly well, and blessed it.

In short, Richard foresaw nothing but doom of this visit to Rosings Park and feared that there was little he could do to prevent it.
Chapter 19

Part XIX.

The evenings spent at Rosings by the occupants of Hunsford now passed more agreeably with the addition of the Darcys and Colonel Fitzwilliam. Anxious to please her daughter, Lady Catherine submitted to having her parson and his guests for dinner almost every evening, commencing but a day after her arrival.

With astonishment did she witness the degree that her share of converse was not sought as often as the guests, and instead she had to resort to disapproving glares and snorts in order to express her views.

Elizabeth found herself spending most of her days at Rosings, in the company of Anne and Miss Darcy, with the frequent additions of Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam. His affability in comparison to his cousin differed greatly. He enjoyed lively conversation, professed an appreciation of music and debate, and displayed a wide knowledge of books and travelling, the latter of which attested to his position in military circles.

As for her friend, Anne seemed well enough, at least to all outwardly appearances. By the time of their first week at Rosings, however, Elizabeth descried sufficient to conclude that Lady Catherine had yet to be told of the fate which would soon befall her daughter, for in her absence Anne would cough with greater frequency and her features reverted to paleness.

From that moment Elizabeth took part in the act, helping her friend to conceal whenever she needed the assistance. Whenever she acted so, it was with sadness, knowing by the oft repetition, that her friend had not long until concealment was no longer an option.

In any case, whatever the occasion, barring the evening engagements, she always had Mr Darcy as escort on her return to the parsonage. The distance between his Aunt's estate and the parsonage was many an afternoon taken up by conversation, as Elizabeth's impression of her friend's husband grew better and better.

She felt much distress upon first encountering him and discerning by his form that he had neglected himself dreadfully in his concern for Anne, but as the weeks of their stay progressed, she witnessed to her relief some improvement if perhaps only slight. Despite this, he was well in all other respects, and his usual habitual reserve gradually slipped away, as Elizabeth built a greater intimacy than she had ever known with a gentleman not related to her.

For the gentleman in question, the effect of her increased acquaintance produced within him quite the contrary. As another day passed in her company, Darcy's torture grew. His absence from her had done nothing to alter his feelings, and upon his encountering her in the woods at Rosings, he had realised that his attempts to forget her were in vain. With every passing moment his love for her grew to unbearable limits, and his guilt at having such feelings doubled.

At Rosings there was very little to do besides ride, billiards, or read, his estate was in good order thanks to the weeks spent on it in town via correspondence, and since his avoidance had only strengthened his inability to do without her, Darcy could do naught but spend his time with her.

When they were in company with his wife and sister, the feelings were less overwhelming, but when the time came to escort her home as Anne dictated, every sense in his body and soul called out to him to declare to her the truth he had so long concealed. And he knew full well he could not.
To make matters worse, while this internal battle was raging, another more urgent concern came to the floor. On the first day of April, Anne passed out at the breakfast table. Somehow, between Lady Catherine's frantic lecturing and the frightened servants, Darcy swept her up into his arms and to her apartments upstairs.

The physician was sent for at once. While he examined the patient, Darcy quietly gave the fatal news to his Aunt. Lady Catherine's reaction was extreme, and by the time the physician was down, she was preaching to her nephew on priorities and would not allow for any interruption.

When the Hunsford party, having not been informed, came for afternoon tea, the house was still in uproar. The Colonel and Georgiana were there to receive them, and Elizabeth, upon seeing the despair written on their features, requested to see Anne immediately. Georgiana, who was unaccustomed to the task of delivering bad news, took her up, leaving the Colonel to inform Mr and Mrs Collins.

Darcy looked up the moment she had entered the room, barely noticing her escort, who, with memories of her father's illness rendering her incapable of attending, left to rejoin her cousin. His intense gaze at her would, at any other time, cause Elizabeth to wonder, but she could not focus on him, only Anne.

She rushed to her friend's side, gratefully accepting the chair he quitted, and took her hand. In reply she received just a listless glance. Noticing her other hand was also held, Elizabeth glanced up to offer compassion at the mother.

Lady Catherine stared at her, then at her nephew. In her grief she saw her worse fears, and exploded angrily at the two. "Get out!"

"Aunt..."

"Do you think I am so unseeing? I know what is in your minds. This is how you repay all my attentions to you, Miss Bennet, with arts and allurements? Well, you shall never succeed. The position which you have the presumption to aspire for is already filled. My daughter's condition is to be expected, and I expect you, nephew, to do your duty, and cast whatever pleasures you find in this upstart aside for the good of your heritage, your heir and your wife! Now, I will not be swayed any longer. Get out!"

They had no choice. Elizabeth, with a last look at Anne, quitted the chamber, not caring to see if anyone followed. As she rushed angrily downstairs, a voice called out to halt her.

"Miss Bennet!"

It was Darcy. "I apologise for my Aunt. She has difficulty believing the news we told her of this morning." He joined her a few steps above. "When Anne passed out at breakfast, she became convinced that her daughter was suffering another, much happier state and would not be persuaded otherwise. I am sorry if she has hurt you."

"She has not hurt me, only angered me," Elizabeth replied, the emotion showing in her eyes. "How could she think things like that of you?"

"I do not know," Darcy answered, hoping his feelings remained concealed. Sighing he turned to lean on the banister. "I suppose though, that she is remembering my previous reluctance. Before.. Ramsgate... I fought every attempt to marry Anne." He closed his eyes, forcing back the sudden tears. "Perhaps I should have given a show of courting my cousin, instead of just relying that her long held wish would convince away any doubts."
"You did what you thought was best," Elizabeth reminded him. "No amount of foresight could have predicted this." She paused. "Do you want us to leave?"

"Never." The word was uttered before he could prevent it. Gathering himself he tried again. "I mean, please stay, if you could. Georgiana will need the distraction." He took a deep breath, attempting to calm himself. "Come, let us go down. I'll speak to the household, make sure everything is arranged."

Elizabeth arrived at Rosings the next morning for breakfast, at the request of Miss Darcy, to find that the insanity which had reigned the house the day before, to be of a temporary nature.

To the relief of all assembled, Lady Catherine was in her chamber, the physician having persuaded her to partake of some laudanum. To the even greater comfort, Anne was down from her bed, and eating, as if yesterday had never occurred.

After the meal the gentlemen departed for a ride and the ladies passed the day much as they had passed many before in each other's company, until Lady Catherine awoke in the late afternoon, whereupon Elizabeth thought it best to leave.

The days reverted to their previous fashion.

When Elizabeth was not called to spend time with Georgiana or Anne, she indulged her passion for walking, and was found on many an occasion by Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam exploring the garden paths and wooded walks that were to be toured on their Aunt's estate. Lady Catherine was not a great walker, thus achieving a certain privacy for herself could be relied upon, during such rambles.

She was engaged one day as she walked perusing a letter from her father, dwelling on some passages which could prove to be amusing, were it not for the events at Rosings, when a shadow crossed her path. Upon looking up, she saw that Colonel Fitzwilliam was meeting her. Putting away the letter and forcing a smile, she said, "I did not know before that you ever walked this way."

"I have been making the tour of the Park," he replied, "as I generally do every year and intend to close it with a call at the Parsonage. Are you going much farther?"

"No, I should have turned in a moment."

And according she did turn and they walked towards the Parsonage together.

"I am glad, Miss Bennet, that we have a moment alone," the Colonel began, "for I have been meaning to talk with you, regarding a subject of some delicacy."

Elizabeth noted his expression to be serious, and wondered if he was to touch upon the matter which Lady Catherine seemed determined to accuse herself and Mr Darcy of. Though she believed that the Colonel knew nothing of the outburst from his aunt which had caused her to leave Anne's side when she collapsed, the household had been in chaos, and the mistress's voice of a volume loud enough to carry the accusation to the hearing of her servants. It was reasonable to suppose that someone, be it staff or his cousins, might have informed him of it.

"If you mean to talk to me about what Lady Catherine accused myself and your cousin of," she began, "I can assure you that...."

"Oh no," he interrupted, "I know that both you and my cousin have behaved with absolute propriety, that it is of my Aunt's illusions, nothing more. No, I merely wished to thank you for your
friendship and support to my cousins since the beginning of their acquaintance with you. I know these past days have been hard and I do not hesitate to assure you that your efforts are much appreciated."

"You do not need to thank me, Colonel," Elizabeth replied, "it has been no hardship. I consider all your cousins as friends well worth having, and I am sorry for their present suffering."

"It has been difficult," Colonel Fitzwilliam admitted. "Knowing the truth behind their marriage, what they hoped to achieve now so cruelly dashed by an illness that, given Anne's past health, we should have foreseen. To her it appears no surprise, but Darcy was deeply saddened by the diagnosis. I know she intends for him to live on, to find himself some happiness when the worse has passed. I hope you can help him to achieve such a state."

Elizabeth merely nodded at first, thinking that the Colonel meant for her to continue in her friendship with his cousins. But then she happened to look up, and caught a certain look in his countenance, which caused her to comprehend another meaning entirely. It was one which Lady Catherine dared to accuse her and Mr. Darcy of only eight days ago, one which she had no cause to place the slightest suspicion in, until this moment.

The Colonel parted from her at the parsonage door, leaving her to seek her room, as she dwelt upon the conversation which had passed, wondering if she was right to suppose he meant to arouse such suspicions in her. She recalled when Mr. Darcy confided in her the truth of his marriage, and the care which he showered upon his wife, often to the neglect of his own health, as she had observed during her sister's and his friend's wedding, as well as during her time at Rosings. She did not believe that Mr. Darcy could possess room for other concerns, particularly those of such a dishonourable nature, which he had apologised on behalf of his Aunt for daring to accuse them of.

But the testimony of the Colonel, a close family member and friend, guardian to Georgiana, could not be doubted. Yet should she really trust that he meant such an illusion to be read into his words? He was a man of sense and education, who had lived in the world, endured the scars of a battlefield. A Colonel used to giving out commands upon which the slightest misunderstanding could cost lives. By this reasoning she must conclude that he meant what he said. Yet the interpretation of his words was dependent on her, and would she really have discerned another sense behind them if Lady Catherine had not accused her and Mr. Darcy of what she did? Elizabeth doubted it, but the words preyed on her mind, until she no longer knew what to think.

The door to the Parlour closed, and Elizabeth sank into a chair, her excuse of a headache now very much a reality. Determined to distract herself from what was at present only a slight discomfort, she chose for her employ the examination of all the letters she had received since her arrival at Hunsford.

Five minutes later, however, she had to abandon the attempt, for any distraction was impossible. The Colonel's words would not stop repeating themselves in her head. Leaning back in the chair, she forced herself to recollect all the events which had led this.

Eight days after her friend's collapse at breakfast had passed, and Elizabeth had spent the majority of each one at Rosings. There was difference however, in the manner of their passing; as she did not see the gentlemen except for meals and returned to the parsonage only after supper each evening with her cousin and sister.

At first she had thought nothing of it, knowing that the nephew would wish his Aunt and mother in law to see that there was no truth in her delusion. As the days wore on, certain conversations from the past began to play in her mind though, causing her to question the once firm belief of his character.
Matters had risen to a head when, only hours ago, she had encountered Colonel Fitzwilliam in the park. After exchanging the usual salutations, conversation had drifted on his cousins and their marriage, whereupon all the implications had suddenly made sense.

At first, the clarity seemed preposterous; she had heard from the gentleman's own lips his intent to give Anne as much happiness as he could, therefore any illicit dealings would be impossible. Yet the idea would persist to remain in her thoughts, even going so far as to bring certain comments of his as further testament to it truth, until Elizabeth had lost all courage to face him that evening.

Her cousin had done nothing to help the conflict in her mind by lecturing her on the insult her absence would be to Lady Catherine and her daughter, insisting that she bravely attend, however ill she felt. Mary then interceded, much to Elizabeth's relief, reminding her husband that they would be late if they did not leave soon and so concerned did Mr Collins become on that point, that they departed the parsonage that very second.

Elizabeth hoped that her absence, although noted, would not excite any concern amongst her friends, that Mary would be able to provide an excuse which would not occasion a visit to enquire after her health. Securing herself a book, she tried to immerse herself within in a novel, in the hope that the ache caused by all the agitation of her thoughts regarding the conversation with the Colonel, would soon lessen.

Elizabeth was surprised when Mr Darcy entered just as the ache had begun to lessen. In a hurried manner he inquired after her health, imputing his visit to a wish of hearing that she were better. She, in no mood to be in company, answered with cold civility. He sat down for a few moments, and then getting up walked about the room. Elizabeth was surprised, but said not a word. After a silence of several minutes he resumed his seat, casting an agitated look at the mantle-piece.

Another silence ensued, with she glancing at him and he at her, each hoping the other would be the first to break it, for neither felt up to speaking. Finally, Elizabeth could stand it no longer, and inquired after Anne.

Her name seemed to at last acquaint him with his situation. Glancing around the room as if seeing it for the first time, his expression of agitation faded, though not without considerable struggle. Steeling himself, he rose from the chair and announced his intention to leave.

Elizabeth rose to say farewell, but this came to be her undoing. For quite suddenly and without forewarning, a sharp pain shot through her head and she collapsed on the floor. At least she would have, had not he, seeing the torment in her fine eyes, acted so quickly, coming behind her so she fell into his arms.

As unconsciousness stole upon her, Darcy gently lifted her to the chaise-long. Softly he raised his hand to her head and felt for fever. Caressing her smooth skin, he kneeled by her side and laid the most tender of kisses upon her face. Hovering over her, he uttered huskily, "you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." Brushing a curl aside, he watched her slip into the realm of sleep, before and with a great sigh, he rose from her to ring the bell.

He awaited for the maid to enter, and then quietly departed.

"Darcy, we quite despaired of you," Colonel Fitzwilliam commented. His cousin merely offered him a tired countenance in reply. After quitting Hunsford, he had walked the long way back to Rosings in order to talk some sense into himself and make him realise just how close he had come to letting Elizabeth know his feelings. And that's another thing, no more Elizabeth. She is and always shall be
"Is that my nephew?" Lady Catherine shouted from the Drawing Room. "Where have you been? Let him come in and explain himself, Fitzwilliam."

"No," Darcy uttered involuntarily. "Forgive me. But I have a pressing matter of business." He started up the stairs, but was prevented by a restraining arm.

"You had better come to the Drawing Room, Darce," the Colonel began in a solemn voice, leading him through the hall.

The gentlemen entered to find their Aunt standing imposingly at the door, her features stern and unyielding. Behind, Mr Collins held his hands in prayer, his face grim and suitably devout, his wife nowhere to be seen.

"Nephew," his Aunt began when Darcy had closed the door, "if you had graced us with your presence a little longer this would not be necessary. Nonetheless, I know however much you ignore your priorities, you cannot avoid this one. My daughter is upstairs. The physician is with her."

Instantly he made moves to quite the room to be by his wife's side. She raised her voice. "I did not command you to go."

Darcy retreated back to his previous position.

"The physician's judgement is that she does not have long. Though that is not my opinion, I shall expect you, nephew, to obey my wishes and attend to her side, as a husband should. You have responsibilities that can not be treated with the contempt you have so far shown them. From this time you are to spend your every waking moment in her company. I shall prefer it if you did not sleep. Now you may go."

Darcy bowed, and left the room. Outside, his features relaxed, and he just stopped himself from collapsing to the floor. If it were possible, he felt more grief and guilt than before. He had deserted her when she needed him the most. He had neglected both of them. As he marched up the stairs, he felt heart split, one half drifting from the house to the parsonage and the other to the woman he had left sleeping upon the Parlour sofa.
Chapter 20

Part XX.

When Elizabeth awoke the next morning, it was without any idea of how she had come to be in her bedchamber. The events of last night she could not bring to her mind, other than saying farewells to her sister and cousin as they departed for Rosings.

Everything that had occurred afterwards was a complete blank. Her room appeared normal, nothing was disturbed or out of place that could reveal a clue as to how she had passed her time, and why she had escaped an evening under the accusing eye of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Matters were not improved by the time she had come down for breakfast, to find that the Parlour was devoid of all but the food that Mr Collins’ had not managed to scoff down before his usual pre-midday exertions. A note addressed to her from his wife sat quietly on her plate and, upon the closing of the door, a solemn faced Colonel Fitzwilliam was revealed.

Barely had she time to take in all that she saw and add it to the other puzzling sights, before she was asked to sit down and given the terrible news of Anne's latest collapse. Her heart awoke the quiet dread that was once more alive in her head. Her friend had not long.

The Colonel persuaded her to eat, and then escorted her outside, to the rich blue damask upholstery of the Darcy coach. During the short journey, oblivious to the passing countryside, Elizabeth read her sister's note, learning that her cousin was at his church, where a service had been called to pray for Mrs Darcy, and that Mary had spent the night by her bedside.

Leaning against the back of her seat, her distraught mind seemed not to notice the comfort or her facing passenger, as her eyes gazed beyond the passing greenery, willing the journey to be over.

Rosings Park seemed already to be in mourning as the carriage came to a halt in front of the imposing north face. As she descended from the carriage, Elizabeth noticed the unopened blinds, darkened rooms and empty gardens, palpably casting a shadow over the sunny April day.

As she entered the house, it appeared even more shrouded in sadness, the entrance hall giving way to countless fanned out doors, revealing empty rooms. The building, so usual alive with activity and baronial importance, now looked barren and devoid of occupation. The house had said its goodbyes.

Elizabeth parted from Colonel Fitzwilliam to the upper floors. She found her sister nearly asleep from exhaustion in a chair by the large ornate four poster that practically conquered the bedchamber. In the rich sheets, Anne lay.

Her friend was shocked at her appearance. Too early did she have the quietus pallor upon her. Shrunken, pale cheeks accompanied limp arms. A cold but ineffectual compress covered her forehead. Her eyes were closed.

Nothing seemed real. Elizabeth woke Mrs Collins and shepherded her out of the room in a trance-like state. As if in a dream she took the chair, reached out, and placed her hand over the thin ailing, one of her friend that lay limp upon the sheets.

Unable to look at Anne's stricken face, she glanced at the room. No candles had been lit, applying an even more grave sense to the dark mahogany furniture. Mural walls stared at the scene before them, their own depiction's acquiring a new tragedy. In short, nothing offered hope. She clutched the hand,
trying to ignore the troubled pulse and cried for a miracle which she knew would never arrive.

With much gloomy deliberation Colonel Fitzwilliam made his way through the empty and silent rooms to the library. Foregoing a knock that would be refused admittance, he entered the dark room and found the object of his quest; encased in one of the dark green leather armchairs, staring morosely at a half-empty decanter of whiskey. Richard took a long, hard look at the hunched figure, and silently sat opposite him.

"What am I to do Rich?" His cousin asked, surprising him, for the Colonel had not thought that Darcy had noticed his presence. "I do not know what to do." He raised his head and fixed his eyes imploringly on his cousin. "Give me an occupation or I shall run mad."

Richard looked into Darcy's eyes and saw the torment, the guilt, apparent for the first time in months. He wondered how long his friend had been carrying the burdens. The control, the carefully rationalised walls that usually formed whenever his emotions, his equilibrium were attacked, enabling him to appear still detached and calm that Richard had always admired in his cousin, were gone, no trace of them remained.

His entire form appeared older than his years. Obscurely his mind recalled the night before, wracked with the outraged voice of Lady Catherine. She had yelled continuously at her son in law, Darcy all the while sitting silently before her, offering no defence. It was only now that Richard knew why. All his cousins' strength for keeping his emotions and thoughts had gone. He was completely vulnerable, his whole self laid bare before anyone who cared to look and judge. A dangerous state to surrender into at Rosings, where their Aunt ruled, and her sovereignty was never begrudged by those who served her, for fear of censure and dismissal.

"Georgiana is in the music room," he replied softly, remembering, as he had passed the room, the sounds of the most mournful tunes emanating from the gap underneath the door. "All she has is childhood memories of illness and what it can do. Miss Bennet is with Anne. If you cannot trust yourself to spend your time beside her and your wife without betraying your inner troubles, go and attend your sister."

Darcy nodded, and left the room. As the door closed with click, Richard took the decanter from the table and poured himself a glass. The liquid brought little comfort. He dreaded to think what else the coming days would bring. A part of him wanted his leave over, to be back in Spain, fighting battles made of gun, sword, canister, shot and shell. Not the emotions of illness and death.

He felt guilty for wishing himself away, but also felt unable to help anyone. His Aunt was upstairs, sleeping off another of the physician's laudanum doses. Miss Bennet was with Anne. Mr Collins in his Parish. Mrs Collins most likely abed, and he had sent Darce to his sister.

His parents and brother had been informed by express the night before. The estate had been comfortably and effortlessly run by Lady Catherine's Steward since Sir Lewis' death, and besides, it was a task that he had little experience in. There was nothing else that needed to be done, and to pass the time by playing billiards, or horse riding would be completely inappropriate.

Outside the sun rose higher, doing nothing to alter the mourning house. Richard emptied his glass and stood. He remembered his cousin's face, the torment etched in his eyes, and the struggle to rise from it, to draw upon the strength that previously had helped him many times before. He quitted the library, his decision made. He would help his cousin and friend, prevent him from losing control completely. There would be time enough for that later.
Somehow, the day passed, although the occupants of Rosings and Hunsford parish hardly noticed. The weather surrendered to the state of the former, rainclouds replacing sunshine, grey sky replacing blue. Its sudden change made the building look worse, even to the impartial observer.

Inside the house was still silent, none of its guests or occupants daring to make the slightest sound for fear of it damaging the fragile state of their young mistress. She herself did not even notice. In fact, there was great concern about if she had noticed anything since her collapse. She had passed the day after it in a restless sleep, broken frequently by coughing that seemed to have no end, and now her unmoving form threatened the same activity once more.

Nothing brought her comfort. Every draught of doctors and old wives tales had been attempted, and failed. Lady Catherine forbade the scarifier,¹ lancet and leeches being used, leaving only those who watched over her daughter to do nothing other than holding her hand and hope for the worse to pass.

The Hunsford guests had spent the night at Rosings, Elizabeth in the chair she had occupied most of the day, watching over her friend, gripping her hand, afraid to fall asleep or relax in case Anne grew even weaker.

Throughout the day she had attended her, propping her up when she coughed, holding the bowl underneath, changing the compress, trying in vain to feed her the broth proscribed. Mary replaced her sister at the daylight of that second morning, leaving Elizabeth to wander the house in an attempt to distract her mind and make it face some sleep.

She found the gentlemen in the Music Room with Miss Darcy, who sat motionless at the pianoforte, watching her brother. He was by a window, trying to escape the room, only turning at Elizabeth's entrance. One look at his expression was enough.

Elizabeth left the building for a walk before the rain that was to come, rebuking herself for misjudging his character. She knew not why now she had ever supposed him to be in love with another. The concern for his wife ran deep on features, clearly marked for anyone to see.

He had not the room to care for someone else at the same time, despite his marriage of convenience. The speculation spoken by Colonel Fitzwilliam had been but that; nothing more. It had be stupid and prejudicial to interpret it any other way, especially the way that she had done so.

He did not deserve her condemnation, nor did she have a right to give it, let alone believe it. She had been so wrong. She who prided herself on intelligence, discernment and professed to know a person by their actions, expressions, manner and converse. She could not have been more blind. Her sister Jane's generous candour would have been far more wise to adopt.

With all this in mind did Elizabeth return to the house, to find it in uproar. Lady Catherine was awake, and yelling, as Lizzy soon discovered, at Georgiana, who was now alone in the Music Room. Upon her entrance the elder woman stopped, glanced at her, snorted in contempt and left.

Georgiana burst into tears. Elizabeth pulled the girl into her arms, and carefully helped to calm down. Slowly the circumstances were revealed; how she had been playing the harp when her Aunt had come into the room.

Instantly Lady Catherine had attacked, accusing her young niece of neglecting her cousin and sister by not taking part in the bedside vigil, and playing her music while Anne lay dying upstairs. Georgiana had tried to explain that she felt it beyond her, her memories of her father's sickroom making her struggle to breathe, but her Aunt would have none of it.

Elizabeth knew not how, but she managed nonetheless to comfort her friend, see that she partook of
a little luncheon, and went to find a servant to fetch it, before making a search for the gentlemen. She found them where she had expected, the library, and acquainted them with the situation.

Darcy thanked her, and left to attend his sister, leaving Colonel Fitzwilliam to help Miss Elizabeth to a chair, a fortifying sip of wine and a bite of food before she went back to the sickroom.

She woke with a start, her fine eyes rapidly glancing around the room to see that she was still in Anne's bedchamber. Across from her sat Mr Darcy, his hand gripping Anne's. He nodded a silent good morning.

Elizabeth returned to gaze at her friend. She at last seemed to be easier. As she was about to murmur a prayer of relief, Lizzy noticed the other symptoms, ones that bespoke not a recovery, but of the afflicted surrender to the inevitable. She did not even have to glance at the other attendant to know that he had witnessed the same.

The day reasserted its dream quality, hours passing with aching slowness. Anne woke at the tenth, causing the room to acquire more people as those who wished to say farewell did so, one by one. Elizabeth, feeling that she was intruding, waited outside until all but herself was left.

Anne did not say much. Elizabeth leaned closely to her, listening carefully to the softly spoken words, pronounced in a rush, for fear she did not time to make her point clear. She glanced up at the one who had been present throughout each visit, unable to leave, and back at her friend, shock and grief overriding the full understanding, but realising what was mainly required of her. Solemnly she uttered the promise.

The room slowly drifted back into stillness. Quietness reigned once more, as the vigil was resumed and the sufferer closed her eyes. Outside the wind swept through the trees and the rain crackled upon the window panes. Flames inside the hearth attacked shriven wood. Above, upon the mantle, the clock struck the first stroke of midday and Anne Darcy drew her last breath.

1. Scarifier: A device used in the nineteenth century to bleed for medicinal purposes, replacing the traditional leeches and lancet. A small metal box, concealing a mechanism which released two blades that clasped the skin, cutting it for the blood to run. Those who have read Bernhard Cornwell's Sharpe's Eagle, will realise this is where I got the name from. You can also see it on the Carlton adaptation of the book.
Chapter 21

Part XXI.

Georgiana, memories of her father's funeral still vivid in her mind, broke down and had to remain at the house. Elizabeth stayed with her, her own mind still in a state of shock about the whole course of events. Anne's death had an unreal quality to it, one that she could not ignore, even though she had witnessed the passing herself.

It was not right, it was unfair that she should have so little time on this world compared to others. Elizabeth was well aware of the injustices of life, in her situation it would impossible to avoid them, but nothing seemed just in the death of her friend. She had only known her a short time. Was it really only since Michaelmas last? Time was frequently all too cruel.

The house, if it was possible, mourned all the more deeply now the event had occurred. The sadness, the grief, had drifted to the outside, where a thick mist hung over the grounds and formal gardens, clothing everything in its despondency. A coldness, like some deadly plague of centuries past, had inflicted the house and it occupants, one that was impervious to any fire, no matter how blazing. Fortunately none of the occupants seemed to notice it.

Elizabeth knew not how the day had passed. She felt herself at times to be watching the world as if she were an outsider and did not exist within its harrowing aftermath. She did not witness the mist fade into the darkness of the night. She did not remember standing with Georgiana to welcome Lady Catherine, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr Darcy back. She knew nothing of the meal that followed their arrival, nor her escort back to Hunsford Parsonage where a dour-faced Mr and Mrs Collins were waiting.

Indeed the only thing that did manage to somehow force itself upon her notice was a thin piece of paper, folded in half and sealed, lying on the bureau in her bedchamber. Closer examination revealed the directions written by a familiar hand; it was her father. Anxious for some partial relief, no matter how temporary, Elizabeth set herself down and opened the paper.

The contents were brief and succinct, as such that might be expected coming from a source so usually hateful of sending correspondence. He asked her to come home. The letter, delayed by the usual modes of travel for such mail, was dated earlier than the express she had sent to Longbourn, informing them of her friend's death.

However at this moment, none of that concerned her. She wanted to go home, to put some distance between herself and the weeks at Rosings now so horrible to her. She wanted the chaos of her sisters, the nerves of her mother, her father's whimsical and often barbed humour. But most of all, she wanted Jane. The outlet to whom she could finally pour out all her grief. She had been forced to be strong for others far too long.

It was time for her to grieve herself.

The morning brought little alteration to either the people or the weather. At breakfast Elizabeth informed her hosts of her desire to be on the road by the afternoon. Unfortunately proprieties interceded, Mr Collins vowing on their behalf. Elizabeth was forced to delay a day, so she could make proper farewells to those of Rosings.

Whether Lady Catherine had realised her daughter was dead or not was not for Elizabeth to judge.
All she could remark about to herself after the visit was that her cousin's patroness seemed unchanged by the circumstances around her. Nothing of the outcry concerning their last encounter in her daughter's room was recalled or referred to by the lady, and Elizabeth chose to remain silent over the matter in light of such. Whether or not Lady Catherine remembered the matter was up to none but her. All that lady could seem to focus on now was a departure which was not following her desired manners and customs. That Miss Bennet should leave so soon was not to be borne.

That her father could not do without her was, to Lady Catherine's mind, even more incomprehensible. Daughters are never of so much consequence to a father. Why would she not stay a fortnight longer? If she would stay but another month complete, it would in her power to take Miss Bennet to London herself;— in the Barouche box.

Careful to make sure her host was placated, and desirous of causing the mother of her departed friend as little grief as possible, Elizabeth exclaimed that as sensible of the honour as she was, she believed that she must abide by her original plan. To which, her host's reply was to make inquiries as to if a servant was to be sent with her.

When she heard that Miss Bennet's uncle had already taken care of that, Lady Catherine turned to making sure that the equipage by which Elizabeth was to travel would change horses in Bromley, and that if Miss Bennet mentioned her name at the Bell, she would be attended to.

The visit ended shortly after that. Mr Darcy, understandably morose and silent, escorted Elizabeth and the Collins to the carriage. As he held her hand in assistance, Elizabeth had occasion to look into his eyes. Seeing the sadness she felt and more besides, she turned away, only to glance up once more as he pressed a thick envelope into her hands. She had no time to question its author or contents, only to stare at him from the carriage window as it moved out of the front drive.

Not until she was inside the parsonage did Elizabeth open the envelope and take out the two sheets of letter paper contain therein. Even then, it was only to skip to the end and find out the author.

It was Anne.

Elizabeth rapidly put the letter back, and then out of her immediate sight. She was not ready to face such a letter yet, nor did she presently possess the will or ability to read it. Her emotions and thoughts were still tangled too complexly for the contents of the lettered sheets to make any sense to her current frame of mind.

Slowly she returned to her trunks and travelling clothes, making a final check on all their contents. She placed the letter in a deep pocket of her coat, hoping to read it after she had put a distance between the neighbourhood of Hunsford, Rosings and herself.

The next morning passed slowly. Mr Collins sequestered her company soon after breakfast, thanking her for the honour that she had paid him and her sister in coming to visit them so soon after their happy union.

At length did he hold monologue over the bliss that was his marriage with Mary, and how well suited, in fact seemingly designed, they were for one another. Most fervently did he summarise the hours and days spent in the company of his gracious patroness, underlining the value she had showed by choosing to invite them so many times to Rosings Park.

At length the chaise arrived, the trunks were fastened on, the parcels placed within, and it was pronounced to be ready. After an affectionate parting between sisters, Elizabeth was attended to the carriage by Mr Collins.
As they walked down the garden, he commissioned her to send his best respects to all her family, not forgetting his thanks for the kindness he had received at Longbourn in the winter, and his compliments to Mr and Mrs Gardiner, whom he had been so happy to make an acquaintance of at the happy occasion of his wedding.

He then handed her in, and the door was on the point of being closed, when he reminded her with some consternation that she had hitherto forgotten to leave any message for the occupants of Rosings.

For that duty however, he was willing to take on himself, and then the door was at last allowed to be closed, whereupon the carriage drove off.
Chapter 22

Part XXII.

Elizabeth found the ride first to London then to the last stop before home, too short to take the time to dwell upon her friend's letter. In remained in her pocket throughout each carriage ride. As she stepped out of the post at the Inn which had been appointed as the place to meet her father's carriage, she happened to look up at the building, causing an instant sigh as a result.

Her younger sisters were behind an open window, Lydia shouting down to her, laughing at the surprise and gesturing for her to come up. Elizabeth obeyed, trying at the same time not to regret her earlier desire to be returned to chaos of her family life.

"Is this not nice? Is not this an agreeable surprise?" Lydia uttered as soon as Elizabeth had entered the dinning room. "We have been here but an hour and we mean to treat you as well, Lizzy, but you will have to lend us the money, for Kitty and I have just spent it at the delightful shop opposite. Look at this bonnet! I do not think it is very pretty, but I thought I might as well buy it as not."

"It is frightful, isn't it, Lizzy?" Kitty declared.

"Indeed it is. Whatever possessed you to buy it, Lydia?"

"Oh there were two or three much uglier in the shop, but it will not signify much what one wears this summer, for the militia are leaving Meryton in a fortnight."

"Are they indeed?" Elizabeth cried with great satisfaction. Even though she had not seen much of them, she was thankful that her sisters would no longer be subjected to their charms.

"They are to be encamped near Brighton, and I do so want Papa to take us all there for the summer. Especially as Mr Wickham is still safe. Mary King was taken to Liverpool by her uncle."

Lydia's chatter continued throughout lunch and into the carriage ride beyond. It turned from the departure of the regiment to inquiring whether her sister had gained a husband, and at her response, protesting the desire to be married herself before she was twenty. On to what she believed a delightful scheme that she and Mrs Forster had played on an officer, then back to the Brighton plan as the carriage drew up Longbourn's drive. Elizabeth focused her mind upon as much of it as she could, unwilling to think of the sadness she had left behind in Kent.

Mrs Bennet rejoiced to see her home, asked constantly after Mrs Collins, and more than once during dinner did her father say voluntarily, "I am glad you are come back, Lizzy."

The party was large for dinner, joined as it had been by the Lucases and Mr and Mrs Charles Bingley. Elizabeth was overjoyed to see her sister looking so well, so happy with her life as the mistress of Netherfield, although they were to move very soon.

Being seated so with her father, Jane and Charlotte, she was able to return to serious conversation, though Lydia did try much to rule the discourse in general with her desire for Brighton. It was a topic Elizabeth found her parents to have debated frequently, and adamantly persistent in their positions upon it; her mother for, her father just as steadfastly against.

The next morning, Elizabeth met Charlotte at the gate, and together they called on Jane at Netherfield. It was a meeting which had been planned the night before, and only once in the calm
solitude of her sister's new home did Elizabeth feel able to touch upon the subject of the late Mrs Darcy.

Jane and Miss Lucas listened carefully and solemnly to her, as she related everything that passed; having no secrecy between her best friend and sister. With quiet sadness did she tell of Anne's gradual decline, and the reaction of everyone there, including her shameful thoughts concerning misperceptions of Mr Darcy.

Jane, anxious that no blame be attached to anyone, struggled hard to reconcile her sister being at fault rather than her husband's dearest friend, neither of which she could rightfully choose between. Charlotte added her usual collected rational side, and soon Elizabeth felt all the better for having confided in them.

Lizzy and Charlotte stayed to luncheon with Mrs Bingley; the conversation drifting on to what had passed while the former was in Kent, and descriptions of her future home; Pearlcoombe Abbey.

Sad as she was to part from her sister, Jane was reassured by her Charles' promise that Lizzy could visit them often, and the latter expressing the wish for her sister to be happy, that she was perfectly right in wanting to move from the risk of their mother visiting daily.

Indeed, Jane was happy. Married but three months, and enjoying every moment of it. Netherfield had fallen rapidly under her charms, and was now as besotted as its master. She managed the household perfectly- a relief to the housekeeper, who had feared herself a captive of Miss Bingley for life. Mr Bingley joined them at luncheon, and Lizzy was glad to see such love between them as she had hoped for her sister.

She parted from Charlotte at the gate of Longbourn, and entered the house to find it in chaos. The reason was soon discovered; Lydia had been invited to Brighton by Mrs Forster. While she flew about the house exclaiming her ecstasy to everyone, ignoring completely Kitty's repining, Mrs Bennet was in such raptures for her daughter that her husband had been forced to retreat to his library.

Elizabeth secretly joined him there but half an hour after her return from Netherfield. Her intention was to persuade him to refuse Lydia permission to go, for she could not help but feel a foreboding about the journey; a quiet dread that something would happen which would be a death warrant to her sister's character.

Mr Bennet however, was not so convinced. "Lydia will never be easy until she has exposed herself in some public place, and here is an opportunity that is without any expense or inconvenience to her family."

"If you were aware," Elizabeth persisted, "of the very great disadvantage to us all which arises from Lydia's unguarded and impudent manner, I am sure you would judge differently."

"Do not make yourself so uneasy, Lizzy my dear. Wherever you and Jane are known, you must be respected and valued; and you will not appear to any less advantage for having a couple; I may say even three, very silly sisters. We shall no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Colonel Forster is a sensible man, and she is too poor to be any kind of prey to a fortune hunter. Rest easy, my child, all will turn out well."

Elizabeth was forced to be satisfied with this answer but only a week. For, in the second since her return from Kent, matters concerning Lydia's travelling plans were taken out of their hands. It all began with a visit from Mrs Phillips, who came dashing to the house one late afternoon.
"Sister," cried she, "I hope you still do not mean to let Lydia go to Brighton, indeed it is my hope that if you do, you shall no longer after I tell you my news. A terrible scandal has descended on Meryton this day and you will all be surprised at its source. Louisa, one of Mrs Long's nieces, has been caught *in flagrante delicto* with Mr Wickham!

"Mr Wickham of all men! It all started at an evening party Mrs Long had held but last night. The officers were all there as usual, and *he* and Louisa were in company all evening, until it was time for them to go, and only then did all notice the two were missing. Louisa eventually was to be heard screaming and crying from the garden, causing us all to rush to her, where we encountered the shameful sight."

Told as this had been to all three daughters and their parents, reactions were varied and in the extreme. Mrs Bennet exclaimed in grief for the poor girl, relief when she learnt that Miss Louisa was unharmed, the party having reached them in time.

Wickham it was said, had been under arrest since the incident, whilst his activities were being investigated. But alas for Lydia, who had yet to appear in the least concerned, things were already decided; she would not go to Brighton. Her father and mother were, for once, in total agreement about that.

As deeply overjoyed as she had been about going, was Lydia grieved that she no longer could. In vain did she appeal to each and everyone of her sisters to persuade her parents to relent.

None would hear her.

Kitty was glad that her younger sister was for once disgruntled, and Elizabeth grateful that the danger had emerged before her sister had left with the regiment, though she was distressed at the way it had arisen. Even Jane, whose generosity for her sister's well-being was always paramount, was of the opinion that Lydia must be resigned to remaining at Longbourn for the summer.

If there was one constant in his life, then Mr Darcy was sure that summer that it was his home. Despite all the grief its occupants had suffered, Pemberley seemed to possess a certain mysterious magic in its walls and rooms that produced smiles in even the gloomiest of expressions. The weather had blessed its sandstone with a beautiful golden glow, casting magnificence all over the grounds below.

Darcy, who had ridden himself almost to exhaustion by only stopping to change horses during the journey from Kent to Lambton, now brought his mount to a halt where the valley dipped low and presented him with the first real view of his country home.

The sun had just cast its brilliance over the walls and grass, and everything glistened as valuable gems. Enchantment took only a moment; his features brightened, his tears faded away. Dismounting his horse, he let the stallion rest while he walked to the large lake that lay in front of the house. Discarding his jacket, waistcoat and cravat, Darcy dived into the water. He emerged some twenty minutes later, refreshed to the core.

Seeing that his horse was attended to, he walked on to the house, where he was welcomed by the comforting arms of his housekeeper. Mrs Reynolds, having known her master from the age of four, had no trouble in the task of making him drop his masks, and Darcy always felt the better for confiding in her all his troubles. Since the death of his parents she was the only person on whom he could rely to offer impartial judgement on any matter that haunted him.

Together did they sit in the Library, his personal retreat, until dinner. Mrs Reynolds was shocked and
saddened at the sight of her master. Knowing as she did the full circumstances of his marriage, she had not expected such a onslaught of grief and guilt to be hanging upon him, as it did.

Since she had seen him last, he had lost weight, slept little and laughed even less. His entire appearance and manner conveyed to her such a sadness as she had only witnessed at the passing of his parents. And it had been by luck that she had managed to help him rise out of it then.

Darcy did indeed feel as weak as he looked. He had come alone to Pemberley, leaving his sister in the company of Mrs Annesley at their townhouse, so she was not a witness to his sad state. He was not ready to face any part of the world, a feeling he made clear by requesting that his presence in Derbyshire was to be kept a secret.

No one, not his tenants, Kympton nor Lambton, were to be informed that Pemberley was no longer shut up. How long this was to be a requirement, he did not know, and neither did his staff. Mrs Reynolds was determined that it would not outrun the summer, and made sure that every other member of the household, strove to ensure the same.

Mr Darcy however, noticed not. Nor did he notice the passage of days, spending time involved with accounts, ledgers, and all nature of things which contributed to his fortunes, without any desire for distraction.

He could not yet bear to face the world, nor did he feel ready to read the letter that had remained in his bureau since his luggage had arrived from Kent. He already knew the identity of its author; and it was this alone which drove him away from its drawer, for it related to all the other matters which caused his grief and guilt.

For, if there was one similarity between our hero and heroine that summer of 1812, it was that neither of them could read the letters Anne had penned them. Thus, neither of them were to know that, had they risked doing so, all their feelings of guilt would be forever washed away.
Chapter 23

Part XXIII.

After the departure of the regiment for Brighton, and the transfer of the former Lieutenant Wickham to the county assizes, events in Meryton and Longbourn settled down to their usual occupations during this time of year, though much of the gossip which took place still referred to scandal involving those personages for some weeks to come.

After the first fortnight or three weeks of their absence, health, good humour and cheerfulness began to reappear at Longbourn. Everything wore a happier aspect. The families who had been in town for the winter came back again, and summer finery and summer engagements arose. Mrs Bennet was restored to her usual querulous serenity and by the middle of June Kitty and Lydia were so much recovered as to be able to enter Meryton without tears; an event of such happy promise, as to make Elizabeth hope that by the following Christmas, her younger sisters might be so tolerably reasonable as not to mention an officer above once as day, unless by some cruel and malicious arrangement at the War Office, another regiment should be quartered in Meryton.

Elizabeth continued to visit her sister and Charlotte, spend time with her father, and with her younger sisters. During her daily rambles she contemplated her friend, the letter that waited for her from that lady, still unread in her bureau. Try as might, her courage could not rise to opening it, and her heart and mind still feared its contents would refer to what Anne had asked of her before she breathed her last. She did not feel that it was right or just to accept the promise yet.

July brought the Gardiners to Longbourn once more, with a planned excursion to take Elizabeth with them for the Lakes, a tour which was proposed and discussed last winter before she went to Kent, accepted in favour of the prospect of such delights as to be seen in that part of the country. Although much had happened since it was first proposed, Elizabeth was still in favour of going and assured her aunt so during their correspondence, as the travel itinerary became fixed.

A fortnight before the beginning of their Northern tour, a letter from Mrs Gardiner arrived which at once delayed the commencement and curtailed its extent. Mr Gardiner would be prevented by business from setting out till a fortnight later in July, and must be in London again within the month, and as that left too short a period for them to go so far, and see so much as they had proposed, or at least to see it with the leisure and comfort they had built on, they were obliged to give up the Lakes, and substitute a more contracted tour; and according to the present plan, were to go no farther northward than Derbyshire.

In that county, there was enough to be seen, to occupy the chief of their three weeks; and to Mrs Gardiner it had a peculiarly strong attraction. The town where she had formerly passed some years of her life, and where they were now to spend a few days, was probably as great an object of her curiosity, as all the celebrated beauties of Matlock, Chatsworth, Dovedale, or the Peak.

With the mention of Derbyshire, there were many ideas connected, it was impossible for her to see the word without thinking of Pemberley and its owner. At first Elizabeth was reluctant to visit the place so soon after Anne's death, until she heard that her sister and Mr Bingley were to join Mr Darcy there after they settled into Pearlcoombe Abbey, bringing Miss Darcy with them from her cousins' estate in Matlock. The estates were within thirty miles of each other, and as such Mr Darcy had promised to assist his friend in certain matters regarding the surrounding villages and tenants.

Mr Bingley showed the letter he received in confirmation of such a prospect, where his friend wrote as to the house being unoccupied until then, to his sister in law, and Elizabeth realised that she could
perhaps enter the estate, rob it of a few petrified spars without perceiving the owner. Not that she desired to avoid Mr Darcy, but she would rather not intrude upon him during his time of grief, when the sight of a dear friend of his late wife, might cause him some sorrow afresh.

Mr and Mrs Bingley were the first to depart, and their leaving of Netherfield caused some little sorrow within Longbourn and Meryton for Mrs Bennet to mourn over at the loss of having a daughter married and living on a grand estate so near. Nothing would persuade Mr Bennet to let his wife go with her daughter to her new estate, and Jane stood firm in her inclination that she did not need her mother's help. Between the sisters there was a fond farewell with the promise of frequent correspondence to faithfully observed and kept. At least in those letters, Elizabeth knew she would have very little to fear reading of.

The period of expectation was now doubled. Four weeks were to pass away before her uncle and aunt's arrival. But they did pass away, and Mrs and Mrs Gardiner, with their four children, did at length appear at Longbourn. The children, two girls of six and eight years old, and two younger boys, were left under the care of their cousin Kitty, who was to take Jane's place in teaching them, playing with them and loving them.

The Gardiners stayed only one night at Longbourn and set off the next morning with Elizabeth in pursuit - that of suitableness as companions; a suitableness which comprehended health and temper to bear inconveniences - cheerfulness to enhance every pleasure - and affection and intelligence, which might supply it among themselves if there were disappointments aboard.

It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay; Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenilworth, Birmingham, are sufficiently known. A small part of Derbyshire is all the present concern. To the little town of Lambton, the scene of Mrs Gardiner's former residence, and where she had lately learned that some acquaintance still remained, they bent their steps, after having seen all the principal wonders of the country; and within five miles of Lambton, Elizabeth knew from her friend, Pemberley was situated. It was not in their direct road, nor more than a mile or two out of it. It talking over their route the evening before, Mrs Gardiner expressed an inclination to see the place again, and Mr Gardiner declared his willingness for the event.

After confirming with the chambermaid at the Inn that the estate's owner was still absent, Elizabeth consented to the plan, although she knew that she would be viewing the grand house and gardens which much of what her friend has said of the place in mind. To avoid thinking of Anne however was fruitless, she had tried to no avail. Perhaps seeing a place which she had spoken so much of, would help compose her mind enough to face what was waiting for her.

To Pemberley therefore, they were to go.

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*Anne did not do it justice.* That was the foremost thought which entered Elizabeth's head upon first encountering Pemberley. She had heard her late friend's description of her Derbyshire home many times, including the best stop along the entrance way from which to view the place. Now, as she sat with her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in their carriage viewing the country house, Elizabeth also realised that no one could really describe Pemberley and do justice to the reality.

The eye was instantly caught by Pemberley house, situated on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness wound. It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well upon rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills - and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. Its banks were neither formal, nor falsely adorned.
Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.

The carriage drove on to the entrance and the trio descended. After acquiring the assistance of a groundsman, they stood waiting to see if the housekeeper would allow them to see the place. Elizabeth gazed at the house, silently observing to herself once more how happily the place was situated.

She remembered the words her friend had used once about the place; claiming that no matter how a visitor felt, Pemberley always managed to cast a spell of happiness upon them. Indeed, she could confess to possessing the same enchantment.

The trio were a little concerned when the wait had begun to lengthen, and then even more surprised when the groundskeeper returned without the housekeeper in tow. Instead the person that accompanied him was no other than the owner himself.

Elizabeth uttered a gasp which drew an enquiry from her Aunt, but before she could reply Mr Darcy was standing in front of her. Scarcely able to lift up her eyes to his face, she was astonished at her efficiency in answering his enquiries after her family and herself.

When she apologised at their presumption and misconception that he was not at home, only then did she risk a look upwards.

The result gave her much to think about.

Though he spoke with the same tone and intellect as reflected their previous acquaintance, it was clear from his entire mien that Mr Darcy was not at all himself. His face, nay his entire form, appeared almost shrunken, and his clothes, once tailored precisely to his measurements, seemed to hang upon him.

"There is no need for you to apologise, Miss Bennet," he answered to her last words. "It is my own fault. I did not wish any body to know that Pemberley was no longer shut up. And now that you are here, it would be my pleasure to escort you and your relatives in a tour of the house."

They were first shown a Dining Parlour, a large, but well proportioned room, and handsomely fitted up. Elizabeth, after slightly surveying it, went to the window and viewed the prospect it displayed.

"What do you think of it?" Darcy asked, surprising her, for she had thought him to be beside her Uncle and Aunt, describing the pieces in the room.

"I do not believe I have ever seen a place so happily situated. Anne was right."

"Right? What did she say?"

"That Pemberley possesses a magic about it that has the ability to make any person smile."

Darcy displayed the emotion as he replied, "indeed it does." He returned to her relatives.

As they continued the tour, Elizabeth found the place to be rising further and further in her estimation. The rooms were all lofty and handsome, and their furniture suitable to the fortune of their proprietor; but Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste, that it was neither gaudy, nor uselessly fine; with less of splendour, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings Park.

The owner proved also to be an excellent guide, answering any question that might be put to him about any object within the place, with detail and an unconscious appreciation. He truly loved his
home, that was clear to see by all of the visitors. It showed in his every description of each room and his recounting of what changes his ancestors had done to them.

Even the discovery by Mrs Gardiner of a likeness of Mr Wickham- whom she had seen at a Christmas gathering at the Phillips - at a mantle piece, did not discomfort him. Calmly did he tell them that it was his late father's favourite room and everything had been left as he preferred it and that was that.

They soon reached the second level, and were shown into a sitting room which their guide explained had been just done up for his sister, who adored the room.

A picture gallery, and three of the principal bedrooms were all that remained to be shown. In the former there were many family portraits, which the owner took care to name each one's identity, along with a story about them which served to produce interest in the visitors who otherwise would not have dwelt upon a stranger.

Elizabeth soon discovered his own likeness, wearing such a smile as she remembered to have sometimes seen when he looked at her. The painting having taken in his father's lifetime, contrasted naturally with the reality, due to the passage of time. Elizabeth however soon noticed as well how much better the likeness seemed than the man himself, who was trying so much to hide his suffering.

With their tour of the interior now completed, the owner offered refreshment, which was politely refused, before escorting them outside. They walked across the lawn to the lake, where they surveyed the outside of the house once more, before entering a beautiful walk by the side of the water.

Here Elizabeth found herself by Mr Darcy's side, her Aunt having taken her Uncle's arm. Once more did she offer her apologies about their intrusion, once more did he brush them aside.

"I am glad you have come," he finished, "for as you know, I am joined here tomorrow by Georgiana and Mr and Mrs Bingley. I would be delighted if, providing you and the Gardiners have no fixed engagements, you could join us for dinner."

"I am sure we would happy to," Elizabeth replied, knowing that they had no fixed plans in the neighbourhood as yet.

They entered the woods, where Mr Gardiner expressed a wish of seeing the entire grounds, only to be informed that they were over ten miles round, causing his wife to request for a return to the carriage, as she was not a great walker.

Mr Darcy obliged them by taking them back the long but easier route, passing through the valley and glen on the way. He observed Elizabeth's regret at not exploring the coppice wood, and decided.

Instantly did he offer for them to spend the remainder of their time in Derbyshire at Pemberley, assuring them that due to the estate's position they could visit the other places in the county that they had planned to see as well as seeing the rest of the estate at their own pace.

After inquiring as whether they were imposing and being assured that they were not, along with the information of the Bingleys joining him on the morrow, the Gardiners were delighted to accept.

When they had reached the carriage he offered refreshments once more, which were again politely declined, and then bade them farewell until the next day. Lastly, as the Gardiners were climbing into the carriage, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. "Do you approve then of Pemberley?" He quietly asked her.

"I think there are few who would not," Elizabeth replied.
They moved to the carriage. Darcy held out a hand to assist her and then added, "but your good opinion is so rarely bestowed and therefore more worth the earning."

Elizabeth was too astonished by the reply to respond, as she took his hand and stepped into the equipage. She could only watch as he delivered his farewells and the expectation of seeing them for dinner on the morrow, before the carriage drove her away.

Darcy watched the vehicle until it had disappeared out of sight, then walked back inside his house. Only when he had reached his retreat did his mask collapse, along with the rest of his strength. Sinking into a chair, he put a hand to his eyes as the entire visit began to repeat itself in his head.

He had been overjoyed to see her, but now the guilt at that feeling had started to attack him in the extremes. It had been an indulgence, one that he should have left to Mrs Reynolds, rather than deciding to take them around himself when she had informed him of their arrival.

Yet he could not resist the temptation of seeing her again.

A knock at the Library door startled him out of his gloomy reverie. "Come."

"I thought you might like some refreshment," Mrs Reynolds answered, entering with a tray in her hands.

"Thank you Mrs Reynolds, but I am not hungry."

"It was not a request."

There was only one person at Pemberley who could overrule him by authority of relationship, and that was Mrs Reynolds. Darcy gazed up at the woman who had known him most of his life, and reluctantly allowed the tray to be placed in front of him. Slowly he let a little of its contents pass into his mouth.

His housekeeper was not satisfied. "William, you have had no breakfast, and no lunch. You must eat more than that." She sat down upon the sofa opposite him, showing no intention of leaving the room until the tray before her master was cleared.

Darcy carefully swallowed some more food. "They are to have dinner here tomorrow."

Mrs Reynolds smiled, knowing who he meant. "Good. Maybe that will persuade you to partake of the meal."

"Kate..."

"No excuses, please, sir. Your sister will be here tomorrow and you are a too awful object to greet her. Since your stay here you have done little to improve the neglect you have inflicted upon yourself since I last saw you. Rest assured, it may make Miss Bennet pity you, but it will not accomplish anything else. Promise me, that you will try to return to your normal well and happy self while she stays here."

"I promise, Kate." Darcy smiled at her. "Thank you." He knew however, that the assurance he had just given, would prove difficult to keep.
Chapter 24

Part XXIV.

"William!"

He caught her before she could fall out of the carriage, his smile almost as radiant as her own for their reunion.

Georgiana's journey to Pemberley had been a protracted affair. After leaving Rosings as she had done so with her brother in April, she had remained in London while he travelled to Derbyshire.

A month exactly was then spent in town under the chaperone of Miss Annesley, before travelling with Colonel Fitzwilliam to his parent's estate in Matlock, where she had occupied herself until the time had come to travel to Pearlcoombe Abbey, where she had joined the Bingleys in their journey to Pemberley.

Now, as she set herself back from the embrace he had eagerly returned, Georgie looked with solemn concern into his eyes, her own carrying the silent message that she had noted his neglect of himself and that she was most displeased about it. His reaction to it was all that she could hope for; serious acknowledgement, and promise to make retribution upon the neglect as soon as may be.

"Darcy!" The ever jovial Bingley cried, causing his friend to retain a hold of only a hand of his sister in order to receive the vigorous shake from the latter. "I must say again how well chosen Pearlcoombe is! How can I ever thank you?"

"There is no need, Charles, you know that. I only passed the description, name and location of the place on. You did the rest."

"Nevertheless I am grateful for your keen senses in smoking it out." He put a loving arm around his wife as he added, "we both are."

Darcy held out a hand, "Mrs Bingley I am happy to welcome you to Pemberley."

"I am happy to be here, Mr Darcy," Jane replied, her eyes grazing up at the sandstone front entrance. "Anne was right when she said that the place holds an enchantment over you."

"And there are none who are more so bewitched than its owner, I assure you," Darcy added as he lead them into the courtyard to the stairs and entrance hall. "I believe your sister said the same thing when she visited."

"Lizzy has been here?" Mrs Bingley queried in surprise.

"Yes with the Gardiners," Darcy replied. "Did you not know of their vacation in the county?"

"Of course, but we did not know the exact day they planned to visit here," Jane explained as they entered the first room of the house.

Georgiana meanwhile walked to another part of the house with Mrs Reynolds who had been there to welcome her home. "Dear Mrs Reynolds, how has my brother been?"

"I think you can see that for yourself, Georgie," Mrs Reynolds replied, their voices low and too distant to be overheared by the man himself. "We have tried to remedy the matter, but you know
how stubborn he can be."

"Only too well," Georgie replied. "I hope the presence of myself, the Bingleys, the Gardiners and Miss Bennet will reverse the neglect." She paused consideringly. "But he will only really recover if he heals himself."

Pemberley cast its spell upon Elizabeth once more she arrived there that evening, the Gardiners and their luggage in tow. She noticed the deeper effects it had in candlelight; the glow that the decor and furnishings emanated in result. This glow could be found everywhere in the building, including the owner himself.

For the first time in their acquaintance Elizabeth discovered herself judging him not as the husband of her late friend, not as a widower, not as a man of wealth, not as a man of influence, not even as her friend. She saw him instead as a woman regards a single man that she cares for great deal, and spends the night in his company contemplating what it would be like for the rest of her life.

Such a revelation was not realised until later that night, but it begun like the enchantment of the estate, in slow, soft, small incidences, rising steadily to a crescendo.

Nor was the effect noticed by the man himself. Concerned he was that her every whim should be seen to as was due of a host, but Darcy remained more focused on how he appeared by his manner and discourse to the party rather than awake to any new feeling the lady of his dreams might suddenly have.

The words of his housekeeper the night before had done a great detail to affect the concern he felt over how people saw and judged him. His natural reserve had assisted the desire, and he forced himself not to collapse and show the reality. A front of perfect calmness and health had to be kept, at least until it became fact rather than fiction.

Dinner was announced; and it was with surprise that Elizabeth noted her place beside Mr Darcy who was at the head of the table, which had been shortened from its usual length for twelve to accommodate conversation more freely.

Jane was opposite, her Uncle and Mr Bingley flanked them, Georgie and Mrs Gardiner at the end. Like the house the meal also served to charm its consumers, containing nothing but the best that the season and his kitchens could provide.

Darcy exerted himself to both eat and talk, and Elizabeth, being aware of his struggles in conversation, willingly assisted him, by requesting a history of his family. It was a topic that he was very familiar and very fond of, for the history had been the first thing he had read; a tradition in his family regarding all children.

This occupied them for the first course. By the time the servants had returned with the next, Darcy had realised that he had run away himself on the topic and apologised.

"Forgive me, Miss Bennet, I am being selfish. I have not even asked you about your own family history."

"No indeed, sir," Elizabeth replied immediately, anxious that he should not slide into his reserve. "It was I who asked you, and I was well aware of the length it might entail."

"But it cannot be very interesting, surely?"

"It is, I assure you," she answered with a light laugh. "Please continue."
And he did.

Night arrived, and the guests retired to their beds. Unknowing to each other Elizabeth and Darcy were the last to fall asleep, both their minds having too much thought upon the events of the evening.

Elizabeth lay awake for two full hours, her mind continually reflecting upon every nuance of the evening, from arrival to retirement. He had been everything she could of expected. It was only her feelings that she believed needed clarification and rebuke. She had no right, no right at all to suddenly think of him as a potential partner in life.

Marriage of convenience he may have had, but it was to a woman she regarded as friend, and who had passed on not four months ago. Every feeling in her should forbid it. This place and its magic had stole upon her unexpectedly, catching her off-guard, serving to awake such thoughts about a man she had known for ten months.

From this moment on she would make herself more aware of probabilities, such as the likelihood of a owner recently widowed wishing to inform no one in his parishes that he was at his estate for the summer so he could pass the season in the relative solitude that the building afforded him. She would not seek him out, respecting his right to mourn as any friend of his late wife should. Instead she would concern herself with her aunt and uncle's plans, and involve herself therein.

With Darcy, he spent most of the night seated in a armchair before the fire in his bedchamber, stroking his faithful greyhounds which sat either side. They, alert as any other dog to the moods of their master, had stayed by him from the moment he had allowed them into his present.

Silently had they followed him from the gallery, down the stairs to the Music Room an hour after the guests had retired, pushing their curiosity about the room aside to observe him leaning on the mantle, gazing at the pianoforte.

Just as silently they had returned with him to his bedchamber some moments later, watching with anxious eyes as he dismissed his valet, stripped down to his shirt and breeches, and sank into the chair before the hearth.

They had joined him their immediately, pushing their heads into his hands for a stroke and pet before he could sink into a gloomy reverie. Like their master, they knew that they had only obtained partial success.

Darcy lost track of how long he remained haunted by the flicking flames, his eyes fixing upon them as a marker to guide him back to the present, upon the instant that memories of the past threatened to overwhelm him.
Chapter 25

Part XXV.

My dear Lizzy, you and I have been such close friends for so short a time. I wish it could be longer, but I know that cannot be. I have to depart, if my wishes for you and my other dearest friend are to come to fruition......

Elizabeth opened her eyes, and the image, like any other dream faded way. Arising from her bed, she walked to the window, remembering the scene in her past where the words had come from. It was when she had sat beside Anne at Rosings, on that dreadful day.... she sighed.

Even now she could not recall the specifics of the conversation. At the time she had been too concerned with the need to make her friend content rather than the details of what she was promising herself to fulfil.

Before she could dwell upon the moment now though, her eyes and senses recollected where she was. Pemberley. She looked out, gazing at the prospect properly for the first time.

The grounds below her rose quite naturally and gradually into a hill, whose own foundation level remained the same until the woods, which seemed to almost surround the estate, over came its plush greenness. Straining her eyes, Elizabeth could espy two figures upon the hill, working in harmony the only way that man and horse excel at. Even at this distance she could, from the outline, determine the identity of the rider.

Indeed, it could not be anyone else; Mr Bingley was married and prone to later rides, while her Uncle preferred to hunt the trout. Elizabeth found herself fixed upon the figure until he arched the horse round to return to the house, whereupon she instinctively turned from the window to a chair.

She knew it to be ridiculous to think that he could discern her from where he was presently halted, and therefore put the irrational fear down to her revelations the night before. Verily now she still did not believe in the notion that the feelings which had arisen during one evening spent in Mr Darcy's company were more of a longer nature rather than the effects of Pemberley's enchantment.

He was an excellent man- she could hardly acknowledge otherwise, given her intimacy with Anne. Their friendship had presented her with a side to him which she might only now be beginning to learn if he had been unattached upon their first acquaintance.

And it was in this significance which the barrier lay. As a rational woman she could not ignore the reality, she recognised that. Had they met in different circumstances..... no, she should not give way to such supposing. There was nothing that could alter the situation between them. It was simply not meant to be.

Upon a hill far away, a rider sat upon his steed, staring at the house. He wondered absently if she knew that he had spent the hours before her arrival discerning which window was to be hers, for just this moment.

Loosing any desire to be attuned to his whereabouts or the time, he remained gazing at the panes, until he had almost imagined the figure in white who he had seen move away just as he had come round. Below him his stallion, as wild as its untamed ancestors, stamped a hoof and rapidly reminded him where he was. Flicking the reins he complied with its wish for exertion.
Arriving in the breakfast room not half an hour later he found to his satisfaction only his sister and Miss Elizabeth- how oft he was prone to drop her last name, wishing for his own to replace it - partaking of the bread and pastries his servants had laid out. Delivering a genial good morning to them both he sat down in his usual seat, and discovered, to his surprise, that, for the first time in months, he actually felt a desire for nourishment rather than just a need.

Georgiana noticed her brother's marked alteration regarding food, and unconsciously smiled in relief before drinking her tea. Her companion espied the gesture, but was unable to remark upon the emotion until their host had moved to sip his tea at the window, a custom she had observed from her days at Netherfield.

"Forgive me, Lizzy, I did not mean for you to notice it," Georgiana replied, her voice too low for her brother to hear.

"Then I shall not inquire further about it."

"Oh no, I do not want that. It is something I dearly wish to keep an eye on, and I know full well how rarely my daily pursuits cross his. Yet, the matter is so delicate..... and heaven knows I do not want him to realise my worry....."

"But..." Elizabeth prompted her.

"It is necessary. Since.... well, I'm sure you can guess, I have seen him take little, if any, enjoyment from eating. He eats the little that he does out of necessity rather than want. I know him too well to think that this will not last. It is his way when he dwells too often on things past. This is the first time in months that I have seen any change."

"I understand your concern. Do not worry, I will try to help, if I can."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," Georgie answered, her thoughts adding but I believe you already have. It was too soon for that to be voiced aloud.

Darcy returned to the table, and the rest of the occupants entered the room to partake of the repast, ending the conversation.

While Georgiana offered to show the ladies around the rest of the grounds, the gentlemen decided that their morning activity was to be fishing. As soon as breakfast was concluded the latter set off, their host regretful that formalities had to be observed, while the former dawdled longer, reminiscing over their travel delights.

Thus, many a minute of the morn was passed by host and our heroine fighting to appear all that could be expected of them and thinking about the other at the same time. He failed to lessen the quantity of fish in his estate, she found herself spending the entire walk wondering on his location and what distance he lay from her group.

His distraction soon led to his friend speaking almost entirely to her Uncle, and her own for her Aunt to smile at her other niece and their hostess and for them to return the expression in mutual understanding.

At luncheon the entire company reunited, and the weather turned for the sake of host and heroine. In the Music Room they sequestered themselves, Georgiana at the pianoforte, idly playing out a tune, the Gardiners in conversation with the Bingleys, Elizabeth at the window watching the effect of rain on the grounds, and Darcy quietly in the sofa by the hearth, his eyes never moving from her form.

The doors opened and the greyhounds came in, rushing for their master in complete disregard of the
footman that had only brought them to the room in a request that they be let out of their confinement for some indoor exercise. Their master brushed away the apology, happy for the distraction, his mental meandering having by now drifted into gloom.

Silently he greeted them both, and then watched as they moved from him to meet the others. Despite their size it was with grace that they moved to each person, allowing them to make the first move before sniffing their hands and prancing to the next.

With Georgiana they balanced their forelegs upon her lap, willingly accepting her joyful fuss of them, until the woman by the window caught their eyes. Solemnly they walked towards her, sitting down before her in almost a bow. Her own pupils lit up at their arrival, and willingly she held out a hand in greeting. Eagerly they stayed by her side.

Their preference did not go unnoticed. Darcy watched them not with surprise, but with the emotion of a man who had long suspected such an event to occur. A man who had foreseen that she would have such a way with everything that he owned, stealing all their hearts without any intent or design, but by sheer manner and character themselves.

A man who knew how well the woman had stolen his own heart.
Chapter 26

Part XXVI.

With the first day passing so agreeably to all concerned, one could hardly hope that the second would pass by with the same emotion felt by all. Yet it did, even going so far as to surpass the first.

The weather continued to prove satisfactorily for this time of year, that is as far as satisfaction can be gained by spending one's time in a typical English summer, being both good and bad, wet and dry, answering not only the requirements of our hero and heroine, but the rest of the guests currently residing at Pemberley as well.

Elizabeth woke to the second morning at the estate with cheerful memories of the pleasant day which had passed before. After the entrance of the dogs, afternoon had soon drifted into evening, bringing dinner. In the Dining Room she had found herself seated by him as previously.

Conversation was begun by him, an anxious enquiry concerning the company of the hounds, to which she had replied in a truthful and enjoyable opinion. They had continued to talk amongst themselves throughout the rest of the meal, the other guests happy to let them alone.

The formalities of separation by sexes followed, whereupon she had spent a half hour with her Aunt and Miss Darcy. Upon the entrance of the gentlemen, he had resumed his usual seat, which happened to be opposite her, causing the trio, quite naturally, to involve him in their discussion.

As a result of this first day, Elizabeth found her emotions unchanged. She responded to them this time however with a new resolution. While she could suppose herself to be affected by the estate for feeling the feelings she currently felt about its owner, she could hardly assume that he was feeling the same about her.

She should not even expect him to consider it. Therefore she knew that it was pointless to dwell and second guess those feelings. Nor should she ever hope that he would learn to feel them too. With this resolution in mind, she put the emotions to the back of her thoughts, and concentrated purely on the present.

Thus, our heroine spent her second day at Pemberley in the noble quest of helping Georgiana and her brother in law, Charles Bingley, in overseeing the health of their host. The latter had expressed his own concern to her during the evening before, and Elizabeth, her own sensibilities deeply concerned with what Anne would have thought of this, promised her willing assistance.

This she began today, the weather proving a help to her cause by not melting the frost of the cold night before enough to encourage the thought of fishing. Instead their host and the gentlemen spent their morning with the ladies, where Elizabeth and Georgiana banded together to involve the former in conversation, keeping him so occupied that when food came before them, he ate with enjoyment rather than necessity.

Darcy was not slow to feel the effects. He had noticed his sister's concern, as every good brother should, but until now it had not occurred to him that she would gain Miss Elizabeth's assistance in the matter. Before this day he had never entertained any reality in the idea that she might feel some part of the same concern and affection that he often felt for her.

The revelation both pleased and distressed him. He still felt guilt over Anne, and he was worried that the distraction of Miss Bennet's presence might lead him to unconsciously express his deep and
loving regard for her before either of them were ready to consider such a motion.

As an educated man he knew that his lack of concentration had to do with in part at least to the neglect he had shown in looking after his health, so he began to compensate accordingly. To the delight and relief of his household and of those around him, he ate all his meals, and threw himself not so very wholeheartedly into any estate work that might require his attention while he entertained, as he had been inclined to do so before the arrival of his guests.

Added to this, and in a conscious effort not focus on his feelings for her, Darcy sought to encourage his sister's relationship with Miss Elizabeth. To see Georgiana so much like the young woman he had witnessed before the summer spent at Ramsgate was truly a joy. He saw just how much both Anne and Miss Elizabeth had contributed to make Georgiana smile, laugh, and be confident with her feelings and opinions, and the results did much to heal his own heart as well as his sister's.

Throughout the second day therefore, while Elizabeth and Georgiana were encouraging him in the restoration of his health, he was often reverting to silence in their company, content to watch and or listen to their conversation. For this he had no other motive, only a desire that his sister recover fully, aware of the future when she would find her own love and move away from him. He could only hope that she had better success than he.

As the days passed, Mr and Mrs Gardiner bore witness the state of their niece and Mr Darcy. Both being keen observers, they soon detected how much each felt for the other, and the concern that consumed them enough to prevent any present avowal of feelings on either side.

It was a topic that the Gardiners often mulled over between themselves, with the rising worry of when, if indeed at all, the relationship might be begun. Due to Mr Gardiner's increasingly successful business, he could not lengthen their disgustedly short vacation in Derbyshire. Nor could they accept the Bingley's kind offer of taking Elizabeth home in their own time, for the Bingley's stay would only last one more day in the county than their own, for Charles still had a multitude of things to sort at Pearlcoombe.

Mrs Gardiner tried therefore to speed things along, but in vain. Usually Elizabeth confided in her everything that she could not discuss with Jane, especially now because of Jane's marriage, but so far she had not. Mrs Gardiner knew of the letter from the late Mrs Darcy to her niece which had yet to be read, knew why it had yet to be read, and could discern from appearance alone just how her niece felt about Mr Darcy.

However until Elizabeth made the move to confide in her, Madeline could render nothing in the way of succour. She knew her niece's character too well to expect anything other than a denial in response if she expressed her suspicions.

Madeline was also aware that it was far too early for either of them to begin such a courtship. The recent mortal departure of Mrs Darcy aside, it was clear that neither of them were ready to even contemplate such a possibility, let alone act upon it. A marriage of convenience for Mr Darcy it may have been, but Mrs Gardiner could clearly espy the guilt that still lingered within him, despite their short acquaintance.

Added to this was her niece's relationship with his late wife. For Elizabeth to even consider the idea Mrs Gardiner knew to be impossible. Every feeling for her late friend would justly forbid it. Months would have to pass before either of them would begin to dwell upon such a courtship without any feelings of guilt or betrayal accompanying such an idea.

So therefore Mrs Gardiner could only watch the couple she hoped so much for throughout the stay at
Pemberley, along with the constant and private prayer that nothing, upon this green and pleasant land or in their minds, emotions and fears, would hinder and or prevent such a future union. For what happiness such an event would bring, not only to their family and friends, but also to the couple themselves.
Chapter 27

Part XXVII.

The Gardiners and their niece passed only six more days at Pemberley before moving from the county back to town. With their absence, distressingly, went what little of their host's brief recovery, which they had accomplished during their stay. Mr Darcy felt deeply the effects of her withdrawal.

Within a day of the Bingley's departure to Pearlcombe, he sent his sister to Matlock, and returned to the cycle he had wrapped himself so much in previously. He ate little, slept even less for fear of the dreams that would haunt him, wore himself out so he would have no dreams, and threw himself into work on the estate.

His household tried in vain to prevent it. Mrs Reynolds, whom had the advantage of the others by being held in high regard, tried every day to get him to eat, sleep and abandon what little estate work remained, but without success.

Her battle ended with him taking the key of his library and study, and locking himself in both each day, leaving her no chance to disturb him until meals or the household accounts, which, due his lack of appetite, required almost no attention.

Darcy seemed to notice nothing of the worry and concern he was creating by the neglect to himself. The symptoms had settled upon him from the moment of her departure, and nothing could remove them except her return. He would suffer, but he would not allow her to see it.

Pleased he had been once in the knowledge that she cared for him, now he looked upon it with distress. He was not worthy of her concern, nor did he neglect himself just to gain her attention. She deserved a better man than he, a man who had no past that he would rather forget.

Summer began slowly to fade into Autumn, and he moved himself out of the house to help his tenant farmers recover the harvest. It was something he had participated in ever since he was a boy, and they welcomed him to their cause.

Yet this change of occupation did not result in a reversion of appetite. He accepted their offer of repast during the breaks, but often ate little or no dinner and frequently missed breakfast upon his return to the house.

Usually he was a sensible man and realised that this neglect would slowly kill him, but his affection for her had made him act irrationally for so long, that he no longer paid attention to the qualms of his conscience.

If he had thought the strong focus upon his estate would cure him of his fascination for Elizabeth Bennet, he was soon proved mistaken. More and more frequently would images of their time together come into his mind, causing much distraction. Only one look, or expression, or manner, or turn of phrase, only one of these would be remembered without any reason by his mind, and he would be lost for the rest of the day.

When this occurred he worked himself more harshly to the ground; adding riding and fencing-provided by a retired master from Lambton -to his pastimes, until there was almost no occasion to think of her.

This resolution had sporadic results. Sometimes he would go days without thinking anything about
her, and other days she would come into his mind no matter what he used to try and his distract himself.

As the days passed, suspicions of the reasons were awakened not only in his household, but also in his tenants and parishes of Kympton and Lambton. When presented with a view of the state of him, the populace of both villages and his land could only comment about it amongst themselves. None knew how, or even if a recovery could be brought on by themselves.

The household, however, did not lose hope of recovery. Mrs Reynolds risked retribution one day and wrote to Miss Darcy. She had little idea of what result it could bring, but it was the last avenue open to her.

Georgiana was shocked indeed to hear of her brother's debilitating health. Never had she seriously thought for a moment that when he encouraged her to visit the Matlocks that he had another motive than her happiness.

She knew it was not a conscious motive on his part to starve himself, but she also realised that he had sent her away so she could not see it, and try to persuade him out of it.

Immediately she wrote a reply to Mrs Reynolds assuring her that she would return at once, and that everything that could be attempted to help her brother, would be. What she did not mention to Mrs Reynolds, is that as yet she knew of nothing that could be done.

She knew her brother in grief and guilt too well. Reversing the process would not be an easy task to accomplish with any degree of success. She could guess at the nature of the long term solution, but also knew that for the solution to be a possibility, other things would have to be achieved, including a answer for the interlude.

At length, Georgiana summoned her courage and confided in her Aunt, Uncle and cousins the full history of events since they had last seen her brother, which, apart from Colonel Fitzwilliam, was well over a year ago.

The reaction to the discovery was great; everyone could not be more shocked, so far had the suspicion of such an event been from their minds. Only to Richard did the development seem not so wholly unexpected.

Discussion of what to do as by way of resolution then followed. First proposed was the notion that they arrived at Pemberley without warning, and confront him. Georgiana instantly discounted that:

"He would not look kindly upon us," said she, "and I doubt if he would admit anything to any of us. I do not wish him to be angry with me or Mrs Reynolds."

Second was the proposal that they persuaded him to travel to Matlock, a notion that was also rapidly discounted. They knew his stubbornness all too well, he would give too clever an excuse to refuse. Disguise of any sort was his abhorrence, but he would do enough to make sure that the excuse was a reality should they try to check.

The viscount then suggested that they took him to town. Soon that was discarded as well; they had all witnessed frequently the effect of Society upon him. Alexis Fitzwilliam was a practical man by nature, and therefore could not understand how his cousin could be so wholly consumed by the guilt of loving someone while under a marriage of convenience, and how his character would forbid him from reacting upon the affection after the end of the matrimonial barrier.

For days did they admit a partial defeat at this juncture, and return to their previous activities for
distraction in the hope it would bring inspiration. In vain did they struggle. Georgiana knew not what to do; to inform any one else would only make them concerned, and feel a uselessness in the inability to offer a solution.

At last then, just when all hope of an answer seemed hopeless, a proposal offered itself up for debate, and the nature of it pleased all.
Part XXVIII.

Pearlcoombe
August 24th

My Dear Lizzy,

I know you will wonder at my writing to you so soon after your return to Longbourn, but the news- or rather the confirmation -came so suddenly as to preclude otherwise.

Be assured I am well, as well as any woman can expect to be so upon learning of a little addition to mine and dear Charles' happy union. We expect to have Pearlcoombe noisy with childish delights in the new year.

We left Pemberley as you known but a day after yourself, and since then have had no news from the place, other than Miss Darcy is presently enroute to Matlock.

Charles believes his friend has much work to do on the estate, though he knows not what the work could possibly be, for he remembers hearing his friend involved upon it while in London.

Nevertheless it is not the motive of this letter to talk of him, but rather of your feelings towards him. Lizzy, I am not so involved in my own happiness to notice that you and he talked frequently during our stay in Derbyshire, and his often distraction while out of your company. Surely you yourself noticed his attentiveness to you?

I cannot recollect a moment during all the time we were all together there when he was not in your company. One occasion in particular comes to mind; he watched you throughout your performance at the pianoforte, and with such a look upon his face as to erase all doubt of what he felt for you.

You will protest to this no doubt, but I saw your concern for him. Charles has told me that he confided to you his concerns over the state of his friend's health, but I would not know my sister as well as I claim to if I did not witness something else, some other feeling from you than just concern and duty you felt regarding Anne.

If such a suspicion on my part is false, then I beg you to forgive me and we shall never speak of it again. But if it is
true, I beg you not to worry yourself over the rightness of feeling it. He clearly feels the same for you.

If your hesitation is a result of Anne, remember what she told you concerning their marriage. Such a future union would cause much happiness to your families, friends and especially yourselves. Delay is only needed for Society's sake, and since when did you much care for what others thought of you?

I hope, dear sister, that you will consider all of the above seriously, and send me a reply only when you have thought fully over the whole.

Yours etc,
Jane Bingley

It would cause considerable surprise to all concerned if Elizabeth, after reading such a letter, did not react with astonishment and consternation.

She had not been a week back at Longbourn when she received it, and the reaction that it caused was such as one would expect from one so unsuspecting that another had seen the feelings which had arisen in that county and the strange idea that he felt the same.

For a long time did she sit in the garden grove where she had first retreated to read the letter, pondering over the revelations.

When she had first returned to the bosom of her family, Elizabeth had been so caught up in talking with her father, her sisters and listening to her mother, that she had scarcely time to reflect over what had happened in Derbyshire, let alone any thought of him. Only now did she realise that her avoidance had be unconsciously deliberate.

For Jane had stated the truth. She did still feel for Mr Darcy the feelings that had been awoken in Derbyshire. The degree and intensity of them had not lessened, indeed quite the opposite, increasing so gradually and so silently in her mind that, almost immediately after reading Jane's letter, she could not protest them without lying to everyone that knew her, including herself.

But the idea of he actually returning those feelings was the thing which made her so astonished to remain where she was until her father came to tell her that it was time for supper. Joy at the idea slowly faded into uncertainty as she recollected the events of her vacation, striving to remember if there was any occasion when he had paid her more attention other than that due of a good host.

Jane's recognition of the recital evening could not be confirmed by herself, for she had been wholly concentrated on performing the piece to the best of her ability to notice nothing else. No other impression came to her mind that could confirm her sister's suspicions.

Yet, the thought did occur that she might be so determined to think that he could not feel for her what she felt for him so far that her own view of the stay was clouded beyond true and impartial recognition.

However, after just such a concept had occurred to her, Mr Bennet came upon her, and Elizabeth was obliged to forget the matter entirely for the rest of the evening. Indeed, during the days immediately after her return, she was unable to give the matter any attention, for other persons feelings required to be looked after.
There was her father to consider, whose penchant for her did not frequently conquer his abhorrence for the pen of correspondency, and as such had much to talk with her about which she had missed during her absence.

The occurrence of their daily evenings together in his study only resumed after her mother and her sisters had exhausted their need to tell her of all that had happened while she was away, and to ask whether she had acquired any new beaux.

Then, just as the days returned to normalcy in the Bennet household, their evenings were taken up with the addition of the Phillips and then the Lucases for dinners and social engagements, along with the rest of the four and twenty families that Mrs Bennet claimed amongst her closest friends.

Elizabeth was obliged to be all that sociable and dutiful of a daughter, as well as fending off her mother's entreaties on any new- and sometimes old -eligible personages, and make sure Kitty and Lydia resorted not to their usual wilderness.

Thus, it would be many days and many events would have occurred before Elizabeth ever had time to think upon all that Jane had written to her.
Chapter 29

Part XXIX.

With the arrival of Michaelmas signalling the full circle of the year which first drew all in to the events in Hertfordshire and its surrounding counties, the house that begun it all had been closed up for four months.

Since the quitting of Mr Charles Bingley, the owners of Netherfield had received no requests to lease the place again. The servants had been transferred or dismissed, its windows and doors shut up, and its game allowed freedom of its skies and grounds without the risk of being shot once more.

Speculation as to who might take up the place had long been exhausted by this time. Many- those who regarded Mrs Bennet as the least interfering and matchmaking of all mothers, indeed, compared to some in Meryton,- Mrs Long in particular -she was the mildest of all -had expected the Bingleys to remain at the place indefinitely and had been a mixture of astonishment and insulted when they quit the place in May.

The latter emotion soon dissipated in the wake of speculation that another eligible gentleman might take up the place, which accordingly faded into disappointment as the months passed and no such circumstance occurred.

Ergo, by the time the Netherfield estate began to display signs of life once more, the personages of Meryton, Longbourn, Lucas Lodge, the great house at Stoke and Hay Park, had forgotten about the place; though if you were to recall such a opinion aloud to them, they would deny such a truth entirely.

Its closure was reversed slowly; with the gradual arrival of a household staff, followed by the slow renewal of shooting on the estate, but so sporadic was the latter that it was hardly noticed. Only when Mrs Long happened, quite by chance,- at least that is her excuse -to pass the house, and look up to see the windows no longer shut up, that the news of Netherfield being let once more made itself known to the immediate neighbourhood.

Conjectures as to the identity of the new tenants duly followed, beginning with the brief expropriation of servants in order to try and gleam the names of who they served. However, unlike the last time, the servants proved difficult to persuade and refused to yield any information concerning whom they obeyed.

Eventually, the tenant himself, being a man of quick parts, caprice and wit, let the neighbourhood know who he was, by posting a notice in the local newspaper. The name at first did not bring full understanding to all, and most complained that it had been done so very ill; just Lord Edmund Fitzwilliam and family, without a syllable said of where he came from or what his family entailed.

Only one guessed the full at once. Elizabeth could not help but gasp at the news, knowing of one Fitzwilliam family. Confirmation came a day after the announcement, with a letter from Jane to herself, relating the news that the Matlocks had travelled to Pemberley and then set off for Netherfield, bring their nephew and niece in tow.

It was at this moment that Elizabeth returned to considering her feelings and the possibility that the man in question might reciprocate them. Indeed she could not foresee any other reason that would bring him to Hertfordshire.
She went to bed that night with the matter still heavily upon her mind, and perhaps it was due to this that when she woke the next morning, a memory she was unaware of ever having existence was the first thing to possess her mind. Opening her eyes she was disappointed to find that it had only been a recollection, so vivid was the sensation of his breath, his touch and his words.

*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you* that was what he had said, just before she had lost consciousness, that night when he had happened upon her at Hunsford Parsonage. She remembered now, just as she remembered him caressing her cheek, and smoothing away a curl of hair in accompaniment.

Despite the suddenness of this revelation, Elizabeth could not doubt its truth. Arising from her bed, she went to her bureau and opened a drawer, from where she took the letter that her tumult of emotions could no longer bar her from reading.

Hunsford
April 11th

My dear Elizabeth,

I write this with the knowledge that I have not long left upon this world, and with realisation that unless such a thing is written, the future I hope for you and my cousin will never occur.

Doubtless such news of my hopes will cause you much surprise, so without further ado, I will relate to you the whole.

I had not long been in Hertfordshire before I saw that William was attracted to you. Knowing my cousin as well as I did told me at once how events would proceed; he has never looked at any other before you and is unlikely to look at any other after you.

By the time of the Netherfield ball he was in love with you, of that much I am certain. The only thing that stood in his way, was me.

Depending on when you read this, and the progression of events, I know not how you will treat this certainty of mine. Astonishment will most likely be one feeling that will possess you, along with disbelief of what I write.

I know not how to assure you of the truth. William has not confided in me or anyone else what he feels, yet I know it. I witnessed all his unguarded looks at you, saw and heard all his praise of you that he felt he could express before he realised what he felt and thought there was a need to be circumspect.

I have never seen him in love before, but I know him to be so and with you. How you feel for him is less certain at present to me.

Since what he told you of Wickham and our marriage I know that you see him for the good and generous man that he is, but
whether you have yet to begin to regard him as someone with whom you could spend the rest of your life with remains unknown to me.

You have been such a good friend as to make me feel disgusted with myself as to what I am about to ask of you when I know my eternal farewell is imminent, but I cannot let the words remain unsaid.

If you have any degree, no matter how small, of the feelings that he feels for you, please tell him. I know him too well to know that if you do not, his guilt may drive him to the point of death over his for you.

I do not wish to make you feel guilty if you cannot express the feelings; nor do I wish you to feel obligated into carrying out such a notion anyway, out of some misguided duty towards me.

I only wish to let you know that if you do not tell him of what you feel, he will never have the courage to tell you. His sense of duty has so long been ingrained upon his character that the idea of you returning his feelings will probably never occur to him, unless you let some of your own show.

I know that you think him to be a good man, a good cousin, a good brother, so the possibility that this will grow into more and this hope of mine concerning your feelings is not entirely in vain.

I wish so much for him to have the happiness in life that he has deserved for so long. The happiness that I could not provide him, for we were never in love and never hoped to be so either.

I wish I had the time or the strength to persuade you to think and feel the way I wish you think and feel about him. But I know I do not. Therefore I can only hope that my wish is father to your thought.¹

So, dear friend, I bid you adieu, and hope that you do not throw this letter out in disgust, but instead consider all that I have told you and the extent of your own feelings towards him.

Anne.

The knowledge that her recently departed friend had not only known all along, but had also given her blessing to the matter, comforted Elizabeth almost immediately.

Her estimation of Anne was increased by this news; that she could be so concerned with the happiness of her friend and husband of convenience while she was suffering her fatal disease made her all the more worthy a friend.
Only one thing was left to distress her. That was that she had yet to hear of his feelings for her from the man himself. Until then, she could do nothing but hope.

1. "Thy wish was father, Harry, to that thought." Henry IV, Part 2 (1597) act 4, sc. 5. William Shakespeare.
Chapter 30

Part XXX.

The motive of the Edward Fitzwilliam, Earl of Matlock, in letting Netherfield, was twofold. Firstly, it was in the hope that the move would bring his nephew back into the land of the living; for it had been the solution that offered itself after they had been made aware by Georgiana of his state of health.

Secondly, it was also in the hope that it might persuade his own sons to quit the bachelor state. After all, if Hertfordshire had the ability to make one of the bachelor quartet- as he had referred to his sons, Darcy and Bingley in private -quit the state for matrimony and another fall in love, it must possess wonders previously unequal to those anywhere else.

Goodness knows he had certainly tried everywhere else. Where London had failed, he hoped Bath would succeed, and when it became certain that the latter was not having much success either, any other place and or county in whatever order after that. His last resort had been before this county, the residence of his sister, but, knowing his sister as he did, he remained convinced that any visit there was more likely to do the opposite, and scare them off matrimony all together.

At present, all of this remained unknown to the general populous at large. Indeed, as these were the private thoughts of the Earl, how could it otherwise? Yet, unknown to all, those thoughts and hopes were about to be revealed to one man of the neighbourhood, a surprise to all concerned, including the gentleman himself.

Mr Bennet- for it was to be he -came to a halt outside the front entrance to Netherfield and wondered for the tenth time that morning why it was he was doing this. Why he was bowing to his wife's wishes? Surely, there were other places of retreat where he could disappear to until it was safe to emerge?

Yes, but Mr Bennet's thoughts were wearied by his wife's constant discussion, her attempts to persuade him to call, and thus had dealt their revenge by persuading him that he had best oblige Mrs Bennet's wishes and proceed forthwith.

His thoughts however were also due to get their comeuppance. For they had failed to remember one thing. The unpredictability of fate. It had the ability to completely against one's wishes and plans without warning, reason, or motive, save perhaps just because it liked to do so.

In any case, whether it was due to a severe case of scarlet fever, different schooling, or just luck of the draw, fate was to intercede yet again on behalf our hero and heroine, by granting a circumstance and connection previously both unknown and unforeseen by all.

But to resume. Mr Bennet was shown into the Drawing Room of Netherfield, and introduced to the Earl before any idea of there bring some unforeseen past connection was made aware to him. Thus he was completely surprised when rising from his bow to be greeted by a familiar voice calling him to remember a friendship of old.

Edward Fitzwilliam, by curious luck of birth and education, had started off life as the fourth unnecessary son of the late Earl, who having already three others before him, saw no need to pay any special consideration to his upbringing. He was sent to Eton and then to Cambridge more out of familial tradition than actual design.
But, after having graduating from the latter, Edward soon found himself swept up the ranks from fourth son to first and heir. Barely a year passed to allow him time to adjust to this extraordinary state of affairs before the Earl had departed his mortal body as well, leaving Edmund little time to learn how to run the massive estate left him.

It is not the intention of this tale to describe in detail how he rose to the occasion and beyond, in fact the entire sequence of events is not at all important to us. All that needs to be said that it was while Edward was at Cambridge that he met and formed a friendship with Mr Andrew Bennet Esq. a friendship that had remained until graduation, when events prevented either of them from keeping in touch.

Both possessed the mixture of quick parts and caprice, the ability to laugh at the absurd and express profound wit and intelligence. In Edmund’s case though, he had a whole family to share the amusement with, whereas Andrew had only two daughters.

Their previous connection once remembered, thus laid the way for both to sit down and fall into conversation, relating to each all that had occurred between their college days and their present reunion. The quirk of inheritance soon drifted into talk of their offspring and relations, as Edward related his reasons for letting Netherfield.

Mr Bennet, naturally surprised at the state of affairs between his daughter Elizabeth and Edward’s nephew, had no unfavourable opinion of the latter to give the possible future match anything but his blessing. Plans, outcomes and solutions were set, waiting to be put into action.

Edward then turned to the matter of his sons. "Richard I know," he remarked to Mr Bennet, "is married to the army, but Alexis has no excuse. If he can only find someone as sensible and as practical as he then he ought to be blessed, but the woman has yet to be seen to exist.

"Lord knows I have tried to search for her. So thoroughly in fact that this county must succeed where others have failed." Edward sighed and took another sip of his port. "After that, there only remains my daughter Eleanor, and do not get me started on her."

Mr Bennet merely chuckled in reply. "If she's anything like my two youngest then I pity you, Fitz."

"Well, its partly my own fault. She's had too much of Richard's influence from an impressionable age, thus she far more content fencing with him than making bonnets." He set down his drink. "However she is also only eleven, so I do not need to worry seriously as yet."

Their conversation returned to other matters, and when Mr Bennet reluctantly rose for Longbourn, it was with a happy recollection of the meeting, and a healthier respect for fate than he had ever had before.

From an upper window, Fitzwilliam Darcy watched the father of the object of his affections until he had disappeared around a corner out of sight. He knew his Uncle too well to mistake what their meeting had been about. Whether he feared or welcomed the intervention however, remained as yet uncertain and unclear to him.

The day that his Uncle and family had arrived at Pemberley was still clear in his mind. Having been out in the wilds of his lands, no news of their arrival was given to him until he returned for dinner, and encountered them in the Music Room, where Mrs Reynolds had installed them and given them their bedrooms until her wayward master saw fit to return to play host.

Images of their shock and disapproval at his state returned frequently without warning to his inner
eyes, making him even more ashamed at himself for letting things slip so low. Having been raised on good principles he had always tried to live up to and beyond their expectations. This was the first time he had failed them, and the failure did not sit well with him at all.

However, he was at a loss for a solution. Restoring his health to what it had once been was immaterial if he could not restore his emotions or his heart to the same standard. He did not think he could spend the rest of his life just surviving on that alone.

But the state of both entities were dependent on factors out of his control. While he no longer doubted that he had done the right thing in marrying Anne for her sake and Georgiana's, not for his own, he doubted that it had done any good to his own mind and body.

Yet it was not in the nature of a good brother to do other than devote himself solely to the well-being of his sister, no matter at the expense to himself. It had been an arrogant presumption on his part to presume that a marriage of convenience to a dying cousin would not have any adverse affect upon him.

The fact that neither he nor Anne had known that she was dying until after their marriage had nothing to do with the matter. He had made the presumption and now he was suffering the effects of it.

To him, it was simply a matter of taking one day at a time.

How little did he realise that events would spiral out of his control, securing an outcome that would prove beyond all his expectations.
Part XXXI.

Having enjoyed the first visit, Mr Bennet could be reasonably assured of enjoying the second. And it was with this and more in mind that he returned to Netherfield the next morning.

He did not return alone. By previous design between him and the Earl, he had managed to persuade Elizabeth to accompany him upon a walk, which, by pure chance of course, would take them by Netherfield, outside which the Earl, would 'just happen' to be walking.

Naturally introductions would ensue. The Earl would then cry, "Oh, Miss Bennet! Do come inside, you and your father. My niece Georgiana has been dying to see you ever since we arrived here."

Elizabeth was thus caught. Realising now the truth of the expression upon her father's face, she chose not to react how he expected, and followed the Earl into the Entrance Hall of Netherfield.

Almost immediately were they greeted by the flying appearance of a tearful Miss Darcy, as she flew to Elizabeth's arms.

Miss Bennet was all astonishment. "Dear Georgiana, what on earth is the matter?"

Georgiana seized upon her with relief. "Oh, Lizzy, I am so happy to see you! Come, walk with me, we must talk."

With that she led her off to the other side of the house, and out into the formal gardens. The Earl and Mr Bennet observed their departure, smiled at each other in appreciation at the success of their plan's first phase, and retired to the Library.

Meanwhile Miss Darcy had secured her arm in Miss Bennet's, and proceeded at once to confide in her.

"Oh, Lizzy," she began, "I am so grateful to see you at last. Things have been so dreadfully amiss."

"My dear Georgie," Elizabeth could not help to entreat, "what is wrong?"

"It is William, my brother," was the response.

And so began the tale. Elizabeth found herself to be grieved indeed by the conclusion of it. Grieved, shocked. She could not doubt its certainty, for Georgie was too dismayed for it to be anything other than truth.

"And has anything been done, has anything been attempted to aid his recovery?"

"Nothing at all, until now. There was nothing that could be done, unless we found a means of getting him away from Pemberley, where he can avoid us. We hoped this move would deprive him of the excuses which he has used to escape detection."

"Then you must not lose hope. You have only been here a few days. It is too soon to notice an alteration."

"Yes, you are right. But still I worry. He is the closest person I have in the world, and I would not be able to bear his loss." Georgiana paused to gather breath, then tentatively asked, "Lizzy, would
you..... that is... I would be most grateful for your assistance."

"What assistance could I possibly provide?"

"Support. You help me achieve so much at Pemberley, when he was in such a state before your arrival. Please, Lizzy, it would give me so much ease."

"Very well, I will. I cannot bear to see you upset."

"Thank you, Lizzy."

Elizabeth took a longer, more solitary route back to Longbourn, an hour or so later. Her mind was overwhelmed by all that she had just heard and seen, turning emotions that, only a day ago, she had been sure of, into a conflicted mass of self doubts.

So surprised had she been at her father's design for their walk, an emotion which had then increased with every passing minute spent at that estate, bringing along with it shock and grief, both at Georgiana's words, and the sight of Mr Darcy himself.

Yes, she had seen him. After making her promise to his sister's earnest entreaty for her assistance, Elizabeth followed her back into the house to rejoin her father and Lord Matlock, only to encounter the gentleman that had been the object of their conversation enroute.

She could not restrain a gasp at his appearance. She had seen him neglect his health before, but it had been as bad as this. If they had been alone, her impulsive decision to wrap her arms around him would most likely have been obeyed, but they were not alone, so all she could do was stand and stare, as she took the full state of him in.

He had seemed as shocked to see her as she was to see him. Standing for a minute in silence, he had then enquired in tones of agitation after herself and her family. His frequent repetition of some inquiries showed plainly the distraction of his thoughts.

When she had asked after himself, purely to see what he would do in response; he seemed to hesitate, look longingly into her eyes, before answering, "I believe I have newly gained some improvement towards my previous state."

Never before had his implications been more clearer. Elizabeth had blushed, then looked away, only to see Georgiana smiling in appreciation.

Mr Darcy then took his leave, adding in farewell, that he was truly glad to see her again, surprising her by taking her hand in his almost frail own, and raising it to his lips.

It had only the briefest of kisses, yet it had been enough to make his sister gasp, and her to blush once more. She blushed even now as she thought of it, and as her other hand stroke the skin which he had touched, as if she could spread its imprint on herself.

This was the first time which she had encountered him with certain feelings and sure emotions of what she felt for him. At Pemberley she had believed herself to be under the spell of the estate, but now, her feelings were more clear, and had remained the same too long for her to doubt them any more.

Anne's letter had helped remedy a lot of her previous conflict. She wondered now if he had received one, and if so, whether he had read it yet. Would it contain the same thoughts that Anne had conveyed to her? Elizabeth could not believe that it would not be unable to avoid some mention of
them, lest she had completely mistaken her late friend's meaning.

Had she mistaken it? No, the words were too precise, the meaning too distinct to interpreted in any other way. Would he have received one? Or had Anne time and strength to talk to him about the matter? Elizabeth thought back to when she had been at Rosings, trying to remember if there had any indication which would support the last possibility.

*You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.* When had he said that? The night before she had learnt that Anne was gravely ill. Surely if his feelings had been clear enough to him then, it were a sign that Anne had talked to him?

Or had they just been struggling within him so long, that he had been unable to do anything else but tell her? Had he meant for her to hear them, or had he meant for them to remain unheard?

Elizabeth decided that it was the latter. This, coupled with certain phrases in Anne's letter to herself, showed that she had not spoken to him before then, only observed and drawn her own conclusions.

Did he still feel the same? Did she? At this moment, Elizabeth could not tell if her feelings were more to with pity at his state since the passing of Anne. Why had she been so certain of what she felt for him before? Was it because they had been apart, and her vanity had been flattered by his spoken phrase?

That is, if he had really spoken it, and she had not dreamt it, during the unconscious sleep brought on by the headache she had felt that night. Oh, she hated this self doubt. He needed to be well again, she needed to see him restored to his previous self, then would she be able to sort out her feelings for him.

Darcy did not know how he had managed to walk away from her. All he could remember was reaching the south entrance, walking to the stables, and saddling his horse, before riding as fast as he could into the wilds of the Netherfield estate.

He had not expected to see her so soon. Nor had he expected to derive any pleasure from it. He had thought himself too ill, too conflicted with emotion for that. Yet pleasure he had felt, along with joy, and in so much abundance that he could barely refrain from smiling at her.

She had seemed just as surprised. Most vivid in his mind were her blush in reaction to his last words, and then another at his kiss upon her hand. The decision to make that act had been completely impulsive on his part.

He had wanted to do so much more than kiss her hand. He had wanted to wrap his arms around her and kiss her lips. He had wanted to kneel at her feet, and ask her to be his wife.

Would he had followed through with these if they had been alone? Upon reflection Darcy decided not. He was still too unsure of himself, still too unsure of her feelings, to possess the courage required for such an endeavour.

Sometimes he wondered if he could ever be certain enough to do what was so desired for his future happiness. Was he being too selfish, at the thought of it? Did she deserve a man so dependent on her feelings for him for his state of being?

No, she deserved better than he. But Darcy had tried to tell himself that too many times. Always after the thought had crossed his mind, would he suddenly think of a certain look, or word from her, and that would be enough to convince him to abandon that noble intention.
Could he really be so sure that she cared for him? Or was he only seeing her pity at his neglect of himself, a part of the friendship she had felt for Anne, transferring to him, out of some promise she had made to her before she died.

Darcy halted his horse, and dismounted, allowing the stallion to catch his breath, and feed upon the grass before they returned to the house. Careful not to mark his breeches or jacket, he sat down beside the steed, clasping his hands around his knees, as he stared at the countryside beyond.

His thoughts however were still focused upon Elizabeth. What had she, he wondered, thought of Anne's letter? For that matter, what had Anne written to her? Darcy did not know, for he had reluctantly left Anne alone that day, returning only when she had finished writing them.

Never once had he thought of breaking her privacy, only following her request, and handing each one to the persons they were addressed to.

Only two things he had yet to do which he had promised her. Firstly, was Lady Catherine's letter. At the time of Anne's death he and his Aunt had still been on anything but speaking terms, rendering it impossible to deliver it to her. The letter still remained in his correspondence ledgers, in a bureau in the library of Netherfield.

Another letter, equally unopened, lay with it. It was Anne's letter to him. He still did not have the courage to break its seal and read the words contain therein. For the first time he wondered if she had ever guessed what he felt for Elizabeth. He wondered that, if she had, if the letter contained anything concerning it, maybe even going so far as to give her blessing to it.

Did he need her blessing? True, theirs had been a marriage of convenience, but they had always been close friends, despite the wishes of her mother, and putting aside that first factor, he would still like to have it all the same.

Was he being too presumptuous however? He had been so careful to conceal the feelings for Elizabeth; had they truly remained undetected to all? Before Anne had fallen gravely ill, Darcy had been certain that he had managed to hide it from everyone, but since her passing, the doubts had grown until he was unable to ignore them. Now he was even more conflicted.

His horse neighed, which, together with the ringing of the Church bells, announcing the hour, brought him out of his thoughts. Back to the reality at hand. It was late, and he should be returning, lest they send out another searching party for him. Slowly he rose and mounted his steed, a decision now clear in his mind. He would read Anne's letter. It was time.
Chapter 32

Part XXXII.

One might think that after the arrival of such a decision, the gentleman who had made it would stop at nothing, or forgo not overcoming everything and anything which might lay in the path before it, to carry out that decision immediately.

Indeed, Fitzwilliam Darcy tried. He went straight to the bureau that held the all important letter, placed the key inside its lock that posed as a barrier to opening the drawer, and turned. The click of the sliding metal barrier sounded impossibly loud to him in the silence of the room. However, barely had he turned the key, before another realisation came to his presently much tortured and taxed mind.

That he should learn to lock doors to rooms that he wishes to be undisturbed from. This was not Pemberley; he was no longer in possession of the privilege that comes in having one's own house and the right to bar anyone access from any room that he chose to inhabit for any length of time.

No, this was Netherfield; presently let by his Uncle, a relative that usually he regarded as one of the most astute gentleman ever to have existed upon this earth. The fact that he only usually regarded him as such was the point in question. For it was the very same relative which now disturbed him from his present mission.

As was custom in the way of intruders who have no possible way of foreseeing what the person that they have just intruded upon was about to do, the Earl noticed not the not terribly well concealed Medusa glare that his nephew was presently sending him. Or if he did, he chose to refrain from commenting about it. "Ah, there you are, Darce. I have the greatest need of you. Have you a moment or two to be at my leisure?"

Darcy was sure that the Earl knew perfectly well- at least he ought, by the looks he had been sending, else he was not as sensible and as intelligent as he regarded him to be -that his nephew right now, did not, have a a moment or two- for inevitably it would take longer than what he judged to be a moment or two -to spare his uncle.

Indeed he happened to perfectly correct in supposing this, for the Earl knew that his nephew did not, but just enjoyed seeing the expression of exasperation that was currently on Darcy's face.

Putting this aside however, Darcy also knew that his uncle was also his host, and that he had a lot to be grateful for to him at present, namely dragging him- no, dear readers, you have not misheard, he was dragged, indeed when he is being stubborn, how is he to be swayed otherwise? -to Hertfordshire so that he might accomplish what he had done so far; see the woman who held eternal possession of his heart.

Therefore Darcy replied that he had all the time in the world to serve his Uncle. Those were not his exact words you understand, for he did not want to seem sarcastic, or anxious for favour, but they still convey the general meaning.

But to resume. The Earl, having received the reply that he wished for, continued. "Excellent. Do you, by any chance, happen to know who Sir William Lucas is?"

Darcy almost groaned. He half knew what was coming next. "Yes," he said with the tone of a man who knows his immediate future fate and has no means of escape. "Why?"
"Because the gentleman is at present waiting to be admitted into the present of my family to pay his respects, and until now, I had never heard of him in my life before. I would be grateful therefore if you could come with me and be able to carry the conversation."

The Earl could not have asked at present a more difficult task. Darcy turned the key in the drawer back from its previous position, put the key back in his jacket pocket, and with one last look at the bureau, left the room with his uncle.

It would do well on my part as the humble author to mention at this point that this event did not take place on the same day as when we last visited this county. Indeed the late hour that the church bells signalled had been dinner, precluding Darcy from attending to the letter from Anne until the hour which he could, safely, without having to explain himself, retire.

However that hour was also late, and as a result it prevented him from being in any fit state to think calmly and rationally about what the letter said, let alone read it to begin with.

Thus it was now the late morning after, Darcy having been prevented from getting to the letter and securing the time alone needed to read and reflect upon it, until this first attempt. And this first attempt would turn out to be his only at the end of the day. For Sir William Lucas, having discovered that the tenants of Netherfield had a prior acquaintance as a relative, and this relative was with them, and in the mood to talk- or rather listen -spent most of the day in their company.

Being a man with unmarried children, particularly two girls who were both of eligible age, and a wife who had not ceased her pestering of him until he had relented to obey her wishes, he was determined to waste no time in finding out if there were any eligible gentlemen staying with the Earl, and what connection they had to him.

Finding out that they were heir, spare and nephew was more than he had dared hoped for. The fact that the spare was a full Colonel and the nephew was one of the most illustrious personages in the land, could not be anything else but an added bonus. True the latter had previously been married and had shown no interest in either Charlotte or Maria, but that did not mean that he did not stand as equal possibility as either of the other two as possible future son in laws.

Therefore, Sir William almost transformed into a certain cleric of our acquaintance, singing- not literally I assure you -the praises of his children until it was hinted more forcefully than the last, that he had taken up enough of the Earl's time. However, he did not leave without securing an acceptance to attend a little gathering at Lucas Lodge in two days time.

His duty now over, Darcy began to make preparations to get the solitude in the library he had previously failed to achieve. Circumstances however, were to prevent him once again. For Sir William had stayed beyond and past when the family usually ate, making the hour now time for tea, which precluded anyone from going off on their own.

So Darcy sat back down and exerted himself into answering the request of his uncle to acquaint him with what he knew about the neighbourhood.

There was at least one reward from this chat. Darcy discovered his uncle's previous friendship and its present renewal to Mr Bennet. Such a connection could not afford to be overlooked, and Darcy knew well the advantage that it might give him.

Due to his previous time in Meryton, he knew that Elizabeth was her father's favourite, and therefore, gaining his approval would give him some aid into accomplishing his hopes and desires for the future.
So when he did at last have an opportunity to make a dash for the library, Darcy did not feel that his imposed delay had been wasted. But by the time he did try again, he began to wonder if the entire world was preventing him from succeeding.

First his uncle and Sir William, now an express from his Steward. The latter, Darcy knew, was a very capable man, else he would never have employed him in the position he held in the first place. For him to send such a letter must mean a grave emergency, and he at once put aside the letter he dearly wished to read.

Naturally, an evening at Lucas Lodge with the assured attendance of the new tenants of Netherfield, was not something that Mrs Bennet wished to avoid. Therefore, once she had heard about it from Lady Lucas, she wasted no time in taxying her husband- he called it taxying, she preferred to refer to it as persuasion -until he agreed that they would go.

Mr Bennet, once he had heard the full details of the evening in question, was perfectly willing to comply with such a usually irksome request. However, he was not about to let Mrs Bennet know that. Such a lapse in character type would ensure the methods that she used to be repeated when another, less welcome diversion from his sanctum would be required by him, and thus he could hardly afford to lose the advantage which his strong resistance usually gave him.

Eventually, Mrs Bennet obtained her wishes. She then announced the evening to her remaining daughters. Lydia and Kitty naturally looked upon the event with great enthusiasm. A man in regimentals was not a thing to be missed. Indeed, a man not only in regimentals, but the rank of a Colonel and single, was not a man to be missed by them upon any occasion. They spent the entire hours until the event itself in a flurry of activity to prepare their gowns and themselves ready for the Colonel to fall at their feet.

Elizabeth looked upon the evening with more fear than willingness. She had no Jane to confide in, only Charlotte, but despite their friendship, even she had not been as close to her as her sister was, by sheer fault of relation. Added to this, was the quite unavoidable fact that she might see Mr Darcy there.

She knew not yet how to face him, let alone talk to him. The memory and sensation of his lingering kiss upon her hand was still so vivid in her mind, that she doubted her strength to remain calm when she next set eyes upon him.

Not only was there he, but there was also Colonel Fitzwilliam, with whom that, although she did not care for him at all like she cared for his cousin, there was still a prior acquaintance, and one that had not been in the best of times, indeed, quite the reverse.

There was also the Colonel's father, whom she had discovered, after the visit to Netherfield, her father knew very well. And knowing her father as well as she did, she knew that his friends were holders of the same characteristics as himself.

Therefore she knew that her every action towards Mr Darcy would be observed and interpreted; for, as she had been informed by Georgiana, every one at Netherfield knew of Mr Darcy’s condition, and possibly his history with her, which meant that her father knew now as well.

Yet, despite all this, she did not wish to remain at Longbourn that evening. The fact that she could not any way mattered not; if she had the opportunity to decline, she would not. A part of her that she was unable to surrender to all her fears, wanted to go, wanted to see Mr Darcy again, wanted to see if he still cared for her the way she supposed he had, the way she cared for him. She wanted to see if there was an chance to accomplish her future happiness.
Unhappily for both our hero and heroine, the evening did nothing to accomplish their expectations. For although both of them had planned to attend, one of them could not.

Mr Darcy was that unfortunate person. He had desperately wanted to attend. Despite the need to read Anne's letter, the need to see her, to be simply around her presence, even if no occasion in the evening granted them time to talk, was greater than anything imaginable.

But he could not. The express from his steward prevented him doing anything but shutting himself in a room away from the letter- so it did not prove to be a distraction -and working out the problem that he had been presented with.

In the end it was not as grave a problem as he had feared. Nonetheless, it did require many hours in the sorting out of a solution for it.
Chapter 33

Part XXXIII.

By the time of the day after the evening at Lucas Lodge, Elizabeth knew the two words she could utter that would make her dear friend Charlotte, blush. She had been astonished that only an evening had managed to accomplish this much from her practical friend, but indeed it had.

"And how was your time with the Viscount Fitzwilliam, Charlotte?"

Miss Lucas could not prepare herself in time. She blushed at the recollection of it, of him and of his voice and manners, before realising that she needed to deflect her friend. This was too fast, it must be too fast for her to feel so much so soon.

"We had a pleasant conversation, yes."

Elizabeth smiled at her friend with teasing eyes. "A pleasant conversation? As I recall, he seemed to be doing most of the talking."

"Lizzy,..."

"Whilst you stared up at him entranced, and when you did speak, one word was enough to have him suffer the same affliction."

Charlotte glanced at her friend, and saw an expression she knew all too well. She could no longer deny the truth, else be teased all morning. "I must confess to have enjoyed his company very much. But Lizzy, it is too soon, is it not? One cannot possibly feel so much after only one acquaintance."

"Especially if one has been so practical, never a romantic before?" Elizabeth added to her companion's comments. "Charlotte, stranger things have happened."

"I do not think that anything could be stranger to me than this," Miss Lucas replied honestly to her friend. "Nothing could have prepared me to believe this would happen to me. I am not like you, Lizzy. I do not have time in my favour."

"Charlotte, you are but seven and twenty! I know of at least one woman who is older but still unattached," Elizabeth replied. "And thankfully, she is not here to try sway people with her orange charms."

Charlotte laughed. "Lizzy, that is unkind."

Elizabeth smiled. "My dear friend, if you intend to utter Jane's most serious rebuke, please do not with a laugh, for I shall know that you agree with me!"

At this they both chuckled, before Charlotte sighed and came to halt upon the path where they were walking, her face serious once more. "In all seriousness, Elizabeth, can I really hope? Or is it too soon?"

Elizabeth thought over her recollection of the evening, remembering how the older brother of Colonel Fitzwilliam had spent most of his time in the company of her friend, and the looks he had constantly been in possession over when staring at Miss Lucas. "I think, Charlotte, that you can hope, if naught else. You have a good beginning, which makes all the difference."
Hunsford
April 11

Darcy,

What was it about your first name that made you not respond to it? What was it about myself and the rest of your relations, that made us never attempt to call you by it anyway? It was always Darce, Darcy or William.

I remember the only one time I referred to you as Fitzwilliam. You seemed to blink, uncertain. As if you were disappointed at the way it sounded. As if you had dreamt of it sounding another way, from the woman you were to marry.

I apologise for this non sequitur opening. Alas, I could not think of any other way to begin this letter to you. I struggled to open it with the same theme that I have begun all the others I had to write with.

You should see the other five versions of this that just become the latest fuel for the fire. I must thank you once for your excellent tutelage in throwing. My aim has improved so much.

You will find this letter disjointed I fear. Already I have drifted from my original intent. To resume now. The debate upon your name.

I know I was not the woman you wanted for your wife. I know that circumstances out of your control dictated this course to you.

I am not disappointed by that. I never held any illusions that we would submit to my mother and fall in love.

You were too much like a brother to me, and I know you always regarded me as another sister.

Nor do I regret our marriage. I am glad to have had some freedom from Rosings, and to steady Georgiana on her course for confidence after that dreadful Ramsgate affair.

I still remember your face when you told me of it; that first visit to Rosings since its painful occurrence. You looked so distraught, so sad. So ashamed at what you believed to be your failure to keep her from harm.

I know how deeply you wished to make your father proud of you, and how you thought him now ashamed of you. Dear Darce, he could not be more proud.

There was nothing that you could have done to prevent Ramsgate, unless you possessed the ability to foresee its occurrence.
The moment that I saw all those feelings of yours, I vowed to make you forget them. To help you in way that I could.

I did not expect marriage to be your proposal. I knew it would be difficult for you to find another companion that you trusted for Georgiana, but I did not expect for you offer the bargain that we entered into.

On a purely selfish basis, I do not regret our marriage. You helped me so much. Gave me many things for which I am so grateful. Freedom from Rosings has done wonders, never doubt that.

But, as I became more certain of my fate, I knew the union would not do you as much good as it has done for me. I know your disposition far too well.

Blessed with the view that you had of your parent's blissful marriage, I knew that you wanted the same for yourself.

Too many tragedies have come to you in your life, Darce. I am only too glad that they have not conquered you.

I know not when you will read this. I can only hope that it is not too soon after my passing, for I know that what I am to write next will affect you greatly. You would not be ready for it until I have been gone for months.

It is simply this; I know whom you love. I knew it almost from the first time I met her that you two were destined for each other.

I also know that my friendship and my passing will prove a hindrance to you both, so let me say, Darce, that I approve wholeheartedly of Elizabeth Bennet.

Do not attempt ignorance. You could not hide from me, we have known each other too long for that.

I know you will feel guilt for possessing the feelings that you possess for her, even though our union was always of convenience, and I know this guilt will continue long after I am gone.

You will be stubborn and resistant to this I am sure. All I am asking is that you do not let it affect you for too long.

If this illness has taught me something, then it is that we frequently take too much for granted, especially when it comes to our passage on this world. It is not the quantity, but the moments, that should be treasured.

I know you believe that she does not feel the same. But the foundations are there. All that need be added is time together,
and you being your excellent self. Then I know, you will find happiness in your second match.

I hope this gave you comfort.
Anne.

Darcy laid the letter aside, his fingers going to his eyes, brushing the tears that had formed during his reading away. As soon as the grief and gratitude had faded, he felt anger stirring within him; directed at himself. Anne would not be happy if she saw him now.

He needed to recover; to be himself again before he dared to enter that second match. He had neglected himself for too long. He must present himself at his best to the woman that he loved. Only then could he hope for the happiness he wished to achieve.

It was time to act.
Chapter 34

Part XXXIV.

"Oh, Mr Bennet! Such wonderful news I have!"

Mr Bennet, with the greatest reluctance, looked up from his book, and inquired, "have you, my dear? Pray, what is this news?"

Mrs Bennet's response was to wave a opened letter in front of him. She did it quite well, and, had it not been for the look of exasperation upon his face, would have continued. "It is an invitation from the Countess of Matlock, to have dinner at Netherfield this evening!"

"Has the Countess properly met all of us yet?" Mr Bennet queried. "For, I'm sure she would not be so enthusiastic to see us all again so soon."

"Oh, Mr Bennet! You take delight in vexing me! You have no compassion on my poor nerves!"

Mr Bennet would have replied to this, had it not for the entrance of his daughters, and Miss Charlotte Lucas. With a smile did he turn and welcome them into the room, noticing with some relief that his favourite seemed a little happier than when he had last set eyes on her. "Is this invitation for us alone, wife?"

"What invitation?" Cried Lydia.

Mrs Bennet set eagerly about telling her dear girls the joy that awaited them that evening. Her happiness at such notice from so prominent a woman, was only slightly marred, by Miss Lucas remarking, "oh, I am so glad you are to come as well."

"You have been invited then, Charlotte?"

"Yes, myself, Maria and my mother and father."

Mr Bennet observed his daughter carefully as she listened to her friend's response. Was he mistaken, or had her expression changed to one of slight apprehension?

"Well, my dears, this is a great honour! Lydia, Kitty, we must go into Meryton today, and purchase some new lace." And Mrs Bennet swept them out of the room with her.

Mr Bennet turned to his daughter. "And you, Lizzy? Are you looking forward to this evening's delights?"

To his surprise, his daughter answered, "Yes, Papa, I believe I am."

The evening soon came. Elizabeth, seated before her mirror, was deep in her thoughts as she waited for Sarah to finish her hair. Her reply to her father had been uttered in complete truth, though she had no idea why she was looking forward to the evening.

It would be only the second time that they had met since his return to the neighbourhood; by all rights she should be feeling apprehensive of what awaited her. Yet she felt perfectly calm. In fact, she felt perfectly eager to spend the evening at Netherfield.

Sarah quietly excused herself then to attend to the other ladies of the house, leaving Elizabeth to
survey her appearance. She was wearing the same dress that she had worn at Pemberley, having cast many of her newer dresses aside, convinced that they would not suit. Based on this, her mind seemed to be a mess of perfect calmness and absolute nervousness. She knew not what to make of it.

This calmness continued as she arrived with her sisters outside Netherfield. The Earl was there to welcome them, ushering them into the drawing room where the Lucases and the rest of the Fitzwilliam and extended family already sat. Elizabeth noticed with satisfaction that her friend was already seated by the Viscount. She also noticed something else.

"Miss Bennet?" Mr Darcy gestured at the empty seat beside him.

"Thank you, sir." Elizabeth replied and sat down. She noticed that he looked remarkably better than when she had last seen him, some days ago. He appeared more robust, less frail, and much more content with his surroundings. His wish for her company, indicated by his gesture for her to join him, made her bold. "Your absence at Lucas Lodge, sir, was dearly missed."

Darcy had great difficulty in withholding a gasp of surprise. Anne had been right, and he was grateful for it. It had been four days and four nights since he had first read the letter. Four days and four nights since he had decided to restore himself to his previous health. And he felt all the better for doing so.

It had been hard to realise properly for the first time how much harm he had done to himself, and the stress he had laid on his body by continuing to ignore it. The first day that he had begun was almost too much of a shock, but, by careful degrees, he had recovered enough to attire himself in the clothes that had been tailored to his more healthier form.

Now all that remain was to court the woman he held most dear. "I am sorry for it, but it could not be helped. My Steward had sent me a missive that commanded my immediate attention."

"I hope it was not anything bad?"

"No, thankfully it only took the night." Darcy proceeded to give her a brief but informative summary of what it had involved.

The discourse soon developed into a discussion upon the subject in general, and Darcy found himself marvelling once more at how much she knew, and on the many subjects that they were mutually interested in.

*How well we are suited,* he mused. *Hopefully well enough to have no more barriers before us.*

"Mr Darcy, are you well?"

He suddenly realised that he had not responded to her for quite some time. "Yes, I am very well. Forgive me, Miss Bennet. I was just caught by the reminder of a letter I had read several days ago. If you do not mind my asking, what was in Anne's letter to you?"

Elizabeth blushed, as she replied. "Just a wish that I would find happiness. Why?"

"I recently read the letter that she wrote to me, and I found myself comforted immensely by it. It gave me hope for something that, even in my dreams, I had never hoped to receive. And now, I have even more cause to hope."

"Why now, sir?"

"Because I have just received confirmation from the source of my hopes," Darcy replied, with a
significant look at her. Elizabeth gazed back.

The world faded away.

Morning seemed to give Oakham Mount particular beauty, Elizabeth found herself musing the next day, as she walked up towards the summit. The thought had been a vain attempt to distract herself from thinking about the previous evening. For thinking about it she could not avoid, as so much had happened for her to rejoice and gain hope from.

He had been present, and all that he had always been in her company, pleasant and gentleman like. Not once, save for the separation of the sexes after dinner, had he strayed from her side. Nearly all of the comments he had made seemed to be meant for no one else but her.

Did she hope too much? Elizabeth could not be sure, hence her long walk so early in the morning, before even the rest of her family were up. She had to distract herself, else she feared that doubt and uncertainty, and then their two opposites would fight to reign over her mind for the rest of the day. Even now they seemed to be winning the battle against her determination to distract herself.

She reached the summit, gasped, and came to an abrupt halt. Cautiously she blinked, convinced that she had imagined the sight before her eyes.

The figure turned and spoke, confirming his reality. "Miss Bennet," Mr Darcy uttered in greeting, "I hoped you would be walking this way."

"You did sir?"

He came to stand before her. "I did."

A long moment passed between them, as he gazed into her fine eyes. Then, taking a deep breath, he made a slight gesture to the path before them. "May I procure your company the rest of the way?"

Elizabeth assented.

Days passed. Now, nearly a month since he had opened that letter, Darcy stood in his chamber, another key in his hand. Like the first, its use allowed entry into a desk, although unlike the first, this desk was one that he always carried within. It was a Davenport, and it contained all that he needed to sort out his estate from a distance, and, in a secret compartment, something else.

Now he seated himself at the desk, lifted the flap, and placed the key in its hole. Gently he turned it, listening to the quiet clicks of the mechanism as it unlocked. Then he slid out the false front panel.

Before him lay a box, to which he lifted out another key and unlocked. Bringing the box forward, he surveyed it contents. Then he gently lifted out the smallest velvet box, opened it, checked the contents for its condition, and, satisfied with its state, returned it to the box and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Carefully he restored the larger box to its hiding place, and the desk to its previous condition. Then he rose from his chair and walked to the window. Once more did he take out the object that lay in the small velvet box, and surveyed it in the natural and slowly fading light. He knew should be questioning himself as too whether it was too soon, yet, strangely, he felt everything to be right.

It was time. He smiled and put the ring away. Gazing out at the view, he reflected over the days that had passed. Almost every moment of them he had spent in Elizabeth's company.
Without saying a word to anyone he had begun a quiet courtship from the morning they had met at Oakham Mount. Her enjoyment of his time with her had soon become easily detectable, allowing his hopes to turn into certainties.

And now, or rather more accurately, tomorrow, he had arranged to meet her at the very same spot they usually met every morning, and ask her for her hand in marriage.

This was not a sudden decision. Indeed it had been something he had planned for many days now, from the minute he had been assured by the lady herself that she returned his regard with the same depth of emotion as himself. She had not declared it audibly, but it had been clearly there to see in her expression as she spoke to him.

Darcy could barely believe his good fortune. All that he hoped for now, was that she said yes.

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**Part XXXV.**

"You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you. In declaring myself thus I am fully aware that this revelation will cause great surprise, and, amongst certain people, outright suspicion of my motives. It will also result in a complete reversal of my character."

He gently took her hands in his own. "Yet I cannot help nor deny what I feel for you. I had never expected to feel so much, indeed to feel anything of this nature at all. It has come upon me so suddenly, without any forewarning on the practical bent upon which my character frequently,- perhaps now too frequently -relies. So I beg you, most fervently, to relieve me from my suffering and consent to be wife."

Charlotte could not refrain from gasping at such a speech. She had never dared to hope that he would ever make such a request to her. Or that her response would be so willing to comply with his every wish. "My lord, I........."

"Alexis, please, my darling."

Miss Lucas blushed but managed to answer. "Alexis, I would be...... that is I......" she paused and gathered her composure. "Yes."

He seemed at first not to hear her, but then a smile came upon him, and he turned to face her once more. If Charlotte had dared to glance at him she would have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight became him, but she could only listen, as he told her how much she had come to mean to him in so short a time.

They walked on, without knowing in what direction. There was too much to be thought, and felt, and said, for attention to any other subjects. Alexis offered Charlotte his arm, and they walked as closely together as propriety allowed, while they discussed the surprise that, as each discovered, they had both felt, in realising their feelings and developing attachment to one another.

"I was never a romantic you know," Charlotte remarked to him, "my only desire was a comfortable home. At my age I had long given up any hope of finding anything more. But then you arrived, and suddenly, every conviction I had previously believed myself to hold true, was swept away, and their place arose this."

"And it made you uncertain for the first time in your life," Alexis continued, so in tune were his feelings with her own, "I know, I felt the same thing. Society and the Ton had taught me to be forever on my guard. To expect nothing true from anyone, and to always be prepared for an ulterior
"Then I met you, and all those cautions were swept away. I realised that my practical bent, had been a result of the society to which I had been raised with from birth. I had no expectations concerning romance, because I never believed I would fall in love,....... until now." He turned and raised her hand to his lips, uttering, "dearest, loveliest Charlotte."

All this and more did Miss Lucas have the honour to raise to her friend the very next day; when she and Elizabeth were out walking, after the news had just been made public to the neighbourhood.

"I am so happy for you, Charlotte," Elizabeth replied, with such a smile, as to know that she was in earnest. "And what did his family say?"

Miss Lucas went on with her tale then, describing how, when they had returned to Netherfield, a single glance from the Earl to his son had been all that was necessary to make it known what had passed during their walk. Barely a minute later and the Viscount was commanded to depart for the Lodge, to ask her father's consent.

Elizabeth bade her friend her congratulations once more, and then returned to Longbourn, where the cries of her mother's despair that Lady Lucas was soon to have a connection in the peerage could be heard throughout every room of the house. Silently, she sighed. It was not that she did not feel truly happy for her friend, it was just that she could not help but feel envious at the same time.

She passed the door to her father's study at that moment, and noticed to her surprise, that the door was open. Looking up, she met his eyes, as he briefly moved them from his book, and called to her, "ah, Lizzy, you are back. There is a gentleman waiting for you in the parlour."

Elizabeth could not be more surprised. Hardly daring to hope, she opened the door and stepped inside. A single look assured her not to despair; it was he. She executed a curtsey, and verbally announced her presence. "Mr Darcy, forgive me. Have you been waiting long?"

He had been facing the window, and seemed to instinctively know of her immediate arrival, having turned round upon the moment of her entrance, though unbeknownst to her. A silence arose as he took in the vision before him, scarcely daring to believe that the moment had come.

"No not at all," he replied softly. Leaving his habitual place of retreat, he walked back into the centre of the room, until he stood barely a step apart from her. For a moment he remained thus, gathering his faculties. Then he reached out and took her hands in his, bringing them to his lips for a lingering kiss, causing her to raise her eyes to his face; in hope and anticipation.

Quickly did he confirm both of those emotions.

"Elizabeth," he began huskily, uttering her name as one would a fervent prayer, "you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you. How long I have felt such feelings, and how deeply they run through me, calling upon me to relieve their sufferings.

"I cannot fix upon the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words which lay the foundation. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun. With each passing moment spent either in or without your company, they have increased tenfold, until I could no longer delay in silence."

He withdrew one of his hands and took out the ring which had been lying in wait in his pocket. Holding it before her, he finished his proposal. "Please will you do me the honour of allowing me to become your husband?"

Elizabeth could do naught else but utter her next words. "I will."
His response was to breath a sigh of blissful relief, and then with a smile, slip the ring on to her finger. It was thus her turn to gasp as she noticed it properly for the first time. "This is not the same ring that........" she found she could not utter Anne's name, for fear of making him reserved.

"No," he replied, understanding her half-finished query. "The Darcy Jewels contain many engagement rings amongst them, each in their own way unique to their owner, and I could not refrain from continuing the tradition by buying a new one to grace your hand. Have I chosen correctly?"

"Oh yes, amethyst is my favourite gemstone. How did you know?"

He smiled. "I obtained the intelligence from Miss Lucas and your sister Jane." He brought the hand to his lips, laying another kiss upon it. "Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth."

With such a compliment, she could not fail to disappoint him. "Fitzwilliam."

The next moment she was in his arms, and he was kissing her with passionate reverence. Only when he had to break to draw breath, did he explain. "Anne was right."

"Right about what?"

"She began her letter to me with a query about my hesitation over anyone using my full forename. As if somehow I had always imagined it to sound right when uttered by only one person. And, until now, I had never realised that truth.

"I have spent my life searching for the one woman who could convey all she felt by one utterance. And now I have found her." He kissed her again, his hands leaving hers to entangle themselves in her hair, until the both of them were too breathless for either words or thoughts to pass between them.

Guiding her to the window, they stood surveying the reflection it conveyed; of their contented embrace, with finely matched eyes of the same depth of devotion to one another. Darcy raised his head, letting her rest hers against him underneath his chin, and kissed her hair in blissful contentment. "How long have I waited for such happiness," he softly declared to her. "I love you, Elizabeth."

"I love you, Fitzwilliam."

How long they stood there neither knew, and, of those that discovered them, none dared to tell nor intrude. Mr Bennet was the first and the only, having quietly left his retreat to determine if all had gone the way he had predicted it would.

Once he had obtained visual confirmation, he silently withdrew, and returned to his sanctum in order to contemplate the happiness he felt for his favourite, and the depth of the loss he would have to bear when she parted for Pemberley.

Afternoon had faded into evening long before the suitor parted from his fiancee to seek consent from her father. He emerged from the room half an hour later, with an agreement and an invitation to dinner, which he happily accepted.

Returning to her side, he remained thus in silent contemplation the rest of the night, while the declaration of their future union was left unannounced until the morrow.

"Did you know how I felt?" He could not help asking when she saw him to his carriage in the darkness of the night.
"Know, no. Hoped, wished that you did, yes." Elizabeth smiled at him, as he silently listened to her reply, marvelling over how the starlight seemed to be mirrored in her fine eyes. "Anne's letter had given me her view, but I could not be certain. Even if I had truly heard those words."

"What words?"

"When I stayed behind at Hunsford with a headache, and you came over. You caught me as I fainted, and I thought I heard you utter what you began your proposal with."

"I did," he replied, amazed and pleased that she had indeed heard the words he had never intended her to hear then, having not the courage nor the position to utter them. "Did you also," he asked softly, "feel this?" He repeated the kiss he had given her that night.

"I did," she answered with a blush, "but I never realised until now."

He came to a halt outside his carriage, turning to face her. "Goodnight, Elizabeth." He kissed her again.

"Goodnight Fitzwilliam." Parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say goodnight till it be morrow.

Part XXXVI.

"A report of the most alarming nature reached me two days ago. Though I know it to be a scandalous falsehood, though I would injure her memory so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, so that I might make my sentiments known to you. And to have the report universally contradicted."

Darcy looked at his Aunt sadly. "I am sorry, Lady Catherine, but to have the report universally contradicted is impossible. I am engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and we will marry as soon as every thing required can be sorted."

"This is not to be borne! Nephew, I insist on being satisfied! Have you lost all sense of reason?"

"No, in fact, Aunt, I do not believe I have never been more sensible in my life." Darcy stood up from his chair and leant against the desk.

To the casual observer, this may have looked like a relaxed posture, but to those that knew Fitzwilliam Darcy well, it was one of barely restrained anger. "You can have no reason to object to what is my own life. You have had no claim on it whatsoever."

"Have I not? Was it myself who planned, while you were in your cradles, to marry you to my daughter?"

"Yes, but the arrangement was never a formal one, only a wish of yourself. The only reason I entered into the match in the first place was because I had Anne's agreement that it was solely for the sake of Georgiana and Anne herself. Why, now that I am unattached once more, should I hold myself back from marrying again?"

"Because honour, decorum, prudence,- nay interest, forbid it!" Lady Catherine replied, her voice rising once again beyond the levels of normal. She paced for a while in front of him and the desk that he leant upon, in proud, forceful strides.

Suddenly she stopped and turned to him again. "I see your design! And now, perhaps, I am not quite so displeased. The continuation of your family's line is of course a priority, I quite understand. But
surely you could have made a better choice, from among those of your own circle."

"Lady Catherine, to suggest that my marriage to Elizabeth is due to no other desire than to procure an heir, is an insult to both her and myself. I have asked her to be my wife out of no other interest than everlasting love, and she has replied to me with the same."

"You may believe that nephew, if you choose, but her arts and allurements have only lead you to believe this. She has drawn you in."

"Quite the contrary, Aunt. It is a result of mutual attraction on both sides."

"Oh this is not to be endured! The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connection, or fortune. If you were still possessed by sense, you would not wish to lower yourself out of the sphere in which you have been brought up."

"In marrying Elizabeth, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. I gentleman, she is a gentleman's daughter: so far we are equal."

"But who is her mother? Who are her Uncles and Aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition."

"Elizabeth's connections do not matter to me," Darcy replied, by now almost beyond his limit, "thus they can mean nothing to you."

"Unfeeling, selfish, nephew! You refuse to oblige me? You refuse to obey the claims of duty, honour and gratitude. You are determined to ruin yourself."

"The only thing I am determined in, Aunt, is to act in a manner which will constitute my own happiness without reference to you, or to anyone so wholly connected to me."

"And this is your final resolve? Very well, I shall know how to act. You are aware that if you follow this course of action I shall endeavour to do everything in my power to ensure that you do not inherit Rosings upon my death?"

"I do not care whether or not I get Rosings!" Darcy snapped, finally losing his control.

"You do not care it seems about a great deal that concerned my daughter!"

"On the contrary, Aunt Catherine, there is one matter that I care particularly about. Anne informed me that she wished any mourning I did for her not to interfere with any future happiness my life may entitle me to. I am fully respecting her wishes in choosing to marry Elizabeth Bennet."

"When did she inform you of this?"

"Anne wrote letters a month before her death, to all her family members, entrusting me to give them out upon her death. One such was addressed to me, detailing the wish that I have just pointed out to you."

He walked to his bureau and opened the drawer that contained them, lifting out the one Anne had addressed to her mother, before returning to his previous position. "And here is yours."

Lady Catherine took the letter, and then strode out of the room. Darcy waited until the door was closed, then drew himself up to his full height, and breathed deeply until he had expelled the rest of his temper.
Then he turned and apologised to his companion, who had all the while, remained unnoticed by Lady Catherine. "I apologise Sir, that you had to witness such an outburst. Let me assure you now that my other relatives do not regard the match in the same way as Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"I have no need for that assurance," Mr Bennet replied, "knowing your uncle as well as I do. The only assurance I needed in fact, has already been given to me."

"And that was?"

"That you would be willing to defend my Lizzy against the hounds of hell if need be." Mr Bennet smiled. "I think you shall do quite well, Mr Darcy. Now, shall we return to the settlement arrangements?"

"An excellent idea," Darcy replied, "if first, you will permit me to fetch Elizabeth. I would like her to be consulted on this."

"Just as you should, just as you should," Mr Bennet commented. "By all means, though do not tarry longer than necessary."

Darcy bowed and walked to the door. When he had gone, Mr Bennet grumbled loudly for a while on the annoyance of relatives, and then settled back into the quiet alcove, as he waited for his daughter to return.

Several days had passed since the announcement to the general populous at large that Mr Darcy was to wed Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Many had rejoiced at the match, and almost as many despaired, as it meant another bachelor gone, and another reason for Mrs Bennet to gloat. Her husband was just thankful that none of them bar himself and his daughter knew the true wealth of his prospective son in law, which came close to doubling what had been speculated as per annum.

With both weddings now planned to take place later in the year, the majority of days were spent by the Bennet and Lucas families at Netherfield, as the various arrangements required were sorted out to everyone's satisfaction.

Needless to say one person had not been satisfied. Lady Catherine, even after reading her daughter's letter, was of the opinion that everyone had lost their sanity along with their reason, and retired to Rosings immediately, calling her solicitors, with whom she instantly set about restoring the old entailment attainer, ensuring that Rosings Park would pass to Sir Lewis' younger brother after her death.

That event came quickly. Barely a month after the marriage of Mr Darcy to Miss Elizabeth Bennet had passed when the papers published the sad news that Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings Park had suffered a stroke, and had died, leaving the estate to her late husband's younger brother.

Despite their less than harmonious relations, the Darcys along with the Matlocks visited the estate soon after the new owner had settled, and had the fortune to see that Robert de Bourgh was nothing at all like his late brother and sister in law.

A single but widowed gentleman, with a secure self made fortune, he also had one daughter, who was to inherit Rosings and all his investments.

It was here that Lady Catherine had the misfortune to have her wish of no one connected to her family inheriting Rosings swept under the carpet, as Richard Fitzwilliam fell in love with Anastarsia de Bourgh, and married her within a year of their acquaintance.
As for his older brother, Alexis and Charlotte married a day before their cousins, and lived the rest of their lives in the greatest felicity and comfort.

They spent most of their time in between Matlock, Pemberley and Pearlcoombe; where they would keep company of the Bingleys and the Darcys, as they enjoyed the happiness their meeting had bestowed upon them. As their children grew, it soon came to pass that there were many a union between all.

And Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam, who presently are stealing a few moments of solitude in the hallway of Netherfield, before joining Mr Bennet and sorting out the settlements, have yet no idea of the happiness that awaits them after their marriage. All they have is the knowledge that their lives will, after such a long wait, surely be bliss.

We leave them now, in each others arms, their lips entwined in an amorous embrace, as all thoughts of the future fade away from their minds, leaving only the moment to relish upon.

*The End.*

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