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**By Its Cover**

by ArtemisRayne

Summary

Aspiring author Elijah Bennet's entire world is turned upside down when he meets publishing house owner William Darcy. Despite being part of two completely different social classes, William finds himself drawn to the spirited writer - leaving him questioning his convictions and priorities. But when a misunderstanding leaves them on opposite sides, gender is the least of their problems. Can these two men overcome everyone's expectations, and their own prides and prejudices, for the sake of love?

A modern Pride and Prejudice with a big twist.

(Currently undergoing mass edits, will repost as new chapters become available.)

Notes

Taking a wild risk here but I wanted to try something that hasn't been done (or if it has, I just haven't seen it in my scouring of the P&P fandom.) Let me know what you think.

I've got the Pinterest board updated so if you're curious about the actors/actresses that I feel best embody the characters as I've written them, feel free to check out the board:
It is a truth universally acknowledged that there is no call an aspiring writer looks forward to and dreads in equal measure so much as a call from their agent.

The synthesized chords of an 80's pop song emanating from his cell phone made Elijah Bennet jump like he'd been electrocuted. "Excuse me," he said to his family, standing up and scurrying out of the dining room. Elijah could hear his mother complaining about his lack of manners, but he ignored her as he slipped into the living room. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he caught a split-second view of his agent's name flashing on the screen before he jabbed the green button and lifted the cell to his ear.

"Hey, Char," he said, a bit breathlessly.

"Oh, Eli, I'm glad I caught you," Charlotte Lucas responded cheerfully. Elijah's heart leaped into his throat in anticipation. "Alright, well I've got good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"

"Let's get the bad over with," said Elijah.

"Right," said Charlotte. "Well, we got another letter." The smile slid from Elijah's face, and he dropped down to sit on the sofa. "I'm sorry, babe, I really thought we had it this time, but they said they're not taking anything in our genre right now. But it's okay, we've still got plenty of options. Which brings me to the good news. I've got us a great marketing opportunity."

"This isn't another stuffy tea party, is it?" Elijah asked trepidatiously. The last time Charlotte had tried to market him to publishers, he'd had to sit through eight hours of weak tea, silent auctions, and interpretive dance. In the end, all of that tedium hadn't even paid off, either.

"Far from it," she said with a laugh. "Netherfield Corp is hosting another one of their fancy fundraisers for literacy, and I managed to snag us some invites. They said to bring my best new project, and that's you. There'll be tons of people from publishing there, lots of chances to make contacts and rub elbows. It's black tie, and you get to bring a plus-one."

"When is it?" he asked.

"Friday," said Charlotte. Elijah made an impatient noise. "I know it's short notice, but it wasn't easy scoring these invites. It's not like we're the biggest agency out there, and you don't even want to know what I had to sacrifice to get Henry to give them to me instead of one of the other agents. Besides, I know you, it's not like you've got other plans. So dust off your best suit if you wanna be the next bestselling author. I know you've got what it takes, the book is brilliant; we just need to find you the right publisher. Okay?"
"Okay, Friday," he agreed.

"That's my boy," said Charlotte. "I'll text you the details, and I'll see you Friday. Love you!" With that, she hung up. Elijah sighed and leaned back into the sofa, letting his phone slip out of his hand.

It had been like that for the last eight months, ever since his manuscript had been picked up by the Meryton Literary Agency. Char was trying her hardest, but it seemed like the majority of the publishing world just wasn't looking to take a risk on a new author or his heartrending coming-of-age novel. Over the last few months, they had collected a stack of rejection letters that just kept growing. Elijah was trying to stay positive, but it wasn't easy when people kept telling him that the manuscript he'd poured four years of his life into just wasn't good enough.

Bracing himself, Elijah stood and walked back into the dining room of his childhood home. Immediately, six pairs of eyes flicked up to him, and he would have balked at the staring if it hadn't been an entirely too familiar sensation. "That wasn't very polite, Elijah," Mrs. Bennet chided, unsurprisingly. Sunday family dinners were something sacred in the Bennet household, a tradition established when the two oldest had officially moved out a few years prior.

"Sorry, had to take that," he said, reclaiming his seat at the table between his father and older sister, Jane.

"Charlotte?" asked Jane, already knowing the answer.

"Any news about your book?" Mr. Bennet asked curiously.

"Nothing good," Elijah said and picked up his discarded fork. He knew what was coming and he wasn't particularly in the mood to deal with it.

As expected, Mrs. Bennet tutted loudly from the other end of the table. "Now really, honey, you ought to look into a more profitable career," she said. "Something where you can afford to support a family. You can't keep working at that library forever. You know, your father's cousin - second cousin? - Anyway, I think he just started an advertising company, that's like writing. You could do that."

"I'm not giving up on my book, Mom," said Elijah, defenses immediately going up. Of the entire family, Mrs. Bennet was the one that Elijah was least like in personality, and it reflected in their tenuous relationship. Susan Bennet, born in Seoul as Soobin Rhee, had made it her life's ambition to raise her children to fit the all-American ideal. It never ceased to anguish her that her oldest son had turned out to be not only wholly uninterested in athletics, but was also a remarkably average student.

To say that Mrs. Bennet was disappointed would be an understatement.

"Besides," Elijah continued, "next weekend could be a big break for me. Char got me into one of those charity events run by Netherfield, it's a big fundraiser for literacy. There's going to be tons of publishers there. Char thinks we can make some good contacts, maybe even get someone interested in a contract."

Mr. Bennet opened his mouth, but Mrs. Bennet beat him to it, cooing loudly. "Ooh, maybe you will meet a nice girl there. You do clean up rather nicely, Elijah, although you could really use a haircut. Jane, would you make sure your brother cuts his hair before the party? He'll never land a girl if he looks all shaggy." Elijah frowned, combing a hand back through his hair self-consciously; he had caved to Jane's suggestion and tried something newer, a style far longer on top and shaved on the sides. Despite his reservations, he actually liked it.
"My hair was far longer when I was his age, and you still married me," Mr. Bennet pointed out with a smirk, indulging in his favorite hobby: riling up his wife.

"Those were different times," Mrs. Bennet said, waving his comment away with a hand. "You've seen the way the men look now, all those actors, they're all clean-cut now."

"Not all of them," Mr. Bennet said. "What about that guy from that house show you like? He's got almost the same hair as Eli."

Mrs. Bennet huffed. "Well he's in construction, he can get away with looking like that," she said, tossing in an exaggerated eye roll for effect. "All I'm saying is that no one will ever take him seriously wearing his hair like some teenager. You must agree there."

"It's a different world, Sue. I think he looks fine," Mr. Bennet said with a shrug. When Mrs. Bennet made another impatient noise, Mr. Bennet glanced sideways at Elijah and winked. Elijah hid his smile behind his wine glass. For all the relationship he lacked with his mother, he more than made up for with his father, even if he could never understand how his parents tolerated each other.

The marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet was dysfunctional, at best. They were the epitome of high school sweethearts and married immediately after graduation, claiming true love. In all honesty, Elijah wondered if it hadn't had more to do with the fact that Mr. Bennet had a promising finance career in his family's business lined up for him after graduation. Things had been fine for a while, until after the birth of the twins, Mark and Kitty. Then the economy had collapsed, and the Bennet family business - and financial stability - went with it.

"So, Elijah," Mrs. Bennet started in her patented prying voice, and he knew he wasn't going to like the conversation that followed. "A Netherfield party? Isn't that the big company that runs all of those fancy fundraisers for the arts?"

"Yes, Mom," he said, knowing full well that she already knew that. Mrs. Bennet was well versed in every form of gossip, but most notably when New York's highest social circles were concerned.

"Oh, how exciting," she said, practically puffing up with eagerness. "You're not taking that redhead you were seeing, are you?"

"I'm not seeing Charlotte," said Elijah. "She's my agent, remember?"

"Oh, good, she's so very plain," said Mrs. Bennet. "Nice hair, but such an ordinary face. And all those freckles."

"She's also my best friend," he reminded her tersely. "And I think she's pretty."

"Well sure, in a way, I suppose," Mrs. Bennet said dismissively. "But she's not pretty like our dear Jane."

"No one's pretty like Jane," Elijah conceded. Next to him, his elder sister blushed modestly.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Bennet, her favoritism showing through. In her eyes, the eldest Bennet could do no wrong. It was impossible to dislike Jane, though; not only was she an exquisite beauty - tall and willowy, with porcelain skin and big, dark eyes - but she also had the sweetest personality.

"You really can do much better than that redhead, though," said Mrs. Bennet. The one piece of her heritage that she had retained post-immigration was an over-involvement in her children's love lives, and it was her favorite pastime. "You're such a handsome boy, Elijah, if you'd just trim that
hair. You never know who you could meet at a party by Netherfield. So many wealthy women. Pretty ones, from good families."

Elijah fidgeted uncomfortably, the truth clawing against the inside of his chest like it often did in these situations. All his mother wanted was for him to find a wife and settle down, but that wasn't part of Elijah's plan. There was that one little flaw where he wasn't interested in a wife. Or girlfriend. Or anyone of the female persuasion, actually. He couldn't tell her that, though, because he knew his conservative, old-fashioned mother wouldn't take well to finding out that her oldest son was gay.

"And you're really at that age where you should settle down and start a family," Mrs. Bennet continued, utterly oblivious to her son's discomfort.

"I'm twenty-seven," said Elijah, grateful for even the slight change of subject.

"I had the twins when I was your age," Mrs. Bennet said pointedly.

Elijah bristled, but he was stopped from saying anything by Jane setting a reassuring hand on his forearm. "Yes, Mother, but not all of us were lucky enough to meet our true love so young," Jane said.

"I have," youngest child Lydia chimed in from the other side of the table, where she was sitting in between the twins. Elijah bit back a snort of derision; Lydia was convinced she found her true love every other week. Perpetual party girl and social butterfly, Lydia went through boyfriends more often than most people changed their socks, thinking each of them was The One. None of her so-called 'true loves' lasted more than a month.

"Oh, that Jordan is a lovely boy," Mrs. Bennet said fondly before turning on her son again. "Whatever happened to that blonde you were seeing? The short one with the glasses? Are you going to take her with you to the party?"

Elijah thought guiltily of the girl from work he had let his mother believe he'd dated just to get her off his back for a while. "No, we aren't together anymore," he said. "We decided it wasn't a good idea since we work together. Actually, I thought Janey could be my date."

"Really?" Jane asked eagerly. "To a Netherfield ball?"

"Oh, how lovely!" Mrs. Bennet cheered and actually clapped her hands together in excitement. "You're so beautiful, Jane, I'm sure all the men will want to dance with you. Maybe you can meet some rich man who will marry you so you can stop working at that awful center."

"I love my job," said Jane. She worked as an art teacher and counselor at the local Boys and Girls Club, teaching painting to inner city kids. It was the sort of job she was perfectly suited for; her patient and caring personality made even the toughest, most troubled kids soften to her eventually. "Those kids just need someone to believe in them."

"I just think you could've been so much more," Mrs. Bennet said indifferently. "A beautiful face like yours, you really should have been a model or an actress. Or you could've been a dancer if you'd just kept with those lessons."

"I broke my ankle," Jane reminded her patiently.

"Ooh, you should wear that silver dress," said Mrs. Bennet, changing tracks without regard for what Jane was saying. As she launched into talking fashion with Jane, Elijah returned to his now tepid dinner and enjoyed being off the radar for a few minutes. He used the time to observe his family.
Across from him, Mark was scrolling through something on his phone beneath the table as he took carefully measured forkfuls of food. Quiet and reserved - and a little bit socially awkward - Mark was the analytical one of the family. He, at least, had met Mrs. Bennet hopes for an academic. In the rest of his life, though, the middle child was the epitome of mediocre; everything that he did, he did halfway.

The same could not be said for his twin sister Katherine, Kitty for short. A perpetual follower, Kitty always did exactly what everyone else was doing, although, to her credit, she did it all with full dedication. Her favorite person to copy was her younger sister, Lydia, whom she idolized and tailed around like a lost puppy.

At the head of the table, Mr. Bennet glanced at his older son and toasted him slightly with a forkful of au gratin potatoes. Elijah grinned in response. He and Mr. Bennet had always been close. It might've been their mutual love of classic literature, a shared fondness for raising Mrs. Bennet's blood pressure, or maybe it was just because they were both men in a mainly female household. All Elijah knew was that he was Mr. Bennet's favorite - something the family patriarch was not afraid to tell anyone who asked.

"Your mom'll kill me for saying it," Mr. Bennet stated in a whisper, "but don't worry about meeting your one true love at the party, yeah? Focus on you and your book and have fun. Everything else will come when it's meant to."

"Cheers to that," Elijah said and tapped his glass against Mr. Bennet's.

Elijah leaned back in his chair and looked around at his family. They might be crazy, but they were still a family. And really, they weren't that bad.

"Elijah, you never did tell me what happened to that lovely girl you were seeing around Christmas. You made such a cute pair..."

Well, most of the time anyway.
This story has been undergoing massive revisions to make it publication-worthy, so I have deleted most of the original version and will be reposting the new chapters as they become available. Thank you to everyone for their continued support and encouragement.

Elijah stood in front of the wardrobe mirror, surveying his reflection critically. His shirtsleeves were unbuttoned at the cuffs, and a black vest hung open over his shoulders. He glanced back and forth between the ties draped over his hand, debating between the plain black and the dark maroon.

"The black," Jane said from behind. He glanced at her in the mirror, and his jaw dropped. She was wearing a snow-white party dress with a single black ridge of ruffles and a pale ribbon accentuating her narrow waist. Her long hair was hanging loose in soft chocolate curls, and her pouty lips were painted a deep scarlet.

"Damn, girl," Elijah said, turning around to take her in properly. "You clean up nice."

"Thank you," she said, curtsying slightly. She crossed the room, her heels clicking on the old hardwood floor, and took the black tie from him. She looped it around his neck and started tying it with a practiced hand. When she smoothed it down, she stepped back to survey him thoughtfully.

Picking up his charcoal gray suit jacket, he pulled it on and held out his arms. "What do you think?"

"Like James Bond," she said, buttoning up his cuffs for him. Elijah turned back to the mirror and buttoned the vest, tucking in his tie. He looked pretty damn good, if he did say so himself. Spending the extra money to rent a tux was well worth it.

A loud, impatient honk from the street below made them both jump and Elijah glanced at the clock on his bedside table. "That must be Char," he said, realizing that even if they left now, they were still going to be fashionably late. He hastily pulled on his shoes and tucked his wallet and keys into his pockets. Once he'd straightened up, he offered out an arm to Jane. "Milady."

"Why thank you, good sir," Jane said playfully as she threaded her arm through his. They locked up the apartment behind them and headed down the rickety stairs that let out next to the front door of the Longbourne Deli. They were almost immediately swallowed up by the rush of bodies on the New York sidewalk.

A taxi was waiting at the curb, and Charlotte Lucas was waving from the back window. Elijah opened the door and let Jane slide in first before folding himself down into the backseat. "Well well, look at you two," Charlotte said, leaning forward to talk to them both.

"Us? Look at you," said Elijah. His best friend, who had been a strictly jeans and t-shirts girl for as long as he'd known her, was wearing a floor-length dress with a plunging neckline that displayed a modest hint at what even Elijah knew was an enviable bust. "I didn't know you even owned a dress."
"I have a couple stashed away," Charlotte said with a pleased grin.

"So, where exactly is this thing?" Elijah asked curiously as the taxi driver pulled away from the curb and into the constant stream of traffic.

"The Forester Penthouse," Charlotte said and smirked. Elijah's eyes felt like they might fall out of his head as he gaped at his agent in surprise, and Jane gripped his forearm in shock. Elijah had seen Forester's from the outside before, a high-class executive suite for company parties and conferences, but he'd never actually thought he'd set foot in a place like that. He combed his fingers through his hair anxiously, suddenly self-conscious.

"Relax, honey, you look great," said Charlotte, reaching across Jane to still his hands. "You're going to turn all the guy's heads."

Elijah grinned at his best friend and older sister, the first two people he had felt comfortable with coming out to about his sexuality. They had both been unendingly supportive of him, and he didn't know what he would do without them. "I think you mean we will turn all their heads," he insisted.

The rest of the taxi ride was spent complimenting each other's outfits and musing about just who in the publishing world would show up for the soiree. They reached the Manhattan high-rise just as the sun had set and the three of them piled out of the car amid the flash of paparazzi cameras. The buzz died down when the photographers realized that they weren't anyone famous, immediately turning their attention to the sleek black car that pulled up where their taxi had been moments before.

Charlotte led them inside, and when she flashed their invitation to the host at the door, they were let into the elevator. Elijah could feel his nerves climbing in time with the lift as it shot up the shaft, and by the time they reached the penthouse, his palms were sweating slightly. There was a ding, and then the doors glided open.

They stepped out into a beautiful wonderland of glass and lights. The enormous open area was surrounded on near every side by walls of paned glass that provided a full circle view of the New York City skyline. Massive round lights hung at intervals and reflected in the carefully polished hardwood floors. A live band played smooth classical music near the bar. The furniture that was set up in the corners was white, chic, and modern, and large doors led to a full balcony overhanging the street below.

"My God, it's beautiful," Jane breathed, her hands covering her mouth. They clustered together, looking around at all of the fashionable people that were mingling and sipping at flutes of champagne.

"Alright, my lovelies," said Charlotte, turning on her toes to face them both and smiling. "Get your mingle on." With that she stalked off into the crowd, making a beeline for a cluster of women in sleek dresses.

"I'm going to need a drink," Elijah said. "You?"

"Yes, please," Jane said and linked her arm through his. They strode over to the bar, and Elijah ordered them both a glass. He sipped it, the bubbles fizzing pleasantly in his throat.

"I am so far out of my element," Elijah admitted as they stood in a corner and looked around at all of the classy, high-end literary agents and publishers milling in groups. "I'm used to sitting at home writing in my underwear, not all this schmoozing."
"Maybe you should've brought Lydia with you instead," Jane said playfully. "She's great with people."

Elijah laughed and shook his head. "I'd never dream of going out on the town with anyone but my favorite sister," he said, nudging her with his elbow.

"You shouldn't pick favorites," Jane chided, but he could tell she was pleased. They finished their drinks and passed the glasses off to one of the roving waiters. A slow, sweet song started, and Jane tugged on Elijah's hand. "Dance with me?"

"Can I ever say no to you?" Elijah responded. She dragged him out to an open spot on the floor near a few other couples who were revolving to the music. When they were growing up, Mrs. Bennet had insisted that all of her children take dance lessons. Jane was the only one who had stuck with them longer than the required year, but Elijah had always prided himself on how well he'd taken to the ballroom. Jane, despite the ankle she had broken quite severely as a teen, was as graceful and lithe as ever as they waltz around the floor.

The song was grinding towards its finish when someone tapped Elijah on the shoulder. The newcomer was an attractive man just slightly shorter than Elijah, his smooth face and perfectly styled blonde hair giving him the quintessential all-American boy look. His wide green eyes were bright and friendly as he flashed them a warm smile. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if I could have the next dance?" he asked, directing the question at Jane.

Jane seemed surprised, and she glanced questioningly at Elijah. Despite the outer appearance of impassiveness, he could see that there was a light of interest in her eyes. "I'll catch you up later, Janey," Elijah said immediately, smiling. He returned the other man's nod of acknowledgment and then headed back towards the bar. As he ordered another drink, he watched the blonde sweep his sister into an energetic dance when the next song began. The two couldn't seem to look away from each other, talking and smiling as they spiraled around the dancefloor.

As the pair spun away, Elijah realized he wasn't the only one watching them. Leaning against the opposite wall was a couple, both of them with their eyes on Jane and her partner. The first was a blonde woman, with the telltale bone-thinness and overly prepared look of a model. Her lips, painted an almost-neon pink, were pursed as she watched the dancers.

It was her companion that truly captured his attention, though. If ever he had seen a man who embodied sex, it was this man. He wore a pinstriped suit that fitted him perfectly, somehow classy while still displaying the fact that he was built like a god; tall and broad-shouldered, with a slim waist and hips. There was a faint five o'clock shadow along his sharp jawline, and his hair lay in a naturally side-swept style that Elijah could never manage with his pin-straight hair. Most striking of all though were his eyes: a bright, icy blue and piercing.

The man suddenly looked over and, for a split second, their eyes met in a clash of blue on brown. A shock raced through Elijah's system, making his limbs tingle. He looked away hastily, but he could feel heat creeping up the back of his neck, and the room felt infinitely warmer than it had a minute ago. Needing an escape, Elijah pushed through one of the doors and stepped out onto the balcony.

The cool night air felt refreshing after the stifling heat of the inside and Elijah leaned against the metal banister, staring out across the city. From this side of the building, he could see glimpses of the Hudson between buildings, a ribbon of dulled silver reflecting the moonlight in flashes. The persistent hum of cars and shouting and air traffic were a familiar backdrop, and after several minutes of measured breathing, the tension gradually left Elijah's shoulders.

"Here you are." Charlotte appeared at his side, leaning her back against the railing by his elbow.
"I was wondering where you'd run off to. I should've known you'd be a wallflower."

"Just getting some air," said Elijah, straightening up. "Got a bit warm inside."

"It is, a bit," Charlotte agreed. "Course that doesn't seem to be bothering your sister much. Jane's been dancing with the same guy for the last four songs." Elijah glanced through the windows and saw that Jane was still in the arms of Blondie, smiling to rival the sun. "Go figure your sister would land Charles Bingley."

"Wait, the Charles Bingley?" Elijah asked in surprise. "Like, the owner of Netherfield Corp?"

"That's him," said Charlotte.

"What is he doing at a little book function like this?" Elijah asked.

"Apparently, he comes to basically every event his company throws," said Charlotte. "He likes to keep in touch with the people he's helping out. He's supposed to be this crazy nice guy; it's no wonders he and Jane are drawn to each other." She turned sideways, fixing a stare on Elijah. "So, we've found someone for her. Now, how about you?"

Elijah's mind went immediately to a pair of frost-blue eyes, and there was a near-nauseating leap in his stomach. "I thought we were selling my book, not me," he said to cover.

"No one ever said we can't do both," Charlotte said with a shrug, smirking teasingly. "Speaking of... C'mon, there's someone I want to introduce you to."

"Can it wait a sec?" Elijah asked, the champagne suddenly an uncomfortable weight in his core. "Bathroom."

"Hurry up," Charlotte called after him. Elijah waved a hand lazily at her as he slipped back into the event center. He wound his way through the clusters of people until he found the narrow hall that led back to the restrooms. He did his business and washed his hands before slipping back out into the corridor.

He had just reached the head of the hall when a familiar name made him pause. "Her name's Jane Bennet, and I'll tell you, Darce, I think she might be the one," said Charles Bingley from just around the corner. Curious, Elijah hovered in the hall to listen.

"Considering you fall in love every other day," said a rich voice with a slight British accent, "forgive me for not being blown away." Elijah assumed it was Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Of course, he has an accent, Elijah thought, feeling his stomach twist up even more.

"This one's different," Charles insisted. "I mean it, man, she's something special." Elijah smiled at the purely enraptured tone of Bingley's voice. Jane had clearly done a number on him. It wasn't a surprise; everyone fell in love with Jane. "What about you, Darcy? Are you just going to stand here and hold up the wall all night?"

"You know I despise these events," the man called Darcy said dryly. "I'm only here because you wouldn't leave me alone until I agreed to come."

Charles laughed. "You could at least make an attempt not to look like you're in physical pain," he said. "C'mon, have a drink, dance with someone."

"You've found the only woman here worth dancing with," Darcy said dismissively. "Even if she smiles too much."
"God, her smile," Charles said, a bit dreamily. "Well, you could at least talk to someone."

"I talked to Caroline," said Darcy.

"I meant someone you don't already talk to all the time," Charles said, exasperated. "Meet someone new. Do some networking. Or I could introduce you to Jane's brother. He's a writer trying to get published. Maybe you could offer him some tips, publisher to writer. He's the one-"

"Bennet, you said? I know who he is," Darcy interrupted. "His book came across my desk. It was decent enough. I have no advice to help him."

Elijah felt his blood beginning to boil. Decent enough? Decent enough? He had a right mind to turn the corner and show that pompous douchebag just how decent he really was. That book was his heart and soul, the embodiment of years of his life, and that ass had tossed it aside saying it was merely decent enough? Of all the arrogant, condescending...

Turning on his heel, Elijah marched back into the restroom before he did something stupid. He leaned against the sinks, staring down his reflection. His cheeks were flushed, and there was a spark in his eyes as he breathed heavily through his nose, trying to calm himself.

Well, there went any attraction he'd had to Tall, Dark, and Handsome. Darcy. What the hell kind of name was Darcy anyway? Was it his first name or last name? Either way, Elijah was over him. No matter how attractive he was, there was no way he could ever see himself with someone so cold and dismissive. Someone who used his position to crush the dreams of those beneath him.

The door opened and startled Elijah out of his fuming. He half expected to see Darcy walking in, but thankfully it was just an older gentleman who smiled at him vaguely. Elijah returned it and then gave his appearance one last look-over. He was still a bit red in the cheeks and his eyes hadn't lost their fire, but he at least looked passably normal again. Everything else he could blame on the heat.

Charles Bingley and Darcy were mercifully gone when Elijah left the bathrooms and walked back into the event hall. He was halfway to the balconies when Charlotte caught him by the elbow. "There you are," she said. "I thought you'd fallen in. Come on."

She steered him across the room toward a little group clustered in the corner. Elijah was so busy rolling his eyes at her pushiness that he didn't realize he recognized the people until it was too late. Charles Bingley stood in between Jane and the blonde model Elijah had seen before, telling a story with a surplus of animated hand gestures. Facing them, with his hands buried deep in his pockets and a look of bored indifference on his face, was Tall, Dark, and Douchey. Darcy.

Well, shit.
First Impressions

William Darcy was not a fan of the silly charity fundraisers from which his best friend made his living. It wasn't so much that he hated the principle of them - he was never opposed to raising awareness for the arts, and literature in particular - but he did hate having to attend them. Mingling and small talk were not his forte, and he preferred to keep to the company of his close circle of friends, which was mainly limited to Charlie and, by extension, his sister, Caroline.

Tonight, he was especially frustrated at being in attendance. He had carefully planned his stay in New York to accommodate all of the business he needed to take care of at the fledgling New York branch of Pemberley Publishing. Then, out of nowhere, Charlie swept in with his big cow eyes and pouting face, and the next thing he knew, William had cleared his evening of paperwork for a night of socializing with New York's publishing middle-ground.

Charles was lucky he liked him so much.

William flagged down a passing waiter and handed off another emptied glass of champagne. He would credit Charlie this; he didn't skimp on the drinks when he threw a party, even when it was less than the highest class of people in attendance. Already, William had been forced to talk to several low-grade agents and authors who had made a small following through self-publishing online. He had taken temporary refuge with Caroline, but the model was naturally bored stiff by the literary crowd, and her mood left her particularly whiny and petulant.

It had been a welcome relief when Charlie finally emerged from the eyes of the Asian girl he'd been drowning in, even if it had only been to drag Darcy away to meet the girl in question. Caroline was giggling about something with the brunette woman when the men approached.
"Jane," Charlie said, setting a hand on the small of the brunette's back. "This is my best friend, Darcy. And Darce, this is Jane Bennet."

Jane smiled brightly and extended a delicate hand. "Pleasure to meet you," she said.

"Likewise," William replied, shaking the offered hand. The other three immediately launched into a lively conversation and William was left to resume his preferred position of the silent observer.

Jane Bennet seemed friendly enough, albeit in a detached and almost uninterested way. She kept up the conversation with the others, but she lacked the same energetic passion that Charlie naturally exuded. Her participation came across as unerringly polite, but it was hard to detect any sincerity beneath her questions. William felt his suspicions rise immediately; it would hardly be the first time Charles was taken in by a beautiful woman with ulterior motives.

William was drawn back into the conversation by Caroline wrapping her hand around his wrist. "Ugh, Will, we should leave these two lovebirds alone before the cuteness kills us," she teased loudly. Even though it was meant as a joke, the heated look in her eyes made her opinion all too clear. He knew that if he gave even a small indication of agreement, she would be dragging him out to the nearest available club.

Formerly one of the highest paid couture models in New York City, Caroline had reached the weary age of twenty-nine – practically ancient in the world of high fashion – and found her fame was slipping away along with her youth. Her desperation to remain on top led her to do increasingly brash and wild things to stop her name from disappearing from the public mind altogether. Being photographed out on the town with one of Britain's most eligible bachelors would surely buy her a paragraph or two in the gossip rags.
Not that he really believed she only wanted him to be her arm candy *du jour*. She had been none-too-secretive about her attraction to him almost from the moment they met. Unfortunately for her, William was uninterested – and not just in her, but in women as a whole.

It was a carefully guarded secret he had revealed to no one, not even his best friend or his little sister, Gina. He had spent the better part of his life struggling to come to terms with the truth himself. Despite his best efforts, he had never been able to feel content with any of the women he dated, and he refused to allow himself the alternative. The upper-class, conservative society he had been raised in frowned upon anything out of the ordinary. His personal life already attracted far more attention than he was comfortable with by family associations alone; the last thing he wanted was to give them a reason to make it worse. So William dealt with the situation by remaining the perpetual bachelor, married only to his work and wholeheartedly devoted to his sister and his best friend. They served as all the relationships he needed.

Of course, all of the logic and rationale in the world didn't stop his disloyal heart from wanting more. He generally kept his feelings tightly bound, but they occasionally broke free and caught him off guard. Like earlier in the evening, when he'd momentarily locked eyes with someone across the room. William hadn't felt an instantaneous attraction like that since he was a teenager with his first crush. The eye contact had only lasted for a second, but something in those wide, dark eyes left his heart racing.

"Oh, Eli, Char!"

William was drawn out of his thoughts by Jane Bennet's abrupt greeting, and he looked up to see that the couple she was waving at had changed direction to join their group. The man was tall and bore a distinct resemblance to Jane, with a curvy redheaded woman on his arm, but William could focus on nothing but the man's eyes; the exact pair of eyes about which he'd just been thinking.

"Elijah Bennet, pleased to meet you," the newcomer introduced himself, shaking Charlie's proffered hand. William's stomach leaped into his throat when the familiar name connected all of the pieces in his mind.

Just earlier that week, his assistant editor had passed along a manuscript she thought he might be interested in: *Chaos in a Bottle*, by Elijah Bennet. It was a young adult novel, hardly the sort of thing William usually dealt in, but Mrs. Reynolds had insisted, and she had never led him wrong before.

William wound up spending the entire night reading the manuscript straight through in one sitting, spending equal amounts of time laughing aloud and crying. It was a work of pure, artistic genius with more heart and soul in its three-hundred pages than the entirety of the books currently in his publishing queue. He made his living from literature, but it had been a long time since a work had affected him so profoundly.

Now the author stood in front of him, one hand held out expectantly. It took William a second to realize that he was supposed to respond. "Pleasure," he said shortly, shaking Elijah Bennet's hand firmly.

"And this," Elijah continued, smiling at the redhead on his arm, "is my agent, Charlotte Lucas."

William shook her hand with a silent nod of acknowledgment, while his traitorous heart twitched hopefully at the realization that the beautiful woman had not been introduced as his girlfriend.

"Oh yeah, Jane was telling us about you, Elijah," said Charlie, drawing them back into the conversation. "She says you're an author."
Elijah smiled self-consciously, and a soft blush spread up into his ears. "Well, I will be once we find a publisher," he said and shrugged. "It's not the easiest field to break into."

"He's just being modest," the redhead next to him interjected. "His book is brilliant. It's just been difficult to find a publisher willing to take a risk on a first-time author."

William couldn't stop an eyebrow from arching in surprise at learning the manuscript hadn't been picked up yet. Any decent editor who read that manuscript would be stupid to pass up so much raw potential. "I find that if a manuscript is truly exceptional, the history of the author has little effect on the success of the book."

He meant the words to be encouraging, but they were apparently not taken as such, judging by the challenging look Elijah fixed on him. "Then it is a shame not all share your sentiment," he said, overly-pleasant tone still not enough to mask the sharp edge of defensiveness. "Countless authors continue to be published on the credibility of their names alone, despite the fact that their writing no longer manages to achieve the skill that earned their reputations. Then, while the publishers are wrapped up in their pet authors, hundreds of skilled new writers fall by the wayside."

The intensity of Elijah's response surprised him and, under the power of his fierce gaze and satisfied smirk, William couldn't find the words to explain himself. Charlie broke the tense moment by clapping William on the shoulder. "Looks like he's got you there, Darce," he said, chuckling. "So Elijah, as a writer, maybe you can weigh in on an argument Darce and I've been having for years. Where do you stand on poetry?"

William rolled his eyes. "It's hardly an argument, and your asking every person we meet for their opinions won't change mine. Besides, he's an artist; they are a notoriously romantic lot, and poetry is often used in wooing lovers. It is obvious which side he will stand on."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Darcy," said Elijah. When William turned back to him, the writer lifted his chin resolutely. "While you're not wrong in assuming I like poetry, I actually think it's a dangerous tool in romance, at least in the early stages. Poetry is best used for expressing the words that can't be expressed otherwise, the ones that get stuck in your chest that you can't get out. No intelligent person would be wooed by pretty words just because they're pretty. There has to be something more behind them; emotion and real conviction. Without that, poems are just empty words broken up into weird rhythms."

"Well said," Charlie said enthusiastically. "See, Darce, I told you there was more to poetry than just picking up chicks."

Elijah glanced at his red-haired partner, and they seemed to have a short, silent conversation. "Excuse us," the redhead said, smiling pleasantly, "but we should really be moving on. We've got a lot of other acquaintances to make tonight."

"It was nice to meet you all," Elijah added. "Oh, and Mr. Darcy? If you've not read it, I recommend Walt Whitman's Song of Myself. It's an incredible poetry collection with no romantic subplot." Elijah shot him one last smile, the corner of his lips curved up ever so slightly into a mischievous smirk, and then he and his partner turned and walked away.

William's heart hammered in his chest, although he managed to keep any of his feelings from showing on his face. Could fate really be so cruel as to bring such an ideal match into his life, just to remind him of what he couldn't have? Elijah Bennet was every bit as charming, passionate, and intelligent as his writing had led William to believe. He was also modest but confident, unafraid to voice his opinion but without the stereotypical American tendency to demand to be heard. And those eyes…
"You've got that look again." Caroline dragged him back to the present by looping her arm around his, leaning into his side. "What are you thinking about, Will? What a waste this night has been?"

"No, better thoughts than that, I'm afraid," he countered.

"Oh?" Caroline asked, a penciled eyebrow arching high on her forehead. "About?"

William couldn't stop his gaze from momentarily darting off in the direction that Elijah had gone. "I'm considering the benefit that a pair of fine eyes brings to a charming face."

Caroline tittered, and by the way she fluttered her lashes she apparently thought he was talking about her watery hazel eyes. "For a man who hates poetry, you sure talk like a poet sometimes. So, what woman's eyes have got you feeling so romantic?"

"None at all," he said honestly, and his lips sketched a move reminiscent of a smile. He carefully extracted his arm from hers and pulled out his phone. "If you'll excuse me, I need to send an email."

William slipped out onto the balcony, reveling in the feel of the brisk city air against his flushed skin. He took a seat on one of the plush white settees and opened his email browser on his phone. This was crazy, what he was thinking about doing. He didn't have the time or budget for this. Not to mention, there was the risk that he was straying into dangerous territory by mixing business with his, albeit limited, personal life.

Except, what if he was making a bigger mistake by letting this opportunity slip by? Charles had called him out on it the moment the words left his mouth. Decent enough? Damn, that's practically glowing praise from you, Darce. The book was brilliant and William was resolved.

Pulling up his assistant's office email, he typed out a quick message.

Mrs. Reynolds,

First thing Monday, I would like you to contact the agent who submitted that manuscript you gave me. Tell them we are prepared to make an offer.

-WD
Judge of Character

Elijah slept late the next day, enjoying the welcoming comfort of his mattress and bedside fan. There was a dull throbbing in the back of his skull, not strong enough to be painful but definitely making its presence known, reminding him that he'd had a fair share of the expensive champagne the night before. He was comfortably tangled in the sheets, and he wanted nothing more than to stay in the idyllic fantasy world his subconscious had crafted for him. A fantasy world filled with five o'clock shadows and frosty blue eyes.

All at once, Elijah's eyes snapped open, and he groaned at his traitorous brain. He had been so warm and comfortable; the last thing he wanted to be thinking about was William Darcy. All of his undeniable physical attractiveness did nothing to make up for the fact that he was an intolerable, elitist asshole.

Well, there was no way he was getting back to sleep now. Elijah reluctantly dragged himself out of bed, tugging up the sagging waistband of his flannel sleep pants, and wandered out of his bedroom. He could hear music coming from the kitchen, and he wandered down the hall of their tiny flat in search of the source. When he rounded the corner into the combined kitchen and dining room, he stopped short.

Jane was wide awake, already dressed in her yoga clothes with her hair piled up in a high ponytail on the top of her head. She stood at the counter, mixing something in a bowl and singing along with a top forty hit on the radio. Her hips were bouncing in time to the beat, doing an energetic dance as she sang in a bright, lilting soprano.

Elijah smiled as he leaned against the door frame, folding his arms over his chest. "Someone's in a good mood," he teased.

Spinning around so quick she almost stumbled, Jane fixed him with the look of a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar. "Eli, you're up."

"How could I sleep with your caterwauling?" he asked with a smirk. Jane shook her head, but a pleasant flush had crept across her cheeks. His eyes flicked passed her to the bowl of pale batter, and he immediately perked up. "You're making pancakes. Definitely in a good mood, then."

"I just thought I'd make you breakfast," Jane said, turning back to the batter. "To thank you for taking me with you last night. I really had the most wonderful time."

"I'm glad," Elijah said. He moved over to lean against the counter, dipping a finger into the batter. Jane tutted in mock disapproval as he stuck the digit in his mouth. "So, you and Charlie seemed to hit it off."

Jane had clearly been keeping herself under control all night, but now that it was just the two of them, her real feelings burst out with an enthusiastic, "Oh Eli, he's incredible."

Naturally beautiful from birth, Jane Bennet had grown up being idolized and sought after by everyone. She was the girl that all other girls were envious of and that all of the boys wanted to have for their own. Her kind nature stopped the attention from going to her head, but it still left its mark on her. She was so used to the public eye that she had learned from an early age to temper herself and kept all of her emotions carefully under wraps.

This was most especially true when it came to the world of men, where her inability to see the bad in anyone had led her astray more than once. She had grown careful and selective in her choices,
and she rarely got swept up in the rush of burgeoning relationships. Used to being fawned over, she did not openly react to flirting or advances. It took someone who knew her well to see the emotions brimming beneath the constant soft smile she wore.

Which is how Elijah knew that she was serious as she continued to go on about her night with Charles Bingley.

"I've never met somebody I've connected with like that before," she said. "We have everything in common. And he's so sweet and charming, and the perfect gentleman. He has such a great sense of humor; I never stopped laughing. We talked for hours and never ran out of things to say. Did you know that he does volunteer work in the city? Like, not just throwing his parties, but he actually visits people and teaches kids to read? He's the most amazing person."

Eli beamed at the smile on his big sister's face. "You guys really seem like a perfect match," he agreed. "Both of you are unbelievably nice and spend your time giving back. Think of how much good you could do the world together? Like the world's politest superheroes. Are you going to see him again?"

"He asked for my number," Jane admitted, her cheeks turning from pink to red. "Do you think he'll really call?"

"Of course," said Elijah. "I'll bet you he even breaks the guy code and calls today."

"You think?" Jane asked hopefully. When Eli nodded, her face broke out into an enormous grin again. "I'm just so amazed he even wanted to dance with me in the first place."

"Why? You're five times prettier than anyone else that was there," Elijah said. "Well, I'm glad you like him. He seems like a nice guy. Definitely better than that last asshole you dated."

"Eli!" Jane admonished.

"Well, he was," he said unrepentantly. "You were just too nice to see it. You always see the best in everyone, Janey. I've never heard you say a bad word about anyone in your life."

"I just try not to judge others too quickly," she replied, turning her attention back to making the pancakes. "Unlike some people I know."

Elijah frowned. "What, me?"

"You do tend to make snap decisions about people," said Jane. "You take little details and use them to make sweeping declarations about people. Especially when it comes to men, even men you like. Like with Rick."

"He didn't even bother to ask what I wanted before he ordered for me," Elijah said disparagingly. "I could've been allergic or a vegetarian for all he knew. He apparently didn't think I was capable of thinking for myself. He just wanted someone to pay attention to him."

"And Ethan?" Jane prompted.

"He was such a hermit; he never wanted to go out. And even when we did, he was always just looking forward to going home. Like when we went to the club and he refused to dance at all. He spent the whole night lurking," Elijah said, shrugging. "He was such a bore, and he never wanted to do anything fun."

"Or maybe he was just self-conscious," she suggested. Elijah scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Not to be rude, but you do sometimes jump to conclusions about people."
"What about William Darcy?" Elijah said. "Do you think I'm wrong about him? Even you have to agree he's an insufferable jackass."

Jane cringed. During the taxi ride home, Elijah had filled her and Charlotte in on the conversation he had overheard between Darcy and Bingley. Even Jane had been indignant about what Darcy had said about Elijah's book; Charlotte had been downright livid. "You might have heard it out of context," Jane offered, digging a spatula out of the drawer and flipping the pancakes.

"And what's his excuse for the rest of the night?" Elijah pressed. "He was standoffish and rude all night. And the way he kept judging me about my love of poetry? Or for not being published already? It was like he was just looking for things to criticize me about."

"Okay, I will agree that his behavior was less than friendly at times," she conceded. "There could have been a reason for it, though. Charlie says he's painfully shy."

"He's painfully something," Elijah muttered.

Jane gave him an exasperated look, the closest she came to ever being openly annoyed with someone. "I'm just saying maybe you should give him the benefit of the doubt before making up your mind."

"And I'm saying that benefit of the doubt is how Sam broke your heart," Elijah said. He regretted the words the moment they'd left his mouth. Across from him, Jane visibly flinched. "Janey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"No, you're right," said Jane. "Sam betrayed my trust. I believed in him, and he proved me wrong. But Sam is just one guy. There are still plenty more out there. I want to believe - I have to believe - that there are still good men in the world. Maybe you should too." Elijah tipped his head, drawing designs on the countertop with his fingertip as he tried to come up with a good argument.

"I'm just worried for you," he admitted. "I'm afraid that one day someone else will try to take advantage of how nice you are. I don't want you to get hurt again."

"I know," Jane said. She walked around the counter to hug him. "But that's my problem, not yours. Just think about it, okay?"

"Okay," Elijah agreed. He tugged the end of his sister's ponytail playfully, and she swatted him with the spatula.

"Okay, enough seriousness for one morning," said Jane. "Sit yourself down. Pancakes are ready."

Elijah obliged, setting out two places for them as Jane brought over the platter of pancakes and bottle of maple syrup. They sat down and dished up their breakfast before Elijah spoke again. "So, for the first time in weeks, we both have a Saturday off," he said over his cup of coffee. "We are having a Jane-and-Eli day, which means greasy diner lunch we'll regret tomorrow and window-shopping for clothes we can't afford."

Their day together went even better than they planned. Despite their plans not to spend any money, they stumbled across a special one-day sale in a boutique. They left the store more than an hour later, arms laden with shopping bags. They carted their treasures with them into their favorite local hole-in-the-wall and were immediately greeted by the owner, who was making the rounds among his customers.

"Hey, Bennets!" he greeted them brightly, his thick, Brooklyn drawl dragging the vowels out. "I hoped I'd be seein' ya today. Come in, then, ya favorite spot's still open." He ushered them to a
cozy little table by the window and produced his notepad with a flourish. "'Cho gettin' the usual, then?"

"I'll have a coffee instead of a Coke today," said Elijah. "Other than that, I'm good." When Jane nodded her agreement, the owner took off with a grin. He brought back their drinks with a promise that their food would be out shortly and then left Jane and Elijah alone to chat.

Jane was in the middle of an amusing anecdote about a finger-painting session with her youngest class at the Y when her phone began crooning a jazzy indie girl song. She glanced at the number on the screen and frowned curiously before answering. "Hello?"

Elijah watched in amusement as her face changed shades very quickly, her natural gold complexion going briefly pale before giving way to bright pink patches high on her cheeks. She smiled into the phone, and he guessed who it was a split second before she said, "Oh, Charlie, hi."

Sitting back in his chair, Elijah tried not to act too interested as she talked to Charles Bingley, but he couldn't help overhear her side of the conversation. "I wasn't expecting you to call so soon...Oh, that's so nice of you...Yes, I had a wonderful time...Really?...Oh wow, that's...Are you sure?...Um, yeah, Monday sounds great...I'll see you there...Alright, bye."

She hung up the phone, unable to contain the broad smile on her face. She met Elijah's gaze across the table and an excited squeak escaped her. "I told you he'd call," Elijah said triumphantly. "What'd he say?"

"He asked me out to dinner on Monday," Jane said. "He's taking me to Daniel."

"Seriously?" Elijah asked in surprise. "Damn, he's not sparing any expense on impressing you."

"I don't think he's trying to impress me," Jane said, her cheeks still flushed. "His sister recommended it. She says they have the best lobster and Charlie remembered me saying that I liked lobster."

"Oh right, his sister," Elijah said, less than enthusiastically.

"She's actually really nice," said Jane. "She was just tired, she'd been away on a photo shoot all week and just got back that afternoon. But she gave me loads of tips on how to do my hair. I really like her."

"You really like everyone," Elijah said, but he laughed to soften the comment. "Well, I'm glad you like her. The way things are going, she might be your actual sister someday."

Jane turned red all the way to the tips of her ears. "Eli, don't tease."

"Alright, sorry," he said, holding up his hands in surrender. "I really am happy for you, though. Although I'm not looking forward to tomorrow night's dinner." Jane wrinkled her brow questioningly. "Think how Mom's going to react when she finds out you've got a date with one of the richest men in New York. She's gonna have kittens."

"Oh." Jane winced slightly. "She'll care about more than just the fact that he's rich, though."

"Will she?" Elijah asked skeptically.

"Of course," Jane said. "She married for love, that's all she wants for us as well. All of us," she added, reaching across the table to squeeze Elijah's hand.

A distraction arrived at that moment as a waitress brought out their lunches, and Elijah gratefully
seized the change in topic. He loved Jane dearly, but he wasn't as optimistic about their mother's acceptance of his sexual orientation. So he picked up his fork and said, "So what are you going to wear? Have to dress up for a place like that." Jane latched onto the subject eagerly, and they spent the rest of their lunch discussing her impending first date with Charles Bingley.
Monday morning found Elijah leaning his elbows against the front counter of the library, his head cradled in his hands. There was a dull throbbing between his eyes that hadn't faded from the night before. He had been right when he'd predicted their mother's reaction to Jane's date with Charles Bingley; Mrs. Bennet had actually whooped with joy, jumping and shrieking her excitement loud enough for all of Nassau County to hear. She had broken out the bottle of special wine usually reserved for holidays and, despite the fact that nearly everyone had to work in the morning, she'd kept them late celebrating.

"You look awful." Elijah looked up to see Maria Lopez, one of the library assistants, on the other side of the counter. She was a petite Latina with her hair cut in a jagged pixie, multiple piercings, and a wardrobe that consisted almost entirely of black and neon. Her glam punk exterior hid a warm and intellectual inside, though, and Elijah had taken an immediate liking to her when she had been hired at the library several months ago. "Rough night?"

"Family dinner," Elijah said, and Maria nodded. She had heard enough about his family to know that was an answer in and of itself. "Do I really look that bad?"

"A bit like you just emerged from a weekend in Vegas that you won't remember," she said with a shrug.

"That would've been more fun," Elijah admitted with a laugh. When his mom broke out the wine, she made sure it was the good stuff. Not quite as pricey as the champagne from Netherfield, of course, but still potent enough. He'd also had to drink quite a lot just to deal with his mother's incessant chattering. The only relief had been that because Mrs. Bennet's entire attention was focused on Jane's love life, she had for once not been pestering him about his own.

"Had a bit too much of the old lady last night, huh?" Maria asked, giggling. She had opened her mouth to say more, but a mother with her small children approached the front counter with their arms full of books. Maria smiled pleasantly at the kids and then took off with her cart of books to be put away.

Elijah straightened up and grinned at the little family. His phone started vibrating on the countertop, and he quickly silenced it before anyone noticed. "Hello there, found yourself some books?" he asked, directing his question at the children.

"Kitty book!" the little girl with blonde pigtails said eagerly, holding the book up so Elijah could see it.

Smiling, Elijah chatted amiably with the family as he checked the books out for them. The little boy was quiet and shuffled self-consciously, but the girl was all too eager to tell him about her favorite books in the animated gibberish of a toddler. Once they were gone, Elijah picked up his phone and was surprised to see he had a missed call from Charlotte, followed immediately by a text.

Call me back asap!

Elijah frowned, his brow furrowing. Charlotte very rarely resorted to texting; she hated the impersonal nature of it. If she had bothered to text him, something crucial must have happened. As much as he tried to stop his hopes from climbing, just in case, he couldn't help the thrill that surged in his stomach.
Elijah wandered over to the non-fiction section where he'd last seen Maria. She was scanning the shelves, a book poised in her hand and ready to be put into its proper place. "Hey Mar, can you watch the counter?" he asked. "I have to return a call real quick."

"Yeah, no problem," she said, dropping the thick book back onto her cart. She walked over to stand behind the counter while Elijah stepped out of the back door of the library. Standing in the little alcove between the Queens Central Library and the large Islamic mosque next door, he dialed Charlotte's mobile.

It only rang once before Charlotte picked up. "Good, you got my message," she said in lieu of a greeting.

"Yeah, what's up?" Elijah asked, feeling his heart rate climbing.

"We did it!"

The three simple words shot straight through to Elijah's core. His heartbeat throbbed in his ears, driving the usual hum of New York to the background. "We - what?" he finally gasped out after several long seconds of silence.

"I called you as soon as I got off the phone," Charlotte said. "We did it, Eli. You've got a publisher."

"Please tell me this isn't a joke," Elijah said weakly as his legs threatened to buckle underneath him. Tremors were vibrating through his entire body, and he felt equal parts elation and absolute terror.

"You know I'd never do that," said Charlotte. "I mean it. The assistant editor from Pemberley Publishing called and said they want to publish your book. It's going to take us a little while to get the contract ironed out and sorted, but this is going to happen. Congratulations, Elijah, you're one step closer to being a published author."

Elijah was torn between screaming in pleasure and fainting. He felt immediately light-headed, and he collapsed against the wall for support when his legs turned to jelly. "Oh my God," he breathed. "We did it. I mean, I always hoped, but I - I was started to think it wouldn't happen."

"I knew you could do it," Charlotte said smugly. "I always told you we'd get there. Your book is brilliant, it just took a while for someone to see that."

"You are the best, Char," said Elijah, laughing dazedly. "I mean it. Thank you, thank you so much. Look, I gotta get back to work, but we're going out this weekend to celebrate, drinks on me."

Charlotte laughed. "Sounds like a plan," she said. "Have fun at work and congrats again, babe."

Elijah hung up and tucked the phone back into his pocket. For a moment he merely stood there, shaking and breathless, and then an ecstatic grin burst across his face. He leaped into the air, feeling like he could fly. It took several minutes of energetic dancing and flailing before he managed to get himself back under control.

His mind went immediately to Jane, and he grabbed his phone again. He had halfway typed a text to her before he paused. No, he wanted to tell her in person. Erasing the text, he quickly keyed in another. *Got gr8 news to tell u 2nite.*

He was walking on clouds when he let himself back into the library. Maria looked up when he came around the corner from the back offices, and her eyebrows shot up curiously. "You okay,
Eli?"

Elijah was beaming as he moved around the counter and pulled the startled undergrad into a hug. "Honestly? Never been better."

For the rest of the day, Elijah had a hard time focusing. His mind wandered off whenever he wasn't busy helping a library patron. He would look around at the shelves of books around him, and the realization struck him that one day, his own book would be sitting on those shelves. At one point, he even wandered over to the fiction section and found the exact spot where it would sit, there among the B's, in between Benitez and Benson.

He was antsy and bouncing on the balls of his feet by the time the end of his shift finally rolled around. Bidding a quick farewell to the handful of other librarians, he grabbed his things and headed for home. It was a relatively short walk to the Longbourne Deli, the kosher sandwich shop beneath their apartment, but today it took everything Elijah had in him not to run the whole way home. He jogged the last block and clambered up the rusting staircase to the door.

"Janey?" Elijah called as he let himself into the flat.

"In here," came the reply from down the short hall. Elijah tossed his jacket over the back of the sofa and headed to his sister's bedroom. Jane was sprawled across her bed, a glossy magazine opened across the foot of the mattress in front of her. She sat up when he entered the room. "Hey, what's up? I got your text."

Elijah sat down on the end of the bed, practically vibrating with pent-up excitement. He had been waiting all day, and the truth burst out of him in a tangled rush. "I got a publisher!" he shouted, the words blurring together into one in his haste.

Jane's doe eyes blinked twice. "What?"

"I got a publisher," Elijah repeated, forcing himself to slow down and breathe. "They called Char this morning. Someone's going to publish my book!"

The expression on Jane's face switched so quickly Elijah was surprised she didn't pull a muscle. She went from confusion to shock to excitement in the blink of an eye, and before he'd even realized what was happening, she had thrown her arms around his neck. "Oh my God, Eli, I'm so excited for you!" she shrieked in his ear. "I knew you could do it!"

Elijah was beaming as he hugged his older sister back. Sharing the news with her brought the reality of the situation home, and he felt happy tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. "I can't believe this is really happening, Janey," he admitted, his voice quavering.

Jane drew back and smiled. "I can," she said confidently. "I always knew it would." She reached out and brushed away a stray tear that had escaped his eye. "I always believed in you."

There was nothing more Elijah could say to that, so he simply reached out and pulled her into the circle of his arms again. For a long moment he just clung to her, letting the full weight of the news settle over him, and then he laughed. "This is surreal."

"We need to go out and celebrate," Jane said, bouncing on the mattress. "Dinner on me."

"But your date," Elijah said. She had been talking all weekend about her date with Charlie Bingley, getting exponentially more excited and nervous as the day got closer.

"It's okay, I can reschedule," Jane said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "This is important, Charlie will understand."
"No, Janey, don't do that," Elijah said. "I appreciate the offer, but really, I don't want you to cancel your date. I know how much you've been looking forward to it. Look, I'm taking Char out for drinks this weekend to celebrate, you should come with, and we can all celebrate together then."

"Are you sure?" Jane asked. As uncertain as she looked, Elijah was resolved. Jane never did anything for herself, always sacrificing what she wanted to make other people happy. He wasn't going to let her give up on this.

"Positive," he said. "Now c'mon, let's get you all dolled up. You've got a fancy date tonight."

Elijah lingered on the bed, chatting inanely about their days, while Jane dressed in her new silver and white sequined dress. Her pale skin glowed against the shimmery fabric, giving her an almost ethereal look, and her legs looked miles long when she put on heels. She twisted her curls up into a braided knot and then turned to him apprehensively. "How do I look?"

"Like a goddess," Elijah replied with a smile. Jane flushed. " Seriously, if he wasn't completely in love with you before, he will be when he sees you tonight."

Elijah was in the middle of helping Jane put on her favorite necklace when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it," he said, fastening the necklace. Jane nodded as she picked up her earrings. Elijah walked down the hall and peered through the peephole in the door. On the other side was none other than Charles Bingley, dressed in an immaculate navy suit and clutching a small bouquet. Grinning, Elijah opened the door. "Charlie, hi," he said.

"Elijah, it's good to see you," Charlie said, offering out his hand. "Is Jane in?"

"She's just getting ready," said Elijah. "I didn't know you were going to pick her up."

"I wanted to surprise her," Charlie admitted with a timid smile. The whole thing just reaffirmed Elijah's conclusion that Charlie Bingley was the sweetest man on earth. If anyone was deserving of Jane, it might very well be him.

"Come on in," said Elijah, stepping back to let the other man into the apartment. "I'll go get her, she should be ready." As Charlie shuffled his feet on the living room floor, looking adorably nervous, Elijah went back down to Jane's bedroom. She was just tucking the last of her things into a clutch purse, and she looked up when he leaned in through the doorway. "It's for you," he said.

"Me?" Jane asked curiously. She glanced at the bedside clock, and he could see her calculating how much time she had before she was supposed to leave, trying to factor in time for this unexpected social call. Elijah bit back his smile and followed a few steps behind as she made her way out to the living room. Jane stopped short at the end of the hall, her eyes wide. "Charlie," she said.

"Wow, Jane," Charlie replied, stars in his eyes. "You look absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you," said Jane, her cheeks turning a soft pink. Elijah lingered back, trying to remain inconspicuous as the couple drank in the sight of each other.

"Oh, these are for you," Charlie said, holding out the flowers.

Jane's face lit up as she accepted the ribbon-bound bouquet. "Lilies and lavender. My favorite, how did you know?"
"You said at the ball," Charlie said, grinning delightedly. "Well, if you're ready, there's a car waiting for us."

"Oh, yes, just let me put these in water," said Jane.

"Go on, I'll take care of them," Elijah said. Jane passed the flowers off to him with a thank you and kiss on the cheek. Charlie grinned, offered an arm to her, and led her out of the apartment. Elijah watched from the window as Charlie held the door of the luxury car for her and then the pair drove off into the rush of the city.

Elijah was smiling as he dug a vase out of the back cupboard and arranged the flowers on the kitchen table. Then, eager to tell someone else who would appreciate his good news, he pulled out his phone and dialed his father's cell phone. It rang four times before the line clicked over to the voicemail.

"Hey, Dad," Elijah said after the tinny beep. "Just calling to give you the news. My book got a publisher. Char's still working out all the details with them and everything, but we've got a real publisher now. Anyway, just wanted to let you know. Call me back when you get the chance."

Elijah decided he deserved a night of relaxation to enjoy his achievement. He changed into his pajamas early and took two pieces of leftover pizza from the fridge, as well as a pint of Ben & Jerry's. Carrying his treasures, he settled down in front of the television to get caught up on his shows.
Siblings

Elijah jerked awake at the scrape of a key in the lock, and he groaned at the odd angle his head
had been twisted in his sleep. The television was playing late night infomercials, his show long
since over, and he was curled up in the armchair. The deadbolt on the front door clicked, and then
the door eased open, the glow of the television screen catching on a shimmery figure slipping
quietly into the room.

"You're home late," said Elijah, glancing at the clock. It was nearly one in the morning.

Jane spun around, a hand over her mouth to muffle her gasp of surprise. "Oh, Eli, I thought you
were asleep," she said. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

Elijah smiled. "It's fine. You just saved me from a horrible neck cramp," he said. He unfolded
himself from his twisted position on the armchair and turned off the television while Jane flicked
on the living room light. "So, how was your date?"

"Honestly? Magical," said Jane, sitting down on the sofa and folding her hands in front of her
heart. "I've never had such a great time in my life. The restaurant was breathtaking, and the food
was so good. Then he took me to this building in Upper Manhattan that he owns and we went up
to the roof, and there was a beautiful view and this little dessert picnic set up. We sat up there and
ate ice cream sundaes and just talked for hours."

"Wow," Elijah said, his eyes wide. "I think I'm falling for this guy too. Does he have a brother?"

Jane giggled. "It was perfect."

"Sounds like it," said Elijah. "So, did he kiss you?"

"He was the perfect gentleman," she said, her ears darkening slightly. "When he dropped me off
here, he kissed my hand."

Elijah resisted the urge to coo aloud at the cheesy, old-fashioned romance of the gesture, although
it was difficult. "When are you seeing him again?" he asked instead.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that," she said. "Charlie invited us to come spend the
weekend at his house in the Hamptons."

"Us?" Elijah asked skeptically. "He wants me to come? I think I'll pass on a third-wheeling
weekend."

"You won't be," said Jane, laughing. "Charlie's sisters will be there, and he said he might have
some friends over too. It's just for a few nights, for the long weekend. He's going to be having a
big Memorial Day barbeque and everything, and he really wants you to be there. You can get to
know Caroline better and meet his other sister. And I told him about your book, and he wants to
celebrate."

"It's like he's family already," Elijah said, and Jane blushed again. "So tell me, Janey, honestly;
you think this guy is for real?"

"I really do," she said. "I know it's fast, and that's completely insane, but I've never met somebody
that I've connected with like I have with Charlie. He's - he's perfect. If I could spend the rest of my
life as happy as I have been since I met him..." She trailed off, a serenely dazed look on her face,
and the giddiest smile Elijah had ever seen graced his sister's mouth.
"Okay then, I suppose as your brother I ought to get to know him better too," he said. "Check him out, make sure this guy's really good enough for you. And I suppose it wouldn't hurt to make nice with his sister either, since it sounds like we're going to be in-laws someday."

Jane's cheeks had turned bright fuchsia at his comment, but she smiled nonetheless. "Thank you, Eli, I really appreciate it," she said. "We're going to have so much fun."

"Yeah, well, who can turn down a chance to spend the weekend at some fancy house in the Hamptons, right?" he said. It didn't actually sound like his idea of a great time, but it clearly meant a lot to Jane. "It's probably the only chance I'll ever get to stay there."

"Until your book sells a billion copies and you can afford to buy a house there," Jane said. She walked over and sat down on the arm of his chair, taking his hand in hers. "I really am so proud of you, Eli. I knew you could make it big and now you're on your way there. I know things have been hard on you for the last few years, but they're really looking up now."

"For you too," he said, squeezing her much smaller hand. "Ever since Sam... But you've got Charlie now, and he seems like a really great guy. I'm happy for you, sis." Jane smiled, but it was quickly broken when her lips parted in a yawn. Elijah grinned. "We should get to bed. It's after one, and we've both got work in the morning."

"That's probably a good idea," Jane agreed. They both stood, and Elijah turned off the television before heading down the hall to their bedrooms. Jane stopped him before he could slip into his room and she pulled him into a hug. "Congratulations, Eli."

"Thanks," said Elijah, kissing the top of her head. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Yes, you could have," Jane said, laughing.

"Okay, maybe, but it wouldn't have been as much fun," he said and tugged on a piece of hair that had come loose from her bun. "Love you."

"You too," Jane said, and she gave him one more quick hug before darting into her bedroom. Elijah climbed into bed and lay on his back, staring at the slats of light on the ceiling cast by the blinds in the window. He'd done it. He was really going to be a published author.

A smile on his lips, he drifted off to sleep.

William Darcy couldn't sleep. He spent several hours tossing and turning until he was so thoroughly tangled in the sheets he couldn't move his legs. When the clock on his bedside table ticked over to two, he finally gave up and extricated himself from the blankets. The hardwood flooring of his penthouse flat was cold on his bare feet, and he shivered in nothing but his boxers. He pulled on an old tee-shirt before heading downstairs to the main room.

The glow of the full moon shone through the enormous living room windows so brightly that he almost didn't need to turn on the lights. It cast the room into sharp relief, the sleek lines and angles of the modern furniture throwing shadows up the walls. William found the wall switch and flipped it up, bathing the room in golden white light.

All of his work was still spread out across the desk against the wall, the pages in perfect stacks where he'd left them. If he wasn't going to sleep, he might as well get some work done. His eyes panned over the papers in front of him; numbered manuscript pages, the margins filled with red editing marks and commentary, were arranged next to business plans and financial graphs.
Even though he was technically the CEO and owner of Pemberley Publishing, he still worked as an editor as well. It was the work he most enjoyed, taking an author's craft and helping to smooth out the rough edges to make them into polished gems. Even as the CEO of the company, he hadn't been willing to give up on his favorite part of the job.

So every year he took on one or two books to edit and sell personally, less than half as many as his actual editors but as much as he could handle while also managing the business. He was supposed to be taking a year off editing to focus on getting the New York branch of Pemberley off the ground, but everything changed when his assistant had sent along Elijah Bennet's manuscript.

To say that William liked *Chaos in a Bottle* would be a massive understatement. It had its faults, as all manuscripts did, but very few had such raw potential. How it hadn't been picked up by another company before he got to it, he had no idea, but he had been thrilled to find out that it was still available.

Despite the fact that he had not meant to take on any books for the year, he hadn't been willing to let anyone else work on the manuscript - not that the burgeoning office had editors to spare. Which is how he found himself buried in more work than he had ever attempted to take on at one time. He had spent several nights in a row up until the early hours of the morning trying to devote the proper amount of time to the book without falling behind on the business end of both Pemberley offices.

Fetching a glass of water from his kitchen, William sat down at the desk and got to work. He disappeared into the printed words on the page, marking errors as he noticed them and adding notes to himself in the margins. He was so deeply invested in his work that he didn't see the sky lightening outside the windows.

The monochromatic chirping of his phone from the bedroom jerked William from a particularly intense moment in the novel. He blinked around in surprise when he realized that the sun had come up, filling his living room with pale light. Shaking away the sudden bout of exhaustion, he raced upstairs and grabbed his cell phone from the nightstand. The photo attached to the caller ID brought a small smile to his lips, and he answered.

"Hello, Gina," he said, his sleep-deprived gruffness softening affectionately.

"Oh good, you're awake," Gina said, and he could hear her smile through the speaker. "I was afraid you'd be asleep. I can't remember what the time difference is."

William glanced at the clock, the red digital numbers declaring it just after six in the morning. That put his London-based little sister five hours ahead of him. "Aren't you supposed to be in class?" he asked.

Gina giggled. "Classes ended last week, remember?"

"Clearly not," he retorted dryly, eliciting another round of laughter from her. "Then what are you up to?"

"Enjoying the start of summer," she said brightly. "Annie's flying in next Tuesday, so we're going to stay at your flat in London and take her out to see the sites for a week or so before we go home. And this weekend we're going to Blackpool with some friends from uni."

"Male friends?" he asked apprehensively.

His sister huffed a laugh. "Oh really, Will, you know there's only one man for me." Her tone was
playful, but he could hear an undercurrent of something darker and fragile that caused a sharp pain in his chest. "The rest of your lot are more trouble than they're worth."

"Not all of us," he said somberly.

"I know," said Gina. "I'm just not quite ready yet. Someday, maybe, but not now." Her voice lightened, and she added, "Don't pretend you're not happy I'm not dating."

William laughed. "You caught me," he said. "I'm fine not having to worry about you a while longer. At least wait until I'm back in the country again and can properly terrify your suitors like a big brother should."

"When'll that be?" she asked.

"Not sure yet," he admitted. "I thought I was only going to be here a few weeks to make sure things were settled, but I just picked up a book from a New York-based author, so I'm going to stay here a while longer to work on it."

"Really?" Gina asked in surprise. "I thought you weren't taking any books this year?"

"I wasn't," he said. "But I couldn't pass this book up, Gi, it's amazing. It could be a bestseller, actually put Pemberley on the map here in the US. Better than that, this is the sort of book that changes lives."

"Wow, I haven't heard you this excited about a book in ages," she said. "It must be something special. Especially for you to stick around and work with the author personally. Cute?"

William's mind filled with images of soulful brown eyes, silky dark hair, and a lean body. He felt immediately hot under the collar and was grateful she couldn't see the color that had flooded his face. "He," said William, emphasizing the pronoun, "is not handsome enough to tempt me."

Gina laughed. "Oh, it's a bloke? Point taken. But it wouldn't kill you to work less and meet someone."

"You sound like Charles," said William, only just resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Good, so he agrees," Gina said. "We're just worried about you. You work too much."

"Because I enjoy my work," he said.

"I know, and that's great, it's just-" Gina trailed off, and William braced himself. "You haven't dated much since secondary school. I know in uni you were busy raising me and I appreciate that. And then with everything that happened... But I'm all grown up now, Will. It's time to stop taking care of me and start taking care of yourself."

William refused to acknowledge the dull aching in his chest at her words. "I have a great family and my best mate and a successful career I love; what more could I need?"

"Love, romance, passion?" Gina suggested. "You're thirty. Don't you want to get married someday? Start a family?"

The pain and longing in William's heart doubled before it was promptly crushed by the practical side of him. There were no such things as happily ever afters for people like him. The only thing that came from trying was scandal and disappointment. He wasn't willing to put himself, or his family name, through that on a whim and a chance. "Someday, maybe," he said simply. "But not now."
The repetition of her own words back at her made Gina pause, and she hummed in understanding. "Alright, I'll stop badgering you," she said. "Just think about it, Will. I want you to be happy. I love you."

"Love you too, Gi," he said fondly. Somehow, she still softened him just as easily as she had when he'd held her for the very first time twenty years ago. Clearing his throat against the sudden swell of emotion, he said, "So, how were exams?"

"Exhausting," Gina moaned dramatically. As she nattered on about studying and her professors at Cambridge, William settled down on the end of his bed to listen. Yes, he had good people in his life, and he was blessed with their love. That would be enough.

It had to be.
A First Collaboration

While he generally didn't fit the stereotype that gay men were obsessed with their appearances, Friday morning found Elijah spending far more time in front of the mirror than he usually did. He dressed and groomed meticulously in an attempt to find that perfect balance between professional and casual. Or at least, he hoped that was how he came across. The entire time, the conversation he'd had with Charlotte the day before was running through his head.

"Got plans tomorrow?"

"Just work, why?"

"Any chance you can get some time off? Your new editor wants to meet."

The moment he'd hung up the phone with her, Elijah promptly called into work and cashed in a favor to get the day off. He spent the rest of the evening fussing around the house in a panic. By the time Jane had arrived home from her late class at the Club, the entire apartment had been cleaned from top to bottom. He barely slept that night and was awake by sunrise in anticipation of the meeting.

Elijah decided he needed a distraction before he worried himself into an aneurysm, and crossed the hall to his sister's open bedroom door. Packing for their weekend in the Hamptons, Jane was, if possible, in an even worse state of nerves. She was still in her pajamas, an open suitcase at her feet. Half the contents of her closet were laid out on her bed, and she was staring down at them like they were a particularly complicated math problem. When Jane spotted him in the doorway, her face brightened up.

"Help?" she asked, and her tone was so pathetic he couldn't stop the laugh that slipped out. "It's not funny," she said, but her lips turned up. "I don't know what to take. This dress is cute, but then so is this skirt, and I don't know what to do."

"Relax, first of all," Elijah said, placing steadying hands on Jane's shoulders. She nodded and took a deep breath. "Firstly, we're not leaving until this evening; you've got plenty of time. Secondly, Charlie is not going to stop liking you based on what you wear this weekend, okay? Now let's get you packed."

After thirty minutes of sorting and debated color palettes versus weather forecasts, they had Jane ninety-nine percent packed. Elijah checked the time and swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat. "It'll be great," Jane said, smiling encouragingly over the discarded socks she was meticulously refolding.

Elijah nodded, his returning smile far more confident than he felt. "Want to take the car?" Jane offered.

A soft huff of laughter escaped him. "This time of morning?" Elijah responded. "I'll never get there." He picked up his messenger bag and checked his reflection one last time in the mirror of Jane's wardrobe. "Okay, wish me luck."

"Not that you need it," Jane said, "but good luck."

The sidewalks of downtown Manhattan were crowded with the Friday mid-morning rush when Elijah jogged up the steps from the subway station, clutching his bag against his hip. The familiar drone of voices and cars made a comforting backdrop, but today they did nothing to ease his
nerves. He took a steadying breath before starting up the road.

It wasn't difficult to find the right building, and he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, tilting his head back to look up the face of the business structure. Number 3287 was a towering edifice of stone and wood amid the steel and glass, a bit of old New York still clinging on in the new century, although it had definitely been restored and updated recently. A swiveling glass door led into a cavernous lobby with parquet floors and gold embellishments.

Hugging his messenger bag closer to his side, Elijah walked up to the massive sign that hung opposite the doors. According to the white typeface, Pemberley Publishing occupied the top floor of the building. He was going to be a little early, but he figured that was safer than being late. The elevator doors opened with a cheery ding, and he stepped in, followed immediately by a large man in a business suit that made Elijah feel underdressed.

The other man got out on the fourteenth floor, and Elijah rode the rest of the way up in silence, drumming a staccato rhythm on his bag while he watched the little light tick its way up through the numbers over the door. Finally, the circle labeled forty-five lit up and Elijah straightened up, smoothing down the front of his sweater self-consciously.

When the doors slid open, it revealed a large office space of mahogany and white. Most of the floor was filled with cubicles, only half of them occupied by people tapping away at computers or poring over printed pages. A receptionist sat facing the elevators, and she looked up from her keyboard when he stepped out.

"Welcome to Pemberley Publishing," she said brightly. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi, my name's Elijah Bennet," he said, suddenly uncertain. One of the people in the room was the one, the person who had chosen his book when everyone else had rejected him. "I'm supposed to be meeting with my editor today. I think my agent said Mrs. Reynolds."

"Oh, that's me," an older woman said, walking over from where she was talking to one of the editors at their desk. She was a composed older woman, her conservative business look softened by a friendly smile and pink scarf. "Mr. Bennet?"

"Elijah, please," he said. "Are you Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Patricia. A pleasure to meet you," she said, offering her hand. "I read your book; it's absolutely fantastic."

"Thank you," he said, fighting against the blush that was creeping up the back of his neck. "And thank you for accepting it."

"Oh, I'm not your editor," said Patricia. "I'm just a personal assistant. I just passed your book along to the boss; he's the one who chose it. Speaking of," she glanced at her watch, "we should get you back there. You're a little early, but he has a tight schedule so that'll help."

Confused, Elijah followed her through the rows of cubicles to an office door in the back wall. Mrs. Reynolds knocked twice on the door and then opened it. She led the way in and addressed the chair behind the desk, which was turned toward a back wall comprised almost entirely of windows. The room was beautiful, with its carved desk and large shelves built into the walls that housed books of every era. Elijah's fingers itched with the desire to browse the shelves and see what treasures lay there.

"Elijah Bennet is here to see you, sir," Mrs. Reynolds announced.

"Thank you, Patricia," a cool, British voice responded. Elijah's stomach lurched in recognition just
as the chair swiveled around slowly to show its occupant, like the villain reveal of an old James Bond film. William Darcy stood and nodded briefly to Mrs. Reynolds, who smiled and left the office, shutting the door behind her. "Mr. Bennet," he greeted.

"Mr. Darcy," Elijah said, struggling to hide his confusion.

"You seem surprised to see me," Darcy noted, peering at Elijah over the top of the black-frame glasses perched on his nose. Elijah's heart did an unpleasant double beat; he'd always had a weakness for guys in glasses.

"I wasn't aware that you were the one who bought my book," Elijah said. His mind went back to the night of the Netherfield ball and the conversation he'd overheard. It was decent enough. Elijah felt his hackles rise indignantly and it took everything he had not to let the flash of anger show on his face.

"Perhaps you should've done more research into the company," Darcy suggested, his lips twisting up just slightly at the corners in a condescending smirk. Elijah bit his tongue to stop himself from responding. "Hopefully this arrangement is still to your liking."

Decent enough. Elijah was half tempted to tell William Darcy exactly where he could stick his arrangement, but the practical side of him managed to grab hold of the words before they reached his tongue. If he refused this offer, what were the odds that he'd get another chance? After all of the rejection letters he'd gotten, did he want to risk his book never being published just because his editor was a vile, patronizing jerk?

"Works fine for me," Elijah said, forcing on a friendly expression. He could play nice. If he was lucky, they'd only have to meet in person a few times. Most editors worked purely through email nowadays anyway. He'd be civil while they fine-tuned the details of his story, and then he'd never have to deal with William Darcy again. Next book he could find another editor. Charlotte had assured him it was always easier once an author was established.

"Excellent," said Darcy. He gestured at the seat on the other side of the desk as he dropped back down into his own. "I thought we could use this first meeting to set up a basic foundation. Get to know each other a little better since we'll be working together over the next few months, go through the preliminary edits, and establish what we're both expecting from this."

Elijah nodded silently, trying very hard not to be charmed by Darcy's accent. It wasn't your typical London accent, slightly rougher and richer. Shame such a nice package housed a cold soul.

Darcy picked up a manuscript from the pile on his desk and tapped a finger against the top page. "It really is an excellent book," he said, staring across the desk to fix Elijah with a piercing, ice-blue gaze.

Decent enough. "Thank you," said Elijah. He couldn't help but wonder what Darcy thought he was playing at. One minute his book was merely decent, and the next he was saying that it was good. He was clearly someone important in the company, having his own fancy office in the building. Why would someone so high up in the company take on his "decent enough" novel?

"I genuinely expect that this book could make it onto the bestsellers' charts," Darcy continued. "It has some rough patches, but overall it's a terrific story. After all, I only take on the very best."

Elijah smirked at the smarmy comment. Could he be more full of himself? "Alright then, let's talk about those rough patches," he said, setting his bag down next to his chair.

Darcy nodded and opened up the manuscript to the first page, scanning over his notes in the
They spent the next few hours glossing over all of the pieces that Darcy felt needed some work. For the most part, Elijah grudgingly had to admit that he made good points. The guy might be insufferable - and the curt, forward way that he laid down his expectations about the changes naturally put Elijah on the defensive - but he at least knew what he was doing. There were a few parts where Elijah firmly put down his foot, resistant to the changes that Darcy had suggested, but overall the edits would serve as considerable improvements.

"I'll send a complete copy of all my recommendations through to your agent," Darcy said when they had finished talking over the climax of the novel. "You have two months to make the changes and then resubmit your new manuscript."

Elijah cringed. That many revisions and three whole sections that needed rewriting in only two months? "How long does this whole process usually take?" he asked curiously.

"Depending on how well your revisions go," Darcy said, giving him a significant look, "the editing process takes about six months. Then things move on to marketing and design, and then production. All in all, the whole process lasts about a year. If everything works out according to plan, this book will be on shelves next summer."

Letting out a heavy breath, Elijah slumped back in the chair. One year. Twelve short months and his book would be sitting on the shelves at the bookstores and libraries. Just one more year and he'd be a published author. It was finally sinking in that this was real; he'd actually done it. He couldn't stop the euphoric grin that broke out across his face at the thought.

"Would you care to join me for lunch?"

The out-of-the-blue question startled Elijah from his fantasies, and he blinked across the desk at Darcy in surprise. "Pardon?" he asked, sure he'd heard wrong.

"I was planning on taking my lunch as soon as our meeting was over," Darcy said, leaning forward and propping his elbows on the edge of his desk. "I was wondering if you'd care to join me. We could discuss any other questions you might have."

Elijah fought back a frown. What exactly did this guy think he was doing? Was this some ploy to find more reasons to criticize Elijah? Either way, he wasn't looking to spend any more time with Darcy than he absolutely had to. He checked his watch and shook his head. "No, thank you," he said, scrambling for an excuse. "I actually have plans so I should probably go soon if I want to get across town on time."

Darcy nodded, standing up and removing his glasses. "Thank you for taking the time to come in and meet with me," he said. "I'll pass that information along to your agent."

"Thanks for making time for me," Elijah said. When Darcy offered a hand, he shook it, determinedly ignoring the leap of his stomach at the warm grip.

"Mrs. Reynolds will contact your agent to set up another time to meet after we receive your edits," Darcy said, wiping his palms on his pants like he wanted to clean them before burrowing them in his pockets. "Feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the revisions. Good day, Mr. Bennet."

"Goodbye, Mr. Darcy," Elijah said and then slung his messenger bag over his shoulder. He slipped back out of the office and smiled kindly at Patricia Reynolds before making his way to the elevator. His mind was humming as he rode down to the ground floor. One year. One more year.
There was a grin on his face as he stepped out into the busy New York rush.

The moment the office door closed behind Elijah, William slumped back into his chair. What was wrong with him? The goal of meeting with Elijah - apart from the actual work, of course - had been to find reasons to stop his infatuation, and instead, all that he'd done was make it worse.

A tap at the door made him look up, and he saw Mrs. Reynolds standing in the doorframe. "Everything went well?" she asked curiously.

"Yes, it was quite productive," he said.

"That Elijah Bennet, he's rather charming, isn't he?" Mrs. Reynolds asked. "So sweet and friendly. And rather handsome, too."

"He seems to be a good man," William agreed. "As for his looks, I am not a good judge." Mrs. Reynolds gave him a pointed look, but William remained unflinching even as his mind raced with images of gentle brown eyes with a fiery spark.

Sometimes he wondered if Mrs. Reynolds didn't already know his secret despite the fact that he'd never told anyone. The older woman had been working with him since he had begun Pemberley Publishing right out of university, helping him to get the business off the ground both in London and now in New York, and she treated him more like a son than an employer. She never came right out and said anything, but when she gave him looks like that or made comments about certain men, he thought she must at least suspect.

"Of course," she said. "Anyway, I was just coming to tell you that I'm going to take my lunch break. Would you like me to pick something up for you while I'm out?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you," he said, bestowing a rare smile on the woman. Mrs. Reynolds nodded and closed the door behind her as she left.

William swiveled his chair to face the window again and looked out at the towering steel buildings. This was getting ridiculous. It was just a stupid infatuation; it would go away as quickly as it came. All he needed was a little time and space, and this silly crush would fade. He had two months before Elijah's revisions were due and no reason to see him again before then. That was plenty of time to clear his head.
"Ugh, kill me now."

From the driver's seat, Jane laughed indulgently. "You're being dramatic."

Elijah glanced across at her, scowling. "I am not." Jane looked away from the road long enough to raise an eyebrow pointedly. "Okay, maybe," he amended grudgingly. "But the situation warrants it, don't you think? Out of all the possible editors in the world..."

The moment he'd gotten home from his meeting at Pemberley, Elijah spilled the whole story to a shocked Jane. She was as surprised by the news as he was and even offered to delay their trip out to Southampton until the next day. Not willing to let her give up on something that she clearly wanted so much, he was now sulking in the passenger seat of her battered VW Bug and indulging his self-pity.

"He runs the company though, doesn't he?" Jane pointed out. "Charlie said he built it up himself since college. So, I mean, he's got to be good at what he does, at least."

"Well, I mean, yeah, I guess," Elijah admitted reluctantly. "He seemed to know his stuff and yeah, some of his suggestions were good. But the way he said it all, it was so patronizing. Like I was stupid for not thinking of it in the first place."

"I'm sure that's not how he meant it," Jane said. "It's his job to make books better. If writers thought of it all first, he'd be out of a job."

Elijah scowled. "Whose side are you on here?"

Jane laughed. "I didn't think there were sides to be on," she said. "You're just determined to not like him."

"Because he's a jerk," Elijah protested. "God, I'm gonna kill Charlotte. She could've at least warned me. I was so shocked, I must have looked like such an idiot just staring at him. Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"Would you have gone if you knew?" Jane asked.

"Of course I would've," Elijah said, indignant without even knowing exactly why. "I'm not going to give up on my career just because Darcy is an ass. It just would've been nice to, you know, prepare myself." Jane huffed a small noise, clearly not buying his line but humoring him for the moment. Elijah sighed and combed a hand back through his hair. "Fine, be disgustingly diplomatic and polite, then," he groused, but he was unable to completely fight off a smile. "I'm just gonna sit here in my shame and self-pity alone."

At that, Jane laughed outright. "Don't be a sourpuss," she teased. "We're going out to spend the weekend in the Hamptons with friends. No work, no stress. So just forget all that for now, okay? Leave Darcy and all that drama for when we get home."

Elijah snorted, stubbornly not wanting to dismiss it so quickly, but he couldn't hold onto the anger from before. After a minute, he reached over and turned up the volume on the radio, filling the tiny car with the sound of her favorite cheesy pop music. Jane beamed and before they'd gone more than a mile, she was singing along enthusiastically just like he'd known she would. A lifetime of knowing someone's quirks paid off, and with Jane, singing had always been a definite sign that she was in a good mood.
It was also, unfortunately for Elijah, weirdly contagious, which was why he was also belting out the over-produced pop music by the time the Bug finally finished the three-hour drive across Long Island.

Southampton was somehow precisely the way Elijah had always imagined, just *bigger*. Posh gardens the size of city blocks and gated communities lined the roads, and it was impossible not to gape at the houses; most of them would've fit his childhood home seven times over. The other cars that they passed were all sleek and expensive, making the ancient Volkswagen stand out all the worse for its faded paint and peeling bumper stickers.

The GPS on Jane's phone steered them onto a road that curved along the coast, glimpses of the ocean visible between houses that each had a cordoned off section of private beach. Despite himself, Elijah felt a flutter of nerves and excitement blossom in his stomach as the signal on her phone brought them closer and closer. They rounded another turn and then, finally, the phone chirped loudly to announce their arrival.

At the end of a curved cobblestone driveway, the Bingley house looked like it would have fit nicely on a Civil War-era plantation. It was a masterpiece of gray stone and white trim, with enormous, shuttered windows and twin, red brick chimneys sprouting from the gabled roof. A column-lined porch wrapped all the way around the house, edged by perfectly sculpted hedges and the occasional rosebushes that were only just beginning to bloom.

"Wow," Elijah breathed in awe. Jane nodded in silent agreement. Shifting the Bug into gear, she drove them slowly up the driveway and parked it at the end of the line of other cars. The red Beetle stood out like a neon sign beside the luxury cars and a soft-top convertible. They both grabbed their bags and walked cautiously up to the front door, feeling wildly out of place.

Before either of them could raise a hand to knock, the door swung inward to reveal Charlie Bingley. It was the first time Elijah had seen him in anything other than a suit, and somehow it only made him more attractive. The worn graphic tee and jeans, matched with his blonde curls and broad smile, made him look like he'd stepped straight off an American Eagle billboard.

*This guy is way too beautiful to be straight,* Elijah thought, almost bitterly. Of course, when he saw the way that both Jane and Charlie lit up when they locked eyes, it was hard to hang onto that resentment.

"Hey, sorry, I heard your car pull up," Charlie said hurriedly. "I'm glad you guys made it."

"Sorry, we ran into traffic on the 4-9-5," Jane said as Charlie stepped back to let them into the foyer. Elijah made a conscious effort not to gape; the hall was cavernous, with a staircase curving up either side to a balcony where the upstairs hallways converged. There was a simple, understated chandelier above them and the floors were gleaming, polished wood.

"No worries, we've just been having a few drinks out on the back porch," Charlie said. "C'mon, I'll show you to your rooms so you can put your stuff away and then you can join us." Charlie picked up Jane's bag and threaded his free hand through hers, and led them up one of the staircases. They headed down the righthand hall, and Charlie stopped in front of a door. "This one's for you, Jane, and the next is for you, Elijah."

As Jane stepped into the first room, Elijah headed to the next opened door. The room beyond was painted in soft blues, and the furniture was made of bleached driftwood. Elijah set his bag by the bed, and after leaning his weight onto the mattress experimentally almost refused to go join the others just for the chance to sink into the soft mattress.
When he slipped back into the hall, he caught a split second view of Jane and Charlie exchanging adoring looks, before they noticed him and jumped apart like guilty teenagers. "I'm sure I can find my way down alone if you two need a minute," Elijah said suggestively.

Charlie laughed, and Jane stuck out her tongue indignantly, both of them blushing like school kids. Neither of them said anything to defend themselves as Charlie turned and guided them back downstairs. Through the dining room, they went out a set of wide French doors that opened onto the patio. Elijah stopped dead in awe.

Emerald green grass was neatly trimmed and perfectly smooth. There was a large, artistically curved swimming pool sunk into the yard and a wooden gazebo covered in climbing flowers. Further out, the grass tapered off into sand, and then finally into the glittering ocean that stretched into the horizon.

"Not a bad view, huh?" Caroline Bingley was reclined in a patio chair beside the doors, a glass of wine cradled in one hand while the other lifted her sunglasses so she could see him.

"So, introductions," Charlie said, clapping his hands together. "You guys already know Carrie."

"Nice to see you again," Caroline said with a small smile, lowering her sunglasses back into place.

"But this is my older sister, Louisa," Charlie continued, gesturing to the woman on Caroline's other side. The resemblance between the two women was immediately apparent, both of them petite, pointed, and a shade of blonde not entirely natural. However, where Caroline embodied her pale features, this woman was the peculiar hue of gold that only came from extensive fake tanning. She also had clearly had some work done to her chest; even Elijah, who was no expert in the area, knew there was no way those were real.

Charlie finished with a wave of his hand, "and her husband, Brian." A middle-aged man, who looked somehow simultaneously pleasant and yet wholly nondescript, was propped against the porch rail, engrossed in something on his phone. He didn't even look up as he was introduced, although Louisa toasted them with her drink.

"And this is Jane Bennet," Charlie said, settling his hand in the small of her back. "And her brother, Elijah."

"It's so nice to meet you," Jane said enthusiastically, aiming the greeting at Louisa. "Charlie's told me so much about you."

"All good things, I hope," Louisa replied with a simpering laugh. She patted the empty lounger next to her and Jane hurried to sit down.

Elijah hovered awkwardly for a second until Charlie nodded toward the patio table, which was laden with platters of finger foods. "Want a beer?" Charlie asked. He reached into the cooler and pulled out two bottles, passing one to Elijah. When Charlie sat down at the table, Elijah joined him with a grateful smile. He helped himself to a plate of food, aware that he hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"I've been looking forward to finally meeting you," Louisa said to Jane from their lounge chairs. "My baby brother's been raving about you all week. I can see why, too, you're totally as pretty as he said. You're like a real-life anime character."

Elijah looked up, one eyebrow raised in surprise at the vaguely racist stereotype, but no one else seemed to notice. Jane wasn't offended, of course, and Louisa was already barrelling ahead with the conversation. "Charlie said you're an art teacher? How'd you get into that?"
"It's what I went to school for," Jane said. "I majored in Child Psychology, with a minor in Art. I've always believed that art can heal people and I wanted to use that to help kids."

"That's sweet," said Louisa. "What school do you work at?"

Jane accepted the drink that Charlie poured for her with an adoring smile before answering. "I work for the Boys and Girls Club."

Louisa's eyebrows shot up. "How - charitable," she said. Elijah caught the vague condescension in her tone and his hackles rose, but if Jane heard, she was too polite to react. "But with a degree like that," Louisa continued, spearing the olive at the bottom of her glass, "couldn't you find work in an academy or private school? That would surely pay better."

"Those kids already have people to help them," Jane said, shrugging. "I want to help the kids who really need someone, who don't have anyone else or don't have the means to try new things. Those are the kids who need art the most." Although the lady Bingleys didn't look overly impressed, Charlie was staring at Jane like she'd hung the moon, and Elijah hid his smile. The man was clearly a goner.

"What about you, Elijah was it?" Louisa said, turning her pale gaze on him and eyeing him up and down.

"I'm a writer," Elijah said, and he felt his spine straighten, a renewed sense of pride and satisfaction flooding through him as he said it. "A novelist, actually."

"Really?" Louisa asked. "Anything I'd know of?"

"Not yet, my first book is still in the publication process," he answered. The elder Bingley lifted one eyebrow, her expression slightly skeptical, but Elijah didn't bother to elaborate. He didn't need to impress her, which was a good thing since he got the idea she was one of those people who was never impressed.

"But next year, everyone's gonna know his name," Jane said, beaming proudly up at him.

Elijah fought back a flush that only got worse when Charlie leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder. "Yeah, congrats man," Charlie said. "That's so awesome. And you're in good hands; Darce is as good as it gets."

"Oh, your book's being published by Darcy's company?" Louisa asked, the other painted-on eyebrow jumping up to join the first. "Congratulations. That must be a great honor for a first-time author."

"I'm looking forward to it," Elijah said diplomatically. "I think we'll be able to make something really great of it."

"Honestly, Darce's editing skills are the only reason I made it through college," Charlie said with a laugh. "I'm absolutely terrible at writing. He edited all my papers for me, made them actually sound smart. If it weren't for him, my professors all would've kicked me to the curb."

Elijah chuckled. "Is that how you guys met? In college?"

"Yeah, at Cambridge," said Charlie. "I dunno why I thought it'd be a good idea to study abroad. I was the only American in my whole dormitory and I felt so lost. Never thought England would be as different as it is. I was having a hard time finding my way around and making friends." He paused to take a sip of his beer. "I got reamed by my PoliSci professor and I was like thirty seconds away from a complete nervous breakdown, and then boom! This posh Brit corners me
outside the classroom and just, like, recites our entire PoliSci 101 textbook at me like a robot.”

Elijah scoffed, surprised, and Charlie grinned. "Yeah, that's what I thought. Had no idea who this guy was but he just starts talking at me. It was enough to distract me from having a breakdown, and eventually, I realized he was trying to help, albeit in a weird way. So I invited him over for a beer and he became my tutor, and the next thing I knew, we're best friends."

"That's a helluva story," Elijah said.

"He tells it far more dramatically than it actually happened."

Elijah's heart dropped into his stomach as everyone turned to the voice. He should've seen it coming; they were best friends, after all. It was only natural. Still, nothing could've prepared Elijah for the shock of seeing William Darcy stepping through the open French doors. He was still dressed in the same clothes from earlier, hair slightly ruffled and glasses hanging on the unbuttoned collar of his shirt. His gaze danced across Elijah and the corner of his lips turned down ever so slightly.

Hiding his scowl behind his beer, Elijah fought the urge to groan; what did he have to do to get a break from the guy?

"Darce!" Charlie cheered excitedly, jumping up and rushing over to hug William. He could tell by the over-enthusiastic greeting and the flush in his cheeks that Charlie had already had more than a few beers. "You made it!"

"Sorry I'm late," William said, putting a steadying hand on Charlie's shoulder as he friend pulled back. "I had to finish a few things up at the office before I could leave."

Charlie made a dismissive noise as he went back to his seat at the table. "You work too much."

William smirked indulgently and filled the last empty chair at the table between Charlie and Elijah, determinedly keeping his eyes off the writer. He had guessed that Charlie would invite Jane out for the weekend, but he hadn't known that Elijah would be coming too. If so, William might've made some excuse not to join them. It wasn't as if he didn't have enough work to get done.

"Yes, well, not all of us can make a career of throwing parties," William said.

Charlie huffed and shoved his shoulder playfully. "Hey, I'm just playing to my strengths," he countered. "And I happen to be good at getting people together to have fun. You, meanwhile, are good at being smart and unfairly talented at all the artsy stuff that girls are impressed by."

William scoffed into his drink at the irony, but the sound was drowned out by a somewhat louder skeptical cough. "You have plenty of talents, Charlie," Louisa cut in dryly. "Just in things that are actually useful to society."

On the other side of the table, Elijah looked up with his brow furrowed. "Are you saying that the arts are not useful in society?" he asked. His tone was pleasant enough but that fiery spark had blossomed once again in his eyes. William's stomach flipped.

"Well sure, they have their place," Louisa said breezily, "but there are so many other skills that are more useful. Practicality, charisma, intelligence, business sense..."

Elijah's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, a sign William was beginning to recognize as the precursor to debate. "Those all serve well in the world of money, sure, but what about in the betterment of society? In making people’s lives better?"
"And you think art does that better than financial security?" Louisa retorted, arching a painted-on eyebrow to convey what she thought of that idea.

"Haven't you ever looked at a painting and felt joy? Or read a book that took you on an adventure? Or heard a song that reminds you of falling in love?" Elijah countered. "Money is good for the material, but art is good for the soul."

"It's a good point," Charlie chipped in. "I mean, we all have a playlist we put on when we need a pick-me-up or a favorite comfort movie." When Louisa pulled a slightly disbelieving expression, Charlie interjected with, "Swan Princess." She flinched, clearly surprised, and closed her mouth with an audible click. William tried not to enjoy her look of humbled submission too much; he never had been fond of the elder Bingley in the way he was of the younger ones.

"And I mean, isn't this kind of the age of the artists?" Charlie continued. "The internet has been great for helping artists of all kinds reach the audiences they deserve. Like, how many singers start out on YouTube and wind up with recording contracts?"

"Or artists who can run their gallery online," Jane added with a shy smile. "I've got a painting in my room that I bought from an artist I follow on Tumblr."

"Or self-published authors," said Elijah. "They might not get the marketing and publicity that they would with an agent and editor, but they can still support themselves with a dedicated enough online following." William glanced across at him curiously, wondering if that was a path that Elijah had considered for his own novel. The thought of such a great book being lost among the piles of self-published rubbish online caused a physical ache.

"Exactly," Charlie agreed eagerly. "It's creating this free, open market for all of this artists, and it's getting the art out there for the people who really want it. Someone's web series might turn out to be the Swan Princess movie for someone else." Louisa shot an arch look at her brother for that comment, which Charlie tactfully ignored. "Seriously, though, it always amazes me just how much talent there is in the world."

William scoffed. "Don't you think that's a bit of a generalization? I mean, for every YouTube singer who gets a recording deal, there's a hundred more who never get further than recording videos in their parents' basement for a handful of subscribers. It's the same in all of the arts. These people may have some skill, but few of them have a true talent to succeed in their art."

"You must have high expectations for what you think is real talent, then," said Elijah.

"Well it's certainly more than just knowing the mechanics of the art," William went on, reveling in the intellectual challenge he'd provided. "After all, one can get a degree in art without having any artistic talent of their own. It's important to understand the foundations of the art, and it always helps to be versed in another art form. They do all reflect and affect each other in many ways, and more significant appreciation is built on having a broader understanding of the world.

"Most importantly, though, is the part that goes beyond the skill. It is, as you've said yourself, a rather difficult lifestyle to commit to your art. It takes a certain depth of character to achieve the proper drive and belief. That is what takes talent beyond the base mechanics, gives it something deeper and personal to bring the art to life. Determination or spirit or soul, whichever you'd like to call it. Without achieving all of those things, the work is merely a vain attempt at art; an empty echo of another's labors."

Elijah laughed, shaking his head. "Jesus, is there anyone who actually meets those standards?"

"You doubt there are artists who meet my criteria?" William asked. "Are you really so hard on
"I can't speak for any peers, but I know I don't," said Elijah. "What you're looking for with that little checklist is perfection. That's unachievable in anything, but it definitely has no place in the arts. Art is a reflection of the human soul, and no human is perfect. Art is made to be imperfect."

William and Elijah stared each other down, and William found the heat and passion in the other man's eyes hypnotic. It brought a life to them that shot through William like an electric current, energizing him to his core. Warmth curled deep in his stomach and William was tempted to keep arguing just to keep that spark alive.

Charlie groaned dramatically. "I seriously need friends who are less eloquent. Darce is bad enough, but now you too," he grumbled, pointing accusingly at Elijah.

Elijah grinned and ducked his head. "Sorry, I'll tone it down," he said. "Lemme finish this beer and I promise, you'll feel like Shakespeare in comparison."

"From one beer?" Caroline asked.

Jane giggled. "He's a lightweight."

"So is Charlie," Caroline responded in a faux whisper. In retaliation, Charlie grabbed a grape from the food tray and threw it at her. The conversation faded into casual banter, and William sat back, sipping his beer and half-listening. His mind was filled with nothing but Elijah; just when he thought he could deal with his feelings, the other man would throw a curveball that completely knocked him off his guard. The sudden intensity of his affection was unlike anything he'd ever felt before, and he didn't know quite how to handle it.

"You alright, Darce?" Charlie asked, rousing William by setting a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Fine, why do you ask?" William replied, putting on his best poker face.

"You just seem distracted, is all," Charlie said. "And even quieter than usual."

William's lips quirked at the tease. "Just thinking of all the work I need to get done this weekend," he said. "Speaking of which, I should turn in. I have a few reports to review and an early call in the morning."

"You're supposed to be on vacation," Charlie reminded him. "Relaxing. Enjoying yourself."

"I've taken on more work than usual," William said, shrugging. "The new office, and all."

"Alright, you spoilsport," Charlie said with a laugh. "But I expect you to try and enjoy yourself a little more tomorrow, alright?"


The others all responded with muttered farewells as he stood and made his way back into the house. Upstairs, he let himself into the guest bedroom he always occupied when staying with Charlie and closed the door behind him. He exhaled slowly, and in the safety of his room, finally allowed the tension to leave him as well. Keeping up a front, especially while spending so much time with Elijah around, was going to be more taxing than he'd expected.

It was going to be a long weekend.
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