

HEARTBROKEN

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE VARIATION



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Chapter One

Rain

It's raining. On the concrete, on the pavement, on the faded leaves. The world is grey, orange, and gorgeous. Puddles of water reflecting the sky. Autumn in the city, at its best.

Elizabeth is sitting outside. Café patio. Awning. She feels pleasantly warm under her heavy coat. Her hands pleasantly cold around the coffee mug. The random beauty of the universe.

Then she thinks of him.

Darcy, declaring his 'love'. In a pub. Near the pool table. Insulting. Passionate. Random, also.

Beautiful.

Strange to think of it that way. Elizabeth hadn't before; she'd been furious.

But now, looking at the rain and the glittering world (a random moment of grace), yes, it was beautiful, that declaration, in a brutal way.

Maybe she'll tell her grandchildren someday, about the haughty, silent man whom she hated so much and who fiercely loved her. A bizarre anecdote, from the past—an unpleasant acquaintance she never saw again.

Suddenly Elizabeth grabs her phone.

She looks at a number (Darcy's number).

She should write something rational, like thanking him for the information about Wickham. Say how sorry she is for his sister. Concluding, 'I still hate your guts though, but have a nice life'.

But that isn't what she writes at all.

His fire. His passion. Those words he'd said. Spiteful, loving words. Elizabeth had never felt that way before; nobody had ever dared speak to her in that way before. So, she writes:

-- It's raining. The world is so peaceful. Difficult to believe our last conversation wasn't a strange, violent dream. --

Send.

She feels a bit weird afterwards. That text is so out of left field. So not Elizabeth Bennet—you know, the rational, polite, kind, somewhat sarcastic daughter.

But... It's still raining. The world is on pause.

She doesn't expect an answer. She gets one though, fifteen minutes or so later.

-- Does that mean you'd condescend to speak to me? --

She reads it with venom (his). Darcy's such an arse. She feels angry and disappointed. The beauty of the world dissolves. Darcy didn't get it, of course. How could he?

Darcy, Bingley, Wickham. Only rich public schoolboys still call each other by their surnames. Pompous, entitled, out of touch...

Elizabeth leaves the café. Walking in the rain. To the bus stop. Inside, the bus is full and wet. People smelling of rain. Windows misty. Droplets.

She doesn't know why she finds this moment beautiful as well. At the back of the bus, a child is crying. She shivers from the dampness. Cold creeping

in. But it's an important moment maybe, a slice of life, splendour—autumn in another form.

Suddenly she sees the text differently.

Like maybe Darcy's begging.

She shivers, again. Maybe her interpretation is crazy. Maybe the first one (arrogance) was right.

But.

She looks at the phone. Maybe she should answer.

Chapter Two

Labyrinth

Five days pass before Elizabeth answers Darcy's text.

Life has begun anew. Normalcy. Pleasant enough.

Elizabeth visits Jackie in hospital. Jackie is 83 years old—one of Elizabeth's father's tenants. Jackie has lived all her life in the old, rundown Bennet building, where Elizabeth's dad hasn't increased the rent for twenty years. He hasn't done any repairs in that time either; that should even it out, he says.

Elizabeth and Jackie laugh a lot in the little hospital room they call the family lounge, on the pneumology floor. About life and death, about the irony of getting lung cancer at 83 when you've never smoked in your life.

Elizabeth leaves, gets into the big metal lift, pushes the wrong button, gets out on one of the hospital's sublevels. When she realises it, she's already wandered a bit.

It's dark. No windows. Narrow corridors, low ceilings, pipes, and containers.

She stops.

The Minotaur Labyrinth. Cosy and warm. Hidden machines humming.

Eerie.

Time stops.

Elizabeth leans against the wall. She thinks. Of her own little labyrinth of tepidness and normalcy. She looks at Darcy's text again:

-- Does that mean you'd condescend to speak to me? --

She writes:

-- Maybe. --

She presses send. Then she adds:

-- I'm always in the strangest places when I text you. --

He answers almost immediately.

-- Where are you now? --

Elizabeth does not. Answer immediately, I mean. She finds her way back to the lift and then to the bus, and she sits and thinks.

What the hell is she doing?

Time passes. Going home. Studying. Leaving her minuscule, cosy studio flat. Climbing the creaking, old wooden stairs, saying hello to Mr and Mrs Phillips, also her father's tenants, vaguely related to the family.

The Bennets' flat on the top floor. Helping her mum. Helping Kitty and Lydia with their homework. Laughing with Jane.

Going back to her own flat. Sleeping.

Walking down the road the next morning—cold, rain, grey (in a good way). Elizabeth loves rain. Puddles opening glittering windows to everywhere in the world.

It strikes her.

Maybe Darcy is waiting for her answer. Hoping.

Again, that thought.

Passion.

An intensity of feeling that has no place in normal life. That speech of his, in that pub—The Hunsford—six months ago. Unforgivable, but...wild. Something ferocious has shaken her existence. If Elizabeth ignores it, *IT* will win.

It's her worst fear, she realises.

She doesn't want to define *IT* yet. (Indifference, routine, and yes, normalcy are part of *IT*, but *IT* is worse.)

Is Darcy waiting for her answer right now? Looking at his phone? And yes, begging her silently, hoping for her answer?

The idea warms her. She feels powerful. A little sadistic even. But all those things he said, in the semi-darkness. About her family, her education, her way of life. He deserves cruelty. Maybe she should never text again. Raising his hopes and dashing them, just for fun.

Then Darcy's text appears:

-- I told Bingley that Jane still has feelings for him. --

Unexpectedly. While Elizabeth is on the bus, thinking of him.

Thinking of him thinking of her.

That floors her. So, it wasn't only in her (cruel) imaginary world. Darcy really was waiting. This text is a desperate attempt to get her to answer. Elizabeth feels so guilty, a horrible person, heartless, a manipulator, John Keats's 'Belle Dame sans Merci'.

She answers instantly, hands trembling.

-- Thank you. --

It's not enough.

-- Thank you so much. --

Then she pauses; she wants to add something, but she doesn't know what.

Minutes pass. She receives a new message.

-- So, are you in a strange place now? Since you're texting me. --

-- On the bus. --

She regrets it immediately. Feeling self-conscious. Poor. Proletarian. ("Your way of life," he'd said. Such spite.)

Ten minutes pass before he texts again.

-- Do you fancy a coffee? Later this afternoon? --

Elizabeth looks at her phone for a long time before typing:

-- No. --

Chapter Three

Pain

-- Do you fancy a coffee? Later this afternoon? --

-- No. --

Silence falls.

Early morning. Yellow and charcoal. Streaks of light. Endless disparate roofs, through Elizabeth's draughty window. Like a painting.

Elizabeth drinks coffee at the old, weary, beloved table. (Belonged to her grandmother.)

She thinks of lost opportunities.

The coffee burns her tongue. Strong emotions, like pain, unfurling with the dawn.

Is he? In pain? Darcy? Because of her? (She would be, in his place. Loving and being rejected, and then the texts and being rejected again.) He must hate her. She would.

Walking to the Tube. The neighbourhood, quirky and hipster—or derelict, depends who's looking. Approaching the Tube. Ugly restaurants in an ugly 1970s concrete block. (O'Tacos. Pizza Quinto. Burger King.) No wonder

Darcy despises her.

Then Elizabeth turns a corner, and, again, autumn. Ash trees in the wind, grey pavements, and people hurrying in the merciful cold.

She misses him. Darcy. No. She misses that feeling she had, when she first texted him.

Noon.

Autumn, yes, but winter is approaching fast. Low sky, light brushing the pavements. Only half a day has passed, but it feels like twilight already. Did she miss it? The opportunity? (Lunch, in a nearby café, less than twenty minutes to eat.) Did she miss *him*? Was Darcy important, to her, somehow?

No. It will happen to her again. Men crazy about her. Not men—a man. Another man. Love declared with words of burning metal. Upturning her life in a few seconds. Her whole existence shifting in a heartbeat.

Of course it will happen again.

Jane is all pink because Bingley is back. He called, he texted. Jane and Bingley had coffee together; they didn't do anything, they didn't resolve anything, but Jane came back flushed and flustered. "Coffee was great," she explains. "Now the worst is over, and Bingley and I can meet again as...you know. Common and indifferent acquaintances."

Elizabeth laughs.

"Lizzy," Jane breathes.

"Very indifferent indeed. Oh Jane," Elizabeth answers, tenderness swelling in her heart. Jane tries to give her a scathing look—and fails.

-- If you persist in pretending indifference, don't take me as your confidante. --

Elizabeth texts elegantly back to Jane, who's going to see the new Star Wars with Bingley as "Friends, only friends, totally innocent, nothing ambiguous, I swear."

Confidante. Take that, Darcy. Is that educated enough for you?

God. He's in her head.

Bingley is omnipresent now, hanging out with Jane all the time in the Bennets' flat upstairs. (Their mother, over the moon.) Bingley mentions Darcy A LOT. They went to the opera, apparently, (with Caroline and Louisa and Louisa's husband). They went to the theatre (same). Bingley wants to take Jane to Lucia di Lammermoor. A drama of love and faithfulness and despair. (With Darcy and Caroline and Louisa and Louisa's husband.)

Jane goes.

Jane comes back.

She is so happy.

A kiss on the stairs at the opera. Bingley stammering apologies. For how he left. Saying he will never leave now. If Jane wants him. If Jane still wants him.

Jane is in tears of joy and disbelief. Elizabeth hugs her; she's in tears too. She tells Jane how she deserves it, deserves everything that is good and fair. She deserves true, fervent love—a life that is genuine and strong.

Mrs Bennet is now firmly on the moon. Elizabeth flees. Two flights of stairs down, to her place. Tears keep falling. No reason why.

Days pass. Before the most awkward indirect conversation ever. Jane's on the phone to Bingley; Elizabeth's lounging on the sofa. Jane mentions Elizabeth's presence and puts Bingley on speakerphone.

“Oh, hi, Elizabeth!” Bingley is saying. “We're in that restaurant—the Italian one. Darcy says hi!” Some muttered sounds. “What? Of course you say hi,” Bingley mumbles.

Jane glances at Elizabeth with a bright smile. “Elizabeth says hi too!”

Registering too late her sister's frantic gestures of refusal. Then it gets worse. Jane stammers, “I mean, no she doesn't...I mean, she doesn't want to...I mean, of course she does, I mean...”

Elizabeth wants to dig a hole, crawl into it, and die.

Elizabeth's flat. Night. Wind blowing.

She imagines Darcy. Living in the world, thinking ill of her. She has to do something, anything, to stop that gnawing feeling.

-- Jane's so happy. Thank you. --

Send.

Four hours later (four!), she gets:

-- Good. --

(Loving and being rejected, then the texts, then being rejected again.)

She takes a deep breath and types back:

-- I'm sorry. I know you must hate me. --

He answers:

-- Hate doesn't even begin to cover it. --

Chapter Four

Stew

The sky is very blue.

The air is very cold.

The season is tainted.

In the Bennets' flat. Mrs Bennet cooks stew. Talks the whole time, yells at Mary, follows no recipe. Result: quite delicious. Carrots, sweet potatoes, and family.

Elizabeth is so angry.

With Darcy. How dare he? How can *he* hate *her*, after all he said, after all his insults? *She* should be the one to hate him—she does; fury almost chokes her. He tainted everything. Such a beautiful day, and instead of feeling the joy of it, now she sees the world through his eyes. (Evil Darcy's eyes.)

The Bennets' flat. Right at the top of the building under the eaves. Probably where the servants slept when the house was in its heyday—the home of a wealthy tradesman perhaps. The place where she grew up. Tonight, she can only see the stains on the wallpaper, the creaking floorboards, the general

dinginess of it all. Narrow rooms, low ceilings, leaks in the bathroom. Her sisters arguing. Jane trying to supervise their homework. (Lydia and Kitty are teens. Nobody should need to supervise their homework.)

See? *See?* That's *Darcy* speaking.

Not literally, of course. What Darcy said in the pub was more elegant, more along the lines of, "the deplorable lack of sense and decorum of your younger sisters." And tonight, Elizabeth hears his running commentary everywhere. She sets the table—and can only think of the tastelessness of the PVC tablecloth, the inadequacy of the mismatched forks. Her mum's incessant gossip. Her dad, locked up in his 'study', on his computer, ignoring the tragedy of Elizabeth's sisters (except Jane) going nowhere fast. Elizabeth was vaguely aware, of course. Before Darcy stated everything in the most cruel, merciless terms. But now she just wants to obliterate the messenger.

She grabs her phone.

-- You'd despise me today. Having dinner with my vulgar mum and my loud, rude sisters. In my dad's derelict building. --

Send.

She's got no idea what she's doing.

The answer comes back relatively quickly, considering its length.

-- At the office. Swimming in money and reducing friends to poverty. Treating everybody with contempt. So, OK. Will spend every minute of my day despising my fellow humans in general and you in particular. Also trying to get some work done in-between. --

His anger radiates. Hers gets worse.

(Yes, yes, the message has subtext and irony. Yes, Darcy's quoting Elizabeth's own words that she said to him. Whatever. She's mad anyway.)

She writes back:

-- Sorry. Can't understand your text. Too many complex words. My sordid way of life and the company I keep have reduced my brain to mush. --

Send.

“Jane, can you take a piece of cake to Mrs Jones downstairs? I made too much,” Mrs Bennet asks.

Ha. There. Take that, Darcy. Cake. Soup. Stew. Pie. Mrs Bennet always makes more for the people in the building. Mrs Bennet helps tenants when they’re ill and old and alone. Elizabeth and Jane, they help too. Like when Elizabeth visited Jackie, in hospital. Take care of thy neighbour, engraved in their neurons.

So, yeah, to hell with thee, Darcy. Charity and love and companionship and warmth. Is that vulgar?

Tears welling again in Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Mum,” she says. “Can I take some stew to the Phillipses? They love your cooking, you know.”

That’ll show *him*.

Darcy answers.

-- Can’t be bothered to read your text. My selfish disdain for the feelings of others, I suppose. Ah well. Now going to bathe in the blood of the innocent. -
-

Lydia yawns and moans that she’s tired. Why does she need to finish her homework? What’s grammar useful for anyway? Elizabeth texts Darcy back.

-- You’re still angry, it seems. Good. I am too. See, lower-class women. They tend to hold grudges. --

Mrs Bennet: unaware of World War III raging a few feet away. Says yes about the stew, mumbling something about her lack of Tupperware, and soon Elizabeth is carefully going down the building’s stairs. Narrow steps. Huge bowl of hot stew. Too full. She almost slips. A little sauce gets on the steps. Dangerous.

“Do you know Mr Bennet doesn’t really own the building?” Caroline Bingley had said to Darcy, on these very steps. Nearly a year ago. A party in the Phillipses’ flat. Too many guests, too small a space, people overflowing

into the stairwell. In the living room, Bingley and Jane dancing. Kitty and Lydia laughing. Elizabeth sitting on the stairs, chatting happily with Charlotte.

(Three weeks after, Charlotte slept with that Collins guy and moved north to work with him.)

Anyway. That night. Caroline. Smoking with short, precise gestures. Spouting venom.

“Mr Bennet’s first wife, she only left him the building’s usufruct. When he dies, they’ll all have to leave. They’ll lose the income from the rent. So, you know”—Caroline blows out a slow stream of smoke—“I suppose the girls are quite desperate.”

The girls aren’t desperate, Elizabeth thinks, right now, in the present, fighting for stew and equilibrium. Because the girls are going to work. Yes, Caroline, work. What a concept. Elizabeth’s studying sociology and Jane business. It should be the opposite, their friends say. But it’s not. Jane’s going to be the kindest, gentlest businesswoman ever. And Elizabeth wants...well.

A life that’s worthy.

(At least the Phillippes are happy with the stew.)

Elizabeth begins to climb back up.

Darcy, that same night, a year ago. During the party. Tall and handsome in black and dark grey. Looking disgusted with everyone and everything. His gaze following Elizabeth, constantly. Disapproval, she thought, at the time.

Now...well.

And Caroline—of course it makes sense now—how could Elizabeth have been so blind?

Still climbing. Wood creaking under Elizabeth’s feet. Darcy saying that the building was a fire hazard. It might very well be. Hateful man.

Phone beeping.

-- Elizabeth, please listen to me. Please. I never said that you were lower

class... --

Elizabeth's so distracted she slips on the wet step, loses her footing, and falls.

Chapter Five

Fire

-- Elizabeth, please listen to me. Please. I never said that you were lower class. Just the opposite. I expressed, too strongly it seems, how much I admired you, your character, your kindness, your fire. It was a mistake, a huge one; I completely misinterpreted our connection, I misinterpreted... well, everything. But I don't want our exchanges to degenerate into bitterness and name calling. Please forget my earlier stupid attempts at sarcasm. Please forget everything I ever said or wrote to you, actually. --

-- Elizabeth, are you OK? I just got Jane's text. She said you'd hurt your head and they're rushing you to hospital. Please give me news. --

-- Elizabeth, Jane told me what happened. Thinking of you. --

-- Elizabeth, Jane tells me you've woken up. How do you feel? --

-- Elizabeth, I apologise. I realise now my latest texts could be considered harassment. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I won't contact you again. I wish you the best in life. You deserve it. --

Elizabeth is sitting in a chair. White and plastic. The waiting room in the Accident and Emergency department. Jane's here. Her dad's here. Darcy's here. Her mother's yelling at someone. The triage nurse?

Elizabeth doesn't know how she got here. (Doesn't remember the car, doesn't remember anything.)

That's not good, right? She should tell her dad.

Darcy isn't really here, she realises. Yes, she should tell her dad she—

The world turns black.

She wakes up in a hospital bed.

“Shh,” her dad says. So much affection in his voice. “Shh, sweetheart, don't move. You're fine. Everything's fine.”

“Shh,” Darcy says, caressing her brow. “You're fine. Everything's fine.”

He isn't really there, of course.

Consciousness, and fading again. It gets better.

One day later. Elizabeth is indeed fine. Eating hospital food, clean hospital sheets, clean pale walls. Being discharged tomorrow. Yes, there was a concussion, but the doctors think the risk is minimal now. She'll have to come back for checkups.

“I, um, I texted Darcy about you,” Jane says.

Sitting in the grey hospital chair, holding magazines and sweets. “When I picked up your phone,” Jane adds, “I saw you'd been texting Darcy all night, and I thought... Maybe... But...”

Jane pauses. Elizabeth's focusing on her spinach.

“Is something going on between you two?” Jane asks. Elizabeth hesitates. “You don't have to tell me,” her sister adds hastily.

Elizabeth decides against the spinach. She puts sugar in her hospital coffee. A lot of sugar. Cause, you know.

“No, nothing's going on. Well, we've been fighting. By text.”

“Why?” Jane asks.

Good question.

“You know, he almost came here,” Jane explains. “Darcy. To see you, when we were waiting. Then he texted me that no, you wouldn’t want that. He changed his mind twice, before finally deciding against it.”

Elizabeth can’t answer. So Jane, the sweetest soul on the planet, smoothly changes the subject.

As soon as Jane has gone, Elizabeth grabs her phone.

She reads the texts.

-- Elizabeth, please listen to me. Please. I never said that you were lower class. Just the opposite. I expressed, too strongly it seems, how much I admired you, your character, your kindness, your fire. It was a mistake, a huge one; I completely misinterpreted our connection, I misinterpreted... well, everything. But I don’t want our exchanges to degenerate into bitterness and name calling. Please forget my earlier stupid attempts at sarcasm. Please forget everything I ever said or wrote to you, actually. --

-- Elizabeth, are you OK? I just got Jane’s text. She said you’d hurt your head and they’re rushing you to hospital. Please give me news. --

-- Elizabeth, Jane told me what happened. Thinking of you. --

-- Elizabeth, Jane tells me you’ve woken up. How do you feel? --

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, Elizabeth.

Like an invocation. Or a prayer. She dozes on and off, still holding her phone. Darcy’s words dancing in her mind, mingling with his image—at the hospital (where he was not), stroking her head (which he didn’t). When Elizabeth wakes up, he’s sitting next to the bed. The impression is so strong, for a moment there she almost believes it.

One hour later. Her mind is clear. She sweet talks a nurse into getting her more coffee, and much more sugar. They share a few laughs. As soon as the nurse leaves, Elizabeth types:

-- Darcy, --

She stops. She closes her eyes to think.

-- Darcy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Thank you for all your texts. Please consider that I am making an extremely dramatic gesture, like falling on my knees in supplication before you (but in a sophisticated, elegant way. Think Cleopatra-style.) When we texted, you were nothing but nice to me—and I was, well, yikes. And then we fought, and it was my fault. I don't know what came over me. Again, so, so sorry. I hope you can forgive me. --

Send.

And then:

-- Yes, I'm much better. It was a serious concussion, but I'm fine now. Going home tomorrow. Never slip on stew. It's an important life lesson. See, at least one good thing came out of our relationship: you know now about the dangers of stew. --

Send.

Night falls. Outside it's very cold; you can feel it through the windows. Elizabeth hears people talking in the corridor; visiting hours are over, but nurses and doctors are coming in, complaining about the weather. Elizabeth pictures them—coats and gloves and scarves. Freezing air creeping in at the hospital's entrances, through the sliding doors.

People pass in the corridor outside the ward, laughing, before walking away. Hospital night life. Dim light, dim colours. Muffled conversations, distant machine noises. Her empty cup, smelling of cold coffee.

Her phone beeps. Darcy.

-- I don't know how to answer that. --

Then, quickly, before Elizabeth has the time to get offended:

-- Sorry, I realise the tone of my previous message could be misunderstood. I mean, I don't know if you want me to answer, or if your messages were a polite, friendly way to end our back and forth. Which would be very like you; God knows I have misunderstood you before. If that is indeed the case, I hope you can forgive this. I just want to say that I'm so happy you're well. --

Not what Elizabeth was hoping for. She has no idea what she was hoping for.

Time passes.

It could stop there. Their back and forth. As he says.

She keeps her phone in her hand. She listens to the hospital's muffled whispers. The building is a half-sleeping beast. She's safe and protected, in the hands of others, floating. Her mind drifts. (Her hand, still holding the phone.)

Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, Elizabeth.

She wants to play again, she realises. Whatever existed that night, when he wrote those texts (Elizabeth), whatever was there, she wants it again.

'Your kindness, your fire,' he'd written.

OK. Let's play with fire.

Elizabeth doesn't want to think when she types:

-- Does that mean you want me to stop texting you? --

Send.

God. She's a bitch.

Darcy's answer arrives less than five seconds later.

-- No. --

Then:

-- No. It doesn't mean that at all. --

Chapter Six

Rules

-- Does that mean you want me to stop texting you? --

Darcy's answer arrives less than five seconds later.

-- No. --

Then:

-- No. It doesn't mean that at all. --

Silence falls.

To be exact, awkwardness falls. Elizabeth waits fifteen minutes, to see whether Darcy will send something else. He doesn't.

She writes:

-- Will we be able to communicate in a civilised manner? Or are we going to fight to the death with words and emojis as duelling weapons? --

-- We can stick to safe subjects. Like food, and the weather. We can't fight about the weather. --

-- Oh, try me :) --

-- You make me laugh. --

That is Darcy's strange non sequitur.

That's it. It stops there, the exchange, at least that night, at the hospital, and Elizabeth is disappointed again. It lacks the fire—or the subtext—she's looking for.

Back home.

Elizabeth must stay put for a week. Her parents want her upstairs, on the living room sofa, where they can keep an eye on her. But three hours of the Bennet 'it's a jungle out there' family life is her limit. Elizabeth flees to her own flat. Only Jane is allowed to visit, twice a day.

Now, bliss.

Lying on the sofa, alone. Lights off.

It's winter now, not officially, but night falls at five, and the day is so grey—deep and dark. The city's draped in—Elizabeth doesn't have the words, but it's like November started and they all stepped into a different universe.

She tells Darcy. Through text.

Then she feels silly. What the hell is she sending him? Little bouts of would-be poetry about colours and seasons? Why? What will he think of her? That she's trying to seduce him with...weird romantic ramblings? She wants to delete the message—of course she can't, so she sends, too quickly:

-- You said we should talk about the weather, so see, I did. I thought, we keep to one text a day, the risk of fighting will be very limited. --

She regrets it instantly. Wanting to undermine her previous vaguely romantic seriousness, and now—gone too far the other way. She seems cold, uninterested. Worse, she just set a limit of one message a day—a strange decree—for no valid reason.

Fuck. Fuck. Panic. She's already messing this up. Darcy doesn't answer. (Of course he doesn't. He must be mortally offended.)

Then he does. A good three hours later.

-- One text a day? So that's the rule? You've already broken it, may I add. Am I breaking it by answering now? Because, is it one text per day, that's it, or is it one text per person per day? And if you answer this, does that mean I won't be allowed to answer you back? Or shall we decide texts about the rules don't count, because they're meta texts, so to speak? So many Very Important Questions. --

Ok. That makes her laugh. She wonders, though, about the three-hour delay. Maybe Darcy has a life, you know, between her texts. But also, maybe he *was* offended. Wanted to end the conversation. And then changed his mind. Decided to play along, as his only chance.

Maybe. Or, you know, he was buying food. Or working. But now that panic has subsided, Elizabeth likes to entertain the idea she has, indeed, the power to hurt him still. Like that day, on the bus. She imagines she's playing with his heart from afar, from the comfort of her sagging sofa.

One text a day. Maybe he is taking whatever crumbs he can get.

She takes her time answering (payback for the three-hour wait). Her tone playful. Messages about the 'rules' don't count, she decides. One message per *person* per day. She's already written hers (with the poetic ramblings), so Darcy still gets one.

-- OK. Then know that I liked your description earlier. My view right now at Pemberley is sort of similar. My office is on the fourth floor. I see sky, roofs, walls. Nothing pretty. Mostly piles of rubble and run-down warehouses. A mess of red tiles, stone, concrete. All draped in winter, as you said. --

She can't answer, of course. She's already used her text.

The next day. Darcy texts about an abandoned Tube station. He's got an architect friend who got him in—for an art project of some sort.

-- As you like weird places, I thought I'd describe this one... --

Elizabeth is fascinated. The text is very, very long. *That's cheating*, she thinks. But she doesn't intend to complain.

She thanks him, sincerely, then adds a funny description of the daily activities of her forced holiday. Well, she thinks the description is funny. She hopes it is. It's just, he said she was clever (in the games room in The Hunsford), and she's trying to prove him right. She tries to be sweet too. Well, 'sweet' isn't the right word; 'sweet' stinks of misogyny now, but she tries to be—gentle? Friendly? Considerate?

He said she was kind, so, you know.

The next day, she's the one who texts first (about a book), and he answers. The conversation is short. Relatively.

The next day, he's the one who messages first. About a warehouse being restored on Pemberley's grounds. There's a picture. Magnificent, as industrial ruins can be.

It goes on for ten more days. (Elizabeth's back at uni, back at work.) Texts about places. Colours. Books. Nothing of their lives. Of their work. Of their friends. Nothing intimate.

Elizabeth knows they're playing a game—she would just like to know which one.

Then:

-- Elizabeth, I'm in a café-bar just next to your place—from where I sit, I can see the door of your building. I had a work meeting with one of Bingley's friends; he just left. I know I already offered to buy you coffee a few weeks ago and you refused, but it feels strange to find myself right here and not mention it to you. If you're at home, you could come and meet me for a minute—it would be very short. I've got to leave soon. I won't pay for your drink, I swear. I'll refrain from any gallantry. I'll do what I do best: be obnoxious and aloof. --

Twenty minutes pass before Elizabeth notices the text, so she rushes down the building's stairs (maybe Darcy has left already). Then she stops at the front door, texts that she's on her way, and walks into the café with studied nonchalance.

Darcy is still there.

It's a meeting of strangers.

The last time Elizabeth saw him, Darcy was in his hipster black/grey clothes, it was night.

She still sees it. Six months ago. The pub. Dark wood, dark green. They're fighting. Elizabeth rejected him; Darcy's pacing the carpet, fury in his eyes, being more insulting by the minute. Turning to her, declaring, "If I'd flattered you, you would be ripping my clothes off right now." "But I hate lying. I'm not a hypocrite, Elizabeth, like everybody around you is, pretending to be blind to your problems to stay in your good graces."

God. He was awful. And seeing him right now, in the flesh, everything comes back to her.

Maybe everything comes back to him too, because he's very pale when she enters the café.

Six months ago. Elizabeth, standing near the pool table, eyes shining. "I've got every reason in the world to despise you." "I don't think you're capable of showing even a modicum of charm, Darcy, or even a twinge of—I don't know—basic politeness, but even if you had, I would still have spat in your face. Metaphorically, of course. Unlike you, I do have manners."

How can they ever come back from that?

In the café, right now, Elizabeth walks towards Darcy. He stands up immediately. She stops next to the small table. They look at each other in silence. Yes, he's a stranger, she thinks, very handsome, white shirt, jeans—but, she doesn't know this man.

Everything is on neutral: his face, his gaze, his voice. They exchange banalities. "How are you?" "How's your family?" "How are your sisters?" Then he has to leave. Elizabeth doesn't even have time to sit down. He's already fled.

This is the end, she thinks. She won't get another text tomorrow.

She does.

Darcy's text arrives in the morning.

-- It was strange to see you yesterday, Elizabeth, but I'm glad we met. It brings our virtual exchanges into reality. I hadn't seen you for so long, for all I knew, you could have died that night on the stairs, and Jane had been texting people every day, pretending that you were still alive, protecting your friends from the pain of knowing of your untimely demise. --

Elizabeth answers, almost instantly. (So, so relieved.)

-- Oh, that would be very much like her! I see you know Jane very well now. She's over at Bingley's so much. I think you talk to her more than I do. --

Silence. (Of course.) Elizabeth hesitates, then breaks the rules by writing a second message:

-- I want to ask, though. In your texts, you're funny and really creative—like you just were with your 'Jane impersonating me' story. But when we met yesterday, you were...stone-faced. You know, all Darcy's patented icy formality. Not that I was much better, I'm sure. --

He answers:

-- Maybe I'm shy. --

So they've both broken the rules now.

Chapter Seven

Mist

It's so cold. Every morning, winter's white mist hanging above the river, brushing the concrete, the steps to the Tube, the moving cars.

Every morning, Elizabeth wakes up with a strange warmth in her belly.

-- Maybe I'm shy. --

He wrote it to her. Just for her. Like a gift. Like a secret.

* * *

This warmth in her belly, Elizabeth carries it everywhere. To uni. To work. On the bus. On the Tube. She smiles at people. Well, she always did, but—you know—more. Christmas draws near. In the park, near her work, one of those huge inflatable castles for children. These things are often ugly, but not this one; this one is an elaborate work of art, with a Russian feel, bright, deep, rich colours, the house of Baba Yaga. A place of secrets and wonders. Something that doesn't fit but is beautiful anyway.

(This is how Darcy makes Elizabeth feel. OK, maybe not Darcy per se, but his presence in her life. His texts, once a day, every day.)

You know—the strangeness, the improbability, the potential of it all.



On Thursday, Elizabeth tells Jane everything. Really everything. Including her evil thoughts, about having power over Darcy's heart.

“Oh, but Jane, see, it was so awful, that night, in The Hunsford. The things he said—the things I said!” Elizabeth explains. Tries to explain. The whole situation—it's such a mess.

(Steaming tea. The city beige and brown and cold around the Bennet sisters.)

“I told him...I told him that even if he was the last man in the world, I wouldn't...you know.”

“Lizzy!” Jane cries, horrified.

“Well, I was pretty drunk!” Elizabeth protests. “Maybe he was too.”

Oh. *Oh.*

Maybe Darcy was drunk too.

Elizabeth remembers now. That night, Bingley, Darcy, and Richard (Darcy's cousin) doing shots at the bar. Darcy looking in Elizabeth's direction. Hesitating. Then asking for another shot. Downing it. Glancing at her again. Another hesitation. Another shot.

And then...

He was drunk. Which is not an excuse, of course. Except Elizabeth is using that same excuse for her behaviour, so...

Saturday.

The Phillipses' flat: a mess by day, a palace by night. All the lights switched off, candles everywhere. Elizabeth and Jane have thrown their parties there for years—when the Phillipses go to the country to visit family, they rent the place to the Bennet girls, off the books, for the evening. Sixty a night. Jane, Elizabeth, and Charlotte used to split the cost; now Charlotte's gone, and of course Lydia and Kitty invite all their friends and don't pay a penny. But hey,

still a pretty good deal.

Saturday, new party.

Thrown by Jane. Because she's happy.

Darcy and Elizabeth will meet there, of course. For the first time since they began texting—if you don't count that short, cold café encounter.

"I shouldn't be surprised, really," Jane says, on Thursday, during their conversation—the one where Elizabeth tells her everything. "You're so witty—so wonderful, Lizzy. Of course Darcy would fall for you."

"It's not possible," Elizabeth blurts. (See, that's the fear. At the bottom of it all.)

Jane, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Saturday. The party.

Very dark (candles only), very loud. Music screaming. A lot of alcohol. People dancing in the living room, quite drunk already. Near the red sofa, Caroline, smoking and sneering. Jane smiling and talking to Bingley's friends. People flooding the stairwell, sitting on the stairs, drinking beer and smoking pot. Richard mixing cocktails in the kitchen.

They said hello. Darcy and Elizabeth. When Darcy entered with the Bingley group. He said hello; it was polite.

Then, Elizabeth dancing and laughing (with other people). Darcy, near the sofa, talking to Caroline. Or to Jane. Or to Bingley. Only to people he knows. Purposely not watching Elizabeth. Well, Elizabeth thinks he's purposely not watching her. Maybe she's making it all up.

Richard comes in from the kitchen carrying tequila-champagne concoctions. Then he dances and flirts with Elizabeth—just a little. Elizabeth laughs again. Thinking Darcy's eyes are on her. Maybe she's imagining things.

Another guy, flirting. Is Darcy still watching her? Elizabeth flees (the guy, Darcy, the world). She goes as deep as she can in the semi-darkness. The main bedroom, full of coats, bags, women redoing their make-up, kids playing video-games. Now Elizabeth couldn't be farther from Darcy if she

tried. The whole flat between them.

She sits on the bed. Women chatting around her. The warmth in her stomach has turned to acid.

Thursday. With Jane. The conversation.

“I was sending him texts. Leading him on—just to refuse him again. Well, not on purpose, I mean, mostly, it just happened, but still...I’m...I’m a monster.”

“That’s not true,” Jane says. “Lizzy, you are one of the best people I know.”

Elizabeth takes Jane’s hand. An affectionate squeeze. “Except I can’t believe you, dearest. It’s your duty to say so. You’re my big sister. You’re, like, paid to be on my side.”

“What? Where’s my money?” Jane asks. “I’ve never had any money. Is there a lot of money?”

“And then, I insulted Darcy—all night—before I fell down the stairs...”

“I think we should get back to this money issue. How much money are we really talking about?”

“Hey! I’m supposed to be the funny one!” Elizabeth protests. “You got the beauty and the brains, and Bingley—you got all the Bs, Jane. You have to leave me something.”

Jane smiles happily—like she does when anyone mentions her boyfriend. Then she gets serious again. “OK. You led Darcy on a few weeks ago, and it was very wrong of you. But what about now?”

“What?”

Jane takes a sip of tea. “Are you still leading him on?”

Saturday. The party. Elizabeth, in the bedroom. Sitting on coats. Two women, chatting about lipstick. She takes out her phone.

-- The rules say one text a day, but we can have a conversation of more than one sentence. --

Send.

Her hands shake a little. She walks out of the bedroom and leans against the wall of the narrow, dark corridor. Times like these, she wishes she smoked.

And suddenly, Darcy's right there.

(Like he teleported across the flat or something.) He leans against the wall too, not far from her. There's like, a metre between them.

It's very dark.

“So, what shall we talk about?” he asks.

Elizabeth gives him her biggest smile—really, it's been a long, long time since she felt like this. Happy. Butterflies. A little lightheaded.

Darcy becomes very still.

“You choose the topic,” she says.

Chapter Eight

Tequila

“You choose the topic,” she says.

He nods. “OK.” Pause. “They’re talking about fears,” he continues. “Over there—the party—in the kitchen. Bingley’s asking everyone what their biggest fear is—it’s a drinking game, but I’m afraid I wasn’t paying attention to the details. It involves tequila.”

“So, what’s your biggest fear?” Elizabeth asks.

Darcy has to think for a moment. “Mediocrity. What’s yours?”

“The same,” she realises.

* * *

Thursday. With Jane, before the party.

“Jane, come on. How could Darcy ‘love’ me like he said he did—after what, a few months’ acquaintance? We met fewer than a dozen times! ‘Love’. That’s ridiculous.”

Jane is taken aback. “You met him as often as I met Bingley. Does Bingley not love me?”

“What—no—of course—of course he does,” Elizabeth stammers. “But it—it’s not—when I mean love, I mean—something deep—”

Saturday. The party.

“Ah,” Elizabeth says to Darcy, in the corridor. Still smiling. “But you see, I don’t think your definition of mediocrity is the same as mine.”

Darcy looks at her—and at her smile—for a little too long. Then he smiles back. “And why would you think that?”

“Well,” Elizabeth starts, “when I mean mediocrity, I mean mediocrity of feelings. Mediocre experiences, mediocre life. I want...true friendship, true love, true...relationships with people. And to be involved in things—jobs, hobbies—that are...well. Not mediocre.”

“Yes,” he answers, “that’s how I see it too.”

Silence. Smiles. Elizabeth loves this—the corridor, the dark, the quiet intensity.

“But,” she adds, with a theatrical move of the head, signalling a possible argument. She stops there, eyes shining with amusement, the silent threat hanging between them.

“But,” he says, “you think I’m a snob. And that I judge people on the way they look, or on their...social class. You think that’s what I mean by ‘mediocrity’.”

“Not...anymore. Not completely. I know I was... I know I said...” Elizabeth shakes her head, ashamed. (The pub. She was yelling. God.) “I know you better now.”

“Do you?”

Elizabeth wants to keep arguing—that she knows he’s still a snob, though a nicer one than she thought—but it’s so pleasant, that moment, that silence, that look in his eyes, that she doesn’t. She just wants to stay here, floating.

Thursday. Jane.

“What Bingley and I have got isn’t deep?”

Oh God.

The party.

In the kitchen. Later. A rather small room, brightly lit. Twelve people, maybe more. Yelling: “Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!”

Jane throws back the tequila-champagne shot. (Oh God, Elizabeth thinks.) That face Jane makes after. Then it’s Bingley’s turn. “Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!” Richard and ten other people are chanting.

Not clear how Elizabeth ended up here, after the corridor scene. (Darcy is leaning against the fridge, right next to her. Very close to her.) The party is made up of disjointed moments.

Bingley drinks. That face he makes.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” Richard (and the others) shout—he’s speaking to Bingley and Jane, of course.

Darcy turns to Elizabeth and kisses her.

The party.

Later. (Very, very late now.)

Elizabeth is dancing. Most of the candles have died by now. Blinking early Christmas lights, set up by Jane, in a corner. Darcy, nowhere to be seen.

Elizabeth wonders whether it happened or not. The kiss. (Oh, yes, it happened.) But it got lost in the kerfuffle. Bingley kissed Jane, and everyone clapped and cheered; nobody saw them (Darcy and Elizabeth).

His lips barely touching hers, lingering for—a second, maybe.

Richard chose Elizabeth for the next round of shots. “Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!” She threw back one. Then she drank a lot of water and some coffee—she couldn’t afford to get drunk tonight. Firstly, she had Lydia and Kitty to watch (upstairs now, after much protest) (her father locked them in), also, Elizabeth doesn’t want to look like she can’t behave herself. In front of, um, people. You know—people. Who might take an interest.

She wonders what text she’ll write tomorrow morning. She should write first, shouldn’t she? After that kiss.

Did it really happen? (It did.)

The party. Even later.

Darcy has reappeared, near the table (disaster area), serving himself some juice. In a plastic glass. It's so dark. People making out everywhere, in the corners, on the sofas.

Elizabeth's heart is pounding.

She walks up to him. She smiles. "Do you want to dance?"

"No," he says. He looks around with a haughty, disgusted look. "Not here."

Elizabeth freezes. Darcy sees it. He freezes too.

Elizabeth smiles again—it's very forced. Then she sort of bows—in a strange, old-fashioned way. "Have a great night then," she says, and she walks away.

Her throat stings, like she wants to cry. Because it's happening again. Darcy tainting everything. She was having such a wonderful time, and now (again) she sees the world through his eyes. The flat—a war zone. Wine spilled everywhere. Dirty plastic cups on the carpet. Stains. (She and Jane will have to clean everything tomorrow.) Drunk people making out (and doing more elsewhere, certainly). She thought it was cute, but now—God, she hates him.

She's almost in the kitchen when Darcy grabs her wrist.

"You misinterpreted what I said."

She turns to face him. She forces a smile again. He's still holding her wrist.

"I..." she starts. He waits for her to continue. "Jane and I have rented this flat for years," she explains. "Yes, the décor's ugly. Yes, the Phillipses are poor. But we love them. We love *it*, this place. Jane and I, we spend all day decorating. We have wonderful, cherished memories here."

"I see." Still holding her wrist. "My wording—no, my tone—was unfortunate. But see, for me, this place, this building..." He sighs. "It's where you fell down the stairs. It's the place where people stared at me when I arrived with Bingley, the first time, and everyone began to talk about how

rich I was. The Pemberley guy. Loaded. And it's still...here. That kind of talk. How rich Bingley is, how lucky Jane is to have 'landed' him. It's still floating around. People looking at him, looking at me. You know that."

"Yes."

Darcy hasn't let go of her wrist.

"You're right," she says. "I misinterpreted."

Very early the next morning—everybody's gone. Elizabeth tries to catch a few hours of sleep before the big clean-up.

Darcy's text:

-- I can't say I enjoy the Phillipses' taste in interior design, but I will try to see the place through your eyes. –

Chapter Nine

Christmas

Monday.

Winter is dreary, and all Elizabeth can feel is hope.

Sitting outside. Café patio. Awning. Where she sent her first text to Darcy, a month and a half ago. Same place, same chair.

At the time, rain, grey, autumn. On the bus, the air thick with humidity. Now, it's dry, colder, greyer. The ash trees have lost their leaves.

Coffee, hot in her cold hands. She texts:

-- About seeing things in a different light. There's a winter fair here, in the square. A very small 'big wheel' and four tiny stands clustered near the world's ugliest supermarket. One half-dead Christmas tree. The guy selling waffles has got a gorgeous view of the steps to the Tube. Pathetic or cute, you choose. --

-- Have you ever been to Cologne? --

Darcy describes the wonders of Christmas markets in Germany.

Elizabeth stares at her phone for a while. Darcy's description, it calls for a 'we could go there one day'.

She could write it. He could write it. But it doesn't get written.

Christmas drawing near.

Thursday.

It's raining at Pemberley and everywhere else in the city. Darcy wonders where Elizabeth is. The rain's a problem. The warehouse work has to be paused. The inauguration is set for April, so there's still time, but you know how construction goes.

People come into the office soaked and laughing, having run the last steps. Soaking the floor (reclaimed wood). Laughing about it around the coffee machine.

Darcy writes.

-- Elizabeth, --

Then he gets interrupted. A hundred times that day. Because of the rain, the building where the construction workers eat their lunch has flooded, so Darcy arranges for them to eat in the upstairs cafeteria, with all the hipsters and their coworking and their startups. Not the first time Darcy's tried to get the two crowds to socialise. Two ends of the spectrum. It didn't work before; it doesn't work today either. The workers scoff at the quinoa and the spinach salad, but they eat it anyway, and joke about getting real food afterwards.

-- Elizabeth, --

It's still written on Darcy's phone.

He's sure she likes the rain.

-- Elizabeth, --

His fingers. They hesitate.

When the text is finally sent, it's mundane. About the weather. About the construction workers being more snobbish than the hipsters. About them (the workers) being arrogant and haughty in the cafeteria. (Darcy chooses the words on purpose.) Feeling superior to those upper-middle-class youngsters who haven't done an honest day's work in their lives. (The workers' interpretation, certainly not Darcy's. He's seen the 'youngsters' work 20 hours a day and burn out, one after the other.)

Social paradoxes; Darcy knows Elizabeth will love it. They discuss it for a while—a dozen texts at least (breaking the rules!). Discussing the infinite nuances of social-class pride and prejudice.

But the point is, for five hours or so, the text was only:

-- Elizabeth, --

It could have become so much more. The text could have been anything. Darcy could have written anything.

Friday.

Elizabeth's jumpy. In her belly, the warmth, still. But sometimes it burns.

Like she's waiting for more. Like she's scared.

Monday. (Again.)

Two days before Christmas. Darcy spends a wonderful evening with Georgiana, just the two of them, serene and affectionate, and he's desperate. He has to see her. (Elizabeth.) To prove that it's real, that it's really happening.

He spends half of dinner being grateful that Georgiana is well, after Wickham. And she is, she's content, her eyes full of warmth and joy; there's nothing Darcy loves more than his sister's smiles, except—you know. The other half of the meal is spent trying silently to devise a way to see Elizabeth again.

Finally, he writes (while Georgiana is adding more cheesy tunes to the playlist she's making for Christmas Day):

-- Hey, Elizabeth, I'll be near that same café tomorrow morning, around 10—the place we met before. Dropping off Bingley's Christmas present. Then I've got to run—Pemberley Christmas work lunch—but I'll have five minutes, if you want to come down for an espresso. Same caveats as last time. Won't pay for your drink, will be aloof and obnoxious, etc. --

Send.

It's a lie. Well, half a lie, like last time. The 'dropping off Bingley's

Christmas present' thing is made up—but Darcy can find a way to turn it into a truth. Christmas work lunch at Pemberley is real. Georgiana organised it for the international exchange students on the third floor. The meal begins at one, so Darcy could stay much longer in Elizabeth's company, but if he does, then it's a date and she'll say no. Or there's a good chance she'll say no. Or there's still a chance she'll say no. (He doesn't know.) Five minutes between two things is casual.

Of course—Christmas Eve. Elizabeth might prefer to sleep in. And if she finds out it's a lie, after all Darcy said in *The Hunsford*, about 'being committed to the truth', then—God—if he could just erase that whole day. Wipe it out of the history books.

His phone beeps. Elizabeth.

-- An obnoxious Christmas Eve espresso! That, I will pay for! Irresistible. I'm so there :) --

Darcy answers:

-- Christmas is never obnoxious. But I will be. --

His heart. Beating fast.

Tuesday.

Christmas Eve. Very, very cold. The sky very, very blue.

The Netherfield building. A bewildered, half-naked Bingley at the door. Darcy hands him a magnum of champagne tied with a red ribbon. Jane's voice from the depths of the apartment. "Who is it, darling?"

"Darcy's being weird!" Bingley answers.

"Oh! Merry Christmas, Fitzwilliam!" Jane calls, and Darcy runs away before Jane Bennet feels it's only polite to rise to greet him, improvise a gift back, and cook him breakfast.

10 am. The café. So damn cold. Elizabeth approaches, her steps dancing, her huge smile dancing (on her lips), woollen hat, woollen scarf, her skin pink (because of the cold). Darcy, standing near a small table on the narrow pavement outside, under a patio heater—heating process, non-efficient.

“Merry Christmas!” Elizabeth says, her smile getting bigger.

“Merry Christmas!” he answers, smiling too—casual, keep it casual, but—God. He adds, “How am I supposed to be obnoxious if you greet me like this?”

“Oh, you have to try,” Elizabeth says joyfully. “You promised!”

“I’ll need time to rally.”

“What have you got planned for Christmas? I mean, Christmas Day—tomorrow?”

“Georgiana and I will be locked in our ivory tower, guarded by armed mercenaries, with orders to shoot—to keep the common people out. I’ve bought my sister blood diamonds, and she’s bought me, um...”

“The keys to a small country?”

“Yes. What about you?”

“Let’s see... It’ll be a mess,” Elizabeth says, eyes still dancing. “The noise level will be through the roof. Lydia and my mum will complain the whole time—for totally different reasons—but it will be...it will be great. We’ve bought my dad a new computer. It’ll make him so happy.”

“You love your dad.”

“I do.”

Silence. Darcy panics. “Ah, well, thanks for meeting me. Sadly, I have to run...”

“What? Wait! We didn’t get our obnoxious Christmas espressos.” Elizabeth glances inside. “Can you still give me, like, two minutes?”

He can. Inside, at the bar, Elizabeth jokes with the barista. “It’s Christmas!” the man says, and he adds whipped cream to both their cups. Whipped cream from a can—a super-cheap, supermarket-value-saver can.

Elizabeth turns to Darcy, all smiles and mirth and rosy cheeks and challenge and whispers, “Oh, come on! You have to say something. Or at least glare!”

It's from a can! It's cow's milk!" Her hand on her heart, theatrically. "It's—
gasp!—not organic!"

-- I love you. --

He writes it later, that afternoon. Hours later, sitting in his office. Then he
deletes the text quickly.

Chapter Ten

Fog

January.

Every morning she goes out and she thinks of him. They're sumptuous January mornings, suspended in the cold. Fog everywhere. People breathing it in.

Darcy's everywhere too. When Elizabeth wakes up. When she tries not to slip on the pavement. When two men walk by, carrying pizza boxes, one of them does slip (thin layer of ice); he almost lets the pizza go—they laugh.

It smells of pizza and snow.

Darcy's there when she comes back at night too. (Not really.)

* * *

But yes, he's everywhere.

He goes out every morning, and he thinks of her.

They keep texting. One text per person per day. Sometimes more—exceptions. They're rare.

They see each other—brief encounters—for 'five minutes' between Darcy's 'meetings', at the same café. The Christmas café. The obnoxious espresso

café. *Their café*, she secretly thinks.

Darcy's always the one who initiates things. He always writes the same text—or almost. He'll be in the neighbourhood. He won't have much time. He'll be haughty and obnoxious. (The smiley face is implied.) He asks if she can meet him; Elizabeth always says yes—when she's at home, which she generally is—maybe he memorised her schedule.

She crosses the road to the café with a huge smile, always. He's waiting for her, always. The way his expression changes when he sees her—when he sees her smiling—it's as beautiful as a January morning.

She wants winter to last forever.

“You're not obnoxious enough,” she whispers one day, standing at the bar, sipping her usual espresso.

“I'm doing my best,” he answers. “Shall I insult the server for you?”

“Maybe you can just snub him.”

“I am,” Darcy explains. “I'm snubbing everybody here, but silently, in my soul, so they don't know.”

“Convenient.”

“I agree.”

“Do you snub me too?” Elizabeth asks (with that smile). “In your soul? Do you secretly despise me?”

“Obviously. That's why we meet here, so often. So I can disapprove of you.”

Five-minute meetings. Twice a week at least.

Except those five minutes sometimes last ten. Or fifteen. Or twenty. Once they stay for a good half an hour, conversing in low voices in the corner of the deserted café, about—nothing. Fog on the other side of the window. Then Darcy seems to remember something—he finds a pretext and leaves, rather brutally.

January, still.

Some mornings, Elizabeth wonders about the strangeness of it all. They're both adults, both interested. (He is, isn't he?)

Some mornings, she's scared. It's such a miracle. That they're talking at all, after everything—after the pub, after their mutual insults, after what she said about Wickham. (How she was wrong, wrong, WRONG.)

Yes, it's a miracle there's any hope at all.

“We must be breaking some world record,” Elizabeth says to Jane. “Darcy and I, it's been, what, weeks? Months?”

“Not at all,” says Jane, smiling. “Some love stories take years. And Darcy's worth it.”

(Jane and Darcy are friends. Jane sees him at Bingley's, all the time. Very frustrating.)

“Well, I haven't got anything against taking it slow,” Elizabeth protests, “but years would be pushing it.”

She seems so sure, when she's talking to Jane. Like they're a given (she and Darcy). But the truth is, Elizabeth isn't that certain. I mean, she knows what she feels, but—sometimes she gets a little crazy. His texts, they are friendly, aren't they?

Friendly.

“Oh, come on,” Jane says, laughing, before giving her sister's hand a tender squeeze. “Friendly? You are being crazy.”

“I am, aren't I?” Elizabeth laughs.

* * *

Darcy leaves for a work trip to Sweden. January melts into February, and now the sun is up, shining. February is generally grey and gloomy here, the month where everything's drowning and depression rates go sky high—but it's a blue sky this year.

They still text. Internationally. Valentine's Day comes and goes. Darcy's text that morning includes a picture: the Swedish royal gardens—beautiful but nothing special. Elizabeth sends a picture too: a silver glimmer on the little park near her work. Then she spends hours analysing everything.

Yep.

She's going crazy.

* * *

Darcy comes back. The next day, the very next morning, he 'has a meeting.' 'Near her place.' 'In the neighbourhood.' 'Won't have much time.' 'Five minutes.' 'Will be haughty and obnoxious.'

His plane landed, like, at 10 pm the day before.

They meet. Elizabeth walks to the café with the same huge smile, but then she's nervous. Darcy is too. Blame the weather. The fog has lifted; time stopped in the heart of winter, but now it's started again. The sun speaks of spring and urgency and things happening. Elizabeth stammers when she jokes. Darcy is—yes, definitely tense.

* * *

Something's got to give.

Saturday. Ed and Maddie Gardiner come for breakfast. The usual big Saturday morning fry-up at the Bennets'.

Ed is Elizabeth's uncle, but he's twenty-eight—her mother's much younger half-brother. Maddie—she has one of those artistic/feminist Instagrams; Ed's a social warrior—the nice, efficient kind, with dreadlocks. The Gardiner Foundation's doing well, Ed explains, sitting at the Bennets' kitchen table. Elizabeth's mum, pretending to listen, actually shouting at Lydia. Mary's trying to play the piano, but it needs tuning. Kitty's complaining loudly about school. Ed doesn't care; he knows Elizabeth and Jane are the only ones listening anyway. Maddie looks around with her usual amused, philosophical smile.

Elizabeth wonders. What Darcy would do, or think, if he were here right

now. Interesting conversation. Constant interruptions. Strident voices, delicious cooking smells. Elizabeth's used to it; she can focus anywhere, but Darcy couldn't.

The Gardiner Foundation is moving. Ed and Maddie take Elizabeth to visit the new place for the office—the potential new place. Saturday afternoon, sun shining. One of those blue-collar suburbs. It's a huge development, where Ed wants to settle. There were factories here, once upon a time; now it's a mix of old industrial buildings and super-modern-ecological-self-sustainable-whatever buildings. Student lodgings, hipster coworking spaces, offices for start-ups—they're cheap—that's where Ed wants the Foundation to be. An all-organic cafeteria where people from the office buildings around come to eat. The cafeteria's not cheap—at all. There are loft apartments to rent—incredibly expensive—but the price of the student lodgings is also very low, Elizabeth realises. Fourth floor is management floor; a Mrs Reynolds is giving them the tour, and it's only when she begins to talk about 'Mr Darcy's father' that something clicks in Elizabeth's mind.

She pulls out her phone.

-- Hey. I know we already texted today, sorry. But guess what I just realised? I think I'm at Pemberley. --

Chapter Eleven

Pemberley

No answer. The tour continues; Mrs Reynolds is pleasant—trendy glasses and kind eyes. Pride in her voice—for Pemberley, for what they’ve accomplished. They enter Darcy’s office. “Mr Darcy isn’t here right now,” Mrs Reynolds explains, “but see—the view is spectacular.”

Space and light, wood and metal. Gigantic windows, overlooking...well, Pemberley. It’s a mess. Decrepit, abandoned industrial buildings, piles of rubble and cracked concrete. Converted warehouses, wooden terraces, solar panels. Construction work in between, renovation going on—yep, a mess. Mrs Reynolds is explaining what the work’s about—a conference centre. Elizabeth’s hardly listening. Darcy’s desk, here, near the wall of books. The window on his left—that’s his view.

One of his first texts, ages ago:

-- I see sky, roofs, walls. Nothing pretty. Mostly piles of rubble and run-down warehouses. A mess of red tiles, stone, concrete. All draped in winter, as you said. --

He wrote that message here, an age ago, when she wasn’t—when she didn’t care for him that much. ‘My office is on the fourth floor,’ he’d said, that day. Yes, that’s where he sits, when he texts her. He thinks about her here. The office is like him, Elizabeth thinks—an extension of him. Cold at first—hard,

geometric lines of metal and wood—but luminous. With books. Space. Depth. Suddenly she’s missing him—the impression’s strong, even brutal. She wants Darcy here; she wants to feel him, hear his voice. Ed and Maddie are chatting happily to Mrs Reynolds—those two, making friends everywhere they go. Their superpower, that they use professionally with astounding success, for the greater good.

Elizabeth’s feeling edgy. She looks at her phone again.

A text. Darcy.

-- I’ll be back in 10 minutes. Don’t you dare leave. --

-- Oh, really? How would you retaliate? --

Elizabeth answers before realising the message is 11 minutes old. Darcy enters the room. Elizabeth’s cheeks burn. She must be very red.

(For no good reason. She’s just following the tour. Mrs Reynolds invited them into the room. But still, Elizabeth feels like she’s overstepped, like she’s walked into Darcy’s most intimate self. Like she’s treading on sacred ground.)

Does Darcy know? Maybe he can read her mind.

Maybe he really can, because he looks right at her. At Elizabeth, standing by the window, cheeks burning. He’s a bit red too.

A pause.

Then Darcy greets Ed and Maddie, and there’s introductions and context and enthusiastic “this is such a beautiful place!” and “have you been offered some coffee?” and “have you seen the common rooms on the second floor?” and appropriate friendly business talk on both sides. Soon they’re on the second floor—Darcy leads the way now, explaining how everything works; Mrs Reynolds seems surprised. Elizabeth follows, staying apart, listening. Ed is so clever; Maddie too. Their conversation—Elizabeth glories in every expression, every sentence; at last, some relations for whom there is no need to blush. The tour continues—terraces, a winter garden, aquariums. Ed falls instantly in love—he adores fish. Mrs Reynolds is talking about the ‘please borrow art’ club; Darcy is at Elizabeth’s side, whispering:

“Mrs Reynolds will handle things. Can I show you the construction site?”

Elizabeth nods, tells Ed and Maddie she’ll be back; Mrs Reynolds promises to feed them (organic) cake, and three minutes later, Darcy and Elizabeth are outside, alone.

With, you know, dozens of construction workers.

Still, it feels like they’re alone. Standing near one of the side entrances, under the sun.

It’s warm, for February. People shouting orders. Machines rolling. Dust flying around. The smell of hot metal.

Silence.

“I, um, do you like what you’ve seen?” Darcy asks. “Do you approve of Pemberley?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “Yes, very much.”

Dialogue of the century. They both feel it—the awkwardness.

She looks at the construction mess. “The people living in the new flats,” Elizabeth asks. “And the coworking regulars. Don’t they object? I mean, the noise...”

“They object loudly. But everyone’s rent’s been lowered drastically to make up for the nuisance.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth smiles. “Yes, I’m sure that helps.”

Another silence. “When my father died,” Darcy starts. Elizabeth looks at him, waiting. Darcy talks slowly. “He made me swear. On his deathbed, in hospital—I thought those kinds of scenes only happened in films, but no, it happened to me. He took my hand, and he made me swear that when I inherited the land, I wouldn’t sell. Any part of the property. Ever.”

Elizabeth’s still watching him. Still listening.

Darcy has a bitter laugh. “I should never have agreed. It was a nightmare.”

Silence, again. Many thoughts, in Elizabeth’s mind. Darcy never mentioned

his mother. Caroline had shared some gossip, a year ago, when Elizabeth couldn't care less; now she wishes she'd listened better. Mrs Darcy had left them, Fitzwilliam and Georgiana, when they were little. They never saw her again—that's what Elizabeth remembers. So, she has a terrible thought—terribly selfish, terribly egotistical—that maybe, their mother's abandonment, that's the reason why Darcy is still...why he still cares for Elizabeth now. (Because he does, doesn't he? Please. Please God.) Maybe that's why he can't stand to let Elizabeth go. He can't bear another woman leaving him—maybe—and you know, Elizabeth is fine with it, totally fine. Please don't get over your trauma, Fitzwilliam Darcy, not before we're together, at least.

The silence grows. "How did you do it?" Elizabeth asks. "The property tax alone..."

"I broke my promise. I had to sell. A third of the land, to pay the bills and get the project going. It was the only way to save the rest."

Elizabeth nods. They walk, leisurely, under the February sun. Huge stacks of wooden planks. Hot tar. Darcy explains everything. How the only way to keep the rents affordable for the students and the small business owners was to make one half of Pemberley pay for the other half—so he went for an extremely modern concept, and when it worked, he expanded on the idea. The super expensive offices paying for the student lodgings, the hipster cafeteria for the artists' workshops, etc. "We've reached equilibrium now," he explains. "The new conference centre," he adds, with a nod to the construction site. "With the green roofs and the sustainable architecture and the trendy wellness centre—it should give us financial freedom."

"You did it," she says, smiling. She stops; she has to look at him, she feels—so proud. Of him.

He stops too. He whispers. "I did."

The silence is deafening. They're facing each other. He's going to kiss her—she feels he should; she feels he might. Instead, they begin to walk again.

There's an alternate universe where they're together, right now. Where they're walking in the exact same way, under the winter light, but his arm is around her waist—if she'd said yes, in the pub. If she'd thought, "Well, this guy's a bit of a dick, but wow he's hot. Let's get it on in the back room." And

then...days would have passed, they would have got to know each other, she would have grown to like him, he would have told her all about Wickham. Elizabeth would know her way around Pemberley now; Mrs Reynolds would be a friend. All those people in the halls—Elizabeth would know their names. It seems so real, this other world, that Elizabeth almost feels it. She feels the weight of Darcy's hand on her waist; she sees their looks, their tender gestures.

It could be real. But it's not.

In the real world, this one, she turns to him and smiles—he's watching her. "I admire you so much," she says. He seems taken aback—and so very moved. Maddie and Ed and Mrs Reynolds are approaching; they walk in their direction across the courtyard, chatting happily. It seems Maddie's parents and Mrs Reynolds are both from round here—born in the same area. They talk of unions and strikes, bustling streets and huge factories—once upon a time, when fairies and other mythical creatures walked the earth. Another time, another world—gone now.

Chapter Twelve

Casual

A party. Later that same afternoon, at Pemberley, on the third floor. A networking event—so, mostly students, taking advantage of the free booze. Darcy asks Ed and Maddie (and Elizabeth) to stay; he wants to introduce the Gardiners to—someone. Elizabeth feels kind of shy—no reason why.

She lets the three of them be professional. She walks around, she listens. Enthusiastic people. Ideas and ideals. Concepts, projects—she knows that most of what she hears will never happen, but she loves it anyway. Darcy reappears at her side around 5; he asks if he can introduce her to his sister. Elizabeth says yes, smiling; she feels self-conscious—no reason why again. Georgiana is beautiful, shy, and oh so young.

The idea that Wickham—God.

7 pm. A completely different party.

On the fifth floor. (“I didn’t even know there was a fifth floor,” Elizabeth says. “It’s a well-kept secret,” Darcy answers.)

Darcy and Georgiana’s apartment. A private, improvised event. Ed, Maddie, and Elizabeth are the guests. Bingley and Jane happily joined in. Somehow Bingley’s sisters, Caroline and Louisa, and Louisa’s husband have materialised there too. And Richard Fitzwilliam, Darcy’s cousin, whom Elizabeth hasn’t seen since the party at the Phillipses’.

(He'd been at the pub too. Months ago. Handing Darcy vodka shots. Sending him to Elizabeth—to the slaughter.)

Richard lives here at Pemberley. "It's a peppercorn rent," he explains, pouring himself a large glass of very, very expensive wine. "Gotta love nepotism." A glance in Darcy's direction (across the room talking to Maddie). "Sooo," Richard adds, looking at Elizabeth, "you're dating my cousin now?"

"No," Elizabeth answers. Richard looks at her with amusement. She blushes. "I mean, I don't know."

Richard smiles and sips. Elizabeth drinks too, and then...everything begins to flow. She doesn't have the right word for it, just—music—Georgiana's playing the piano. Low waves of happy conversations—Bingley laughing, looking at Jane just *that* way—a subdued joy in the room. Then it's 10. Ed and Maddie leave, the other guests scatter around the room—coffee tables, conversations, glasses.

Darcy and Elizabeth find themselves sitting on the stairs (the apartment's on two levels). Alone. Out of view.

The others' voices flow on and off, like the tide. Elizabeth's settled halfway down the stairs—or halfway up. Darcy's sitting, literally, at her feet.

The night, hopeful and slow.

They talk about Georgiana—about sisters. About what Elizabeth heard at the networking event this afternoon.

"They're all so enthusiastic and—I'm sceptical, of course," she states. "A part of me's cynical, like my dad. You know what his favourite sentence is? 'What do we live for but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn.'"

Darcy smiles. "I think I'd like your dad."

"He's extremely clever, and I love him, but..." Elizabeth sips her (third) glass of wine. "If he'd been listening to the students earlier...all those idealistic kids—and yes, I realise I'm no older than them—my dad would only have thought of all the ways they were going to fail. He would have

pulled out statistics...”

“Statistics are depressing,” Darcy says. “I know them well.”

“But I don’t want to live in a world of cynicism,” Elizabeth whispers. “I’d rather hang around with people who try. Who...believe in tiny practical pieces of utopias, like Edward, than be with the people who laugh at them from the sidelines.”

Darcy nods. “Good decision.”

“Still,” she adds, smiling, “there is a sarcastic Elizabeth somewhere, living in the recesses of my soul. I’m not sure I like her.”

Darcy is silent for a while. “My dad was a harsh man,” he explains, at last. “Very difficult to please.”

“But you’re still trying,” Elizabeth comments, in a low voice. “To please him even now, beyond the grave.”

Darcy’s smile turns a little bitter. “You know what?” he declares, after another sip of wine. “I’m glad he died early.” Elizabeth looks at him with horror, and Darcy adds, his voice perfectly calm, “His coldness, his... authoritarianism—he would have destroyed Georgiana. She was his perfect little girl, so he loved her. But growing up, she wouldn’t have been perfect, and if my father had witnessed the whole Wickham thing...” Darcy shivers. “One mistake, and he would...annihilate people.”

Elizabeth’s horror grows.

“Good thing I went to boarding school,” Darcy concludes. “It was very strict, but...better.”

Silence falls. Elizabeth wants to hold him close, to cherish him. To tell him that humans are amazing. What they’ve gone through, both Darcy children, and still here they are, comparatively unscathed. Then she realises she *can* tell him, so she does. Darcy listens silently; Elizabeth feels that her voice is betraying her, that he will hear the...everything in her tone.

She can pinpoint the exact moment when Darcy begins to feel self-conscious—he tries to change the subject. He gets help. Caroline, at the

bottom of the stairs. Champagne flute. Unsteady hand. Glaring at them both.

“Are you flirting?” she asks.

Darcy answers with perfect calm. “As a matter of fact, we’re not.”

“Then why are you hiding?” Caroline continues. “You’re the host. You should come and join the others, Fitzwilliam.”

“I should,” he says. And doesn’t move.

Only Elizabeth’s eyes are laughing—the rest of her, perfectly still.

“You’re a bit red, Elizabeth,” Caroline says. “Too much to drink?”

“The wine was so good,” Elizabeth answers politely. “I might have overindulged a bit. Or,” she realises, “it might be the sun.”

“Yes, we were outside for quite a while,” Darcy confirms.

“Sunburnt in February,” Caroline says contemptuously, as if it was, somehow, proof of Elizabeth’s low breeding. “Be careful, Eliza, or your skin will be all brown and wrinkled by the time you’re forty.”

“That would be tragic,” Darcy comments, his voice still perfectly neutral. “Such beautiful skin.”

Elizabeth laughs. “That must be the strangest compliment I’ve ever received. But I appreciate it nevertheless.”

“Well, dear Elizabeth,” Darcy answers, his voice still amazingly steady—but Elizabeth thinks he is a little red too now, “I apologise. I’m quite drunk. My compliments will be better when I’m sober.”

“I look forward to hearing them,” Elizabeth says, in the same serious, formal voice.

“See, Caroline,” Darcy adds, still perfectly calm. “Now we’re flirting.”

Caroline turns on her heel and leaves.

Silence.

Elizabeth sips her wine. “That was almost cruel.”

Darcy's looking everywhere but at her. "Yes. Well. Caroline can be somewhat difficult."

"No, really?" is what Elizabeth wants to say, but she doesn't—Sarcastic Elizabeth isn't welcome in this conversation. Sarcastic Elizabeth judged Darcy on a whim and found him wanting; Sarcastic Elizabeth believed Wickham when he said Georgiana was a stuck-up bitch. Sarcastic Elizabeth thought she was so clever but got everything wrong. *Caroline's fragile, and all the men in her life are being stolen by Bennet sisters.* That would be the right analysis—but for obvious reasons, Elizabeth can't say it out loud.

Darcy isn't expecting an answer; he stands up brusquely—still not looking at her—going to replenish their drinks.

Taking his time. Talking to Georgiana. Elizabeth fiddles with her phone.

A text. Darcy.

-- I'd ask Mrs Reynolds to lock you in my office, of course. --

It takes Elizabeth a few seconds before realising what it's about. Their last texts:

-- *Hey. I know we already texted today, sorry. But guess what I just realised? I think I'm at Pemberley.* --

-- *I'll be back in 10 minutes. Don't you dare leave.* --

-- *Oh, really? How would you retaliate?* --

-- *I'd ask Mrs Reynolds to lock you in my office, of course.* --

Elizabeth smiles. Hesitates. Looks at Darcy, on the other side of the room.

Well.

-- Really? Would you be locked in with me? Whatever would we do then? -

-

Send.

Her heart's beating a little too fast. Georgiana goes to the piano again. She plays beautifully, and she's only sixteen. Elizabeth thinks of Mary at home,

trying her best on their sad, cheap, half-broken piano. Of Lydia, who needs private tutoring but will never get it. Georgiana has everything—one would think she lived a charmed life, protected from the world by her doting brother—but...but as exasperating as Elizabeth's parents are, they are, well, alive.

And, Jane and Elizabeth, and their sisters really, they have always been *free*—an invaluable gift. Elizabeth looks at Georgiana now and sees a scared young girl, locked up by her own fears. Could she help? Be a sort of older sister? Get Georgiana out of her (prison) shell—if, you know, *if*—Elizabeth's phone beeps.

-- I am all astonishment, Miss Bennet. How could you interpret my last text in such a way? If we were both locked inside my office, I'd offer you tea and show you my sociology books. --

Damn it. So many dirty, unladylike replies she could write, but she won't. Laughing silently, she tries to catch Darcy's eye, but he ignores her; he stays near the piano, looking—quite smug.

-- I apologise, sir. Be assured that I will only discuss serious topics from now on. Say, what do you think of Nietzsche? --

Nietzsche can wait. Darcy comes back to the stairs, eyes shining, carrying two glasses of wine, but Jane joins them, then Bingley, and then everybody else—except Caroline, who has 'another more important *soirée* to go to'. She vanishes into thin air, without even saying goodbye to Georgiana. They're a merry party, there on the steps. Louisa and her husband are surprisingly nice in Caroline's absence. Richard hands round vodka shots, again, and then it's 5 am; Elizabeth really has to sleep. Everyone leaves—coats and goodbyes and laughs. Jane, all smiles, surrounded by people she loves. Bingley, looking at Jane like he still can't believe his luck. Darcy's hand on Elizabeth's shoulder, he says, in a whisper, "Can I see you again soon?"

"Yes. Yes. Absolutely."

"We need to talk. Monday night? The same café? 7 pm?"

"The Lambton?" Elizabeth nods. "7 pm."

All day Sunday, Elizabeth is in a haze. Tired (and hungover). The rain's back. Patented February grey. The fear's back too. And anticipation. Joy.

Elizabeth's stomach hurts; she is so nervous.

Monday. 7 pm. The Lambton Café (the Christmas Café, the Obnoxious Espresso Café, their café). Totally different in the evenings; when they meet in the day, it's calm, almost deserted. Until 5 pm it's an avocado-toast-and-coffee kind of place. Homemade cakes, vegan options. Freelancer-types on laptops and mums with pushchairs. After 5 it's all cocktails, music, and low lights. 7 pm is happy hour; now it's packed, different staff, people in suits from the nearby offices, drinking. Standing (nowhere to sit). Darcy, in a faraway corner, near a high table. Standing also. He looks very nervous. Elizabeth's hands, shaking.

"Hey," she says, when she gets to him.

"Yes," he answers. He's still got his coat on. His eyes on her, as soon as she entered the place. He doesn't smile. "I mean...sorry. Good evening."

"Good evening," she answers, with a strained laugh. Darcy immediately begins.

"Elizabeth, I know you're not— You're very independent, and I wouldn't want to— So I have a proposition for you, if you— We could start... something, the both of us, if you're interested. Casual, of course—no exclusivity required, it doesn't have to be a big deal..."

Elizabeth is paralysed. She feels sick. All the things she'd waited for—that she'd hoped for—this is not. She tries to reason with herself—she knows her reaction is too strong; she didn't sleep last night, and the alcohol too. She's not that good an actress; she knows what's painted on her face now. She stares at the table, not at him—don't look at him. Suddenly, she can't breathe, she can't stay; she turns on her heel and begins to walk away, like Caroline the other night, except two seconds later Darcy is at her side, taking her hands in his.

"Elizabeth, talk to me. Why—why are you reacting like this? Look at me."

She doesn't—she can't—but...her hands in his. He leads her back to the table, and they—they stay there, holding hands. Everything's melting. Elizabeth's shock, her disappointment—swept away. What Darcy said doesn't matter, his words are contradicted by his touch, by his warmth, by the

look in his eyes—when at last she does raise hers—but, she’s a reasonable being; she can have a reasonable conversation.

“I’m sorry,” she begins. “I wasn’t thinking clearly.” Darcy is so close, listening so intently. Her heart is beating so fast; she’s never letting his hands go, not even in the event of an apocalypse. “I was just thrown by the ‘no exclusivity’ concept,” she explains (around them crowds and conversations and noise and beer and nobody cares). “I’m— I’m kind of traditional. So, you would be the only one to...”

“Forget it, then, forget it,” he whispers hurriedly. “I just thought you... Forget the ‘no exclusivity’ bit. I...just imagined you would want to...” He stops talking, because maybe the idea strikes him that if they’re negotiating the terms, then it means they agree on the nature of the deal. They’re pushed closer to the wall; a new group just came in, singing something (some sporting event going on). Darcy and Elizabeth, still holding hands.

Darcy leans down and kisses her, softly at first; she kisses him back, the crowd pushes harder, he catches her waist to steady her, her hands are on his shoulders now, she pulls him nearer, she smiles, and that smile he cannot resist, everything becomes a blur—of kisses. (His hands, his breath, his coat.) It becomes a little wild (God, Elizabeth loves his coat), his hands on her face, on the back of her neck. Darcy’s head hits the wall when Elizabeth is pushed by a new wave of people. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“No, no,” he says, in the same tone. “By all means, push me against the wall.”

She laughs again, and again he can’t resist, so...he’s lost.

Later, outside in the street, people are smoking and joking on the pavement, Darcy and Elizabeth still kissing in the shadows.

“So, casual, yes?” Elizabeth says—ironically, because it seems anything but.

“Yes, yes, OK, casual, yes,” Darcy whispers, kissing her again—with passion.

He’s not really listening anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

Up in the Air

“*Casual*. I hate that word.”

Elizabeth and Jane. Their favourite café, near the park. Sun, leaves, cars, busy buses. Elizabeth thinks about Pemberley. She and Darcy, walking near the construction site, under the February sun. Hope, joy. Dust and possibilities.

But it’s March already.

“I don’t think he means it,” Jane answers, stirring her tea with serene, elegant gestures. “*Casual* doesn’t seem in Darcy’s character. He seems calm, but it’s all pretence. Fire beneath the surface.”

Elizabeth silently agrees.

“Have you, um... Have you... Already... You know?” Jane asks.

“Oh yes.”

Two days ago. The Lambton. Outside. Kisses in the night. People drinking beer. “My flat is just around the corner,” Elizabeth whispers.

They go. The stairs—it’s dark, wood creaking, everything is faded and old, Darcy’s holding her hand. “Be careful,” he whispers. “You’ve already fallen once.”

She has to stop and kiss him again. He's so passionate then—sweeping her into his arms, between the first and second floors—they forget everything for a while. Then someone somewhere opens a door—one of the tenants maybe—the building feels full of life and spies. They laugh, hurry to Elizabeth's flat.

Her studio. Just a room at the back really. Space stolen from another flat. An architectural assault on the once beautiful Victorian building. Everything seems small. Darcy doesn't belong here. Elizabeth feels awkward, then forgets everything because yes, it's dark, and yes, the bed is narrow and small, but they are both on it, both soon naked—she can hardly see him, they haven't turned on the lights—no time to lose. The moment feels unreal—all sensations and skin. Clumsy. A mess.

Perfect.

Afterwards, they try to fall asleep; the bed is really too small—they laugh in the dark, and again, perfect.

“But then, it was morning—the Bennet Saturday family breakfast. I wanted to invite him upstairs, and I couldn't.”

“Why?” Jane answers. “You know Mum would have been...”

“Oh, I know. But...*casual*, you know? You don't invite your *casual* date to breakfast with your parents, on the first day.”

Jane shakes her head. “Lizzy, you're making this more difficult than it has to be.”

Elizabeth sighs. “And then, of course, came the Lydia/Wickham shenanigans.”

Morning. Darcy, drinking coffee in the minuscule studio flat. Standing silently, near the minuscule kitchen area. Elizabeth is still in bed, drinking coffee too—he brought her a mug. (Perfect, I told you.) Morning light, through the old, single-glazed window. Dust shimmering in the sun.

Perfect, again.

Then Elizabeth has to say she's leaving—for family breakfast. Everything

turns awkward. Silence, banalities. Everything's tense.

Elizabeth walks Darcy downstairs, and Wickham is THERE. Flirting with Lydia on the first floor, near the flat that's being redone; Lydia stole the keys somehow. She's ushering Wickham inside as Elizabeth and Darcy go down, so Elizabeth thumps him. (Wickham, not Darcy.)

One blow, right in the face. Wickham falls down the stairs. (Yes, the stairs again.) He breaks his nose. Lydia shrieks. Darcy is standing there—so cold. Then it becomes a huge thing, because Mrs Bennet chooses that moment to come back with the shopping. Elizabeth's shouting, Wickham's holding his bloody nose and threatening to call the police, so Darcy shoves him against the wall, in a pretty violent gesture, and then shoves him again, and then Elizabeth's dad comes down the stairs.

“Lydia is underage. *We* are calling the police,” Mr Bennet says, with perfect calm.

And then he does.

Darcy's gone.

To Sweden. Another sudden work trip, connected to the first one. A Swedish firm wants a partnership, to ‘recreate the Pemberley model’. Sweden is ‘Politically Correct Fairyland’ (so Ed says), so, helping students and start-ups, the idea that parts of the complex pay for the other part—yep, very Swedish.

Darcy's negotiating. He's gone for two weeks.

Elizabeth's going slightly mad. You know, like the song.

They haven't seen each other since that first night. Since the morning awkwardness—since Wickham. Elizabeth's drowning in a sea of what ifs. What if Darcy was disgusted by the Lydia/Wickham thing? By the entire Bennet family, screaming around him?

Or...the opposite... Elizabeth's dad is pressing charges—Ed's helping him; he knows a good lawyer—while Darcy did *not* press charges, after Georgiana. So, Elizabeth wonders—is Darcy feeling weird about it all? Fearing that Georgiana might be exposed? Or, feeling guilty, because if he

had gone to the police, then Wickham couldn't have preyed on other innocent girls?

Or, what if...what if it's none of the above? What if it's true—their relationship is *casual*, and Darcy just doesn't care?

No texts.

First day, nothing. (Darcy's between planes, Elizabeth reasons.) The following day—nothing.

Third day. Elizabeth texts. Something light and fun. With a view of the river through a restaurant window, blackbirds and water, sun warming the beige facades on the other side. A rusty metal bridge, traffic lights.

Darcy answers, like, three seconds later. The text comes with a beautiful and very modern view of Stockholm. The sky, icy blue.

-- I wasn't sure our arrangement was still on. --

Back to two texts a day. Elizabeth misses Darcy so much. She hangs out with Jane and Bingley. To hear about Darcy. She deftly steers the conversation to get Bingley to tell anecdotes. (Jane sees what she's doing, of course.) It's...wonderful. Elizabeth was so obsessed with her own bizarre romance, she forgot how much she likes Bingley—his optimism, his kindness. Jane is so happy; they have such a lovely time, the three of them.

It would be even more perfect if...you know. If there was a fourth.

Elizabeth invites Georgiana to lunch. Then overthinks it like crazy. What if it's overstepping? What if it's, like, marking her territory—cultivating a relationship with the sister—while the relationship is supposed to be CASUAL? Is it...something Caroline would do? (Oh, the horror!)

Georgiana has a great time though. Her shyness, thawing. Timid smiles over starters, enthusiastic conversation by dessert. They go shopping. Elizabeth buys Georgiana something bright red.

Night. Elizabeth feels so guilty she can't sleep. (Marking her territory. Something Caroline would do.) The next day, she confesses everything by text. The lunch, 'was it overstepping?' 'I'm so sorry,' etc.

Darcy's answer comes half an hour later.

-- Sorry, in a meeting. I'm glad you had lunch. Very glad. --

A great weight is lifted.

Darcy is coming back. Tonight, 6 pm.

-- Would you like me to come and meet you at the airport, Mr Darcy? :) --

-- Why, Miss Bennet, I would certainly appreciate the gesture. --

Georgiana's coming too—but Darcy still wants Elizabeth to be there. Elizabeth wonders if it means Georgiana knows—about them. When she meets Darcy's sister at the airport, the answer is crystal clear—Georgiana, all smiles and awkward hugs. Darcy's plane is late, so the two women wait in a small depressing café—concrete pillars and low concrete ceiling and green neon adverts.

Elizabeth doesn't feel depressed at all, she's—you know. Anticipation and desire and stomachache.

Georgiana—so friendly. So hungry for affection it hurts.

Then Darcy's plane is really, really late.

A three-hour delay. Elizabeth and Georgiana wait and wait; airport staff are not helpful, and of course they can't text Darcy—everything's up in the air. Literally.

Georgiana has to leave. Something important going on at Pemberley—one of the Darcy siblings has to be present. Elizabeth forgets, sometimes, that Georgiana owns half of everything. Wickham didn't forget, of course.

“He was after money,” Darcy had said, ages ago. He didn't explain further.

Elizabeth waits.

An hour passes again. (Darcy is four hours late now.) Elizabeth would worry, but a nice woman in a dark blue uniform with whom Elizabeth chatted earlier comes to tell her, “The plane's landed. Now there's a problem with baggage claim.”

Phone. A text from Darcy.

-- I am so, so sorry about the delay. Georgiana told me she had to leave. You should go too. We're still stuck on the plane—for God knows how long.
--

Elizabeth hesitates. A lot. (Don't overthink it.)

-- I'd rather wait. I've invested a lot of time already—you know, sunk costs and everything. --

Send.

She feels so nervous—her hands shaking a little. As Darcy does not answer in the next three nanoseconds (the cad), she texts in a hurry:

-- Unless you want me to leave, of course. --

A minute passes.

-- Obviously, I'll be glad if you stay. If it's no imposition. --

Elizabeth stares at that message for much too long. Waits five minutes—doesn't want to seem too eager—before sending:

-- Then I'll be here, casually waiting :) --

One minute later.

-- I casually very much look forward to seeing you again, Elizabeth. --

-- That doesn't feel grammatically correct. --

Elizabeth presses send.

A huge glass panel separating her from the luggage area; she'll see Darcy when he arrives on the other side. He'll ride down that escalator there on the left. Now there's a wave of people coming down it, from another plane. She hates them. Hates them all.

Her phone buzzes.

-- Who cares about grammar or meaning? --

-- Oh, I'm sure you do. Don't tell me you're not a language snob. --

-- You're right, I am. Any pretext to casually despise people, as you know. -

-- I'm casually pacing the hall, waiting for you. --

Send.

Then she adds:

-- Impatiently. Anxiously. Choose your own synonyms. --

Silence.

Five minutes. Ten.

-- We're out. Walking the labyrinth somewhere. Be there in—fifteen minutes, I suppose? --

Twenty minutes pass. The baggage claim area on the other side of the glass is a cursed land, where Darcy never appears. Elizabeth's heart jumps each time a tall, serious-looking man with a dark coat comes into view.

Then one of those men is him.

He doesn't see her at first. He's far from alone of course—hundreds of people on that plane—then he walks to the baggage carousel and he spots her. She gives him a shy smile—on the other side of the glass. He doesn't smile back, but something in his eyes... He stares at her for a second, then he's eaten by the crowd.

Ten minutes again—getting his case—and then he's out.

She's waiting for him near the concrete pillars. He walks directly up to her. No words are needed. He takes her in his arms, and they hold so tight—every pretence gone. Wickham and 'casual' and awkwardness—none of it matters. It never did.

Everything is so clear.

Chapter Fourteen

Naked

In each other's arms.

"I've got a meeting, here, at the airport," he explains, later, when they let go. "Tomorrow morning at 7. I thought I'd spend the evening with you, then come back here tomorrow, but..."

Empty halls, people hurrying off. Almost midnight already.

"But, considering..." Looking at Elizabeth. Hesitant. "I thought I'd stay here, in a hotel, if..." She's already smiling.

"If you'll stay with me."

Inside the airport. The hotel—luxurious. Their room, on the 14th floor—everything's modern, clean, wood and metal, like Sweden (the imaginary Sweden in Elizabeth's mind). Like Pemberley. They hold hands in the lift, then it's not enough, so Darcy lets his case fall, and they kiss for 14 floors. Elizabeth is so happy (her back against the mirror). Also, so scared. She feels fragile, as if everything could just vanish—as if it is not quite real.

The doors open. They both jump. (Darcy is nervous, she can tell.)

They walk to the door. "You should always meet me at the airport," he says.

She smiles. "I will."

“Is that a formal pledge?”

“Do you need it in writing?”

“Mrs Reynolds will send you the contract.”

Keycard. They’re in the room. It’s big. It must cost a fortune. Elizabeth looks around—she’s Cinderella. This is Darcy’s world. Her studio, it’s hers. It’s fine, she likes both, but—vulnerable, again.

He gets rid of his coat and jacket. Elizabeth watches him. Twenty years ago, he would have worn a tie, she realises. Not now, of course, not in the start-up scene. Still, so, so strange. She’s dating someone *formal*. A businessman. This is—alien. Alice in Wonderland.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asks. (Oh yes, he’s nervous.)

Thirty seconds later. Elizabeth is sitting on the bed. Darcy’s on a chair. Both drinking glasses of water.

Elizabeth pours a little bit of water over her fingers—just a little—and throws droplets at his white shirt.

Darcy, bewildered. “What...exactly are you doing?”

She does it again. “Your shirt’s wet,” she declares. “Better get rid of it.”

He blushes. He actually, honest-to-God, blushes. How could she ever have thought the man cold? He stands up. He does get rid of his shirt—his colour, a little high; his voice, steady.

“The situation is clearly unbalanced. You’re fully clothed.”

Her turn to blush. (Silly—she initiated it. Still.) He sees her embarrassment—but doesn’t comment. She slides her top off. He’s watching her silently.

“Your turn,” she orders.

He doesn’t obey. Instead, he leans down to kiss her—awkwardly, tenderly. She wraps her arms around his neck, whispering, “You must be so tired.”

“I am,” he answers, before proceeding to divest her of the rest of her clothes. No reason she shouldn’t reciprocate. Somewhere during the process,

Darcy succeeds in dimming the lights (many modern sophisticated dimmers and switches). They take their time. Then, limbs and kisses and passion; planes leaving and landing in the dark; distant, muffled thunder on the other side of the double-glazed window.

Silence.

“There’s a law,” Elizabeth breathes afterwards, lying in the darkness, in Darcy’s arms. (Their legs, absurdly intertwined.) “No planes at night—I think. To protect the nearby residents.”

“Mmm,” is Darcy’s articulate answer, but maybe it rouses him from the sands of sleep, because he adds, “Tomorrow morning. I’ll go to the meeting. You stay in bed. Then I’ll come back and order breakfast.”

“Most perfect plan I ever heard.”

“Mmm.” He sleeps.

Six. Darcy’s alarm rings. Awfully early, Elizabeth thinks. It’s pleasant though—pleasant and strange—to wake up in a strange room, in strange sheets, with a strange man. With this man.

Planes. Reality’s floating.

Darcy stirs, sits up in bed, his back to her. Elizabeth sits up too. She’s seized by a wave of tenderness. She takes him in her arms; he leans back against her chest. She kisses him everywhere—on the neck, on the shoulders—it’s not sexual, it’s...being half asleep, in love, not wanting him to leave. They stay unmoving for a few moments—another plane, roaring. Darcy turns in the relative darkness to try to look at her—everything just shifted. Elizabeth knows. The music of their morning just changed drastically because of her. Everything became more intimate, more real.

“I’m sorry,” she breathes. “About everything. What I said in the pub. The texts. My attitude—you know.”

Silence on the other side. Then, “It’s cruel, what you’re doing. Telling me this just before my meeting.”

Elizabeth doesn’t know whether he’s joking or not. His voice is a little

hoarse, but he just woke up, so she apologises in a whisper. They kiss, he showers, he leaves.

Planes.

Elizabeth can't sleep. She rises, she showers, she gets dressed. She's nervous. She goes for coffee downstairs in the lobby. Darcy is there, talking to a man in a small, private conference room, behind a glass door. His back to her, thank God—he'd think she was stalking him. Maybe she is. Elizabeth stays there, standing in the hall for a few seconds before realising there's a coffee machine in their room. She feels stupid.

A text. Darcy.

-- I'm the one who should be apologising. What I said that night in the pub was unforgivable. I don't know what came over me. --

How is he doing that? Elizabeth looks discreetly. In the conference room, the man, showing something on his laptop. Darcy, pretending to look at it, casually putting his phone back on the table.

It feels like she's spying, like she's cheating. She runs back to the lift; she runs back to the room. She sits down.

A text. Darcy.

-- I wanted to apologise a thousand times. But I also wanted you to forget all about it, so I didn't dare raise the topic. --

Elizabeth's hands are shaking. She doesn't know how she should answer—serious, light-hearted?

A text. Darcy.

-- I think we should talk. We never really did. About what I said in that pub—some of it's still valid—but I'd rather t --

The text stops there. Elizabeth closes her eyes, imagines the conference room, Darcy sending the text by mistake, the guy turning to him, Darcy having to pretend to listen. He's had no answer from her—three texts and no answer—certainly he believes she's still sleeping, but...the mere idea that he could be waiting. It makes her sick—except she doesn't know what to write,

apart from the obvious, but the obvious would be throwing herself at his mercy. She thought she was brave—but clearly...

He comes back ten minutes later. Finds her sitting on the bed, her phone on her lap, very pale.

He sits beside her. She tries to smile.

“That must have been quite the productive meeting.”

“I’m an expert at nodding at all the right times.”

“Your text,” she begins, still going for a smile—it doesn’t really work. “The last one. ‘I’d rather...’ I’d rather what?”

“I’d rather talk to you in person.”

He takes her hands in his. She waits.

“What I said in the pub that night,” he whispers, finally. “When I told you...how I fell in love with you. How it drove me crazy. How I thought about you, all the time. It’s still true.”

Elizabeth can’t speak. Can’t look at him.

“Thank you,” she breathes, at last.

New pause. He laughs. (Not a real laugh.) “Not exactly what I was expecting. But...still better than, you know—last time.”

“I was such a fool,” Elizabeth explains in a strangled voice. “I almost missed something great, something beautiful, except I didn’t, thanks to you, thanks to your obstinacy, to your...to your love,” she continues, tears in her eyes, for some inexplicable reason. Then she’s terrified again. “I-I didn’t miss it, did I?”

His voice is strained too. “You didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” she breathes, after a while. “I am so, so bad at this. I know my reaction is underwhelming...”

“It’s fine,” he whispers. “I’ll take it.”

“Are you out of your senses, Lizzy? Moving out—for a man?”

Her dad, pacing his study—a tiny room, at the far end of the Bennet flat. Elizabeth spends a lot of time there, reading, daydreaming in the battered green armchair, while her dad’s on the computer. A military alliance—Elizabeth and her father against the world.

Now—the alliance is broken.

“Explain this to me, please,” Mr Bennet asks. “You’re going to live at Pemberley?”

“In a student apartment,” Elizabeth explains, her voice steady. (Practicality, rationality: the best way to convince her father.) “The rent’s very low,” she continues, “and Mary can have the studio at last. It’s her turn—you know Lydia and Kitty are driving her crazy...”

(Just this morning:

Kitty, in a sing-song voice: “Wickham was thumped and dumped!”

Lydia: “Shut up! You’re so mean! I hate you!”

Mary: (Desperately trying to study musicology.)

Her father doesn’t give a damn about Mary. “Nice try, Lizzy, but you’re not fooling me. Your mother tells me there’s a man—Pemberley’s owner. Is he the reason?”

Practicality. Rationality.

“Ed and Maddie have offered me a job. It’s better pay, more responsibilities—it’s related to my field, and now that the Gardiner Foundation is at Pemberley, with no commute, I can spend more time studying. But,” Elizabeth adds, after a pause, “yes. There is a man. And yes, it’s about him. I mean, it’s also about him.”

“That is just wrong,” her father protests, pacing the study again—quite a feat, because the room is awfully narrow. “That is...a terrible mistake, Lizzy. A strategic error, as well as a moral one...”

Elizabeth’s getting flustered. “Dad, why...how come you never said that to

Jane? When she started seeing Bingley. Or now, when she's practically moved in with him already..."

"Because Jane sincerely loves Bingley! And—I have to admit—yes, his constant optimism is rather grating, but still, he's a good man..."

"So—what? Jane won't seduce a man for his money, but you think I would?"

"Yes!"

Elizabeth is stunned.

"Sweetheart, I didn't mean... I phrased that wrong," her father stammers when he sees her expression. "It's just...you're more ambitious than your sister. Which is good! You're clever, you think things through, but..."

Elizabeth massages her forehead. So, this is what her father thinks of her. Because, she realises, he doesn't know her—not that well. Because she is really a coward. Because practicality, rationality. Because she hides her emotions.

"Well, no. I'm not with Darcy for his money," she says, her voice slightly trembling. "I...I love him."

That doesn't go well. Her father goes into full cynical mode. He accuses her of being like Lydia—silly and stupid. Elizabeth doesn't really listen—so many thoughts, all at the same time. Things she vaguely knew, things she'd explained to Darcy even, but they didn't...they didn't really *compute* before. Yes, feelings scare her, or, at least, expressing them does, and that's her dad's fault—that's the fault of her parents' marriage. Feelings are Mrs Bennet's realm, and she handles them so badly. *I am screwed up*, Elizabeth thinks. Her dad's still ranting. Elizabeth has her second revelation—her dad will miss her. Terribly. And this discussion—that's what it's all about, really. And her third revelation is—obviously—if she loves Darcy, she should tell *him*, not her dad.

"I'm sorry," she interrupts. "I have to go."

So, she tells Darcy. Via text. (Darcy's back in Sweden, for three days only.) Then she tells him face-to-face, when she meets him at the airport, and their

night after that—well, not unpleasant.

Walking in the street, leisurely. She and Darcy. Holding hands.

(They're holding hands all the time, except at Pemberley, or in the vicinity of Pemberley. Darcy has to look respectable there.)

The movers have come. Everything Elizabeth owns, in a small van, heading for Pemberley, to a rather large one-bedroom apartment—white walls, huge windows. The movers have to stop somewhere first, so she and Darcy, they have the afternoon free—time, stretching before them.

The sun's out. It's pretty cold. A few black buds, showing on the branches of the ash trees. Blackbirds. People hurrying towards the Tube.

“Look.” Elizabeth smiles. “There. That café. It's where I sat when I sent you the text. The first one. The one that started everything. It was raining...”

“That's a pretty pathetic looking place,” Darcy comments.

“Oh my God, you are such a snob.”

Challenge and amusement in Darcy's eyes. He leads her to the café, they sit down (on the patio, under the awning), they order espressos—they're awful, so bitter. Darcy smiles victoriously—point proven. He raises his tiny cup to her with a smirk.

The sun is almost warm, and this moment—Elizabeth will remember it forever. Both moments—the beginning and the end, the first text and the really bad coffee. She turns to Darcy and kisses him on the cheek, on the jaw. She puts her head on his shoulder. That look on his face—that's the one he generally gets, after her tender gestures. Disbelief. Like he's not used to affection—maybe he's not, considering his childhood.

“So why did you do it?” he asks, after a while. “Why did you send that first text?”

“Bored. And still angry with you, I suppose.”

Darcy, unfazed. “You're such a romantic. It warms my heart.”

“Well, actually, it was more complicated than that,” Elizabeth realises, after

some thought. “It was more... You were so fervent, when you spoke to me. I was...curious. At the beginning, I was leading you on,” she says, quickly (to bury her sins).

A memory of old pain, flitting in his eyes. “I know.”

A pause. He takes her hand again. A few seconds pass before she continues, in a low voice, “I was looking for passion, I suppose. I just didn’t understand it at the time.”

It’s dangerous, what she just admitted. She feels—naked. But Darcy simply answers, “I would ask that, starting now, all passion of a romantic nature is directed towards me.”

“Fine.”

“Is that a formal pledge?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth answers.

He holds her hand even tighter. “Good. Well.” A pause. “You got what you were looking for, of course.” He hesitates. “You realise that, don’t you?”

They’re not looking at each other.

“Yes.”

“Excellent. As for your side of the deal...”

“Do you need it in writing?”

“Mrs Reynolds will send you the contract.”

THE END

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Books By This Author

Do You Love Me?

Passion and unrequited love...

From luxury to war, from the elegant ballrooms of London to the sound of canons...and back again.

After his failed marriage proposal, Darcy meets Elizabeth regularly in London. For the elegant Miss Bennet, life seems to involve nothing but witty conversations and delightful dances. Darcy is as in love with Elizabeth as ever, but he hardly dares to speak to her. What if she hates him still?

For Elizabeth, life in London is a whirlwind; for Darcy, it is the constant suffering of one-sided passion.

But fate intervenes, and when the war takes an unexpected, tragic turn, Darcy and Elizabeth find themselves alone at Pemberley, garrisoned by soldiers...in constant danger, their fortunes changed forever.

They are so close now. Helping each other through every hardship—each other's confidant, each other's only hope.
Love, by any other name.

Still, Darcy cannot, dares not, ask for Elizabeth's hand. Because if she refuses, if she leaves... Then he loses it all.

Can the curse be broken? Will Darcy at last propose, in a changed world, to the only woman he has ever loved?

Who Is Elizabeth Bennet's Soulmate?

What if you could hear, in your soul, the inner music of your soulmate, the person you are destined to marry?

England, 1811. Elizabeth Bennet has just begun to ‘hear’. The inner melody of her soulmate resonates in her soul. She is destined for someone...but who? Who is this mysterious gentleman who will one day ride into her life and change her existence forever? Is he living close by, or is she hearing his music from afar? Is he rich? Is he poor? Has she already met him?

Elizabeth flirts, she converses, she sketches the character of any gentleman she meets to determine whether their personality fits with the deep, beautiful, sometimes sombre notes she perceives. With the help of her sister Jane, who is happily married to her soulmate Charles Bingley, Elizabeth makes a list of all the possible soulmates in the area.

The haughty, disagreeable Fitzwilliam Darcy certainly does not appear on this list.

A shame. Because Darcy, who has no doubt that Elizabeth’s music is the one that haunts him, is falling more desperately in love with her each day.

But does Elizabeth really want to fall in love? In truth, does she really want to have a soulmate?

Four Proposals Of Marriage

What if Darcy had to propose marriage four times—yes, FOUR—before Elizabeth accepted his hand?

The Darcys and the Bennets have always been neighbours and close friends, and Fitzwilliam Darcy grew up scampering through the fields in the company of Mr Bennet’s two daughters, the very pretty Jane and the very impertinent Elizabeth.

Now, Elizabeth is a proper young lady with an excellent education and a sizable dowry. Fitzwilliam Darcy is a respectable gentleman and the owner of

Pemberley. The light, teasing relationship of their youth has long transformed into sincere friendship.

Elizabeth and Darcy see each other daily, they debate, they laugh. Till Elizabeth is whisked away to London to find a husband and Darcy realises, belatedly, that she is the only woman he could ever marry.

Friendship blossoming into love—a common story! This should be a simple, uneventful tale.

But no love story is ever simple. And it will take four passionate proposals of marriage—yes, four—from Mr Darcy to the rich and elegant Elizabeth Bennet before the lady will, at last, realise the depth of her own feelings and gladly accept his hand.

From the glittering ballrooms of London to the groves of Pemberley...a ‘friends to lovers’ Pride and Prejudice variation.

The Governess

If Elizabeth were poor, and in dire circumstances, would Darcy fall in love with her again?

After his disastrous marriage proposal, Darcy doesn’t see Elizabeth Bennet for three whole years, during which she loses everything: her father, her wealth, her place in society. When Darcy and Elizabeth next meet in an elegant London house, she is the family governess.

Their first conversation is tense, the sight of her awakening feelings in Darcy which he thought long forgotten. But how can he see Elizabeth, speak with her, when she is in service in another house?

Will Darcy have, at last, the chance to win Elizabeth’s heart?

All These Years I Dreamed Of You

19th century. After refusing Darcy's insulting proposal, Elizabeth Bennet married George Wickham... A decision she came to bitterly regret. Three years later, she is a widow, and somewhat cynical about love. Darcy has never forgotten her. And one evening, he meets Elizabeth again during the glittering whirlwind of an elegant London ball...

21st century. After rejecting Darcy's passionate, but obnoxious declaration of love, Elizabeth Bennet dated George Wickham for three years. Worse decision ever. Now she is single and certainly not in the mood for romance. Darcy has never forgotten her. One night, he meets Elizabeth again at a raucous party in Bingley's elegant London flat...

Two stories, two time periods, intricately connected and woven together into the same, timeless love story...

[Pemberley](#)

In a post-apocalyptic, dystopic world, Mr. Darcy is a citizen...and Elizabeth Bennet is not. It means she can be disrespected, beaten, even kidnapped in the street, and nobody will care. It means the Bennet family is in dire straits and Mrs. Bennet has even more motivation to sell her daughters to the highest bidder.

So, even if Fitzwilliam Darcy falls desperately, passionately in love with Elizabeth, it would be crazy to propose marriage, right? An irrational, illogical, demented decision...

But the world around them is demented and cruel. Darcy himself has secrets and doubts about the oppressive system they live in.

Still. Is it possible, Darcy wonders, to be in love in the darkness? To carve your own happiness in a dictatorial world?

And, as a more pressing concern, will Elizabeth ever fall in love with him in return?

Note from the author: Pemberley is a passionate love story with a happy ending, but the setting of this book is dark. There is violence and profanity. The first chapter is especially harsh, so don't hesitate to read the preview before purchasing this book—it may not be for you.

But, this is also the most romantic story I've ever written!

Heartbroken

Elizabeth hasn't heard from Darcy since violently rejecting his declaration of love. But then one day... She's bored. Yes, bored. No, there's no better reason for it.

Anyway, she texts him. And Darcy texts back.

For Elizabeth, it's nothing, sending this first message. It's a game — an absurd decision that she just makes on the spur of the moment. For Darcy, this is life and death. This is his second chance, to maybe get Elizabeth to look at him, really look at him at last.

So. A party, where Jane and Bingley are annoyingly happy. A business meeting at Pemberley. Short dates in a café, in winter, while it's snowing outside. Valentine's Day in February, in the rain.

The game is getting serious. Elizabeth is getting attached. And Darcy will do anything, anything, not to lose her again...

From despair to hope, a passionate, intense love story...

Games Of Love And Cruelty

Fitzwilliam Darcy falls madly in love with the vivacious and clever Elizabeth Bennet. After a few shots of tequila, he declares his affections for her. It is a disaster. Elizabeth resoundingly rejects him. But...it's late, they're alone and slightly intoxicated. They sleep together.

Now Darcy has everything...and nothing. He is having sex with Elizabeth and while he falls more desperately in love each day, she still hates him. It is the beginning of a secret, sensual, complicated liaison, wherein each plays a cruel game; Darcy because he is hiding his passion and growing despair, Elizabeth because she is feeling lost.

As Darcy gets more hopeless, and Elizabeth tries to deny her budding feelings, another man begins to vie for her affections...

Note from the author: As you may gather from the premise, this is a modern Pride and Prejudice variation, and neither a sweet nor clean tale. Nevertheless, Games of Love and Cruelty is also not erotica. The story is deeply romantic, and the depictions of sex are not too graphic or explicit.