

Chapter 4 – A Disturbance at Netherfield Park



In one household in the neighbourhood, happiness was hard to be felt. Mr. Darcy had returned to Netherfield that evening after securing his own happiness, only too acutely aware of how his news would likely affect his friend.

Bingley was in no fit state that evening to discuss anything, having had the better part of a bottle of brandy. Darcy found him fast asleep and in a precarious position in a billiard room chair, clutching the bottle with a glass of the liquid spilled over at his feet. He summoned Fossett to discreetly have him put to bed less one of the lower servant found their master in such a dishevelled fashion.

The following morning as Darcy sat at the breakfast table, the sudden loud banging open of the door assaulted him. Darcy watched with some alarm as Bingley entered and slowly negotiated the path from the breakfast room door to the breakfast table. Fitzwilliam wondered to himself how Charles could have managed such a thing: to arise so early in the morning after such a night.

And Bingley's look did not inspire confidence; it could only be described as pitiful: his shirt, haphazardly put on and buttoned, was dirty and wrinkled; his skin, pale; and his hair, once so carefully arranged was now matted on one side, from, as it appeared, as if he had slept on the floor.

After many a laboured step and finally having made it to the table, Bingley sighed heavily as if the task of walking had taken all of the energy he could spare. He rubbed at a swollen red nose with the back of his dirty sleeve and looked up for the first time as if he had just noticed Darcy in the room. Charles looked over the attire of his companion, taking in the fact that Fitzwilliam was dressed in his hunting clothes.

“Well, well,” said Bingley, his voice hoarse and dripping with sarcasm, “Someone is certainly very smart looking this morning; Darcy, you shouldn't have.”

Bingley did not wait for a reaction; he merely cast a disgusted glance at the breakfast foods laid out on the sideboard and not seeing what he required, slapped the palm of his hand to the top of the table to get his servants attention. “Fossett,” he bellowed, “bring me a bottle of something!”

Fossett hesitated and looked to Mr. Darcy as if asking for approbation. However, Darcy refused to meet the servant's gaze.

“I say, Fossett,” yelled Bingley, this time pounding the table with his fist, “are you deaf, man?”

The butler snapped to attention and immediately stepped over to the liquor cabinet in the corner. After searching for a time, he produced a bottle of light dessert wine. Bingley watched him narrowly, frowning his brow at the servant's odd choice, but made no objection.

Darcy merely attended to his coffee and toast, having decided not to interfere in how Bingley managed his household or, if he could possibly help it, anything else for that matter.

“So,” said Bingley eyeing his friend suspiciously, “What are your plans this morning? I can see very well that they do not involve me.”

Darcy took his time wiping his lips before answering; he was formulating a plan.

“I was going to mention it to you last night, however, by the state you were in, if I did, you would certainly have forgotten. Nevertheless, I will mention it now; I shoot with Mr. Bennet this morning.”

Bingley rolled the information around in his muddled brain for a moment. He had no idea why Darcy would be spending the morning with that gentleman; in fact, he knew very well that Darcy wasn't on particularly friendly terms with any of his neighbours. Bingley began repeating with increasing incredulity, “Mr. Bennet? Mr. Bennet?”

“Yes, Bingley,” said Darcy impatiently, “I shoot this morning with Mr. Bennet?”

Fossett stepped forward tentatively and set a half a glass of wine in front of his master, earning himself a forceful reproach. “I asked for a whole bottle, damn you!” cried Bingley in an agitated manner. Fossett rushed over to retrieve the bottle immediately.

At that moment Darcy was just about to take a bite of his eggs, but paused at the uncharacteristic behaviour of his friend and set his fork down having lost his appetite at such a display.

Bingley continued on as if nothing unusual had happened and simply smirked at his friend as if daring him to interfere. “And when did you and Mr. Bennet become so friendly?” he asked, casually reaching for the bottle of wine Fossett had just set in front of him.

Darcy didn't want it to come out the way that it did, but thought that perhaps a certain amount of shock would rouse Bingley out of his ill humour. “Mr. Bennet and I have become friendly, as you put it, ever since I became engaged to his most beautiful daughter.” Darcy purposely meant to be vague: Bingley's drunken behaviour was beginning to wear on him.

To Bingley however, Mr. Bennet's most beautiful daughter could only mean Jane, and that, in itself, was enough to compel Bingley into action.

“I will kill you!” shouted Bingley tossing the bottle aside as he dove across the table and grabbed a hold of Darcy's neck cloth, pulling them both and the contents of the table unceremoniously to the floor.

Fossett, although stunned, had the tact to dismiss the servants waiting at table and followed them out and closed the door. To the young footmen, Mr. Bingley had always been the most amiable of masters and it was certainly a surprise to see him act in such a way over the last few days. But now, all his odd behaviour now made perfect sense to them: he had suffered a disappointment of the heart and in his present circumstance; all recent acts of rudeness and bad manners were instantly forgiven.

Inside the breakfast room, Bingley was no match for Darcy. A week of drowning his sorrows in drink and idleness had made him weak and uncoordinated and Darcy was readily able to pull himself away.

Standing and straightening his clothes, Darcy said calmly, though slightly out of breathe, "Charles, even though you don't deserve it, yesterday, as I left Longbourn after meeting with Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet kindly asked us both to join them for dinner this evening. Naturally, I gave your assent and we are expected, together, at seven this evening. I strongly suggest you use that interval to bathe and shave and do whatever is necessary to make yourself presentable again. *Jane*, as I may now call her, asked me to assure you that you would be most welcome."

A flash of white-hot anger coursed through Bingley's blood. "Oh, so it is Jane now, is it? You backstabbing devil in sheep's clothing! You are a blackguard of the first stripe," was Bingley's forceful and, to own the truth, somewhat tearful reply.

Darcy remained composed, secretly relishing the effect his words had on his friend. "Oh, and Charles," added Darcy calmly, "I want you to know that I am borrowing your double barrel shotgun this morning."

"Yes, that's right, take it all and sundry. Do you want Netherfield as well?"

"At present, the gun is all that I require." Then adding a hint of a smile, added, "Well, that and my lady's sweetest love." Darcy then pulled his greatcoat from the back of one of the chairs and casually put it on.

Bingley cried out in rage, "All that time you persuaded me against Jane, how could I have been so blind? I see it all clearly now: you wanted her for yourself, you have always wanted her for yourself, ever since that first assembly ball in Meryton; I remember you saying how lovely you thought she was."

Darcy was unconcerned; he rolled his eyes as Bingley was talking nonsense now. Darcy began to slowly put on his gloves.

Bingley continued. "Then, to put a finishing flourish to your evil plan, you sent me over to Longbourn so that I might make a fool of myself and you knowing all along that Jane would refuse me so that she could accept you. You were just bidding your time, weren't you? I have never in my life met with such treacherous and dishonourable behaviour. If such a one as you called me your best friend, I would hate to see how you treat your enemies."

Darcy put one of his hands on the back of a chair and the other on his hip and now stared down at Bingley for a moment before asking, "Are you quite finished?"

Bingley's anger only increased at Darcy's cavalier manner. "Get out of my house this instant and never set foot in it again!" Bingley looked half crazed and struggled to pull himself up by the wall, only to slide down into a helpless heap upon the floor.

Darcy felt then and there that his friend had had enough. "I will return sometime after luncheon to make myself ready for dinner. I intend to be ready by six this evening; I hope you will be ready at that time when I come downstairs to collect you."

He turned briskly, opened the door and walked out, but immediately leaned back in, glancing sharply at Bingley as he sat on the floor staring up at him in a fury. "Oh, by the bye, my dear fellow, all of Mr. Bennet's daughters are lovely in their own unique ways, and as I have said before, Miss Bennet is very pretty, however, I have always fancied Elizabeth as the most beautiful."



Mr. Henry Bennet was never what one would call a stupid man. The fact the he had a full brace of pheasants and Darcy, with his general inattentiveness, penchant for smiling idiotically at the oddest moments, and the reality of his having merely two birds did not go unnoticed.

He chuckled to himself and briefly thought of making sport of his future son-in-law's marksmanship but soon thought better of it; Darcy did not appear to be the type who would willingly be laughed at. Therefore, it was with thoughts of mercy that Mr. Bennet ended their morning excursions, and suggested that they retreat to the warmth and comforts of Longbourn Manor.

As the gentlemen approached the house, Henry Bennet took particular notice of the flutter of curtains indicating that someone was observing them from the drawing room window and he knew very well it could not be his wife, Mary, or Kitty. Mrs. Bennet, having heard the news concerning Elizabeth's offer of marriage the night before, spared no time for any of them that morning and hastened out the door first thing to her sister, Mrs. Philips, dragging her younger daughters behind.

Henry looked a little closer. He knew perfectly well that it was not Jane. His eldest daughter was blessed with a definite lack of curiosity in things that did not rightfully concern her and who, he was certain, was not the type to peer at gentlemen through windows.

This naturally left Elizabeth, and if she chose to pry he would make certain to give her a good show. He demised his servants and the men departed with the birds. He also knew that this would probably be his last moment alone with Mr. Darcy so he took his opportunity, for he had much to discuss.

"Mr. Darcy," said Mr. Bennet, touching the young man on the arm to halt him, "before we enter the house and you become the singular object of attention to my dear Elizabeth," (here Darcy smiled much as he had done the entire day) "might I have a word with you on a matter of some delicacy?"

Darcy was curious and at the same time cautious. "You may speak to me on any matter that you wish, sir."

"It concerns certain... monetary obligations."

Darcy made haste to reassure his companion. "Mr. Bennet, as I said yesterday, your daughter's fortune is of no concern to me. I was perfectly serious when I said I would take her if she were shoeless, destitute, and without a farthing to her name." A fetching portrait of a barefooted Elizabeth entered his mind; he smiled to himself but had the decency and the common sense to turn away.

"No, no, you mistake my meaning, sir. It does concern money, but not as it concerns my elder daughter; I fear this concerns your aid to my youngest and most foolish offspring."

All cheerful reflections fled Darcy's mind and thoughts of embarrassment now intruded. He turned around but had trouble meeting his future father-in-law's eye. "Mr. Bennet, I will not ask

how you came to such knowledge, but as I said to your daughter, Elizabeth, I would just as soon forget the matter entirely.”

“Sir, you are very kind, but forgetting the matter for my part is impossible. You must see that it now falls under the providence of honour. Now, as to a schedule of repayment—”

Darcy panicked; the mere thought of Elizabeth’s father repaying him for something that he thought of as his own fault made him feel horribly guilty. “Sir, it is unnecessary to speak on the matter further. The situation concerning Mrs. Wickham was due in part to my failure to warn the neighbourhood of my former god brother’s devious character. You must know that I will never seek repayment for a thing that I brought down on all of you myself.”

Mr. Bennet could see that Darcy was discomposed but felt he needed to press the offer at least one more time, if not for prides sake then definitely for the sake of actually seeing how violently in love this man was with his daughter.

“You take too much upon yourself, sir. You have been very kind to us all, but you must know that I clearly see where the fault actually lies; I am not so much of a coward to admit that I raised a very silly young woman and if there is any blame to be placed, it is firmly settled upon my shoulders.”

Mr. Bennet finished his speech and waited for the fireworks to start and to his great delight; it did not take very long.



Jane sat over her work, thinking of Mr. Bingley. Now that her sister was engaged to marry his friend, Mr. Darcy, she knew that she could not proceed any further down her path of dislike and remorse. She knew she must somehow find a way to make amends to him for her reproachful words without further engaging his affection.

Elizabeth stood at the drawing room window watching the exchange upon the lawn. She saw nothing to worry her at first; in actuality she enjoyed seeing her father and beloved talking together.

“Lizzy,” said Jane, frustrated with her own thoughts and wanting to divert her ruminations elsewhere, “What do you do there?”

“I’m watching Papa having a conversation with my Mr. Darcy.”

Jane smiled to herself. Lizzy had a faraway quality to her voice at that moment and it pleased her to see her sister so much in love.

“Oh dear,” said Elizabeth, suddenly, “Come here Jane; something is wrong.”

Jane went immediately to her sister’s side, looking out of the window herself. Both gentlemen were at a slight distance from the house, yet, Mr. Darcy had all the appearance of a person in high dudgeon. His arms flailed about his head as he made wild gestures; one moment looking severely impatient and the next looking highly offended. Her father, on the other hand, stood by

calmly, his arms crossing his chest and his head bobbing up and down, and, if Jane was not mistaken, he seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

Elizabeth was not as observant as her sister. That her father and her fiancé would stand out on the lawn quarrelling caused pangs of grief to enter her heart. She knew not what to make of it and wanted very much to run out to put a stop to the unpleasant scene.

Jane had seen enough and knew enough of her father's odd ways to know that he was simply making sport of the young man for some outlandish reason. She wondered at her sister Elizabeth for not plainly seeing the signs of it. Jane did not know what to think; it was not like Elizabeth to be so unperceptive; clearly love caused blindness in other ways.

"Come away, dearest," said Jane, gently, sensible that they should not be espying the events upon the lawn. "Father will not thank us for intruding in such a way." She tried easing Elizabeth away, but her sister was rooted to the spot.

Elizabeth watched on in dread as her father suddenly turned away only to be grabbed by the arm and held back by Mr Darcy. She gasped, drawing Jane's notice back to the window.

The gentlemen's conversation then went on for several more minutes, then, they both turned suddenly and headed for the house. Elizabeth, realizing that she did not want to be caught watching from the window in the manner of one of her sillier sisters, immediately drew back and began to pace, deep in thought.

"What should I do Jane, what should I do? Should I go into the hall and see what the matter is?"

"No Lizzy, what I think you should do is to sit down and calm yourself; have a biscuit."

Elizabeth surprised at Jane's lack of sympathy, rebelled, and ran to the door. No sooner was she out of the room did she hear the door to her father's library close with a violent snap. She ran back into the drawing room.

"Jane, they have gone into my father's book-room and father has slammed the door. Oh dear, oh dear, what can be wrong?"

Jane replied as soothingly as she could. "I am sure that whatever it is, the gentlemen will discuss it and resolve their differences. Mr. Darcy is a sensible man and father will hear him out, whatever the concern is."

"No, Jane, I have seen Fitzwilliam so angry once before and this does not bode well; I just know it." Elizabeth began to pace.

"Calm yourself, Lizzy. Working yourself up into such a state will do no one any good."

Elizabeth then began to fidget. She wrung her hands, she hugged herself, and tried her best to heed her sister's advice but with no success. The only thought that continually raced around her mind was the thought of Mr. Darcy leaving Longbourn in anger, never to see her again.

After ten minutes in such a manner, she could not stand the agony of not knowing any longer. Once again she ran from the drawing room and took the few short steps that led to the library door and knocked forcefully.

“Come,” she heard her father say.

Elizabeth flung the door open expecting the worst, but the scene that greeted her eyes brought much astonishment. There sat Mr. Darcy and her father in two chairs facing each other, each calmly enjoying a glass of port.

“Ah, Lizzy, just the person we were just speaking of, come in, come in. Your Mr. Darcy here certainly drives a hard bargain.”

“Bargain, sir?” asked Elizabeth in wonder as she stepped in.

“Yes and a good barter he has made, too. Well then, Mr. Darcy,” said Mr. Bennet turning back to his guest, “we have an agreement! When you receive your special licence in a few days, you may carry off my second daughter as soon as you please. I hope you know that I will have to pay dearly, for my wife had her heart set on travelling up to London to shop for wedding clothes. But, knowing my Lizzy as I do, that is of little matter; she can marry you in any old thing; in fact the very dress she’s wearing today will suit.”

Elizabeth looked down at her modest frock as several emotions played across her face at once: shock, dismay, and anger. She herself had looked forward to an engagement of several months in order to plan the wedding of her dreams. How could her father be so callous, how could Fitzwilliam be so unfeeling as to...?

She then looked more closely at the scene before her. Fitzwilliam had his lips firmly pressed together, trying desperately to control his laughter. Her father on the other hand was all seriousness. He sat on the edge of his chair, staring up at her in earnest with the exception of a hint of merriment giving his eyes a cheerful glow.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Apparently she had been taken in.

Her father stood and came over and quickly kissed his daughter on the forehead saying quietly, “And that is what you get for spying out of windows, Miss Lizzy.” He felt no need to discuss with his daughter the real gist of his conversation with Darcy. He knew all along that the young man would rant and rave about his love for his daughter and no more talk of repayments and compensations would be necessary.

Elizabeth, for her part did not suspect anything as to the content of their conversation, she only felt all the embarrassment of having been seen watching it.

“Well, Mr. Darcy,” said Mr. Bennet, “I think you may now use my room as long as you will to write your letters. If you will excuse me, sir, I promised Sir William that I’d come and have a look at his new mare before the morning is done; Lizzy, why don’t you offer your young man some tea?” Mr. Bennet grabbed his hat and walking stick and was gone and seemingly had no concern in leaving the two young people alone.

Elizabeth now crossed her arms across her chest; she was devising a punishment suitable for such a one as the Master of Pemberley.

Darcy could see the look of perturbation on her face and felt the need to speak first, though a little sheepishly. “Your father is correct, you know; it was very wrong of you to pry.”

“Oh, and your deception does not hold the same level of wrongness, sir?”

Darcy simply smiled up to her; she had him dead to rights. He stood and walked over to her and repeated her father’s salutation by kissing her on the forehead only he chose to linger a little longer.

Elizabeth, seeing what he was doing, asked cheekily, “Did I hear my father correctly. Do you not have letters to write, sir?”

Darcy smirked, “I find my current occupation much more enjoyable.” He drew away a little hesitantly and looked down upon her pretty face. “But, if you will only give me a pen you may have the distinct pleasure holding the sheets of paper and dutifully handing them to me as I require while I write of my happiness to all my relations.”

Elizabeth slapped his arm playfully and replied, “I fear, sir, that as much as I would enjoy sitting at you feet, mending your pins and admiring your handwriting, I have letters of my own to write.”

Elizabeth moved to her father’s desk, opened a drawer, and withdrew several sheets of paper and an extra pen. She divided the stack in half and set one off to one side. Darcy brought over a spare chair from the other end of the room. He positioned that chair at one end of the large desk, leaving Mr. Bennet’s own desk chair in its original place and pulled it out for Elizabeth to take a seat.

“Why thank you, Mr. Darcy.”

“You are very welcome, Miss Bennet.”

They smiled to each other as Darcy took the spare seat.

“Well, who shall you write to, Miss Bennet?”

“I think firstly to my Aunt Gardiner, and then Charlotte,” she said, indicating her small circle of correspondents. “Might I ask who you shall write to, sir?”

Darcy contemplated the task. There were very few Darcy relatives to consider and neither of them were what he would call near relations. Of the Fitzwilliam family, however, there were many to consider.

“Oh dear, let’s see; notwithstanding Georgiana, I will write to the Fitzwilliams: Lord and Lady Matlock first, then to Lady Catherine, naturally.”

“Yes, naturally,” said Elizabeth smiling slightly, wondering what that lady’s reaction to the news would be. Fitzwilliam continued, “Then there are my Fitzwilliam cousins, Lord Whitfield, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Lady Adele.”

Elizabeth thought for a long moment; it had never, until that moment, dawned on her that there would be other people in Mr Darcy’s life for her to meet.

Fitzwilliam now studied the changing emotions on Elizabeth’s face. “What is the look for?”

“Look, sir? What look?”

“The look that clearly says, ‘Oh, my dear, what have I gotten myself into?’”

She smiled and said, “I know I am being ridiculous, but there seems to be so many new names and places that I will have to learn.” She then turned away slightly as she was seized with more pressing thoughts. “Take the Matlock’s, for instance, will they accept me as their niece, do you think?” Fitzwilliam began to answer her and give his assurances that they would both love her instantly, but Elizabeth had now taken a different course. “Oh dear, how am I ever going to run a house the size of Pemberley, and who do I invite first, Lady Catherine or Lady Matlock? I assume we should have Lady Catherine first; after all, she did have me as a guest at Rosings Park. Then, there is Lady Matlock to consider. Would it not have a very odd appearance if I did not invite her first? She is, after all, the wife of an Earl.”

Fitzwilliam Darcy could do nothing but laugh; Elizabeth was working herself up into such a state and all for nothing. “Fitzwilliam, this is not funny! Stop laughing at me!”

“I am not laughing at you, dearest; I’m laughing at the situation. No one has made such a fuss over who to invite and who not to invite to Pemberley in so long, that it quiet gladdens my heart.” His face suddenly softened, his manner became very tender, and he simply said, “Thank you.”

Elizabeth, seeing the sudden change in his continence, reached out and touched his arm. “Why do you thank me?”

“You must understand, it has just been Georgiana and myself on our own for so long. I thank you because you will be such a welcome addition into our home; you have saved us both from ourselves and our quiet little lives. So, on behalf of the both of us, thank you for simply saying yes. No man could be more fortunate in his choice of wife.”

Elizabeth could not be insensible to all that he was saying. She moved closer and embraced him.

While she laid her head upon his shoulder, all thoughts of doubts as to the life of the Mistress of Pemberley faded. As long as she had the man that she loved at her side she was certain she could face anything. However, for some extraordinary reason her thoughts at this time did not navigate towards Fitzwilliam Darcy or, for that matter to any member of his illustrious family. All of her contemplations for the future were now centred on her sister Jane.



Before dinner that evening, Elizabeth was not nervous for herself; it was all for her sister. Her nervousness compelled her to toy with a loose thread on her shawl, which led her to direct her attentions onto the twisting of her necklace moments later. When her hand began worrying a stray curl, her mother immediately stepped forward to slap it away.

“Leave it be, Lizzy! Why do you keep fidgeting so? If you keep tugging at your hair, it will stay that way and make Mr. Darcy think better of his decision to marry you and then were will you be? I for one can not take care of you after your father is dead.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and said teasingly, “Mother, if I felt that Mr. Darcy’s opinion of me was of so slight an inclination, I would never have agreed to marry him in the first place. If the sight of my ankles deep in mud had not scared him away, I doubt that ill-groomed hair will have much of an effect.”

Satisfied with her speech, Elizabeth made to sit down. However, to Mrs. Bennet, a wrinkled gown was tantamount to a capital offence and she prevented it. “Stay where you are, Miss Lizzy, you will crease your gown. I’ll not have the Mr. Darcy saying that the Bennet girls are common ragamuffins. Anyway, I hear the carriage now approaching; stand straight Jane, shoulders back Kitty.”

Elizabeth turned to her father who stood by her side in the foyer and shared a private look of weariness. Mrs. Bennet had been in a state all day and now she had the entire family assembled in the front hall to await their esteemed guests for the last fifteen minutes. When Kitty chose that moment to break out in a fit of nervous coughing, Mr. Bennet then got in on the diversions.

“You time your coughs ill, Kitty. If you keep coughing at moments such as these, Mr. Darcy will not wish to marry your sister, Lizzy, and then where will all you be when I am gone; starving in the hedgerows, I’ll wager. Come to think of it, I don’t know why I care, for I shall be dead.”

Jane smiled at her father which prompted Elizabeth to continue teasingly along the same bent.

“And Jane, I don’t know why you smile so? You know Mr. Darcy once claimed within my hearing that you are apt to smile too much. Wipe that smirk off your face this instant! Would you have the Master of Pemberley say that the Bennet girls are all silly? Would you deprive me of my husband? Then where will we all be when our father is dead?”

Mr. Bennet, caught up in Elizabeth’s nonsense, turned to have a bit of fun at Mary’s expense. “And Mary…” but Mary stood there the perfect picture of propriety so he thought better of it and immediately lost interest in their game.

Mrs. Bennet was highly incensed and refused to listen to either one of them. She never understood their need for humour in such a situation. Anyway, Hill was ready to open the door and for now, that took all of her concentration.

Darcy came in first with a shy smile. His eyes searched out his intended, but attentions to his prospective in-laws took first precedence.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, thank you so much for having us.”

“The pleasure is all ours, I am sure,” Mrs. Bennet gushed enthusiastically, her first time seeing her perspective son-in-law since she heard of the engagement and now busily calculating Elizabeth’s expected pin money and wardrobe allowance in her head.

Darcy now stepped aside to permit attentions to his companion. Bingley seemed to shrink away as all their eyes turned toward him. It was his first time back at Longbourn since that fateful day and he had never in his life felt so ill at ease. However, Darcy had assured him more than once on the way over that Jane had asked for his attendance most particularly. Naturally he was nervous but he felt that this was probably his best opportunity to find some way to have Jane forgive him.

Mr. Bennet, who lately and so callously had made sport of the young man, immediately felt sorry for him. Though Mr. Bingley was impeccably dressed and well groomed, a slight shadow had formed around his usually bright eyes making the older man feel that he had probably suffered enough. Mr. Bennet made to welcome him more generously than even Darcy.

“Mr. Bingley, you are very welcome, sir. You have stayed away far too long. Please come in and enjoy yourself. We are delighted to have you amongst us again, are we not Jane?”

Jane smiled brightly and if she felt any trepidation on this meeting, it never showed. She was keenly aware that everyone was very much interested in how this first meeting would go on since the ill-conceived proposal, and Jane was determined that it would be a success.

“Hello, Mr. Bingley. I am so glad that you were able to accept my parent’s invitation.”

Bingley was taken aback by her manner. She seemed just as sweet and just as gentle as she always had been, but to him, even in all that kindness, he surmised that any feelings of love that Jane had once had for him were probably most assuredly gone. It pained him to believe it, but he took her hand none the less. And if he held it slightly longer than necessary and caressed Jane’s fingers in a loving way, Jane never let on.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet, you are very kind.”

Darcy let out a long held breath and when Elizabeth saw him do it, she let out her breath as well. They each exchanged a look of silent understanding, each glad that the moment of expectation was finally over.

Despite the palpable tension in the air, each member of the Bennet family was determined to entertain their two guests and dinner was an immensely enjoyable affair. Moreover, Mrs. Bennet was quite determined not let the situation between her eldest daughter and her neighbour rest. She sat Bingley to her left and Jane directly across from him at the dining room table; she knew from his seat that he would have the best view of her all throughout the meal and Bingley took full advantage of her proximity, surreptitiously glancing at Jane at moments when her attention was called elsewhere.

Mr. Bennet did his utmost duty to entertain them all. He regaled those assembled with tales of such humour that it drew out the laughter of the stoic Mr. Darcy (as he poked at the mysterious meat on his plate) and even the now reticent Mr. Bingley.

When the meal was over and the ladies withdrew into the drawing room, over port and cigars Darcy was gratified to see that even though it was his right as the affianced of the group to have most of Elizabeth’s father’s attention, he saw what Mr. Bennet was up to when he singled Bingley out as the beneficiary of most of his conversation.

“I did not know that you were a Downing College man, Mr. Bingley. I went to Queens, myself. Where did you lodge?”

“I had rooms at Beacon Hall.”

“I lodged at Ridley. What great days they were.”

Bingley's thoughts were in a whirl; he was so overwhelmed to be so singled out by his host that he suddenly blurted out, "Mr. Bennet, what you must think of me? I can hardly guess, but I do want to assure you that I have only the highest regard for your daughter."

Mr. Bennet smiled and as sorely as he was tempted to laugh at the young man before him, he resisted with all that was in him. "Now, Mr. Bingley, please, none of that, none of that," said Mr. Bennet, highly uncomfortable with Bingley's confession and hoping, somehow, that it all could be quickly forgot.

"But I trifled with the affections of the most affectionate creature in the world. I went away, never taking proper leave of you all and left that gentle creature to believe that I was all that was discourteous. No wonder she refused me; now wonder she thinks that I am all that is thoughtless. How you all can bear to look at me is a mystery."

"I assure you that no one here thinks ill of you. You are not the first young man to make a fool out of himself over one of my daughters. If you could have seen my cousin, Mr. Collins' vain attempts to woo one of them, you would laugh yourself senseless." Here Henry Bennet paused to wink at Darcy, causing that man to wonder what his future father-in-law meant. "So, you see, Mr. Bingley, I doubt if you will be the last."

Sensing that Bingley was in a frightful state and that this discussion might well head down some sort of emotional path which he did not wish to take, Mr. Bennet said, "Come gentlemen, let us join the ladies and see what ridiculous entertainments they have in store for us tonight. And if my middle daughter chooses to delight us with a song, I only ask that you forgive us now."



On entering the room, Darcy, who could never have enough of Elizabeth's presence, moved immediately to her side, taking a seat at the table where Elizabeth was set to pour the coffee. Mr. Bennet took his customary chair near the fire next to Mrs. Bennet. Kitty was employed with turning the pages at the pianoforte for Mary who had wisely chosen a simple concerto. This left Jane sitting on her own in the window seat.

Bingley, who came in lastly, looked around to see what was expected of him. Elizabeth was just about to urge him to take another seat at the table with Darcy, when Jane spoke up.

"Mr. Bingley, please join me; I do so want to hear news of your sisters."

Perplexed, Bingley moved forward to the other end of the room to Jane. She smiled and patted the seat next to her and moved over slightly to admit him. At this end of the room Jane knew their conversation could not be so well heard, for she had much to say.

"I thank you for letting me have the pleasure of sitting with you Miss Bennet," said Bingley timidly, "But, I must say, I am at a loss to understand what you mean; my sisters can not be a subject so palatable to you."

Jane continued to smile. "Excuse my little deception, Mr. Bingley, but it was the only way I could get you on your own this evening. I fear that everyone is determined to observe our every interaction."

Bingley blushed and looked at Jane's hands resting on her lap. That Jane had him so near again was delight enough, even though it caused his heart to ache that much more.

Jane, feeling the need for urgency lest someone should call her away, spoke quickly and quietly. "I wanted to ask your forgiveness, Mr. Bingley. I spoke rather harshly to you the other day, and I--" Bingley looked as if he would interrupt, so Jane then said, "Please, Mr. Bingley, this is hard enough for me to say as it is and I find that I can only get it out if you do not interrupt me."

Bingley silently nodded, for Jane had a look in her eyes of quiet determination and he feared for himself all the more.

"I have given the matter much thought and I know it would be uncharitable of me not to forgive you." Bingley brightened and Jane, instantly seeing the slight renewal of hope in his face, pressed on. "When I look back on this past year, I find that I only have myself to blame. I allowed myself to hope for more from you than I ever had a right to believe. The plain facts are these: You never once indicated to me that you held me in any special regard and I mistakenly let my imagination run wild. I will always think of you as the most amiable man of my acquaintance and hereafter I do hope that we can meet as friends."

Charles reached over slowly and let the tips of his fingers brush the tips of hers. "Miss Bennet, as much as I am grateful for your assurances of friendship, you must know that that is not my intention. I still mean to engage your warmest regard and I will not rest until I can call you my own."

Jane instantly saw her mistake and drew away her hand; to engage Mr. Bingley in this sort of conversation was pointless. She had hoped to inspire in him a need to carry on with his life in a way that did not involve herself.

Jane dropped her head and said almost in a whisper, "In light of my declaration, Mr. Bingley, you must know that I am perfectly serious."

"And, Miss Bennet," he said, leaning over and whispering into her ear, "you should know that in light of my former declaration you must know that I am, myself, perfectly serious."

Jane drew back and said, "Forgive me if I appear presumptuous, Mr Bingley, but surely if you went away for a time, you may..."

Bingley interrupted. "I will not leave Netherfield. Where would you have me go? Do you think for one second that I would set foot in my sister Hurst's home or in my London house with Caroline ready to take up residence with me again? No, I will never return there, especially after what they have both done to you, my most beloved, my most precious Jane?"

His voice was beseeching and Jane wanted so much to glance over but forced herself to look forward. Her heart was in a flutter to be called his most beloved and precious that she knew full well that if she let herself look into his sad blue eyes she would never be able to resist him again.

Bingley continued. "And Darcy; yes, look at him over there. He may call himself my great friend and yes, he may have rushed down here in a great hurry to see me through this disappointment, but we will never be what we once were; we shall never be such good friends again. So, this naturally leaves my removing to Pemberley out of the question. I have no family to speak of: my parents are dead and they had no sisters or brothers themselves to provide me with a pack of cousins with homes for me to escape to. No, Miss Bennet, you see, Netherfield is all I have now,

and I will never leave it and if I do, it will only be at the urging of my most sweet and most angelic wife.”

For Jane, the moment was almost too intense to bear; it was so intense in fact that they both did not hear Mrs. Bennet call for the card tables to be placed until Elizabeth walked up to touch her sister on the shoulder.

“Mr. Darcy and I are to play whist; will you not join our table, Jane, Mr. Bingley?”

Jane, clearly discomposed at all she had heard, broke away from Bingley’s hold over her, “Y-Yes, of course, Lizzy.”

“And you,” said Elizabeth turning to the gentleman, “Will you not join us as well, Mr. Bingley?”

Bingley still stared at Jane and caused her no little degree of discomfort. He slowly looked away from her to Elizabeth and hesitated before answering. He was acutely aware that if he continued in a close proximity to Jane Bennet his nerves would be torn to shreds, so he answered by saying, “Excuse me, Miss Elizabeth, but I was hoping to challenge Miss Catherine to a rousing game of Lottery tickets.”

Kitty, hearing her name in conjunction with her favourite game, immediately clapped in delight and began arranging the cards as Mr. Bingley stood and approached the card table. Mary, having no inclination or desire to play at cards, remained at the pianoforte playing soft concertos. Mrs. Bennet, who had received intelligence from her husband earlier that he had no desire to play, eagerly made up a fourth at the whist table partnering with Jane.

The Bennet household remained in this fashion until the two gentlemen departed. And later that night, when all in that household had gone to sleep, only one pair of eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling, strategising and planning for hours and hours, thinking only of Bingley.

And they were not Jane’s.