

Will You ...

A free gift to you
from

*Austen
Variations*



Will You...?

by Nicole Clarkston

I paced Mr Bennet's study, my shoulders bunched, palms itching, and my knees unwilling to support my weight. Sweet glory, the moment was upon me!

I tugged at my cravat, wishing for a gulp of something besides Mr Bennet's tasteless sherry to wet my throat and refresh my tongue. By heaven, I was addled as a schoolboy, and overcome with a powerful urge to beat my breast so my heart might resume a steady cadence.

I had been angry the last time I had nerved myself to speak—furious, jealous for my own dignity and sure of my right to insist on her adjudication. Blind, I had been—blind to aught but myself, and the shining vision that had been my notion of restitution, as if she were to be my reward for all the past. This time, my only hope was that I might lavish the remainder of my years on her, seeking each day some new means of giving her comfort or joy. Yes, that would be the noblest pursuit to which I could devote my life!

The bookshelves, the furnishings, even the window all disappeared as I strove for words, trying to piece together something more comprehensible, more suitable than the garbled string of syllables presently clogging my throat. I wandered aimlessly about the room and could not say whether it was only seconds or long minutes before the door opened again, and she slipped inside.

I paused, and simply adored her from afar—her scent already washing over me, her irresistible hold already taking me until the whole of my body warmed in eager longing. Her hands were still behind her back, against the latch, and her eyes lit with mischief. "Having trouble locating a book, Mr Darcy?"

I crossed the room and stopped, just short of touching her. "I was seeking something, but it was not a book. I wonder if you can help me find it."

Her chin lifted—not in defiance, but in concession, so her eyes met mine directly. Soft flesh furrowed at their corners, and her voice was light, gentle when she spoke. "Perhaps first, you might tell me what it is."

Slowly, I reached behind her back and found her hands—my inner arms grazing her hips—then brought her fingers up and twined mine through them. I looked down, caressing each slender digit with reverent care, and then turned her palms over to expose her ivory wrists. I brushed my thumbs over those delicate planes, seeking the fine ridges and dips, and following down to circle the sensitive hollow at the centres.

"Mr Darcy," she murmured, her voice tight and uneven, "if you wish for me to help you look for something, I will require the use of my hands."

"In fact, it is I who need them to find what I seek."

She swallowed. Her irises, which a moment ago had been golden pools of light, darkened in an instant. I heard and thrilled to the trembling of her breath as she gazed expectantly up to me. "And what is that?"

"Life," I whispered. "The sort of life I had lost hope of ever living. Elizabeth?"

She hesitated, then nodded shakily. "Yes?"

"I would cling to you, hold fast to none other through the rest of my days. I will fall—I am certain to stumble along the way, but will you catch me? For I promise, I shall ever be waiting for you."

A silver bead had started down her lashes, hovering and sparkling in the light from the window as it threatened to tumble down her satin cheek. Her breathing stopped; her lips parted, and her brow drew into tender awe as she beheld me.

"Elizabeth?" My hands slackened. Shaken and fearful, I tried to force myself to release her, to permit her to draw back, but she tightened her grip with a startling ferocity. She pulled, insisting and urgent, and then her arm was round my neck, her fingers threading through my hair, and she raised up on her toes to meet me.

"Eliza—"

She cut off my hoarse protest when she tugged my face lower, captured me, and stole my breath. While one hand cradled my head, the other slid over my chest, and she possessed me utterly. I was frozen for but an instant; then I snaked my arms round her waist, my hands cupping the sweep of her back, and my only verbalisation was a heady groan as I savoured the sweet spice of her lips.

Again and again, she overpowered me. I think I had never been so helpless, nor so whole—desperately famished and wondrously sated all at once. I was too dizzy to count, too intoxicated to number her caresses, but they were plentiful... and lingering. At length, she quavered, gasped, and reluctantly lowered herself. I followed, stealing one last taste of her lush lower lip before she spoke.

"I... did not mean to do that," she panted, her breath warm against my jaw. "I meant... I think I meant to say something terribly clever."

I caught the hand resting on my chest and held it there. "I hope you meant it to sound like an acceptance?"

She choked, a sobbing sort of laugh. "Heaven only knows! You do have such a dreadful way of setting me off my balance. I only knew... I could think of nothing but that I... I want you."

I was as a man struck dead—I truly believe that my heart did rupture, and my mortal frame ceased to be for an instant. I had dreamt only of a modest acceptance—at best, a promise to bear with me in good cheer for the next thirty years, or whatever was to be our allotted time on this earth. Was that not all a woman ever really surrendered? But even in this, I had been ignorant, underestimating the magnificence of shared passion.

"You want me?" I repeated stupidly; my head still muddled with the wonder of it all. "Truly want me?"

She nodded, gazing intently into my eyes, and I became aware of her light fingers, yet stirring in the hair at the base of my neck. Goose flesh broke out all over my body, and the hand I had arrested over my heart was as a flame to my chest—bold and intimate, laying claim to me in a way none had ever dared.

"Foolish of me, is it not?" she whispered, lifting her mouth near my chin so that her breath sent a fresh wave of shivers through me. "But I am fearfully obstinate, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and I am afraid I am quite determined to have you."

"You had me ages ago, Elizabeth. God help you." Her laughter was all that is beautiful and fine and magical in this world—even more so, because for the first time since

I was a boy, I truly laughed with her. I could scarcely draw breath for the great bubbling well of elation that twirled me in its thrall, as I kissed her and wept for joy by turns.

Elizabeth did not give her affections by halves, and by the time Mr Bennet knocked on the door, after our appointed quarter hour was long up, there could never again be any distinction between us. My life was irrevocably hers.

Will You...?

A Proposal by Shannon Winslow

Maybe if I had been able to refer back to *Pride and Prejudice* for what happens next, the day after the big ball at the neighboring gentleman's estate, I wouldn't have been taken off my guard when someone came to call on me late that afternoon, asking to speak to me alone. It wasn't Mr. Collins, thank God, but George Galloway.

Although I had never been proposed to before, in the nineteenth or any other century, I recognized the symptoms right away. George was looking very nervous and speaking very formally when he made his request of my mother for a private interview with me. Mama knew instantly what it meant too, of course, and before leaving the room she gave me a stern look, although I wasn't sure if it meant she wanted me to accept George or to say no.

I flew into a bit of a panic, doing exactly what Lizzy had under the same circumstances: pretending not to understand and pleading for my mother or one of my sisters to stay. "Surely, Mr. Galloway can have nothing to say that is unfit for you to hear," I said to their retreating backs.

And then I was alone with George. I turned to face him and fell under his painfully earnest gaze.

"Miss Barrett... Kathleen," he began, with a tremor in his voice.

He then paused so long that I wondered if he had forgotten what he came for or had changed his mind. I really hoped he had, because I didn't feel ready for this. I had pictured the scene where I accepted the proposal of the man I was crazy about. I had rehearsed that in my head a hundred times, but not how to kindly refuse an unwanted proposal. Once again, I felt like my preparations for Regency life had fallen short, although maybe there wasn't any perfect way to handle this situation in any time zone.

"Forgive me," George said. "Perhaps you would prefer to be seated before I... uh, before I proceed."

"No," I said, just as awkwardly. "No, I don't think so, not unless you plan to carry on for a long time. Oh! I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I imagine you will get it over with as soon as possible."

Egad! How could I have said such a thing? It had to be nerves. I suppose I should have attempted another apology, but I didn't dare. I suddenly felt like I might burst out laughing if I opened my mouth again, even though there was nothing funny about the situation. So I just bit my lip and shook my head at my own clumsiness.

George looked a little bewildered, but he pushed ahead anyway. "Forgive me if my visit was unexpected, Miss Kathleen, but I simply could not stay away – not after dancing with you again last night, after hearing you play and sing. You must know in what high esteem I hold your family and, more particularly, how sincerely I admire you. I could not succeed in hiding my affection if I tried. But I do not wish to conceal it, from you or from anybody; I wish to declare it to the whole world, this love I feel for you. Dearest Kate, will you do me the great honor of consenting to be my wife?"

I didn't feel like laughing anymore. My eyes were filling with tears instead. "That was beautiful," I said because that's what I was thinking. "But I do not deserve it."

"Do you mean...?"

"I mean that I do not deserve your love because I cannot return it, at least not in the measure required to make such an important commitment. I am dreadfully sorry, dear George, but I cannot accept your lovely proposal."

He took a deep breath and said, stoically, "There is someone else. I should have known; you must be admired wherever you go. Is it Mr. Kingsley? Or Mr. Cavanaugh?"

"No, certainly not! There is no one else, I swear. Do not torture yourself with such thoughts. In truth, I have no intention of marrying anybody at present."

He brightened at this. "Then there is still reason for optimism. You implied you feel at least some affection for me."

"Yes, certainly, but..."

"If there is no one else to come between us, it is possible that your affection for me will grow in time. That hope will be enough; it must be. I will not take your answer as a definite refusal, just your honest confession that you are not yet ready for marriage. You are young, and I am patient, Kate. I will show you by my constancy that you can entrust your future to me. Only promise that I may continue to see you and continue to hope."

I probably should have been firm, but I just couldn't bring myself to snuff out his optimism, to squash his little kernel of hope as if it were a crunchy beetle underfoot. Besides...

"Anything is possible, George."

George seized on this tidbit like a hungry dog thrown a T-bone steak, and he went away just as happy, saying that I should consider his offer open for whenever I found myself able to accept it. I didn't want him to be left feeling obligated to me, but nothing I said could change his mind. And really, when I thought about it later, it didn't seem so unreasonable. I did like George, very much in fact, and my affection for him increased a little every time I saw him. So I believed it was at least possible I would grow to love him in time, just as I'd told him.

As for my family, I had to tell them something too. I said, yes, that Mr. Galloway had proposed, and that I'd promised I would consider it.

"Very shrewd, Kate," said Mama. "Yes, very shrewd indeed. You mustn't toy with the young man's affections, for I would not have you put our relations with his family at risk, but it is only fair that you be given time to consider your position. Although Mr. Cavanaugh has flown off again, Frederick Kingsley may yet produce an offer of his own, you know, and no one would fault you for accepting him instead."

Later, I told Lucy, "Mama has it all wrong. I am not weighing George's offer against other possibilities, for I wouldn't accept Frederick Kingsley if he should ask me."

"I do not blame you for that, Kate. I am convinced I could not really esteem him either. But does the same hold true for Mr. Cavanaugh? Would you refuse him just as quickly?"

I sighed. And then I sighed a second time, more deeply. I just couldn't help it because a picture of Mr. Fitzwilliam Cavanaugh on one knee before me had popped into my head.

"But he will not ask me, Lucy, so there is no point in thinking about it. He is gone away, and I will likely never see him again."

Will You...?
A Three Colonels Proposal
by Jack Caldwell

(To set the scene, Colonel Sir Richard Fitzwilliam, recently awarded the Bath, has just returned from France after the Battle of Waterloo and is reunited with his beloved Anne de Bourgh at the Darcy townhouse in London.)

Sir Richard and Anne finally entered the sitting room, walking in hand in hand. Elizabeth, Marianne, and Georgiana embraced the couple with cries of delight. It was some time before the pair could sit down upon a sofa.

"If you do not mind, Darcy," Sir Richard said, "I think there will be a change of plans."

"I thought there might. Kent or Derbyshire?"

"Rosings first—Lady Catherine deserves at least that." Sir Richard then grinned. "Besides, I need to survey my new properties now that harvest time grows near."

"Do you think you will enjoy farming, sir?" asked Denny.

He gave the younger man a stern look. "Denny, we are comrades now. You may call me..." he hesitated, and then with dramatic importance, "Sir Richard."

A pause—then Fitzwilliam dissolved into laughter.

"Denny, if you call that fool anything but Fitz, I will personally cuff you," demanded an amused Colonel Brandon.

After a poke from Anne, Sir Richard stopped laughing. "I think I will like it well enough, Denny. I know I will fancy the accommodations." He started chuckling again when he noted that Anne was not amused. "What is it, my dear?" She simply gave him an arch look. "What?"

"Oh, do not be cross, cousin," cried Georgiana. "Tell us of Richard's proposal!"

"You have hit upon the heart of the matter, Georgiana," Anne responded. "There has been no proposal!"

"What? Then how are you engaged?"

"You had a hand in that." Anne said with a look.

"Oh, the letters!" Georgiana blushed, while Denny simply looked confused.

Anne nodded in confirmation. "Yes, we have compromised ourselves! We wrote to each other, Colonel Denny, and there is nothing for it but to marry! Which is all fine and good, but it would be nice to actually receive a proposal," she turned to her intended, "especially as Colonel Sir Richard Fitzwilliam acts as if Rosings Park is his already!" She gave Richard a de Bourgh glare.

Sir Richard looked thoughtfully at Anne for a moment, and then away. "Hmm, we cannot have that." He began to stand.

"Richard?" Anne was afraid that her teasing had gone too far and she had offended her beloved.

But abruptly, Sir Richard threw himself at her feet. On one knee, with one hand on his breast and the other raised to the heavens, he declared: "Sweetest, loveliest Anne! You are the light of my life, the song in my soul, the starch in my stockings—"

"The starch in your stockings?"

“Quiet, woman, you are ruining the moment. Where was I? Ah yes, I cannot live without you! Would you—could you—might you—consider taking pity on this poor fool? I offer all that I have—an old warhorse and a slightly used sabre. What treasure! All I own and my heart. Say yes and make me the happiest man in the world! Turn me down and call for the undertaker the next instant, for I shall surely die of a broken heart. My fate is in your hands, my lady.”

He lowered his face into his hands for a moment before peeking up at her. He beheld a smirking Anne, trying not to giggle. He could not see the various looks of his audience, ranging from delight to amusement to astonishment. “Marry me, Annie?”

She smiled sweetly. “Of course! Before you inflect yourself on some other unfortunate lady.”

Sir Richard sweetly kissed each of Anne’s hands before retaking his seat next to her. “How was that, Georgiana?”

His cousin just shook her head as the others exploded into laughter.

Will You...?
A Quarantined Proposal
by Nicole Clarkston

“Lizzy! You’re sucking up all the Wi-Fi!” Lydia shouted from the next room. “How am I supposed to Face Time with Denny?”

Elizabeth flicked her eyes to the clock. “My chem class ends in ten minutes. Can’t you wait that long?”

A scratching, scraping noise slid along the door to Elizabeth’s bedroom—that would be Lydia, pressing her face against the wood and trying to annoy her into surrender. “He haf to go to worph at the ftation,” came the muffled response. “Come on, Lithy, pleathe? My phone ith thpazing out on data.”

Elizabeth sighed in exasperation and pulled out her own phone. “Fine. I’ll hotspot for the next few minutes, but you’re paying for my data.”


A squeal from outside, followed by the sound of her sister’s feet tripping away, was her only answer. Elizabeth touched the volume on her laptop and squinted at the professor on the screen. The video was pixelating again. Ugh! Was this isolation order never going to end? She could hardly read the notes he was putting up, and occasionally his voice broke away entirely into some mechanized garble that always stalled the class for several minutes while he repeated himself.

At last, the prof signed off, with the promise that he would post the quiz by late afternoon. Elizabeth scanned over the meager notes she had managed to take down and knew they would not be enough to study from. She was going to need help.

She stretched, closed her laptop, and unplugged her phone from the charger to send a text.

●●○○○ AT&T LTE

11:33 AM

80% 

[Back](#)

Mr. Stuffypants

[Contact](#)

Friday 11:26 AM

You busy?

Wow. Isolation must be getting to you.

Dude. Thought we were past this

Let me guess. Your sisters hoarded all the chocolate and you're hoping I'll drop some off.

What? No. Need help tho

I'm not cutting your hair for you.

You are so weird





iMessage

Send

●●○○○ AT&T LTE

11:38 AM

80% 

 Back

Mr. Stuffypants

Contact

Friday 12:40 AM

Srsly, can you Facetime later?

No. Crazy busy

Will! You're sitting in your living room eating Ramen and teaching your dog to play dead! You're not busy.

Very busy.

Whatever.

...

...

You need to get out more.

Not funny





iMessage

Send

●●○○○ AT&T LTE

11:46 AM

74% 

 Back

Mr. Stuffypants

Contact

Friday 11:39 AM

Okay, fine. What do you need?

Chem help. Zoom was glitchy

Chem, huh? I'll show you chemistry...



There it is! The Lizzy Facepalm.

You know how I love... reactions.

Oh. My. Gosh.

Look, I have to go pick up some stuff for my sister. Call you after?




iMessage

Send

●●○○○ AT&T LTE

11:52 AM

80% 

 Back

Mr. Stuffypants

Contact

Friday 11:47 AM

How is she?

Better. It was just allergies.
Her quarantine ends tomorrow.

Glad to hear it. You're wearing
a mask, right?

Made it myself out something
red and silky

Stop

What? It was just an old tie.

With some of your hair bands
for straps.

You cut up my hair bands?



iMessage

Send

●●○○○ AT&T LTE

11:58 AM

📶 80% 🔋

⬅️ Back

Mr. Stuffypants

Contact

Friday 11:53 AM

Repurposed is a better word.

Besides, they smell like you

My friends have normal
boyfriends.



And my sisters.



Even my cousin is normal
compared to you



Yeah, but I'd rather watch
paint dry than hang with him.

Later



iMessage

Send

Still grinning, Elizabeth tucked her phone into her pocket and went downstairs. Will Darcy might have been the sharpest med student on campus, with the most residency opportunities landing in his lap and the brightest career rolled out before him in cardiology, but he was a giant goofball once he finally cracked a smile. Although, she recalled, it had taken a year for that to happen. Everyone expected him to go for Caroline Bingley, the daughter of a pharmaceutical magnate, and make a professional match of it.

Until, that was, he and Elizabeth got locked in the elevator for two hours. What had begun as a personality clash ended in a kiss... several, actually... so hot that she was still looking for her hair ties. Now she knew where they had ended up.

She walked into the kitchen and surprised Kitty, who was in the act of opening the very last box of Golden Grahams.

"Hey!" She poked her sister. "Those are for Saturdays only."

Kitty stared right back at her with a defiant grin as she stuffed a dry handful of cereal in her mouth. "Wan thome?" she offered.

"Absolutely."

Half an hour later, the box was gone, and the sisters were contemplating how their father's Bran Buds would taste without milk when their mother came in. "Oh, girls, it is the most awful thing! We are completely out of coffee creamer, and we've only one tomato left!"

Kitty stifled a short, gluttonous burp. "I thought you were going to say we used up the last roll of toilet paper."

"Not yet, but with the way Mary blows her nose—what will happen in two more days! I cannot send your father anywhere, not with his health as it is. What are we to do?"

"I'll go out this afternoon, Mama," Elizabeth offered. "I'm waiting on a call from Will, then I'll go to the store..."

"You will do no such thing, Elizabeth Bennet! To think of all those people coughing on you, touching things... no, indeed!"

"Ma," Elizabeth protested, "I'm a pre-med student. I think I know how to keep safe. I have gloves and sanitizer, and—"

"Out of the question! What would you bring home with you? I'll order a delivery, assuming the store even has things in stock. No girl of mine is leaving this house until this entire nightmare is ended!"

Elizabeth scowled, although good-naturedly, and Kitty snickered. "The truth is, Mama, that Lizzy is going stir-crazy. She actually started sewing yesterday, and this morning I caught her counting the number of bread slices in the loaf."

"I just wanted to know how long it would last," Elizabeth answered reasonably.


Mrs. Bennet clicked her tongue. "You and your father are both fit to be tied. Go... just go walk around the living room or something. Do those exercise thingys or go help Jane with her puzzle."

She tried studying, but she needed Will. Next she tried reading with her father, but he was more restless than she, and they only irritated each other. As a last resort, she knocked on Jane's door, but when she saw the 5000 piece puzzle of polar bears playing in the snow, she refused to attempt it. No one could possibly be that bored.

An hour later, Elizabeth was lying half-asleep on the couch. Still nothing from Will, but she held her phone in her lap and dozed... or she would have been dozing, except for the hideously loud Spotify music echoing from Mary's room. The last thing she was in the mood for right now was her sister's Cello Masters at Moonlight playlist. She closed her eyes and waited for her phone to buzz. When it did, she snorted awake and nearly dropped it.

●○○○○ AT&T LTE

3:32 PM

↑ 36% 

[← Back](#)

Mr. Stuffypants

[Contact](#)

Friday 3:30 PM

Hey, Gorgeous

You're alive

Sorry, took longer than I thought. Still want to study?

No, but I need to

Hang on, gotta get back to my laptop

Nah, stay where you are

You look comfy there on the couch

Wha...



iMessage

Send

Elizabeth got up and went slowly to the window. Somehow, in the few minutes she had had her eyes closed, Will had come—and not only had he come, but he had brought with him a full SUV worth of grocery bags. They were stacked on the ledge by the window, some leaning just far enough for her to catch glimpses of toilet paper rolls, eggs, milk cartons, and... and her favorite cereal.

Will Darcy stood in the center of it all—crushing her mother’s hydrangea, but Elizabeth doubted anyone would care about that. He was leaning against the outside of the glass, his eyes shaded so he could see her more clearly. As soon as she touched the glass from her side, he grinned, and those blue eyes of his twinkled like a ten-year-old boy.

“You sure know the way to a girl’s heart,” she said through the glass.

“Through the sternum wall,” he replied. “Even an undergrad knows that.”

“Don’t you have any better comebacks?”

He shook his head, rocking his forehead back and forth on the window. “I’m running on fumes. Need a refill of sassy woman to keep me going.”

“Six feet back, sir. How do I know you haven’t picked up something?”

“Oh, I did. Pick up something, I mean. Want to see?” He gave her a cheesy, lopsided grin and started to unbutton his coat.

“You do know my family is all here, right? Like, they could walk by any minute and see whatever you’re showing off.”

“I’m not that desperate. Hang on.” He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a wad of red satin.

“Oh, man,” Elizabeth groaned. “I thought you were just kidding about that thing. You know that won’t actually protect you from anything, right?”

“I never joke about red satin. Besides, I put a filter in it, but that’s not what I was going to show you. Here.” Reaching deeper in his pocket, he grasped something and tugged it free, then held it up to the window.

Elizabeth’s heart flipped, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of an easy conquest. She raised her brows. “A box? That will come in handy for something, I’m sure. Maybe I can prop my phone up with it.”

He turned slightly with a fake look of irritation and held the box higher as he opened the lid. “There, you irksome creature. What do you think of that?”

Her eyes popped. Good grief! The thing was bigger than that glass bauble Lydia bought from the dollar store when she was ten! She blinked, rubbed her eyes, and cleared her throat. “Uh... you know I... I can’t wear something like that, right?”

He pulled the ring from the box and held it closer to the window. “That’s why it comes with this convenient wedding band. See? Matching set. One you wear all the time, and the other you wear when I take you out on the town in that red dress you never got to wear last month.”

Elizabeth had to brace both hands against the glass—oh, Mama was going to have a fit when she saw how dirty the window was! But her head was light and she truly felt like she was going to lose her balance.

“Are you... serious? You’re asking me to marry you now? I thought we talked about waiting until I graduated. I mean, you have your residency coming, and then your internal med, and...”

“Elizabeth.” He put the ring back in the box, tucked it again in his pocket, and pressed his body against the glass. “I never liked the idea of waiting. It seemed like the smart thing to do at the time, but I want to begin my life with you now.”

“When we first started hearing reports of all this stuff, I decided I couldn’t wait any longer, so I went out and bought that ring. That was a month ago—I was going to give it to you that night we planned to have dinner downtown, but... well, everything shut down the next day, and we never got that evening out. I’ve been carrying this thing in my pocket ever since, because it kept you closer to me. I think I’d rather have it on your finger. What do you say? Will you marry me?”

Her eyes were brimming by now, and she could hardly see his face. She was laughing, her fist pressed to her mouth to stop up a decidedly girlish shriek of glee. “Yes,” she choked.

“What was that?” He shook his head and tilted his ear to the window. “I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“Yes!” she repeated.

“Yes what? Yes, you’ll wear it, or yes you’ll marry me?”

“Yes, yes, I will marry you Will Darcy, you great goon! Come here and kiss me.”

He laughed and bent down a little lower, then pressed his lips to the glass. Elizabeth reached up to kiss that same spot and held long enough to imagine the heat from his lips warming her own side of the window.

“Wow,” he said with a visible shiver. “You are one sizzling kisser, Elizabeth Bennet.”

“You just wait for this isolation to end and see what I plant on you, Will Darcy.”

His shoulders hunched and his whole body shuddered. “Whoa! I am all anticipation. Are you going to TOUCH me? I can hardly bear the excitement. Better bring a defibrillator with you.”

“I have no intention of stopping your heart, Will. If anything, you have made mine come alive.”

He placed his hand on the glass and waited for her to press her palm against it. “Together apart,” he said, quietly enough that she could hardly hear him.

She fought back another tear—this one of impatience and frustration. “Together apart. Oh, I can’t do this any longer! It’s so unfair!”

His expression had grown sad as well. “My Lizzy, you know I would give anything to hold you right now. Some engagement, right? Not exactly what I had planned. I would take you out to the overlook under that big full moon we just had, and turn up the car radio, and we would dance all night... if only.”

“I’m coming out, Will. I don’t care if—”

“Elizabeth, stop.” He looked like he was swallowing back his own outrage. It took him a moment to collect himself, then he offered a forced smile. “You can’t. I got the call—I start at the hospital early because they need extra help. I have to be able to tell them that I have been properly ‘social distanced’ and all that.”

Something squeezed within her and she started to crumple. “Oh, Will! You have to be careful! Please—you cannot get sick.”

“I won’t. Nothing’s going to stop me from marrying you just as soon as the order lifts. Do you hear me, Elizabeth?”

She shook her head, but she was smiling through her tears. "You'd better say it again."

"I. LOVE. YOU."

She leaned her cheek against the glass. "I love you, too, Will. I wish you could come in and stay."

"Hey. Why don't you go get your laptop and I'll see if I can help you with chemistry from here?"

She pulled back and looked at him skeptically. "You have a hydrangea branch poking your butt. That can't be very comfortable."

He glanced around at the bush. "It's not a swivel chair, but I can make something work."

She laughed. "Just open the gate and come around to the back porch. I'll meet you there."

He stepped back, his hand leaving the glass last. Elizabeth backed out of the room, watching him—and giggling at his expense—as he tried to do battle with the hydrangea.

She raced upstairs and grabbed her phone charger, laptop, and her notebook. As an afterthought, she bundled her fluffy body pillow under her arm, because she had a suspicion she was going to be sitting on the linoleum by the sliding door for a couple of hours. Poor Will would be stuck with a patio chair.

She came back down to the kitchen and was starting to set up her study station when her father walked in. "Lizzy, what is all that stuff outside? And why does it look like someone has been making love to my front window? Ah... I should have known. It looks as if Will Darcy has broken into my back yard again."

She looked around. Will was at the sliding door now, pulling up a patio chair. He waved when he saw her father. "Hello, Mr. Bennet. I got you some milk for your Bran Buds," he called.

Mr. Bennet looked pleasantly surprised. "Really? You can soil my windows anytime. Thank you, son."

"Be sure to leave the groceries outside to air out for a while," Will reminded him.

Mr. Bennet shuffled out of the kitchen, waving nonchalantly. "Yes, yes. Have fun on your date, Lizzy. Home by eleven."

Elizabeth snorted and shook her head. "Papa!"

Will had made himself comfortable on the patio, so Elizabeth cozied up to her own side of the glass and flipped open her laptop. "Okay, so... Chemistry. Reactions..."

"Inhibitor," he said.

She looked up. "What?"

He tapped the glass. "Remember your flash cards? A substance that delays, slows, or prevents a chemical reaction. It occurs to me that we have between us an inhibitor."

She crossed her eyes and focused on the glass before his finger. "Or we have an opportunity."

"How so?"

"Well..." She held her hand up to his. "I would define it as merely a nonreactive container. Keeping apart two reagents until they can be combined at the proper time."

“And meanwhile, the reagents are multiplying.” He smiled and pulled that ring box back out of his pocket, setting it just outside the sliding door. “It’s going to be an explosive reaction when they pour us together again, Elizabeth.”

“Oh, I hope so.”

Will You...?
Another Proposal Scene
by Jack Caldwell

Carrie Bingley sat on the couch in the front room of John Buford's condo, her feet tucked underneath her, snuggling with her boyfriend. He had one arm wrapped around her and the TV remote his hand. The LSU Tiger baseball team was on the tube. A big bowl of popcorn was on the table, and there were beers within reach. She couldn't think of a better way to spend a warm Saturday afternoon.

"Aw, come on, ump, are you blind? That wasn't a strike!" complained Carrie. A big baseball fan, she wore an LSU t-shirt commemorating the four NCAA championships the Tigers had won in the 1990s.

Buford shook his head in agreement just as the doorbell rang. "Hang on, babe, I'll get it," he said as he got to his feet. Carrie said nothing, her concentration on the game before her.

"Where is she? Where's my daughter?" came a woman's voice from the foyer.

Carrie's eyes snapped wide open. She leapt to her feet, her heart in her stomach, as Catherine Bingley swept into the room, followed by Buford.

"Mom! What are you doing here?"

"I might ask the same of you, Caroline Ann Bingley! This certainly isn't Anna Elliot's dorm room. I don't know what kind of finals you're studying for, but it doesn't look like Public Policy!" She had her hands on her hips.

Carrie blanched. She had decided to keep her relationship with John Buford secret from her mother for the present. Knowing the woman's obsession with her marrying well, particularly with William Darcy, Carrie wanted to put off the inevitable confrontation. In the weeks that passed, Carrie had delayed and procrastinated. Now the day of reckoning was upon them.

Still, Carrie was not one to back down. "Mom, let me introduce you to my boyfriend, John."

"John Taylor Buford, Jr. at your service, ma'am." He extended his hand with a smile.

Catherine Bingley ignored the gesture. "We'll see about that. I wish to speak to my daughter for a few minutes—alone."

Buford took the insult without a blink. "Of course. Make yourself at home. I'll be in the kitchen." He gave Carrie a quick wink and left the room.

"Mother, you have no—"

Mrs. Bingley cut her off. "Don't you take that tone of voice with me, young lady! Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm watching a baseball game with my boyfriend, Mom."

"Your boyfriend!" The older woman pointed at the kitchen. "That's your boyfriend? And just when were you going to tell me?" She didn't allow Carrie to answer. "Never, I suppose. If it weren't for Gloria Van de Snoot telling me she's seen you in this neighborhood—Ah! You didn't know she lives just down the block, did you? She tells me you've been spending a great deal of time here!"

"You had me followed?"

"Don't be so dramatic! I just had lunch with Gloria. That's when she told me."

"So, you came looking for me. Why didn't you just call?"

"Why, so you could lie? No, I wanted to see for myself."

Carrie sighed. "Very well, you've met John. I suppose you're wondering why I didn't tell you before. It's because I knew you'd react just like this."

Catherine's voice went up a notch. "And just how am I reacting?"

"Over-reacting, Mother. You're overreacting. I knew you'd be disappointed."

"And why shouldn't I be?" she cried. "You're throwing away your chance of landing William Darcy!"

Carrie had had enough. "Stop it! I'm not landing anybody, especially William Darcy! You are so intent on me making this great catch, you've forgotten about how I feel—about what I want."

Catherine sneered. "How would you know what you want? You're too young to know what you want!"

"I'm almost twenty-two."

"Twenty-two—and you think you know everything! Let me tell you, missy, if I knew what I know now when I was twenty-two—"

"Mother, I don't want to talk about Daddy!"

"Very well, then. Get your things. We're leaving right now."

She was now sure her mother had lost her mind. "Leaving? I'm not leaving!"

"Yes, you are! You are not going to throw your life away, not while you're living under my roof!"

Before Carrie could respond, Buford strolled out of the kitchen with a polite smile on his face. "Pardon me, ladies, but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. I think everybody ought to settle down so we can talk about this like adults."

Catherine Bingley turned on him. "You're intruding on a private conversation! Leave us immediately!"

Buford's smile disappeared from his face. "Pardon me, again, Mrs. Bingley, but you are sadly mistaken about something. This is my house, and no one dismisses me from one of my rooms. I would suggest you sit down—right there." He pointed at a chair. "And then we'll continue our conversation."

"How dare you!"

"Sit—down—ma'am."

Buford's posture could not be called threatening—he was barely in the room. His voice was low and controlled. But his eyes blazed with a righteous blue fire. Mrs. Bingley must have felt the force of his personality because with a small gasp, she half-fell into the chair indicated. Carrie couldn't deny his power any more than her mother, and a moment later, found herself seated, even though her boyfriend's command was directed at Mrs. Bingley.

Buford's expression changed immediately. "Thank you, Mrs. Bingley," he said calmly. "I'm sure we've got a lot to talk about, but I think we ought to find out a couple things first."

He turned to Carrie and gently asked, "Carrie, do you want to leave?"

Carrie's eyes started to fill. "I think it's best that Mother and I—"

"Carrie. Do you want to leave?"

The pair stared into each other's eyes. Buford's blue eyes blazed again, but not in anger this time. Carrie felt the same exposed sensation she had experienced in February in a Metairie motel room. She knew John could see into her soul.

"No."

Buford smiled. "Good. I don't want you to leave, either."

Catherine Bingley was heard from again. "Well, I'm not going to sit around here!"

Without taking his eyes off Carrie or losing his smile, Buford said, "Mrs. Bingley, we're not finished yet." The statement sounded like a command. He blinked as he seemed to gather his thoughts. "Carrie, this might be a little soon, but I think it's time we've made it clear how things stand between us and where we're going."

With that, he got on one knee before her.

"Caroline Ann Bingley, you are the most important person in my life. I love knowing you, I love being with you, and I cannot image spending my life with anyone else in this world. I love you with all my heart, with all my strength, and with all my soul. Please make my life complete by saying you feel the same, that you will live with me, be with me, and grow old with me. Carrie, my dearest love, will you marry me?"

"Oh, my God!" gasped Mrs. Bingley.

For her part, Carrie could say nothing. In fact, she could hardly believe what she had just heard. Only Buford's intense, loving, and nervous gaze convinced her she wasn't dreaming. Still, she could only manage to nod her head as her hands flew to her lips, at first gently, and then with far more enthusiasm as a smile grew on her face. Finally, like a bubble bursting forth, she cried through her fingers, "Yes! Oh my God, yes!"

Buford reached into his jeans pocket. "Here, this is for you. I bought it a little while ago, not planning to give it so soon. But I just got it from my bedroom, seeing how it might come in handy." He handed her the small box.

"Oh, give me a break," came Catherine's voice from behind him.

"Quiet, Mother," said Carrie absently as she opened the box. Glittering inside was a small diamond set in a gold band. She giggled slightly as she wiped a tear from her eye.

"It's not that big, I know," Buford was saying. "Just call it a down payment on what you deserve."

"Hush up, you lovely man," she said happily. She allowed Buford to take the ring out of the box and slip it on her ring finger. It fit perfectly. "I love it, Johnny. Oh, I love you so much," she said as she leaned in to share a kiss. "How did you know my size?"

He whispered in her ear, "I tried on one of your rings a few weeks back. It was the same size as my pinkie."

"When did you do that?" she whispered back.

"While you were sleeping."

Carrie definitely didn't want her mother to know about that! "Thank you, sweetie," she said in a normal voice.

They shared a look of deep understanding. "I told you that you were doomed."

"Yes, you did." She lightly stroked his face.

Buford grinned and got to his feet after kissing the ring and the finger it now graced. He turned to his future mother-in-law.

"Mrs. Bingley, I'm afraid we got off on the wrong foot. Now that everyone understands how things are, I hope we can make it up over dinner tonight. Why don't you take a seat on the couch next to Carrie? I'm sure you've got a lot of planning to do for the wedding." He turned his head towards his intended. "When, babe? Next year—the summer after you graduate?"

"That sounds fine, Johnny." Her head was still in a whirl.

"It's your call, sweetheart." He turned back to Mrs. Bingley. "Whatever Carrie wants," he warned her.

Oh, my God! He's standing up to Mom! Can I love him any more?

He held out his hand. "Can I get you something? We've got beer and soft drinks. How about some coffee?"

The intimidated woman allowed herself to be helped to the sofa. "C-coffee would be fine."

"I'll put a pot on right now. How about you, Carrie?"

"I think I need another beer."

"Comin' right up," he said as Mrs. Bingley sat down next to her daughter. "We'll grab some dinner in a little while." He disappeared into the kitchen.

Carrie gazed at her ring. Johnny, you are so going to get laid tonight!

Her mother broke in breathlessly. "He's...he's a bit forceful, isn't he?"

Carrie didn't take her eyes off her hand. "Haven't noticed, Mom."

Catherine Bingley seemed to catch her second wind. "Well, I hope you're happy! I wash my hands of you. You made your bed. You can just sleep in it."

Carrie blushed as she realized she and her mother had the same thought for different reasons.

"Oh, hush, Mom." Knowing what would interest her mother, she added, "Johnny's part of the most prestigious law firm in Baton Rouge. He'll make partner before you know it. Just look at this place! You think it came cheap? I think he can afford me. Now, don't you think my ring's pretty?"

Will You...?
A Daring Proposal from The Falmouth Connection
by Joana Starnes

A cry of delight escaped her lips when the suddenly stronger breeze swelled the sails above, making them flap wildly as they trapped the welcome gust. The ropes grew taut, adding their hum to the muted tune of straining wood and the ship leaned windward, altering its course.

Instinctively, Darcy gripped the spokes to keep the wheel from spinning further than it should, and the much-missed thrill coursed through him yet again as the full power of the wind in perfect synergy with the manmade craft was channelled into his tightened muscles.

The primeval joy reminded him once more of long-gone days out sailing with his father, but flashing memories of those distant times paled before the glory of the moment: the all-powerful sea, the breeze – and her proximity. She was before him, between him and the helm, hands clasped alongside his on the well-worn wood, her back warm against his chest, her scent intoxicating.

The old Cornishman, the skipper, had willingly relinquished the ship's wheel in his keeping and had made no comment other than a smirk half-lost in his greying beard when Darcy had chosen to share the privilege with his betrothed. He had left them to it and had withdrawn to the bow alongside his crew, who were now going about their business tightening ropes and adjusting sails, with the odd covert glance towards the quarterdeck.

For once, this was insufficient deterrent and Darcy leaned closer, inhaling her sweet fragrance mingled with the salty air. She had long relinquished her bonnet and the strong breeze was blowing freely through her auburn tresses, ruffling them into an adorable tangle that swayed to and fro, in turns concealing and exposing the whiteness of her neck. Temptation swelled like the high winds above them, wild and tantalising, until resistance became unthinkable. Impossible.

He lowered his head to press his lips against the fragrant skin and, with a breathless gasp, she tilted her head sideways, aiding and abetting him in taking the delicious liberty. His lips drifted to the corner of her jaw, then slid further to find a small velvety earlobe. A soft sigh left her lips, sending his senses spinning wildly – just as the ship's wheel might have done, had Darcy not tightened his grip on the spokes, as much to keep control of the craft as of himself.

"I love you," he murmured against the creamy skin, then leaned back in a futile quest for sanity that was destined to be thwarted even before she let her head rest on his chest.

"As I love you," he heard her whisper, and was thoroughly undone. A blessing and a curse, this day together, alone but for a few weather-beaten Cornishmen!

Surprisingly – or perhaps not so much so, after their recent *rapprochement* – Mr Bennet no longer felt compelled to shadow Darcy on the proposed outing. More surprisingly still, his views remained unaltered even when it had emerged that his second daughter and her betrothed were to sail alone. [...] Alone and free. More so than ever. Not merely free from the constraints of convention or the reserve imposed by her family's

presence, but one with glorious nature, feeling the sun on their skin, the wind in their faces, tasting life as it must have been before so-called civilisation had put its stamp upon it, to adulterate it into something tame and bland. A man, a woman, before the open world in all its glory, answering to no one – just the call of the sea.

Yet this freedom had its insidious dangers. Such as finding it devilishly hard to countenance returning to everyday constraints. Devilishly hard to subdue his yearning for her, and for the time when they would be allowed to be together every God-given moment.

With a rueful smile, Darcy could not fail to ponder on human nature, insatiably craving more. A while ago a 'yes' was enough to render him wild with joy. Now he was struggling through every hour that separated them from the fulfilment of that promise; through every hour when he could not see her – or could see her, but not hold her. And hours loomed. Not hours, *days!* Too many. There was another month at least until the wedding. The banns would be called once they returned to Longbourn. A special licence could be obtained of course, but then there were those lengthy preparations to contend with, as Mrs Bennet's daily effusions claimed. Wedding clothes. Wedding breakfast. Invitations. Visits. Incursions to the warehouses. The whole assortment of hindrances and delays – a curse on them all!

"Fitzwilliam?" her pensive voice drew him from his frustrated musings.

"Yes, my love?"

"I once heard it said that seafaring captains can read marriage vows. Is that true?"

Breath caught in his throat. *What was she saying?* His stark surprise melted into tenderness at the discovery that they were thinking the same thoughts. His chest swelled and fanciful imaginings took flight – then Darcy stopped the mad rush in its tracks, before he allowed himself to hope.

"I think so," he cautiously replied. "On merchant ships, they can."

"And is *The Rashley* a merchant ship?"

"Hardly," he said and forced out a chuckle.

"But Mr Tregarrick is a seafaring captain."

"Of sorts."

"Then can he marry us?"

"Elizabeth!" he whispered, then pulled himself together.

With a glance and a nod, he summoned the helmsman, who was quick to come and take on his duties, thus freeing Darcy from the suddenly cumbersome task of paying attention to anything but her.

They left the quarterdeck and withdrew to lean against the starboard rail. Their eyes met – his questioning, hers smiling. Before he could put his questions into words, Elizabeth spoke:

"I would very much like to be married today, Fitzwilliam," she said softly.

"You would?"

Still smiling, she clasped his hands in hers.

"I would."

It was only with considerable effort that he resisted the wild urge to kiss her – especially when she playfully arched a brow:

“Unless you think me forward. If you would rather not...”

She trailed off and Darcy retorted promptly and with feeling:

“You know there is nothing I want more.” The role of the devil’s advocate was something he wholeheartedly detested, yet in good conscience he felt compelled to add, “Still, I cannot vouch that having it performed by old Tregarrick would be in keeping with the law of the land...”

“We are not on land. But need I worry that you might be tempted to use this as an escape once we are ashore?”

“Minx,” he smiled and kept to banter, yet the concern was real. “Your father might very well ask for my head on a platter. I am not saying it would not be worth it, but I imagine it defeats the purpose.”

“My father need not know,” Elizabeth replied, soberly this time. “No one need know. It shall be our secret. For everybody else’s benefit, the wedding will be held at Longbourn. Yet you and I will know that we were united here and now, just off the very shores where we have reached our understanding.”

The beauty of the thought and of her exquisitely romantic choice touched his soul – but, bless her sweet innocence, did she not know what she was asking? Married – but not quite. In word, but not in deed. How was he to leave her – *his wife* – at Landennis tonight as if nothing had happened, and return to his empty chamber at the inn in Falmouth?

“You do not wish it,” Elizabeth observed matter-of-factly, and before any mistaken notions of rejection could take hold and pain her Darcy forced all selfish thoughts aside. He would do anything for her, anything to make her happy – and by all that was holy, frustrated desire would not get in the way!

Darcy put an arm around her and called out:

“Mr Tregarrick? A word, if it pleases you.”

The old sailor looked up from the bow.

“Would you be so kind as to marry us?” Darcy asked, his voice carrying over the loud flapping of the mainsail.

The man’s bushy beard, thick enough to lose a ferret in, split widely into a toothless grin.

“Bless ye, m’ludd, Ah thort ye’d never ask.”

Will You...?
Yet Another Proposal Scene
by Jack Caldwell

Never before in his life had Darcy wished to strike a woman. His anger at his aunt and his confusion over Elizabeth's behavior had brought him to his breaking point. He was on the verge of losing control.

"Ah! I see your little minx returns!" Lady Catherine sneered.

Darcy was so amazed at her crude words he forgot to be insulted. He turned and beheld his beloved walking across the lawn with what he now recognized as deceptive calm. He paid no attention to the ranting of his aunt as the lady grew closer.

To his immense relief, Elizabeth gave him a slight nod and mouthed, "Forgive me" before taking her place beside him, raising her hand to take his arm. As she did, Darcy noted that she displayed a haughty and seemingly disinterested air—an expression he had never seen Elizabeth exhibit before. For an instant before turning back to his aunt, he wondered whether he appeared as cold when he assumed such an appearance.

"So, it is true! You are then resolved to have him?"

Elizabeth answered in an unemotional voice. "I have said no such thing. I am only resolved to act in that manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you or to any person so wholly unconnected with me." As she finished speaking, Elizabeth slightly squeezed Darcy's arm.

Lady Catherine was highly incensed. "You have no regard, then, for the honor and credit of my nephew! Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?"

Darcy had begun to growl a retort when Elizabeth interrupted him. "Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say. You know my sentiments."

"You refuse, then, to oblige me. You refuse to obey the claims of duty, honor, and gratitude. You are determined to ruin him in the opinion of all his friends and make him the contempt of the world!"

The old biddy turned to her nephew. "Darcy, what of your family? Your cousin Anne? Where is your duty there?"

"Neither duty, nor honor, nor gratitude," replied Darcy, "have any possible claim on me in the present instance. No principle would be violated by my marriage to Miss Bennet, should such a marriage take place. As I tried to make plain to you, I am not attached to my cousin Anne, or she to me. On this, we are in perfect agreement. I would suggest you speak to your daughter before presuming to speak for her.

"And with regard to the resentment of my family or the indignation of the world, if the former were excited by Miss Bennet marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn.

"I would add, Aunt, that I have been exceedingly generous to allow such an interview. I cannot speak for Miss Bennet, but my patience is at an end! Allow me to be rightly understood, madam. I will brook no further interference by you into my personal affairs, or into anyone that is closely connected to me. By that I mean any relations I may have in the future."

Lady Catherine's eyes grew wide at this, but she was not permitted to interrupt. "The family of the companion of my future life is my family, and thus falls under my protection. Do not be so foolish as to fall foul of my good graces! You know my power."

Lady Catherine blanched. "You would not dare."

"Do not tempt me, madam."

At this, Elizabeth's reserve cracked momentarily. "Lady Catherine, shall I show you to your carriage?"

In the manner displayed previously, Lady Catherine talked on until they were at the door of the carriage when, turning hastily round, she added, "I take no leave of you, Miss Bennet. I send no compliments to your mother. You deserve no such attention. I am most seriously displeased!"

Elizabeth said nothing as the footman closed the door of the carriage, and it drove off down the lane. She felt, rather than saw, Darcy approach her from behind.

He was very close when he said, "Elizabeth, I must beg your forgiveness. You have done nothing to deserve such treatment from my family."

She turned and faced him. "I am sure she meant well."

With a look of open astonishment on his face, he said, "Meant well? How can you defend her so? I have a right mind to banish her from—" The twinkle in her eye gave her away, and he laughed in a relieved manner. "You are teasing me, I see. It is well you can take the matter so." She walked into his open arms. "I am not so merciful, I fear. I have not your kind heart. A failing—forgive me."

"It would be wrong of you, sir, to think I am untouched by what has happened today," she said into his coat as she happily snuggled close. "But I recall that this dream of Lady Catherine's is of distant creation and of long duration. I fear it will take no little time for her to reconcile herself to the destruction of all her hopes. In time we may be, if not forgiven, at least tolerated. I pray that Anne or the Collinses will not have to suffer her wrath in the meantime."

"They will not, if Lady Catherine does not wish to provoke my displeasure."

She looked up. "You are before your time, sir. I had not expected you to Longbourn while my sister and her husband were in residence."

He looked down at her with an ardent expression. "You are correct to think that it was not my wish to spend any more time in their company than I already have, but to own the truth, I could not abide to be apart from you any longer, Elizabeth."

"So, you have come to collect your reward, Mr. Darcy?"

Confusion showed on Darcy's face. "Elizabeth, I told you, I expect nothing for my actions. It was an honor to be of service to your family. It is my fault that—"

"Ask me."

"—Wickham was free to—I beg your pardon?"

"Fitzwilliam, ask me."

Darcy's eyes darkened. "Miss Bennet, would you do me the very great honor of accepting my hand in marriage?"

Instead of answering, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him full on the mouth. It took a moment for an amazed Darcy to respond, but when he did, he returned

his lady's affections ten-fold. The passion in their kisses stirred him, and only with the greatest of efforts was he able to push away.

"I see I shall have to be careful of you, sir," Elizabeth shakily uttered into his chest.

"Elizabeth, I cannot say I am sorry, but I must control myself. Have I embarrassed you?"

She still could not look him in the face and smiled into his shirt. "I assure you I am unharmed. Do not be uneasy, Fitzwilliam. You did not do anything I did not desire."

"So you are not displeased?"

She blushed. "No, in fact, it is rather comforting."

"Good, for after we are married, I shall spend much time demonstrating how comforting I can be, my love," he said roguishly. "May I call you 'my love'?"

She kissed his chest. "If you do not, I shall be most seriously displeased."

Darcy chuckled. "Oh, you are clever!" Her reward for her wit was another kiss. "Should I go to your father now?"

Elizabeth seemed to consider the question for a moment. "Fitzwilliam, would it be too much to ask to wait until our guests are gone? I would much rather not deal with their false congratulations."

Darcy sighed. "As much as I want your father's blessing, I must agree with you. The less time I spend with them the better."

Elizabeth released him. "I do not believe my father will withhold his blessing, dearest. You are quite his favorite now. He cannot wait to invade your library at Pemberley."

Darcy smiled. "If that is the price for having you as my wife, then I will pay it gladly."

Also from THE COMPANION OF HIS FUTURE LIFE –

(Meanwhile, Charles Bingley is trying to apologize to Jane Bennet for his idiotic behavior and beg for a second chance, while Jane is trying to find the words to tell Bingley she has changed her mind about him,)

Jane and Bingley walked slowly along the lane between Meryton and Longbourn in silence, she with her hands clasped before her, and he holding his horse's reins as the creature trailed behind. They had not said ten words between them since exchanging self-conscious greetings a quarter hour before.

Bingley was in a quandary. Since his first disastrous proposal, he had endeavored to prove to Miss Bennet that he was his own man, that he could be a husband, master, and provider without constantly seeking the advice and approval of others. He had accomplished his goal of helping the Bennet family during the Wickham matter, but he felt he failed, as well. He could not have succeeded if not for Darcy. He was sure that Jane knew all. There were no secrets between her and Elizabeth. How could he secure his future happiness if Miss Bennet still felt he was unworthy?

Bingley was afraid to begin, and how long they might have remained in this state no one could tell, had not the sound of a rushing carriage startled the pair out of their common misery.

"Miss Bennet! Watch out!"

Without another moment's hesitation, Bingley released his horse, seized the lady and pulled her out of the path of the oncoming vehicle. Rolling on the grass beside the road, they could barely make out a woman's cry of, "Stupid farmers—out of my way!" as the coach dashed past. The carriage did not stop, and by the time the couple was able to sit up, it was halfway to Meryton. Bingley's frightened horse was galloping back to Netherfield.

"Good heavens! Are you uninjured, Miss Bennet?"

"I am well, Mr. Bingley. I believe you have saved us from an unfortunate accident." Jane's hair had come undone, and her dress was dusty, but to Bingley's eyes, never had she looked more desirable.

"Thank God! Oh, Jane, had anything happened to you—I could not bear it!" His hands grasped her shoulders. Overwrought by his feelings, Bingley blurted out, "Oh, my dear, dear Jane! Have I any chance of succeeding? I know I am not much of a man, but I will try to be what you need, what you deserve. I vow to protect you always! Can you not give me some sign that you feel in any way kindly towards me?"

"Oh, Mr. Bingley! I am so sorry for the pain I must have inflicted upon you. Please forgive my wicked words. Oh, how they have haunted me! To say what I did—you have been so good, so kind—"

"Jane! Please, you must see—you must know how I adore you! Please say you will be mine! I swear I shall prove worthy of your trust!"

"How can you doubt the feelings I have for you? I love you, Charles!"

"Then you say yes? You will have me?"

"For forever and a day!" What else she meant to say was lost, as her mouth was more agreeably occupied.

Will You...?
A Proposal from To Conquer Pride
by Jennifer Altman

Still holding Elizabeth's hand, Darcy made his way along the avenue that circled the formal gardens. Turning onto a smaller footpath, he continued past polished marbles and neatly trimmed topiaries until he could finally see the high stone wall, covered almost entirely in thick vegetation. Stopping beside the iron gate, Darcy reached into the pocket of his coat, removing a small brass key and twisting it in the lock. The gate squealed open on its hinges, and Darcy stood back, allowing Elizabeth to enter.

Stepping into the enclosed space, he watched her freeze, a small gasp escaping her lips.

Directly at the garden's center, water from a marble fountain cascaded into a circular pond, producing a soothing murmur, while all around them flowers of every variety blossomed, creating a riot of color. Sunlight filtered through the surrounding trees and the scent of honeysuckle and lavender floated on the breeze. Nestled between the blooms, several stone benches sat on a carpet of bright green grass.

Elizabeth turned in a small circle, her eyes shining. "Your mother's garden," she whispered.

Darcy nodded. "Yes. I have wanted to show it to you since you arrived, but there did not seem to be the opportunity [...]"

"It is magnificent!"

Darcy smiled at her obvious delight. "I have kept it locked since my mother's passing. Besides the gardeners, only my sister and I possess the keys." He paused for a moment. "I have never brought anyone here before."

Elizabeth turned to face him. "Thank you for showing it to me."

Settling his palm at the small of her back, Darcy led the way to one of the benches opposite the fountain. He waited for her to sit and then took the spot beside her.

Somewhere in the trees a sparrow called, and another one answered.

Darcy hesitated, collecting his thoughts, before turning to her with a solemn expression. "Elizabeth, there is something I need to say, and I hope you will be kind enough to allow me to express myself without interruption."

Elizabeth nodded her agreement, and after a moment, Darcy began to speak. "Before I met you, I had always considered myself to be an honorable man. I was raised with good principles by two excellent parents who were very much in love. In fact, seeing their devotion to one another made me understand that I would not be happy in a marriage of unequal affection."

He paused and the expression on Elizabeth's face made him believe she saw the sadness he carried.

"But then my mother died, and soon afterwards my father. By the time I reached my majority, the world had become a place where I no longer felt comfortable. I realized that the people who sought my favor saw me only as a commodity. I was highly coveted by women of the ton, but not for who I was. No, it was my position, my standing in society, and my money these women wanted—not me.

“By the time I came to Netherfield with Bingley, I had closed myself off to all but a few trusted friends, certain I would never find a woman who could touch my heart.

“Unfortunately, when I first encountered you at that assembly in Meryton, I did not behave honorably. In fact, it pains me to recall the things I said. I do not know why... but I’d like to think it was because I saw something in you, felt something, and I was afraid. Afraid to let down the carefully constructed walls. Afraid to stand up to my family, who I knew would not approve of the match. Afraid to be hurt. And so, I behaved badly. Not just to you, but to everyone in the neighborhood. I was proud and arrogant and I deserved their censure, and yours. To safeguard my heart, I convinced myself that you were unsuitable, and I fled, hoping to put you out of my mind.

“And it worked, for a time.

“But then I saw you again at Rosings, and I realized I could no longer fight my attraction, and so I offered for you. Dreadfully. Yet in my vanity and conceit, I never doubted that you would accept me.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth, but Darcy held up his hand. He swallowed hard, staring out across the garden. “No. Pray, let me finish.”

“Your rejection of my offer—of me—was one of the lowest moments of my life, but it made me take stock of my imperfections. When you refused me, you spoke of my selfish disdain for the feelings of others, and in that you were correct. I realized when I offered for you, I thought only of my own needs, my own feelings, my own desires. Not yours. I observed myself clearly for the first time, and I did not like what I saw.

“When I left Kent that spring, I did not believe our paths would cross again. Indeed, knowing your feelings for me, I made every effort to see that they did not. Yet I still wished to improve myself. To be a man worthy of your regard, even if your affection was something I could never hope to attain.”

Elizabeth flushed, lowering her lashes. “But we did meet again,” she said softly, and Darcy nodded.

“Yes, by the grace of God, our paths crossed on that cold November day. And over the past nine months I have had the privilege to be once again in your company. To bear witness to your kindness, your intelligence, and your strength... and I have been awed and humbled by the experience.

“So, here we are, and I now know with absolute certainty that we are not equals. You are my superior in every way that matters.” Reaching out, Darcy lifted Elizabeth’s hand, brushing a kiss upon her knuckles before sinking to his knees. “Elizabeth, the love I feel for you defies expression. I love you wholly, without reserve. If you refuse me now, I know that I shall never marry, for there is no other woman who could fill the space in my heart that belongs to you.

“So, I will ask you one last time, the way I should have asked you all those months ago. Elizabeth Bennet, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

As Darcy stared up at the woman he loved, tears welled in Elizabeth’s eyes. She opened her mouth and then visibly swallowed, offering him a shaky nod.

“Yes?” Darcy whispered, hardly daring to breathe. “You are accepting me?”

Elizabeth nodded, more forcefully this time. “I am accepting you, sir.”

Darcy started to rise, but to his amazement, Elizabeth fell to her knees in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Instinctively, his own arms slipped about her waist, and he pulled her body firmly against his. His eyes began to sting as he hoarsely choked, "Elizabeth, tell me you will never leave."

"I will never leave."

His palms traveled up her arms, coming to rest upon her shoulders. He lifted his fingers to caress her cheeks, dipping his chin until their faces were inches apart. Elizabeth's mouth opened ever so slightly and his heart raced as his lips brushed hers for the first time. He kissed her delicately, reverently. A small sound slipped from her throat, somewhere between a sigh and a moan and Darcy was overcome with the brightest joy. Dear God, how had he lived his entire life without this feeling? He pulled back to gaze into her fine eyes before once again capturing her lips. Her kisses were as sweet as honey and as intoxicating as the strongest drink. Time seemed to slow and then stop altogether, and Darcy was in no hurry to have it start up again.

He wanted the kiss to go on forever, but after several moments he broke away. He knew he had already gone well beyond the bounds of propriety and he did not wish to overwhelm her. After all, they had an entire lifetime to look forward to.

He opened his eyes to find Elizabeth staring up at him, but this time a mischievous smile brightened her expression.

Reaching for her hands, he rose to his feet, pulling her with him. "Is there something you find amusing, Miss Bennet? Most gentlemen do not like to be laughed at when they have just kissed a lady for the first time."

To her credit, Elizabeth blushed. "Oh, it was not the kiss I found amusing. The kiss was lovely."

Darcy smiled, exposing deep dimples. "Good. I am pleased to hear it."

"It was only that I was thinking about everything you said to me here in this garden, and I believe, Mr. Darcy, that is easily the longest speech I have ever heard you utter. Until today, I would have thought such a thing quite impossible."

Will You...?
THE BEST-LAID PLANS
by Joana Starnes

A heavy sigh broke from Darcy's chest as the carriage rounded the corner. He flinched as he turned away and headed back towards the house. He would have thought that the last four months had inured him to sadness. To the wrenching sense of loss that he had carried with him ever since April. Yet seeing her leave Pemberley brought it all back, sharper than ever.

"Accursed *fool!*" he muttered under his breath.

Why had he not asked them to stay? Stay at Pemberley, rather than the inn at Lambton?

Would she have consented to the scheme? He sighed again. Who knows? She was... altered. Different. Overpowered by mortification, just as he was. The entire time spent together strolling through the gardens – there was so much he could have said! Yet he had kept silent, stifled by the fear of pushing forth where he was not wanted.

"The deuce!" Darcy cursed yet again. At least he could have asked her for how long she and her relations were proposing to remain in the area. Surely there could have been no harm in asking *that!* Yet he had stood tongue-tied, and so had she, until she had begun to speak of her travels through the Peak – Matlock, Dove Dale – and he had grasped the subject as if it were a lifeline, and blathered mindlessly about scenic spots and natural beauty. He scowled. The devil's own fool, rambling on about Matlock and Dove Dale, when so much was at stake. She was here! She had consented to set foot in his home. *Why?*

"Is there anything you require, sorr?" asked Thomas, the youngest footman, and Darcy turned towards him with a start.

"Pardon? No. No. Nothing. Ah, yes, in fact," he suddenly reconsidered. "Where is Mrs Reynolds? Would you seek her, pray, and ask her to join me in my study? I must speak to her."

It was an impulsive, senseless notion, and Darcy was well on his way to regretting it by the time that his aged housekeeper made her way into his private realm and found him, port glass in hand, staring out of the window.

"Good evening, sir. Thomas told me you wished to have a word...?" the elderly woman prompted, once she had closed the door behind her and waited, hands crossed, for him to have his say.

"Yes," Darcy acknowledged, setting his glass down and squaring his shoulders. "The couple who visited earlier today," he began with caution – and a touch of slyness that was as uncomfortable as it was uncommon.

"Mr and Mrs Gardiner, yes. And their niece," Mrs Reynolds supplied, and Darcy pursed his lips.

"Yes. Precisely."

"What of them, sir?"

"Did any of them mention what had brought them to— Hm! To this part of the country?" he amended, for what purpose would it have served to ask if any of them had

disclosed their reason for visiting Pemberley? What the blazes did he expect, that *she* would blithely walk in and share her private thoughts with his housekeeper?

"Aye, sir. Mrs Gardiner said something about seeking old acquaintances. I understand that she grew up in Lambton."

"Ah." Of course. He already knew as much from Mrs Gardiner herself. "And did the lady speak of the duration of their stay?" he asked – only to meet with disappointment.

"I think not, sir. Not that I can remember."

"No matter," Darcy forced himself to say – for it would not do to share his frustrations with his housekeeper, even though the devoted woman had known him ever since he was four years of age. "And how long have they been here?"

"In Lambton, sir?"

"No. At Pemberley."

"All in all, some three hours, I believe. Just over an hour in the house. And then Lawson took them for a stroll through the grounds and the ornamental gardens."

"And indoors? What did you show them?" Darcy pressed on, and could not fail to note the surprised glance that his housekeeper cast him, before she evenly replied.

"I took them on the usual tour, sir. Through the reception rooms, that is to say. The drawing room, the music room, your father's sitting room and Miss Georgiana's, the picture gallery..."

"The library?" Darcy prompted, but Mrs Reynolds shook her head. He pursed his lips. "Ah. A pity. That would have pleased—" He caught himself at the last moment before blurting out that the library would have pleased Elizabeth the most. And what of it? Had he not learned yet that she would not be lured with material possessions? He flinched as Madame de Villeneuve's moral tale sprang to mind. *La Belle et la Bête*. The Beauty and the Beast.

"My apologies, sir," his housekeeper offered, drawing him from dark ruminations. "I was about to show them the library, but I spotted Mr Lawson below, ready to take them on the garden tour, so I thought I should not keep him waiting. We were delayed in the picture gallery, you see. The young lady turned back twice to examine Miss Georgiana's charcoals. And the newest portraits too."

"Oh?"

The newest portraits. She had turned back – *twice!* – to examine the newest portraits. Georgiana's – and his. What in heaven's name was he to make of *that*?

* * * *

Three whole days had flown by – and he was still none the wiser!

Darcy tightened his fist on his knee and shuffled in his seat, hard-pressed to summon the patience to submit to his man's ministrations. There was not a moment to lose. Elizabeth was to leave Lambton by the week's end. Her uncle said so yesterday. So he must make the most of the days that were left. Call upon her. At the inn in Lambton.

He frowned. There was no privacy to be had in this house, even if she could be persuaded to call at Pemberley again. Miss Bingley was as hard to shake off as a thistle tangled in a sheep's tail – damn the confounded woman and her impudence!

A stroll around Lambton or a quiet morning in the Gardiners' parlour at the inn might offer better chances of a private conversation with Elizabeth.

And if he could arrange it... what was he to tell her?

'If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever.'

No! Not that!

A hiss left his lips at the direct, immediate pain of the sharp razor cutting into his chin, when the other pain – the one sparked by the hideous prospect of a second rejection – made him start.

Weston, his valet, was profuse in his apologies.

"Do not concern yourself. It was my fault," Darcy acknowledged, then closed his eyes and winced as his man busied himself with tending to the cut. The wince had naught to do with it, but rather with another acknowledgement, an inward one this time: it was far too soon for such forthrightness. He needed to proceed slowly and with caution – demonstrate that he had taken her reproofs to heart – take the time to court her. *If* she allowed him to.

'Elizabeth, would you permit me to start again?'

No. Still too rash. Too blunt. And it would be presumptuous to call her by her Christian name. He would do well to bear that in mind. Even if she had been *Elizabeth* to him in his private thoughts ever since November.

Darcy released a long sigh and silently cursed the sleepless night that seemed to have addled his brain, for it was working more sluggishly than ever. But at least he remembered to keep still, so that Weston could finish shaving him – and not turn him out with his face covered in cuts and scratches. That should be a fine thing, if he were to appear before her as though he had fought his way through brambles.

'For goodness' sake, think!' he fiercely prodded, yet felt as if he were pushing against a brick wall. A few choice oaths rattled through his otherwise useless brain. Of all the times to turn into a dunderhead who could not string two thoughts together!

'Miss Bennet, might I be allowed to travel with you?'

No. Far too vague.

'Miss Bennet, may I be allowed to escort you to Longbourn?'

She would find it odd, to say the least. And what of Georgiana? He ought not leave her to the task of playing host to Bingley's aggravating sisters.

Weston was still at work, and the razor still sharp against his skin, so Darcy's scoff remained a mental one. Miss Bingley and the Hursts could damn well carry on to Scarborough. Georgiana would be safe and content at Pemberley without them. Or she could come to Hertfordshire with him. As for Bingley, he would like nothing better.

Ah, but what if there was no joy for Bingley at Longbourn?

Elizabeth would know. That was something he could ask her...

'Miss Bennet, I hope you would pardon my presumption. I do not wish to pry into your sister's sentiments. I have caused too much damage already. But I do wish I could find a way to repair it. Would you be willing to advise me?'

She would not object to *that*, surely. It was a start, asking for her assistance. Asking her to forgive him. Will she?

Darcy drew a deep breath. Enough! Only Elizabeth had the answers. And he had to ask. He had to!

* * * *

The horse's hooves beat a steady canter along the tree-lined lane to Lambton. When the rising sun broke past the brow of the hill, Darcy squinted into the sudden brightness and readjusted the brim of his hat, then gripped the reins and leaned forward, urging his mount into a gallop towards hope.

Will You...?
Through Kitty's Eyes
by Diana Birchall

Bingley, who wanted to be alone with Jane, proposed their all walking out. It was agreed to. Mrs. Bennet was not in the habit of walking. Mary could never spare time, but the remaining five set off together. Bingley and Jane, however, soon allowed the others to outstrip them. They lagged behind, while Elizabeth, Kitty, and Darcy were to entertain each other. Very little was said by either: Kitty was too much afraid of him to talk; Elizabeth was secretly forming a desperate resolution; and, perhaps, he might be doing the same. They walked towards the Lucases, because Kitty wished to call upon Maria; and as Elizabeth saw no occasion for making it a general concern, when Kitty left them she went boldly on with him alone. – From *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

Kitty was soon at the Lucases', and she saw Maria and two of her younger sisters with their noses pressed to the window glass as she approached.

"Miss Kitty Bennet," the woman servant announced, and Kitty skipped into the parlour, to be graciously received by Lady Lucas, who said something about drinking some tea.

"Oh! Mamma, we don't want tea," protested Sarah, the next oldest sister. "Maria should have to get it, if we did, and we all want to hear the news from Kitty."

"I would order Betsey to bring it," protested Lady Lucas, mildly hurt.

"But it is washing day, and Betsey has gone back to her work, after showing Kitty in. Don't pretend, Mamma, Kitty knows perfectly well that we have to get all our own meals. We don't have three servants as they do at Longbourn," said Maria.

Kitty hastened to assure Lady Lucas that she did not at all want tea, though she was sure it would have been delicious. "I have been walking with Lizzy and Mr. Darcy," she said importantly.

Lady Lucas was mollified, and as eager to hear Kitty's news as the girls could be.

"Well, tell us what he is like? Is he still so proud and unpleasant as he used to be?" asked Sarah.

"He was not so bad when I saw him at Hunsford," observed Maria. "I remember he spent a good deal of time looking at Lizzy, and Charlotte thought there was something in it. She told me so."

"I should say he is still what he was. Proud and silent. He barely deigned to speak a word on our walk. I was very surprised that Lizzy went on with him when I turned in here," said Kitty.

"Hum. On the contrary, I am not surprised in the least," commented Lady Lucas. "I think he has made up his mind to have her, and we shall be hearing an announcement from the Bennets any time now."

"Mamma, how can you say so? Do not you know that they hate each other?" cried Susan, the youngest. "Remember all that talk when he first came, when he said she was not handsome enough to dance with? Lizzy made a funny story out of it, but I know she was hurt and has hated him ever since."

"That is just how some love affairs begin," said her mother wisely. "And do not forget, weddings are catching. Now that Mr. Bingley has proposed for Jane, there is nothing more likely than his best friend marrying Elizabeth."

"Well, did you see any sign of it, Kitty?" asked Maria eagerly.

"I cannot say that I did," replied Kitty doubtfully. "They barely looked at each other. And Mamma apologized to Lizzy for having to walk with that unpleasant man, but of course she had to do it because he is Bingley's friend."

"Oh! Kitty, I am sure he is proposing to her right this minute, as they walk along together. You watch carefully, now, when you get home, and see if you can detect any symptoms of love. Then come back tomorrow and tell us – or no, we will call upon you," urged Maria.

"Then we might see Mr. Darcy and Lizzy together!" said Sarah with glee.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy returned home very late, after a walk of several miles, during which they opened their hearts to one another and exchanged the promises that made each happier than ever before. Kitty was already back from her visit to the Lucases, and as the party sat down at the long dinner table, questions broke out.

"Where can you have been, Lizzy?" every one asked. She quietly replied that they had walked rather far, beyond her own knowledge in fact; but this answer raised no suspicions. Kitty looked hard at her, but there was nothing to see. Lizzy and Mr. Darcy were not seated near one another at table, and they did not speak at all. Lizzy cast her eyes down at her soup, and seemed thoughtful; and Mr. Darcy was as taciturn as ever, though he did unbend enough to tell Mrs. Bennet that the roast of beef was excellent. Most of the conversation was carried on by Mr. Bingley and Jane, whose spirits were overflowing, making them chattier and livelier than ever before. Mr. Bennet beamed upon the young lovers, whose joy was undeniably a pleasure to behold.

Kitty had to go to bed no wiser about the situation between Lizzy and Mr. Darcy, if there was one, and she regretted that she would have no intelligence to convey to the Lucases on the morrow.

Punctually on the stroke of nine the next morning, the two gentlemen were seen approaching Longbourn once again. "Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Bennet, "if that disagreeable Mr. Darcy is not coming here again with our dear Bingley! What can he mean by being so tiresome as to be always coming here? I had no notion but he would go a-shooting, or something or other, and not disturb us with his company. What shall we do with him? Lizzy, you must walk out with him again, that he may not be in Bingley's way."

Mr. Bingley, full of repressed joy at his friend's happiness, of which he was in the secret, slyly suggested that there might be more lanes hereabouts in which Lizzy might lose her way again. Mrs. Bennet suggested the view from Oakham Mount, and Mr. Bingley, his eyes twinkling, suggested that would be too far for Kitty.

Kitty knew her friends would be coming, and determined to stay at home. She thought she saw something in Lizzy's expression as she made her exit with Mr. Darcy, to indicate that there might be a glimmer of truth to the story after all. Lizzy's cheeks were decidedly flushed, and she looked at the floor, while Mr. Darcy glanced at her with warm, almost proprietary admiration.

"I declare," she said to Mary after the door had closed. "Did you see that? I do believe Mr. Darcy is in love with Lizzy! Do you not think so?"

Mary put down her book and looked seriously disapproving. "Kitty, has not the late sad event concerning our poor sister Lydia taught you any thing? Romantic speculations are a sure path to ruin. Your mind should be on self-improvement, not concerned with love matters, or you will become like Lydia yourself, and bring misery untold upon your dear family."

"I would not do what Lydia did," Kitty said fretfully, "and I don't see any harm in wondering about Lizzy and Mr. Darcy."

"It is an indelicate subject for a young lady to entertain," Mary reproved. "You should use the morning of your life to furnish your brain, not to lose yourself in idle and frivolous speculations."

"I should think you would have interest in the subject yourself," returned Kitty spitefully. "Have you not heard what a fine library Mr. Darcy has at Pemberley? And if Lizzy marries him, we might be invited to visit. I should go to wonderful balls, and you could spend all your time in that library!"

Mary was thoughtful. "There is something in what you say," she acknowledged.

When Lady Lucas and her three oldest daughters arrived for a morning visit as early as could be possibly considered decent, they were all alive to hear the news, but Kitty had nothing definite to tell.

"Still, they have gone walking out – alone?" Lady Lucas advanced. "To Oakham Mount, you say?" Kitty agreed to it. "Then it is as good as an engagement! Mark my words, we will hear it all tomorrow." And she nodded emphatically, the feathers on her hat waving.

"Oh, Lady Lucas, surely you don't think because we sent Lizzy and Mr. Darcy out walking, to clear the way for our dear affianced couple to be alone, that there is anything between them? Mr. Darcy is such a proud, unpleasant man, Lizzy is being quite a saint spending time with him. But it is for the sake of her sister, you know. For Jane," Mrs. Bennet told her.

"If you say so," agreed Lady Lucas, but her expression agreed to none of it. At length the Lucases had to take leave, though Lizzy and Mr. Darcy were still nowhere in sight. "We won't wait," said Lady Lucas with a meaningful smile.

Lizzy and Darcy did not come in until nearly dinner time again; and Kitty was as watchful as before. After the meal, when her father withdrew into his library, Mr. Darcy stood up and followed him.

She pinched Mary. "Did you see that?"

"Hush! Lizzy will hear you."

"I don't care for that. He is gone to ask Papa for her hand, I know he is!" she said in a loud whisper, which luckily Lizzy, across the room working her embroidery at a table under the lamp, did not seem to hear.

"I'm going to sit with Lizzy, and be near enough to see what happens," Kitty whispered, and removed herself to the table. Lizzy looked at her in surprise.

"I will help you roll your threads," Kitty said meekly, and Lizzy nodded indifferently and moved over to make room for her. Moments later Mr. Darcy emerged from the library, and stopped at the table to admire the embroidery. Owing to her advantageous position, Kitty was perfectly able to hear his words as he whispered to Lizzy, "Go to your father, he wants you in the library."

It was not in a whisper that Mrs. Bennet received Lizzy's announcement, at bedtime. She was in her own chamber, but her wild exclamations could be heard all over the house, and Kitty heard every word with much satisfaction, in her own bedroom.

"Ten thousand a year! And very likely more! Tis as good as a Lord!"

Kitty turned over in her bed contentedly. She would have a fine story to tell the Lucases tomorrow.

Will You...?
Quarantined with Darcy
by L.L. Diamond

Darcy watched from his study window as Elizabeth jogged down the front steps and walked briskly towards the rose garden. With a groan, his head dropped against the window frame. What had he been thinking? He couldn't have been thinking—not with his right mind or he never would've done this, would've never invited *her* to Pemberley. He'd been mental. That had to be it! Maybe a case of temporary insanity? Only one reason existed for him to have invited Elizabeth Bennet to Pemberley—he was a glutton for punishment! Constant and never-ending punishment!

~ * ~

Four weeks prior-

Darcy scanned the numbers on the doors of every flat as he hurried down the corridor. "Two hundred ten, two hundred eleven—Ah! There it is," he said in a mumble under his breath. Without analysing what he was doing, he knocked loudly on the door in the hopes of being heard over the music coming from inside. The music dimmed and he rapped upon the door a little harder, as if it needed emphasis.

"Darcy?" Her voice filtered through the door before it opened. When she appeared in the doorway with wide eyes, he shifted on his feet. Lord, she was beautiful, even in that ratty, oversized hoodie and leggings. "Has something happened with Charles and Jane?"

He swallowed hard. Standing in front of the woman who'd had a starring role in his every fantasy as well as every nightmare for the last month was hard enough without summoning the courage to speak. "No, they're fine. Bingley managed to snag two seats on the next flight into England. They'll land in Manchester in a few hours."

His good friend Charles Bingley and Elizabeth's sister Jane had married the weekend before. With the illness having finally made landfall in the U.K., they'd wanted to have the ceremony in the event everything was shut down as it had been in China. The burgeoning pandemic, however, didn't stop them from taking their honeymoon trip to Greece. Not that they were on a major bus tour. Instead, they stayed in Darcy's private villa in Santorini. They had sun, a seaside view, a pool, wi-fi, and a hot tub. Darcy wouldn't have been keen to travel in a cramped airplane for the five- or six-hour trip to return, but Bingley and Jane made other plans.

Now countries around the world were starting to institute travel bans or talking about travel bans, so Bingley and Jane hurried to secure plane seats home before they became stranded.

"Thank goodness," said Elizabeth all breathy and pressing her hand to her chest.

He cleared his throat and shoved his hands further into his pockets. "I've offered Bingley and your sister the use of the old gamekeeper's cabin at Pemberley to quarantine and to continue their honeymoon for the next few weeks. I'm leaving for Pemberley now. I've shut down Darcy Publishing's office building and moved everyone to working from home for the time being. Georgiana's school is allowing her to take her classes online because of her asthma. Mrs. Reynolds is bringing her home as we speak. Since you work

from home already, I thought you might prefer to be in the country, and closer to Jane at the same time.”

The words had rushed out in one long, rambling mess. Why couldn’t he speak and behave normally around this woman?

“You’re inviting me to Pemberley?” The words were slow and spaced. If he couldn’t gather her disbelief at the way she spoke, her jaw hung slightly lax and her high eyebrows spoke volumes. “If this pandemic continues as some are predicting, I could be there indefinitely.”

“I understand that. Pemberley is large enough that you can hide in your rooms for the duration if you want. When I spoke to Bingley, Jane said you couldn’t work at Longbourn. You’d have peace and quiet when you need it at Pemberley.”

She glanced back over her shoulder before shaking her head. “What about my cat? I can’t just leave Tilney here for all that time by himself. I also can’t ask my neighbour to feed him for that long either.”

“So bring him with you. I’ll help you pack up anything you need. He can wander the house, or if you’re more comfortable, you can have a suite of rooms to yourself so he’s easier to find.”

She opened and closed her mouth two or three times. Would she really prefer remaining in London? After her scathing refusal of his invitation for a weekend in Paris during the Rosings book festival last month, he knew she didn’t think much of him, but he’d emailed her that evening to explain their misunderstandings. Perhaps his words held more venom than he’d thought? Boy, he felt like an ass!

“I apologise for bothering you,” he said quickly. “If you’d like to join us, you’re welcome at any time.” He ran a hand through his hair as he turned to make his escape.

“Wait!”

When he pivoted back around, she stood in the hallway. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful. You surprised me is all. I would prefer to be in the country and near Jane, but I need to pack. I also have food that could spoil from the last delivery. Since I can’t write at Longbourn, I’d planned to hunker down for as long as possible.”

“We can pack up the groceries and bring it with us or you can give it to a neighbour.” Her teeth scraped her bottom lip, making him grip his hands at his sides. She had to have no idea how that tiny habit turned him on.

“I don’t know how we’re going to fit everything in your car.”

“I’m driving the Range Rover. Pack whatever you need.”

~ * ~

Boris Johnson locked down the country a week later.

Now four weeks since the lockdown, Bingley and Jane still lived in the gamekeeper’s cottage. Instead of moving to the main house after their two-week quarantine, they’d opted to remain in their secluded hideaway. The small house was well-stocked and quite liveable. They purchased grocery delivery from the Pemberley home farm, and since none of them left the grounds, they came up to the main house for an occasional dinner on the terrace. They certainly weren’t suffering!

In the meantime, Darcy, Georgiana, and Elizabeth occupied the larger house with Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds living in their comfortable apartments below stairs. Every day, Elizabeth joined him and his sister for meals. She was polite and got along with Georgiana as if they'd been sisters their entire lives. Interactions between him and Elizabeth had improved—he guessed they were better anyway, or was that wishful thinking? They spoke of books and current events. He'd learned that she hated brussels sprouts and loved tofu. The problem was he fell more in love with her by the day. Meanwhile, she seemed no more affected by him than she ever had.

Four weeks! They could be like this for months! He lifted his head and dropped it back against the wall and groaned. Months!

~*~

Elizabeth wound her way through the trees along the river and sighed. She grabbed the trunk of the next birch tree and swung around, trailing her fingers along the rough bark as she stepped toward the next. Thank goodness for Darcy inviting her to Pemberley! After four weeks in London, cooped up like a budgie in a cage, she would've been stir-crazy.

Now, if only she could understand the man behind the life-saving invitation!

When he offered for her to join him and his sister, she thought perhaps he'd forgiven her. She hadn't exactly refused his date request in a sympathetic manner. No, she'd ripped him a new one as though he had extras to spare. But what had he expected? He'd never treated her as if he thought much of her.

The first time they met was Charles and Jane's engagement party a year ago. He'd insulted her—said she was okay, but she wasn't the prettiest woman he'd ever seen, he'd glared at her as if she couldn't do anything right, and his cousin, who was a bit pissed, had spilt the beans about his attempt to break up Charles and Jane a few months before.

She'd gladly walked away from that encounter without giving him the time of day. Then they happened upon one another at the Rosings book festival. He'd show up at all the same talks and events. He must've purchased a signed copy of every book she'd ever written. He also seemed to bump into her every night at dinner and would ask to join her so neither of them would have to eat alone. When he came to her room and asked if she'd join him for a weekend in Paris—as his girlfriend, she'd lost it.

"Lizzy?"

Her head jerked up from where she stared at the water to Jane, who stood a few feet away. "Charles let you out of bed?"

She laughed and leaned against a tree. "You know we're both working from the cottage. He has to log in to the Darcy Publishing server every day, and I'm teaching my students from the garden when the weather cooperates."

"The weather has been incomparably good since all this mess started."

"I know," said Jane, with a chuckle. "We're all only allowed one walk a day, and we're given blue skies and sunshine for weeks on end. Not that the government can do much if we walk more since we're on the Pemberley grounds and away from everyone anyway."

Elizabeth glanced around. Where was Charles? "What are you doing out here?"

“William invited us for dinner, so we were walking to the house. But when I saw you heading toward the river, I thought I’d join you.” She lifted her eyebrows and crossed her arms over her chest. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.” Elizabeth picked a daisy along the riverbank and twirled it in her fingers.

“I don’t buy that. You were concentrating very hard on the water until I startled you. Normally, you’d be looking straight ahead and walking as if you might break into a run at any moment.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, mirroring Jane’s stance.

“Don’t do that,” said Jane. “I know you like William, but whenever Charles and I come to dinner, nothing changes. The two of you get along, but it’s obvious neither of you has said anything to the other.”

“What do you want me to say, Jane? I was a daft idiot? I was a bitch? I’ve changed my mind.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” She kicked the grass at her feet. “I was horrible to him, Jane. I still can’t believe he invited me here.”

“And before the lockdown too,” said Jane. “If you’d waited and tried to come now, you might’ve been stopped along the motorway and told to return to London.”

Elizabeth sagged a bit more against the tree and covered her face with her hands. “I feel so stupid,” she said, dragging her hands down her cheeks. “He’s everything I’ve ever searched for in a man: handsome, intelligent, and caring—I mean look how he’s practically a father to Georgiana.”

“So what’s the problem.”

“I don’t want him to think I like him out of gratitude.”

With a grin, Jane walked forward and put her hands on Elizabeth’s shoulders. “I can guarantee he doesn’t want that either.”

“I feel terrible.”

“Why? You like him. He likes you. I don’t see why you should feel terrible.”

After she pulled back her arms, Elizabeth propped her hands on her hips. “Firstly, I don’t think he likes me anymore, and to be fair, I don’t blame him. Second, I’m staying for free in his house. I tried to give him money for food yesterday. The expression on his face. You’d have thought I killed his favourite horse.”

Jane giggled. “That’s one reason why we stayed in the cottage. William stocked it before we arrived, but Charles knew that William would insist on paying for everything if we moved into Pemberley. He also worried Caroline might get arrested trying to travel here to isolate with us.”

Elizabeth spluttered out a giggle. “Oh my God, I can just see her in her little orange Fiat, racing down the ‘M’ and making it on the telly because she was trying to ‘holiday’ in the country during lockdown.”

“Be kind,” said Jane with a sly grin. She grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and started tugging her toward the house. “As for William, make the first move. I guarantee he won’t say no.”

“As if you made the first move with Charles.”

Jane turned around and waggled her eyebrows. “How do you know that I didn’t?”

“What?” Bursting into gales of laughter, Elizabeth let Jane drag her back into the house.

~ * ~

Elizabeth stood along the edge of the terrace, her wine glass barely propped against the stone wall, watching the shadows shift as the sun slowly sank below the horizon. The slim shafts of light filtering and slowly disappearing between the trees cast a beautiful, yet eerie sight.

She lifted her eyes to the stars, twinkling like fairy lights in the dark. The stars were not nearly this bright in London. Too much light combined with pollution dimmed them or hid them from sight.

“If you want to look at the stars, there’s a better place for that.”

Jane and Charles had headed back down to the gamekeeper’s cottage when the sun began to dim, and Georgiana had disappeared into the music room with the excuse of practicing. When the girl wasn’t doing her homework, eating, or sleeping, she was playing her cello. If she kept at it, her bow would permanently fuse to her fingertips.

“The stars are spectacular from here. I don’t know where you could possibly have a better view.” The flesh of her back prickled. She didn’t need to glance back to know he was close.

“Let me show you,” he said, his voice low and soft.

When she turned, he held out his free hand. Why did she suddenly feel like Christine in Phantom of the Opera—like she was about to take his hand and let him pull her through the mirror and into a different world?

Her palm met his and a jolt flew up her arm as he closed his fingers over hers. As he led her past the table, he grabbed his empty wine glass and the bottle of red that still sat to one side, untouched, and led her into the house. “Is this how you lure unsuspecting ladies to your room?” She laughed, but her insides fluttered and flipped. “You tell them they will see stars and even galaxies.”

A small bark of a laugh came from him as he shook his head. “We’re just grabbing a blanket. We’re not staying in the house.”

After they found a blanket and a basket to hold that and the wine, he grabbed her hand and tugged her out into the dark, down past the rose garden, until they reached the river.

“How can you find your way in the dark like this?”

“My dad brought me out here when I was a boy. He even put up a small shed nearby to keep a telescope.”

Part of her yearned to draw closer to him. Lately, she’d been having some urges where he was concerned—to brush that one curl off his forehead, to see if his lips were really as soft as they looked, and the most disconcerting, to rip his shirt off and see the muscles that his shirts only hinted at. CEOs weren’t buff, were they?

Finally, they reached a clearing where he stopped so abruptly, she ran into his shoulder. "Sorry," she said, her eyes close enough to catch his in the sparse light coming from the moon.

"Look up," he whispered.

She tore her gaze from his and inhaled sharply. "The sky looks like those brilliant photographs where you can see the Milky Way."

Her heart gave this odd tug when he pulled away and spread the blanket, making her follow. He set the basket to the side and laid down. "If you join me, you won't get a crick in your neck."

She held herself back so she wouldn't look like she was running to cuddle with him. When her head rested upon the soft quilt, she surveyed the panorama of twinkling stars and dark sky before her and breathed. "So beautiful."

"I think so."

When she turned and squinted, he wasn't looking up since the profile wasn't that of his nose, but of his ear and hair. Her heart frantically skittered against her ribs. It was now or never! She rolled to her side and inched closer until she could make out the features of his face. Lord, she was going to be sick!

She squeezed her eyes closed and dove for his mouth, only what she kissed was harder than she would have expected. With a low laugh, his hand threaded through her hair, cupping the back of her head. "While I'll take your lips anywhere, I think I'd prefer my lips to my nose."

His chest shook as their lips met, but his laughter soon subsided as their kiss deepened. Their bodies pressed together, making her heart whisper that she was exactly where she was supposed to be. His fingers trailed along her sides and her shoulder as though she were made of fine porcelain—delicate and priceless.

"Elizabeth," he said in a breathless murmur when their lips finally separated. "Marry me."

She jerked back but without leaving the circle of his arms. "What?"

"Too soon?" Even though there was little light, a slight smile graced his features.

"With our past misunderstandings, I'd say just a bit."

He drew her closer. "Then I'll have to ask you every day until you say yes."

She burst into laughter. "You can't be serious."

His own chuckles joined hers. "I suppose you'll find out how serious I am tomorrow."

His lips claimed hers, which ceased all talking for the time being—until the next morning, that is. When she awoke, he smiled even though her hair had to be a fright. She didn't even want to consider how bad her breath reeked!

Then, despite the tangled, messy hair and horrible breath, he proposed again. Who knew William Darcy was not only handsome, but also rich—and persistent!