Still Unfinished Business

by Ralkana

Summary

Ghostly meddling has led a modern-day Elizabeth and William to each other. Perhaps the well-meaning interference will lead to everybody's just rewards? A sequel to Alicia's story, Unfinished Business.

Notes

Author's Note I ~ This story is a direct sequel to Alicia's story, Unfinished Business, and will make no sense if you have not read hers first. My story begins exactly a year after her story ends. I've never done a sequel to someone else's work before, but the muse would not let this one go!

See the end of the work for more notes

"Lizzy, they'll be here any minute," Jane said as she burst into her sister's room. "Wow, you look fantastic!"

"Thanks," Elizabeth replied with a smile, smoothing one hand down the fabric of the beautiful Regency gown she wore. She glanced in the mirror again to make sure the flowers she'd woven into her hair were staying put. "Will and I decided to stick with our theme from last year. It's kind of a tradition now."
"Jane!" Charles' exuberant voice called. "Where are you guys?"

"Coming!" his fiancée called back. She grabbed her sister's hand. "Come on, you're beautiful, let's go!"

Laughing, Elizabeth hurried down the hall after her.

The men stood in the entryway. Elizabeth watched fondly as her sister greeted Charles with a smile and a soft kiss, and then she turned to her own date.

Her William.

He stood before her, hands behind his back, dressed in a dark tailcoat and an elegant waistcoat, every inch the handsome, fine-figured Regency gentleman. Her breath caught. They had been together for a year now, and her heart still raced every time she saw him. And then he smiled, dimples winking, and happiness rushed through her.

"Good evening, sir," she said, failing to repress a giggle as she dropped into a curtsey.

He blinked in surprise. Then, smoothly, he bowed. "Good evening, madam. Will you do me the honor of dancing the first, if you are not otherwise engaged?"

She laughed. "And all the ones after that, too. Improper as it may be." She moved toward him, brushing a hand over the fine material of his coat and glancing at the complicated knot of his cravat. "How many tries did it take you guys to tie that thing?"

Laughter rumbled through his chest. "Way too many. I think Charles was ready to strangle me with it. You look amazing, my Lizzy."

He drew her into his arms, and she sighed happily as his lips met hers. They lost themselves in each other until Charles' grinning voice finally intruded.

"Come on! We're late for dinner!"

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Elizabeth glanced at William as they rode in the back of Charles' SUV from the restaurant toward the ball. He held her hand tightly as he stared straight ahead, his eyes focused on something she couldn't see. He had been very quiet at dinner, even more than usual, and she could sense the tightly-coiled tension in him. His back was unyieldingly straight and stiff, his face an impassive mask she had not seen in a while, and she felt a tiny niggle of worry within her.

She squeezed his hand and he glanced at her, the mask crumbling just slightly as the corners of his lips curved up in a tiny smile.

"Everything okay?" she whispered.

Something flickered in his eyes, barely visible in the darkness of the backseat, but he nodded. "Fine. I can't wait to dance every dance with you."

Elizabeth had to laugh. "Quite a change from last year."
She could have bitten her tongue as his smile faded. "Elizabeth, I -- "

"Shh." She squeezed his hand again. "I shouldn't have said anything. We've both changed so much since this time last year."

Though he nodded again, she could tell he was losing himself in memory and self-reproachment. "I love you," she whispered.

He turned back to her, his eyes lit with a quiet joy. "And I love you, Elizabeth. So very much."

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The Netherfield Halloween Ball was in full swing when they arrived, and the four of them threw themselves happily into the fray.

They danced and mingled with friends and classmates, enjoying the evening. Elizabeth and William both caught glimpses here and there of another man and woman in Regency attire, but never together, and never at the same time.

They were grateful for the help they had been given at the previous year's ball, and had long wished to thank the other couple, but their matchmakers had seemed to vanish into thin air, never to be seen again at that ball or anywhere on campus. Elizabeth and William had playfully talked of ghosts and curses and star-crossed lovers, both aware -- and neither saying -- that the whole thing made them uneasy.

Elizabeth tried to relax into William's arms as they swayed to a slow song, but he held her stiffly, his body taut and tense, his gaze once more miles away.

"Will, what's wrong?" she murmured.

He glanced down at her, and then away again. "Nothing," he said curtly.

"Please tell me?"

"I'm fine, Elizabeth."

"You're lying," she snapped, hurt by his tone and by his unwillingness to trust her with whatever was bothering him. Her wounded anger spurted hotly, flashing in her eyes, igniting his. They glared at each other, motionless on the dance floor, and then he sighed and closed his eyes, resting his forehead against hers.

"I'm ruining it," he murmured sadly. "I'm doing everything all wrong."

Bewildered by the sorrow and the self-reproach in his voice, she smoothed away the lines on his worried brow, cupping his cheek in her palm. "You're not ruining anything, William. It'll be fine if you just relax. I know you're not that fond of large parties, but I thought we were having a good time."

He nuzzled into her touch, pressing a kiss to her palm before he grabbed her hand. "We are. Come on. Come with me."

"Where are we going?" she asked as he threaded rapidly through the couples on the dance floor,
leaving her to dodge hurriedly along in his wake. "Will, wait!" she laughed as she tried to keep up with his quick stride. "Your legs are too long!"

The sounds of the ball faded away, leaving only the thrumming pulse of the music as they walked through the quiet halls of the old house.

"I don't think we're supposed to be here tonight," she whispered. "I think this area's off-limits during the ball."

"I don't care," he shot back as he opened the door to the library and switched on the overhead lights. He closed the door behind them and led her to one of the comfortable reading chairs set up before the no-longer-functional fireplace.

"Will you sit? Please," he added as an afterthought. He cleared his throat, his fists clenching briefly before he clasped his hands together behind his back. "I wanted to do this later tonight, after the ball, but..."

He trailed off, and she did as he asked, sitting slowly, more than a little uneasy now at his brusque tone and anxious air. The little bit of worry she'd been feeling all night threatened to grow into a full-blown panic attack.

Why are we here? she thought desperately as he ran a hand through his hair and paced away from her and then back. Surely, he wouldn't have gone through all this -- the costume and the ball and everything -- if he was going to break up with her. Would he?

And then he dropped to one knee before her and took her hands in his, and she realized exactly why he was so nervous.

"Oh," she breathed, and tears sprang to her eyes.

"Elizabeth," he started, his voice strangled, and he cleared his throat again and swallowed hard. He slid his hands from hers to tug anxiously at the tight collar and cravat he wore, simultaneously shifting his balance so that he was no longer awkwardly kneeling on his coattails.

"How did any man ever do this dressed like this?" he muttered. She laughed, unable to help herself, and the tension eased somewhat. He took her hands again, and she smiled at him, lost in the storm of anxiety in his beautiful eyes.

She wanted to blurt out yes!, to tell him not to worry, to comfort and soothe him, but more than anything, she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"Elizabeth," he started again, slightly more confidently this time. "We have spent a year together, and it has been the happiest year I've ever known. You make my life a joy, every single day, and I hope... I hope that you have been as happy as I have. You -- your love -- has changed me so much, has made me realize at last the kind of man I want to be, and I want... I want to spend the rest of my life trying to be that man, to be a man worthy of you, and of your love. I want to spend my life with you, taking care of you, making you happy and seeing you smile. I love you, my Elizabeth, so very much. Will you do me the honor of accepting my hand and making a life with me? Will you marry me?"

Her tears spilled free as she beamed at him. "Yes. Oh, yes, William, I will. I love you so much!"

Elated, he shot to his feet, pulling her up out of the chair and into his arms, embracing her so tightly that she gasped. She slid her arms around him and held him just as tightly, and she had only a moment to see the expression of heartfelt delight in his shining eyes before he kissed her.
The kiss was hot and hungry, and he groaned into her mouth as his hands slid down to cup her curves, molding her body closely to his. She tangled her fingers in his curls and held him to her, sighing into the kiss.

Reluctantly, she pulled back to breathe, gasping as he trailed soft kisses down her neck. She breathed his name, tugging at his hair to bring his mouth back to hers, and then the lights went out.

Startled, they stepped back from each other.

There was a whoosh from the fireplace as a blazing fire sprang into life from nothing, and they glanced around, disoriented. The modern books and shelving units and library tables were gone, replaced by gleaming wood and gilded leather bindings. The plush, comfortable, contemporary club chairs had disappeared, and in their place stood beautiful, elegant antique wingbacks. The room was dim and shadows were everywhere, since the only light came from the fire and a few well-placed wall sconces -- the kind that held candles, not decorative light bulbs.

"What the hell?" William muttered. Blindly, he reached for her hand, and she squeezed his as she stared around the room in disbelief.

They both flinched at the sudden sound of the doorknob rattling angrily, their alarmed gazes jumping to where the heavy wooden door remained closed.

They watched in shock as a spectral version of the door flew open and the eerie, wraithlike figure of a man in Regency dress strode through it -- and consequently, straight through the real wooden door -- before slamming the ghostly door shut behind himself.

A quiet gasp slipped from Elizabeth as she recognized the man she had seen William speaking with at last year's ball, and William squeezed her hand at the sound. She and William silently moved closer to each other, stepping back into the shadows as the man paced and prowled angrily around the room, muttering to himself, the tails of his coat swinging wildly behind him.

"Will," she whispered, her voice quivering, and he squeezed her hand once more. She understood the gesture was a plea for silence, and she nodded, but she had to know if she was the only one who recognized him. "That's -- "

"I know," he breathed, his own voice just as shaky. Wrapping his arm around her, he held her close and gently rubbed her trembling arm.

The agitated phantom was still stalking around the library, and he passed so near to them that they felt the current of brutally cold air that trailed in his wake. They both shivered.

"Impertinent, infuriating, maddening, bewitching woman!" the spirit snapped angrily. "No!"

He stood in the center of the room, his fists clenched at his sides as he glared at the closed door. He took in a deep breath, and they watched a flurry of emotions pass rapidly over his features. Longing, fury, sorrow, and finally, resolve.

"No," he repeated, his voice firm.

He walked to the fireplace, leaning one arm against the mantel as he stared into the roaring flames.

"I shall conquer this," he said softly as the clock on the mantel began to chime for midnight.

"I shall!" he repeated, his voice stronger now, just as the last chime hit and everything plunged into darkness once more.
The lights came back up. Angry spirit and gilded leather bindings and blazing fire were gone, and only the modern library remained, bathed in the cheery glow of incandescent lighting.

Blinking painfully in the sudden brightness, the thoroughly shaken and newly engaged couple leaned into each other, uncomfortably pressed up against the cold metal of the shelving cart.

"Was that real?" she asked in bewilderment.

William strode over to peer into the fireplace. It was cold and empty, covered in a thin layer of dust. He turned back to her, opening and closing his mouth a few times before he sighed.

"I have no idea."

Needing him, she crossed the room, slipping into his arms. He held her tightly.

"I think it was," she said quietly as she thought of the angry, miserable man they'd just seen, and the quietly desolate woman to whom she'd spoken the previous year. "I think it was real, and I think they're both incredibly unhappy, and I think they're trapped here. Oh, Will."

She buried her face in his chest, and he kissed the crown of her head, deeply troubled.

William Darcy was a logical, reasonable man. He'd never believed in ghosts or spirits or Halloween curses, but then, he'd never seen any of it with his own eyes before. Now, he'd smelled the wax of the candles and felt both the heat of the fire and that horrible, freezing draft that followed in the spirit's wake.

"Even if it is real," he answered hesitantly, "What can we do? Who would even believe us? Everyone would think we're just making it up, trying to add to the rumors that this place is haunted. Everyone talks about the ghosts, but no one I know has ever seen anything. At least... not until now."

"I know, but we owe them so much, Will!"

He gently wiped her tears with his thumbs, stroking the soft skin of her cheeks.

"You're right, we do owe them. Without them, we might never have overcome everything that stood between us, but Elizabeth, what can we do? When I... when I talked to him, he told me that he chose his path, chose to give her up."

"She said the same thing."

"And what we just saw seems to confirm that. They're not really star-crossed lovers, sweetheart. They weren't ripped away from each other or forced apart. They made their decision, they chose their own path."

She sighed. "I know. I know they did, and I don't know how we can help them. I can't help but think that they wanted us to be happy. They wouldn't have done what they did last year otherwise, right? I just... I hate to think of them being so unhappy when I'm so ridiculously happy."

He gazed into her eyes. Everything they'd just seen, the existence of paranormal phenomena, the fate of the two ghostly lovers -- it all faded into nothingness as his euphoria came rushing back. She said yes! he thought jubilantly. "Are you, my Lizzy? Are you happy?"

She laughed, her misgivings about the fate of their matchmakers giving way to delight in the face of his obvious joy. "How can you even ask me that, Will? Of course I am! This is the happiest day of my life! Or, I guess, since it's after midnight now, yesterday was, and today I'm even happier!"
He chuckled as he wrapped his arm around her and steered her toward the door. "I'm very glad," he answered. "And today, we'll go ring shopping."

"Ooh!" She wriggled in happy anticipation. "Come on, we have to find Jane and Charles."

They paused at the door, both glancing back at the cold hearth.

"We'll do some research," William said, firm resolution in his voice. "I don't know where, or how, or what kind, but we'll look into it. For them."

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh. "That's my William. Logical and decisive and already developing a plan of action."

He smiled down into her eyes. "I am so proud to be your William, my Lizzy."

"Oh my God, we're getting married. We have so much to plan!"

Talking animatedly of the future, they left the library to the past.

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The Library at Netherfield Hall
One Halloween Later, 11 A.M.

Sunlight shone brightly through the tall library windows, benevolently bathing the radiant couple that stood side by side, resplendent in their Regency wedding finery.

The small group of guests that sat watching them were similarly attired, some fidgeting as they tugged uncomfortably at the unfamiliar clothing.

"I, William, take thee, Elizabeth..."

The man's confident voice rang through the room, easily reaching another couple that stood silent in the shadows at the very back of the library. They also wore Regency finery, though theirs spoke of the ballroom rather than the wedding breakfast.

They were given just one day a year to be visible, to be present, to be in each other's company, and it was indescribably beautiful -- and inexpressibly heartbreaking -- to have been given the opportunity to witness this triumphant celebration of the couple in the sunlight. They watched with a painful mix of envy, joy, and sorrow on their faces.

"That might have been us," the ghostly man in the shadows said, his voice heavy with regret and just barely loud enough for the specter of the woman beside him to hear. "If I had not been so proudly disdainful."

"And if I had not been so willfully prejudiced," she answered, her voice an anguished whisper.

They stood close enough to touch, but they did not, could not. They strained desperately toward each other, aching for the all-consuming passion of an ardent kiss, the calming reassurance of a tender embrace, even the simple solace of a gentle handclasp, but contact was a comfort they had
been denied for more than a century and a half, when they had first found themselves haunting the halls of an empty, abandoned estate, unhappy shadows of the foolish and misguided young people they had once been.

The man smiled sadly as the groom, his face shining with pride, slid a simple band of gold onto the bride's finger. "They will be very happy."

"Oh yes," the woman murmured, her voice wistful as she watched the bride gaze lovingly up at her groom. "Yes, they will."

They lapsed into silence as the ceremony continued, and the couple in the sunlight were pronounced man and wife.

Mr. and Mrs. William Darcy shared their first kiss as a married couple, and the spirits watched longingly, the yearning of centuries quivering between them. One shifted on ghostly feet, neither was sure which, and their fingers brushed.

Astonished, they stared at each other. Slowly, disbelievingly, they clasped hands, entwining their fingers.

"Elizabeth," he whispered, awestruck.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam!"

Congratulations and applause for the couple in the sunlight echoed through the library, but the spirits in the shadows heard none of it. Wrapped in each other's arms, lost in a passionate embrace, they faded from view, finally, finally at peace.

End Notes

Author's Note II ~ When I read Alicia's original story, I was captivated by the idea of these poor, trapped lovers. It reminds me a lot of the poignant BtVS episode, I Only Have Eyes for You, and I couldn't stand the thought of the ghosts not being at peace. After reading the original story again, I'm not sure if their meeting at the end of it is supposed to reflect that they've resolved things, but I couldn't let it go without absolute proof.

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