Hindsight and Headaches

by Nortothepoweroften

Summary

Modern AU, genderflip. Darcy and I have had a tumultuous relationship to say the least, full of hard lessons. Hopefully if you read this you can avoid some of them. This is the story of how our pride, prejudice and one vicious snake of a man nearly prevented us from happening. Disclaimer: I don't own Pride and Prejudice, I'm just playing in the sandbox.

Notes

I'd like to acknowledge on of my favourite unfinished fanfics that inspired me to write this, 'And this is what you think of me?' by Tulina. Despite the fact it remains unfinished it is still the greatest modern era gender flip fic I've ever read and possibly the best modern era fan-fic I've ever read PERIOD.
Parties... I have an interesting relationship with parties. I like the excuse to have all my friends in one place, but I'm not so certain on having to deal with crowds of potentially drunk people. The people watching is fun you know, but being the one sober guy at a party quickly gets old. I really can't hold my liquor. Its a side effect of being small, well, that and not being able to reach things on high shelves.

There are some nice things about parties though. I like dancing. Mum was one of those scary people who pushed me and my oldest sister Jane into competitions when I was younger and I'd found it rather like riding a bike. You never really forgot. I made a lot of friends at parties as well; I even met Darcy at a party.

Darcy is probably the best thing that's ever happened to me. She's a bit of a force of nature, but more of a glacier than a hurricane. I should probably mention right now however, that our first meeting was less than ideal. She was in a place she didn't know, with people she'd only just met and deeply uncomfortable. Darcy has never been the best at first impressions. She's spiky and if you act like I did at the start, you never bother to see past the spikes.

The party was William Lucas' sixty-somethingeth birthday. William is a nice older man who used every birthday as an excuse invite all of his extended family, friends and neighbours to his very large house to celebrate. William's birthdays were always fun; you don't really see anyone utterly smashed at the birthday of a man over 60, except for those over 60 of course. I knew plenty of people and I could always chat with Charlotte, William's daughter. She's much older than I am, but we had always got along well and been fairly close, despite an age gap of nearly 10 years.

Charlotte and I had been busy chatting up by a wall where I could keep an eye on Lydia and Kitty, my two younger sisters and ensure they didn't try to sneak any alcohol. They'd were drinking punch, which I was pretty certain someone, probably old William come to think of it, had spiked with alcohol. Not something I could do much about. Mum was here and I was pretty certain she'd back them. It was at that point I felt an elbow in my side.

"There's the new neighbours," said Charlotte, gesturing with her drink to a small group of people standing near to William.

"Their last name's Bingley right? Mum mentioned them." I was standing with my second cider in hand, so that people would stop trying to get me drinks.

"Of course she would have," replied Charlotte smirking. "Charlie and Caroline are both single."

"Ah. Of course." And here I was assuming they were an odd couple.

Mum had never liked that Jane and I were single. At that point she was constantly trying to get us to meet every single person she could find. This was completely ignoring the fact that Jane and my friends were mostly single too. She wanted to have a hand in it; a problem since Mum is neither subtle or the sharpest tool in the shed. I know this probably sounds like an awful thing to say about my own mother, but I can't lie about what my parents are.

Charlie was his same, eternally friendly self I'd grow used to when I finally met him. He seemed to be enjoying himself already. Caroline was busy being Caroline, something I'd also grow used to when I got to know her too.

"And whose that?" I asked, gesturing towards the tall woman standing slightly behind Charles,
arms folded, face closed.

“That's Darcy. Glad to see someone's caught your eye.” Charlotte smirked at me and I rolled my eyes.

“Seriously? You too?”

“Oh don't act like that. She's pretty.”

Just for the record, Darcy is more than pretty; she's beautiful. She's about 6 feet tall, elegant and dark haired. She speaks with a polished British accent, has the clearest laugh you've ever heard and has hips that sway in a way you don't see outside of movies and is almost impossible to replicate. Darcy is quite possibly my ideal woman on a purely physical level, ignoring all emotion.

I noticed a number of other people eyeing her up while Charlie was chatting away to William. But her face was under lock down, her posture was defensive and so in my eyes I only saw her as merely pretty.

“I'll drift over,” I conceded. Jane was being practically towed along by Mum and I'd rather things not get too awkward for my sister. Plus maybe I was a little curious about Miss Tall, Dark and Icy. That's probably part of the reason for how she reacted later.

“Hey Jane, Mum,” I said as we appeared at their elbow.


“Yeah,” I said as we reached William.

“Ah, Eli, Jane! And the lovely Mrs Bennet. I don't believe you've met Charlie and Darcy.” William was properly sloshed by this point, his cheeks red, but he's a harmless drunk. “Charlie’s moved in down the end of the drive.”

“Lovely to meet you,” said Charlie, shaking my hand and then Jane's, holding hers a little longer. Charlie's always had a gift for making friends, especially with girls. Charlotte quietly led her dad and my mum away, grinning wickedly. Traitor.

I caught Darcy's eyes on Charlie and Jane and smiled, the smile almost fading when it ran into Darcy's patented ice wall. “Nice to meet you, Darcy.”

“Likewise.”

It didn't look likewise. Darcy crossed her arms slowly and deciding it was a lost cause, I turned back to Jane and Charlie to find them disappearing off towards the other dancers. Darcy watched critically.

“So, I've heard your from England,” I said, making conversation.

“Derbyshire,” said Darcy, nodding stiffly.

“And how are you finding Melbourne?”

“Perfectly acceptable,” she said, smiling awkwardly before stepping backwards. “Excuse me.”

And like that she was gone. Charlotte was baby sitting several very drunk people and could probably use some company, but my mum was getting loud. Jane was dancing with Charlie and I was on my own.
I danced for a bit but eventually I found myself leaning against a wall, nursing my second cider which I'd picked back up from where I'd left on a window ledge, watching Jane giggling with Charlie, Lydia and Kitty hitting on John Lucas and Darcy standing close by, up against the wall too.

Charlie eventually moved across to the drinks table and picked up three glasses, before heading over to Darcy.

“Darcy.” He handed a glass over to her, smiling.

“Charlie,” she replied. There was the ghost of a smile on her lips.

“Darcy,” said Charlie, sounding exasperated.

“Charlie.” She looked amused.

“You can't just spend every party standing by a wall,” he said, turning to lean next to her.

“Yes I can,” she said, taking a sip.

“No, you can't,” replied Charlie, trying to loom over her and failing.

“Yes I can,” repeated Darcy, her lips twitching.

“Erg! Why?” he said, gesturing widely towards the crowd. “The people here are great.”

“Really?” Darcy snorted, swirling her drink as she looked dismissively across the crowd. “You know this isn't my scene.”

I shifted against the wall. I loved a bit of people watching. Or eavesdropping, whichever you prefer to call it. They were talking pretty loudly, over the noise of the crowd, so I didn't feel too bad.

“Anyway,” said Darcy, grinning slightly, “You've done your typical thing and found the most attractive person in the room. Everyone else is kinda... meh.”

“Ian's beautiful, isn't she?” said Charlie. “She's super nice too. You'd love her.”

“Probably not as much as you,” replied Darcy, giving him that same critical look from earlier.

“Yeah, well...” said Charlie, going quiet for a moment. “What about Eli, Jane's brother? He's not half bad looking and Jane said-”

“He's passable, barely,” said Darcy, rolling her eyes. “Go back to... Jane, isn't it? You're wasting your time with me.”

And that was when I decided I didn't like Darcy very much, leaning there a little way away from her on the same wall, seething. Of course, I didn't stay there for long; eventually I found my way over to Charlotte and we had a good laugh about with some mutual friends. Pretty much guaranteed everyone we knew didn't like her too. I'm ashamed to say I made a lot of mistakes that night, even if Darcy's always insisted it wasn't my fault.

But thing is, I don't usually talk shit behind someone's back quite like I did then either, so I don't really agree.
Chapter Summary

In which we see why I'm not very bright and clearly not as good at judging people as I thought I was. -Eli

Chapter Notes

I'm not following the exact plot-line and order of events, just so you know, but I won't diverge massively.

It was quite a few weeks after the party that I finally learnt about Jane and Charlie being a thing. In fact, come to think of it, it was closer to two months.

See, I hadn't lived at home for a while now, the same with Jane really, so even though we talked over Facebook, I hadn't really picked up on this vital piece of information. I knew that she liked him from watching them together at the party, but Jane has never been one to talk about everything with other people, even me. She's an intensely private person.

Out of all of my siblings Jane is the one I'm really close to. Its probably because we were born fairly close together; she's roughly 21 months older than me. There was always more of a distance between me and my younger sisters, what with them being born 4 to 6 years later.

Jane is probably the nicest person I know. Once upon a time I would have called her nice to a fault; these days its come down to simply being incredibly nice. She's not jaded, but she no longer attempts to see the best in everyone we meet, which I have to say was a huge shift for me. As in, a huge world shift. Jane had always been kind of a rock in my life; watching anything change was alarming.

“So, you know Charlotte's birthday party?” Jane began over lunch one day. We were at this Vietnamese soup place at the covered Market I worked at.

“Yeah?” I said. I was trying to not make a mess while not splattering myself when I dropped things back in the bowl.

“Well, I'm kind of going with Charlie,” she said nervously.

“Charlie Bingley?” I asked.

“Yeah. We've been kind of dating.”

“Wow, okay. Really?” I know it might seem like a bit of an overreaction, but Jane hadn't dated anyone since back in high school when she was about 15. “He seems really nice.”

“He really is,” she said, smiling a little.
“Well, okay then,” I replied, grinning. “Good for you.”

“Actually I was bringing it up because of something else,” she said, twisting her fingers around her chopsticks. “Charlotte kind of invited Charlie and everyone else staying in his house, so Darcy’s going to be there too. She’s just got back from England. Charlie’s sisters will be there too,” she rushed out, seeing my face.

“Darcy?” I dragged out the word, like it was the worst thing in the world.

“I don't see why you've decided to dislike her so much,” said Jane defensively. “She's always been nice to me.”

I didn't say she had to be, which was what I was thinking at the time. It was also patently untrue, not that I realised that. Darcy was still the devil bitch in my eyes at this point and before you say anything, I know that was unfair. My pride had totally got ahead of me at this point.

Jane sighed in a way that meant she was irritated with me, but didn't say anything and eventually the conversation moved to other things.

So, a week later there I was at Charlotte's birthday party, standing with Jane, Charlie, his sister Caroline who'd just come out from England (who I have never liked, by the way) and Darcy. I don't remember what we were talking about, just that we were standing in the kitchen and I was busy making Charlie and Jane laugh. Eventually Charlotte joined in the conversation too, then John, then Lydia and Kitty (I swear those girls used to make it their life mission to make that poor boy feel awkward.)

Mum was thankfully somewhere else, saying loud things about Jane and Bingley. Darcy heard some of it, which lead to complications later, but anyways, apparently this was the time Darcy decided to take a shine to me. She always said it was because of my humour and vivacity (she actually uses words like that) and I always feel nervous about it, because I'm uncertain of how funny I actually am at the end of the day.

That party was also the first time I noticed her watching me and in my determination to dislike her, I wilfully misinterpreted that too.

“I must really have offended her,” I said casually to Charlotte, as we stood there in our silly birthday hats on the veranda.

“Really?” said Charlotte, amused.

“Really,” I replied. “We were cracking jokes earlier and I'm certain some of what I said must have got under her skin.”

“Eli, you don't stare at people you dislike, you avoid them. She's checking you out, love.”

“Bull****,” I said. (Hey I'm Australian. I try real hard, but sometimes stuff just slips out. Believe me, I swear nowhere near as much as most of my old classmates did. The worst word I ever use is f***, which practically isn't swearing at all amongst large swathes of Australian society.) “I'm certain she just finds me objectionable.”

“Mhmmm? And she was staring at your arse because?” Charlotte trailed off, grinning like the damn Cheshire cat.

“Oh, whatever,” I saiddismissively. I've never really believed much in my looks (possibly a bit of a side effect from Mum always praising Jane a lot more).
“Believe what you want,” said Charlotte, sighing. “Can you get me another drink dear?”

“Dear?”

“It is my birthday,” she said, almost pouting.

“Oh alright, jeeze.” I stepped back into the house. “But I distinctly don't remember you doing drink runs for me on my birthday.”

“You never asked.”

Should have known it was a set up.

The windows were all lit up and Charlotte had a perfect view from the veranda of who was standing by the drinks table. In this case it was William, who had apparently trapped Darcy in conversation.

“Don't you think dancing is one of the finer things in life,” said William, somehow making it a statement and not a question, who was of course, drunk. He really only gets this way at parties and large social gatherings. Of course, Darcy had only ever seen him at parties and large social events. [D: Has, you mean. I've warmed to him though.]

“If you call this dancing,” said Darcy. “I'm not certain any dancing school teaches the art of the awkward shuffle.” [D: I didn't say that, did I?]

“Oh, well you should see Jane and Eli then,” said William, happily ignoring Darcy's sarcasm. “Eli, I believe Darcy would like a proper dance partner.” He said proper in a way that was clearly mocking, but affectionate.

“Sorry,” I replied, as I grabbed a beer. “Drinks run.”

“I'm sure it can wait,” insisted William.

“I'll dance with you,” said Darcy, offering her hand. How I looked past this very obvious hint as to her opinion of me I will never know.

“Sorry, birthday girl's request,” I said, stepping backwards. “Later Will, Darcy.”

“Later,” came Darcy's voice as I walked away.

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I used to work at this menswear store, relatively upmarket compared to most of the stores around it for Ellen and Isaac Gardiner, friends of my parents, which only really comes into the story because Darcy and the Gardiners ended up becoming close and because of a man named George.

George was, to put it simply a F***ing snake. And yes, all those capitals are meant to be there. [D: I agree Eli, but I had to sensor this quite a bit. Just remember we have to keep this appropriate or someone will take it down, okay?] Not that I knew that at the time. I thought he was great back then, I really did. He used to
'misplace' items, steal cash when he thought he get away with it and when Isaac picked up the discrepancies, he tried to pin it all on me. He also did far worse stuff to Darcy and others that I won't elaborate on here and will only speak of in the most general terms later in the story.

But back then he was my mate as far as I could tell. Used to come round to dinner at my mum's place and everything, which takes on a whole new dimension now.

“So how was the party?” he asked while we had some time to kill.

“Good, mostly, apart from the bit where Charlotte's dad tried to get to dance with Darcy.”

George stiffened and ran a hand through his sandy hair. “Darcy Fitzwilliam?”

“Yeah?” I asked, confused. “You know her?”

“You could say that,” he said, laughing awkwardly and moving into the back of the shop to get something. “Listen man, be careful around her, okay?”

“What does that mean?”

“Are you close?” he asked. Obviously he was trying to gauge how much he could spin, but I didn't know that at the time.

“No,” I said, still confused.

“Well just be careful, okay?”

“Okay man,” I replied hesitantly. “Sure thing.”

Back then, I didn't think much of it, merely a friendly warning about someone I didn't like anyway. Now I realised he was setting up the groundwork to ensure that I wouldn't trust Darcy if she ever brought him up. He started slow, a comment here and there and eventually got big. Very big. And I bought it all, which lead to a lot of hurt down the line.
Trapped at the beach.

Chapter Summary

The story of how I was trapped in a house full of people I didn't like (at the time) by a girl with glandular fever.

Well I've finally had a look at what Darcy posted. Shouldn't have been surprised, but what do I expect when I ask her to be my beta for all this? Then again who else could be my beta for this? Love ya Darcy! [D: Likewise.]

It was a little while before I saw Darcy again. Eventually there were was a big group film outing where we saw each other briefly. Occasionally she'd appear at parties and it being summer, she jumped at the opportunity to use anyone's pool, although to the disappointment of many she wore a one piece.

Charlie and Jane continued to date. I thought things were going well and I told Charlotte so.

“Jane needs to be more proactive,” was Charlotte's response. “Make it really clear she likes him, even if it's a little more than she's comfortable with.”

“Really?” I asked, eyebrow raised.

“Totally,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “We don't want Charlie to get the idea she isn't interested. You know how reserved Jane is.”

I do actually and Charlotte was right, kind of, but I didn't think that at the time and I don't think Jane attempting to 'be proactive' the way Charlotte meant would have worked.

“Well people shouldn't push people to do things they don't feel ready for,” I countered defensively. “Jane shouldn't have to act in ways that make her uncomfortable to get him. He likes her. Jane'll let him in when she's ready.”

“Has he been to a family dinner yet?” asked Charlotte.

I laughed. “Well no, but would you want to trap Charlie in a room with my mum for any length of time? She'd scare him off.”

“Not if he was really worthy of Jane. Face it Eli, if you didn't bring a girl to meet the parents, eventually she'd come to the assumption you weren't taking it seriously enough and leave.”

I made a non-committal noise and sipped my latte.

“Hell, if you think someone might be worth the effort, you pull out all the stops to convince them you're definitely worth the effort,” she continued.

“Before you even know whether you like them?” I asked, sceptically.

“No point deciding you like them if they've already decided you aren't interested,” Charlotte said, shrugging.
This conversation may seem to be an odd thing to bring up, but I feel I should point out that I'm only bringing up things that give context to what happened later. Frankly, a lot of this stuff isn't my story to tell, but other peoples' stories effect ours, so I'm trying to give you enough information to understand our actions without saying too much.

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So, aside from the occasional social event, where Darcy generally stayed pretty quiet and just kind of watched me, we hadn't actually spent much time together.

That was until Jane got glandular fever and I rushed down to Sorrento to help.

See, at some point Charles had taken time off from his work at the company and invited a bunch of people down to this beach house he'd rented for a few weeks. Sometimes I wonder whether he just invited the others so that Jane wouldn't feel uncomfortable, but I have no proof.

Unfortunately, the second day she'd been down there, the glandular fever hit and I got a phone call from Charlie, which led to me explaining what had happened to the Gardeners and heading straight down to find Jane hallucinating from the fever.

“I have no arms,” sobbed Jane, who was sat in bed, looking like a dog's breakfast.

“What?”

“I have no arms,” she insisted.

“Yes you do,” I said, sighing. She was really sick and I wasn't certain how well she'd been looked after. Charlie had spent a lot of time helping and Darcy had done a bit, but I knew Caroline and Louisa had been avoiding being in the same room as a sick person. “Have they been treating you well?”

She mumbled something affirmative before burrowing down into the sheets. I assumed that she'd been taken care of, but part of me was a little worried. Remember, I didn't have the highest opinion of some of the people in the house and I know that I wasn't entirely welcome. In fact, I'm going to hand over the laptop to Darcy for a bit, since she knows more about this than I do.

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Darcy here. Okay, so Eli wants you to know why he wasn't entirely welcome. Simply put, the way he presents himself didn't go over well with Caroline, Louisa and her boyfriend. Probably something about the fact that he's secure enough to grow his hair long and dye it the way he does, or the tattoos, or the fact he has opinions and doesn't care who knows it. I don't think that's all of it for Caroline, but I've never asked.

Caroline thought my interest in Eli was hilarious, ever since I made a remark about how nice his eyes looked, so the moment he walked in to see Jane, she was on him.

“Did you see his hair?”

“Yes.” Eli's hair was a tangled mess. The cool change had hit at the end of the day, bringing the rain with it and it had frizzed up.

“I can't believe anyone would allow their hair to look that way,” piped up Louisa.

“And he was absolutely covered in sand,” continued Caroline. “Did you see? He's left it all through the house.”
Well of course he was covered in sand, we were at the beach during a cool change. We had every window open to let the breeze through, so sand was coming through the fly screens anyway.

“I must say this might have affected your opinion on Eli's fine eyes, hey Darcy?” asked Caroline, smirking.

“Why?” I was genuinely confused, because as far as I could tell all the things they had brought up were non-issues based on events outside his control. I know that Caroline was upset she hadn't got the response she'd wanted, but I still can't tell why.

They didn't exactly make Eli feel welcome either. They barely included him in conversations, started ignoring Jane the moment he came to care for her and picked at him for every little thing. I'm not surprised he spent so much of his time with Jane, or secretly laughing at them.

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I really hate the beach. I haven't always, but when I was about 19 my skin decided to get sand rash, so now the beach is my version of hell.

I drove to the shops in Sorrento, or down to Rosebud where the prices weren't so absurd on some days, but I spent most of the time at Charlie's beach house, either looking after Jane, or reading my way through the small collection of books the owner had left behind, mostly Ruth Rendell and Dean Koontz, which left me hungering for some better crime writers, so I picked up some Val McDermid books in an opp shop.

You can't sit in the one room all the time when you're a guest, so I ended up spending a lot of time sitting in the lounge room, or on the balcony or veranda with the others. There were a lot of little conversations with Darcy, usually when I escaped onto the balcony and she followed. I used to assume she was trying to escape from Caroline and Louisa. I didn't even think she was following me out there. [D: Well, I was doing that too.]

There was one night that stood out to me in particular. We were all sitting in the lounge room. I was reading in one of those uncomfy chairs that always gets sent down to beach houses, Darcy was on her laptop and the others were playing poker on the coffee table.

“Want to be dealt in on the next hand?” asked Charlie, for what must have been the fifth time.

“No thanks,” I said, smiling. I couldn't afford to, with the amount of money they were flowing around. One of my friends is a croupier at Crown, the casino in the city, and he's always very insistent that you never sit at a table you can't afford. In fact, Paul doesn't gamble at all, which says a lot.

“Eli's not interested Charlie,” said Caroline irritably. “The only thing he's into are his books.”

Something about the way she said it really pissed me off. “I've got plenty of interests. Getting cleaned out by Ryan here isn't one of them.”

Ryan grunted something dismissive and Caroline decided I was boring. “Darcy, what are you doing over there? Do you want in?”

“No thanks. I'm in the middle of a conversation with Georgiana.” Darcy clearly wanted to stop the conversation right there, but Caroline pushed on.

“Oh Georgiana, she's a darling,” she said. “How is she? Is she much taller?”

“Georgie's fine.” Darcy had the 'drop it' voice on, but she looked up and realised Caroline wasn't
quite satisfied. “She's about Eli's height now, or a little taller.”

“If I remember she was quite the piano player, eh Darcy?” said Caroline. “Eli, do you play an instrument?” She has an amazing ability to make simple questions into veiled insults and accusations.

“I played guitar a bit in high school, but all that means is I know how to play 'Smoke on the water', while trying to look cool. I'm not sure that counts.” Darcy had subtly shifted in her chair to listen.

“Georgiana is so talented,” said Caroline, smirking. “Tell me, how many languages does she speak Darcy?” Like she didn't know already.

“Three.”

“Do you speak another language Eli?” asked Caroline.

“A little Italian.” I was seriously thinking about bailing by now.

“That's more talent than I have,” piped up Charles. “I'm stuck with English, I'm afraid.”

“I'd hardly call that talent, Charles. Tell me Darcy, how many people would you call talented?”

“Mhm?” Darcy looked up from her laptop. “Sorry. Can you repeat the question?”

“How many genuinely talented people do you know Darcy?”

“Maybe twelve at most,” she replied dismissively, in a tone that implied all sorts of things about the asker.

“And what would you say makes a person talented?” I said, looking forward to the answer.

Darcy mulled it over. “I'd say you'd either need to have one true talent, or be very accomplished. Knowing at least one extra language, one instrument, an understanding of world issues, being well educated and travelled would probably do it.”

“Add to that, a person needs presence, manners and presentation. Something that sets you apart from the others.” Caroline smiled venomously.

“And a mind widened by extensive reading,” replied Darcy, smirking.

“I'm surprised you know anyone talented with that list.”

Darcy smiled slightly. “You doubt the existence of such people.”

“I've never seen someone that fits your list.”

Darcy gave me a look that said 'I didn't' and looked back at her computer.

“Perhaps if you were more widely travelled?” asked Caroline. If you ever wonder why I dislike Caroline, this is why.

[D: I know I'm finding it hard to remember why I ever put up with her. This story is bringing up a lot of things I hadn't really thought about much before.]

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Aside from walking in on Darcy wearing her birthday suit in the spa one time the beach holiday was pretty dull. [D: I deny that this ever happened, but I'm flattered that if it did, it wasn't dull.] Jane was stuck in bed for a most of it, or floating from room to room if she was up for it and Charles spent a lot of his time following her.

One day Jane was feeling up to sitting in the lounge room, watching a movie with the rest of us. Well, the movie that some of us were watching anyway. It was Darcy's turn to choose and she'd chosen Planet of the Vampires. Needless to say Louisa and Ryan had walked off half-way through, Charles and Jane were no longer watching and Caroline was only trying to look interested. It was basically only me and Darcy left really watching.

Eventually, I think Caroline started trying to distract Darcy. To which end she decided to use me.

"Eli, can you come and make one of those excellent coffees of yours? I'm no good with this infernal machine."

I didn't want to say no, still having a few days left before we left, so I complied.

"Darcy, would you care to join us?" she asked, smiling over her shoulder.

I turned to see Darcy watching us. "No thank you. As you can see, there's a movie on. I believe Eli was still watching it, would you like it paused?"

"No thanks, I can still here it fine."

"Tell me Eli, where do you get your hair done?" asked Caroline, changing direction. "I don't know many men brave enough to have your style."

"I can see why you would want to know. Its certainly better than yours."

I don't know whether Caroline picked up on the insult [D: Caroline had been attacking Eli the entire time he was there, so I don't even feel remotely bad about it if she did.], but she still acted affronted. "Do you here that Eli? I believe Darcy thinks your hairdresser deals in girls' styles. However shall we punish her?"

"Well I need to know her faults first," I said, handing her the damn coffee, minus the sugar and hiding a grin as she grimaced.

"I doubt Darcy has any real faults whatsoever." May I just say that Caroline really knows a thing or to about sucking up.

"No real faults. Oh dear, how disappointing," I said, smirking.

"Disappointing?" Darcy's eyebrow shot up.

"Well how can I tease someone with no flaws?"

"You make a habit of mocking people?" said Darcy with a thin lipped smile.

"Not to hurt, but to expose the ridiculous, yes. It would be shame to live without laughter, or be unable to laugh at ourselves."

"I suppose," said Darcy. "I'm afraid however, that my flaws aren't very funny."

"Really?" I said, smiling.

"Does a temper and an inability to think well of someone after they've shown their worst sound
“Does a temper and an inability to think well of someone after they’ve shown their worst sound funny to you?”

“I’m afraid not. I suppose we all have our flaws, yours being a tendency to hate everyone.” Its funny how bad that sounds typing it out.

Darcy gave me the look I’ve come to know as hidden amusement. “And yours is a tendency to wilfully misunderstand them.”
Chapter Summary

In which we here George's amazing abilities with half truths and a lot more from Darcy. -Eli.

It was heaven to get away from the beach house, away from a houseful of people who for the most part, I didn't like and who I was generally right in thinking didn't like me. Don't get me wrong, Charlie is a great guy and my memories of my time with Darcy have now become very happy memories, but being out from under the same roof as Caroline, good God that was amazing.

The Gardiners were happy to hear Jane was mostly well again, aside from the fact she'd lost a bunch of weight over the course of her sickness. It's always a bit worrying when you can say 'aside from something horrible'. I was glad to be back at work, with George for company and Charlotte in easy driving distance.

Of course, George had heard from the Gardiners where I'd been and who I'd been with, so he immediately started trying to gauge my opinion of Darcy while were sitting in the Post Office Hotel.

“So, now you've spent some quality time with Darcy, how do you find her?” he asked with an easy grin. “Singing her praises yet?”

“No,” I laughed. “God no.”

“Really?” asked George, surprised. You can bet I know why he was surprised now.

“Yes. Darcy's objectionable enough when she's taken in small doses. When you have to deal with her every day...”

“I'm glad,” said George, smiling. “People usually give her some leeway.”

“Why?”

“Because she's rich and if Darcy decides you're worth the time, she can be sociable and kind even.” George pulled a face. “Of course that hasn't been my experience with her for a long time, but you know...”

“No I don't.” I replied. “I don't have a clue.”

“Ah, well...” He let it peter out in a way that was designed to encourage my curiosity.

“You don't have to.”

“No, I'd actually like to talk about it, if you're okay with that.”

“Of course,” I said eagerly. “It's not just like anyone's around at the moment.”

“Yeah, well...” George acted reluctant before he continued. “Darcy and I kind of grew up
together. Our dads were friends and her father was my godfather, so I was always around at her place. I think that might have been part of the problem.”

“What do you mean?” I asked confused. George rubbed the back of his neck and laughed awkwardly.

“Well, Mr Fitzwilliam had two daughters and no sons and sometimes I wonder whether...” He waited for me to complete the sentence.

“He thought of you as a surrogate son?”

“Kind of?” he replied, acting hesitant. “Not that he did love me more than her, but I think Darcy thought he did and that's what matters.”

I know that must have been a lie. George has a massive sense of entitlement and feels like the rest of the world should bow down at his feet. But I bought it, of course.

“So what did she do?”

“She cut me out of the f***ing will,” George said, laughing bitterly. “I didn't even know that Mr Fitzwilliam left me any money until after he died. The moment the will was read she started looking for ways to take the money back. She must have really hated me.” [D: Oh, believe me, I really did.]

“Jesus.” I was shocked.

I mean, I really didn't like Darcy, but I didn't think she was capable of that, which really should have set off alarm bells. She was prickly and difficult at parties, disdained most of the company around her and was constantly snide, but never vicious, except maybe occasionally to the particularly stupid (read: Caroline). [D: Thanks, I think? Just kidding, I know how I was.]

“I mean, we were so close when we were younger, but then we date for a month and it all falls apart,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “I just don't get it.”

“I'll buy the next round,” I said, patting him on the back and heading over to the bar. I resolved to buy most of the drinks that night. I bought the drinks most nights actually, come to think of it.

***

Charlotte looked sceptically over the dinner table. “I don't know Eli.” Mum was busy arguing with Mary, my middle sister while Dad looked on, amused. Oh yeah, there's another sister. It could be an intense household back in the day.

“I know Darcy a bit stand-offish, but I don't think she's capable of that,” said Jane, seeming really uncomfortable. [D: God I love Jane.]

“Why do you believe George?” asked Charlotte. “Its a bit 'he said, she said', isn't it?”

“I know George,” I said, gesturing with my fork. “He wouldn't lie about that kind of thing and he didn't try to play it up.”

He was obviously relying on me to play it up, but I don't like to think about that. My dad had bored of watching my mum and sister argue and was now listening to our conversation in amusement.

“Ah yes, George,” he said, smiling. “He does have a talent for exaggeration, doesn't he, Eli?”
“No, this isn't like him telling the story about the sheep,” I said, laughing. “This is him getting a load off his chest at a bar.”

“And you always tell the truth at bars?” asked Dad.

“I don't usually go to bars, do I?” He just smiled at me and went back to eating. Mum is an excellent cook.

I've always been close with my dad, far more than my mother and I think that in a lot of ways I'm a lot more like him. We both liked a laugh, often at the expense of others. In my dad's case it's usually my mother's. Its often not as kindly meant as it should be.

Charlotte reached across the table for the wine. “Well I just think that even if Darcy does have some history with George, you shouldn't focus on it. You don't know all the details and besides,” she said, leaning forward and slipping into a stage whisper, “we both know Darcy wants into your pants.”

“Jeeze Charlotte!” I said, appalled. “She's a f***ing psychopath!”

“She keeps staring at you!”

“All the more reason to stay well away!” I said, exasperated. “Believe me, we don't get along. We spent three weeks just arguing.”

“Who are you two talking about?” Mum's got amazing timing.

“Darcy, Mum,” I replied, deeply satisfied as her face immediately became stony.

“That woman,” she said, like it was a curse. “You're well shot of her Elijah.”

“Thank you mum,” I said, smiling.

“If she is interested, Eli, avoid her like the plague. Don't give her the satisfaction.”

“No danger there Mum,” I replied. I remember being happy we were on the same side for once, since we don't agree on much.

I remember Charlotte being generally unimpressed with me for the rest of the week. She's usually a smarter person than I am a lot of the time, even if she is more of a cynic than I can understand sometimes.

I'm handing the laptop over to Darcy now, since she wants to explain her side of all of this.

***

Hello again. So, I guess you can see Eli's opinion of me by this point. It's kind of painful, especially knowing how I was feeling.

I was deeply infatuated with Eli. I wouldn't have called it love yet, but I was in real danger of it becoming love. As far as I could see, we were flirting casually every time we met. I hadn't minded it at the start. I was on holiday with friends, I was a world away from home, I needed a distraction and here was this charming young man, really much too young for me, who was so unlike what I usually went for, or what my family would approve of.

Those that say that what your family thinks doesn't matter are lying. It does. Family can make your life hell if they really want to. I eventually realised I was worrying about the opinions of the
wrong family members, but at the time...

So, I was trying to not get Eli's hopes up while I was busy slowly falling for him myself. This leads to my next point, something that I'm not proud of. My only defence was that I thought I was doing the right thing. You may remember how we said we were trying to avoid talking too much about other peoples' business? Its a large part of the reason we've barely talked about Jane and Charlie's relationship, or Louisa and Ryan, or Charlotte.

Well considering their relationship ended up having an effect on our relationship, I'm going to give you a general overview of what was going on between Jane and Charlie. They'd been happily falling in love over the course of the last 4 or 5 months, I'm not really certain of the exact time frame, and I'd spent a lot of that time hiding my objections to the relationship.

There were two major causes for this. One was that Charles moves around a lot for his work and I'd seen him 'in love' so many times. Not once had it ever gone anywhere. He used to be very impulsive, moving around to the next big offer without thinking much about the consequences.

My second objection to the relationship was Jane. I like Jane. Everybody likes Jane, Jane likes everyone and that was the problem. The truth is that I still don't know Jane, even now. She's this amazingly reserved woman who has a smile saved for everyone. No-one on the outside of Jane's life really knows what's going on behind the smile.

So, when all I saw was the same pleasant smile she gives everyone I was concerned. She didn't seem interested to me. In fact, I came to think she was trapped between Charles' obvious interest and her mother's pressure for her to have a boyfriend, that she couldn't see a kind way out.

So eventually, thinking I was doing the right thing, I encouraged Charles to break it off before anyone got hurt on either side. Jane, Charles, I know we've talked about this before, but if you ever read this I'm really sorry. I love you both and I'm sorry I ever got in the way.
The Dance

Chapter Summary

Where I ask a lot of questions and get know answers because I'm not listening properly.

George needn't have concerned himself with ensuring my dislike of Darcy, because we soon got an invitation to a going away party from Charles, to see her off. I'd almost forgotten she lived somewhere else, since she'd been here for so long.

[D: Eli's right. I was in Australia for about 4 months, doing all the touristy things, since I hadn't had a real holiday in a long time. I'd almost burnt myself out back at home and my relationship with Georgiana had suffered, both from me being a workaholic and other things. We both needed a break from one another (mostly she needed a break from me), so she stayed with Richard, my cousin, while I went to Australia. I spent a lot of time at the start wanting to be back with her, but she was right.]

Charlie's place was full of people, most of them his friends and therefore people I already knew, but also a bunch of people who'd Darcy met over her time in Melbourne who I didn't recognise. I remember finding it funny at the time that there was anyone there at all, which wasn't fair. However, I get the feeling that Charles had invited a lot of people without asking Darcy.

Charlotte smiled from where she leant by a wall, some expensive looking beer in her hand. “Hey Eli,” she said, smiling. “Didn't think you'd be coming to this, all things considered.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, grinning wryly. “I doubt that Jane would've been impressed and it's Darcy's going away party, so its almost a celebration.”

“Really nice,” said Charlotte, sighing.

“You know what she did,” I said in a low voice.

“Just... be nice, okay?” she said, giving me a long suffering look. “It's the last time you'll see her. Don't go making it unpleasant, okay?”

“Relax Charlotte, I'm not going to start anything unless she does.” I turned around, surveying the crowd. “So, who's here?”

“Oh, you know, the usual. Caroline, Louisa and Ryan are all floating around somewhere if you want to avoid them. Darcy's over there if you want to say goodbye. It is her party.”

“Fair enough,” I said, smiling. “I'm going to go meet some people. You want to come?”

“No thanks,” said Charlotte. “I'm going to wait for someone.”

“Okay then.” I smiled, hugging her before slipping past to say hi to my sisters, who'd apparently all managed to argue Jane into giving them a list. Really, Lydia and Kitty shouldn't have been there, but apparently Mum had argued Charles around.
I said hi to my younger sisters, while giving them the 'I'm watching you' look, before drifting over to say hello to Jane. “Ah, Eli,” said Caroline, appearing by her side.

“Crap,” I mumbled, before putting on my game face. ‘Caroline, so good to see you. How are things?’

I felt Jane's elbow in my side and dropped the attitude a bit. “Hello Caroline,” she said, smiling gently.

“Hello Jane,” said Caroline, pulling her into a hug. “I think I heard Danny was looking at you.”

“Oh, right, said Jane. “I'll go find her then?”

“I think she was in the living room,” she said, smiling insincerely and watching Jane until she left. “So, Eli…”

“Yes Caroline?” I asked, surveying the woman, standing there in her bright orange dress. You have to be very brave to wear orange with her skin tone. Either that, or very stupid.

“So, I heard you were friends with George Wickham?” she said mockingly, slipping closer.

“Really?” I said, smiling politely.

“Oh yes, your mother is very fond of him.” She smiled at me. “I should probably warn you though, I haven't heard the best things about your friend from Darcy.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yes, Darcy said she grew up around him and had all sorts of bad experiences.”

“Uh huh, that's nice Caroline,” I said, cutting her off, “But I have people I have to greet so...”

“Very well,” she said tersely. “It was kindly meant.”

The party was not a fun one. At one point I had to confiscate a bottle of wine and another of something clear from Lydia and Kitty. I'm certain they got more later, but I wasn't willing to open a can of worms by trying to insist they went home. By the time I'd found Charlotte was dancing with someone I didn't know, but eventually found out was my cousin Colin from Adelaide.

“Hello Eli,” said Darcy from a little behind me.

“Hi Darcy,” I said frostily, before throwing on a weak smile.

“How are you?” If I'd known Darcy properly, I would have been able to realise that her stiff posture and closed off face was a clear sign of extreme nervousness.

“Oh I'm good,” I replied politely. And yourself? Are you looking forward to heading home.”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “I've been missing her and I'm certain things have gone unattended in my absence.”

“Oh really?” I said, amused. “No-one else is capable of doing your job?”

“No,” she said, a small smile playing across her lips. “Would you like to dance?”

“Er...” I said, caught off guard and looking for a way out of this that wouldn't upset her or Jane. “Of course.”
Darcy nodded, then took my hand and led me out onto the dance floor, well into the lounge room to be more precise. I slipped back into my old formal dance training, which wasn't really fitting for a party with really too much drinking, but Darcy seemed happy with it. [D: Nothing quite like proper dancing to make you feel special.]

It was an awkward dance, partially because of my own emotions, but mostly because Darcy was silent as a statue. [D: I was busy enjoying being held by you, love.]

“So,” I began, smiling at how ridiculous this all seemed. “Are we going to be silent the entire time we’re here? We should talk of something.”

An expression I've come to recognise as well concealed panic flew across her face, but she remained silent. Darcy's not a person who talks while dancing, which I've always found funny. She finds dancing one of the most intimate things you can do with someone. To me, talking increases that, to her it detracts from the physical intimacy. Read into that as much as you want. [D: Eli! Please don't people.]

“It doesn't have to be much,” I continued. “A comment on the party would be enough.”

I watched her brow furrow in confusion. “What do you want me to say about the party?”

“That'll do for the moment,” I said, smiling at her reaction. “In a bit I might say how much I prefer dancing at parties to dancing at clubs.”

“Do you always talk while dancing?” asked Darcy, almost smiling.

“It'd be strange to spend so much time together and not say a word, wouldn't it? Of course it also means we have a reason to say as little as possible.”

“Are you talking about yourself or me there?” We actually had a fair amount of attention on us by now, formally dancing in the middle of a group of people doing the 'awkward shuffle' as it were. Luckily the music was loud and most of the people there were at least a little drunk.

“Both I would say. Neither of us likes to say anything if people won't be talking about it for a while.”

“Really?” said Darcy. “That certainly doesn't resemble you, does it?”

We fell silent for a while after that and I was almost able to forget who I was dancing with and simply enjoy it; the feeling of someone's physical presence, the way we moved together, the fact that I was dancing with my 'ideal woman'. I love dancing with Darcy by the way. She's so strong, it opens up a lot of possibilities, even if my smaller size closes up a few.

“How did you meet George Wickham?” asked Darcy suddenly.

“Through work,” I said testily. “We're friends.”

“He's always been good at making friends,” mused Darcy. “Keeping them however...”

“Didn't you say that have a terrible temper? I believe you even said once you thought badly of someone, you’d never think well of them again.” Darcy was quiet, watching me silently. “You are careful about the second one, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

“And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?”
“Of course. Why do you ask these questions?” I think Darcy was giving my insight more credit than it was due.

“Why, I'm merely trying to figure you out,” I said, smiling at how uncomfortable Darcy looked. I know I was being a bastard, I'm sorry.

“And how are going?” asked Darcy, her face closed.

“Not well, I'm afraid,” I said, with exaggerated concern. “I hear such different things about you that I'm utterly confused.”

She smiled thinly. “I'm afraid the impression you might make out now might make both of us look bad.”

“Ah, but you're leaving,” I said, smirking. “When else will I have the opportunity?”

She looked down at me as we came to a stop in the middle of the lounge room. I felt scrutinised. “You've certainly made life very interesting Elijah Bennet. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, I guess.” I know, rude, but she didn't pick up on it, so there was that.

That was probably the first time I'd actually been physically attracted to Darcy. Before that, I'd known I found her attractive, but there was a difference here, probably something to do with how buzzed I was and how close we were standing. I'm not saying I liked her, I didn't, but I did want to do something incredibly stupid with her somewhere quiet. [D: I could tell.]

“Goodbye Eli,” said Darcy, stepping out of my arms. “In case we don't get a chance to say it later.”

“Goodbye Darcy,” I said awkwardly. “Good luck with all that work back home.”

That was our last meeting for over a year. That was also the night before Charles broke up with Jane. I know you probably want to know all the details, but I'm certain you've got enough of an idea of what happened already and like we said before, the exact details aren't our business. Needless to say Jane was heartbroken and Mother was livid with him.

Charles eventually moved again, this time to Sydney (traitor). Jane put on a brave face, but was obviously very depressed. I started planning a working holiday. Colin and Charlotte got married and moved to England for his work, shocking everyone (They aren't together anymore). And apparently Darcy spent her time trying to forget about me. [D: Unsuccessfully, obviously.]
The Other Side Of The Coin.

Chapter Summary

A look at the world from Darcy's perspective.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been written by Darcy, who is far less comfortable with her style and has far more trouble writing dialogue, so she's essentially avoided using any. Be warned.

Darcy here! Eli needs a break from typing this up, so I've taken over for a little while. I'm really uncertain about how I should continue this, but in the tradition of Eli, I'm going to skip to our next meeting, with a short explanation of what happened beforehand.

I'd come home to find, despite my slight concerns, everything in order at home. Don't get me wrong, I trust Reynolds with everything, but I was leaving an awful lot with him and I know that it had driven me to despair. I was so happy to see my sweet sister Georgiana and my goofball cousin Richard. Reynolds was happy to see me and Georgiana and I settled back into our old routines at home, with the significant change that I was actually spending time with her, which I think we both needed. Gigantic age gap aside, (I was about 28, while she was 16), Georgiana and I have always been very close. Our relationship isn't exactly normal; I've had a tendency to slip into 'mother mode' ever since our father died, but it is a strong one. Things were looking up, barring one thing. I kept on thinking about Elijah.

I know, what was I expecting? Of course, Georgiana picked that something up pretty quickly and I eventually had to confess to her and of course she told Richard. Apparently coming back from Australia pining over a young man was just the most exciting thing ever. A very young man, according to Georgiana. She was actually rather scandalised. I guess an age gap of roughly seven years is a little unusual, but I think Eli was forced to mature fast in such a large household.

There were a lot of questions, most of which I tried to avoid out of embarrassment. Nevertheless they still got a lot of information about Eli; mostly about him standing up to Caroline, or him being willing to watch old science fiction with me, or his humour and love of books. I think Georgie was a little in awe of him after that first one, since she used to find Caroline rather intimidating.

Richard somehow got the idea that Eli was some sort of well muscled surfer, which I still think is hilarious. I really don't know how he got that one wrong. I think I might have told Georgiana more details than I ever told him, probably because she didn't tease me mercilessly for it.

Eventually however, interest in Eli faded away. I was busy running Pemberley. There was plenty going on too; garden tours, wedding bookings and corporate programs all need somewhere to happen and an old country estate has a certain glamour. Georgiana was enjoying her new school, which was close enough to home she could come home in the evenings.
The year went on as it always had. I visited my aunt Catherine and was amazed when I found that Charlotte was sitting at the table. I'm sure you remember how Eli mentioned she'd moved to England with her husband. I'd always valued her for her intelligent conversation, even if Colin was somewhat lacking in that department.

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It was roughly a year before I saw Eli again and he was as shocked as one might expect. Aunt Catherine had asked me to assist her sort out Rosings' future. Rosings was once one of the largest estates in England, but after World War 2 the government instituted. The De Bourghs, Catherine's side of the family, had practically all of their funds wiped out.

The wealth estates like Pemberley and Rosings have traditionally relied upon, that of tenant farming and trade, back in the days of the British Empire, have long dried up. Essentially, all you're left with is a large, expensive house, which is typically needing maintenance and a tonne of other upkeep costs.

Rosings wasn't doing as well as Pemberley, mostly since Aunt Catherine was always unwilling to adapt. Father had seen a new way forward and accepting it, albeit begrudgingly, but Sir Lewis, Catherine's husband, was appalled by the idea of turning his family home into something else. Catherine held on for a long time, too long sadly. After she died last year Anne decided to sell the house, finding it too much to handle and I really don't blame her. I don't think anyone could have saved Rosings, even if they'd started ten years earlier with ten times the money. I'm sorry for Anne. I know she's still sad about losing her home.

***

Okay, Eli's always been good at writing down our conversations, even though I'm certain he mustn't remember every detail. Even so, he has a talent for keeping it true to events. Truth be told, I don't feel so confident, but I promised Eli I'd try. If this comes out as mush, I'll ask him to rewrite this next bit.

Catherine had a tendency to not require two people in a conversation, not to speak ill of the dead. I remember being frustrated with her. We'd been talking about the estate earlier and she'd shut down all of my ideas while bringing none of her own to the table, so I hadn't really been listening to much of the conversation over dinner. I only dropped back into the conversation when I heard Eli's name mentioned.

“Elijah Bennet?” I asked.

I remember Aunt Catherine glaring at me for obviously not listening. “Yes, he is staying with Colin and his wife. Do you know the boy?”

Catherine always had a talent for using words like 'boy' as insults, ladening them with all sorts of meaning.

“Yes, we met while I was on holiday. He always seemed an intelligent young man.” I didn't like how my aunt was talking about him.

“He cannot be considered a proper young man,” said Catherine. “What kind of person grows their hair out and dyes it blue? I believe such things are the sign of a person who does not care enough for what people think of them.”

I remember saying something defensive about Eli's hair. I know I mentioned what excellent condition it was in, but aside from that, I was too embarrassed and angry to remember much else.
What I do remember is the expression on her face. I think she developed suspicions about my feelings for Eli fairly soon after that. I know she did like him to an extent. He is very diverting and is one of the few people I haven't seen bend under my Aunt's pressure.

However, she didn't like the attention Anne and I paid him. He wasn't the 'right sort'. She used to call him 'common' and 'unkempt'. I spent a lot of my time quietly seething and was very relieved when Richard arrived later that week.

At this point I still hadn't seen Eli again and had resolved to avoid doing so, in the hopes that my feelings wouldn't come back in full force, but of course that was never going to last. Charlotte learnt of my presence at Rosings and invited me and my cousin for dinner. I remember finding it bizarre at the time, but I now know Charlotte's reasons.

So, I ended up having dinner with Eli. I feel uncomfortable trying to write our conversation down, as I barely remember any of it due to how flustered I was. What I do remember and still find funny is Richard's first reaction to Eli.

He'd been teasing me about my hunky boy toy all the way there in the car, but when he stopped when he stepped into the house and was introduced to Eli. I remember him taking it all in; 5'4", waist length (electric) blue hair, numerous piercings and the hint of a tattoo poking out from under one sleeve. I think he stood their staring for a good thirty seconds.

“I do tricks too,” said Eli as he introduced himself, which got a laugh at Richard's expense from Charlotte and a glare from Colin. He needn't have bothered however, Richard took it in good stride and they got along famously after. Also, Richard became far less mocking of me liking Eli after that. I find it odd that my military minded cousin was more accepting of a small metal head than a 'hunky' surfer, but he was and I was glad of it.

I'm sorry this is all just a wall of text but I find writing this difficult. I'm afraid I've gone off on a few tangents as well. I promise that Eli should be back for the next post. He should be able to give you more detail and less of whatever this is.
Well, I'm back and that won't be happening again. Darcy really didn't enjoy writing all of that, so we're going back to the old system of me writing, her betaing and occasionally adding a paragraph here or there. May I just say though Darcy that I thought you did great and if you want to try taking over again, I'll be around to help you out. [D: Thanks, but no thanks.]

You know what Darcy was busy doing, so I suppose I'd better mention how I ended up in Huntsford, the village where Colin and Charlotte lived. Now, before I continue, I should mention that Charlotte's given me permission to talk about her former marriage. In fact, she even encouraged me.

“It'd be hard to talk about Rosings without bringing it up, wouldn't it?” she pointed out, when I phoned her up to explain what I've been doing and ask her opinion on how I should deal with the topic. “And he did do that thing, remember? You're going to have to talk about him anyway, aren't you?”

“Yeah, well, I don't have to talk about... you know...” I haven't felt comfortable discussing the private lives of others ever since the George-Darcy thing and the only reason I don't have qualms about talking about George is because he doesn't have a leg to stand on.

“I'm not squeamish about it, if that's your concern,” she said flippantly. “It was a life lesson. A bit of a costly one, but what's the point of learning something if you don’t talk about it?”

“But it's not my story,” I'd said nervously.

“No, it's mine and I'd like you to tell it,” she'd said, sounding amused by concerns. “I might have been upset if you hadn't asked, but you have, so stop worrying.”

I'd known Colin had been back in Australia visiting family on his side, but since my dad doesn't get along with his I hadn't known much about it. Charlotte had met him through some mutual acquaintances and decided to say yes when he'd asked her out and later when he'd asked her to marry after barely four months. When I'd heard this I'd thought the entire situation seemed ridiculous and it had sparked an argument when she'd told me.

“Eli?” She said it like a question after I'd stood silently by her dad's pool for half a minute, staring at her like she had two heads.

“Why the hell are you marrying him?” I'd asked when my words came back to me. “You don't love him, so what reason could you possibly have?”

“What the hell do you know Eli?” she'd said, her smile sliding off her face as it set like stone. “You're not the person in this relationship, are you?”

“How long have even been dating him?” I could tell I'd hit a nerve, but I couldn't see how I could avoid having this conversation. “You two can't be ready for this, not yet, unless I've missed some
“Sometimes you've gotta just go for things Eli,” she'd said, angrily. “I can't just let things pass me by for all my life, can I?”

I really wish the argument had a more satisfying conclusion, but unfortunately that was the moment that Charlotte's mum walked out. “Everything okay out here?” she asked.

“Yes Mum,” said Charlotte, giving me a look.

“Of course, Mrs Lucas. Do you need any help setting up?”

“Well, you could help with setting the table,” she'd said, gesturing over her shoulder.

We didn't argue any more that day and I realised after a few tries I wasn't about to shift Charlotte's opinion, so I dropped it. She was my best friend and I couldn't let anything change that. Plus, she was right. It was her life, not mine. So they got married and Charlotte moved with him to England. It was amazing how much that affected the rest of my life.

***

Remember how I mentioned thinking about taking a working holiday? I'd been considering going somewhere, anywhere really, for years. The problem was trying to work out accommodation and work once I was over there. It wasn't insurmountable, but it was enough to put me off. It had always been on the back burner since there were always other concerns, paying rent and keeping my car running for example.

Well, back when Charlotte and Colin got married and they started talking about moving to England, the idea began becoming floated about again, initially by Charlotte, although Colin agreed to it pretty quickly. The idea had a certain appeal. I'd always wanted to see England and Huntsford was pretty central being a bit of a railway hub. Colin had an uncle who owned a pub and had employed holidayers before, so it all kind of fell into place, at least for the first part of the trip.

The only problem I could really see was that I would be staying with Colin. Colin is... eager to please, but not very good with people, I guess. He comes off to a lot of people as smarmy and can be a little sycophantic, but I'd never call him a bad man.

I didn't really want to live with Colin for a month or more, but eventually Charlotte had persuaded me. I told the Gardiners and found out they were going to be in England during the later part of my holiday, so I agreed I'd meet up with them in Derbyshire.

***

So eventually I found myself being met at the train station by Colin and Charlotte. I grinned as Charlotte stepped forward and pulled me into a hug.

“Hi Charlotte,” I said, as I tried to sort out my bags aroun my friend. “It's great to see you. Hi Colin,” I said over her shoulder.

“Hello Eli,” he said, picking up one of my bags as I slipped out of Charlotte's arms. “Welcome to Huntsford. The car is just down there.” He gestured a little way down the street to a car that seemed to large for two people.

“Great,” I said as he turned away carrying two of my bags, while I sorted out what I was carrying. “You okay Charlotte?”
“Oh yes, I'm fine,” she said, putting on a smile I found false before changing the conversation. “How was your trip?”

“The flight was good, but sorting out the train trip was a little difficult,” I said as I slid my bags into the back of the car. “How have things been for you Colin?” I know I've left Colin out of conversations before, so I try to make an effort to include him.

“Oh, most excellent,” he said enthusiastically. “Lady Catherine has been a truly amazing patron, so gracious and supportive.”

I glanced at Charlotte, raising an eyebrow at an eyebrow at 'patron', but she only gave me a tense little smile.

“She’s been incredibly supportive in helping us set up here in Huntsford,” he continued on. “Nothing is below her notice.”

I snuck a look at Charlotte and noticed how tense she was. “How has work been for you Charlotte?”

“Oh, good,” she said, although her tone didn't match her words. “I've been working at an advertising firm in London. Things have been going well.”

“Lady Catherine recommended you to Alison, didn't she dear?” continued Colin, oblivious to Charlotte's feelings.

“Yes, yes, she did,” said Charlotte shortly. “How is your family Eli?”

“Oh, you know,” I said quickly. “Much the same as ever. Lydia is still causing all kinds of trouble at school, Kitty still follows her lead on everything. Jane's still feeling down.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” said Charlotte. “Has she heard any more from Charles?”

“Not that she's told me,” I said, grimacing.

“I'm certain she'll feel better soon,” said Colin. “Give her enough time and everything will be right as rain.”

I wanted to snap at him, but he could have been right as far as I knew, so I said nothing until we arrived at Colin and Charlotte's cottage, which sat on the outskirts of the village. Rosings was very close by, which was good for Colin's work. “Welcome to our humble abode,” he said as we stepped out of the car.

“I wouldn't call it humble,” I said as I stepped through the front gates, thinking back to my share house. “It's beautiful here. Have you been working on the garden?”

“Oh yes,” said Colin proudly. “The cottage used to be home to an elderly lady who hadn't been able to maintain the garden in her later years, so I've been restoring it to its former glory. Shall we go inside?” he said, gesturing us toward the door. After the obligatory tour and putting all my things away in the guest room, we had lunch at the local pub where I was introduced to Colin's uncle. I was going to start work on Monday, so we just spent some time talking.

As we were heading back Colin spoke up. “Oh Eli, I almost forgot I hadn't told you. We've been invited to Rosings for dinner. Lady Catherine was very eager to meet you.”

“Really?” I said, surprised.
“Oh yes, any friend of Charlotte's is a friend of hers, isn't that right Charlotte?”

“Well I'm glad to be invited,” I replied politely, wondering exactly what I was being dragged into. As it turned out, a lot.
Hi everyone, Eli here. Alright, I need to place a disclaimer at the start of this post. Catherine de Bourgh was not a bad woman. She could be very overbearing, she held a lot of beliefs that I find offensive and we often rubbed each other up the wrong way, but sometimes people just get along.

Looking back, I also know that she did like me far more before I started dating Darcy. She always thought Darcy deserved better than me and while her idea of 'better' may not match Darcy's or mine, but at least her heart was in the right place.

Also our relationship did improve, although it never really got over the breach caused by Darcy and I marrying. So, now that is said, on with the story.

***

We'd taken Colin's car to Rosings' park since we'd been late at lunch. The park is an impressive piece of land with beautiful gardens and woodlands, although most of it's former glory was gone, since the family had been forced to sell more and more over the years. The house eventually came into view through the trees as we drove down the gravel driveway.

“And there it is. Rosings. Impresssive, isn't it?” asked Colin as we pulled up near the front of the house.

“Very,” I said politely. I had to admit it was a very impressive building, but Colin had been talking about it non-stop on the trip over, which had killed some of its charm. I knew it was built in 1794, how many windows it originally had (64), how much the glazing on those windows originally cost (643 pounds, I think), the original size of the grounds which I can't remember and more, but you get the point. I could also tell that the house had seen better years. Moss was creeping over the rood, the brick work was dirty and needed repairing in areas plus I learnt later that most of the house was both unheated and unused.

“Don't worry about your appearance Eli. Lady Catherine won't mind your clothing. She understands that most can't afford to dress as she does.” Colin hesitated for a moment before continuing. “You might want to ensure that your tattoos are covered however. I know that Lady
Catherine has strong feelings on... peoples' appearance.” He said the last while looking at my hair disapprovingly, which I had pulled back and plaited.

“Sure thing Colin.” I caught Charlotte's eye and she shrugged non-committally.

Lady Catherine De Bourgh was a tall, proud looking woman, who greeted us at the door with her daughter Anne and her support worker Julia. She greeted Colin and Charlotte as we entered the house, before pausing to look at me.

“And you must be Eli Bennet,” she said, giving me a quick once over, her eyes lingering on my hair and the wrist where my tattoos extended past my sleeve.

“Yes,” I said smiling. “It is a pleasure to meet you Lady Catherine. Thank you for inviting me over.”

She didn't answer immediately, merely pursing her lips for a moment before nodding in acknowledgement.

“Oh, of course we are all very grateful to you for inviting Eli over on his first day in the country Lady Catherine. None could make him more welcome.” I was a little shocked at how thickly Colin was laying it on, but Catherine seemed pleased and allowed him to prattle on in such a manner as we made our way through to the dining room.

I caught Anne rolling her eyes and raised an eyebrow, which she responded to with a pointed look that I'm certain translated to 'don't you dare'. I think that was when Anne and I started to become friends actually.

***

Dinner was an awkward affair. We were sat around an old fashioned long dining table, clearly meant for far more people than the six of us, with Lady Catherine sat at the head like she was holding court, with Anne on her right and Colin on her left.

When I say she was holding court I wasn't exaggerating. Lady Catherine always took great delight in conversation, but never seemed to pick up that it required more than one person, or that telling others how to live their life in a loud voice was inappropriate.

“You really ought have your kitchen renovated soon Charlotte,” she said at one point. “The last time I saw it the décor was woefully out of date and I doubt it has changed much.”

“Oh we most definitely agree, don't we Charlotte,” said Colin quickly. “Your advice is excellent as always and as useful as ever. I believe you recently helped Mrs Johnston with the planning of the town fair.”

“Oh indeed,” said Catherine, before launching off into her next speech.

Charlotte was sitting stiff as a board, with a determinedly neutral expression on her face. Her hands, which were wrapped around her cutlery, were practically white. In short, she looked furious, although I'm pretty certain Colin and Catherine barely even noticed if at all.

“You okay there?” I asked her quietly.

She gave a short shake of the head, not looking at me.

“Want to talk about it later?”
Charlotte was about to say something when Catherine spoke to me for the first time in half an hour, cutting off Colin mid sentence. “And what do you do Mr Bennet?” she asked.

“Currently I'm working in retail, but I'm keeping my options open.”

“And what of your schooling?” she asked.

“Well I was never much of an academic, so I opted to start working immediately out of high school and decide what I wanted to do later,” I said, noting the dismissive snort she gave me. “Turns out I made the right decision,” I continued, “given the number of people I know who ended up in courses they didn't like and jobs they hated.”

“You doubt the importance of an education?” asked Catherine, looking down her nose at me.

“No,” I said smiling in amusement at the look of indignation and contempt on her face. “I just doubt many people know enough about what direction they want their life to take when they're 18.”

Lady Catherine was, as I learnt later, one of those people who believe that the only people worth knowing were those with an university education, unless of course if you hadn't been born into the right sort of family. I could see I'd offended her and I had to say I found the entire situation ridiculous. I probably would have found her reaction very funny if she hadn't upset Charlotte so much.

“Do you have any siblings Mr Bennet?”

“Yes, four sisters,” I said. “Jane is 3 years older than me, but Lydia, Mary and Kitty are all still in high school.” I'd originally tried to convince her to call me Eli, but now I was thankful she hadn't. It would have somehow been too intimate for someone like her.

“And would you encourage your younger sisters to do the same when they?”

“God yes,” I said, smiling at the thought of Lydia going straight into Uni. “Although of course that'd be a fair way off yet. I'm pretty certain Mary already knows exactly what she wants to do anyway.”

“And how old are you Mr Bennet?” asked Catherine.

“Old enough to have opinions on the matter,” I said, enjoying how rankled I seemed to be getting her.

I find peoples' ridiculousness amusing and although I make a habit not to be cruel, sometimes I just enjoy getting people going. Darcy was fantastic because she doesn't simply disengage like most people do. She actually enjoys someone who can get under her skin. Catherine was a little like her in that department, with the unfortunate difference being the cause. Catherine didn't want to argue, she wanted to win, even if it wasn't an argument. [D: Entirely true. I've never had a conversation with her she didn't try to come out on top of, even over the littlest things. I remember when I was nine we got into an argument about Santa which left me in tears.]

“Come now, you can't be more than twenty three or four;” she stated.

“I'm twenty two.”

Catherine gave me a look that said she clearly didn't respect the opinion of someone so young or so uneducated and the conversation died there. Eventually Colin and Catherine slipped into talking about business, what repairs needed to happen and where the money would come from (a
topic quickly shut down by Catherine). Charlotte, Anne, Julia and I were left out of the conversation and I quickly realised if I wanted to have some peace it was best to keep my mouth shut. Like I said, dinner was awkward.

***

“So... do you want to talk about it?” I said, sitting down next to Charlotte after Colin had gone to work the next day.

“Not really, no, but I've got a feeling I need to.” Charlotte chuckled morosely. “What do you do when your husband cares more for what his boss says than his wife?”

“I don't know.” I looked at Charlotte and saw how tired she looked. “I'm guessing last night wasn't the first time he's done that to you.”

“No,”

“I take it talking to him about it isn't working?”

“You think?” She laughed a bit then. “We have the worst arguments and he can't understand why.” She slipped into a passable impression of Colin. “Charlotte, you're being unreasonable, she's only offering advice. Charlotte, she's a very knowledgable woman. Charlotte, she just wants what's best for us. She treats us both like we're idiots and I'm the only one who sees it.”

“Should I go find somewhere else to stay?” I said awkwardly. “If my presence here is just going to make things more difficult-”

“No,” said Charlotte shortly. “You should stay. We aren't constantly fighting or anything and besides, where would you go?”

“I could find somewhere easily-”

“No.” Charlotte made it sound very final. “Besides, there are some places around here I wanted to show you and I'd like to introduce you to some of my friends.”

“If you're sure,” I said. “But if it ever becomes too much-”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” she said dismissively. “Come on, let's get out of the house. I'll show you around the village.”

***

Despite my initial concerns, staying with Charlotte and Colin turned out to be fine, although admittedly I had plenty to do at the pub in the evenings and Colin was at Rosings for most of the day. Colin and Charlotte ate at Rosings on Saturday, but considering I was working in the evenings I happily couldn't accompany them.

I spent a lot of time travelling to various towns around Huntsford, or travelling into London by train in the mornings, which is actually pretty easy once you work out what you're meant to be doing. When I didn't do that I spent my time walking. The English countryside is a very different thing to the Australian countryside. It's no more beautiful, but it certainly is lusher and less scrappy.

And then, on the second week of my stay in Huntsford, Darcy walked back into my life.
It was the second week of our stay when I found out that Darcy and her cousin Richard had been invited over for lunch. This was about 30 minutes before lunch, mind you, so I couldn't even flee the house to York or something [D: Hey!].

Despite my feelings, I slipped into something a little dressier, did something with my hair and polished up my manners before meeting her. Darcy was wearing something elegant and blue, I think. At least I hope it was blue. I don't know how she'll react if it wasn't. [D: Yes, it was blue and I did look fantastic, by the way. Ignore Eli's theatrics.]

She looked really good, anyway, and being from the north of Britain she never seems to be affected by the weather, so she was in this light summer dress, with white flowers on a blue background. [D: And of course Eli knows exactly what I was wearing. He's just pushing my buttons. Well, I know how to push his buttons too, just wait till later.]

I remember Richard staring at me like I had two heads. I only learnt the reason for that later, which I still think is absurd, but anyway, I called him out on it and got him laughing.

“So,” he said, smiling. “You're the famous Mr Bennet?”

“Famous?” I asked, casting a glance over at Darcy. “You're not a cop are you?”

“Worse,” said Richard, grinning. “I'm military.”

“Oh, oh dear,” I said, acting nervous. “Charlotte, how fast can I get tickets out of England?”

Darcy was watching all of this silently, smiling in a way I only came to recognise later. “Hello Darcy. How have you been?”

“Well,” she said, shifting her weight, in a way that means she's nervous. “And yourself?”

“Good, good. I've been really enjoying Huntsford.”

“How is your family?” she asked stiffly. [D: Well, I was seeing Eli for the first time in a year after deciding to avoid him. I was having trouble with the entire straight faced thing.]

“Oh, well, for the most part anyway.” I caught Darcy's expression. “Jane's been feeling down for a while now.” I caught Darcy's face slipping into a frown, but didn't pay much attention to it.

Jane was still feeling very cut up about Charles. He'd been the first guy she'd let close in a long time and despite seeming very nice he'd utterly dropped her, without even an explanation. I learnt later that Caroline and Louisa, lovely people that they are, had been trying to convince him that Jane was after his money.

Really, the wealth gap between Charles and my family is huge. We aren't poor by any means, but we all fall into what would easily be called 'working class'. Honestly, Mum is a bit of a bogan,
which didn't help their opinion of our family either. [D: A bogan is an Australian term for describing people who generally have little wealth, education or culture and a great deal of pride in being Australian. It's actually a lot more complicated than that and often a sort of badge of honour and I wouldn't exactly call Liz a bogan, but she does have that attitude.]

Their comments certainly were enough to play upon Charle's insecurities however and this had made Jane's and Charles' relationship rocky. Eventually, just after being offered a really good job in Sydney, he asked Darcy for advice. Darcy did what she thought was right and Charles had ended it badly.

[D: At the time, I was determined to think I'd done the right thing. You know how the easiest person to deceive is yourself, right?]

After a little while of awkwardly standing there she silently turned and drifted over to the window. Richard glanced at her in amusement.

“So, I guess you can tell we don't usually get along,” I said quietly to Richard when he silently gave me a questioning look.

“Really?”

“Well, you know how first impressions are and I'm afraid Darcy's good opinion once lost is gone forever.”

Richard stayed silent, but gave me a very odd look. Darcy would have been appalled if she'd heard that. You know, I really should have been better at reading all the cues I was getting. I'd built Darcy up in my head into this utter monster of a person and no amount of evidence was going to get in my way.[D: Honestly, it's a little hard to read about what Eli used to think of me, even now.]

***

Despite this hiccup, Richard and I quickly became friends. I found myself invited on trips to places I'd never even heard of before and events I didn't know existed as an outsider. This was part of how I suddenly found myself spending so much time with Richard and Darcy, as well as increasing how often I was invited to Rosings, which was not so fun.

Darcy also started meeting me on my morning walks through the countryside. I remember that I'd told her which way I usually took so we could avoid one another and been frustrated that she hadn't taken the hint. [D: Looking back on it you really were kind of stupid about the whole thing.] If I was able to go back in time I would probably take advantage of those walks, but as it was, I spent most of my time varying what path I took, trying to avoid her and failing. [D: I know the area around Rosings pretty well.]

***

I've honestly never been proud of my piano playing. It was only something I picked because of Mum dragging me to dancing lessons and I quickly did my best to avoid that entire world. Unfortunately however, one time while we were over at Rosings I found myself looking at the piano. Lady Catherine had noticed me looking and once she discovered I could play, she insisted.

So there I was, playing to an audience. Richard had wandered over to avoid his aunt's conversation and Catherine had taken that as an opportunity to start criticising my technique.

“You will never learn to play truly well unless you practice,” she said this time. She seemed to be working her way through a list and was just nearing the end. I kind of tuned her out and nodded
politely at this point. When she was finished and still looking at me expectantly I chose another
tune I knew and continued.

[D: I think she invited him over to practice on the piano. Then she went on about her appreciation
of music and her skill if she'd actually learnt to play. I know, but what can you do when you have
to live with her.]

I remember looking up and seeing Darcy looking at me. “You okay?” I’d asked, confused.

“You said you couldn't play,” she said accusingly.

“I did?” I honestly couldn't remember what I'd said that gave her that idea.

“Yes, you did. You said you could barely play guitar, let alone piano.” She had her arms crossed
and a slight tilt to her hips that made me feel like I was in trouble.

“Oh, that,” I said, finally realising what we were talking about. “Well I can play smoke on the
water too, if that's what this is about.”

“That's not the point–” said Darcy, looking clearly frustrated with how stubborn I was being
before she was cut off.

“Am I missing something here?” asked Richard, glancing between the two of us.

“Yes–” began Darcy, but I quickly spoke over he.

“Oh Darcy is just trying to intimidate me,” I said confidently. “She just hasn't realised that I fight
back when I'm challenged.”

“You do love saying the most ridiculous things,” said Darcy, an annoyed smile on her lips. She
was leaning on the side of the piano now, looking about as casual as I've ever seen her.

“I do believe she's calling me a liar,” I mock whispered to Richard.

“I believe she might be,” he said, looking between us, clearly confused.

“That's really not a smart move,” I said in a sing song voice, grinning wickedly. “I have some
stories about Darcy that might embarrass her...”

She looked at me in horror. “You wouldn't dare,” she said, scandalised. [D: I thought he was
going to tell Richard about the spa thing that didn't happen!]

“Oh I would,” I said. “Have you ever seen Darcy at a party?”

“I'm not afraid of you,” said Darcy, relaxing.

“I'll bite,” said Richard, smiling a little. “What's she like?”

“Well the first time I met her, we were at a birthday party for a family friend. I saw her standing
there, not knowing anyone there and decided to head over. I think I got three responses out of her
before she said 'excuse me'... and just walked off, leaving me standing there.”

Darcy looked so shocked and ashamed that I knew she must have forgotten it, but she covered it
well. Richard glanced at Darcy and laughed. “Wow, Darcy. Smooth moves you've got there.”

I could see her planning her next words carefully, schooling her face into one of
“I find it difficult to meet new people,” she said eventually. “I never know what to say or how to be interested in what they are saying.”

“Well I find playing the piano without sounding like a four year old difficult, but I always figured that was down to a lack of practice.”

“You're right there,” she said, smiling. “Although I think you play far better than you think you do. I don't think either of us want to perform in front of strangers. I take it your desire to avoid it comes from your days as a tiny, little ball room dancer?”

She got me blushing and Richard laughing, which unfortunately drew Lady Catherine's attention. The conversation just sort of petered off after that. After a while I stopped playing and eventually the evening was over, leaving Darcy and I with completely different understandings of what had happened.

I went away thinking we'd had just another argument, a little disappointed that I'd lost. Darcy, well, I'll leave it to her to explain what she was thinking.

***

Darcy here. So, how was I feeling about Eli? Extremely conflicted. I'd realised by this point that it wasn't just a crush. Honestly, I'd probably been in love already with him when I left Australia, but the relationship seemed impossible.

I had a lot of reasons which made it still seem impossible, none of them very good. That'll come up later however. Richard didn't think it was impossible though. He really liked Eli, even if he didn't entirely understand the relationship I thought we had.

I was torn. I wanted to go after Eli but I was certain it wouldn't work, that our families, backgrounds and lifestyles were too different. I'm afraid to say I did look down on his family. I saw them as loud, boozy and common.

The thing I'm most ashamed about however, is that I assumed if I asked him he'd say yes.
Alright. This is the part of our story that everything has been building up to. Really, this is the moment that our entire relationship has been defined by, to this day. It's been really difficult for us to write this down, as well as all of the events that led up to it, so please, be understanding. Neither of us behaved well here.

Also, we've decided to only focus on the events and conversations that had the biggest impact on how this all happened, so we won't be going into every conversation we ever had over that month. The blow-up only happened right at the end, so there'd be a lot of filler. Even so, expect this to be longer than usual.

Having said that, it's time to get on with the story.

***

Darcy kept finding me on my morning walks after that conversation at the piano. Her reasons however, had changed. She started asking probing questions, questions she'd never bothered with earlier. Suddenly she wanted to know about my religion, whether I wanted kids, my opinions on homosexuality and what my attitudes towards drugs were. I didn't understand any of this, of course, but I found it all deeply uncomfortable. Eventually this led to one conversation in particular. This is one of those 'how did Eli miss that' moments, so please, don't ask me how I missed that.

"How are you liking England?" asked Darcy, while we were walking through a tougher overgrown path where I'd thought she wouldn't find me.

"You know I like it here," I'd said, annoyed but doing my best to not show it. I thought she was doing her best to be polite and felt I'd better do the same, if we were stuck with each other.

"More than Australia?" asked Darcy, as we clambered over a log. She reached out to grab my hand when I slipped on the moss and I thanked her awkwardly. I was silent for a while before answering.

"I don't know ," I said as we reached the top of a hill looking over Rosings Park. "They're very different places."

"Would you ever think of moving here?" she asked, sitting down a small bench seat I hadn't noticed before.

"I don't know," I said. I'd barely ever thought of living over seas before. "All of my family lives in Australia."

"Does that really matter in today's world?" Darcy asked dismissively. "We have the internet. We have Skype and Facebook."
“We have crappy internet in Australia, remember?”

“Oh yes,” said Darcy, grimacing in disgust at the memory. “Why hasn't anyone done anything about that?”

“Because no-one wants to spend the money to fix it. Didn't you see the politicians arguing about it on the news?” I shook my head at that.

“I’m pretty certain I ignored that,” said Darcy, leaning back in the chair and stretching in a way that I could only call seductive. “So, would anything induce you to to leave Australia?”

“I don’t know,” I said, thinking about it. “Maybe the right woman, I guess.”

“The right woman?” asked Darcy quietly. I glanced over at her and saw she was staring straight ahead.

“Um, yeah,” I said, turning away, suddenly embarrassed to be talking about something so personal with Darcy. “If she felt she couldn't live in Australia, we could make it work.”

“If she had a career, or commitments, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” I said, standing up. “I'd better get going. I've got things I need to do.”

“So have I,” said Darcy, grimacing. “I have to go talk with Aunt Catherine.”

“Good luck with that,” I said, smiling. “Later Darcy.”

“I'll see you around then,” said Darcy, standing and jiggling from foot to foot.

“I'll probably see you on Saturday, if I'm not called in to work at the pub,” I said, immediately planning to ask whether I'd be needed at the pub on Saturday.

“Hey Eli?” called Darcy as I started back towards Huntsford.

“Yes?” I yelled back, just wanting to be away from her.

“Thank you.”

I thought about asking what she meant for a moment, but by that time she was heading down the other side of the hill. I shrugged and just went my own way, not even realising what she thought I'd just told her.

***

Things were well on their way to a disastrous conclusion when, in the last week of my stay, Richard dropped a bombshell that made things far worse. He couldn't have known of course. Darcy had never told him much about who Charles was dating, or how we were all connected, but that didn't change the facts.

It was one night when I was working late at the pub that it all happened. It had been a fairly dull shift and I hadn't had much to entertain me, so I was very pleased when I saw him come in the door.

“Eli!” he yelled as he entered, drawing out my name in a way I'd come to know very well.

“You're already drunk, aren't you?” I asked, sighing, but secretly amused. He's a fun drunk.
“Well I may have had a couple of drinks before coming here, but no-one really cares,” he said, grinning goofily. “I'm in the army. They don't mind if we cause problems just so long as it's not their problem.”

“Jesus Richard,” I said, laughing despite myself. “How the hell did you become you a colonel?”

“Hell if I know,” he answered, smiling. “Give us a drink. No, not water,” he said, groaning as I popped a glass down in front of him.

“You'll thank me in the morning,” I said, pushing it forward. “Drink up.”

“You're a good mate, you know that?” he said, sculling his drink and ignoring my protests. “You know who else is a good mate?”

“Who's a good mate Richard?” I said, pushing a second glass of water towards him and miming drinking slowly this time.

“Darcy,” he said loudly. “Darcy's the best mate I've ever had.”

I glanced apologetically at the man sitting next to him. “Well of course she is,” I said shortly. “She's your cousin.”

“I'm being serious Eli,” insisted Richard. He looked around the pub distractedly for a moment before turning back to me. “Can I have a proper drink now?”

“Sure, but I'm going to cut you off after this one, you know that right?” I said, watching him carefully.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, taking the beer I handed him. “I mostly came in to see you before I head up to Rosings.”

“Oh. Well, thanks man,” I said awkwardly. “Just so I know, how are you going to get there, because you clearly can't be driving right now?”

“Darcy'll be picking me up in about half an hour,” said Richard, dismissing my concerns. “You know what's great about Darcy? The way she looks after people.”

I shared a grin with the others sitting at the bar. Everyone knew and liked Richard. He was a semi-regular at this time of year and he occasionally shouted a round, so he got a lot of leeway.

“Whatsoever you say man,” I said, moving on to serve a leggy blonde who'd just came in. “You should get something to eat if you haven't already.”

After that, I left him to his own devices for a little while. There were other customers to serve and I ended up doing a bit of impromptu waiting to help with a sudden group of builders who'd just arrived. It ended up being a pretty good night for the pub, but I was feeling exhausted by the end of it, especially after what I learnt next.

“Do you know Charles Bingley?” asked Richard as I was passing him.

“Um, yeah, I do actually,” I said then, but I didn't have a chance to stop right then. When I did however, I asked him why.

“Well, he's exactly what I'm talking about with Darcy,” Richard said seriously, leaning forward. “Charles is always getting himself into some sort of girl trouble or other and Darcy always has to get him out of it.”
“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling myself blanch, but trying to remain calm.

“Apparently there was a girl about a year back who left him really cut up. Darcy advised him to call the entire thing off.”

“Did Darcy say why?” I asked, trying to stay calm.

“I think she said the girl wasn't really into the relationship. Poor old Charlie, eh?” Richard stood up slowly. “Listen, I'd better go and wait outside. I just wanted to say goodbye in case things come up and we don't see each other before you leave.”

“Thanks,” I said stiffly, trying to keep a calm face. “I'll see you around then.”

“Keep in touch, alright?” he said as he started towards the door.

I spent the rest of the night in a sort of rage induce haze. After the second time I messed up someone's order the boss sent me home, saying that I looked unwell. Being back in the guest room, lying in the dark, didn't help things. Anger is one of the most powerful human emotions. High end concentrated fury focuses the mind down on a task or thought like nothing else I've ever felt. Undirected rage however, is like a fog, clogging the mind up and sending it in circles. I'm afraid to say I went to bed angry.

***

Charlotte and Colin were a little alarmed at how subdued I was over breakfast. When I told them I didn't feel well Charlotte packed me back to bed, thinking I was coming down with something. Eventually I did slide back to sleep, not having slept much the night before and so it was about 10 'o clock when I was woken by the door bell.

Slipping on a dressing gown so as not to scandalise the visitor, I went to see who it was.

“Darcy?” I asked, surprised and dismayed to see her.

Immaculately dressed and made up, she surveyed me with worry on her face. “You weren't on your morning walk. Are you feeling unwell?”

“I'm fine,” I said tersely. “Colin and Charlotte are both at work I'm afraid.”

“I know,” said Darcy, shifting her weight from foot to foot and looking at me expectantly.

I thought about slamming the door in her face for a moment, but in the end, I swallowed my anger and decided that would be beneath me. Besides, I wanted a straight answer about Jane from her and I couldn't let myself lose the moral high ground.

“Do you want me to wait while you get some clothes on?” asked Darcy nervously.

I mumbled something like a yes as I went to get dressed, then returned to find her sitting awkwardly in the lounge room. She stood abruptly and began to pace around the room.

“Are you okay there?” I asked, watching her fiddle with the knick knacks on the mantelpiece, not expecting her to answer somehow.

“I can't do this any more,” she said, her voice shaking. “I've been repressing my feelings for too long. I love you Eli.”

“What?” I said flatly. My brain had just shut down, unable to follow what had just happened.
“I know this is a terrible idea, but I can't avoid this,” she said, approaching me suddenly. “No-one will approve of us. I know you're too young for me, that your family are very different to mine, I know how people will look at you and judge me, but I can't help my feelings.”

She took another step forward. “I know this goes against my character and my family's wishes, but I don't care. I haven't got the will to resist these feelings any more.”

I was still standing stiff as a board, mouth open in shock, when she kissed me painfully, our teeth clacking together and sending pain shooting up into my gums. “No,” I said hurriedly, pulling back. “I'm sorry if I ever gave you the impression I was interested, but I've never wanted anything like this and neither have you, obviously. I'm sorry,” I said again, collecting myself, “but I hope the feelings that discouraged you allow you to move on.”

Darcy's face sort of crumpled into a mess of shock and heartbreak. Soon however, other emotions started to bubble up and suddenly I was being towered over by someone who looked about ready to skin me. I've never before been scared of a woman, but in that moment I was terrified of Darcy. However, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, before stepping back.

“May I ask why you've rejected me so insultingly?” she asked, her voice steady and cold.

“May I ask why you told me you loved me against all of your will, better judgement and character?” I said, sliding straight passed rage into cold fury. “How did you think I would take it? Anyway, I have no reason to like you; I know you destroyed my sister's relationship with Charles.” I caught the expression on her face. “Do you deny it?”

“No,” said Darcy, shifting from shock to cool disdain. “Why would I? I did what was best for both of them. I'm glad I could spare them both some pain.”

“Spare them some pain?” I said, shocked. I was outraged at her comment and attitude. It seemed so callous, even for her, that I didn't even want to here the reasoning. I paused for a moment, collecting my thoughts. “What about George?”

“George!” Darcy yelled, stopping herself before she took a step forward. “You- why do you care so much about him? You don't really know him, do you?”

“Why don't you?” I countered, ignoring Darcy's question. “He's had a hard life.”

“Oh yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed,” said Darcy sarcastically, turning away from me in disgust.

“And of your doing,” I said insistently. “You mock him, even after all you have done.”

The air was so tense between us that we both paused for a moment, breathing heavily.

“This is your opinion of me?” asked Darcy eventually, her voice strained. “Tell me, Eli, would you have overlooked all of this if I hadn't acknowledged the issues we'd face? I wasn't about to lie to you about my just concerns. You would, wouldn't you?” she said accusingly.

“Oh God,” I said incredulously, as it all clicked into place. “You expected me to say yes. You didn't even consider I might not want you.”

Uncertainty clouded Darcy's face and in that moment I knew exactly how to hurt her, exactly what words to say.

“Darcy, all your speech achieved is was to strip the sympathy I might have felt for you if you'd acted like a decent human being for once. There was no way I would accepted you. All you've
ever shown me is arrogance, conceit and contempt for those around you.” I stepped forward, getting closer as she seemed to shrivel from the abuse and whispered to her. “I hadn't known you for a month before I knew you were the last person on the Earth I would ever love.”

She flinched like she'd been struck and stood there silently for a long time, staring at the ground. “You've made your point,” Darcy said quietly after that long wait. “Goodbye Eli. Have a good life.”

I stood there, boring holes in her back as she walked out of the lounge room and didn't move until after I heard the front door open and close. Only then did I take in a deep breath, put my hands to my face and sink into the nearest chair. I was flabbergasted at what had just happened. The idea that Darcy was in love with me rocked my world down to the foundations. I couldn't understand what I might have said or done to have caused it. I was torn between shame at how I'd just acted and anger at how she had behaved.

I couldn't stay still or settle in any room in the house, so I left the house and ran. I ran until I couldn't run any more, then threw up in the gutter and walked home, still angry. Charlotte and Colin still thought I was ill when I arrived at home and since I did nothing to enlighten them they left me alone with my thoughts.

***

So, now you've read about our first big fight. I told you it was bad. Please do remember that I asked you to not judge either of us too much, especially Darcy, since she hasn't had a chance to defend herself fully yet. Also if you're wondering why she hasn't been commenting this time, she's been helping me write this chapter the whole way through. It's been tough, but I think it was good for us.

It's funny that I remember swearing horribly for example while Darcy doesn't remember me swearing at all. Please remember while reading Darcy's side next time is that we each think we were worse.

Until then, goodbye.
The Letter

Chapter Summary

In which some of the truths about George Wickham come to light. -Eli

Chapter Notes

AN: Sorry about the gigantic wait for this chapter. I've had a lot going on recently with TAFE and family, so while I've been working on this I haven't had much time to finish it up. I'm going to mention a few things before we go ahead. Firstly, it seemed wrong to have Eli and Darcy disclose every detail, so some things have been left out by them. Secondly I'm throwing out a trigger warning on some of the discussions in this chapter dealing with paedophilia. It's a true story from my school years I've given to Eli, so fair warning.

Sorry Eli and I haven't posted in a while, but Mary is staying at Pemberley and we've had flat out at Pemberley. It's been nice but utterly hectic, so I haven't had a chance to write my side of things yet. Mary has been reading our posts, by the way, which somehow surprised us, but what do you expect when you post online?

Eli's helping me with some of the details, as well as writing out the dialogue. I actually went and wrote him a letter and you'll be hearing his reaction to it a little later. He says hi, by the way.

***

As you can imagine, I didn't cope with rejection well. I don't remember how I got back to Rosings. I remember storming past Richard, slamming my door in his face and yelling at him to go away when he tried to ask me what was wrong. I hid in my room and cried while Richard quickly figured out what had happened and went to find Eli.

All the things Eli had said were going round and round in my head, drowning out my reasoning. I couldn't stand the thought that Eli hated me. I also didn't want to believe anything he'd said about me as a person. It took me a long while to accept it and it didn't happen overnight.

So eventually, not in the best state mind you, I sat myself down and began writing about the points I could contest. In my mind a lot of Eli's hatred stemmed from misunderstanding. Our last conversation had gone terribly and a letter was safe and comfortable.

I started off by stating my opinion on Jane and Charles, which I've already told you about. I won't repeat it here. The second part dealt with what happened between me, my family and George Wickham. Eli's helping me rewrite the letter, so I hope you'll see what it was like for the both of us.

However, we aren't posting everything I told Eli online. Wickham affected a lot of people and they'd rather not have it talked about for personal reasons. If you want any further confirmation of
the kind of person he is, you can look up the Victorian court case that put him away for statutory rape.

What follows is roughly what part of the letter contained.

***

George Wickham was my constant companion throughout my childhood. Our fathers had been friends and George was my father's godson. George's dad died when we were both young, so my father took him under his wing. I do admit I was very jealous when I was younger. George had a talent for attention grabbing and a shy young girl who reminded him too much of his wife wasn't really going to compete.

This made our relationship strained as we got older and my father grew more and more ill. My father only saw the face George presented him. I saw a George who got his 14 year old girlfriend pregnant when he was 17, then pressured her into getting an abortion.

Then eventually when I'd just turned 22 my father died and I was left in charge of both my sister's welfare and Pemberley. I'd always known I'd inherit the estate, but never thought it'd have been so soon. I found it utterly overwhelming.

For the first little while I focused on just keeping us together and didn't bother looking over the estate accounts. Eventually I did find the time, at which point I noticed that despite the fact I'd barely touched them since my father died, there had been a steady number of withdrawals coming out of our accounts. At first I'd thought it was being taken out to pay for bills and repairs, but then I realised the amounts didn't match. Throughout this time Wickham had been busy spending the money on all sorts of things, mostly alcohol and drugs from what I can tell.

There wasn't enough evidence for Wickham to be charged with theft but there was enough for me to sue for him to be removed from the will. George was furious of course, screamed in my face outside of court and then promptly disappeared from my life.

I remember driving Richard to the train system later in the evening. He gave me side long glances the entire way and eventually I couldn't take any more of it.

“I'm fine Richard,” I said angrily, but I wasn't and we both knew it. My bitterness was seeping through and I think he could tell I blamed him for something, even if he couldn't tell what.

“Something happened between Eli and you, didn't it?” he asked.

“Didn't you ask him?” I snapped, wanting this to all be over.

“I couldn't find him and he wouldn't answer my messages,” Richard said. “Darcy, what's going on?”

“It was just a misunderstanding,” I said, doing my best to hold back tears. “I'm afraid we had very
different ideas about what our relationship was."

“Oh Darcy I'm so sorry,” he said, reaching over to touch my shoulder. “If he was only after something casual-”

“No, no, that wasn't it,” I said, laughing sadly. “We never had anything. I thought we did, but apparently he had no idea.”

“Well maybe-”

“He hates me Richard,” I said, cutting him off. “He's friends with George Wickham. Even if he wasn't, he thinks I ruined his sister's relationship with Charles. Something I believe you told him about.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, shocked at the tone of my voice and I could tell I'd really hurt him.

“No, I'm sorry,” I said tiredly. “That was uncalled for. You didn't know because I didn't tell you.”

“Do you think you made a mistake?”

“No,” I said defensively.

“Clearly Eli thinks you did.” I refused to answer and we fell into an awkward silence all the way to the train station. “I'm sorry Darcy. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable,” he said as we pulled up.

“It's okay,” I said, trying to smile and failing. “Have a good trip.”

“I will,” he said. “Hey, Darcy, you know if you need to-”

“Yeah, yeah,” I snapped, slightly more affectionately than before. “I'll call if I need to. Just don't talk to Eli about it. I want to handle this myself.”

He smiled and I could tell he thought I was making a mistake, but he didn't say anything.

“Goodbye Darcy.”

“Goodbye Richard,” I said, smiling properly this time. “I'll see you in a few weeks?”

“Of course,” he said, pulling me into a hug before opening the door. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Stop worrying so much.”

***

It was nice to have someone worrying about me, even if I acted like I didn't want it. Honestly, now that I'd written the letter, I was having trouble with the idea of actually delivering it. Despite this, the next morning I went out early to one of Eli's old haunts, in the hopes I'd see him. I figured he wouldn't be expecting me, so I sat down on the bench in the clearing and waited.

I don't remember how long I waited there, but eventually I heard the sound of footsteps behind me and turned around to find Eli trying to back away without being seen.

“Eli!” I said, hoping he wouldn't just walk away. “Listen I know you don't want to talk to me, but can a have a second? Just a second, please?”

I saw him pause and straighten his shoulders before turning back to me. “Alright. What do want
Darcy?

“Could you read this, please?” I said, thrusting the letter forward. “I wanted a chance to explain myself and I know you don't want to talk to me right now.”

He looked at it for a moment before stepping forward and taking it. “Sure,” he said as he thrust it into one of his coat pockets. “I can do that.”

It felt like some sort of peace or truce had been reached. We weren't yelling at each other at least, anyway so I stood up and stepped back towards Rosings. “I hope you enjoy the rest of your holiday Eli.”

“Thank you,” he said, making a clear effort to be polite.

I smiled awkwardly, before turning around and walking a way, feeling a little better, although the truth of Eli's words still ate away at me over the next month. It was better once I left Rosings, but all the little things Eli had said, the ones I couldn't justify or defend, got to me. Eventually I came to doubt my choices surrounding Jane and Charles as well.

I'd always thought of myself as a good person and I'd never really been called on my actions before. I'd been arrogant and judgemental the entire time I'd been around Eli. I couldn't deny it. My reserve didn't excuse me being rude to others, or looking down on them. The worst part was when I realised I had just assumed that Eli was waiting to have me, that he'd accept me if I ever decided I wanted him.

It was hard realising I'd utterly blown my chances, but not as hard as picking up the phone and calling Jane. The worst bit was she didn't even yell at me, she just acted understanding while she cried a bit.

After that, I ended up taking the entire thing as a wake up call and went back to living my life and running Pemberley. I didn't think I'd have the luck to run into Eli again. Thankfully, the number of coincidences that filled our lives arranged for it to happen anyway and I'd been working on improving myself.

***

So, you've heard the story of Darcy's letter. I remember staring at her as she left and wondering what she could've been thinking. I thought about leaving the letter unopened for a moment before opening it anyway. I was furious about the first part. Once I calmed down I could see what she meant, even if I wasn't happy about it. I almost didn't read the rest of it, but my curiosity and a certain amount of guilt got the better of me. I was a shaking mess by the end of the letter, because I didn't want to believe I'd been taken in again.

When I was at high school there'd been a bus driver that'd seemed to be the greatest guy on Earth. Of course, he'd turned out to be a paedophile. When we'd learnt that it was a surprise, but it made perfect sense. He'd been easy going and friendly, so we'd all overlooked the little signs he'd given, because that's what you do.

My mum thought all of that must have been an act, that his charms were put on and he was only friendly to get what he wanted. I don't think that's the truth. I think his friendliness was just in his nature. There's a distinct difference between 'nice' and 'good'.

The thing is, now I could see that maybe he and George Wickham weren't all that different.

That's why I messaged the Gardiners. I needed to talk about this with someone and given that they'd probably spent more time with George than anyone it only made sense. Isaac messaged me
and arranged a time to talk over Skype.

“Hi Eli!” said Ellen enthusiastically when we’d finally set up the call properly. “How’s your holiday going?”

“Good,” I said, smiling despite my mood.

The Gardiners are two of my favourite people in the world. They’re practically family and I’ve often turned to them for answers when it felt like my parents couldn’t give them to me. They’re both incredibly sympathetic and level headed. While I love my parents, neither possess both of these traits.


I heard the sound of Isaac sitting down next to her. “Hi there Isaac.”

“Hi Eli,” he said. “Are you okay? You sounded a bit... off.”

“Honestly, no, I'm not. That's kind of why I've called.”

So I sat there in the living room and unloaded some of what I'd learned about George, omitting some details since they weren't really my business. After I'd finished they were silent for a moment before answering.

“Eli, I'm afraid to say this doesn't surprise us,” said Isaac awkwardly.

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused

“He did the same to us,” said Isaac. “We noticed money going missing recently and when we compared our sales records with our takings things showed up. He only started taking larger amounts recently, which was why we picked up on it, but I'm embarrassed I missed it for so long.”

I wasn't surprised he had. The Gardiners owned a few stores, as well as having to deal with various warehouses, so he could hardly blame himself.

“Oh god,” I said. “I'm so sorry.”

“You were as taken in as we were,” said Ellen gently. “He blamed the early thefts on you when we confronted him. You have no reason to be sorry.”

“Have you called the police?” I asked.

“We talked to them, but he was careful to only take money when other people were on shift, so they won't be pressing charges,” said Isaac.

That fit so well with Darcy's account that all my doubt suddenly evaporated. I was distracted from the conversation as I looked back over everything she'd ever told me and I realised that I don't think I'd ever heard her lie.


“Sorry,” I said awkwardly. “Bit stunned by all this. I mean, I sort of knew, but I didn't want to believe it.”

“We're really sorry Eli,” she said. “We know he was your friend.” She waited for me to say something for a moment, but when I said nothing she continued.
“We've already told your parents and we were going to break it to you the next time we talked, but you kind of jumped the gun on us.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I'm sorry about all this. I just heard this and I felt I had to check.”

We talked for a little while after that before promising to meet up in Derbyshire and saying goodbye. Then I was stuck sitting there in my room at Charlotte's, thinking about Darcy. I didn't want to of course. It meant I had to acknowledge the fact that the only reason I'd ever hated Darcy was that she didn't think I was pretty enough when we first met.

Yes, George was my friend, but that didn't mean much. I've always been a bit of a cynical bastard. If he'd told me the story about someone else, maybe even Caroline, I would've taken it with a grain of salt. But Darcy was the bombshell who'd flicked me off and so I believed every word he'd said. It made me realise some horrible things about myself and I felt thoroughly ashamed.

***

I was glad when my time with Charlotte and Colin was up. It felt like I needed time on my own to sort everything out. Charlotte kept on asking pointed questions while Colin was as oblivious to everything as ever. Besides that, things between them were getting worse. I couldn't wait to escape the place, and Lady Catherine who managed to be part of the house without ever being present. The ride to the train station was heaven.

“Have a good time in Scotland,” said Charlotte, pulling me into a hug just inside the station entrance. It was raining and Colin had stayed at home. “Lord knows why you want to go somewhere so cold, but hopefully you'll enjoy yourself.”

“I will,” I said, laughing. “Good luck with everything. I hope things settle down soon.”

“Oh, I'll be fine,” she said unconvincingly. “You just look after yourself. I know you've been down and I think I know why. Just remember, you can phone if you need to.”

“I will,” I said. “Same here, okay?”

We said our final goodbyes and I was off to Scotland, to have a month alone with my thoughts and the cold. All in all it felt like what I needed.
Hi guys, Eli here. I'd like to apologise for this taking such a long time, but we've been doing some pretty extensive renovations at the estate, the kind that have you not sleeping due to stress and we just haven't had the time or energy to even think of this. I'm really sorry, but we're finally posting this chapter, so I hope you forgive us.

***

Scotland was fantastic, despite Charlotte's nay-saying. I won't go into too many details since this story isn't about my travels, but Edinburgh is gorgeous and I really enjoyed myself. It is cold up there, but it's totally worth going if you're interested. A lot of castles with dark and bloody pasts too, if you're into that sort of thing. I made a few friends up there and had time to think over things.

One thing that took me by surprise while I was there was getting a message from George on Facebook. I hadn't unfriended him yet, since some part of me still didn't want to believe what had been said yet, but I wasn't expecting him to message me. Looking back on it the only times George ever messaged me were when he was bored and wanted someone to hang out with or to drag me to bars.

[D: George often attached himself to interesting, attractive or likeable people to make himself look better.]

The message blinked in the tab for a bit before I worked up the courage to take a look.

George: Hey Eli. How's you're holiday going?

(I didn't answer.)

George: Hey Eli. You there?

Me: Hi George.

George: Hey man! Good to hear from you. So, how are things.

Me: Complicated.

George:?

I really didn't want to answer him. I knew what he was now and was seriously considering just going off-line and blocking him. My curiosity however, got the better of me.

Me: I've just had a lot going on. How about you? Anything going on at work?

Georg: Oh, you know, nothing much.
Me: Really?

I watched the 'George is typing' symbol for a while before opening up another tab to give him time to come up with an answer. Eventually he replied.

George: Actually I got a new job. No offence, but there wasn't really anywhere to go working for Isaac.

Got to say, it wasn't bad, but the fact he'd spent so much time coming up with it was pretty telling.

Me: Oh. How did they take it?

George: Not well. So, how was Rosings? Did you meet Lady Catherine De Bourgh?

Me: Yes.

George: Pompous bitch, isn't she? She's Darcy's aunt, which tells you a lot.

I waited for a while before deciding to reply.

Me: Actually I ran into Darcy while I was there.

George: Really? How bad was she?

Me: She wasn't bad at all really.

I was waiting for a good long while after that last one. I could almost imagine him sitting there, thinking about what to say next.

George: Really? I'm surprised. She doesn't change much.

Me: Oh, she hasn't.

G:?

Me: I just know who she is now. I don't like her, but I can respect her. I think she's a good person underneath it all.

There was a pause, then George went off-line. A few moments later, I found myself unfriended, confirming everything I suspected.

I talked with Jane about it a bit and we both agreed to avoid George entirely from now on, then life kind of went back to normal for me. As you may recall, Darcy eventually talked with Jane, but I never knew about that at the time.

Eventually, my time in Britain was almost up and I was meeting up with the Gardiners. As much as I'd enjoyed myself, it was good to see some familiar faces. I was looking forward to seeing Ellen's hometown, but I didn't expect to see Darcy again. I know you can see where this is going. Remember Darcy's family estate? Pemberley? Well guess which town it neighbours...

Of course, Ellen wanted to see it, since she'd only been once as a girl and knew how much I loved old houses and gardens. I didn't want to disappoint her, so I agreed and then hurriedly phoned Charlotte to see whether she knew where Darcy was.

She lied. [D: Good to know I had someone in my corner.]

***
Pemberley is, in my own opinion, the most beautiful place in England. Unlike some stately homes, which simply obliterated whatever natural landscape existed beforehand, Pemberley had been built with the landscape in mind. The house itself is lovely, but the grounds and gardens are beautiful. They attract hordes of tourists practically all year round, even a few in winter.

[D: True, although it's pretty quiet most weeks.]

Pemberley was originally the home of the Darcys until the 1890s, when the last member, Richard Darcy, almost drove the estate almost into destitution. When he died the house was inherited by Alfred Fitzwilliam, a relative who decided there was no way to salvage the Darcy name and did not take it.

Luckily, Alfred was a clever man and managed to drag things back from the brink. Pemberley somehow managed to weather the Second World War and all the changes of the twentieth century, although it was in a poor state until Darcy's father Henry took over and revitalised it. Darcy built on what he had started and now Pemberley was not just supporting itself, it was turning a profit for the first time in nearly 50 years, allowing repairs and new improvements.

So if you wonder why Darcy is so proud of Pemberley, there's your reason.

We'd arrived on a slow day, so aside from a small group from a local school we were almost the only people there. After a small donation to get in, we essentially just spent a lot of time moseying around the grounds and walking along the edge of the lake. After a while the school group left and Mr Reynolds, who had let us in, wandered over, smiling.

Mr Reynolds is a nice old man whose entire family has worked at Pemberley for centuries. He used to volunteer at Pemberley after he retired, but recently that got to be too much for him and so now he works in the gift shop. He's the kind of man you'd expect to see brandishing a shotgun and chasing poachers in an episode of Midsomer Murders.

“Hello there,” he said. “Enjoying the gardens?”

“Yes,” said Ellen. “They're very beautiful.”

We talked about the gardens for a while, eventually coming to a slow point.

“We've been working on some other areas of the park, but I'm afraid they aren't open to the public yet,” said Mr Reynolds. “Would you like a look inside the house instead? We've just had a school group in, so it wouldn't be any trouble.”

“As long as that's alright with the owners,” said Ellen, slightly hesitantly.

“Oh, of course,” said Mr Reynolds, casually waving her concerns away. “The house is open to the public. Usually we ask for a fee to see it, but I think it'll be fine just this once.”

He saw us hesitate and leant closer with a cheeky grin. “It's been a slow day.”

“Well in that case...” replied Ellen, smiling.

So, just like that, I found myself inside Pemberley, awkwardly looking around and feeling like I was intruding on Darcy's privacy. [D: Eli hasn't mentioned the obvious fact that there are public and private rooms at Pemberley. Having tourist wandering around the galleries is something I've been used to ever since I was a child.]

We wandered from room to room with Mr Reynolds, past paintings and portraits of long dead
men and women as he told us about each room, any significant features and the events that occurred within them. I remember coming to a pause in front of one portrait in a long gallery.

It seemed far newer than the others, but the main reason it stood out was that it was of a beautiful Pakistani woman in the midst of a sea of white people.

“Who is this?” I asked, not really aware of the conversation going on around me.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Mr Reynolds as he turned to look at me.

“Oh, sorry,” I said, feeling sheepish about being distracted. “I just saw—” I trailed off, pointing at the lady above me.

“Ah,” said Mr Reynolds, smiling up at her fondly. “That was the late Mrs Fitzwilliam. I'm not surprised you noticed her. She does stand out, doesn't she?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing awkwardly.

“Her daughters look a lot like her,” he commented, still smiling. “Especially Darcy.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” I said, surprising myself.

“You never mentioned you knew them,” said Reynolds, surprised.

“I met Darcy when she was on holiday in Melbourne,” I said hurriedly. “We mostly ran into one another at parties.”

“Oh,” he said. “Yes, I think she mentioned you actually.”

“Really?” I felt myself blanch.

“She did talk about someone with... long hair,” he said conversationally. “Darcy's spent so long working on this estate that she certainly deserved that holiday. I don't know anyone more driven.”

“That's very true,” I said, catching Ellen's curious glance. I'd never really talked with the Gardiners about Darcy, although they did know we never really got along.

“I don't think we could ask for a better steward for Pemberley,” said Mr Reynolds proudly. “I've known her ever since she was a little girl and she was always the sweetest thing you could ever imagine.”

“Really?” I asked, trying to mask my surprise.

“Oh yes,” he said, smiling. “She's always been a quiet one, but she cares. Used to come over with cooked dinners every Sunday after my wife died, until she decided to invite me here instead.”

I shouldn't have been so surprised. [D: Probably not.] I'd become very used to my idea of Darcy and still hadn't discarded it even though I knew she was a decent person. I eventually managed to disengage from the conversation and quietly headed outside when the Gardiners followed Mr Reynolds into another room.

***

I stood in the servant's entrance we'd entered by, trying to collect my thoughts. I really didn't want to think about Darcy. I still had a lot of guilt about what had happened and listening to Reynolds talk about her was incredibly uncomfortable. Eventually I slid my headphones in and just blared the loudest Metal I had on my iPod, trying to shut out the thoughts.
This was why I originally missed the fact Darcy ended up standing right in front of me, carrying a pair of canvas bags.

“Eli?” she said, startling the crap out of me. [D: When he finally heard me. I've set down rules about ruining his ears now that we're married.]

“I'm so sorry.” I said, starting to babble as I pulled my headphones out. “I know I shouldn't have come, but Ellen wanted to come and-

“No, no,” said Darcy hurriedly. “It's no problem at all. How are you? You look a little... jumpy.”

“Good, I'm good,” I said, trying to melt into the wall. “How are you?”

“Good,” she said, a little less flustered. She plopped down her bags, then shifted on the spot awkwardly. “And your family?”

“Yeah, they're good,” I said, wishing I could think of something better to say than 'good'. [D: You weren't the only one.]

“I'm really sorry Darcy,” I said after a moment, which we both spent looking at our feet. “I thought Charlotte said you were in London. If I'd known you were home-”

“What?” Darcy looked confused. “I just told her I was-”

We both fell silent, with me going incredibly pale and her incredibly red faced.

“Excuse me,” I said, feeling like an utter coward. I slipped out past her, certain she didn't want to see me. I thought about slipping through the house to find the Gardiners and leave, but that meant I might run into her again and it seemed unfair on them too.

Instead, I made my way over to a tree near the driveway where I decided to wait for the Gardiners. I didn't expect to feel her hand on my arm about five minutes later. [D: It'd taken a while to collect my thoughts.] I jumped a little and she took a quick step back.

“I'm sorry I didn't welcome you properly earlier,” she said. “I know I might have seemed a little shocked, but I'm glad to see you.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “Thank you.”

“So, how have you found Pemberley?” she asked, gesturing around her. “Does it match up to your expectations?”

“It's very beautiful,” I said honestly, feeling bemused. “Anyone could see it.”

“Ah, but I know how harsh a critic you are,” she replied, almost smirking. “I take it you were on a tour with Reynolds?” She gestured back towards the house.

“Yes,” I said. “I'm here with some friends. I should probably get back to them.”

“Anyone I know?” she asked, coming along with me as we walked back to the house.

“I wouldn't say so,” I replied. “Unless you shopped at Preston Market.”

“I'm afraid not,” she replied, before pausing for a moment. “I'm making you uncomfortable, aren't I Eli?”
“Yes,” I said, laughing, with a strange sense of relief. “I'm sorry Darcy. I don't know if you've picked it up yet, but I'm kind of rubbish at all this.”

“I can hardly claim to be any better,” she said, smiling warmly.

I hid my surprise at her sudden openness and looked at her properly. “You look really good, by the way. You seem different, somehow.”

She was still dressed well, her hair was in a neat glossy bun and her make-up was the same as it ever was, so it took me a moment to realise what it was. I'd never seen her this warm. I hadn't even seen her smile properly before.

I caught the amusement in her eyes as she noticed my watching. “Sorry,” I said, coughing awkwardly as we entered the house, through the front door this time.

We walked in silence through the house, with me following a few paces behind, until we came to Mr Reynolds and the Gardiners coming the other way.

“Darcy!” said Mr Reynolds, raising an eyebrow. “I take it you found Mr Bennet?”

“Sorry,” I said, sheepishly. “Needed a bit of fresh air.”

Ellen and Isaac looked concerned, obviously picking up on my nervousness. “Everything alright Eli?”

“Yeah,” I said. Turning, I became aware of Darcy's expectant gaze. “Ellen, Isaac, this is Darcy Fitzwilliam. Darcy, this is Ellen and Isaac”

“It's lovely to meet you,” said Darcy, slipping forward to shake their hands.

“It's nice to meet you too,” replied Ellen, smiling back. “I must say it's bee a long time since I've been to Pemberley, but it's as lovely as I remember.”

“So, you've been here before?” asked Darcy.

“I grew up in Lambton,” said Ellen fondly.

“Is your sister Alice Thompson, by any chance?” asked Darcy.

“Yes,” said Ellen, pleased by the recognition. “We're actually staying with her at the moment.”

“I still remember her yelling at me to not climb that old oak tree, the one near the Old Smith cafe.”

“Yes, she was always touchy about that ever since our cousin fell out of it and broke his arm,” said Ellen, laughing. “I was very sad to see it gone.”

“I know,” agreed Darcy. “But it was hit by lightning. What can you do?”

I noticed Reynolds giving a sly smile to Darcy as he disappeared around the corner. “Tell me, have you seen the maze yet? It's only at half it's full height, but you can still get lost in it.”

“No, we haven't,” said Isaac.

“It's not technically open to the public yet, since we've had tourists damage it before, but if you'd like to see it...”

“I'd love to,” said Isaac. “Ellen?”
And that is how to not only ensure that people stay for longer, but to also find an excuse to lose them in a large, chest high maze people. Of course she spent plenty of time making conversation and showing off how much she'd improved [D: This might sound snide, but that actually was what I was doing, at least partially], but after a while we got to the centre of the maze and she let them walk off while I was busy looking around the garden. [D: Not how it happened. Eli was looking at the garden, I was looking at Eli and Ellen and Isaac chose that point to abandon us. Just because you can see people in a maze doesn't mean you can get back to them.]

“So how long are you staying in Lambton?” asked Darcy, as we paced along the rows. I could see Ellen's hat a fair way off, but by this point I'd given up on getting back to her.

“I'm leaving with the Gardiners on Sunday,” I said, avoiding her eye. “Did you deliberately get us lost?”

“Maybe,” said Darcy, smiling.

“Of course you did,” I said, shaking my head. “So, I suppose you also put the Gardiners on the wrong path too?”

“No!” she said, looking annoyed.

“I don't want to have to explain to my parents why the Gardiners starved to death in a maze Darcy,” I said in mock seriousness.

“Alright, very funny Eli.”.

“I have to know Darcy,” I said, leaning forward as she drew back, her face stony. “Did those tourists have to cut their way out?”

And that's when Darcy shoved me through a hedge. Well, that's not exactly true (or fair). She didn't so much shove me through a hedge as fell through it with me. It started off with her pushing me in the chest harder than she meant to. The moment I was going backwards I panicked, grabbed onto and her pulled her off balance. Let's just say it was a very good thing the hedge was there to break our fall.

There was a crash, the cracking of branches as we went through the young, still growing, hedge wall and I ended up half lying, half sitting in the hedge, sandwiched under Darcy who, being taller, fitter and curvier than me, carries far more weight than I ever have. I'm an absolute twig compared to her, even though I'm not out of shape.

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry,” said Darcy, looking absolutely horrified. “I didn't realise you were that off balance. Are you okay?”

“That hurt,” I said, after a few moments, looking up at her. That was the point I started to giggle. The entire situation was just so inherently ridiculous I had real trouble stopping to say anything. “What are you, twelve?”

“Apparently,” she said, smiling sheepishly as she pulled me out of the hedge and sat us both on the ground. “Shit. I knew I shouldn't have taken tourists into the maze.”

“Oh come on, you can't pin this on me,” I said exasperatedly.

“Watch me,” she said, her smile mocking and gentle. Darcy was leaning back with her hands behind her, looking remarkably ladylike for a woman with twigs in her hair.
We sat in silence for a while, watching the clouds with Darcy occasionally trying to pull the hedge back into shape. Eventually she just gave up and sat quietly with me.

“Eli?” she said after we’d been sitting there a long time.

“Yes Darcy?” I asked, shifting my wait on the gravel to look at her.

“I’m so glad you don’t hate me, I really am, but I miss the friendship I thought we had.”

“Oh,” I said, hopelessly, feeling terrible. I hadn't even thought of that side of things.

“I understand if you don't want to,” she said, carefully not looking at me, “but I'd like if we could... you know... try being friends.”

She took my awkward silence as rejection. “Of course, if you're uncomfortable-”

“No, no, no,” I said hurriedly. “I would like that.”

“Oh good,” said Darcy, sounding surprised.

[D: I was. My relationship with Eli had been based on so many misconceptions up to this point that I felt certain he’d be utterly disinterested. The only reason I’d decided to even ask was because all the advice I’d got online (because I sure wasn't getting advice from people I knew) told me to be more direct. It probably wasn't the right choice to help me to get over Eli, but frankly I didn't care.]

“Charlie and Caroline are going to be staying at Pemberley for a little while too,” she said after a moment. “I was wondering whether you might like to join us at some point.”

I almost said no to avoid being around Caroline and to a lesser extent Charles. Instead I manned up for once and said: “I would love to. What day were you thinking?”

“Wednesday perhaps?” said Darcy, sliding around to face them. “You and the Gardiners could come over for dinner. There's someone else I think would like to meet you too.”

“Who?”

“My sister Georgiana.” Darcy blushed a bit. “I've talked a little bit about you and it'd be odd if I didn't introduce you two.”

“Of course.”

“Fantastic.” She picked herself up and dusted herself off before pulling me to my feet and we walked back to where Ellen and Isaac were standing, just outside the maze.

“Looks like you to had some fun,” said Ellen, looking over our appearance.

“She pushed me through a hedge because I was being annoying.”

“I believe that part,” she said. “You have twigs in your hair dear.”

It took us both an embarrassing moment to figure out which of us she was talking about. Turns out it was both of us. Darcy spent a good few minutes picking stuff out of my hair while Ellen and Isaac pretended not to laugh.

“I was just saying to Eli that I would love to have you to over for dinner,” she said, as she tried to pull a fairly sizable piece of twig out of my hair without hurting me. “I was wondering whether
you were free on Wednesday. I have some friends visiting this week but I'm sure they won't mind.”

I was pretty certain Caroline probably would, but didn't say anything.

“Oh, thank you, but I'm afraid I'm seeing my aunt on Wednesday,” said Ellen. “We're free on Thursday, if that's okay?”

“Definitely,” replied Darcy, smiling.

So we ended up swapping numbers and agreeing to phone if anything came up. The entire situation would have been incredibly surreal at the start of the day. What would have been more surreal was when I found myself chatting with Darcy and her sister the next day, with me seeing them first and heading over.

This was the start of when Darcy and I entered a new phase in our relationship and it was good. Events eventually made things a lot worse, but the problem was never how we thought of each other again.

Goes to show what happens when you pull your head out of your ass and act like a decent human being. [D: I don't know whether to edit that out or not.]
Hello all, Darcy here.

So, guess who decided she wanted to write another full chapter? We finally got the renovations sorted, so I figured I might as well use some of my free time.

I know I said I wouldn't but, hey, things change, don't they? There are stories I want to tell and I think they might be illuminating and entertaining.

You might remember how Eli mentioned he ran into Georgiana and I was picking her up from the bus station. He'd been at his most charming and even managed to get a smile out of Georgie, then he'd taken us over to the pub for a drink (non-alcoholic of course).

I was amazed by how much Eli and Georgiana hit it off, not because they didn't seem like they'd get along, but because Georgie was still incredibly shy back then and Eli had a tendency to intimidate people back then. A lot of people used to find the hair, piercings, clothes and tattoos a little confronting, even if he's actually the most gentle person I know. These days the hair is more restrained and the wardrobe is far more normal.

However, I'd evidently talked enough about Eli to disarm those problems and so we ended up sitting with him for a good three quarters of an hour. I'm afraid I don't remember much of the conversation; I was a little distracted by the entire situation and my worries.

I evidently wasn't being very discreet, because afterwards, when we were back at home, Georgie gave me a funny look. “So... about Eli?”

“Yes?” I asked. I could feel myself blanching, which is a sure fire way to tell when I'm not happy about something. Georgiana of course picked up on it, but persisted nonetheless.

“You like him, don't you?”

I thought about what I should tell her, before deciding to be honest. I'd never been good with talking about my feelings and it had really damaged our relationship in the past. Besides, the only reason to not be honest with her was not being honest with myself.

“I do. I love him actually, but I'm afraid it's not going anywhere,” I smiled slightly at the look on her face. “I suppose that wasn't what you were expecting me to say.”

“Not exactly,” said Georgiana awkwardly. “You love him? Have you-”

“Yes, I've told him,” I said tiredly. “In the worst way possible in fact. The fact that we're even on speaking terms is amazing.”

“You're certain-”
“I’d like to think differently, but yes I am,” I said, cutting her off. I laughed sadly. “You look so disappointed. More disappointed than me at this point.”

“Of course I am,” said Georgie. “I meet the first person you’ve been interested in in years and you immediately tell me it's too late? How do you think I feel about it?”

“How do you think I feel about it Georgiana?” I snapped back. “I'm not exactly happy about this, am I?”

I saw her face and immediately felt terrible. “I'm sorry Georgie, I shouldn't have snapped. I just had this going around my head for a while, that's all.”

Georgiana came over and I found myself being hugged too tightly. “Alright, now you're bruising my ribs,” I said, patting her back awkwardly.

“You invited him over though,” she said quietly.

“A moment of madness, I assure you,” I said, smiling slightly. “Caroline is going to be furious.”

***

Of course, my prediction turned out to be correct “You invited Eli Bennet over?” asked Caroline incredulously. She looked less than pleased, but I got the feeling she didn't want to criticise my decision.

“Of course,” I said, giving her a calm look. “We haven't seen him in ages and he'll only be in England for another week.”

Caroline seemed to consider that for a moment before shaking her head and going back to eating her breakfast. It had been wrong of me to invite someone over without consulting my guests, but I had really wanted to show my best self to Eli and had gotten a little carried away.

An awkward silence fell over the breakfast table, with Caroline pointedly not looking at me and Charles pushing his food around his plate. There was the clinking of cutlery on dinnerware for a moment before Charles spoke up.

“How is he doing?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“He's going well,” I said, smiling nervously.

“And how are his family?” asked Charlie.

“They're well,” I said, giving him an awkward smile back.

Caroline gave me a sharp look, but didn't say anything.

I'd had a word with Charles about how I thought I'd made a mistake soon after phoning Jane, but as far as I could tell he'd done nothing with the information, not that I could blame him. I wasn't exactly the best person to give relationship advice after all.

“The Gardiners are also coming over,” I mentioned casually, hoping he was okay with this. “Have you met them Charles?”

He shook his head and went back to his bacon. Eventually Caroline stood up, placed her plate on a tray and left the room.
“I'm sorry Charlie. I didn't think about how awkward this would be for you.”

“Don't worry about it,” he replied. “I'm going to crawl back to Jane on my hands and knees when I get back to Australia, anyway. I'd probably have to see him then at some point, so I might as well get it over now.”

“I'm glad,” I said, smiling. “I still feel terrible about that you know.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn't your fault. I was the one having doubts.”

We sat quietly for a moment, before a thought suddenly popped into my head. I still hadn't actually planned anything for dinner.

***

Dinner went well, despite the fact I'd spent the entire day worrying about buying the right ingredients, starting early enough and generally making more work than was actually necessary. I'm a fair cook, but unfortunately I've never been a particularly calm one; I often over-think and over-prepare.

Georgiana realised what I was doing the moment she got home from school and immediately came to my rescue, helping me with various odd-jobs around the kitchen and generally keeping me from snapping at anyone. Charles did his best to be useful, but didn't know anything about how my kitchen was laid out so I quickly sent him away.

The meal itself was very pleasant and I like to think nearly everyone enjoyed themselves. Frankly, a gathering of seven people is about the most I've ever really enjoyed. I seriously tried to propose just going to the registry office rather than having a wedding, but that didn't go over to well with Eli's mum or my relations either.

Eventually we moved out from the kitchen and into one of the estate's many lounge rooms, since what's the point of having a large house if you don't use it? Really I just didn't want to have to think about the dishes until the morning, but it was a change of scene and it kept things going longer.

I caught Eli's eye when he was leaning on the fireplace talking to my sister and smiled, and was surprised when he came over and sat on the couch next to me. “So,” he said, casually. “Apparently you've been telling fibs about me to your sister.”

“What?” I said, glancing over at my sister in confusion. This wasn't helped by Georgie's embarrassed shrug.

“We both know I'm not that good on the piano and yet here your sister is, insisting that you said my playing was a gift from the gods or something.” His grin was infectious, but I still found myself rolling my eyes at him.

“I'm not going to even deign that with an answer,” I said, sniffing melodramatically, which got a grin out of him. He shifted across on the couch as Georgie came over and they were soon chatting once again.

Eventually Georgie headed off to bed, leaving Eli and I sitting next to each other in silence, surveying the rest of the room and occasionally interjecting into whatever conversation was occurring at the time.
“Caroline doesn't seem very happy with us,” said Eli conversationally in a lull when we'd gone to get the drinks.

“She’s just sad she's not the prettiest one here,” I said dismissively.

He laughed, caught off guard. “Wow. Vain much?”

“I was talking about you actually,” I said somewhat coolly. I know, I know, I was being incredibly thin skinned, but the comment brought up things from the past I wanted to forget.

“Oh,” he said. “I'm sorry. Thanks, I guess?”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked, quirking an eyebrow at him.

“Well I don't know whether a guy being pretty is generally considered to be a good thing or not,” he said, slipping into an overly feminine poise and almost getting a laugh out of me.

“Trust me, in your case it definitely is,” I said.

“Well thank you then,” he said, bowing low.

“You're welcome,” I said, smiling and shaking my head. “Did you have a chance to see the library when you visited by the way?”

“Since I only care about books?”

“No-” I paused for a moment, thinking back to the beach house. “Eli...”

“Sorry,” he said, smiling. “I did though. It's beautiful, although I get the impression the books aren't read much, which surprised me.”

“Thank you. You're right though, they're not. A lot of them are very fragile and moreover we still haven't had half of them catalogued. After World War 2 the family inherited a bunch more from another estate that was mostly bombed out and there wasn't really any time to sort through them. We've got a more private library that we actually use.”

“Ah.” We were silent for a moment while we pottered around the kitchen, stacking dishes and cutlery into the rack. (I know, I was planning on leaving them till morning, but mess bothers me and Eli just followed suit.)

“I'm guessing your private collection is full of Pulp Sci-Fi, isn't it?” he asked, smirking.

“Yes,” I said, a little surprised. “How did you know?

“You were reading Pellucidar at the beach house,” Eli said, smiling. “I got to say, I never knew Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote hollow earth novels.”

“But how did you know it was mine?” I countered. “I could have just picked it up there. You know how beach houses just collect unwanted books.”

“Beach houses are generally full of old best sellers and autobiographies in my experience,” he said. “Did I ever tell you about the time I realised my gran had been reading one about a woman who had become a stripper for a lifestyle change?”

“No and I'd be grateful if you stopped right there,” I said, disgusted but still somewhat amused. “Still doesn't prove that book was mine.”
“Besides, but would something you just picked up have your name written in it? With squiggly lines and flourishes?”

“You got me,” I said, a smile sliding back onto my face. “I’ve always loved pulp.”

“Before I picked up that book all I ever knew Burroughs wrote was Tarzan,” said Eli as he got down the cups and saucers.

“Oh don’t worry, Tarzan goes down to the hollow earth.”

“You're kidding.”

“And it all happens in the same universe as John Carter of Mars,” I said excitedly.

I ended up giving him far too much information about the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs while we made the tea and set up the trays, but he spent most of the time smiling, even if he did look a little bewildered by it all.

“You're a complete and utter geek, aren't you?” he asked, when I'd run out of things to talk about.

“Why are you so surprised?” I asked, handing him a tray of cups and saucers. “You're the one who thought I'd be a pulp fan!”

“Yeah, well, I didn't expect you to be all fun and quirky when I got you talking about it,” he said, carefully balancing the tray while I followed with the kettle.

“Well how were you expecting me to react?” I asked, giving him a look. “You gave a nerd a chance to talk about a passion.”

“I don't know,” he said awkwardly. “I thought you might try to downplay it. You've always seemed so... prim and proper.”

“That's me,” I said sarcastically. “Prim and proper.”

“Oh come on, don't be like that,” he said, laughing at my reaction. “This week is the first time I've seen you acting casual. Hell, I've rarely seen you out of a dress.”

“How about we don't talk about the time you saw me out of a dress?” I said challengingly, catching him off guard and causing him to blush. I stepped up beside him and glanced over. “Still think I'm prim and proper?”

“No ma'am,” said Eli, his face carefully schooled. “You are most definitely not prim and proper. I'm just being childish.”

“I know,” I said. “I'm sorry I overreacted.”

“Why were you so determined to hide the fact that book was yours anyway?” he asked curiously.

“My father never really approved,” I said, embarrassed. “He always thought they were rubbish and always got annoyed whenever Reynolds gave me another one.”

“My mum was the same about my taste in music.” He stood to one side while I stepped through the door with my tray. “The only reason I started growing out the hair and getting the tats was to get back at her about it.”

“You're more confident than I was,” I said. “I'd have never done something like that.”
“I was only that way with my mum,” he said. “I used to hide all kinds of things from my friends at school.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know,” he said awkwardly. “I used to pretend I didn't like romance films, classical music and jazz. Stuff that didn't gel with me being a Metalhead.”

“And the ballroom dancing?” I asked.

“Oh, I definitely hid the ballroom dancing,” he said. “Well at least I did until Year 12. I tangoed with the hottest girl in school during the valedictory. Really pissed off all the alpha males.”

Something about that image made me want to change the topic, so I asked him “So, you like romance films?”

“Yeah,” he said grinning. “Remember '10 Things I Hate About You’?”

“Of course,” I said. “I'm guessing you're going to s-”

“There you two are,” said Charles, smiling slightly at me as he came around the corner. We'd been standing in the hallway for quite some time and he'd been sent to find us. “We'd begun to wonder whether you'd gotten lost in your own house Darcy.”

“I got her talking about books,” said Eli as way of explanation, stepping past him carrying his tray.

“Ah,” said Charles. “Well there's your first mistake. You'll never escape if you get her started on books.”

“So I gathered,” he called back as he headed into the lounge room.

I rolled my eyes at him as he approached.

“Well?” he asked quietly. “What was that all about, really?”

“We're friends,” I said defensively. “Friends talk.” I felt a mixture of other emotions boiling under the surface, sadness, regret and a vicious little piece of hope that really hurt, but I pushed them down and walked back into the lounge room.

***

Things eventually came to a close and we all walked Eli and the Gardiners to the front door. Ellen hugged me (I didn't know how to respond really, since there aren't many people I've ever felt that comfortable being so close to, but it was still nice) and I had an awkward half hug with Eli which had my heart skipping, then the night was officially over and I was humming happily to myself.

Then came a conversation that fundamentally set things in stone for me.

“That went well,” said Charles, glancing at me.

“I know,” I said as we turned to head in doors. “It was nice seeing him again.”

“Did you see his hair though?” said Caroline dismissively. “Every time I see it becomes more and more awful. It's bad enough that he dyes it in such lurid colours, but he's now let it fade out to absolutely nothing and it looks absolutely hideous.”
“I really don't know why you invited him over Darcy,” she continued, apparently taking my silence as agreement.

“He was our friend, remember?” I replied.

Charles noticed the tension in the air, so said something in agreement before excusing himself and heading off to bed.

“I honestly don't see what you ever saw in him. He's so... meh.” She waited for a moment for me to respond, but when I didn't she continued. “You know my opinion on his hair of course, but he’s also so thin. You'd think he'd take a bit of pride in his appearance and go to the gym once in a while.”

“He's not thin, he's lithe,” I said testily, “and besides, I've always admired people who have the confidence to be themselves.”

“It's a pity then his confidence is so misplaced, isn't it?” she said snidely. “And as for his eyes... I frankly can't see what you found so attractive about them. They're... what, exactly? Muddy brown?”

I wanted to tell her to stop, but I was afraid I'd end up snapping at her. The next comment proved too much however.

“Anyone who covers themselves in that many tattoos clearly doesn't care how they present themselves. You used to find him attractive however, which I don't understand at all.”

“That's right Caroline,” I said, breathing in hard and controlling my tone. “I did used to think he was very attractive. These days I'd call him the most beautiful person I know.”

Caroline stared at me like I had two heads and went silent for the longest time. Frankly, she looked disgusted and upset at my comment.

I would have happily not spoke on the matter further, but eventually she regained her voice. “But what about Charles, Darcy?”

“What about him?”

“Eli is a reminder of Jane, remember?” she said angrily. “We don’t need him to be feeling all nostalgic over her.”

“Why not?” I asked, confused. “She's a sweet girl and I'm very sorry I misunderstood the situation. Charles should go for it if she'll have him back.”

“But I thought you were interested in...” Caroline trailed off, a mixture of confusion and anger on her face.

“You thought I was interested in Charles?” I asked incredulously. “Caroline, if I'd wanted Charles, I would have asked him out years ago.”

“Well then why haven't you asked Eli then, if you find him so attractive?” she countered.

“What makes you think I haven't?” I said, challengingly.

She took a step back, aghast. “But he's so common,” she said, horrified. I really should have seen this coming, but somehow I hadn't and now we were fighting over it.
“Your talking about the fact he's working class, don't you?” I said. I waited for her to respond, but there was no answer.

“Caroline, I won't pretend that class isn't a real issue in relationships or that I haven't held... similar beliefs to yours in the past, but the only real difference class makes to a person is their outlook and opportunities. It doesn't affect their worth or quality. The fact that you seem to think it does is disgusting.”

I waited for another moment, but she remained silent. “I'm going to bed. Goodnight Caroline.”

I never heard her reply and I'm pretty certain we both went to bed angry.

I don't know how fair to her I was over the next few days, but I'm afraid our relationship never recovered. I suppose I'm flattered that she wanted Charles and I together, but I have been known to be a little over-protective and the idea of someone talking down about Eli like that made it difficult to look at her the same way I had before.

I was afraid it would affect my relationship with Charles, but thankfully he was very understanding and never brought it up.

The good thing that came from this however, was that the conversation proved to be a catalyst for a new thought. I knew I still loved Eli and I knew, now that I'd been forced to acknowledge them, my beliefs had definitely changed too.

Eli and I had just had an entire evening where we'd both thoroughly enjoyed each others company, as opposed to only one of us too... so maybe I'd have another chance. I resolved to approach him soon and talk about my feelings. I didn't want to hide anything from him again, not after last time, and I was hoping it might work better if I didn't pretend to want to be 'just friends' with him.

I felt almost confident when I drove into town and walked up to his front door a few days after the party. Unfortunately that was the day when everything truly went to hell.

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