Prejudice and Pride
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8862334.

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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2016-12-16 Updated: 2019-12-25 Chapters: 30/? Words: 147703</td>
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Prejudice and Pride
by Pondermoniums

Summary

Second son of a house full of women, James Elizabeth Bennet is as devoted to the women in his life as their mother is to getting them married. Being the only male sibling gives him the entitlement of starting mischief as well as ending it, until the local estate for rent is finally claimed by a wealthy Charles Bingley alongside his sisters and a guest by the name of Fitzwilliam Darcy.

As the middle and wealthy classes combine, old agonies resurface within both parties, alongside current and forbidden needs. For one such as Jamie, though, as marriage becomes a very real aspect in his sisters' futures, loneliness becomes a more present element of his.

Notes

Welcome! For those of you who are die-hard Austen fans, please do not expect the 19th century language to always be present. While many lines are directly from the text, I am not putting that kind of pressure on myself for the pieces I add in.

I hope you enjoy!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Newcomers

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

At least, this was Mrs. Bennet’s claim while the family gathered in the foyer to wish Mr. Bennet safe travels. Straightening his coat lapels, she kissed the whiskers of his recently shaven face while simultaneously ushering him out the door. “Netherfield Park is let at last and it is hardly two kilometers down the road. Off with you!”

“My dear, you’ve hardly given reason,” he stated mildly. His stark bluish grey eyes flicked to his second offspring’s while his wife was occupied.

“Oh but I have!” she defended.

“And what is his name?” Mr. Bennet guessed.

“Bingley!” she chimed.

“Is he married or single?”

“Single, to be sure!”

“I can never be sure, dear.”

She swatted his chest. “He is for one of our daughters, certainly. A single man of large fortune: four or five thousand a year! What a fine thing for our girls.”

“Not all of them at once, I hope?” her husband remarked.

“I hope you don’t mean to insinuate young men are collectible things, mama,” James Bennet intercepted from where he leaned against the parlor doorway with the eldest, Jane. Mr. Bennet smiled softly.

She gave him a smirk. “With four daughters to take care of, my Lizzy, I will collect as many as I can.”

She turned back to her husband while he asked, “Is that his design in settling here?”

“Design!” she huffed. “Nonsense, how can you talk so? But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes.”

“I see no occasion for that,” he harrumphed mildly, wielding his walking cap. “You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party.”

James and Jane exchanged smiles while the youngest, Lydia and Katherine giggled profusely. The middle daughter, Mary, sat in the window seat reading and giving all appearances of ignoring them albeit for her occasional glances.

Their mother fanned herself against the late summer heat. “My dear, you flatter me. I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five—I mean four, sorry Lizzy, love, your middle name is a curse upon you.”
James cast his grey eyes to the ceiling, gently shaking his head while his mother continued, “When a woman has four grown-up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.”

"In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of,” Mr. Bennet commented dryly, earning snorts of mirth from his eldest children behind their hands.

Mrs. Bennet’s mind was on a singular track. “But my dear, you must go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighborhood.”

“It is more than I engage for, I assure you,” her husband smarted.

“But consider your daughters! Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, and you know they rarely visit newcomers. You must go or it will be impossible for us to visit him otherwise.”

“You are over scrupulous surely. I daresay Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls. I’ll even throw in a good word for our Lizzy. If Mr. Bingley has a half-penny of humour worth exploring, he will enjoy the scheme.”

Color rose in Mrs. Bennet’s cheeks. “I desire you will do no such thing. Jamie is not a bit better than the others, and I am sure he is not so half so handsome as Jane—”

“Thank you for thinking so highly of me, mama,” he quipped. His fair sister Jane rubbed his arm.

Mrs. Bennet spared a consoling glance over her shoulder. “Oh my love, you know you are precious to me but this is a matter of four against one.” She turned back to her husband. “And no one is half so good humoured as Lydia. You are always giving him the preference. Did I marry such a typical Englishman?”

Mr. Bennet tucked a flyaway curl of ash brown hair behind her ear. “I fear there is everything typical about me, my dear, as there is with my children. They have none of them much to recommend them. To the urban breed, they are all silly and ignorant girls. It should be a light to our lives that Jamie has something more of a quickness than his sisters. I haven’t any idea from where he got it.”

“Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way? You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves,” she exclaimed while slapping the cap upon his head.

“You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.”

“Ah, you do not know what I suffer!” she proclaimed. Her son leaned his head against the doorframe behind her, and Jane put her own upon his shoulder.

Mr. Bennet opened the iron-ribbed door to allow a fresh breeze into the room. “But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighborhood.”

“It will be no use to us if twenty such should come!” she retorted. “Since you will not visit them!”

He straightened his cap. “Depend upon it, my life-love, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all, as I already have this one.”

Wife and daughters perked their heads up. James smiled softly while Mr. Bennet grinned, the man so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, with reserve and caprice that the experience of
three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. “When is the next ball of Meryton expected, Lizzy?”

“Tomorrow fortnight,” was the reply.

With glistening eyes she pulled him in for a kiss before just as quickly slapping his chest. Her mind was less difficult. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.

Once their temperaments had been set to rights, Mr. Bennet stood straight and announced to his family, “Well who would join me for a stroll into town, since I’ve been swept from my own home?”

Even Mary rushed to find her shoes.
Bees and Flowers

Chapter Summary

The Meryton Ball.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven’s sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces.”

“I do not cough for my own amusement,” replied her second youngest in the darkness of their chaise.

Mrs. Bennet’s fan moved fretfully in the air, bidding the excited heat of the evening away. “Your father has dealt a treacherous hand! Had Mrs. Long come back a day earlier, we would have depended upon her to introduce him to us!”

Mr. Bennet voiced his presence as he peered out the window. “Then you may have the advantage of your friend, my dear, and introduce Mr. Bingley to her. As the cards hold, the party in question has not arrived prior to us. I do not see a carriage befitting their station.”

“Impossible, Mr. Bennet,” his wife declared as if it were obvious. “Impossible, when I am not acquainted with him myself! How can you be so teasing? Besides the point, the wealthy have fashionable deadlines which are of course later than most.”

James and Jane exchanged looks. The queue of carriages rocked forward and it was finally their turn to leave the stuffy chaise. Before they could escape inside, Mrs. Bennet heralded her children around her to establish a meeting time at the end of the evening as well as to voice a final complaint toward her husband’s negligence.

Mr. Bennet countered, “The past weeks have hardly been an exercise in negligence. A fortnight’s acquaintance is very little. One cannot know what a man really is by the end of a fortnight, therefore I thought to not strain my beloved’s nerves more than necessary. As to your concerns of Mrs. Long, she and her nieces must stand their chance; she will think it an act of kindness, your standing aside until this evening.”

Mrs. Bennet made an indignant sound along with, “Nonsense! Nonsense!”

Mr. Bennet smarted, “Do you now consider the forms of introduction, and the stress that is laid on them, nonsense? What say you, Mary? You are a young lady of deep reflection.”

Caught unaware, Mary wished to say something sensible and awe inspiring but knew not how. Her mouth opened only to hang open.

“While Mary is adjusting her ideas,” Mr. Bennet continued, “let us return to, or should I say begin with, Mr. Bingley.”

His wife let out an exasperated sound. “I am sick of Mr. Bingley.”
He was hardly bothered while he ushered his family to the doors. “I am sorry to hear that, but why
did you not tell me so before? If I had known as much this morning, I certainly would not have
called upon him a second time. He seemed quite thrilled for tonight’s festivities. We shall now
make a very awkward acquaintance when he arrives.”

The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished, that of Mrs. Bennet surpassing the rest;
although when the initial tumult of joy was over she began to declare it was what she had expected
of her husband all the while—

Kitty’s handkerchief flew up to catch her cough, but her brother wasted not a second. Curling his
arm through hers while Jane was on her other side, the eldest siblings rushed her through the doors
before their mother’s wrath was further incurred. “Let’s get some tea into you,” James declared.

“Tea?” Kitty whined. “But Jamie, Mrs. Lucas said there’d be wine.”

“Not a drop of it until you’ve had a cuppa,” Jane retorted.

“Ugh,” Kitty growled indignantly. “I’ll need to make my own tea every half hour!”

James leaned close for her ears alone, “Try to contain your vulgarity. This evening means a lot to
our mother.”

“And wine passes through the system as quickly as tea,” Jane concurred as they arrived at the
refreshment table. “Behave yourself.”

They took steps to leave Kitty to her fate but their mother and Lydia arrived. “Lydia, my love,
though you are the youngest, I daresay Mr. Bingley will dance with you at this ball.”

Oh!” Lydia exclaimed stoutly. “I am not afraid; for though I am the youngest, I’m the tallest.”

James grimaced over his shoulder. “What’s that to do with anything? Can we tell people you bump
your head too much on doorways?”

“Lizzy!” their mother all but screamed while Lydia tried to strike him but he was swift. Lydia
chased him through the crowd before growing distracted by a young man asking her for the first
dance. James met with the Bennet’s neighbor, Charlotte Lucas, and with her they rejoined Jane
who had been ensnared by Mrs. Bennet and Charlotte’s own mother, Lady Lucas.

“You’ve met him!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “Well go on! Tell all! My husband refuses to provide a
satisfactory description of Mr. Bingley, no matter how we interrogate him.”

James murmured between Charlotte and Jane, “By we, she means herself and Lydia.”

The ladies chuckled, the latter seconding, “Poor Kitty gets swept within Lydia’s excitement as
well.”

James saw a dark glimmer in Charlotte’s eye, then, and let himself be pulled by her away from
their mothers. Jane had seen it too, and followed. “I’ve seen him,” Charlotte revealed.

“Please tell me he’s appalling,” he japed. “Warts and thinning hair, the works.”

Jane laughed but scolded. “If mother has her way, one of us is to marry him! Don’t curse us so.”

Charlotte held Jane’s arm within her own as the three of them made a lap around the assembly.
“He’s quite attractive, actually. His hair is the color of copper and he wore a fine blue coat atop his
black horse.”

Jane’s brows lifted. “He must have come to have tea with you?”

She nodded. “With papa, yes, but he was perfectly lovely to me. He’s quite young. He can’t be much older than you, Jane. And he loves to dance, he said this to me directly. We shan’t wait much longer before we see him here.”

Jane wondered, “Do you know how many will be in his party?”

“Oh,” Charlotte’s brows furrowed while she recollected. “I can’t be sure. As soon as he left us he rode back to London to bring more people to Netherfield. Twelve ladies, and seven gentlemen was what I heard but I truly doubt these numbers. Charles spoke specifically of his sisters and perhaps a cousin.”

“You are on a first name acquaintance with him,” Jane laughed. “Do not reveal this disclosure to our mother. How large is his family?”

“There are six. He and his five sisters. I know nothing of the cousin.”

“Oh!” Jane smiled. “He is quite like you, Jamie. If only your hair had more assam instead of honey in it.”

He shrugged, sharing her smile. “One sister more than me. He has me beat.”

Jane reached behind Charlotte to rake her fingers through his honey brown hair, the silken, floppy tresses long enough to tuck behind his ear but short enough to fall back around his face. He felt Charlotte’s hand between his shoulder blades. “Well, if the rest of the Bingleys are like the Bennets, the rest of us will be blinded by your beautiful families.”

James guffawed. “A set of bumpkins among London’s glossy breed. I think we should place our wages to how long it takes them to kick dirt up in their haste to leave us.”

“Lizzy,” Jane scolded. “Why would you say that? We haven’t even met them.”

“But papa has.”

“That means nothing,” she countered. “He is an old man who prefers the solitude of his library than the science of truly studying and understanding people. Anyhow, both he and the Lucases seem to think well of Charles Bingley.”

“Out of the seven of us, he is the only one who has been to London,” James reminded. “Perhaps his observations and studies have driven him to the library’s solitude.”

“Oh Jamie,” she sighed, and gently shoved his head. “You’re speaking like an old man too soon. Let us be children one more night.”

Charlotte concurred. “I may see the end of my twenties more clearly than either of you but I will drink to that. Let’s find the wine.”

The gentleman standing sentinel beside the wine poured a sweet red for James while Jane and Charlotte preferred a crisp white. James lifted the crimson fluid to his lips, the glass edge indenting his flesh, and it was in this moment the doors to the assembly opened. Heads lifted from wine and conversation. No one could have said whether music still played or not, so invested were they in who was arriving last.
Charles Bingley was easy enough to select from the rather small group. Out of Charlotte’s numbers, it appeared only three men and two women were apart of the party. James heard Charlotte whisper to Jane, “His two sisters, the husband of the eldest, and…I do not know the other man.”

As befitting their station, a herald announced, “Mr. Charles Bingley, accompanied by Lord Fitzwilliam Darcy, Miss Caroline Bingley, and Mr. and Mrs. Hurst.”

“Lord?” Mary voiced, suddenly on James’ other side. “The Darcy fellow is a lord?”

“A small one, surely,” Jane supplied. “Otherwise we’d know of him?”

“Oh...he is heir of Pemberley,” Charlotte remembered quietly, and the group of them fell silent. Pemberley was one of the most prominent estates in England. Even they in their rural ignorance knew of the Derbyshire home which was only small against the castles of kings.

James felt his sisters’ hands on the back of his tucked shirt, grounding themselves. He had removed his waistcoat in the heat of the room and he was certainly not the only gentleman to do so, but this contrasted highly with the layered, lustrous fabrics of the newcomers. Mr. Bingley wore the telltale blue coat, glistening slightly in the chandelier’s glow. He was good looking and gentlemanly with his copper hair that matched his sisters’; he had a pleasant countenance and easy, unaffected manners. James could see that immediately in how he grinned and shook the assembly manager’s hand, the very image of old friends despite this being their first meeting.

The brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, appeared a typical gentleman along with his wife, whose hair was only slightly more auburn than the brilliant copper of her unmarried siblings. Overall, the Bingley sisters’ attire was fine and decidedly fashionable in their contrast to the rest of the women present.

But Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room. Like bees and flowers, the Bennets were drawn to one another since James heard his mother whisper behind his shoulder, “My word, his height...but what handsome features.”

James could not say he disagreed. Mr. Darcy gripped the attention of the room by his fine, tall stature, noble mien, and by the report which circulated the venue within five minutes, of his having ten thousand a year.

“Is his hair a bit long? Is it fashionable?” Mrs. Bennet queried to Charlotte. “It’s a slight unruly, isn’t it? Oh, but I suppose it is quite rugged…”

James analyzed the man of which his mother was having difficulty developing an opinion. The hair was nearly black, or a rich brown that reminded him of a Christmas Mr. Bennet had brought home chocolate for the family. It had been bitter but sweet, and he had been the only Bennet to enjoy it enough to finish the parcel. As far as James could tell, the man had quite straight hair, but the late summer’s humidity had pulled it into soft waves. The tresses on the nape of his neck were perhaps too long but instead of the hair falling messily over his forehead, it was combed neatly to one side. Unlike Mr. Bingley’s, Darcy’s hair pushed off his scalp with quite a bit of volume.

Mr. Bingley had soon made himself acquainted with all the principal people in the room. He proved lively and unreserved as he appeared determined to dance every melody struck up by the orchestra. After his first dance with Charlotte, however, Mr. Bennet succeeded in drawing him over to meet his family. Mr. Bingley’s own joined them.

Mr. Bennet began, “It is my pleasure to introduce my Mrs. Bennet, and our five children. The eldest, Jane, James, Mary, Katherine, and of course, Lydia.”
“Charles Bingley,” he smiled with a hand on his chest. “Charles, please.”

He kissed Jane’s hand first and then shook James’s while the members of his party chose to introduce themselves individually. Mr. Darcy noticeably remained on the outskirts of their circle, silently watching the ballroom’s goings on. Mrs. Hurst was kind but collected whereas Caroline’s hand felt limp and ready to be pulled back when James bowed to kiss its surface. Her hand parted from his without contact of his mouth as if they had silently agreed upon it. Her topic of conversation afterward cemented his disinterest.

“It is quite dark and stuffy in here. Has no one thought of rebuilding the place with less wood? You are brave folk to have so many candles in such a place. You can see the tails of smoke among the rafters.”

He smiled kindly and left her in favor of Bingley’s company, which was diametric. “This is extraordinary!” he all but sang. “There is never anything like this in London. You’re even free to remove your waistcoats here!”

His blue eyes landed on James, who also felt Darcy’s dark gaze turn toward him in the corner of his eye. He laughed congenially. “It is hardly proper, I assure you. Give my mother a moment to notice and she will scold me.”

Charles’ grin never faded. He leaned forward to say as if in confidence, “I shan’t catalyze your punishment. Simply allow me to voice my jealousy.”

James felt his lips matching that smile. Charles was making it difficult to find a fault in the man—Mr. Darcy said, “A punishment is hardly what one would receive at a London engagement. Lacking the appropriate pieces of attire would bar the individual from entering the assembly entirely.”

James’ brows reached for his hairline as he brought his glass to his lips to hide his expression. He twisted on the ball of his foot, giving a silent good luck to his sisters as he pulled Charlotte with him under the excuse of a dance.

To his surprise, Charles and Jane lined up next to them as the music began. Not a minute must have passed but they exchanged nods and the music commenced. It started with the four of them each grasping hands to turn in a circle. Charles made a point to say, “I apologize for him.”

The four broke into their separate pairs but when they rejoined, James inquired, “You needn’t give apologies for others who are unwilling. I cannot say I am surprised anyhow.”

Charles guffawed but was unable to reply until their next joining. “Are you so skeptical of us? What reputation has London citizenry created for itself?”

Charlotte cut in with a warning look to James, “Not an altogether negative impression, I assure you.”

Charles impressed James by shaking his head. “I don’t buy that for a moment, but I will have to scold my companion later tonight. He is not even native to London. He hasn’t any excuse.”

“I suppose everyone has some excuse,” James supplied.

Charles beamed as they broke apart but the dance ended a moment later. “You are compassionate to say so but I wish you good fortune wriggling it out of him. If Darcy was not staying with me in Netherfield, I doubt he would have come tonight.”
“I hope I do not darken your impression of me,” James laughed, “but I haven’t any desire to discover anything more from the man.”

Even in this, Charles’ smile did not tarnish. If anything, it shined brighter. “Coming to Netherfield is proving deliciously refreshing with every moment. The air is rich and I far prefer your wicked honesty. As if London’s elite did not have enough money, they flock around Darcy like insects in this heat. Speaking of, how aren’t there any flies?”

Charlotte tapped her nose. “Smell the cedar? Mosquitos loathe the odour.”

“I did not see any bonfires outside, though,” he voiced.

She turned to point at the large tapers as thick as a man’s arm on either end of the room as well as beside the entrances. Charles’ eyes widened with curiosity. “You mean, those candles have the scent within the wax?”

“Yes,” Charlotte smiled and gestured to James—

“Charles.”

The quiet yet smooth baritone took James by surprise as he and Charles turned to face Mr. Darcy. “A word,” he requested tersely.

He clearly expected for Bingley to follow since he turned and they watched those dark shoulders silently part the crowd. Bingley squeezed Jane’s hand consolingly and leaned towards James. “He hates being left alone, especially among people.” He winked, and left them.

Lydia appeared beside Jane, then. Her mouth opened, and then closed, clearly not seeing the intention of her arrival. “Where’s he gone?”

“Mr. Darcy wished to have a word,” Jane provided.

“Oh him,” Lydia scoffed. “Such a waste in qualities.”

Jane laughed, “Whatever do you mean?”

“Well he is handsomer than Bingley,” she stated as if it was obvious, “but his manners have turned the tide of his initial popularity. He is quite a disgusting man.”

James’ brows lifted. “Tell us your true feelings, Lydia.”

Lydia gripped his arm in earnest. “Did you not see his behavior during our introduction? He did not shake papa’s hand or introduce himself!”

“You didn’t either,” Jane interrupted. “Father said your name and you ran off to dance with the Longs’ boy.”

“I won’t stay where I am unwanted,” Lydia proclaimed. “Bingley’s already set his sights on Jane, and Darcy is so unbearably proud I shan’t waste a moment on him.”

James laughed darkly while Jane retorted, “Do you hear your own words?”

Lydia rested her chin on James’ shoulder. He felt the sweat of her cheek against his own and gently leaned his head back against her curly hair. “All I’m saying is Darcy is above our company and above being pleased. If you can prove me wrong then I will delight in your nuptials, since Darcy will surely be among Bingley’s groomsmen.”
She nuzzled against James and whined, “Lizzy, will you let me taste your wine?”

He turned his head to kiss her hair. “No.”

She pouted, “Why? Kitty’s but a year older than me and she has a glass.”

“And it is one of the few occasions she has something before you. Mother is too lenient with you.”

He grimaced against the wet raspberry she kissed against his cheek. “Why shouldn’t I be pampered? I’m the youngest.”

“Congratulations, you were born when our parents were too tired to provide proper enforcement.”

She giggled and hugged his middle while he drained the glass. “Is it difficult being the only boy, Lizzy?”

He inhaled slowly for a long sigh, and then, “It’s only difficult being your brother, Lydia. Your hair takes up too much space.”

“OH!” she growled, her hands curling to tickle his sides but her arms loosened and he took off through the assembly with her on his heels.

“Lizzy! Lydia!” they heard Mrs. Bennet screech, however a new song was striking upon the orchestra’s strings. James stopped instantaneously and caught his sister’s momentum to turn it into the first motions of the dance. To his surprise, Charles had returned and asked Jane for a second dance, and further along the line, was Mr. Darcy with Mrs. Hurst.

“What a surprise,” Lydia commented when she noticed where his eyes were. “Mr. Bingley is getting on well with Jane, though.”

This was an understatement. As James observed the pair from the corner of his eye, he had never seen his sister laugh so freely, nor danced as readily. He supposed Charles had this contagious quality to his character, but he knew Jane better than anyone.

When the dance was finished, Lydia hugged him but scolded, “Not another one! There are so few gentlemen here, I must spare them each a dance.”

“Thank you for taking me into such brief consideration,” he scoffed, but lent her his handkerchief for her to wipe her face while he departed for a fresh glass of wine. A low voice drew his attention to the end of the table, where Mr. Darcy had pulled Bingley aside once more.

“Won’t you dance with us again?” Charles insisted.

“I will not,” his companion refused.

“Come, William,” he said with more urgency. “I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing by yourself in this stupid manner. Much better to dance and play at merriment. You may well surprise yourself by actually enjoying yourself.”

“You know I think too highly of you, Charles, to lie in such a way. I yet refuse. You know I detest it, unless I am well acquainted with my partner. At an assembly such as this, it would be a punishment to me to stand up with any other woman in the room.”

Bingley scoffed, “Upon my honor, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several you must agree are uncommonly pretty.”
“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” Darcy replied. James peeked at the gentlemen to see them looking at Jane, who was currently with Mrs. Bennet.

Charles agreed wistfully, “She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld.”

“There you had best return to her and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.”

Charles caught his arm before he could turn away fully. “Disagree with me all you like, but I brought you here for your betterment. You must interact with the waking world. This is an invigorating change of people, I promise you. Please. If not the women then perhaps the second Bennet?”

Darcy recoiled somewhat. “You mean I should dance with a man?”

Charles guffawed. “Perhaps at the end of the night when the wine barrels have emptied, but I meant for you to appeal to him for conversation. His tongue may prove as sharp as yours. You could use the competition.”

“Mr. Darcy.”

The pair perked up for Caroline Bingley’s interruption. “Won’t you share a dance with me?”

Darcy seemed to consider it and then answered, “Of course.”

Charles made an exhausted sound and exhibited the first amount of annoyance James had yet seen. “Acquainted enough, are you?”

“Charles—”

“No, no,” he waved them away. “Far be it for me to wish my friend real happiness.”

He moved to make his way along the trestle table, and James rotated quickly so to not appear the eavesdropper, although he soon felt a hand on his shoulder blade.

“James!” Charles greeted with a fresh breath. “You are not dancing? I estimated more ladies than men present. We are needed.”

James was impressed by the man’s gallantry, then, as he was pulled forward toward his own mother. Charles asked Mrs. Bennet for a dance, which had her floundering and only too eager for the music to begin. James invited one of the Long’s nieces for the dance to appease Charles’ insistence. He could not help but observe his and Darcy’s forceful neglect of each other during the music.

Afterward, James drew Charles toward the entrance for some fresh air. “Is my face horribly red?” he laughed, sipping the crisp white wine.

“Yes,” James laughed, “but it should be cooler at this time of night.”

Charles gasped as the night air encompassed them like a cloak, all darkness and muffled silence from the noise within. “I needed this. Thank you, James. Why does your family call you Lizzy? If I may ask.”

James sipped his red with a shrug. “My middle name is Elizabeth.”

“Ah!” Bingley laughed merrily. “That explains it. I suppose Mrs. Bennet would have named you this if you were a fifth daughter.”
“Undoubtedly,” James confirmed.

“Walk with me,” Charles requested, gently holding James’ arm to steer him toward a path past the carriages. “I hope you do not misunderstand. I love my family dearly, but you are blessed in the quality of yours.”

Without really thinking about it, James let his arm fall within the crook of Bingley’s. The two of them were of the same height and strolled easily past the mares and stallions. When they came upon a glistening black horse, Charles stroked its cheek and snout. The creature had the calm of one familiar with its master. “Darcy gave this one to me,” he said.

“A fine mount,” James provided.

For whatever reason, Charles laughed. “A stubborn beast, like the master who bestowed him to me. Caroline is infatuated though.”

“A fine match,” James returned.

Charles looked him full in the face and accused cheerfully, “I’m boring you! I can tell!”

James let the giggle escape his throat. “I am not as knowledgeable in these things. I’m not the one you should converse such matters with.”

But Charles surprised him with, “Good. This small talk is exhausting,” and pulled him with renewed vigor along the path. “Where does this lead?”

“Out of Meryton,” James answered. “Eventually to Netherfield.”

“Ah,” Bingley hummed, and turned them back toward the assembly. “I would never hear the end of it if I were to leave without my sisters. Darcy would hardly care. That is both a treat and a nuisance of his character.”

“Are you sure? You are the reason for his being here.”

James realized his blunder too late. Charles’s shoes scraped the gravel in his halt. “Aha! I knew you were listening to us,” he beamed. “What a treat. You do not waste breath on pointless words, so I did not anticipate finding a fault in you.”

“I have four sisters, Mr. Bingley,” James reminded. “I can’t afford to waste my breath. I did not have malicious intentions—”

His words were waved aside. “Peace, please. I have sisters, myself, don’t I? I know how curiosity and eavesdropping become second nature. Call me Charles, James…or do I have the liberty to use Lizzy?”

Laughter burst from James’ mouth as they strolled around the assembly building. “I can’t say whether my mother would be livid or beside herself if you choose the latter.”

Charles inquired, “Is it reserved for intimate family?”

He shook his head. “Charlotte Lucas may as well be my fifth sister and she often addresses me as Lizzy. But she just as easily calls me Jamie.”

“Jamie it is,” Charles decided. “Why would Mrs. Bennet be livid?”

“I cannot say.”
“Jamie,” Charles gave his best attempt at scolding. “It has been only an evening but I sense a keen friendship in you. Why can’t you tell me?”

“Well, it involves a friend’s future courtship,” James said bluntly.

Charles blinked and fell silent suddenly. “I see…”

James stopped walking, bringing both of them to a halt. “I didn’t mean to be untoward. I just…surely you suspected…?”

His breath paused in his throat as Charles’ fingers dusted over his cheek. “Of course I suspected, yes. I must always suspect. It is the consequence of my station in life.”

“How torturing.”

Charles bowed over with his laughter. “Yes! Please don’t misunderstand, and—god—I sound silly with what Darcy puts up with.”

James suppressed his sigh and instead consoled, “He is not here right now. Is marriage not an immediate goal of yours?”

Charles’ weight leaned to and fro as he finished his wine. He set the glass on a windowsill as he said, “It is neither immediate nor far off. I only…” His words faded as if he was contemplating whether to reveal his thoughts. “I suppose I decided a long time ago I already had the money and prestige because of my family. I would want the love for myself. I wanted this much to be within my own control. Do I sound mad?”

“No,” James replied calmly. “You sound brave.”

Charles raked his hair back into place with a strained laugh. “Jamie, you sound so hopeless!” he exclaimed while his weight heaved.

James gripped Charles’ upper arms to help him stand. He only meant to hold Charles steady, but he felt the pads of fingers beneath his chin, and then James realized there was a faint dusting of freckles on Charles’ nose.

His lips were soft, and he tasted like white wine. From his hair came the scents of jasmine and lemon rind. The kiss was long and soft, but before James’ mind could catch up, Charles’ forehead rested against his and he was speaking. “There is a difference between realism and cynicism, Jamie. Don’t let the latter overcome the former. Let people surprise you for the better.”

He leaned back, then, as if he remembered something. “Caroline will be needing me. It will be near time for us to retire as well.”

He left Jamie in the darkness beside the window. The ghost of lips against his own and the aroma of his hair rooted James in place…and ever so faintly, Jane’s lavender perfume from his jacket. The summer night was oddly cold against his skin as he made himself tread back inside. James returned Charles’ glass to the trestle table while he refilled his own, if nothing else than for something to hold as he came to stand between his mother and Caroline Bingley. He could not say what they were discussing until he heard Lydia’s shriek of laughter from the current dance. Peering around himself, he realized he was alone with the Bingley sisters, Mr. Hurst, and Mr. Darcy.

“That girl certainly is…loud in her glee, isn’t she?” Mrs. Hurst voiced as if he was not there.

Caroline remarked, “And her stature…as if her voice wasn’t enough on the ears, you cannot hope
to escape from such a long-legged thing.”

A wet snort jerked their attention to James, who was forced to set his wine down. Caroline stood appalled by the spectacle, but Jamie knew he was officially drunk enough to not regard her opinion so highly. He set his glass back on the table, and took it upon himself to excuse himself from the assembly altogether.

Chapter End Notes

Charles puts the Bi in Bingley. <3

If you're interested in an alternate reality where James gets with Charles instead of Darcy, you may start here :)
James felt the mattress move beneath him and the rustle of the covers as Jane slipped beside him. He had not been asleep long but he rubbed sand from his eyes as he turned over to face her.

“You left early,” she whispered, shuffling close to his warmth. Her cold fingers interlaced with his and he felt her breath on his knuckles. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Too much wine,” he breathed, his eyes closed. “But I’ll be fine by morning.”

Her silence opened his eyes. “Did you want to talk?”

“It can wait for the morning,” she hummed.

“I’m listening,” he coaxed, unconsciously playing with her fingers.

After a long moment she said, “What do you think of him? Of Mr. Bingley. You spent some time with him, I saw.”

“You first,” he prompted.

“Well he is just what a young man ought to be, I suppose,” she said. “Sensible, good humoured, lively; I never saw such happy manners. So much ease with such good breeding.”

Jamie smiled with his eyes closed. “Breeding is a happenstance. His manners are learned and chosen.”

“Then you like him?” she pressed.

“He is handsome,” James agreed. “His constant smile would be difficult to look at otherwise.”

“Jamie,” she giggled. “Be serious.”

He opened his eyes and absorbed her messy, pale blond hair. It was straight and floppy like his own but her skin was fair while his was warmed by the sun. “I like him,” he confirmed. “Between your criteria and mama’s, his character is complete.”

“I do not care about his wealth, you know that.”

“Well that’s good,” he declared. “Because there isn’t enough to induce one to extend such feelings toward his family.”

Her eyes crinkled with her mirth. “Were they truly so unbearable? The Hursts seemed like a fine pair.”

“Diluted waters,” James responded.

Jane pinched his nose. “You’re cruel, Lizzy. They were strangers in a strange place, forced to meet everybody at once. You wouldn’t enjoy the situation if you were in their place.”

“You’re right,” he granted. “But you enjoyed tonight?”

“I was very flattered by his asking me to dance a second time,” she confirmed. “I did not expect such a compliment.”
“Only a second?” He held her gaze. “Jane. He could not help seeing that you were about five times prettier than every other woman in the room. No thanks to his gallantry for that.”

“Lizzy…” she avoided.

“Compliments always take you by surprise, but never me,” he countered. “He certainly is agreeable, and I give you leave to like him.”

She laughed, “Well thank you, I needed it.”

“I know,” he smirked. She pinched his chin as he added, “Besides, you have liked many stupider people.”

“Lizzy!”

The bed crunched softly against their laughter. After a time, James’ mirth faded against the inquiry, “What did you two discuss outside?”

His lashes were heavy as he blinked, examining her features before he replied. “He kissed me.”

He could see the visible pause in her thoughts. Then, “Oh. Do you think…?”

“No,” he said, pushing her hair behind her ear. “At least, not entirely. If your heart is open to him, let it remain so. I do not think he was aware he did it. These city folk are weak to our wine.”

A smile flashed on her lips but quickly faded. Her fingertips tickled along the edge of his jaw. “Were you all right?”

“Fine,” he chimed softly. “He smells like jasmine and if the kiss was any indicator, he will be a considerate lover. You’ll enjoy him.”

The hand left his face to press against her own embarrassment. He chuckled, “I thought you ought to know. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world is good and agreeable in your eyes. I’ve never heard you speak ill of a human being in my life despite many who deserved it. Even myself.”

“I’ll never think or speak ill of you, Jamie,” she hushed, her cheeks rosy. “I owe you too much.”

“You owe me nothing,” he finished darkly, but just as quickly lightened, “I just wanted you to know he volunteered his lips for a taste. You have my approval.”

“The wine is still in you,” she accused with a smile.

He wiggled gently, adjust his place on the bed. “If that is your strongest effort toward an insult, you’ll have to do better.”

“Tomorrow perhaps,” she laughed breathily. “Once we hear the full assault of mama’s retelling of the ball.”

He exhaled heavily. “Good night.”

“Night,” she concurred.

Their eyes closed together, and opened in what felt like minutes despite it being the following morning. Mrs. Bennet’s voice could be heard singing through the walls. James only sighed as he held Jane’s gaze. Lifting onto his elbow, he kissed her forehead and warned, “I’ll bring you tea, but I can’t withhold mama’s summons for long.”
He tucked the covers so none of the heat escaped and carefully went down the narrow servants’
staircase to the kitchen. A kettle was already on the stove, which he poured into a small pot and
loaded a tray with a cup, sugar, and lemon so Jane could have her earl grey in peace. After
dropping off the tray, he descended the main stairs to where his mother was arranging a fresh
bouquet in the dining room.

“Good morning, dearie,” she sang when he kissed her cheek. The hand on his nape smelled of the
lavender branches she was handling.

“Morning, mama.”

“Where is your sister?” she beckoned while fixing his hair. “The two of you normally rise
together.”

“She’ll be down soon,” he promised, leaning away from her ministrations. He sniffled against the
aromas of bacon and rosemary-spiced eggs.

“Lizzy, are you feeling ill?” she worried. “You shouldn’t have walked home last night.”

“I’ll be fine,” he disregarded, lifting a piece of bacon to his teeth.

His mother slapped it back onto the platter. “Not before we’re gathered! We’ll break our fast like a
proper family. Where is your father? Fetch him, would you? Wear your coat, the morning still has
its chill.”

“The wooly thing?” he complained but she was pushing him in the direction of the back door coat
stand.

“Not a word,” she hushed. “It does its occupation well enough. I do not care how it itches.”

He stepped into the worn boots that stood nearly to his knees as he shrugged on the faded black
garment. The collar stood against his nape but it was welcome as the cold fog encompassed him.
The moisture glowed yellow with the morning light as he found Mr. Bennet on his way back to the
house with a brown wrapped parcel he immediately handed to James. “Look what I have. It’s ready
for autumn. These will make lovely additions, yes?”

James pulled the twine and found cinnamon bark and various dried herbs. He lifted them to his
face and inhaled. “Mmm,” he hummed. “Mama will want these for her pies,” he said, holding up
one of the cinnamon pieces.

“There’s more where these came from,” he assured. A large weathered hand pushed the hair off of
his son’s face and slid down his neck to the coat collar. “This old thing? Are you feeling unwell?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” he disregarded. “Mama’s just worrying.”

“Ah, well. You know she loves you. This comes through in many forms, some of them
overbearing. I suppose breakfast is ready if she’s sent you to fetch me. Save one of those rosemary
bits for your tea.”

James did so, holding the sprig between his teeth while he retied the parcel and set it on the
stairway upstairs before he rejoined his family at the table. He dropped the rosemary in the cup
Jane was pouring for him and they proceeded to listen to the predicted dialogue:

“We have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. Jane, you were so admired, nothing
could be like it. Everybody said how well you looked and Mr. Bingley thought you quite beautiful.
He danced with you twice!”

“She was present for them, mama,” James reminded.

She disregarded him. “But twice! Only think of that! She was the only creature in the room he asked a second time. I was so vexed to see him stand up with Miss Lucas, however he did not admire her at all; indeed, nobody can, you know, and he seemed quite struck with Jane. Then he danced with Miss King, and the fourth with Maria Lucas, and of course myself, and then that Boulanger—”

Mr. Bennet put a stop to this. “For god’s sake, say no more of his partners; should that he had sprained his ankle in the first dance.”

James and Kitty snickered into their toast while Jane patiently weathered her mother’s recollections. She proclaimed, “I am quite delighted with him. He is so excessively handsome and his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw anything more elegant than their dresses. The lace upon Mrs. Hurst’s gown—”

Here again Mr. Bennet refused any description of finery. Barred from her preferred topics, she then fell to Mr. Darcy. “So much bitterness of spirit and shocking rudeness,” she exaggerated. “I can assure you all, we do not lose much by not suitting his fancy. He is a most disagreeable, horrid man; not at all worth pleasing.”

“You make it sound as if it were our duty to do so,” James challenged.

“Well certainly not anymore!” she declared. “So high and so conceited was he that there was no enduring him! He walked here, and then he walked there, fancying himself so very great!”

“Could this not be the same as boredom?” Mary suggested quietly. James refilled her teacup easily with one hand, a finger holding the lid in place.

“Bored at a ball!” she bristled. “Such assemblies are not exclusive to us country folk; he hasn’t any excuse! Bless Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst for tolerating him; he is not handsome enough to dance with. I wish you had given him one of your set-downs, dear,” she addressed to her husband. “I quite detest the man.”

“Far be it for me to intrude upon Jane’s courtship,” Mr. Bennet refused. “Mr. Darcy and Bingley have established their friendship and you must navigate around it.”

“Well,” she continued while buttering a scone. “None of the lot’s manners are equal to dear Charles’, but the majority are very pleasing when you converse with them. Miss Bingley is to live with her brother and keep his house. I am much mistaken if we shall not find a very charming neighbor in her.”

Jane and James exchanged looks but listened in silence.

However it was one of the occasions their mother saw. “Lizzy, what think you of the Bingley sisters?”

“Mama, would you pass the strawberry—” Jane tried to distract but she waved Jane’s voice aside.

“Lizzy?”

He held his mother’s gaze while he finished chewing his bacon and spared a glance to Mr. Bennet before proceeding, “They were fine ladies, sure. Neither was lacking in good humour when they
were pleased and both held the power of being agreeable where they chose it. But they are proud and conceited. No amount of handsome qualities or rightly places freckles can forgive their unbearable characteristics.”

“But Jamie, they are highly educated women, and Caroline has at least a fortune of twenty thousand—”

“Indeed,” he curtailed. “They are handsome, have been educated in one of the best private seminaries, are in the habit of spending freeing without concern, and of associating with people of rank. Therefore in every respect they are entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of everyone else. I am not disillusioned by their fine fabrics. They are a northern family otherwise as bumpkin as us; the only difference is they earned a fortune in trade.”

His mother parted her lips but Mr. Bennet finished, “My love, this is the last we will hear of it.” His tone brokered no argument.

She sighed but ate her scone and continued without an ounce of missing energy. Apparently she had done her duty in reconnaissance the night previous for she unfolded a series of details about the Bingleys: their father had passed away before establishing a family estate but left behind one hundred thousand pounds which Charles intended to use for such a purpose. He was renting Netherfield with this prospect in mind, much with the encouragement of his sisters.

She seemed to have also deduced, or at least convinced herself she had, the reasoning behind his and Darcy’s friendship. “Charles’ easiness, openness, and ductility of his temper,” she insisted. “Despite the greater contrast between them, on the strength of Darcy’s regard, Bingley has the firmest reliance. He considers Darcy’s judgment of the highest opinion. In understanding, Darcy is superior, of course…”

“Careful, mama,” James teased. “It might almost sound as if you approve of the man.”

“We must hope for some of his education to come through,” she said over a long sip of tea. James saw she had finished the milk for her tea and passed the second small pitcher over for her to replenish her cup. “Bingley is by no means deficient, but Darcy is clever. This hardly excuses him of his haughty, reserved and fastidiousness, his manners…I find myself agreeing with you, sweet, if not about the Bingley sisters. Though well-bred, he is not inviting. Yes, Charles far has the greater advantage. Bingley was so sure of being liked wherever he appeared last night. Darcy was continually giving offense.”

“Mama, how often did you witness him speak?” Jane challenged.

She patted her eldest’s hand. “It matters not how many times one’s lips part, but what passes when they do—Lydia.”

Her youngest had belched, much to the disgust of Mary beside her. James guffawed with a hand over his mouth while Kitty joined his mirth despite their mother’s chagrin. “Oh, Lizzy, you delight in anything ridiculous. Don’t influence your sisters so.”

Mr. Bennet hardly stifled his own chuckles. “How odd, to cast the blame on someone other than she who belched. It seems Lydia can do no wrong.”

Lydia was the picture of innocence and the table was officially in an uproar.

Once breakfast was finished, Mrs. Bennet announced her intention to visit the Lucases, and insisted upon James’ company. “You know how their younger children adore you. I need you to
keep them company so Lady Lucas and I can speak properly. Charlotte will rejoice in your company too.”

“Only so someone else can play governess to her siblings,” he teased, but nonetheless went to wash his face and dress himself appropriately.

“She is twenty-seven,” his mother said beside him, using the mirror to add a bit of red pigment to her lips. “She may well be a governess to somebody soon.”

“She is educated and level-headed enough,” James commended.

His mother’s head tilted as if she had either been distracted or not expecting this from him. “Yes, yes, of course. Now don’t forget your coat. The last thing I’ll be able to bear is you falling ill—oh, Jane! Are you joining us?”

James reentered their shared room where she was tying a sunhat atop her loose blond braid. He reached over her shoulder for his own but… “Where is mine?”

“I think Lydia borrowed it,” Jane supplied while their mother helped her tie it.

“Lydia doesn’t borrow anything,” he complained and went in search of her. It proved easier to simply take it from her and Kitty’s room without direct interaction, and before long, the three of them were walking through Longbourn. That the Miss Lucases and the Miss Bennets should meet to talk over a ball was more than friendly custom: it was absolutely necessary. Since the latter had worn out the topic amongst her family, Mrs. Lucas and Charlotte were her last resources.

“You began the evening well, Charlotte,” she commended when they finally sat themselves to tea. Charlotte of course said something pleasantly self-demeaning in favour of Bingley’s liking of Jane, to the delight of Mrs. Bennet.

“Oh—you mean—because he danced with her twice…”

James took his leave, then, to carry as many smaller Lucases outside since they had already climbed atop him.

“Jamie! Catch me!” one of the boys sang, and James turned to catch him at the bottom of the stairs between the porch and the ground.

One of Charlotte’s sisters tugged on his arm. “Jamie, our radishes have sprouted! Come see!”

“Am I to be neglected?” Jane laughed, making her escape from the discussion within. The children sang their jubilation and drew the Bennets into the garden where Sir William Lucas welcomed them and waved aside their apologies of intrusion. Together they picked the radishes and the Bennet siblings ushered the children to wash their hands while Charlotte joined them.

“They have moved on to the topic of Lord Darcy, now,” she informed.

“Predictably,” James shared a smile with Jane while petting the Lucas’s hound.

Charlotte sat beside Jane on the stairs, “Lizzy, you didn’t say he had been rude to you. Mama said she overheard Charles suggest to Mr. Darcy that he should converse with you and he outright refused?”

Jane quickly said, “Miss Bingley told me that he never speaks much unless among his intimate acquaintance. With them he is remarkably agreeable.”
“I understand shyness or hesitancy,” Charlotte remarked, “But I wish he had not snubbed Jamie so. A bristled tongue he may have but Jamie is endearing to all those deserving of his kindness.”

Jane cast a worried glance to her brother, who merely gave her a smile while the hound’s tail wagged with frenzy. “Another time, perhaps.”

Charlotte sighed. “His pride does not offend me so much as vanity often does, because there is typically an excuse for it. For him, one cannot wonder how so very fine a young man with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may express it, he does have a right to be proud.”

Jane scolded, “I beg you would not put it into Lizzy’s head to be vexed by his ill treatment. We shan’t handle his company more than necessary, so Mr. Darcy need not make excuses for himself at all.”

James tugged on her earlobe to calm her. “I’m afraid I agree with you this time. Why should I think ill or highly of somebody who has yet to speak to me directly? You know I’ve never cared much how others view me; more so how their opinions affect my family’s happiness.”

“Pride,” Mary Bennet surprised them by appearing in the house’s doorway, “is a very common failing, I believe. By all that I have read, I am convinced that human nature is prone to it. There are very few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency for some quality or other. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, while vanity is what we would have others think of us.”

In the wake of their silence she came to sit between her siblings. James set his sunhat atop her head to protect her pallor; her complexion was quite red from the walk to catch up with them.

Suddenly one of the young Lucases declared, “If I were as rich as Lord Darcy, I would not care how proud I was! I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine everyday!”

The elders laughed heartily. Charlotte drew her brother into her lap and warned, “Then you would drink a great deal more than you ought, and if I were to see you at it I should take away your bottle directly.”

The younger seemed determined to deny this and press his point until Mrs. Bennet declared herself satisfied from her discussion. The following day Mrs. Bennet made a different pronouncement: they were to call on Netherfield.

“James! You are being unreasonable,” she lamented as the chaise was prepared. The summer’s heat had made a reappearance so the roof was folded down.

“I disagree,” he said patiently albeit tersely.

“It will be considered an offense if you do not join us in welcoming them to Netherfield.”

“What was the Meryton ball?” he questioned.

“The ball would have happened with or without them,” she reasoned. “Now that they have recovered from the festivities, we must play hosts of Longbourn and Meryton.”

He walked her outside where his sisters were already waiting. “I respect the responsibility you have volunteered for but I have my reasons for choosing exclusion.”
“Name them,” she challenged.

“Autumn is upon us and I have errands to attend to. Mr. Robinson asked me to cast more candles for the winter assemblies, as have Mrs. Long and Lucas but I must collect the bees wax from Sir William first. And lastly, papa’s not going, so the need for every Bennet’s attendance is clearly not dire.”

“We were at the Lucas’s yesterday,” she chided. “Why did you not speak with Sir William while we were there?”

“I need to visit the market for more supplies and I thought to visit Sir William on my way back. It is too much of a burden to carry that much wax all over Meryton and Longbourn. I didn't think to get the wax yesterday.”

“Well your chores do come in handy, don’t they?” she finished with a tug on his wool cravat for a kiss on his cheek. He offered his hand to assist her into the carriage while she gave a parting warning: “I best see twenty tapers as tall as the kitchen table when I return. Mr. Bennet’s age may be his excuse but not yours.”

“Then what a joy it will be to grow old,” he called as the chaise started moving. “I may never see the world again.”

“Then I shall be forced to live forever and grip you by the ear!” she answered. He laughed and waved until the carriage was gone within the thicket of trees which extended into the forest they shared with Netherfield Park. Of course Mrs. Bennet’s demands were impossible as he only just managed to finish his errands by midafternoon when he heard the chaise return. He was sitting in the garden beside an old stump, using a nail in the wood to braid thread for wicks when his mother placed a kiss atop his head and was aflutter with old news.

“Positively lovely gentleman! Where’s your father?”

“His study,” he murmured.

“Of course he is,” she huffed as she rushed into the house. Jane, Kitty, and Lydia took her place, the first draping her scarf on his nape where the sun had warmed it red.

“You missed a perfect luncheon,” Lydia said as she landed beside him. She plucked her finger across the wick to garner his attention.

“I think my opinion of perfect varies widely from yours,” he chuckled, “but do tell.”

Kitty supplied while she lounged over the long grass, “At first we feared the worst—”

Lydia finished, “That Darcy bloke was present so clearly we had made every offense just by breathing.”

“Kitty, you’ll stain your dress,” Jane chided mildly. “You’re being over dramatic, Lydia. Mr. Darcy was there to make initial greetings but he left soon after.”

“Yes!” Lydia stormed. “He left! What elevation of disinterest must you have to leave in the middle of luncheon?”

James reminded sternly, “That bloke is a lord, bumpkin. He likely has a slew of priorities even your fluffy head cannot encompass.”
“Well,” she uttered, in a tone which made him know a jape was coming. “Caroline made a comment on your hair when mama made apologies toward your absence. ‘His hair…it is quite asymmetrical, is it not?’ Didn’t she say that, Jane?”

“Many things were said,” Jane disregarded.

“It was, I remember it perfectly, because this was right before Darcy left.”

Kitty complained, “He did not say why he left.”

Lydia concurred, “I keep telling you he is the rudest man! But anyhow, Caroline finds great amusement in your hair—”

“Lizzy likes to part his hair on the side. Her own brother does the same, as does Mr. Darcy,” Jane hushed. "Just because Lizzy's hangs lower on one side does not make it wrong."

“He makes so much fun of my hair, can I not do the same?” she pestered.

“I’m not sure how you can,” Kitty retorted. “Jamie and Jane have the best hair of us all. It’s like all of mama and papa’s good attributes were stored up for them.”

“This isn’t true,” Jane exclaimed. “Mary has beautiful ebony hair.”

Lydia snorted, “And where in the family did she get it? We all have brown or light hair—erh—ERH!”

She flailed against James suddenly clenching her nose between his knuckles. “What are you implying?” he uttered darkly.

“N-Nothing! Ow, Lizzy!”

“Do you not remember mama’s sister? Her hair is like Mary’s. She gets her hair from our grandparents. The only thing setting her apart from us is how a contemplative mind such as hers could have been crafted from the same womb that made your feather-light head.”

“Jamie…” Jane whispered the same moment Lydia dislodged his hand and rose up enough to slap him across the cheek.

“Are you trying to suffocate me?” she erupted.

“This is what I mean,” he growled. “You don’t think. You spend too much time using your mouth to talk, it never occurs to you to breathe through it. Watch your bloody tongue or it will bring us all to ruin, and it will be from something as ludicrously simple as disrespecting your sister. The rest of Longbourn knows us well enough but if you’re not careful, these newcomers will believe something you say, not understanding that you’re joking.”

“You’re one to speak of disrespect!” she exclaimed, standing and brushing off her skirts. “You and Mary are of a kind; she abhors anything entertaining and you speak as if you are above us! You ought to join us next time and take Darcy off our hands. The two of you may get along, yet. You’re so very proud for being so very poor.”

She left them, her loose curls bobbing behind her. James tied off the wick by crimping a metal wire around it, and started a new one as if his cheekbone was not blooming scarlet. Kitty shuffled close to him, one of her knuckles lightly brushing the wound—
“KITTY!” Lydia yelled from the house.

She floundered slightly, glancing over her shoulder and back at James, but his lack of response spurred her to rush to the house. Jane was silent for a long time. Then, “You didn’t have to say it quite like that.”

“Was I wrong?” he countered quietly.

She sighed, “No, but to force the issue will only make Lydia believe she is more correct.”

“Then we are all to watch her fall into her own ruin, is that it?”

“Do not attack me,” she almost whispered.

His hands stilled and his head finally lifted. His eyes closed heavily. “I’m sorry.”

He felt her weight fall against him, her head finding the familiar bend of his shoulder and neck as her arm came around his waist. “I know you mean well, I do. I don’t know how to watch over Lydia any better than the rest of us already do.”

“There may be nothing we can do,” he uttered, turning the threads once more, “except let Lydia dive over the cliff’s edge.”

“You don’t mean that,” she said against his hair.

“Well I haven’t any better ideas,” he huffed. He set the braid down and rubbed his eyes. Turning his head, he kissed her hair and tried to say on a lighter note, “So, Bingley? Has he fallen in love with you again?”

This drew a laugh from her. “Hardly. Quite the other way around…his patience with mother and our sisters is incredibly admirable.”

“We already knew this,” he said, leaning his weight against hers.

“It’s different now, without the wine or the comfort of strangers. Nothing has changed in him. He’s invited us to dine with him again this week.”

“Then you have a dress to iron,” he proffered a smile.

“You won’t be coming?”

“I’ll only be in the way.”

“I don’t think so,” she urged.

He rubbed the arm that was on his waist. “You’ll be marvelous without me. You needn’t even try. Charles Bingley is already smitten.”

And so with his comforting words, Jane and Mrs. Bennet dined with the Bingleys two nights afterward, and then collected three more evenings so a fortnight had passed with it seeming like they were at Netherfield every other day.

The air had officially turned with the changing of the season despite the summer’s enduring heat during midday. Charlotte Lucas had come to the Bennet’s home with a delivery of extra bees wax as well as to aid in his craft. The cook and kitchen aid had taken the day off to allow him the room’s use. Charlotte plucked the stems off of sage leaves while remarking on the current events of
“I must admit, our opinion of his sisters has gone up. Their kindness toward Jane cannot be ignored. He does admire her, after all, but I daresay Jane is at a disadvantage of being so guarded.”

“What do you mean?” he said from the stove, stirring the pale wax with a wooden spoon’s handle. He waved his hand in the air, bringing the aroma to his nose before dispensing two more drops of oil and a stick of cinnamon into the pot.

“Well there are very few of us who have the heart to be really in love without encouragement. For all his smiles, Charles is reaching into thin air. Jane must show more affection than she feels—”

“More than she feels?” James grimaced with perplexity. “She feels enough for the man. Just because she does not throw herself at him like Lydia might does not mean she is without love for him.”

“I only mean,” Charlotte reiterated, “that he might never do more than like her if she does not help him on. Bingley does like her, undoubtedly; I was there for the past two dinners, but he does not know her as well as we do.”

“She displays her affection as well as her nature allows,” James said, joining her at the central counter to pull rosemary leaves off the branches. “He must be a simpleton to not see it.”

“Please hear me,” she pestered. “He is not the same as you, Lizzy. Despite having five sisters he only brought two with him here; one of whom is married and likely does not spend the full year with him, while the other spends more time dictating her brother’s thoughts instead of knowing them. You have spent your entire life with Jane, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia, with no barriers to stop each other from knowing your true characters or how you display affection. Perhaps Charles will learn Jane’s affections if he spends enough time with her…but it is never alone. They always see each other in large, mixed parties, so it is impossible for them to truly learn about one another; to have the leisure of falling in love.”

“Given his status, I doubt this will happen,” James uttered. “Especially with Caroline and mama in attendance. Perhaps the latter will allow it but Caroline won’t let her brother out of her sight. Even when he managed to escape her at the Meryton ball, it was only for a few minutes.”

“You enabled this, didn’t you?” she remembered, handing him the sage while he returned to the stove. “Could you not spare an evening to help her?”

“I best not.”

“Why not?” she demanded tiredly.

“I won’t be another Caroline in her life,” he could not help but laugh. “When all is said and done, Jane will be married to Charles, not Caroline, no more than Charles will be married to me.” He paused, if nothing else than to stir the second pot of wax. “Jane is everything she needs to be for Charles to love her, and if he does not, if Caroline affects him to the point of changing his heart, then he was never worthy of her in the first place. I cannot meddle now or else I will be forced to meddle forever.

“And why shouldn’t she be hesitant if she is concealing her feelings?” he added suddenly, turning back to her. “This is a lot of fuss over a fortnight whereas the consequence lasts for a lifetime. She is more than logical to be hesitant. Some dances and a handful of dinners are not enough to make a person want to marry the other.”
“They’re hardly *just* eating food together,” Charlotte argued, whipping the tail of a tea towel against his hip. “An evening can do a great deal in learning one’s mind, and they have had four. Four evenings can do a great deal.”

“It has been enough for him to keep inviting her,” James returned.

Charlotte sighed, “I wish Jane success with all my heart, then. And if she were married to him tomorrow I would think she had as good a chance of real happiness as if she decided upon it after a year of study.”

James set the spoon down and met her gaze. “You feel strongly in this? They could really be happy?”

“Well,” Charlotte replied guardedly. “Happiness in marriage is often a matter of chance, but when the individuals match so well together as Bingley and Jane do, there is a positive outlook. However now is the time to act, not wait. The better to grow together so you suit one another down the road instead of discovering faults which cannot be overcome. In fact it may be better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.”

James stared at her, waiting to see a break in her expression. When none came he guffawed anxiously. “You make me laugh, Charlotte, but I would never wish such a fate on any of my sisters. I prefer to know someone thoroughly to avoid wasting my time on them. I thought you and I shared this.”

“Yes, and it has made me a spinster,” Charlotte grumbled. James smiled consolingly as he moved one of the pots to the central counter. Charlotte aligned the glass jars otherwise reserved for jams and marmalades for him. With the wicks tied along another wooden spoon, she dipped the braided threads into the wax and set it above a sheet of paper to catch the drips. He had already prepared several large taper molds, though, which rested on the floor.

“Ready?” Charlotte prompted, holding the wick up, and he carefully poured wax into the tin cylinder.

“Let it solidify some and then you can let go of the wick,” he instructed.

She held the next wick for him while he poured. “How do you do this on your own? There are six more molds.”

He pulled the waiting wicks out and revealed the ends had been tied to wooden skewers, which he then laid across the top of the cylinders. “Like so.”

“All right, sir, don’t be keen,” she retorted, making him laugh. “Tie these as well so I won’t have to hold them, then.”

He set the large pot down and did so. Charlotte huffed a breath and shoved her fringe out of the way. “So if a wooden stick can take my place in even this, what am I to do?”

His expression was apologetic as he set a mortar and pestle on the counter. “You can grind the herbs, if you like.”

She took up the task with gusto. “Would that my mother had shown as much relish in pairing me off as yours does for your sisters.”

“You must not think this way,” he consoled. “Marriage may grant wings to some but it just as easily binds them to the earth. You could avoid the gamble and fly on your own.”
“It’s not about liberty or money, Lizzy,” she sighed. The corners of his mouth lowered as her tone became heavy with fatigue…sadness. “Sky or earth, I don’t care which. But I can’t bear to be there alone. Eventually my siblings will stop being little ones and will succeed where I have failed.”

He stood against the counter for a long while, and in the end did not say much more throughout the afternoon. Not until he lay alone with Jane in their room and retold the conversation to her.

“Seven and twenty is a frightening age for a woman,” Jane agreed with a laugh. “You have the liberty to be a bachelor your entire life, but society does not think it seemly for a woman to follow the same path.”

“All for the sake of having children,” he scoffed. “What if Charlotte does not want children?”

Jane giggled. “The way she adores her siblings, do you really think she doesn’t? A woman’s body is a clock winding backwards.”

“Mama had Kitty and Lydia well within her thirties, though,” he said. “She did not have you until she was twenty-seven, herself.”

“But she was married to papa for a number of years first,” Jane reminded. “The only reason we did not each arrive sooner was because of his travels. And they had already courted one another. You can’t expect Charlotte to meet and consummate a husband all before her next birthday.”

He had to relinquish this point. The pad of her finger tapped his jaw. “You are good to worry for her.”

“She is another sister to us. You know that.”

“I do,” she smiled softly. She changed topic. “The last I saw Mr. Bingley, he asked for you. He wondered why so many Bennets had been to see him, all except you.”

James was silent a moment. “He shouldn’t want to see me again.”

“Well shouldn’t he?” she wondered. “Jamie, you haven’t any friends besides Charlotte.”

“He shouldn’t desire my company over yours,” he said more adamantly.

“And what makes you think he does?” she interrogated mischievously. “He could have simply been polite in desiring your attendance. He’s asked for you but once. According to mama, the numbers matter greatly.”

He smirked gently as his eyelids grew heavy. “Greatly.”

“Lydia and Kitty are planning to go into town tomorrow to see our aunt and uncle. She will be reminded of Aunt’s dark hair soon enough.”

He chuckled, “You’re still worrying over that? I am not expecting acknowledgement from her. Lydia will be too consumed with Aunt’s hat shop to notice whatever color her hair is.”

Jane giggled the same moment the family’s cat made its appearance on their bed. It jumped up with a slight hush of sound, her blue eyes aglow as she silently found her place on Jamie’s chest. He stroked the white fur and pale grey ears while slumber consumed him.

The rest was much needed, for the next morning Lydia and Kitty set off early only to return with fervent news: the regiments were in Meryton. James’ head sagged on his shoulders, already
exhausted by Lydia’s chirping but he had to admit, “At least her energies are focused on something.”

Lydia was harping on a certain Colonel Forster or a Captain Carter—James preferred his cauliflower stew to either—when she was interrupted by a letter arriving for Jane. Mrs. Bennet had not so much a glimpse of the sender address before she ushered, eyes glittering, “Well, Jane, who is it from? What is it about? What does he say? Jane! Make haste and tell us. Make haste, my love.”

“It’s from Miss Bingley,” Jane calmed, and read aloud:

“My dear friend,

“If you are not so compassionate as to dine with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives, for a whole day’s tête-à-tête between two women can never end without a quarrel. Come as soon as you can on the receipt of this. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers.

“Yours ever,

“Caroline Bingley.”

“How is an extra woman going to stop the other two from arguing?” James puzzled.

“With the officers!” Lydia exclaimed instead.

Mrs. Bennet, however, frowned. “Dining out…that is very unlucky.”

“Can I have the carriage?” Jane requested. James peered outside, where the sky had been heavily overcast all morning.

“No, my dear,” Mrs. Bennet answered. “You had better go on horseback. That way you will have to stay the night.”

James’ head whipped back in her direction. “Horseback?”

“Yes, Lizzy. I cannot speak for everyone but I believe it is when one rides on a horse’s back.”

He disregarded that and replied, “Will they not offer to send her home afterward?”

“But they cannot,” Mrs. Bennet chimed sweetly, “if the men are in their own carriage at Meryton.”

“But with the officers,” Lydia grumbled jealously.

Jane’s eyes were on the sky outside as she interrupted, “I would much rather go by coach, mama.”

“Even so, the horses cannot be spared from the farm, can they, Mr. Bennet?”

Their father was in the midst of rising from the table to return to the very work about which she inquired. “We must finish before the rain falls so we cannot do without the horses. I’m sorry, Jane. We can spare one for you, but not enough to pull the chaise.”

Jane exhaled quietly, folding the letter back to its original state whereas James declared, “Here’s a savage concept: don’t go.”

“James!” Mrs. Bennet had never appeared more appalled.
“If the Bingleys are so esteemed to need Jane’s company on a day like today, they can ride their own purebreds over here.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “And they can all listen to your silly sisters twitter about the regiments. It is almost better to let Jane go.”

This was all Mrs. Bennet needed. No sooner had Jane left then the sky unleashed upon them. Jane did indeed stay the night, and it was approximately the same time the next morning when another letter was delivered, this time for James. The messenger waited patiently for a reply, nearly soaked through by the rain that had yet to end.

James tore through the letter furiously, his eyes absorbing every word as Mrs. Bennet gave the messenger a hot cuppa to warm himself.

“I find myself very unwell this morning,” he read, “which, I suppose, is to be imputed to my getting wet-through yesterday. My kind friends will not hear of my returning home till I am better. They insist also on my seeing Mr. Jones—”

He looked up at Mr. Bennet. “Isn’t that Meryton’s apothecary?”

“Oh love,” Mrs. Bennet hushed, reading over his shoulder. “She says just here, that she is only including this information since we are likely to hear of it somehow, and she wishes us not to worry. Nothing but a sore throat and a headache.”

The spoon of Mr. Bennet’s tea chimed loudly as he lifted the cup to his lips. “Well, if our daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness and die, it will be a comfort to know it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders.”

Her lips pursed. “People do not die of trifling colds. I am not at all afraid of her dying—oh, Jamie.”

He had thrust the paper into her hands and rushed into the kitchen for essential items. He reappeared in the dining room just as swiftly. “You can’t mean—how can you be so silly in all this mud! You will not be fit to be seen when you get there!”

“I will be fit enough to see Jane,” he snapped, shoving his arms through the woolen sleeves of his coat. He pushed past the stunned messenger, the door clattering against the house in his haste.

“So would I, if I could have the carriage,” she complained to no one.
Chapter Summary

While Jane recovers, James spends time in Netherfield.

Chapter Notes

Charles Dickens is briefly mentioned in this chapter. Realistically, he was at the end of the 1800s while Austen was at the beginning, but I had Christmas vibes. Just pretend I uploaded this in time for the holidays~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James had never been to Netherfield House. At least, not under invitation. As a boy he would pull Jane onto the estate grounds during the day—when there was no one renting it, there was no one to say otherwise. The gardeners held no qualms over two children playing; if anything, their laughter was welcomed, and in the darkness of night the single guardsman was easily avoided during their explorations. No one cared whether two children wished to see the luxury they would never themselves have.

All that seemed far away now, another lifetime as James leaped clear over a brook and felt a puddle’s splash soak into his trousers. He kept running, seeing the pale façade appearing through the trees until his boots tread over fine gravel instead of mud and grass. The fingers of branches reached for his hair and coat but he was soon clear of them as the rain finally began to ebb. By the time he took the curved, white stairs two at a time up to the double doors, the servants had already dried off the terrace banisters.

The footmen took in his appearance with a critical and dubious eye, however the doors parted for James without a word. The memories of this place drifted to the forefront of his mind, calculating the house’s recipients to be breaking their fast in one of the main parlors instead of the large dining room…

Again, the footmen opened the path for him, and James rounded the columned entrance of the room in his filthy and dripping state, much to the shock of the butler and maids present—

Of the people sitting at the table, Mr. Darcy was the one who shot to his feet. James could only imagine how he looked: the worn black coat fell to his mid-thighs while the collar lying high on his neck must have given him the visage of a beggar. Though his trousers were tucked within his boots he had been through kilometers of mud and grit; he did not know whether his sodden hair rested flat against his cheeks or stood in frizzy licks. And after running all the way here…he must have appeared every bit a mad man.

He realized, suddenly, that his jaw was stiff and trembled slightly from the cold. He steeled himself to say, “May I see my sister?”

Charles Bingley glanced between him and Mr. Darcy, his mouth unsure whether to gape or stay
shut. Finally he settled with, “Yes, of course. Show him to Miss Bennet’s room, please.”

The butler appeared to be the least willing person to allow James anywhere else in the house, but he complied. As soon as he was out of the room, Mrs. Hurst uttered, “Is he here before the messenger’s returned?”

“That hardly matters,” Caroline declared. “His boots look as if they’ve been six inches deep in mud! Darcy?”

The man blinked, and found his seat once more.

“Do take care to walk along the marble and not the carpets,” the butler requested stiffly. James did so but more as a second thought as he was nearly walking ahead of the butler in his haste to reach their destination. It was some consolation that Jane’s door looked out over the vast foyer on one side and her room opened to a terrace on the other, so it was well ventilated. But no sooner had the butler turned the knob then James swept inside, startling a frighteningly pale Jane.

“Jamie!” she gasped, but with immense relief, as if she had been waiting for him. She struggled to sit up but reached for him. “Oh Jamie…your hands are ice. You look like an absolute fright.”

One of his hands parted from hers to feel the moisture on her temple and throat. “You’re feverish, Jane.”

“I didn’t wish to concern you or everyone else,” she admitted as he eased her back onto her pillows. “I suppose I failed any how. Now I’ve gotten you ill as well. Take off that sodden coat.”

He looked to the fireplace, whose embers burned low. “And hang it over what fire? Have they done nothing for you?”

She laughed tiredly as he set to work over the embers. “They’ve done a great deal for me, Lizzy—Lizzy! Your boots and trousers…”

From his wet pockets he dispensed various parcels and jars, one of which he unloaded into the growing flames. The room filled with the aroma of piney rosemary and eucalyptus. He stood to plunge dried mint leaves in the metal kettle on the bedside dresser for her tea.

“Your shirt too,” Jane urged. “Jamie, I can see your shoulder blades, take the thing off! You’re fit to keel over any minute.”

Mechanically he did as she bid, but he did not pause until the room was fit to his standards. From the pitcher of water he dampened a cloth for Jane’s forehead to remain cool while her body sweated through the fever. By her request he had finally removed his trousers and boots which were surely caked in mud. Left in his pants, he stopped for breath, and voiced, “Mama said Netherfield was only two kilometers…”

Jane laughed over her tea. “Yes, I discovered the same. It seems Netherfield is closer to five kilometers’ distance. Mertyon is what’s two kilometers away.”

“Huh…” he voiced softly. Jane managed to flip the covers on the other side of the bed open for him to fall into, and he slept.

When he awoke, the sunlight had changed and Jane was picking leaves out of his hair. “You’re a mess,” she whispered.

He blinked heavily, observing the indigo shadows around her eyes. “You have not slept enough.”
“No, but my fever’s broken, thanks to your stubbornness,” she smiled. “Thank you for coming.”

He sniffled only to find his sinuses quite full. “There was no way of you getting better here. You need a touch of home to heal.”

She huffed, “It does smell like it now, with the rosemary. All that’s missing is mama’s lavender. This house is so minimally used it only smells of paint and…” She yawned, “Things I do not recognize.”

“Gold leaf and silk,” he teased.

“I have yet to see either of those things,” she rebuked. “Charles visited while you slept.”

James’ eyelids drooped to half-mast. “And that is why you haven’t.”

She smiled guiltily but then revealed. “Lord Darcy came too. You must have given them such a scare at breakfast.”

“Have they taken my boots away for burning?”

Her eyebrows lifted as she shook her head. “No one’s touched your raiment. On the contrary, Charles brought his own garments for you to wear to dinner if you’re feeling well enough.”

He sighed raggedly. “I must dine with these people…if nothing else than out of courtesy for letting you stay here.”

“I am not so much of a nuisance,” she defended, “but yes, you must. Charles said dinner was at five o’clock.”

“When is that?”

She leaned high enough to see over the mountainous covers at the clock on the mantle. “Twenty minutes.”

“Ugh,” he groaned, flipping the covers over his head. He roused a moment later, though, and put more eucalyptus leaves over the fire to clear his and Jane’s sinuses while he dressed. “Cotton,” he remarked upon sliding his arms through Bingley’s dress shirt. “How middle-class of them.”

Jane peered at him from where she rested upon the piled pillows. “You’re not going to be this way during dinner, are you?”

“An arse, you mean?”

“If I was inclined, yes,” she confirmed.

He laughed and finished buttoning the soft material to his throat. Bingley’s dark green breeches were a material James could not identify; a luxurious blend of some sort which he buttoned around his hips. After tying the satin cravat of blue and green paisley design, he sat down to clean his boots. Enough cloths had been provided for Jane’s fever, so he used them now to scrape and collect the clumps from the worn riding boots. One of the kerchiefs was enough for this purpose, and then a second with oil removed the last of the grit. When Jane was not looking he tossed them behind a log to burn into nothing.

“How then?” he requested. He stood straight for her inspection.

She smiled. “You look like a lord.”
His shoulders slumped. “Be serious.”

“What makes you think I’m not? All you’re missing is the waistcoat, but I think they will excuse it.”

“Well according to Mr. Darcy, lacking all of the pieces can get one eliminated from an assembly,” he remembered while straightening the cravat.

She breathed for patience. “Give them another chance, Jamie. Please?”

He ceased fiddling with the cravat and leaned over to kiss her forehead. He felt her hand on his chest. “Send for me if you need anything. Anything, Jane.”

“Yes, yes,” she pushed him toward the door. “Currently I need you to thank our hosts for their hospitality.”

He shut the door behind him and the butler was waiting for him at the end of the corridor. To James’ surprise, he was led to the original breakfast parlor. The room was aglow with the late sun’s orange light while the maids were lighting the first candles for the evening. This time Charles sprang to his feet.

“James! I’m so pleased to see you on your feet. You seemed fit to fall off them last I saw you.”

Charles shook James’ hand with both of his own, his skin cool to the touch. “You clean up remarkably well!”

James laughed. “I owe everyone my apologies.”

“Hush,” Charles assured, moving his hands to James’ arms. “There is nothing to forgive.”

“Especially in such fine colors,” Caroline said from the table. “Your cravat certainly does suit him, Charles. It softens the severity of his eyes.”

James blinked. Severity?

He then had the acute experience of having Charles’ blue eyes trained on him. “Severity? Caroline, you sound as if you’ve never seen grey eyes before.”

“Grey eyes, assuredly,” she commented. “But none quite so pale.”

Charles’ mouth formed an upside-down crescent. “Pale on occasion, perhaps, but not so now. Darcy? What say you?”

Charles stepped aside and revealed Mr. Darcy not a step behind him. James could hear his mother’s voice in his head. My word, his height...but what handsome features. The evening light shined through the man’s eyes, which saw from a view a head taller than either James or Mr. Bingley, revealing them to be far from a dark color; they were a rich amber, molten gold if the light had not cast them an orange hue.

“They were brightened by the exercise,” he said in his soft baritone. And that was all.

James blinked, and looked to Charles, who laughed. “Come, I know you’re famished.”

James found himself seated between Charles and Mr. Hurst. The ovular table lent a far more casual atmosphere than he expected; James sat opposite Mr. Darcy, with Caroline and Louisa to the left and right. James mutely watched a selection of dishes being set down: broccoli and cheese stew,
ragout, lamb cutlets, and glazed pears. James dipped his spoon into the stew and was relishing the creaminess with a unique, salty tang of cheese when Charles asked, “How is she?”

He was caught with broccoli in his cheeks but quickly swallowed to say, “Her fever’s broken but she needs vegetables. Dark ones, preferably…like this broccoli.”

He shoveled more into his mouth. His eyelashes swept up to see Charles call the butler to him and assure Jane had such requirements for her own supper. Mrs. Hurst gripped his attention, “You like the soup, Mr. Bennet?”

He chewed quickly, covering his mouth just in case. “I do. It’s delicious, thank you.”

“I’m curious,” Charles voiced, “why you specified dark vegetables.”

“I’m hardly an apothecary or botanist,” James admitted, “but lighter ones seem to be only water and fiber. When we were ill as children, our mother always fed us the darkest vegetables she could find, and we were better within a short number of days.”

“Mrs. Bennet?” Caroline chimed. Her smile gleamed like a cat’s after achieving the mouse. “How wonderful that she attended you all in place of a governess.”

James chose not to respond to that, and did not need to for Charles spoke next: “What else would you prescribe? I’ve sent for Mr. Jones and he should be here on the morrow.”

Caroline stated, “I don’t understand why poor Jane should wait till tomorrow. Is everyone in Longbourn and Mertyon ill? I told you we ought to send for a proper physician in London.”

“Then I should think we would be waiting a week instead of a day,” James chuckled.

Caroline was without mirth as she inquired coolly, “What would you say Mr. Jones’ credentials are, since you are familiar with the man?”

James had to think back to when he had last interacted with the man. “I would say his specialty is children’s maladies. He is quite passionate for falconry and is thus skilled at setting fine bones, such as within hands or when children’s energies result in dislocations or fractures.”

“The injuries of farmers,” she surmised. “Not the ailments of the weather.”

James reached for a bread roll so he would not be required to speak. Charles continued to voice his joy that he had come, though, and that he was sure between he and Mr. Jones, Jane was sure to feel better soon.

“Are you often in Meryton?” he asked after a time.

James nodded. “My mother has a sister there. She and her husband are the Philips. She owns a miller’s shop while he is an attorney.”


James was caught off guard by Mr. Hurst. “You do not like the ragout, Mr. Bennet?”

He stared at the man for a blunt moment before he looked at the abandoned portion on his plate. “It is not to my tastes, no, but I much prefer stews…”

Mr. Hurst had looked away halfway through is answer. James wanted to explain how he simply wanted more cumin in the dish but his wife reclaimed his attention.
“Have you any family in the city?” Louisa asked.

“My other aunt,” he nodded, reaching for his cup. “She and her husband, Mr. Gardiner.”

“Whereabouts?” she furthered.

James much preferred when the sisters were worrying about Jane. “Cheapside,” he finished, gulping his water.

Silence. Then Caroline changed topics, providing James with the quietude he needed for the rest of the meal. The glazed pears were delicious but when everyone stood at supper’s completion he found himself already at the door when Charles called, “Jamie! Won’t you join us for coffee in the library?”

“Have you tasted coffee?” Caroline asked while rounding the table. Her fingers slid along its surface until she crossed behind Mr. Darcy to take his arm. “It is an acquired taste.”

“Hardly,” Charles laughed as he approached James. “It is bitter, but nothing a little milk won’t cure. If nothing else, assist me in picking a volume or two to bring up to Jane.”

Unable to argue, James felt himself drawn into the next room: a rectangular space he originally thought to be oddly small for such an estate, smaller still with furnishings. The walls were paneled with lush wood while numerous windows provided natural light during the day. A number of bookshelves had been added which stood approximately to his hip, their tops performing as a platform for bouquets which added a floral aroma to the burning wood in the fireplace.

James noted how Caroline preferred a glass of sour wine as the butler poured coffee for the others. She broke from Mr. Darcy to direct his attention to the nearest bouquet. “How do you like them? Are you familiar with this bloom?”

“Paeoniaceae,” he murmured, more so under his breath than for her ears. Louder he provided the answer she sought, “This is a bulb flower. They are not in season.”

“Peonies. We acquired them from a green house in the area,” she chimed. “The flower can be fooled to behave out of season if the temperatures and humidity are manipulated properly.”

“How cruel,” he said, quieter still. She peered at him as if she might have heard him or thought him odd for mumbling but he lowered himself in order to read the spines.

He heard the conversation behind him as if a wall divided them, until the benevolent charm of Charles’ voice broke through his reverie. “You’re acquiring quite a pile. You’re welcome to borrow them, but I do hope the state of Jane’s malady has not made you grab so many.”

James peeked up to see a cup lined with copper being held out to him. Standing up, he accepted it and smelled an aroma of which he had never the pleasure of breathing. “This is coffee?” he exclaimed in an awed hush.

Charles laughed. “I went ahead and added milk to cut the acidity,” then he leaned close enough to whisper, “I quite prefer it with sugar.”

“What is it made from?” James queried, too busy enjoying its smell to taste it.

“Beans,” Charles grinned. “Well, berries, actually. However they must be roasted before they are ground up and put to hot water similar to tea.”
Jamie uttered wistfully, “This would be such a nice smell in the candles.”

The copper head tilted to one side slightly, before realization dawned in those blue eyes. “You made those? The cedar tapers from the assembly?”

He took the cup from James’ hand and set it on the bookshelf before he was pulled from the room by the wrist. “I’ll have a parcel sent to you! How much do you think you will need?”

He neglected Caroline’s urgent summons and led James through an alternate set of doors than those returning to the breakfast parlor. Outside of the library, Charles said to a maid, “Bring up some of the coffee beans for Mr. Bennet to examine.”

James was observing the tranquil darkness of the room in which the grand staircase climbed the walls above their heads. A cup not unlike the vessel James never managed to taste arrived, and he held one of the unique spheres while Mr. Darcy emerged from the library. “Charles—”

James put it in his mouth, arresting Bingley’s attention entirely while he chewed. “Hm!” he chimed.

“It’s good?” Charles said incredulously.

“It’s…grainy,” he elaborated. “I wish I had the chocolate my father brought home long ago to pair with it. You said it can be steeped like tea?”

Charles grinned like a fool as he took James’ hand again. “Let’s just watch them brew another pot!”

“Charles,” Darcy uttered firmly. He turned to face his friend, who said, “Now is not the time. You are the host here.”

“And I’m hosting,” he replied cheerily, but James felt the stiffness pushing the words out. “Caroline is older than me, so she is already trained to last through a good deal of time without me.”

James cut in, “I do not want to be the ignition of a dispute. I meant to retire any how.” He handed the cup back to Bingley and lifted the stack of books under his arm. “Thank you for indulging me as well as letting me stay in Jane’s company. I’ll have these returned promptly—”

“There is no rush,” Bingley insisted. “Let me see you to the terrace. A set of stairs will take you directly to the upper veranda and to her room.”

“Charles, no,” Darcy counteracted.

Bingley’s steps halted once more as he looked back, silently pleading. Darcy was immovable. He turned back to James, and gently held his forearms. “Just outside and to the left. You will find your way.”

His demeanor was sullen but resolved as he returned to Darcy and continued on through the library’s doors. James turned toward the doors of the terrace Charles had directed him to, but Darcy’s prolonged presence gave him pause. He turned back, but the dark shoulders were to him and were passing through the library doors.

James turned once again to the terrace, but his own name held him in place. “I do wish you would stop this, Charles. Mr. Bennet has nothing to recommend him of our company.”
“Except being an excellent walker,” Mrs. Hurst joined her sister with a brief laugh.

Mr. Darcy spoke next, “I do not believe he walked so much as ran.”

Caroline’s mirth was high pitched. “He did indeed, Lord Darcy! I could hardly keep my countenance this morning! It was very nonsensical to come at all! Why must he be scampering over the country because his sister has a cold. My word, his hair was so untidy, so blowsy!”

“It was a bit more than a cold, Carol,” Bingley voiced. “Jane had a fever all of the evening she came and all night. It only ceased once Jamie arrived.”

“*Jamie,*” Caroline scoffed. “Your familiarity with him is distasteful, Charles.”

“Never mind,” Louisa intercepted. “I can understand his need for haste but the state of his attire… He was absolutely oblivious.”

“This is all lost upon me,” Charles declared. “I thought Jamie looked remarkably well when he came into the room this morning. The state of his boots or hair escaped my notice.”

“To walk the three kilometers, or four kilometers, or five, or whatever it is, above his ankles in dirt, and quite alone! It seems to be to show an abominable sort of conceited affectation or some other which is indifferent to decorum.”

“It shows an affection for his sister that is very pleasing,” Charles defended.

Caroline said, “You observed it, Lord Darcy. You seemed quite in awe of his visage when he arrived. After some reflection, I am inclined to think you do not hold the same regard of Mr. Bennet’s fine eyes as you once did.”

“You are wrong,” James heard him say. “There is a unique pleasure a pair of fine eyes give when set within a pretty face. It is a shame the eldest Bennet does not share her bother’s eyes.”

Caroline was decidedly silent. Until, “Well there we have it then, Charles. If nothing else, the eldest and least obnoxious Bennets have earned a modicum of regard. When shall we wish you joy?”

Darcy answered first, “That is exactly the question I expected you to ask. A lady’s imagination is very rapid. It jumps from admiration to love, and from love to matrimony in a moment. There is no reason to wish anyone joy.”

“Nay, I shall consider the matter as absolutely settled,” Caroline teased with bristles on her tongue. “Charles, you will have a charming mother-in-law, indeed, of whom you may always expect to be wherever Jane is.”

Mrs. Hurst sighed. “I do have an excessive regard for Jane. She is a very sweet girl and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it.”

“With one uncle working as an attorney in Meryton and another doing who-cares-what in Cheapside?” Caroline all but barked. She and Louisa chortled.

James left them to their ramblings. The night air along the terrace was fresh from the rain as he jogged up the stairs and identified Jane’s door. Jane was asleep when he carefully opened the French doors and set the books on the coverlet in order to attend the fire. He stoked the embers up into small, sustainable flames—
“How was dinner?” He turned to find her gazing at him. She smiled, “The stew was good, I thought.”

Instead of replying he came to sit beside her, feeling her forehead…and throat… “Jane. You’re burning up.”

“Mm hm,” she uttered weakly.

“Why didn’t you send for me?” he growled, tearing at the knot of his cravat as he sought his wool coat. Rummaging through the pockets he found what he was looking for: a jar of vinegar with lemon rind and basil leaves infused within.

Jane grimaced. “Not the vinegar.”

“Yes the vinegar,” he said firmly while stuffing the copper kettle from her bedside into the embers. “You’ve brought this upon yourself. I could have kept the fever at bay.”

“I didn’t want to disrupt your evening,” she murmured softly, her face glistening.

“You wouldn’t have been disrupting anything that oughtn’t be interrupted,” he huffed, pouring more water from the pitcher into the kettle. As steam began to wind its way out of the spout, Jane noticed the books on the bed.

“Will you read for me?”

He made a sound in his chest as he opened the glass jar and let the contents splash into the kettle. Jane’s nose wrinkled as he pulled the kettle from the fire and poured a cup for her. “You’re to drink this all before you sleep again.”

“The pot?” she gaped, her pallor giving her a horrified visage.

“The pot,” he confirmed, holding out the cup. “Best get started.”

He draped another cool cloth over her forehead and removed his boots, socks, and trousers before climbing back in beside her. She began to move near him, inducing him to retort, “Don’t come over here when the pot is on your side!”

“Then nestle it within the covers,” she responded. Her voice was growing weaker with every sentence she spoke. James did just as she said, the kettle nestled beside his hip while Jane moved to recline against his chest. “What are we reading?”

He showed her each of the covers. “I have a pair of volumes on botanicals…”

“Oh, Jamie,” she huffed with mirth. “Four daughters, and you were the one papa would find with flowers in his hair. He would have to carry you back because you had fallen asleep in the Lucerne fields, do you remember?”

Jamie sighed and set aside the books while holding up the rest like playing cards for her inspection. “This one seems to be a record of discussions in a French salon, a few penny dreadfuls, and a novel of some sort. Do you know Dickens?”

Her hair was soft against his chin as she shook her head. “Mary might know. Read it.”

The tight leather binding creaked when he opened it as if it had never been read. He read the title page and its dedication, the way Jane liked before he began. “Drink your tonic,” he chided while
refilling the two sips she had taken.

“Yes yes,” she hummed pleasantly. “Go on.”

So he did, reading the first part and nearly the second but a knock sounded on the glass doors. The siblings looked up and Jane waved for Charles...and Mr. Darcy to enter behind him. “Sorry to disturb,” the former greeted. “Caroline and Louisa have retired to bed but they insisted I check—I mean, of course I would have anyway, but—well—are you well, Jane?”

“I’m afraid my fever has made an energetic return,” she said apologetically.

Charles appeared crestfallen as he looked between she and James. “I shouldn’t have insisted you come to dinner. I am so sorry.”

“You couldn’t have known,” James disregarded, “but if you were preparing a separate room for me, I must stay here.”

“Of course!” Charles exclaimed. “Far be it for me to take away the closest thing to an apothecary we have. Am I furthering the malady by imposing upon you?”

“No, you could never, Mr. Bingley,” Jane said, a smile in her voice.

He was visibly warmed by her words. “How often have I asked that you call me Charles? Which of the books did you settle on, Jamie?”

“A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens,” he answered, holding up the cover. “We’ve nearly finished the first stave.”

Darcy’s lips frowned. “It’s quite out of season.”

“Nonsense!” Charles sang. “I tormented my governess by having her bake me mince pies all year round. A dose of festive cheer may be just the thing we all need. May we join you?”

The way James’ innards plunged, he wondered if Jane had accidentally elbowed his abdomen. “I am by no means a good reader.”

Jane perked up, “I don’t think so.”

“I mumble.”

“Articulately,” she countered, and waved a gentle hand. “By all means, Mr. Bingley, my lord,” she added for Darcy.

Charles all but dashed out of the room to personally carry two chairs for himself and Darcy. When they were seating themselves, James wondered, “You seem knowledgeable of the story, Charles?”

“Oh yes!” he sang. “It was my favorite as a child.”

“But this volume has never been opened,” he elaborated, fingering the tight leather over the spine.

Charles appeared crestfallen. “Yes...it is a new edition of the tale. My sisters insisted upon finer volumes for the family library instead of the ragged paperback we pored sleepless nights into. I...I am not even sure where it has gone, what with my parents’ deaths and our constant travels.”

“Then you’ll just have to read this one ragged,” Jane supplied. “Consider it a proper homecoming. For a lover of stories, nothing warms a home like well read tomes.”
James watched those blue eyes glitter in the firelight as a grin blossomed across his lips. “I believe you’re right…Jane.” He recovered himself and cleared his throat. “Please, Jamie, read for us? No, no—” he corrected when James began turning back the pages. “—right where you were. You needn’t start over.”

So he returned to his former place and started softly, his comfort growing as he read, “Scrooge closed the window and examined the door by which the Ghost had entered. It was double locked, as he had locked it with his own hands, and the bolts were undisturbed. He tried to say ‘Humbug!’ but he stopped at the—”

Jane splayed her fingers over the page. “Say it like you used to read; give him a voice here—do an impression of father when he’s cross.”

“Oh my,” Charles laughed. “Are we worthy of such a peek into domestic life?”

Jane giggled. “Jamie used to call it his ‘dragon voice’ when we were small.”

Charles was the epitome of curiosity and glee. “Well go on then! I never thought I’d be so lucky as to hear a dragon in Netherfield!”

“It strains my voice,” he uttered quietly.

“Then I ought to oversee you practice,” she said. “Perhaps Lydia will hear you better.” She reached back to poke his cheek, causing his lips to pout.

She lifted with the rise of his chest as he breathed, and then he growled, “Humbug.” It rumbled in his chest and scratched his throat like swallowing embers, but Jane giggled profusely. Her mirth turned into full heaves of breath which then evolved into coughs. Jamie was ready with a handkerchief as well as her tonic.

Charles was half risen from his seat when she laid back once more on James’ chest. “Are you all right?”

“Oh the contrary,” she grimaced around vinegar as the red in her cheeks faded. “The phlegm has finally broken from my ribs—” Her features opened in horror. “I—I’m sorry. That’s—oh, it’s disgusting—I’m so sorry.”

It was Charles’ turn to guffaw. “Rest assured, I am not disillusioned enough to think women are not subjected to the same fluids as men. ‘Jolly boys make for jolly old men,’ so they say, because laughter is the best medicine.”

He looked to James, then, “I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad to see Jane smile and laugh despite her fever. I hope you will forgive me for being forthright, but I thought you were avoiding me.”

Truth and a ready lie clashed in Jamie’s throat, leaving his mouth open. Jane supplied, “He was.”

The betrayal was keen. “I wasn’t,” he countered, pinching the back of her arm. “Your leisure time has overlapped with my occupation, that’s all.”

The moonlight coming in sideways cast a unique glimmer over Bingley’s blue eyes, and shadows over Darcy’s brown ones. Charles said, “I am eager to hear more about this occupation. We’ll have more time tomorrow? I can see we’ve imposed ourselves enough.”

James glanced down at his sister, seeing her pale lashes resting on her cheeks more often than they were lifted. “Yes,” he acquiesced, “tomorrow. Thank you again for being hospitable to us—”
Charles stood while waving his hand. “It’s a pleasure, a pleasure. I only wish there was more time. Sleep well, Jamie, and you, Jane. I hope the morrow brings you better health.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bingley. Lord Darcy,” she smiled weakly.

Darcy leaned forward slightly in a bow and followed Charles out with their chairs. As the door shut behind them, James placed the volume atop the others on his bedside table while Jane shifted to lie on his shoulder. The nearly empty pot joined the books as she spoke.

“Two sightings of Mr. Darcy in one day.” He heard a smile in her breathy voice. “Aren’t I lucky. He must have come because you’re here.”

James breathed in the familiar scent of her hair and meant to close his eyes, but something in his peripheral vision made him turn his head back to the glass doors. Darcy and Bingley finished returning the chairs to the other room, and their shadows were leaving the veranda.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all had a safe and delicious holiday!
James awoke to sounds in the room. Jane was out of bed, and just from her manner of movement, he knew she was feeling better. The first rays of sunlight were swords lying across the coverlet. She came around the bed while pouring a cup of tea; she glanced over the rosemary sprig to see his squinting eyes and smiled. “Good morning,” she almost whispered.

“Mmh,” he sighed, watching the cup balance on his chest. He could feel its heat seeping through the plush down while he heard the sound of a tin container opening. A salve smelling of eucalyptus was rubbed under his nose. “Forgot I brought that.”

She laughed softly. “My ailment was in my chest, but yours is in your head. Can you breathe through your nose?”

He shook his head while wiggling to sit up enough to drink his tea. She informed, “Richard brought basins for us to wash.”

James’ eyes had already closed once more. “Richard?” he heard as if from a dream.

“The butler,” she informed while dragging her hand back and forth over his chest. “You must wash,” she coaxed. “You’ll feel better. Come on.”

Heaving himself up, he drained the cup and first washed his and Jane’s underthings in one of the basins. While they dried over the fire the siblings washed during pieces of conversation before Jane exclaimed, “Jamie, what’s this?”

He looked up at Jane’s bare breast pulled to the side. He squinted and stepped out of his basin for a better look at her sternum. He laughed, “It’s only a spot. Wash thoroughly.”

“I thought I was past getting spots,” she complained mildly.

“It’s because you’ve been in bed for a few days,” he supplied while washing his face. “Consider it an unexpected advantage you do not own one of the fashionable London gowns that would otherwise reveal your treachery,” he laughed.

Jane frowned. “Their gowns are not cut so low.”

He had wrapped himself in a towel and knelt over the basin to finish. “It is hardly within me to
care one way or another how low a woman’s dress is cut…unless it’s Lydia.”

“I think the larger concern would be Lydia’s swollen pride at owning such a thing, and less how others reacted to her bosom,” she voiced. “Let me wash your hair. Your sinuses must ache.”

They did. Leaving his face wet, he heard her towel move around her body and felt her fingers push into his hair. After suds had been made Jane poured water over his hair and he did the same for her. Once they had finished she said pleasantly, “I think I’ll have a spot of breakfast. Will you join me?”

He nodded and buttoned the last holes of his shirt. They were informed their hosts had already dined and were out on the terrace awaiting them. James’ own cold had taken hold, eclipsing his appetite, but it was a relief to see Jane famished. She managed to push apple slices and a bite of toast into him but beyond that he excused himself as she finished her last cup of tea.

He exited the French doors leading to the terrace which wrapped around the rear of the house but a footmen gestured around the corner where the family would have a view of the lake. James thanked him, and as he rounded the corner, he paused upon hearing their discussion.

“An uncle who is an attorney is all fine and good, but another in Cheapside!” The voice was unmistakably Caroline’s.

“That is capital,” Louisa chortled.

Charles cut in, “If they had uncles enough to fill all of Cheapside, it would not make them one jot less agreeable. You lot hold too much emphasis on material wealth.”

James neared the corner, pressing his shoulder to its edge. He let his body roll over it so he was in view of the family, or rather, they each faced the view of the lake where Mr. Darcy leaned against the banister. But Darcy’s gaze locked with James’.

“Charles,” Louisa said measuredly, “we have our wealth thanks to material goods.”

Caroline concluded, “And their lack thereof materially lessens their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world.”

Darcy held James’ eyes with his own, but if there was any emotion there, James could not read it. Richard the butler arrived with coffee, of which Darcy appeared uninterested, but James was thankful for the conversation change to announce himself. “My sister feels well.”

Caroline and Mrs. Hurst perked up, ignorant of his being there all the while. “What lovely news!” the latter sang.

“Is she with you?” Caroline asked.

“She finishes breaking her fast as we speak,” he confirmed. “She will be with you shortly.”

He began to shift back the way he’d come, but Charles exclaimed, “You will remain as well? Share the morning with us?”

James smiled and assured, “I am going to retrieve your books. I’ll be back momentarily, excuse me.”

James delicately pinched the bridge of his nose as he walked to the opposite set of stairs. Just the press of the pads of his fingers elicited aches, and the sun was too bright on his eyes. Nonetheless,
he collected the borrowed volumes and returned to find Jane conversing with the Bingley sisters. James silently found a cushioned settee and continued the novel he had started the night previous while the others played a game of loo.

He could not go ignored for long, however. Mr. Hurst looked at him with astonishment. “Do you prefer reading to cards? That is rather singular.”

“Mr. Bennet,” said Caroline, “has been shown to despise cards, or at the very least he is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else.”

Jane’s smile began to evaporate. “That’s not true—” she began but James’ voice covered her own.

“I deserve neither such praise nor censure. I am not a great reader and I have pleasure in many things.”

Charles agreed, “In nursing your sister you have great proclivity! Look how she glows!”

He swiftly bloomed red at his own exclamation but James was glad for the leave to look back at the pages. Until Bingley sat beside him.

James’ chin remained lowered whereas his lashes swept up upon hearing Bingley’s charge: “I wish my collection were larger for your benefit and for my own credit; but I am idle when it comes to book collecting. Though I have not many, I have more than I ever look into.”

James opened his mouth to speak but Caroline claimed the air. “I am astonished that our father left so small a collection. What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Lord Darcy!”

“It ought to be good,” the man himself put forward. “It has been the work of many generations.”

“And you have added so much to it yourself; you are always buying books!”

“It hardly matters how many you have as long as you enjoy them,” James sighed, if nothing else than to get the sentiment out, but he realized Charles had heard him. Bingley leaned into him so their shoulders touched, and James peeked up to see a kind gaze meeting his.

However Charles’ head swung the other way upon Darcy saying, “I cannot comprehend the neglect of a library in such days as these.”

“Neglect!” Caroline said. “I am sure you neglect nothing that can add to the beauties of that noble place. Charles, when you build your house, I wish it may be half as delightful as Pemberley.”

“I wish it may,” he admitted.

Caroline proceeded, “But I would really advise you to make your purchase in that neighborhood, and take Pemberley for a kind of model. There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire.”

“With all my heart; I will buy Pemberley itself if Darcy would but sell it.”

James’ eyes found Jane, who remained silent despite the storm of worry he recognized in her eyes, the set of her mouth. Caroline too easily pulled Charles in a different county altogether despite being right beside Jane. It was an odd relief that Caroline herself then canceled the notion.

“I am talking of possibilities, Charles.”

Bingley laughed, “Upon my word, Caroline, I think it more possible to acquire Pemberley by
purchase rather than imitation.”

The conversation faded from James’ attention in favor of monitoring Jane. He could not say when exactly she had learned the skill of silence within a social setting, but she had mastered it, being able to hold her space while saying very little. James realized that Charlotte was right: Jane and Charles needed to be alone. Jane needed the relaxed space and comfort to speak freely, and beyond that Charles would undoubtedly be irrevocably attached to her.

“Has Miss Darcy grown much since the spring?” Caroline asked at some point. “Will she be as tall as I am?”

“You are already of a common height,” Darcy provided. “Therefore she will be taller.”

James was reminded of Lydia, however Caroline proclaimed wistfully, “How I long to see her again! I never met with anybody who delighted me so much.”

Hell, woman, you’ve forgotten one of my sisters only to insult the one sitting beside you! he thought angrily.

“Such a countenance, such manners!” Caroline praised. “And so extremely accomplished for her age! Her performance on the pianoforte is exquisite.”

“It is amazing to me,” said Bingley, “how young ladies can have the patience to be so very accomplished as they all are.”

Louisa returned as if from a reverie. “All young ladies, Charles? What do you mean?”

Bingley pressed on, “Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover screens and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished.”

He and James looked up as Darcy joined, “Your list of the common extent of accomplishments has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it for nothing more than netting a purse, or covering a screen. But I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance that are truly accomplished.”

“Nor I, to be sure,” Caroline was simply too quick to agree.

But James swiftly cut in, “You must comprehend a great deal into your idea of an accomplished woman.”

Darcy’s pause could not have been long, but the way he held James’ gaze, it was like a short eternity passing before he answered, “Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it.”

“Have you ever netted a purse, my lord?” James finished.

The silence again. “No. I cannot say that I have.”

His ever-faithful assistant came to the forefront. “No one can be really esteemed in accomplishment unless you greatly surpass what is usually met with. Netting purses is child’s play. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages to deserve the word. Besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.”
Darcy agreed, “All this she must possess and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, through the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.”

The book had long since slid through James’ fingers to rest somewhere between his knees. “Then therein lies the secrets of your libraries: your quest to create the perfect woman. I am no longer surprised at you knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any.”

Then there it was: the first furrow of Darcy’s brow, the visage of perplexity in those bright brown eyes. “Are you so severe upon the sex that you doubt the possibility of all this?”

James could not help but smile tiredly. “With a sister at home I would have thought you might have a special insight to these people you speak of in such a detached way. I have four siblings in various degrees of what you might call accomplishment, and I still never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity and application alongside elegance as you describe, united. Perhaps one or some triumph but never all at once. On the contrary, such layers of endless study seem to be a fit recipe for madness. My lord.”

A sewing needle might have dropped and shattered the marble beneath their feet for all the silence that encompassed them. As if it had, Mrs. Hurst and Caroline exploded against the injustice of his doubt before Mr. Hurst called them to order. Only his insistence of going into Meryton quelled Louis’s agitation, and they excused themselves from the party. To Jane’s utter relief, Mr. Jones finally arrived and was awaiting her for her medical examination. James was only too glad to join her, but not before Caroline said her last remarks.

“Mr. Bennet, I’ve only just realized, did you bring a razor with you?” Caroline asked.

He met her gaze. “No?”

A grin flashed on her face. “I had believed you not much younger than Jane, but there is not a day’s worth of growth on your chin.”

“That’s hardly worth commenting on,” Charles intercepted. “My beard is not quick to grow, and when it does you cannot see the blond hairs.”

James left them, too tired and uninterested to humour Caroline’s taunts. Upon entering the house, however, James immediately recognized not only his mother’s voice, but Lydia and Kitty’s conversing with Mr. Jones. James touched Jane’s arm, informing her that he was going to the library to return the books.

He was expecting the library to be a source of quiet, but he considered that he should have suspected the opposite from the previous conversation. Upon entering the library, he discovered that the room shared the exterior of the house by which Caroline Bingley was speaking. Then again, she had the sort of voice that carried, not unlike Lydia.

As he set the books upon their shelves, Caroline reacted to the butler informing them, “Mrs., Miss, and Miss Bennet have arrived.”

“Well is that all of them?” Caroline retorted. “I can hardly keep count.”

“Perhaps we should have added mathematics to the list of necessary accomplishments,” Charles responded, much to James’ mirth.

“Richard, did you supply Mr. Bennet with a razor this morning?” Caroline inquired.
“Carol, this hardly matters,” Charles complained.

The butler replied, “I tried, mum, but Miss Bennet assured me he would not have a need for it when they bathed.”

“It is an advantage of which to be jealous,” Charles approved, but Caroline had caught on something.

“Jane assured you? Why would she...they were in separate rooms, were they not?”

“No, mum,” Richard said. “Mr. Bennet attended to her throughout the night.”

“William and I saw this,” Charles declared. “Really, Caroline—”

“But Jane intercepted the toiletries?” she continued. “Why on earth would she—my god, Richard, did they bathe in the same room?”

“I was not there to verify or confirm, mum,” the butler supplied. James peeked through the window to see him addressing Caroline, Bingley, and Mr. Darcy, who watched their goings-on from where he still leaned against the terrace banister.

“Charles, how can this not matter to you? Jane is a delicate, sweet thing but that James Bennet—”

Charles raised his hand, halting her words. “You and I have bathed together, Caroline. I do not want to hear it.”

“When we were children!” she exclaimed. “This is hardly proper!”

Charles whirled on her. “You might have taken a moment to stop ogling Darcy in order to notice that Jamie was barely standing when he was on his feet! He’s spent all of his energies taking care of Jane; I am not surprised at all that she might return the kindness in helping him wash in order to be presentable for us. You speak so much of what’s proper—let’s go out and meet the Bennets as our precious station dictates.”

James was both impressed and disappointed. Far from being unnerved at Caroline’s incestuous accusations, he only wished Charles would show as much energy for Jane instead of himself.

“Lizzy, dear? Jamie?”

He turned to find his mother entering the library. Her eyes landed on him and she smiled—only to rush forward and take his face in her hands. “Lizzy! Lizzy, my love...you shouldn’t have rushed into the rain as you did. You look dead on your feet.”

“I’m fine, mama,” he said, but instead of pushing away her hands, he leaned into them.

“The skin around your eyes is black,” she retorted, making him laugh weakly.

“No it isn’t.”

“Whose shirt is this?”

“Mr. Bingley’s.”

“Oh!” she chortled. “I must thank them—you have, of course, haven’t you?”

Without waiting for his response, she ushered him into the foyer where the others drew them into
the breakfast parlor. Mr. Jones had already deemed Jane in fine health and was enjoying a biscuit while Mrs. Bennet thanked them for allowing her children to stay on their hospitality. James came to sit by Jane, resting his elbow upon the cushioned arm and simultaneously bracing his aching brow against his hand while shielding his oversensitive eyes from the morning blaze. “I am glad upon realizing she was too ill to be removed, you provided every possible comfort to her.”

“Removed!” Charles startled. “I would not have thought of—it never entered my mind! My sister, I am sure, was much the same and would not have lent an ear to her removal.”

“You may depend upon it, madam,” said Miss Bingley with cold civility from her place by the windows with Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Bennet was profuse in her acknowledgements.

“If it was not for such good friends I do not know what would have become of her, although she would have endured with the greatest patience in the world, which is always the way with her. She has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with. I often tell my other girls they are nothing to her. You have a wonderful room here, Mr. Bingley, and a charming prospect over that gravel walk. I do not know a place in the country that is equal to Netherfield. You will not think of quitting it in a hurry I hope, though you have but a short lease.”

“Whatever I do is done in a hurry,” Charles admitted. “Therefore if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in five minutes. At present, however, I consider myself quite fixed here.”

“I should expect so,” James said to himself, but to his constant reliance, Charles’ ears heard him.

“You begin to comprehend me, do you?” he teased, smile flashing.

James met his disposition with mischievous eyes. “Oh yes. I understand you perfectly.”

Charles guffawed, “I might take this for a compliment, but to be so easily seen through is pitiful.”

“It happens. But it does not necessarily follow that a deep, intricate character is more or less estimable than one such as yours.”

“Lizzy!” hissed his mother. “Remember where you are, and do not run on a wild manner that you are suffered to do at home.”

However Charles was unperturbed. “I did not know that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study.”

“I’ve found intricate characters to be the most amusing. They have at least that advantage.”

He had not expected Mr. Darcy to reply. “The country,” he said, “can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighborhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.”

“I disagree,” James confronted. “People themselves have the ability to alter so much, there can be something new to observe at any time.”

“Yes, indeed, my lord,” Mrs. Bennet bristled. “I assure you there is quite as much of that going on in the country as in town.”

Pairs of siblings exchanged glances throughout the room, but Darcy, after looking at her for a moment, turned silently away. Mrs. Bennet fancied she had gained a victory over him and sought to continue it. “I cannot see that London has any great advantages over the country, except the
shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is it not, Mr. Bingley?”

“I can be equally happy in either,” Bingley revealed. “When I am in the country, I never wish to leave it, and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, I’d say.”

“Aye, that is because you have the right disposition, but that gentleman,” she meant Darcy, “seems to think the country was nothing at all.”

James’ patience had worn thin. “Mama, do not make assumptions as if the subject of your criticism is not present.” He saw Mr. Darcy look at him in his peripheral eye. “You misunderstood Lord Darcy. He meant that there was not such a variety of people within the country as there would be in a larger population, such as the city. You must acknowledge this to be true.”

His mother began to agree but before she could be swept away by her own words he asked whether she had seen Charlotte of late. Indeed she had, as Sir William and his family had dined with them just the previous evening. The redirection succeeded until Mrs. Bennet proclaimed, “What an agreeable man, Sir William is, Mr. Bingley. That is my idea of good breeding; and those people who fancy themselves very important and never open their mouths quite mistake the matter.”

James’ eyes widened the same moment he heard Jane’s intake of breath. He peeked under his hand to gauge Darcy’s reaction: the man was as stoic as ever, but sensing James’ gaze, those irises flicked to him. James could only bid him a silent apology.

But she was far from finished. “The Lucases are wonderful company. It is only a pity Charlotte is not more handsome—”

“Mama—” James tried to stymy.

“She seems a very pleasant young woman,” Charles concurred.

Mrs. Bennet progressed, “Oh, dear, yes, but you must own she is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane’s beauty. I do not like to boast of my own child, but to be sure, with Jane one does not often see anybody better looking.”

One of James’ fingers rubbed circles between his eyes, breathing for calm.

“It is what everybody says. I do not trust my own partiality. When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman—”

“Mama,” Jane exclaimed this time.

“—in town so much in love with her that my brother Gardiner and sister-in-law, who were likewise in town, were sure he would make her an offer. But however he did not.”

Jane’s fingers curled around James’ hand resting between their hips. He felt her nails press into his palm. He had lost the feeling in the back of his throat.

“Perhaps he thought her too young. He did leave town rather suddenly, which might have given rain to sow suspicions, however he wrote some verses for her, and very pretty they were.”

“And so ended any affection,” James concluded impatiently. His voice betrayed the lack of strength in his throat. “An underestimated quality of poetry—its efficacy of driving away love.”

“I have been led to believe poetry is the food of love,” Darcy wondered.
The pads of James’ fingers wandered over his eyes, feeling how thin and fragile the skin there had become. “Of a stout, healthy sort of love it may. I can only guess it would serve to nourish what is strong already. But if it be only a slight, thin sort of inclination, one good sonnet will correct such illusions.”

Darcy appeared to be absorbing this, and upon reflection looked upon James with something like piqued intrigue.

All the while the youngest Bennets had kept their heads together, whispering until the moment presented itself. “Mr. Bingley I do remember you had said at Meryton that you would like to host your own ball here at Netherfield.”

Charles guffawed. “Goodness, that does sound like me. Are you here to collect the debt?”

She beamed. “Only to encourage good ideas.”

Caroline eyed her. “You are a well grown girl of…how old are you, Miss Bennet?”

“Fifteen,” she answered proudly.

“And it must have been your good humour that encouraged your mother to let you debut at such an early age,” Caroline smiled.

“The officers are in Meryton, did you know?” Lydia pressed. “It would simply be shameful to not invite them.”

James scolded, “He cannot be expected to invite the entire regiment.”

Lydia shot poison at him with her eyes. “Then a few select captains I have already validated as good company.”

Charles intercepted jovially, “I am ready, I assure you, to keep my engagement. After your sister has had a few more days to establish her health, you may name the very day of the ball.”

Lydia was beside her self. “Oh yes! Captain Carter and Colonel Forster will make excellent guests, and when you have given your ball, I shall insist upon their giving one also.”

“Now, now, Lydia, you’ve convinced a good man to give his word, and we best be off. Mr. Bingley, I do hope I may trust my children in your care a while longer? Surely you’ve noticed my Lizzy’s condition.”

Charles’ brows reached for his hairline. “Of course!” he chimed. “It will be my pleasure—not to say it’s a pleasure that he fell ill too—but a pleasure to spend a while longer with him. Yes, mum, I’m only too happy to have him.”

Mrs. Bennet looked quite pleased. “And you too, Jane, must take care of him as he did vice versa. But do take care to not trade this ailment back and forth endlessly.”

“Mama, I’d rather go home,” James voiced, albeit quietly.

“Nonsense, my love. Mr. Jones is already here,” the man himself harrumphed at the table, where he had fallen asleep. “I won’t hear a word about it. You mustn’t be moved. Straight to bed with you.”

James only had a moment’s notice to witness Charles graciously escorting his mother and sisters
back to their carriage, and Caroline’s sour expression before he found himself in bed under the examinations of Mr. Jones. A common cold was his verdict and he supplied a ready tonic he carried with him. He left with the order, “A good broth with lots of greens,” and that was all.

“James.”

He blinked, fighting unconsciousness.

“James, you look like an absolute horror,” Jane pressed. “Tell me what to do.”

He felt about the same, but he could not say whether it was a physical affliction so much as a mental one. As if from far away, he felt her fingernails dragging over his scalp. He locked onto the sensation, the tingles seeping through his skull to hum pleasantly in his cranium.

“Leave,” he rasped.

“You know I will not.”

“You’ll be ill again.”

“Then you’ll heal me,” she said stubbornly. “Tell me what to do.”

Lifting his eyes was a heavy ordeal, like coins had been placed over his lashes. “Lemon tea.”

She kissed his forehead and left to relay the request. James remained conscious long enough to drink a pot, and then another in the evening. Jane put a candle on the headboard to light the book in her hands; she was always there when his lashes fluttered open. The next day he awoke to the soft voices of Charles asking how he was. Upon seeing James awake, he waved happily while Mr. Darcy stood statuesque behind him. James did not realize he had simply fallen back asleep until his eyes opened again and Jane chuckled.

“He’s not offended. He was ecstatic you had the strength to hear him at all.”

James still could not breathe through his nose but his head and throat felt better. “You should spend time with him instead of me.”

She giggled, sliding a finger up the bridge of his nose. “Mother’s excuse to have me stay here is not going to plan. Bingley wishes me to stay with you.”

“But…” James began but is lashes heavily fell in time with her stokes along his nose. “You needn’t…”

“You can’t be dictatorial if you can’t get the words out,” she hushed.

His eyes shut under her ministrations, and he did not wake again until mid-morning, and he awoke with a hunger. He suspected Jane to be at brunch with the family as he dressed in fresh garments provided by Charles. The maid waiting outside the room startled from her journal and led him to a different parlor. This one was furnished in a clean and spacious Grecian style along with bookshelves and a writing table at which Mr. Darcy sat.

“Jamie!” Jane hopped up from the couch on which she and Charles had been conversing and held his forearms. “Are you feeling well?”

“Ravenous,” he smiled groggily.

Charles had risen with her to grip his shoulder. “Food will be brought at once. You slept so
soundly we could not bother you to even give you the prescribed broth. Do you have a craving for anything?” Upon James’ hesitation Charles insisted, “Anything at all.”

“Dumpling stew.”

Bingley grinned and nodded to the maid, who left. The dish arrived quickly, having used the broth and greens but Jamie’s spoon lifted savory dough eggs that stuck to his teeth pleasantly. He was left to eat and listen as he pleased, while sitting adjacent to Mr. Darcy and his pile of paper and finished letters.

This also lent an unobstructed view of Darcy’s discourse with Caroline, who was strolling about the room with lingering steps around the table. She noticed the current letter’s intended recipient. “How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!”

James peeked up to see, indeed, the length of the pages but Darcy made no answer.

“You write uncommonly fast.”

“You are mistaken. I write rather slowly.”

James peered over to where Jane and Charles were getting on well on the couch. He ladled the thick stew into his mouth while Caroline was otherwise distracted with observing Darcy’s finished pile of envelopes. “How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of the year. Letters of business too. How odious I should think them,” she chortled.

“It is fortunate, then, that they fall to my lot instead of yours,” Darcy responded. James held his spoon over his lips to hide any traces of a smile.

“Pray tell your sister that I long to see her.”

“I have already told her so once, by your desire.”

“Your pen grows dull. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well.”

“Thank you, but I always mend my own.”

James looked to Charles again, who was still thankfully oblivious to his sister’s tyranny over Darcy’s focus.

“How can you contrive to write so evenly?”

Darcy was silent.

“Tell your sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp, and pray let her know that I am quite in rapture with her beautiful little design for a table. I think it infinitely superior to Miss Grantley’s.”

James commented, “I thought a letter’s contents were between the sender and the recipient; just as confidential before or after the envelope.”

He let his spoon tap his lip while Caroline otherwise looked daggers into him. Darcy did not look up from his page. “Will you give me leave to postpone your raptures till I write again? At present I have not the room to do them justice.”

Caroline’s tone was unperturbed as she went to the window. “Oh, it is of no consequence. I shall see her in January. But do you always write such charmingly long letters to her, Lord Darcy?”
January. James saw Jane’s head lift and met her gaze briefly. If the party traveled together, there were yet many months to share.

“They are generally long,” Darcy conceded, “but whether always charming, it is not for me to determine.”

“It is a rule with me that a person who can write a long letter with ease cannot write ill.”

James did not withhold his grimace at her logic or lack thereof but Charles intercepted, “That will not do for a compliment to Darcy, Caroline. He does not write with ease. Simply with a great deal to say.”

“And you, Charles, write in the most careless way imaginable,” Caroline exclaimed. “You leave out half your words and blot the rest.”

Bingley blushed and said to Jane as if in apology, “My ideas flow so rapidly that I hardly have the time to express them...although this often results in my letters conveying little to no ideas to my correspondents.”

Jane smiled and assured. “Some of the greatest minds have shown similar reproof. Active minds often display themselves in either carnage or meditation.”

James witnessed Charles’ eyes soften just before Darcy spoke. “Nothing is more deceitful than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast.”

James set his spoon back within the bowl. “An indirect boast?”

Darcy looked up from his letter. “For instance, when Charles claimed his ability to be quit of Netherfield in five minutes; such an action would result in necessary business being left undone and would achieve no real advantage for oneself or anyone else. To insinuate such things as laudable is a sign of foolishness, not intelligence.”

James could not help but smile. He was indeed feeling better and rose to the challenge but Bingley defended himself first. “Nay, to remember at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning is too much. And upon my honor, I believed what I said to be true; one needn’t leave unfinished things behind if he is to be quit of a place. If anything, it is a testament of efficient management.”

“And you are so capable of that,” his sister japed.

“You contradict yourself,” Darcy seconded. “You claim to be committed to one or the other, or easily capable of forgetting something or other. If you were but to mount your horse and a friend said, ‘You had better stay till next week,’ you would sooner comply whether the request was a week or a month.”

“You claim I am easily manipulated!” Charles exclaimed.

Well if the hair’s red, James thought bitterly but said aloud, “To yield readily to the persuasion of a friend holds no merit with Lord Darcy, I suppose. Be steadfast in your choices, Charles, even if they are wrong.”

Darcy’s head tilted every so slightly; examining him as if to make James’ thoughts visible for inspection. “You make fun of me.”

“I delight in cheating a person of their premeditated contempt,” James countered softly. “Despise
me if you dare.”

“I do not dare.”

James blinked, having expected to have affronted him, not this gallantry. Instead he heard the words pass through Darcy’s lips as well as seeing the cogs slide into place behind Darcy’s eyes, the rumination slow yet deliberate. Darcy returned to his letter, but the sharp point of his pen hovered.

Caroline observed this, and came to stand beside James’ chair. “Mr. Bennet, will you take a turn around the room with me. It is refreshing after being so long in one position.”

James was surprised but agreed out of courtesy, though to feel Miss Bingley’s arm on his was an odd experience. Then her scheme became apparent. “What of you, my lord? Will you not take reprieve from your letters?”

“I will not, and for the better. Whatever secret affairs you wish to discuss with Mr. Bennet may be done more easily without me.”

“Oh! How uniquely considerate,” she teased. “How shall we punish him for such a notion?”

“Laugh at him,” James said bluntly although he could not help but agree with Darcy’s underlying sentiment: Caroline had nothing to share with him nor did he wish to pretend at such confidence. “Laughter just as easily makes a man as it destroys him.”

“Nay, Lord Darcy is above laughter.”

James snorted softly in his throat. “You mean he is not to be laughed at. That is an uncommon privilege, and one I hope does not continue. I dearly love to laugh.”

Darcy intercepted, “Miss Bingley has given me credit for more than can be considered accurate. Even the wisest of men can be rendered ridiculous if there is but one to laugh at them.”

James conceded, “There are such people but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. I will admit to enjoying certain follies and nonsense, but I suppose you are without these.”

“It has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which expose a strong understanding to ridicule.”

“I won’t ask what inspired this study,” James promised. “But it must be said that some weaknesses are correctible while others are not. I suppose pride is among the latter?”

Darcy considered this. “Where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be under good regulation, yes.”

James meant to send a smile to Jane, but met a frown on her face.

Caroline inquired, “Your examination of Mr. Darcy is over, I presume. What is the result?”

“He owns himself without disguise. I cannot withhold that from him.”

Darcy’s gaze followed him throughout the room. “I have faults enough, and they are sadly without understanding. I dare not vouch for my temper; it is too unyielding. While you laugh at follies and vices, I cannot forget them, nor offenses made against myself. My temper would likely be called
resentful, and once my good opinion is lost, it’s lost forever.”

Caroline had since left his arm to sit on the settee opposite Charles and Jane. James returned to the table to finish his meal. “You’ve chosen your fault well, I won’t laugh at it. You are safe from me.”

He would have happily left it at that, but Darcy inquired, “Is there not, in every disposition, a tendency to some particular evil, a natural defect, which cannot be overcome even by the best education?”

James was very still as he met Darcy’s eyes. What are you implying? he might have asked if they were alone, but instead he forced a smile and returned, “And your evil is a propensity to hate everybody?”

Then, Darcy smiled. “And yours is to understand them.”

James was not sure if he had been insulted or if he had just shared something akin to a secret.

“Do let us have some music,” Caroline proclaimed, and the spell of the last hour was broken. Even more so, it was a great relief that Charles granted he and Jane the use of his carriage to leave Netherfield by the end of the morning. Richard the butler had graciously washed and pressed James’ original attire, allowing him to leave Bingley’s garments behind as they strode toward the waiting carriage. And none too soon; James felt the morning’s strength begin to leave him; the sky was overcast thankfully but he still felt his eyes trying to squint against the light. He breathed for stamina as the last stretch of niceties was being met.

Charles and his sister saw Jane safely into the carriage, apologizing for the Hursts’ having been in Meryton, but they would send their regards, surely. Charles then shook James’ hand with both of his; Caroline graced his with her touch and that was all—

A large hand filled his, causing James to look around at Darcy—he felt the added strength through his arm, aiding his steps into the carriage. “Thank you. My lord.”

Darcy’s eyes stared in that characteristic way, and then he nodded once and released his hand.

Jane arranged herself in the open carriage but pivoted quickly upon seeing James rubbing his sternum. “Lizzy? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” he breathed. “It’s not important. Let’s just get home.”

They rocked with the first rolling of the wheels, and then they were well down the drive and away from Netherfield House.

“I for one,” Caroline said as they observed the carriage leaving the drive, “am glad for only four Bennet sisters. Should James Bennet have been a woman, he would have been one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex by undervaluing their own. And with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. It is a paltry device, a very mean art.”

She looked up to Mr. Darcy, who realized he had been the subject of her complaints.

“Undoubtedly,” said as if without much thought, but then, “there is meanness in all the arts by which ladies employ for men’s captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable. It sours the spider’s intelligence the fly might have otherwise appreciated.”

The pebbles beneath his boot growled as he rotated, leaving a speechless Caroline behind him.
God I just want to get to the Netherfield ball already ¯\_(ツ)_/¯ There's going to be a lot of original content once Wickham shows his stupid - I mean handsome - face. Thank you everyone for sticking with me!
James meets George Wickham and learns more about Mr. Darcy.

They were not cordially welcomed home by their mother.

Their father, however, smiled warmly and embraced his children, voicing their importance to their family table. “Our circle has been broken of late,” he said, guiding the way past an annoyed Mrs. Bennet with his children on either arm. His hand dragged over Jamie’s hair. “Dinner conversation has lost all its animation, and certainly all its sense.”

He and Jane laughed, their arms overlapping around Mr. Bennet’s waist. He kissed both of his children’s temples, sending them off but not before he turned Jamie’s face for a proper look at him. “We’ll put the sun back into these eyes. Upstairs, now.”

James could not reach his and Jane’s bed swiftly enough. He managed to remove his boots but otherwise fell into the embrace of the thick covers, coat, trousers, and all. His last conscious thoughts were hearing the family’s feline landing on the bed, and the flexing paws against his backside as she came to perch between his shoulder blades.

The following morning, though, James was well enough to break his fast with the family. Lydia was telling nobody in particular the latest as to her Captain and Colonel, before Mr. Bennet received a letter and announced, “I hope, my dear, that you have ordered a good dinner tomorrow evening, because it seems we are to have an addition to our family party.”

Mrs. Bennet’s curiosity was piqued but she answered, “Whatever do you mean, husband?”

“A gentleman and a stranger,” he answered, distracted by the first lines of the letter.

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes sparkled. “A gentleman and stranger! You mean Mr. Bingley, I am sure. Why Jane! You never dropped a word suggesting he might be visiting, you sly thing! I shall be extremely glad to see Mr. Bingl—”

“It is not Bingley,” Mr. Bennet answered in a monotone. “After nearly a week of losing our eldest children to Netherfield, one can hardly call him a stranger. The stranger I speak of is someone none of us have ever met.”

He waited several moments while his wife and daughters pelted him with inquiries and curiosity. “About a month ago I received a letter from my cousin, although he is so young I have more reason to think of him as a nephew. His father and I were like brothers before our falling out but he has since passed away.”

Mrs. Bennet’s brow furrowed with memory. “That awful man who made a great to-do about not coming to our wedding? Why on earth should his offspring have reason to write let alone visit us?”

Her husband withdrew an older letter from his waistcoat pocket, presumably the first letter from their cousin. “Well if Jamie was not among us, Mr. Collins would be the one to inherit our quaint home after my passing.”
James peeked up with his mouth full of chive potatoes while his mother set her silverware down with finality. “He needn’t visit at all, then,” she declared darkly. “Our home is our own. The coattails of inheritance no longer apply to him.”

Far from perturbed, Mr. Bennet chuckled, his hand finding his son’s wrist on the table. “Yes, yes, our Jamie has saved the family. Nevertheless, Mr. Collins has informed me that he hasn’t any need or desire for the farm anyway, since he has acquired a wealthy benefactress, among his own reasons.”

With both letters in hand, Mr. Bennet read,

“Dear Sir –

“The disagreement between yourself and my late honoured father always have me much uneasiness and, since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach in our families.”

He sent Mrs. Bennet a look. “For some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with anyone whom it had always pleased him to be at odds. My mind, however, is now made up on the subject, for having received ordination this past Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the right honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh. This Lady’s bounty and beneficence has granted me the valuable rectory of her parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.”

“A clergyman?” Kitty uttered.

Her father nodded over the words, “As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures of goodwill are highly recommendable—”

“He certainly flatters himself,” Mrs. Bennet remarked dryly.

Mr. Bennet smirked but continued, “I hope that the circumstance of my being second in the entail of Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch—”

“What on earth is he saying?” Mrs. Bennet bristled.

Her husband simply held up his open palm to halt her anger. “Not to insult my father’s memory further, but it would please me a great deal if you and company would consider me a close relative by this circumstance instead of a threat. I dare not be the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends.”

“He completely ignores Lizzy and writes as if he were still to inherit the estate!” Mrs. Bennet flared.

Mr. Bennet finished with the latest reply, “If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, the first week of November, by four o’clock. I shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday se’nnight following, which I can do without any inconvenience as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided another clergyman may do the duty of the day. I remain, dear sir, with respectful compliments to your family, your well-wisher and
friend,

“William Collins. And so you have it.”

“How fortunate we are,” his wife growled, “and for Mr. Collins’s reply to arrive in such a fashion as to give us no time to spaciously ready for such an intrusion.”

“You mean no time to refuse,” he remarked, albeit with mirth in his eye. He folded up the letters. “Therefore, at four o’clock tomorrow we may expect this peace-making gentleman. If nothing else, he seems a conscientious and polite young man, and may prove himself a valuable acquaintance if Lady Catherine is so indulgent as to share him with us.”

Mr. Bennet seemed greatly amused by his own statement but had the good grace to keep it silent in the face of his wife’s rage. She replied coolly, “There is, at least, some sense in what he says about making any amends. I shall not be the person to discourage him by doing right by us.”

“That is very good of you, dear,” he affirmed.

Jane voiced, “Though it is difficult, to guess in what way he can mean to make us the atonement he thinks is our due. The wish is to his credit, though.”

“Mm,” James seconded. “There is something to be said for a man willing to marry and bury his parishioners.”

“Lizzy,” his mother scolded jadedly, rubbing the protruding vein in her forehead.

“You’re not wrong, though, mama,” he said, joining his cuts of vinegar asparagus and chive potatoes. “There is something pompous in his style; why would he have need of mentioning specifically the entail inheritance when he is disqualified from it?” James looked to his father. “Is he sensible?”

Mr. Bennet’s humour faded and he answered seriously, “No, love, I think not. I have great assurance of finding the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letters, which is remarkably reminiscent of his late father. This promises an intriguing week. I am impatient to see him.”

His wife sighed. “I had forgotten your fancy for studying people. You’ve imparted this awful habit to our son.”

“I call it a learned intelligence, not awful nor habitual,” he refuted. He then shared a look with James. “A week should suffice for us to dissect Mr. Collins.”

James laughed around his mouthful, his father’s smile growing just a little wider at the shine returning to his son’s eyes.

“In composition,” said Mary, who sat opposite James on Mr. Bennet’s other side, “his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch is perhaps not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed.”

Mr. Bennet smiled softly for her, patting her hand fondly. “You’re not wrong, darling. The metaphor holds its meaning well.”

To Lydia and therefore Kitty, neither the letter nor its writer were in any degree interesting. Their cousin wore neither a scarlet coat nor was he likely to have any useful connections to a regiment member. Their mother, however, calmed over the course of the day and the following, so much so
that she was preparing to see him with a degree of composure that rather astonished her husband and children.

“The chamomile, I think,” Jane said the following afternoon as they waited restlessly around the house.

“Mm,” James agreed tersely, watching his mother’s movements. It was not that tranquility was outside of her character, more so was her lack of dialogue. It reached a point that Hill, the family’s cook and butler of sorts arrived with lavender scones as James steeped her tea; her favorite biscuits.

“Don’t you think the windows could use a cleaning?” she said offhandedly as James took her hand in his, massaging the tense ligaments of her fingers and wrist.

“Yes, mama. Hill will take care of it,” he soothed quietly. She began to nibble on the scones and voiced certain complaints or concerns, slowly easing against her son’s touch.

“Lydia, you have a loose curl, dear. Mary, if you won’t tie it back, brush it at least. Oh Jamie, a stain…”

“Yes, mama. I know, mama,” he said accordingly, moving to her other hand.

“Oh…what must he think of me, Jamie?” she said after a time. “Your father’s side never much cared for me; indeed, they have not communicated with us since our engagement. Oh…that was over twenty years ago…”

“It’s all right, mama,” Jamie hushed, pushing circles into the muscles of her forearm. “As papa said, he may think very little, or at least not much of consequence.”

His father came inside, then, announcing a carriage coming up the drive. James helped his mother stand and Mr. Bennet took her arm before leading the family outside to greet their guest.

Mr. Collins was punctual to his time and was received with politeness by the whole family. Mr. Bennet said little, however Mrs. Bennet had regained her confidence and said much in his stead. Her daughters were ready enough to speak and Mr. Collins seemed neither in need of encouragement nor inclined to be silent. A reasonably tall man of five and twenty, Mr. Collins’s gait lent to a heavy-looking stature. A look from James silenced Lydia’s whispers to Kitty of how skinny Mr. Collins’s legs were in comparison to his barrel-like torso.

Far from Mrs. Bennet’s previous concerns, Mr. Collins proved largely ignorant of the roots of his father’s hatred of Mr. Bennet or the Bennets’ matrimony. In fact, the topics he chose to open to Mrs. Bennet would normally have been readily received, except for his contradictory grave and stately manner. His addressing the furnishings and state of the gardens was expected but his remarks on her “fine family of daughters plus an heir,” was met with patient silence whereas, “with no miscarriages as well,” brought color to Mrs. Bennet’s complexion. James exchanged a glance with his father, who was stoic. James supposed it was due to his patroness, of whom he was blatantly proud of, that held his spine so rigid, but for Mr. Collins’s lack of sense during a conversation, he could not discern any obvious reason.

The morning before his arrival, Mr. Bennet had pulled James aside and given him the task of sitting on the side of the table where his mother traditionally sat. He now understood why. He took her hand and felt her squeeze his fingers.

Mr. Collins continued, “Your robust health shines in each of them. I met the fame of your family’s beauty upon my first moments in Meryton around luncheon. “The people there have many kind
things to say of the Bennet daughters’ beauty, but I am glad to find their words have actually fallen
short of the truth. It must be a great anticipation to see them each disposed of in marriage.”

_Disposed of?

James barely withheld his grimace as he looked at Jane. Her eyes moved but otherwise she sat
composed. James was pleased to find his other sisters exchanging looks to one another but Mrs.
Bennet had calmed enough to respond, “You are kind yourself, sir. I wish with all my heart to have
my daughters settled, but of course there isn’t any fear of impatient settling as there might have
otherwise been.”

James watched Jane inhale deeply, her thoughts not far from his in wishing this dinner would end
swiftly. “You allude perhaps to the entail of this estate,” Mr. Collins guessed.

Mrs. Bennet smiled sweetly, like poison. “Entail, sir? There is no entail. More so a direct passing.”

This led to Mr. Collins’s gaze falling to James. “Quite right. An odd but necessary practice, I must
say, despite it being rather difficult to whom a property may go to once it has been entailed. Mr.
Bennet, do you enjoy the routine of a career in husbandry?”

“I’d say I care more for agriculture,” James provided, which then led Mr. Collins to compliment
the meal they were all sharing.

“To whom of my cousins may I pay my compliments?”

James only just checked his mother’s asperity by holding her wrist down on the table. “You may
be certain, sir,” she said measuredly, “that we do keep a good cook. None of my children find
themselves in the kitchen out of poor necessity.”

It was one of the few blunt hints Mr. Collins grasped throughout the evening, and he proceeded to
apologize for it over the next quarter of an hour. This ended when Mr. Bennet wisely opened a
subject on which Mr. Collins both welcomed and was eager. Though Mr. Bennet spoke very little,
his decision turned the tide of the conversation.

“How kind of the Lady Catherine to bestow her generosity. You are very fortunate in a patroness.”

Mr. Collins brightened, as far as his dull solemnity allowed. “Oh. Yes. Never have I witnessed
such behavior in a person of rank, such affability and condescension. I have, as yet, only spoken
during two Sundays, but she has been graciously pleased with both discourses. She’s also asked me
twice to dine with her in her home, Rosings Park, and has included me at her card table just last
Saturday.

“I have met many opinions in that part of the country regarding her ladyship as proud, but I have
never seen anything but affability in her. She has always spoken to me as she would to any other
gentleman; not the smallest object to my joining in her higher society of the neighborhood, nor
even my occasionally leaving the parish to visit my relations.

“During the last evening I spent at her quadrille table she even advised me to marry as soon as I
could, provided I choose with discretion, of course. More so, she’s visited my own humble home
and approved of all the alterations she had once advised me upon when I first moved into the
region…”

James met his father’s silent but glimmering eyes. So there it was: Collins’s reason for visiting was
to find a wife via the blind orders of his benefactress.
“Does she live near you?” Mrs. Bennet inquired.

He nodded, “The garden in which stands my humble abode is separated only by a lane from Rosings Park, her ladyship’s residence.”

“We heard you the first time,” Kitty murmured beside James. Her silverware knocked against her plate when he pinched her thigh, but the family ignored it.

“I think you said she was a widow? Has she any family?” their mother progressed.

“She has only one daughter, the heiress of Rosings, and of very extensive property,” Collins confirmed.

“Ah!” Mrs. Bennet cried softly, “then she is better off than many girls, how her station allows her a direct inheritance. What sort of young lady is she? Is she handsome?”

Mr. Collins was either ignorant or chose to be in regards to Mrs. Bennet’s insult. “She is a most charming young lady indeed. Lady Catherine herself says that in point of true beauty, Miss de Bourgh is far superior to the handsomest of her sex because there is in her features that which marks the young woman of distinguished birth.”

James outright grimaced. “That’s absurd.”

Mr. Collins blinked as if water had been splashed in his face. “Pardon?”

James stated as if it was obvious, “How many monarchs have we had who were noticeably ugly or unlucky to be born malformed? One’s station doesn’t—”

“Shut your mouth,” his mother silenced.

James’ appetite vanished but he found an odd saviour in Mr. Collins, who was shaking his head as if confused. “No, no I…must agree with Mr. Bennet, at least in part. The station of one’s parents cannot guarantee all advantages in a mortal realm. The young Miss de Bourgh is unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her from making any progress in many accomplishments she would not otherwise have failed in…”

James had already had this discussion on ‘accomplishments’ and did not wish to have it twice. He sat against the spine of his chair and waited for dinner to end. The last spot of entertainment came from Mr. Collins’s revealing, “I try my utmost to provide the little praises which please her ladyship and which I conceive myself peculiarly bound to pay.”

Mr. Bennet inquired, “It is happy for you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy. May I ask whether these pleasing attentions are from the impulse of the moment or are they the result of previous study?”

James’ lashes lifted, hearing Collins’s reply of, “They arise from what is passing at the time, though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions. I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible.”

James could see a certain expectation being fully met within his father’s eyes. His cousin was as absurd as he had predicted but Mr. Bennet maintained an amused composure, with only occasional glances to his son.

After they supped, the family and Collins adjourned to the parlour where a shelf of books arrested their guest’s attention for some time. Mrs. Bennet asked if he would like to read for them, and he
readily consented, except for the choice in material.

“I beg pardon, I never read novels—”

Lydia startled while Kitty maintained a stunned silence, “Never! Novels? Never!”

It was to her next and utter horror that he did find a volume that suited his interests: a book of sermons. Lydia gaped as he opened the book and, with monotonous solemnity, read up to three pages before she could take no more.

“Mama, do you know that uncle Philips talks of turning away Richard, and if he does, Colonel Forster will—”

“*Hush,*” both of her eldest siblings scolded.

Mr. Collins, clearly offended, set aside the book. “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested in books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. But I will no longer importune my young cousin.”

Lydia stared wide-eyed as her family slowly dispersed, unsure whether she was truly in trouble or if she had done a good thing by bringing an end to Collins’ reading. Either way, the night’s events came to an unceremonious end.

Later into the night, Jane stroked the cat’s throat as she and James discussed their relative. “He does speak highly of the Lady de Bourgh.”

“Mr. Collins is an old widow’s hobby, and we are the collateral subjects,” he said.

“It is not right of mama to ventilate her insults on him, no more than it is for papa to use him as a source of amusement.”

James knew he could not say anything to sway her from defending the man. “The methods may have been ill-chosen but the intent to educate a person is not wrong.”

“Mr. Collins is educated, though. He is a clergyman.”

“You know there is a difference between being educated and actually having sense,” James scoffed. “You cannot tell me honestly you find him sensible.”

Jane pressed her lips together, at an impasse.

The next morning Lydia had the intent to go into Meryton, and it was Mr. Bennet’s fancy to get Mr. Collins out of his house at least for the better part of the day, especially after he admitted to Mrs. Bennet that he had come to Longbourn to fulfill the Lady de Bourgh’s encouragement and gotten the matriarch in excited spirits at having the prospect of two daughters soon married. So the Bennet siblings and Collins walked to town after breakfast.

“Keep your wits about you,” James murmured while Mr. Collins walked ahead, pointing out various articles of foliage of which he thought he was knowledgeable. “With Bingley reserved, Mama will pass off one of you to Mr. Collins if you let her.”

“Ah! Sweet Peas,” Collins said before them, pausing to bend over a knee-high, leafy plant. “It will be lovely when these bloom—”

“That’s a stinging nettle,” James corrected, striding past him. Collins startled and recollected
himself before following them. After traveling to Netherfield on foot, Meryton felt closer than usual, and the town was bustling with morning commerce. Lydia was immediately akin to a cat with string at the first sight of a redcoat, but James hooked her arm with his like a proper escort and drew them to their aunt’s hat shop.

Mr. Philips was home for lunch and came downstairs from their home above the shop to greet them. He showed initial intrigue upon meeting Mr. Collins. “I can only recall meeting a handful of Bennets, and that was before these children were born,” he chuckled, gesturing to James and his sisters. “And you’re not even a Bennet, if we consider the details.”

That set Mr. Collins off, and James could see the benevolent curiosity melting from his uncle’s complexion. Thankfully his wife drew them back upstairs for tea and a light lunch. Mr. Collins was all praises for her courgette sandwiches and her choice of furniture. “The same exquisite taste as Lady de Bourgh,” he commented. Initially put off, Mrs. Philips then learned of whom Lady de Bourgh was and how just a mantelpiece clock cost eight hundred pounds in her Ladyship’s home; afterwards she was highly flattered and appealed to Mr. Collins for more conversation.

James took his plate and cup o’tea to the window seat where Mary had occupied herself with a book. He placed a wedge atop the open pages, forcing her to eat it in order to see.

Lydia was aflutter for news of the regiments’ gossip; she did not even bother acknowledging James when he pointed out that news and gossip were not the same thing.

“That reminds me!” Mrs. Philips chimed, “Mr. Denny ought to be coming round about this time—”

“Mr. Denny!” Lydia exclaimed loudly. “You’ve never mentioned a Mr. Denny!”

Her aunt chortled. “Because he is nearing his fortieth year, dear. He’s only coming round because of certain fabric troubles the lads have been having—that’s him, now.”

The bell attached to the shop door sang below them. Lydia, Kitty, and Mr. Collins went downstairs with Mrs. Philips, leaving her husband to enjoy his lunch in peace. Mostly, since Lydia’s voice carried up the stairs. Then came the stomping footfalls of Kitty rushing up to wave Jane downstairs. “Jane! You must see, him!”

Jane looked at James, who appeared just as vacant as to whom Kitty meant. He left the rest of his tea to Mary and followed the eldest into the shop, only to be confronted with the object of their sister’s fascination.

Golden hair, slightly darker than Jane’s pale blond shade, and hazel eyes turned toward them. Mrs. Philips introduced, “My first niece as well as my nephew, Jane and James.”

Mr. Denny greeted them first, his long silver hair tied behind him while his tricorner was clutched under his arm. “Mr. Denny, if it pleases you. Allow me to entreat permission to introduce my friend, Mr. Wickham. He’s come with me from London, having agreed to a commission of being within our corps.”

“Miss Bennet,” he smiled, coming forward to kiss Jane’s hand. “Is the morning treating you well?”

“Very well, Mr. Wickham, thank you,” she returned pleasantly. “My brother…”

She guided his attention to James, who stepped forward with Kitty practically on his heels as he shook Wickham’s hand. The man’s stare was not as piercing as Bingley’s, but his features did open with jubilant curiosity. “Twins?”
James blinked and met Jane’s glance. From this alone, Wickham knew he was wrong in his assumptions. “My apologies,” he laughed. “You both share a similar face and build. I hope I have not already worn my welcome?”

“Sensible conversation is difficult to wear thin,” James appeased, his hand falling back to his side. “How are you liking Meryton?”

“I wish I had arrived in the spring,” Wickham voiced, “when things would be more lush and green. Otherwise, the people have been nothing but cordial and charming.”

Mr. Collins cut in, “Yes, indeed, the people of Meryton and Longbourn are uncommonly welcoming to strangers. In my brief study, it must be a characteristic or measurement of ones wealth. Those with more are more aloof because they of course have more to protect—”

Wickham’s eyes softened as he watched Mr. Collins speak but it was solely a mask to hide his surprise, whereas he peeked at James who grimaced openly. Wickham laughed and drew him over to where Mrs. Philips displayed her spools of ribbon on horizontal beams. “I was told he is your cousin?”

“Distant,” James stated bluntly. “We only met him yesterday.”

“And you already disagree with his sentiments,” he encouraged.

“I won’t speak ill of family in public, sir,” James declined but teased, “Especially when the hours of sunlight are so limited in the autumn.”

Wickham laughed again, fingering the smooth silk of a poison green ribbon. “We can certainly allot several days for the conversation.”

“I thought the regiment was supposed to keep you busy,” James cornered. “Don’t tell me a soldier lives a sedentary existence.”

“Then I won’t say it,” he smiled cheekily. “After the initial training, there isn’t much to do unless we are abroad. After all, the ocean and a naval fleet protects the king’s borders well enough.”

“No Scottish rebellions of late, then?” James teased, leaning his elbows on the central counter which was topped with mannequin heads wearing hats.

“None that I’ve seen, thankfully,” Wickham said as if with relief. “The great Roman Empire stopped its northern expansion at Scotland after all. Despite the charms of long haired sheep and haggis, I do not care to see the passions of its people first hand.”

James laughed. “I cannot say I am an expert on cuisine cooked within a stomach but you are versed in history. That is refreshing.”

“And you are active in current events,” Wickham nodded, joining him at the counter. “What inspires this?”

“My father’s escapism,” James said offhandedly. “He receives regular newspapers from London.”

“That is not so difficult to understand,” Wickham empathized. “Don’t you ever despise the entrapment of rural society?”

James lifted a brow. “Bold talk from a man who accepted an indefinite time in the country.”
“Regretting it less and less,” Wickham smiled, and James could only tilt his head.

“Cheeky,” he said quietly, like a whisper.

Wickham’s weight shifted and he leaned close to directly utter near James’ ear, “Bored.”

James’ lips had parted with curiosity but his lashes blinked heavily. His chin dropped in a sign of refusal. Wickham read this and returned to his former place at the counter. “Then you’ve chosen the wrong person for conversation, I’m afraid. I am the most boring person in Longbourn or Meryton.”

Wickham smiled again. “James, I’ve met the most boring person in Longbourn or Meryton,” he sent a look over to Mr. Collins. “You ought to give yourself more credit.”

“You’ve known me but a moment,” James frowned slightly.

“Then allow me more moments,” Wickham petitioned, holding out his hand. “My name is George.”

He looked at the hand and decided to extend his own. “James.”

“A pleasure, James,” Wickham smiled. “How long are you in Meryton today?”

His hand lingered in James’; he pulled away slowly, the pads of his fingers reaching briefly for the net of veins on James’ wrist.

James shrugged. “As long as my aunt will host me. I don’t stay longer than luncheon, usually.”

“Will you walk with me, then?” Wickham petitioned with a look to the man still conversing with Mrs. Philips. “Mr. Denny does his best but he is not a native of these parts. A tour would be most welcome.”

Lydia had heard. “That’s sounds delightful! There’s so much we could show you!”

Both men had turned toward her exclamation, and now James laughed softly. Wickham’s gaze drifted over him, a soft smile matching on his lips. “All right,” James said simply. “All right.”

Lydia, an eager hostess, donned a new bonnet courtesy of her aunt and flew out the door with Mr. Wickham on her arm. He matched her energy, his hair glinting in the sunlight that periodically fought through the clouds. Mr. Denny stayed behind to converse with Mary, who had come down the stairs at the last moment. Jane took her brother’s arm, laughing merrily as Lydia all but danced with Wickham ahead of them. Kitty came close behind them and asked, “Can you imagine having children with him? Golden bairns—ow! Lizzy!”

He had pulled her ear for her attention. “You sound like Lydia. And where did you learn that word?”

“I do read!” she huffed, throwing herself against his back with her arms around his waist. “A great deal more than Lydia.”

“That’s a relief,” he uttered. Walking was difficult like this but no one thought to change their positions.

“You’re not as strict on her today,” she voiced, muffled against his shoulder. His other hand rested atop her own on his stomach. Kitty was small and curvaceous compared to their gangly and tall
youngest sibling.

“She’s too distracted to be obnoxious,” James retorted.

“Jamie,” Jane scolded, but Kitty laughed.

“She does quite well with an occupation, I think,” she agreed.

“Lydia has a craving for esteem,” James reiterated. “Perhaps this comes from being the youngest of five, but if it translates itself in doing a job well, then all the better.”

“What about me?” Kitty asked.

James peeked at her over his shoulder. “Hm?”

She squeezed him a little tighter. “Well…Mary and I are the forgotten children, aren’t we?”

Jane exclaimed softly, “Kitty!”

“Don’t pretend like it’s not true,” she hushed, but not angrily. James was impressed by this. “Mary is content in her books and in her silence but I feel like people would not notice me if I did not cloak myself in Lydia’s energy.”

James’ thumb stroked over her hand. “Hm…Lydia’s certainly loud enough for two…who are you?”

“Lizzy!” she barked, curling her fingers into claws to tickle his ribs. He whipped around and grasped her head to plant a loud kiss on her forehead. Her hair was the same honeyed brown as his own, but in loose ringlets knotted over her shoulder. His arm encompassed her shoulders and he pulled her along so they could catch up to Lydia and Wickham.

They walked along the main thoroughfare of Meryton before reaching the edge of town where the assembly building for balls stood. The road curved in the distance into a thicket of trees. “Where does this lead?” Wickham asked James. Lydia had gone to the assembly house to ask Mr. Robinson as to when the next balls might be held.

“Into Longbourn,” James said, “and Netherfield Park. There’s a fork in the road, and the latter is to the left…”

The sound of horses drew their notice to the bend in the distance, where two distinguishable figures were trotting toward them. Jane brightened, “Do you know of Netherfield Park, sir? It was being let but is currently rented by Charles Bingley and his family.”

“Bingley,” Wickham said, but something in his tone, its quietude, turned James’ attention toward him.

The figures on horseback seemed to have recognized them as well, because the black steed ambled forth with a grinning Bingley on top of him. “Miss Jane! How are you? James and Lydia too! How lucky! We are just coming from your home; Mr. Bennet informed us you were at your aunt’s.”

Lydia had rapidly reappeared on James’ other side, and together they bowed or curtsied. “And good day to you, Lord Darcy,” Jane added lithely. “We were there but we had the pleasure of making Mr. Wickham’s acquaintance…”

Darcy did not acknowledge her pleasantries. He was looking at Wickham, and vice versa. James
glanced between them and had the uncanny experience of watching Lord Darcy change color. A brilliant red bloomed in his cheeks as if he was holding his breath against violent emotions. Wickham on the contrary, paled.

With a brusque hand, Darcy handled the reins of his horse; its snow white head turned and the last they saw of him was its storm grey croup galloping back toward Netherfield.

James watched him go with great perplexity, until he felt Lydia turning in his direction and met her unimpressed gaze. “I rest my case,” she uttered as if to finish a discussion they had been having.

Bingley did not seem to have noticed what had passed. His horse fidgeted beneath him, awaiting orders, but Charles caught James’ eye. “I apologize, these were to be given under alternative circumstances.”

Out of view on the horse’s other side, Charles extracted two separately wrapped parcels for him. James took them and not a moment later Charles apologized again and rode off after his friend.

Collectively, they decided to return to the hat shop, but not before James had unwrapped the curiously audible of the two and revealed a burlap sack of coffee beans. *I am sorry I could not provide the chocolate*, Charles had written on a note within, along with a page he presumed was supplied by the butler on how to brew it.

The party separated at the shop, Mr. Wickham stating that he ought to return to Mr. Denny and the Bennets began their walk home. Mary and Kitty were intrigued by the smell of the coffee and even liked the taste when he offered them each a roasted bean. Mr. Collins was speaking to no one in particular over his conversations with their aunt, until he reached Mrs. Bennet who was very pleased to hear his good opinions of her sister.

Jane remained in the parlor but shared a look with James as he ascended the stairs with his parcels, bidding him to be silent when Mr. Collins voiced, “Apart from her ladyship, of course, I cannot say I have met with so much attention in the whole course of my life.”

So instead he went to their room and set the coffee on the table by the window in favor of his last parcel. It was heavier and sturdy, and upon opening, he recognized the exact same volumes he had borrowed from the shelves of Netherfield. There was not a note attached to them, apart from a silk band wrapped around and within the Dickens cover, marking the place he had stopped reading.

The next day they received an invitation to dinner by their aunt herself, and the following day they rose into the Philips’ home to find Mr. Denny and Mr. Wickham already in attendance. The pair greeted Mr. Bennet first and then his wife, before resuming their acquaintances in their offspring. Wickham smiled at James and shook his hand. “You look very well tonight.”

“I’ve been learning how to brew coffee,” James admitted, “and I’ve found it has eye-opening affects.”

“Coffee?” Wickham frowned with humor. “You can stand the bitterness?”

“With a bit of steamed milk and sugar, yes.”

“Steamed milk? I’ve only ever had it with hot milk, not steamed,” Wickham stated, suddenly intrigued.

“My mother sometimes likes steamed milk for her tea,” he explained, sitting beside Wickham on the davenport couch.
“I can smell it on your breath,” Wickham said warmly, leaning close to inhale. One of his hands had come to rest on the wooden trim of the couch but slid along James’ shoulder and down the lapel of his waistcoat. “This color is nice on you. I’m only ever allowed to wear red, black, and blue now.”

The waistcoat was a modest fabric but dyed a rich green. The back was a metal grey with a belt-like fastener so it tapered with his waist. “You’re fortunate those colors suit you,” James replied, causing Wickham to chuckle.

“Thank you, I have that consolation at least.”

Their attention was stolen for some time by the conversation in the room and then a dinner of Shetland pie. Afterward they gathered in the parlour and James met Wickham’s smile as he returned to sit beside him. Wickham offered two glasses. “I was not sure which you would prefer.”

James picked the glass of white wine, knowing his aunt kept dry reds and sweet whites. Wickham had already had a taste of both and lifted his brows. “You have a sweet tooth, Mr. Bennet.”

“Do I? How would you know?”

“The sugar in your coffee,” Wickham remembered. “And now a sweet wine—wait,” he paused, eyeing James until a smile cracked on his face and he sipped his wine to hide it. “My word, James, you’re a flirt.”

James’ smile lingered, and then faded. Wickham’s legs pivoted toward him so their thighs touched. “You were not expecting me to…understand, were you?”

James’ gaze lifted. Wickham appeared patient and appealing. “For most people, there is not anything to understand.”

Wickham leaned against the back of the couch, relaxed as he said, “Only out of ignorance or a hesitancy to understand. Gentlemen in our position are more common than you might suspect.”

James was quite still. This was his first glass of the evening, but he felt warmth in his ribs. “Our position?”

George smiled kindly. “I don’t have a preference in regards towards intimacy.”

The warmth faded. “Oh.”

Wickham blinked, and sighed, “Ah…you…only enjoy the male form?”

James leaned away, rolling the edge of his glass against his bottom lip. “I suppose this makes me closed minded in the worst way.”

Wickham guffawed, catching him off guard. “So severe on yourself. I cannot condemn you for loving men when I find you very beautiful.”

James did not have a ready response, and their discourse fell silent. Wickham tried to salvage, “I suppose this is a wrong time to say I was hoping to visit you in Longbourn?”

“There is not much to see in Longbourn.”

“There is you.”

James gave him a look and Wickham had the grace to appear bashful. “You said once that
Netherfield Park is near Longbourn. How close?"

“Five kilometers or so from my family’s farm,” James provided, knowing where Wickham was
treading. James had no premeditated desire to discuss the confrontation he had witnessed between
Wickham and Darcy, but Wickham seemed intent to begin the subject himself.

“How long have the Bingleys been renting the estate?”

“Over a month,” James said, waiting until, “You said you knew Bingley.”

“Yes, well,” Wickham began, “I knew his father. His father, my own, and the former Lord Darcy
shared company.”

James hummed. “So that explains the relation. Darcy is a man of very large property in Derbyshire,
as I understand it.”

“Yes,” Wickham said with some measure of severity. “His estate there is a noble one. A clear ten
thousand per annum, aside from the lordship granted to the ancestor of the acreage. Not a house
full of historic deeds, but esteemed nonetheless. Though lacking in titles myself, I have been
connected with his family since my infancy.”

Wickham paused to analyze James’ reaction to this. “You may well be surprised, James, after
seeing the very cold manner of our meeting the other day. Are you much acquainted with Mr.
Darcy?”

James shifted on his seat. “I have spent some days in the same house as him but I cannot say I’ve
held more than perhaps one conversation of any merit with him. The overall opinion of him is that
he is disagreeable.”

“I have no right to give my opinion,” Wickham said, “as to his being agreeable or otherwise. I am
not qualified to form one; I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. It is
impossible for me to be impartial. But I believe this overall consensus of his character would
astonish circles outside of this one. It would be best to not express it quite so strongly anywhere
else. Here you are in your own family.”

James listened and frowned. “You seem more than qualified to present your opinion if you have
known the man since childhood, and this opinion is not so much my own as it is all of
Hertfordshire’s. Of humble origins we may be, but the people here are proud of the little they have,
and to be put at odds against one whose pride is the same but whose wealth far exceeds our own,
well, the scales tip for themselves. The people here are not fond of him.”

Wickham was thoughtful for a moment, allowing James to drink his wine. “Many men such as him
should not be estimated above their deserts, however with him I believe this does not often happen.
The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing
manners. He is seen only as he chooses to be seen.”

“He has admitted to being ill-tempered,” James said.

Wickham inhaled for a deep sigh and shrugged. “I wonder if he is to be in the country much
longer.”

“I’ve heard it said the whole party might take leave around January, if that is too unbearable for
you.”

“Oh! No, it is not for me to be driven away by Mr. Darcy,” Wickham exclaimed in a rush. “If he
wishes to avoid seeing me, he must go. We are not on friendly terms, and it always gives me pain to meet him, but I have no reason for avoiding him except for a most painful regret at his being what he is. His father, James, was one of the best men who ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had. I can never be in company with his son without being grieved to the soul by a thousand, even the minutest, recollections. His behavior to myself has been scandalous, but I verily believe I could forgive him anything and everything, rather than his disappointing the hopes and disgracing the memory of his father.”

James’ brows had lifted slowly throughout his speech. Wickham observed his countenance and said, “You seem dubious.”

“It is not my place to inquire further in personal affairs,” he acquiesced, “but such a platform without evidence is difficult to argue for.”

Wickham’s jaw lifted in understanding. “Well, it was long ago and my fate has been decided. I have made my peace with it so I will tell you.”

He looked across the room to where Mr. Denny was conversing with Mr. Bennet and Mr. Philips. “My friend Denny tempted me toward this corps because it is the most respectable and agreeable corps; the prospect of constant society and good society in the country finalized my decision, for I am not meant for solitude. My spirits will not bear it. This employment has been a blessing to me but a military life is not what I was intended for. The church ought to have been my profession.”

James did not conceal his surprise. “The church?”

“Oh yes,” Wickham confirmed. “I was brought up for the church, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking of just now.”

“Darcy?”

“Yes. The late Lord Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my godfather, you understand, and excessively attached to me. I cannot do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply, and thought he had done it, but when the living fell, it was given elsewhere.”

“How can that be?” James wondered. “I should think such a family could afford lawyers who know how to read a proper will.”

“Indeed,” Wickham admitted, “but such a family is also…how did Collins put it? Protective of their assets, they were. It would be only too easy to sway a lawyer to overlook certain lines in the testament.”

“And you could not seek legal redress?”

Wickham shook his head. “There was such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from the law. A man of honor could not have doubted the intention, but Darcy chose to doubt it, or to treat it as merely a recommendation. He then asserted that I had forfeited all claim to it by extravagance and imprudence. When I came of age two years ago, the living was given to another man.”

James processed this with more astonishment. The farm had always been promised to him; the prospect of it suddenly being taken from him planted a dark seed in his belly. He looked toward Mr. Collins who was speaking with Mrs. Philips in a renewed light.
“Public humiliation for his deeds seems a mild punishment at best,” he voiced.

Wickham shrugged. “Some time or other, he will be, but it shall not be by me. I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may perhaps have sometimes spoken my opinion of him, and to him, too freely. I can recall nothing worse for his temper to be directed at me, but the fact is that we are very different sort of men, and he that he hates me.”

After a pause, James said, “This is the only motive he could have for such cruelty?”

Wickham finished drinking his wine and offered, “A thorough, determined dislike of me—a dislike which I cannot but attribute to jealousy. Had the late Lord Darcy liked me less, or had not ordained to neglect his son more, Darcy and I might have been on very different terms. Sadly I believe this jealousy was sowed early in his life and he had not the temper to bear the sort of competition in which we stood.”

James set his wine aside, no longer caring for the taste. “I must admit, I had not thought of Mr. Darcy so bad as this. I had supposed him to be unnecessarily despising of his fellow creatures due to a preference for ignorance, but never did I think he would descend to malicious revenge or injustice.”

“You intelligently spoke of pride, earlier,” Wickham nodded. “I believe almost all his actions can be traced back to his pride, the pride his father crafted in him. This esteem has led him to in fact be incredibly generous to all but myself. The irony of his taking away my living has been his ample charity to his tenants, the poor, and in all regards he is quite liberal with his money. But we are none of us consistent, as is evident by his behavior to me. It may also be attributed to how his pride is rooted in his family that makes me so easily severed from his affections. Much like his love for his father, he is well known as a devoted brother.”

“What sort of a girl is Miss Darcy?” James could not help but ask. For all the talk he had since heard of her, he wanted more information about this legendary character.

But Wickham only shook his head as if in great sadness. “I wish I could call her amiable, but she is too much like her brother. Very, very proud. As a child, she was affectionate and pleasing, and likewise extremely fond of me. I devoted hours and hours to her amusement, but she is nothing to me now. I’ll grant, she is a handsome girl of fifteen or sixteen now, and no doubt highly accomplished—”

James lost interest almost immediately. When Wickham noticed, he apologized for entering such a bitter subject, but James’ ruminations reopened the matter. “What of Bingley? With such good humour and who is truly amiable, how does he keep such a close friendship with Darcy? You said you know Charles?”

Wickham stared at him for a moment and then looked dejected again. “I’m afraid I knew the father more than the son. He is good, you say?”

James confirmed, “He is incredibly sweet-tempered and charming in comparison to the picture you have painted of Darcy. It’s as if he does not even know the man in his own house.”

Wickham agreed, “It is possible. A gentle character can sometimes come at the risk of observation or sense. Darcy is also trained in the ability to please where it is useful to him.”

James frowned once more. “On the contrary, Darcy seems perfectly comfortable not pleasing when it is an inconvenience to him.”
Wickham rose from the couch with a hand on James’ knee for leverage. “You would certainly know the man better than I. For all the years he and I spent with the same toys and the same education, I hardly know the man. And his aunt de Bourgh, being as fond as she is of him, has made it certain that I have little to no engagement with the family forever more.”

James froze, his hand catching Wickham’s wrist. “De Bourgh?”

Wickham gazed down at him. “Yes, Lady Catherine de Bourgh was sister to the late Lady Anne Darcy. Mr. Collins’ patroness is Darcy’s aunt. Collins has not told you?”

“I do not ask further into Mr. Collins’ life than I have to,” James blurted.

The smile returned to Wickham’s face as he said, “Well Darcy was born into wealth and will be granted immense power before long. Her daughter, Miss de Bourgh is of course the heiress to a great fortune and all of her parents’ connections. A union of matrimony will unite the two families; at least, it was spoken of while I was a child and spared from adult evils.”

James had much to process. An arranged marriage slowed the cogs of his mind and he could not help but say, “I have heard that she is sickly.”

“In health only,” Wickham said as he slowly began to depart. “She takes after her mother: headstrong, conceited, and greatly arrogant. Birds of a feather, that family.”
Demonstration

Chapter Summary

The Netherfield Ball-

Chapter Notes

Finallyyyyyy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James lay in bed, the cat on his chest while he pondered all he had heard. He had felt inclined to toss Wickham’s accusations aside until he had mentioned the Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mr. Collins had not been silent regarding her throughout the evening but James had the suspicion he was ignorant of the lady’s nephew. Wickham had procured that information himself, and with such ease as to give it credence.

“What is it?”

The cat’s paw flexed on his collarbone as if to keep him from startling and disturbing her rest. Instead, James looked at Jane with surprise. She smiled softly and extended a finger to wiggle between the cat’s ears. “She purrs so loudly when you’re awake, as if she’s trying to be heard over your thoughts.”

As if in confirmation, each exhalation yielded loud dry rumbles, only broken by a sharp yawn. Her jaws spread so far she rolled onto her side, whiskers tickling James’ neck. Jane chortled quietly.

“Darcy is Lady de Bourgh’s nephew,” he said.

“Oh?” her tawny brows lifted.

“Wickham grew up with him.”

“Based on their confrontation, the years did not reap fondness?”

He hesitated. “No.”

Jane rolled onto her stomach, holding the pillow to her chest for leverage. “Did Wickham tell you all this last night?”

James’ brow furrowed, but a look to the window revealed dawn lightening the sky. “Yes.”

“Why does another family’s disputes trouble you?”

“Because Charles and Darcy have remained close, and Charles is too transparent to cause discord.”

“Excuse you,” Jane scolded. “I may become the lady of his household.”
“Indeed,” James seconded, “which means you may have to witness these matters firsthand. The Darcys and de Bourghs are not Bingleys, but their proximity may erase such distinctions. I don’t want you caught within their divisions.”

She was quiet for a time before she asked, “Was Wickham’s departure from Lord Darcy so severe?”

James relayed what had crossed between Mr. Wickham and himself. Jane listened patiently, with astonishment and concern. When he had finished, it was not in her nature to question anyone who revealed even a drop of good intention. This resulted in her speaking for all parties, insisting, “They have both been deceived, I think. We can form no idea on how, exactly. Interested people have perhaps misrepresented each to the other. It is impossible for us to conjecture the causes or circumstances which may have alienated them.”

James listened and voiced, “I do remember his saying at Netherfield of the implacability of his resentments. An unforgiving temper would yield a dreadful disposition.”

“You can’t take that as his attestation,” Jane defended. “Consider this from Mr. Darcy’s side, to be treating his father’s favorite in such a manner—and one whom his father had promised to provide for. It is impossible. No man of common humanity, especially on who has such value for his character, could be capable of it.”

“Well do exonerate everyone, will you?” James retorted. “I’ll have no one to despise otherwise.”

She gave him a look. “His most intimate friends cannot be so deceived of him, can they? I admit Charles’ kindness can make him ignorant but his sisters not so.”

James huffed, the feline rising on his chest. “I am more inclined to think the sisters see Darcy as a rare beast for capture than Wickham is able to craft such an intricate lie. Such facts and names were given with ease, but let Darcy contradict them if he can.”

“You’re not going to confront him about this, are you?” Jane startled. “Lizzy, please, just leave this alone. Wickham will go wherever the king bids and Darcy or his enemies need never enter our lives again. I certainly shan’t ask any Bingley for their knowledge about it.”

When they might see a Bingley again was unknown until later that very morning. James heard the commotion downstairs from his place within the cat’s fur. Lifting his head from the soft fur, he recognized Charles’ voice bidding the family good morning. “Oh! But where is the young Mr. Bennet?”

“The oaf is lazing upstairs!” Lydia chimed.

“Hush,” Jane’s soft voice defended. “Forgive him, he hardly slept last night.”

“My word, doing what?” came Caroline’s voice. James lowered his head back down. He let his consciousness fade back to slumber, until he knew by the sudden volume of his sisters that Charles had finally made the arrangements for his ball.

When he heard the Bingleys depart, he descended the stairs to find his family fluttering at the dining table, apart from Mary, Mr. Bennet, and Mr. Collins, who appeared tranquil in comparison. Lydia was singing the melody of her favorite dance before she looked upon Collins.

“Do you dance, Mr. Collins?”

He perked up pleasantly. “I am by no means of opinion, I assure you, that a ball of this kind can
have an evil tendency. I am so far from objecting to dancing that I shall hope to be honoured with the hands of all my fair cousins in the course of the evening. I dread neither a rebuke from the Archbishop or Lady Catherine, and I take this opportunity to ask one of my cousins of soliciting the first two dances of the evening.”

“First two?” Lydia huffed.

“Are you volunteering, darling?” Mr. Bennet smiled to himself from behind his London newspaper. Lydia gaped like a horrified fish until Mary diverted their attention.

“While I can have my mornings to myself, I think it no sacrifice to join occasionally in evening engagements. Society has claims on us all, and I profess myself one of those who consider intervals of recreation and amusement as desirable for everybody.”

Lydia was truly lost for speech. Mr. Bennet chuckled and patted her hand. “I am sure the young men will await your hand patiently for a dance.”

As for James, he listened to Lydia distracting herself by talking to no one in particular about which members of the regiments were going to the ball. When Mr. Collins left she hissed how she had anticipated giving those dances to Mr. Wickham or a few other names lost on James’ ear.

“Lydia,” their mother scolded. “Just last night I heard Mr. Collins compliment you on your wit and vivacity. And what a thought: to be the mistress of Hunsford Parsonage, right across from Rosings Park!”

The roses in Lydia’s cheeks wilted and James coughed over his large cup of tea. The threat of Mr. Collins’ finding a wife was suddenly a very real terror in Lydia’s eyes, while Mary was contemplatively silent beside her.

It was an even greater dread that it rained all but constantly until the night of the Netherfield ball, limiting the youngest Bennets’ visits to Meryton. Not that James minded; he occupied himself in the kitchen with the windows open, listening to the rain while wax and oils simmered on the stove. His father helped him cast the larger candles while Jane quite liked staining paper for labels or wrappings; overall decorating the candles for their intended recipients.

When the evening of the ball arrived, the Bennet household was all but turned upside-down. Ribbons and petticoat skirts hung from doorways while lost mates of shoes were kicked aside in the corridors.

“Mama! My blue one! Where’s my blue one?” Lydia called through the walls.

James and Jane frowned at one another and then at the robin’s egg dress she had somehow left in their room. “Don’t tell her,” James brightened.

Jane guffawed. “You’re cruel.”

“It’s the fool’s fault she left it here. Are you ready?”

She sat at the vanity table for him to stand behind her and do her hair. Baby’s breath and forget-me-not flowers waited on the surface for him to braid delicately into her hair. He had already combed his hair and was dressed in his grey trousers and waistcoat though his shirt had yet to be tucked in. He could hear through the wall that Lydia settled on her green dress instead and was eagerly imagining what Mr. Wickham would be wearing.

“The winter dress attire or the summer?” she asked Kitty loudly. “Oh, I do hope it’s the winter!”
“Speaking of,” Mr. Bennet was heard, “It will be a cold evening. Bring your coats.”

“Kitty, could you find my shawl—”

“Coat, Lydia,” her father reiterated. “Surely you can bear to be seen in it for the moment it takes to get out of the carriage and reach the cloak room.”

“But papa—”

James interrupted, “If I have to take care of you because you couldn’t be bothered to wear proper garments, I’ll make you drink three pots of vinegar.”

The house was silent. Then they saw a coat angrily land on the banister outside of their door, ready to be taken downstairs.

Dinner was a rushed affair, the daughters eager to taste the sort of hors d'oeuvres a cook such as the Bingleys could afford would make. By the time they piled into their carriage and entered the queue of guests and regimental horse riders, James was just as eager as Lydia to see Wickham, simply for the reason that it meant getting out of the carriage.

“Oh, there’s the Colonel! And—” Lydia was pointing out of the window.

“Do you see Wickham?” Kitty asked.

“Not yet! He must already be inside!”

James, of course, had not shared with her how one of their hosts might allow all of the regiments in, apart from one. Thinking upon it now, he realized he was quite eager to see Wickham for his own personal reasons. He swallowed thickly in the stuffy carriage and waited patiently for them to rock to a final stop.

“Goodness,” Mrs. Bennet sighed, her fan waving energetically despite the descent of late autumn around them. “Go on girls, up you get. We mustn’t keep Netherfield waiting.”

Lydia flew up the stairs with Kitty in tow. Mr. Collins had ridden with Mr. Hill on the box seat, and was now busy admiring various persons he thought he recognized from Lady de Bourgh’s card table. No one paid him much attention.

“Jane, dear,” their mother tried to usher ahead. “Why don’t you greet him with your father?”

“I’ll stay behind, mama,” she refused kindly. This obviously displeased their mother but they were already within the entrance of Netherfield, and Charles stood beside his sisters to welcome their guests. His eyes brightened upon seeing them.

“Mr. Bennet! I’m so pleased you could make it! How are you, Miss Lydia and Katherine?”

They curtsied in unison before Lydia spoke for the both of them. “We’re absolutely breathless at the decorations! The music within sounds divine already. I’m so pleased you kept your word for a ball, Mr. Bingley!”

“A person is nothing without their word,” he smiled kindly, and then turned, “Wouldn’t you agree, William?”

The family turned to see Lord Darcy coming down the grand staircase to meet them. “I do,” he said simply.
Lydia leered slightly and reclaimed Bingley's focus. "I am so glad you invited the regiments! I am so eager to be reacquainted with Colonel Forrester, Mr. Wickham, and of course, Mr. Denny," she said, considering herself clever.

None of the Bingleys gave any reaction to the names she offered apart from Charles. "We’ve just met Mr. Denny," he chimed. "Your aunt and uncle Philips arrived with him not moments prior."

James let his eyes slide to Darcy on the step, his added elevation allowing him to examine the heads coming through the doors, those craned to see the high ceilings of Netherfield house, as well as ogling him and the Bingleys in turn.

"All right," Mr. Bennet ushered gently. Lydia, Kitty, and Mary went ahead through to the other rooms. Mr. Bennet stayed long enough to keep Mr. Collins’s introduction brief, along with Mrs. Bennet’s. This left Jane and James to finish.

Charles took her hand and kissed its back. "You are a vision, Miss Bennet."

Pink roses blossomed in Jane’s cheeks as Caroline said, “You’ve dressed with more than usual care, Mr. Bennet.”

Charles tore his gaze from Jane to see James’ cool grey trousers under his newer buttoned, black coat. It was thin and weak against the approaching winter, but for a formal engagement, it tapered to his waste and accentuated his figure very well. James chose to keep his tongue dull at this moment and remained silent. Charles smiled and reached for his hand. “Jamie, you look well—”

James did not take his hand, causing them to look down at the canvas sack he was offering, along with a medium sized wooden crate. “It’s rather late in the season,” he apologized, “but for the insects.”

Charles opened the bag to see the tall column of a cedar candle. Then in the crate, were much smaller candles of coffee, cinnamon, wine, lavender, and earl grey. Charles picked one up at random to smell, his features flattening with awe. “You made these for us? Jamie, you needn’t have—”

He shook his head. “It was the least I could do. Opening one’s home to strangers is no small thing, no matter how large the vessel is. I hope wherever you settle, these might help the transition.”

Charles was truly expressionless at this. Caroline frowned as her eyes wandered over the personal candles. She picked up the one smelling faintly of sweet rosé. “There is one for each of us?”

“Jane, you decorated these, surely?” Mrs. Hurst diverted with her own awe. “Your calligraphy is marvelous—”

Charles broke through his sisters on either side of him and pulled James close in embrace. The air startled out of James’ chest upon the abrupt contact, his arms opening to move the crate aside, leaving them chest to chest. James’ eyes softened, his lashes heavily fluttering over his eyes. The sensation of Charles against him was…more than pleasant.

“Charles, this is quite inappropriate,” Caroline reminded quietly.

James felt Charles’ fist clench the back of his coat before he unwillingly released him. “Shall we light the big one, then? Tis not the season for mosquitos but the flies stubbornly abound.”

And so a footman took the gifts and the Bennet siblings moved on. They found their sisters in the room with the food, decoratively piled on silver tiers. Lydia and Kitty were eagerly pestering their
aunt and Mr. Denny, the latter of whom was looking and sounding apologetic upon the eldest siblings’ arrival.

“Oh!” Lydia exclaimed haughtily. “But he must be here! He wouldn’t dare miss such an occasion!”

“I am sorry, my dear,” Mr. Denny said with great sadness. “I do not imagine his business would have called him away just now if he had not wished to avoid a certain gentleman here.”

Mr. Denny stopped quickly with a glance around them. This part of his intelligence, though ignored by Lydia, was caught by James. It had previously been a source of reprieve or humour, waiting to meet Mr. Wickham here, but now the emptiness of his absence left James realizing how desperately he had wanted to see him. After the warmth Charles had left on his coat front, James had been looking forward to Wickham’s conversation, his wit, as well as his open understanding. Against his better judgment, James felt a keen sharpening of understanding regarding the displeasure shared amongst his younger sisters towards Mr. Darcy.

It was a strange surprise when the man himself, the Bingleys, and the Hursts joined the rest of the party, having quickly finished greeting the rest of their guests. It was an even better surprise that Charlotte Lucas was with them, having arrived last. She and James greeted each other immediately, the latter drawing her away to the cloak room.

“Goodness, you haven’t tired of company already?” she teased, handing her satin, wool-lined cloak to the footman. “This is quick, even for you.”

They exchanged jaded expressions with one another as he also transferred his coat. As they left the room, he said tersely. “Wickham is not here.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?”

He quickly informed her of everything that had transpired between himself and Wickham, including the past Wickham had shared.

Charlotte listened with great patience and receptivity. “I understand your liking and unease, but really, I’m surprised at you. Your sisters could each experience the same event and then retell the account in vastly different detail. To so quickly despise Lord Darcy seems a bit illogical.”

“You sound like Jane,” he grumbled.

“I should hope so,” Charlotte said with lifted brows. “She is the keenest Bennet apart from you and your father. That is immensely flattering, thank you.”

He could not help but laugh, and she shared in his mirth. Her gloved hand touched his cheek. “Really, Lizzy, you were not formed for ill humour; I miss the days when anger and sorrow did not dwell long in your spirits—”

“Charming moldings,” Mr. Collins interrupted. His head was craned toward the domed ceiling. “Marvelous frescoes. Not as many as Lady Catherine would deem appropriate but a charming country estate, nonetheless.”

He continued on his way, possibly not even noticing to whom he had spoken. “Who was that?” Charlotte wondered.

“That,” James said bluntly, “is my cousin. Mr. Collins.”

“Oh,” she acknowledged.
“Mm,” he returned, watching the man interact more with the Bingleys' furniture than people until the first dance was announced, which he clearly intended to follow through with Lydia.

“When did he arrive?” Charlotte asked as they moved to the ballroom and watched Lydia remarkably handle Mr. Collins’ missteps. It was likely due to Kitty and her partner beside them that Lydia did not erupt then and there.

“A year ago? A month? It’s hard to say now.”

“What is his given name?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You’re certainly a harvest of information,” she retorted.

“I can tell you about Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her parsonage,” he returned, which made her frown before he related the oddities of his cousin to her.

“Mr. Darcy’s aunt?” she brightened with interest. “Well they ought to know one another shouldn’t they?”

“They don’t,” he corrected, “And I daresay I wouldn’t wish that experience on Darcy.”

“What experience?”

They both turned toward the unmistakable voice. “Lord Darcy,” Charlotte curtsied, and James bowed as much as the closeness of people allowed. “We were just watching the dance. James’ sisters and cousin are in it.”

Darcy nodded distantly, his gaze vaguely crossing over the dancers. “It is finishing.”

Indeed it was, as announced by the seething arrival of Lydia beside James. “I demand salvation,” she all but hissed. “How fortunate, you’re with a cleric,” he said pleasantly.

“He thinks I am to dance with him twice!”

“I remember, that is what was promised,” he nodded.

“Lizzy!” she hissed desperately.

“What am I to do?”

“I don’t know! Dance with him yourself!”

“I think that might put mama in an early grave,” he declined. “I have already done my part in greying her hair.”

“Please, Lizzy!” she pleaded, as Mr. Collins joined them.

“I have not decided if the music is avant garde or misplaced. I should think I would have heard the melodies of high fashion but I do understand that one’s preference limits one’s awareness in these matters.”

“It is quite all right, Mr. Collins,” Lydia proclaimed. “An unknown melody can misplace one’s
steps a great deal. It’s the unfamiliarity, you know.”

“I do,” he nodded. “I have been credited many a time for my lightness of step and quickness of foot.”

“I can’t imagine where,” Lydia said bluntly, and then her tone changed. James eyed her narrowly even before she had reached her point. “Mr. Collins, I am afraid I’ll need to gracefully decline our next dance. That is, unless I have a proper demonstration. You know, Jamie is also known to be good on his feet.”

She cast her charming smile on her brother, whose silence held the weight of sororicide. Mr. Collins was considering. “It would be quite unprecedented for two men to partner for the dance, however I suppose this would not be a coupling, so much as a teaching and demonstration. Indeed.”

James had the horror of his cousin’s gaze landing on him. “Cousin, would you do me the kindness of teaching me the dance?”

James was suddenly jealous of water and its ability to evaporate. “I do not think this the right place and time—”

“It is absolutely the right place and time,” Lydia interrupted sharply, her charm fading. “Mama is with Lady Lucas in the other room along with most of the officers. The start of the ball is the best time for a demonstration, before the guests eat and drink their fill and come to the ballroom.”

Do this while there are so few eyes, so I needn’t be seen in your stead! she glared silently. They stared venom at each other.

“The lesson shan’t last four minutes,” Charlotte said beside him. James looked every bit betrayed.

James found himself in the line of dancers, facing Mr. Collins. The only comfort was that it was a group dance in which a leader and a follower were not determined, and Jane and Charles stood beside him. They peeked at him and he explained tersely, “He asked for a demonstration.”

They nodded their mutual understanding as well as silent apologies.

Watching Collins dance had been a sorry affair. Being the partner to it was something else entirely. It was a dance of mortification.

Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, often moved wrongly without being aware of it, despite the very obvious examples all around him. He bumped into Charles and very nearly stepped on his feet. When it came time to walk around each other in a counter-clockwise circle, he insisted on doing the opposite. When the dancers held hands to form a circle, Collins was meant to stand opposite James; instead he crossed in front of Jane, thinking he was meant to hold the hand of his partner, not the people next to him. While some might think this romantic, it disoriented everyone involved.

He returned to Charlotte’s side with the same absent-mindedness that had taken him to the dance to begin with. His jaw hung open since Mr. Collins first rejected one of his corrections, and he had never quite closed it. “Dear Lizzy,” Charlotte giggled warily. “You look as if you’ve just returned from war.”

He inhaled as if his lungs had been empty for the entirety of the dance. “I wonder if this is how it feels.”
She laughed fully and pulled him into the next dance. The familiarity of Charlotte rejuvenated James’ spirits, who then danced with a local officer’s sister alongside her brother and Kitty. They seemed as close as he and Jane, lending to merry and pleasant conversation between the four of them before he danced with the Longs’ daughter beside Jane and Charles once more, with Charlotte nearby. Afterward, the four of them went to the wine display with laughter in their throats. James finished a glass of water before starting his second helping of wine. He turned, intending to ask Charlotte for another dance—

“Mr. Bennet.” Lord Darcy stood behind him instead. “Would you join me in the parlour adjacent to the library during the next dance?”

“Alright.”

Darcy nodded slightly and left.

It was a long moment before James processed what had occurred. Charlotte stood beside him, patiently waiting. Slowly, he looked at her. She nodded. He shook his head in immense disbelief, “What? Why?”

Charlotte, greatly amused, shook her head in turn. “I cannot say. I daresay you may find him very agreeable. Go, the musicians are almost ready. But Lizzy—”

She caught his sleeve, “I caution you to guard your tongue. Darcy may be the only lord here but this does not change his station. Do not let your fancy for Wickham mark your behavior as unpleasant in Darcy’s eye, a man whose consequence is ten times that of Wickham.”

This left Jamie without words, so he made no answer as she gave him a little push. James was now aware of how his raiment stuck to him after his exertions. He made his way to the breakfast parlour, knowing it was next to the library, but when he arrived guests were visiting the pudding table, whereas Darcy was nowhere to be seen.

Crossing through to the library, a footman gave him a look, and James knew why as he entered the dark and empty library. James supposed it was his previous occupancy in this house that allowed him to pass. As he traversed the library, James peered out of the windows at the veranda, and he knew the lack of light shining through other windows meant he had entered the side of the house restricted to guests.

Apart from the doors to the terrace and breakfast parlour, there was only one other door in the library. James’ hand lingered on the knob. Should he knock? He was invited, but it may not be the correct room…

He knocked lightly, opening the door on silent hinges. Darcy stood in the center of an unfurnished room, beneath the bluish shards of moonlight striking the floor from windows set within the ceiling. Dying leaves had sporadically fallen over the glass, leaving kaleidoscopic shadows.

James shut the door behind him, and Darcy turned to him, but they stood for some time without speaking a word. James could hear the music faintly through the walls, and began to wonder exactly how long Darcy intended to keep him here. Having been invited, he considered not breaking the silence, but then impatiently fancied a sort of punishment in making the man speak.

“You asked me here, my lord?”

“Yes,” Darcy replied. Then silence.

“Why?” James drawled slowly. Charlotte might have fainted at the slight.
Darcy, however, gave no indication of insult. Or it was his request in which James' punishment awaited: “I would appreciate your hand in this dance.”

Breath wavered in James throat as if he had not heard him. “Pardon?” he blurted.

“A demonstration, as it was called,” Darcy reiterated.

James blinked, analyzing. “You want me to dance with you? This dance is specifically for a man and a woman.”

“A leader and a follower, yes.”

James understood, now, Darcy’s reasons for bringing him here. “I suppose you’re not asking me to teach you how to follow. But you’ve danced before.”

“I have, although…” Darcy wavered, “it does not bring me the sense of ease with which your feet seem to move.”

James relaxed somewhat. “You mean your dance teachers could not find a method to help you keep to a tempo?”

Darcy’s eyes did not move from him. “More like I outgrew their teachings quicker than they could manage.”

James inclined his chin, understanding. It was not abnormal for young Meryton boys to suddenly outgrow their trousers and leave their boyish grace behind. “What would you have me do?”

“Can you follow?”

“I have four headstrong sisters, of course I can follow.”

It was a testament to either Darcy’s patience or his determination that he simply gestured for James to stand opposite him. Darcy bowed at the hips, inducing James to as well. The dance was well underway in the main ballroom but the tempo was repetitive, allowing them to listen and wait for the moment the step sequence restarted—

The immediacy of their steps falling into place was lost in the wake of Darcy’s lack of gloves. The way he moved with James was easy, reminding him of Charlotte but the bare skin holding his hand was far from her satin. They stepped toward one another, Darcy taking James’ hand as they turned to walk through the rows of dancers who were not there. The shadows of the windowpanes above served as their markers, parting ways to walk around invisible dancers like the curves of cloverleaves. Resuming their place in the line, they stepped toward one another, and stepped back, the dance bringing them together and then pulling them away.

“This is usually when you engage your partner in conversation,” James reminded the next they came together.

“Is it,” Darcy said, not so much as a question but a reply.

James frowned slightly as they moved down the line. “Do the sisters not speak to you when you dance with them?”

“They speak. I listen,” he answered, striding through the clover curve. James could not help but laugh. Caroline’s courting seemed to be as effective as a fly bouncing off a horse’s flank. Darcy’s eyes were on him. “Are you laughing at me?”
“Not you, no.”

“What then?”

Darcy took his hand, and they walked. “No no, if you’re here to practice, it is your turn to remark on something trivial, such as the size of the room, or the number of couples.”

Darcy’s lips curved with a glance at the lack thereof around them. “I hadn’t considered—do you talk by rule then, while you are dancing?”

“Sometimes. It would look odd to be entirely silent, yet for the advantage of some, conversation may be arranged as such they may have the convenience of saying as little as possible.”

“Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that your are gratifying mine?”

“I am not the one disgusted by dancing with a man, my lord,” James declared quietly.

Darcy went silent, but James could feel his gaze on him all the while. Finally, “You were listening, then. At the Meryton ball.”

“I am capable of observing how private balls are pleasanter than public ones. As gatekeeper, you may limit the options and choose more specifically who to bother dancing with.”

“Your tone suggests this is a trait not to be desired,” Darcy intuited.

“That is not for me to say,” James countered. “I cannot ignore a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We share an unsocial, taciturn disposition.”

“You mean to insult me, James,” Darcy said, taking him by surprise. They faced each other across the line. “We do not share this disposition at all. I have only seen amiable qualities as to be desired in social environments.”

James was not sure how to respond, much less was he sure if Darcy had just given him a compliment. He made no answer, and they were again silent until James realized they had danced through silence and another song had started in the distance. James’ step halted, his hand having lifted to take Darcy’s hand once more—

“Do you and your sisters often walk to Meryton?” Darcy inquired, pulling him into the next dance. This music was slower. Darcy’s palm rested against James’ as they revolved around one another.

“Yes,” he admitted. “well…we are close to our mother’s sister.”

“Mm,” Darcy acknowledged, and whether this was his final response or not was negated by James’ step faltering. Darcy looked him over with vacant inquiry.

“I don’t know these steps,” he admitted reluctantly.

“It is a variation of the waltz,” Darcy explained.

“Oh,” James scoffed. “I’ve never danced the waltz.”

“Why not?”

James peered at him. “We country folk prefer something a bit more lively. A ball for us is a large affair. The waltz is…”
“Intimate,” Darcy finished.

“There’s a word for it—what are you doing?”

“Teaching you,” Darcy said as he helped James stand erect with a hand on his waist, pulling him forward. “It is an equal exchange, is it not?”

James was inclined to think not. Darcy moved with the skill of a well-taught pupil. The only area he lacked prowess in was conversation.

“What—?”

“We waltz down the line, and then part similar to before,” Darcy narrated. “Right foot back.”

“If a woman ever asks me to waltz, I will lose my dignity as a partner,” James muttered, watching Darcy’s feet.

Darcy chuckled, snapping James’ gaze back up. “It is easier than you think,” he assured, and pulled James along. Just as before, once they were down the line, Darcy released him and they mirrored each other’s curved paths. They stepped together, palms touching as they joined in the parting touch, and stepped back; seemingly for the other couples to waltz past. When they rejoined Darcy instructed, “Put your hand on my shoulder.”

James lifted a brow at that. He had a wonderful view of the man’s cravat. White silk—

His spine shot erect as fingertips slid up his spine. “Do not slouch,” Darcy explained. “If the idea is to converse with your partner, you must look at them.”

“What were we even speaking of?” James all but growled.

“Your aunt,” Darcy said rather pleasantly.

James paused, his thoughts coming full circle before he ventured, “Yes, when you met us the other day, we had visited her and had just been forming a new acquaintance.”

The effect was immediate. A deeper shade of hauteur overspread his features. “Do not speak of him.”

Their dance slowed. “You truly hate him so much?”

“Yes,” Darcy surprised him. “If love and hate rest within the same chamber of the heart, he has marked his place in mine.” They stood stagnantly in the light, Darcy stiff around him.

“Love?” James echoed with disdain. “Then he has been so unlucky as to lose your friendship, and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life.”

Darcy’s features were hard, but moonlight cut through his irises, making his eyes appear both cold and soft, sunken within his face. “Wickham is blessed with the happy manners that ensure his making friends. Whether he may be capable of retaining them is less certain... Has he so captured your loyalties?”

Yes James was ready to say, but...something...in his tone made James falter. “He has my sympathies,” he revised.

Darcy’s lips parted, a furrow between his brows. “Then he has told you very little.”
Air stopped in James’ throat. “What?”

Darcy was close. He spoke softly. “As one who values the study of people, I would think prejudice beneath you.”

James blinked, unable to navigate where this was going. “I remember you saying you hardly ever forgave; that your resentment, once created, was unappeasable… I imagine this makes you very cautious in its creation.”

“It does,” he affirmed gently.

“Then it is incumbent for those of stubborn opinion to secure a proper judgment at first.”

“To what purpose?”

James’ jaw angled upward to meet him. “To illustrate your character…my lord.”

“You may forgo my title. You forget it often enough anyway. Am I so difficult to read?”

James’ features stiffened, but not out of anger. “I am trying to make it out.”

“And what is your success?”

He swallowed thickly, gently shaking his head and looking away. “I do not get on at all. I hear such different accounts of you, which puzzle me exceedingly…”

The hand holding his let go in exchange for Darcy’s fingers to run along his jaw, gently bringing their gazes back together. “Then allow me to make the correction: I was not disgusted by the prospect of dancing with a man…nor in the execution of it.”

James’s eyelashes were heavy over his eyes. He realized too late that he was staring at Darcy’s mouth. His waist was sensitive to Darcy’s hand there, as well as the slight pressure pulling them flush together. Darcy’s lips were soft and full, and James’ eyes were closed before he could help it.

Darcy’s mouth was as soft to the touch as to the eye, but not as soft as the pressure with which he applied. Light and fleeting was the kiss upon his lips, and tremulous was the breath between them when he parted.

The hand left his waist.

James could no longer feel Darcy’s breath on his mouth.

A heel clipped on the floor, opening James’ eyes.

The last he saw of Darcy was his back as he shut the door behind him. James was assaulted by two unavoidable thoughts: how desperately he had awaited a second kiss, and how swiftly Darcy had removed himself from the room.

James took several moments to recover himself before he rejoined Jane. However, upon viewing her, he saw a woman very happily settled. Standing with Charles and others, though the others were there for him they laughed with her and engaged her in eager conversation. Charles’ hand occasionally touched her waist or her hand, moments of agreement and affection. She was the lady of Netherfield in all but name.

James removed himself before meeting her, determined not to venture near her lest he shatter the moment, and future.
Charlotte was nearby, so he joined her. She brightened at the sight of him and tilted her head. He knew the words resting on her tongue but shook his head sharply, denying her inquiries as to his recent dance partner. Charlotte frowned with worry, but accepted his wishes, which was fortunate since James realized Darcy had not gone far. The man’s gaze was on Charles, clearly observing him but refraining from joining his intimate party. This, however, put him right in place to hear Charlotte’s father, Sir William Lucas, address James.

“Hello, Jamie,” he said a bit loudly, and far from sober. “Viewing the local rituals?” he said with a blatant look at Jane and Charles. He lifted his walking stick to gesture about the room, “Lovely venue it will be, certainly...for a certain desirable event. What congratulations will flow in! Ah, but let me not disturb ye young people.”

On any other occasion, James would not have minded Sir William’s banter, but as soon as his red face passed by, Darcy’s stern and shocked one was in view. He met James’ eyes for such a moment as might have been accidental, so sharply did he cut his gaze to Charles as if he was just now understanding what was happening between them.

It was a strange and wholly unwelcome distraction in the arrival of Mr. Collins, who disclosed, “I have just found out, by singular accident, that there is now in the room a near relation of my patroness. I happened to overhear the gentleman himself mentioning to the young lady who does the honours of this house the names of his cousin Miss de Bourgh, and her mother Lady Catherine. How wonderfully these sort of things occur! Who would have thought of my meeting with a nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in this assembly! I am most thankful that the discover is made in time for me to pay my respects to him, which I am now going to do, and trust he will excuse my not having done it before. My total ignorance of the connection must plead my apology.”

“You are not going to introduce yourself to Lord Darcy,” James said, both demanding and beseeching.

“Indeed I am,” Mr. Collins nodded. “I shall entreat his pardon for not having done it earlier. I believe him to be Lady Catherine’s nephew, cousin! It will be in my power to assure him that her ladyship was quite well yesterday se’nnight.”

“Your ignorance is finely placed,” James hissed darkly. “You addressing him without introduction will be considered an impertinent freedom. Forgo whatever compliments to his aunt.”

“Mr. Bennet,” Collins said, in what he thought was an assertive tone, “cousins though we are, I am of a clerical office, and I consider such offices to be as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom—”

Both Charlotte and James were the epitome of blunt and unflattering surprise. Collins said a great deal more regarding clergy-this or humility-that but it was lost on James until he finished with the insult, “Pardon me for neglecting your advice, though in the case before us I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young farmer like yourself.”

He watched in horror as the man so unfortunately tied to his family approached the most prominent member of the assembly. It was a small consolation to see the absolute shock and perplexity on Darcy’s features.

“Did he just equate himself with the king of England?” Charlotte said with a good deal of dark humour and awe.

“As well as the stupidest gutter rat,” James rephrased. He turned to leave her. “I’ve lost my
patience with this place.”

“Jamie!”

James turned to find Charles too near to escape. “Were you going outside? That sounds lovely. It has gotten quite stuffy in here.”

“No, I…I was leaving.”

Charles stared at him. “Leaving? Is the ball really so terrible?”

“Of course not,” Charlotte salvaged with a look to James. “Jamie isn’t feeling well.”

“Is the heat too much?” Charles wondered eagerly. “Come, we must go outside.”

Charles grasped two glasses of wine on their way out, and thus James was swept to the veranda, the evening appearing far from over. “I have missed you,” Charles said, looking out over the stretch of grass, gardens, and lake, made blue by the night. “We’ve barely spoken tonight. I feel as if I’ve barely seen you in weeks.”

He handed a glass to James, who simply set it down for a maid to find later. Charles’ lips on his own paused, and lifted. He joined James where he leaned against the balcony. “What is the matter?”

He sighed, “A growing number of things.”

“That sounds dreadful,” he uttered, deadpan.

“Indeed,” James could not help but huff a laugh.

Charles’ knee bumped his thigh. “Is there anything I can do?”

“No,” James answered easily, refusing his gaze.

“Jamie,” Charles scolded mildly. “This is not how friendship works.”

“I’m not convinced you can claim much on the matter—” James accused, but Charles’ lips cut them short. James was washed within the familiar scent that was Charles, along with the added salt of perspiration and taste of wine. Like an ember falling into James’ chest, a sudden, hot anger infused him. As if sensing this, Charles pulled back slightly, silently asking why James was not returning his kiss.

“You should have kissed me earlier,” James almost whispered. Charles thought this an allowance to kiss him again, but James’ hand on his chest stopped him. “Charles…whatever you are seeking to explore under the excuse of drunkenness needs to stop.”

The blue in Bingley’s eyes was sober as he slowly leaned back an appropriate distance away. It hurt more than James could bear to ask, “Are you in love with my sister or aren’t you?” His voice was hoarse.

Bingley was thoughtful in his silence. “I… I feel a great deal for her. I may even love her,” he admitted.

“Then why are you here with me?” he dreaded.

“I have never been in love, so my confidence in such matters is weak,” Charles looked away. “I did
not mean to take advantage, Jamie, I am sorry.”

“It is not me who deserves the apology,” he returned.

Fear was prevalent in Charles’ eyes. “Do you truly wish me to?”

James swallowed, but his throat was dry. “No. I want to be forgotten. I want Jane’s happiness. If you can provide her that, then I will be satisfied.”

Charles’s chin slowly fell as he contemplated this, inducing James to add, “I do not mean you must marry her. If the feelings are not there then they never will be, but if something *is* present, then nurture it. Do not distract yourself with me.”

“I understand,” he replied softly, nodding. “You…are a very good brother, Jamie. I respect and admire you for it. Please do not misunderstand, I do care for Jane very much, but I will feel amiss if our friendship comes to a close tonight.”

“Well,” James played at a scoff. “Far be it for me to be cruel to a potential brother-in-law.”

Charles smiled, but there was sadness in his eyes. “I am now sorry Mr. Wickham is not here.”

Whatever cheer had been returning to James’ heart faded quickly. “Why?”

“You seemed…crestfallen when I revealed he was not here. Are you quite happy in his company?”

James knew what Charles was really asking. “Yes. No. I mean…we haven’t—”

“I understand,” he chuckled. “I hope, if he does make his reappearance, that he makes you very happy.”

James could feel Charles preparing to go back indoors, so he quickly curtailed, “Does he speak of him? Darcy, I mean.”

Charles’ brows lifted. “William? No? Oh,” he tipped his head in acquiescence. “I suppose it is no secret the Wickhams were stewards to the Darcy family until this generation. But William seems no worse for wear without a Wickham by his side, if that is what you mean?”

It wasn’t, but Charles had verified himself as ignorant. James replied, “I had just heard that Mr. Wickham and Darcy knew one another. I expected he would be here.”

“I certainly sent an invitation,” Charles provided, “but it was he who refused to come. Wickham was already well on his way out of William’s life by the time I entered their intimate circle, so he bore no obligation to meet me.”

James nodded and changed the subject. “I am feeling better now.”

“Once more unto the breach?” Charles teased. He opened his elbow to him, and James curled his arm within it.

The calm established between them was short lived, however.

Upon entering the house once more, a voice singing from the piano room paled James’ complexion. He left Charles to find Mary at the keys. It was not that she had an unpleasant voice, but a weak one, which leant itself to uneven notes which her lack of artistic style could not disguise.
Scanning the room, James found his father, who sensed his son’s eyes on him met his gaze. James silently entreated him to interfere, lest Mary be singing all night. He took the hint, and when Mary had finished her second song, approached her:

“That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit.”

Mary, perplexed at having been stopped, did not quite understand and sat for some time on the seat before her father patted her hand and pulled her along. James was sorry for her but the next consequence of the evening came in the form of his mother. He found her among her usual party, particularly Lady Lucas. It was a blessing that Charlotte was among them, engaging Mr. Collins with distracting conversation, but his mother was as loud as ever, and Lord Darcy was agonizingly close enough to hear.

“Mama, if you love your children at all, you will stop talking,” he said behind her.

“Oh Lizzy darling!” she sang. “I was just talking of how soon you are likely to have a sister married!”

“Stop talking,” he uttered darkly. “I hear no wedding bells. You shouldn’t speak so loudly.”

But the wine was in her and she only scolded him for being nonsensical. “Really, darling, three or four months, and I expect I’ll have but three daughters in the house! Perhaps less soon after! Engaging to such a fine young man with such amiable connections might surely open other doorways…to other chapels!” she chortled.

He rubbed his eyes. “For heaven’s sake, speak lower. You haven’t any advantage for saying such things than to make our family a further laughing stock than we already are.”

As much as James tried to check the rapidity of his mother’s words, the endeavor was in vain. He was only saved by the arrival of Charles with Jane, and his mother began her pursuit of inviting him to their house for dinner.

“It would make me so happy for you to share a family dinner with us, Mr. Bingley! At any time! Truly, there is no need for any formal invitation, you are always welcome!”

Charles grinned, all grateful pleasure, and he readily engaged for taking the earliest opportunity of waiting on her.”

Mrs. Bennet was perfectly satisfied, and was ready to quit the assembly only once theirs was last carriage to leave it. She was all a flutter with mindless chitter of wedding clothes and new carriages for the event she was sure to happen. James could only appreciate Charles’ pleasant tolerance of her and ignore Darcy, who had once met James’ gaze with such a darkness as he did not want to think about.

He was pushing his arms through the sleeves of his coat, his sisters following their mother into their carriage when he heard Caroline remark behind him, “Wedding satins and—is she really speaking of garters? Not only is she out of her mind, forgetting how poor she is, but her vulgarity forgets she is still in the presence of company. William, do you agree? I am quite finished with tonight—”

“Her vulgarity is only comparable to your over familiarity, Miss Bingley,” he finished sharply. “I would appreciate it if you addressed me as Mr. or Lord Darcy.”

James did not dare turn around. Although for different reasons, he was quite finished with this
night, indeed.

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Not three days later, Netherfield was empty.

Chapter End Notes

What a night. Poor Jamie. The kisses I put him through e_e
A letter arrived for Jane.

As it came from Netherfield on a sheet of elegant, hot-pressed paper, it was opened immediately. James watched his sister’s countenance change as she read it, her eyes lingering on passages before she recollected herself and discretely put the letter away to rejoin the family’s conversation. But her false cheer was a poor imitation of her true joviality, and Jamie waited for her eyes to meet his so she would see him leave the room.

Soon she met him in their room and she silently handed him the letter. He recognized the flowing hand from Caroline Bingley’s other notes sent to her, though this one was considerably longer. His own mouth frowned upon reading the first line, and he resigned himself to disliking the entirety from there:

*Dearest Jane,*

*I do not pretend to regret anything I shall leave in Hertfordshire, except your society, my dearest friend…*

“She ought to stick to writing. She’s better at lying that way.”

Jane was decidedly silent, spurring him to read quickly, and aloud the most ridiculous of sections.

“When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days, but we are certain it cannot be so, as these matters are never so swiftly resolved. We have determined on following him thither, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in a comfortless hotel…*

His eyes moved quickly over the words, sparing Jane's ears from enduring the majority of it a second time.

“I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings… She certainly intends to keep him for a good while,” James remarked.

“It is evident he comes back no more this winter,” Jane agreed from her place at their window.

James scoffed from his seat on the bed, “It is only evident she does not mean he should.”
She sighed, “It must be his own doing, Lizzy. He is his own master, but you do not know all. Keep reading.”

He was skeptical of that but he continued forth with an ever deepening furrow in his brow and a darkness in his voice.

“Mr. Darcy is impatient to see his sister, and to confess the truth, we are scarcely less eager to meet her again. I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and—Well now she’s just insulting.”

Jane’s chin dropped but a slight smile was on her lips. James only paused again when he read, “Louisa and myself are heightened into a state still more interesting, for the hope we dare to entertain of her being hereafter our sister…. My brother admires her greatly already, he will have frequent opportunity now of seeing her on the most intimate footing, her relations all with the connection as much as his own…”

He understood now why his sister’s eyes had lingered so long on the letter, as his did now. Jane asked softly, “What think you of it?” His head lifted at the sound of tears in her voice. “Is it not clear enough? Does it not expressly declare Caroline neither expects nor wishes me to be her sister?”

James stood and came to her, pulling her against him to catch her sobs. “She is perfectly convinced of her brother’s indifference,” she said.

“I’ve told you from the beginning that Caroline Bingley is selfish and a egotistical,” he said softly, without pride. “Will you hear me?”

She nodded against him. “Caroline knows her brother is in love with you. No one who has ever seen you together can doubt his affection. She wants him to marry Miss Darcy, for her own benefit, and she follows him into town in the hopes of either persuading him or at the very least, keeping him away from you.”

Jane shook her head again, inducing him to squeeze her gently. “Could she have half as much love in Mr. Darcy for herself, she would have ordered her wedding clothes. But the case is this: We are not rich enough, nor grand enough for the ideal she has cloaked herself and her siblings. She is the more anxious to get Miss Darcy for her brother, solely along the thought that if she acquires one Darcy, she may more easily secure the other. But she forgets how Miss de Bourgh is already betrothed to Mr. Darcy, and if she has deceived herself in believing she can go against the infamous Lady Catherine, well…we may yet witness Charles running back to Netherfield if nothing else than to escape both families.”

Jane might have laughed if she had agreed with him. “If we thought alike of Caroline I might be made to feel more easy about this. But I known the foundation is unjust. Caroline is incapable of willfully deceiving anyone; and all I can hope in this case is that she is truly deceived, though not for the reasons you give.”

James’ chin rested on her head heavily, exhausted by her insistent need to find good in everybody. “If only Lord Darcy were as easily swayed by artful words as you are. You may find, one day, how liberating it is to see the evil in somebody.”

Jane pulled away from him, finally smiling and wiping her eyes. “I will not, rather I remain loyal to Charles being independent of influence. A thousand things may arise in six months.”

However it was not the following months they need be concerned with, rather the following days.
The eldest Bennets kept the occupancy of Netherfield to themselves since the wake of the ball was still felt within the house. However the arrival of the Philips broke the family’s bliss.

“How absurd,” Lydia exclaimed, while her siblings were silent. She tried to meet someone’s eyes, to make contact and shatter the reality, unveil the joke. When none were willing to meet her, she turned back to her visiting relation. “Aunt, you must be joking!”

Her aunt Philips shrugged over her tea, looking apologetic. “I’m sorry, darling. Honestly, I am surprised I am the one to tell you, what with how close you are to Netherfield.”

Lydia sat back in her chair as if this was a personal affront. “What reason did he give for leaving?”

“Why, none,” their uncle chuckled. “A businessman need not give any reason for leaving a country estate when said business is in London. We only met him in passing.”

This was far from satisfactory intelligence but the eldest siblings left the room alongside their father and uncle, leaving Mrs. Bennet and her other daughters to pester Mrs. Philips with inquiries.

Mr. Collins, however, felt that in the midst of either the ball’s afterglow or the confusion of the Bingleys leaving, he would make his address to the family in form. Mrs. Bennet was speaking to no one in particular while the family broke their fast, her vocal thoughts lingering on how Mr. Bingley missed his promise to dine with them when Mr. Collins announced:

“May I hope, madam, for your interest with your fair daughter, Katherine, when I solicit for the honour of a private audience with her in the course of this morning?”

Silverware scraped to a halt on plates as the family stared at him. Whether it was the superfluous formality in his manner of speaking or his choice in Bennet, the family was shocked to stillness.

Kitty? James wondered incredulously, meeting Jane’s equally astonished eyes. He then looked at Kitty, who looked at Mr. Collins vacantly before she quickly turned back to her plate, her complexion paling considerably.

Mrs. Bennet was the first to recover. “Oh, dear! Yes—certainly. I am sure Kitty will be very happy—I am sure she can have no objection! Come, Lydia, I want you upstairs.”

She rose from her chair and bustled around the table, tearing her children from their meals apart from Kitty. All seemed reluctant to leave for alternate reasons, except for Lydia who seemed eager to leave lest Mr. Collins’ attentions find her again.

Kitty tried to plead, “Do not go—Mr. Collins must excuse me. He can have nothing to say to me that anybody need not hear. I am going away myself!”

“No nonsense, Kitty. I desire you will stay where you are,” Mrs. Bennet refused with a hand on her shoulder. “Kitty, I insist upon your staying and hearing Mr. Collins.”

Kitty lowered back onto her seat, her eyes finding her last salvage in the room: Jamie. He stood with his hand on the doorknob, waiting for his mother to bustle out before he held her gaze as he shut it behind him. He remained right where he was, listening on the other side of the door. An intimate corridor opened up behind him, with Mary sitting on the stairs, Jane in the window seat on the landing, and Mrs. Bennet with Lydia on the small couch against the stairs, the former fanning herself. Mr. Bennet had taken his tea and departed from the room at the start of breakfast, therefore blissfully ignorant to the events occurring outside his library.

The sound of Mr. Collins’ chair skidding over the floor was heard. James could see it clearly: poor
Kitty sitting there, subjected to Mr. Collins’ high chested proposal.

“Good morning, my dear Katherine,” Mr. Collins opened. James grimaced, glancing back at Lydia stifling her giggles.

“You may be wondering, given my certain neglect, why we find ourselves together now.”

James sighed heavily, his eyes falling into his palm. This was going to be unbearable.

“Believe me, your unwillingness toward my audience is most typical of your sex and has not dissuaded me in the least. Your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there not been this little unwillingness…”

James leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. If nothing else, Mr. Collins might grow winded before he ever reached his climactic point.

“You can hardly doubt the purpose of my discourse, however your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble; my intentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life, but before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying, as well as my esteemed choice.”

The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, would have made Jamie’s laughter echo in the rafters had this not so involved Kitty’s own nerves.

“My reasons for marrying are first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add greatly to my happiness; and thirdly, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness. Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion on this subject, and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford that she said, ‘Mr. Collins, a clergyman like you must marry. Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for my sake; and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way…’”

James blinked and rubbed his cheek, forcing the disgust off his face. Was this supposed to be a seducing compliment? That one’s future husband is so easily swayed by a rich widow?

James’ brows shot up as he heard Mr. Collins utter a sound akin to a chuckle. “You may be wondering at this juncture, why I chose you over your more lively sibling, as well as your more educated and beautiful sister—”

There is such a thing as censorship and you should bloody well use it.

“—both of whom would surely amuse or be approved of by the Lady Catherine. Rest assured, I have not chosen you for your likeness of name, rather, my fair cousin Jane has been reserved for another, while cousin Lydia is too young, and I think myself right in saying that though she would initially be welcomed at the quadrille table, the Lady Catherine would soon tire of a girlish spirit incapable of maturing.”

James peeked at Lydia, who was caught between insult and relief.

“Allow me, by the way, to say that I do not reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will find her manners beyond anything I can describe; and your wit and vivacity I think must be acceptable to her,
especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. It remains to be told why my views were directed to Longbourn instead of my own neighborhood, where I assure you there are many amiable young women.

“But the fact is, that being as I am, the son of the relative who was so long at odds with your father, I feel myself obligated by my position and indebted to the patience and kindness your father bestowed upon my own to fully dissolve the dispute with our marriage. It is, of course, no small thing, to help one live comfortably and pass peacefully from this world despite retaining a refined dislike of this individual…”

*If she marries you, I think she will understand more intimately than anyone should,* James thought sourly.

“This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains but for me to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection—”

Kitty’s own chair screeched over the wood of the floor. “You are too hasty, sir,” she cried. You forget that I have made no answer! Accept my thanks for the…compliment…you are paying me. I am *very* sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.”

Mr. Collins sounded far from perturbed. “I am of a knowledge that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, even during the second and third proposals. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the alter ere long.”

There was a pause. “Well your hope is rather an extraordinary one,” Kitty responded bluntly. “I do assure you that I am not one of those ladies…if such ladies there are. Why anyone would risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time it truly beyond me, but I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced I am the last woman in the world who could make *you* so. Nay, were your friend Lady Catherine to know me, I am persuaded she would find me in every respect ill-qualified for the situation.”

James took his weight off the doorframe. He did not like Kitty’s having to fall to self-deprecation in order to dissuade Collins’ intent.

“I cannot imagine her ladyship would at all disapprove of you,” Mr. Collins refused. “And you may be certain that when I have the honour of seeing her again I shall speak in the highest terms of your modesty, economy, and other amiable qualifications.”

Kitty’s tone was almost too low for James to hear: “If I am to be known by nobility, I don’t want it to be for my modesty…”

Despite being right next to her, Collins behaved as if he had not heard. “When I do myself the honour of speaking to you next on this subject I hope to receive a more favorable answer so that we might skip the dalliances and playful refuses typical of your sex. They do not suit me, though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present.”

“Really, Mr. Collins,” Kitty huffed with some warmth, “you puzzle me exceedingly. I cannot understand how my replies have hitherto been accepted as encouragement.”

“You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses are merely words of course. My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my
relationship to your own are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to you—"

James’ spine went rigid, his weight strong over his legs.

“—Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejections of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of young females—”

James swept into the room, startling Kitty, who looked ready to both fly at Mr. Collins as well as from the room entirely. Mr. Collins appraised James and said, “Apologies, cousin, for holding the room for so long. Did you need it?”

James silently went toward the door opposite them which led outside, moving the table’s chairs out of the way for her escape. “Leave, Kitty,” he ordered softly, holding the door for her.

She eagerly flew past him, exiting outside instead of being caught by their mother in the corridor. James shut the door and rested his forearms on the back of one of the chairs. “Mr. Collins, if you have any hope of marrying into the female sex then you would do best not to insult them.”

Collins was clearly oblivious. “I must disagree with your interpretation, I did no such—”

“You did,” James curtailed. “More than once. I do not know who gave you the notion that a woman’s refusal means anything other than a refusal, but they are an invalid source.”

“Forgive me, Mr. Bennet,” Collins countered, “but this matter involves myself, Miss Katherine, and your mother—”

“No it doesn’t.”

“I—pardon?”

“It involves you and Lady de Bourgh, which this house has heard too much of since you arrived. In what dream did you find it appealing to marry a man who speaks entirely of an old woman?”

Mr. Collins began to come around the table, his self-proclaimed clergy superiority driving him to stand near James. “I am surprised at you, sir. I have thought highly of you and would have believed you held your family’s happiness in the greatest esteem—”

“You are not wrong,” James finished, his patience officially leaving the room in Kitty’s wake. “But you misunderstand us entirely. My mother wrongly led you to believe one of her daughters would be interested in you.”

The odd sound of mirth came from Mr. Collins again. James barely restrained his disgust. The senior Mr. Bennet would have done a better service in taking Mr. Collins as a child and teaching him proper interpretation of social interaction as opposed to feeding his useless father during his last years.

“Mr. Bennet, your intentions are good but it is my place in society to lead people like yourself and your sisters in the right direction. Though it would do young Lydia the better lesson of being married to the church, Katherine, I think, will suit Hunsford very well—”

James stepped forward, his voice dark and irreproachable. “Mr. Collins, you are a fool and an
imbecile. You are the toy of a bored widow and you will never marry a woman from this family. You have insulted them. You have humiliated them. You ridicule us for being poor when we are only so because your father could not gather the energy to feed anyone more than himself. If you owe any debt to us, return it in the form of respect and silence, nothing else.”

Mr. Collins opened his mouth to speak but James stopped. “Get. Out. Of this room, Mr. Collins. I’ll admit to not knowing how they do it in Hunsford but in Longbourn, no. Means. No.”

Mr. Collins seemed to at last have a stroke of either brilliance or fear. His eyes widened and his mouth shut decisively. His heels clipped across the wood as he obediently left in silent contemplation.

Mrs. Bennet, having dawdled about in the vestibule, no sooner heard Collins leave then with a quick step entered the breakfast room to accost Jamie. “Have you lost your mind!”

“Sometimes I think I’m the only one with it,” he answered mildly, moving to stride past her. In a great sound of frustration, she bustled after Mr. Collins while Lydia rushed upstairs and out of sight. He made to ascend around Mary, but upon noticing her expression, he paused and sat beside her. “Mary?”

Her head moved as if to look at him but did not quite make it. Her dark hair was still loosely braided over her shoulder for sleep. After a time, she voiced, “I had thought… I had thought it would be me.”

James frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“He and I are of a kind. Abnormal. Neither of us is overly welcomed by society. His conversation may be dull and ignorant but he is never averse to talking to someone, regardless of who they are. I would have thought his desire for a prudent woman and someone who enjoys books as much as he would steer his proposal toward me.”

James heard her and absorbed her thoughts before he took both of her hands in his, which was rare considering most of her family touched her only sparingly and she did not request contact. “Mary, you are inquisitive, introspective, and artistic. You are anything but dull. Just because your thoughts vary from what normal society deems as ‘important,’ does not make you unintelligent or less deserving of anyone’s time. If you want to marry Mr. Collins, it should be because you enjoy him, not because you feel obligated to be with him. He is wrong to say one’s first marriage proposal will be one’s last… Do you know what it means to be one’s wife?”

She nodded gently but James was not sure. “Do you… know how one has children?”

She nodded with more surety, her dark grey eyes shyly meeting his gaze. “Yes.”

“Do you want Mr. Collins’ children?”

Her lips pressed together as she shook her head.

“During his time here, have you enjoyed him? Spending time with him, sharing conversation with him?”

Her lips parted, but as she considered this, they closed, and she shook her head. “No… I cannot say I have. But… Jamie… If I am to never marry…? If I… do not wish to marry…”

He startled her by standing, and kissing her hairline on his way up. “Then you will have a home here, as you always have.”
“But, but Jamie!” she rushed as he began to leave her. He paused and met her shocked and confused gaze. “Do you mean it?”

He grimaced a final time, but for entirely different reasons. “I’m your brother, Mary, not your benefactor. You have just as much right to this place as I. More, for surviving this madhouse with more patience than anyone.”

He met Jane on the landing and they continued upstairs together, leaving Mary with a small smile on her lips.

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“Mr. Collins!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed raggedly as she caught up with him. “My utmost apologies, sir,” she breathed. “Kitty shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself directly. Both Kitty and Lizzy are a very headstrong and foolish. He does not know Kitty’s interest; but I will make them both know it.”

Contrary to her hopes, Mr. Collins’ brow and lips were set in stern decision. “Pardon me for interrupting you, but if she is really headstrong and foolish, I know not whether she would altogether be a very desirable wife to a man in my situation, who naturally looks for happiness in the marriage state.”

Mrs. Bennet was beside her self, uttering an involuntary, “Ha!” in her exhausted state from running after him.

“If therefore she persists in rejecting my suit, perhaps it were better not to force her into accepting me, because if liable to such defect of temper, she could not contribute much to my felicity.”

He turned to continue his walk. “Sir, you quite misunderstand me,” Mrs. Bennet cried, alarmed. “Kitty only easily takes after which ever sibling captures her attention at the given moment! This is her only fault! In everything else she is as good-natured a girl as ever lived. I will go directly to Mr. Bennet, and we shall very soon settle it with her, I am sure!”

She did not give him time to reply, rather, hurrying instantly to her husband, calling out as she entered his sanctimonious library.

“Oh! Mr. Bennet,” she huffed, her face scarlet. “You are wanted immediately! We are all in an uproar; you must come and make Kitty marry Mr. Collins, and you must place Lizzy into submission! For she vows she will not have him, and if you do not make haste he will change his mind and not have Kitty!”

Mr. Bennet raised his eyes from his book as she entered, and fixed them on her face with a calm unconcern which was not in the least altered by her communication. “I have not the pleasure of understanding you. Of what are you talking? What is this about Kitty and Jamie?”

“Of Mr. Collins and Kitty!” she harrumphed. “Lizzy declares he is an imbecile and Kitty ran from the proposal!”

He blinked at her mildly. “And what am I to do on the occasion? It seems a hopeless business. I agree, Mr. Collins is an imbecile.”

“Speak to Kitty yourself!” she shrieked. “Tell her you insist upon her marrying Mr. Collins and when Lizzy tries to intervene, stop him! You know how impressionable Kitty is! She will easily believe Lizzy knows best!”
Mr. Bennet stared at her for a long moment contemplatively, almost as if to test her patience. Finally he uttered, “Let her be called down. Both of them.”

Mrs. Bennet rang the bell beside his door. Mr. Hill arrived and accepted the task of going to find Kitty and James. When Mr. Bennet’s children arrived, James stood near the door with his arms crossed while he called Kitty close. “Come here, child. I have sent for you on an affair of importance.”

Being the smallest of his children, she came to sit on his lap, his fingers interlaced on her waist. “I understand that Mr. Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true?”

“Yes, papa.”

“Very well, and this offer of marriage you have refused?”

“I have, sir,” she answered worriedly.

He nodded. “Very well. We now come to the point. Your mother insists upon your accepting it. Is not it so, Mrs. Bennet?”

“Yes, or I will never see her again!” her mother pronounced.

Mr. Bennet’s eyes glimmered as his son uttered a soft Ugh. “It appears an unhappy alternative is before you, Kitty. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do.”

Kitty startled at his response. A smile flashed on her face but hesitated. “Do you mean it, papa?”

Her mother, however, stormed, “What do you mean, Mr. Bennet, by talking in this way? You promised me to insist upon her marrying him!”

James cut in, “While you threaten to only have four children otherwise?”

“I ought to make it three!” she fumed.

His eyelids only hung at half-mast as he shook his head. “Marrying your children off before anyone else in the county is no achievement if they are unhappy and despise you.”

Mr. Bennet intercepted, “Then our Jamie was right in intervening in Mr. Collins’s pursuit of you?”

Kitty nodded eagerly and he nodded with a warm smile. “Then go on. Your last duty of the day is to suffer the humiliation brought on by Lydia.”

She kissed his stubble and collided with Jamie to hug around his middle and take him from the room before their mother found a reason to keep them. Mr. Bennet picked up his book once more, only sparing a moment to tell her, “My dear, I have two small favours to request: first, that you will allow me the free use of my understanding on the present occasion. And secondly, of my room. I shall be glad to have the library to myself as soon as may be.”

“This entire family is against me!” she proclaimed despite leaving the room.

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While the family was in the throes of this confusion, Charlotte Lucas called upon the house to spend the day with them. She was met in the small foyer by Lydia, who flew down the stairs to her and relayed, “I am glad you’ve come! There is such fun here! Mr. Collins has made an offer to
Kitty! Kitty! But she will not have him, and Lizzy has made quite an ordeal over it.”

Charlotte had hardly time to answer, before they were joined by Kitty and Jamie leaving their father’s library. They confirmed the news, and made the mistake of entering the breakfast room for Charlotte to join them in the finishing of their meal, but Mrs. Bennet was there and called upon Miss Lucas for her compassion. James exchanged an apologetic look with Charlotte, who was sure to endure their mother’s pleading her to persuade them while her own children fled the room.

“For nobody is on my side!” they heard their mother exclaim. “Nobody takes part with me, I am cruelly used, nobody feels for my poor nerves! See how they leave me! Oh it is all very well that I shall never speak to them again! I have no pleasure in talking to undutiful children. Not that I have much pleasure in talking to anybody. People who suffer as I do from nervous complaints can have no great inclination for talking. Nobody can tell what I suffer! But it is always so. Those who do not complain are ever pitied…”

Charlotte, as a good neighbor and long standing member of the family would do, listened and let Mrs. Bennet commiserate with herself with very little help from Charlotte. Mrs. Bennet spoke for such a time as Charlotte eventually witnessed James and Kitty alongside Jane appear outside of the window, although they only made eye contact with her and sat upon the step outside.

It was during this time that they were joined by Mr. Collins who, upon returning from his walk, entered with an air more stately than usual. Mrs. Bennet immediately sent Charlotte from the room. She went as far as the others sitting on the stoop, which was close enough to still hear what was possibly the largest testament to Mr. Collins’ intelligence, and the last:

“My dear madam,” he curtailed before Mrs. Bennet took hold of the conversation, “let us be forever silent on this point. Far be it from me to resent the behavior of your son and daughter. You will not, I hope, consider me as showing any disrespect to your family by withdrawing my pretensions to your daughter’s favour. My conduct may I fear be objectionable in having accepted the refusal from your daughter’s lips instead of your own. But we are all liable to error. I have certainly meant well through the whole affair. My object has been to secure an amiable companion for myself, with due consideration for the advantage of all your family, and if my manner has been at all reprehensible, I here beg leave to apologize.”

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Despite the rejection and his acceptance of it, Collins seemed determined to not leave early. For the coming Saturday he was bound to leave and until the coming Saturday he meant to stay.

The sole reprieve during this time came from the usual walks to Meryton, which provided a change of scenery, company, and on this particular occasion, the return of Mr. Wickham into their lives.

The Bennet siblings were looking through their aunt’s latest shipment of fabrics and ribbons when James looked across the street to see the man exiting a cobbler’s shop. As if sensing him, their eyes met and Wickham grinned, looking along the avenue before he jogged across to meet him outside. Today his hair was untied, the honeyed tresses flopping pleasantly in the sunlight.

“How lovely to see you,” he greeted, sliding an arm around James’ shoulders. “Walk with me.”

James looked back to wave at Jane and noticed as they walked that Miss Lucas’s civility dictated her listening to Mr. Collins along their own stroll; so he might also enjoy Meryton without due closeness to the Bennets.

To James’ surprise, it was Wickham who entered upon the obvious topic at hand. “I must
apologize for not meeting you at Netherfield. I found, as time drew near, that I had better not meet Darcy. To be in the same room or at least in the same party with him for so many hours together, might be more than I could bear. The possibility of unpleasant scenes arising between him and myself kept me away.”

James could only sigh. “The Netherfield ball feels weeks away. I haven’t the energy to scold you, so I will easily agree.”

Wickham gazed at him with a sympathetic smile. “Oh? Have I missed out on more than a ball?”

James gave him the short and simply of it: of Netherfield’s occupancy and their own domestic unrest. Wickham listened with his usual calm and at last voiced, “Well, from two weddings to none. And yet everyone is happy apart from your mother,” he chuckled. “This is a unique circumstance.”

They walked for much of the day, eating at his aunt’s and using Wickham’s free day to their advantage until in the mid-afternoon he had to return and James met Charlotte once more. She was without Mr. Collins, who left to ensure his things were in order to leave the day after next.

“New accessories?” Charlotte asked, flicking a ribbon sticking out of one of his parcels.

“It is the season of clove and berry,” he confirmed. “Papa’s finally given me leave to use our fruit preserves while mama’s distracted by her own lamentation.”

Charlotte laughed but with some sympathy for his mother. “May I help?”

“You just want a scone with jam,” he accused.

“Of course,” she smirked, “but I’ll work for it.”

With his own smile he opened his elbow to her and they strolled home to Longbourn. It was there he stirred the wax in his pots while she revealed that though the family was without two weddings, she was equipped with one.

James stopped his stirring and looked at her, gauging her sincerity. “Is your Collins the same as our Collins?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes around her scone, taking a break from labeling his tapers. “There is only one Collins in Longbourn until I marry him.”

He pivoted toward her with severe skepticism in his eyes. “Mr. Collins? When did this happen?”

“Today,” she said, “although my receiving him has been since he first arrived.”

“Sure, but I thought you were just being kind.”

She shrugged. “I was, but with his feelings being unmet by Kitty, I thought I might sway them in my direction.”

“Feelings?”

Her eyes rolled again. “Whatever he has. His intent is now focused on me.”

“Mr. Collins?”

She glared at him. “Jamie.”
“You are engaged to Mr. Collins! Have you paid no attention to how ridiculous he is?”

She sighed gruffly. “Ridiculous he may be but he is not unmanageable. I am seven and twenty, Lizzy, and the match is not unattractive from a logical standpoint.”

“Logic,” he scoffed, returning to his herbs to rub them between his palms and drop them into the according pots.

“Why should you be surprised, Lizzy? Did you think it was impossible for Mr. Collins to be able to procure any woman’s good opinion?”

“He already has the good opinion of his patroness,” James countered. “Whether Collins could be half of a happy home is less believable.”

“Jamie,” Charlotte scolded, but her tone was different. Softer. James’ head turned over his shoulder to find her gazing out the kitchen windows. “When you have had time to think it over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic, you know. I never was.”

“You never believed you could afford romance,” he reiterated.

“Some of us cannot!” she rounded. “The same could be said for you. You have your home but what about after? The entailment entitles it to Mr. Collins after the immediate males pass on. Have you ever even considered being with a woman?”

James bristled but just as quickly paled. He had not. “I will sooner break the entailment and give this place to Jane’s children,” he voiced quietly.

Charlotte sighed, tired. “I ask for a comfortable home only. I haven’t any money or prospects apart from this. Considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state. At the utmost, I might sculpt the home to suit my needs and comforts while he distracts himself by pleasing Lady de Bourgh’s fancies.”

They fell silent. James could only rest his pelvis against the counter as he absorbed her sentiments. He could only gaze out of the windows as well as he thought aloud, “Somehow this marriage predicts a loneliness greater than if you went without him.”

Charlotte huffed a laugh. “I refuse to believe myself alone while you yet live. I will never forgive you if you do not visit me and visit me often, James Elizabeth.”

His shoulders lifted with his own mirth, his smile falling to the floor in shame. “Yes,” he said, lifting his eyes to meet hers. “I will. Of course I will.”

The tension between them eased. Her chin bobbed once, pleased and relieved. “Good. And I fully expect you to decorate my wedding.”

His head tilted back as he guffawed, but as she finished her tea and they poured the candles, he could not quite fathom the events of the week. The strangeness of Mr. Collins’s making two offers of marriage within three days, juxtaposed with his now being accepted was both commendable and unbelievable.

But what weighed heavily on James’ thoughts was how Charlotte’s opinion of matrimony varied so widely from his own. James could not say his parents’ marriage was a happy one. Perhaps in the beginning, and in moments, but he was witness to his parents avoiding one another more often than sharing a common space. Previously he would have painted a marriage with Collins as a
humiliating picture, but his friend’s sacrificing happiness for social and domestic security altered his opinions.

He had developed a strict standard of happiness for himself and his siblings, taking for granted that how his sisters might achieve happiness did not match his own. His sisters could achieve marital bliss, even if only for the initial honeymoon months. He could not, and the reality of Charlotte leaving Longbourn with the impending state of his sisters leaving as well, left Jamie feeling wounded and alone.
Nuisance

Chapter Summary

The Bennets find a reprieve from recent events.

Chapter Notes

Helloooo~ We're officially in volume II of the canon story (it was originally published in three parts, if you didn't know). This is sort of a transition/intermission to the next storm of the story haha

This chapter's short 'n' sweet because 1) I couldn't be bothered to edit a longer chapter (sorry u_u) and 2) the next one will probably be long anyways.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To say Mrs. Bennet shared in her neighbors’ happiness would have been a laughable falsehood. She most certainly interpreted the matrimonial announcement as not only an insult, but an injury due to the method of its unveiling.

Mr. Collins at long last bid his farewells, but not without foretelling his return. Mrs. Bennet had little time to astound at his forthrightness as, similar to the Philips coming the with news of Netherfield’s occupancy, Sir William and Lady Lucas came by the house for luncheon and unguardedly shared their news. Lydia, always unfiltered and often uncivil, boisterously exclaimed, “Good lord, Sir William, how can you tell such a story? Do you not know that Mr. Collins wants to marry Kitty?”

It was a credit to Sir William’s breeding and his knowing Lydia since her birth that he weathered such a reaction. Mrs. Bennet, however, was statuesque despite her growing colour. Also similar to the Philips’ meeting, Jane and James left early, leaving the family to sort out the news by themselves.

Despite James’ initial reservations of the match, he found himself looking forward to the winter wedding, though he dared not voice such a thing in his house. Between his mother’s glares and Lydia’s incessant reminders, the family could not rest in piece before the imminent return of Collins.

There were still some days until such a time, although James awoke early to feel their home in the grips of winter. Frost glittered in the grass and the overgrown foliage of their garden as he took a steaming pot of tea and a book on seasonal flowers outside. He sniffled in the golden morning, sitting upon a stone wall which had been built and neglected long before his time. His nose was red but the sun was warm through his coat, as the wind had not yet awoken.

Jane joined him, then, the sound of paper crinkling drawing his thoughts. Only a glance told him
whom the letter was from. “Another one?”

Jane’s sigh fogged before her face. “Do you want to read it?”

James answered as he read his own pages, “If she’s only going on about Miss Darcy, I haven’t any interest.”

Jane drank from his cup, her pale fingers pushing the letter open. “She says they’ve moved from London to Darcy’s home for some weeks. She writes with great pleasure of Charles being an inmate of Darcy’s house, with some of her own plans regarding the furniture…”

“It sounds as if she is trying to mark her territory by tyrannizing Darcy’s decorating,” James returned bluntly. “It is unsurprising at this point. She speaks so highly of the place and then tries to make her own changes to it. To be the dog on the rug in that house to watch her failures would be greatly amusing.”

He took the letter from her, if nothing else than to take her eyes off it, before he noticed, “Jane, this letter is a week old.”

“Yes,” Jane dismissed, her gaze far away.

James did not want to read it. He cared more for the distance in his sister’s eyes and her reluctance to share her current fears with him. He knew she could think of nothing else, yet whether Bingley’s regard had really died away, or was suppressed by his friends’ interference…was of no question to him. Charles loved her even if he was ignorant of it, but because of this James began to fear of Charlotte being correct. Whether Bingley had been aware of Jane’s attachment or whether it had escaped his observation entirely was something James scolded himself for not considering sooner.

Whichever was the case, his sister’s situation remained the same, and her peace was wounded.

“Jane…”

“I’m fine,” she said a bit too quickly. She sniffed, shaking her head to move the hair out of her face. “I am only harmed by mama’s continual reflections on him. But I will not repine. It cannot last long. He will be forgotten, and we shall all be as we were before.”

“What happened to ‘anything may arise in six months’?”

“You doubt me,” Jane bristled. “Indeed, you have no reason. He may live in memory as the most amiable man of my acquaintance, but that is all.”

James’ eyes were deadpan and dubious, but he was not one to stop her from convincing herself.

“I have nothing either to hope or fear, and nothing to reproach him with, thankfully. I have not that pain. A little time, therefore…I shall try to get better. I have this comfort immediately: that it has not been more than an error of fancy on my side, and that it has done no harm to anyone but myself.”

He poured into their cup, his eyes lifting heavily as her sigh trembled. “Jane, this is not fair. You wish to think all the world respectable and are hurt if I speak ill of anybody. I only want to think you perfect and you set yourself against it. Either Bingley is a blind, impressionable fool, or you are the one at fault. This is your logic.”

She turned to him finally, her eyes red. “And if it is both? Were he and I so unlikely from the start?”
He could not meet her pain, so he occupied himself with returning the cup to her hands. “You know my thoughts already.”

“You persist, then, in supposing his sisters influence him.”

“Yes, in conjunction with his friend.”

“Mr. Darcy?” Jane puzzled. “I cannot think Lord Darcy has much thought on others apart from being away from them...although...if his pride does extend to the company his friends keep...”

“No,” he halted immediately. “I fear Darcy’s involvement has been a direct result of myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I...” he hesitated. “I fear I was tested. And I failed.”


“He...knows I fancy men.”

“How?” she urged, her own fears forgotten.

“He kissed me,” he revealed quickly. “It is my own fault for kissing back.”

Jane was quite silent, and then, “Do you fancy him?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Are you sure? He is handsome—”

“No, Jane,” he curtailed. “He may be just as, if not more so, responsible as Caroline is for your unhappiness. I do not fancy him.”

Her features softened, her eyes clear. “Jamie...he’s not—”

“Do not say his name,” he snapped.

Her breath halted, but she pressed gently. “All right. But he isn’t. This situation isn’t like that one, and I’m not saying that time was your fault.”

“It was, Jane,” he finished, leaving the pot with her as he stood from the wall.

“Lizzy,” she tried to halt but he only shook his head, striding away.

He considered walking toward Meryton, so his steps took him to the pressed grass of the road, but as he rounded the house he heard his father’s voice coupled with another. He saw none other than Mr. Wickham chatting animatedly with his father over the balanced logs acting as a fence.

Wickham’s eyes found him, “Hello, Jamie.”

Amusement curved his lips. “What’s brought you so far so early in the morning?”

“I thought I would either invite you to breakfast or impose on you for it,” he grinned.

James laughed. “Doesn’t the military feed you?”

His father pulled him against his strong, weathered body. James fell willingly inside his arm.
“Forgive him. His tongue is sharp when it has not been dulled by a meal. We’re happy to have you and your company will be a welcome distraction at our table.”

“You are sure?” Wickham asked. “I do not wish to be a complete nuisance.”

“One nuisance to replace another is sometimes a welcome change,” Mr. Bennet countered enigmatically. He squeezed James’ arm. “Be sure Hill knows we have a guest.”

“Hill?” Wickham said as he followed James into the house.

“Our…” James gave it more thought. “Cook. He’s more than a servant or a butler. He has his own house and family near the Lucases.”

“Paying for help is no small thing,” Wickham esteemed. “I was under the impression you were poor.”

James’ laughter burst from him. “Perhaps it’s your status as a regimental without a war that makes you think that. Four unmarried girls on a farm is looked upon by others as poor.”

“Don’t remind me of my exciting life,” Wickham grinned, taking the seat James offered beside his customary place at their dining table. Their conversation was trimmed short by Lydia and Kitty’s arrival for breakfast.

Mr. Wickham’s society proved to be exactly as Mr. Bennet predicted. He was of material service in dispelling the gloom, and after he revealed to have the day off from his duties, Wickham was welcomed to stay the entirety of the day as well as encouraged to visit many others.

After they supped, the Bennets huddled by the road and wished him a safe walk back to Meryton. Wickham bid them each farewell, his eyes lingering on James as they shook hands, and then again when he was down the road and turned back to wave.

His sisters twittered back to the house with their mother whereas Mr. Bennet remained with James as they took a stroll in the twilight. “So, Lizzy,” he began, “your sister is crossed in love, I find, and I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of, and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. When is your turn to come?”

James huffed a laugh, “Papa…”

“You will hardly bear to be long outdone by Jane,” Mr. Bennet continued, and then paused his stride to meet James head on. “It is time, Lizzy. I will not let my daughters fly in either real or imaginary happiness while you sink here alone. Let Wickham be your man. He is a pleasant fellow, and I daresay he enjoys looking at you more than your sisters.

“Or not. Here are officers enough at Meryton to disappoint all the young ladies in the country. If it isn’t Wickham, I’ll trust your taste to not love a fool.”

He might have walked away but instead he brought his son’s hand inside his elbow to pull him along. Jamie’s other hand was left to cover his face as well as his embarrassment.
Love your comments! <3 The Gardiners and Charlotte's wedding are next!
Chapter Summary

The Gardiners arrive for the holidays and Charlotte's wedding and Jane leaves with them for London.

Chapter Notes

*Comes in with BTS choreography* Guess who's back~~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the following Monday, Mrs. Bennet had the pleasure of receiving her brother and his wife, who came as usual to spend their Christmas at Longbourn. Mr. Gardiner was a sensible, gentlemanlike man and overall more educated than his sister, as evident by his choice in a matching wife. James much wished his uncle and aunt could have arrived earlier so the Netherfield ladies could have stumbled over believing how such a pair from Cheapside were as noble and charming as they thought themselves to be.

Mrs. Gardiner, who was several years younger than Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Philips, was an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman as well as a favourite of all her Longbourn relatives. Between Jane and James especially, there resided a particular regard that brought them to visit her many times during their stay in Meryton.

Upon her first visit, Mrs. Gardiner distracted her younger nieces with their gifts before drawing the elders to a different room for their presents. “You will understand momentarily my reluctance to bestow such things in view of your siblings. Lydia and Kitty can be distracted by ribbons and illustrated pamphlets of the latest fashions, and Mary with her music books, but the pair of you have the care to appreciate finer goods.”

For Jane, she bestowed a new gown of modest green fabric but exquisite lace trimmings. Jane flushed at the sight of a single pearl necklace to wear with it. “Aunt, this is too much! How much this must cost!”

Mrs. Gardiner only laughed. “Do you think I sit idly all day waiting for money to come in? My husband has had a successful season and not without my own labours. Your mother has already related her grievances to me that we shall have a wedding to partake in soon. I would very much like you to wear it.”

For James she gave a fine new dinner jacket that could withstand the winter wind, as well as a green cravat with a pearl pin to match Jane’s dress.

Later on, however, while the rest of the family was busy with their uncle, Mrs. Gardiner gave him a leather bound notebook with metal pen nibs, brushes, as well as inks and colours with which to use them. He showed her his sketches of the floral plans he was contemplating for Charlotte’s wedding, marking notes of her approvals and suggestions.
“What think you of this matrimonial business, Jamie?” she asked. “Two sisters almost married, I heard most thoroughly, and then none. The Lucases stride with quite a melody in their step whenever I see them in town.”

“Better for them than us,” James said mildly. “Once you meet Mr. Collins, you can measure the man yourself. The only sadness is Jane’s.”

“Yes, the so infamous Mr. Bingley,” Mrs. Gardiner breathed, leaning back on the couch cushions. “It seems likely to have been a desirable match for Jane. I am sorry it went off. But these things happen so often. A young man, such as Bingley, easily falls in love with a pretty girl for a few weeks, and when accident separates them, so easily forgets her. These sort of inconstancies are very frequent.”

“A consolation it would be, aunt, if it were an accident,” he said. “Or does it often happen that the interference of friends will persuade a young man of independent fortune to think no more of the girl? To witness two people violently in love and then sorely wrenched apart begs more consideration than a common autumn romance.”

His aunt wrinkled her nose. “Violently in love? Goodness, do people still use such context? I thought it had been hackneyed, so doubtful and indefinite are such emotions. It is often applied to feelings which arise from a half hour’s acquaintance and mistaken for real, strong attachment. Pray, how violent was Mr. Bingley’s love?”

“Longer than a half hour,” James grumbled. “His attraction to her was immediate but endured for a month and more. I never saw a more promising inclination. He was growing quite inattentive to other people, so engrossed he was by her. It might have saved him to notice the contrast of opinions shared among his peers. He readily enough behaved uncivilly, whether it was in refusing to dance with other partners or ignoring participants in conversation entirely. Is not incivility the essence of one in love?”

His aunt guffawed, her hand coming to stroke his shoulder blade. “I should hope love would inspire the more pleasant parts of a personality to shine through but I cannot disagree with you. Every now and then, we find we have the capacity to love but one person and let the rest hang. Of that kind of love I suppose him to have felt. Poor Jane!” she sighed. “I am sorry for her because, with her disposition, she may not get over it immediately. It had better have happened to you, Lizzy. You would have laughed yourself out of it sooner.”

His hand stilled over the paper. “Do you think me so fickle in matters of the heart?”

“Oh hush,” she chided. “I know you perfectly well. From your mother you have a large heart, but from your father a skeptical mind. You do not love easily, but when you do it is fully and irrevocably.”

He was silent for a moment before he turned back to his drawing of the church and his floral additions. “We agree only halfway.”

“Oh?” she chimed. “Do you fall easily in love? Your mother will be overjoyed.”

A laugh escaped him and she shared in his mirth, drawing more laughter from him before she said. “Do you think Jane would be prevailed on to go back with us? Change of scene might be of service—and perhaps a little relief from home may be as useful as anything.”

James considered that. “We know Bingley to be traveling between London and Derbyshire.”
His aunt was not bothered at all. “We live in so different a part of town, all our connections are so different and we get out so little. It is improbable they should meet at all, unless he comes to see her.”

“That is unlikely,” James said bitterly. “When I say he is guest of Derbyshire, I mean that he is custody of his friend, Lord Darcy, who would no more suffer him to call on Jane in such a part of London. Mr. Bingley seems to never stir unless it is in Darcy’s company.”

“So much the better. I hope they will not meet at all. But does Jane not correspond with the sister? She will not be able to help calling.”

“She will drop the acquaintance entirely,” James countered. This raised his aunt’s brows but thoroughly closed the topic.

The Gardiners stayed a fortnight at Longbourn; and what with the Philipses, the Lucases, and the officers, there was not a day without its engagement. This was perhaps the first year that the holiday was eclipsed by another occasion, but as weddings were so few per person, its arrival as well as that of Mr. Collins, became the only talk of Meryton and Longbourn. With the influx of activity and officers in the house, among which was Mr. Wickham, James had the arsenal he needed to prepare the church for Charlotte’s wedding.

Since Caroline had first mentioned a greenhouse in the area, James had asked around and Wickham agreed to ride with him to collect the foliage he wanted, with the added help of Sir Lucas’s wallet. The preparations for the wedding progressed remarkably smoothly, largely by Charlotte’s expert handling of Mr. Collins. Charlotte gave him tasks that either amounted to nothing or which he could accomplish and would keep him from the church or James’ handling of the decorations.

Charlotte herself was beside herself in helping James wrap wreaths of pine and pussy willow, green and violet being her chosen theme. Silver partridge feather leaves made up the bulk of her bouquet with purple pansy flowers as well as English ivy to cascade along the front of her dress. Her gown was a modest white linen with long sleeves, but Lady Lucas had unearthed an heirloom garment of lace that was a similar pattern to the partridge leaves. She reworked it to make up the starched collar and chest of Charlotte’s dress, making the gown look fit for Sir and Lady Lucas's eldest daughter.

On the day, Sir Lucas, Charlotte, and James stood in the church foyer while a violin began to play the song Charlotte chose to announce the bride’s arrival. James was just pinning the pansy blossom and sprig of silver leaves into her hair before she entered the church. “I reckon you have half an hour before the flower wilts, so finish promptly.”

“Why would you get me a flower as fragile as that?” she scoffed.

“Because pansies are able to survive winter snows and even bloom outside of spring. It’s stronger than it looks and you’re the strongest person I know.”

“Lovely recovery,” she challenged but her smirk softened as he kissed her cheekbone.

“You look beautiful. Now go put my mother to shame.”

She laughed, doubling over to check her skirts and then took her father’s arm. Wickham and Mr. Denny opened the doors for them and the pews creaked as everyone stood. James waited until the bride and father were well down the aisle before he stepped in to stand discreetly in the back row with Wickham. “She does look beautiful,” he agreed in a whisper. “You made her into a lady.”
“She already was a lady,” James disagreed as they sat and the wedding began. “She has more dignity than this place deserves. Thank you for your help.”

“It was my pleasure,” Wickham assured. “Though my intent was selfish in wanting your time and less than charitable for Charlotte.”

“Are you flirting with me during a wedding?” James cornered.

Wickham put a knuckle over his mouth to stifle his chuckle. “Just picked up the mood, I suppose.”

But as James gazed down the aisle at the bride and groom, he wondered what exactly that mood was. Charlotte was resplendent and held her ground with poise and elegance. Mr. Collins was the same as ever, high chested and solemn, but blissfully silent. He reckoned the Lucases were the ones setting the overall tone of the audience; the parents proud and smiling through tears while shushing the younger siblings’ giddy whispers and movements.

Charlotte and Mr. Collins slid silver rings over each other’s fingers and everyone stood to file out of the church, creating a tunnel of tossed clover leaves over the bride and groom as the new couple led the way to the assembly building for their reception. Somehow in the throng of people queuing for the wine, Wickham arrived beside James with two glasses. They chinked together as he said, “To a long day of merriment!”

“Is that what this is?” James laughed, drinking his.

Wickham frowned over his gulp. He unfurled a finger from his glass to accuse, “Mr. Bennet, I do say you are a cynic.”

“I am a pessimistic romantic,” James clarified.

Wickham guffawed. “That’s something of a contradiction. Whatever could I do to alter such an existence?”

“Repeat whatever wizardry allowed you to fill this the first time,” James said, handing him back the empty glass.

Wickham appraised it and pivoted to do just that. “You don’t take celebration lightly, I respect this.”

However upon seeing Lydia engage Wickham in conversation by the wine table, James followed him and gently snatched his glass before Lydia took it instead. “Don’t waste a drop on her, no matter what she says.”

“Waste?” Lydia balked. “Lizzy, it’s a wedding! Surely I can drink today!”

“Make a fool of yourself at your own wedding,” James countered, “but not at Charlotte’s.”

“You’re so sure I would!” she scoffed, but his even stare broke her confidence and she angrily stomped elsewhere.

His aunt Gardiner smoothly appeared in her stead. “The sentinel big brother never ceases.”

“It might if she had spent another month in the womb to develop her sensibilities,” James said bluntly. Wickham snorted beside him but sealed in his mirth.

“Hush,” she scolded. “She is only acting her age. What were you doing at fifteen?”
James was definitively silent. Wickham glanced at him and offered, “George Wickham, mum. I don’t know if James has spoken of me.”

“I am his aunt Gardiner in law,” she gave him her hand. “You are the one who’s helped him with today’s decorating, yes? Only a military man would tie such a knot on a bouquet.”

His chin bowed as he laughed. “Not as elegant, I admit, but I challenge those flowers to come undone when she throws it.”

“You were born in Derbyshire, no?” she eyed him.

Wickham’s expression froze but he recovered, “Yes, mum. Born and raised. You are familiar with the area?”

“With its people,” she nodded. “It was perhaps more than a decade ago, I’ll admit, but I had the honour of calling Derbyshire my home for a good while. I am sure you and I would share many acquaintances.”

“I am afraid not,” Wickham disagreed. “I left almost immediately after the late Lord Darcy’s death.”

“Your families were close,” she recalled. “I do not remember often hearing the Darcy name without Wickham accompanying it.”

James watched Wickham’s fingertips blanche and refill with colour as he intermittently gripped and relaxed around his glass. “My father and next two forefathers worked loyally alongside the Darcy family.”

Her face tilted. “What inspired the break in tradition? I hope his majesty’s army has come through in its promise of adventurous service.”

She looked to James, who shared her mirth while Wickham smiled out of courtesy. “I am sorry to say it was more out of necessity, as my father loved the late Darcy so much he gave every thing to him.”

Her brow furrowed. “Then either he was a fool or he thought you would follow in his steps and secured your inheritance with a powerful family.”

“Undoubtedly,” Wickham acquiesced, “although Darcy’s children…did not agree with tradition.”

She gazed at him closely. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I do not like talking about it,” Wickham altered. “The current Lord and Lady Darcy were dear friends to me, regardless of their hubristic upbringing.”

“Yes, I encountered them one day in town,” Mrs. Gardiner declared. James’s eyes slid to her, recognizing the tone of her voice when she challenged her husband to chess or cards. “They were lovely and remarkably behaved children. A gentle lord and lady before their time. What happened to alter such behaviour?”

“The lack of a mother in the home, perhaps,” Wickham guessed. “Gentility is something to be nurtured and reminded of. Without a source for it, I worry it was left to wither, and the deaths of our fathers left our relations to do that same. Lord Darcy was just here not some weeks ago. I would have liked your measure of him now.”
“As would I,” she agreed. “I have heard he is remarkably tall and handsome. Perfect for an older woman’s daylight fantasies. Or candlelit.”

James coughed on his wine but Wickham laughed. “Most assuredly. I pray you do not let the current estimation of the man ruin them, too.”

“Oh?” she challenged anew. “What gossip is there? I do hope it is thoroughly lascivious and venomous.”

Wickham guffawed at that. “Lascivious, no. The man is far too cold and bristled to do any such thing.”

“I should think a certain briar in the right place does the trick,” she remarked.

James rubbed his eyes and swirled the contents of his glass. Wickham continued, “You are not wrong, of course, however that is simply not the sort of man Darcy is. He would never do anything to condemn his family’s honour or so much as hint at it. Nay, he shut the gates entirely to anyone outside of the family; even those destined to join it.”

James and Mrs. Gardiner stared at him, the latter uttering, “You were engaged to Georgiana Darcy?”

“You never told me that,” James said, “Just that you were meant to inherit a livelihood. Something about service to the church.”

“Married service to the church, thankfully,” Wickham revised, “or at least it would have been. It was not finalized, as our fathers perished beforehand. I cannot say I am entirely denied happiness, as the proud Georgiana would have been a dragon of a wife, although that fated connection to my inheritance has been forever denied me. I am left to live as one of thousands of the king’s toy soldiers and the Darcys are the richest, albeit most disliked people to ever visit Hertfordshire.”

Mrs. Gardiner hummed to herself, pondering. Wickham added, leaning forward as if in confidence, “I must ask you not to share my former state with the Lady Darcy to others. I did not tell you, Jamie, since nothing came of it and I do harbour some fear as to what Darcy will do if his sister’s story were shared.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Gardiner finished with a look over Wickham’s shoulder. “Oh goodness, Wickham, would you be an immense help and occupy my sister in law? She has bristled in her own way out of jealousy. Conversation with a handsome man like yourself will be just the remedy.”

Wickham grinned. “At your service.”

He left them and James felt his aunt’s arm entwine with his own as she strolled to more spacious, quieter areas of the ballroom. “I must warn you toward caution, Lizzy.”

“Caution?” he repeated.

“I don’t like when people tell me to forget what they’ve immediately told me,” she breathed. “It rings with a certain danger or untruth, especially as his story so immediately clashed with his initial version to you.”

“It did not clash,” he corrected, “merely lacked that key detail.”

“Even so,” she continued, “his manner of speaking…he is quite the skilled talker. I do resent age and how it fades one’s memory. I have of course heard tellings of the Darcys’ pride but his account
of the children too easily overlaps my own recollections. And I consider myself a keen and intelligent woman. To have my memories so fractured makes me inclined to dislike the cause of it, not my own faults.”

“Can you be sure this isn’t your own pride?” James suggested. “We are each privy to a certain amount of self esteem.”

“I live in London, darling,” she retorted, “and the swiftest way to ruin in such a place, is a lack of surety in oneself. Hear me, Lizzy. You are too sensible to take warning just because I have given it. You may analyze it as you wish before finding a conclusion, but I would have you be on your guard. Do not involve yourself, or endeavour to involve him, in an affection which the want of fortune would make imprudent.”

“Fortune?” James laughed. “Neither of us has such a thing.”

His aunt continued as if she had not heard him, “I daresay I have nothing against him. He is a most interesting young man, and if he had the fortune he ought to have, I should think your sister could not do better.”

James frowned. “Which one?”

She gave him a look. “Lydia, of course! You have not neglected her fancy for handsome military men. But as it is, you must not let your fancy run away with you. Your proximity to him will too thoroughly build Lydia's bridge to him. You have sense, and we all expect you to use it. Your father would depend on your resolution and good conduct, I am sure. You must not disappoint your father.”

His brows reached for his hairline. “My, this is being serious.”

“Yes, and I hope to engage you to be serious likewise,” she cornered.

“Well, then, you need not be under any alarm. He shall not be in love with me, if I can prevent it.”

“Jamie, you are not serious now.”

He finished his glass and apologized, “I beg your pardon, I will try again. At present, I am not in love with Mr. Wickham—”

“Lizzy,” she snapped.

“—but if he becomes attached to me, I do see the imprudence of it. How the abominable Mr. Darcy’s actions have driven Wickham toward my company and therefore Lydia’s and—goodness—how Lydia’s ideal lifestyle in ogling military men for the rest of her days would come to fruition.”

He wrinkled his nose and shook his head theatrically. “We can’t have that. But in all sincerity, my father’s opinion of me does me the greatest honour, and I should be miserable to forfeit it. My father, however, is partial to Mr. Wickham. In short, my dear aunt, I should be very sorry to be the means of making you unhappy, but even if Wickham is in search of a woman of fortune, he shan’t find such a one in any of us. As to the matter of his relation with the Darcys, they are gone, as Wickham himself is soon likewise to be. My interest in such familial ordeals will leave with them.”

“Very good,” she resolved, appeased. “At least, during his remaining weeks here, you should not remind your mother of inviting him.”
He looked accusatorially at her. “Who just sent him over to her?”

“Oh,” she scoffed, “two can be manipulative, and young men do so enjoy being useful. I wanted to speak alone with you, that is all, however I see our time has come to an end. Congratulations, darling. You make for a stunning bride.”

James looked up to Charlotte who had met them. “Thank you so much,” she grinned with a glance down at herself. “I may finally let myself go!” she laughed.

Mrs. Gardiner laughed with her but briefly touched her arm in passing. “On the contrary, I encourage you to always feed your magnificence. Then you may be forever the goddess of your home while the man shrivels away.” She winked at her, and left them.

Charlotte, mildly dazed, looked at him. “Your aunt is…”

“Something,” he smiled. “How do you feel?”

“It hasn’t sunk in yet,” she admitted, taking his hand while her other came to hug the bend of his elbow. “Whatever will I do without your company, Lizzy?”

“I imagine a number of things,” he soothed. “Though I do not know what married women do outside of my mother’s habits.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then you shall be free to decide yourself. Or Lady Catherine will decide for you.”

She laughed but said seriously, “You cannot think me overly impressionable.”

“No, I don’t,” he assured.

“I shall depend on hearing from you often, Lizzy.”

“That you certainly shall,” he smirked.

“And need I remind you,” she declared, “of your vow to come and see me?”

His head bowed over his smile. “No, you needn’t.”

“Good,” she said softly, relieved. “My father and Maria are to come to me in March. I hope you will consent to be of the party. Of course you are as welcome as either of them at any time.”

“I know,” he promised.

The bride and groom soon set off for Kent, leaving the assembly to continue celebrating without them. James wrote to Charlotte the following morning, both fulfilling his promise of correspondence as well as supplying material for her to further relish matrimonial success. His mother made it quite easy with her “Thank heavens they’ve left!” and “The next one, Maria, is hardly out in society.”

Charlotte’s first letters were received by himself and Jane with eagerness. There could not but be curiosity to know how she would speak of her new lodgings, and upon reading them, Charlotte wrote cheerfully, seemingly surrounded by comforts, and mentioned nothing which she could not praise. The house, furniture, neighborhood, and roads were all to her taste.

“At least Lady Catherine keeps her neighborhood pleasantly managed,” Jane said. Charlotte went
on to write how the Lady Catherine’s behaviour was most friendly and obliging. All in all, it was Mr. Collins’ picture of Hunsford and Rosings rationally softened. “This is good, isn’t it? Surely it can be good to be wrong once in a while, where it counts?”

“I won’t know how far Charlotte’s optimism has stretched until March,” James concluded.

Then it was Jane’s turn to leave. James was happy to see her excitement while she packed, how her skirts bloomed with air when she twirled to reach for this hat and that shoe. She was a year or more younger as she slid her loose hair behind her ear, looking at the vanity and gauging what from it she would need. “You needn’t worry,” James soothed whenever a wrinkle of doubt passed over her face.

“What if I forget something?”

“You will be in London,” he hushed as he sat on her trunk and clicked it closed. “If our aunt lacks what you need, I am sure somewhere in the great metropolis, there will be a shop for you to explore.”

“I don’t plan to spend too much money,” she declared. “Just a refreshing holiday in the city.”

“What is a holiday without a little spending?” he challenged and then reminded, “If nothing else, Lydia and Kitty shan’t forgive you for lack of souvenirs. Just don’t bring back the plague.”

“The plague,” she laughed as she collapsed next to him, “hasn’t been in London for more than a century. I wish you were coming with me.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

She looked at him as if he had asked a remarkably dull question. “Because I enjoy your company. Why else?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he considered. “You and aunt might mistake me for a strong man who might carry your luggage.”

“How dare you,” she teased, “I am not cruel. And I would not let her. It would be your holiday just as much as mine.”

He nodded, “Next time, then.”

“What will you do here while I am gone?” she asked, rising to finish today’s attire. She sat at the vanity and James arrived behind her to manage her hair.

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“No adventures while I am away?” she smiled at him in the mirror. “You’ll save them for when I return?”

He smiled as he worked. “I think we’ve had our adventures. We’ve outdone this place.”

“That can’t be true,” her voice softened.

“People never stay at home for adventures,” he reminded. “They must go elsewhere for new ones. Charlotte has gone to live hers as you are going to find your own.”

“Then what of you, Jamie?” she asked. “Is it too late to beg aunt to accommodate you as well?”
He took a deep breath, “I would not recommend it. Aunt has a mind that Caroline will visit you and I best not be within the area.”

“Or you’ll defend my honour?” she grinned at him.

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, with my glistening sword and my ready pistols.”

“A pirate all to myself,” she giggled.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m happy,” she wiggled a little with energy.

His gaze lifted to meet hers in the mirror. “Good.”

Jane wrote to him to announce her safe arrival in London, to which he sent her an envelope of dried lavender and lime rinds he had found in a forgotten jar. When next she wrote to him she informed how her apartment now smelled of summer and that she had heard of the Bingleys being in town. In her letters to Caroline—which James had observed were getting less and less frequent before she left—she had revealed to be traveling to town. She refrained from making any sort of further announcement of herself for a week, but then relayed:

*Out of friendly obligation, as well as aunt’s going into that part of town tomorrow, I shall take the opportunity of calling upon Grosvenor Street.*

She wrote again when the visit was paid, and had successfully seen the younger Miss Bingley. *I did not think Caroline in spirits, but she was glad to see me, and reproached me for giving her no notice of my coming to London. I was right, therefore; my last letter had never reached her. I enquired after their brother, and she told me he was well, but so much engaged with Mr. Darcy, that they scarcely ever saw him. I found that Miss Darcy was expected to dinner. I wish I could see her. My visit was not long, as Caroline and Mrs. Hurst were going out. I daresay I shall soon see them here to repay the visit.*

James closed the letter with somber thoughts, and went to find other pieces of home to cushion the maltreatment of London.

Jane’s succeeding letters told of her events and tours of the city, but it was not until the end of the month that she returned to the topic of the Bingleys. She had not seen Charles at all, and as for the sisters, even Jane admitted to developing excuses for them as each evening arrived with no return of her visit to them. Jane could no longer be blind to Caroline’s inattention, but when the visitor did at last appear, her shortness of stay and altercation of her manner did not allow Jane to deceive herself any longer.

*My dearest Lizzy, will, I am sure, be incapable of triumphing in your better judgment at my expense when I confess myself to have been entirely disillusioned in Miss Bingley’s regard for me. Though the event has proved you right, do not think me obstinate if I still assert that, considering what her behaviour was, my confidence was as natural as your suspicion. I do not at all comprehend her reason for wishing to be falsely intimate with me. Caroline did not return my visit till yesterday, and not a note, nor a line did I receive in the mean time.*

*When she did come, it was evident she had no pleasure in it. She made a slight, formal apology for not calling before, said not a word of wishing to see me again, and was in every respect so altered a creature that when she went away, I was perfectly resolved to continue the acquaintance no longer. I pity, though I cannot blame her—*
James put the letter down to exhale and rub his eyes. “For once in your life, blame somebody,” he whispered to no one.

I can safely say that every advance to intimacy began on her side, but I pity her, because she must feel that she has been acting wrong, and because I am sure that anxiety for her brother is the cause of it. I need not explain myself further, and though we know this anxiety to be quite needless, yet if she feels it, it will easily account for her behaviour to me. So deservedly dear as he is to his sister, whatever anxiety she may feel on his behalf, is natural and amiable.

James had to reread this section several times before he ultimately shook his head and continued on. “You no longer make sense, Jane.”

I cannot but wonder, however, at her having any such fears now, because if he had at all cared about me, we would have met long ago. He knows of my being in town, I am certain, from something she said herself. It should seem by her manner of talking as if she wanted to persuade herself that he is truly partial to Miss Darcy. I cannot understand it. If I were not afraid of judging harshly, I should be almost tempted to say that there is a strong appearance of duplicity in all this.

James scrubbed a hand over his face. “Maybe I should have gone to London.”

But I will endeavour to banish every painful thought, and think only of what will make me happy: your affection, and the invariable kindnesses my dear uncle and aunt have bestowed me. Let me hear from you soon, Lizzy. Miss Bingley said something of his never returning to Netherfield again. That the house was given up, but not with any certainty… We had better not mention it, least of all to mama. I am extremely glad that you have such pleasant accounts from Hunsford in your last letter. I look forward to switching places, with myself awaiting your letters and you entangling yourself in new company.

Yours, ever,

Jane

At this point, Caroline Bingley met every expectation James had of her, which left his criticism to fall upon Charles. He could not even wish for a renewal of his affections for Jane if he were to continue being a coward in the face of his sisters and friend. As much as James had enjoyed his own moments with Charles Bingley, his character sank in his review of the letter, and James even dared to think it advantageous if Charles married Georgiana Darcy. If Wickham’s account were to be believed, Charles would have his lifelong punishment, and Jane would at last be free from him.

Mrs. Gardiner, of course aware of the siblings’ correspondence, sent her own letter within the parcels Jane sent him. She reminded him of James’s promise concerning that gentleman, and required information. James patiently assured her that the man’s attentions had been thwarted from the Bennets, if nothing else then for the reason of the regiments leaving Hertfordshire.

Dear aunt, your concerns fall upon an anticlimactic result. Not only has Wickham begun packing for a new location, but he must part with a lady outside of the Bennet home. One of the King daughters caught his fancy—she does have a stake to ten thousand, if you are so stuck on our discussion of fortune—however none here dislike him for it and I can assure you I am as much not in love with him as when I first told you. As seriously as ever, I guarantee that if I were in love with him, I would have detested his very name and not only wished him every manner of evil, but would have endeavoured to grant him those evils.

That being said, only Kitty and Lydia feel his defection. They are young in the ways of the world, and are not yet open to the mortifying conviction that handsome young men must have something
to live on. I am sure Lydia believes Wickham would pluck the stars from the sky and eat them as easily as chocolate truffles, the beautiful fool.

Look after Jane. She dwells in her own thoughts almost as much as I do.

James Bennet.

Chapter End Notes

Mrs. Gardiner doesn't know Jamie's gay, so their conversation is meant to have some sort of ironic humor in it.

Next is Jamie going to visit Charlotte~ we 'bout to get rowdy y'all.
James visits Jane in London and then goes to Rosings Park.

Theaters in London used to sell fruit before and during shows...in case this detail seems random when you read it.

So passed the Longbourn family through January and February. James’ thoughts on the impending visit did gradually alter: his promise was secure even though he thought little of the visit. However the increasing absence of Charlotte and Jane raised his desire to see them and lessened his disgust of Mr. Collins. There was added novelty in the scheme as, with such a mother and sisters, home was not entirely faultless. A little change was not unwelcome with the new season.

The only pain was in leaving his father, who likewise began to voice his guarantee of missing his second eldest. For Mr. Bennet’s part, as time progressed he came to so little like James’s going that he declared he would write to and even reply to his son’s letters.

James laughed as Mr. Bennet restlessly lingered in his bedroom doorway while he packed. “Heaven forbid you actually use your stationary,” he teased.

Mr. Bennet sniffed derisively. “Correspondence implies a want of visitors.”

James laughed further as he reached up for a mounted shelf of books. “Then I’ll be sure I read them privately or else others might think you welcoming.”

“See that you do,” his father ordered, reaching past him with his added height for the volumes. “They shall be reminders for you to return safely to me.”

“The only danger lies in madness incurred from Charlotte’s husband,” James said as he accepted the books.

His father chuckled the same moment they heard the bell on their front door chime. “That will be a certain gentleman leaving first.”

Mr. Bennet left the room and James heard Wickham’s voice greet him in the corridor. “Good day, Mr. Bennet.”

“And you. He’s just in there.”

“I shan’t be long. The regiment is leaving earlier than planned; subject to an overeager lieutenant. Hello, James.”
The man himself appeared in the doorway, looking resplendent in his scarlet uniform with his cap under his arm. “Back in your spring raiment,” James observed.

“Yes,” he sighed, stepping forward, “before the cold has finished, however. I think they have the idea the travel will warm us. They forget that horseback lifts us into the wind.”

James laughed, “So your complexion will match your jacket.”

“You’re leaving as well?” Wickham looked around the room and its mild state of unrest.

“To visit my sister in London and then further to Charlotte in Hunsford.”

“Brave soul,” Wickham teased. “You will surely come face to face with the Lady Catherine de Bourgh if Mr. Collins’s frequency in her home is to be believed.”

“I am going for Charlotte, no one else. Even at the risk of being known as a recluse.”

Mirth was in Wickham’s tone. “Will you refuse the lady’s invitations, then?”

“Not initially, I suppose,” James admitted as he crossed the room for clothes in the tall dresser he shared with Jane. “Charlotte is still gaining her place in her ladyship’s part of the country. I will not sabotage her efforts.”

“Gallant as ever,” Wickham approved from where he leaned against the wall. His head turned as he surveyed the room once more. “Is this your room? It has a certain…female presence.”

“Mine and my sister, Jane’s,” he clarified.

“Really?” Wickham chimed with interest. “How unusual. You haven’t another room?”

“I told you we aren’t wealthy,” James gave him a look.

Wickham had the grace to look bashful. “You are right, of course. I cannot remain long,” he stood from the wall. “I wanted to say goodbye to the one who granted me his ears and patience before anyone else.”

“You sound like you’re dying,” James remarked.

Wickham guffawed. “Really, James. Not everyone would have been receptive to my plight.”

“You seem to be doing well for yourself regardless,” James said as he closed his own small trunk.

“I am persistent if nothing else,” Wickham smiled and held out his hand. “Safe travels, Jamie. I hope to have left you with an ideal image of myself.”

James accepted his hand. “As an amiable and pleasant scoundrel?”

“Only pleasant?” Wickham taunted. “I must do better next time.”

“I challenge you to,” James smiled. “Do not catch your death.”

Wickham released his hand and touched his coat buttons. “So long as the stitching doesn’t fail me. My regards to your sisters, and Charlotte, of course.”

James’s fellow travelers the next day were equally amiable though notably less charming. Sir William Lucas and his daughter, Maria, were a good-humoured pair but empty-headed, the latter
taking after the former and thus their discussions faded into the rattle of the chaise. It was a journey of only twenty-four miles, and they began it so early as to be in Gracechurch Street by noon. As they drove to Mr. Gardiner’s door, Jane was at a drawing room window watching their arrival. When they entered the narrow passage that led from the front door to the foyer, Jane was there to meet them, embracing her brother and holding his face to touch his lengthening hair. James earnestly looked at her face, pleased to see it healthful and lovely.

Taking his hand, Jane led him further into the apartments to where a troop of little Gardiner boys and girls stood waiting on the stairs. Their eagerness for their cousin’s appearance would not allow them to wait for him, but coupled with the shyness of their youth, kept them on the stairs. They had not seen him for a twelvemonth but all it took was James commenting as he theatrically looked around, “I was hoping to see my cousins, but all I see are stair mites.”

Thunderous little feet surrounded him and the day passed wonderfully away with the morning in bustle and shopping, while the evening was at one of the theaters. During intermission, Jane went with their cousins to purchase an orange, and James took her place sitting next to their aunt. Mrs. Gardiner savoured his company while he inquired after Jane’s time with her. He was more grieved than astonished to hear, “Jane does struggle to support her spirits, so there are periods of dejection. Your company has much altered this.”

Her focus soon returned to George Wickham, however. James gently rolled his gaze. “Aunt, the man has left Hertfordshire. He bade farewell to me personally.”

“But what sort of girl is Miss King? I should be sorry to think our friend mercenary.”

“Mercenary or prudent motive, it hardly matters, no more than where discretion ends and avarice begins. Even if he were trying to get a girl with ten thousand pounds from a recent inheritance, such a sum does run out. Then he would be left with a wife he may not be able to stand.”

“If you will only tell me what sort of girl Miss King is, I shall know what to think,” she persisted as one of her youngest found James’s lap and climbed onto it.

His arms easily fell around the sleepy child as he voiced, “She is a good kind of girl. I know no harm in her.”

“But he paid her not the smallest attention till her grandfather’s death made her mistress of this fortune,” his aunt deduced. “There seems indelicacy in directing his attentions towards her so soon after this event.”

“If she does not object to it, why should we?”

“Her not objecting does not justify him. It only shows her being deficient in something herself—sense or feeling.”

James laughed gently so as to not disturb his cousin’s sleep. “Have it as you choose. He shall be mercenary twice over given his profession and she shall be foolish.”

“I do not choose this, Lizzy,” she urged. “I should be sorry, you know, to think ill of a young man who has lived so long in Derbyshire.”

“Really? You seem eager to think so of him. It would fit the poor opinion already in place for men of Derbyshire.”

She chuckled with a glance to be sure Jane had not yet returned. “And their intimate friends who’ve visited Hertforshire who are not much better?”
“Well I am going to see a man who has neither sense nor agreeable qualities to recommend him. It seems stupid men are in vast abundance.”

“Take care, Lizzy. That speech savours strongly of disappointment. Actually, that reminds me: how would you feel about trading positions with your sister? Specifically for a tour of pleasure in the summer. We have not quite determined how far it shall carry us, but perhaps to the Lakes.”

James brightened. “I would like that very much.”

“Oh,” she huffed pleasantly as she patted his hand. “You are tolerable and dare I say agreeable. You are a different creature altogether.”

She beamed at him. “You are my type of company, which is the best kind.”

James convinced Sir Lucas and Maria to stay another day, the better for them to recover for the final leg of the journey and for him to ensure Jane’s happiness. Together they took their cousins to the park nearest the Gardiners’ home and created memories which would carry Jane for the rest of her time in London. With all fear for her health banished and the prospect of his northern tour with the Gardiners to look forward to, James and the Lucases departed the next day.

When they left the high road for the lane to Hunsford, every eye was in search of the parsonage, and at length is was discernible. The iron paling of Rosings Park was their boundary on one side: the garden sloping to the road, the house standing on it, as well as the various laurel hedges and trees creating places for matching iron benches and shade. Everything declared they were arriving. As he looked up at the mansion on the hill, James smirked at the recollection of all he had heard of its inhabitants.

Mr. Collins and Charlotte appeared at the door as their chaise rocked to a stop before their quaint gate and the gravel walkway between it and the house. In a moment they were all out of the chaise, Charlotte embracing Jamie much in the way as Jane had, hugging him and commenting on his growing hair. “Soon you’ll be able to tie it back! Shall I braid it for you?”

“Why? So you may put me to work already?” he retorted, but pulled her back for another hug. As for Mr. Collins, his manners were not altered; his formal civility was just what it had been and induced James to be captive for some minutes as he inquired after his side of the family.

After another delay of his pointing out the neatness of the entrance, they were taken into the house where Charlotte held reign. Mr. Collins requested they tour the garden and the two meadows that made up their grounds. Maria, however, in the face of the white frost, had buried her proper boots in her luggage and so the ladies stayed behind while Sir Lucas joined him. James unashamedly remained at the house; Mr. Collins hardly seemed to notice or mind. As James watched them pass by the windows, he heard their soles break through the crusts of frost as Wickham surfaced in his memory, and he wondered distantly how he fared.

During this time, James learned that Lady Catherine was home after some time abroad, and it was spoken of again over dinner for Sir Lucas’s ears. The topic, however, set Mr. Collins off. “Yes! You will all have the honour of seeing Lady Catherine de Bourgh on the ensuing Sunday at church...
Charlotte gracefully met James’ eyes, silence passing between them. “—and I need not say how you will be delighted with her. She is all affability and condescension, and I doubt not but you will be honoured with some portion of her notice when service is over.”

"Has no one yet told him that condescension is not a desirable trait?" James murmured to Maria beside him. She covered her mouth to stifle her giggles.

Mr. Collins continued, "I have scarcely any hesitation in saying that she will include you all in every invitation with which she honours us during your stay here. Her behavior to my dear Charlotte is charming."

James’s brows lifted as he claimed Charlotte’s attention again. My dear, he mouthed discretely and weathered the venom in her gaze before she smirked triumphantly. Meanwhile her husband finished, “We dine at Rosings twice every week, and are never allowed to walk home. Her ladyship’s carriage is regularly ordered for us. I should say one of her ladyship’s carriages, for she has several.”

Charlotte softened, “Lady Catherine is a very respectable, sensible woman, and a most attentive neighbor.”

James swirled the wine in his glass at that, both observing how the family’s interactions were much the same as before the matrimony, but he also meditated on the differences. He silently anticipated how the visit would pass: the quiet tenor of their usual employments, the vexatious interruptions of Mr. Collins, and the gaieties of their intercourse with Rosings.

Even a lively imagination could not settle it all, for in the middle of the next day James heard a sudden slam beneath his room which seemed to boom through the house. After listening a moment, he heard somebody running upstairs in a violent hurry before he met Maria on the landing. Breathless, she huffed, “Jamie! Make haste and come into the dining room…there is a sight to be seen. Come now!”

Together they rushed into the dining room, where Maria planted herself once more before the window which looked out across the lane. In a low phaeton sat two ladies who were speaking with Charlotte and Mr. Collins. James frowned, “Is this all? I expected at least the pigs had gotten into the garden. There is nothing but Lady Catherine and her daughter.”

“That’s not Lady Catherine!” Maria corrected. “The old lady is Mrs. Jenkinson, who lives with them. The other is Miss de Bourgh, only look at her. She is quite a little creature, is she not? Who would have thought she could be so thin and small?”

But James was recalling Wickham once more and a conversation they had once shared. “She is either foolish or rude, then, to remain out of doors in all this wind and to insist on Charlotte’s staying with her. Why does she not just come in?”

“Oh! Charlotte says she hardly ever does. It is the greatest of favours when Miss de Bourgh comes in.”

“How much of a favour can it be to accept tea and biscuits made by somebody else?” he wondered skeptically as he observed the young lady. Her dark hair reminded him of Mary, which stirred a longing for Longbourn inside of him, but she was indeed frail-looking even from this distance. James found it an odd yet fitting picture: her and Darcy next to one another, engaged in their dark colours and somber expressions.
The Collinses stood at the gate in conversation with the ladies for some time while Sir William stationed himself in the doorway, caught between avoiding social obligation and wanting to use his title. He settled on bowing whenever Miss de Bourgh looked his way until the ladies drove on, and the others returned into the house. Mr. Collins no sooner took two steps into the abode than he began to congratulate them on their good fortune, however he took so long in getting to the point that Charlotte simply cut him off:

“We’ve been asked to dine at Rosings tomorrow. Miss de Bourgh is eager to meet you all.”

It became immediately blatant that Mr. Collins considered the invitation a triumph. The Bennets’ indifference of his patroness coupled with the opportunity of displaying the grandeur of such a lady to his visitors inflamed a wish he did not expect to be granted so soon. It was a unique experience, watching Mr. Collins flutter in a mixture of excitement or agitation—it was difficult to distinguish in the man—during his usual boasts.

“I confess,” he said, “that I should not have been at all surprised by her ladyship’s asking us on Sunday to drink tea and spend the evening at Rosings. I rather expected, from my knowledge of her affability, that it would happen, but who could have foreseen such attention as this! Who could have imagined that we should receive an invitation to dine there—and an invitation moreover including the whole party!—so immediately after your arrival!”

“The lady is entirely insignificant since it was her daughter who made the offer,” James said, but so only Charlotte was the one to hear. Sir Lucas only inspired Mr. Collins with his own ramblings of elegant breeding, therefore nothing else was spoken of for the entirety of the day and the next morning. Mr. Collins was carefully instructing them on what they were to expect, so that the sight of such rooms, so many servants, and so splendid a dinner might not wholly overpower them.

When the ladies left to dress for dinner James could no longer leash his annoyance. “We are not allergic to finery simply because we do not have it. Get on with it.”

But this seemed to trigger another train of thought in Mr. Collins. “Do not make yourself uneasy, cousin, about your apparel. Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us, which becomes herself and daughter. I would advise you merely to put on whichever of your clothes is superior to the rest; there is no occasion for anything more. Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved.”

So I am to play the country bumpkin, James thought somewhat bitterly as he retreated to his own room to don his green satin and pearl his aunt had given him. However, Mr. Collins visited their doors so frequently to tell them to hasten their pace, that Lady Catherine so much objected to being kept waiting for her dinner, that Maria became more and more frightened. Her anxiety reached such a height that James entered hers and Charlotte’s room to give her his pearl pin for her hair. It would not eclipse Charlotte’s modest jewels but would simultaneously elevate Maria’s confidence.

Though the weather was fine and the frost had melted to make their walk through park pleasant, James’s sentiment for the gardens did not meet the raptures Mr. Collins was desiring. James felt a subtle foreboding that this was to be a continuous theme throughout the evening.

Though the home was exquisitely carved from light stone, the interior was dominantly painted, papered, or paneled in deep, expensive colours. The point was made: each detail was luxurious, but James easily decided he preferred Netherfield’s lighter, spacious rooms which gave way to light and air instead of dark caverns of finery.

When they ascended the steps of the entrance hall, Maria’s alarm was every moment increasing, and even Sir William did not look perfectly composed. Far from insuring their confidence, Mr.
Collins had shattered it altogether. James’ courage did not fail him as he lifted Maria’s hand into his elbow, silently cursing that he could not do the same for Charlotte on her first evening in this place. Maria clutched at him, but her breaths audibly grew even.

Through the hall and an antechamber of sorts they crossed, before they entered the room in which Lady Catherine, her daughter, and Mrs. Jenkinson were sitting. Her ladyship, as she rose with immense dignity, was visibly night and day to Mrs. Jenkinson. James felt foolish for having mistaken them.

Mr. Collins had of course already informed them that she was to speak first, that it was befitting her rank to offer the opportunity of introduction. She did so, first addressing the Collinses; it settled both James and the Gardiners’ trepidations to see Charlotte welcomed so familiarly by the figure of their fears. Next was Sir Lucas, who occupied Lady Catherine by his title only briefly before her eyes detached with boredom. She transferred ambivalent compliments of Charlotte to her sister: “You have the same complexion as your sister and a likewise admirable posture. Your mother has taught you well.”

Maria bobbed a curtsy and thanked her but gratefully passed off her attention to James.

“You are Mr. Bennet.” It was not a question. “I have heard curious things of you from Mrs. Collins. You are an entrepreneur of sorts.”

James produced another bow. “I have been fortunate to find a small population willing to pay for the fruits of my hobbies.”

“Are you being modest?” she chortled in a way that suggested both amusement and satisfaction. She was a tall and large woman, not as a result of any obese habits, but rather her body matched her strongly marked features, which might once have been handsome. Her air was far from conciliating. On the contrary, her manner of receiving them was not inclined toward her visitors forgetting their inferior rank. Her tone dripped with self-importance. Watching her eyes roam the present company for confirmations of her opinion and humour brought Mr. Wickham immediately to James’ mind, as well as a sharp longing for his warm conversation.

“Well do sit down. We have some moments before the aperitifs have finished. Charlotte, have you resolved that matter with the poultry…”

James accepted the chance to sit and turned his eyes on the woman’s daughter. Maria’s astonishment was not unwarranted. Perhaps Miss de Bourgh would have looked like her mother, but her being so thin and so small denied her of this. Further contrary to her mother, she spoke very little except in a low voice to Mrs. Jenkinson, whose appearance was nothing remarkable; she easily remained in the background of Lady Catherine’s grandeur. As James silently observed the family, the lady certainly thought of herself as the planet around which her satellites revolved, but the family dynamic was so contrary to James’s that he daydreamed with some humour what Lady Catherine’s reaction would be to his rambunctious sisters.

However as they were ushered into the dining room, the topic of conversation did turn to his family. Lady Catherine seemed intent to weed out his pedigree. After thoroughly inquiring about his father and what sort of carriage he kept, she moved on to his wife. “What is your mother’s maiden name, Mr. Bennet?”

“Gardiner, my lady.”

“And how many siblings are in her line?”
“Herself, a sister, and a brother. Our aunt lives near us in Hertfordshire with her husband, Philips. Her brother lives with his wife in London.”

“In a commercial district, I imagine?”

“Gracechurch Street, yes,” he consented, glad she kept her standards nice and low; less to disappoint.

“I have not heard unpleasant things of this district, especially since certain merchants have taken residence there—for the low rent, of course—and have quite turned the place around,” she remarked, and then proceeded to relay every detail of Gracechurch Street she had, regardless whether it was given to her or derived herself. James was glad he was momentarily relieved of her attentions, if at the risk of her basing her impressions of his relatives on a part of town and not the people themselves.

“And how many sisters have you, Mr. Bennet?”

“Four.”

“Any of them married?”

“None, as yet.”

“Are they not handsome?”

James restrained his laughter at her privileged audacity. Charlotte saved him with, “They are very handsome, my lady. The eldest, Jane, is well known as the most beautiful in the county.”

“But not married,” Lady Catherine finished. “This must be attributed to either her accomplishments or the lack of available men in the country. Do you play and sing, Mr. Bennet?”

“A little.”

“Oh! Then surely so do your sisters. Some time or other we shall be happy to hear you. Our instrument is a capital one, probably superior to—well. You shall try it some day. What do your sisters favour playing?”

“One does,” he corrected. “She enjoys the piano.”

“Why did not you all learn? You ought all to have learned. The Miss Webbs down the road all play, and their father has not so good an income as yours. Do they draw?”

“No, not at all.”

“What? None?”

“Not one.” Charlotte shifted restlessly in her seat beside him.

“That is most strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity. Your mother should have taken you to town every spring for the benefit of masters.”

“My mother might not have had any objection, but my father hates London.”

“He has spent much time there?”

“He lived there as a young man, earning his fortune to buy our home in Longbourn.”
"Has your governess left you?" she switched.

"We never had a governess," he replied with some mirth. Lady Catherine looked momentarily appalled.

"No governess? How is that possible? Five children brought up at home without a governess, I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education."

James could hardly help smiling as he assured her that had not been the case.

"Then who taught you? Who attended to you? Without a governess you must have been neglected."

"Perhaps my younger siblings were," he acquiesced, "but if any of us wanted to learn, we never lacked the means, and likewise could choose idleness. We were always encouraged to read and had all the masters that were necessary. My mother and father raised us in either a markedly old fashioned or perhaps advanced way: by themselves. My father largely took up the task of our education. He is the jack of all trades."

"But a master of none," she finished indifferently. "Your mother was surely not idle, not with two siblings doing well for themselves?"

James was briefly stunned by the workings of her thoughts. "Of course not, but my father and mother do their best work at different times of the day. They balanced our education between the two of them."

"Aye, no doubt, but that is what a governess would prevent. If I had known your mother, I should have advised her most strenuously to engage one. I always say nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it."

James sighed to himself and contented himself with his soup while Lady Catherine spoke her fill. "It is wonderful how many families I have been the means of supplying in that way. I am always glad to get a young person well placed out. Four nieces of Mrs. Jenkinson are most delightfully situated through my means, and it was but the other day that I recommended another young person, who was merely accidentally mentioned to me, and the family is quite delighted with her. Mrs. Collins, I did tell you of Lady Metcalfe’s calling yesterday to thank me? She finds Miss Pope a treasure. ‘Lady Catherine,’ she said, ‘you have given me a treasure.’ Are any of your younger sisters out, Mr. Bennet?"

His attention lifted off his food as if to clearly convey, _Oh, me again?_ before he said, "Yes, ma’am, all."

“All!” she was beside herself. “What, all four out at once? How odd! And you are only the second. The youngest out before the eldest is married? Your younger sisters must be very young?”

“My youngest is not sixteen,” he confirmed as Lady Catherine huffed to herself. “But really, ma’am, I think it would be hard upon younger sisters, especially such socially inclined ones as mine, if they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder is still unmarried, and from such circumstances as they may not be able to help. The last born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth as the first. It would be unlikely to promote sibling affection if such a hierarchy barred such interactions."

It was to Lady Catherine’s credit that she remain silent to listen to all he had to say. “Upon my word, you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person. Pray, what is your age?”

Whether James’s smile was bashful or guileful, he left it to her to decide as he said, “With three
younger sisters grown up, your ladyship can hardly expect me to own to it.”

Lady Catherine seemed astonished at not receiving a direct answer, and James suspected himself to be the first creature who had ever dared trifle with so much dignified impertinence. Mr. Collins was the picture of perplexity, not understanding such an interaction which did not involve profuse flattery of her ladyship.

“You cannot be more than twenty, I am sure,” she decided with finality. “Therefore you need not conceal your age.”

“I am two and twenty,” he defied.

Lady Catherine held his gaze but a new coarse arrived along with a footman with a letter, and the conversation moved elsewhere. The lady only exempted herself from conversation while she read her letter and complained to the footmen of its writer being late.

“At this time of year, frost and ice are nothing, and the traveling season has not begun, what is keeping him?”

“I cannot say, my lady,” the man murmured patiently.

“Tell our cook to check his inventories. Easter dinner as well as various brunches beforehand…”

James was relieved of his part until dinner was finished and they were called to her ladyship’s card tables. Thankfully quadrille required a limited number, so James was left to play with Miss de Bourgh, Mrs. Jenkinson, and Maria. Of course this resulted in him conversing only with the latter, but not without his trying to engage the younger de Bourgh. Her eyes were shy but intelligent, further reminding him of Mary, but while Mary was eager to speak when she had something to say, Miss de Bourgh seemed adamantly silent. Only the slightest of curves moved her lips when he teased, “Do you play at casino in rebellion of your mother’s quadrille? As I hear it, she plays nothing else.”

He calmly waited for her to reply, but her progress was slow and Mrs. Jenkinson intercepted the topic.

By the time the carriage was called, James did not care to admire it and instead rode with the driver for the night to cleanse the evening. Mr. Collins was of course in spirits as they arrived at their home, but Sir William and Maria announced they were going to sleep, leaving Mr. Collins to his own devices while the house settled for slumber. It was no surprise to James when a soft knock sounded on his door and Charlotte entered as he finished stoking the fire.

“Your patroness is predictably a piece of work,” he said without preamble.

Charlotte laughed as she shut the door behind her. “Yes, but you did your part in provoking her.”

“You mean unlike everyone else, I checked her assault. Her late husband’s title has given leeway to her impertinence.”

“Be nice,” Charlotte scolded, but only mildly as she came to sit on his bed. “She may be unbearably nosy but her high standard and constant interference has made this area a descent place to live. If any disagreement arises among the neighbors, she attends to it herself.”

“How admirable of her,” he said grumpily as he poured two cups of tea from the kettle resting in the embers. “She seems to enjoy you well enough.”
“It doesn’t take much for her to like you,” she granted.

“Just do everything she says and agree even when she’s wrong,” James taunted.

“That is the nature of aristocracy, isn’t it?” she threw back, accepting the cup he handed her.

James laughed as he sat beside her. “Now who is cynical?”

“This is my life now, Lizzy,” she reminded. “You can be as rude as you like because you’re leaving.”

“I am not so awful, but I am giving you something to talk of after I’m gone. Shall I do my best in convincing her I am a rural scoundrel? If nothing else you will have a reprieve from her speaking of herself.”

Charlotte guffawed but pleaded, “Heavens, no. It would be unbearable to hear her tirade about someone I care about so deeply. I know it injured you to weather her questions and remarks.”

He raked his hair back. “I know my family is not a picture of exemplary puissance. I suppose I expected it but I’ve never thought anyone was quite worthy enough to pass judgment on us.”

“Your family is closer than most and lacks the rigid obligations so many face. But you were able to say yes to most of her queries. Why didn’t you? You’re very accomplished.”

James’ brows lifted over his cup as he sipped. “I haven’t any pride to feed.” Then he froze, “You have not told her I decorated your wedding?”

She smiled. “No, she hasn’t asked.”

“Good. Perhaps she’ll forget I play piano. My skills are not worth mentioning twice.”

“Don’t be so sure,” she warned. “Her ladyship enjoys music. I think your playing is well enough.”

He shrugged. “Mary needed someone to help her practice duets. I don’t harbor any particular love for the instrument.”

“Did you notice the letter during dinner?” Charlotte switched.

“Sure. What about it?”

She gave him a look. “You haven’t any idea who might be arriving for Easter?”

James grimaced. “Surely the Darcys would prefer their own church compared to Mr. Collins’s.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “It is a family holiday. Even you and yours have a special meal and your traditions.”

“Ohours do not include attending church,” he reminded.

“I always found your father’s scholarly atheism to be fascinating but I’d avoid antagonizing her ladyship with it. You were positively pagan every time we went to play in the fields and wood. You needn’t attend every Sunday. But do so often enough to save face. We can only lie about illness or fatigue for so many weeks.”

“You can only listen to her ladyship harp on about medicine for so long,” he taunted. “Surely she thinks herself a vault of medical knowledge as well.”
“Indeed,” she finished and he huffed a breath of mirth over his tea. She smiled briefly. “I’m happy you’ve come, Lizzy.”

“It’s not unbearable being here,” he returned.

“Oh!” she stormed, shoving his shoulder so he fell, laughing, among his pillows, tea lost to the floor.

Sir William stayed only a week at Hunsford, but his visit was long enough to convince him of his daughter’s being most comfortably settled. While Sir William was with them, Mr. Collins devoted his mornings to driving him out in his gig and showing him the country. And when Sir Lucas left it was a further relief to know Mr. Collins spent the time between breakfast and dinner either working in the garden, or within his own library. He had strategically stationed himself in a room which faced the road, while Charlotte had likewise claimed a back room as her parlour. James commended her choice, as the room absorbed the morning light and thus afforded itself the warmest and brightest place to spend one’s leisure hours.

Mr. Collins’s place in front of the road was revealed to be the obvious reason why dining at Rosings was a biweekly occurrence. He was often heard rushing out of his office to meet the telltale phaeton and converse with whomever was inside. Few days passed in which Mr. Collins did not walk to Rosings, and these were often enough that Charlotte did not think it necessary that she join him. In this way Charlotte spared James the tiresome dinners, as refusing her ladyship’s invitations was more commonplace than Mr. Collins had led to believe.

Until the morning arrived in which Charlotte, her sister, and James were lounging in her room, lethargically eating the last bites of their brunch, and a familiar carriage was heard rattling past. But far from the usual length of time between Mr. Collins going to meet it and his returning to the house, the latter arrived quickly and the man himself burst into the room.

“Lady Catherine’s Easter guests has arrived! His lordship, the very same from the Netherfield ball has come with a Colonel Fitzwilliam, both of whom are her ladyship’s nephews. I may thank you, cousin, for this piece of civility. Lord Darcy would never have come so soon to wait upon me.”

One of James’ brows lifted as he slowly dragged his fork out of his mouth, not fully understanding —

The doorbell chimed almost simultaneously as a door opened in the house, but all the house’s occupants were already in this room. “Sorry for the intrusion! Thought we might stop by for a proper hello.”

And then there they were: a man in scarlet with a markedly broken and repeatedly healed nose and Mr. Darcy in contrasting dark blue, black, and white silks. James was suddenly aware of his place on the couch, lying with his breakfast plate on his chest. He knew Charlotte was looking at him, her terror only hidden by her head turned and down during her curtsy. He rose as smoothly as he could and set his plate aside, the better to be rid of his embarrassment and stood to shake the Colonel’s hand.

“James Bennet. I’m visiting from Hertfordshire. I knew I’d be playing the part of bumpkin but I did not anticipate the role coming so easily.”

The Colonel surprised him by guffawing and shaking his hand vigorously. “Please, the fault is our own. We’ve completely intruded without any real invitation. I’m Colonel Fitzwilliam. Our parents shared the unfortunate thought to name us this but my rank makes doing away with the name easy.”
He glanced at Mr. Darcy, who so visibly contrasted him in colour and demeanor that it took several moments before James remembered that they did indeed share a first name. “Oh…I’ve only heard the name shortened to William.”

Darcy’s eyes landed on him silently, inducing James to bow. “Good morning, my lord.”

The man’s hand extended before him. James straightened and felt the fingers slide past his, gently cold from the morning travel. “Mr. Bennet,” he greeted simply.

“Maria, refreshments,” Charlotte ordered softly. Her sister gratefully ran from the room as the Colonel took James’ plate from the couch and set it on the table to take its place. James sat beside him and began to drain his glass of juice, if nothing else than to excuse himself from speaking—

“So have you met my hag of an aunt yet?”

James snorted into his glass. “Um,” was all he managed as he recovered.

“That’s a yes,” the Colonel laughed. “I hope she has not ruined any chance of us seeing you at dinner. Though the company is cumbersome, the food is divine.”

“We would be happy to join you at Rosings,” Charlotte salvaged.

“Indeed,” Mr. Collins began. “We have the familiarity of often dining twice a week with her ladyship—”

The Colonel lithely interrupted, “Of course this would be under my invitation, which I daresay would be more informal and allow one to excuse themselves from quadrille if they so needed.”

He met James’ gaze with a look of knowing exactly what dinner at Rosings entailed. James found the decision to like Colonel Fitzwilliam immediate and easy.

“How is the health of your family, Mr. Bennet?” Darcy asked, yanking James attention to him.

“They’re…well. They’re well,” he said more confidently. “My eldest sister has been in town these three months. I don’t suppose you would have happened to see her there.”

Of course he had not. Darcy shook his head and confirmed as much, and then fell silent for the remainder of their visit. His cousin filled the conversation with ease, informing them the Rosings house would be occupied with various events for the following week building up to Easter, but afterward they would surely be hosted to dinner. The men soon left, leaving the house to calm after their intrusion.

His foretelling proved exactly the case, although the Colonel came to them often enough. “Poor Darcy is auntie’s favourite,” he said upon his second visit to the house. “So he must remain behind. He has the audacity to leave Georgie behind, so to compensate, he must remain in her sights.”

“Georgiana?” James wondered.

The Colonel nodded over his sandwich. “Aunt loves music most of all, and Georgie is the best pianist in the family. Darcy does her a great relief in leaving her out of aunt’s clutches.”

James laughed somewhat anxiously. “I’ve yet to meet anyone other than myself who speaks as bluntly.”

“My half of the family is rather distant, geographically,” he nodded, “and my being in the military
has roughened my tongue. You said you were from Hertfordshire? A number of regiments were there this autumn past, I believe. I would have enjoyed meeting you prior to now.”

“I am not so interesting, but you would have certainly had spectacles to occupy yourself during that time.”

“Really? Darcy speaks well of you.”

James was stilled in disbelief. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” the Colonel recollected, tipping his head to the side as he considered, “he spoke of you. Mentioned, more like, however you surely have noticed his ineptitude regarding conversation.” He smiled consolingly. “That skill went to me, but if you made enough of an impression as for him to mention you in this way, it is as good as praise from him.”

“You are kind but I disagree.”

The Colonel nodded his acquiescence. “Well it’s not like the man is here to defend himself. Charlotte and Maria, whatever do you get up to while Mr. Collins is attending to my aunt?”

The Lucas sisters had certainly come to enjoy hosting Colonel Fitzwilliam, though he was an easy individual to host. Intelligent but simple minded, he was kind and refused to be any sort of difficulty. He knew exactly when his welcome had worn thin, though this often was not until after dinner.

It was the evening before Easter that he announced, “I do believe tomorrow my aunt will invite you all to tea or supper. You have been duly warned. Now that I have fractured our festivities, James, I must tell you I am vexed by these sweets. They put my aunt’s pastry chef to shame.”

Charlotte and James laughed, the former declaring, “You have fractured nothing, sir.”

“And I highly doubt my crude truffles can stand up to her ladyship’s cuisine. I must thank you for bringing the chocolate. It was a wonderful surprise.”

“I had expected to be the hero of the evening, but then you disappear and return with these!” he exclaimed, waving the small orb before popping it into his mouth.

James apologized with mirth in his words, “The Collinses have had quite a harvest of hazelnuts. Roasted and coated in honey and chocolate make for a guilty sweet. My father made them for us many years ago.”

“Ahm!” he moaned dejectedly. “I would kiss the man if my threads were not threatening to pop. I must take my leave before this happens. I trust I will see you all on the marrow.”

And indeed they did during the morning’s Easter ceremony. It took James one look at the unique interior of the church to decide where to sit. As churches were usually shaped like a cross from a bird’s eye, so was this one, however Mr. Collins’s platform was in the center of the room, presumably implying his words came from the Saviour’s heart. Thus the seats were arranged to face this focal point, and James sat on the outskirts, where he opened a sidedoor to let in the fresh morning air and birdsong.

The prominent figures of the assembly sat where they could both see and be seen; Lady Catherine and her nephews sitting near the head of the cross. Colonel Fitzwilliam came over to shake James’ hand and to kiss the ladies’ but soon returned to her ladyship’s side for the service to begin. Charlotte and Maria sat in the pew in front of James, covering any view one might have as to why
he was writing so much in his book of psalms. Only the bored and wandering child who came to sit next to him would know he was drawing wreaths he might make later to adorn the Collins’s home.

The service passed pleasantly in this way, James placing his journal on the child’s legs to keep him in place while they silently drew until the little one was called back by his mother before a hymn began. As everyone stood to sing, James slipped out of the church.

When the family returned to the house, he already had collected materials and made a wreath for their gate and the front door; hazelnuts, grey sallow, and various wildflowers he could find made up the bundles. Rabbits were approaching and dashing away from his work, curious and eager for his treats as the family walked up the walkway.

“Tea and supper,” Charlotte said without preamble.

James silently snipped the ribbon and twine he was using to tie bundles of carrots, greens, and crystalized salt on twigs to hang from a tree to distract the rabbits. The sisters helped him tie the treats to the saplings in the garden as a family of deer was already visible in blue fog of the forest in the distance. Mr. Collins was pacing excitedly around, rambling his usual praises at receiving such an invitation.

“To be included with the intimate family on such a holiday! To share the feast! What a immense pleasure—”

His sudden pause drew their attention to his waving at the phaeton driving past. Various heads turned toward them in the open carriage, but James bent to retrieve more twine instead of ogling.

At the appointed hour, they joined the party in Lady Catherine’s drawing room. It was much as their first evening there, but with the added company rising to meet them. Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed overjoyed to see them as if the morning had never happened, shaking James’ hand before he had even faced the obligation of greeting Lady Catherine.

“Happy Easter!” he said, shaking James’ entire frame from his hand.

“Hap-py Easter,” James laughed against the energy rattling up his arm. Mr. Darcy approached, then, and they bowed to each other. If they were to speak, they did not get the chance as Lady Catherine was foreign to being greeted last.

Once the family was settled once more, James came to stand beside the Colonel at the window. “I apologize in advance for your uniform.”

The Colonel turned puzzled eyes to him and then at the tin box he held to him. His expression transformed into jubilation as his hands both reached for the tin and gripped his nape. “You rascal! You’re not sorry, whatsoever.”

“What is this?”

James looked up at Darcy gazing between them. With complete gravity, the Colonel pushed him to stand between them and her ladyship as he murmured, “Have one of these, Will. Save me from myself.”

Dark lashes kissed his cheeks as he gazed into the open tin and the truffles resting on a shred of blue cloth. He silently lifted one to his lips and chewed contemplatively. His only response was turning to James, “Did you make these?”

“William! Come here, I must know how Georgiana is doing with her history studies,” his aunt
interrupted.

The Colonel sighed as he and Darcy exchanged looks. They parted ways, the former excusing himself so he could put the sweets in his room, and the former attending to his relative. He proved to be her chosen person for discussion, speaking mostly to him and him alone unless she desired someone else’s agreement. James observed this with something like confusion. Her ladyship all but ignored her daughter and Darcy his fiancée. James planted himself beside Miss de Bourgh and Mrs. Jenkinson, although the latter was engaged with Charlotte and Maria.

“Do you have a favourite dish during the holiday?” he began. She looked at him, and after a moment shook her head. “Forgive me if I am forward, but does your health permit you to eat sweets?”

She blinked at him and said quietly, “Sometimes. It is not sugar which ails me.”

“Then may I suggest bothering your cousin, the Colonel, when the craving strikes you? He’s hiding a small trove of chocolates in his room, but he can be persuaded to share.”

She processed this and a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Is that what you gave him?”

He grinned and nodded. “The quiet ones are always observant, like your intelligence is a secret. You remind me of one of my sisters.”

Her features softened. “Which one?”

“Mary. She came after me. I’m afraid she’s been rather caught between generations; Jane and myself inspired her literary interests, but the younger two came too late to inspire a rambunctious spirit.”

“Are they very energetic?” she asked.

“Uh,” James laughed as he raked his fingers through his hair and behind his ear. “I think that is putting it mildly. Our youngest, Lydia, is…her heart is good. Her mind is lacking…in sense. Or rather, it moves too quickly to give sense the time to judge her actions.”

A laugh of all things gently escaped her throat. “But you love her. That much is obvious.”

James felt Darcy’s eyes move toward him from where he silently weathered his aunt’s conversation.

“You said you had two younger than Mary?”

“Kitty,” James nodded. “Well. Katherine, but we call her Kitty.” He gave a slight glance at her ladyship as her daughter nodded.

“I understand. What is she like?”

His brows lifted as he smiled bashfully. “I am not boring you? I do have so many siblings.”

She smiled more easily and shook her head. “I’ve never left Hunsford but once when I was a little girl.”

“Well that must change,” he declared softly.

She visibly closed within herself. “My…condition does not allow me the opportunity.”
“Have doctors never told you a change of climate is good?”

“Mother does not believe any place to be superior than home.”

“Ah,” he nodded with another look at her ladyship. Darcy was clearly listening to them instead of her. “If I may be so bold, I disagree with much she says. I think you should be the one who decides which climate suits you best.”

Her chin lifted, her eyes filled with something like hope. “Where would you recommend?”

He leaned back and tilted his head guiltily. “I am partial to Hertfordshire. The sun shines through the morning mist in a way it doesn’t anywhere else. The air turns gold. And the company is not so bad; we country folk find different things interesting than other tiers of society. I think you would like Netherfield Park.”

“William wrote to us from there,” she nodded. “I would like your views on it.”

He shrugged. “It is quite contrary to your home. Where you have deep colours and dark wood, Netherfield is marble and white paint.”

“It sounds like Pemberley,” she voiced fondly. “That is the only place I have been.”

“My aunt is fond of Derbyshire, but I have never been,” James said.

“It is beautiful.” They looked up at Darcy coming to sit in the chair adjacent to them.

“Is Netherfield much like Pemberley?” Miss de Bourgh asked him.

“It is smaller and…perhaps rustic, but it is not without its charms,” he granted.

“Rustic because only certain rooms were furnished during your stay,” James reminded.

“It was predetermined we would be there for a short time,” Darcy replied.

“I thought the Bingleys were looking for a family estate,” he contrasted.

“Such things take time and searching to decide upon.”

“That depends on who is deciding,” James held his gaze.

“I imagine it is a decision between the four of them,” Darcy said simply. James gave him a deadpan look, to which Darcy had the grace to look puzzled—

Lady Catherine cut in from her place across the room, “What is that you are saying, Fitzwilliam? What is it you are talking of? What are you telling Mr. Bennet? Let me hear what it is.”

Darcy exhaled through his nose, taking his time in turning his head before his voice carried, “We are speaking of music, madam.”

James’ features opened, undeniably impressed.

“Of music! Then pray speak aloud. It is, of all subjects, my delight. I must have my share in the conversation, if you are speaking of music. There are few people in England who have more enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne, if her health had allowed her to apply.”
James observed how Miss de Bourgh’s jaw gradually fell, her hands composed in her lap. Eventually she felt his eyes on her and accepted his small smile with her own.

“I am confident that she would have performed delightfully. How does Georgiana get on, Darcy?”

“In piano or her wellbeing? In both, she fares marvelously. She is a young lady ahead of her years.”

“I am glad to hear such a good account of her,” she proclaimed, “and pray tell her from me that she cannot expect to excel if she does not practice a great deal.”

“I assure you, she does not need such advice. She practices constantly.”

“So much the better. It cannot be done too much, and when I next write to her, I shall charge her not to neglect it on any account.” James let his head sag onto his hand, foreseeing no immediate end to her input. “I often tell young ladies that no excellence in music is to be acquired without constant practice. I have told Mr. Bennet several times that he will never play really well unless he practices more—”

James lifted his head with a confused grimace on his face, earning a stifled giggle from Anne. Darcy looked rather ashamed of his aunt’s behaviour but he perked up to ask under her words. “Do you play?”

“It’s nothing for her to craft ideas about,” James disregarded.

“I would like to hear you,” Anne said softly. “Does Hertfordshire have its own songs?”

He shrugged. “Some local composers were kind enough to make copies for Mary to use for practice. I wouldn’t think them up to her ladyship’s standard.”

“That is for us to decide, is it not?” she said smoothly. He stared at her and after a moment she giggled to herself.

“Miss Anne, you have a sense of humour.”

“My guilty secret,” she laughed.

“Protect it with your life,” he joined her mirth. “One’s humour is the first to leave in the face of hardship.”

“Would you lessen such hardship with your playing one day?” she asked. “We have a piano in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room, so you might play without a critical ear to judge you.”

He smiled, “You are kind to cater to my wishes, but I do not wish to be an inconvenience.”

“How would you be inconvenient?” Darcy wondered.

James met his steady gaze. “I imagine many sort of ways.”

Darcy gazed at him, absorbing this until it was announced to be dinner time. At some point during the meal, the word came around to the Colonel, who approached him while coffee was being served afterward. “I am I to expect a concert eventually?”

“Absolutely not,” James laughed. “A meager demonstration, perhaps.”

“Are you being modest, Mr. Bennet?” Lady Catherine overheard.
The Colonel’s eyes were immediately apologetic but he was silent. “I’m afraid not, my lady,” James said.

“Then take the time to practice here. You shan’t be a bother to us,” she insisted. The room was silent in regards to counterarguments.

The Colonel whispered, “The better to get it over with.”

James handed him his untouched coffee and went to sit on the bench. The lid over the keys lifted and slid back more smoothly than any piano he had played. He could see Mary’s fingers over the keys, and from there he oriented himself. Her favourite was a melody in which the pedals elongated the notes, creating a sonorous story in the air. Lady Catherine listened to half of the song, and then spoke as before to Lord Darcy until the latter walked away from her and toward the pianoforte. James glanced up at him at the risk of missing two of the keys, but Darcy gave no indication he had noticed or cared.

“Do you mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming to hear me? I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well. I have the stubbornness that allows courage to rise in the face of intimidation.”

“I mean no such thing,” he countered, but not unkindly. “I have had the pleasure of your acquaintance long enough to know you do so enjoy ridding a person of their premeditated ideas.”

James laughed as he focused on the keys. “Am I the villain to your story?”

“I think not.”

James let the notes drag and linger in the air as he rotated to say to the Colonel behind him, “You will either learn or hear from Mr. Darcy to measure my words with salt. I have a habit of dissecting one’s personality for my own analysis.”

The Colonel approached the piano from where he had been leaning against the wall. “I should like to know how Will behaves among strangers, then.”

“Would you? You may find my retellings unsavoury.”

“Oh, Darcy,” the Colonel accused. “What have you done of which I might be ashamed?”

James looked at him as he countered pleasantly, “I am not afraid of you.” His handsome features were as close to a smile as James had ever seen.

“Let me hear what you have to accuse him of,” the Colonel grinned.

“At his first assembly in Hertfordshire, he participated in but four of the dances, though ladies were scarce in the room.”

“Lord Darcy,” Colonel scolded. “With how your own sister enjoys dancing, surely you would not deny a room of willing ladies your time?”

“I had not at the time the honour of knowing any lady in the assembly beyond my own party.”

Lady Catherine interrupted, “Colonel! I need you, come here.”

“My turn, is it?” he harrumphed, and left them with a lingering look at Darcy.

James’ fingertips roamed over the keys, no longer playing, simply feeling the smoothness of such
He looked up at Darcy, who had not moved.

“I should have judged better…but I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers.”

James’ brows furrowed over his smile. “You are a man of sense and education who has lived in the world… It is strange you might think yourself subpar to introduce yourself, especially to such country folk who are easy to please.”

“I disagree,” he said softly. He had looked across the room toward his cousin. “I do not have the talent which some people possess.” He looked back down at James. “Of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I have often seen done.”

“If we are to take your aunt’s advice, the solution would be incessant practice,” James provided. “But really…I’d say you are only poor at lying.”

Darcy’s eyes were soft as his lips parted, waiting for him to say more.

“As you once said, you judge critically. If one does not meet your interests, you cannot feign delight or concern. Some might deem this small minded or closed hearted, but I cannot fault you in being selective, what with how many already seek your attentions.”

“Yes…” he said, and the way he said it…James felt it was a small glance inside the man’s façade. He sounded tired. “I have grown accustomed to strictly sifting through acquaintances.”

“And here I stubbornly sit,” James chuckled. “Defying your censorship.”

That puzzled expression came across Darcy’s face once more. “I have not thought negatively of you, Mr. Bennet.”

James perplexed the man further by waving his words aside. “Might as well call me James. There is a certain familiarity which comes from sharing a house and enduring a hostess such as Caroline Bingley.”

James did not look at him during his silence. “James…” he said, as if feeling the word on his lips. “Have…have I not heard your relations call you…Lizzy? Or something similar?”

“My middle name is Elizabeth.”

“Oh…” he exhaled ponderously.

James peeked up at him. “How does your time with the Miss Bingley progress?”

Darcy’s features settled into indifference. “My time with her is as much the same as my time spent with most, I would say.”

James laughed, and Darcy’s eyes seemed drawn to the sound. “How tragic for her, to have fallen through your cracks.”

“What do you mean?”

James gazed at him almost pitifully. “Surely you must have noticed? She fancies you.”
“Oh…yes, I have,” he admitted.

“That there is hope for you, yet,” James teased gently.

“But I harbor no…interest for her. Though this has never seemed to dissuade her intentions.”

James huffed a breath of mirth as he lazily began a new song. “No. Why would it? You will fulfill all of Caroline’s monetary fantasies.”

“And what of your own?” Darcy surprised him.

James looked up, but only briefly. “My fantasies involve feeling, not money.”

“You misunderstand me, James.”

He looked up again, but Lady Catherine came into view. They fell silent as she listened to James’ playing. “You would not play at all amiss, Mr. Bennet, if you practiced more, and could have the advantage of a London master, though your taste is not equal to Anne’s. Anne would have been a delightful performer, had her health allowed her to learn.”

James disregarded Lady Catherine’s unique talent for giving a compliment and insult simultaneously to watch how Darcy reacted to the praise of his fiancée, but neither then nor any other time could he discern any symptom of love between the two of them. Watching his interactions with Miss de Bourgh was not unlike his interactions with Caroline, but James supposed real love was not often a consideration among couples of aristocracy.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has fanart! See the beautiful image PeaceLoveArtsnArt made here ~

Okay, some clarification on this timeline. Austen says the Bennets were married for twenty-three years, which I have included in the first chapter, but I’ve also put in the story that Mr. Bennet had to work/travel a while before he and Mrs. Bennet were able to start baby-makin’. SO they have actually been married for closer to thirty years in this story, but they’ve had their home and family for twenty-three. They consider his purchasing Longbourn and the birth of Jane as the start of their married lives. Jane is twenty-three. James is twenty-two. Mary is eighteen while Kitty is sixteen and Lydia is fifteen. *huffs out of breath.
James reread Jane’s letter as he sat down in Charlotte’s parlour to reply, mentally marking the items he wished to respond to alongside his own retellings of the events since his last letter—

The bell of the house chimed, and being a guest as he was, it took him an extra moment to realize he was the only one in the house to answer it. Charlotte and company had gone into the nearby town for various errands, leaving James to his breakfast and letters. As he had heard no carriage, he thought it unlikely to be Lady Catherine, but nevertheless he pulled a blank sheet of paper over the beginnings of his letter and was folding Jane’s as he went to the door.

Mr. Darcy, and Mr. Darcy alone stood there.

James frowned, his mind rushing to find a reason for his visit, perhaps his having left something when he and the Colonel were here…

“Uh,” he summarized eloquently.

Darcy seemed equally astonished at finding himself there and at finding James alone. “I…I had believed the family would be here.”

“They’re in town,” James informed, and bluntly rotated to lead the way back to Charlotte’s parlour. It was where he and the Colonel were first hosted so it was not an abnormal destination, but James returned to it with fresh eyes: all of the unused and waiting pieces of foliage, wire, twine, and a cutting board and knife scattered in various states around the room.

“I apologize for the intrusion,” Darcy said as he eyed the room and James hastily piling things on the cutting board to seamlessly make a place for him at the table. “Are these what you were doing when you left the service?”

“You noticed?” James said as he dusted off a seat and then looked up at Darcy. “Well. You would, wouldn’t you?”

“I do not understand what you are implying,” Darcy admitted as he sat down.

James waved his hand in the air as if to physically remove the topic but then his fingers leveled with the top of Darcy’s head. “You’re. Well. There must be a tree in your genetic line.”
He turned around to avoid seeing whatever reaction that caused and continued tidying the room until, with abrupt clarity, he was behaving like his mother and decidedly landed on the couch against the wall.

Meanwhile Darcy uttered. “Oh. I see. Hmm…” The sound was warm and almost like mirth, enticing James to meet his eyes again. “I trust you know that extends past the capabilities of reproduction.”

James rolled his eyes to glare at the wall. “Of course I know. It’s a metaphor. Didn’t you stress poetry or something once?”

“Oh. I see. Hmm…” Darcy confirmed, “but you seemed to disagree with its effects, if I remember.”

James had no idea where this was going. “I didn’t read poetry.”

“I could guess,” Darcy nodded. He did not outwardly smile but his eyes were kind. “What did you read?”

“Whatever we had,” James remarked. Darcy’s lips parted as if to speak but James beat him to it. “Is all well at Rosings?”

Darcy blinked, his mind processing the change in subject. “As well as can be, I suppose… There is some ordeal on the grounds but it is hardly worth mentioning.”

“Well that’s what conversation is,” James declared. “Elaborating upon unmentionable things.”

“I’m…not sure that’s quite it,” Darcy replied. “Have I caught you at a bad time?”

James could practically hear his mother scolding him and reminding him of whom his guest was. He swallowed. “No, my lord. I…sometimes react poorly to surprises, is all. What is happening on the grounds? Is Lady Catherine’s garden in turmoil?”

Darcy’s lashes moved over his eyes in that contemplative way he had before he said, “Not at all. The grounds keeper sighted creatures at dawn. They have not yet been identified as foxes or large rats.”

James did not have much to say to that apart from, “There…is quite a difference between a fox and a rat,” but the discussion fell silent. With nothing else to procure, James left the trouble of finding a subject to him, and Darcy took the hint, his eyes brightening with understanding that it was his turn.

“This seems a comfortable house. Lady Catherine, I believe, did a great deal to it when Mr. Collins first came to Hunsford.”

“I have heard she did,” James confirmed. “I am sure she could not have bestowed her kindness on a more grateful object.”

Darcy nodded, his eyes moving as if searching for something else to say. “Mr. Collins appears very fortunate in his choice of a wife.”

James snorted in the back of his throat. “His friends may rejoice in his having met with one of the very few sensible women who could have accepted him.”

Darcy seemed mildly surprised. “You reiterate it in a cruel fashion.”
James’ brows lifted. “No one has ever accused me of being fashionable. My friend has an excellent understanding; whether I consider her marrying Mr. Collins the wisest thing she’s done…does not matter. She seems happy. In a prudential light, it is certainly a good match.”

“It must be agreeable to her to be settled within so easy a distance of her family and friends,” he considered.

James eyed him. “I would not have considered the distance an advantage of the match.”

“Nevertheless, little more than half a day’s journey, and on good road; an easy distance, I’d say.”

“We have contrary opinions. Easy it may be, but ideal it is less so.”

“This is proof of your own attachment to Hertfordshire. Anything beyond the very neighborhood of Longbourn, I suppose, would appear far.”

Darcy held James’ gaze, and once again James felt a sort of challenge in the man’s dialogue. Or not so much a challenge…but the feeling of a secret or jape held only between the two of them.

His features relaxed as he said pleasantly, “The far and the near must be relative, and depend on varying circumstances. Where there is fortune to make the expense of traveling unimportant, distance is no evil.”

“I am not unfamiliar with the evil of distance,” Darcy returned softly, quickly. His head turned so his eyes could once more look over James’ tools and the various bundles and scraps of plants. A full sprig of dried lavender and grey sallow rested next to an unfinished wreath, which Darcy’s fingers brought under his nose. The gesture was small, but he rubbed the soft grey pillows against his skin. “However…despite your local attachment and your…more rural rituals, you cannot have always been at Longbourn. You spoke of travel with Anne.”

James scrutinized him, trying to decipher wherein lay his question. “Are you calling me pagan?” he blurted.

Far from angry, Darcy seemed merely puzzled. “No? Although the enquiry may arise at some point, after leaving an Easter service to make such old fashioned wreaths.”

Then James laughed, startling Darcy further even though his eyes softened. “Old they may be but they are hardly out of convention. I am only out of place in its not being Yuletide. Surely you know how Christianity overwrote pagan holidays with their own celebrations. Names change and traditions adjust but we are creatures of habit.”

He had stood without thinking, plucking a small brass cross from the wall above the couch as he strolled to the table. As he spoke he nestled the cross in the center of the wreath and let the various reeds and lavender haphazardly complete the circle, illustrating how the simple adjustment changed the religion attached to the decoration.

He realized now how close he now stood by Darcy, whose eyes were down as he analyzed the wreath. James ventured, “You’re not one of those sensitive God-fearing men, are you?”

Darcy’s features gave nothing away. “I was raised to be God-fearing,” he admitted, “but I quickly found that the realm of men gives me more trouble.”

James stared at him, and then withdrew the cross to return it to the wall. “I am continuously finding you difficult to disagree with, my lord,” he said with some annoyance. The chair skidded behind him and James rotated to see Darcy preparing to leave.
“Forgive my intrusion,” he rushed, not meeting James’ eyes.

“I already did?” James wondered as the man left the house and he heard the front door open the same moment a shriek similar to Marie’s reached his ears.

“Oh! My lord—how do you do—” Charlotte exclaimed, but James made it to the hallway just in time to see both women move out of Darcy’s way, as he seemed more than intent on leaving. Mr. Collins was not with them but Charlotte gaped like a fish until she rounded on James. “Did you set fire to his heels?”

James frowned. “Why is it my fault? He left as quickly as he arrived!”

Charlotte hung her cloak and hat on the hooks before she ushered Marie off to do some distracting task. Afterward she caught up to James binding the last of his wreath together. He peeked up and then stared at the giddy expression on her face. “What is the matter with you?” he feared.

“My dear, Lizzy,” she announced, “he must be in love with you, or he would never have called on us in this familiar way.”

It was James’ turn to let his jaw hang. “I understand you’ve grown accustomed to overzealous displays of fondness for the Lady in residence but it shouldn’t come as a surprise if other people seek any means of escape from her household.”

“Ah huh,” she charmed, not dissuaded in the least, “so I’m late in understanding his eagerness to spend such escapades here? With you. Alone in the house.”

He stood moved away from her under the excuse of disposing twigs and unusable twine in the bin. “He expected the rest of you to be here—stop grinning.”

“I’m perfectly entitled to smile, as he is to seek your company.”

“The only reason he should have for seeking it is the same interest one returns to an unbeatable puzzle. There is otherwise nothing to do: all the field sports are over, within doors there is Lady Catherine, books, and a billiard table, but these can only be interesting for so long.”

“You are saying you’re interesting,” Charlotte cornered.

“Hardly,” he growled. “Darcy would have remained silent as he always does if I hadn’t pushed him to converse.”

Charlotte seemed content to leave him alone about it, and he was thankfully saved by Colonel Fitzwilliam’s arrival and inviting himself to dinner. Not that they minded, of course; his charm quite reminded James of Wickham’s manner of joviality and discussion.

The topic silently returned the following day and the day afterward, however, as Mr. Darcy now frequented the parsonage as often as his cousin. Initially Charlotte had given James a keen look before Darcy proved his ability to sit comfortably in silence for longer than ten minutes. His lips would not open until necessity pried them apart—a sacrifice to propriety, not a pleasure to himself. James caught himself scrutinizing him, wondering how an animated feeling would appear if it ever emerged from the man.

Charlotte eventually admitted to not knowing what to make of him when Colonel Fitzwilliam came by the cottage alone. He laughed and shrugged, “Darcy is different, to be sure. His own breed of stupid. We all have one, I reckon, and that’s his.”
Nevertheless, she watched him whenever they were at Rosings, which had unfortunately picked up in occurrence, as well as when he came to Hunsford. Her examinations only yielded that he certainly looked at James a great deal, but the expression of that stare was disputable.

“It’s a rather earnest, steadfast gaze, isn’t it?” she mused one evening upon their return.

James silently wondered if he ought to have had another glass of wine for this.

“It is hard to tell whether there is admiration in it,” she continued.

“Wonderful. He either loves me or hates me. Frankly I think he’s used to drowning the noise of the room out of his mind and his eyes have the unfortunate habit of landing on me.”

“Then it is fortunate that you are attractive, then,” she teased, “or else he would certainly despise you.” He demanded she fetch a bottle or else leave him to slumber.

As the developing season made midday comfortably warm, invitations to Rosings often switched to luncheon, followed by walks through the property. The park was always open to anyone wishing for a stroll, which James came to utilize. It was during one of these that he caught a sighting of the suspicious fox or rat: a dirty ginger cat. It stopped only briefly to eye him and then trot quickly past a flowerbed to its den under the bushes.

The next day, James found himself once more in the park with Lady Catherine, Lord Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Charlotte, Maria, and Mr. Collins. Gardening, being Mr. Collins’ preferred pastime, made her attentions devoted to him until a gruff yet composed man approached them with a bow. “My lady, might I have a word?”

“Go on,” she confirmed.

“The matter of the vermin seen in the gardens. It is a feral cat. She has made her den somewhere, however she seemed to be carrying food. We suspect there are kittens as well.”

“No no no, that will not do,” her ladyship ordered. “Remove them at once. I will not have anything carrying disease near Anne.”

“Yes, mum. We’ve already captured the cat. Her den will be found immediately.”

He bowed again and left. The group continued on until Lady Catherine turned around. “Darcy? Whatever are you doing? Come here—where is Mr. Bennet?”

But Lord Darcy’s gaze was fastened to James, who had since left them and was now sprinting behind them with something in his hands; like a tablecloth or a large jumper. Her ladyship chortled. “What on earth is the fool doing?”

Darcy watched him slow and step over one of the longer flowerbeds to lower onto all fours, derriere high as he looked for something among the roots…

“That young man is fond of inappropriate behaviour,” her ladyship commented dryly, but James’ arm shot underneath the shrubs, placed something in the cloth, and then moved in long strides with the bundle in his arms. He paid them not the slightest attention as he left the park.

“Uh—I must apologize,” Charlotte exclaimed. “I’ll go with him and make sure everything is all right.”

Marie’s eyes widened like she was being abandoned but Charlotte held her hat while she went to
catch up with James. He was already back in their cottage, pouring the tepid water from their morning tea into a basin. From the bundle in his arms came an array of angry, high pitched yowls.

“You actually found them,” she laughed, removing her hat and gloves to help him.

“One,” he corrected. “Hand me that brush.”

She did so, the short and packed bristles scraping over a bar of soap before he wiggled it in the water and moved gentle circles over the spiked and matted fur. Dark brown gave way to fiery orange and white paws, the creature particularly indignant to having its white underbelly cleaned.

“Some broth with the ground meat,” James considered as he lifted the tail. “He should be weaned by now if its mother was bringing it food…but only just. He needs to eat now if the imbeciles killed its mother before he could eat.”

“They’re not imbeciles just because they were doing their jobs,” Charlotte scolded as she stood to do as he bid—

“Lord Darcy!”

She had left the front door open and now the man stood in the entrance of her parlour. James looked up but could not grant him his time as he bounced the bundle on his arm and two ears sprang free with another annoyed yowl.

“How did you find it so quickly?” Darcy exclaimed in wonder.

“I witnessed its mother returning to its den during my walk yesterday,” James replied briskly. He reached forward, gesturing Charlotte to slide past the man to hand him the dish of food. “Your softest blanket in a box,” he said, and she left once more.

“It has a mustachio,” Darcy commented.

James frowned up at him, visibly questioning why he was still there, but then he peered down at the cat. There was a curved black patch on the side of its nose.

“Why are you holding it like that?”

James refrained from sighing and continued stroking a soaked cloth over the creature’s face. The bouncing calmed the creature to silence despite the angry orange eyes glaring up at him. “Kittens catch their death faster than we do if they get wet.”

“I was referring to the rocking,” Darcy reiterated.

James’s impatience won out. It was simply too much to explain how one picks up these habits after raising two younger siblings and helping his father with their calves and chickens. “It works, doesn’t it?” he snapped.

It was to Darcy’s credit that he deduced smoothly, “You’ve done this before.”

James blinked, something in him relaxing. “I have a cat at home.”

Darcy remained silent as he watched James pick off flea after flea from its face and ears before he deemed the creature clean and placed it in the box Charlotte procured. James returned to the fire to gather a small number of coals for an empty tin used to hold Charlotte’s sewing needles. He made sure the tin was wrapped well before inserting it into the hissing box.
“Last step,” James murmured, holding up a chunk of meat.

“Is this not dangerous?” Charlotte worried.

“He needs to associate me with good things,” James refused. “Give him a moment to realize he’s comforta—”

James underestimated the creature’s hunger as the meat was snatched from his fingers and the creature landed upon the dish. Charlotte giggled as he recovered, “Fine, then.”

“He’s going to be beautiful,” Charlotte mused. “A right fluffy ginger. What shall we call him?”

“Assam, perhaps,” James smirked.

Charlotte pouted, “Oh that won’t due. Your other cat has such a beautiful name.”

“What name?”

They both looked up as if realizing Darcy was still there. “Alys…short for alyssum,” James murmured.

“You do so employ yourself in the knowledge of flowers,” Darcy observed.

“Is that wrong?” James responded.

Darcy’s gaze was soft. “No. Not at all.” After another moment he took his weight off the doorjamb. “I’ll take my leave.”

Charlotte bobbed up show him out, whereas James remained where he was, watching the kitten finish its meal.

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It was not until Jane’s next letter arrived and James was going for a walk down the lane that he came upon one of the neighboring party. Colonel Fitzwilliam was waving and smiling, “I did not know that you ever walked this way.”

“You’ve found me out, sir,” James smiled.

“Are going much further?”

“No, I should have turned in a moment, before my charge awakes and desires freedom.”

James leaned to reveal the slumbering kitten in his shirt, held up by his waistcoat. “Then I shall impose and join you,” he chuckled.

“I would be disappointed if you didn’t,” James said as he put away his letter. “I heard from Charlotte—well, from Mr. Collins—this morning that you are to leave on Saturday?”

“Yes,” he nodded, “if Darcy does not put it off again. It’s been rather strange, his putting off our departure so much this year. To be rather blunt about it, he is not exactly eager to remain with his aunt, but I am at his disposal. He arranges the business just as he pleases.”

“He has great pleasure in the power of choice, does he?” James remarked.

“He likes to have his own way very well,” the Colonel obliged, “but so we all do.”
“A particularly strong family trait,” James said upon looking up at the mansion within the park. “If my own siblings are any indication, I wonder how Darcy fares as guardian of his sister.”

“Oh, that is a task which he must divide with me. I am joined with him in the guardianship of Miss Darcy.”

“Are you?” James’ interest piqued. “And what sort of guardians do you make, looking after such trouble? If she has the true Darcy spirit, surely she too likes to have her own way.”

He laughed, however the sentiment was not shared between them. The Colonel looked upon him with something of confusion. “Why do you suppose she is likely to give any uneasiness?”

Gravity was so far from the Colonel’s character that James momentarily felt himself lost for words. “I…must apologize. I did not mean offense. I confess to have never met the lady, and indeed, have not heard any harm of her. She is a great favourite with some ladies you may be acquainted with: Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley.”

“I know them a little,” the Colonel granted. “Their brother is a pleasant gentlemanlike sort—a great friend of Darcy’s.”

“Yes,” James agreed somewhat dryly. “His lordship is uniquely kind to Mr. Bingley, and takes prodigious care of him.”

“Yes, I believe he does take care of him in those points he most wants care,” the Colonel said on a lighter note. “From something he told me in our journey hither, I believe Bingley to be very much indebted to him—but I ought to beg his pardon, for I have no right to suppose it was Bingley at all, for he did not name him specifically.”

“Then speak anonymously,” James frowned. “To what debt do you mean?”

“It is a circumstance which Darcy of course would not wish to be known, because if it were to get round to the lady’s family, it would be an unpleasant thing.”

James steeled his features to reveal nothing. “A scandal of the romantic kind. The public does so enjoy those. You may depend upon my not mentioning it.”

“Well do remember that I have not much reason for supposing it to be Bingley at all apart from his having been with the man up until recently. What he told me is merely this: that he had saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage.”

“Imprudent,” James repeated. “How so?”

“I understood there were strong objections against the lady.”

James processed this and found it wanting. “Did Mr. Darcy give any other reasons for his interference?”

“I cannot say he did,” the Colonel admitted.

Their walk fell into silence, as James made no answer. He walked on, his heart swelling and deflating the more he pondered and reasoned, pondered and reasoned…

“And now we are thoughtful,” the Colonel commented quietly. “I had not suspected you would take gossip so seriously.”
“I am only thinking of what you have been telling me in regards to how your cousin’s conduct does not suit my own judgment. Why was he to be the judge and further, the executioner?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam’s eyebrows lifted. “You are of a mind to call his interference officious?”

“I do not see what right Mr. Darcy has to determine and direct someone else’s happiness, friend or otherwise,” he voiced with some warmth before he recollected himself. “But as we do not know any of the particulars, it is unfair to condemn him. It is not to be supposed that there was, in fact, affection in the case.”

“That is not an unnatural surmise,” the Colonel agreed, “though it does lessen the honour of my cousin’s triumph.”

He chuckled, having meant it as a jest, but James’ inability to partake spurred him to change the topic quickly. James conversed easily with him on whatever matters he proposed, but once left to reflect, James faced a conundrum he had not anticipated. In short, he had been concerned with the depth of Darcy’s involvement, but he had quite convinced himself of Charles and Jane’s separation being Caroline’s design and arrangement. Her own proximity and constant prattling in Charles’ ear were too easily the center of analysis while Darcy’s quiet judgment gave away very little.

Or rather…Darcy was the prime instrument of Wickham’s unhappiness, and James had placed a different figurehead at the bow of Jane’s. The lack of Wickham’s company had resulted in Darcy’s crimes quite falling away from conscious thought…

Strong objections against the lady, the Colonel had said. To Jane herself, he was sure, there could be no objection. All loveliness and goodness, her understanding was excellent, her mind quite equal to and her manners above the Bingley sisters’. Any objections would have to be made to her family, who were admittedly lesser if bank sums were to be counted. If personality were the cause, only Jane’s mother could be a complaint, but for Darcy to weather such as Caroline Bingley and Louisa Hurst together, Mrs. Bennet was hardly worse.

Was Darcy’s pride so fragile to require the sound material of his friends’ connections instead of happiness or sense? Then again, if he himself was so attached to a loveless engagement, James supposed he could not rule out the man incapable of such interference…

The agitation of these thoughts created such an agonizing headache and turmoil in James that when evening arrived with an invitation to Rosings, he could hardly rouse himself enough to even tell Charlotte he was not going. Her hand was dry and warm against his forehead as he blinked heavily under her ministrations.

“You’re dreadfully pale,” she worried. “Lizzy, what’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Go. Enjoy dinner.”

Mr. Collins piped from the corridor, “Her ladyship shall be most displeased if we are late or one of us is missing! Is everything quite well?”

Charlotte steeled herself and James was momentarily quite impressed with how she handled her husband with a firm word before the house closed behind them. When they were gone, James reopened his letter from Jane and examined it for any hints or inclinations of suffering. There were none, but so were any sparks or prominent threads of joviality; the cheerfulness which had once characterized her style of writing. It became some consolation to think that, whether the prime instrument of removing such cheer or not, Lord Darcy was to be leaving the day after next. And still greater, in less than a fortnight he would be with Jane again, and perhaps all language of
Darcys or Bingleys could be forgotten.

James managed to fall asleep, but the new addition to his room was quite rambunctious the moment the first light of day made its way into his room. Warming some broth to pour over its food, James felt its fragile spine arch up into his hand as it ate.

It was licking the last of the broth when James peered out of his window at the orange sunrise, as well as the dark clouds soon to eclipse the sky. “Come on, before it rains,” he said, but upon turning around, the cat was already curled against his pillow, consuming his lingering heat on the bed.

“You’ve moved right in, haven’t you?” he cooed, crouching to rub a finger between those tall ears. “What shall I call you…” he breathed as a sound reached him elsewhere in the house. Opening his door, he found Charlotte rushing between rooms.

“Lizzy!” she exclaimed upon seeing him. “Can you get the washing from outside? The sky will fall any moment!”

“Can I help you here first?” he wondered, observing the red in her cheeks.

“No! Now! They’re the bloody drapes for church and I will never hear the end of it if they haven’t dried by Sunday!”

She shoved him right out the door, where he was consumed in an unseasonal warm wind which surely was carrying the rain over his head. He ran around the house to where the trees were able to hold the lines for washing and started filling his arms with the first garments he could reach: dresses and underthings alike, which he dumped onto Charlotte’s parlour couch.

The drapery was next, the long white linen reaching toward him as he felt the first drops of rain. The largest tree had wide-reaching, thick beams which held the lines like spiders’ thread. If the tree was full, it might have saved the linen from the rain but as it was, James rushed to yank the fabric—

“God and Christ!” he exploded as a fabric pulled down to reveal Lord Darcy. James clutched the fabric to his face, both to save it from the ground and to cover his embarrassment. His body bowed slightly until he recovered.

“I am sorry,” Darcy apologized quietly. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

James straightened with his hand over his eyes, his messy tresses falling over his knuckles…

Fingertips moved over his hand, inducing James to lower it and find Darcy holding his hair aside. James stared dumbly at features he had never seen so expressive. Those fingers pushed his hair behind his ear, eliciting a tingle that made James blink heavily.

Suddenly both hands cradled James’ face and Darcy was close enough to share breath. “James,” he heard from a husky whisper, before soft lips claimed him. James swayed into his kiss, stumbling slightly so Darcy’s hold tightened and James felt his shoulder blades brush against the bark of the tree. His own hands found Darcy’s wrists, discovering his cuffs unbuttoned underneath his jacket sleeves. The second kiss fell right into the first, James’ body warming, reacting…

Darcy separated them but only just. James felt his gasp across his lips as Darcy’s eyes wandered his face. “I have struggled in vain.”

James blinked, his mind slow to absorb his words until they fell upon him all at once.
“My feelings will not be repressed. I cannot deny and must tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

James could only stare silently. Doubt flickered behind Darcy’s eyes but he did not move apart from his thumb stroking over James’s cheek once. “I-I…don’t understand,” James stammered.

“I love you,” he whispered. “What else is there to understand?”

James’s eyes closed, burning from holding them open too long. “Do…you not fear ridicule and segregation?”

“What?” Darcy hushed. His hands loosened around him. “Because you’re a man?”

James’s eyes opened. “A man of your stature spending…how long? With another man of poorer standing? Perhaps you are not God-fearing, but people can be far more cruel.”

He gently removed Darcy’s hands from him. They lowered to Darcy’s sides but the man remained immobile. “Is that what you fear? The duration of my affections and the scorn of others?”

“Are you not engaged?” James curtailed.

Darcy blinked. “With Anne? In my aunt’s eyes, perhaps, but to she and I, not at all.”

“What does that mean?” James grimaced.

Darcy’s brow furrowed as he tried to read him. “It means nothing. I am engaged to no one. My affections entirely revolve around you—you’re laughing at me.”

James chin had fallen to his chest, but his breath lacked mirth entirely. “You’ve never done this part with a man. I cannot expect you to understand.”

“I understand ridicule well enough. I have found once people tire of talking they either stop or move on to other arguments. I would not waste my time worrying of what others think of us any more than I would waste your time with a distracted mind.”

It was raining fully now. The curtains lay forgotten on the earth. Darcy’s declaration struck James in a way he had not anticipated. The backs of his eyes ached, his throat even more so. The muscles in James’ jaw moved as he could no longer hold Darcy’s gaze and looked elsewhere.

“A promise of total devotion…you are…I believe you mean every word you say. Even if it were to come that you could no longer bear my company.”

“Why do you assume such an end?” Darcy uttered. “An end when we have not yet begun?”

James shook his head. “I do not understand you at all.”

Darcy frowned. “Do you or do you not? Ask me anything, I’ve already laid myself bare.”

“Perhaps you ought to take my rejection and go,” James warned impatiently.

“Rejection?” Darcy repeated. “Under what reasons?”

“Reasons,” James murmured. “Apart from ignoring how you dislike me as much as you love me so as to suffer under the strain of shoving your feelings aside? No one much likes to be told they’re unbearable even if they know it themselves. Apart from your own superiority inducing you to think it somehow obvious I should accept? I have never desired your good opinion and you have
certainly bestowed it unwillingly. I am sorry to have caused pain to you; it was unconsciously done.”

Darcy’s eyes were fixed on his face, a mixture of resentment and surprise there. “And is this all the reply I am to have the honour of expecting? Shall I swallow my superiority and at least have the respect of being informed why I am thus rejected?”

James sniffed, loathing his tears but he bit out, “I must first voice that I do not understand how one could deny a friend and sister’s happiness but then so ruefully seek his own, which would spark more scandal than such a friend’s marriage.”

He looked up, and Darcy’s frown slowly faded. James’s eyes were a violent silver in the red of his tears. “I speak of Charles and Jane,” he elaborated.

“I know,” Darcy said quietly, and then nothing at all.

James pushed, “Do you deny it?”

“I cannot,” Darcy admitted without shame.

James’ weight shifted on his feet. “Why did you do it?”

Darcy’s features hardened. “Because the matrimony between your families would have hindered the advancements his family wishes to make.”

“That Caroline wishes to make,” James corrected.

“Is it difficult to believe Charles holds the same aspirations?” Darcy wondered.

“I believe you thought he was nothing more than a fool in an autumn romance, while my sister’s happiness remains fractured indefinitely because of him.”

“Fractured?” he said incredulously. “I never once perceived more than a liking for him on her part; only a fondness of friends with perhaps romantic inclination.”

“You yourself have admitted to being a poor judge of conversation,” James erupted. “How could you think yourself right to measure such a relationship?”

“I did not do so with unsound reason,” he defended. “Jane befriended such women as Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and with such sisters as your youngest two, as well as a mother of loud mind and mouth. Was I so wrong to think it a sign of indifference that she did not relay such similar characteristics, that she never once voiced her opinion so strongly as the company she kept?”

James’ head shook slightly. “You’re a bloody hypocrite, my lord.” That wiped the man’s features clean. “You’re the most silent in a room and yet here you stand. It has taken you over six months to say anything of love to me. How can you expect someone as shy and at such disadvantages as my sister to do any better? And then there is Mr. Wickham.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes brightened. “Wickham.”

“Yes, Wickham,” James spat. “Have you nothing to say of him? He unfolded long ago the story you wrote for him.”

“You take an eager interest in that gentleman’s concerns,” he declared darkly.

“Being kindred spirits of misfortune can have that effect,” James retorted.
“Yes, his misfortunes have been great indeed,” Darcy all but growled. “But as I said, he has told you very little. Is this your opinion of me? It rests so entirely on a rogue’s lies. Thank you for explaining so fully. These accusations might have been overlooked had not your pride—”

“My pride?” James bristled.

“—been hurt by my honest confession. I am not ashamed of the feelings. They were natural and just. But shall I address one crime at a time? You were friends with Charles and closer than no one else to your sister. Why did you not act as a catalyst for them? Why could you not clear the air for no ill assumptions to linger and fester?”

“Because I’m done meddling in Jane’s happiness! I did so once, but not again!”

Darcy frowned. “You mean that gentleman your mother went on about at Netherfield? The great sabotage of poetry at fifteen?”

“It wasn’t about poetry, you fool! My mother doesn’t know the man was in love with me and not Jane!”

He did not mean to yell the last part. Perhaps he hadn’t. It was hard to tell with his throat in such pain, with only the noise of the rain around them. James tore his gaze away, and then explained hoarsely, “My mother’s memory is not good. I was the one who was fifteen, and he did ask Jane to marry him, but it was broken not minutes afterward, so she never really knew.

“He and I…well. We were involved long enough for him to have anything he wanted of me. My body. My heart. To the rest of the family he was a friend, like any other, so it was not abnormal for him to spend time with me or Jane or anyone else. But one day…Jane came to me with something she was not yet ready to tell our parents. I was confused. She and I were not close then as we are now. She told me she was engaged. I was entirely confused. With whom could she be engaged? She knew no one outside the family and…well there it was, wasn’t it? I was stupid and foolish, and then I was heartbroken and livid. Because his plan was never to love my sister.”

He looked up at Darcy, who listened in silent astonishment. “We look the same, don’t we? Or similar, at least. He thought he could manage it. Being with a woman…for the necessary parts. So long as she looked like me.”

James could no longer see Darcy clearly through the tears falling past his jaw. “He thought he could have the both of us…a beautiful doll of a wife, and whatever the hell he considered me. Needless to say I thoroughly ruined her engagement.”

He spared a look at the drapery. It was a lost cause at this point. “You can ridicule my sisters as much as you like, for I was not always kind to them. I thought Jane was weak, and Mary strange. When Kitty and Lydia were born they were nearly joined at the hip and equally ridiculous…but I proved myself the weakest…the most foolish…and certainly the most strange. But Jane, she stayed with me. I realized too late that I would have done anything for their honour while my own crumbled through my fingers—but she stayed with me. She is the strongest of us…and the bravest person I know. Charles is as kind as he is foolish but she deserves him. She deserves everything she wants.”

He stepped forward, not truly seeing where his feet moved. The curtains were sodden and heavy in his arms. “So you see, my lord…I haven’t any pride to make myself interested or deserving of your affections.”

James left him, or at least, he did not look back as he entered the house and deposited the drapery in
a basket beside the door. He sensed Charlotte near him but he heard himself say as if from a great
distance, “I’m sorry. They won’t be ready for Sunday,” and retired to his room.

Chapter End Notes

So. Uh. Still merry Christmas? I’m so sorry to have changed the epic confession
quotes U_U. It just...needed a little rearranging u_u *runs away*

Also, Assam tea brews quite a red color, hence the name suggestion. Most
importantly, more will come to light regarding James’ trauma, but there is no rape tag
because it’s not what happened. Just in case anyone was worried.

Alyssum was used in ancient Greece as a remedy for animal bites (rabies) so in the
language of flowers, means "without rage/madness" as well as "worth beyond beauty."
Take from that what you will~
The Letter

Chapter Summary

Before Darcy leaves, he delivers Jamie a letter.

Chapter Notes

Some more time line things— I'm putting Darcy in his mid-late twenties. Like twenty-sevenish. So Georgiana would be sixteen now.

Regarding the first paragraph, kittens need someone to stimulate their lil booties to help them go to the bathroom. That's all :) Happy Boxing Day~

The next dawn illuminated a grey world. The storm lingered throughout the night, the last drops falling as James pulled himself out of bed, but the winter had returned with a fierce vengeance. After James helped the kitten relieve itself, it settled contently in his shirt while he was otherwise wrapped in one of Charlotte's largest blankets. With a tin cup of tea in one hand, he meant to walk down the lane, but he did not reach it; instead climbing to sit upon the Collins' fence, letting the cold settle over his closed eyelids…

"Mr. Bennet."

His eyes opened to the familiar voice but his head only turned slightly in acknowledgment. “I had hoped to meet you before I quit Rosings…just to give you this.”

An envelope slid under James’ gaze. He mutely took it.

Darcy’s voice was soft as he finished, “I don’t suppose we will have reason to meet again, therefore you may do as you like with it… I do hope that you will read it.”

Darcy’s eyes lingered on his face before they flicked down to observe the ears sticking up from James’ shirt, but otherwise the man left with only his footfalls for sound.

James held the envelope within the blanket for some time; he even heard the carriage pull out of the park on the other end of the lane and rattle away before he pulled the pages from their confines. His eyes widened somewhat on the two sheets covered in close lines, but they were written in a neat, even hand, so he began to read:

_I suppose at this point you are weary of my interferences in your daily goings on, James, but be not alarmed. I have no intention of repeating those sentiments which yesterday were so disgusting to you. I write without intention of paining you or humbling myself. I wish only to provide what you granted me yesterday: an explanation and recounting of events which have led me to be the person who has had the honour of sharing your time._

_Two offenses of a very different nature you laid at my charge. The first, that I had detached Mr._
Bingley from your sister, and the second, that I blasted the prosperity and prospects of Mr. Wickham. I in no way imply these two crimes of equal or unequal gravity; you may remain the judge of that. I will but say briefly first that I did willfully throw off the companion of my youth, the acknowledged favourite of my father, a young man who had been brought up to expect a due inheritance. You have not been led astray in this regard, but during my explanation, if I relay feelings which are still offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry.

I had not been long in Hertfordshire before I saw, in common with others, that Bingley preferred your eldest sister to any other young woman in the country. But it was not until the evening of the dance at Netherfield that I had any apprehension of his feeling a serious attachment. I had often seen him infatuated before, and I think you know how his affections have never been limited by gender. However after I was made acquainted with the prolific expectation of marriage among the party’s guests, from that moment I observed my friend’s behaviour attentively.

Simply put, his partiality for Miss Bennet was beyond what I had ever witnessed in him. Your sister I also watched, but you and I have already discussed how erroneously I judged her. How her open, cheerful, and engaging personality were in fact drawn out by her adoration of Charles, not merely symptoms of the company and music. Your superior knowledge of your sister cannot make your accusations false, and if I have inflicted so much pain by such an error, your disdain of me is not unreasonable. I can only urge you to understand that I was never led by my own hopes and fears. I truly believed your sister indifferent, not because I wished it.

Charles left, as I think you recall, with every intention of returning soon after. His sisters’ uneasiness had been equally excited with my own; their own discomforts of your mother’s family, though objectionable, was possible to overlook. However their favouritism for propriety was too often trampled upon by your younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father.

I beg you, pardon me. It pains me to offend you.

Our similarities of feeling were soon discovered and, I now realize, induced a harmful chain reaction. Retrospectively speaking, there was no time to be lost in detaching their brother, and we shortly resolved on joining him directly in London. There I engaged him in such a discussion, pointing out certain aspects of the match like thorns turned against the rose. Please take it as testament of Charles’ character that I would not have delayed his return to Netherfield in the slightest had I not finished with the topic of Jane’s indifference. Only once convinced he would be returning to nothing did Charles give her up.

I must confess to not wearing blame for having done this much, but there is one part in the whole affair I do reflect on with shame, for it involves my lying to you. I did know your sister was in London, for Miss Bingley did meet with her and was certainly concerned for her brother’s discovering as much. I kept him ignorant that she was nearby and so returned the whole to Pemberley where we remained for a brief time. Perhaps this concealment was beneath me, but it is done, and it was done in only good intentions. If I have wounded your sister’s feelings, it was unknowingly done and certainly unintentional.

With respect to the other, more excruciating accusation to my person, that involving Mr. Wickham, I can only refute it by laying before you the whole of his connection with my family. Of what he has particularly accused me, I am ignorant, but of the truth I can summon more than one witness of utmost veracity; namely the good Colonel, whose character I know you enjoy and trust.

Mr. Wickham is the son of a respectable man who had for many years the management of all the Pemberley estates. His good conduct and trust naturally inclined my father to be of service to him as well as George Wickham, who was his godson. His kindness was therefore liberally bestowed
without complaint or argument. My father supported him at school and afterwards at Cambridge; a most important assistance, as his own father, always poor from the extravagances of his wife, was unable to give him a gentleman’s education.

My father was not only fond of young Wickham’s society, as you know whose manners were always engaging, he had also the highest opinion of him. He had expected and hoped the church would be his profession, intending to provide for him everything he would need in that regard. As for myself, it has been many, many years since I first began to think of him in a different manner.

Wickham inherited nothing so strongly as his mother’s taste for extravagance, and with my place as a young man of similar age, I had opportunities of seeing him in unguarded moments, which my father did not.

My father died about five years ago. His attachment to Mr. Wickham was to the end steadfast, so much so that he included particulars in his will. My father trusted me to promote Wickham in the best manner that his profession might allow, and that a valuable family living might be his as soon as he was granted a church over which to operate. Included in this was a legacy of one thousand pounds.

His own father did not outlast mine, and he did not have anything of significance to impart to his son, but Wickham wrote to me within half a year that he had resolved against joining the church. He mentioned some intention of studying law instead, and thusly the one thousand pounds would be insufficient to support his pursuit of such a career. I cannot say I was surprised; as I said, I was the one to witness...unguarded actions which would be incredulous if they led to a life within the church. I also cannot say that I believed him to be sincere, but regardless I followed through in my promise to my father and granted him three thousand pounds.

My suspicions were quickly confirmed. All connections to my family dissolved entirely, and I easily learned that his being in town to study law was but a pretense. Being now free from all restraint, his life was one of idleness and squandering, until such invisible tethers tightened upon him once more. The money was gone within three years, during which I heard little to nothing from him.

Afterward, he applied to me by letter. His circumstances, he assured me, which this time I had no difficulty in believing, were exceedingly bad. He had found law a most unprofitable study, and was now absolutely resolved on being ordained, if I would but present him to the living he was granted by my father. You may find it surprising, since knowing my own income, that I kept a close watch over the three thousand pounds. I was not inspired to grant him his demands. I am sure his resentment was in proportion to the distress of his circumstances, and afterward dictated his actions.

I must now come to a part which I would wish to forget forevermore, much less to unfold to another human being. However, simply, I trust you, as you trusted me.

My sister, who is more than ten years my junior, was left in the guardianship of myself and my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I do not know in what circumstances Wickham lived after my refusing his demands, but about a year ago, my sister vanished from her schooling. She had been established in London, where she possibly encountered Wickham or vice versa, and then went with a lady who was to be her personal mentor and teacher. Thither too, went Wickham, as we were to discover. Whatever his living circumstances, his charm never tarnished, and thus he led my sister’s governess quite by the nose, and in any direction he liked. Through this connection he established a relationship with my sister, whose affectionate heart retained a strong impression of his kindness to her as a child.

She was thoroughly persuaded to believe herself in love, and consented to elope with him. As you
know of the naïve and sensitive age of fifteen, as well as the knowledge and bond shared between close siblings, I managed to make out her behaviour…but was too late. I caught up with them a day or two after the elopement. The only gratitude I can impart to Wickham is his respect for my sister’s apprehension and her own knowledge regarding the female body. Our own mother never fully recovered from Georgiana’s birth, despite being of an appropriately advanced age, and passed when my sister was but three years old.

Nevertheless you can imagine what I felt and how I acted. Upon my entrance to where my sister, her governess, and Wickham were staying, he flew from the place immediately. I cannot deny he was wise in that decision. The governess was of course removed permanently from her position, and Georgiana was distraught for months afterward for offending my trust and our family’s honour.

Wickham’s chief object was obviously my sister’s fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds, but I cannot help supposing that the hope of avenging himself on me was a strong incentive. His revenge would have been complete indeed.

And so, this is the faithful narrative of the events in which we have been concerned together. Know that I do not blame you for misunderstanding Wickham’s version, nor your own misreading of me. Any effort on your part to make inquiries upon the subject would been deemed inappropriate, intrusive, and met with avoidance or even lies, to preserve the secret. I am only sorry my character had to be explained in this way, and only after such force of events. I do hope you will acquit me of cruelty toward Wickham. You, more than anyone else, can understand my fealty to my sister, and how the violence of our love can astonish us.

As for you and your sister, pain is the last sensation I would ever wish upon either of you. When I told you that you had misunderstood me, James, I had asked about your own fantasies. Your intentions, your desires, I wanted to know everything you wished to feel so that I might endeavour to grant them to you, to share them with you…but I get away from myself. This letter has grown long enough and I must prepare for the carriage. I hope its reaching you does not incur further disdain of me.

I think you perfectly deserving of all the happiness in the world.

William Darcy
Rejuvination

Chapter Summary

James' time at Hunsford comes to a close.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the slow updates, lovelies. It's my last semester of college and I'm already cheating death by giving you this lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lizzy?”

Charlotte’s voice was soft yet earnest. James could not tell how long she had been there. He had finished the letter and had gotten lost somewhere in his second reading, his eyes aching and seeing nothing.

“Wretchedly blind,” he said but his voice failed him, hoarse and ragged as it was.

“What?” she asked, her hands curving over his around the letter.

He shook his head as thick tears slid free of his eyes. “How despicable am I.”

“Of all the souls in this world, yours is the last I would declare despicable,” Charlotte scolded. “What’s happened?”

James sniffled as he slowly shook his head. “A just humiliation. I’m absolutely ashamed of myself.”

Charlotte’s thumbs brushed the tears from his face, a palm coming to hold his cheek. “Does this have to do with Lord Darcy?”

James swallowed thickly. “It’s my own wrongdoing of him. It’s Jane’s happiness being destroyed by her own relations.”

Charlotte sighed. “You always did inflict self punishment to an absurd degree. There isn’t a thing you could do to halt Jane’s devotion to you.”

James’ face once more moved from side to side. “Everything I’ve thought…has been wrong.”

Charlotte listened patiently as he relayed an abridged version of the letter to her, leaving out Darcy’s sister and his confession. “My aunt was right and I outright refused to agree with her suspicions. Wickham was leaving so I hadn’t cared what his abrupt liking for Miss King was; that his placing himself in my home was just his desire for a hot meal and my company, not an investigation of my sisters and wealth.”
“Refrain from doing this to yourself,” Charlotte mildly chided. “Wickham may have very much relished your company during his scheme. You needn’t degrade yourself for being charmed by a scoundrel.”

“It is what I deserve,” James quietly disagreed. “I’ve been so cruel to Darcy.”

“Upon justifiable reasons,” Charlotte proffered. “He did in fact act in Jane and Bingley’s separation, but it seems you’ve reached…something of an understanding for one another. And I do think it is quite time you returned to Longbourn.”

He nodded weakly, “I can’t but agree.”

“For entirely different reasons than you’re thinking, you beautiful idiot,” she remarked, pinching his nose to wag his head from side to side. “You need Jane’s company and your father’s. You are never unwelcome here; but I am under no illusion that your heart can heal in a place which isn’t home.”

He swallowed again, nodding with more confidence while she combed her fingers through his hair, rearranging it into something that had not just rolled out of bed as the front gate clattered shut. Mr. Collins was returning to the house, appearing highly pleased with himself.

“I’ve just come from Rosings! The two gentlemen have taken their leave and I was most graciously allowed to impart my well wishes for their travel. It was most fortunate I made a point to visit as I could console Lady Catherine and her daughter, who do so exceedingly feel the loss of company.”

A grimace slowly contorted James’ features as he watched the man stroll his way into his house. “What must it be like? Living so blissfully in ignorance?”

“Not unlike a bee bumping against a stag’s arse in a field of wildflowers,” Charlotte remarked as she held the blanket around him so he could come down from the fence. Mr. Collins’s joviality was only stymied by their announcement of James’ leaving. They had once more been invited to dine at Rosings, but James could not say he was sorry to miss it.

Knowing her ladyship would insist upon Marie having a chaperone for her own departure, it was then decided she would join him. Marie seemed hardly bothered to leave early and by midday they were packed and approaching the carriage. Charlotte embraced him for a long moment before it was her husband’s turn to shake his hand.

“I do not know, cousin, if it has yet been expressed, but the favour of your company has been much felt. We know how little there is to tempt anyone to our humble abode. Our plain manner of living, our small rooms and few domestics, and the little we see of the world, must make Hunsford extremely dull to a young man like yourself. I hope you will believe us grateful of your joining us, and that we have done everything in our power to prevent your spending your time unpleasantly.”

James’ brows lifted somewhat, undeniably impressed. Mr. Collins’s statement was so contrary to the first boastings they had first heard of his Rosings settlement. James considered how even Mr. Collins had room for growth—

“We have certainly done our best and most fortunately have it in our power to introduce you to very superior society, and from our connection with Rosings, the frequent means of varying the humble home scene, I think we may flatter ourselves that your Hunsford visit cannot have been entirely irksome…”
Marie entered the carriage first, where she waited with his feline ward. As the door closed and their journey rocked into motion, she exhaled, "Good gracious! It seems but a day or two since we first came and yet how many things have happened!"

He hummed a sound of acknowledgment but it lacked her spirit. "A great many indeed."

From thereon their journey was performed without much conversation, and they arrived within hours at the Gardiner’s home. As they had left so soon, there was no time for a letter to arrive announcing them. Regardless, Jane opened the door as if she had been sitting at a window and embraced Jamie when he was barely through the door.

She looked well, her demeanor only altered by her brother’s spirits. She locked eyes with him briefly during the commotion of their arrival in the cramped foyer, but she waited until after dinner and they were retiring for sleep to ask him what was wrong.

James only shook his head as he dragged his shirt over his head. And then he paused. The morning of travel and afternoon of rambunctious family distorted time, but he realized he still had Darcy’s kiss on his lips. His confession felt a month in the past, but his kiss reemerged, fresh and powerful across Jamie’s lips, so he stood in silence, holding his shirt to his chest.

His head jerked toward the sound from the bed, and the ginger head staring back at him. Jane was watching him, but said nothing as he extended an arm to cradle the purring head before it lifted its front paws onto his forearm so his fingers tickled that soft white chest. "I ought to call you ‘Darcy’. You barge right into my time and thoughts…"

The sheets rustled under Jane’s nightgown as she pulled her knees to her chest, watching him contemplatively. He glanced at her and met her eyes, but she simply pressed her lips together in a small, patient smile, waiting for him. He stripped his trousers so he unfolded himself under the covers. Wiggling his fingers, the kitten waddled and pounced, playing on its side and gnawing on his fingers when he stroked its chest and blinking slowly at Jane as she scratched along its forehead.

“Lord Darcy was at Rosings,” he eventually murmured. He could feel Jane’s eyes on him but he had already written this detail to her in their letters. "He…changed my thoughts on Mr. Wickham."

Tears leaked of their own volition into his pillow. Jane’s lips parted, her legs finding his under the covers. He swallowed and sniffed before he continued the rest of the tale, only leaving out Darcy’s involvement with Bingley.

“So our aunt’s suspicions were correct,” she said softly.

“Ugh!” he breathed. “Don’t tell her, she’ll be insufferable.”

Jane smiled. “You leave me and go and get heartbroken twice, Jamie.”

"You have to have a heart for it to break."

One of her brows lifted. "You have one of those, I’m afraid. A rather large one."

It ached in his chest, and his eyes pressed shut. Hearing someone else say it aloud… “Do I love him, Jane?”

“Wickham, no. But Darcy…I’d have to say so. Curious, but we don’t choose these things, do we.”
His eyes opened, a fresh stream of tears soaking into his pillow. His sister was blurry beside him, but her voice was calm, reassuring, and faintly content. “And so we go on.”

He sniffled as he met her gaze and loosely laced their fingers together. “We go on.”

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It was some days before they left Gracechurch street, as their aunt wanted time for a letter announcing them to reach Longbourn. The time spent in London was a welcome reprieve; the hustle and bustle shaking free James’ woes before he returned to the quietude of Longbourn and the familiar noise of his family.

On the day they left and reached the inn that marked two-thirds of their journey done, it was initially a lovely surprise to find Kitty and Lydia waving at them from the inn’s dining room window. They fluttered down the stairs to greet their siblings, Lydia informing them that lunch was already being served while she gave fleeting kisses on their cheeks. Kitty hugged James’ middle for a longer moment, her eyes closed as he kissed the top of her head and held her hand on their way up the stairs.

On the table were already cold meats and a cucumber salad. Lydia flung her arm out in gesture, “Is this not nice? We wanted to treat you both—but you must lend us the money, for we have just spent ours at the shop out there. See our purchases!”

James and Jane exchanged silent glances while Lydia unpacked her triumphs. James met Kitty’s eyes across the table, her own visage somewhat apologetic yet she was as rosy cheeked as Lydia.

“Look here, I have bought this bonnet, though I do not think it is pretty. I plan to dismember it as soon as I get home to see if I can make it back up any better.”

Jane’s gaze was deadpan while James outright balked, “You wasted money on something you admit you wouldn’t use otherwise?”

“Oh, but there were two or three much uglier in the shop! And I have bought good satin along with it; I think it will be very tolerable. Oh! But I do have some news! Or did you already hear about Wickham and Miss King?”

The elder siblings collectively sighed, jaded as their waiter returned to refill glasses and the table fell silent until he had gone. “What, you thought the waiter must not hear? As if he cared! I dare say he often hears worse things than I am going to say—but he is an ugly fellow. I am glad he is gone; I never saw such a long chin in my life.”

“Because you’ve seen so many chins,” James snapped dryly.

“Oh fine,” Lydia remarked, “but is it not well and good that that intrigue has passed? Wickham is safe! Though I do miss his presence since he has been moved to Brighton.”

“Safe too, is Mary King,” James finished.

Lydia ignored this and continued, “She is a great fool for not putting forth more of an effort if she liked him.”

Jane remarked, “I hope there was no strong attachment on either side.”

“I am sure there was not on his. I will answer for it he never cared three straws about her. How could he about such a nasty little freckled thing?”
James could tell what expression he wore due to Kitty’s reaction of it across from him. He caught the waiter’s arm in passing and apologized crisply, “I am so sorry. We haven’t money to pay for this. You will have to return it to the kitchen.”

“What?” Lydia blurted.

James never looked away from the anxious waiter. “We have been traveling and only have enough for our last carriage. My youngest sibling seems to have spent their last coins on meaningless things. I am so sorry for having bothered you.”

“Lizzy!” Lydia hissed as he stood from the table. Jane smoothly joined him alongside Maria. Kitty hesitated only briefly before Lydia realized she could very realistically be left at the table.

She was either incredibly forgiving or it was a testament of how her thoughts moved as they piled into the carriage and she said, “Well, let us be quite comfortable and snug, and talk and laugh all the way home. Regarding Brighton, I do so want papa to take us all there for the summer! It would be such a delicious scheme, but in the first place, let us hear what has happened to you all. Kitty and I have spent a good number of evenings with Mrs. Forster and her husband, the Colonel; I do say she considers me her very best friend! And the mischief we have gotten up to with their lingering regimental friends during dinner—Have you seen any pleasant men? Have you had any flirting? Being in London, I was in great hopes you would have got a husband. Jane, you will be an old maid soon—”

James made a point to target Kitty’s ticklish ribcage, her gleeful shriek slicing through Lydia’s ranting.

Their reception at home was most kind and welcoming. Mrs. Bennet rejoiced to see Jane in undiminished beauty, cupping her face in their small foyer. “Ohho! My darling, you’re prettier every day! Or since I have not seen you, I must have forgotten, but how terrible a mother that would make me.”

Mr. Bennet silently appeared in the doorway, but his warm smile gave him away as he gazed at his children. His arm opened for James to collapse against him, quickly followed by Jane, then Kitty and Lydia. Once dinner arrived he absentmindedly raked his hand through his son’s hair, and then later voiced, “I am glad you are back, Lizzy.”

But it was not solely a Bennet affair, as the herd of Lucases had come to meet Maria, who had only parted with the Bennets upon reaching Meryton. The families packed into the Bennets’ modest but sizable dining room to hear all the news regarding the Collinses, the de Bourghs, and anything else that would elicit great merriment. Mrs. Bennet was eager for Jane’s retelling of London’s fashions, while Lydia’s loud voice hailed anyone who would hear her.

“Mary, I wish you had come with us. As we went along, Kitty and me drew up the blinds and pretended there was nobody in the coach. I should have gone so all the way, if Kitty had not been sick, and when we got to the inn, I do think we behaved very handsomely, for we treated the other three to the nicest luncheon in the world.”

“It wasn’t. And they didn’t,” James undermined, but only for his father’s ears. Mr. Bennet chuckled over his glass of wine but had nothing to say on it.

“And then when we came away it was such fun! I was ready to die of laughter, and then we were so merry all the way home, so loud that anybody might have heard us ten miles off!”

Mary, however, voiced, “Far be it from me to depreciate such pleasures. They would doubtless be
congenial with the generality of female minds. But I confess they would have no charms for me. I should infinitely prefer a book.”

Lydia typically listened to nobody for more than half a minute but her jaw thoroughly dropped when Mary added in afterthought, “I can’t much see the appeal of pretending to not exist. No one much cares about an empty carriage passing by. And this reminds me of something I once heard some of the regimental gentlemen say…about the…they called it the ‘female caterwauling,’ I think. They seemed rather displeased by it.”

James snorted on his wine and coughed for several minutes while his father pat him on the back, his own smile never diminishing.

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The first week of their return was soon gone, and James found himself seated with his mother in her parlour, having gone there for the morning light and she to speak with him.

“Well, Lizzy,” she began as she sorted through sprigs of lavender and mugwort beside him. “What is your opinion now of this sad business of Jane’s? For my part, I am determined never to speak of it again to anybody, but I cannot find out whether Jane saw anything of him in London.”

“She did not. She saw Caroline, but was not wholly received with enthusiasm.”

His mother’s lips parted at this treatment before her features hardened. “Well. They are certainly undeserving young folk. I do not suppose there is the least chance of her getting him now. There is no talk of him or anyone coming to Netherfield in the summer. I have enquired everybody who is likely to know.”

“I do not believe he will ever live at Netherfield again,” James confirmed.

She sighed, waving a purple strand under her nose. “Ah, it is just as he chooses. Nobody wants him to come anyhow, though I shall always say that he used my daughter extremely ill. I did not expect that of him. Of others, of course. Well…hm. But Mr. Bingley did present himself too well. I am beginning to feel melancholic at the idea that Jane may very well die of a broken heart. She has the warmth of first attachment, but given her age and disposition, her love of him has a greater steadiness than first infatuations usually boast.”

“She is stronger than that,” James said hopefully.

His mother’s lavender paused as if she had been lost in her own thoughts before she heard his. He felt her soft, weathered hand cup his face, her thumb stroking along his eye. “The Bingleys may certainly be sorry for what they have done. They would have made a wonderful lady out of Jane, and she a wonderful family out of them; and so too might you have had Bingley’s companionship and an easy means of travel. You always did relish explorations.”

“I do not intend to leave Longbourn, mama,” he countered gently. “This is my home and my inheritance. I won’t abandon it.”

She pushed his silky, roguish hair behind his ear. “You would certainly never hear the end of it from me. This reminds me, I suppose the Collinses live comfortably, do they? If Charlotte is half as sharp as her mother, she is an excellent manager.”

James could not help but smile as he confirmed, “She is, of course.”

“And how was that Catherine de Bourgh? Goodness knows I feel as though I have already met and
dined and argued with the woman.”

James laughed, “She is indeed a lady to the tips of her nails, but I shudder to think how you would put her in a place of subordination if she ever crossed your path untowardly.”

Mrs. Bennet held her chin a little higher at that.

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The Brighton scheme certainly lingered in Lydia’s conversation, for she seemed constantly determined to keep it in people’s minds until she received the answer she liked. James was pleased for his father’s casual refusal to humour such desires, and then further his outright refusal of the trip.

“If one could but go to Brighton!” Lydia lamented. “The sea air would cleanse our spirits; never mind the regiments there! But papa is so disagreeable.”

James had no qualms or reservations in rolling his eyes but he went ignored while his mother and Kitty wholeheartedly agreed.

“A little sea-bathing would se me up forever,” Kitty mused wistfully, having never seen more than Longbourn’s streams.

Although the house’s normal amount of noise reached a new pitch in the form of Kitty slamming a door for possibly the first time in her life. James and Jane stared at their sister, so long aspiring toward Lydia’s likeness in behaviour and looks, however she now stormed through the house looking far more like a version of her mother’s rage and her own person. “What on earth’s happened?” Jane murmured worriedly.

The news would have come from their father, who arrived in the room looking most jaded and annoyed, however Lydia was all but singing through the walls as she swung into the room and announced, “Mrs. Forster’s invited me to Brighton!”

“Who?” James uttered dumbly with a look to Jane, who appeared apprehensive.

“Colonel Forster’s wife!” Lydia exclaimed.

James frowned as his father landed in the chair beside him. “You mean the bloke you harped about before the Netherfield ball? He was single, then.”

“He’s married now!” she chimed, “and these three months have been splendid!”

James was thoroughly perplexed now as he squinted at Jane. “Were we gone three months?”

She shook her head as their father’s baritone softly intervened, “The overly similar Mrs. Forster has shared dear Lydia’s time these past several weeks. They are…remarkable in likeness.”

Mrs. Bennet perked up from where she sat by the window. “That sounds, marvelous, darling! The cards seem to have been dealt in your favour!”

Lydia certain knew it, as her ecstasy demanded everyone’s congratulations, whereas the luckless Kitty eventually entered with such a complexion that her elder siblings knew she had been crying and was on the verge of doing so again. Lydia was wholly inattentive to her feelings.

“I cannot see why Mrs. Forster should not ask me as well as Lydia,” she interrupted the noise of the
room. “I have just as much right to be asked as she has. She’s asked me to everything alongside Lydia and I-I am older!”

James’ heart both swelled and ached for her; the amount of bravery Kitty needed to finally step aside and in front of Lydia was monumental, but Lydia was still the louder of the two.

“There is a difference in being older and favourite,” Lydia countered smugly.

Enraged and betrayed, Kitty left the room with Jane rushing after her. Mrs. Bennet practiced some sort of damage control by ushering Lydia outside so at least the trees could listen to her celebration. James, however, turned toward his father. “You cannot possibly be thinking of letting her go with that woman.”

Mr. Bennet was rubbing his temple. “Lydia will never rest easy until she has exposed herself in some public place or other. We can never expect her to do it with so little expense or inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances.”

There were very few occasions James was disappointed in his father, but his lackluster performance over Lydia was one of them. “She will not be satisfied even if she does! The better to keep her here or somewhere with proper company! Insist she take Kitty! Or Jane! Or that she does not go at all! Married or not, a second Lydia will only catalyze her ruin.”

Mr. Bennet’s eyes were tired and apologetic. “And we shall never have peace at Longbourn if she does not go.”

James was flabbergasted. “You’re…you’ve given up on her.”

“Not at all. I daresay Colonel Forster is a sensible man. He did not marry our Lydia after all, but an older and wealthier one. Being so positioned in his rank, he can be counted upon to make sure Lydia does not fall to ruin, for that will reflect badly on him, his wife, and all those under his leadership. Lydia is certainly too poor to be given too much attention.”

“You know that hardly matters to certain people,” James uttered darkly. “Think of Kitty, then. Lydia, who will be declared the most lascivious flirt that ever made her and her family ridiculous, could very well ruin more than herself. Lydia has already marked the pair of them with her own wild volatility and the disdain of all restraint. If this is what it takes to shut Lydia up then Kitty does not deserve it.”

“On the contrary, I find that this separation of the two may very well work toward young Katherine’s favour, though I may be the only one who sees it.”

The chair legs creaked as he stood. “At any rate, Lydia cannot grow many degrees worse, without authorizing us to lock her up for the rest of her life.”

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And so May arrived, but with it came the surprise of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and their troupe of young ones. Lydia had been insufferable and Kitty sinking lower than any of them had ever seen her. So dark were her eyes and the surrounding skin that even her uncle remarked, “Good heavens, child, whatever has been done to you?”

Lydia had merely overlapped any chance at a response with her accounts of Mrs. Forster’s invitation and her endless attempts at packing. “England’s springs are so long! I find myself packing and unpacking at least thrice a day! I haven’t much time left to make up my mind!”
Mrs. Gardener, however, was wholly uninterested as she drew James aside and said, “And what of your own packing, hm? Are you ready?”

“This is earlier than I expected,” he admitted, and then it occurred to him. “Aunt…could I impose on you?”

She frowned, “I do not grasp your meaning.”

He retraced their steps so his aunt could peek at the rest of the family in the parlour. “Kitty has been like this since we returned from London, since the plans were arranged for Lydia to go to Brighton.”

“A blight of jealousy, then. What am I to do for a child’s envy?”

“Can she come with us?” he said plainly. He had certainly caught his aunt off guard, and before she could process her own surprise he assured, “Kitty very much reflects whosoever company she is with. I assure you, with Lydia gone, Kitty is remarkably intelligent and well-spoken.”

His aunt’s brows lifted. “That’s quite a claim, considering I have never seen such a display.”

“Because you have never seen the two apart. Kitty is her own woman, but she has never been allowed to prove it.”

“Nonsense. She’s never grasped the opportunity,” she countered.

“I am sure if you approach the subject with her, she will be most receptive of joining us. Not to mention,” he pointed at the crowd of children around Jane, on whose lap a tail moved, “that furry thing is my charge at the moment. I would be glad to have a bit of help while Jane is otherwise watching your children.”

His aunt was thoroughly dumbfounded. “You’re bringing a cat? It looks neonatal.”

“Not as young as that but just about,” he confirmed.

Mrs. Gardiner stared at him as if waiting for this to be a jape. She huffed, “I don’t suppose you can leave the creature behind?”

“No one in this house could be bothered to stop Lydia’s going to Brighton. I am not counting on them to take care of my charge.”

Mrs. Gardiner appeared annoyed and resigned, but not unhappy. She went forth into the room and sat next to Kitty, who looked every bit like she had never anticipated having her aunt’s attentions trained on her.

James went to his room to begin packing, as his relations wished to leave no later than the morrow’s afternoon. Lydia’s own prattling echoed in his mind as he too wondered what ratio of winter, spring, and summer raiment was appropriate for the three weeks or so they would be gone —

“Lizzy,” said a small voice in the doorway. He turned to face Kitty. She looked haggard, but something in her eyes had lifted. “Can I really come?”

His expression opened innocently. “I’m not paying for this venture. Has aunt invited you? Very good, then.”
He turned back to plop his undergarments into the trunk—

Arms slid around him as Kitty pressed herself to his back. James turned in her embrace to hold her and kiss her head. “It’s not Brighton, but…” he said to her hair.

“I don’t care,” she mumbled into his shirt.

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His uncle caught up to him while he was in the kitchen with Kitty; she was sitting on the island counter with cold water and lemon as well as a pastry he had made for her while packing various jars and bundles of dried herbs. The effect of the coming trip and her brother’s attentions were slowly but thoroughly rejuvenating her.

“Has my other half told you of the change of plans?”

James looked at him. “Regarding the trip?”

“Yes, our original intent to tour the Lakes has been changed. You see, we are here early because otherwise my work would have put the trip off until July, however at this time the Lakes are unbearably cold and windy. Not to worry, I am sure we’ll happen across a good number of natural streams and brooks, as we will be wandering a great deal through Derbyshire.”

Kitty looked at James, whose knife slipped on the wooden board. “Derby-where?”

His uncle looked puzzled at his reaction. “Derbyshire, of course. Your aunt grew up there, you know, and it is a place many of your own acquaintances have originated. Goodness, I have heard enough of Lydia go on and on about that Wickham fellow; I should think you too would like to see what sort of place makes his stock.”

“Absolutely not,” James blurted.

His uncle was unperturbed. “Nevertheless, your aunt is terribly fond of the place, and I cannot deny its beauty. Have you all packed, Kitty, dear? Be sure you have proper boots, as the rainy season is likely to ruin a wheel or two, and we will be forced to walk some distances.”

He left the kitchen humming to himself, leaving James in mortification. Kitty’s feet swung lethargically as she said, “At least with the rain I won’t have to make any excuse for my curls.”

And so to Derbyshire, they were to go.

Chapter End Notes

And now we will be in Volume 3 ~ Soooooo...yeah. This is where things get even more different from canon haha Please trust me <3
“When I requested peace in this house, I did not mean for half of its inhabitants to fly off,” Mr. Bennet declared indignantly while their carriage was being packed. James and Jane had already said their goodbyes; the latter was doing the kindness of distracting Lydia and young Gardiners elsewhere. He and Kitty both looked up at their father with mixtures of humour and apology.

“Are you not pleased to spend time with your nieces and nephews?” James accused.

Mr. Bennet uttered a gruff sigh as he looked elsewhere, jaded by things not going his way. James felt his jaw on top of his head, though, when he embraced him, and then Kitty landed beside him. “Will you miss us, papa?”

“I am trading two of my own for twenty of someone else’s,” he complained. “This is hardly a fair deal.”

Kitty giggled, “There aren’t that many!”

“Hard to tell when they all talk at once,” James sympathized. The three of them separated for Mr. Bennet to shake his brother-in-law’s hand.

“I’ll have them back to you in one piece, not to worry,” their uncle chuckled.

“I’ll thank you for it with a meal upon your return,” Mr. Bennet nodded.

“Speaking of, my offspring tend to be particularly energetic in the evenings, so plan their supper right before bed. They fade soon after. Otherwise, you’ll find yourself woken up most rudely before dawn.”

That reminded James of the small one he was bringing with them on this journey. He handed the kitten into the carriage for Kitty to hold while he sat with their driver for fresh air. He looked back at the lane infrequently used by carriages before it turned out of sight of their home. Mr. Bennet noticed and raised his arm for a final wave, which James returned.

James had not spoken to Kitty of his reservations about entering the county he had heard so much about. He consoled himself by reassuring that their travels would take them quite a distance around Derbyshire before they entered it, and then even, the residents were not alerted every time travelers passed through. It was also extremely unlikely a certain family were even home, so much time did they seem to spend in London.

This tactic was largely successful as they met their first natural wonder: a lush stone bridge blooming with moss, and the trees around filled with blossoms. It looked ancient, and despite its architects making something everlasting, the latest frost had worn into the stone like sharp pockmarks, resulting in their first delay. It was nothing more than a fractured spoke in one of their wheels, easy enough to repair, but the time was well spent sitting on the raised sides of the bridge or skipping stones over the tranquil waters passing underneath it.

Only once did their aunt scold them. “Kitty, are you not concerned for stains on your dress?” she voiced as the Bennets ate lunch.
James’ mouth was fully but Kitty remarked, “I don’t care much what happens to Lydia’s dress.”

He coughed on his food, laughing after he managed to swallow. Mrs. Gardiner frowned, “Do not encourage vindictiveness, James.”

“It is hardly my fault if cleverness is used for evil,” he defended as he examined her dress. “You finally learned how to fix hems.”

“I can’t ask you to adjust everything for me,” she defended, “especially after it became apparent I had stopped growing but Lydia had not.”

“Do you even like the same colours?” he queried, “Or were you just intent on sharing everything?”

“I like the colours,” she admitted. “I look better in them than Lydia.”

James guffawed, his crossed feet dangling contently above the water. “Why on earth would you ever hide this personality behind Lydia?”

Kitty grew solemn. “Because people like Lydia.”

He looked at her. “They’d like you too.”

When she appeared doubtful and let her chin drop, he leaned abruptly to bump her shoulder. She shoved him back as their driver announced the wheel fixed. Kitty visibly hesitated in getting back in the carriage, and asked when James voiced his concern, “Could I perhaps sit with the driver?”

He did not mind at all, and when they arrived at their first stop, Oxford, he helped her hop down from the seat, looking red cheeked and bright eyed. “That was wonderful!” Kitty bloomed as he curled her arm with his and guided her into their hotel for dinner, listening to her chatter.

“Our driver’s father is French and he is bilingual! He taught me how to ask for bread and cheese as if I were in France! Oh Jamie, would you ever go there? You wouldn’t go without me, surely?”

“Let us hope you would not discover seasickness,” he chuckled.

“Let us just hope the rain finishes this night, let alone more water,” their aunt intercepted as the putter of rain sang through the rafters over their heads.

Their uncle settled down with a bottle of wine and glasses. James poured for Kitty after a splash of water diluted her cup while their uncle said, “You know, I cannot care much for Paris. All those narrow, crowded streets—overcrowding is becoming quite the issue there, you know. You take a turn down a lane and suddenly you’re lost, mugged, can’t remember the smell of anything which isn’t a horse carcass.”

Kitty looked ghastly. She slowly set her wine down. Mrs. Gardiner laughed, “Take care, dear, the same has been said about our London but we make do perfectly well. Your uncle is just too English to receive other cities.”

The final dregs of the storm lingered in the morning but for the most part Oxford was theirs the following day. James could not say he cared for the town much; a place of collegiate learning and professional interest, it was certainly a stop catering to Mr. Gardiner, but he and Kitty enjoyed their explorations until their journey continued the following day to Blenheim and then Warwick.

James could by no means claim to be a horseman, but their hosts arranged for the next three stops, as they were so near each other, to be attained on horseback while their luggage went ahead in a
carriage. A stableman assisted Kitty to climb behind James in the saddle and she chatted excitedly during their lap of Blenheim before they continued on to Warwick.

Lush with spring, the village was decorated with medieval architecture and spacious greens. All of it was easily visible in an afternoon, however Birmingham was their next stop and it provided quite a contrast.

Like a smaller London without the rush for modernity, Birmingham was simultaneously urban yet rural. Kitty much more preferred the variety of shops and proved far more frugal with James holding her purse and their aunt guiding her fashion tastes.

James kept his preference for London to himself as he strolled along the avenues. A few start-up industries smeared the roads with black and perfumed the air with coal or less identifiable elements, but where the city was yet untouched, it was clean and spacious. He particularly liked walking along a narrow part of the river. It was more like a canal as people traversed along both sides of it or stopped to scoop water to clean their faces.

They quickly moved on, however, traveling ever further north. This was James’ favorite part. Though the hubs of humanity were lively and quaint, the smell of the trees in spring, and the wet crush of petals underneath his feet could not be overcome. He enjoyed the humidity which curled Kitty’s hair into frizzy ringlets and his own into mussed waves. He enjoyed walking along pebbled riverbanks and picking leaves out of Kitty’s hair; he had previously only shared such experiences with Jane, so quickly had Lydia’s interests stolen Kitty from her elder siblings.

However the destination could not be avoided and quite snuck up on James, as he did not realize they were in Derbyshire until their aunt began pointing out natural landmarks. James quickly evaluated with no small amount of annoyance and shame, that the area was beautiful. By far the most lovely they had yet seen. Rolling hills guided them into the county of stone cottages tucked within gardens and groves. It did remind him a bit of Hunsford in regard to the upkeep of the homes and vast grounds and fields, but there was a warmth here Hunsford did not have. People waved to them as they rolled into town; more than one person from their inn emerged to assist with their bags. For all of Lady Catherine’s righteous charity, these people seemed to do it freely and happily, without obligation or forced hospitality.

The Gardiners settled in for the afternoon, but James agreed to stroll through the town with Kitty. They could not make it twenty paces without someone calling “Afternoon!” or asking how they liked Derbyshire, or stopping them altogether for conversation. He and Kitty only made it down the street where a kind older woman let James use her garden to play with and feed his cat.

‘Oho! Please, come in! Use the garden however you like! Oh, what’s his name?’ she asked cheerily.

“I don’t think you ever told me his name,” Kitty realized as they passed through the woman’s gate. “Have you named him?”

James looked embarrassed before he admitted, “Would you think ill of me if I were to call him ‘Darcy’?”

The woman’s expression went blank for a second before she guffawed, “Not at all! Oho, very good!”

Word of his ward quickly spread throughout the neighborhood and the evening became filled with children. The woman was kind enough to host dinner for him and Kitty while he reminded the children to be gentle and let the cat rest if he was tired from play.
He carefully lifted the groggy creature from the lap of one of the girls and promised to be round again the following evening as they would be in Derbyshire for the week. The children ran to their homes with this promise and James slept soundly with it as well, however come the following morning, his aunt’s intentions quickly evaporated all feelings of rest.

“Surely you don’t mean the house is open for tours?” he blanched over breakfast.

“Why shouldn’t it be when I spent a number of years with the housekeeper?” Mrs. Gardiner challenged. “With no residents at home, and ourselves being respectable, she is happy to host us, and I have the pleasure of meeting a too long distant friend.”

“I’ve seen enough fine carpets and satin curtains in Netherfield,” he remarked bitterly, looking down at his eggs and roasted asparagus without appetite.

His aunt harrumphed, “If it were merely a fine house richly furnished, I should not care about it myself, but the grounds are delightful and Mrs. Reynolds is loyal to her post and so we must go to her. I doubt you will mind as they have some of the finest woods in the country.”

Therefore after breakfast they loaded into the inn’s modest phaeton and rolled out of the village into the deeper hills of Derbyshire. James, as they drove along, watched for the first appearances of Pemberley Woods with some perturbation and forced calm. Simply put: he felt it an insult to Lord Darcy for coming here, however as they entered the dark canopied, wild woods contrasting with trimmed carpets of green fields, he could not deny his pleasure and curiosity.

James’ spirits fluttered as their driver narrated how they had actually been in the Park a good while, so large as it was. James’s mind was too full for conversation, as his gaze was glued to the moss on trees and the silvery-blue leaves of plants he had never seen. The town was in a lower valley while they began a steady ascent into the woods and eventually exited from under the shadow of the canopy to look out over Pemberley House on the other side of the valley.

“I didn’t realize we were following a river,” Kitty said, and indeed, James’ eyes lowered to the ribbon of water curling back toward town before first turning a waterwheel and rushing through a line of washing hanging over the river.

They drove down the hill and crossed the bridge over the river to where the road arrived at the house: a large, handsome, stone building not unlike the cottages of the town, however at least thrice as large as the biggest one. The valley was deceptive depending on which angle you stood. As James set foot on the pebbled drive, he looked around at the space carved into the valley for such a residence. He could now see how the house stood upon a raised hillock of the valley to better look out over the river. If this was the front, he was curious what the rear gardens were.

James turned back to look up at the house as well as Mrs. Reynolds emerging from it. A respectable, more elderly woman, she carried herself with the air that was fitting for one tasked with the upkeep of a Lord’s home, and yet…there was something remarkably casual about her. As she guided them up the stairs into the home, James peeked back over the valley, realizing it was the complete opposite of Lady Catherine’s abode: tucked away from prying eyes instead of situated high up for everyone to see. Inside was much the same as he met the eyes of various servants going about their duties: the uniform was certainly of high quality, but highly customizable.

Mrs. Reynolds led them into the dining parlour first, however the journey to the room was not without its wonders. After surveying the servants, James’ head was permanently craned toward the high ceilings; eventually he felt Kitty’s hands curl around his arm for guidance, as she too gaped at their surroundings.
Chandeliers and wall sconces lined the ceiling and walls of the vast rooms, however they were unnecessary as tall windows stood between each one, cascading the ornate floors with natural light. Instead of expensive dark colours, the place glowed with few, but bright materials. James reckoned the darkest colour was the black or blue of a servant’s trousers, perhaps the green marble of the foyer while white or peach marble were dominant everywhere else.

The dining parlour was certainly the room meant to impress: a massive portrait hung over the fireplace tall enough for Kitty to enter, its frame gilded in gold. “The late Lord Darcy,” Mrs. Reynolds introduced, “and just opposite him, his wife, Lady Darcy.”

Kitty and James craned their heads back and forth, looking at the previous generation of this house. The late Darcy was as tall as his son if his portrait was to be trusted, along with his similarly dark hair. The Lady Darcy, however, had given her son most of his traits. Warm eyes and a full mouth, the artist had done her justice as well as the faintest of smiles; a sense of humour not lost from her townsfolk.

James was glad when they moved out of the room, for it contrasted with the luxurious airiness of the rest of the home. He unconsciously stroked between the ears of the sleeping Darcy in his shirt, glad to have played out his energy before coming here; Mrs. Reynolds gave his shirt several looks before she was swept away by her narration of the rooms.

*What on earth could he have intended,* James wondered silently, *by confessing to me? That I might live here?*

James briefly considered asking Mrs. Reynolds where her employer was, but his courage failed as he thought better of it.

However leave it to his uncle to bring up unwanted inquiries.

James turned his back on the words which left Mr. Gardiner’s mouth, “Where is the man? I wouldn’t bear to leave such a place for long, nor as frequently as he does.”

James quickly moved on to the next parlour, a more intimate space with various portraits and miniatures. He exhaled heavily, not realizing his aunt was beside him until she asked, “What do you think?”

He looked at her and followed her gaze, with some shock, to the miniature of none other than George Wickham on the mantelpiece. Mrs. Reynolds had since followed them in and voiced, “Ah, he is the son of the late Lord’s steward. Brought up by the Darcys’ own expense, in fact, but I am afraid he has turned out rather wild.”

His aunt hummed a note of *You don’t say?* as she met his glare. She was smug. He moved on.

“And this,” Mrs. Reynolds continued behind him, “is my master.”

James was almost to the next room but his heart froze as he turned back to her. He realized with some horror that he expected the man himself to be in the room, but she was only pointing to a different painting lying on the table between the opposite wall’s windows. They crowded around it while she lifted it up.

“It is perhaps my favourite, however he stubbornly always removes it from the mantelpiece. This one is only smaller than his parents’ portraits because it was painted at the same time as the miniatures, about eight years ago. It is very like him. The artist is the same who painted his mother; he has a great talent for capturing eyes.”
An immense pain bloomed in James’ chest. He could not quite hear what was said around him, but felt Kitty’s hand on his arm. He looked down at her and realized what expression he must have worn due to the concern on her face.

“…heard much of your master’s fine person,” his aunt’s voice drifted through his ears. “It is a handsome face, but Lizzy, you can tell us whether it is like or not.”

Mrs. Reynolds’ respect for him seem to grow tenfold in the second it took for her to turn to him. “Does the young man know Mr. Darcy?”

“Uh,” he blurted dumbly. “A little.”

“A little,” his aunt snorted. “You spent some time with him while he was at Netherfield and then again at Hunsford, did you not?”

James gaped like a fish as Mrs. Reynolds pressed, “And do you not think him a very handsome gentleman? Though perhaps it is a strange question to ask a man; as they are too often taught to be negligent or arrogant of masculine beauty.”

“I can’t but agree,” Mrs. Gardiner declared while her husband indignantly cleared his throat.

“Yes,” James admitted, his voice hoarse, “he is handsome.”

Mrs. Reynolds beamed as she went to return the piece to the mantel. “I am glad to say there is another, larger one, in the gallery upstairs. This room was simply my late master’s favourite, and these pictures are just as they used to be then, apart from my Lord’s stubborn removal of his own image.”

Before they could move on, Mr. Gardiner had likewise returned to the mantelpiece, where a similarly sized portrait was raised in his grasp. “And is this the young Miss Darcy, then? She has the colouring of her mother.”

“Oh yes!” Mrs. Reynolds chimed.

His wife came to look better at it. “Is Miss Darcy as handsome as her brother?”

“Of course, the handsomest young lady that ever was seen; and so accomplished! She plays and sings all day long. In fact, in the next room is a new instrument just down for her—a present from my master. As I told your husband, she is due back tomorrow at the earliest with him to see and play it, however it is so customary that his travels are delayed up to a week, I cannot be sure.”

James felt sick. He had to stride ahead of them but found himself in the telltale room: a long rectangular expanse of gold and orange tones from the lacquered wood beneath his feet. In the center of it was a matching pianoforte, glistening with newness and he all but ran from it to the French doors to his left.

His boots clipped over the veranda marble, his lungs expanding with a gust of fresh air billowing in his shirt and lifting his hair. He looked out over the carved banister at the gardens around the side and back of the house. They were an array of uneven green spaces made intimate by the trees or flower bushes fencing it all in, but the front of the property was deceptive of how much space was behind it. The house was high enough for more hills to be visible beyond the treetops.

The creature in his shirt perked up at the rush of smells around. James squirmed somewhat against the whiskers as he strolled along the veranda that went along the side of the house and curved around the back of it. He plucked a long strand of silvery-green sea grass from one of the plant
urns and set the creature on the marble, wiggling the strand to occupy its time.

Through the windows he could hear faintly Mrs. Reynolds’ voice going on about Mr. Darcy. “…best landlord and the best master. Not like the wild young men nowadays, who think of nothing but themselves. Some people call him proud but I am sure I never saw anything of it. To my fancy, it is only because he does not rattle away like other young men.”

“Ugh,” he groaned. “This is a unique torture.”

“Is your master much at Pemberley in the course of the year?” Mr. Gardiner’s baritone resonated.

“Not so much as I could wish, sir, but I daresay he may spend half his time here. Miss Darcy is always down for the summer months, to be sure.”

Mrs. Gardiner offered, “If your master would marry, you might see more of him.”

It was the first occasion James had of hearing Mrs. Reynolds laugh. “Perhaps, but I do not know when that will be. I do not know who is good enough for him.”

James sighed as he threw himself down onto the stone floor, eagerly climbed over by the cat. Kitty’s voice surprised him when she giggled, “What melancholy has inspired such a display?”

“It is a long story,” he groaned, his hands lightly wrestling the claws and needle teeth.

“Then perhaps you might share it with me tonight?” she asked. He did not have a ready reply and she did not demand one as she sat next to him and looked through the balustrades to the lawns around them. “How different is the account of a man we so despised previously. I haven’t heard a single negative thing about him from anyone here.”

“Curious,” James agreed, and then corrected himself. “Though not anymore.”

She looked at him. “I didn’t know you met him while you were at Charlotte’s.”

“He is the nephew of Lady Catherine,” he confirmed. “He was there for Easter.”

Her features opened with surprise and then furrowed with analysis. “Is that…expected? I mean, are they a pair?”

James did not voice his reply so much as shake his head at the sky. “No, they’re not. They are entirely opposite. This is a home. Lady Catherine’s estate is an untouchable statement.”

“Is she as awful as Mr. Collins made her out to be?”

“Worse.”

Kitty made an unladylike sound of disgust, which drew laughter from her brother. He heaved himself up, feeling better as he caught sight of the stairs leading down to the grounds. “I’m sure this one needs to relieve himself. Are you going inside or staying with me?”

“With you,” she beamed, and trotted after him. Thankfully the cat had not yet grown to a size that granted speed, so the two of them were able to keep track of him while the gardeners were otherwise amused by the display. Once free of his bowels, James quickly scooped him up before he made any lasting damage to the fragrant blackberry bushes, whose leaves he found most enticing.

They entered the house from the back, and immediately discovered that they were lost. James took a step through the large lobby, stopped, and turned to find Kitty paused on the stairway going
upstairs. They both laughed nervously and looked around.

“Where’s a servant when you need one?” she queried.

James, holding the wriggling kitten to his chest, joined her on the stairs. “Mrs. Reynolds said something about the gallery. They have likely gone there by now.”

They rose to the next level and were two rooms deep before James realized, “Wait, she said it was ‘upstairs’ from where we were…”

“That was the second floor, was it not?” Kitty puzzled. “This one? So we need to go up one more —oh, Lizzy!”

The cat had finally freed itself from his grasp, and bolted from the room. “Hell,” he cursed, running after it.

“Don’t let him claw anything!” Kitty called, running after him. “They’ll remove us from Derbyshire tonight!”

“More like don’t let him under anything,” James corrected, lunging to divert Darcy’s path from a room of unused, covered furniture. “We’ll never get him out.”

“We can’t chase him forever,” she huffed behind him. “He’s running because we are chasing!”

James agreed, “We need to trap him in a room! Here! Shut the door!”

Darcy ran into a room and James heard Kitty slam the door behind them while he almost shut the opposite, but not before the cat slithered between his legs to the next room.

“Jamie!”

“Stay here! Catch him if he comes back around!”

His head turned as he looked around. Thankfully, the creature had paused to listen, his ears swiveling atop its head. James realized he heard music. Someone was playing a piano. They must have been near the music room.

Who would be playing the pianoforte? he wondered perplexedly. Then again, it would come as no surprise if the household had a musician for hire who could tune any instrument whenever they liked. If the masters were to return tomorrow, her ladyship’s gift would need to be ready.

“Darcy, come here,” James called quietly. The cat looked at him and then scurried elsewhere in the room. It was unfortunately an office of sorts that was clearly used often if the furnishings were any indication. The cat went directly under a writing desk and behind the window curtains, swatting at the gauzy material.

“No! No no no…” he quickly snatched the curtain and the cat exclaimed an annoyed “Mrow!”

The pianoforte fell silent.

James felt mortified. The last thing he needed was a servant bringing him back to his aunt after causing a ruckus. He would never hear the end of her ridicule and mirth—

“Darcy! Come here! Now!” he crawled under the large table, sighing briefly in relief at hearing another door shut; at least Kitty was being productive.
The chairs pushed in around the table gave the illusion the cat was walled in, allowing James just enough time to scoop the creature against him before it realized it could fit between the legs.

“Darcy—!”

“Yes?”

James’ entire form froze into a statue. That soft, deep voice thundered through him. It was unmistakable, but it couldn’t…but it was. James’ head jerkily turned toward the boots waiting patiently in the center of the room—

The clip of slippers and rustle of skirts announced Kitty’s entrance to the room. In a breathless voice she exclaimed, “Jamie, have you got—oh my god.”

James clamped his eyes shut and forced himself to calmly exhale. Pushing one of the chairs out, he climbed out from under the table, met the shocked face of his sister, and then turned toward Lord Darcy. He looked very much the same as any other occasion James had seen him apart from the morning of his confession. Mr. Darcy was clean pressed apart from his hair being unruly from travel. James could only imagine what image he and Kitty made.

He bowed and heard Kitty rush to curtsy likewise.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is attached to Paris, this isn't me hating on it lol remember that this is before the massive renovation of the city, back when Paris was sketchy as fuck (if you didn't know, whole blocks were demolished and rebuilt between 1853-1870 so that Paris could have its wide boulevards, more hygiene, and overall less criminal activity).
If the power to evaporate were in his repertoire, James would use it. He peeked up to see Mr. Darcy equally baffled and lower into a bow. James initiated his and Kitty’s rising and stepped backward to find her hand. “My lord, I’m sorry to intrude—”

“You’re not.” Darcy breathed. James’ eyes flicked toward him to find those amber ones trained on him, but not angry. “I was told people were here to see the house, but I never imagined… Do you like it?”

He and Kitty were speechless, their silence adding to the already present tension between them. “Yes,” James managed to croak and he blurted, “It’s beautiful. Not like your aunt’s at all.”

Then, Darcy smiled. More, Darcy laughed. “Ehm,” he exclaimed with mirth, taken by surprise. “I cannot disagree. Goodness knows she’s tried to assert her influence, but to no success.”

James felt as if he had been struck by a door opening to a different world. His own blundering aside, Darcy…fit here, as he had nowhere else. A few words, and he was visibly the most comfortable he had ever been. And why would he not? The man was in his home.

“Was it you who was playing the piano?” Kitty’s voice yanked him back.

“Oh,” Darcy glanced behind him toward the music room. “Yes. We are a musical family, even though my skill is nowhere near my sister’s.”

“I thought it was wonderful!” she exclaimed.

James’ eyes felt like they were falling out of his head as the man’s head lowered. Darcy was…bashful. “You are too kind.”

“I’m not, usually,” she blurted.

James’ eyes widened. “We need to be getting back.”

“Back?” Darcy took a step forward.

“We came with our aunt and uncle,” he said, and saw Darcy’s eyes lower to his hand sandwiched between Kitty’s.

“All of you?”

Kitty giggled against his shoulder as he amended, “No, just myself, Kitty, and our aunt and uncle Gardiner. And—em…”

“Darcy?” the namesake raised his brows at the squirming cat. James exhaled, unable to conjure an answer. “Why are you in Derbyshire?” he pushed softly.

James’ mouth opened to speak but his gaze was trapped in Darcy’s. His chest swelled but still no words used the air. Thankfully Kitty supplied, “Our aunt used to live here! She is a friend to your housekeeper — Mrs. Reynolds won’t be in trouble, will she?”

Darcy’s eyes flicked to her, releasing James. “No, she is not in trouble. I’ve given her liberties to
see her family and close friends through the house before. She lives here too, after all.”

His eyes pulled back to Jamie, who was distracting the cat with several kisses to its forehead. The first froze the creature in a stunned daze before it recovered and twisted around to paw his mouth and bite his nose. Kitty’s attention moved between them before she said, “We thought they might be in the gallery upstairs.”

Darcy blinked. “Yes, likely. The gallery is Mrs. Reynolds’ favourite room. I’ll take you there.”

He strode past them to reopen the doors Kitty had shut and waited in the vast corridor where — what was a grand staircase to them but likely just another set of stairs to Darcy — rose from the floor below, used the corridor to wind around, and then led up once more to the upper levels. James’ heart shuddered as he realized Darcy intended to walk beside him.

“You were not far off. The stairs lead directly into the gallery,” he narrated for Kitty ahead of them. She lifted her skirts and eagerly skipped up the stairs, leaving James and Darcy with enough room for their own conversation. “I am surprised you brought the cat with you.”

The animal in question was only behaving since James held it under his chin for belly rubs while it gnawed on the ends of his hair. “My aunt’s children are in Longbourn, and there are too many for anyone to pay much attention to this one.”

“Is there not another cat?” Darcy remembered.

“There is, but I haven’t introduced them. Cats do not always get along as immediately as dogs.”

“I see,” he voiced, and fell silent as they crested the stairs. Before them was a long, wide hall which was clearly the gallery. Paintings of all sizes hung around them; even the ceiling was a landscape of forest fringing a cloudy peach sky.

James reacted to the rough sound deep in Darcy’s chest. “What?”

“I moved the smaller one, but Mrs. Reynolds is relentless,” Darcy complained, and James was sure he was ogling the man like a fish. Darcy did not like his own portraits. He was complaining about it. How in the world had James ever thought he was proud?

Darcy peeked down at him and returned, “What is it?”

James snapped his mouth shut and looked away. “Nothing. We…just missed each other, then. She showed us your father’s parlour first.”

“Oh. Yes,” was all Darcy said. James noticed his steps were slowing, as if reluctant to reach his portrait.

James asked, “Where is your sister?”

Darcy looked at him. “Georgiana arrives tomorrow.”

James puzzled, “You don’t travel together?”

“We do,” he assured, “but I had matters to attend to, and she is not alone. Now I understand why
the townsfolk were amused when I returned.”

His eyes once more fell to the cat, who James had set down since there was little to no furniture for it to destroy or hide under. He sputtered, “I didn’t mean — I didn’t — the cat’s name is not meant to be a jape of you.”

“I was not insulted,” Darcy replied calmly. “Only…confused. The children were meowing and the adults were laughing. It never occurred to me that I was even remotely the cause. On the contrary, you leave a lasting impression.”

James was sure the heat rising in his face radiated all the way to Darcy. He looked away and soon heard, “Have I said something wrong?”

“No, not at all. It’s nothing more than I deserve,” James disregarded, moving to step away.

A sharper clip on the floor sounded as Darcy stepped with him. “I meant it was a good impression.”

“My lord,” James rushed. “I didn’t…know that you would be here. Your housekeeper informed us that you would not be here until tomorrow. I never meant to be so forward as to intrude in your home.”

“I told you, you’re not intruding,” Darcy soothed. “Although I am curious…how long are you to be in Derbyshire?”

James admitted, “For the week, to be sure.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. “Then I wonder what your thoughts were that I would be returning at all, during your time here.”

James did not have an answer. “I didn’t have…I don’t know,” he finished softly.

Darcy’s features were gentle as he released him from the inquiry. “Though it is good fortune you are here at this time. The rest of the party with whom Georgiana and I were traveling is to arrive early tomorrow, and among them are some who will claim an acquaintance with you. I mean Charles Bingley and his sisters.”

James’ eyes swooped up as he repeated bluntly, “His sisters?”

Mirth splashed across Darcy’s face. “Yes, his sisters. Bingleys come in threes, inescapably.”

James closed his mouth. Both because he was caught between laughter and shock — shock that Darcy had incited the mirth — and because Darcy had quite said it all. He read James’ expression and a small smile softened his features.

Darcy looked up and, seeing that the Gardiners had noticed them, broke their gaze. “I meant to finish my affairs quickly. I must go. Where are you staying?”

James’ heart did strange things before the name of the inn fell out of his mouth. Darcy bowed curtly, and was striding back from the direction they came. In a daze, James met his family partway through the gallery. Kitty held his arm while his aunt voiced, “That was him, surely? Goodness, he does have a presentable figure…”

The housekeeper chortled. “I hope you won’t take offense? He’s back early, and surely is rushing to make the house and affairs ready for his guests.”
“Guests? Notables from London?” Mrs. Gardiner asked as they continued through the house. James scooped up the kitten and held it close, no longer interested in the house so much as the owner.

Thankfully they moved out of doors to see the various gardens. Most of the estate was rustic woodland, but groomed to provide space for lounging or sport. James had his head turned longingly for the more decorated flower garden when Kitty squeezed his arm. “Oh my god, he’s coming back.”

The Bennets gawked at Lord Darcy striding forward while the housekeeper curtsied, inducing the Gardiners’ attention to turn. James could not read him; whether Darcy felt more pain or pleasure in seeing each other, but he bowed with composure to his unlikely guests.

“I trust Mrs. Reynolds is seeing to your every need?”

“Certainly, my lord,” Mr. Gardiner said upon standing up straight. “And a fine job she does for your house!”

“Though I was just about to ask for a respite,” his wife voiced. “As an urban breed, I am not a great walker. I am sorry to have drawn you out this far, my lord.”

“I’ve actually just had tea set out on the west side of the house for you,” Darcy assured, “not a far walk at all from here.”

Sure enough, between the water around the house and the trees, the estate was large as well as deceptively easy to navigate. Darcy led the way up to the veranda, where covered trays protected a tea set and sandwiches. Mr. Gardiner occupied Darcy’s attention regarding the river and lakes around the place, fond as he was of fishing. Darcy met it with the knowledge to appease him and more: the promise to fish there as often as he chose during their week here.

Mrs. Gardiner, who sat opposite James, looked at him with no small amount of wonder before she japed, “You are too kind, sir, or too smart, for though my husband is fond of fishing, he will certainly not thin the lake of inhabitants.”

Mr. Gardiner harrumphed but said nothing to interrupt Darcy’s reply. “As long as they were well seasoned and enjoyed, I would not mind. My guests tomorrow are not the type to notice a shortage of stock. They do not fish.”

A short burst of air came from James’ nose. The notion of any Bingley fishing was ludicrous, although Charles would certainly give it his best go.

Not ones to overstay a welcome, the Gardiners soon declared it their time to depart, and thanked Darcy for the late luncheon and tea as he walked them to the front of the house. James was handing Kitty into the carriage when Darcy said, “Do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance? She would be overjoyed to meet you.”

Kitty, half hanging out of the carriage to gape with Jamie, waited for their aunt and uncle to reply. Husband and wife looked at each other and responded a resounding pleasure to do so. Then the family was within the carriage, Mr. Gardiner sitting with the driver, as his wife otherwise voiced all of her thoughts on Mr. Darcy.

“Don’t get me wrong, my dear friend has lived there for the better part of thirty years and has certainly fanned the flames of his character. I could hardly help laughing aloud sometimes, her fondness breeching into the territory of mothering. But there is something so pleasing about his
mouth when he speaks. It is not common, a baritone that soft yet clear upon the ear.”

*I know,* James thought bluntly, pressing his fingertips into his eyes and enthusiastically looking forward to a nap before dinner.

* * * * * * *

“Are we really going to meet his sister?” Kitty said the moment he opened his eyes. Hers and the cat’s glowed in the darkness descending around the inn. Outside of their room could be heard the general hubbub of tenants readying for supper.

True to his promise to the neighborhood, however, he postponed that line of thought in favour of letting the children of the village play the kitten to exhaustion. Thus he and Kitty were allowed to talk throughout the night while the creature slept between them. “Darcy is not the sort of man to offer empty words. He means for us to meet her.”

“Do you think she is much like her brother?” Kitty worried.

“Are you and I much like each other?” he considered.

“Not at all,” she worried. “Have you heard much about her?”

“Not enough upon which is sound reason to judge a Darcy,” James refused. “But he said the Bingleys were arriving as well.”

“Really?” she perked up before deflating somewhat. “His sisters do not care for me.”

“They care for few apart from themselves,” he consoled. “Charles is kind enough.”

“Will he think ill of me and Lydia for forcing the Netherfield ball?”

“No. Charles likes festivities, and he won’t be cruel to you.”

He did not mention how it was possible they would not even meet the Bingleys, if Caroline had her say. It would not surprise James in the slightest if she kept her brother away from any Bennet for the week.

Kitty’s lips pursed to the side as she thought, and then uttered, “Why did you name the cat, Darcy?”

James sighed. “It was a mistake I cannot take back now. He answers to it.”

“Hm.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

James was content with closing his eyes and letting the matter drop, but Kitty asked, “Would you tell Jane if you thought he was handsome?”

“What are you on about?” his eyes opened.


They joined their aunt and uncle the next morning to break their fast and listen to the potential
plans for the day. There was a boutique their aunt wanted to visit as well as a number of places Mr. Gardiner was intrigued to see before a great commotion sounded downstairs.

“Is he here? You know how he walks around! What if we’re too late?”

A woman’s voice laughed as a man murmured a reply. James and Kitty froze, staring at each other before the latter realized, “Is that—?”

“James!”

The entire dining room rotated to see Charles Bingley crest the stairs and maneuver through the tables. James had just managed to stand when Charles threw his arms around him. “I thought William was lying, the bastard! Or making a joke of me!”

“Then he remembered how my brother isn’t funny,” the woman seconded.

“Um,” James blurted, but his sole focus quickly went to holding himself and Charles up. He heard his aunt and uncle rise from the table and begin to greet, “My l—”

“Lovely eggs, yes,” she cut off. “Would we be overly imposing if we dined with you all?”

Charles finally released James and he was able to properly look at Georgiana Darcy. Her brother stood beside her, looking mildly apologetic while she was otherwise composed and smiling. James pulled his eyes to the others in the room, their various states of rising, should the new comers be someone important to greet.

James’ eyes flicked to Georgiana’s, and he silently fetched a chair from an empty table. Charles followed suit, quickly helping him to pull a table alongside theirs with the necessary chairs, and then all were seated for composure to return to the room. By the manner in which the innkeepers stood at the door and waiters brought fresh platters of food, they knew perfectly well who had strolled into their establishment. They were likewise silent for the other tenants to remain oblivious.

James could hardly process his rising embarrassment, let alone observe the picture they made. He could only try to send Kitty reassuring glances across from him as Charles sat next to him and the Lady Georgiana next to her. Darcy took the end of the table, his eyes lingering on Charles but he said nothing.

Georgiana extended her hand over the table to more casually greet the Gardiners. It was some surprise to James that her hands were not gloved, but he was given the time to further observe her before she got to him. Miss Darcy was tall like her brother, and though little more than sixteen, her figure was well formed; womanly and graceful. As Mr. Gardiner had noted from her miniature, she had her mother’s colouring: all light ambers and faint golds. Together the Darcy siblings had richly warm eyes.

She is less handsome than him, James realized distantly, and then outwardly startled at his own thoughts. Charles was speaking but he could feel Darcy’s eyes on him and realized it was doubled. It was a startling thing, having two pairs of the same eyes on him. James wondered briefly if this was how people felt when he and Jane were next to each other. Georgiana smiled, good humour and sense in her face. She played the part of unassuming well enough as she gently reached for him.

“My brother’s told me a great deal about you.”
“Good lord,” he blurted, horrified.

“James,” his uncle warned, but she and Charles laughed heartily.

“He’s a delight, I promise you,” the latter grinned, “and Miss Bennet! I hardly expected to see you here!”

“Kitty, please,” she smiled shyly. “It’s easier to differentiate us now.”

Charles’ smile faltered. “I always knew which one you were.”

Her eyes lifted brightly as James rescued, “It is a surprise either of us are here. My aunt is the one with the connection to Derbyshire.”

“That’s not true,” Georgiana said with her chin resting on her fingers. One of them pointed to her brother. “Did this fool never invite you?”

Darcy coughed on his tea, stunning the table. James fumbled, “He…might have. I’m not the best listener.”

“Huh?” Kitty puzzled. James silently begged her to keep quiet.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re here now,” Georgiana navigated tactfully. She then asked what plans they had interrupted, providing the Gardiners the opening they needed to eagerly manage the conversation. The three arrivals, indeed, incited a lively attention. James was certain his aunt’s observations were directed toward Charles after having Jane for so long, but also to the Darcys. James could not help himself either; the pair carried the same sort of confidence and silent dialogue that he shared with Jane. There were moments when Georgiana would say something and look to her brother for verification. The admiration meeting her was evident enough.

When his aunt and uncle’s reign ended, he realized the lull that ensued was waiting for him. He alone knew two of the party, and the third was obviously there to meet him. Georgiana appeared bright and eager, Darcy calmly determined, and Bingley ready for anything.

“I heard your sisters were with you,” James provided toward Charles. “How long until they manifest around us?”

“I don’t have a curfew!” Charles accused. “And frankly I’m as good as a phantom the moment Georgi appears. If they do show themselves, it will be for her, not I.”

Charles’ arm rested across the back of his chair, familiar and nostalgic. James missed him, but not without likewise longing for Jane. Charles had not yet given any hint as to his often, if any, recollecting her.

“Yes, I am so curiously popular,” Georgiana voiced, earning surprise from the rest of the table.

“Well,” Charles tried to salvage, “my siblings are overly affectionate. A symptom to being orphans before the eldest was married.”

But the way Georgiana’s eyes moved, avoiding others until they flickered up to his and then switched to James…and the lady was shyer than she let on.

However long their gaze lasted, she then broke it and changed, “Thankfully we pushed through the night and arrived well before the sun. It should not surprise me at all if they are still sleeping now.”
“You don’t require sleep?” James wondered.

“Alas, I don’t sleep much,” Georgiana replied.

“Neither does he,” Kitty commented. James smiled faintly.

“I wonder if it is because of a creature of which I’ve heard tellings,” she looked back at him. “But I suppose cats are not allowed in the dining room.”

“He is in our rooms,” he granted. “I am finished here, so I will be just outside with him.”

“I’ll join you!” Charles shot to his feet, and followed James out of the room. “Did you know that Caroline forbade us from having pets? Not that Louisa argued against anything; it was a scheme for the sake of protecting their dresses and slippers, but I do miss dogs.”

“I should warn you that cats are a bit different from dogs,” James laughed as he unlocked his door. The small Darcy met him eagerly, yelling around his ankles and then purring in his hands as the door shut behind them.

Plopping himself down on the grass outside of the inn and wiggling his fingers at the cat, Charles grinned, “I would have twenty of each.”

“Twenty,” James huffed with mirth. “Be serious.”

“Charles is always serious,” Georgiana’s voice sounded from the inn’s doors. The kitten spooked at the rustle of her skirts and then waddled over them, pouncing on mountains of air and silk. As her hand slid over its back, she exclaimed, “William said my aunt had its mother killed? And then you made a spectacle of yourself rescuing it?”

Charles intercepted, “Is kindness a spectacle?”

James smiled softly. “I don’t know what goes on in the great minds of lords and ladies.”

“Gilded hogwash, mostly,” Georgiana murmured, taking James completely off guard before he doubled over with laughter.

He heard her giggle and Charles’s soft laughter before he recovered to say, “My sister, Jane, would like you; if for nothing else, than your refreshing cynicism. She too often puts up with my own.”

“How is she?” Charles blurted. The breath in voice drew James’ gaze to those blue, blue eyes, suddenly so filled with…a kind of sad hope. He seemed to read James’ expression like a mirror and bowed his head. “I only mean, I’ve realized it has been a very long time since I’ve had the pleasure of seeing her. We have not met since we were all dancing together at Netherfield. It was perfect.”

James’ lashes sagged over his eyes even while his heart did a clumsy flight upward at his words. Charles’ lips parted, ready to say something more, but a clip of a boot over the inn’s stairs was heard, and then Darcy saying, “Perfection is an abstract concept created out of man’s imagination.”

Charles appeared crestfallen, but only as long as it took Georgiana to declare, “Good grief, one would think you’re not romantic. Sit down.”

James peered at the grass she suggested, and then up at Darcy, who had the most genuine look of confusion he had ever beheld. He silently did as he was bid, settling between his sister and Charles, his eyes again flicking to Charles’ placement next to James.
James quickly made to rise, “I should get blankets or we can move to the benches—”

“You needn’t,” Darcy interjected. Charles and Georgiana watched him as he otherwise held James’ gaze. “It’s been a long time since anyone of my house has seen a grass stain. I must test their skills on occasion.”

Georgiana laughed, her tone full of surprise. “Careful, you sound too much like myself.”

James smiled warily as he said quietly, “I think your raiment costs thrice as much as his, my lady.”

“And I hear you dig around gardens for cats. Can’t we have a little fun while we are yet still anonymous?”

James granted her a smile but his head turned at the sound of children nearby. “I do not know how much longer that will be, my lady.”

“DARCY? Darcy!”

“Is it Darcy?”

“It’s Darcy!”

“Oh!” she piped as children, who almost fell over themselves to bow, swarmed them. “No, no, you’re clearly here for this one. Don’t mind us.”

They looked at James for guidance, who simply hoisted the cat into the air, before pulling it back when one reached for it. “Gently, remember?”

The child nodded and he relinquished the creature. Their high pitched voices quickly softened into coos. To their credit, the children were more interested in watching and petting it than vigorous play. James turned back to stare at the man opposite him. Lord Darcy’s expression was one of deep contemplation with a raised brow until he came to a decision. “That won’t do. You must call me William.”

James’ own brows lifted while Charles and Georgiana laughed. Without a reply, he lifted himself to sit upon the benches lining the front of the inn. He averted his gaze and forced composure as the bench lightly creaked with the added weight of Mr. Darcy. James was suddenly aware of the picture he made: hair hardly brushed and bits of grass on his trousers, including a small white blossom stuck on his laces. It was no more than a weed, surely, which seemed too symbolic — a pretty weed that had somehow found itself among silks and—

“Did you enjoy the books?”

James looked at him vacantly. “What?”

Darcy looked at the flower he had plucked from his boots. “There was a book on horticulture, or something like it… In the pile I gave you from Charles’ library.”

James felt his mouth hanging open. “You?”

“I replaced Charles’s so you might keep the ones you selected,” Darcy elaborated, his expression slowly falling. “Did you not like them?”

Dumbfounded, James’ brows deepened as he pointed at the inn. “I have them with me! I mean, some — You…? But Charles gave them to me.”
“During an unfortunate meeting I had not planned for,” Darcy nodded. James had to think back to that day, realizing it was the first moment Darcy had made plain his connection and regards toward Wickham. “It was fortunate Charles was carrying them, or else you might not have ever received them.”

Astounded, James exclaimed, “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Darcy’s expression opened. “I did not think you’d had enough time to read them all at your leisure. And it hardly mattered from whose hands you received them, as long as you did and then enjoyed them.”

James rested his back against the bench, processing. “I know you’re not good at conversation, but it might have cured some initial misconceptions.”

“I am aware of how others view me,” he consoled. “I have learned to not hear them as anything of consequence. Their judgments are usually the same as one thinks of beauty. A look is all it takes for an immediate conclusion, an unfair decision upon which the entire relationship or lack thereof is built upon.”

James did not have a ready reply to that, so far was he in his astonishment and anguish at Darcy’s simple kindness.

Then Darcy voiced, “Though, perhaps, a little more effort would not be unwarranted.”

James huffed, clearing his throat. “Don’t strain yourself.”

Darcy eyed him. “You said you have them with you?”

“Did I?”

“You did.”

“That makes me a slow reader, then, doesn’t it?”

“And a fast talker,” he agreed patiently. “Perhaps you should read as much as you talk.”

“And vice versa to you,” he retorted, sounding childish in his own ears before he blushed at the sight of Darcy’s smirk.

“I’ll try,” he relinquished softly.

“Fine,” James returned.

The Gardiners joined them, then, and the fishing scheme was not long afterward renewed. Darcy was gracious and accommodating, rising from the bench only after Mr. Gardiner extended the invitation to James. “Are you joining us?”

James fixed him with a look. “When have you ever known me to fish, uncle?”

“I thought you might discover the interest if the lake was in our company’s property,” he declared with a slight warning in his voice. “Though I suppose you were always more of the fish and less the fisherman.”

Darcy looked at him. “You swim?”

“Why not?”
“I did not think it was common for inland people to know how to swim,” Darcy admitted.

James returned, “But you fish?”

“Only when I have to,” he replied so quietly James almost missed it. He turned his head but failed to hide his snicker.

The party was leaving with Mr. Gardiner while his wife, James, and Kitty were free to do as they wished. They were slowly strolling back into the inn when Georgiana ran back through the stone gates and grasped James’ arm to halt him. “Will you return the honour of having breakfast with us tomorrow?”

James blinked vacantly at her before the only reply he had slipped out of his lips. “May I bring my sister?”

Her smile was sunlight. “Yes, of course. Bring whomever you wish. But you will come?”

He nodded deeply. “I am your servant, my lady.”

She giggled. “I doubt that very much, but I’ll have you for as long as I can.”
Opinions

Chapter Notes

Happy October, everyone!

It might have occurred to James, as he readied for his second visit to Pemberley, that it was inevitable he should meet the Bingley sisters, especially under such an invitation as breakfast from the lady of the home. However it was not until he and his family arrived and he glimpsed the company descending the stairs to meet them that he realized neither Caroline nor Louisa had once entered his thoughts. William Darcy and his sister had occupied them entirely.

Most of it was due to his uncle’s endless praise of the man after he returned to the inn, ever so pleased to provide a fish for his wife’s dinner, already cleaned and removed of scales by the Darcys’ cook.

It was Mrs. Reynolds, Georgiana, and her brother who met their carriage, with Charles rushing close behind, and then in front of them to open the door and help Kitty out of it. “No one told me you were coming! I’m so glad you accepted the invitation! I had to see a table set for eight before I was aware of anything.”

“I’m sorry, Charles,” Georgiana laughed. “We were separated for the whole of yesterday so I never had the chance to tell you.”

“Good company is made better as a surprise,” Charles disregarded as he helped Mrs. Gardiner from the carriage.

“Good morning,” said Darcy, his voice somber but gentle.

“Morning,” James returned as Darcy walked beside him into the house. They were shown into where the staff was setting out their breakfast. The tall northern windows, opening to the veranda and then the grounds, admitted a refreshing view of the high woody hills behind the house; beautiful oaks and Spanish chestnuts speckled the intermediate lawns.

Charles’ surprise was the clue, and therein were the less-than-happy Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, standing near the windows. They appeared tranquil and greeted the Gardiners civilly, while another woman introduced as Georgiana’s governess curtsied nearby.

Georgiana and Charles led the introductions, but while the latter was blissful in his ignorance, the former was more observant of the sisters’ demeanour. James recognized embarrassment when he saw it, and the ensuing shyness and fear of doing wrong by the Bingley sisters. Just as he had misinterpreted her brother, James realized Georgiana’s retreat could just as easily be mistaken for a proud and judgmental character.

The Bingleys sat around the table, Charles chatting with his aunt and uncle while the sisters remained frigidly silent apart from their courtesy during conversation. James, however, earned Georgiana’s attention when he approached her with his offered arm. “May I plague you with my company this morning?”
She grinned with relief. “I invited you here. You’re hardly a plague.”

But she took his arm and they walked to a pair of empty seats. “Oh, they might disagree,” he murmured, only flicking a glance diagonally across the table. “But they have the highest opinion of you. You are free to abuse it to your greatest advantage.”

James observed Caroline perk up, her mouth opening to speak while Darcy passed by, however she remained silent as he came to sit opposite his sister and James, on the other end of the table. Georgiana seemed visibly relieved to have him near, but James soon observed that he was now a closely watched specimen of Caroline Bingley. He wondered briefly what her greatest annoyance could be, then realized he had quite accomplished all of them: both Darcys sat around him and away from her; Kitty was opposite Georgiana and next to William while James was next to Georgiana. For someone so long in the scheme of marrying one while engaging her brother to the other, James had thoroughly replaced Bingleys with Bennets.

However the thought did not please him as it might have once done. Instead he poured his hostess’s tea and then his own, preferring to focus on breakfast—

“Pray, Mr. Bennet, are not the militia removed from Meryton? They must be a great loss to your family.”

James’ eyes lifted to meet hers across the table. He remained stoic while she appeared shy of triumphant. He could feel Georgiana’s discomfort as the tea overflowed to the saucer before he set the pot down. He took a second to glance at her, but her eyes were on her brother, who was silent as ever. Caroline was keen enough to not name Wickham directly but James could only think of her as an idiot, too interested in wounding him than to notice the sensitivities of her hosts.

“Why should my family mourn?” he replied. “The militia may do their travel and my sisters may do theirs. My youngest is riding for Brighton as we speak while my eldest was just recently in London for several weeks, you might remember.”

Her triumph evaporated as Charles’s head turned upon hearing his words, and then looked toward his sister. James left that fire where it was to apologize to Georgiana for spilling her tea. “That’s all right,” she said perplexedly, watching but not understanding the interactions around the table.

James reached for the milk near Darcy, only to feel nailed to his chair by how the morning light illuminated the eyes focused on him. Darcy’s lips curved slightly in a smile.

It struck James like a blow to the chest why he had been feeling such a way — or rather, what he had been feeling at all. When Darcy looked at him, it was not with contempt, spite, or even simple dislike. William did not hate him. And more, James no longer felt any repugnance toward him. It was gratitude. Gratitude, not merely for having once loved him, but for maybe loving him still, at least well enough to forgive him. Instead of avoiding James as his greatest enemy, he seemed eager to preserve their acquaintance and further it with the introduction to his sister.

William’s gaze traveled over the table, naturally absorbing his friends’ countenances before he returned to James. Jamie felt bruised as Darcy’s gaze inquired silently. He mirrored James’ softness, perhaps out of concern or further wondering, but James slightly shook his head and looked away, trying to find the air to breathe again.

He blinked and had no idea why he was holding the sugar, so he set it down and found himself looking to Kitty, who was quiet as she glanced between him and their host before her gaze drifted to Georgiana. James observed her staring at Darcy’s sister, until Kitty recovered herself and
glanced at him, turning scarlet. His brows furrowed inquiringly but Kitty looked at her lap and remained there for the rest of their meal.

Their visit did not continue long after they broke their fast, but it did adjourn to the gardens, where the party was invited for a long walk around the house before departing. While Mr. Darcy was attending to the Gardiners behind, Caroline vented her frustrations ahead, in the form of criticism of the Bennets, who strolled in between. Caroline did not name them but as Kitty’s arm through Jamie’s tightened, her focus was apparent.

“I never in my life saw anyone so much altered since winter…” her voice drifted back to them. “I must confess to seeing some beauty before these ventures. Her face had a lovely plumpness, but now it is too thin, her complexion left with no brilliance.”

For her part, Georgiana did not respond. She glanced back once, perhaps for her brother, and then remained silent until James announced, “Do speak louder, Miss Bingley. Opinions ought to be brought to their subjects’ ears, at least that is the nature of conversation as I understand it.”

Kitty gasped, beseeching him for silence while Caroline looked back at him without shame, though perhaps some surprise. “I was only speaking of you and your sister’s health. It was not so long ago that you and another sibling were our guests during an ill time. The both of you are quite different than when we last saw each other. Your hair is longer. She is thinner—”

“It is remarkable,” he interrupted, “how much the body changes in a year, then ten, especially during one’s youth. Jane was certainly pretty at Kitty’s age, but truthfully, she was only a lighter blond with straighter hair.”

He felt Kitty relax, and when he looked at her, a grateful smile was in her eyes. “I was no great specimen, either, and look at me now. The prettiest of the lot.”

“Oh!” her relief was replaced by annoyance. “And the most insufferable one!”

He flashed a grin and found Georgiana laughing. They had caught up with each other and Charles jogged to meet them, eager to walk beside James as he offered Georgiana his arm. “Of what are we talking? I won’t be left out of laughter,” he said.

“Only jealousy and cowardice,” James murmured, but enough for Miss Darcy’s ears. “If she likes your brother so much, she might think to lessen these parts of herself.”

She giggled anew, indeed glancing back at her brother, whose interest had piqued at them. Darcy’s expression was wiped entirely at the sight of James peeking back to smirk at him as well. “He’s too smart for her, poor girl.”

“You think so?” she turned back to him.

But too many Bingleys surrounded them for further discussion. “Smart, but pretty. Forgive me for saying it, my lady, but he is the handsome one.” He leaned toward her. “You’re the smarter one.”

Far from insulted, she laughed and Charles joined her. “I wonder what William would say to that. No one’s ever accused him of prettiness before.”

“Nor I of intelligence, especially so soon after meeting,” Georgiana agreed. “Might I ask what’s brought you to such a conclusion?”

“You have the Bingleys eating out of your hand,” he smirked at Charles, who took it with grace. “Your poor brother gets shoved around by them.”
Charles exclaimed, “I agree about him drawing attention for his features but we hardly do cruelty to the man.”

“Was it not you who brought Darcy to Hertfordshire?” James smiled. “Quite a stir, you raised. Meryton will be speaking of you for ages, so often do we host such acclaimed company.”

“Hertfordshire was a wonderful host,” Charles smiled. “I might dare to desire imposing on you again.”

Georgiana reacted to James’ chin jerking toward him before he recovered himself. Her tone fell as she admitted, “You are kind, but…I do not think anyone eats out of my hand, as you say.”

“A lot changes in a year, and then ten,” he consoled. “Give yourself time, my lady.”

“Georgiana, please,” she urged. “My brother trusts you. I trust you.”

James held her gaze softly as Charles chuckled, “Rendered speechless. How rare. A Darcy’s trust is an even rarer thing, Jamie.”

“Jamie,” Georgiana repeated. “I like that!”

Charles smiled. “I have not been granted the rights to use ‘Lizzy,’ yet.”

“Lizzy?” she asked.

“My middle name is Elizabeth,” James provided.

“And who calls you as such?” she wondered.

“Family, usually,” Kitty intercepted. Georgiana’s gaze met hers when she spoke but Kitty could not hold it for long.

James noticed but gave it no consequence as everyone’s attention was drawn to Darcy’s voice arriving behind them, “James, what’s this on opinions and then I hear my name?”

“I’ve underestimated your ears,” James replied warmly.

Georgiana smiled at her brother and said, “Jamie has called you pretty and myself smart. How do you reply?”

He looked to the man in question. “Jamie?”

Caroline chimed, “Yes, how close we are becoming.”

James ignored her and replied to Charles, “Has it bothered you to not call me Lizzy?”

“No, ‘course not,” he grinned, but his voice did not match his mouth. “I respect your family’s right to it. In another world we might—’ve—um.”

James and Kitty stared at him with wonder. Without a way to salvage his mistake, Charles stumbled into silence.

Louisa filled it. “Mr. Bennet, I must ask you what exactly you mean when you say a lot can change in ten years.”

He cast a puzzled look at her. “I do not pretend to know the misunderstanding.”
“I mean that in ten years’ time, the Lady Georgiana will be quite along in her twenties. Nearing spinster territory. It is not becoming of a woman in her standing to go so long unmarried.”

“On the contrary,” he said, “I see that as the exact reason to go so long unmarried. She has the title, the family, and the money to live her life exactly as she pleases with ease. Of course societal pressures are another matter entirely, but I am not one to so hastily judge another’s life or their decisions. At least not anymore,” he added more for himself. “When one has the sense with which to navigate their own happiness, it is not a friend who steers them away from it.”

The next voice to reach him was his sister’s, and he was grateful for its familiarity. “That’s why you saved me from Mr. Collins? And then Mary…”

His hand covered hers as they rounded the front of the house and their carriage was in sight. “You’re hardly forgotten.”

Her other hand came to rest on his arm as she said so quietly he almost missed it, “I think…I might enjoy an unmarried life. But how would you think of having two sisters permanently at home?”

“You and Mary?” James considered. “I highly doubt either of you would stay at home. All it takes is Mary to discover how many literature societies are in London and she might never return home. It is not uncommon for women to use a male pseudonym to publish themselves. I doubt very much that Mary will live out her life in Longbourn.”

Kitty giggled but pressed, “Mary is brave, isn’t she? But you wouldn’t mind being stuck with me forever?”

“It is my task and mine alone to be the pessimist in our family. You should next travel with Jane; she’ll undo my corruption of you.”

Georgiana drew their attention back to her. “Your sisters sound wonderful.”

“They are!” Kitty chimed with more confidence. “It is so rare that we are not all in one place.”

The former smiled, “What would you do with your time? If you were not hunting for a husband?”

“I…” Kitty faded. “I’m not sure. I’ve…never truly explored any interest.”

“You’ve never explored anything Lydia found boring, which is most of everything,” James corrected. “What do you look forward to doing? What can you do with pleasure for long periods?”

Kitty gave it a good deal of thought as they approached their departure. “Any time Lydia wanted something altered or made, it was not her doing it. I never...I never sought credit because I enjoyed it.”

A slow grin formed on James’ face. “I did not know that. Perhaps you should start taking credit, then.”

“Truly?” Charles exclaimed. “Lydia asked me to compliment her dress at least twice at our ball! But it was your work the whole time?”

Kitty giggled. “I was with her when you gave it, so your words were not unappreciated.”

Georgiana offered, “Female designers are publishing their designs in French magazines. I have a couple if you’d like to see them next time you’re here?”
Kitty’s jaw dropped. “I would like that very much! But I do not speak French.”

Caroline hummed a derisive sound while the sisters leaned toward each other as if to share a silent confidence before their heads jerked at Georgiana’s saying, “Then you’ll have to come back.”

She was grinning, reinvigorated. “Alas, we’re due in town soon for William and Charles’s errands, which will keep us all day. So this is farewell, but only briefly.”

Kitty said her goodbyes and entered the carriage first, followed by the Gardiners while James remained outside to ride with the driver. “Good day, Mrs. Hurst. I hope your husband is safe and enjoying his time in London.”

She returned his bow with a curtsy and something civil before she went first back to the house. Charles was finishing a brief conversation with Mr. Gardiner as Caroline did not curtsy, but held out her hand to him. James bowed over it, but before he could bid farewell she said, “You are cruel to encourage your sisters to a singular life. A husband grants them security and companionship, but you would deny both to them.”

He straightened. “So often marriage is a test of one’s will, not an exercise in love.”

Caroline looked at him with something like pity. “Your sister does not have the luxury of being unmarried. As a poor individual, your gender hardly gives you more of an advantage in this regard. I am surprised, though, how you never made an effort to court me. But I understand marriage often consists of a great deal of hatred. That much is obvious in how your father avoids your mother, even during social functions. Your sister is either weak or intelligent to avoid it, but as you said, it is hardly my place to decide another’s lifestyle.”

James did not break eye contact with her, but her mirth faded against his calm resolve. “I disagree. In our home we’ve learned that hatred and love rest within the same coin. When you shine one side, you inadvertently shine the other. You are right, however. In your current unmarried state, you haven’t any right to judge my siblings. As to the matter of my courting you, for us to have hatred in our marriage, it would first involve me cultivating love for you, which I cannot do. Excuse me.”

He left Caroline in bristled silence as he rounded the carriage to where Darcy stood. James looked at his extended hand and voiced, “You’re too kind, my lord.”


James stood quite still. His mouth opened, but he found nothing there to fill it. “I-I, hum…”

He frowned, and quipped. “Well I really disappoint myself. You Darcys are getting too good at quieting me.”

The man chuckled and reached for James’ hand to assist him up to the bench. “Then perhaps when you’re able again, you might take me up on calling me William. Good day, James.”

“And you,” he replied, and they were off.

Caroline approached William as he watched the carriage drive into the hills. “This is thrice now that we have watched Bennets depart our premises.”

She peered up at him but received no reply. She chortled softly, “I remember, when we first arrived to Hertfordshire and everybody recommended these Bennets to us. ‘The eldest’s beauty,’ they said, ‘and the next one’s wit, though surely both are beautiful.’ Jane is quite incomparable to the rest but
he a beauty? We might sooner call their mother a wit, for Jane reserved all proper behaviour, and therefore regard, for herself. I thought you once agreed.”

“Yes,” replied Darcy, who finally rotated to face her. “But that was only when I first knew him. It is many months since I have considered him the handsomest man in my acquaintance. I suggest you stop counting, Miss Bingley, for they will be my guests for many more occasions.”
The townsfolk found it great fun how one of the guests carried a cat in his shirt. Although with the growing connection between Darcys and Bennets, James thought it might be less adorable and more inappropriate for Lady Georgiana to make a friend whose brother could not dress properly. With Kitty’s help, a discrete sling held the sleeping creature against the warmth of his chest, at the expense of his meager collection of cravats.

“Where on earth is your cravat?” the shopkeeper exclaimed as he held the door for Kitty. Her face craned to gaze at the ribbons hanging from the ceiling like festive streamers and the hats piled in decorative stacks.

“I have it,” James crooned unashamedly, “though I defy the current fashion in favor of function.”

The milliner was not amused as she peered at the sling hanging from his nape. “Beasts are not permitted in here.”

“Should I be flattered?” he wondered with a pointed look at the sleeping kitten. “Because you surely don’t mean this one. I’ll just be outside, all right?”

Kitty rotated and quickly handed him her purse. “Control this.”

He laughed and pulled out a sum. “Be practical and make it count. If you finish early, I’ll be next door.”

They separated and the bell chimed as he entered the stationary store. “Good morning.”

“Morning!” the man returned, approaching the counter from where he had been arranging a display. “Can’t say I know your face. Looking for material to write to home?”

“A gift, actually,” he replied as he spotted a large vase full of quills, “but I’d like to save a bird and buy a pen.”

“Lovely! I have a fresh shipment from London,” he declared as he came around the counter and pulled down a panel to reveal a compartment of slim cartons. Unboxing as he went, he elaborated, “I have just about everything from replacement nibs to ivory bodies or ones with gold pins to help them stick in your pocket.”

“You’re soon to despise me,” James apologized. “I don’t want any ivory or gold or tortoise shell, nothing ornamental like that. A simple brass fountain pen for a sturdy hand is all I need.”

“I can’t dislike a man who knows what he wants. That makes my job easier,” the shopkeeper understood. Replacing the boxes, he extracted four others. “And I’ll do you one better: steel fresh from the factory.”

James frowned as he accepted the one handed to him: a steel body with leafy ornamentation like a silver spoon, and then a brass nib on the end.

“That’s fashionable but I doubt I can afford it,” James apologized.

“On the contrary,” the shopkeeper consoled, “with factories becoming commonplace and machinery getting better, there are at least a thousand like this one, which makes it not as financially extravagant as you might think. Of course, here are my brass ones.”
“I see…” James considered as he rotated each one in his grasp before he lingered on a similar steel one with the long, feathery leaves as well as fronds like lavender. Around the handle was a gripping design like vervain or Queen Anne’s lace. “I can’t imagine what it takes to make a mold like this. Dare I ask how much this one is?”

“That one? Four pounds, to be sure. It is lovely, isn’t it? But this one, here, is two quid, if you prefer.”

_I certainly do_, James thought with some dread for his purse. He held both in his hands, gripping them as if to write something. The flower pattern was not as sharp on his fingers as he expected, and he could just imagine posh company’s reaction to a yellow brass pen compared to a quail’s feather. His thumb moved over the vervain in the steel—

“Tell you what, I can see you like that one, and you said it was a gift,” the shopkeeper began. “I’ll bring it down to three quid.”

“No, you’re too generous. It’s beautiful and worth four pounds. Four pounds you should get,” James decided, setting them both back within their boxes.

“I’ll wrap it for you,” the man offered, and took the box behind the counter. “What colour ribbon would you like?”

James looked up from where he was placing his coins on the counter. “Green.”

After giving the pen a polish, the shopkeeper sealed the box with the dusty green ribbon, the colour of sage. He took James’ coins, but as he reached into his sling to scratch between Darcy’s ears, his puzzled gaze perked up at the sound of metal landing in his purse. He glanced between it and the shopkeeper, who gave him a kind smile as he passed the box over the counter. James could only return it as he collected himself and left the store — and intercepted Charles and William of all people in the lane.

“James!” the former beamed. “I thought I saw Kitty in the store but was surprised she was alone. I should have known you were nearby.”

He smiled and shook his hand. “I couldn’t possibly be seen in the milliner’s store. My bare throat is unsavoury and more importantly, unfashionable.”

Charles took the cat, who was awake and eager for release while he said, “I suppose it’s not a successful milliner who is not strict, but no fun, that one — hello, Kitty!”

She bobbed a quick curtsy and showed James the length of robin’s egg blue satin she had purchased. “It’s the proper length for a hat trim or an ornate bow. I’ve never made one before, but you’re good at knots. Could you teach me?”

“I think my knots are a swift way to ruin satin,” James refused with a look at Charles. “But a Bingley with his fancy ties might be a better teacher.”

Charles smiled and bowed. “It would be my honour. When are you next at Pemberley?”

Darcy answered, “Georgiana would be pleased to host you today.”

Kitty brightened while James felt the current of the day sweeping him along.

Charles agreed, “You will arrive for luncheon, then? William and I should be finished soon if you want to travel with us?”
James refused, “We need to inform our aunt and uncle where we’ll be.”

“They are invited, of course,” Darcy replied.

“Let’s go tell them!” Kitty declared, hugging her brother’s arm as they started down the road. They encountered Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner on their way out of the inn, who were sorry to miss it since they had already made arrangements to meet an old friend of their aunt.

Georgiana was coming down the stairs as their carriage approached, and James had the surprise of her colliding with him for an embrace before she curtsied with Kitty. Charles and her brother emerged on the landing as she took James’ cat in her arms, much more talkative today as she informed Kitty how a new magazine had just arrived in the post for them to look through together.

When James crested the stairs behind the ladies, Darcy fell in line with him. “What would you like to eat?”

James looked at him. “You’re asking me?”

He nodded. “Some things have already been prepared, but if you have a specific request, it can be accommodated.”

Darcy informed him how lunch so far was a collection of roasted and salted vegetables and open-faced sandwiches. James considered, “It’s strawberry season.”

He met Darcy’s warm eyes. “We have strawberries.”

James blinked softly. “Something with strawberries.”

William nodded with a gentle smile, and went to inform the kitchens.

Charles led them to the terrace overlooking the garden. Tea and lunch were already resting under glass covers while they sat. Charles apologized, “I hope you won’t mind my sisters not being with us. Their own errands in town are taking longer than I expected.”

No one minded, and lunch progressed. James sat beside Charles while his sister and Georgiana already sifted through the fashion pages across from him. Darcy returned and sat on his other side.

After Kitty tasted the tea, she hummed, “Do you remember that tea you made last summer?”

James looked up. “The lemon one?”

“It was so refreshing,” she confirmed. “I’d like it again.”

Charles laughed, “Don’t mention something delicious if I can’t take part in the spoils.”

“And spoiled, you are,” Georgiana teased. James chuckled as he popped an olive into his mouth. Her and Kitty’s discussion on sewing and fashion evolved into a French lesson, through which the latter struggled.

“My accent is so harsh,” Kitty murmured.

“Speaking French is rather like speaking with too much saliva,” Georgiana consoled with a laugh.

Kitty waved a hand in James’ direction as she huffed, “You’ll have an easier student in him. Lizzy and papa speak Latin to each other!”

Charles pointed full cheeks at James while Georgiana likewise peered at him with intrigue. James
quickly defended, “I was the only one who sat long enough for the lessons. Well, myself and Mary.”

Kitty sighed as her hand caught her cheek while she looked over the prints and words. James reached across the table, tapping his teaspoon against her forehead. “You can’t be discouraged after a few minutes. Let yourself fail and learn.”

“I agree,” Georgiana encouraged. “No one really talks about the effort which goes into mastering something. Not many people know about the piano I broke.”

Kitty gaped at her while James peeked at William chuckling to himself. “You broke a piano?” the former exclaimed.

“Eh, yes,” Georgiana admitted shyly. “It was out of tune for ages. I think William was finally tired of hearing it. Thanks for the new one, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied as a member of his house approached the table with a large covered platter. After the sandwich plate was removed, individual ramekins with bulging soufflés were unveiled.

Kitty inhaled while James gazed in awe. “Is that chocolate?” she breathed. “Oh, it’s been ages since we had chocolate!”

The staff member bowed. “Chocolate and strawberry soufflés, ma’am.” He looked at Darcy, who curtly nodded his departure. His gaze returned to the table, where there was a distinct difference between Charles and Georgiana’s ease at picking up their dishes while James and Kitty had not moved.

Georgiana had noticed as well. She laughed and set one of the ramekins in front of Kitty. “It’s not sacred. You’re meant to enjoy it. I hope you do.”

James took a dish to make Kitty feel better but she admitted, “I can’t remember liking chocolate much.”

“This will probably be sweeter than what we had,” he consoled, lifting his dessert fork. It broke through the crispy surface, unleashing a tiny tendril of steam curling up to his senses. It smelled divine, and it tasted even better. Kitty pulled a chunk of strawberry out of hers, humming pleasantly when she tasted it. James savoured it slowly, his jaw coming to rest on his hand while he ate.

His fork slid between his lips as the Bingley sisters emerged on the terrace. “Pudding without us?” Louisa teased. “No, don’t rise for us. Mr. Bennet looks completely enraptured, anyway.”

Mr. Darcy settled once more in his seat while a staff member ducked inside for more food. As Louisa wiped her mouth of crumbs, she inquired, “Now that we’re all together, what shall we do?”

Charles inputted, “The day is too fine to be indoors.”

“Croquette?” Caroline said.


Kitty sent a puzzled glance at her brother, who asked for them both, “Polo?”

“It’s marvelous!” Charles began. “It’s a game on horseback with mallets. We have just enough room for it here—”
“It’s croquette on horseback,” Caroline summarized indifferently.

Her brother exclaimed, “That’s not true at all!”

“Either way,” James intercepted, “I am not a horseman.”

“You don’t use horses on your farm?” Charles wondered. His sisters seemed both surprised and puzzled by their brother’s interest of such things.

“We do,” James admitted, “but we don’t have experience using horses for sport.”

“Something else, then,” William suggested.

“I’ll disappoint you now,” James smiled. “My interests are boring to most.”

“That’s not true,” Charles declared. “There’s time enough to find something, and I still owe you a favour, I believe,” he added to Kitty.

Afterward, they settled in the garden that opened up to the groomed field. White clover and rogue wildflowers sprouted here and there but the Bingleys were hardly perturbed as the game was decided: cricket.

“It won’t be a true game,” Charles admitted as the necessary equipment was brought out, “but even some pitches and hits will be enjoyable.”

He looked expectantly at James, who snorted from where he sat in his garden chair, “I don’t think I’ve communicated accurately how much I lack athletic interest.”

“You won’t partake at least once?” Charles whined.

James peered up from the notebook he had accepted from Georgiana as she and Kitty further discussed the magazines. So far a soufflé had been drawn and prospective candle flavours listed in it. “Cricket is not my forte.”

Kitty looked up as Charles beamed, “But you have played?”

“Once. I cannot claim to have ever grasped the rules,” James replied.

“It’s simple,” Charles said as he retrieved the bat and held it out to him. “The ball bounces off the ground before you hit it.”

Kitty shifted as James sighed and stood, grasping the bat. Charles ran a good distance before he doubled back. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” James replied, looking as if he were tasked with holding something unpleasant.

Charles skipped a step and ran with his arm winding—

William’s gaze moved toward Kitty’s sharp intake of breath, and then at James’ swift step into position. The bat cracked upon impact as the ball soared over Charles’ head and disappeared within the tree line. Charles rotated, stunned, as he looked back at James returning to his bored position. “I don’t have to run, do I?”

William watched Kitty exhale, her chin falling as she slowly returned to Georgiana’s notes and drawings. James inspected the bat before he leaned it against a large potted plant and sat down. Louisa and Caroline were visibly stunned to silence before the latter voiced, “Impressive strength.
It is a shame your form is so poor.”

James laughed, far from insulted. “I said I never grasped the rules, let alone any real skill. I’m sorry to have lost you the ball,” he added to Darcy.

He shook his head, unbothered. “The hounds will find it one day.”

James’ jaw lowered. “You have dogs?”

The Darcys perked up. “Yes,” the eldest said. “Rather friendly ones, too. Would you like to see them?”

Georgiana chuckled as James stood. “That would be my doing. I tried my best to make them indoor pets.”

He followed William around the house, but upon glancing back he saw that he was the only one. “It’s quiet here. I never would’ve known you had dogs.”

“They sleep during the afternoon,” he explained, “and are most active in the morning and evening. I assumed you preferred cats.”

“I don’t have a preference,” James replied as the small structure that was the kennels came into view, nestled in the tree line. “Although my parents used to keep birds. As a boy, I was constantly releasing them. Finally adopting a cat stopped them from restocking the cages.”

William chuckled. “That sounds like you.”

The kennel master met them with a bow and informed them how one of the younger pups was restlessly awake if they would like to run it. William watched James’ mouth fall open as a white border collie with a splash of black on her face bounded to him.

“You said they were hounds!” he whined as he rubbed her face, fluffing her ears.

William smiled, “I have them bred with gentler breeds since Georgi loves them so.”

“Loves them so,” James repeated weakly as his face was tormented with licks.

The kennel master procured a ball and baton as he said, “She’s grasped the concepts of ‘fetch,’ for the most part.”

William accepted them and whistled. The dog pushed off of James to run after the sphere that like a cricket ball which had been sacrificed to the dogs. She quickly proved only capable of surrendering it in exchange of running after the baton, or James, who riled her up and playfully wrestled her to the ground.

“My lord,” the kennel master wondered. “Is that…appropriate?”

William glanced at him. “In the endeavour to exhaust her energy, I think it is quite appropriate.”

He bowed once more and left them. “My lord.”

James overheard and stood, brushing grass and hay off himself before he threw the ball. William returned to his side as he apologized, “Can’t take me anywhere, can you.”

“I invited you to play with a dog. This seems the obvious outcome,” he disagreed as they began walking along the grounds with the collie sniffing along after them.
“Well, before this gets damaged further,” James announced, pulling a slim box from inside his waistcoat. “This is for you.”

He outstepped William, who had been brought to a halt. James held out the grey box with its sage green ribbon. His lashes flickered up as William’s hands cradled his. “You didn’t need to do this for me. Sharing your time is enough.”

James’ head rolled with his eyes as he sighed. “Well, with the way you write letters, this was the only thing I could imagine you don’t already have. Just take it.”

James slid his hand out of his grasp to distract himself by throwing the baton. William pulled the ribbon and unveiled the steel fountain pen. His lips parted as he held it up, examining the design—

“It’s obnoxiously floral, like me,” James quipped. “So you can’t forget who it’s from.”

Perhaps he meant it as a taunt or a curse, but William laughed, his smile reaching his eyes. “Good. It’s beautiful. I won’t forget.”

He watched scarlet bloom behind James’ complexion as he looked away. Gently returning the pen to its box, he ventured, “This will require me to write more letters.”

James sighed haughtily, still not looking at him. He waved a hand, “Nothing is required, just save some birds their dignities while you’re at it.”

“I’m saying I want to.”

“Fine.”

“You’re really unfamiliar at gifting things, aren’t you?” he wondered.

“I’m even worse at replying. I don’t want to read any complaints of my handwriting,” he snapped with a sharp look at him, but his eyes quickly sank in his skull as he recovered, “I don’t mean—it would be to me you…” He sighed raggedly, “I’m going to be sick.”

“Yes, that is the uncanny feeling,” William remarked.

James glared at him. “You’re enjoying this.”

He offered him a gentle gaze as he put the lid back on the box. “It is a mild comfort.”

James huffed a hot sound and began striding away, a wagging tail in his wake. William chuckled to himself as he quickly followed. “You’re not saying I can’t?”

“You’re rubbing it in!” James all but shrieked as he marched back to the garden. Charles was thoroughly preoccupied with the dog upon their arrival until looming clouds overhead drove them inside, and the Bennets further into a carriage.

“You don’t need to leave,” Georgiana said as they moved through the spacious foyer. “You’re welcome to join us for supper.”

“Georgi,” her brother tempered.

“We would love to,” James apologized, “it’s just our aunt and uncle are expecting us. We can’t share too much of your time without sowing their jealousy.”

“And what of my own when William surely gets invited to dinner once he’s in town?” she
complained.

His eyes widened slightly on her. “I’m running an errand and we are traveling together, that is all. I’ll be back shortly.”

She raised a dubious brow as she startled Kitty with an embrace, followed by James. “Right. You can just weather Charles’ complaints once you’re back. Whenever that is.”

James recognized a brother’s sigh as William guided them to the carriage and they were off. The sky grew heavier and heavier as they entered the inn, the air fragrant with rain. William stayed long enough to greet their aunt and uncle, who were found on their way up to the dining room.

“Please, join us!” Mr. Gardiner boasted. “It’s the least we can do after refusing you earlier today! Let’s have a drink in the parlour first. The inn is remarkably vacant; most of the tenants departed this afternoon.”

“Absolutely,” his wife agreed, cornering the man as she turned to her nephew. “Lizzy, there are letters for you in your room. Those replies you’ve been waiting on arrived while you were gone.”

“From Jane?” he chirped, immediately turning toward his lodgings. “Finally, I’ve been waiting for ages!”

As he found the small stack on his writing table, James felt relieved from the disappointment of not finding a letter waiting for him at breakfast since he had arrived. His repining over, he was rewarded with not one, but two correspondences. He laughed at one, whose envelope had been quite mishandled by postmen who delivered it to the wrong place before it joined the second. However, upon examining the misguided one’s address, James frowned, for he had never seen Jane’s neat hand so disheveled.

He opened it first, finding it dated five days ago. The first paragraph was jarringly different from the rest of the letter, which was written a day afterward. He bypassed it entirely to Jane’s agitated additions, which made up the bulk of the letter.

*I’m so sorry to change the course of our conversation, dearest Lizzy, but since writing the above, something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature. I can only beg that you not be alarmed, as you and sweet Kitty are, I’m sure, enjoying a long deserved holiday.*

*I will relay the events while I can: what I have to say relates to poor Lydia.*
An express came at twelve last night, just as we had all gone to bed, from Colonel Forester, to inform us how she has gone off to Scotland with one of his officers — with Wickham! You cannot imagine our surprise, though it was certainly, wholly, unexpected. I hope Kitty does not respond harshly to the news; I am very very sorry, Lizzy, to place this information upon you.

So imprudent a match on both sides! We have discussed Wickham before, of course, but…I have to be willing to hope for the best, for our sister. Wickham’s history has painted him a rogue for money, but it is no secret Lydia has none! I simply don’t understand… Thoughtless and indiscreet I can easily believe him, but this step…he must know papa can give them nothing.

Poor mama is grieving. Our father bears it better. How thankful I am that we never let them know what has been said against him; we must continue to keep that within ourselves. He and Lydia were off Saturday night, we were told, but we have the small relief that they were still seen in town until yesterday morning. The express was sent off directly. They must have passed within ten miles of us! Colonel Forster gives us reason to expect him here soon, since Lydia left a few lines for his wife, informing her of their intention.

I must conclude, for I cannot be long from mama and I am not sure I can make out what I have written.

James could not recall his moving to the front of the inn. He was drawn to the door, open as it was to relieve the stale smell of the interior rooms. The sheets of rain now falling cast a cold breeze over his fingers as he seized the next letter, tearing it apart so the grey light could illuminate its contents.

By this time, my dearest Lizzy, you have received my hurried letter. I wish this may be more intelligible but…my head is so bewildered I can only hope it is somehow more coherent. So uncommonly are you away from home, that I almost did not write again, afraid you might never take holiday again after these events and what further bad news I have for you.

Imprudent as a marriage between Lydia and Wickham would be, we are now anxious to be assured it has taken place, for there is too much reason to fear they are not gone to Scotland. Colonel Forester came yesterday from Brighton, having left not long after the express. Though Lydia’s short letter to his wife led them to think they were going to Gretna Green…well, our Lydia was never a fair liar, was she? And something revealed by Denny confirmed their suspicions.

Denny firmly believed, and gave some reason, how Wickham would simply never have reason to go there, let alone marry Lydia at all. Colonel Forester, instantly taking alarm, set off from Brighton, intending to trace their route. He did manage to trace them easily to Clapham, but no further, for upon entering that place, the pair was removed in a hackney-coach, thereby leaving their original chaise as a dead end.
All that is known after this is that they were seen to continue the London road. The Colonel, bless his efforts, made every possible enquiry on that side of London, as well as to all the inns between there and Hertfordshire, but to no success. No such people had been seen to pass through. With the kindest concern, he and his wife came on to Longbourn, and broke their apprehensions to us. After such efforts and their own grieving, I cannot but feel the utmost sincerity from them both, alongside a quite unfamiliar anger at our sister. That she would betray such compassionate people for her misguided adventure is…I cannot say it. I do not feel like myself; this version of me that is shedding its love for a sister.

Our distress is very great. Mama and papa believed the worst, and it is the greatest curse to see them wither under the met expectations. Any altered circumstances would have made this easier to stomach; a private marriage in town, if they had insisted, but when I voiced my complaints to the Colonel, he shook his head. He is not disposed to depend on their marriage. He openly feared Wickham was not a man to be trusted.

Mama has fallen so ill she keeps to her room. Could she exert herself it would be better, but…. As for our father, I never in my life saw him so affected. You once accused our parents of their lacklustre performance over our youngest siblings, but know that they never denied a drop of their love to them.

It is the greatest condolence, Lizzy, how you urged the Gardiners to take Kitty with you, as it is also a jealousy of mine that you have both been spared these distressing scenes.

Now as the first shock is over, shall I own that I long for your return? I am not so selfish, however, as to press for it. It is so rare that you venture outside of Hertfordshire; I would never forgive myself if I made this your last. Adieu.

“Lizzy?”

His head jerked up, startling his sister. He vacantly saw William’s form behind her in the corridor as she waited for him to speak. “You’ve…been walking back and forth between here and your room. It’s almost like you’re trying to pack but…the hallway is a mess…”

She moved around him to grasp the trunk he did not remember dragging from his room. His gaze vacantly wandered back to the letter, where he read as if from a long lost dream:

P.S. I take up my pen again to do what I have just told you I would not. Circumstances are such that I cannot help but earnestly beg you to cut your trip short. Lizzy, I…I cannot console mama. I do not know how. You are the only one of us who knows her heart, and I have a request for our uncle. Our father is going to London with Colonel Forester to try to discover our sister. What they mean to do, I am unaware, but papa’s excessive distress will not leave a tranquil home, nor make his path the safest course. Colonel Forster is obliged to be back at Brighton as soon as possible, leaving our father to his own ends. In such an exigency, uncle’s assistance would at least guarantee the safety of papa.

“Jamie?”

William’s soft voice was a ripple on the surface of James’ mind. His eyes widened as James’ head lifted, his silver and hazel-green irises severe on the backdrop of red as tears began silently rushing down his face. “I have to go.”

“What?” he breathed as he searched James’ eyes, but he was far away. “James, what’s happened?”

“I have to go…Ihave to go…” he muttered, not feeling the palm on his cheek as he
turned away.

“Lizzy?” Kitty’s voice sounded hollow as fear widened her own gaze.

“James, stop, you’re not packing anything,” William urged as the clothes Kitty picked up from the floor were taken from her and haphazardly thrown into the trunk.

James paused and had the thought to push the letters into her hands. “Uncle. Wh-Where is our uncle? He needs to go to London. I need to go.”

“Go where?” Kitty exclaimed. “Lizzy—please!”

“James?” his uncle’s voice uttered. “What’s going on?”

He had gone in haste to his room, but William’s hand on Kitty’s shoulder drew her frightened eyes up to him. “What do they say?”

She fumbled with the crumpled paper, pieces of envelope falling to the floor like leaves as she tried to read Jane’s writing. “I-I can’t—it’s too—”

Mr. Gardiner yanked them from her and read quickly, “Relates to poor Lydia… inform us how she has gone off to Scotland with one of his officers — with Wickham. Lydia has run off! An elopement?”

“What’s this?” his wife voiced behind him as James returned from his room.

Kitty rushed into her arms. “It’s happening again!”

“Lydia’s gone… Send the luggage after me, I have to go,” James said to no one.

“Again?” William was the voice of calm.

“I don’t know what it is!” Kitty cried. “An affliction, an attack — please stop him!”

“James!” Mr. Gardiner called down the corridor.

William rushed after him to the stables on the other side of the inn. The rain had already made frigid puddles in the gravel and mud when William grabbed his arm. “James! You cannot travel in this!”

The rain made his hair into tendrils sticking to his face. “I have to! Wickham will fuck her and leave her and for what? Whatever shillings are in her purse while she laughs along like it’s some adventure until birth kills her!”

“James,” he griped both his arms. “You’re in a shirt and waistcoat. You will die out here first.”

James grimaced, sniffling as he struggled. “She isn’t your sister. She doesn’t have any reason to be treated gently!”

There it was, the horror his thoughts were unable to process until now. His hands caught his sobs, covering his mouth as he suddenly moved backwards. William’s knee landed in the mud as he caught Jamie slipping completely off his feet. He held James tightly against him, his shoulder blades against William’s chest as he sobbed against the hand cradling his head.

“She is lost forever…” he breathed, going limp in William’s arms.
The rain continued through the night and into the morning. William arranged his best driver and carriage to take Mr. Gardiner to London at first light, but not before stepping into the doorway of James’ room.

His eyes were open, gazing out of the window. Kitty had slept with him, and was still slumbering close behind him. After sleeping so long with Jane, it had been a small comfort as well as necessary body heat after William carried him inside.

“Strange luck we have,” he heard Mrs. Gardiner speaking to her husband as he was donning his coat and shoes in the corridor. “The last time this happened, he was fifteen during our visit to Longbourn, remember?”

“Of course I remember,” her husband growled tiredly. “I would sooner forget it. He nearly wasted away.”

William’s heart ricocheted in his ribs when James’ eyes met his and then dragged back to the grey light of the window, far more alert than he seemed.

“I never expected your sister to cast us out of the house like that. I did not think she had it in her. Loud of voice, sure, but loud in authority, I never imagined.”

“Her second child and only son was dying in front of her eyes, what would you have done?” he hushed as he stood from his trunk for the driver to take it out to the carriage.

“I might’ve responded with a bit more grace for whatever affliction befell my child,” she supplied. “They never gave us an explanation for what this is. He didn’t eat, he didn’t sleep—”

“My dear,” he curtailed as he donned his hat and held her shoulders. “You are the mother of my children and the love of my life. My partner in business and adventure, but you cannot know what it means to have a sibling with a heart like a storm and to see that trait thrash in one of her children. Do not speak of things of which you know nothing.”

As if he could see her mouth opening to speak, William’s voice carried through the corridor. “I quite agree that silence is the best option, Mrs. Gardiner,” he finished. “You’d best be off, Mr. Gardiner. I will be after you presently.”

While husband and wife finished their farewells, William turned back to the bed to find James watching him. He went to sit at the writing table, which stood on James’ side of the room. “You’re leaving,” he said hoarsely.

William nodded gently as he leaned forward to set his elbows on his knees, an effort to sit that much closer to him. “I am bound for London as well. I hope you won’t take offense; I read the letters. I understand the circumstances.”

James’ glazed eyes wandered his face. “Why are you going to London?”

“To help in finding your sister,” he said softly, to not disturb Kitty. “I believe I am the one with the most experience when it comes to interrupting elopements.”

His eyes were kind while James’ gaze suggested he did not believe him. Eventually, he uttered, “I must go with you.”

“No,” William surprised him with a shake of his head. “You need to rest and then take the carriage
I’m leaving for you back to Longbourn. You can do the most good in your home. Your mother has lost her vivre, and Jane her optimism. They need you.”

James swallowed thickly as his eyes grew shinier with tears. “You know Wickham better than anyone.”

“Then I have the advantage, don’t I?” he agreed.

James dry lips parted. “Why are you helping us?”

The hope leaving William’s face pulled his eyes down. “Jamie, I…”

He fell into silence as tears slid over James’ face, the pair of them at a strange impasse. William stood and reached for James’ hand. The fingers trembled in his grip as William kissed the back of his palm. “I want a reply to my next letter. Do that much for me.”

He did not wait for a response. He set James’ hand down, spared a moment to pet the kitten’s head that was slumbering on his pillow, and strode out the door.

Chapter End Notes

I know a lot of people wanted James to go with William for this part of the story but, well…my baby is a little damaged, so it’s not in the cards for him.
The little Gardiners, attracted by the sight of a chaise, were standing on the steps of the house as the carriage drove up to the door. The joyful surprise that lit up their faces and moved them to huddle before the carriage door was a pleasing welcome compared to the somber house behind.

James caught the first to leap into his arms, and quickly kissed and acknowledged them while Jane rushed down the stairs. Mrs. Gardiner quickly attended her children while Mary embraced Kitty.

“Oh, Lizzy,” Jane breathed, holding his pale face before he gently pulled her hand down.

“Upstairs?”

She nodded and he hugged Mary briefly before he trekked into the house and up to his parents’ room. His mother’s door was silent as he knocked a familiar rhythm on the wood. Mrs. Bennet’s distressed voiced cried on the other side, “Leave me be! I’ll see no one…”

“Mama. It’s me.”

He could hear her sobs change, her clumsy stepping out of bed before the door opened to reveal her tear stained cheeks and mess of hair. “Oh, Jamie. Jamie!”

She fell into his arms as he hugged her tightly, waddling them back into the room. “Oh, Lizzy, a house full of children but mine were all gone!”

“I’m here, mama,” he soothed. “Kitty’s here too. The four of us are here, you haven’t lost us.”

“Lydia! Oh, I am a horrid excuse for a mother. My beautiful children, my beautiful nieces and nephews and all I can think of is Lydia!”

He coaxed her into one of the chairs by the fireplace while he tended to the extinguished embers in the grate. “Lydia is still yours. You’ve never lost one of us before. You never even had a miscarriage to prepare you for this.”

“Wretched!” she sobbed with her fingers pressed to her mouth.

“You’re not wretched,” James exhaled as he hung a thankfully full kettle over the growing fire. “Papa and your brother have gone after her. This was Lydia’s foolish decision, but her foolishness might get her found.”

“Might,” she whispered. “Oh, Jamie…”

He stood beside her chair, holding her hand as she sobbed against his torso. When her anguished seemed to ebb, he carefully detached himself. “I’m going to wash your hair.”
“Ughoh! Hair! To what end? For what purpose? I should look as wretched as I feel.”

He placed her washbasin by her feet as he poured water from her pitcher as well as the kettle into it. “And what if Lydia were to arrive today? Tomorrow?” he announced as he set her feet in the hot water. “What if she is closer to Meryton than we know? That she couldn’t bear to travel any further without one of Mrs. Philips’ hats? And then she comes home to see you like this.”

His mother rolled her head with her gaze, her fingers pressing into a mouth that refused to smile. “That sounds like her,” she admitted quietly, “but there are milliners everywhere.”

“Not like ours,” he refused. “Not like home. This is her first time away from us. Do you remember how I first behaved when papa took me to London?”

A huff of mirth finally escaped her. “You were insufferable. A week shriveled into a handful of days because you became ill without having your sisters with you.”

He retrieved another basin from her closet as well as her wash things. “I’m not the strongest of us,” he admitted as he set them on the small table behind her. She pressed her head to his chest as he hugged her, “That’s you. And she’s yours. She will come back to you. Lavender or honeysuckle?”

She sighed, resigned to her fate. “Lavender. You know I like lavender.”

He selected the corresponding bottle, and set to work.

* * * * * * *

Washed and after much convincing, fed, Jamie tucked his mother in for a proper rest. He came down the stairs, hearing Kitty occupying his aunt’s children outside while Jane and Mrs. Gardiner were discussing in their parlour.

“I have been thinking it over,” she declared, “and really, I am much more inclined to hope for the best. Consider it: Lydia is a bee to as many flowers as she can possibly manage. So it appears to me very unlikely that any young man should form such a design against a girl who is by no means unprotected or friendless. She was staying with his colonel’s family and he already knows yours quite well! Could he expect that her friends would not step forward? Or to really be unnoticed by the regiment, after such an affront to Colonel Forster? There ought to be a limit to foolishness.”

“Do you really think so?” Jane queried, brightening for a moment as she found James passing through to the kitchen.

Her aunt nodded around the berries she popped into her mouth. “It is really too great a violation of decency, honour and interest. I, myself, never trusted the man, but I never took him for a complete goat. She was staying with his colonel’s family and he already knows yours quite well! Could he expect that her friends would not step forward? Or to really be unnoticed by the regiment, after such an affront to Colonel Forster? There ought to be a limit to foolishness.”

“But Lydia hasn’t any fortune,” Jane reminded.

“Indeed,” her aunt pondered, and then laughed, “I wonder if it is so inconceivable that the man actually likes her. To risk friendly and occupational integrity, one would hope a great deal of love would drive one so far from reason.”

Jane frowned, “But then…why all this secrecy? Why any fear of detection or need for privacy? And haven’t we already been warned of his never intending to marry her? Wickham will never marry without money, as he cannot afford a wife, let alone children. All Lydia has left is youth, health, and good humour.”
Her aunt raised her eyebrows and tilted her head. “You’d be surprised how far that takes someone. When they all moved to Brighton, and after Lydia’s insistence on going there, you had no reason to believe them fond of each other?”

“Not in the slightest,” Jane persisted. “I can remember no symptom of affection on either side. When first he made himself known, she was ready enough to admire him, but so we all were. Every girl in or near Meryton was out of her senses about him for the first two months. However he never distinguished her by any particular attention. After any moderate period of extravagant and wild admiration, her fancy for him and others of the regiment — truly anyone who treated her with more distinction — became her favourites.”

Jane sighed, scratching her nails gently along her hairline. “She is very young, and never was taught to think on serious subjects, much as some of us tried. Ever since the regiments were first quartered in Meryton, nothing but love, flirtation, and officers have been in her head. Lydia did everything in her power by thinking and talking on the subject, perhaps to validate her feelings externally. Instead of checking them, our silence was taken as tolerance. And we all know Wickham has every charm of a person and address that can captivate a woman. I imagine such attention falling on a girl such as Lydia was overwhelming and welcomed.”

Her aunt tipped her head to that. “I would say it is a natural discourse, to be led by the nose by some roguish charmer at one point in life. However a firm word and small amount of intelligence is ideally all it takes to intervene.”

Jane reached for James as he returned with a sandwich and jar of hastily made tea. He sat with her on the sofa, his plate on his knee while he gULped from the jar. Jane requested, “Let us talk of better things. Where did you go? What have you seen? Before my devastating letters reached you.”

Mrs. Gardiner visibly brightened as she sat up to exclaim, “We came directly from Derbyshire! And just after frequenting the Darcys’ home for a number of days.”

“The Darcys?” Jane perked up with a look to her brother.

Mrs. Gardiner spoke while he chewed. “I far prefer the opinions of Derbyshire than Longbourn of that family, and I do think even our James’s mind was changed about them.”

Jane’s eyes softened as she gazed at him for confirmation. He nodded, “It shouldn’t be a surprise that I’m a fool. Wickham once told me that Georgiana Darcy was just as proud, reserved, and disagreeable as her brother. He was entirely wrong. Kitty was smitten and you would have similarly fallen in love with her. The Darcys were more than hospitable.”

Jane knew better than to press for details with their aunt present, but the children soon came inside for food and distracted her. For the rest of the day, the siblings were free to go to their mother’s room, where they lay on either side of her. There they slept and spent most of their time comforting her: James massaged his mother’s hands, taking care around the swollen, arthritic knuckles as Jane practiced her calligraphy; if nothing else than for their mother to watch and comment on something that was not Lydia.

“And now Mr. Bennet’s gone away,” she lamented one morning. “I know he will fight Wickham, wherever he meets him, and then he will be killed, and what is to become of us all?”

James gently rolled his eyes. “Really, you get one person in your head and the world ceases its rotation. I’m old enough to manage things here. And with our uncle joining him, papa will be fine.”

As if on cue, their aunt knocked on the door. With a nod from Mrs. Bennet, Jane let her in and she
sat at the foot of the bed against the post. Their mother asked, “Have there been any letters?”

“Only from your brother,” she confirmed, handing a warm half of a bread loaf to Jane, which she shared with James.

Mrs. Bennet sighed, “Mine never had much puissance for the post. My brother is as much as I could hope for. As you write back to him, tell him from me, that if he should find them and they are not married already — make them marry. And above all things, keep Mr. Bennet from fighting.”

“Rest assured, I dictate him most efficiently,” she smiled.

When the Bennet siblings helped their mother to bed, they joined the others for a late dinner. Mary and Kitty likewise emerged from their rooms, one from her books and the latter from her sewing manuals. They were both calm given the turbulence of the household, only revealing otherwise once they had reasonably filled their stomachs.

One of their nieces asked if Lydia was coming back, which their mother occupied while Mary spoke to James, “This is a most unfortunate affair, and will probably be often spoken of.”

James agreed, “People enjoy gossiping about the destruction of virtue.”

Mary considered this and replied, “Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it these useful lessons: that a person’s virtue and integrity, either male or female, is only as strong as the familial support behind them; sibling consolation will be her balm once she returns.”

James peered at her, mildly impressed as he replied, “Then Wickham has not much integrity to speak of, as he has done away with any familial relations he once had.”

Mary absorbed this and disagreed, “I see their union as kindred foolishness. Lydia is known for lacking sense, and therefore standards, but Wickham does not redeem confidence in his undeserving sex. It may be the greatest irony that they are well fitted for one another. One can only hope that they remain foolish, and therefore in love.”

James lifted his eyes in amazement, and slowly smiled as her attention diverted elsewhere.

When he and Jane were free to be alone, he immediately availed himself of the opportunity to speak freely, and she likewise to make inquiries. His retellings of his time at Pemberley both relaxed and thrilled her. “But this is wonderful, is it not?”

James was not sure, and this reflected upon his face. “He’s gone to London as well.”

Jane’s countenance fell. “For Lydia?” He nodded from his place by the window. Jane’s brow furrowed, “You’re not relieved?”

The crescents under his eyes were stark against the light as he turned his fact to the window. “I’m leaving the kindest man with an endless chain of unhappy memories.”

Jane smiled mercifully. “But you did not ask this of him. He’s gone of his own volition——”

A slight knock on their door drew their gazes to Kitty anxiously arriving. Jane saw the letter in her hands first. “Did that just come?”

She shook her head. “No. I received it while we were in Derbyshire. I didn’t think anything of it; I suspected any letter from our sister would be just a gloating account, but now I can’t help but feel
responsible.”

Jane took the letter from her as she went to hold onto Jamie, his arm opening for her. After a time, Jane shook her head, “There is nothing to regret, Kitty. There is but a slight hint at something making her particularly happy, nothing more to infer. Did you know of any infatuation between them during his stay here?”

Kitty replied, “She spoke of him but I did not think anything in it was special. If only I had taken her more seriously instead of being consumed in my own wants.”

James squeezed her shoulder. “The boy cried wolf too many times and the whole village ignored it. You are not at fault.”

Jane agreed, “It could have been better handled by many of us. We only acted with the best intentions.”

James’ head slowly lifted as he stared at the paper in her hands. “Did the Forsters happen to bring Lydia’s note with them when they were here?”

Jane nodded, “Yes, they brought it for us to interpret ourselves.”

She retrieved it easily from the bedside drawer on her side for him to read:

My dear Harriet—

You will laugh when you know where I have gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise tomorrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, for it will make the surprise the greater when I write to them, and sign my name Lydia Wickham! What a joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing.

Pray make my excuses to Pratt, for not keeping my engagement and dancing with him tonight. Tell him I hope he will excuse me when he knows all, and tell him I will dance with him at the next ball we meet, with great pleasure. I shall send for my clothes when I get to Longbourn; I wish you would tell my dear sister, Kitty, to mend a slit in my worked muslin gown, before they are packed up. Goodbye. Give my love to Colonel Forster, I hope you will drink to our good journey!

Your affectionate friend,

Lydia Bennet.

James stared, dumbfounded at the note, too fatigued for further anguish. “Our sister is a halfwit.”

Jane sighed, but did not outright disagree. “At least it shows that she was serious in their journey’s objective. Poor papa, how he must have felt; I never saw anyone so shocked. He could not speak a word for a full ten minutes.”

“I suppose he never truly believed one of his children could be of such caliber,” James retorted, dropping the note on the writing table. “I suppose in typical fashion, every person in Hertfordshire knew by the end of the day this all started?”

“All the better,” Jane contrasted. “The more eyes and ears listening for Lydia, the more to our advantage. With our mother in hysterics and father departing, the voluntary help has been most kind. Our aunt Philips came just after papa went away, and was good enough to stay two nights
with me. She was of great use and comfort to us all, and Lady Lucas has been very kind. She walked here when the dew was still cold on the grass to console us and offered her services, or any of her daughters, if they could be of use to us.”

“She would have done better staying at home,” James disagreed. “I’m sure she meant well but under such misfortune, mama would prefer they triumph over us at a distance and be satisfied.”

“Which is why I kept her in the parlour with our nieces and nephews,” Jane returned with a small smirk, earning a breathy laugh from him.

* * * * * * *

The whole party was in hopes of a letter from Mr. Bennet the next morning, but the post came in without bringing a single line from him. His family knew him to choose his spoken words with care, and so expected nothing more from his written correspondence. They were forced to conclude that he had no intelligence to send, as much as they were eager for even a note regarding his wellbeing.

In his place, they were reliant on their uncle’s letters. He promised to prevail on Mr. Bennet’s return to Longbourn as soon as he could, to the great consolation of his sister, who lamented her husband’s return as her only security.

Mrs. Gardiner and the children were to remain in Hertfordshire a few days longer. She shared in their attendance on Mrs. Bennet, and was a comfort to them in their hours of freedom. Their aunt Philips also visited them frequently, however her arrivals soon evolved into a unique source of mirth.

With the design of cheering and heartening them up, she never came without reporting some fresh instance of Wickham’s extravagance. Kitty was dispirited and Mary unimpressed as to why she would bring such news, until they looked to their elder siblings, who appeared oddly amused.

During a much needed walk through Meryton, James remarked, “Everyone is striving to blacken the man who but months before was almost an angel of light. I’m quite looking forward to Lydia’s return: our neighbors will do the scolding for us.”

“Gossip is not a balm,” Jane scolded. “Far more like a bouquet concealing thorns against those who wield it.”

However as they listened to or were delivered various accounts, Jane’s hand rushed to her mouth to hide her giggles. Wickham was declared to be in debt to every tradesman in the place. His intrigues, scornfully honoured with the title of seduction, had been extended into every tradesman’s family. On the whole, everybody claimed he was the wickedest young man in the world, and so found that they had always distrusted the appearance of his goodness.

Kitty caught up with her laughing siblings and rushed, “Why do you laugh? What if these accounts are true?”

Her siblings caught her with their arms linking hers as Jane explained, “If Wickham were truly in as much debt as to earn the scorn of every family in Hertfordshire, Lydia would be his last choice for an elopement.”

James agreed, “We are only amused by how fickle our townsmen prove themselves to be. We find ourselves in the middle of a spectrum of society: Mr. Collins and his foolish pomposity, as well as our neighbors’ runaway imaginations.”
Kitty frowned, “But if we are flanked by foolishness, what are we in the middle?”

Mary answered, “Thankfully, people are more diverse than they are given credit. Batter is raw and burnt sweets are burnt under any extreme, but in between these, it may be a macaron, a cake, a pudding of any kind.”

Jane smiled, “Mary, I do think that is the most eloquently delicious thing you’ve said.”

Mary surprised James by taking his hand. “Would you make cakes again?”

He smiled softly. “The small ones? With the treacle?”

* * * * * * *

The smell drew his mother to the kitchen, which was more progress than anyone predicted. Hill provided a chair for her in between his helping James cook the sugar and monitor the oven.

“Lizzy, do take care of the left corner. It burns everything,” Mrs. Bennet sighed as if it had taken great strength to travel to the kitchen.

“I know, mama,” James said mechanically as he dipped teaspoons into the treacle, letting them cool before passing them off to his nieces and nephews.

“I quite miss candied lemon,” she said to no one in particular as she watched a niece enjoy her sweet. James met Hill’s gaze, who nodded gently before he marked lemons into his pocketbook.

He sautéed an apple with cinnamon and oats for her as Mrs. Gardiner came down the three stairs into the kitchen. Jane perked up from her twine crafts with the children to observe, “A letter?”

“Nothing to be excited about,” their aunt quickly hushed. “Merely my husband saying he’s written to Colonel Forster with the instruction to seek out any intimates in the regiment who might know Wickham’s character better than himself.”

Mrs. Bennet’s fire sparked as she huffed, “Well yes, if there were anyone that could be applied to, with a probability of gaining such a clue as to their whereabouts, it would be of essential consequence. You mean my brother or Forster did not think of this in the beginning?”

James could only chuckle, pleased how if nothing else, annoyance would bring his mother back to life.

He looked up as Jane leaned against the counter next to him. “How well does Lord Darcy know him?” she whispered. “It’s been a number of years, hasn’t it?”

James peeked around the bustling kitchen and shook his head. “Better than any of us, to be sure. But uncle hasn’t written of him and aunt has not mentioned him. I think no one wishes to catch mama’s hopes up.”

Jane nodded gently the same time their mother exclaimed, “What has put your heads together? I won’t stand being left out!”

James smiled as he set the bowl with her apple and oats on a towel in her lap. “You seem ready enough to stand for cake.”

“Well!” she harrumphed. “We rarely have it. The only reason children get so many sweets is because they are guaranteed another set of teeth!”
The little Gardiners giggled and at the command of the eldest, held up their spoons for more treacle.

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Slowly, the days at Longbourn grew calm and peaceful; the children’s laughter welcomed and unhindered while James and Hill kept the kitchen full of aromas that drew them all together.

Letters remained a steady source of anxiety upon the household, and were withheld from the group until the reader was able to temper its contents for the rest of them. Such was the case as when a letter arrived from Mr. Collins, of all people. Jane, under the direct order to open anything arriving for her father, read it in the safety of hers and James’s room while he waited patiently.

When his sister’s brows flew up, he commented dryly, “This is why it would have been better for Lady Lucas to stay away. She would have the insensibility to write a letter to the Collins household instead of to her daughter directly. Charlotte would know better to keep this to herself.”

But Jane’s lips pressed together as she merely hummed, “Mhm.”

Unable to wait any longer, James came around her shoulder to read:

My dear sir,

I feel myself called upon by our relationship to condole with you on the grievous affliction under which you are now suffering. Be assured, my dear Mrs. Collins and myself sincerely sympathize with you in your present distress, which must be of the bitterest kind. No arguments shall be wanting on my part that can alleviate so severe a misfortune, or that may comfort you under a circumstance that must be most afflicting to a parent’s mind. The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this—

James snorted as he moved away. “Burn that one. Mama will fly to poor Charlotte’s house this evening if she hears of it.”

“To be sure,” Jane agreed, her eyes still on the paper. “Lady Catherine knows.”

“Of course Lady Catherine knows,” James scoffed. “If she were half as decent as she considers herself, she would use her power to return a lost girl to her family. But no, no, kindness is too simple and therefore too low for her kind to reach.”

Jane peered at him. “She was that insufferable, huh?”

His head fell back theatrically from where he had seated himself by the window, blowing his lips like a horse.

Two more letters arrived that afternoon, one from Charlotte, profusely apologizing for not handling all correspondence from Longbourn in place of her husband. James set to replying to her while their aunt joined them to read the latest from their uncle.

“Gambling debts?” Jane repeated. “A gamester!”

“Apparently the only friends Wickham could be bothered to have were his gaming partners or debtors,” their aunt confirmed. “Colonel Forster has tallied the sum to be more than a thousand pounds to clear his expenses from Brighton.”

Jane looked to her brother, who simply shook his head and returned to his own writing. “I have
nothing more to say.”

Their aunt picked up, “There is good news. Your father has left London. You may expect him as soon as the morrow.”

Jane sighed with relief, “He is certain to not be withheld by a duel now.”

However when their mother was told of this, her children mutually groaned. “What? Is he coming home without poor Lydia? Surely he will not leave London before he has found them! Who is to fight Wickham and make him marry her?”

Mrs. Gardiner left her spirits to Hill and Jane while she otherwise confronted James. “I will be departing from you tomorrow, I think. I reckon your father and I may pass each other and he will return in the chaise in which I leave. My bairns need their own beds. I must ask you, have you received any news from his lordship?”

James’ eyes softened as he shook his head. “Not a word.”

“Ah,” his aunt exhaled with a nod. “Was I foolish in thinking he had gone to London to help?”

“No,” he soothed, “but far be it for me to guess the man’s methods or successes. I’m sure a great deal in London occupies his time.”

“Oh, yes,” his aunt agreed. “One such as him could only hope to travel in quietude, or else the pish posh of London would spring upon his arrival.”

James chuckled to himself as she kissed the air beside his cheek and heralded her children to begin packing.

Sure enough, they heard the rattling of a chaise not long after their aunt’s left in the morning. When Mr. Bennet stepped out, he had all the appearance of his usual philosophic composure. He said as little as he had ever been in the habit of saying, his only signs of relief at being home were how he pulled his children into his arms, holding them tightly.

He made no mention of the business that had taken him away while James made tea and Hill prepared a hot and hearty meal for him. No one disturbed him while he was in his study; it was he who drew himself to the kitchen as his family had since made it a habit to comfort themselves there. Sitting upon the stairs beside Mrs. Bennet’s chair, he kissed the back of her hand and simply looked around the room, at everyone he still had.

In the evening, James returned to the kitchen to find him seated by the open window with a pipe in hand. The blue tendrils dancing from the end dissolved against his pale exhalations. “It’s been a long time since you smoked.”

“London drives me to tobacco,” he quipped dryly. “Make enough for three.”

Puzzled, James looked up to realize Kitty was entering behind him. Their father gestured for her to join him at the window as he said, “I feel out of season. The air smells of summer but the night is still cold with winter. Did you cook with cinnamon recently?”

“I did,” James confirmed. “Do you want something with it?”

“Whichever tea you’re making, put it in a hot toddy,” he confirmed.

James did, choosing to make three versions of the autumnal beverage, taking care to only splash
Kitty’s with whiskey.

“Oh!” she giggled as her cheeks warmed. “This is good!”

“Say nothing to mama,” James teased. “She forbade our father from whiskey and tobacco ages ago.”

The man blew fragrant smoke up to the moon as he said, “Who should suffer but myself? It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it.”

“You must not be too severe on yourself,” James soothed.

“You warned me well against such evil. No, Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I am to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough.”

Kitty voiced, “Are we mourning her passing, then?”

He looked at her and fondly touched her cheek. “I choose to celebrate that I have four healthy and intelligent children. Not too bad, I’d say.”

Their heads turned toward Mary descending the stairs. James handed his mug to her while she asked, “Do you suppose them to be in London still?”

“Yes,” their father answered. “Where else can they be so well concealed?”

Kitty sighed, “And Lydia used to want to go to London.”

“She is happy, then,” he finished. “Her residence there will probably be of some duration.”

The embers in his pipe glowed orange before he amended, “Lizzy, I bear you no ill will for being justified in your advice to me. I am not the kind to hold my child’s greater intelligence against myself like an injury.”

James smiled and shook his head as the eldest Bennet child arrived. Their father leaned back against the window frame. “Well this is a parade.”

Jane chuckled. “I don’t mean to disturb. I’m just here for mama’s tea.”

“You disturb nothing, sweet heart,” he hushed, eliciting keen glances among his children. Their father was grateful to be home. “A day will soon come when I am back in my study with my nightcap being the most troublesome one in this house. Or, perhaps, I may defer it till Kitty runs away.”

Her jaw dropped as she frowned at him. “I am not going to run away, papa. If I were ever to go to Brighton, I would behave a great deal better than Lydia.”

Smoke trembled as he laughed warmly. “You go to Brighton? No, I have at last learnt to be cautious and you will feel the effects of it. No officer is ever to enter my house again, nor even to pass through the village. Balls will be absolutely prohibited, unless you stand with one of your siblings. I daresay you are never to stir out of doors until you can prove that you have spent ten minutes of every day rationally.”

Kitty was a mixture of confusion and affront while her family laughed merrily. Oddly enough, it was the first in a long while that they had seen their father grin as he patted her knee. “Do not make yourself unhappy, my love. If you are a good girl for the next ten years, I will review it all at the
Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, everyone :) whether you celebrate anything in December or not, I'm super grateful for all of you <3 Thank you for sticking with me thus far and cheers to 2019.
Forward

Chapter Notes

Ao3 emails tend to get filtered as spam, so if you're waiting for chapters, check your spam folders :)

Two days after Mr. Bennet’s return, as Jane and Lizzy were walking together in the shrubbery behind the house, they saw Hill coming towards them. Expecting him to herald them for their mother, they went forward to meet him, but instead of the expected summons, he said, “I beg your pardon for interrupting you, but I was in hopes you might have got some good news from town? I took the liberty of coming to ask.”

Brother and sister glanced at each other before the latter answered, “What do you mean, Hill? We have heard nothing from town.”

“Dear madam,” he said in great astonishment, “there is an express come from Mr. Gardiner. Mr. Bennet has had the letter for a good half hour. I thought you would have seen the delivery and inquired further.”

Away ran the Bennets, too eager to have time for speech. They ran through the vestibule into the breakfast room, and from thence to the library. Their father was in neither, and they were on the point of seeking him upstairs when they were met again by Hill, who laughed apologetically. “You have changed places with him. He is now outside, walking towards the little copse.”

Reversing through the hall, they ran across the lawn after their father, who was pursuing his way towards a small wood on one side of the padlock where an iron bench was nestled in the shrubbery.

Jane was not as much in the habit of running as her brother, who lagged behind while James, panting, cried out, “Papa? What news? Have you heard from uncle?”

Mr. Bennet was as stoic as ever, the letter in his hands. “Yes, I have had a letter from him by express.”

“Well,” James huffed impatiently as Jane joined him. “What news does it bring? Good or bad?”

“What is there of good to be expected?” he said, relinquishing the paper. “Perhaps you would like to read it.”

James caught it from his hand while Jane pressed herself against him, not inclined to wait a second. Their father insisted, “Read it aloud, for I hardly know myself what it is about.”

So James read:

*My dear brother—*

At last I am able to send you some tiding of my niece, and such as, upon the whole, I hope will give you satisfaction. Soon after you left me on Saturday, I was fortunate enough to find out in what part of London they were. The particulars I reserve till we meet. It is enough to know they are
discovered. I have seen them both—

Jane interjected, “Then it is as we hoped? They are married?”

James continued:

I have seen them both. They are not married, nor can I find there was any intention of being so; but if you are willing to perform the engagements which I have ventured to make on your side, I hope it will not be long before they are. All that is required of you is to assure to your daughter, by settlement, her equal share of the five thousand pounds secured among your children after the decease of yourself and my sister. Moreover, to enter into an engagement of allowing her, during your life, one hundred pounds per annum.

These are conditions, which, considering everything, I had no hesitation in complying with, as far as I thought myself privileged, for you. I shall send this by express, that no time may be lost in bringing me your answer. You will easily comprehend, from these particulars, that Mr. Wickham’s circumstances are not so hopeless as they are generally believed to be. The world has been deceived in that respect. I am happy to say there will be some little money, even when all his debts are discharged, to settle on my niece, in addition to her own fortune.

If, as I conclude will be the case, you send me full powers to act in your name throughout the whole of this business, I will immediately give directions to Haggerston for preparing a proper settlement. There will not be the smallest occasion for your coming to town again; therefore, stay quietly at Longbourn, and depend on my diligence and care. Send back your answer as soon as you can, and be careful to write explicitly. We have judged it best that my niece should be married from this house, of which I hope you will approve. She comes to us today. I shall write again as soon as anything more is determined on.

Yours, etc.

Edward Gardiner.

James’ head snapped up, simultaneously hopeful and livid. “Is it possible? He will marry her?”

Jane seconded, “Wickham is not so undeserving, then, as we have thought him. Dear papa, I congratulate you.”

“Congratulations,” James scoffed, throwing the paper onto the bench. “We are to pay Wickham’s salary for the rest of our lives at the credit of our sister. Marriage is a business deal, as it ever is. Have you answered the letter?”

Jane defended, “We always knew Lydia’s security would only come after money was supplied.”

Their father answered, “No, but it must be soon.”

Jane then swept up the letter and eagerly handed it out to him. “Come back and write immediately! Consider how important every moment is in such a case. Let me write for you, if you dislike the trouble yourself.”

Mr. Bennet had not looked at them much during this whole exchange and he did not accept the letter from her now. He nodded solemnly. “I dislike it very much. But it must be done.”

And so saying, he heaved himself up, and walked towards the house. James leapt into stride with him. “The terms, I suppose…must be complied with?”
“Complied with!” his father scoffed. “I am only ashamed of his asking so little.”

James’ boots halted in the overgrown grass. “What?”

Mr. Bennet only paused long enough to say, “There is nothing else to be done. But there are two things that I want very much to know: how much money your uncle has laid down to bring it about, and how I am ever to repay him?”

Jane had caught up with James. “Money — uncle?” she cried, looking between them. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that no man in his senses would marry Lydia on so slight a temptation as one hundred a year during my life, and fifty after I am gone.”

Jane sighed, “His debts to be discharged, and something still to remain... I am afraid uncle has distressed himself. A small sum could not do all this.”

“No,” their father agreed without turning around. “Wickham’s a fool if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds. I should be sorry to think so ill of him in the beginning of our relationship.”

“Ten thousand!” Jane cried as he disappeared into the house.

James stopped her, the breath leaving her throat at the sight of his countenance. “Darcy,” he said, barely above a whisper.

Jane’s features opened. “You think so?”

“Who else has that sort of sum? Our uncle does not. And he said it: We judged it best. Lord Darcy is with him.”

He scrubbed a hand over his forehead as he marveled, “And they are to be married...for this we are to be thankful. That they should marry, small as is their chance of happiness, and wretched as is his character, we are forced to rejoice.”

His sister absorbed this and then voiced, “I must admit that I’ve comforted myself with thinking that he would not marry Lydia if he had not a real regard for her. Now I cannot believe that ten thousand pounds, or anything like it, has been advanced for a match doomed for unhappiness. You’re right. How would uncle even begin to supply that amount when he has children of his own, and may have more?”

James landed on the bench and set his elbows on his knees to rub his eyes. “If we were ever able to learn what Wickham’s debts have truly been, we would know exactly how far Darcy has saved us.”

He heard Jane’s boots rustle through the grass as she neared him. “We cannot live by assumption anymore. Though I do think you’re right, his lordship has probably done us an immense kindness, but we must behave as if it is our uncle’s doing; for both of our parents. Papa may settle comfortably thinking he owes a debt to his brother-in-law, but never if it is to Lord Darcy. And anyhow, it is our aunt and uncle who have Lydia now. Their kindness can never be requited. They’re taking her home, and affording her their personal protection — by this time she is with them! If such goodness does not make her miserable now, she will never deserve to be happy. What a meeting for her, when she first sees our aunt!”

James was silent as his sister loosely paced in front of him. “We must endeavour to forget all that has passed on either side. I hope and trust they will yet be happy. His consenting to marry her is a
proof, I will believe, that he has come to a right way of thinking. Their mutual affection will steady them and potentially grow. They will then settle quietly, live in a rational manner, and may in time make their past imprudence forgotten.”

James stared at her incredulously. “Your innate habits are coming forth, and as ever, deluding you. Their conduct has been such as neither you, nor I, nor anybody, can ever forget. It is useless to talk of it.”

Jane’s eyes found him, and he could see the same impasse between them as had ever been. But it had cracks in it now. Jane was unsure, and her brother could only soften his gaze in understanding. Lydia’s mistakes had inserted her into circumstances ripe with misfortune and difficulty. They could only focus on the sources of light and foster them, for their sister’s sake.

“Who is going to tell mama?” James asked after a time.

Jane sighed, “Papa will not be speaking to anyone for a while.”

It was left to them. Ascending to their mother’s room, Mary and Kitty were already with Mrs. Bennet; one communications would, therefore, do for all. Jane read the letter aloud, and with every word their mother could hardly contain herself.

As soon as Jane read Mr. Gardiner’s hope of Lydia’s being soon married, her joy burst forth, and every following sentence added to its exuberance. James leaned against the wall as his mother was brought to almost violent delight, her fidgets and irritation now on the side of happiness instead of anguish. To know that her daughter would be married was enough. She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, nor humbled by an remembrance of her misconduct.

“Dear, dear Lydia!” she cried, fluttering to her closet and back. “This is delightful indeed! She will be married! I shall see her again! She will be married at sixteen! My good, kind brother! I knew how it would be — I knew he would manage everything—”

Mary and Kitty could only keep out of the way while Jane otherwise silently met her brother’s tired eyes.

“How I long to see her, and to see dear Wickham too! But the clothes, the wedding clothes! I will write to my sister Gardiner about them directly. Lizzy, my dear, run down to your father, and ask him how much he will give her for them —Stay! Stay, I will go myself. Ring the bell, Kitty, for Hill. I will put on my things in a moment. My dear, dear Lydia! How merry we shall be together when we meet!”

She flew from the room, leaving it vacant despite the four people remaining.

Mary was the one who spoke, “I must admit to my usual inability to read an atmosphere…but I do not recognize a great amount of merriment for Lydia’s marriage. After so long waiting in great hope for Jane’s matrimony…this seems a sad irony.”

A mutual exhalation passed among them, slow nods silently agreeing before Jane left to chase after their mother and soften her impact around the house. James raked a hand through his hair, briefly considering how long it had grown, but the thought passed as soon as it arose. He heard Kitty say his name, but he gently shook his head as he left the room.

Slowly wandering through the corridor, he heard pieces of his mother’s and Jane’s speech through the house. “For we…attribute this happy conclusion…that he has pledged himself to assist Mr. Wickham with money.”
“…all very right! Who should do it but her own uncle?...had not a family of his own, I and my children would have had all his money, you know…have a daughter married! Mrs. Wickham! How well it sounds…will settle with your father about the money afterwards, but things should be ordered immediately.”

She was then proceeding to all the particulars of calico, muslin, and cambric, and would shortly have dictated some very plentiful orders had not Jane persuaded her to wait till her father was at leisure to be consulted. Her mother was too happy to be quite so obstinate as usual, as other schemes soon came to her head.

“I will go to Meryton! As soon as I am dressed, and tell the good news to my sister Philips. As I come back, I can call on Lady Lucas and Mrs. Long. Kitty! Kitty run down and order the carriage! An airing would do me a great deal of good. Girls, can I do anything for you in Meryton? Oh! Here comes Hill. My dear Hill…”

James, meanwhile, closed the curtain over his and Jane’s window. Shielded from the light, he slumped in his bed, returning to its soft comforts while his boots clattered on the floor. Mary had quite said it all: so tossed and turned as they had been, James simply wanted the matter to end. Lydia’s situation must, at best, be bad enough, and for now was becoming no worse. So he chose to be thankful for that, though in looking forward, neither rational happiness nor worldly prosperity could be expected for his sister…

But looking back, as it so often does, held only pains he wished to forget in slumber.
Quid agis? - How are you?
Fessus sum. - I’m tired.

It was the pencil scratching softly across paper that pulled Jamie to consciousness. He knew without looking who sat beside him in Jane’s place. A candle was lit as the faint sunset glowed through the curtain. James’ lungs stretched as he heaved an inhalation, rolling over to see the edge of the book in which his father wrote.

His feet were crossed as he scribbled away, his baritone voicing softly, “I like to make corrections in scholars’ tomes. It makes me feel superior without stepping on delicate toes.”

James eyed the book groggily while the pencil worked. “A great many?”

“It is astounding how academia requires a certain complicated diction which results in masters of field but not masters of writing.”

James’ countenance was gentle with a smile. He recognized the shape of Latin on the page and a scribbled verb conjugation in the corner. Mr. Bennet slashed through another word, leaving a tiny number corresponding to the proper conjugation.

“Quid agis?”

“Fessus sum,” Jamie murmured.

His father hummed a sound of understanding. After a moment he said, “My chief wish is to have as little trouble in this business as possible, now. I have already revealed my mortal infirmities by being overcome by the first transports of rage, but have since returned to my customary indolence.”

He turned the page while James’s lashes beat against his cheeks. His father continued, “I have given the particulars to Edward and a settlement is established. He is thankfully briefer than his sister, despite my begging to know further particulars of how much I am indebted. I am left now with the anger that keeps me from messaging Lydia.”

“You mustn’t consider it a debt to our uncle,” James tried to console. “The only salvation in this business is the sentimentality of family. The paperwork is done. Let it all be done.”

Mr. Bennet’s head turned from the book in his lap, the pencil falling into the crevice as he moved a palm over his son’s forehead. “There is but a two-part satisfaction to all this. The first, in prevailing on one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain to be Lydia’s husband. The second, how my selfishness has been appeased in having my son return home. But at such a cost…your uncle told me what occurred at the inn.”

The back of James’ throat was immediately sore. “I’m fine.”

“It has been a long time since you had such an attack.”
“I’m fine.”

“All right,” his voice rustled. “It was good of Darcy to look after you. It makes me wonder how else his lordship has taken us under his wings.”

James’ lashes slowly lifted up to him. “Would it matter?”

Mr. Bennet’s features opened as he inhaled deeply. “For me, no. I would never be able to repay him. For you, perhaps.”

James blinked, and then felt himself laughing. “Indebted to his lordship for the rest of my life. What romantic irony.”

“Romantic?” Mr. Bennet chimed inquisitively. “I suppose as long as you don’t mind, yes. Though that does beg for certain details to be discovered.”

“Papa.”

“I leave them all at your leisure of disclosure.”

James laughed some more, but it soon faded as he asked again, “Would it matter?”

His father sighed, closing the book on his pencil. “I’ve heard a great many opinions change about the man. And my youngest has taken nearly the worst path for her life. I am now the last person to make audacious predictions about anything. But of course, this is under the assumption that Mr. Darcy has done anything for us at all.”

Those silver eyes fell on him. James shook his head. “I don’t know. He said he was going to London…but he said he would write. He hasn’t written.”

“Oh?” his father chirped. “As bad as me, then? Well, that means you would, theoretically, need to be the proactive one.”

“Good grief,” his son crossed his arms over his face.

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “A man may enjoy being chased as much as a woman.”

“There is no chasing.”

“Fair enough,” his father finished. “I came here for the quiet, but also to inform you that our exertions are not over. Your mother has not yet returned from Meryton, but already the ripples of her conversations have returned to our abode. Lydia herself would only do better in her arrival, or the happiest alternative, secluding herself from the world, in some distant farmhouse.”

James smiled. “In her mind, she’s already lived thusly her whole life.”

“I suppose you are right. There is much to be talked of in her marriage, and the good-natured wishes for her well doing. I admit to finding the spiteful old ladies in Meryton fascinating, how their minds turn from one conversation to the next, from one thought to an entirely different voiced opinion. They may wish Lydia all the well while nevertheless condemning her position.”

“Oh,” he sighed, “your mother will make us the talk of the town for a while yet. Her spirits are oppressively high and she has been away from the head of our table for at least a fortnight. No sentiment of shame will dampen her triumph. It is a quality I have admired throughout our years
together, but I want to warn you that soon, tonight even, may be the end of such fondness.”

James felt his heart in his throat and then its sliding down through his ribs. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing to fear,” his father recognized in his voice. “I mean only that I see an argument on the horizon, and I do not want you to be harmed by it. Your mother has wanted a marriage of her daughter—any daughter—since sweet Jane was sixteen. Her thoughts and her words run wholly on those attendants of elegant nuptials, fine muslins, new carriages, and servants.”

James snorted softly. “Lydia will never have servants.”

“I agree. But it is no longer your task to bring the lighter heads in our family back down to earth. I will take on that mantle, though an enemy I will therein make myself. Your mother will be most infuriated with me for a long while.”

Mr. Bennet kissed his fingers and then stroked them through Jamie’s hair before he lifted himself from the bed. “You may share my warning with your sisters as you see fit.”

“I may with Kitty,” James considered as Mr. Bennet paused in the doorway. “She might take it as a fright to see her parents quarrel so.”

“On the contrary,” his father countered, but in an appraising tone. “Our Kitty was old enough and far more aware than Lydia during the events of your fifteenth year. She is sharp and observant, and it is indeed her special peculiarity how she absorbs so much around her but none of it is the angry parts of ourselves.”

James listened to his father’s footfalls all the way to the faint closure of his study door. Not long afterwards, Jane arrived with a cup of tea for him as well as their adult cat, Alys under one arm. The cat rattled a startled purr when she was dropped onto the bed, then earnestly pushed her head into James’s palm. “Where is Darcy?”

“With Kitty,” she relayed. “So we are to have a storm in the house?”

“You heard?” he inquired, more so conversationally.

“Not much passes through these walls without everyone knowing. At least, ever since Lydia and mama’s noise has not been here to eclipse it otherwise.”

They both paused at the sound of the front door slamming, easily knowing it to be their mother. James’ lips returned to the edge of his cup. “And so it begins.”

“What are we to do?” Jane wondered.

“Hold an umbrella over Mary and Kitty,” he supposed.

He held Alys and his empty cup while he and Jane descended the stairs. Their mother was tossing her scarf and hat over the pegs while speaking a great deal to nobody in particular. “Lizzy! Put the cat down, dear, and tell Hill to brew his best for dinner, and splash something special into it! We shall also have a bowl of punch when Lydia arrives!”

James rushed nowhere and instead sat at the dinner table with Alys contently napping on his lap. Jane transferred the message to Hill, but with the alterations of a calming tea, with a slice of lemon to otherwise fool their mother that she was drinking something special. Her cheeks were red with merriment and exercise enough while they all gathered for dinner. Mr. Bennet was the last to join them, taking his place under the wary and observant gazes of Mary and Kitty.
There was almost hope during their soup course that Mrs. Bennet had talked her fill of Lydia in Meryton; instead she fancied a discussion with Jane over what supplies she might need during the summer and coming autumn, and when they might frolic through Meryton for the goods.

“I do so enjoy walking through town with my girls. It feels so long since we were all together among the shops, discussing this lace or that pie. Mary, you remember the music sheets we bought so long ago?”

Mary perked up with a subtle look of perplexity. “Yes. I play them every day.”

“Oh, and Lizzy, those berries! Whatever were they called—they made the most delightful jam.”

Mr. Bennet crossed under her words to assure, “A good choice, Mary. You’re more proficient everyday.”

Her matching silver eyes softened as she pressed her lips together, nodding once while James did not bother replying at all. His mother hardly needed it anyhow. She soon arrived exactly where she wanted.

“You know, if Lydia settles near us, it may be quite like no time has passed at all! Haye Park might do, if the Gouldings would quit it, or the great house at Stoke, if the drawing room were larger; but Ashworth is too far off! I could not bear to have her ten miles from me; and as for Purvis Lodge, the attics are dreadful.”

James and Jane peeked at their father while their dinner of chicken, potatoes, and carrots were arriving. He allowed Mrs. Bennet to talk on without interruption, while their small staff remained. The rim of his wine glass was speckled with condensation, as it was filled with hot water instead of wine. His fingertips held it for a long moment, before he took a slow drought and when the staff had withdrawn, he spoke.

“Mrs. Bennet, before you take any, or all of these houses, for your son and daughter, let us come to a right understanding. Into one house in this neighborhood, they shall never have admittance. I will not encourage the impudence of either by receiving them at Longbourn.”

Kitty’s eyes widened like circular spectacles but she dared not pull them from her plate. Mary was somber. James was exhausted while Jane reached under the table for Kitty’s hand. Though it was one of the few occasions in which they had seen their father silence their mother, it did not last. A long dispute erupted at the table, their mother’s puzzled and then livid speech allowing James to meet Kitty’s gaze and twirl a finger in the air. Leave.

She flew up, bobbed a curtsy, and nobody noticed how she took her plate with her. A moment later, Jane gave Mary a nod, and she followed suit.

Mrs. Bennet blazed through her tirade, and at the end of it found, with amazement and horror, that her husband would not advance a guinea to buy clothes for his daughter. “She is to be married like a pauper?” she exclaimed.

“That is to be determined by her beloved husband,” Mr. Bennet said without emotion. “With so much money bestowed upon them, he may decide exactly what finery shall start their marriage. After so little consideration was given to us by Lydia, she will receive a matching amount of affection on whatever occasion by me. Our wild Lydia has been so privileged to only see devoted families all around her. Now she must learn the hard way that family is exactly what you put into it. Lace and satin are pretty but do not change what lies beneath them.”
Mrs. Bennet could hardly comprehend this. “You’ve been driven so far, to such a point of inconceivable resentment, as to refuse our daughter a privilege without which her marriage would scarcely seem valid!”

“You’ve been driven so far, to such a point of inconceivable resentment, as to refuse our daughter a privilege without which her marriage would scarcely seem valid!”

“You are being ridiculous!” she cried.

“I merely attempt to understand things as you present them,” he replied. “The disgrace which a want of clothes will reflect on a daughter’s nuptials, as you say, does not outweigh the shame of her eloping and living with Wickham a fortnight before they took their hands in marriage. But do go on. Society may see her silk slippers and not care about any of that.”

“Do not pretend you’ve ever held a great care for what society thinks!”

“Quite right. I have not. Then dismiss that and instead think on the hypocrisy to our sweet Jane. Have you not cared about her happiness? Or merely the sight of so fine a house as Netherfield and your carriage visiting it?”

James slowly grew numb to the argument and instead let his thoughts drift toward Mr. Darcy. He was heartily sorry for bringing this whole affair to the man. The forces driving Lydia’s fate so parallel with Georgiana’s, met by William’s insistence and compassion in lending his aid in the whole debacle were processed by a great deal of shame alongside warmth. James was embarrassed how they were for so long misunderstanding each other, and now stood upon the same bridge built by Lydia’s foolish tyranny. Indeed, only William could understand him during these times…

So why hasn’t he written?

His jaw rested in his hand while his eyes closed tiredly. His heart ached. It was not to be supposed that a Darcy would connect himself with a family whose youngest married under such terms, especially a marriage to the man whom both Darcys justly scorned.

James’ eyes ached. His revenge would have been complete indeed. Was Wickham capable of it? Marrying Lydia to place himself in a family which Darcy could not associate with ever again? Denying William the person he loved by his simple presence…

James’ eyes opened to find Jane’s on him. We cannot live on assumption anymore. He smiled sadly at her inquiring gaze, and she mirrored it back to him. Together they left the table, leaving their parents’ dwindling argument to pick at their own plates in their room.

“What were you thinking of?” she asked around the pinched chicken in her fingers.

“I was thinking of William.”

She smiled nervously, like she didn’t dare smirk at him. “And?”

“And how I am convinced my foolish heart could have been happy with him. Just as it is no longer
likely we should meet.”

She frowned. “Not likely?”

“Lydia married the man he hates most in the world,” he sighed like it was painfully obvious.

“Then he may be free to hate Lydia. Goodness knows papa isn’t the most fond of her right now either,” she remarked, catching him off guard.

James huffed a laugh as he leaned against the post of their bed. “I suppose your period of daydreaming over Bingley ends as mine for Darcy begins.”

A moment of silence. Then, “It hasn’t ended.”

His head rolled against the painted white wood as he gazed at her. “Here we are. Two pathetic specimens.”

His expression was wiped from his face as Jane heaved herself off the bed and vanished from the room. He gazed, puzzled, at the door until she returned to the room with a bottle of wine. “Oh lord.”

“If there was ever an evening for us to drink. It is now,” she declared.

She poured directly over their water, glasses chinking before they shivered. “You stole from papa’s cupboard,” James croaked.

“He has better taste,” she confirmed, her voice warm.

“I’ve been a marvelous influence on you,” he appraised, stroking Alys’s fur next to his leg.

Jane diverted, “What are we to do, then? Dream up hypothetical men with all of our specific requirements?”

“More like leave the men as they are and change the world around them,” James groaned.

Jane smiled, her cheeks flushing. “William is that lovely?”

Her brother sipped his wine again, feeling the heat slide down his throat as he confirmed, “I wouldn’t change a thing. It has been a just fate for me to find a man who suits me in every way, then to have both myself and outside forces erect barriers between us.”

Jane’s eyes rolled. “You deserve no such thing. Tell me why he suits you. Apart from how he’s handsome and rich.”

James guffawed. “I don’t care that he’s rich.”

Her smiling lips moved on the rim of her glass. “No, you never cared about such matters. What did you do at Pemberley?”

“He showed me his dogs.”

“Dogs?” she chirped. “Well that’s a fast way to your heart.”

“And his chef is undeniably magnificent.”

“Are we hypothetically losing you to Pemberley or to his lordship?” Jane teased.
They chuckled together, a silence eclipsing them until James relinquished, “He’s kind, Jane. I mistook his kindness for pride. His generosity. He’s intelligent enough to check my wickedness. He’s gone a great deal out of his way for my comfort, and I don’t know how to do the same for him. I’ll never have the chance to try.”

“Bloody hell, you’re gloomy.”

His eyes widened like saucers. “Jane!”

Alys uttered a rumbling exclamation as he threw his handkerchief at her. She was amidst a fit of giggles when Mary and Kitty arrived at their door. “Of what are we speaking?” the former inquired.

“All manner of unlikely events,” James disregarded as he waved them over. Kitty landed on the bed, earning another indignant sound from the feline. James handed Mary his glass while his head leaned back once more on the post. “God, can you imagine Lydia living alone with a husband?”

Mary replied, “It is not for us to imagine so much as to witness eventually. It is more to imagine how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue.”

Jane snorted into her wine while James laughed in his chest. Mary peered between them. “What? What have I said?”

Kitty appeared curious as well until she bloomed scarlet at James’s saying, “I never expected Mary to be the one to bring up intercourse.”
Their sister’s wedding day arrived, but some days before it, a letter from Mr. Gardiner. James, Kitty, and Mary were with their father in his study when Hill brought in the correspondence. Jane had assumed the task of assisting her mother in Meryton, although the primary purpose was to assure her that she was not alone in a house against her.

Mr. Bennet tore into the letter lethargically, read a single line, and then passed it off to his nearest offspring to read. “It seems Wickham has resolved in quitting the militia.”

James and Kitty frowned at one another while Mary read the page:

It was greatly my wish that he should do so, as soon as his marriage was fixed. And I think you will agree with me in considering a removal from that corps as highly advisable, both on his account and my niece’s. It is Mr. Wickham’s intention to go into the regulars; and among his former friends, there are still some who are able and willing to assist him in the army.

He has the promise of an ensigncy in an honourable General’s regiment, I assure you, which are now quartered in the north. It is an advantage to have him so far from this part of the kingdom. He promises fairly, and I hope among different people, where they may each have a character to preserve, they will both be more prudent.

I have written to Colonel Forster to inform him of our present arrangements, and to request that he will satisfy the various creditors of Mr. Wickham in and near Brighton with assurances of speedy payment. And will you give yourself the trouble of carrying similar assurances to his creditors in Meryton, of whom I shall subjoin a list, according to his information. He has given in all his debts; I hope at least he has not deceived us on those.

All will be completed in a week. They will then join his regiment, unless they are first invited to Longbourn. I understand from Mrs. Gardiner that my niece is very desirous of seeing you all before she leaves the south. She is well, and begs to be dutifully remembered by you and her mother.

Yours, etc.

Mary peered up at her father. “Well it is surely a better option to have a steady income and security versus whatever spontaneous things the militia promises. And he may have occasion to rise in the ranks, therein improving his reputation and income.”

Kitty looked to James hopefully, but he was only able to gaze back indifferently. Mr. Bennet voiced some phrases of agreement as to the opportunity which Wickham faced, but none toward his thinking that Wickham was likely to prevail upon such circumstances.

Mrs. Bennet, as usual, had a deal more to say on the matter once she and Jane returned home for lunch. “North? North? My Lydia is to be taken close to those barbaric Scots—”

James curtailed, “Our aunt Gardiner’s mother was MacDougal, remember. Don’t make up rubbish out of unhappiness.”

His mother made an indignant expression before she rattled on some better arguments, “She is to
be away from Hertfordshire and away from a regiment where she was acquainted with everybody, and had so many favourites! She is so fond of Mrs. Forster—"

"The one who couldn’t keep a lead on Lydia in the first place," he mumbled under his breath. "Won’t miss her." Jane clattered her dishes over his voice.

His mother progressed, “It will be quite a shock to send her away! And there are several of the young men, too, that she likes very much—"

“Options open, King Henry, old chap,” he sassed. Kitty slurped loudly, coughing as a great deal of it went up her nose. James tranquilly handed her his napkin.

“—the officers may not be so pleasant in General Who’s-Its regiment,” Mrs. Bennet finished. “And she shall go north without friend or relative…"

Her children watched the creases around her eyes pull downward. James did not speak in the silence that followed, soon broken by their mother’s realizing she had fallen into a melancholic state. She perked up, doing her best to shake it off, or at the least, to overlay it with more cheer, but there was not much to salvage the sincere sadness that had taken hold of her heart.

Mr. Bennet was slouching in his chair by the fire of his study when James appeared. He did nothing to disturb his father, instead waiting until his presence was noticed and they gazed at one another over Mr. Bennet’s half-moon spectacles. His eyes returned to the pages while a weathered finger moved to mark his page. He was listening.

“I think Lydia should come home. Once. Before she leaves for her new home,” James said quietly.

His father was still, but his eyes did not move over the words. “Do you?”

“Don’t send her anything. Don’t send her money or clothes. But don’t shut our doors against her.”

Mr. Bennet ruminated on that in silence. James waited for as long as it took. Finally, his voice, especially gravelly, said, “If she comes, he will come.”

James had leaned his shoulder against the door-jamb. “Good.”

Mr. Bennet’s gaze flicked up, sharp and glowing with the fire. His son’s voice was light, even musical to the untrained ear, but as he lifted himself off the door frame to leave the room, his eyes were contrastingly cold.

* * * * * *

On the wedding morning, the house was oddly serene. Only the vibration of anxiety and wonderment in each member disclosed their true feelings.

Mary’s goings on were much the same: breakfast and then she took her tea to her piano for her usual practice. The music provided a cloud of distraction in their heads while Kitty stuck close to Jane as they changed.

“Why do I feel like I’m the one being married?” the latter exclaimed when she could stand it no longer.

Jane rubbed her arm. “We feel for her probably more than she feels for herself right now.”

James interrupted from his place before their vanity, “Only because Lydia’s too stupid to feel
Jane’s eyes frowned while Kitty otherwise huffed, “I’d rather get ready for a funeral! Why did we ever so eagerly want weddings? Mary! Play louder!”

She swept from the room, leaving Jane to stare at her brother’s shoulder blades. It was still loose, puffy, around his waist, allowing the light to illuminate a phantom silhouette in the white fabric. His humble, dijon waistcoat was draped over the chair, waiting to be worn.

“Lizzy?”

“Hm?” he acknowledged, not looking up. Not even when her reply was long in coming.

“Are you all right?”

He sniffed casually, having so long had his head bowed over his shirt buttons before he met her reflection in the mirror. “I’m fine.”

She could not read him as he looked back down, moving on to his cuffs. That frightened her. “Are you?” he returned.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Mm,” he agreed.

* * * * * *

They came. The family was assembled in the breakfast room to receive them but their mother, Kitty, and Mary flew to the door, all but knocking Hill out of the way as the carriage drove to a stop. Jane looked at her father standing with his hand on his dining chair. He looked impenetrably grave, a total contrast to his wife’s and Lydia’s voices now drifting through the vestibule. Jane peered at her brother, but his eyes were glass.

The front door’s opening had sucked one of the in between doors closed, but it was now thrown open as Lydia ran into the room. “Jane! Jane!”

James’s chest collapsed as if he had been holding his breath for weeks. His lips pressed together as his cheeks flushed with the warmth Lydia brought with her. Mr. Bennet observed this but said nothing until Lydia parted from Jane to greet him.

“Papa,” she bobbed a curtsy.

“Hello, dear,” he almost whispered, granting her a kiss on her cheek. That seemed enough for her, as she then flew to collide with James. Though it was brief, they held each other tightly.

It was Kitty rushing in and moving out of the way that signaled Wickham’s arrival. He entered with Mrs. Bennet, who allotted him an affectionate smile before she spoke to Lydia. Meanwhile Wickham was left to greet Mr. Bennet, who was not so cordial. James watched Wickham expertly navigate his father’s emotions: bowing to him with a sincere “Good morning, sir,” but only glancing at his hand to know that was out of the question.

Mr. Bennet replied only a “Good morning,” before he seated himself at the table. From then on, his countenance rather gained in austerity, and he scarcely opened his lips though it was a while before the others settled for their meal. Where Mrs. Bennet was most pleased by the young couple, her husband was visibly provoked and therefore ignored.
“Lydia, I would have so much enjoyed seeing you being married,” her mother sighed dreamily.

“Oh mama,” Lydia chortled, “we must agree that this is easier. The two of us were able to travel to the church and to Longbourn all in a morning! The six of you toing and froing would have slowed us down, and of course you would have invited the whole heard of Lucases. The poor church would have been overwhelmed.”

She and her mother giggled to each other. “It is natural to want to show the town one’s married daughter—oh!”

Lydia splayed her hand in the air between them, and Jane’s breath caught in her throat. Not at the diamond on Lydia’s finger, but at the rage in James’s eyes.

In a flash, it was gone, and Jane was left blinking between him and Lydia, who was now turning from sister to sister, demanding their congratulations. Her siblings provided as much as was necessary before she moved on and they watched with incredulity as Lydia was as untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless as ever.

Wickham’s charisma proved as agile and keen as it ever had been. Far from distressed, his manners were pleasing and convincing; his smiles and his easy address, his careful touches on his wife’s hand or her arm tasteful and familiar. He liked Lydia well enough, that much was plain.

However as Jane came around to stand beside James’s chair, he silently took her outstretched fingers, while they watched the pair’s goings on. Wickham’s affection for Lydia was just what they had expected: not equal to Lydia’s for him.

“Oh, mama! Do the people hereabouts know I am married today? I was afraid they might not—we overtook William Goulding in his curricle! So I let down the side glass next to him and took off my glove, and let my hand just rest upon the window frame so that he might see the ring. Then I
bowed and smiled like any old day—"

She stopped with a little hop upon meeting Jane. Her sister looked up at her, the pair of them equally confused until Lydia laughed, "Ah, Jane, I take your place now. You must go lower, because I am a married woman."

"You will sit exactly where your place has always been," Mr. Bennet growled.

The silence may have well have been a canon blast, so loud it was that no one dared breathe. It was a tone Lydia had never once heard, and it transfixed her to the floor, her expression utterly lost. Indeed, it was a tone his wife had never beheld either, if her twitching lips were any indication.

Wickham braved the void, coaxing gently. "Sit down, please."

That roused Lydia, and Mrs. Bennet hastily waved her over to her customary seat: far from Mr. Bennet, and far from her husband. Kitty anxiously fidgeted, realizing that it probably ought to be her chair that Lydia took, to be next to him, but the briefest shake of Jane’s head kept her in place.

It was not to be assumed that time would give Lydia that embarrassment from which she had been so wholly free at first. On the contrary, she shared her mother’s tactic for overlaying her concerns with more and more speech. Her ease and good spirits soon returned and increased. She voiced her longing to see Mrs. Philips, the Lucases, and all their other neighbors, especially to hear herself called Mrs. Wickham by each of them.

Somewhere in all of this, they managed to eat and finish the meal. They each gratefully moved on to the parlour, where seating was not nearly an issue and Mr. Bennet was free to disappear from the party entirely. Jane watched James, fully expecting him to vanish as well, but while the women settled in their seats, he remained standing to keep an eye on Wickham discussing something with Mr. Hill.

Lydia proceeded to say, "Well, mama, what do you think of my husband? Is he not a charming man? I am sure my sisters must all envy me. I only hope they may have half my good luck. They must all go to Brighton! That is the place to get husbands. What a pity it is, mama, that we did not all go."

"Very true," her mother agreed, "and if I had my will, we should. But my dear, I don’t at all like your going such a way off. Must it be so?"

"Oh, lord, yes!" she surprised them. "There is nothing in that. I do so have an aptitude for travel, and I shall like it of all things. You and papa, and my sisters and Lizzy, must come and see us. We shall be at Newcastle all the winter, and I daresay there will be some balls, and I will take care to get good partners for them all."

"I should like it beyond anything!" said her mother.

"And then when you go away, you may leave one or two of my sisters behind you. I shall get husbands for them before the winter is over."

Mary intercepted, "I thank you for my share of the favour, but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands."

Lydia stared at her, and it might’ve been venomous from anyone else, but Lydia merely tossed her head like Mary was the silly one and answered their mother’s question regarding how long they were to stay.
“Only ten days!” she cried.

“Aunt and uncle Philips are lending us their spare room,” Lydia nodded. “They were the means which George and I met, you know! What poetic symmetry to it all!”

James’s gaze was drawn to Wickham suddenly next to him, his eyes observing him in the same, silent way as before. James left him to sit upon the window seat, denying engagement with him. Jane watched and stood to occupy Wickham’s attention in the meantime.

Eventually it was Lydia who sat next to James. “You are exceedingly fond of him,” he murmured.

She grinned, “Why ever wouldn’t I be? He is my dear Wickham.”

“Oh every occasion, it seems,” James retorted.

She ignored him and said, “Lizzy, I have not given you an account of my wedding. You were not by when I told mama and the others all about it. Are you not curious to hear how it was managed?”

“Not even the slightest,” he declared as his eyes flicked to her wedding ring. “There cannot be too little said on the subject.”

“La!” she pouted. “You are so strange! But I must tell you how it went off. We were married, you know, at St. Clement’s. It was settled that we should all be there by—”

“The short version, if you must,” he retaliated.

She huffed. “I should think you would care more about my feelings. I was in such a fuss! I was so afraid that something would happen to put it off. And then there was our aunt all the time while I was dressing, preaching and talking away just as if she was reading a sermon.”

“Which fell upon deaf ears,” James reckoned.

“I did not hear one word in ten,” she confirmed, “for I was thinking of my dear Wickham. I longed to know whether he would be married in his blue coat.”

“It seems he was,” her brother commented dryly. Wickham glanced over at them as if sensing the direction of conversation.

“Grief, you’re almost as bad as our aunt and uncle. I thought it would never be over. They were horridly unpleasant all the time I was with them. If you’ll believe me, I did not once put my foot out of doors, though I was there a fortnight! Not one party, or scheme, or anything—”

“Am I to praise you for behaving the first time in your life?”

Her lips pressed together angrily even though it only made her cheeks fuller like a child’s. “Do not mistake my felicities now for a lack of terror beforehand!”

“I doubt you know what terror is,” he sassed.

Lydia continued as if he had not spoken, “I was so frightened I did not know what to do! For my uncle was to give me away, and if we were beyond the hour, we could not be married all day. But luckily, everything came about with ten minutes to spare—however I recollected afterwards, that even if he had been delayed, the wedding would not be put off, for Mr. Darcy was quite at the ready of it all—”

James’s chin jerked. “Mr. Darcy?”
“Oh, yes!” Lydia chimed as if it were any name in the world. “He has come here with Wickham, you know. But gracious me…”

Her tone dropped with every word until she was whispering to him. “I forgot! I ought not to have said a word about it. I promised them so faithfully. It was to be a secret—don’t tell Wickham I said anything!”

James leaned forward, intent on hearing properly, “Mr. Darcy. His lordship Darcy—”

“Yes! For heavens sake,” she shushed. “Ask no more, for I will certainly tell you all, and then George would be angry.”

Threads of contrasting emotions knotted together in James’s core, so tightly that he left the room. William was at his sister’s wedding. He had been nearby, though that surely was no longer the case.

James rushed out of the back door as if the house was devoid of air. Breathing heavily, he paced and scrubbed a hand over his face, his hair. The neatly combed tresses were pulled into disarray but he felt more like himself again.

He wanted to write to his aunt Gardiner. He needed her details of Lydia’s wedding; a reliable source, so much so that he stepped back into the house and out of it again as if the landing were white hot steel.

Writing from here would not do. His feet were taking him before he comprehended it, and then he was running to Meryton. Though the inhabitants found him odd, none were surprised by his arrival or rushed demand for pen and paper. A bent quill and a torn, incomplete paper donated later, the post was thoroughly impatient with him.

*I must know if he, a stranger and saviour to our family, has been amongst you at such a time. Write instantly, and let me understand it—be damned with Lydia’s secrets.*

His aunt would know his writing, messy though it was. The courier left that very moment, peering over his shoulder at him, quite at ease getting away from him.

James took the long way back to Longbourn, walking past the vacant Netherfield and the extra distance to his home. The estate was as trimmed and proper as ever, but as much of a vacant shell as it had ever been apart from the late summer and autumn of Bingley’s inhabitation.

James did not linger. His stomach twisted as though he had barely eaten and night was rapidly falling. The Wickhams’ carriage was thankfully gone when he arrived and the house was at rest. As Jane shot up from her chair in the kitchen, demanding to know where he had gone, James chose to not let his thoughts linger on how there were nine more days of their visit before they moved north.

* * * * * *

He had the satisfaction of meeting Hill first thing in the morning when he descended the stairs for his first tea. In the man’s hands was a reply from his aunt.

“Are you expecting to send a letter back out?” Hill asked, “because the courier was as eager to deliver this as he was to leave.”

“Never mind,” James said, all but snatching it up. “Thank you, Hill.”
“What is that?” Jane asked when her brother returned much too quickly and without tea. Then she remembered his hasty explanation the night before. “What! That’s it? She replied? But Lydia said —”

“Shh!” he snapped, trying to read.

Dear nephew—

I have just received your letter and shall devote this very moment to responding. I foresee that a little writing will not comprise what I have to tell you but I will keep accounts as concise as I can manage.

In short order: yes, to your question. In explanation, upon the very day of my return home from Longbourn, your uncle received the most unexpected visitor. He and Darcy were shut up for several hours and it was all over before I arrived. It was a good thing I had not yet come for he was there to tell Mr. Gardiner that he had found where your sister and Wickham were, and that he had seen and talked with them both. Wickham repeatedly. Lydia once.

From what I can collect, he came to town just as we knew, to hunt for them. My husband described it curiously, as Mr. Darcy declaring that it was his duty to step forward, to endeavour to remedy an evil which had been brought on by himself. I must inquire to you if you know whatever this means, for neither of us understand it.

James felt Jane beside him reading but did not mind it.

Nevertheless, there is a lady, it seems, a Mrs. Younge, who was some time ago governess to Miss Darcy, and was dismissed from her charge on some cause of disapprobation, though we know not what. This Mrs. Younge, he knew, was intimately acquainted with Wickham, and she had taken house on Edward Street. Darcy went to her for intelligence of him, but it was two or three days before he could get from her what he wanted. Her loyalty was in the wrong man, it seems, but Wickham indeed had gone to her, on their first arrival in London.

The next portion may not put your sister in the most favourable light, although even I must admire her conviction. Darcy called upon Wickham first thing, and as I heard it, addressed him most briefly in order to speak to Lydia. His first object with her had been to persuade her to quit her disgraceful situation and return to her friends as soon as they could be prevailed on to receive her. He offered his assistance as far as it would go, but he found Lydia absolutely resolved on remaining where she was. She cared for none of her friends, wanted no help of his, and would not hear of leaving Wickham.

She was certain marriage was coming, you see, and thought nothing of her circumstances. Since such were her feelings, it only remained to secure and expedite a marriage, which I am even more sorry to inform, was just as you had known. In Darcy’s first conversation with the man, he easily learnt a marriage had never been his design. He confessed himself obliged to leave the regiment, leaving Lydia’s fate to be blamed on her own folly, and as to his future, he conjectured very little about it. He must go somewhere but he knew not where, and certainly would have nothing to live on.

Myself and Darcy share the same inquiry, which he asked next: why ever did he not marry Lydia at once? Though your father is not rich, he would have been able to do something for him, and his situation would have benefited somehow through the match. In reply to his question, Wickham still cherished the hope of more effectually making his fortune by marriage.

Obviously, Darcy was then the one to drown him in the waters of reality. He proceeded on
convincing him to marry your sister. Of course Wickham wanted more than he could get; his wants were reduced to be reasonable.

After this he went to call on my husband. It was the evening before your father left; however Darcy judged, and rightly so I must add, that your father would not be the person whom he could properly consult.

“He saved papa’s life,” Jane breathed. James kept reading.

So next he came when your father was gone, and spoke at great length with my husband. But he came again the next day, during which I saw him. Lydia may think herself steadfast, but a Darcy’s obstinacy is not to be outmatched. I wonder, Lizzy, if his obstinacy is the real defect of his character, but it came in most handy during these times. Your uncle was, naturally, displeased about the sums, which Darcy took on entirely, but as his wife and, frankly, accountant, I cannot thank his lordship enough.

Nevertheless, they battled for a long time, which was more than either the gentleman or lady concerned in it deserved. But, as I said, at last Mr. Gardiner was forced to yield, and instead of helping his niece, was entirely given credit of it, which went sorely against the grain. Men and their prides, no offense. Although your letter has certainly given him great pleasure, because it requires the explanation he has been so eager of giving. He does so hate to fly on borrowed feathers, so now we may give praise where it is due.

But Lizzy, and I am sure, Jane, this must go no further than yourselves. You both know pretty well, I think, what has been done for these young people. His debts are paid, and more than one thousand pounds they were; the other sums, of which I believe you are aware, and his commission purchased. When all this was resolved upon, his lordship was to return to his friends, who were still staying at Pemberley, but it was agreed that he should be in London once more when the wedding took place, both to finalize the transactions as well as to be nearer at hand, if necessary.

I believe I have now told you everything. As ever, it is a tale of much displeasure, but it is not without its thankful parts. Lydia came to us, and Wickham had constant admission to the house, I saw myself the genuine fondness between them, imbeciles though they are. There is no love lost on my part for my niece, rest assured. But really. Imbeciles. I tried my utmost to tell her repeatedly of the wickedness of what she had done, but if she heard me, it was by good luck. Only in my recollections of you, Lizzy, and sweet Jane, was my temper quelled and patience nurtured.

Mr. Darcy was punctual in his return, and as Lydia informed you, at the wedding. Your letter, in fact, arrived not long after he left our home, for he dined with us this evening. I must say, with as little apology as I’ve ever given you, for these are not new sentiments I am sharing with you, how much I like him. His behaviour to us has, in every respect, been as pleasing as when we were in Derbyshire. His understanding and opinions all please me; he is wanting of nothing but a little more liveliness, and that, if he marries rightly, his wife may teach him. I thought him very sly; he hardly mentioned your name but once. He understands discretion after sensitive events, I think. Slynness also seems to be the fashion.

But I will finish here and send this to you.

Yours, very sincerely.

“He was in London all this time,” Jane concluded. Her brother startled when a little laugh escaped her. “He’s very resourceful.”
“Jane,” he lamented, “He’s mortified. That woman helped Wickham steal his sister, and he had to go to her for aid. He’s had to supplicate a woman he despises in order to find the man he equally abominates, all to persuade and bribe a marriage to our sister, whom would neither regard nor esteem.”

“Lizzy,” she returned, not caring for the details. “He’s done this for you.”

“What?” he retorted, even while his heart whispered the very same words.

“Well he certainly hasn’t any pride now,” she remarked. “But what use is pride in the efforts of love? He loves you. This was for you, not Lydia.”

“Then why hasn’t he written?” his voice rasped. He said it spitefully, but not so much as to her as to himself, to prove to himself that he was unloved. That his deeply seeded hope, which was growing into the most gargantuan weed, was clouding his vision of the truth.

Jane’s eyes softened. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m sure he is busy, that’s all—”

All at once, many noises sounded downstairs. Hill rang the bell announcing brunch was ready, a knock sounded on the door, eliciting Mrs. Bennet’s exclamations and what sounded like Mary and Kitty rushing out of bed. “Lydia! Lydia’s here! Everyone! Downstairs, now!”

By the time the eldest Bennet siblings arrived to the breakfast table, all apart from their father were seated. The patriarch was nowhere to be seen, but no one raised any inquiry for him, and thus were allowed to sit where they wished. Only Wickham noticed Jane and James sitting down. He nodded at them both, but only Jane acknowledged him; James turned his gaze away, focusing on the food while his mother and Lydia conversed.

“You will be with us all day again, won’t you?”

“Not here, surely,” Lydia complained. “I intend to walk through Meryton. I’ve had the worst luck, coming and going when no one of interest is about! Not even Lady Lucas has been in her usual bookshop when I popped in last night and this morning before we came here.”

“How is Charlotte?” Wickham asked, his eyes on James.

Lydia answered, “Still married to that horrible Collins, can you believe? It’s almost as if she is truly fond of him; I can’t believe her endurance so strong.”

She was raising a white wine to her lips, or at least she intended, until James, reaching for the bread rolls, knocked her arm. She coughed and sputtered and he simply took the glass from her while she recovered, setting it between himself and Jane and far from her.

“Lizzy! Give that back, and you did that on purpose! Oh, my dress—”

“Do you think being married allows you to drink at all hours of the day?” he returned.

“Ah!” she piped a laugh. “I am married indeed, so your silly opinion on what I drink no longer matters.”

Jane frowned. “You wield marriage like a divine ordinance to do what you want?”

Wickham graciously intercepted. “The day is long and there is much to do. The glass will be better savoured afterward.”
Lydia giggled. “You’re right, of course, love.”

James refrained from rolling his eyes and contented himself with drinking tea instead of eating.

However it was decided not long thereafter that the Wickhams, and whatever Bennets, would journey to the Lucases’ abode. “If they cannot be found in town, we shall call upon them directly!” Mrs. Bennet proclaimed, much to the glee of her youngest.

James shot a warning look at Hill, who instantly understood and went to send word to the Lucases. His gaze was drawn back by Wickham’s calm voice asking, “You will join us, won’t you, James?”

It was not so much him as it was Jane’s tight grasp on his trouser leg under the table that answered. “Afraid not.”

Something deflated behind Wickham’s eyes. “Afterwards, then,” he said, as if his inquiry had been more in depth.

The house soon emptied of all but James and his father, the latter remaining outside for the farm’s toil until he returned to his library. James was content to roam the grounds, relishing the golden rays that warmed him through even while the cold spring breeze moved his hair. Again he raked a hand through it, considering a trim, but let the consideration fade from his thoughts.

His gaze was drawn to their small pasture, where a newborn calf was hopping about. “She’s new?” he called to the nearest workman.

“Aye, sir. Born just this morning. The goats as well.”

Indeed, their pair of goats had spawned three more, which were making a great spectacle of climbing and falling over the piled stones of an abandoned fireplace or even going as high as the roof of their small barn.

James smirked to himself and how life continued around him; blissfully ignorant of the sinkhole they had been living in. His gaze moved over their fields and the distant forest they shared with Netherfield, then all the way back to the small shed attached to the barn. More like a closet, really, he opened it to reveal all manner of rakes and play tools left untouched for years. At the bottom leaned two cricket bats, one of them broken.

He roused by someone’s approach. His mind wiped clean at the sight of Wickham coming over the path. “I am afraid I interrupt your solitary ramble, Mr. Bennet?”

James grimaced, though it probably only looked as if he were squinting in the sun. “You certainly do. You’ve escaped the Lucases.”

“Merely a head start on the way back,” he smiled cordially. James returned to the pasture fence as he added, “It’s been a long time since we spoke together.”

“The others are coming along?” James disregarded.

“Eventually, I’m sure. Your mother showed me off and then as good as waved me out, my duties done. You and I were good friends, I’d like to be better now.”

James eyed him. “Brothers-in-law?”

“Well, yes,” Wickham laughed. “I can’t think of one better.”
James did not respond. In his peripheral, he saw Wickham’s smile fade but he smoothly moved on to an alternate topic. “I heard from the Gardiners that you have actually seen Pemberley since we last spoke.”

“I have.”

Wickham joined him beside the fence. “I almost envy you the pleasure. I do often miss it. Yet I believe it would be too much for me, or else I could take it in my way to Newcastle. Best not,” he laughed. “Lydia would get it in her head that we could acquire such a place. Then you saw the old housekeeper, I suppose? Reynolds is still there? Woman never caught so much as a cold all the while I was there. Of course she did not mention my name to you—”

“She did.”

There was a second’s delay to Wickham’s reply. “And what did she say?”

“Not much.”

“Oh, then,” Wickham cleared his throat. “That can hardly be a surprise. It’s been a long time since we knew each other. Did I interrupt an activity?”

James peeked at him and saw his gaze on the shed. “No. Just rummaging.”

“May I? Rummage,” he flashed a grin.

“Fine. No one’s been in there since I was fifteen.”

“Really?” Wickham wondered, picking up the nearest and least filthy thing. Twirling the undamaged cricket bat between his palms, he continued, “Perhaps you saw his lordship while you were there?”

“Yes, he introduced us to his sister,” James tested.

“Did you like her?” Wickham asked.

“Very much. She wasn’t at all as you’d described.”

“Is that so?” he drifted off before he picked up with more confidence. “Good. Growth is always an admirable attribute. I have heard that she is uncommonly improved but thought nothing of it. From your lips, though, I may celebrate the news. I am glad you liked her. I hope she will turn out well.”

“I dare say she will,” James all but scoffed. “She has gotten over the most trying age.”

“Did you go by the village of Kympton?”

James frowned at him. “I do not recollect that we did.”

Wickham tipped his head. “I mention it because it is the living which I ought to have had: a most delightful place with a parsonage house. It would have suited me in every respect.”

“And how would you have liked making sermons?” James disregarded, turning to march back to the house.

“Exceedingly well,” Wickham declared. James peered over his shoulder at him. “I should have considered it as part of my duty, but I won’t repine. I don’t suppose Darcy ever mentioned the place. Why would he?”
“No, but as I said. You were hardly mentioned.” They arrived at the back of his house. “I do have it upon good understanding, that the place was conditionally promised, however.”

Wickham laughed. “Is not everything attached with conditions—oh, I ought to have returned this,” he realized, looking at the bat.

“It’s fine,” James stated. Wickham then leaned it against the house while James continued, “I believe sermon making was not so palatable to you as it seems to be at present, though a simple bargain even I can understand: work for the church and have everything promised to you. But after hearing such a resolution of never taking orders, your conditions were forfeited, certainly.”

“Did you hear indeed?” Wickham chimed, but not so pleasantly this time. His eyes narrowed as if searching James’s gaze. James was illegible, and so he resolved to a shrug. “I suppose the past does not matter, though. I am sorry for embarking on such a worthless subject.”

“The recent past does interest me,” James intercepted. “You shall not blame Lydia or my aunt for it. Lydia spills secrets as easily as her wine, and my aunt shares confidences as much as her hospitality, in which you took part. I’ve learned you’ve spent some time with his lordship recently.”

Wickham shifted his weight. “I have, of course. But I sense a specific question underway.”

James relented, “Where might he be now?”

Wickham blinked, genuinely perplexed. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Back to Pemberley or London? Perhaps preparing for his marriage with Miss de Bourgh. I did see an envelope bearing her mother’s writing among his pile of letters during our time together.”

James felt nearly every muscle in his face pull downwards. He had completely forgotten about Miss de Bourgh, and it was exactly the answer he lastly wanted to hear.

He paced briefly before he was reaching for the bat. Wickham was still speaking. “Though that is not irregular. Always watching over her nephew—You’ve played before, I assume?”

“Once,” James confirmed, feeling the familiar grip.

“Only once? But you seem athletic enough. I don’t suppose the ladies might partake?” he added, his gaze far off like he might see them along the road. “Or I may pitch for you?”

“No.”

“No?” Wickham repeated, turning back around.

“I tend to break the bats,” James declared, and swung.

The conk of the wood was dull compared to the crack of Wickham’s nose. He landed on his back, more out of shock than pain, but as the latter caught up with him, red poured over his lips.

A rough sound escaped him when James bluntly pressed the bat to his sternum. Teary eyes stared up at him. Gone was Wickham’s charm, replaced by real concern for his well being.

“Did he buy your wife’s ring?” James growled. “Did he buy it?”

“No,” he coughed painfully, shifting onto his side. James realized he had in fact seen someone on the road, because now he heard Lydia’s distant cry. “It was my mother’s.”
James moved the bat to the base of his throat. Wickham stilled. “If my sister...ever comes to me crying because of you, I suggest you leave the country. Darcy won’t save you.”

“George! GEORGE!” Lydia screamed. It was another moment before she was able to catch up to them, and by then James had thrown the bat away. “LIZZY! LIZZY, what have—you’ve—oh my god—you’ve broken his nose! George, oh love...”

Jane had been right on her heels, but she swiftly moved out of her brother’s way, leaving him free to stride into the house. Their mother was huffing raggedly, eventually catching up and crying snippets of speech, generally exclaiming her incredulity over Wickham’s bloody face and shirtfront.

James marched right past his father standing in the doorway of his study, his silver brows merely raised with interest.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has fanart! See the beautiful comic PeaceLoveArtsnArt made here ~
Mr. Bennet’s spirits considerably lightened, so much so that he returned to his place at the dinner table regardless of the Wickhams’ choosing to dine with the Philips. The entire demeanour of the Bennet household was unusually bright, with the exception of Mrs. Bennet’s general confusion over the whole matter.

Lydia, when she came for her now briefer visits, seemed an equal mixture of perplexity and anger; two sentiments of which she was highly unfamiliar and uncomfortable experiencing. Wickham was much the same: polite and affectionate with his arsenal of pretty things to say, especially once his visit to Mr. Jones corrected his broken nose.

The day of their departure soon came, rather faster than originally intended. The sun was shining in the morning that the Wickhams arrived for their final breakfast, and the air was still golden when they gathered in front of the house for their farewells. Mrs. Bennet was forced to submit to the separation, especially as her husband by no means entered into her scheme of their all going to Newcastle.

“Oh, my dear Lydia!” she cried, holding her youngest close. “When shall we meet again?”

“Oh, lord! I don’t know. Not these two or three years, perhaps.”

James, from his place behind his family, sensed Lydia’s inclination to prefer those years to her current circumstances.

“Write to me very often, my dear,” their mother sniffled, releasing Lydia and wiping her nose on a handkerchief.

“As often as I can, but you know married women have never much time for writing. My siblings may write to me. They will have nothing else to do.”

A high-pitched giggle came from her, but it lacked her usual self-entitled conviction as she turned to the last individual to whom she must bid farewell: her brother.

James lethargically threw out his arm. Flattening her brow to look as fierce as she could manage, Lydia stomped over and put her arms around his middle. “How could you?” she hissed in his ear.

“If he ever hurts you, I’ll do it again.”

That caught her off guard. For a second, brother and sister stared at one another before Lydia’s haughty demeanour returned. “You are ridiculous.”

“Someone has to set the standard for you to live by,” he returned.

“I am an established woman now!” she declared, though in his ears it was the same Lydia he had always known.

“If you take anything I say seriously,” he pleaded softly, “take this: integrity is in actions, not speech. Stop bloody talking and be the woman you want so many to fawn over. You’re finally free from this place, as you so desired.”
“I am the one with so many friends, Lizzy. You are so stupid in forgetting!”

“Quantity and quality and all that,” James exhaled, defeated. He let her skip back to the carriage, where her husband offered his hand to assist her inside it. He then turned fully to James and bowed, but proceeded no further. James returned the courtesy and silently watched them depart, his mother’s handkerchief waving after them.

His father had come to stand beside him. “I think the bump will suit him. He is a fine fellow, and fine fellows do wield injuries so well.”

“It wasn’t my finest moment,” James admitted under his breath.

“Perhaps,” his father agreed. “Society does so forbid violence but when the occasion provides the opportunity for it, I am pleased you carry yourself efficiently.”

Silence befell them as they observed Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Mary calling after the carriage while Lydia was hanging out of the window, waving her scarf at them. Mr. Bennet considered, “He simpers and he smirks, and makes love to us all. If he teaches Lydia proper charm, they may take over the country.”

“I didn’t expect you to speak so highly of him,” James teased.

“I am sorry for ever recommending him to you,” his father’s voice softened.

“You didn’t know,” James assured.

“That is the crux of my conundrums. I’m not as omniscient as I like to feel,” Mr. Bennet sighed, then passed a smile to him. “And now we are ourselves again.”

“Something like that,” James agreed as they collectively moved back into the house. He and Jane began a long walk around the property, going as far as Netherfield, where the housekeeper and gardeners waved to them familiarly.

“It does feel as if a storm has settled,” Jane considered, looking up at the clean, white façade, stacked with its classical columns. “I don’t feel the same longing or severance to this place as I once did.”

“It’s been a shell for most of our lives,” James considered.

“It was a lustrous delusion,” his sister crooned, “turning it into a proper home.”

“Not a delusion,” James soothed. “Just escaped hopes.”

“Perhaps you might buy it one day,” she surprised him.

“What?” he laughed breathily. “Be serious.”

“I am,” she remarked as the gravel path crunched beneath their boots. The sky had changed so the air was soft and fragrant with rain. Patches of sunlight sparked green around them even while it began to sprinkle. “Your candles are always in demand. You might save enough to extend our property.”

“My fantasies are humble ones,” he retorted with mirth. Then he checked himself, “For the most part.”

Jane looked at him with a kind, knowing smile before exhaling, “What are we to do now? It feels
almost as if the world has stopped with the dream. How do we make it pick up again?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “We should visit Charlotte.”

“I agree,” she hummed, holding onto his arm while their pace quickened under the drops. Bumping together, they made their way home, wherein Hill met them with a hot kettle for their room. Mary and Kitty soon joined them with a deck of cards, with which the siblings spent the gentle rain together.

* * * * * * *

The loss of her daughter dulled Mrs. Bennet for several days.

“I often think,” she said while gazing out of the parlour window, “that there is nothing so bad as parting with one’s friends. One seems so forlorn without them. They never distinguish the afterward of a child leaving home.”

James replied bluntly from behind his book, “This is the consequence, you see, of marrying a daughter.”

“Lizzy!” Jane scolded diagonally from him.

He shrugged indifferently. “It must make you better satisfied that your other three are single.”

Their mother made a gruff sound. “It is no such thing. Lydia does not leave me because she is married, only because her husband’s regiment happens to be so far off. If that had been nearer, she would not have gone so soon.”

James did nothing to hide his sigh of disagreement while he heaved himself out of his chair. “I am going to Meryton. Have you need of anything?”

“No, dear,” Mrs. Bennet disregarded.

“May I go?” Kitty asked in the corridor.

“You needn’t ask. Bring a shawl; it’s warmer today but the seasons are still making up their minds.”

Once wrapped in her dusty blue, wool shawl, they walked into town, firstly stopping at the tailor’s in the hopes of acquiring scrap fabrics deemed out of fashion and therefore value. Kitty successfully came away with two rolls at a lesser price: a brown cotton with a lye stain, and a remarkable amount of mustard seed satin.

“Can you believe no one has used this in two years?” she exclaimed on their way to their aunt’s.

“Pinks and greens are the coveted colours of late,” he observed as they entered the milliner’s shop. Indeed, various shades of warm pastels hung over the cutting table while green, silk flowers had been arranged in vases like bouquets. Kitty lifted a weaved sun hat with some of the flowers pinned over the brim—

“Well hello, hello,” their uncle Philips greeted, coming down the stairs. Kitty went to him for a kiss on her cheek while James met him for a handshake. “How are things at Longbourn? I won’t pretend like we didn’t enjoy the commotion, nor relish its disappearance.”

Kitty replied, still with the hat on her head, “Mama is healing but all is well.”
James was wrapping ribbons around his wrist, estimating their likeness on a glass or tin jar while he listened to their uncle ask, “Did you happen to meet—eh—blimey, known her for years but can’t remember her name. The housekeeper of your neighbors. Netherfield. She was just here.”

Kitty and James exchanged glances and shook their heads. “No,” she said. “She must’ve gone into a different shop.”

“Aye, the butcher’s, to be sure,” he voiced as he came around the counter to retrieve the scissors for James. “She’s preparing the house for a new arrival.”

Kitty looked to her brother, who whined, “Ugh…who is it this time?”

“Didn’t ask. I can’t remember her name so I didn’t bother prying. She seemed pleased, well enough, so potentially no one dastardly.”

Kitty returned the hat and stood next to James measuring the amount of ribbon he wanted. “Did she say when they were coming?”

“No, but I reckon before the month’s through,” he guessed. “She mentioned something about hunting so I was more inclined to think of their duration.”

Kitty clutched her purchases while it was James’s turn to admire his successes on their way home. He slid a thin piece of lace through his fingers, considering if he should save it for Jane since the silken hoops were certainly out of his usual budget—

“Lizzy!”

“Hm?” he realized she had been speaking.

“I said it’s a man! A man is moving into Netherfield, or I haven’t heard of any huntresses.”

“You’re probably right,” he said, pushing the lace back into the bag. “I wouldn’t count on it being a young person, though. And only Hill particularly enjoys hunting, so other than niceties, we may not see them much.”

“Oh,” Kitty pondered. “Then do you think an older person would have a daughter? It would be nice to have someone to meet. Are you all right?”

His yawn finished and he wiped his watering eyes. “I just need some sleep. The afternoon is not my time. You may be the one to give mama the news, if you want.”

“Mmm…” she pursed her lips to the side. “I don’t wish to stir up new feelings when she is still eclipsed by current ones. I’ll draw up some designs for these.”

She returned to being content with her fabrics and James passed his bag to Jane the moment they met in the foyer. “Oh! This is pretty,” she found the lace.

“You won’t be using it?” she queried.

“You’ll be cleverer with it than I,” he made by answer. A rumbling chirp greeted him from the bed, where small Darcy was lifting his head. The pink tongue curled out of the cat’s mouth while the ears flattened in a yawn. James chuckled, “Likewise.”

He slid underneath the covers as the cat stood, spine arching in a stretch. James’ hand slid over the
head; he observed the overgrown fur around the ears. “You’ll be a shaggy puss. I’ll introduce a comb to you, later.”

Darcy seemed thoroughly content in settling back into a nap.

* * * * * *

James did not intend to sleep through the day, but his eyes next opened to Jane rubbing between his shoulder blades. “Jamie. It’s a new day. You should eat.”

“Mm,” he hummed. Perhaps he showed the intention to rise, so she left him, but he fell deeply back into the waters of slumber.

He could only guess it was the afternoon when thunderous feet finally roused his eyes open. “Lizzy!” Kitty called. “Lizzy, wake up!”

He stared groggily at her running from the doorway with no further explanation. A flash of dark hair revealed Mary equally energetic before Jane returned and outright pulled him up.

“Where’s th’fire?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes as he sat up.

“Netherfield!”

He squinted at her. “It’s on fire?”

Jane sighed jadedly. “No, Lizzy. New occupants are moving in and our mother is in a fit.”

“Really?” he blinked up at her. “Already? How long did I sleep?”

“You knew?” she looked puzzled.

“Our uncle told us he’d met the housekeeper when Kitty and I were in town,” he yawned anew.

“Well mama has been to see our aunt and she’s fluttering about the house.”

“Fine. Fine,” he said wearily, rising toward the summons. Donning fresh clothes, he was rubbing a cream on his face as he descended the stairs. Straight to the kitchen, he dropped into a chair the moment he saw the kettle already on the stove, although he felt quite inclined to doze as his head fell against his hand—

“I know it is! I know it is!” Mrs. Bennet’s voice rang, startlingly close by.

“Mama, please, Jamie’s just risen,” Jane’s velvet tone hushed. She flew past him into the kitchen, pouring the barely whistling kettle into a pot on the island counter.

“Has he?” she chimed. “Lizzy? Lizzy!”

His mother appeared, and after kissing his head, she just as quickly scolded, “How could you not tell me that Netherfield was let once again?”

“Because who cares?” he yawned. This was proving a constant affliction.

“Who—?” she clipped. A low, frustrated growl came from her. “I have just been to see my sister. And do you know what she’s told me?”

“The housekeeper is readying the house,” he moaned, letting his head fall back on his hand.
“Indeed she is!” she stormed. “Mrs. Nicholls was in Meryton today as well! I saw her pass by, myself, and my sister had to be the one to tell me, ‘Well, well, and so Mr. Bingley is coming down, sister!’”

“Who?” James blurted dumbly.

“Mr. Bingley!”

“Our Bingley?”

“How many Bingleys do you know?” she almost shrieked.

Jane intercepted, “He’s not exactly ours since the whole county seems to lay claim over the poor soul, the moment he’s within a mile of us.”

“We don’t know anything,” James declared tiredly. “We know someone is arriving for the area’s hunting, and therefore we are to deal with the noise of gunpowder and hounds.”

Mrs. Bennet drew herself up like she was greatly proud of herself. “His things have already been arriving all morning. And what’s more, Mr. Bingley had no less than seven ducks at his ball while he was here last year! And I did not miss the opportunity to rush into the butcher’s to ask what order Mrs. Nicholls had put in—three pairs!”

“Not much of a hunter if he’s ordered the housekeeper to the butcher’s,” James remarked, and then his head lifted. “Perhaps it is Charles.”

His sister sighed raggedly. “It merely guarantees the person is fed for the week.”

James picked up, “Didn’t you say something or other when he left that you would have not a thought nor action to do with him?”

Mrs. Bennet paused, clearly having forgotten. “Well, not that I care about it. No, not at all. Of course he is nothing to us. I am sure I never want to see him again, however he is very welcome to come to Netherfield, if he likes it. And who knows what may happen?

“But that is nothing to do with us. However if a single new detail of his coming arises, I demand to know at once!”

She left her eldest children, perhaps to find better catharsis in her younger pair. James was then able to properly look at Jane, who had not been able to hear of Charles’ potential arrival without changing colour. Her eyes darted to him, sensing their weight on her.

“I know I appear distressed.”

“That’s putting it rather mildly,” he said gently. “I didn’t think it was him, really. It never occurred to me to tell you.”

“I understand,” she nodded despite her hitched breath. Jane held her diaphragm as she voiced, “It is just as you said, we have only speculated—I am only confused, because what a surprise it would be! I only feel that I should be looked at.”

He let her piece together her words and then interpreted, “It isn’t so much an expectation…so much as a hope?”

She exhaled haughtily, not because of him but for her own fortitude. “I assure you that the news
does not affect me with either pleasure or pain. Even as we act under the belief that it is indeed Mr. Bingley, I am glad of one thing, that he comes alone. Because we shall see the less of him.”

James’ brows tilted slightly, a frown of disagreement. Without his sisters, Charles was moved by his own wants.

“Not that I am afraid of myself,” Jane continued, “but I dread other people’s remarks.”

It occurred to James that he had never told her of seeing Bingley at Pemberley. Lydia had so encompassed his thoughts that Charles really had been far removed from all consideration. He did not think the information a balm for the moment so instead he suggested, “It is easier to refuse and ignore social engagement when one has other pursuits. There won’t be anyone to speak to if you have any ideas for me.”

Her hand had moved to her face, pushing her cheek up as she stared at him. “Ideas for what? Oh, the lace?”

“I was considering using it for the candles, unless you would like to use it with Kitty’s projects?” She blinked, her eyes brightening with the immediate distraction. “I was considering…although it would render the lace useless…”

His head lifted. “Useless?”

“I was considering if we put a powder over the semi-dried wax. If we sifted it over lace, and then peeled it up, the design would be left in the negative space.”

His lips parted. “A doily would be better. And Kitty can make those out of linen thread.”

He stood suddenly, going to the lower cabinets in the corner. Crouching and digging through the clangs and noise, he emerged with tarnished, metal containers previously used to hold oil for lamps. “If Hill can remove the tops of these—”

“How many of those do we have?” Jane picked up.

“Oh dozens. Papa uses oil during the summer since the fireplace is too warm to read by. You haven’t noticed these? They’re cached all over the house.”

“I’ve only seen the glass ones. We’ll need to be sure they’re clean of oil,” she considered, taking the bottle and smelling the spout.

James opened a drawer at the counter and removed paper and pencil for them to mark down all of their thoughts and chores. Eventually Hill arrived and confirmed that either he or a known man in town could adjust the bottles for their needs. James marked down other ingredients that Jane did not understand until he rapidly sketched his ideas on the pages.

“We’ll need a decent adhesive. Something which does not dry sticky,” she ruminated.

“Kitty!” James called. Their sister joined the conversation before she ran for her sewing books, in search of what chemical binders were used in apparel.

With such toing and froing, Mr. Bennet soon arrived and slaked his curiosity by joining his children and Hill into Meryton. They strode into their aunt’s shop, where their uncle was working so Jane was relieved from the topic of Netherfield.
Between Hill’s resourcefulness and their aunt’s supplies, James and Jane soon busied themselves within the kitchen. Mrs. Bennet declared some mild complaints at her family’s going into Meryton so late in the day instead of with her that morning, but otherwise left everyone to do as they wished. Hill prepared a simple roast with potatoes in the oven, leaving the stove free for James while Jane and Kitty worked on renovating the oil tins into candles.

When the ladies retired to bed, their brother continued working with the company of his father, who sipped his tea over his book at the window. After a while, the book closed and he stood. “Sunrise is soon. Get to bed or you’ll be trapped in this pattern.”

“All right,” James answered indifferently. Mr. Bennet gazed at him trimming the wicks off the queue of finished candles. He lifted one of the square containers, feeling its weight and the rounded corners while he observed the semi-polished metal. The dark tarnish was a gradient to the shining, polished side while coarse salt was sprinkled over the top of the wax for texture.

Another, entirely polished candle was partway sprinkled with cinnamon, in which the dirtied doilies had left elegant hoops in the wax.

“I’d enjoy seeing what you make with copper.”

James peered up at him as if he thought his father had already gone, but he just as quickly returned to his task. “Copper is expensive.”

“So you charge more,” Mr. Bennet answered simply.

James peeked at him but returned, “I don’t know where to get copper jars or cups.”

“Next I go to London, you will join me. Keep a list.”

With that, he made his was up the short set of stairs. “Good night,” James said after him.

“Good night, good night,” he hummed.

* * * * * *

Mr. Bennet’s words came true in the following days as James’s personal clock was delayed some six hours compared to his family. He doggedly came down the stairs of the kitchen to find Jane smiling over his finished collection. “These look wonderful, Lizzy.”

“Why are you telling me? You did them.” He poured his tea and nodded a silent thanks to Hill placing a dish of buttered toast before him.

Jane’s weight sagged to one hip as she smiled with sisterly annoyance. “Well thank you, but I am not the one spending all hours of the night in here.”

“You still have glue on your fingers. I can see chicken down on them.”

She picked a tuft off her thumb. “They were especially ornery today. But we have eggs.”

He chuckled as his tea rose to his lips—

“Oh my god! Oh my god!”

James gulped as their mother fluttered past the doorway, and then back once more, and then into the kitchen. Jane was the one who asked, “Mama?”
“Sit down,” James offered at the sight of Mrs. Bennet’s scarlet face.

“Absolutely not! If I sit, I’ll expire. I have just been from Netherfield! Good heavens, I surely ran all the way here—”

“Really?” James sassed. “You didn’t take the carriage?”

“Hush, Lizzy, and listen! I went to see Mrs. Nicholls, you know, because that poor woman is so often alone in that great house with nothing but footmen for company—”

“What’s wrong with footmen?” Mary arrived in the doorway with Kitty.

“—We must be decent neighbors, after all! And bless her, she was certainly weary from a great deal to do so spontaneously. And then he just walked in! Mr. Bingley walked into the room! Never mind that we were in a butler pantry—good lord—he heard my voice and sought me out to say hello! I must talk to your father.”

She then rounded on James, “You thought I was quite mad! Never mistrust a mother’s intuition!”

James’ brows reached for his hairline as he silently continued drinking his tea. Their mother’s voice moved through the walls as she followed after her husband, demanding that he call upon Bingley to make the obligated pleasantries.

“You will wait on him, of course!”

“I think not, my dear,” the baritone was heard. At hearing him draw near, Mary and Kitty rushed into the kitchen to evade their parents by looking productive with their siblings.

More murmurings were heard before Mr. Bennet appeared, perhaps also seeking evasion in the kitchen. “No, no. You forced me into visiting him last year, and promised if I went to see him, he should marry one of my daughters. But it ended in nothing, or a great deal of somethings we wish not to revisit, and I will not be sent on a fool’s errand again.”

Mrs. Bennet fisted her skirts, freeing her feet to navigate the stairs in his wake. “You must! It is absolutely necessary such attention be made from all the neighboring gentlemen on his returning to Netherfield!”

Mr. Bennet met his children’s gazes—each hastily ducking their heads, leaving him to his wife’s mercy—as he rotated to face her. “‘Tis an etiquette I despise. If he wants our society, he may seek it, and what need is there for myself when you have already done the deed well enough? He is reminded that we are alive, where we live, and I will not spend my hours running after my neighbors every time they go away and come back again. He’s a ginger delight, not the pope, and even then would I have my reservations.”

James snorted as he pivoted to conceal his face behind Jane.

Mrs. Bennet declared, “Well! All I know is that it will be abominably rude if you do not wait on him, at the very least negating my mistake! Had I have known, I would have made inquiries properly! Not entered as if to interrogate Mrs. Nicholls!”

“I highly doubt he thinks as much, dear, especially since he forewent social rules and met you directly.” Mr. Bennet claimed James’ toast and settled by the window.

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes moved around the room keenly. Her children boldly peeked at her but otherwise kept themselves removed. “Then you shan’t prevent my asking him to dine here. We
must have Mrs. Long and the Gouldings soon. That will make thirteen with ourselves, so there will be just enough room at table for him.”

She threw her shoulders back to march up the steps. Mr. Bennet slouched in the window seat. “How auspicious a number with which you seek to torment me.”

When the silence settled over them, Kitty murmured, “She’s not really inviting him to dinner, is she?”

The answer, which they received the following day, was thankfully no, however they were only spared by Mrs. Bennet’s desire to thoroughly vanquish her neighbors in seeing Mr. Bingley without their attendance.

And so he was to arrive for tea.

“You could take up drinking,” James suggested the evening before the fated afternoon. Jane flapped her hands as she paced their bedroom; little Darcy followed her on the bed, occasionally pawing the air for attention. “Forego tea and sleep through the day.”

Jane did not even bother with an answer to that and instead said, “I am sorry that he comes at all. It would be nothing. I could see him with perfect indifference—”

“You call this indifference?”

“—but I can hardly bear to hear it thus perpetually talked of.”

“Who’s talking? You’re pacing,” he remarked from his place in the bed.

“Mama means well, but she does not know—no one can know how much I suffer from what she says. Happy shall I be when his stay at Netherfield is over!”

Her brother’s brows lifted, impressed. “That may be the first you’ve admitted to our mother’s faults.”

“Lizzy!” Jane pleaded.

The book sagged into his lap. “I wish I could say anything to comfort you, but it is wholly out of my power. We must, at least, commend mama for not outright naming you at all. You could use this to your advantage and go to Meryton, or to Charlotte’s, if you’re truly wanting to escape obligation.”

“He comes tomorrow,” she huffed.

“Then I suggest you get packing.”

Her fingertips rubbed her forehead as she halted on the floor. Her eyes pulled to him when he released a brief sound of mirth. “The preaching of patience to a sufferer is usually denied me, because you have always so much. You must feel my satisfaction in seeing you brought so gracefully down from the angels.”

“I am hardly angelic,” she exclaimed. James smiled at the sight of her light blond hair in unusual fluffy disarray.

“Your former composure begs to differ. You’re truly a Bennet now.”

He stayed up with her, both from his own lack of sleep and for her worries. She finally dozed as
the light began to change in their room. James made sure their low fire kept the room warm for her to sleep through the morning, but she was up early enough to wash, dress...and then wait.

The whole house waited; between stale sitting or fretful moving about, all the Bennets apart from the patriarch were in various states of anxiety. James remained the kitchen, preferring to squeeze a ball of beeswax between his hands instead of waiting with his sisters in the parlour.

Clearly neither did they, for Jane eventually arrived and Kitty and Mary went back and forth as the day changed to afternoon.

“When the hell do people drink tea?” he finally asked.

His sisters shook their heads around him, already exhausted by—

Jane’s head jerked up. Kitty and Mary reacted to her and then James heard it: horse hooves.

In an instant, the house erupted with commotion. Mrs. Bennet cried, “He’s here! He’s here! So help me, if that’s Hill herding the—I see him! Oh good lord!”

Kitty and Mary ran for their kerchiefs, stuffing the fabric into their dresses before Mary turned around for Kitty to roll up her braid, pinning it to the back of her head.

“Jane! Jane!” their mother heralded, fussing over her hair even after James had fluffed her fringe and smoothed her bun. Their mother pushed the loose tresses behind her ears, decided against it, and pulled them back around her face before Jane pushed her away. Mrs. Bennet knocked over a saucer in her haste to move the parlour pillows and Kitty shrieked as she dropped a cup and immediately stepped on it.

“I hear more than one horse,” Mary said from the window.

“Of course! Of course, he’d use the carriage,” Mrs. Bennet assumed as she swept up the broken bits with swiftness.

“There is a gentleman with him, mama,” Mary said.

James landed on couch beside the window with Mary, and then Kitty, while Jane managed to keep her composure by the table. They each had to lean far right to see the paddock on the other side of the property, but through it rode Mr. Bingley and—

James shot back from the window as if he had been burned. He stumbled back, innately finding Jane as she emerged from her stupor to catch her brother’s hands. They mirrored ill complexions at one another. “William’s here,” James croaked.

Jane frowned, her eyes vacant. “Charlotte’s husband? Why would he be here?”

“What? No—William’s here!”

“Mr. Collins’s first name is William,” she nodded, but she was facing an equivalent wall of befuddlement.

James scoffed, “No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is,” she insisted, but as her mind slowly caught up, their mother was waving the matter aside.

“Some acquaintance or other, my dear. I am sure I do not know—”
“It’s Mr. Darcy!” Kitty yelled. Mrs. Bennet joined her daughters on the couch, ogling the state of events outside.

“Oh,” Jane breathed.

“Oh!” James growled pointedly at her.

They both snapped into the present as it was her turn to scoff incredulously, “You really didn’t know Mr. Collins’s first name?”

“Who cares?” he retorted the same moment he made a chair skid over the floor.

Mr. Bennet startled mildly from where he was passing in the corridor. “Goodness. How did we ever weather through poor Bingley’s company before?”

Mrs. Bennet and Kitty flew off the couch, the latter meeting her brother. “Do you think Georgiana’s with him?”

James ignored her since Jane was suddenly very close to his face. “Lizzy, was Charles there when you visited Pemberley?”

He felt his mouth fall open as he gaped like a fish. “I, um, we-well, yes. Yes?”

Life returned to Jane’s cheeks as she flushed. “Lizzy! Why on earth didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t important!”

Mrs. Bennet drowned out any disagreement she might have had. “Good gracious! Mr. Darc—Lord Darcy! We’ve never had a—well any friend of Mr. Bingley’s will always be welcome here to be sure, but—Hill! Cease whatever you’re doing and find our finest brews!”

Mr. Bennet calmly moved aside for her to run toward the kitchen, however she did not make it there.

The bell rang, and the house froze with silence.

Chapter End Notes

Even in his panic, James doesn’t care about Mr. Collins lol. It’s also a reference to the Netherfield ball, when he’s speaking to Charlotte and he doesn’t know the man’s first name, then, either. It was meant to be ironic how a certain William will become so important to him. <3

As the Pride months begin to roll in, I hope everyone takes care of yourself, whether you’re out or not, straight or unsure. Love yourself and be safe. <3
Breathing

“I’ll get it, Mr. Hill,” Mr. Bennet gestured him back to the kitchen. “These gentlemen are guests like any other. I will be the one to open my home to them.”

Mrs. Bennet rushed back from where she had retrieved his waistcoat. “Oh, Mr. Bennet! We ought to turn out like a proper household. Lord Darcy—”

“Knows that he is catching us unaware, I am sure. Lizzy.” His son parted from Jane to better come into view. “Sit with your mother.”

“But Jane—” Mrs. Bennet began.

“It’s about time I answered,” her husband curtailed, smoothing the front of his aged, garnet waistcoat.

The rest of the family synchronously moved to their seats: Mrs. Bennet and James at the table, and the sisters on the couch. They heard the door open and their father’s welcome resonate through the vestibule. Bingley’s louder and quickness of voice was easily discernible, while a lower, almost inaudible tone was Darcy’s return of the greetings.

Standing and bowing was a blur of formality; even Charles’ grin seemed dimmer beneath the giveaway in his eyes. He was as polite and boisterous as ever, but no sooner had he made his greetings, then he deferred to his companion. James used the moment to glance at Jane, whose colour had returned to her face. If it was her realization at her brother that inflamed the rouge, at least it added a lustre to her eyes. She looked healthy instead of hollowed by her months of love sickness.

They all returned to sitting, Jane intent and composed. She received them with tolerable ease, and with a propriety of behaviour equally free from any symptom of resentment, or any unnecessary complaisance…

James swallowed, not so much hearing Charles’ discussion with his mother as he ought. He said as little to them as civility would allow, while desperately wishing he could vanish into occupations like his sisters: Kitty with her embroidery and Mary sharpening her quill—

James’ eyes moved on their own, venturing a glance at William. His amber irises were poised elsewhere. James swallowed thickly, looking away. Darcy looked serious as usual, but therein James considered the man’s countenance was how he used to look in Hertfordshire, versus how he had seen him at Pemberley. With his mother’s chatter in the background of his consciousness, James wondered if perhaps William could not in her presence be what he was with the Gardiners. It was painful, but not an improbable conjecture. The Lord of Pemberley would have to navigate social circles with his personality enclosed like a tap.

Charles was Charles, but in the brief moments James paid him attention, he saw him looking both pleased and embarrassed. Mrs. Bennet received him with a degree of civility which made her eldest children the opposite of pleased and most embarrassed; this was only heightened by the contrast with the cold and ceremonious politeness of her addresses to his friend. James particularly felt how much she owed to the latter the preservation of her daughter from irremediable infamy.

“But you rode on horseback, Mr. Bingley. Is everything quite in order with your carriage?”

“It’s more than fine,” he assured. “William commented on the fineness of the morning and I agreed
we ought not restrict ourselves in the carriage.”

James involuntarily let Charles’ glance at Darcy pull his own eyes back to the man, only to feel himself locked in that amber stare. William blinked, his eyes flicking back to the matter at hand. The briefest of pauses might have suggested he was not paying attention, or perhaps it was merely unwillingness, as he smoothly confirmed his friend’s words.

“How do the Gardiners fare?” William asked before the conversation could be moved elsewhere. Asked James, specifically, who felt staked to his chair as the inquiry was clearly directed at him. Enough time must have passed in which James could not remember how to breathe, for William added, “Have they written of safe travels?”

It was such a rational question that James could only respond, “Yes, they reached London safely,” and not read anything further from it.

He knew his father—who had done his part and promptly left the family to their fate—had meant well in their seating arrangement, but James felt its flaws. Charles was left to Mrs. Bennet instead of speaking with Jane, and James was not seated beside either of them. The guests had wound up on the opposite side of the Bennets, with Mr. Darcy farthest than anyone.

Now several minutes had elapsed, without bringing the sound of William’s voice. When occasionally, unable to resist the impulse of curiosity, James raised his eyes to his face, but found him looking at Jane or at the floor. James could not blame him. They had both failed at any attempt of proper discourse, but William had always been open about his lack of puissance when it came to conversation. Instead, James felt his disappointment and anger directed at himself.

Their last moments together had been under terrible circumstances, and their time apart had been with Darcy going to such lengths to clean up his family’s mess. At this point, all James could stomach was a heartfelt thank you, let alone all the rest he was feeling, but even that he was ignorant of how to communicate.

James wondered if he looked as pathetic as he felt: in no humour for conversation with anyone but the man across from him, and to him he had hardly courage to speak—

“How is Lady Georgiana?” he sparked. It was an afterthought that he had cut through Charles and his mother’s discussion.

William’s eyes found his, widening just a bit with attention. “She is well, of course.”

The man’s lips remained parted, but James did not dare let himself hope that he wanted to say more. For nothing else emerged, and he slowly nodded as he rested back against the spine of his chair, defeated.

Mrs. Bennet, however, flicked her gaze between them before decidedly ignoring them. “It is a long time, Mr. Bingley, since you went away.”

Charles, ever gracious, agreed to it.

“How began to be afraid you would never come back again. People did say you meant to quit the place entirely, but I hope it is not true. A great many changes have happened in the neighborhood since you went away. Miss Lucas is married and settled. And one of my own daughters. You must have seen it in the papers; it was in the Times and the Courier, I know, though it was not put in as it ought to be. It was only said, ‘Lately, George Wickham, Esq. to Miss Lydia Bennet,’ without there being a syllable said of her father, or the place where she lived, or anything. It was my brother
Gardiner’s drawing up too, and I wonder how he came to make such an awkward business of it. Did you see it?"

James had quite given up looking at William and instead kept his head down. It was a secret to perhaps only his mother why Lydia was so briefly cited in the papers; the involvement desired to be quickly forgotten by everyone else in the room.

Charles replied that he had seen it, and made his congratulations. James did lift his gaze to examine the man, and found one ready to let Mrs. Bennet fill the conversation all on her own while he otherwise sought Jane’s gaze. James did not dare turn his head around to see if she was returning it.

“It is a delightful thing, to be sure, to have a daughter well married, but at the same time, Mr. Bingley, it is very hard to have her taken such ways from me. They have gone to Newcastle, a place quite northward, it seems, and there they are to stay, I do not know how long. His regiment is there, for I suppose you have heard of his gone into the regulars. Thank Heaven! He has some friends, though perhaps not as many as he deserves.”

James pressed his lips together and forewent posture in favour of slouching in his chair to hide his eyes behind his hand. The only thing which drew him out of the cave was the realization that Charles needed to be saved.

“The rumour around here is that you’re here for hunting. Naturally, I was sure you weren’t the one renting Netherfield,” James teased.

Charles brightened but his visage lacked its usual splendour. James was at least grateful for what he saw: Charles only wanted to speak to one person in the room and was losing his ability to hide his disinterest with everyone else. His voice was hollow with growing fatigue as he returned, “It may surprise you that I am a good shot, even if it is not my favourite pastime.”

“When you have killed all your own birds, Mr. Bingley,” intercepted Mrs. Bennet, “I beg you will come here and shoot as many as you please.”

James could feel his sisters’ sighs behind him at such unnecessary and officious attention. Rather feeling like everyone in the room was at stake now, James supplied, “I rather prefer the processes closer to the eating.”

Charles exhaled with his weary, blue blue eyes on him. “As do I,” he sent a thankful smile to him.

James then announced, “Good things in small measure, I think. They’re containing their travel weariness with grace but we’ve run out of tea, anyhow.”

No one had consumed a drop apart from Mrs. Bennet and Charles’ touching his lips to the cup before being swept away by nerves and conversation.

Charles and William stood in unison, which prompted James to stand while his mother shot Jane a dagger of a look. Her lips parted and she bobbed right to her feet, her eyes vacant until James reached for her. They began to follow their guests out to the foyer while Mrs. Bennet called, “You are quite a visit in my debt, Mr. Bingley, for when you went to town last winter, you promised to take a family dinner with us as soon as you returned. I have not forgot, you see, and I assure you, I was very much disappointed that you did not come back and keep your engagement.”

Charles looked a little silly before he was officially out of view. James was sure he never remembered such a promise, and neither did he; so much had happened since then that even if Mrs. Bennet were making it up, it could hardly be proven one way or the other.
James pulled his sister with him to get the door, and being the only lady, Charles bowed slightly for her to go first. That left the pair of them moving towards where the horses were tied, while James and William were well behind them. The former was rather impressed that William had taken the hint and remained where Charles and Jane could have a few precious moments alone.

Just as the height of the impression came, however, it dropped James into a low at the awareness that he was face to face with William. He shut the door of the house for their own privacy, and could only hope he sounded braver than he felt as he gestured to the other pair. “Thank you for… giving them a moment.”

William nodded once. “I am surprised they were not given one inside.”

James felt his chest inclined to cave in and knew he was slouching. “I’m sorry,” and he meant it. “Don’t be,” he said, but not harshly.

“She doesn’t know…” James tried to insist. “She…” He ran out of air.

“Don’t apologize.”

The man’s hands hung on either side of him, empty and harmless. James focused on breathing but wound up being trapped by those amber irises, now almost orange in the sunlight. In their silence, which lasted seconds or hours, he could not tell, James could only part and close his lips, uttering soft or silent “Um…um…”

He felt sick and stupid. How bloody hard was it to say thank you? Perhaps because a great many things were in the way.

*I’m sorry.*

*Thank you.*

*I’m sorry for Lydia.*

*I’m sorry for Wickham.*

*I’m sorry for my mother.*

*I’m sorry I love you.*

William’s hand was suddenly on his chest, and James thought he heard an odd crunch in the fabric —

His head turned, and James realized he was looking at Jane curtsying to him. William bowed, and he was already on his horse, and then they were gone.

The siblings stood motionless beside one another. James felt ragged, like a banner in the wind.

“Am I breathing?”

“Poorly,” he heard his sister say.

“Oh. Good.”
As soon as they were gone, James walked to recover his spirits; or in other words, to dwell without interruption. However, as much as his own behaviour vexed himself, William’s matched it and some more.

James scrubbed his hands through his hair, ruining any comb’s work while he ruminated, *If he came only to be silent, why did he come at all?* He understood that familiar places reaped familiar behaviour, but… *He could be amiable and pleasing to aunt and uncle, but only on his own property?*

He quickly released this process of thought, as it did not lead to any place of relief and was shrouded in his own vexation. He could not surmise what might affect the man’s inclination toward conversation or demeanour without it landing upon himself as the cause. *But if he fears me or hates me, why come hither?*

His stride faltered at the sound of his name, like the ringing of a church bell a citizen hears too many times and thus ignores. After a moment, Jane caught up with him, her cheeks ruddy. “Goodness…I was calling you surely for several minutes! When you really vanish, you truly lock yourself in that head of yours, Lizzy.”

“I’m sorry,” he heaved.

“We really need to cut your hair.”

Her tone pulled his attention to her gaze, which was equal parts judgment and…amusement? “What are you so cheery about?”

Jane was content, having snatched her brother’s focus, to continue holding it. “Now that this first meeting is over, I feel perfectly easy. I know my own strength, and his coming shall never embarrass me again. I am glad he will dine here. It will then be publicly seen that on both sides we meet only as common and indifferent acquaintances.”

James made a face. “Indifferent indeed. Well, take care, Jane.”

She coughed an incredulous sound. “Lizzy, you cannot think me so weak as to be in danger, now? I thought things went well?”

“Certainly well, what with mama prattling his ear off, and the poor fool staring at you with only enough brain power to tell our mother ‘yes’ to anything. I think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever.”

Jane’s strength faltered, even if he was the only one who might have seen it. “He was not staring. He was perfectly engaged in the conversation…”

She gasped somewhat when she saw the hardness in his eyes, as if she had stumbled against a wall. “Do you even know what the topic was?”

“Of course I do,” she ruffled.

“What was it?”

“It changed some times. You are thinking of trapping me in mindless infatuation.”
“Oh please,” he scoffed. “You weren’t listening any better than I, or this afternoon would have gone far better. Now mama will ensnare us all in this dinner of hers.”

Which was announced the next afternoon to be the nearest Tuesday. Mrs. Bennet, in the meanwhile, was giving way to all the happy schemes which the good humour and common politeness of Bingley, in his half an hour’s visit, had revived. Not even the fact that she would be hosting one higher than any of their stations deterred her.

The eldest children took opposite methods of enduring the wait. James was quite convinced the Bingley sisters would descend upon Netherfield and either deter the dinner, or it would be moved to Netherfield at a later date. Denial and procrastination.

Jane had already mastered her talent for holding a silent and pleasant demeanour while maintaining a steady deliverance of gaiety. Concealment and delusion.

On Tuesday, the party assembled at Longbourn. The two who were most anxiously expected, to the credit of their punctuality, were in very good time. It was an odd pleasure that William’s title made it more appropriate to bow and curtsy instead of informal handshakes and shoulder touches —James held his hands behind his back during their arrival. His mother, and then sisters, had demanded ornamentation. Lacking jewelry, they were left with floral replacements. James had donned his nicest dinner jacket and clasped his splintered and aching hands behind himself.

He was glad his injuries were not so bad as to warrant bandages when it was time to settle around the table. The only notice that anything might be the matter was in Charles’ dumbfounded floundering at the tiny, pastel violet buds woven into Jane’s hair; as well as William’s immediate scan of all the Bennet women with some plant or other on their person, followed by the flick of his eyes to James.

James had certainly never expected to be running around the fields, earning various cuts and scrapes from jealous nature on this day. He had barely made it down the stairs in time after bathing himself. It was a rare day he was ready after his sisters, but his mother’s red cheeks from hollering for him were merely attributed to her energy for the evening.

James now watched where the pieces fell around the table. In all their former parties or gatherings, the seat beside Jane had belonged to Charles. Neither Mr. or Mrs. Bennet denied it to him now, but upon entering the room, he hesitated. Then he looked around the moment Jane was doing the very same, and she reflexively smiled.

It was quite decided, then. He placed himself beside her.

James could only hide his smile while he was awash in the first bout of relief, and even triumph, that he had experienced since the beginning of all this. Bravo, Charles.

He looked to William, who was likewise observing the situation, but with noble indifference. It did give James a note of unease when Charles also looked towards his friend with half-laughing alarm. You have your sanction to be happy, idiot. Stop asking permission.

Charles’ behaviour toward Jane during dinner showed an admiration for her, which, though more guarded than formerly, persuaded James and certainly their mother that desired sentiments would be secured. The family left them entirely alone, or however alone could be when they ogled every platter Charles passed to her, every head turn and smile.

Meanwhile, James could only wish his sister good tidings while his spirits dwelt lower and lower. William was almost as far from him as the table could divide them. He was on one side of his
father, and James felt the fool for sitting beside his mother. He had thought to be the buffer between her and their guests, but now he was as far from any conversation that side of the table was likely to have—which was nil.

Between his father’s lack of speech and his mother’s abundance of senseless chatter, James wished more than once that he could tell William that his kindness was neither unknown nor unfelt by the whole of the family.

He was in hopes that the evening would afford some opportunity of bringing them together; that the whole of the visit would not pass away without enabling them to enter into something more of conversation than the mere ceremonious salutation attending his entrance. Anxious and uneasy, the period of transition between the dining and drawing room left James feeling so wearisome and dull that he was almost uncivil. Gone was his proficiency in social entanglement; if he could not get a decent word in to William, he wanted nothing more than to disappear from the world in sleep.

Mrs. Bennet was making tea with her daughters around her, and James exhaled a great deal of relief at the likelihood that William would approach—

“Lizzy, serve the tea!” she commanded.

Jane looked back at him with apology while he otherwise looked every bit like this thoughts were You have three daughters around you! Why me?

The only option left to him was to contribute to the evening passing as smoothly as possible, so he went to the table and handed out cups and saucers—

A large hand met his on the dish, halting James’ breath in his lungs as his gaze jerked upward. William took his tea in silence, leaving James in a wake as steaming as the tea.

He swallowed dumbly, thankfully landing in a seat already beside him, only to have his hot, dreamy daze get punctured by Kitty plopping beside him. It was no matter, as Darcy had since walked away to another part of the room, but the option was certainly closed now. As James followed him with his eyes, Kitty observed and whispered, “You can just stand up with him, you know?”

He looked a dagger her way but he doubted how sharp it was. “I can’t. I’ll vomit.”

That gave her pause. “Oh…yeah.”

James peered at her until she gasped with an epiphany. “You can ask him about his sister—Could you?”

He blinked dumbly. “Uh…”

“Do it! Now!” she hissed, pinching his rear so he flew out of his seat. He realized a second later it was because William had finished his tea and was bringing it back to the table. His gaze perked up when James all but slammed into him, taking his cup for something to hold.

“Um.” Oh hell. “Is your sister at Pemberley still?”

Darcy nodded once. “Yes, she will remain there till Christmas.”

James’ brows twitched in a frown. “Alone?”

He blinked. “No, not alone, but…that is several months away. It is too soon to know our exact
plans.”

“Has Pemberley quite emptied since I was there?” Be nosey until you faint. Escape plan.

“A Mrs. Annesley has since gone to be with her. The others have gone on to Scarborough these past weeks.”

James nodded slowly. He was not fainting and could think of nothing more to say. They stood together for what felt like several minutes in silence until James fumbled, “Did you want more…?”

William looked down at his cup and smiled in an apologetic way, as if honesty drove him to admit, “Thank you, no.”

James collapsed once more in his seat, utterly spent. Kitty was doing her best to discretely pester him for whatever information he had gleaned, but then the tea things were removed and the card tables arrived. He stood too late—

“Sit down, Lizzy! This will be our game,” his mother announced as the tea table left and the card table was poised before him. He swallowed thickly, watching his and William’s confinement at different tables take hold.

Mrs. Bennet had designed to keep the two gentlemen through supper and well afterward, but Mr. Hill had been told well before, and without her knowing, to call the carriage at this time. They had nearly finished one game before the cards fell from hands and the family had to stand to wish their guests farewell.

James met his seat with an audible thud afterward, catching his cheek in his hand while his mother’s banter faded from his ears. “Well girls, what say you to the day? I think everything has passed off uncommonly well, I assure you! The dinner was as well dressed as any I ever… everybody said they never saw…fat a haunch… The soup…”

James imagined going outside to a balmy evening, seeing the last second of the carriage turn around the corner into the trees. Blissfully out of sight and painfully far away. He remembered with a slight smirk how he had stolen his father’s pipe as an adolescent, smoking and choking in the summer evenings while Jane scolded him. He would pull it out now, if nothing else than to see the orange flame of the lamp mounted beside their front door burn into the tobacco and char the pipe as he tilted it to light. He would smell the tobacco and the night as he moved the pipe between his lips…

Perhaps William would grasp his chin, revealing he had not gone in the carriage. His thumb would push the stem aside as he leaned down, taking James’ mouth for himself. The clatter of the pipe would not matter when his fingers cradled James’ head, pulling him like a sheet in the wind, and all of James would follow.

James’ hand on his cheek moved over his mouth, trying and failing to suppress the memory of lips there, switching sides to taste him again.

Taste.

Like wine and vanilla and pepper before he only tasted William. The flavours would leave as James felt the softness of his cheek against his own while William moved down his neck…

“I am quite sure we will see him again tomorrow,” his mother concluded, thoroughly dousing him in cold water.
“Again?” he croaked, his voice breaking as if he were reversing in age. His siblings stared at him.
It was a few days before Mr. Bingley called again, and this time alone. Whether Mrs. Bennet’s inquiry of his friend was improper or not, was for once not judged upon by her family, for they were listening in the corridor for the response.

“Has his lordship been mortified by our humble residence?”

“No!” Charles blurted without formality. “Goodness, no! On the contrary, he has been forcibly removed to London on urgent matters. I expect his return in no less than ten days time.”

Jane rubbed her brother’s back, the initial contact a balm before it evolved into a nervous action, fisting his shirt during the hour Mr. Bingley was there. He sat with their mother without her calling them in, which was puzzling but perhaps for the better. Kitty’s fidgeting and pacing were only hushed by her stockings and lack of slippers. Though Mary did not share in her siblings’ anxieties, she eventually took Kitty’s hand, isolating her energy to one spot.

A silent explosion of limbs erupted as they ran for concealment when the drawing room door opened. Hill peeked up when they landed in the kitchen, peering around the doorway to hear Mr. Bingley say, “I am sorry I could not stay longer.”

“Oh, it’s quite all right. I’m grateful you made the time at all. Next time you call, I hope we shall be more lucky. Might that be tomorrow?”

Her children exchanged looks when it was confirmed, and then they heard the front door shut. Their mother arrived with a content lift in her step as she descended the stairs and accepted the lemon tea poured by Hill. Mary broke her siblings’ quietude. “He sounded in good spirits.”

“Yes! I think he was,” Mrs. Bennet chimed. “It is admirable, his alignment with his lordship, but I do worry how that brooding man weighs on Bingley’s bright composition.”

“He does no such thing,” James intercepted. His mother looked sympathetic, to which he insisted, “I’ve been with both of them on various occasions. Darcy only has Bingley’s best interests at heart.”

She huffed a chortle. “Well then he might put in the effort of not appearing like sharing our company holds the same enjoyment of a sour cheese room.”

James opened his mouth, but it was Mary who answered. “Perhaps the greatest secret in our differences is that they feel the same as we do under scrutiny.”

Mrs. Bennet’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, dear?”

“I mean that it is no secret women seek a fine marriage, and the obvious pairing is him and Jane, but he cannot face Jane alone. He must face all of us. So he chooses a companion, to divide our gazes. Perhaps Bingley and Darcy, because of their money and positions, feel quite under attack just as we would to be so stared at. Bingley wields his charm; Darcy his stoicism.”

James felt his insides cease their swaying, calm as if after a long storm. Mrs. Bennet was absorbing and after a moment of contemplation, announced, “I’ll send a note to Netherfield.”
“Mama, let him be,” Jane pleaded.

“I merely desire to send an open invitation,” their mother chimed, “to hunt with Jamie and your father in the morning.”

James’ neck clicked when it swiveled around. “Hunt?”

* * * * * * *

Mr. Bennet was in matching spirits the hour that Charles called on the house, which was earlier than the ladies’ were dressed. Mrs. Bennet ran through the second floor in her dressing gown, and with her hair half finished while crying out, “My dear Jane! Make haste and hurry down! Someone help with your sister’s hair!”

“We will be down as soon as we can,” Jane answered.

James was otherwise in his father’s study, nursing a strong cup of tea as the house went silent for Hill to show their guest into the room. Charles was appropriately attired as he gave the room a once over and then settled in a chair around the coffee table. “Oh, this is marvelous.”

James poured for him while Mr. Bennet dumped a heap of potatoes on the empty plate. “I must admit to having already broken my fast, but this is all very kind.”

“It’s a long walk around these parts,” Mr. Bennet informed. “Double your strength.”

“We won’t use horses?”

His elder lifted mildly surprised eyes. “Oh, we won’t be using the guns, unless you’re eager.”

Charles sent an inquiring look toward James. “We’re here to be blunt, but that can wait. You’re in no harm from us. I’ll be needing another cup.”

His father’s brows bobbed with affirmative, and he reached behind him to a jar on the shelf. After shoveling more tealeaves into the pot, he unhooked the kettle over the fire to refill it.

Charles was more nonplussed than ever when James and Mr. Bennet held flintlock shotguns under their arms as they ventured out into the dewy morning. The latter led them through a field to the edge of the forest, where a worn path was smooth underfoot. “I apologize for ignorance, but could you explain what I’ve been invited to, if not hunting?”

Mr. Bennet responded, “My wife is hunting. And she’s set out her hounds.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s taking the two of us this time,” he marveled toward his son, who smirked at the ground.

Charles ruminated on that. “Am I to understand that I am the waterfowl in this scenario?”

Mr. Bennet turned impressed eyes upon him, and then at his son said, “He might almost be as smart as he is pretty.”

“Be nice,” James scolded.

Mr. Bennet looked disappointed, but only briefly as he set his firearm against a tree. The others followed suit, and they walked on in conversation. “You needn’t apologize for ignorance, Mr. Bingley, for we have ambushed you. Do you have feelings for my Jane?”
“Papa!” James burst. His father peered at him. “Maybe a tactful approach?”

Mr. Bennet appeared as if this had truly never crossed his mind. “I appreciated the direct question when your uncle approached me. Well, he asked me, ‘When the bloody hell are you marrying her? Because she won’t shut up about you,’ but I valued it nonetheless.”

James could not help but laugh, and an easy smile lifted Charles’ features. Mr. Bennet focused on the latter once more. “I’m not saying the engagement has to be this afternoon, or next month. But do everyone involved a mercy, and decide whether your attachment towards Jane can grow into a lifelong journey. You’re not subtle, and my wife is as subtle as the firearms we left behind. We know you like Jane, and she certainly fancies you. So for the sake of quieting my wife, will you court Jane, or not?”

* * * * * * *

“He what?”

James reared back from his mother’s voice. “He went home,” he repeated, this time lifting his hands to shield his ears.

“What do you mean he went home?”

He gave her a wary look. “I mean, he was invited for a hunt, the hunt is finished, so he went back to Netherfield. Like a rational person.”

“You were supposed to bring him back here! It was a ploy to have him with us all day!”

“I thought the point of being rich was that you had the money to choose your leisure time.”

Before his mother turned the colour of wine, Jane stepped between them. “Mama, it’s all right. Rising at dawn and moving through the brambles may tire anyone.”

“Brambles,” their mother scoffed. “For going into the fields and woods, this is the cleanest Jamie’s ever been. Bingley is surely sparkling.”

Jane peeked at him, at a loss. He shrugged. “He’s a figure in hunting trousers and riding boots.”

“Which,” Mrs. Bennet fumed, “she would have witnessed today and for days to come, if you had used your sense!”

She stormed off, at least to the next room, where they heard, “Ah! Mary! My last hope for intelligence in this family!”

Jane heaved a sigh and met an unapologetic expression on her brother. “I’m sure some part of Charles is aware and glad you spared him from today.”

“Someone has to be on the poor fool’s side,” he murmured as they went up to their room so he could change his attire.

“I don’t suppose you at least arranged a future meeting, for mama’s sake?” Jane pulled the needles from her hair, letting it fall in a heap around her shoulders when she reclined among the pillows.

She waited for him to disentangle himself from his shirt. “I thought it might be a worthwhile experiment to let him make the next invitation.”

Jane sighed, “That’s a no, then. There’s no saving you from mama.”
After digging inside their dresser, he found a long forgotten jumper dyed a weak crimson, with large tortoise buttons. He donned a fresh shirt, soft from years of use, and then buttoned the holes but left the shirt’s collar up and rumpled. Jane’s eyes wandered over him. “That’s too large for you.”

“Yes,” he crooned, peering down at the hanging sleeves. “Someone expected me to grow as tall as Lydia.”

“You almost did.” She stood and went to fold his collar down. “I can alter the cuffs.”

James held a small fold at the end of the sleeve for his sister to sew, which tapered the sleeves down to his wrists so they did not slide over his hands. When she was returning her sewing tin to her vanity drawers, she remarked, “It has been an agreeable day, nonetheless. Even good company is made better with a bit of time in between visits.”

Her brother peered up from his sleeves and let his head hang back down with a shake and breathy laugh. Jane whirled around, “Lizzy, you must not do so. You must not suspect me.”

“You hide it well, only asking once and ‘for mama’s sake’ whether or not there is a Bingley sighting on the horizon.”

“I assure you that I have learnt to enjoy his conversation as an agreeable and sensible young man, without having a wish beyond it.”

“Have you kissed him?”

Jane’s mouth hung open…and her cheeks blossomed. James was smug, and then he was in that curious place between befuddlement and great amusement. “When?”

Her jaw snapped shut. “It doesn’t matter. A good kiss does not warrant a good marriage.”

“Oh, it was good, then? That’s a relief. We can’t do with terrible kissers coming into this family.”

“You’ve already kissed him!”

“It was the least I could do, to save you the trial, but I never knew you’ve been venturing on your own! As your roguish brother, I demand to know the details.”

Jane snorted softly. “You’re not a rogue.”

“The religious call my fancy sodomy, and I’m in love with the richest man to ever step foot in our tiny corner of England. Where did that bottle go?”

“We haven’t had lunch yet,” she chided, but made no move to stop his finding the wine tucked between their bed and the dresser, and pouring her a glass. She shook her head despite her smile as he chinked his cup to hers. “You are cruel. You will not let me smile at having a simple friend, and are provoking me at every moment. Why should you wish to persuade me that I feel more than I acknowledge?”

James swallowed quickly to avoid gargling on his laughter. “I am always partial to indifference if it grants me liberty to laugh. But alas, in this I cannot be your confidante. If one of us is doomed to be happy, it better well be you, and I won’t let you out of it, not after you’ve already invested months of heartache for the rich idiot.”

“He’s not insensible!”
“You’re avoiding the question.”

“I never demanded this from your kiss with him.”

“It must have been at Netherfield. What better place to hide than a ball?”

“Lizzy!”

“No wonder he was so lively, and you so composed. That is your only give away in lying: you’re too calm. Well…two out of the five of us escaped mama’s propensity for combustion.”

Jane paused in her sip to peer at him. “You are never overcome like mama is.”

“No, I cave in entirely,” he scoffed, and consumed another gulp.

Jane was quiet for a moment, and then when she reached for the water pitcher to top off their glasses, she asked, “What do you think has taken Darcy away?”

“Maybe he’s gone away to shield us from the Bingley sisters.”

He snorted into his glass at Jane’s stern look. “Careful. You almost look like mama with that.”

“I hope to be half the mother she is.”

James smiled softly, and then flinched at the sound of sharp heels across the floor. He held his cup close as Mrs. Bennet arrived at their doorway. Her mouth opened and then her eyes narrowed. “Are you drinking wine? At this hour of the day?”

“No.”

“You are!”

“Absolutely not.” He drank faster.

She swept into the room, fists on her hips. “From a teacup, no less! For heaven’s sake, consume from an aerated vessel if you’re going to be ludicrous!”

The cup was timely empty when it fell from his hand, yanked as he was off the bed. “Wine in the middle of the day! I raised you far from the vine!”

“Why is Jane completely ignored?” he complained as he stumbled barefoot behind her toward the staircase. “Scold your favourite!”

“A true mother doesn’t have favourites, only fools—”

James tripped to a halt on Mrs. Bennet’s skirts, catching himself before they both tumbled down the last of the steps. The pair of them stared at Hill beside the front door with Charles.

A beat of silence, and then, “Mr. Bingley!”

James lurched forward, the front of his jumper in his mother’s grip pulling him into a bow the same moment she curtseyed. In an instant, James knew Bingley was nervous, but nothing else. His hands fidgeted at his sides while he smiled and said, “Jamie, you look so comfortable dressed down. I don’t mean that as an insult. I am envious.”

Mrs. Bennet did not release his jumper as James realized he was humbly barefoot, whereas Charles
still wore his hunting trousers, coat, and riding boots. “We’re not particular here, if you want to come in further than the door.”

“On the contrary…” He stopped, frowned at the floor, and then started again, “I was wondering if I might have the privilege of inviting you all to dinner this evening.”

Another silence and then Mrs. Bennet uttered, “Why, of course! We would be delighted!”

Charles forced a flash of a smile. “It’s not too short notice?”

James reassured, “Nothing is ever short enough notice in this house.”

Even his undershirt twisted in his mother’s grip as she pulled him against her shoulder in warning. “He means that he is looking forward to it. What time would be convenient for you?”

It was settled that six would be their expected time and dinner would be an hour accordingly. This gave Mrs. Bennet an entire afternoon to rush James across the house and garden.

* * * * * * *

The foil to his wife’s enthralment, Mr. Bennet seemed puzzled over the whole affair. Nevertheless, he gathered his children’s finest outer garments for the hot press, and alongside the curling rod, the Bennets readied for Netherfield. James was curling large bunches of Jane’s hair and pinning the loose waves in place while their mother scrutinized his collection from the garden.

“I thought I told you to gather the pink blossoms?”

“They wilt within an hour. The green is fine enough.”

“Fine enough isn’t fine or enough at all!”

“Mama, I’m perfectly comfortable in green,” Jane soothed.

“Oh but Jane, you do look so pretty in pastels.”

“And if I get so chilled that I must borrow Lizzy’s jacket, I will still match.”

She had Mrs. Bennet stumped. “Well, I suppose…”

The siblings deflated with relief when she left to fuss over Mary and Kitty despite being nowhere near ready herself. James exhaled, “I wonder if our aunt is somehow smug by all the occasions we’ve had to wear her gifts to us.”

“Mama seeks to make me look like a spring cake, dressed in that light green with pink decoration,” Jane giggled.

“What will you wear?” he asked softly, but his tone made his sister frown at him in the vanity mirror.

“What’s the matter?”

James did not readily answer. “I’m just tired. I wasn’t allowed to sleep today.”

She caught his hand over her shoulder. “You don’t need to come if…I’m sure Charles will understand.”
After a moment, he tried to smile, but it did not reach his eyes. His tone was more convincing as he chimed, “After he saw mama dragging me down the stairs and possibly stealing from his own shrubs? No, I won’t let one of my episodes detain me.”

Jane’s eyes widened at the heap of flora on the table. “These are from—?”

“Oh, he won’t mind.”

“You can’t steal from our host right before we are to dine with him!”

“But afterward? Hm, noted.”

“Lizzy!”

In the end, Jane dressed in wool stockings and linen petticoats for warmth, but a gown of airy, white layers that glowed in the light like chiffon. Kitty’s face paled and then filled with pink when she came into the room for James to do her hair. “You’re…you’re wearing that one?”

Jane smiled. “Yes, why not?”

Kitty smiled shyly. “It’s…I didn’t really know what I was doing… It might not be seen as proper or decent.”

Her sister peered at herself in the mirror with a perplexed expression. “I’m perfectly covered…?”

James’ head popped into view. “She means you look too pretty. Weak men don’t like that sort of thing.”

Jane absorbed that and eventually blushed over her smile. Her brother came around her, finishing putting the small fern pieces into place. He gave her a once over. “I mean, really, if he can’t bloody function with a nymph in the room, then he’s not worth it anyway.”

“Lizzy!”

* * * * * * *

James fluffed his cravat one more time as they ascended the stairs, only to immediately fantasize about removing his outer garments. The house was alight; the foyer chandelier full of dancing candles, every social room made warm by a crackling fire. The Bennets were collectively filled with rouge at Netherfield’s warmth.

Charles Bingley swept in as if from thin air to meet them, his hair glistening in an elegant arch combed back from his face. “I must apologize, I hadn’t anticipated such a warm evening.”

“Nothing to forgive, Mr. Bingley!” Mrs. Bennet gestured with her fan. “The temperature will surely fall over the course of the evening, and I don’t mind being spoiled by such display! Netherfield was certainly built to impress.”

James smiled to himself as Charles graciously let commentary of the house fall away and instead shook his and Mr. Bennet’s hands before arriving to Jane. He had the tact of extending his words to her sisters, but his primary focus was on her. “I am sorry for my negligence. I would have very much liked to share your time, but after the morning, the day was quite taken from me.”

Jane smiled. “You’re perfectly in the right to spend your hours how you see fit, especially to any obligations promised before us. Thank you for remembering us.”
His brows twitched into a furrow. “I will always remember you.”

Mr. Bennet chirped, “So, dinner.”

Charles stood to attention. “Yes, of course.”

Dinner progressed with Mrs. Bennet sending glares at anyone who interrupted even the slightest gaze or word between the two of them. However overall, the meal was pleasant in taste and conversation. Mr. Bennet was even prevailed upon to laugh more than once.

“How marvelous that someone should dislike London as much as myself.”

“I assure you, it is a bittersweet entanglement,” Charles said after wiping his mouth. “Industry and trade are surely growing at a staggering rate, and as thrilling as it is to be apart of it all, it only inspires a greater appreciation for the countryside.”

“They each have their flaws and redeeming points,” he acquiesced.

“But for a home,” his wife intercepted, “the country does far outweigh the city, don’t you find?”

James shifted in his seat, readying, should the need arise, to divert Mrs. Bennet’s attentions in the conversation. However Mary spoke next. “I wonder if a study has been conducted, discussing the differences in life and wellbeing between urban and rural.”

Bingley’s features opened. “Oh, absolutely. It is a growing field, the study of ourselves, and in several branches. Social, mental, cultural…the humanities have grown alongside our maps.”

Mary’s eyes illuminated in a way that made her elder siblings exchange smirks. Charles went on to say, “I can put in an order for you, if you like. It’s no trouble for published journals to be sent here; half the men they get sent to read them but once and then the paper is as good as tinder, any how.”

Their dessert bowls were being taken from the table while Mary swallowed, too overcome for words. Jane supplied, “That would be most welcome, Mr. Bingley. I’m afraid we cannot keep up with Mary’s mind, so anything you are able to send our way would be most gratefully received.”

He shook his head. “I’m happy to do it.”

Mrs. Bennet sent her glare around the table, daring anyone to interrupt their shared smiles, until quietude encompassed the room. James was induced to chime, “Are we awaiting a second dessert?”

Charles looked at him and shook himself as if emerging from a dream. “Whoever wishes is welcome to remain for coffee, which reminds me, Jamie, that I have something for you.” Standing from the table, he announced, “There is no rush. A carriage will be brought ‘round for whomever wants it. I’ll return momentarily.”

He went to speak with one of the footmen first, and while he was in the room, Mrs. Bennet was just so pleased that she sent a wink to the first one to meet her eyes, which happened to be Kitty. She squinted, “What is the matter, mama? What do you keep winking at me for?”

“Nothing, child, nothing,” she hastened. “I did not wink at you.”

She beat her fan in the air like the gentlest butterfly wings, sending a smile Bingley’s way before he left the room and she announced, “We are each of us leaving, apart from you, Jane, and perhaps Kitty.”
Her youngest pair erupted at once. “Why me?” Kitty exclaimed.

“I am quite the better partner for conversation,” Mary agreed. “There is so much I’d like to ask him!”

“That is precisely why you mustn’t remain, dear,” their mother apologized. “A man and woman have so few occasions to speak openly together, that nothing else must get in the way now. But of course someone must remain for decency’s sake—”

“Oh to hell with decency,” Mary sighed, slouching back in her seat.

James could not help but smile to himself, nodding pleasantly. Mr. Bennet had already stood and was waiting beside one of the windows, observing the night until Jane murmured, “I want Lizzy to stay.”

All heads turned to her. Mrs. Bennet’s voice softened but was adamant, “Darling, I understand, but Lizzy is equally too disposed to sweep Charles’ attention—”

“Lizzy will stay,” her husband declared. “I’ll trust no other with my daughter.”

Mrs. Bennet huffed a loud sound of mirth. “She is in no danger from Bingley!”

James watched his sister. She was unable to pretend now. Her head was slowly falling until it lifted with conviction. “I want my brother to stay.”

Her eyes flicked to him, and he could only fill his eyes with what he felt. It was not often that she stood up to their mother, and he was always immeasurably proud when she did so. Jane inhaled as if she had been without air for a long while.

Mrs. Bennet’s scheme was ineffectual. Bingley returned with a parcel in his hands, but first guided the family to the foyer and stood attentively on the steps until the carriage was rolling along the drive. He turned back to Jane and her brother with a grin. “Ah, my favourite Bennets—I hope you don’t mind my saying.”

Jane bowed her head modestly while James barked a laugh. As they made their way to one of the parlours, he teased, “With you waving that around, how can I leave?”

Charles realized he still held the parcel. “Oh! Fine fine, although I cannot take credit for it.”

James paused in reaching for it. “What do you mean?”

Charles stared at him. “It’s from William, of course.”

James did not so much take the brown-wrapped parcel as he felt it enter his hands. He began pulling the green ribbon off of it while he heard Charles lead Jane to the table beside the fireplace. “I do not recall, did you ever share coffee with us here?”

James barely heard his sister’s reply as he unwrapped a sack and looked inside to find ovular nuggets…smelling and appearing not quite as he remembered. Pinching one between his fingers, he held it up and it hit him all at once: chocolate. Coffee beans coated in chocolate.

*I wish I had the chocolate my father brought home long ago to pair with it.*

The flavour was on his tongue, his hand over his mouth as he was overcome. The sharp burst of caffeine that filled his senses when he bit into it. The gently sweet bitterness.
“Lizzy?”

He looked up into his sister’s face. Behind her, Charles wore a worried expression. Removing his hand, he uttered, “I’m so sorry, but can I trouble you for the supplies to write a letter?”

This took the both of them by surprise, but Charles nodded and opened his arm to guide him to a nearby drawing room. “It’s all here. Use the room as long as you need. Are you quite all right?”

“Yes—but are you certain in the time you said Darcy would return?”

Something behind those blue eyes changed. “I’m certain. He was most unwilling to go and already eager to return.”

“All right, thank you,” James dismissed, plopping down and sharpening the nearest quill. Charles wavered for a moment, moving a candelabrum to the table for extra light, and should James decide he wanted for anything else, before he left the room.

James did what any self-respecting person would do: he wrote every thought in his head to his dearest friend. Struggling to remember the last letter Charlotte had written, he quickly replied with what few statements he could as to her goings-on, and then moved on to his current placement, and how he had arrived there. He started at the Meryton ball. More than once did he laugh at himself, for he was sure Charlotte would be while reading.

Two quills, several pieces of paper, and blotting dust later, James stood and exited the room to… pause…outside of the parlour.

It was quiet, but as he drew closer to the cracked doors, he heard the soft murmurings of earnest conversation. Peering inside, barely pushing for a better view, he perceived his sister and Charles standing together over the hearth.

“Do you desire an envelope and shipment?” said a hushed voice. James startled at the butler, who last he had seen, still despised him for soiling the various carpets after the rainstorm which had first brought him here in Jane’s wake.

“Um, no, thank you,” he whispered, as he was sure he was not finished with it.

He startled anew when a maid reached between them to open the doors—both he and the butler stopped her. She stared between them, dumbfounded until James hissed, “Don’t you have a weather eye for people falling in love? Go away!”

Her jaw dropped as she tilted to see inside, but she obediently left. James and the butler remained standing guard. The former wondered how long it had taken the pair to reach the point in conversation they were in now. He could not hear them well, but Charles’s face contorted and he took Jane’s hands in his, kissing their backs and holding them to his chest. Jane’s cheeks shined with tears.

Her hands moved around his face, and she kissed him, nodding against his lips.

James’ heart lifted into his throat, distantly feeling the butler’s hand on his shoulder. He sniffed, no longer seeing them clearly through his tear-stained eyes.

Jane was engaged.

His tears fell past his cheeks, granting him sight as he pushed open the door to lean his shoulder against the jamb. Jane was holding Charles close, their foreheads together until her chin turned in
his direction. Charles was less graceful, nearly jumping out of his skin. A long instant of blabbering followed before he was coherent. “James! I! Er—that is to say—”

Jane cut him off by flying across the room to be enclosed in her brother’s arms. His face buried against her neck. “It’s not fair,” he sobbed. “And you deserve it all.”

She was giggling and crying, and only parted from him once the butler emerged into the room. “Sir? Might I endeavour to provide this?”

Charles scrubbed a hand over his face, and accepted the...jar of lentils. James and Jane stared at his nervous laughter. “I fought Caroline tooth and nail for this, and only managed victory once I stole and hid it.”

James sniffled loudly. “I never knew lentils were so hard to come by—”

Charles extracted a box buried beneath the jar’s contents. Jane’s hands flew to her mouth while James lost his balance, swaying a few paces away from them until he grasped the back of a chair.

Charles lowered onto one knee. James landed rather loudly in the chair, his elbows on his knees and holding his mouth. Charles sent him a giddy smile and then blinked up at Jane.

“Miss Bennet. Ever patient, Jane. Will you forgive me for taking this long?”

She was already nodding, still crying and laughing as he removed the box’s lid to reveal a gold ring with an octagonal diamond the size of her little finger’s nail.

“Will you do me the lifelong honour of being my wife? Will you be lady of Netherfield? You are what makes these walls special to me. I can’t live here without you... Will you say yes before I accidentally burn the place down with all these candles?”

Bennets and butler laughed. Jane flexed her hand for him to slide the ring onto her finger, and then lowered to be caught in his arms. James and the butler—and the entire staff lingering in the corridor—clapped their hands while she kissed him, her feet dangling above the floor.

When he finally set her down, he continued to hold her against him, her hand splayed over his cheek. “I want to stay,” James heard her say, “but I must go to my mother...she would never forgive me to hear the news from somebody else. Oh, but papa—”

She gasped, finally piecing something together as she looked between her fiancé and brother. “You’ve already been to see him.”

Charles smiled and nodded. “I was rather cornered but they saved me the trouble.”

Her eyes widened on her brother, who managed a smile through his silent tears.

Chapter End Notes

Did the Georgians have over-sized cardigans? Who cares. My baby needs it.
There's more fanart! See the beautiful comic PeaceLoveArtsnArt made here ~
The battle of the ages is here.

The door flew open hardly before their carriage had stopped. Mrs. Bennet bustled onto the stoop in her shawl. “Children, get inside, quickly! Winter still grips these nights and I must hear—”

She absorbed their faces in a stupefied manner, and then stared at Jane’s silent explanation in the display of her hand. Candles appeared as if from the walls as family members came out of the woodwork in the wake of her scream. Mr. Bennet stood against the doorway of the foyer, grinning contently as he opened an arm to his son. James settled against his ribs, hugging around his middle while Jane was otherwise spun round and round by their jubilant mother.

Mary was smiling on the stairs while Kitty chased her sister around, demanding details about what things she would want for her wedding, until Mr. Bennet carefully moved forward to capture his daughter in his embrace. “Congratulations, sweetheart.”

“Thank you, papa,” she was crying anew.

He stroked her head while he said, “I told the man, that if he intended to court you, he had better get on with it. I hadn’t meant for him to do so in the same day.”

His family laughed around them, and he announced that it was quite time for bed. “Yes, yes!” Mrs. Bennet agreed. “Dear Jane, you must rest! There can’t be enough sleep before the wedding!”

“It’s not tomorrow, mama,” James exclaimed.

“Nevertheless! Up with you! To bed, everyone! Mr. Bennet, you must go to Netherfield tomorrow—”

“I must nothing! I’m done with the place,” he curtailed.

“You have to thank him! For—”

“He’s got my daughter and the prettiest thing in the country with an equal amount of sense. I should be the one being thanked.”

James and Jane laughed all the way up to their room. They washed their faces slowly, still giggling at random times and without prompt. Jane bounced over the bed in her nightgown, a girl again while her brother smiled. “You know, you’re fortunate the ring fits. He never asked me for a size or to test it on my hand first.”

“You would never let him live that down,” she scolded. “And we aren’t the same size, anyway.”

“Do you want to try?” he teased.

“No. It will never leave my hand. I don’t want to imagine it getting stuck.”
His head fell back on the pillow with his mirth. “Well I congratulate you. You will be a very happy woman. The happiest, wisest, most reasonable end.”

A burst of giggles escaped her as she bobbed onto her side. “‘Tis too much, by far too much. Oh, why is everybody not as happy!”

He huffed, “Engagement ideally happens only once and even more hopefully ends.” The bases of his palms kneaded his eyes. “Our mother is going to be insufferable. Two daughters out of the house, and you with five thousand a year.”

Jane grinned, but it slowly faded into a wistful expression. “Netherfield will no longer be let…ever again. It will go to my children.”

“And the ring won’t fit your swollen fingers,” James realized with a gasp of epiphany. “We’ve come full circle.”

“Don’t be cruel!” she beat her pillow against him before hugging it under her. “Let me enjoy my engagement.”

He chuckled around the coffee bean he popped into his mouth. His smile lingered as he listened to Jane speaking, prattling more than she was normally inclined to do. “He has made me so happy by telling me that he was totally ignorant of my being in London! I had not believed it possible.”

“I suspected as much,” James commented, recollecting the man’s expression when he poised the accusation to Caroline’s face at Pemberley. “But how did he account for it?”

Jane’s head had lifted to be poised on her fist. “It must have been his sister’s doing. They were certainly no friends to his courtship with me, which I cannot wonder at, since he might have chosen so much more advantageously in many respects.”

“Hush.”

“But when they see, as I trust they will, that their brother is happy with me, they will learn to be contented, and we shall be on good terms again.”

“Ugh,” he groaned around another bean.

“Though we can never be what we once were to each other.”

James fixed wide, impressed eyes upon her. “That is the most unforgiving speech that I have ever heard you utter. Good girl! It would vex me, indeed, to see you again the dupe of Miss Bingley’s pretended regard.”

She moved to her belly, sitting up on her elbows. “Would you believe it, Lizzy, that when he went to town last November, he really loved me, and nothing but a persuasion of my being indifferent would have prevented his coming down again!”

James swallowed thickly, silently thanking the gentleman’s upbringing that warded against naming people in the wake of misunderstanding. “He made a mistake, to be sure,” he guarded, “but it is to the credit of his modesty.”

This naturally introduced a panegyric from Jane on his diffidence and the little value he put on his own good qualities. James rolled his eyes. “You both finally speak up for yourselves and wind up engaged. The wonders of proper communication—careful!”
The protected his pouch of edibles morsels against the swat of a pillow. Jane giggled, “I am certainly the most fortunate creature that ever existed! Oh Lizzy, surely I can’t be singled from the family, blessed above them all. If I could but share this day’s pleasures and see you as happy!”

James coughed a laugh deep in his chest. “Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I can never have your happiness—No, no let me shift for myself,” he curtailed when she sat up. “Perhaps, if I have very good luck, somehow better than yours, I may…That’s rather loud.”

They listened to the commotion outside of their house. “Horses?”

“At least three,” her brother counted.

“A carriage,” she realized.

A sharp knocking downstairs drew their gazes together.

Mary and Kitty’s heads poked out of their rooms while Jane and Mrs. Bennet were likewise tying the sashes of robes around their waists. Mr. Bennet was further along the stairs when Kitty asked, “You don’t think that’s Charles, do you?”

Jane opened her mouth to speak, but it was their father’s velvet baritone which answered, “It is a four-horse.”

This seemed sufficient answer enough as his family lined the stairs behind him. It was not Charles Bingley.

Mrs. Bennet lurched a step back upon the door opening. Such finery as the amethyst silk, the black velvet cloak, and the ostrich feather in her cap was not to be misunderstood. It was Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

James carefully descended the stairs as if to not make a sound. Though his parents had never seen the woman, they knew wealth when they saw it, and bowed and curtsied appropriately. Her eyes flicked to James, who bowed. “Lady Catherine.”

He heard the immediate rustle of fabric as his sisters curtsied low upon the stairs. Taking that as her invitation, her ladyship strode into the foyer, inducing the owners to move aside. Mr. Bennet, his voice measured, announced, “Ladyship or not, I’d like to inquire why you visit us at such an inhospitable hour.”

James was not surprised by her lack of formality, but her air was more than usually ungracious as she placed herself before James and made neither greeting nor a glance at his sisters or his parents more than necessary. “I wish to address your son on an urgent and most private matter. I presume there is a drawing room or study where we may speak alone.”

His mother’s head turned with her gaze darting between them. Mr. Bennet only looked at his son for confirmation. James gave it through gesturing to the nearest room. “Our parlour is just there.”

“Yes! Of course,” Mrs. Bennet rushed forward, throwing the door open and making quick work lighting the candles already melted over a candelabrum. James realized Jane had followed them inside when he rotated and she stood next to him. Behind her, were Mary and Kitty in the door jamb. Mr. Bennet was not far beyond, his shoulder visible as he leaned against the stairs.

While Mrs. Bennet was moving the candelabrum to the central table, Lady Catherine voiced, “You seem quite well, Mr. Bennet. This woman, I suppose, is your mother. And these are your sisters.”
James met her hard stare and knew politeness was limited and waning. “They are pretty, my lady, but they are not dolls. You’re free to speak to them directly.”

Her eyes flashed and he could feel Jane’s warning glare boring into him while their mother’s spine went rigid. “Yes, madam,” she intercepted. “Jane is my eldest. All my girls are here but one; my youngest of all is lately married. It just so happens that Jane was engaged this very…well, I suppose it was yesterday evening actually, to a wonderful young man, whom I believe will join our family nicely.”

To her ladyship’s credit, she listened to Mrs. Bennet’s nervous prattling and replied over her shoulder, “You have a very small park here.”

This gave Mrs. Bennet pause. She acquiesced, “It is nothing in comparison of Rosings, my lady, I dare say, but I assure you it is much larger than Sir William Lucas’s.”

“Speaking of Lucases,” Jane tried to curtail. “Have you come with a letter or word of Mrs. Collins? May I take the liberty of asking your ladyship whether you left Mr. and Mrs. Collins well?”

“Yes, very well. I saw them the night before last.”

James blinked, and could feel his sister’s weight lean toward him. Lady Catherine had certainly rushed here.

Her tone hardened. “I must emphasize my previous reason for being here: to speak with Mr. Bennet alone.”

Neither Jane nor their mother made efforts to move, apart from the latter urging, “We probably haven’t what you are in the habit of preferring, madam, but I shall gladly get to work on refreshment—”

“That will not be necessary. I do not intent to stay long enough for such things, however it is quite up to Mr. Bennet.”

At a loss, Mrs. Bennet looked to her son, who shook his head. “It’s all right, mama. You can go.”

An expression he had not often seen hardened her features as she nodded once. Jane grasped his hand, but he gave it a squeeze and let their mother usher all of his sisters out the door. It shut, and they were alone.

James stood in silence as Lady Catherine took a turn about the room. As she passed the mantle, he realized his mother had pried a candle off a metal arm and tossed it onto the logs. The embers were quickly glowing back to life to combat the subtle fog he exhaled over his lips.

Lady Catherine faced him, the firelight glowing in her feather. James determined not to be the first to speak; the woman could uphold her pride all by herself if she thought herself worthy to be more than usually insolent and disagreeable.

Thank god the nephew fell far from this tree.

She began, “You can be at no loss, Mr. Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither. Your own heart, your own conscience must tell you why I come.”

She let that fall in the air between them, for he certainly could not absorb it. “Indeed, you are mistaken, madam. I am not at all able to account for seeing you here.”
“Mr. Bennet,” she broiled, “you ought to know that I am not to be trifled with. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness and, in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it.

“A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. I was told, that not only was your sister on the verge of being most advantageously married, but that you, Mr. James Bennet, had on various accounts, and were continuing to do so, made advancements on my own nephew. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood—I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible—nevertheless, I instantly set off for this place so that I might make my sentiments known to you.”

James was uncertain how to feel. For a moment, he felt his heart crushed as if between two iron plates. And then he felt nothing at all. A lost expectation was finally being met like an old friend.

“If you believed it impossible to be true,” he returned, his voice quiet, “I wonder why you took the trouble of coming so far.”

“To insist upon having such a report universally contradicted!”

James smirked as an idea, like a drop of oil sliding through the cogs of his mind, must have likely found its way to Lady Catherine’s ear. Caroline was more devious than he gave her credit for.

“We so often care more about the information we are given, instead of from whose mouth it reaches us. But never mind.” His voice felt cold to his own ears. “Your coming to Longbourn to see me and my family will be rather a confirmation of it, if indeed such a report is in existence.”

“If!” she huffed. A small part of James wondered if she had ever been so challenged. He did not have the stomach or the interest to celebrate his circumstances. “Do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Do you not know that such a report has spread abroad?”

“I rather think such information was spread specifically and tactfully, to the person who would be most sensitive to it.”

The closest curve of a smile he had yet seen moved her lips. “It vexes me to say that I rather hope you are correct. Then can you declare that there is no foundation for it?”

His lungs burned. How humble, the need to breathe, and perhaps a vindictive part of him relished making her wait as he did so. James sighed, “I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship; more so that we ought to establish it outright. You may ask your questions plainly, which I shall choose or deny to answer.”

“This is not to be borne,” she growled. “Mr. Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, my nephew, made you an offer of homosexual partnership?”

James blinked. Sensation rushed back into his frozen fingertips; the chill of the room compounded with his aching limbs, the gentle warmth of the candlelight on his face. She knows William is…?

As if reading this from him she seconded, “Oh yes, I know of my nephew’s…prior mistakes. Boys kissing each other is nothing a stern word or rod may alter if done early enough.”

Frigidity forgotten, heat blazed inside James’ torso. “Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible.”

“It ought to be so! It must be so, while he retains the use of his reason.”
“But now you say he must be the one approaching me?” James tilted his head, a dark humour in his eyes.

He was admittedly impressed by how she matched it. “We are each of us susceptible to allurements, even my own flesh and blood. Your arts may, in brief moments of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to his family. And I am not oblivious, Mr. Bennet, to your unique negligence in outright refusing such accusations.”

“And how do most gentlemen refute these things?”

“Most vehemently and whole heartedly.”

“I cannot apologize for disappointing. Your nephew learned himself how I do delight in contradicting expectations.”

She stepped forward, “Mr. Bennet, do you know who I am? I am almost the nearest relation he has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns.”

“I disagree to every word you’ve just now spoken, but it is not my place or ability to change your mind. I can, however, assure you that you are in no way entitled to know my concerns, nor will such behaviour as this ever induce me to be explicit.”

“Let me be rightly understood. This match can never take place. Never. William is engaged to my daughter. Now what have you to say?”

“Only this: that if he is so, he is also an honourable man. You can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me. However, as I ignore your accusation, I notice you likewise neglect a common adversary to men who kiss men. Are you not a god fearing woman?”

Lady Catherine hesitated for a moment, taking the time to return to the window and gather her words. “I am as religiously respectful as one can be, however it is a harsh reality one faces when they discover the love for their family outweighs the adoration of the divine. I have turned a blind eye to many individuals and their inclinations, so long as they do not impact mine or my parish. You now obviously pose a problem. I was able to ignore your obvious hold on my nephew—even the enjoyment my daughter found in your company. They have been intended for each other since their infancy. It was the mutual wish of myself and his mother. While in their cradles, we planned the union—”

“I do not care for the aspirations of girls too young to know the hearts of their children,” James shook his head. “I always dreamed that those rich enough and so positioned had the privilege to love freely. That it was logical for a mother to desire the happiness of her children, and for this to be the force she used to guide her children’s decisions. Not to make the decisions for them in such an unfair manner. The reality is devastating.”

“Quite,” she marked. “You may be free, as men so often are, to mind your own business. As that business has since crossed with mine, here we now stand. The reality is this: you are of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family, and that is disregarding the most presentable case against yourself! Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends? To his engagement to my daughter?”

“I had heard of it before,” he drawled stiffly. “But what is it to me?”

Her voice sharpened, “Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy?”

“I wonder at the illusion of power you think you have over a grown man. You are not a girl
deciding fates anymore. You did as much as you could in planning the marriage. Its completion depended on others. If William is neither by honour nor inclination confined to his cousin, why is he not to make another choice? And if I am that choice, why may I not accept him?”

The words fell from his mouth before he meant for them to. The safety of emptiness was long since removed from him. The back of his throat ached and his eyes were glazed with furious tears.

Lady Catherine’s demeanour was not malicious. It was stoic with confirmation. “Because honour, decorum, prudence—nay—interest, forbid it. Yes, interest, for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace. Your name will never be mentioned by any of us.”

“By none of your circle, perhaps,” he almost whispered.

“These are heavy misfortunes!”

“I’ve been to Pemberley,” he combated. Lady Catherine appeared as if she had been struck. “I know Lady Georgiana is the daughter you wish you had and that their home, filled as it is with happiness, is unlike anything you’ve shared. I cannot apologize for your never having extended periods of happiness, your ladyship, for I cannot much take credit for anything in your life. I can be certain, though, that any partner, whether it is a wife or otherwise, to the Darcy family will have extraordinary sources of happiness. It makes sense, then, that you so desire Miss de Bourgh to have a place there. But it is not you who decides this. It’s William and Georgiana.”

Her aged jowls trembled in her rage. “Obstinate, headstrong fool! I am ashamed of you! Is this your gratitude for my attentions to you in my own home? Is nothing due to me on that score? You are to understand I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose, nor will I be dissuaded from it. I have not been used to submit to any person’s whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment.”

James crooned, “And here we are. However pitiable your ladyship’s situation may be in your eyes, it will have no effect on me.”

“I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence. My daughter and nephew are formed for each other. They are descended from noble lines. Their fortunes on both sides are splendid. They are betrothed by the voices of every member of their respective houses, and what is to divide them?”

“Perhaps that, out of the voices you are citing, all are dead apart from yourself.”

“And it is up to me to upload our legacy against the upstart pretensions of a young man without family, connections, or fortune. This will not be endured! It must not and shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, and the good of your sisters, you would not persist through this course of action.”

“Lady Catherine,” James growled. “You may say any damn thing you like about me, but the moment you threaten my sisters is the moment you learn of the vulgarity you insinuate the lower classes of having. You claim you care about yours and your sister’s offspring, where in fact you only desire the maintenance of pride. I, however, lack pride entirely. I will do anything for my sisters, and you forget that I am a gentleman’s son. I have every right to your nephew’s company.”

“True. You are a gentleman’s son. But who is your mother? Who are your uncles and aunts? Do not imagine me ignorant of their condition—”
The door burst open, shocking the air from James’ lungs insofar that he grasped the back of a chair for stability. He distantly heard his sister’s frightened chirps as the door slammed once more, this time with Mrs. Bennet inside.

“What condition is that, madam? For if your sources are to be reliable, then you would know my brother and sister have married not only well, but have raised themselves and their spouses from pennies to comfortable thousands. They are not unlike the Bingleys. Will you hold one family in high regard while hypocritically defaming another?”

Lady Catherine’s wide gaze was justified, however she was not dishonest of her resolution. “You ought to know as well as I that it is easy for extended family to lower a reputation, but it is not easy for them to raise it. Society is fickle in that regard. What of yourself, then? What income gains can you boast?”

“None,” Mrs. Bennet huffed, “because that pet who boasts so fondly of you—I mean of course, Mr. Collins—his late father took monthly sums from my husband’s generosity! But as he is gone and Mr. Collins is now under your responsibility, my Jamie is quite free to rise as far as he pleases, alongside my daughters’ dowries. They are in fact free to love whom they wish, where yours can only marry each other to keep money and arbitrary dignity safe within the family.

“I must say, I quite loathed your nephew. Every occasion I’ve had to observe or interact with him, I’ve found him full of hubris, disdain, and frankly, the spinning image of yourself. But my Jamie is indeed his father’s son, and both have terrific judgment in the company they keep. Therefore, whatever my connections may be, if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you.”

Lady Catherine looked thoroughly incensed, the fireplace now illuminating the room on one side and the candelabrum standing central to them all. She locked onto James, and bit out, “Tell me once and for all, are you joined with him?”

Both women waited for him to speak, making him aware of the tears tickling his face and jaw. Though James was more inclined to not oblige in answering, he could not but utter, “I am not.”

Lady Catherine seemed pleased as she relaxed as much as her corset enabled. “And will you promise me never to enter into such an engagement?”

“I will make no promises of the kind. Ever.”

Once more into the fight, she inhaled and spoke, “Mr. Bennet, I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young man. Nothing is in your favour. Do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require.”

“Then at a stalemate of spite we shall remain, and I seem to be winning, as I have more time than you,” he rasped.

Her mouth was agape until Mrs. Bennet intercepted, “Your ladyship wants Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter, but our giving you the wished-for promise will not make their marriage at all more probable. I have tried thrice to have married children and my efforts have only succeeded one of those times. Supposing your nephew to be so attached to my son, would any refusal sway Darcy’s reaching hand to move to his cousin’s? Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that you have widely mistaken each of our characters, and frivolously come to us with such poor persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell, but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in ours.”
Her ladyship raised a gloved hand. “Not so hasty, if you please. I am by no means finished. To all the rational objections I have already urged, I have still more to add. I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest’s infamous elopement. I know it all; and I daresay more than you—”

“You don’t,” James countered.

Lady Catherine’s nostrils flared, but she progressed, “—that the young man’s marrying her was a patched-up business at the expense of your father and uncles. And is such a girl to be my nephew’s—in some distorted view—sister-in-law? Heaven and earth! I cannot even humour such wordage! Your union with him is incriminatory! I cannot believe I must discuss this when it will never come to last any how.”

“You would be surprised how well my sort do in this world,” James voiced quietly. He would not dare tell her of William’s involvement to Lydia’s marriage.

She huffed, “Am I truly the sole being who sees every angle of foolishness to this mess? Wickham to be once again so closely attached to the Darcy family—Of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?

“Well go on then, your mother has spoken for herself, what of you? What can you think will happen once you and William age and a man of such fortune bears no children?”

James’ voice felt hollow. “Pemberley will go to Georgiana, and I am sure she will manage it even more beautifully than you’ve managed Rosings Park.”

“And it will befall the ownership of whatever man she marries!”

His brow furrowed. “You are so terrified of change. I am not afraid of Jane’s children inheriting Longbourn, because they surely will. I am not afraid of its being known as the home of Bingleys instead of Bennets. I am not afraid of a name fading inside the rush of time. I care only for Jane’s happiness, the health of her children, and Georgiana’s confidence in being a woman of privilege in such a den of snakes like you.

“You can now have nothing further to say. You have insulted me, in every possible method. I must beg you to leave my house.”

James began to move toward the door. His eye sockets ached as if his eyes were stone—

“You have no regard, then, for the honour and credit of my nephew! Unfeeling, selfish tyke! Do you not consider how a connection—and one such as this—will disgrace him and his sister in the eyes of everybody?”

He paused with his hand on the knob. “Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say. You know my sentiments.”

“Then you are resolved to have him?”

“I am resolved to be responsible for my own happiness, and the happiness of anyone who is brave enough to attach themselves to my treachery. This will be done without reference to you or any person so wholly unconnected with me.”

“You are determined to ruin him in the opinion of all his friends, and make him the contempt of the world,” she spat.

“I know the man and his friends a great deal better than you, your ladyship, and I can proudly say
it has been an honour sharing their company. William, Charles, and Georgiana, none of them fear
the world as you do. There is a reason William never let your tendrils wrap around Pemberley.
William never once approached me in a secret manner, he never once feared the indignation of the
world. He has only held me in the highest regard and treated me as such. Your asking me to not do
the same for him is absolutely shameful and vile. I will have nothing more to do with you.”

He marched from the room as Lady Catherine’s voice rang out, “Do not imagine that your
ambition will ever be gratified!”

And then his mother’s, “Be silent, you infernal cow! A ladyship you may be but you are not the
lady of this house, and I demand your silence as well as your removal! You’ve sought to injure my
boy, and insulted two of my girls, and all I can say is that not enough money in the world has made
you so fortunate as to have Jamie to combat with over myself!

“You’ve been given a precious gem from our county, and I can only hope Charlotte does bloody
right by your own. As for the rest of us: Longbourn, Netherfield, and Meryton will only host you in
the most strictly necessary of manner. Longbourn may be a small estate, but she is self-sufficient,
long adored, and full of more heart than your entire bloody park has ever known! Now, if you are
quite finished, get out!”

Her ladyship’s heels clicked sharply over the floor, her feather bobbing ever-elegantly behind her
as she strode to the door Mr. Bennet was already holding open. Lady Catherine spared a final
moment to growl up at him, “You raised a fowl creature for a son. Have you any notion what my
word over his can do?”

The man drawled, “Your ladyship, nothing more would please me than to close this door without
gracing you with a response. However you are on our threshold, and I must tell you, not only to
move a pace backward before I am given that pleasure, but also that any card removed from a
pyramid makes all the cards fall, regardless of suit or value. So pick away. At the very least, we
will be below fair William to catch him.”

Her astonishment swayed her backward, and the door shut with the loud latch of its lock.

Chapter End Notes

Lady C: you know why I’m here.
J: ?? you got me.
Lady C: your gay is polluting my nephew!
J: I think you severely underestimate how gay this generation is.

When Mrs. Bennet says she’s tried three times to marry her kids off, she means Jane
twice and Kitty once. Lydia was quite out of her power so she doesn’t count it.

“Tyke,” is an old British way of calling someone (a man) a disagreeable
asshole...according to my dictionary.
The house was silent and dark. James had returned to his room, leaving his family in a stupor. His mother’s noises slowly faded as the hour dragged on, and eventually Mary and Kitty’s rooms fell silent. Jane tried to light a candle to sit with him, but he had insisted on sleep. Naturally, he remained wide awake, his stomach aching while he chewed another espresso bean.

He listened to Jane’s breathing for a while, to the gentle creaks and voice of the house, until he was certain all were asleep. Then with coffee sack in hand, he donned his old, weathered coat and stepped into his similarly aged but trusted boots. He only paused when Alyss met his legs as he stepped out the door. Bending to stroke her soft, pale fur and pick out a couple of brambles, James inhaled the night air: already balmy with a new day yet still frosted from the moon. The cat’s body froze at an unheard sound in the underbrush and took off, leaving James free to eat as he walked.

Careful not to awaken the house, he set off at a slow pace along the same path his father had taken himself and Charles. A path he had shown James as a boy, and one he had tread hundreds, thousands of times, so much so that the soft earth was scarred from growing fresh vegetation. As he walked, James opened his throat to the cold, his untied hair pressing against his upturned collar as he felt his muscles stretch. A bird or two trilled a greeting. It was still too early, even for them.

The lake had always been his favourite, albeit for the insects that congregated over it. The season kept them slumbering in the ground, leaving him free to tread alongside the water’s gentle music. Netherfield had views of its vast green expanse, but Longbourn had its intimate creeks and stone beaches if one knew where to find them.

James felt a twinge of remembrance as he passed an anchored canoe he had not used in ages; not since he had fallen asleep in it and Mr. Bennet had swam out and oared them back to shore. His father had been amused. His mother had been terrified, and then angry when she learned her husband let him sleep the whole day, only informing her that James had been found when they both arrived for dinner.

James preferred the water glittering with gold, but that hour had not come, so he walked on. Longbourn was bigger than most knew, as the only busy part of the property was around the house. Fields, acres, were haphazardly planted with things that were then left to tend themselves: whole stretches of Lucerne, wheat and barley, herbs of all kinds which were untouchable in the thick of summer, since the bees claimed the perfumed acreage for their own.

James found his favourite: a Lucerne meadow already sprouting indigo and violet blossoms in the green that splattered dew on his shins. Here and there a rogue yellow weed was present, lovely amongst the green that was almost black in the morning darkness. In the meadow stood a fence of cut and stacked logs, more of an establishing line than any hindrance keeping someone from crossing between Longbourn and Netherfield.

In a fit of young rage, James had dismantled a portion of it, and the logs had remained to be blanketed with moss and fungi, decorated by pinkish Valerian. James had awoken in his father’s arms, having fallen asleep in the field after his temper burnt out. He was already being lulled back to sleep by the sway of his body as Mr. Bennet chuckled, “To hell with the fence anyway. Netherfield won’t miss a few acres. The meadow is yours.”
With his eyes, James found the spots he often spent grueling summer afternoons, when the sun was too high to inspire anything productive, and lying on the earth was the only way to keep cool after swimming in the streams. Right in the center, he had awoken to fingers tracing his hairline. He knew his mother’s touch from the worn softness of her fingertips as she crooned, “Darling, I think you might have my temperament.”

He had found himself in her lap and rolled over, pressing his face to her abdomen while her hand buried in his hair, protecting him as he cried back into slumber.

James reached into the bag, but found it empty. He pocketed it as he chewed the last bean, savouring the smooth chocolate on his tongue before the grainy caffeine washed down his throat. A blanket of fog was suspended around him, testament of the seasons still discussing when summer should reign. He had not properly noticed the sky beginning to thin out with the dawn...

It took a long time for a melodic rustling to filter through the gentle noise of the sleeping meadow. James expected it to be a doe, so often did they frequent these fields with a fawn or two clumsily announcing themselves. Long enough for James to know the details of his face as William stepped to meet him.

James stared at him, his dark hair rumpled and the lot of him so unkempt that James thoughtlessly reached out—

A burst of sound escaped him as he whipped his hand back from the soft white shirt sticking out from the coat. William’s eyes widened, puzzled yet amused. “Did you think I wasn’t real?”

“What—Well, yes!” James exclaimed, his hand feeling like excited needles were dancing through it.

“What—Do you hallucinate with regularity?” Darcy said with the gentleness of sincerity.

“No! Just—What am I supposed to think when you’re supposed to be in London? And now you’re walking?” The silliness of his own words filled his ears, so he tried again, “What are you doing here?”

A flash of a smile donned his face but faded as William’s head bowed to glance at the ground. “I’ve been inspired to try walking. By my aunt.”

His gaze lifted warily, unsure how to tread the subject. James scoffed, “Yes, she travels fast for her age.”

Silence eclipsed them. James realized how tired he was. His eyes flicked back to William, and fell into a gaze so compassionate his lips parted. “I’m so sorry,” William murmured.

James’ heart felt bruised and…confused. “You don’t need to apologize,” he all but whispered.

“Yes, I do. I hadn’t known…” He closed his eyes in a long blink and a soft shake of his head. “To spare you the details, I tried to keep her from coming. And I failed you.”

James swallowed, but for all the good it did, his voice betrayed him. “No you didn’t.”

William’s features were soft, his every movement gentle as his chin tilted, waiting. Mounting emotion quickly hollowed James’ words. “I can’t—”

He stopped, is face dropping toward the ground. “I can’t tell you how felt your kindness is… I can’t…”
Heavy eyes lifted. “I can’t give back the generosity you’ve given us in any form of gratitude, because it isn’t enough.”

“It’s enough.”

James’ brows pinched together as he shifted his weight. Even now, William was too good to him. “No it isn’t. The way we’ve treated you after…after what you did for my sister—for both of them! Were it known to the rest of my family, you wouldn’t be treated so…”

“Lizzy.”

Air filled his throat as the word hung between them, until the flicker of a smile or a sob lifted James’ mouth. William moved a step forward. “We are each of us flawed, and I…I’d like for my goodness to have been the reason…but it wasn’t. That is not to say that I wish ill or indifference to your siblings’ lives, but my part in their happiness was brought by my own selfish desire to please you. Much as I respect them, I thought only of you.”

A soft smile warmed his features as he gazed at James, who was too dumbfounded and embarrassed to rescind anything but a stupefied stare. William finished with a tired, “Though I had very much hoped half of my involvement would’ve remained unknown. I did not think Mrs. Gardiner was so little to be trusted.”

Despite himself, a snort escaped James, “No, but Lydia is to be trusted exactly so. Once her thoughtlessness betrayed to me your name, my aunt knew it was easier to relent the tale instead of deviating my interest.”

William’s features opened, something in James’ words putting a light behind his eyes. “Ah…and is it true you broke his nose?”

“Chipped a tooth too,” he shrugged, and then frowned. “How did you even hear of that?”

William smiled, a laugh pulsing deep in his chest. Instead of answering, he replied in a long sigh, “I am now intimately familiar with the evil of distance.”

“What, five kilometers?” Jamie teased, but a look from the man silenced him as he removed a folded paper from his coat.

“I wanted a reply…but I never reached the opportunity—or perhaps the tenacity—to send it.”

James blinked, his features pinching ever so slightly as he beat fatigue aside while a burst of caffeine urged him to say, “Tell me now.”

But William smiled somewhat sadly. “It is unfinished, and nothing more than something to incite laughter.”

James felt his heart fluttering like a hummingbird’s wings, suspended as it was in his chest. “I wouldn’t laugh.”

William met his gaze with a brightness of hope behind his eyes. “You are the one who is too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last…last we spoke of such things, you would do well to tell me so at once—”

“They’re not the same.”

William’s mouth remained open, his words caught. With every word he next spoke, pain bruised
his features. “You needn’t be generous. One word from you will silence me on this subject forever.”

“After you’re finally talking?” James whispered, his voice lost. It was his turn to smile sadly as he felt all the shame of the last year fill his eyes, but he forced himself to hold William’s gaze, to let him see all of it. “I have pushed you into hell and am selfishly trying to pull you back.” He swallowed and inhaled. “Do you still…?”

James could not finish. He did not know what he would do at the reply. Sprint from the field. Disintegrate among the dewdrops.

William smiled, his eyes wet. “Most ardently.”

Time hovered around them. Only William’s smile moved as James struggled to process, “Lizzy, I love you.”

William was standing right before him, his hand slowly reaching to cradle Jamie’s face, giving him time to refuse. He whispered, “Sweetheart—”

Jamie reached for his rumpled lapels the same moment he rocked onto his toes, craning his chin to find William’s mouth. He had startled the man, but only slightly, as his hands found James’ waist. He felt his boot catch on the stalks of a plant as he was lifted off the ground, William’s mouth opening for him as James’ arms encircled his shoulders. Their lips moved together, clumsy and soft until James parted for air, in time to feel his rear placed atop the piled logs. Had the fence always been so low?

William held him close, standing between James’ parted knees as his head sank down to rest against James’ shoulder and neck.

“I’m sorry,” James breathed into his hair, inhaling the ghosts of amber hair oil, citrus soap, and something else that might have been William himself. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

He felt William shake his head. “I think I would wait forever.”

“Now that is laughable.”

And James did laugh: choked sobs of residual anguish before bliss glittered in his tears. William stood up, gently lifted his chin and coaxing him with kisses to his forehead, his temples. “Stop thinking you’re worth so little. You are precious to me.” He paused. “You taste of coffee. Did you get my gift?”

“I ate it.”

William blinked as his eyes focused. “All of it?”

James wore a silly smile as he extracted the sack from his coat. William simply took it and stuffed it and the useless letter back inside his raiment. “I’ll refill it.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I want to.”

“Oh, here we go,” James chuckled, wiping his cheeks only to let his head fall heavily onto William’s shoulder. His arms slid around his torso, leaving William’s hands free to rub his neck, explore his hair, and rub his shoulder blades. The sky was beginning to be fringed with the softest
orange behind the tree line. “How did you find me here?”

William kissed his hair before relaying, “My haste and failure to stop my aunt brought me back to my rooms in Netherfield. It has been…a long night.”

James’ head moved so his chin was on his shoulder. “She’s there now?”

“Yes, and probably readying to leave. I was furious. Livid at my inability to stop her; at my arriving after she had already spoken with you. I was certain she had ruined whatever favour you and I had grown between ourselves, but apparently she did not meet the profuse obedience she is so used to receiving.”

A soft snort went into the smooth wool his coat. “From a Bennet, she will never receive such a thing.”

He heard William swallow, and a hand on his nape prompted James to sit up, to let their foreheads come together. “Poor Charles had to witness it all, as only a true friend would have stood in the storm we unleashed in his house. But I could hardly care once she told me… I was seduced into hope, as I had scarcely ever allowed myself to hope before. I thought I knew enough of your disposition to be certain that you would be honest, as you’ve ever been. That, had you been absolutely decided against me, you would have acknowledged it to her, frankly and openly.”

James’ lips pressed together. “I didn’t.”

William kissed him for a long moment, a testament to his comfort that he learned Jamie’s lips at his leisure; pivoting his head and moving his lips to feel the supple flesh give under his own.

“You didn’t.” he confirmed.

“After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruple in abusing you to your relations.”

William chuckled and continued, “So I hoped, and lay awake until I could bear it no longer. In my wanderings, I followed the gardens and fields and whatever small, forgotten paths I knew to be going in this direction…until I arrived here. I would’ve been content just to come within sight of the house, but…I reckon that’s false now. I might’ve waited until someone came outside before my sensibilities returned to me. I suppose I needn’t ask how you did the same.”

But Jamie obliged, “It’s where I always come. When I…can’t bear to be with myself, let alone anyone else. Sit here.”

William peeked at the place he was patting on the log. “This fence is old. Will it hold us both?”

“It better. It was a nightmare to push over.”

William visibly calculated what that meant, his gaze moving to the dismantled and knocked over portion beside them. “I take it that wasn’t from any duty to labour,” he teased, swinging his leg over the fence. The topmost log was wide enough for them to sit facing each other comfortably. James moved closer, his knee nudging William’s until he decidedly draped his leg over William’s thigh. An amused twitch lifted William’s lips, his fingertips mapping the slope of that knee into his shin.

“It was years ago. I was angry over something stupid.”

William peered at him with curiosity as he took James’ hands, warming his fingers. “Tell me.”
So he did. James told him how out of place he had felt as a boy in a houseful of girls, before the years brought to light how perhaps it wasn’t their strangeness, but his own that ostracized him from them. He told William of the jealousy he experienced at Lydia’s open regard of the male sex, as well as his fear. Fears he had never shared with anyone about himself, and so did William.

“When I first watched you at the Meryton ball,” he voiced, “It…angered me…to see you experiencing more happiness in an evening than I had in years. Of course I had the logic to know better, but my habits of stoicism and separation prevailed. You’ve thought my title and money provide me with certain liberties…but this is far from the case. You exhibit all of the freedom I have craved since I was a boy, innocent of my side of the world.”

James’ lips curved on one side. “I suppose it’s all relative.”

William agreed. “Of course I believed myself perfectly calm and cool, but I am since convinced I revealed my bitterness of spirit.”

James could not help but giggle at that. “I’ll take warm and foolish over the alternative.”

He received a smile as William’s fingers pushed inside his coat sleeve. “I know I have been a villain for most of our knowing one another—”

“You needn’t reflect on it.”

“No, please let me,” he hushed, but not angrily. “I have been a selfish being all my life. As a child, I was taught what was supposedly right, but not taught to correct my temper. It may not manifest itself in the usual violence of noise that men are fond of using, but I’ve had a temper nevertheless. I was given good principles, but unfortunately being an only son—for many years an only child—meant I was spoilt by my parents. Though good in themselves, they inadvertently taught me to be selfish and overbearing, which I eventually thought justified, as I had a great deal to inherit.”

Perhaps they meant for you to have the fortitude to withstand the likes of Caroline Bingley.”

His seriousness gave way to reluctant amusement. “I think they sought to protect me from the world, you are correct in that. I have a memory of a nanny telling my mother how contrary I was, full of heart but also so full of head. After my mother’s passing, spurred on by my father’s grief, I was taught to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of the rest of the world, especially after Wickham. I was never inspired or warned of the dangers in not choosing one’s family…not until I met you. You showed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please someone worthy of being pleased.”

James chuckled with a dash of sardonic humour. “It is some jape of the universe, pitting your innocence against my cynicism.”

“I never would have described myself as ‘innocent’…until you asked me if I was god-fearing. I was sure you knew my feelings for you, so openly had you asked such a thing.”

Jamie kept his hands open, adoring how William traced his wrists, held them palm to palm. “I posed the same question to her ladyship. I was surprised when she didn’t list damnation as a reason to hinder your involvement with me.”

He faced an apologetic smile. “Christian charity keeps her close enough to God and slakes her need to place herself in people’s lives.”

James could not help but smirk; he felt the same giddiness as when Jane spoke ill of somebody. “It would’ve been a comfort that she fears something, but still not a weapon against me. My father’s
logic has kept me long away from fearing God. The church on the other hand…”

William shared his smirk. “The realm of men is the more treacherous to navigate.”

James’ gaze lifted, their smiles mirroring each other until the former’s began to fade. His lashes sagged closed when William kissed his forehead. “And you’re…still sure you don’t mind navigating it with me?”

The sigh he pushed through his nose was answer enough as William once more pressed his forehead to Jamie’s. “If I am to prove my selfishness—”

“No one’s proving anything!”

“After finally tasting your reciprocation—”

“William,” James whined.

“Lizzy,” he breathed upon James’ lips. He surrendered himself to William’s kiss, the taste of his tongue sliding between his lips, sweet after so much bitterness. William held his cheek as the gentle wet sound passed between them, parting enough to say, “I know you fear for my reputation, but more lords and rich men than you might expect go unnoticed, living and dying as bachelors. I would have my truth known to you, and all you trust. I am not socially inclined enough to raise suspicion. What is the point of a title, if I cannot use it for dastardly deception?”

“Oh no, you’re already sounding like me,” James teased, but the worry did not leave his face.

William kissed him and purred, “I would have all of you, Lizzy. In my home, in my bed. Whether the structure around us is yours or mine, I haven’t a preference. And if the world fails us, we’ll have Netherfield.”

Sarcasm lifted James’ lips, inducing William to say, “What? You think the Bingleys won’t host us?”

“I think my sister resigned herself long ago to having my constant presence in her life.” Giggles bubbled forth, moving James backward lest they bump heads—and then he froze as it struck him all over again. “My sister’s a Bingley.”

William chuckled. “For a while longer, she’s still a Bennet, and she will always be your sister. Georgiana’s voiced an eagerness to meet the rest of your family.”

“They will like her very much. Kitty’s been pestering me to ask you if Georgiana came with you.”

“I suspect Netherfield will be filling up quite fast.”

James felt himself leaning closer. “The wedding isn’t happening that soon.”

William met him over their huddled legs and hands. James liked his slow way of kissing. “Might I steal you away to my rooms anyways?”

Jamie stared dumbly. “You mean now?”

William smiled. “Not now, but soon.”

“Charles is dense but not that dense. We will be incredibly obvious.”

“No one is more so a lover of love than Charles, and he is particularly enlightened as far as my
James gazed down at their hands while he asked, “What do you mean?”

The answer was far from what he was expecting. “On the eve of our coming back here, I made a confession to him, which I ought to have made long ago. I told him of all that had occurred to make my former, impertinent interference in his affairs so distant from his true desires. His surprise was great, and his anger justified. He had never the slightest suspicion.”

He provided a moment for James to absorb that. Afterward, the latter wondered, “I’ve never seen Charles angry before, apart from general annoyance at his sister.”

“He turns just as scarlet as you might imagine.”

James’ eyes widened, and then he was swaying backward with laughter. William eventually grinned with him, and the sight of William Darcy comfortably in love was more than James could bear. Lifting their hands up, he made the man’s palms cup his cheeks, and felt himself pulled forward for William to breathe him in.

“Long story short, here we are.”

Chapter End Notes

Charles: I’ll call you Jamie!
William: I’d literally tear the sky down for you, I’m calling you Lizzy.

*Long sigh*
I’ve literally daydreamed about this chapter since I had the very idea for this story in my head. It’s easily the most important chapter, since these lads just need to hecking talk to one another, and that’s what I wanted: a long, soft discussion, filled with verbal as well as physical intimacy. As Mr. Bennet said in the last chapter, the Bennets catch whoever they deem worthy; like Charles, they stand by those they love in any storm. I wanted this place so filled with Jamie’s past and emotions to be where William gets his reciprocation. Where Jamie’s allowed to be vulnerable, and William’s allowed to be less than perfect.
Jane’s head lifted from the pillow, her eyes puffy with sleep. “Lizzy? You’re up?”

The answer came in the form of a clattering tray of tea on the bed. “Will you cut my hair?”

She could only stare at him while he went about the room, quiet for her groggy nerves, but nonetheless readying the vanity chair for the task. Sitting up and drinking her tea, Jane let the spark of lemon brighten her awareness as the rising sun did the same to the room. Eventually she ventured, “Did you sleep?”

“No. I’ll sleep later,” he replied, doubled over the basin as he washed his hair.

When Jane stood behind his seat, tying off her own and adjusting her nightgown sleeves, she asked, “Just how it was, then?”

“Shorter, please.”

Taking the shears in hand, Jane clipped his hair close to his nape and followed up the back of his head. Where his hair was parted off to the side, she now pulled it from the crown to fall over his forehead; the shortened tresses fell at a tousled, asymmetrical angle above his eyes. The floppy locks, the color of amber honey, began to curl at the ends as they dried, even more so as he ruffled his hair, sending it in random directions.

“Hold still,” she giggled, taking an unused polishing brush and swatting away bits of hair. Warming her favourite lemon oil on her hands, she ran it through his hair, reestablishing something pleasantly unkempt but still appropriate. “There now.”

James experimentally raked his fingers through it, combing it back and watching it slowly fall back over his brows. “Thank you.”

His sister’s demeanour faltered as she moved aside for him to stand and undress for further bathing. He made quick work of it and was already donning a new shirt when she asked, “Are you all right?”

James’ head perked up. “I’m fine.”

Jane squinted, her features pinching together as she chirped. “You’re sure?”

A smile of all things flashed on his face. “I’m very well. I’ll be downstairs.”

He left Jane in a confused state as he traversed the stairs and found his mother in her robe, speaking to Hill who had just arrived. “Morning, mama.”

He kissed her cheek the same moment she exclaimed, “Oh, darling! What do you want for
breakfast? Absolutely anything you want—for no apparent reason. We’ve got sausages, don’t we, Hill?”

“We do, and the Mrs. sent me over with a pair of loaves to bake, ma’am,” he answered, heaving a woven basket upon the counter isle for her inspection.

“This many eggs? We can’t take them all from you—”

Hill curtailed, “We have the lot to spare, believe me, and the currant bushes are weighed down with so much fruit. Have your way with it.”

Mrs. Bennet crossed her arms around herself with a sigh, “I do wish we had raspberries to mix with the currants—Lizzy!”

James blinked against his mother’s hands turning his face to properly inspect his hair. Her astonishment eased into a grin as she cooed, “Oh, it was Jane who did it? You look marvelous. Like a gentleman from London, I reckon.”

“I thought it was time,” he admitted, gently removing her hands so he could light the coals of their oven.

“I didn’t mind it long, you know,” she declared while taking a seat at the counter. She plucked a long sprig of chamomile blossoms from the glass carafe that had been improvised as a vase. “There’s something gallant to long hair—not that short hair is unseemly. It connotes a handsome tidiness.”

“I’ll have to try again, then. I despise living up to honourable expectations,” he teased, earning a smirk and a swat from the plant.

His mother observed Hill’s leaving the kitchen, likely to relay to Mr. Bennet certain details of the farm’s wellbeing this morning. “I must say, you’re rather cheery after such a night. We needn’t talk about it! I won’t ruin the mood further than this.”

“Mama, it’s fine,” he hushed, pouring her tea.

Prompted, she commenced, “The nerve! Of course I had a good notion after all that ridiculous Collins has said, but one must keep the benefit of the doubt close at hand. After meeting that ladyship, I’ve quite lost any desire to meet another!”

“They’re not all bad.”

“Oh?” she chimed, letting her jaw rest in her hand while she eyed him. “And when were you going to tell me there was a charm I wasn’t seeing in his lordship?”

Jamie’s hands froze around the ceramic jar of sugar. “I…I never really thought you knew…”

“Darling,” she scoffed. “What can you possibly mean? I told you before: never mistrust a mother’s intuition! How could I not have known after that dreadful business with Jane’s first suitor? I know illness of the heart when I see it. Although I never expected you to open your heart to Lord Darcy. Then again, he is handsome. I admitted that the moment I saw him.”

“He’s more than handsome—and I don’t want to hear a word about his money,” he added quickly, feeling giddy with something like embarrassment as well as if the waters of his soul were finally calming after years of trepidation.
Mrs. Bennet waved her hand, declaring innocence until she shook her head coyly. “You do aim high.”

“I wasn’t aiming!”

She smirked. “So when can I expect him? Or has he run away to London to avoid this whole business of his aunt’s?”

“He hasn’t run away,” James defended tiredly.

“Good! I would certainly forbid this pairing if he were a coward. It is not your duty to be brave for the both of you, not where the heart is concerned. I would never forgive him if he abused you in such a way. Nothing is worse than a lover who takes instead of loves. Thank you,” she finished, accepting her cup of tea.

She slid off the stool to go dress while chiming over her shoulder, “Best keep at it. I can already hear your sisters descending, and they will be most ornery with nothing in their bellies.”

James could not help but smile and laugh to himself as Kitty arrived with her amber and golden curls wild around her head. Mary’s loose braid hung around her waist as her slender fingers closed around a cup similar to how Jane took her tea. When Kitty began unloading spoonful after spoonful of sugar into her cup, James swiped it from her with a complaint for her teeth.

“Come on, Lizzy! I’m tired!”

“Then wait for breakfast!”

Kitty exclaimed rudely, “Agghh!” which James simply matched until Mary’s giggles calmed the room.

Mr. Bennet followed the chatter into the kitchen, where he observed his children for a long moment before he descended the stairs and handed James one of the dishtowels. Without thinking, James took it, incidentally trading his cup of tea. By the time James realized his mistake, Mr. Bennet was already sipping contently. “Ah, perfect.”

“Wha—Wait!”

“Thank you very much,” Mr. Bennet cooed on his way out. He heard the fading laughter of his daughters as his wife intercepted his path to his study.

“Husband, dress yourself! We are to have visitors.”

“I benevolently refuse until I’ve finished my tea.”

But his wife hissed, “From our bedroom window, I’ve just seen your daughter’s fiancé riding up to our house this very moment with Lord Darcy! Dress yourself! Our son’s happiness is very much at stake!”

She shuffled off, heralding Mary and Kitty to do something with their hair, but before she could justify their getting dressed, Mr. Bennet found himself back in the kitchen as well. “Jamie. I’m peckish for blueberry cake in particular, and there’s a bush right in between Hill’s property and ours. I’ve kept it secret from him for years; it’s technically his. A cup should suffice. You’ll have no trouble finding it. Mind the thorns.”

James caught the tin cup used for measuring cream, but exclaimed, “Why don’t you go?”
“Oh, I’m far too busy enjoying my tea,” he replied, sipping accordingly. James’ features pinched in disgruntlement as he marched out the door.

Mrs. Bennet, upon observing James vanish outside, reached for a shelf where a glass jar was clearly filled with dried blueberries. “Mr. Bennet?”

He set the tea back on the counter before answering, “There are few occasions when our son is so distracted. The timely reappearance of Mr. Darcy foretells that he has a great many things to say. If our son’s happiness is at stake, the man must speak for himself.”

Jane heard this all from the corridor, her head turning at the sound of Charles’ familiar knock. Between her sisters descending the stairs and Hill’s asking, “Would you like to get the door, Miss, or shall I?” Jane was roused from her thoughts. Taking Kitty and Mary in hand, she directed them to the parlour.

“You may do so, Mr. Hill, and I suppose breakfast will involve two more plates, if you please.”

“What’s happening?” Kitty exclaimed when Jane directed her siblings onto the sofa. “Who is here? Not that horrible woman again? She was so rude to you!”

“Hush, Kitty, please,” Jane stymied, quickly moving about the room to make it fit for guests.

Jane had never silenced Kitty before, and the result was bewildered obedience. Mary took her hand, equally shocking her before the former explained, “Sometimes observance is the conduit for answers.”

While she spoke, the door opened, and Charles appeared in the doorway with his lordship behind him—only to bump backwards as Charles moved aside. “Mrs. Bennet! Please, after you. Good morning, Mr. Bennet!”

“No need to be so formal!” they heard their mother proclaim. “I do believe we are past all that. After you, after the both of you.”

They did see her skirts fold in her curtsy to Darcy before the four of them entered the room. Jane could not help but notice Darcy’s leaning a bit to see down the corridor the same moment Kitty whispered, “Where’s Lizzy?”

“He’s outside,” Jane finished.

She passed a reassuring smile to Charles, who came to stand beside her and take her hand while he announced, “I must apologize twofold. One, for disturbing you all before you’ve even had your breakfast, and second—”

“Because of me,” Darcy’s velvet tone intercepted. Charles sent him a concerned look before the man insisted, “It’s all right. She’s my aunt. I had hoped to intervene in Lady Catherine’s arriving here. Instead I not only failed, but she called at a most inappropriate hour concerning not just my personal affairs, but one of your own.

“My aunt is…known for her insensitive manner and directness of speech. I do not name these attributes as excusatory of her behaviour. She is not the sort of person to be sorry for anything, but I am. It is, of course, each of your decisions to forgive in any measure you see fit, but I can assure all of you that she has set off back to Hunsford this morning. I put her in the carriage myself with fresh horses.”

A stifling silence might have followed if it were not for Charles declaring, “Which was quite a feat.
She’s bloody proud of those stallions.” He peeked down at Jane. “They match her phaeton.”

A high-pitched sound drew their gazes to Kitty covering her mouth. Mary’s eyes widened before soft giggles escaped her, warranting further stares from the room.

Mr. Bennet rumbled, “I like brief apologies.”

Mrs. Bennet chimed. “Yes, everything seems quite in line. Kitty and Mary, won’t you go prepare the table? Take care to set out eight places.”

“Really?” Charles blurted.

“Yes, of course!” Mrs. Bennet said with a wave of her hand. “In fact, as son-in-law, I might be so bold as to put you to work as well. The three of you will make a wonderful team. It is good for a man to know his way around the fork and spoon.”

Charles looked a mixture of relief and glee, and had every intention of taking Jane with him before she placed her other hand over his own. “I’ll stay a while longer.”

Charles absorbed this, and the state of the eldest Bennets standing opposite Darcy, who had not moved. An inquiring look to his friend earned a soft bow of his head, and Charles left the room without another word.

Mr. Bennet added on a lighter note, “Shall we take turns?”

Jane stood. “I will not take part in overwhelming someone who has just shown enough consideration in apologizing to all of us. I’ll be in the foyer.”

“Then I’ll be in my library,” her father seconded with a look to his wife. “Be gentle with him.”

She saved any retaliation in favour of closing the door and came to stand not far from her place just a handful of hours prior. After a long moment, with Mrs. Bennet’s gaze scrutinizing him, she uttered, “You are much altered, since I last beheld you.”

William nodded. “I am much altered. For the better, I think.”

Her skirts rustled as she moved, planting her weight as she voiced, “In traditional courtship, there is much fluttery and dance, which women have been forced into mastering, while men retain either indifference or disdain of such maneuvering. I now must agree with the latter, because this involves my son, who—as established just in the dark hours of his morning—is not inclined to anything traditional.

“So I will be brief. My opinion of you has not been fond during my knowing you, however my Jamie stood for you against not only your relation, but a person of immense privilege and renown.”

“I know,” he replied with solemnity. “I received a detailed retelling by her ladyship personally.”

“And what was your evaluation?”

“Relief. Immense relief. And hope.”

Darcy had succeeded in surprising her, allowing him to continue, “It is not lost on me how grave the circumstances are which my aunt presented to James, nor what his retaliation could inflict. I can only assure you that my aunt values upholding our families’ reputation, through either the elimination of what she deems a threat, or by stifling all knowledge of scandal. Charles is witness
to my forcing her to choose the latter.”

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes widened, but otherwise she was silent. Her gown was loud in the quietude, her throat moving as she swallowed. “Whatever their faults or proclivities, I love each of my children, with my entire being. But Lizzy is the gem of this household, and he is in the most danger. As a mother of four girls, that is not an easy thing to say.”

“I understand,” and he did. As they gazed at each other, Mrs. Bennet’s age was more apparent than ever: the soft, weathered skin, the various spider webs of lines, and how her under eyes puffed with worry. It was a rare moment of tranquility that made William think for the first time that James rather looked like her instead of his father. “He will only stand for me the one time. He doesn’t stand alone any longer.”

Mrs. Bennet’s chest heaved with her long inhalation before she declared with lighthearted composure, “Good! It is exactly as I would have it. I won’t stand for this to begin with a temporary mindset. You will not be one of those individuals who changes their mind in favour of cruelty or the result of boredom. My Jamie is not the kind to tolerate such disregard.”

“Never in the world, ma’am, so long as Jamie is in it,” he uttered softly, with as much readiness as she had spoken. It had quite taken her by surprise, the reassurance of it, his calm sincerity. “May I ask, where is he?”

“Mr. Bennet as run him on an errand, so that you may run this gauntlet of ours. You will have a lot of us to answer to, you know! Should anything happen—”

The smile on Darcy’s face as he lowered his head to chuckle caught her off guard. “Yes, ma’am. I understand. Thank you.”

Mrs. Bennet was quite wrung out. Her whole body bobbed with her nod, and then she was arriving at the door. “I hope you like blueberry cake, because Mr. Bennet has ordered more of it than we’ll ever reasonably finish.”

She exhaled a vocal, “Oooh,” on her way through the corridor, leaving William to find his own way to the foyer, where Jane met him with the invitation, “Are you too hungry for a brief walk?”

Something moved behind his face, a twitch of a smile. “Not at all.”

At his gesture, she went first and he closed the house behind them. “Congratulations on your engagement.”

Jane made a sound of surprise. “Thank you, my lord! Um, might I—”

“William is fine.”

“William,” she chimed, “I’ve wondered if I’ve missed something. My brother’s demeanour hardly matches what it ought to after last night.”

“I was able to meet with him at dawn, quite by accident.”

Jane knew she wore a silly grin on her face, but made no efforts to quell it as she saw how her glee brought a wash of scarlet to his lordship’s cheeks. “All this is formality, then.”

“But no less necessary.”

“You needn’t be defensive. Your immediate arrival and apology is just the respect we desire. The
romantic company my brother likes is a secret only to Lydia and our extended family. For as much as my mother talks, you wouldn’t expect her to keep it from her own siblings, though I sometimes wonder if they know, in their own way. Lydia is, of course, too involved in her own self to pay anyone else much attention. You are quite safe with us.”

Jane let that linger between them as she guided their path around the front garden. When he was ready, William said, “I am surprised by how simple my reception as been so far.”

She chuckled, “We’re not complicated people. We love whom we love, and so long as respect is maintained from both sides, we’re not ones to cause trouble.” Darcy followed her gaze back to the house when she leaned forward. “It’s not Pemberley, but it’s home, and it’s ours. And for a lot of Jamie’s life, he wasn’t sure of that. Not until his fifteenth year.”

“He’s told me of it,” William said in a tone that did not require further details.

However Jane pushed on, “But how much? He won’t discuss it now, even with me.”

“Oh, I can. I’m his sister,” she chimed, earning a startled laugh from the man.

“You very much remind me of my own sibling.”

“I’d be thrilled to meet her. James had only nice things to say of her and Pemberley. Particularly the dogs. Our cat, Alyss, is so territorial, he’s never been able to have a dog. But he’s never complained. James was almost lost to us, if it hadn’t been for Alyss and our father.”

William said nothing, letting her speak. She gave him a reassuring smile. “I knew something had happened in Derbyshire the moment we met again in London. My brother is prone to mental afflictions; periods of melancholy which, thankfully, rarely escalate into his traveling to a place we cannot touch. Perhaps it was your presence in Derbyshire that kept him close, or the need to care for Kitty, or the familiarity of it, but at fifteen, he had none of those circumstances. I say none of this in an attempt to scare you away.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he calmed. “As far as I can tell, his emotional escalation is not unwarranted.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “There’s always a reason… I would say his head is perfectly level on his shoulders, like our father, but he inherited our mother’s heart. My father is often too calm, to the extent of being entirely unbothered despite the worst of events, whereas my mother is tumultuous. Lizzy has been both fortunate and cursed to inherit both attributes: his mind is strong but his heart is a storm.”

“You uncle Gardiner said something similar.”

She smiled, but her eyes saw far away. “I have always liked to think of myself as invincible when I am with him, but this is untrue. This is his ability, which I have only shared via proximity. To be with my brother is to be with a force of nature. At sixteen, I did not understand him; I simply wanted the opportunity to share his time, but who wants to be with their siblings at fifteen? I took his annoyance at my intruding on his friendship to be that very reason. It was not until that friend proposed to me, until I ignorantly accepted, that I understood anything.

“He broke Wickham’s nose, you know, for taking advantage of Lydia.”

William blinked, caught between the subject change. “Yes, and chipped a tooth, he said.”
She hummed in affirmation. “Because you had already settled their marriage and Wickham’s new position. Our father had to intervene when James discovered I was engaged to his lover.”

Jane peered at him, observing how that settled. “Thing is, Jamie has never been angry with me. Anyone else would have seen me as the one intruding on his relationship, but as he beat that poor fool with a cricket bat in this very garden, he was screaming how my fiancéd wasn’t good enough for me. My brother, who had never shown me any regard…and why should he? I was just one of his annoying sisters…

“But I wasn’t. I realized, even in his anguish, he loved me more than himself. Then he fainted in papa’s arms, and didn’t get out of bed for two and a half months.”

She sniffled, but only briefly, and cleared her throat. “The irony is that he believes he is nothing; that all he has to offer is his presence. He hasn’t fathomed how potent he is.”

She met Mr. Darcy’s gaze suddenly, her eyes clear. “Jamie feels things passionately, entirely. That much I’ve known, because I have seen his intelligence and awareness of society lock these traits inside of him. All I have been able to do is watch him suffer.”

Though she did not say it, the question was there: the accusation that she would not trust her brother in his care unless he was able to safeguard James’ happiness.

“I cannot guarantee that he won’t suffer with me. I am stubborn to a fault, and steadfast in my wants—”

Jane laughed, “Good! It would be dangerously idealistic to hope the two of you would never disagree or argue. It is only human to warrant discomfort on occasion.”

She turned back toward the direction of the house, moving along with the house on one side and the farm on the other while Darcy spoke. “I take Jamie’s discomfort more personally than is perhaps rational, but I intend to inspire more occasions of happiness than the alternative.”

Jane smiled up at him as they arrived at an open door into the house. “I look forward to seeing it. Just there, on the left,” she pointed into the house. “Don’t let the door fool you, papa’s waiting.”

William’s expression softened when she passed by him with a hand on his arm and the other knocking on her father’s study door. It was only just ajar, but William answered the summons within and shut it behind him. Mr. Bennet was standing at the window, an open book in his hands. Without preamble, he said, “If you’re to join this family, you’ll have to do away with the title in domestic situations.”

“William, I am content being called William. But Fitzwilliam is my cousin.” The tinge of mirth in his tone drew Mr. Bennet’s gaze from his pages.

“That is a good start. You have a lot in your favour at the start. More money than you’ll ever know what to do with, a family estate, and most would consider your having one sister a benefit, however your aunt certainly makes up for having a lack of in-law relations. But that is nothing at all to do with your character.

“We have known you to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man, but this would be nothing if Lizzy really liked you. And yet…after the confrontation last night, my son displays none of the weight his mind has previously done in past years. He is happy this morning. Am I right in assuming you are responsible for this?”

William realized he had been holding his breath. “If I may be so bold as to claim such a privilege. I
had the luck of coming across him early this morning.”

“Then your hearts are very much settled?”

“Mine is, and I was given the promise that his is as well. Do you have objections?”

Mr. Bennet took his time closing his book, setting it down on the windowsill, and turning to lean his pelvis against it. “I am not a religious man, William. I ceased with all of it when I understood how money ruled this country, not faith. It has ostracized me from my family, but I never missed them because my wife’s relatives embraced me readily. My highest priority has been crafting my children into the best people they can be. I cannot say I have been successful with them all, however I adore them each in a way you may or may not ever understand. When they are in pain I feel it in the marrow of my bones, and my James has experienced too much pain.

“London physicians would diagnose him with the general term, ‘madness.’ The religious would have him treated and likely killed in the process. The evolutionists would call him peculiarly natural; men and dogs and primates have had same sex relations for longer than religious types care to admit.

“I call him my son. He’s my Jamie. That is all. Do you understand?”

William held his gaze steadily, his amber irises bright. “I do, sir.”

“If I entrust him to your care, I am trusting you with more than his safety; his happiness and his pain, his laughter and his tears. If you will not treasure them all, you will do more than dishonour yourself: you will never deserve him.”

The answer was ready upon William’s lips, his words more sure than any he had ever spoken. “On the contrary, Mr. Bennet, it will be my constant study to know James’s pleasures, his laughter, and his tears. I will consider my life well lived so long as I am able to share in his happiness and his laughter, but when the others should appear, I will be his constant ally. I do not ever intend to take him so far from you that you cannot reach him, and I will never allow someone else to remove him from me, unless he chooses to himself.”

Mr. Bennet’s crossed arms slowly relaxed, and his head turned at the distant sound of a door shutting. “Well then. I think it’s rather time for us to complain about food until it is presented to us. You may find your beloved in the kitchen. He may be a bit scratched up. Our wild blueberry bushes are more treacherous than you’d imagine. Straight down the corridor. You’ll find your way.”

* * * * * * *

James came through the kitchen door feeling both worse for wear and invigorated by the morning sunlight. Though his eyes ached from lack of sleep, he set the tin of berries on the counter and found his former cup of tea gone cold. Nevertheless, he drank the mug dry, and rotated to rifle through the basket Hill had moved to the stove counter. As he counted eggs, he let his thoughts wander among recent memories.

“You’re sure? It’s a long walk.”

“I want to,” William had soothed, taking Jamie’s hand and starting their progress back to the house after they came down from the fence. Eventually he had not been able to contain his giggles, inducing William to inquire, “What?”

“You’re walking me home. How chivalrous.”
“It would be truer to say I am having trouble letting you go.”

“I won’t vanish when the sun is up.”

“But you’ll let me verify that for myself.”

James put the eggs inside the large jar of flour so he could move them all to the island counter, but with the sight of William coming down the three stairs, it was all James could do to gawk and hold the vessel against his torso. “This is a kitchen.”

William gazed at him, coming right to the opposite side of the counter while Hill bowed. “I am aware. You may stand, sir, please don’t mind me.”

“You’re in a kitchen!” James piped.

“I don’t burst into flames from being next to a stove,” William assured. He slid onto one of the stools while he elaborated, “As a child, I demanded to be wherever the food was, even if it was not yet at table. The habit returned once I inherited the house…however my cooks are frighteningly territorial. They were far more tolerant when I was a child.”

“As big as you are now, I can see why,” James murmured, breaking the eggs into a bowl. Then his head jerked up. “How long have you been here?”

However he was not given an answer, as William reached across the counter to carefully pull a small branch from his hair the same moment Mrs. Bennet arrived. “Lizzy, you’re free to use those, but your father’s neglected the entire jar, just there.”

She pointed at the shelf on her way to the kettle hanging over the fire. “You haven’t poured him tea yet? Oh, isn’t his hair lovely? Jane cut it just this morning. Lizzy dear, you need to pull a comb through it. Darcy, what do you put on your toast?”

A clumsy smile lifted his lips. “I’m not particular, but I enjoy jam.”

“We’ll have currant jam for the next year,” she scoffed. Her head lifted to Jane on the stairs. “Jane, do help your brother with the cake. Kitty! Where’s she gone?”

“Turning the pages for Mary,” Jane replied, already sifting flour the same moment a piano was heard through the walls.

James set his elbows on the counter to catch William’s attention. He caught him stirring his tea. “You might want to wait in the dining room.”

His eyes peeked at Jane, who smiled as she moved for her mother to reach the stove. “We are energetic in the morning. A side effect of living on a farm.”

“I don’t mind,” he assured, his brow furrowing as he took a sip. “This is good.”

James smirked. “Two parts milk, one part cream.”

Mrs. Bennet turned around, frowning. “Did you hear someone at the door?”

Jane and her brother looked at each other, silently sharing that they had not heard anything, but James volunteered, “I’ll check. Can I put your coat in the dining room?”

But as William handed him the garment, he murmured, “You may check the pocket if you like.”
James was not sure what to infer from that, but as he hung the coat on the chair next to his own, he indulged. Inside the breast pocket was a sack of coffee beans, and a sprig of lucerne blossoms wrapped in a wet handkerchief. Smiling to himself, he held the items as he opened the door—

A familiar, pale face looked at him from under her parasol.

“Miss Anne—er, Lady de Bourgh,” James stumbled into a bow.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said I made an alternate chapter 2 for all the Charles & James shippers? You can read it on MY WEBSITE! It's totally free and I'm working on uploading all of P&P and The King's Cup to it, but for now, have this chapter and a little spicy extras on the side ;)

Happy holidays! You can find the alternate chapter under the What's New tab ;)

Please ignore whatever the FLUFF those images are attached to the chapter titles -.- they don't behave like any other image on the site; I swear they're glued into its coding. So it's still under a bit of maintenance, but I wanted you guys to have this <3

One last thing, to the incredibly kind person who once asked me if I was ever going to post this chapter on ao3, I replied to you in a really unnecessarily rude way, and I want to apologize. In truth, I didn't know if/when/how I was going to release it here, but I hope this makes up for it and that you are having a wonderful December <3

Original notes for this chapter:

Mrs. Bennet: Charles, set the table, there’s a dear.
Charles: Dope. Tables, love it.

Mr. Bennet: Humble yourself so far down as the kitchen.
William: Is there a wedding altar in there? I’m ready.

End Notes

This work has fanart!! Send them some love <333

You're welcome to visit me on My Tumblr or My Twitter
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!