Duty and Honor

by dassala

Summary

Circumstances arise, preventing Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr. Collins' proposal. With Elizabeth betrothed to a man she does not love, to what lengths will Darcy go to win her heart and her hand?

Notes

I do not own these characters, nor most of the story. However, I always wondered this very scenario.
Chapter 1

"…when we are married." Mr. Collins' words hung in the air like the stale smell of a horse barn. They puzzlingly seemed to have the same effect upon Elizabeth's nose, causing it to wrinkle with disgust. She parted her lips to speak.

Before a word could be spoken, however, there was a great commotion in the library. Elizabeth's mother, who had previously been lingering at the parlor door with the intention of hearing Lizzie's acceptance, was shouting. This was not usually an uncommon occurrence within the Bennet household, but there was a frantic tone to her voice.

Lizzie sprung from her chair and made a dash for the door, flinging it open to hurry down the hallway, her skirts rustling about her stocking-covered legs. Mrs. Bennet was sobbing, a handkerchief to her mouth as she gasped for air.

"Mama, what is it?" All Mrs. Bennet could do was point into the library. Mr. Bennet sat quietly in his chair, a book opened in his lap. Again, not an unusual occasion, however there was something amiss. Elizabeth took a few steps forward, kneeling carefully at her father's feet.

"Father?" It was if her voice knew more than Elizabeth herself. She reached out and touched his hand, feeling the chill of death upon it. Her beloved father. Lizzie's knees were weak and she was unable to stand for a moment. Mr. Collins appeared in the doorway.

"Oh my dearest Elizabeth," he said softly, moving into the room without waiting for invitation. "If it would be pleasing to you, I shall issue the last rights. It should come, of course, from his destined son-in-law."

At such a presumption, Elizabeth most likely would have verbally chastised Mr. Collins. However, the flames of her anger were drowned within a sea of sorrow. She remained silent, standing and turning to her mother. Kitty stood in the hall with their mother, offering up memorized quotations of Fordyce's sermons, as if the words of the clergy would comfort a woman who went to church to gossip. Elizabeth took her mother's free hand, holding it within hers.

"We are ruined, Lizzie. To be thrown out into the street." The shrill tone of her mother's voice was exponentially more solemn, more sincere than usual.

Although her tears fell much more quietly than her mother's, Elizabeth shook her head and reached up to push a few of them from her cheek. "No, Mama, we shall not. I am to marry Mr. Collins. I am sure he will allow the family to stay at Longbourne."

A look of confused disbelief crossed Mrs. Bennet's features. She hesitated for a moment before she spoke. "I implore you to ask that of your intended husband."

Jane had heard the news from her sisters, and was most definitely touched with sorrow as she moved to Elizabeth's side. Lizzie slid her hand into her sister's, holding it tightly, mostly for her own comfort. The girls were watching a box, containing the body of their deceased father, being hoisted into the back of the undertaker's cart.

"Whatever shall we do without him, Lizzie? I cannot imagine what the study will look like without Father in that chair," Jane spoke quietly, her eyes red-rimmed from tears.

"He will always remain there in our hearts, Jane. He will be very much missed, but always here."
Jane turned to Lizzie, breathing in deeply. "Mama said you have accepted Mr. Collins' proposal."

Elizabeth nodded slowly and looked at their joined hands. "It is fortunate that I had not spurned Mr. Collins prior to learning of our father's death."

Jane's gentle countenance had not allowed her to assume Elizabeth had accepted the proposal for any reasons outside of changed feelings for their cousin. "Did Mama persuade you? Surely you are inclined towards the marriage."

"Oh Jane," Lizzie sighed, looking at her sister, "That is what I love about you. Your heart is unassuming in any way. Mama did no persuading outside of the amount prior to Mr. Collins' request."

"I cannot believe you would accept a man for whom you had not the slightest feelings." Jane's expression was of genuine shock, a great change from the cloak of sadness which had covered her features throughout the day.

"I would, Jane, to keep my family within their current circumstances. It is the sacrifice I can make to ensure the happiness of my other sisters in marriage," Elizabeth squeezed her sister's hand. "It is my sincerest hope that the benefit of our tragedy should be to bring you closer to Mr. Bingley."

The elder sister, her soft features framed in delicate blonde curls, stared incredulously at Elizabeth. "You cannot be serious. You will not be happy. Perhaps there is another way to secure our status here at Longbourne."

The girls watched their mother retreat into the house, a black kerchief already covering her vibrant red hair. Despite the seemingly volatile relationship her parents shared, Elizabeth observed an eerie silence from her mother. It was increasingly more evident to Lizzie that her mother had loved her father more than she had ever let on.

"I believe, Jane, that I could grow to be happy, after some time. Do not worry for me."

Knowing there was little more she could say on the matter, Jane quietly watched the cart pull away. Her hand remained within Elizabeth's, the two sisters unable to fathom their respective futures.

Longbourne church was filled with the residents of Meryton, those who had known Mr. Bennet and those who merely longed for the social event of a funeral. Elizabeth's black lace shawl did little to keep her shivering shoulders warm. Mr. Collins stood at her side, rambling unmarked about the size of the windows and their relation to those at Rosings Park. It was good, Lizzie had asserted, that she had already learnt how to allow Mr. Collins' dull conversation to pass without having to do much listening. She offered a slight smile to the man after he finished talking, before returning her attention to the front of the church.

Though she had cried to herself when Jane was away from their bedchamber, it was hard for Elizabeth to comprehend the loss of her father. A part of her still felt his presence within the walls of Longbourne. In a way, it was as if Mr. Bennet had always been there in spirit, lingering by himself within the study, making an occasional comment about the silliness of his three youngest daughters. Lizzie knew the hardest part of her father's loss would come on her wedding day, set for only two months from the day of the funeral. She was making a sacrifice for her family, and she knew her father would have stopped at nothing to talk her out of such nonsense.

There was a rumble of whispers as the church doors opened, allowing Mr. Bingley inside. He held his hat close to his chest, his expression solemn. On the other side of her, Elizabeth felt Jane's body stiffen slightly at the entrance of the man she loved. She couldn't help but smile, watching the way
Jane's eyes bashfully made contact with Bingley's before dropping her gaze to the floor, blood rushing into her fair cheeks.

Mr. Darcy strode behind Bingley, his own gaze fixed upon Elizabeth. She tightened her jaw slightly and turned her head towards Mr. Collins, creating a question of doctrinal importance to avoid further interaction with the proud man who had done nothing but insult her in the past.

The clergyman began his speech, speaking on the virtues of living a long life, and loving the church. Elizabeth thought of her father's criticism of the church and its clergy. The entirety of the service was almost exactly the opposite of her father's view of the world. All Elizabeth could think was that was he there to hear it, the two of them would have laughed together. Before she knew it, Mr. Collins was carefully touching her hand. She glanced over at the man and noticed a comforting look in his features. She nodded slightly and offered up a slight smile. Her mother followed the casket from the church, and Jane and Elizabeth soon followed. The other girls were cross; Mary about not being allowed to play a dirge for her father, Lydia and Kitty about a fight they'd had over bonnets.

Through a line of condolences, Lizzie thought only of memories of her father. She was suddenly overwhelmed with thoughts of him. She smiled cordially at those who came to offer their praise of him. A few people spoke of her engagement, since news was rarely kept for long within the Bennet house. Mr. Bingley made his way through the line. Jane watched carefully and remarked on the lack of Miss Bingley and Mr. and Mrs. Hurst.

Jane's blush at the condolences of Mr. Bingley said much about the young woman's feelings. Miss Bingley would have looked disgusted, Elizabeth thought. She gave a slight nod to Mr. Darcy as he passed. He nodded in return.

"Miss Bennet," said with his usual tone, "I am deeply sorry for the loss of your father."

"Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

As the crowd dwindled, Elizabeth looked around and took in a deep breath. "I need a walk," she said to Jane, during a moment when Mr. Collins had stolen away to speak of his condescending Patroness.

"Do not go far," Jane replied, "Mama is bound to take us home directly."

Elizabeth nodded and stole her moment to walk off into the churchyard. The yard was quiet and serene, littered with occasional tombstones to the West. She remained on a path towards a small grove of pear trees, flowering but not yet with fruit. Rounding into the grove, Elizabeth was astonished to find herself very near Mr. Darcy again. She paused, but he had heard her footsteps in the lawn.

"Miss Bennet," he turned and bowed slightly at her appearance near him. "Forgive me for ruining your moment of solace. I was simply admiring the grounds of Longbourne."

"Do not trouble yourself, Mr. Darcy, the grounds of the church are quite open to all those who wander them." She wetted her lips before continuing, "Thank you so much, sir, for being a presence at my father's service. I do believe he would have appreciated it."

"You are quite welcome. Bingley, being such a dear friend to your family, could hardly go alone."

Elizabeth thought of this as a way to admit he had been forced to attend.

"I must extend my congratulations, Miss Bennet, on your impending nuptials."
"Yes, thank you," she hated to admit the circumstance under which she was to accept the congratulations. There was an awkward silence before Mr. Darcy bowed slightly again.

"I will leave you. May Bingley and I call upon your family tomorrow?" He placed his hat upon his head.

"I believe you may," she replied, somewhat perplexed. "Good day, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth bowed in return before she watched Mr. Darcy walk back towards the front of the church. Turning to the trees, Lizzie toyed with her shawl for a long moment, lost in thought. Mr. Darcy was kind, gentle with her. This was unusual given his genuinely cold manner.

"There you are, my dear Elizabeth," Mr. Collins said with a smarmy smile as he approached her. Elizabeth turned slowly after gathering herself.

"Yes, I walked away for a bit of fresh air. I hope you'll excuse me." She took the arm offered to her and walked with him back to the front of the church.

"I meant to tell you this morning, I've had a letter from my patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She offers her congratulations on the engagement and regrets to say she will not be able to attend the wedding. However, she will be sending a basket of the finest from Meryton, although she fears it to be quite sub par in comparison to the immense riches to be found in Kent." He spoke with a proud smile, backhandedly delivering insults about the place where Elizabeth had spent all of her youth.

Elizabeth ignored the comments to the best of her ability and offered up a slight hint of a smile, "How kind of her. Tell her I do look forward to meeting her, when you next write."

"Of course."
Until the morning Denny and Wickham arrived at Longbourne, Elizabeth had scarcely thought much about her friend from the regiment. So much was happening around her that even reading in her father's study was a distraction. Dressed in a deep blue gown, Elizabeth kept a black scarf draped across her shoulders as a symbol of her mourning. She walked quietly through the courtyard, a seemingly speechless George Wickham at her side. Finally, Elizabeth spoke.

"We missed you at Netherfield, Mr. Wickham," she offered a slight smile to him, "Although I cannot say I blame your absence."

"Yes, I feared a confrontation which may have spoiled the evening for many. Perhaps I may claim the honor of a dance with you at the next ball." He smirked as he spoke, "That is, of course, if your fiancé will relinquish your attentions long enough."

Elizabeth laughed just a little. "I will do my best to persuade him."

Lydia and Kitty laughed as they watched a bowl bounce across the garden. Denny looked embarrassed.

"Is it true that you will travel into Kent this next fortnight? Your sister Mary had much to say on the subject." When Lizzie's scarf slipped slightly, Wickham was quick to her aid, pulling it up to her shoulder again.

Lizzie smiled, "Mary often has much to say in matters of morality. Yes, thank you, I will travel to Kent. Mr. Collins' patroness, Lady Catharine has insisted upon meeting me. My Aunt Gardiner has volunteered to make the trip with me."

"Do you look forward to the trip?" The pair settled to a seat on a bench near a hedge.

"I cannot honestly say I much anticipate meeting Lady Catharine, but I welcome an escape from Hertfordshire." She folded her hands in her lap with a smile, "I believe London is quite diverting this time of year, and we intend to stay a couple of days there."

"It is. I remember spending my spring-times in London as a boy," Wickham's gaze wandered towards the giggling girls across the lawn. "Lydia says you will buy your wedding clothes in London. She looks forward to being a bridesmaid."

"No doubt Lydia will make a bigger fuss over her position in the wedding than even I."

"Are you not an anxious bride?" He well knew the answer. Elizabeth's disdain for Mr. Collins had been evident prior to her father's death.

Her lips parted, but Elizabeth found herself unable to answer for a moment. "I feel the death of my father has overwhelmed any pre-nuptial excitement I may have felt." It was not quite a lie, yet not wholly the truth.

The sound of hooves upon a gravel path caused Lydia to gasp loudly. "My, we are quite the popular ones, are we not?" She and Kitty took off towards the front of the house, leaving bowls behind with a befuddled Lieutenant Denny.

"Your sisters seem healed from the recent tragedy," Wickham offered, "It is nice to hear them in such good spirits."
Elizabeth knew her sisters loved their father, but she was unsure that his death had affected them much at all. The girls were young, and most certainly preoccupied with the regiment being in Meryton. Taking a breath, she nodded carefully. "They are most easily distracted. Your presence, as well as Mr. Denny's has improved their spirits greatly."

Lydia sulked her way back into the yard. She picked up her bowl and sighed. "It was just Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. How dull those gentlemen are. I do not know what Jane sees in Mr. Bingley."

It was amazing how quickly Mr. Wickham stood. "Denny, we should take our leave. We were to have tea with Mrs. Foster this afternoon."

As if the arrival of boring company and a scolding look from her sister Elizabeth was not enough, now Lydia's entertainment was leaving. She let out a low whine. "But we've only just started our game! We cannot finish with two."

"Lydia," Elizabeth warned, standing as Mr. Wickham bowed a quick farewell to the women and hurried towards the front of the house.

"Wickham, do come back soon!" Lydia shouted after them, then continued pouting. Kitty had a forlorn expression as well. Elizabeth shook her head and walked into the house. She knew Jane and Mary would be the only company for Bingley and Darcy.

Upon entering the house and removing her bonnet, Lizzie was met with the stale-sounding piano chimes of Mary's playing. She sighed and headed towards the parlor. She was almost amused to see the pained expression upon Jane's face as she uncomfortably allowed her younger sister to exhibit what she considered to be a "talent". Her features relaxed into an embarrassed smile, however, when Lizzie appeared in the doorway. Mary finished her concerto just as everyone else noticed Elizabeth's appearance. Bingley and Darcy politely applauded for only a moment before both men stood.

"Miss Elizabeth! How delightful it is to see you." Mr. Bingley bowed to her with a bright grin. Mr. Darcy mimicked the movement with a stiff posture.

Mary shuffled through her book to find another song, and Lizzie rose from her curtsy only in time to notice it.

"Mary, I heard Lydia and Kitty saying they needed another player for their game of Bowls. You should join them." She moved carefully to the couch occupied by Jane and had a seat next to her older sister.

"Join them? Why, games are so idle and useless." Mary scoffed, pushing her glasses up on her beaky nose. "Time would better be spent studying great sermons or practicing a genuine talent."

It surprised everyone with Mr. Darcy spoke up, "On the contrary, Miss Mary."

Elizabeth was most shocked, her jaw actually falling open for a split second as she looked to him. He rarely spoke without provocation.

"Games are useful for sharpening one's mind with a keen intellect and strategic planning. I believe truly accomplished women should aspire to learn such games."

Mary gave pause before she closed her songbook. She stood slowly and bowed to the party in the parlor before heading out towards the back, undoubtedly making her younger sisters miserable.

Lizzie could not help but smirk as Mary left. She turned to the two men. "What brings you to
Longbourne this afternoon? We were quite surprised to see you."

"A great desire to check on our friends," Mr. Bingley spoke with a jovial smile. "We came to give our best wishes to your poor mother, however we hear she is unable to take company."

"Yes, she has not been well since our father's death. We thank you, however, for your kind inquiry." Lizzie grinned. She loved Mr. Bingley as a brother, and hoped to rightfully do so in the future. He was as kind a fellow as she had ever met, and she took great pride in knowing a man such as he.

"We were just being entertained by your sister Mary's talent and your sister Jane's delightful conversation."

Out of the corner of her eye, Elizabeth could see Jane's cheeks and ears flushing crimson from the attention from Mr. Bingley. She knew her sister's desires when it came to the gentleman. It was most of the reason why she had accepted Mr. Collins' proposal. Elizabeth's own spirits sunk slightly at the thought of her intended.

"How are the plans coming for your wedding, Miss Elizabeth?" Mr. Darcy spoke up again.

"Very well, thank you. Mr. Collins has returned to Hunsford to prepare his own affairs." She folded her hands in her lap, allowing her shawl to fall around her forearms. "The invitations should leave the house within the next week."

Darcy's hand gripped the arm of his chair more tightly, his knuckles white with tension. No one noticed, but the chair did creak under the strain. His heart pounded from the moment she entered the room, and sank when she confirmed the continuation of plans for the wedding.

"Lizzie travels into Kent next week to visit Lady Catharine, Mr. Collins' patroness. I have heard she is your Aunt, Mr. Darcy. Is that correct?" Jane offered as a conversation point.

"She is," he answered curtly, nodding.

Bingley could sense the way his friend tensed. He sat up a little taller. "We wish you a very merry journey, Miss Elizabeth."

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley." Lizzie smiled softly, fiddling a little with her shawl. "Would either of you care for tea?"

Jane smiled, hoping Bingley would stay a while and have tea with them.

"I am afraid we must take our leave soon. Darcy and I make for London shortly. We are to spend some time there, while the season begins." Bingley's voice was filled with regret. Darcy took this as a cue to stand and bow to the two ladies.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth. Thank you for your cordial hospitality."

Lizzie stood, and Jane followed on much weaker knees. "Thank you for coming. Enjoy London, and we look forward to seeing you again soon."

Darcy marked Elizabeth's words and nodded before leaving the room, followed by a lingeringly quiet Mr. Bingley.

Once they were gone, Lizzie turned to a pale-looking Jane. "Jane, what is it that troubles you?"

"They plan to spend the season in London. I shall not see him." Her voice was small.
"Oh Jane," Elizabeth said, taking her sister's hand. "He loves you. He will always return to your side, without a doubt."
Chapter 3

Elizabeth Bennet peered out the carriage window as it tottered down the bricked streets of London. She had anticipated the bustle of the city, but certainly not to this degree. There were people of all kinds - from high society ladies in expensive and fashionable gowns to gentlemen in the tallest hats she had ever seen. Street vendors sold potatoes, fruit and bread as they avoided dirty-looking children with their carts, hoping to keep from falling victim to thievery. The carriage rolled into Cheapside and stopped in front of a townhouse, bricked and sturdy, but not nearly as grand as some she had seen in the city. Silently, she wondered if Mr. Bingley or Mr. Darcy kept London homes such as those.

"Lizzie!" Mrs. Gardiner made her way quickly down the stairs as the footman opened the carriage door. "How well you look! Was your journey tolerable?"

Lizzie stepped out of the carriage. "Yes ma'am, quite tolerable," she returned her Aunt's kisses of greeting and watched the footmen unload her things. Mrs. Gardiner tipped them with a coin from her purse.

"Come in! You must be half-starved! Jenkins is preparing a dinner as we speak."

Lizzie smiled warmly at her Aunt's reception. She was one of the most cordial women of her acquaintance. She cared little for the fuss of fashion and society, a great opposite from Elizabeth's mother. Perhaps that was why she complimented her Uncle Gardiner so very well.

Loosing the ribbon on her bonnet, Lizzie was greeted by four handsome and darling children.

"Hello there! Look at how you've all grown!" The girls curtsied and the boys bowed before taking off to play.

"Simon, Julia, Henry, Heloise…wash up for dinner!" Mrs. Gardiner called to them as they left. Lizzie remembered the births of each child, and how beautiful they were as babies. Henry and Heloise had been particularly darling, as they were small when they were born. The twins had come a little early, but amazingly survived.

"Lizzie, you must tell me all about your wedding plans," her Aunt interrupted her thoughts, "I am most anxious to hear of them."

Lizzie laughed. "I am ashamed to say that I have not done much. My mother has given the most direction about things. I mustn't have a passion for it, as she does."

"Then it is a good thing that she should have five daughters," Mrs. Gardiner smirked.

Later that evening, Lizzie was placing her gowns back into her trunk for the next day's journey. She sat for a moment on the side of her bed and looked out the window of her room, down at the bustling city below her. Even in the late evening, London was moving at a much quicker pace than any of the country villages she had ever visited. Turning her head, she looked into the mirror.

Since her engagement and her father's death, Elizabeth had felt herself getting older, one day at a time. She noticed lines that had never been there before, circles beginning to darken slightly underneath her eyes. She looked sickly and drawn. Her appetite had decreased, and therefore her gowns had gotten larger. She had been cinching herself a little less tightly to be able to fill out the gowns. Elizabeth sighed softly and turned to pick up a book she had brought from her father's library. It had been one of his favorites, as evident by the softened pages. In the dim candlelight,
Elizabeth felt a wave of sorrow as she looked at the book. She took in a great breath before sobbing loudly into her hand, unaware that it had been coming from deep within her. She turned and buried her face into her pillow to silence herself, drawing in the dusty air from the feathers within.

The pillow was damp before her uncontrollable sobs stopped. She had not cried like that in ages, and certainly she had not let herself show that kind of emotion to anyone since her father's untimely death. It was as if her soul had finally burst within her and she was feeling the absolutely dire situation in which she now found herself.

It was quite a few hours before Lizzie drifted off to sleep.

The journey to Kent was not very long, but Elizabeth felt that it could have gone much faster. She was quite eager to be done with the entire visit. She would have to get used to a life in Kent, but she hated being there before she was forced.

Mr. Collins stood at the gate to Hunsford, waving at the driver. Mrs. Gardiner, sensing Elizabeth's tension, squeezed her niece's hand firmly and gave her a look in the eye. Lizzie blushed a little and shook her head with a gentle smile.

"This journey is certainly much more pleasant with you being here," Elizabeth spoke. Her Aunt nodded, finally understanding what her niece was doing for the family.

Mr. Collins held out his hand to help Elizabeth from the carriage. She took it and climbed down.
"Thank you, Mr. Collins."

"Please, Miss Elizabeth," he said quietly to her before her aunt emerged from the carriage, "You may call me William."

Elizabeth found herself surprised, but cleared her throat and did not respond. She stood aside and waited for her aunt.

Mrs. Gardiner exited the carriage and smiled warmly at Mr. Collins.

"Mr. Collins! How lovely it is to see you again!" William Collins bowed low to the woman.

"Mrs. Gardiner, a great pleasure to see you here at Hunsford. I believe you shall see how comfortable your niece and I will be here, once this is our home." He grinned in a way that made Elizabeth even more uncomfortable.

"Shall we meet Lady Catharine while we are here, do you think?" Lizzie asked to relieve her own tension.

Her fiancé looked surprised that she should even ask. "Of course, my dearest Elizabeth. She has already requested our presence for dinner at Rosings Park tonight. In fact, we have little time before we are expected there. I will show you to your rooms and then we shall have to leave."

Elizabeth drew a deep breath and forced a smile, hoping Lady Catharine to be more accommodating than she seemed to be.

It was absolutely amazing to Elizabeth that even within the walls of Rosings Park, Mr. Collins did not stop talking about its grandeur. She tuned him out and took in the overly-lavish furnishings and décor during their walk through the front corridor. There were endless portraits of what she assumed to be many members of the de Bourgh family. One woman, in particular, looked very familiar. Lizzie paused and cocked her head to examine the grand painting for a moment longer than the others.
"That would be Lady Fitzwilliam, Ma'am," the Housekeeper said quietly, "Lady Catharine's sister. Mrs. Darcy, as she became. She's been gone a few years now, bless her soul."

The maid crossed herself and Lizzie nodded slightly, then continued on, as Mr. Collins rattled on about Mrs. Darcy's own estate, Pemberley.

As the group entered a drawing room, Lizzie spied a woman in her later years, dressed in a gaudy, pompous gown with a sickly-looking daughter next to her. It made Lizzie fully aware of her own ill appearance. She walked slowly and paused in front of the woman, who examined her without seeming ashamed of it.

"Lady Catharine, may I present the future Mrs. Collins, Miss Elizabeth Bennet," Mr. Collins spoke with a smug smile.

Elizabeth curtseyed slowly and then stood again, offering a weak smile to the old woman.

"You look pale, Miss Bennet. Was your journey difficult?" The woman finally spoke, her accent indicative of the highest breeding.

"No, Ma'am. I simply have not been out of doors much as of late." It was amazing to Lizzie that the woman hardly waited a moment before her criticisms began. Mr. Collins introduced Mrs. Gardiner and a brief conversation began about where Mrs. Gardiner and her husband lived, as well as the kind of trade in which Mr. Gardiner worked. During this conversation, Elizabeth spied movement out of the corner of her eye.

"Ah, my nephew. Fitzwilliam, please do come in." Lady Catharine raised an arm with a content smile.

Elizabeth blinked and turned her head fully to see Mr. Darcy enter the room. "Mr. Darcy!" She could not help but exclaim as he walked towards her.

Darcy paused near the group and bowed carefully to Lady Catharine, then to Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Collins.

"Do you know my nephew, Miss Elizabeth?" The Lady seemed to be almost hoping that Elizabeth would have done something entirely impertinent, so as to create reason to criticize her more fully.

"Yes, Ma'am," Elizabeth said, somewhat embarrassed, "Mr. Darcy and I became acquainted in Hertfordshire, when he visited with his friend."

"Mr. Bingley," he spoke softly, looking first at Elizabeth, then to Lady Catharine. "I spent a brief time there, Aunt."

"Well," Mr. Collins broke in with a grin, "What a pleasure it is to see you again, Mr. Darcy."

Darcy nodded again to Mr. Collins, then his gaze drifted again to Elizabeth. He noted her pale, drawn appearance and he struggled to keep his brow from furrowing with concern.

"Will you be joining us for dinner, Mr. Darcy?" Mr. Collins asked.

Lady Catharine laughed, "Of course he will. Won't you, Darcy?"

Again, Darcy simply nodded in reply.
Chapter 4

The massive dinner table was quiet save for the occasional clink of silver against china. Elizabeth Bennet ate uncomfortably as she tried not to look up. Mr. Darcy sat across from her, next to Mr. Collins. Between the two of them, she felt like there were always eyes on her.

"You have four sisters, Miss Elizabeth?" Lady Catharine finally asked, lifting her crystal goblet to her lips to drink of the fine red wine they had been served.

Thankful for the break in tension, Lizzie looked up and smiled slightly at the older woman. "Yes, Ma'am, I do. Three younger, one older."

"And your elder sister is married, is that correct?"

She fought a glance to Mr. Darcy. "No, Ma'am. She is still at home. All of my sisters are."

Lady Catharine's spoon fell loudly against her soup bowl. "You are to be married before your eldest sister? How very odd."

Mr. Collins tensed. "Mrs. Bennet assured me, Lady Catharine, that Miss Jane Bennet was very soon to be engaged."

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat at this notion and Lizzie dared to look towards him. He took a drink from his water goblet and glanced up at Lizzie. Her eyes darted away immediately.

"My sister has not yet entertained an offer of marriage, Lady Catharine." She looked back down to her soup and Lady Catharine's eyes narrowed at the girl.

Mr. Collins surveyed the table for a moment before taking the opportunity to offer up one of his very best compliments. "Of course, your Ladyship, I selected my choice in wife based upon your recommendations of finding a useful kind of woman, fitting for a man of my position."

The clawed feet of Darcy's dining chair scratched along the wooden floor as it moved backwards quickly, nearly rocking back on its hind legs.

"Please excuse me, Aunt. I have business to attend, and I had lost track of the time." He bowed and dropped his napkin atop his half-eaten dinner before turning to walk from the room.

Elizabeth listened to the heels of Mr. Darcy's shoes clicking along the floor. She glanced at Mr. Collins, who seemed wholly un-phased by the sudden exit. He gave his betrothed a crooked sort of smile, which Lizzie assumed was supposed to be endearing.

Apparently, Mr. Darcy's leave of the table was only a surprise to Elizabeth. Mrs. Gardiner did not even seem to notice. She did, however, break the silence.

"What excellent courses we are having, Lady De Bourgh. Please send my most sincere compliments to your cook," Mrs. Gardiner gushed about the pork and potatoes.

Lady Catharine's acknowledgment was little more than a slight nod of her head. She had more important issues to attend. "Miss Elizabeth, where will you buy your wedding clothes?"

Lizzie had not thought of it. She stammered a little and shrugged her shoulders slightly. "I, well, my mother and I had not quite done any of the shopping as of yet..."
"You should have a proper dress, fitted here at Rosings. I will call in my seamstress. I will not have the wife of Mr. Collins wearing something from a London warehouse," the older woman skewered a bite of potato with her fork.

Mrs. Gardiner's posture changed next to Lizzie. She bought all of her gowns from warehouses in London. Refusing such an offer from a woman such as Lady Catharine, however, would be a great mistake.

"I thank you, Lady Catharine." Elizabeth offered a slight smile to Mr. Collins, to show a bit of enthusiasm.

"Come tomorrow morning, Miss Elizabeth. If you stay in the upstairs rooms, no one will be disturbed."

Mr. Collins beamed. "I thank you greatly, your Ladyship, for your extraordinary kindness to Miss Bennet. I can tell that your sincere generosity is never to miss a single beat."

Despite her smile, Lizzie's stomach did a flip at the mere thought of putting on a wedding gown.

It was near twilight by the time the ladies arrived back at the Oak Inn at Kent. Mr. Collins had held onto Elizabeth's hand for far too long as they had departed, and she felt the urge to clean it.

"How very generous of Lady Catharine to make such an extraordinary offer about your wedding clothes, Lizzie," Mrs. Gardiner said softly.

Elizabeth turned with that forced smile once more. "Yes, it was quite nice. I had no intention of wearing much other than what I already owned."

"You cannot be serious!" Her Aunt laughed. "Oh, Lizzie. You inherited none of your mother's traits."

"I suppose not," Lizzie actually laughed a bit. "I daresay I am very much like my father."

The carriage came to a slow stop. Mrs. Gardiner reached out and took her niece's hand. "Your dear father. He is very missed, Lizzie. I hope you are healing well."

Tears came to her eyes at the thought of him, but she nodded slightly. "Thank you. I am."

"He…he would have…been proud of what you are doing for your family. However, I cannot say he would have…"

Lizzie cut her off. "I am very confident in my decision, Aunt. Thank you for your concern."

The footman opened the door and offered a gloved hand to Lizzie, who took it and climbed down onto the cobblestone street. She heard the whinny of a horse and turned her head towards it, catching a glimpse of a tall, dark-haired man on his horse. His coat was a distinctive emerald green. Just like what Mr. Darcy had been wearing at dinner. She paused and watched the horse gallop through the street, which had cleared for the night.

Mrs. Gardiner stepped up behind Elizabeth. "Was that your friend Mr. Darcy?"

She had not been imagining it. Mr. Darcy had been on their street. Perhaps his business was within the town? Surely he was staying at Rosings, as the apparent heir to the great house itself.

"I do believe it was," Lizzie spoke softly. Her mind was whirling with possibilities. She would have
to ask him about his presence in town, should she see him again.

Elizabeth's aunt looped her arm into her niece's. "Let's turn in, Lizzie. You are expected at Rosings very early tomorrow."

Reality struck and caused the twinge in her stomach once again. In the morning, she would take another step towards becoming Mrs. William Collins, wife of the most ridiculous man she had ever met.
Chapter 5

Morning sunshine portrayed Rosings in a different light. The vast portrait-framed corridor faced East, and was now illuminated with mid-dawn hues. The housekeeper led her to a large staircase and Elizabeth lifted the hem of her skirt by just an inch to climb without hindrance.

"The Lady de Bourgh is still at breakfast with Miss Anne. You should be fitted in here, Ma'am," the housekeeper spoke with a Liverpool accent. Elizabeth smiled at the thought. Lady Catherine had invited her only to the dress fitting, but not to breakfast.

"Thank you," Elizabeth stepped quietly into the room and glanced around. Two gowns laid against a chaise in the corner. A stout woman stepped out from behind a dressing screen.

"Miss Bennet?" The young woman asked. Lizzie nodded. "Good morning, Ma'am. My name's Sarah and I'll be helping you with your gown." She guided Lizzie to a platform and helped her to stand upon it. Humming to herself, the girl pulled out a tape measure and began taking Elizabeth's measurements.

"Are you married, Ma'am?" Lizzie asked as she watched the quick-moving seamstress.

Sarah laughed. "Lord, yes. Been so since I was sixteen. One of thirteen children, I am."

Elizabeth was not too surprised, but she smiled. "Quite the busy household, then."

"Indeed! I married my husband in May, like you'll be. Vastly pretty morning. My dress weren't quite so fine as yours, of course, but I was happy as could be."

"You loved him, then?" The question surprised even Lizzie as she spoke it, betraying her own confidence to some degree.

Sarah nodded, "'Course I did. Why else would I marry the man? Weren't for the money." She chuckled heartily.

Lizzie smiled, "I just thought with such a large family, you would have married to get out."

"I'd have improved my status to marry younger. But I couldn't betray my heart." Sarah moved to the chaise and picked up a gown of ivory silk. Delicate flowers were embroidered in gold thread along the hem, with a pale blue sash around the waist.

"What's the point of livin' without respectin' your partner in life?"

The question prompted a pensive silence from Elizabeth. Sarah ushered her behind a screen and helped her to change into the beautiful and elaborate gown. It was a little tight around her chest, then too loose at the waist. Moving back to the platform and mirror setup, Sarah began humming as she pinned Elizabeth into the gown, fitting it to her body.

A few moments into her laborious task of bending, then standing again, followed by crouching at the hem, Sarah muttered under her breath.

"Beg your pardon, Miss. I've run myself out of pins. I'll excuse myself a moment to fetch some more," Sarah curtseyed and hurried from the room.

Elizabeth sighed and looked into the mirror, admiring the gown, yet feeling completely lost in its
grandeur. It was beautiful, but hardly fitting for a penniless gentleman's daughter who was marrying a member of the clergy. Looking up from the mirror, her curiosity got the best of her. She had been eyeing the bookshelves in the room, which seemed to be a small office for letter-writing. Climbing carefully from the platform, she moved to the shelves and examined the leather-bound volumes.

The door to the room opened again. Elizabeth turned, startled. Caught! She hurried back towards the platform, but when her eyes caught sight of the person just inside the door, her feet halted.

He saw her only after the door closed behind him.

Lizzie blinked a few times, then offered a hurried curtsey. "Mr. Darcy."

Darcy's eyes were upon her, dressed in a wedding gown, the sun streaming in through the window to illuminate some auburn streaks in her dark hair. It silhouetted her form, the pleats of the fabric in the gown, the way the gown hugged the curve of her bust just a little too tightly. He bowed his head, "Forgive me, Miss Bennet. I did not mean to intrude."

She had almost asked what he was doing there until she remembered he was staying at Rosings. She remained silent instead, unsure of what to say.

Elizabeth did not have to speak. Mr. Darcy moved, but not back through the door as she had expected. He moved closer to her, and Elizabeth could see the tension in his jaw.

"I must ask you, Miss Bennet. I cannot restrain myself any longer." He spoke quietly, quickly. "Why?"

She was confused. "I…Mr. Darcy…I am not…sure…"

"Why are you marrying him?"

She was not sure why, at that moment, her heart pounded within her chest. Her lips parted as if she were to speak, spill the entirety of the situation, but she stopped herself.

"You cannot love him," he stepped closer, within whispering distance.

"I am bound to Mr. Collins, sir. By my own choosing." She dared not admit the truth after all. What would he think of her? His opinion of her was so undoubtedly low, and he was most likely attempting to save Mr. Collins from a marriage which was born of necessity.

Mr. Darcy raised a hand. Elizabeth's deep green eyes watched the movement, perplexed by it. He stepped forward again, and his hand brushed a tendril of her soft curls from her forehead. His fingers brushed against her skin, and she felt her face flush. It was suddenly so much more difficult to breathe. The bust on the dress felt so tight. She dared not move, lest she do something untoward.

Leaning in, Darcy's lips were so close to hers. Lizzie felt his warm, sweet breath on her skin. Instinctively, her lips parted as if she were to speak, and her eyes involuntarily fluttered shut.

The door to the office opened again. Darcy's hand snapped back to his side as he took a step backward, obviously startled. He bowed to Elizabeth.

"Thank you for your company, Miss Bennet." Turning on his heel, he left the room quickly.

She knew her skin was scarlet with passion, and her breathing labored. She turned her head from Sarah.
"Can we continue this later?" Elizabeth asked in a quiet voice. She just wanted out of that dress. It made her heart ache, her head swim.

Lizzie could not think of anything but Mr. Darcy as she left Rosings. Her pace was quick, her heart pounding. She did not run, but she certainly did walk with a livid determination. What kind of man would approach a soon-to-be-married woman in such a manner? She hardly even knew him! The absolute presumption of the man to be so forward!

Walking up the lane, Elizabeth passed a harried-looking Mr. Collins in the garden. She did not stop to give a greeting. It was all she could take not to stomp her feet on the stairs leading to the second floor of the house as she marched to her writing room.

Taking a seat upon the stool at her writing desk in the small quarters, Elizabeth picked up a quill and a piece of paper to begin writing to her sister.

Dear Jane,

I hope you are well, and that you are not going mad alone in the house with our sisters and Mother.

Have you heard from the excellent Mr. Bingley? I daresay he should return to Netherfield shortly, with the intent on seeing you.

I do hope he does not bring his horrid sister or their friend, Mr. Darcy, the latter with which I have had the most unfortunate of encounters! I have just left Rosings Park after a quite disastrous fitting of my wedding clothes. Firstly, I have no taste for the gown that Lady Catherine has selected for me. Her grandiosity is almost unbearable. Everyone at Longbourne Church will think I have chosen a gown high above my status. It is unfortunate that I should have to take such charity from this woman, who will not even be present at my nuptials.

While I was fitting my gown, Mr. Darcy ambled into the room. He was lost, as one typically becomes at Rosings, and found himself within my company as I wore my wedding gown. I was cordial to the man, of course, but he was terribly strange. Jane, I daresay the man acted fully in love with me! Can you imagine? He did his very best to disturb me in every way and I felt myself unable to breathe for the tension from the situation. I asked to be excused from my fitting the very moment Mr. Darcy left the room.

What kind of thing would possess a man such as Mr. Darcy to act in such a way towards a woman such as myself? I am of little to no consequence in the grand scheme of Mr. Darcy's world, and I do not believe myself to be of any particular acquaintance to him. He would not even dance with me upon our first meeting, and he branded my looks as 'barely tolerable'. His actions cannot be of his own genuine feelings.

Oh Jane, how I miss you so. I cannot wait for my return to Longbourne, and I do send my very best wishes. Love to Mama.

Lizzie
Dearest Lizzie,

As is most expected, Mama has ventured little from her rooms. Lydia, Kitty and Mary are constantly at one another in regards to the lack of entertainments to which they are now exposed. With the Regiment leaving Meryton, Lydia and Kitty are quite put out. Myself, I have been catching up on quite a bit of reading. You must share your favorites with me, and I will certainly hope to read them soon.

I cannot believe your encounter with Mr. Darcy! Has he harbored feelings for you all this time? Perhaps his dislike of you was the inability to control his own feelings? Could it be that he has only allowed them to come forth since your engagement to Mr. Collins? My Goodness, Lizzie, I do hope you are not exposed to his behavior again while you visit Hunsford.

I very much doubt Mr. Darcy's return to Longbourne due to the fact that his friend Mr. Bingley has resolved not to return at all. I received a letter some days ago from Miss Bingley, which informed me that Mr. Bingley is quite taken with a young lady in London and may never return to Longbourne due to the confined society.

I am not injured by the news, Lizzie, as I daresay you will assume. I feel quite at peace with the entirety of the situation and do hope life will return to normal after you have married. I know your feelings regarding your future marriage to Mr. Collins, but I believe that I am beginning to understand your motives and the great sacrifice you are making.

It is my most sincere wish that your journey home is pleasant. Give my love to our Aunt Gardiner.

Jane

Elizabeth sighed and folded the letter as she watched her things being lifted into the carriage. Mrs. Gardiner smiled as she approached her niece, tying the ribbon on the new bonnet she had purchased while in Kent.

"What news from Meryton, Lizzie?" Mrs. Gardiner asked with a gentle smile, "Is Jane well? Your sisters and mother?"

"Yes, quite well." Lizzie lied, knowing her sister's secret pain at hearing that her love may never return to the country to again be by her side.

"Has your Mama been much healed since we left?"

Lizzie shook her head, "I believe she is still confined to her rooms." She shifted her shawl and looked towards the Inn again. Mr. Collins approached and offered a hand to Lizzie. She reluctantly took it and forced a smile to her betrothed.

"My dearest Elizabeth," he said to her with a smarmy smile, "It will only be a short time until Hunsford becomes your home. A month's time, I believe. Until then, I will be sure to patiently await seeing you once again. Lady Catherine sends her fondest regards, of course. She is always offering her kindnesses to you and your family, as is her duty as a woman of higher rank and situation."

Another backhanded compliment from Mr. Collins nearly sent Lizzie into a fit. She nodded slowly. "I will see you in a month's time, Mr. Collins." Quietly, she wondered if it would become possible to feign herself deaf to Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine after she moved into the house at Hunsford. Mr.
Collins did not release her hand until he had seen her lifted into the carriage, then he waved and smiled, lingering at the front of the Inn probably far after they had begun their journey from Kent.

Once they were on the road for a while, Mrs. Gardiner took the opportunity to speak candidly with her young niece.

"Elizabeth," Mrs. Gardiner spoke, "I never thought I would see such a bright and pleasing girl as yourself offer her hand as such a sacrifice."

Lizzie was surprised. She turned her head to Mrs. Gardiner and took in a deep breath.

"I know what it is that you are doing for your family, Lizzie. I daresay you have much more courage than I have ever possessed."

"I cannot see my younger sisters turned out onto the street because of my own pride, Aunt." Lizzie spoke quietly, barely audible over the rattling of the carriage's wheels. "Or Jane, for the matter of that. However, I believe her prospects to be recently quashed underneath the stride of a foully deceitful woman."

"Careful, Lizzie," Mrs. Gardiner hissed, "Speaking ill of others does little for your character. Miss Bingley may be a woman of little tact, but I hardly believe that abusing her does you credit."

Surprised again at her Aunt's incredible perception, Elizabeth bit her lower lip and turned her head to look out the window at the passing countryside. She could not think of much else to offer in the conversation. All she could think of was Mr. Darcy's touch, the feeling of his warm breath against her skin. All she knew was how she longed for it.

Longbourne was quiet upon Lizzie's return. Mary and Kitty had ventured into Meryton to entertain themselves by shopping for ribbons. Neither girl had the money to purchase any such baubles for their bonnets, yet they longed to stroll through the stores to delight in the colors and textures of the fabric.

Removing her bonnet, Elizabeth stepped through the door. She was met by Jane, with an affectionate embrace. Lizzie hugged her sister tightly and sighed.

"Oh Jane," she smiled sadly, "However will I do without you once I am married?"

Jane smiled and pulled back from her sister with a smile. "I shall have to come to Kent to visit very often."

"Indeed, you shall. Bring Charlotte Lucas, or else I should run mad," the girls giggled and Lizzie mounted the stairs to give her greetings to her mother.

"She bought your wedding clothes? Oh, what a presumptuous woman she is!" Mrs. Bennet shook her head, curls flopping about her loose black lace bonnet.

"Mama, she is doing us a great favor," Lizzie offered.

"We can certainly afford to buy your wedding clothes. She need not flaunt her wealth in such a way that should make the people of Meryton think we are in dire need of assistance."

"But we are, Mama. I could not have afforded half the dress which Lady Catherine has provided."

Mrs. Bennet shook her head and dabbed at her eyes, which was her newest gesture of stress. "Would your father have been here to see this. He would have written a stern letter to Lady Catherine for
usurping the privilege of providing for his daughter!"

Would her father have been there, Lizzie thought, she would not be marrying the stupidest man in all of England.

Jane piped up, "Mama, I do believe that once you see the gown, you will be quite thankful for what Lady Catherine has done for Lizzie."

"I would not care if it were covered in the finest lace and pearls!"

Unbuttoning her overcoat, Lizzie slipped it off and glanced at Jane, who offered a defeated frown.

"Lydia! That is my button!" Kitty screeched out above her sister's giggles. Not even Mary's drab piano concertos could drown the sounds of her younger sisters' quarrel. Elizabeth picked up her book and walked from the house, into the back garden. She hated to admit the thought that when she left the house, she would most likely long for the sound of her sisters' arguments. They would be nothing in comparison to Mr. Collins' endless string of subtle abuses.

Turning the page in the book she had snagged from her father's library, Elizabeth settled onto a stone bench near the back of their property. The sounds of the garden were quite peaceful and aided in her reading.

"…this summer, I do believe." A man said to his companion as they passed by the fence which divided Longbourne House from the lane to Meryton.

"What a scandal! They say that lady Jane Bennet was near-dead in love with him. Now he marries?" The woman laughed.

The conversation, which she would have normally ignored, caught Lizzie's attention. She stood and moved quietly closer to the fence.

"Well you know it's all about convenience. He's marryin' that Mr. Darcy's sister. Georgiana, was her name. They say she ain't sixteen yet, but Mr. Darcy ran Mr. Bingley out of town to secure the engagement. Wanted to get his friend away from Miss Bennet before he married her and left his sister open to fortune hunters. She's got thirty-thousand, y'know."

"Lord in heaven. I could do right well with thirty-thousand."

The two laughed as they continued on down the lane. Elizabeth's mind was swimming. She clenched the fist of her free hand. Mr. Darcy had ushered Mr. Bingley from Netherfield just to secure his sister's fortune and marry her to his best friend? What of Mr. Bingley's feelings for Jane? She knew she had not been so blind as to mistake them when the two were dancing at the ball at Netherfield.

All of her thoughts about Mr. Darcy were roundly confusing, giving her a lightheadedness that forced her to sit before she should collapse. What did he mean by ruining her family?
It was not long before news of Mr. Bingley's engagement spread through the whole of Meryton. Netherfield's bevy of servants was released, save for a few placed on retainer to move into Mr. Bingley's London house, when the purchase was complete.

Elizabeth's dearest sister Jane, who herself had heard the news in town before Lizzie had the opportunity to break it to her gently, was pretending to be unaffected. Their ever-critical mother had taken to being completely vexed over the "ill-temper" and "unpleasant nose" of Mr. Bingley, most assuredly in an attempt to defend her eldest daughter. It was only Elizabeth, though, who seemed to notice a dip in the false smile Jane had learned to wear. Her posture was not nearly as tall, and the young woman's color was turning pale despite the warm summer sun.

The two ladies sat in the afternoon parlor of Longbourne house, idly stitching pale yellow ribbons into the lacy edges of three bonnets, one for each sister to be a bridesmaid to Lizzie. Mary had refused the occupation, insisting that being part of the congregation was far more useful for a woman baptized in the church. Jane, Kitty and Lydia had ignored her crowing.

When Jane pricked her finger on the needle she used, without the slightest flinch of pain crossing her features, Elizabeth felt she had had quite enough.

"You cannot pretend anymore, Jane," Lizzie's bonnet landed heavily in her own lap. "I refuse to watch you suffer in this manner."

Jane looked up, her usually-hollow eyes blinking with surprise. "I…I beg your pardon?"

The younger sister sighed, "You act as if Mr. Bingley's engagement is nothing at all to you, Jane. I know this is not true."

Looking back down at her hands, Jane seemed to take a trembling breath. "What other choice do I have?" She did not look up. "My…Mr. Bingley will marry whether I show my true feelings or continue…to hide them."

Lizzie noticed a small spot on her sister's soft blue gown that darkened with the wetness of Jane's quietly –falling tear. Another joined it soon after. She moved forward and knelt at Jane's feet.

"You have been wronged. It is only natural to feel sorrow. Let it out, Jane."

Instead of more tears, Jane laughed. It was not jovial, as per usual with the young woman. No, this laugh was bitter.

"Your situation is far more disturbing than mine, yet you pretend that your own heart is unbroken. Do not lecture me, Lizzie. I will not bear it. Least of all, from you." Jane stood without another word and left the room, placing the bonnet on a table as she left.

Elizabeth was stunned. She had never heard a cross word from Jane. Climbing from her knees, she looked at her writing desk.

\textit{Papa,}

She wrote.

\textit{What can I do? The whole family is falling apart without you. I marry Mr. Collins in a fortnight, and}
Jane despises me. Mary is on the verge of becoming a bitter maid at seventeen, and Lydia and Kitty expose themselves to more ridicule for being relentless flirts! The worst is that their behavior is encouraged by a selfish, loathsome mother who sits above the stairs and whimpers of a loss she does not even feel strongly.

Jane's heart is so broken. I slighted Mr. Darcy, and now he engages his little sister to Jane's one true love. Could it be that this is all of my own doing?

Oh Papa, I miss your guidance. I miss your sense. What would you have me do to save our family?

With the heaviest of sighs, Lizzie folded the letter and tucked it into the pocket on her gown. She reached for Jane's unfinished bonnet to continue the tedious work.

Hooves pounded on gravel road as Darcy approached his estate at Pemberley. He dismounted well before the steed had come to a complete stop. He was removing his riding gloves as he approached the massive estate, his steward practically jogging alongside to keep up with the man's pace.

"Welcome home, Master Darcy. Can I take your things? The cook has prepared a small dinner for you..." he was cut off before being allowed to finish his details of the evening.

"I have no stomach for dinner. Please divide it amongst the staff. I require only solitude tonight. I will have no need for any of the staff this evening." His tone was resolute, but most definitely not unpleasant.

The steward nodded, understanding his master's tone and mood, having worked with him for so many years. Mr. Darcy was a gentle man with a seemingly stern exterior. He walked away to advise the staff to enjoy the dinner amongst themselves, then take the evening off to be with their families.

Darcy climbed the stairs two at a time as he ascended to his bed chambers, his jaw clenched tensely. The large doors closed behind him and he loosened his cravat. The bottle of brandy near his bed was calling to him. The deal had been made in London a week earlier, when he gave his sister's hand to his best friend. Both had seemed somewhat hesitant about the match, despite the fact that they were very good friends. With Georgiana so young and Bingley so attached to the Miss Bennet in Hertfordshire, neither looked forward to their nuptials.

It was for the best, was it not? Keeping his sister's fortune from the hands of fortune-seekers and keeping his best friend's interest in mind seemed to be the best thing he could do for himself and his family. The smooth brown liquor sloshed in the glass as he lifted it to his lips and took a long draw. It smelled sweet, but had a warm bite down the back of his throat.

Had it not been for Miss Elizabeth Bennet, perhaps things had been different. She was to marry that imbecile. How could she?

Darcy paced the room slowly, his thumb rubbing an intricate carving on the side of the glass. After a moment, he turned to his writing desk and sat. He gripped a quill and pulled out a piece of paper to begin his letter.
Chapter 8

Time was going by far too fast for Lizzie. She would have begged aloud in church for God to slow it down - or perhaps reverse it altogether. Instead, she sat quietly, hands clasped, her eyes upon the sour-looking woman of forty near the front of the church. Mrs. Callaway was the wife of Reverend Callaway. It had always seemed to Lizzie that the two were an odd pair, but since her own engagement to a member of the clergy, she had paid more attention.

Mrs. Callaway, who no doubt had heard every sermon more times than even the most devout could bear, seemed as if she had been quiet pretty at one time. Lizzie caught the older woman's genuine smile earlier in the month as she chatted with a shopkeeper in town. There was a bit of the mischievous hidden within the smile, and the younger girl imagined Mrs. Callaway had once been very much like her own self.

Was this Elizabeth's future? To stand idly beside Mr. Collins, making general conversation full of complementary, yet falsely polite, statements about the parish and the weather? She imagined the cold, dark parsonage upon Lady Catherine's massive estate. Day by day, she would undoubtedly write cordial greetings and hold empty teas with parishioner's wives.

By the time the service concluded, Elizabeth Bennet's stomach was in knots. She hitched up her skirts to her ankles and pushed past the ambling Sunday crowd.

"Lizzie?" Lydia called after her. Ignored for the sake of Lizzie's sanity, the call went unheeded.

It was not until she had reached the vast lane which tied Meryton to Netherfield Park that her footsteps and breathing slowed. Reaching up, Lizzie removed her bonnet and allowed the sunlight to warm her face.

What had become of her? And what would she become hereafter? This was not at all like Elizabeth Bennet. Not one bit.

She hadn't heard the carriage until it was nearly upon her. Jumping back from the lane, she felt her boots sink into loose mud.

"Watch out, there!" Called the driver, giving her a smile and a wave. Thoroughly embarrassed, Lizzie waved and moved to unstuck herself from the muck.

"Lizzie Bennet, are you always in the mud?" The familiar voice came from within the carriage. A jovial face appeared in the window. Edward Gardiner, her mother's brother, was smiling out at her.

"Uncle!" She smiled brightly, grateful for the distraction from her own thoughts. "What brings you out to the country?"

"Business, I fear. I've just come from Longbourne, where I left your Aunt and cousins. Come, can I take you back to the house, then?"

She glanced down along the lane. "No, I thank you. I would not keep you from your work. Will I see you at dinner this evening?"

"I believe you shall!" He tipped his hat and grinned, "Watch for carriages along your journey." Waving, he signaled to the driver as the carriage lurched back into motion. Lizzie waved with a smile, then turned back towards home, anxious to meet again with her Aunt.
What little color that remained in Jane's delicate features was brightened by the presence of their Aunt Gardiner and the children. Jane ran through the garden in a feeble attempt to set the children's kite to flight. Elizabeth smiled as she watched her sister, with whom she had not spoken since their argument.

"She will make a fine mother someday, will she not?" Mrs. Gardiner took a seat next to Lizzie, cradling a cup of tea in her hands.

"I believe she shall," Lizzie answered with a smile and a nod, "Surely such a beautiful girl as Jane will be married within the next year." This was more to convince herself that Jane was not marred in society by her previous association with Mr. Bingley.

"So very true." Mrs. Gardiner looked more to Lizzie. "And her younger sister marries in just days."

"Do not remind me," she forced a smile and shook her head. "The preparations are very nearly finished. Will you and my uncle be staying the week?"

"Of course! It would not make much sense to return to London for only a few days. Besides, Mr. Gardiner's business may keep him here for a few more days as it is."

"Good," Lizzie's smile became more relaxed, "For having you here, Aunt, makes it all the better."

"How is she, since she heard of the engagement?" Mrs. Gardiner nodded to Jane, who was helping untangle the flying contraption from a blackberry bramble.

Elizabeth thought for a moment. "She pretends. I know her heart to be broken. We quarreled about her feelings just this week."

"But the two of you have never fought!"

"I was surprised as well. She would share none of her feelings with me." Lizzie looked at her hands. Another moment of silence passed between them.

"Perhaps, Elizabeth, Jane's discontent is heavy not only for her own loss."

One of the children shouted for their Mama, and Mrs. Gardiner stood to attend to him.
Chapter 9

Morning came on the day of Elizabeth's wedding. Her mother, who had not yet stirred out of doors since her husband's death, was hurriedly running about the house, chiding her sisters about the style of their hair or a wrinkle in their gowns.

Before she could be noticed, Lizzie tied her long, curly brown locks loosely behind her head and pulled on a coat. She placed a single finger to her lips as she passed Hill in the hallways. Hill wearily nodded in understanding and turned to attend to a crying Kitty.

Dew still clung to gently-swaying overgrowth along the path to the lake. Taking deep breaths, Elizabeth made an attempt at savoring what she considered to be her last moments of freedom. She recalled running through the clear, warm landscape with Charlotte when they were young. Charlotte was older by a fair six years, but Lizzie had always been quicker on her feet.

Mr. Bennet had taken Lizzie through the woods when she was young, in an attempt to spark amateur interest in one of his favorite subjects: botany. Lizzie moved to touch a tree, where Mr. Bennet had lifted her high enough to examine the leaves when she was small. Plucking one of the greener bits, she tucked it into her bodice.

"Now you are with me, Papa." She whispered.

The sound of a twig snapping startled her. Elizabeth turned and blinked, suddenly unaware of her surroundings. She had recalled the tree, but not quite how to return home from it. Another snap of a twig, a crunch of leaves. Her heart rate increased slightly within her chest.

"Hello?" She listened, unable to hear much but her own breathing. She turned slowly, only to face the loosely-jacketed torso of a man. She took a defensive step back. Before being able to part her lips to excuse herself, her arms were grasped by what nearly felt like shackles of iron.

"Elizabeth," spoken in a soft, yet resolute tone.

Her eyes drifted upwards. She found no chains or the face of an attacker, as the beating of her heart assumed in fear, but the chiseled jaw line and warm brown eyes of Mr. Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy," his grip on her arms loosed slightly, but she did not back away. She could not. It was if their locked gaze upon one another prevented such an action.

A long moment passed. His lips parted for a second, then closed again. He was in search of words for the moment,

"Pleasant day," he finally managed.

It came to Elizabeth's consciousness that she was not formally dressed for a social encounter.

"It is," she replied, her voice managing not above a whisper.

A lump was slowly swallowed in Mr. Darcy's throat. "Don't." He was still staring into her eyes.

She blinked and furrowed her brow, but remained silent.

"Do not," he whispered, "marry him."

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat.
"I must go..." whispered. She pulled back slightly against his grip.

It seemed words were ineffective. They were not enough. Tightening his large hands again, gripping her tiny arms, he pulled her close within a moment's time. One arm snaked itself quickly around her back, and he placed a firm hand against the center of it.

Elizabeth's inappropriately-dressed body pressed against Fitzwilliam Darcy's. His chest was hard, his shoulders more broad than she had ever noticed from afar. Instead of being offended, Lizzie's inherent curiosity had her body locked from all movement. She continued to stare into his eyes.

Darcy's lips found Elizabeth's in the blink of an eye. Hers were soft and warm, despite the chill in the morning air. The passionate embrace lasted for seconds. When he felt little response from the young woman in his arms, he pulled back slowly, savoring the taste of her mouth for as long as he could. He whispered, still very close.

"I do love nothing in the world so much as you."

And then, he was gone. Elizabeth stood alone in the woods, the morning sun rising before her, illuminating the path home. Had she dreamt it? Was her mind playing tricks? No. She slowly allowed her tongue to touch her lower lip, finding it still damp from Mr. Darcy's kiss.
Chapter 10

The morning blurred into hardly-recognizable moments of doubtful clarity for Elizabeth. She heard her mother's chiding of her younger sisters, followed by careless giggles from the direction of Lydia and Kitty's bed chambers.

Hill hummed a tune as her hair was pinned tidily into place, secured with Baby's Breath for wishes of fertility in the marriage. The only thing Lizzie could see in the mirror was the steely gaze of Mr. Darcy. She did not so much recall his words audibly as she felt them rock her body with shivers.

"Are y'cold, m'lady?" Hill smiled gently and helped Elizabeth to her feet. "I reckon this fine gown'll do plenty to keep you warm in the church."

Nodding slightly, Lizzie moved easily at the encouragement of the maid, being dressed in the expensive yards of fabric before the whole thing was cinched tightly into place. The bonnet that went onto her curls had a lace veil that trailed down her back, very nearly to her feet.

"You look almost like an angel, Miss. I'm sure he'll be very happy," She opened the door for Lizzie. The hallway seemed dim and quiet; none of the usual dim-mid morning sunlight visible through the windows.

"Yes, I suppose he will." Lizzie gave a hapless smile and descended the stairs one by one. The house seemed eerie with everyone gone, having taken to the church to receive family and friends. Hill carefully carried her train, avoiding letting the priceless material fall to the dirt path outside.

Once she had reached the doors of the church, Lizzie turned to Hill.

"Wait, who…will be happy?" She asked the clarifying statement to the young woman who fixed her gown.

"Why, the man you love, Miss." She handed her the small nosegay of greenery and white flowers. "Good luck, Miss Elizabeth."

The church doors opened with the sounds of dull pipe organ music. With a deep breath, she stepped forward, towards that which she felt bound to do. Mr. Collins stood at the altar with a smug smile, wearing black clothes much like that of his Clergy Brethren to his right. Her steps were slow and hesitant, as if her feet knew more than her determination cared to acknowledge.

Collins reached a hand towards Elizabeth and she took it slowly, her feet coming to a stop where it had been rehearsed. The Clergyman cleared his throat.

"Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation…"

The words meant nothing to Elizabeth. She hardly listened. While her gaze wandered to the ornate bible upon the pulpit, she took shallow breaths, her bodice feeling altogether too tight. Her heart pounded against the boning in her corset and she swallowed hard to will the feelings away.

"Thirdly," the Clergy boomed, as if he were giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon, "it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort, that one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore, if any man can show just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him speak now or else hereafter hold his peace."
A soft noise sounded against the wooden floor planks at Elizabeth's feet. She glanced down, blinking. It was as if the bleary fog which had clouded her thoughts was lifted.

Releasing Collins' hand, she bent to retrieve the twig she had plucked from her father's tree in the forest. It had been secured within the small bouquet in her hands, yet somehow dislodged itself only moments earlier.

"Elizabeth!" Collins hissed through clenched teeth as the sanctuary shifted uncomfortably at Lizzie's lack of attention.

Her pale green eyes turned to him, "I will not hold my peace."

Dropping the bouquet, she ripped away her bonnet and gathered her skirts in one swift motion. The congregation, half of whom had been asleep, erupted into gasps.

Lizzie grinned and bolted back up the aisle, reaching out to shove open the heavy church doors. She burst from the structure, into the bright noontime sun. Her head tilted back as the doors slammed behind her, her eyes closed, and she let the warmth kiss her face, bringing her back to life.

Hooves sounded against the dirt road. Opening her eyes, she saw Darcy approaching on horseback. Her smile brightened.

The church doors opened again and the crowd began to empty into the courtyard, a few excited shouts still sounding within the sanctuary. As Darcy came to a stop, Elizabeth threw open her free hand.

"Take me away," she requested. With incredible strength, Darcy grasped Elizabeth's hand and lifted her onto the steed. She flung her arms around his waist and the crowd again gasped at the imprudent sight of the two escaping on horseback like two barbaric lovers.
"Darcy! You made it back!" Elizabeth had been nearly asleep, lulled into complacency by the rhythm of the horse's hooves. Her arms clung to Darcy tightly as the horse came to a stop, just in front of Netherfield Park. Sitting up, Elizabeth pushed her mussed curls from her face and looked down to see Mr. Bingley, carrying a green coat and top hat in hand.

Darcy dismounted and reached up, helping Elizabeth from the horse. Before her lips could part to allow her to speak to him, he turned to Mr. Bingley.

"Send off the letter," Darcy said, exchanging the blue coat on his back for the green one. He put the hat atop his head and looked for a moment to Elizabeth. "I shall return in a couple of days."

Lizzie's jaw dropped slightly in protest, but she was unable to utter a sound. He climbed atop a different horse; this one she recognized as his regular steed. He took off without another moment's hesitation and Eliza could only turn to look at Mr. Bingley.

"Come inside, then," he said softly, offering his hand, "I know you have had a trying day."

"Please," she said softly, "I must know…"

"All will be revealed, Miss Elizabeth."

The letter reached Longbourne before nightfall, when Mr. Collins had finally packed his things to begin a departure from the house. He accepted the letter from the servant and opened it with haste, his temper at a breaking point.

Mr. Collins,

I believe we have met previously at the ball at Netherfield Park. I wish to write you and inform you of the condition of your bride, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

It became apparent to me, upon my late arrival to your nuptials, that Miss Elizabeth had fled the church under strange circumstances. I caught her just as she left the sanctuary, and I noticed she was not of a sound temperament. Fearing she was ill, I took her upon my horse to Netherfield, where a physician was already attending Miss Georgiana Darcy for a turned ankle.

The physician examined Miss Elizabeth and has determined that she was quite delirious with a fever upon her wedding day. We have been warned not to move her from Netherfield for fear of further endangering her health. The fever is also warned as being quite infectious, and only the doctor is allowed in to see the lady.

It is my sincerest hope to have your bride returned to you in no excessive length of time, so that your days of wedded bliss may come to fruition quite soon.

Sincerely,

Mr. Charles Bingley

Netherfield Park

"Oh good Heavens! She is safe!" Mrs. Bennet, in a most distressing flurry of nerves throughout the afternoon, settled into a chair, completely relieved. She fanned herself and reached out a hand to
Jane, who was settling her own emotions as well.

"Jane," she said, "Your Mr. Bingley, although the has made quite an ill choice in engaging himself to Miss Georgiana Darcy and it pains me to see him thus, is very much a saint in taking in your poor, ill sister! Many people had told me it was Mr. Bingley's tall, proud friend who had pulled Elizabeth onto the horse, but now I most distinctly recall seeing the blue coat Mr. Bingley had always worn! And his white horse! Oh, Jane, she is safe!"

Mr. Collins seated himself across from Mrs. Bennet. "Now that I am aware that her departure was not a decision of a sound mind, I am hoping the invitation to remain at Longbourne will be extended until the point that she is well and we can continue with the wedding plans."

"Of course! Of course you will stay!" She waved her handkerchief at him, her features reddening. "Oh Mr. Collins, we knew Elizabeth could not have been herself. Poor girl! Such a fever! I only hope that the physician attending her knows what he is doing!"

Elizabeth had been led to a bedroom at Netherfield Park, where she was given quite a less elegant yet more comfortable gown than the wedding clothes. She ventured down the stairs towards the parlor where she had before spent time with Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and his sister during Jane's illness. Now, she saw quite a different lady seated at a piano forte, playing a most beautiful tune.

There were footsteps behind her, and Elizabeth turned to see Mr. Bingley.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, bowing slightly, "I trust you found your accommodations satisfactory for the time you will stay with us."

She curtsied slowly and looked at Mr. Bingley, "And how long will I be staying? I am…quite at a loss, I must admit."

"Please, join us. I will explain as best as I can."

The tune at the piano slowed to a stop and a girl with soft blonde curls stood, curtseying to Miss Bennet. She returned the gesture and Mr. Bingley stepped between them.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet, may I introduce Miss Georgiana Darcy," Bingley said softly.

Elizabeth could see the appeal for Mr. Bingley. Miss Darcy was quite beautiful. She was petite and elegantly dressed, wearing some of the finest silks Elizabeth had seen in all her life. "Miss Darcy, it is a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Elizabeth," she said in a gentle voice, smiling. "I have heard much about you."

"I hope only good things," she smiled, "Congratulations on your engagement."

Miss Darcy's eyes glanced to Mr. Bingley, who cleared his throat and gestured to some seating near the fireplace. Elizabeth took the cue and stepped to a chaise, where she sat slowly and brushed wrinkles from her gown.

Miss Darcy walked to sit across from Mr. Bingley, and she turned to face Elizabeth, smiling at her still.

"First, Miss Elizabeth, I must apologize for leaving you out of our designs here at Netherfield. We most certainly should have included you in the planning, so that you would not be as surprised as you are at the present moment."
"I...admit I am quite without certainty. I do not know what is happening here, nor do I understand what is happening at home. I fear I should write to my family and make my apologies..."

"That would not be necessary," Bingley said, glancing at Georgiana. "Let me tell you first that Miss Darcy and I are not engaged. There is a story behind the deception, but it is simply an arrangement which benefits Miss Darcy and protects her from a gentleman - one who barely deserves the title."

Blood rushed to the cheeks of Miss Darcy where she sat.

"Secondly, I have to admit that I have written a letter to your family, explaining that you are stricken with a fever which prevents you from returning home."

Elizabeth's brow furrowed. "Why would you write such a deceptive letter, Mr. Bingley?"

"I...I have been informed that you are not marrying Mr. Collins for any reason beyond saving your family's estate. Is that correct, Miss Elizabeth? Please let me know if I have made a mistake, but Mr. Darcy..."

"Mr. Darcy is correct," she said softly, "I am not in love with Mr. Collins. My father's death has sent the family into somewhat of a tumultuous situation."

"I am so sorry for your father's death, Miss Elizabeth," Miss Darcy said, "My own father died only a few years ago."

Lizzie looked at her hands. "So, you were...trying to save me from marrying Mr. Collins? I do not see how this would help avoid my family being removed from their estate, Mr. Bingley."

"The second part of that is being handled by Mr. Darcy, who has gone to Kent." He leaned forward slightly and looked Elizabeth in the eye. "He is gone to make arrangements with his Aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourge."

Lizzie's eyes darted between Mr. Bingley and Miss Darcy. She thought about the situation for a moment and took a deep breath. "What can I do to help?"

Mr. Bingley's features spread into a smile, "I may have requests of you, Miss Elizabeth. I beg your patience, and I hope you will enjoy your time here at Netherfield whilst we wait out your supposed illness."

Elizabeth laughed softly, blushing as she was joined by Miss Darcy.
The marble steps of Rosings' front entrance were flawlessly polished. Darcy felt a stab of guilt that his muddied boots left tracks upon them, to be cleaned by a servant, no doubt.

A butler opened one of the large doors, his wig slightly askew and the buttons on his jacket improperly fastened. "Mr. Darcy," he bowed slightly.

"Good evening. Do not trouble yourself, I may find my way on my own. Pray, where is my Aunt?"

Directed to Lady Catherine's private study, Mr. Darcy entered the room without ceremony. Lady Catherine looked up from her newspaper, quite surprised.

"Darcy! It is nearly midnight. What brings you here in all this state?"

He bowed slightly. "Forgive me," his boots were muffled by the fine carpets under foot. "I bring news from Hertfordshire."

The woman folded the paper and set it neatly aside. "Of Collins' marriage to Miss Elizabeth Bennet? I know it is to have taken place today."

"Quite the opposite, madam. Miss Bennet has taken ill. She was unable to withstand the ceremony," he rested his hands upon the back of a large chaise. "I have heard Mr. Collins was quite put out by the matter. He was forceful in his demands of an explanation for her leave of the church."

"And why should he not be?" Her voice raised slightly and she gripped the arm rests of her chair. "How abominably inappropriate, for her to behave in such a way," she pursed her lips.

"It is widely known that she is a most headstrong young woman," he said, offhandedly. "However, I am not entirely sure she may be blamed for her illness."

Being corrected threw his Aunt into a huff. "Well of course she can! She should have paid better attention to her health! She should have seen a physician, was she feeling poorly. I have seen her walking all over whilst she visited Rosings. All of that exercise cannot be beneficial, for sure. I encourage Anne to get as little of the outdoors as possible, should she catch her death out there."

"Perhaps you are right," Darcy took in a deep breath, "And as for her attitude, it is my sincerest hope that her strong-willed tendencies do not transfer to her husband once they are married. Mr. Collins would be quite another person altogether."

It was obvious to Darcy that Lady Catherine thought hard about this statement.

He continued, "Miss Caroline Bingley and I considered at one time quitting our connections with the Bennet family altogether." He clasped his hands behind his back and turned toward the fireplace. "She said, 'Who would want to be associated with a penniless widow and her overbearing daughters?'"

"Yes," Lady Catherine's tone was slow and thoughtful, "I now wonder about Collins marrying the girl at all."

"Mr. Collins must, even now, face some shame at having the entail of the estate where they live. He cannot escape the association whilst he owns Longbourne."
The older woman's jaw set determinedly. "Bring me my writing desk, Fitzwilliam. This moment."

"Miss Elizabeth, will you come and play a duet with me?" Georgiana Darcy had been toying with the piano for a while, as Elizabeth read.

The young lady looked up and laughed. "And what makes you so sure I can play, Miss Darcy?"

"My brother says so! He heard you tell my Aunt you played when you were visiting Rosings," the girl grinned, "Please, Miss Elizabeth."

Standing, Lizzy marked her book and moved towards the piano forte. "I believe you must excuse the fact that my playing is hardly at the caliber of yours."

"Then perhaps I shall be able to help you improve," Georgiana made room on the piano bench for Elizabeth.

"If you can improve my techniques, you will be the most excellent teacher I ever saw." She sat as Mr. Bingley entered the room, followed by a servant with a tray for tea.

"A treat!" Bingley clapped his hands together. "A duet by two fine young ladies. I am exceedingly fond of duets." He seated himself.

"We will do our very best to please you, Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth laughed.

The two began playing, keeping the volume soft enough to allow for conversation.

"I suspect Darcy will return this afternoon," Bingley commented. "I am sure the two of you have grown tired of my company. Mr. Darcy is always in good humor these days, and I think you should be ready to have new conversation." His eyes moved to Elizabeth.

She avoided the gaze. "What sort of business did Mr. Darcy conduct last evening, Mr. Bingley? How can Lady Catherine do anything to assist my situation? And why would she?" Lizzy asked.

Miss Darcy corrected one of Elizabeth's fingerings with a gentle tap. "My Aunt is rather dependent upon the curate of her parish."

Mr. Bingley gave an impish sort of smirk, a look Elizabeth had rarely seen on the gentleman. "Darcy's powers of persuasion can be... quite influential, Miss Elizabeth. Even upon his dear Aunt."

"I know that to be so, Mr. Bingley, for I believe that once, you were so persuaded by him as to quit Netherfield for a time." Lizzy eyed him between glances at the sheet music.

A blush rose to Bingley's visage. He cleared his throat, "Upon greater reflection, Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy found his attitude to be inappropriate."

Elizabeth pressed an incorrect key and the ladies laughed together.

"My return to Netherfield is at the urging of my friend, this time."

"Yes," said Georgiana, "For the both of them, I fear, had left their hearts in Hertfordshire."

One side of the duet ceased. Elizabeth looked at Mr. Bingley. "My sister?"

She knew the question to be imprudent, for who was she to question a young man's regard. The
color upon Mr. Bingley's cheeks spread across the bridge of his nose and reddened further.

"When you are supposedly healed," he said softly, "I hope it will be within my power to beg for Miss Bennet's forgiveness."

Her heart swelled for Jane, who had been so forlorn since hearing of the party's removal from Netherfield. To have her sister with Mr. Bingley! It would be the greatest joy in the world.

"And my brother," Georgiana sighed as she played, smiling dreamily, "Will hopefully make similar apologies. I do so hope to have my dear sister-in-law by Michaelmas."

It was Elizabeth's turn to flush with embarrassment.
"Oh Jane, it is unfortunate that Mr. Bingley should return to Netherfield, but as a man engaged. And to Miss Darcy! Well, I should say," Mrs. Bennet sipped her tea, "that if she is anything like her abominable brother, he will get what he deserves."

"Mama," Jane said softly, holding back her feelings of sincere disappointment. "I am sure that Mr. Bingley chooses to marry Miss Darcy because he loves her. And for such a man to love her, she can hardly be disagreeable."

Mrs. Bennet shook her head, "I cannot see why you still should think so favorably of Mr. Bingley, after the way he treated you."

"We had no understanding." Jane looked back to her embroidery.

"Well, it is my comfort that you are so beautiful that any other rich men, God-willing, who come into the county will not waste any time in -"

Mrs. Bennet was interrupted by Mr. Collins. He entered the room quickly, out of breath. "Mrs. Bennet, it is upon this day that I have received a most alarming letter from my esteemed patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"Pray tell, Mr. Collins, is Lady Catherine well?" The matriarch was disturbed by the intrusion, but Mr. Collins' animation had piqued her interest.

"That is the most troubling part of the correspondence," he nearly sat in a chair but seemed to change his mind. "Lady Catherine is adamant that I return to Hunsford immediately. News of Miss Elizabeth's illness reached her late last night. She has decided that Miss Elizabeth's irresponsibility in her own health and imprudent behavior in the church makes her unsuitable as a wife for a man of my position."

Mrs. Bennet's eyes widened in horror. "But Mr. Collins!"

"I cannot bear to hear of it, Mrs. Bennet. A carriage comes for me almost this moment so that I may take my leave. It is best for my position as a clergy and for the sake of dear Lady Catherine that I discontinue my association with your family."

"Mr. Collins, I am sure she does not mean for you to slight our Lizzie over a trifling fever! Pray write to her, for I am sure she has not heard it as it occurred!"

Jane thought Mrs. Bennet might burst into tears right there in front of Mr. Collins. She went to her mother.

"Mrs. Bennet, when a man such as myself is condescended upon by a lady such as Lady Catherine to be her clergy, it becomes a man and his relations to pay the utmost respect, and to honor every one of her wishes! Your accusations of her understanding are falling upon deaf ears, and I will take them as no more than a confirmation of her opinion of this family!"

With her hands upon her mother's shoulders, Jane stared at Mr. Collins as he left the house, dragging his trunk behind him. A cart had just stopped in the gravel drive.

"Make haste! It is already far too late for my departure! My Patroness will not stand for such a thing!" He spoke to the driver, most forcefully.
Mrs. Bennet collapsed into her chair, weeping. "Poor Lizzie! She will now not be married! And I am sure that Mr. Collins will turn us out tomorrow! Oh where should we go?"

Sitting aside her mother, Jane could do little more than wish Lizzie were there with her.

Mr. Darcy returned in the late afternoon. Two days of horseback journey to Kent and back had worn on the man. He entered the foyer, untying his cravat.

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth spoke from a doorway. She had heard the horse as it approached. She gave a slight curtsey.

Darcy stopped and looked at her. He bowed. "Miss Elizabeth," he said quietly, his heart racing even upon the sight of her. "I hope you are well."

She laughed lightly, "I believe you are one of the few in Hertfordshire who know me to be so."

His expression remained stoically exhausted as he looked around, grasping for a subject. He could not yet say to her what he truly felt.

"I know you are tired after your journey. I will not keep you," she stepped a little closer. "It was simply my wish to thank you. For bringing me here. For what I suspect you have done for Jane, and what I know you have done for me."

He thought for a moment. "It may not be much longer, now. I hope my efforts have been to as much affect as I intended."

Although she was still not sure of the particulars, she believed he had saved her. "Will...may I see you here tomorrow, Mr. Darcy? Do you intend to remain a guest here at Netherfield for long?"

"I believe so. My business affairs and other efforts may keep me here for some weeks yet."

She grinned, "Then tomorrow." With another curtsey, she turned to leave him to rest.

It had been many nights, since first meeting Miss Elizabeth Bennet, that Darcy had been unable to sleep with ease. He knew it to be very late indeed, yet he paced the floor of the bedroom. He had set the plans in motion to be in danger of losing - what? The respect of an exceedingly proud and disagreeable Aunt? He could see little to no loss.

No, Darcy was as ready as any man to settle down and begin a family of his own. He had resolved to break the cycle of intermarrying to reserve the sanctity of a family's wealth. The resolve was, of course, aided by falling in love with a young woman who possessed a much lower status in life. She may be the daughter of a Gentleman, but her lack of fortune was a reminder of her unsuitable place in society. He looked at the door, taking in a deep breath.

The day in the forest stuck most in Darcy's mind. Just having her there, alone, all to himself. He walked to the Southernmost wall of the bedroom, stopping against the pale blue-painted plaster. Raising a hand, he touched the wall, his heart beating loudly in his chest. He could imagine Elizabeth just on the other side, sleeping like an angel.

Closing his eyes, Darcy took in a deep breath and leaned his forehead against the wall, smiling softly to himself. He imagined a beautiful life with Miss Elizabeth. Excitement grew within him, a hope in which he had never before dared to venture.

As he had said, it was only a matter of time before the chain of anticipated events could begin to fall into line. And the end result would be his greatest wish in the world.
Chapter 14

Footsteps on the gravel walk piqued Lydia's interest.

"Someone's come to call," she said, standing from the table where she had been pulling an ugly bonnet to pieces.

Jane barely looked up from her sewing, "Who is it?"

Kitty stood and joined Lydia at the window, where the two girls giggled conspiratorially. "You will never guess," the younger teased.

The oldest Miss Bennet held back a sigh. "I should think not. Pray tell me?"

Mary, who had taken station at another window in the drawing room, spoiled the girls' fun. "Mr. Bingley, Jane. I believe he must have come to see you."

Any prior disappointment Jane had felt about Mr. Bingley was tucked aside. "Let us hope he brings news of Lizzie."

She stood and brushed creases from her skirts.

Hill entered, introducing Mr. Bingley. He entered slowly, his pale blue eyes scanning the room before coming to rest upon Jane. The girls curtseyed in reply to Bingley's bow.

"G-good afternoon, Miss Bennet, Miss Mary, Miss Lydia and Miss Kitty," he said with some nervousness. Kitty made a face about not being preserved in her position as elder than Lydia. "How are you all today?"

"We are well, Mr. Bingley," Jane smiled cordially, "Will you sit? May I have Hill bring you some tea?" The younger three moved back to their seats.

"No, no tea, thank you." He sat across from Jane. "Is Mrs. Bennet at home?"

"Yes, but I am afraid she keeps to her rooms above stairs. She is quite disappointed, I believe, in our sister's broken engagement."

He nodded, very slightly. "Ah, yes. I was…just informed of it in town."

Lydia huffed. "You'd think us all lepers, the way people talk of it. Mr. Collins has barely been away from the house, and all of Meryton knows."

"Lydia," Jane warned. She cleared her throat. "Do…do you bring news of Lizzie, Mr. Bingley? Or do you have business with Mama? I can call for Hill to try and fetch her."

"Please," he said, holding up a hand in protest, "Please do not trouble her. I was hoping you would enjoy a walk, Miss Bennet. And your sisters, of course. It is very fine out."

Jane's heart sank a very little. "I thank you. I would like a walk, very much. Mary, Kitty, Lydia?"

Lydia stood, "Kitty and I will bowl, won't we?" Kitty nodded emphatically.

Jane bowed her head slightly, then looked back up at Bingley. "Very well. Shall we?"
Mr. Bingley offered his hand to assist Miss Bennet as she stood.

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Kitty giggled as Jane and Bingley walked in silence for a long few steps.

"Your sister Miss Elizabeth is showing signs of improvement, Doctor Palmer says," Bingley offered at last. His voice seemed weaker than before. Jane was perplexed by his seemingly disappointed manner, but she could not contain her joy at hearing of her sister's condition.

"Oh! That is good news! Mama will at least be happy with that, if nothing else."

Bingley cleared his throat and took a deep breath, steadying his nerves. Before he could speak, Jane seemed to anticipate him.

"And…how is Miss Darcy?"

His cheeks colored and he stopped very near the tree swing. "Miss Bennet, may I ask you to sit?" He folded his hands behind him. "I have a…story to tell you."

Jane's brow wrinkled with concern as she looked from Bingley to the swing, then carefully seated herself upon it.

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The breakfast room at Netherfield was quiet. Elizabeth enjoyed solitude, but so much silence was wearing upon her. She lifted her teacup to her lips and took a sip of her now too-cool tea.

"I hope I am not disturbing you, Miss Elizabeth."

Her heart leapt in her chest and she put down the teacup before she could drop it. "I daresay you nearly shocked me to death, Mr. Darcy!" She followed the scold with a laugh of embarrassment.

"Forgive me," he bowed slightly and stepped into the room. He walked towards the buffet, where the Netherfield cooks had created a fine early meal.

"Won't you join me?" she asked.

Darcy's emerald-tinted eyes set upon her and he sat. "The breakfast is not for me, today. But I would be glad to have conversation."

A maid entered the room and removed Lizzie's plate. Miss Bennet watched the girl leave before turning to Darcy again.

"I believe I cannot thank you enough," she smiled softly. "I received a letter from Mr. Collins this morning. He communicated, in a way very distinct to him, that he no longer wishes to see me as his betrothed. As much as it pains my mother, I am sure," she took in a breath, "I believe myself to be much saved. Again, by you."

"Miss Bennet," he spoke tentatively, "You have no need to thank me."

"Do not be so modest, Mr. Darcy," she laughed.

"I would do anything for you."

His quiet declaration gave Lizzy pause. She blushed and took a moment to gather her wits before
speaking again. "I only hope, Mr. Darcy, that I may repay you someday."

Darcy went quiet for a long minute, but his eyes never left hers. "Can we begin with a turn about the grounds?"

Elizabeth could not stop her grin. "Yes, please! I feel so confined, as if I have done something wrong."

This time, Mr. Darcy smiled. It looked so well on him, his features brightened with amusement. And something else. "Then I should be glad to release the prisoner."

Jane stared at Bingley in disbelief. She looked down at her hands, clearly confused as to the character of all parties involved. Once she looked up again, she cleared her throat and spoke softly. "Then Lizzie…she is not ill at all?"

Bingley nodded in affirmation. He breathed in deep. "I hope you know, Miss Bennet, that I will never again be false to you. Mr. Darcy and I came up with this plan after we heard of your engagement. We had just returned from London. Had it not been for the sanctity of the plan, we would have informed you much earlier."

"Why did you return?" her brow furrowed slightly. "I hear in town that you took up the house again not a fortnight after you left."

Shaking his head, Bingley sighed. "I saw my sister's true colors. She nearly exploded with anger when I shared plans to propose to you—" He stopped himself and blushed deeply.

Jane's own cheeks reddened. She felt suddenly hot. "But now, you are supposed to be engaged to Miss Darcy."

Slowly, Bingley knelt down in front of her. They were obstructed from Lydia and Kitty by a large hedgerow. "Miss Bennet," he whispered, "I have no actual understanding with Miss Darcy. We are simply friends."

Jane's eyes watered slightly, "Yes, you told me that."

Reaching up, Bingley took Jane's hand carefully. He held it in his. Her skin was so soft, so warm. "Then I hope that my belated request will be received by you." His blue eyes searched hers for a long moment.

Jane felt a lump in her throat. She had to remind herself to continue to breathe. What was happening? Could this all be true, or was it simply a dream?

"Miss Bennet, would you do me the honor of becoming my secret fiancée? Once everything has cleared, we can announce it. I just…I wanted to make sure I could talk you mine."

A soft sob escaped Jane's lips. She placed her free hand to them as tears fell from her eyes. She nodded slowly. "Yes, Mr. Bingley. Yes."
Chapter 15

The early sun was drying the dew from the gardens at Netherfield Park. While servants cleaned and packed Elizabeth's things, she had found herself touring the grounds of the vast estate with Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy was, without a doubt, a most interesting course in Elizabeth's favorite pastime: the study of human folly. She had learned the practice from her dear father, and her interest in the subject had dimmed somewhat since his death. As her heart healed, however, Elizabeth found Mr. Darcy's character to be much changed from that which she had first observed.

His semblance of pride was no to be viewed as reserve, and his curt manner of speaking was now obviously bred from an inability to practice. Most everyone in Mr. Darcy's company spent a great deal of their time chattering away about the state of the roads, the weather, or the lace on a young lady's gown. The atmosphere hardly left room for Mr. Darcy to speak his most guarded opinion. He once claimed his good opinion to be lost forever, should one encounter the poor fortune of losing it, but Lizzie could sense a change in his sentiments.

They walked closely, Elizabeth adjusting the shawl around her arms before she allowed her hands to hang slightly lower. There was the faintest, feather-weight of a touch between them. For all her might, Lizzie could not bring herself to recoil from the barely-there graze of his hand against hers. The phantom sensation seemed to straighten Mr. Darcy's impeccable posture as he walked, but he made no effort to rectify the situation either.

"I have no seen Mr. Bingley this morning," she spoke, looking up from the gravel walk beneath their feet. Her eyes focused up to his face. His jaw was set, eyes forward as if keenly focused upon the horizon.

"He has ridden ahead of you to Longbourne," Darcy replied, without looking down at her. This surprised Elizabeth. Blinking, she raised her eyebrows.

"Has he? Is my family so well without me that he must present the grievous news before I return?" she smirked.

This caused Mr. Darcy to smile. "I believe not, but I could not tell you of his motives." Finally, his pale green eyes shifted down to her. "I rather believed he would have wished to accompany you on your journey back."

She returned the smile warmly. "And you, Mr. Darcy?" She shrugged her shawl a little higher upon her arms. "When should you leave Netherfield? I should hope you would stay some while." A blush crept into her cheeks as she imparted such a bold request.

"I think not," he state, returning his gaze to the horizon, "I am long expected at Pemberley by my staff. My sister and I should return this very afternoon."

The reply was not favorable, but what could she have expected? Mr. Darcy had done Elizabeth an incredible kindness in saving her from a miserable prospect. She could not fathom to ask more from the man, could she? The morning among the trees seemed ages ago, now.

*I do love nothing in the world so much as you.*

Pausing in her step, Elizabeth took a deep breath and looked up at Mr. Darcy. He slowed to a stop, turning back to her.
"Miss Elizabeth?"

"Did you mean it?"

"I beg your pardon?" His eyebrow rose.

"What you told me. On my wedding day."

Darcy's posture shifted as he moved his weight from one foot to the other. He remained silent, watching her.

"I am sorry to throw propriety to the side, Mr. Darcy, but I believe what happened in the forest should be…discussed."

"Brother?" A soft, feminine voice called.

There seemed to be a battle raging behind Darcy's eyes. He cleared his throat after a moment.

"Here, Georgiana." He answered.

Elizabeth silently fumed. The anger, as it bubbled inside a calm exterior, turned her cheeks pink. She could not decide, however, whether the anger was with her for raising the subject, or if it was with Mr. Darcy for snagging the opportunity to avoid it.

"Oh," Miss Darcy said quietly, upon seeing the two of them. "Miss Elizabeth, there you are. I was just coming to ask my brother if he had seen you." She approached and curtseyed. The gesture was met.

"Your carriage is ready," she said with a smile, "But before you go, may I ask that you and your eldest sister come to stay at Pemberley in a few weeks? I will, of course, send a formal invitation."

Elizabeth certainly could not ever be upset with such a sweet, steady girl.

"If your brother would have no objection," she said quietly in reply.

Darcy shook his head slightly, remaining silent.

"Then I would be happy to accept the invitation, as well as on behalf of my sister."

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Elizabeth made sure to wave at Mr. Bingley as she passed him on the road. She asked the horseman to stop and leaned slightly out the window of the carriage, expressing her gratitude for the opportunity to stay with him at Netherfield. Mr. Bingley's charming pleasantry were always very welcome to Elizabeth. She smiled and waved again, leaning back into her seat for the remainder of the short journey back to Longbourne.

Such a pleasant fellow he was, she thought to herself, and what a great match he would make for Jane someday. She hoped very much that he was intending to make her an offer, as he had indicated during their stay together.

The carriage approached Longbourne house, where Elizabeth was slightly taken aback to see a high flyer parked outside of the home.

Removing her bonnet, Lizzie stepped in through the front door. A man brushed past her, tipping his hat as he passed. She paused and looked at him, but then was startled by a wail from her mother.
Lifting her skirts, Elizabeth hurried up the stairs. Her sisters were inside her mother's dressing room, where Mrs. Bennet had collapsed. Hill was hurrying in with the smelling salts.

"My Lord, what is it?" Lizzie gasped, moving to her mother's side.

Jane had tears in her eyes. She handed a letter to Lizzie.

Mrs. Bennet,

This letter is to inform you that the entail on your estate has been exercised, and you are to be removed from your home upon the date of Tuesday next. Please be prepared to leave and take your belongings, save for what belongs to the estate, to a place of lodging which will accept you and your daughters.

Sincerely,

Mr. George Brickman, Esquire

She let the letter fall limp in her hands. Even Lydia and Kitty were silent. Mr. Collins was having them removed from the house. It was the event so dreaded by her family since the moment of her father's untimely death. She had nearly saved the family from being turned out, but Mr. Darcy had intercepted her in a moment of unfit behavior. Closing her eyes, Elizabeth breathed deeply.

"This is my fault," she said softly.

"You cannot have expected this," Jane replied, waving a fan at her mother.

Surely Mr. Darcy had not doomed them all, had he? There was no money left behind, except for the girls' dowries. They would have to be spent in finding a house, and even then, the money would not last long. She took a seat upon the bed, holding the letter tightly in her hands, a tear falling upon the page, obscuring the dooming black ink.
"Mama, honestly," Elizabeth sighed, lifting a basket of ribbons into the open hands of her sister Lydia. "Everything will work out. We have been provided a place at Lucas Lodge, and I am quite sure we will find a suitable place to rent as soon as Sir William finds one for us."

"Oh hush! You cannot know these things! We are doomed to be indentured to the Lucases until I am cold in my grave! Oh, your father never would have stood for this!" The older woman sobbed into her handkerchief as Lizzie sighed and turned to Jane for another basket of belongings. She offered her older sister a slight, knowing smile. "At least you are safe, Jane, from this life our mother describes."

Jane blushed a soft pink, averting her eyes. "Only when Mr. Bingley makes good upon his promises."

"That's the last of it, Ma'am," the family's manservant spoke as he placed the final trunk atop the carriage. He climbed down and tipped his hat to the girls. "It has been a pleasure to serve you, Miss Bennet. The whole lot of you." Turning, he cleared his throat. "Mrs. Bennet..." He bowed to the Matriarch as well, but she dismissed him with a shake of her handkerchief.

"Go, go. We are now to live as paupers. Go work for a much richer family!"

"Sister!" Mrs. Phillips approached the gloomy few, carrying a basket of her goods from Meryton. She waved to Mrs. Bennet. "Sister, be relieved!"

The attention of each of the girls was piqued, as well as Mrs. Bennet's. Had Mrs. Phillips come up with a solution to leaving the home the girls had known since infancy?

"Relieved! What could relieve us from our state of absolute poverty?" Mrs. Bennet cried.

Mrs. Phillips paused, but then she gave an impish smile. "Well, I cannot relieve you from that particular burden. However, you should know that you and your daughters are no longer the talk of Meryton! A scandal has arisen that has taken much of the town by surprise!"

"Heavens be praised," the sarcasm in Mrs. Bennet's voice was evident. Lizzie was impressed. She was not sure she had ever seen such attitude from her mother. Turning to Mary, Lydia and Kitty, the second Bennet daughter dismissed them into the house to collect their personal things for the travel to Lucas Lodge.

"Do you recall a Miss Mary King, to whom I introduced you at Lucas Lodge?" Mrs. Phillips helped her sister sit upon a wrought-iron bench near the garden.

Mrs. Bennet nodded and touched her dry cheeks with her handkerchief. "Of course, of course."

"It is said that she has been absolutely taken in by a scoundrel in the regiment! A Mr. Wickham! Apparently, when Mr. Wickham discovered Miss King's extensive inheritance, he whisked her away to Gretna Green!"

Elizabeth was not quite sure whether this news disappointed Mrs. Phillips, as it pertained to a young woman of her acquaintance, or if it excited her to share it.

Mrs. Bennet shook her head and sighed, "Oh now a tale of a fortune hunter is hardly news compared to an entire family being put out of their home. I am sure the news will fade away when the town
hears of Mr. Collins coming in his carriage!"

"Now Sister, you have not heard the lot of it! Be still while I tell you!" Mrs. Phillips seemed to puff out her chest before telling the very best part of the story, "I heard from the butcher that this Mr. Wickham was once a potential suitor to Miss Darcy of Derbyshire. The very one engaged to Mr. Bingley of Netherfield Park."

Jane looked up at Mrs. Phillips, her folding of linens slowing considerably. Elizabeth's eyes instinctively turned to her older sister.

"As he cut a haunch of pork for the house, he told me that in order to keep Miss Darcy safe, Mr. Bingley feigned the engagement. Because he is such very good friends with Mr. Darcy, you know." She nodded, satisfied with her telling.

A long moment passed before Mrs. Bennet spoke, "Are you telling me, Sister, that Mr. Bingley's engagement is false?"

"Yes! Mr. Bingley and Miss Darcy are NOT engaged! Mr. Bingley's cook told the butcher so this very morning!"

Ravenous dogs had never had such a look as Mrs. Bennet at that moment. She turned to her eldest daughter. "Jane. Have you heard this?!"

Jane swallowed hard and nodded. "I, I have heard, Mama."

"Oh thank Heavens! We are saved! We are saved, Jane!" The mother of the Bennet family threw her hands into the air, running towards her eldest daughter.

"You must write to Miss Bingley this very instant and ask to see her! That way, you can make Mr. Bingley fall in love with you once again!"

Elizabeth, although she knew the situation better than Mrs. Phillips had described, laughed at her mother. "Oh Mama, you know it does not work like that!"

"Why should it not? Jane is the handsomest of all of the girls in Hertfordshire! He is bound to fall in love with her once again. Jane, make haste!"

The gravel drive was disturbed in that moment by another visitor, but this one did not seem so friendly as Elizabeth's aunt. A haughty-looking solicitor pulled back on the reins of his horse and dismounted, bringing a roll of parchment to Mrs. Bennet. He cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Bennet, I presume?"

Mrs. Bennet's hand flew to her sister's, which she gripped tightly. She swallowed hard and nodded, looking as she was shaking far too violently to be able to stand.

Elizabeth stepped forward. "My Mama is not well, sir. I am Elizabeth Bennet, Mrs. Bennet's daughter."

The man turned and nodded to her, handing over the parchment. "Miss Bennet. I am from the offices of Snead and Blakely, London. I've come with papers for your mother to sign."

"If you want me to sign over anything, you are to be sorely disappointed, sir! I have lost my home, and there is nothing else I am prepared to lose!" The strong voice was surprising, coming from the trembling woman.
His jaw dropping slightly for a moment, the solicitor looked from Mrs. Bennet back to Elizabeth. "I…I only need someone to sign…"

Elizabeth took the parchment and unrolled it, reading carefully. She glanced up at the man, then back to the papers. "There has to be a mistake, sir."

"No mistake, Miss Bennet," he nodded to the paper. "Deal was closed just yesterday in London, and they've sent it on to be signed."

Jane stepped up alongside her sister, glancing down at the document. "Lizzie, what is it?"

"Yes, girl, tell us!" Mrs. Bennet cried.

"This is the deed to the house. The estate. It…it has been purchased for us," Elizabeth blanched and her words became whispers as she spoke the last sentence. Looking up at Jane, the older girl blinked. "Mr. Bingley?"

Jane's jaw dropped. She shook her head. "It cannot be. He wrote me yesterday, and…"

The proverbial cat was suddenly out of its bag.

"Wrote to you? You have been writing Mr. Bingley? How long have you…?" Mrs. Bennet stood.

The poor, tired solicitor looked at the group of women before him. "Will someone sign, please? I've got to ride back to Bromley, yet."

Elizabeth thrust the parchment at her mother. "Please sign it, Mama."

Mrs. Bennet hurried into the house for a writing instrument, Mrs. Phillips on her tail.

"Mr. Bingley would have told me, Lizzie. He would have said something. We were planning details of the wedding, but he said nothing about buying the house. He would have said something!" Jane was distressed. She patted her apron pocket for her letter to prove her case.

"He must have! Perhaps he wanted it to be a surprise for you, Jane?"

"It weren't a Mr. Bingley, ma'am, who bought the estate," the solicitor spoke, rocking on his heels a bit. He shoved his hand into his pocket. "A Mr. Davey? No, Darcy. Mr. Darcy of Derbyshire. Relation of yours?"

"Of all of the high-handed, presumptuous, deceitful…" Mrs. Bennet stomped into the drawing room, placing down a basket of sewing. She threw her hands into the air. "What kind of a man does this?!"

"Mama, please! We are in a great debt to Mr. Darcy!" Jane sighed and lit a couple of candles in the dim room.

"He could not have sent the attorney days ago, when we still had servants? When we had not packed every single thing we owned!?"

The howlings of her mother were muffled as Elizabeth Bennet walked outside to the front garden. She held a letter in her hands, one she was almost afraid to send. In her haste after learning of the sale of their property to Mr. Darcy, she had scrawled the letter of appreciation. But now, what did it all mean? Why was he so entirely self-kept about his feelings for her?
Thinking about Mr. Darcy infuriated her. Lizzie kicked at the stones in the walkway, shaking her head. Why could he not simply tell her that he loved her? Why did he have to keep it all hidden away like some great secret? Had he not gotten past his contempt for her lower status in life? Surely, the elevation of her sister after her marriage to Mr. Bingley would eliminate some of the ill feelings. He had been so kind to her before, but now this – no notice of the purchase!

Moving around to the back garden, she watched moonlight dance into the sky, pushing the sun to its evening resting-place. The night cooled her angst-warmed skin, and she closed her eyes, sitting upon a bench in her favorite place. How things had changed for Elizabeth. Her entire life had been thrown into a whirling abyss of confusion since her father's death. Even through the escapades with Mr. Collins, a romantic moment of being whisked away by a horsed savior, and a daring charade in which she played the invalid for the sake of avoiding an undesirable marriage…Elizabeth found herself alone.

"I hope I am not disturbing your reverie," a deep voice spoke from before her. Elizabeth's eyes snapped open. The moonlight silhouetted the figure in front of her, but the voice and shape were unmistakable. She watched him for a moment, just breathing.

"Why?"

"You looked so peaceful," he said.

"No. Why did you purchase the estate? How…how did you do it? Mr. Collins…"

He sat next to Lizzie, turning to face her. Now, his handsome features came into view. "I had a talk with my aunt. I explained to her the certain evils of having association with the family, and please do not be insulted," he watched her closely as he spoke, "with the family of the woman who had jilted Mr. Collins."

Taking into stock his request to avoid insult, Elizabeth nodded for him to continue.

"Naturally, any advice which comes down from Lady Catherine will most certainly be taken by Mr. Collins. He hastily issued an eviction notice and sold the property to the highest bidder." He gestured to himself.

"Why?" She asked quietly again, looking up into his eyes.

He paused and watched her. Raising a hand, he tentatively pushed one of her dark brown curls away from her face. "I wanted him out of your life. So…so I may take his place."

Elizabeth's heartbeat pounded inside her chest. Taking in a deep breath, she whispered in return. "Do you, Mr. Darcy, have designs on taking his place? Being my landlord?"

He smirked and shook his head, laughing softly. "No, Elizabeth," he spoke her Christian name with such elegant beauty. "I have designs on becoming your fiancé. And I hope I may have more luck in becoming your husband."

Her lips were dry. She took a moment to wet them. "I have no other horsemen waiting in the wings to rescue me."

He nodded and smirked again, leaning in a little more closely, whispering in return, "Good. Very good." Leaning in, his lips connected once again with hers. This time, Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kiss, with no intention of ever letting go.
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