Capture and Contemplation

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Summary

Between financial stress, the trouble of conceiving, and running a household, Jane and Bingley could use all the help they can get, especially that of Darcy and Elizabeth. But when things go awry, it will take everyone's help to get them back to normal.
Chapter 1

While some universally acknowledged truths are quite easy to fulfill given a proper bend of knee and ring, it is sometimes not enough to satisfy any mother freely willing to admit to wanting more. Upon occasion, it is most true that the most sought thing after marriage and money is that oft-desired asset of grandchildren.

Some families fulfilled this with ease as was the case of the Darcys, who gave birth to a healthy baby boy named William in the icy month of December, though truly, it was Elizabeth who did most of the work, as she relayed to Mrs. Bennet in a post the week after the delivery.

The letter to Jane had been full of joy and delight at the news:

_Dearest Jane,_

_I have given birth to a healthy boy and Mama would be quite proud as he does already content himself in crying and keeping me up at all hours. It is a lucky thing, then, that I adore him more than I could adore anyone (save for my dear husband, Papa, and yourself, rest assured) and that I would gladly listen to the music of his screams for hours upon end._

_His name is William and I would be most honoured if you would be his godmother. I do think that Darcy will ask Bingley to serve as godfather, so you see, not only will the child be loved unconditionally, but the arrangement will serve as quite convenient. We shall expect a visit of you soon, but do not rush on our account. I would be hard-pressed to entertain, given my current exhaustion and forcing Darcy into social situations is a cruelty that even he does not deserve (as he has done nothing in recent days to deserve it)._  

_Yours,_  

_Lizzy_  

Though Jane and Bingley were dearly happy for their relatives, the matter of children had been a constant topic of discussion between them that did not cease, not t’wixt visits to Pemberly, nor moving from Netherfield, and the discussion only increased when tasked with visiting Longbourn.

Even a year to the date of young William’s birth, the topic of children did arise with some frequency and now, Jane’s tone took on worry with every passing conversation.

She lay in Bingley’s arms, content to let the quiet of the night pass them by. They had only thirty minutes past redressed in their nightclothes (he had been ensorcelled by her appearance in the candlelight and could wait no longer to undress her and make love) and now lay awake, listening to the crackling of the single candle beside the bed.

It was Jane that spoke first, and with the familiar worry that had begun to inhabit her voice as of late. “I am sure it is my fault,” she murmured gravely. “I cannot give you an heir, Charles, I…”

“Jane!” Bingley remarked with some alarm, his eyes wide with worry all his own. His red hair was quite a mess and he had the beginnings of a shadow upon his cheeks as the hours of twilight were upon them. “Darling, please, do not speak this way. It is said that this is the husband’s own fault, and I am sure that is mine.”
Such discussions were common between them, in which blame was portioned and appointed to
themselves and then redistributed when the other claimed that the original confessor could hardly
be at fault.

“My own father,” Bingley continued, brushing his thumb in soft circles at Jane’s hip, wrinkling
the soft fabric of her slip, “had trouble conceiving with my mother and now look! There are three
of us and we are all quite healthy,” he assured, ever optimistic.

Jane sighed and rested her cheek upon Bingley’s shoulder, resting close to him and his warmth,
along with the warmth of the words he offered. He stroked her hair with softness and great love,
pressing a kiss there upon her temple.

“You must not worry, Jane,” Bingley said, with only a note of fear in his knowing tone. “We shall
soon have many children to our name and we shall look back upon this and think nothing of it,
truly.”

Silence passed between them as Jane occupied herself with the study of running her fingers up
and down the strip of skin between his trousers and bedshirt and he ran his hands through her
hair.

“Lizzy is still arriving tomorrow with Darcy and William,” Jane murmured sleepily, her eyes
already half-shut with the weariness of the evening. “I do hope he will be able to aid with your
finances.”

“It is a trifle of a worry,” Bingley assured, his own tone befitting that of exhaustion. “Merely
enough to investigate and hardly enough to harm our situation.” He wrapped his arms about her
waist and pulled her closer still. “Jane, with all this worry, we shall commit ourselves to gray hairs
and early deaths, I fear, and I cannot bear to part with you. We simply will have to find some way
to solve all our problems.”

Jane smiled up at Bingley, more than a touch besotted and quite clearly believing that her husband
could indeed move the moon. “You’ll find a way.”

Bingley, however, laid awake far longer than Jane did, holding his wife and filled with the worry
that he would not and would doom her to perpetual worry and strife.

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Jane and Bingley were both present to greet Darcy, Elizabeth, and the little one upon the drizzling
and damp February day, shielded by the large covering above the porch. The carriage bringing the
Darcy’s was quite on time and Jane was more than slightly delighted to see her sister and her
godson (and of course, her brother-in-law, though she could never muster the same amount of
pure delight as she had reserved for her nephew).

“There are rooms prepared,” Jane assured Elizabeth as she helped to lead them inside. Darcy and
Bingley had already absconded to the study to discuss numbers and figures (such tedious
gentleman’s topics). She turned to the manour’s housekeeper, a Mrs. Brown who was from the
North and always helped Jane with her dressing, and smiled with a demure nod. “Mrs. Brown has
offered her assistance with William.”

Elizabeth gave Jane quite a grateful smile. “Jane, honestly, while I hardly want to disillusion you
to the nature of children, they are quite the handful. Thank you for the help,” she said, words
never filled before with such gracious thanks.
She and Mrs. Brown were off, heading towards the second floor and the prepared guest rooms and in the privacy of the hallway, Jane stopped and allowed herself a moment to exhale shakily and collect herself.

William was a beautiful boy, taking after his mother’s curious nature and inheriting both her colouring and facial structure. He bore the hair of Mr. Darcy, however, and had sternness to his face that Jane hoped would melt with age, lest he be bullied as a child for being too severe and serious. He was so thoughtful and curious of the world which caused an ache inside Jane to see a boy so earnestly wonderful and thought that Lizzy could truly have had only the most perfect of children; William was going to be a fine boy, could not be anything less for his parentage.

“Mrs. Bingley, are you all right?”

The voice startled her out of her thoughts, but when Jane realized that it was only Mr. Townsend, the house’s main butler who had served the Bingley family for thirty years – having been hired by Bingley’s father thirty years ago. He was a loyal and kind man, who had been hired straight out of his teens and had quite the distinctive and calming voice. He had taken it as a personal quest, it seemed, to calm Jane when her nerves threatened to get the best of her.

Even now, he had a cup of tea upon a tray.

“Mr. Townsend,” she greeted, affixing a polite and small smile upon her face to reassure him. “I am merely nervous.”

“Is it Mrs. Darcy?” he asked, his voice as smooth as the sherry that Bingley often enjoyed in his study sometimes, before Jane would visit him from her rides on their land. “Her room is quite ready, I promise.” A smile lit up his face – which was a crooked smile and did make Jane smile herself but for the lovely imperfection that made him so unique. He had a lovely head of hair that was blond and graying at the temples and was a tall man. Her husband had spoken of a grievance between his father and Mr. Townsend, but Jane could not see it possible for Mr. Townsend to ever do something to Bingley Senior to cause a disagreement and so she attributed it to misunderstanding.

“No,” Jane assured, quite fervently. “Of all things, my sister’s visit is truly the best of possible occurrences.”

Mr. Townsend smiled sympathetically, something flashing past his eyes.

“Is it the lack of children?”

His familiarity went uncommented upon as Jane did not mind such personal discussion with so trusted a servant. Jane’s non-answer gave a perfectly thorough answer to that question and she looked away, saddened and heavy with a grief she could not name. The disappointment overrode anything else and she nodded.

“My dear,” Mr. Townsend murmured, extending the cup of tea towards her. “You must not worry over such things. You are a young woman and there is plenty of time yet.” He smiled reassuringly. “Spend some time with your sister and I am sure before the day is out, you shall feel all the better.”

His advice was well placed and Jane departed with sincere thanks for the tea, but she was not thirsty quite yet and placed it back on the tray, earning a promise to be served again soon.
She resolved to think negatively no more on that day and to catch up with Lizzy on all the latest news of Pemberly and Derbyshire.

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Darcy had been pacing up and down the length of the study with a ledger in his hands and he made the most distressing disapproving noises that Bingley had ever heard. They were enough to give him nerves to rival Mrs. Bennet’s. “Darcy, you cannot do such things to me!” Bingley protested. “Honestly, man, you’ll have me unfit!”

He turned, glancing up, his taciturn demeanor not ever departing as he set the finances back upon the desk (which appeared quite unused).

He merely resumed his study of the books, sending Bingley into a fit of frustration, slumping over into the office chair, all bound with red leather. “And there he goes,” Bingley narrated idly, gesturing into the air. “Fitzwilliam Darcy, off he goes with his disapproving noises,” he continued, mimicking and mocking each grunt and thoughtful ‘hmm’, “and withholding the truth from his very best of friends. Honestly, one would think Wickham had left you a plea for money in my books!”

Without raising his gaze, Darcy replied in turn, “I see Mrs. Wickham’s letters have reached your door as well?”

“Yes, but that is not the topic at hand,” Bingley dismissed it immediately. “What is wrong with the figures of the house?”

Darcy set the ledger down and regarded Bingley with a sympathetic look, sighing. “I did fathom it would happen, but I’d hoped it would be later and not sooner.” His visage took on a wry smirk. “Bingley, your assets are being stolen by one of your servants."

Bingley’s face went ashen and he stared at Darcy, yanking the figures towards him, studying them as though he had the slightest idea what they meant and as though he did not pay an accountant a great deal of money per annum to tell him what to do. “That’s not possible!”

“Not only is it possible, it’s probable and it’s happening,” Darcy informed him. “You see these figures here?” He gestured to a specific line. “This was petty cash and items you had lying about the house. You’ve had no visitors in the past month as Caroline is in London and Louisa is busy with Mr. Hurst, and I do not think Jane capable of carrying such a large sum away from you. Therefore…”

“It is one of the servants,” Bingley realized, staring down at the desk in horror. “Darcy, I must fire the perpetrator,” he said, but it was phrased as a question.

“Unless you wish to set a precedent that stealing from your wealth is perfectly acceptable.”

“No! Hardly not!” Bingley said firmly. “No, this cannot be. I will deal with it immediately.” He faltered, glancing up at Darcy. “As soon as you help me ferret out the thief?”

“But of course,” Darcy agreed easily. “I could hardly let you do it alone. You’d likely let the man or woman off with a gentle scolding.”

Bingley had the good grace to smile at that, almost ashamed. Truly, he thought that his staff could
do no harm by him, especially since so many of them had served his father before serving Bingley himself and his father had been so adept at choosing those who would remain loyal to the Bingley name.

Bingley closed the books firmly. “Jane need not know about this,” he said. “She has enough to worry of, and this will only damper her spirit.”

“Let Elizabeth tend to her spirit,” Darcy assured, taking a seat opposite Bingley and easing back into his chair as comfortable as a king in a throne. “She and William can no doubt put a smile upon even the darkest of faces.”

Bingley could hardly pass up an opportunity so perfect and chortled in almost immature amusement. “Even yours?”

Darcy did not see fit to supply a reply to such a thing and Bingley was content to laugh at his own joke as he tucked away the business and moved on to far more pleasurable topics of conversations; their wives.

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Jane settled herself within Elizabeth’s room, setting a blanket on her sister’s lap to keep her warm when she remarked that there was a mild draft and worried for William’s sake. Jane smiled demurely and did not remark on the resemblance between Elizabeth and their mother when it came to worrying. Some things were not meant to be said; merely thought.

“…and just the other day,” Elizabeth was saying proudly, bouncing William on her knee, “He tried to speak Darcy’s name, but it came out as something rather incoherent.”

“Oh!” Jane remarked, eyes bright. “But it was close?”

“Quite,” Elizabeth agreed. “Soon he shall either be babbling his father’s name or that of a stranger. We shall soon know. For the sake of my dear husband’s ego, I hope for the latter,” she said, with a smile upon her lips. Jane gave Lizzy a stern look but it melted quite quickly when little William gave a plaintive cry and Elizabeth was there in a moment, soothing him. “I am half-ready to tell Darcy that his first word was not his name at all, but rather, ‘Jane’.”

“Oh, do not implicate me,” Jane said in swift reply, though there was a joyous light in her eyes and a teasing note in her voice. “I would hate to be upon the receiving end of a stern letter.”

“Which he would no doubt pen with such extraneous information that you would only find out about his grievance upon page three,” Elizabeth replied, with an air of haughty knowing, and yet, deep love. “I never thought I might meet a man who wrote as many letters as you and I.”

“Is that so?” Jane teased gently.

“And hardly did I think I would fall so recklessly in love with him,” Elizabeth agreed ruefully.

“The most terrible kind of falling in love!” Jane said, delightedly. “Oh! Lizzy, it is so good to see you so happy,” she observed with a small sigh. “It is all I ever hoped for.”

Elizabeth beamed, letting out emotions that Jane mostly kept to herself. “I admit, I’m quite ecstatic to see myself so happy.” Sobering up, she reached over and took Jane’s hand with her free one that was not occupied in holding William. “The same happiness will find you too, Jane, I
promise,” she swore.

“And I am sure of it,” Jane agreed, rising slowly to her feet and leaning over to place a kiss to William’s head. “I hope you won’t mind if I take tea while you prepare for bed?”

“I would not fault you for a second,” Elizabeth promised, balancing William upon her hip. “We’ll simply visit his father.”

Jane watched her sister and nephew depart with a look of fondness in her eyes and she sighed, rising to her feet. Perhaps Mr. Townsend would have that cup of tea still ready for her in the kitchen.

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Elizabeth entered the study to find her husband and brother-in-law deep in their cups of port. “Gentlemen,” she greeted, walking in after she was announced. “I’ve brought more male company for you to further corrupt with your ideals and principles of business.”

Darcy rose to his feet to greet Elizabeth with a deep kiss upon the lips that had Bingley looking aside to give them a moment of privacy. “I assure you,” Darcy said, his tone serious, “that William will only learn his accounting from me and not his absentminded uncle who has no head for numbers.”

Elizabeth peered past Darcy. “Bingley, do you really think that true?”

“Oh, not only is it true, but I am also poor with history,” Bingley agreed swiftly. “I have no concept of time but the time before me.”

Elizabeth smiled widely at that and pressed a finger to Darcy’s chest. “Perhaps you should focus more upon the present and not the past, as Bingley does.” She sat down gently. “Jane is taking tea before she resigns for bed.” Bingley nodded, clearly grateful for the information, but Elizabeth did not linger on the subject, peering at the wide array of books on the table. “And what have you men discovered about the Bingley affairs?”

“It is quite simple,” Darcy replied. “Their generosity and kindness has finally caught up to them. There is a thief in the home.”

“A thief!” Elizabeth reacted with shock. “After your goodwill and Jane’s charity? Some people are truly too ungrateful,” she said, almost snidely. “Have you discovered the criminal yet?”

Darcy glanced to Bingley and Bingley glanced back, but neither man spoke up until Elizabeth prodded them onwards and William let out a cry, as though to agree with his mother.

“It’s obviously someone who has both access to the bedrooms and the kitchen, where they could be hiding the money.” Darcy informed his wife. “We’ve narrowed it down to the waitstaff; the butlers, the maids. I was just about to suggest we go to the kitchen and discover any possible hiding places for coin.”

“Quite smart,” Elizabeth praised, rising to her feet. “Are we idling for any purpose besides cooling your heels?” she asked, quite perfectly in dominance of the conversation and aware of it.

Bingley nearly jumped to his feet. “I’ll join you soon,” he said, offering a brief smile. “I think that first, I must check on Jane.” Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged a look, but said nothing. It was clear
as the sun during the day that the Bingley household was experiencing a time of stress. He offered another brief smile as he hurried out and left the Darcy family to their own wiles.

Elizabeth wandered to the door and nodded, indicating that they should still pursue their lead. “Do you think the stress too much?” she asked of her husband, voice quiet to prevent any eager ears from eavesdropping. “Do you think it harmful?”

“I think Jane and Charles stronger than we give them credit for,” Darcy said, a hand upon the small of Elizabeth’s back. “And their troubles with conceiving are merely temporary. No doubt nature shall right everything in due time.”

They walked in thoughtful silence the rest of the journey towards the kitchen, but when Darcy pushed into the room, Elizabeth was meanwhile distracted with a loud shout coming from the upstairs bedroom.

And the profanity her husband let loose from within the kitchen was hardly encouraging. Elizabeth wandered inside to see a teacup shattered on the ground and a knife lying upon the table, as though misplaced.

And from upstairs, Bingley was rushing down, pushing into the kitchen with a look of wild panic in his eyes, a piece of paper crumpled in his hand.

“Charles,” Darcy snapped, immediate and almost cold (Elizabeth knew it was only done to get Bingley’s attention). “Bingley, what’s the matter, what is the manner of this mess?”

Bingley only stared at the teacup, his face pale and his gaze spooked. “Jane’s gone,” he said, voice hollow and distant. “She’s gone.”

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Elizabeth was quickly achieving a state of panic similar to Bingley’s as she clutched William tighter in her grasp. “She’s what?” she echoed, searching about as though Jane was simply playing a game with them and hiding in the nearest closet.

“She’s gone,” Bingley said, distraught, his hair a mess and his clothes looking disheveled although it was sure that he hadn’t been doing anything to cause such a thing. He thrust the paper into Elizabeth’s hand and wrung his waistcoat with his fist, running that same hand through his hair, truly agitated. “Some of her clothes are gone, but not all, and several of her things!”

“She’s left you?” Darcy inquired, suspiciously, studying the broken teacup on the ground, surrounded by an ample amount of liquid. He crouched down and surveyed the scene before him, rising to his feet. “No. No, she did not.” It was simply too much of a mess to have been a fit of passion.

Elizabeth had unfurled the letter (the one that Bingley had found within his chambers) as best as she could with William in her arms. “Charles,” she gasped. “This is a ransom notice! It says that the kidnapper has Jane and another important asset to the estate,” she read on, pursing her lips. “Whatever could he mean?”

“The money, no doubt,” Darcy swiftly replied, placing a firm hand on Bingley’s shoulder. “Bingley, I need you to focus for me. We won’t find Jane with you in this state. Look at me,” he ordered. “We will find Jane,” he promised, the sternness that was usually so brusque and off-putting was not reassuring. “And we will return her and whatever else was stolen back to you and
Jane shall be swiftly returned to your waiting embrace.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Bingley said immediately. “I merely want my Jane back!” He let out a chagrined exhalation. “I want her back in my arms, I want to be able to kiss her and promise her that this will never again happen and that I do not care about an heir, so long as I have her. I do not want my last words to my wife to be a placating half-truth that I can solve everything.” He shook his head. “Darcy. Elizabeth. Please,” he begged.

Elizabeth and Darcy exchanged a look, quickly realizing how difficult the man would be to deal with. Elizabeth raised a hand, almost as though she might try and slap sense into Bingley, but lowered her palm after a warning glance from Darcy. He murmured something to one of the maids hovering in the doorway, whispering about the mistress. That maid soon returned with a glass of ice-cold water that was pressed into Bingley’s hand by Darcy himself.

“You need to calm yourself,” Darcy ordered. “Is that clear?”

Bingley nodded, sinking down into a chair and staring off into the middle distance, as though the walking dead.

“Who could have done this,” Elizabeth snapped, her own voice icy and angry. “No one should simply be able to take my sister away from me!” While Bingley was quickly going catatonic, Elizabeth was becoming enraged; polar opposites of emotions as they spun about the same troubling issue at hand.

Darcy recognized the fire in his wife and stepped forward. “We shall achieve nothing with panic and fury,” he announced. “First things first, we must make haste in reporting Jane missing. Elizabeth, would you please read the letter aloud for us, my dear.”

Elizabeth shot him a glare and he swallowed.

“Of course, my pearl,” he corrected himself, with a murmur.

Elizabeth took a step forward and unfolded the letter, pacing back and forth. “It is scrawled and nearly illegible in places,” she warned the men, having handed off William to the maid who hovered, keeping her son in her sight the whole of the time (after all, after there is one kidnapping, there is hardly ever a second for the family and friends are far too paranoid to let it occur lightly).

“Bingley,” Elizabeth read. “That is how it begins, with no formal address or…”

“Please, just read the letter,” Bingley pleaded, his voice terse as he paced back and forth, his hand almost yanking out at his red hair. “Just tell me what I must do.”

Elizabeth read on silently and let out a distressed sound. “There are no instructions.”

“What!” Bingley and Darcy sounded in tandem, echoing in pure shock.

“No instructions!” Elizabeth repeated incredulously. “It simply says that they,” she said, stressing the ‘they’, “have Jane and an important asset to the estate. Your money, no doubt?”

“Or an heirloom,” Darcy pointed out.

“I hardly think it matters,” Elizabeth retorted acidically. “Given they have my sister.” She held the letter to the light. “It says that you should look into the past affairs of your family, Charles, and that your father’s sins are at fault for the taking of Jane and that it should be well-recorded in

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books in less-than-visible places. It goes on to say that with time, perhaps she shall be returned… as soon as you suffer as they have?” she swiftly finished the letter. “How dare they take on such a tone? Make you suffer,” she remarked, the anger building up again. “I have half a mind to build a dungeon in Pemberly, just to make it even when we catch the men who did this.”

“Or women, or man and a woman,” Darcy pointed out. “Bingley, see which of your staff are currently missing. I think we might just have our kidnapper then.”

“My staff? You think of…” Bingley did not finish his sentence, however, for he charged off immediately, the inspiration of having his love gone missing setting fire to his feet. His voice could be heard down the halls, stringently summoning his staff to stand accountable for the chaotic events of the evening.

Elizabeth turned to Darcy, taking William back into her arms and allowing herself to crumble in his presence. “My sister is gone,” she said, her voice breaking slightly as she spoke the words. “Darcy…”

“We’ll find her,” he assured, pressing a kiss to Elizabeth’s forehead and to her temple, kissing her lips slowly and reassuringly. When finally, both he was calmer and she appeared calmer, he eased away.

Elizabeth nodded, clutching her son tightly to her chest. “Mama and Papa must not know,” she realized quickly. “There would be an incredible fuss, it would only harm our search.”

“Elizabeth, I don’t think it fair to keep your family in the dark,” Darcy warned.

“Nonsense,” she said in quick reply, surveying the broken teacup one last time. “The dark is a perfectly suitable place. After all, it is where they kept us for so many years, when the knowledge of proper manners shone so bright outside our door, it might have blinded us had they glimpsed it.” Her vitriolic words were out of character for her and Darcy worried that the stress of the day was wearing on her nerves. “Oh, honestly,” she sighed. “I just want Jane home safely. After that, it is simply a tall tale to tell Mama and Papa. First, Jane must be found. And then, we shall notify the families.”

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Jane felt rather woozy and quite out of place, as though something strange had just happened. Had she hit her head? No. No, she had been enjoying her tea, and then…

“Mrs. Bingley?” a familiar voice whispered, groaning mildly.

Jane’s eyes fluttered open slowly and she looked to the side to find Mr. Townsend tied up in a chair above her. She seemed to be sprawled upon the floor of a…stable? There was hay about and she sat up, hurrying to untie the ropes that bound the family’s butler. Whatever could he be doing here? What might have happened? “Mr. Townsend, are you all right?” she asked worriedly, finishing up the last of the ropes. “What happened?”

He rubbed at the back of his head, fingers coming back and they were coated with specks of blood. Jane gasped, covering her mouth in horror. She quickly looked about in search of something that might clean him up, and found a bucket of seemingly fresh water.

“I hardly know, ma’am,” Mr. Townsend replied groggily. “I had just finished preparing Master Bingley’s room for the evening when everything went suddenly dark.”
Jane murmured with worry, patting down Mr. Townsend’s head and wincing when she felt a sharp pain in his stomach, so severe that it stunted her work.

“Mrs. Bingley? Mrs. Bingley, are you all right?” Mr. Townsend remarked with grave worry.

She had not felt so ill in months, the last time having been after a particularly inspired dish by their house cook (something of India, apparently). Jane’s stomach had not settled for a week at the spices and upon resuming their old diet, everything had returned to normal. Now again, she felt pain in her stomach to rival that of months ago. Perhaps she had imbibed something gone bad?

“Simply a bit of…indi…” she murmured, a hand to her stomach.

“Mistress, was your tea rather odd?” Mr. Townsend asked worriedly. “The sugar seemed to be disturbed and given our present situation, I daresay that something did not go as planned.”

Jane took a deep breath and calmed herself and the pain eased itself away and she resumed her work untangling the ropes. “Do you know where we are?” It certainly appeared to be a stable, but there was no sign of livestock. She rose to her feet and peered around, her form casting a silhouette on the ground. Behind her, she heard Mr. Townsend rustling and pressing the cloth to his bleeding head. “I do not know,” she admitted, worried. How she did wish for Charles!

“Perhaps a house? Perhaps town?”

Mr. Townsend approached at her side and tugged her closer. “Mrs. Bingley, I do not think it prudent,” he whispered, “for us to wander when we do not yet know who has taken us.”

Jane regarded Mr. Townsend with wide eyes and nodded, almost skittishly. She fidgeted with her hands, twisting the rings upon her finger and wishing for her husband more than anything else, for she was still filled with the fervent belief that her husband would best any evil that threatened to part them.

Looking around the strange barn, she shivered. Night was closing in and was quite cold and she wore a simple dress and no more.

“Mrs. Bingley, please take my coat,” Mr. Townsend spoke quietly, draping it over her shoulders without another word. “We cannot have you catching cold. It would be very ill at this time.”

She closed her eyes and though she was grateful to be trapped with someone so very kind and thoughtful, she wished that she were at home in her warm bed and wrapped up in Charles’ arms. She wished this, even if it meant that they must be forced to discuss some sombre topics as the lack of children. She pressed her lips together and when she opened her eyes, she was still peering at the creaky wooden beams of the rafters of the barn. She exhaled and her breath appeared in tiny puffs of condensation before her and she gave a soft sigh.

“We should wait until morning,” she murmured, sinking down into the chair that Mr. Townsend had previously preoccupied, staring forward into space.

Honestly, she could not fathom how the situation had become so very dreadful so very quickly.

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Bingley was upon his knees within the library, upending each book with a comment and a snide remark upon his father’s estate, muttering on. Darcy had never seen him in such a state and he had
seen Bingley in many states, mostly those that were happy and at peace. But then, Bingley had never had his dear wife stolen from him and to see a man lose the thing he loves the most is a horrid sight.

“This is madness!” Bingley announced, sitting knee-high in books and journals kept by his father. “Louisa holds some of Mother’s things and Caroline inherited most of her jewelry, but I have all of father’s things and I can find no trace of whatever this madman or madmen or madwomen might want or wish!”

His eyes were growing wilder and Darcy was beginning to fear that he would not be able to calm Bingley down. The very idea of having Bingley awake without Jane beside him was enough to worry Darcy into thinking of prescribing the angry younger man to take some ether to bed with him.

Elizabeth was more patiently going through journals, but there was a glint in her eye that betrayed the more serious nature to her quest. Darcy feared for whomever had stolen Jane, for they would have not only the combined wrath of himself and the Bennets, but also a very enraged sister and very aggressive husband.

“Charles,” Elizabeth murmured. “Are you sure you don’t recall anything, no stories, perhaps?”

Bingley gave a frustrated sound. “Mrs. Darcy, I assure you that I recall nothing of the sort! I am sorry to say that we Bingleys are sadly neglect of familial drama, something that you and your husband cannot claim, I do not think.” The words and the emotion behind them were cruel and rare and he apologized softly under his breath before continuing to search.

Elizabeth had been taken aback, but Darcy paid no mind. A man out of his mind was hardly accountable for the errors of his judgment during his madness.

“Wait,” he said after a moment, staring up at Elizabeth and Darcy. “Oh, dear Lord, wait.”

“Yes?” Darcy encouraged. Finally, it appeared that there was a lead. He hardly wanted to act as a detective as he was not suited for such tasks, but Darcy considered himself a man of intelligence (quite above the normal stock as far as gentlemen went) and the notion of solving the mystery and bringing back his sister-in-law (whom he had grown quite endeared with, as all sisters-in-law should be) to his dearest friend would please him most of all.

Bingley stood and began pacing, wringing the tail of his waistcoat and pausing every now and again to think, or as it to begin speaking, but merely closing his mouth. Eventually, he stopped and drew in a large breath. “I was speaking to Jane of this just last night,” he said, Jane’s name coming across upon his lips in a painful manner. “About how my parents had trouble conceiving at first. There were rumours about that there was, in fact, no trouble conceiving.”

Darcy narrowed his eyes and Elizabeth leaned forward, clearly interested.

“It is a silly thing,” Bingley insisted, as though he now did not believe even his own words.

“Charles!” Elizabeth reacted, simultaneously with Darcy’s frustrated plea of, “Bingley!”

Bingley gave a sharp yelp of frustration. “Oh, honestly, the rumours were that my father was not sleeping with my mother during the first two years of their marriage! He was supposedly sleeping with some other woman!”
Darcy’s mind was already spinning with the new information. “Pour through the books, look for any women that might be angry at being spurned when Bingley Senior returned to his wife and settled down to have a family.”

Bingley nodded and returned to his fortress of books and Elizabeth buried her nose in a book once more. Darcy, for his part, turned on his heel.

He was going to question the staff.

tbc
Chapter 2

Elizabeth was awake at dawn, not wanting to waste a single moment in traveling from the Bingley’s home to Longbourn. She now felt she was well-equipped to deal with the inevitable questions and fits of nerves. With a deep breath, she stood at the foot of the carriage, taking William into her arms and bouncing him lightly, speaking directly to him and only to him. “Mother is going to miss you very much,” she promised him, smoothing soft hair back from his forehead and watching the way William’s inquisitive eyes watched her. “She will be back very soon, indeed.”

Darcy actually looked worried in almost an adorable mother-hen sort of way and Elizabeth gave him a peck on the cheek. “We’ll miss you,” he said, sounding quite broken and worried.

“Take care of our boy,” she instructed. “Children are not, as a rule, to be dropped upon their heads and contrary to your belief, are not to be fed whatever you so please.” Darcy’s smile was rueful and Elizabeth was smiling as well, but she pressed on. “He is to wear clothes and is not to be let out to roll about in the snow, like a common dog.”

“With his breeding, he is hardly common,” Darcy replied dryly.

Elizabeth shot him a stern look, and gently placed William in Darcy’s arms, kissing his cheek with a lingering and loving peck, brushing her lips to his and pressing another kiss there.

“I shall be a letter away,” she promised, settling into her seat. “If anything happens, you must write,” she warned. Darcy eased closer, adjusting William in his arms. “Even if you think you’ve seen Jane about, write. And please, write to Caroline… Georgiana, Lydia, and Louisa as well, please, tell them. Perhaps they might help.” There was an edge of desperation in her voice and to suggest Caroline for aid was a clear sign of how much she wanted her sister back and to what lengths she would strive to achieve that goal.

Darcy nodded to each missive that Elizabeth gave and closed to door to her carriage for her, giving her an assured nod through the window. She mouthed a tender ‘I love you’ to both her husband and her son and grasped the cushion of the seats as the carriage took off, at a speed that she best remembered only from years ago, when the entire family had been in such an uproar over Lydia’s elopement.

It all seemed so recent, those times, but in truth, they were distant. Elizabeth, however, still remembered the night before their weddings and Jane’s anxiety coupled with her girlish excitement.

Jane was packing up her belongings, but interspersed with the necessary task, she jumped on the bed with such a fit of joy and delight that Elizabeth was beginning to wonder just what creature of mischief and ecstasy had secretly slipped in and replaced her sister during the night.

“Jane!” Elizabeth remarked with shock. “Honestly, I think your lips have permanently curved upwards! Mr. Bingley will be rather disappointed when he wishes to kiss you and you can do nothing but smile.” She was sitting upon the bed, twirling the cloth ribbon keeping her hair tied up. “Perhaps I should mimic you and Mr. Darcy might have to find a new, inventive way to kiss his bride.”

Jane covered her mouth and her smile with a hand, clasping it over her lips. “Oh! Do not tease
me so,” she gasped, but laughed good-naturedly as she crawled upon the bed and embraced Elizabeth tightly. “I do not think I have ever been this happy,” she sighed happily. “It is quite a feeling, to be so elated!”

“And to think,” Elizabeth observed with love and awe, enjoying the sight of her sister being so delightfully free, “you shall feel this way forever. Mama’s meddling seems to have finally paid off.”

Jane jumped a little, easing away and returning to her packing. “And to think, that this time tomorrow, you shall be Mrs. Darcy and I, Mrs. Bingley! It seems all too dream-like to be real.”

“And yet, it really is truly a dream-like existence,” Elizabeth assured, her own feelings towards the wedding that of excitement and anticipation. However, in the light of Jane’s incomparable shine, she seemed only a dull star when her sister was shining like the sun. She tugged Jane closer to her, to keep her close on this, the last night where they were to share a bed as sisters.

Soon enough, they would be wedded women.

Jane rested her head upon Elizabeth’s shoulder and together, they whiled away the lonely hours of the morning that taunted them with its’ darkness, for it would not shift to dawn and did keep their husbands-to-be far away from them. Elizabeth contented herself in stroking Jane’s wild hair and fathoming the future from where they sat. Perhaps they would never drift and things would be so very perfect. Perhaps they would both have heirs within the year.

“Lizzy?” Jane murmured sleepily after they both spent some time alone in their thoughts.

“Yes, Jane?”

“Never leave me,” Jane spoke softly. “I realise that we are to be parted, but you must write still and I shall write and always visit. We must remain sisters and best friends.”

Elizabeth could not possibly think of any other promise she was so happy to make.

The scenery passed by the window, but Elizabeth barely watched it as she had kept her gaze upon the floor between her boots, thinking of some way to tell her Mama and Papa that Jane was missing. It would no doubt have a heavy bearing on how Kitty and Mary were treated and Elizabeth did not wish either of them to be kept inside as though imprisoned.

The driver did his job and for that, Elizabeth was more than grateful. Speed was the most necessary tool of the moment, and she was sure that once she arrived, Papa would have ideas and if nothing else, they could contact their Aunt and Uncle to aid in the search.

After all, they had found Lydia. They could find Jane.

*  

Bingley’s carriage arrived in London in the morning when the rays of the sun touched upon the ground and the snow of the previous night was just settling in, as carriages pushed it aside to the alleys of the road. He hadn’t slept a single wink and did not think it possible for him to be level-headed about anything and so, when he was driven up to the address that he had been given, he sat in the carriage, merely staring at the address.

23 Smallton Road. This was where Mrs. Townsend lived.
If she was not there, Bingley would know that she was the perpetrator and was unsure as to just what he might do. Perhaps he would inquire to her relations and friends about the town to discern her habits and her tendencies (and perhaps, might even slip in a scathing question regarding her predisposition towards kidnapping young, beautiful angels married to him).

He slowly disengaged the carriage and stepped down, affixing his hat atop his head and fidgeting with straightening his waistcoat. His heart was pounding in his chest when the thought occurred to him that Jane might be here. Perhaps Jane was even within this very townhome!

He spoke briefly with his carriage driver to give him instructions to wait there upon the street. All around them, the snow was falling again and it only served to deliver a keen and icy ache in Bingley’s heart, his memories still lingering on the last fresh snow with Jane. He kept his gaze down upon the ground and regarded the footprints his boot made in the freshly-fallen snow as he ascended the stairs and held his fist above the door, not quite ready to knock.

Where was Darcy when he needed him, honestly!

Darcy was the one who could speak volumes in perfect calm, when Bingley was more prone to panicking at a pin’s drop. He had barely been able to propose to Jane without Darcy’s aid. And now, here he was, on the doorstep of what might be Jane’s salvation and he lacked the words to express his dire need to find her.

He paced back and forth upon the small porch while he searched for the proper words and the gravitas he knew he would need to impress upon Mrs. Townsend the severity of the situation and how very displeased he was with whomever’s conduct was at fault and how he was terribly sorry for his father’s sins, but he was not, repeat not, his father. He would imply that her aid in finding Jane would be part and parcel of good behaviour that Bingley would then relay to the police already involved in the investigation.

Finally, he summoned the courage to knock on the door, standing there and staring at the white painted wooden object before him. It would hold the answers he required.

He exhaled shakily, his nerves rivaling that of his mother-in-law as he waited.

And waited.

Oh, honestly, who took this long to answer their door? Bingley was pacing back and forth, quite sure now that he had his kidnapper and that this woman was at fault, for the mere reasoning that she was not there. He was surely jumping to conclusions, but it seemed as good a reason to accuse someone as any.

But just as he was ready to alert the nearest constable of this discovery, he heard the creaking of old floorboards and a woman’s voice reassuring him that she was coming. It appeared that she intended to draw this process out as she was coming to open the door very, very slowly. There was a woman’s voice that called out a soft, “I’ll be there momentarily!” and Bingley tried to calm himself for the time it would take between that very moment and the moment the door would open. He twisted his wedding band and was almost shocked by how icy it was.

Bingley rose to his full height as the door was drawn open and upon the doorstep was a kind-looking older woman with grey in her brunette hair, smiling up at Bingley and holding a candle in hand. “You,” she realised, gasping. “You’re the very spitting image of your father,” she stared, as though it was not a rude thing to do. “His very face and hair, and oh! The eyes are so very nearly
identical. Indeed, you do bear great resemblance and are the very mirror image in this light.”

Bingley removed his hat quickly, only then realizing that he had kept it on. He clutched it tightly within his hands. “I am? I am,” he confirmed. “Yes. I do hope that’s all right.”

She studied him with critical gray eyes that were more hardened with the years of age, wrinkles forming at the corners. “Would you like to come inside for some tea, sir?”

She drew back to gesture inside to a small kitchen and Bingley could already see a pot of tea brewing.

“It would be quite lovely,” she spoke, with a thin smile on her face, “to speak with you and recount what I have missed. Please, sir, do join me.” There was an inviting smile upon her face, but there was something lingering there that Bingley could see as plain as day. It was a coldness that hadn’t warmed during their short conversation.

Bingley just nodded and wandered inside past her.

And Mrs. Townsend closed the door to the townhouse, just as the carriage driver pulled away, as per Bingley’s instruction to depart if he was to be occupied by further discussion within the house.

* 

It wasn’t until the evening that Jane saw signs of life stirring once more. She swallowed nervously and kept an eye on the footsteps and the door was drawn open hurriedly, as though whoever was keeping her here was now panicking. She could hardly fathom a reason for that and she merely rose to her feet, fidgeting with her hands and trying to keep herself in a calm mood.

“Out,” the woman ordered harshly, her voice cold and the look in her eyes harsh. She wore a scarf wrapped about her hair and her mouth, and Jane could not see who it was, but her voice was so terribly familiar. She was sure that she had seen her before.

She glanced back to Mr. Townsend, her heart pounding in her chest so loudly that she feared that the very sound of it might reveal Jane’s true intentions.

She had spent many hours awake, thinking of how to escape. Only now did she think it feasible, with the door open and the sunlight spilling in with the bursts of snow. Perhaps this woman (her kidnapped, Jane must remember) was simply cold and not trying to conceal her appearance.

She stepped forward nervously, holding up a hand. “I do not wish for any violence,” she spoke, calmly and evenly.

“Mrs. Bingley, we’re leaving. We must travel a very long way in very inhospitable conditions,” the woman spoke, but her eyes were behind Jane and fixated on Mr. Townsend. Jane did not even want to think about just what conditions those might be and she nervously stepped forward once more. “I do not think you should do that,” the woman warned.

The tone chilled Jane to the bone and she stared at the woman’s eyes and daringly took yet another step forward.

“Mrs. Bingley,” the woman’s tone was sharp. “Do trust me. That is something that you do not want to do.”
“Why not?”

It was the knife at her throat that truly surprised Jane and sent her heart careening to the floor in disappointment and grave fear. She strained mildly out of sheer human habit, the need to not be imprisoned, but the knife was only pressed tighter to her throat and she was truly afraid when she felt a droplet of blood pour down her chest and stain her dress. There was a tight hand around her waist and she closed her eyes.

“You see, Mrs. Bingley?” the woman remarked, almost sadly. “You should have listened.”

Jane was most saddened by the knowledge of who was pressing the knife to her throat. The daylight spilled into the room and she let out a distressed cry, as though someone passing might hear her.

“Don’t cry out,” Mr. Townsend warned her, pressing the knife tighter, handling her roughly. “We need to get you into better accommodations. If you’re to be our ransom, we need to make sure everything is well treated.”

All that Jane wanted to know was one question. “Why?” she choked out as she was shoved forward, while the woman ahead hissed, ‘Careful!’

Mr. Townsend’s eyes had taken on a sharp and icy look. When he spoke, the normally dulcet tones of his voice were hard as diamonds and almost cruel and they made Jane flinch almost worse than she flinched at the weapon at her neck.

“Revenge.”

**

Elizabeth stepped down from the carriage on the cold February day, the sun shining above her. Longbourn was presented before her and the calm was ever so deceiving, as she was about to ruin it all. Linens hung out on lines and the geese frolicked about, causing a loud ruckus. All that Elizabeth could think was how very small it now appeared, after living at Pemberly for nearly two years. And yet, Longbourn would always hold a dear place in her heart.

She paused on the doorstep and peered into Papa’s study, watching him reading and when he glanced up, she smiled sadly and waved, wishing that she could be there on happier terms.

The door seemed to be thrown open and by the squeals of delight from both Kitty and Mama, it seemed that her presence was quite well-welcomed. She was nearly tackled to the ground with hugs while Mary lingered behind them and from the study, Papa’s voice could be heard, calling out, “Who is it, my dear?”

“It’s your daughter!” Mama shouted back, gleefully. “Oh, Lizzy, it is so good to see you! Tell me, how is my grandson, how is William? Is he here?”

Elizabeth shook her head, taking her Mama’s hands. “No, Mama, he is not with me. He’s with Darcy at the Bingley estate.”

“Oh?” Mama inquired, rather fretfully.

“Have you come to invite us to Pemberly?” Kitty asked excitedly. “Will there be a ball?”
“I rather hope not,” Mary murmured her displeasure. “It would be a disappointing event if the first time we were to all visit Pemberly was for such an event.”

Kitty stuck her tongue out at her younger sister and skipped about Elizabeth, almost in a mirror image of what Lydia might do. “Oh, do say it’s a ball!” she hoped, giggling happily. “Perhaps at the Bingleys? Has Jane given consent?”

At the very mention of Jane’s name, Elizabeth’s stomach seemed to turn and her voice disappeared all of a sudden and she could not bear to smile when she knew how dire the situation was. Instead, she focused on taking a deep breath and leading her family inside the drawing room, grateful that Papa was curious enough to inspect the commotion (and to press a kiss to her hair, something that calmed Elizabeth exponentially).

She looked around, fearful of what her news would do, and it seemed that Papa instantly knew something was amiss.

“I’ve come with terrible news,” Elizabeth confessed. The look on her face must have told the news before she could even derive the words to say and Mama’s mood immediately faltered and Elizabeth did hate to cause her such pain.

It seemed almost as if time itself froze all about her and her exhalation sounded so loud that it might cut through glass. She knew that she was walking forward and sitting down in the midst of the fainting sofa with Kitty on her left and Mama on her right and she could faintly recall speaking the words, the dreadful and horrid words that Jane was missing and they hadn’t an idea where.

She knew she’d done these things, but for the life of her, Elizabeth could hardly remember actually doing it.

She sat there, shock-still as Mama nearly did faint and Kitty cried in shock and Mary sat much the same as Elizabeth in quiet contemplation while Papa busied himself about, muttering to himself about letters that must be written.

“Oh! My Jane!” Mama fretted. “My dearest Jane!”

Papa did not appear quite consternated, but one look in his direction from Elizabeth showed her that he truly was in the midst of many thoughts and that he would not rest lightly. “Papa,” Elizabeth pleaded. “Papa, we must find her. We must rouse Uncle’s help and we must find Jane.”

For once, it seemed as though he was not to take a grave situation lightly.

“Of course, Lizzy,” he concurred, mulling it over. “We shall depart immediately. My dear,” he said, this to Mrs. Bennet, “watch the girls. It would hardly do to lose more than one in one week.”

“Mr. Bennet, do not be so cruel!” Mrs. Bennet wailed, a hand to her chest. “Oh, my nerves! You do know what you do to my nerves.”

But Papa was hardly listening, as he was already grasping his things. “Come, Elizabeth. I have a daughter to find.”

* 

Darcy did not feel as though he had been surrounded in so many books since his days at university. They appeared to be everywhere around him, as though inescapable. William had been
taken by one of the maids for his nap and to leave Darcy in incomparable quiet to do his research through pages and pages of Bingley the Senior’s journals.

There were mundane details, facts of the children. In fact, Darcy did think he could have gone the whole of his life without knowing that Caroline, as a child, preferred silk to linens and that she took a liking to sucking upon her thumb. The more interesting facts were about young Charles, however, who had a tendency to make up games in which he rescued the princess from dragons and sudden danger; her knight in shining armour.

It was almost a sad irony, then, that Bingley was off trying to do the very same for his actual Princess and wife.

“Here we are,” Darcy mumbled to himself, as he came upon the records of the time of Mrs. Townsend’s employment, finding references to the events the servants of the house had first spoken of. It was quite true to all the stories, but in these private journals that seemed to be for only the eyes of him, there was a startling new discovery.

One that truly, might affect both Bingley’s journey and Jane’s fate.

He penned the letter for immediate post, two to be sent to Elizabeth and Bingley as swiftly as possible:

Dear Charles,

New findings have resulted in what I think is a grave situation for you to be in. It appears as though your father may have had a dalliance with Mrs. Townsend and I have found several references within his private journals as to the possibility that he may have rendered her with child.

It does not continue to say whether the child was birthed or lost, but I believe that it is a potential hazard, as this woman may be quite dangerous to you and Jane, both, especially if the Townsends are seeking compensation for the damage down to their marriage, their jobs, and to their own well-being.

Write back swiftly, if you can. I have sent a duplicate of this letter to Elizabeth in the hopes that she may aid you if you are in need of it. She is at Longbourn, encouraging her family to help in the search.

I shall continue to search for Jane in more local areas.

Yours sincerely,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

With the letters sent out, Darcy could only watch the carriages go, standing by the window and surrounded by his books. He felt quite useless and more than anything, he wished to be in London, to aid Charles in whatever troubles he was investigating.

* 

Jane could not help but admit that she felt terribly scared and that the situation seemed to have progressed from a horrid one, to something even worse. She had lost her only ally when Mr. Townsend had turned upon her with the knife. Now, she truly was alone and without a single
piece of knowledge as to where she was or what she would do.

She had not seen the woman in quite some time, after they had tied up her wrists and ankles and pushed her into a covered carriage. Inside, Mr. Townsend rode alongside with her, and Jane did her best to sit perfectly still, hoping not to draw the silver knife upon her throat again (where it still did sting from where it had been dug in before).

Every now and then, she hazarded a glance up at him and felt icy fear clutch her when she realised he had not once taken his eyes off of her.

“Are you feeling well, Mrs. Bingley?” The truly vile thing was that his voice was still quite kind, as though he was still the same gentle man that she had known for the years of her marriage to Charles.

However, now she did know the truth, and inclined her gaze lower. “I hardly see why you would care,” she spoke demurely, keeping her eyes upon the floor of the carriage. “You seem to wish me harm.”

“Hardly,” Mr. Townsend soothed her, shifting off his seat and sitting beside her. “In fact, Mrs. Bingley, what we want is exactly the opposite. So long as you are with us, no harm shall come to you, but we must have you with us.”

“Why?” Jane inquired, truly clueless as to her purpose.

Mr. Townsend’s face curved up into a rather unpleasant smile that made Jane cringe to see. He moved a hand closer and though it appeared for a moment that he was going to rest his hand upon her shoulder, he eased away. “You’ve something quite precious that we want.”

Jane’s mind immediately turned to her most precious possessions. Surely, they were going to steal the ring? She did love it ever so and Charles had given it to her upon their wedding. Or perhaps the earrings he had bestowed her on their first anniversary? She exhaled worriedly, trying not to let Mr. Townsend see her fear, and glanced away, unable to see any of the countryside passing as there were black drapes covering the windows.

“We’re taking you to a very nice place,” he assured her. “Where you will stay for the next few months.”

His words alarmed Jane quite terribly and she stared at him, confused. “Months!” she remarked, horrified. “This cannot be. Charles will find me. My husband will find me,” she insisted, sounding more as though she was begging.

“Do you know,” Mr. Townsend ruminated thoughtfully. “How easy, Mrs. Bingley, it is to keep a secret?” His gaze flickered back to her and she found herself frightened by the icy smile. “Especially such a large one?”

“What secret?” she asked, as he seemed to pause, as though he was waiting for her to fulfill the curiosities and ask.

Mr. Townsend leaned in, smiling wider yet as he rested a hand on Jane’s stomach. “You’ve been pregnant, Mrs. Bingley, for several months now. Which is why I do hope you won’t try anything daring in escaping, harming the child in the process.”

Jane froze in place, thoughts flickering to mind about how it could not be possible. She had asked
about the lack of affliction and had been assured it was merely stress, that occasionally, women did not experience it every month (and by and large, it was true, as when she was younger, Jane had sometimes not experiences her time of month and even then, Mama had comforted her).

Her pallor had lightened. “That’s not possible,” she insisted. “I assure you, I cannot be. I did not experience any sickness."

“You did,” Mr. Townsend assured. “I merely had the cook prepare meals that were quite neutral and would not upset you.”

Jane’s shock gave way to anger and fear once more and she stared at him. “You cannot have my child,” she protested, far louder and more vehement about this one thing than she had ever been before in her life. Her gaze took on a stern character and she rose up in her seat.

They would not get away with this so very easily. Jane would make sure of that…somehow.

* 

“Would you like some tea, dear?” Mrs. Townsend inquired demurely, as she led Bingley down the narrow halls of her London townhome. Bingley, however, was too busy surveying each painting, each rug, each piece of furniture as if it contained a clue that would lead him to his beloved. “I’ve just put some on!”

She seemed a pleasant woman, if a little distracted and Bingley gave a distracted, ‘yes, thank you’, because really, there was no need to be rude, even in such situations.

As he wandered down the halls, it seemed the perfectly pleasant hearth of a woman separated from her husband and Bingley sighed, feeling the disappointment of a failed task wearing at him more than he wished to experience. She must have seen it so clearly on his face, for Mrs. Townsend turned and immediately made a sound of sympathy, as though she were his mother consoling him.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I don’t suppose,” he began, attempting the question, even though he knew there was little chance that she might be of help, “that you have seen a beautiful blonde woman with the radiance of an angel about, who answers to the name Mrs. Jane Bingley?”

For a moment, merely the sound of teacups clinking and clashing together sounded in the air, and then, Bingley felt a hand upon his shoulder. He looked down at her as he was offered a cup of tea.

“I cannot say that I have,” Mrs. Townsend responded. “But, do sit. I may not have seen her, but I have heard of your wife.”

Bingley took umbrage immediately, for Jane did not merit rumours spread about her and anger flickereded over his fair features. “What has been said!” He rose to his feet, nearly smacking his fist upon the table. “I assure you, it isn’t true,” he swore. “Whatever was said.”

Mrs. Townsend regarded him calmly, merely sipping at her own tea.

“What was said?” Bingley asked, rather pleading now.

“When you calm yourself, dear, I will tell you,” Mrs. Townsend assured, extending the bowl of
sugar to him. “One lump, or two.”

Presently, no amount of sugar was going to satisfy him. Not until he knew what was afoot.

**

The carriage was well-prepared, but Elizabeth lingered yet, for she could not bear to see her mother in such a state of distress and could not think to leave her in such a state. “Mama,” Elizabeth pleaded, hugging her closely. She tried her best to soothe her, as though she were a cantankerous child in need of its mother. “Mama, please,” she said softly. “Jane is strong and we will find her in safe condition.”

She could not bring herself to actually make the promise, but mustered an encouraging smile, nonetheless. She glanced over her shoulder to find Papa being pursued by Kitty and Mary at his heels, demanding questions and for one brief moment, Elizabeth could almost mistake Mary for Lydia for the way she and Kitty seemed so very in synchronization in their pursuit for information.

“Papa!”

“You cannot think to simply leave us.”

“She is our sister too!”

Elizabeth relinquished her hold on her mother to come to her father’s aid, giving them each a worried look. “We haven’t the slightest clue where she might be, and you are safest at home,” she said, rather severely, and was met with the discontent looks of her two younger sisters. “Kitty, Mary,” she pleaded. “Honestly, after we find Jane, we shall take her to see Bingley and then we will bring her back immediately,” she assured, hoping that would quell their protests.

Kitty crossed her arms, looking rather petulant, although Mary seemed to be coming around to the matter of sense.

“Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet beckoned, sounding far too calm for Elizabeth’s liking.

Elizabeth took a deep breath, compartmentalizing all her thoughts quickly. “Mary,” she began, bringing her into a hug. “We will have you over to Pemberly to study the library and the pianofortes, I promise,” she remarked. “As soon as everything has settled.” She offered a nervous smile. Grasping Kitty’s forearms lightly, she smiled, knowing exactly what she wanted to hear. “And then, eventually, there shall be a ball.”

That seemed to please her, and Elizabeth moved on to Mrs. Bennet, regarding her quietly. They could not rush this moment and Elizabeth was greatly aware of this information. Elizabeth exhaled very slowly, feeling as though she released some pain in that moment, but not enough; not nearly enough.

“You fetch my Jane,” Mrs. Bennet said, more firm than she had been before. It seemed her nerves had settled, even though she still clutched at her embroidered handkerchief with a grip so tight that had it been a hand in Mrs. Bennet’s palm, it would have been bruised to the deepest shade of blue and purple.

Elizabeth felt a heavy weight upon her back and she nodded.

“You bring her back, Lizzy,” Mrs. Bennet continued, faltering only mildly. “You bring her back
to me so that I may keep her safe from any future harm.”

“I will,” Elizabeth promised. “Mama, I promise you I will.”

She turned and quickly boarded the carriage with Mr. Bennet, sitting opposite of him as they began to move, the wind pushing through Elizabeth’s hastily pinned-up hair and she tugged her coat tighter about herself to ward off the chill of the wind about them. She did avoid looking right at Mr. Bennet, for she was not sure if she could manage a conversation at the current moment.

“What do we go first?” she finally asked, when the silence was far too overbearing.

Mr. Bennet was watching the countryside roll past. “We are going to your Uncle’s. Perhaps he will be able to help fetch my wayward girl.” Elizabeth finally caught his eye and they both underwent a moment of avoiding each other’s gaze. “And how is Mr. Bingley faring in Jane’s absence?” he asked casually, as if simply striking up any old conversation.

Elizabeth shot her father an incredulous look. “Hardly able to function, Papa,” she remarked, rather tersely. “He adores Jane, and you know that.”

Mr. Bennet pursed his lips together. “Whether he adores her enough to find her before we do remains to be seen,” he said, and Elizabeth turned her attention away once more, not in the mood for her Papa’s jests, not today. “But rest assured, one of us will find her.”

* 

Jane’s wrists had been tied up by Mr. Townsend and the silhouetted woman hours ago and she sat in a simple room, with a basin of water and a platter of food set out for her. She struggled to sit up, eyeing the door warily when it was opened and Mr. Townsend entered, heading to her. “We’ve brought you a Doctor, Mrs. Bingley. Now, I would not recommend that you do or say anything silly,” he advised, as though reassuring her.

He unknotted her wrists. She stared at him with as much loathing as Jane could muster for someone she had previously trusted so dearly. He didn’t even seem to notice.

“If you do cause a mess, then I shall be forced to harm your husband,” he said, with deep regret in his voice. “Now, I don’t think either of us wants it to come to that, dear. Isn’t that right?” Jane felt the same icy fear that had become her constant companion gnawing at her and she nodded, just the once. She could not be the cause of harm to Charles; she would never live with herself.

He released her and turned over his shoulder. “Doctor, she’s quite decent, now.”

As the Doctor entered the room, Jane and Mr. Townsend exchanged a long and heated look, neither of them quite pleased with the other.

“Mrs. Bingley, good day,” the Doctor greeted – he appeared an older man, quite friendly – and he smiled as though he could see nothing amiss whatsoever.

Mr. Townsend lingered by the door. “I will be right outside,” he warned. “Doctor, I will have a summary of your discussion after?”

“Of course, yes,” the Doctor agreed pleasantly, as Mr. Townsend closed the door and left Jane to be studied and prodded. She was instructed to lie down and she closed her eyes tightly, the idea running through her mind of delivering a message somehow, but this Doctor would surely tell Mr.
Townsend what had occurred.

Her breaths were short and she was in quite a state of distress, hardly paying attention.

“Hm.”

Jane opened her eyes and regarded the Doctor, who appeared to be making notes, inspecting her carefully. “Yes, Doctor? Is something amiss?”

“It seems that your man has been mistaken,” he chuckled. “Have you been quite tired as of late, Mrs. Bingley? Perhaps your chest has experienced soreness? Or perhaps, attending the washroom with more frequency?”

Jane had not wanted to complain, not of the first and second, and she nodded, almost skittishly. Was she with child then, or not? Mr. Townsend had implied two months, but it was not true, was it? “Several months ago,” she spoke. “I had been quite nauseous,” she remarked. “Is that part and parcel of this?”

“I believe,” the Doctor remarked, hands now removed from Jane’s stomach, “that you had merely suffered indigestion. Perhaps a case of ill food.” He offered a smile. “Congratulations, Mrs. Bingley, you are four weeks along.” He stood, offering her a sympathetic smile. “There may be nausea, but you must only keep yourself in good health and it shall pass.”

Jane felt as though the world was moving all about her and she might fall, so she grasped the sheets beneath her tightly. “Doctor…” she spoke urgently, as he moved towards the door. “Doctor, please, if you would…”

“Yes, Mrs. Bingley?”

He would harm Charles, if she said anything, if she did anything. The fear paralysed Jane and though she direly wished to speak and to send warning, or good news, or any news, she did not know where she was and could not do anything but incite harm.

“Thank you,” she finally offered, soft and sincere as she hung her head, unwilling to risk Charles’ safety, not when she was in such an unknowing position. She would protect herself and her child as best she could until she better knew what to do.

Someone would find her, she knew. Somehow.

*  

“You see,” Mrs. Townsend was remarking as she went about tidying up the cups of tea and the lumps of sugar from the table – her slightly wrinkled hands gently brushing the granules from the polished surface of the table. “There was a request for a Doctor about town. I have been serving at the Doctor’s office and was there to hear a young miss inquire of a Doctor’s services for one Mrs. Bingley.”

Bingley was listening intently, every word more important to him than the last. “Yes?” he prodded, being very careful not to ruin her patience with his constant demands.

The tea was cleared and Mrs. Townsend had brought out several biscuits, as though Bingley needed to be entertained. “The Doctor agreed to see her.”
“Where?” Bingley demanded. “And for what, is she injured?”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Townsend assured. “No, you must not think such dark thoughts!” she reprimanded. “Please, do eat.” How Bingley could ever think this woman to be capable of malice was far past him now.

He plucked up a biscuit and nervously gnawed at it, hands twitching. Every additional piece of information only led to horrendous images and scenarios playing out in his mind. He stared across the table, quite rudely, but he had no care for it.

“Anyhow,” Mrs. Townsend continued, her voice rather sweet. “The Doctor did take his leave to go to the home.”

“Is it in London!” Bingley asked excitedly. “Is Jane here?”

“Perhaps,” Mrs. Townsend remarked, turning to hold out a stack of letters, bound together by thick ribbon. “At first, I did think it was quite strange, that it be your Mrs. Bingley who needed a Doctor, for she would be with you. Then I did realise…”

Bingley fidgeted past what was completely proper and he pleaded with his eyes.

“…that perhaps, my husband has been quite foul.” She handed the letters to Mr. Bingley. “In these, there is a list of every location and family my husband has serviced over the years. The Doctor spoke of not knowing where he must go, and when he did depart, he did not give me the address.”

Bingley nodded, taking the letters quite gratefully. He was one step closer then and the tea and the biscuits put him at a strange ease, for he could not worry about not finding Jane, not now, not when he had just discovered a clue. “Thank you,” he remarked, quite enthusiastic, bowing and jumping to his feet. “You have been most kind, Mrs. Townsend, thank you.”

He nearly dashed from the room in his departure, almost running right into his man as they boarded the carriage. “Where to, sir?”

“The townhome,” Bingley remarked, eagerly. “I’ve reading to do and I must send a letter to Darcy at once!”

**

One Week Later

The letter from Darcy arrived with due haste, but Bingley was no longer in the townhome to read it. The events of the past week had prevented that. Now, the townhome was in disarray from a breaking and entering, and the letter still sat, unopened upon the table, clearly unwanted.

**

Five Days Earlier

Arriving in London, Elizabeth barely stopped as she stepped off the carriage, hurrying to the door of the Bingleys townhome and knocking, holding her skirts up to prevent them from becoming muddy. Her father joined her as quickly as he could behind her, but it was not before Bingley drew open the door, looking quite unkempt and unshaven, letters in his hands.
“Mr. Bennet!” he remarked with surprise. “Elizabeth! You’re early!”

“It is Tuesday,” Elizabeth reminded him, almost sharply, as she peered past him. “As we agreed upon. May we come in?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Bingley hurriedly remarked, stepping back. “I apologise, I’ve not slept in what seems to be days! I’ve been to so many homes and locations and not a one has Jane!” Elizabeth passed him, followed by Mr. Bennet, and the both seemed to be traveling at a speed entirely different than that of Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth glanced about the house, searching for signs that Bingley was still taking good care of himself, and she found half-eaten remnants of food and a half-drunk cup of tea from the last meal and she sighed.

“Charles,” she remarked, sympathetic and stern all at once. “What would Jane say if she saw the way you were caring for yourself?”

“I hardly care,” he said, brushing the criticism off. “She may say what she will when we discover her and until then, I shall not stop for lack of care in my diet or ways.”

“What have you learned?” Mr. Bennet spoke up, for the first time, seemingly distracted by the trappings of the home and searching them as if to find some answer hidden amongst the busts and the books.

Bingley paced back and forth, running a hand through unruly locks of hair. “That Jane has been in need of a Doctor, though for what, I hardly know. If she is injured or ill, I shall not stop to bring them to justice, or…or harm them!” he said, hastily, though both Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet knew that the chances of Mr. Bingley harming anyone, even in the worst fits of rage, were very unlikely. “There is a list of places she may be, that this wretched man may have taken her, but I cannot say where she is, for I have not found her.”

Elizabeth took the letters herself, reading them carefully.

Mr. Bennet crossed the room to peer over her shoulder and read the missives.

“There’s a large number of homes named in here,” he remarked, rather disapprovingly, in Bingley’s direction, as though it were his fault specifically that it be such a long list. Elizabeth was mired in the details of the letter and she continued reading, looking for some hint or clue that would lead them to the right location.

She sat herself on the nearest chaise and sighed, returning to her reading. There was much work to be done and with Bingley in such a state, she did not truly believe him to be capable of standing the stress much longer.

* 

Jane had begun to feel ill two whole days after her visit from the kind Doctor. It had awoken her in the morning and she barely had time from which to scramble from her bed into the nearest bucket they had brought into the room. It did make her feel relieved and unhappy all at once to know that she could conceive, but that she had found out in such dire circumstances.

There was no one in the room to witness her sickness and she remained swathed in the warm
sheets of the bed, pale and exhausted from the sickness, barely moving when she heard the door unlatch and the humming of someone entering.

Jane did not even believe her eyes when she saw the woman, the woman who was so clearly the accomplice in these terrible acts.

“I’ve put ginger in your tea, Mrs. Bingley,” Mrs. Brown remarked, voice stern and matronly, all at once. “It will settle your stomach and drive away those terrible ills that plague you.”

The tea and tray of toast was set before Jane and the very smell made her sick once more and she nearly flipped the tray completed as she retched to the side of the bed, into the bucket, once more. The tea had spilled over the side and dripped downwards, dripping onto the coverlets and Jane closed her eyes tightly, tears staining them.

“Oh, this is a nasty case, then,” Mrs. Brown observed. “You know what this means?”

Jane did not take the proffered damp cloth, but Mrs. Brown did not stop, easing in to clean up Jane’s mouth. She eased away, bustling about the room to tidy it as Jane watched her warily, taking the cup of tea with shaky hands and washing about the miserable taste.

“It means a difficult pregnancy,” Mrs. Brown remarked.

Jane watched as the curtains were drawn open and she winced. “Why are you doing this?” she asked, finally, her voice hoarse. In the back of her mind, she recalled that Mrs. Brown had been assigned to aid Elizabeth and William and she felt dreadful for both assigning such an awful woman to them and yet, at the same time, neglecting service to them while Jane herself was kidnapped.

“Mr. Townsend, he has promised a new start,” she spoke, sounding rather elated and wistful. “We will have your child and have the life that the elder Bingley denied him.”

Jane stared at her. She was clearly mad, but Jane did not dare say a word. “You truly intend to keep me here for nine months?”

“Yes, our plans are rather early, aren’t they?” Mrs. Brown gave a thoughtful sound. “But such is the way of life. No matter. If someone gets too curious…” Her gaze turned over her shoulder and her smile was dark, almost sinister. “We have ways of dealing with that, dear.”

She curtsied, as though she still served Jane somehow, and that very gesture sent another wave of nausea through Jane.

“I’ll be by with more tea soon, Mrs. Bingley, you just keep drinking that.”

Jane, however, would not touch the tea at all, preferring the sickness to the kindness of devils.

tbc
Letters, as a rule, came sparingly when they were truly wanted and Darcy went days without hearing a word from London beyond the letters that informed him that Master Bingley was at the townhome accompanied by Mrs. Darcy and Mister Bennet. The letters never bore news such as, ‘we have discovered the whereabouts of Jane’. Of course, Darcy was beginning to believe that news of that sort was almost too optimistic, given the cloud of negativity he had seemed to fallen prey to. It only compounded with Elizabeth gone and some of the servants of the Bingleys estate had begun to whisper behind his back about his demeanor.

This morning, Darcy arose and went about all his normal tasks, finding there to be no reason to differ from any other day. He made himself presentable and spent breakfast with young William, reading to him a new letter or chapter of a book per day to increase his literacy.

Though, with each passing day, William was now becoming concerned with his Aunt, Uncle, and Mother’s absence. It was not spoken.

“Papa,” William babbled, his limited vernacular benefiting him now. Darcy could hear the note of discontent in his voice and hardly knew what he could say to make the situation better. “Mama?”

“She’ll be home soon,” Darcy promised, forcing what best of a smile he could muster. If he presented a warm and confident front, he might believe his own words as much as William did.

His son frowned, as if there was something amiss in the answer, but he continued to eat the breakfast fed to him by one of the maids, allowing Darcy to set the letter down upon the table and return to his deep thoughts on the nature of all this terrible business with Bingley and Jane.

The facts were clear.

Mr. Townsend, a disgruntled servant, had taken Jane in an effort for revenge. Mrs. Brown was also missing and the staff cited a long-had affair between Townsend and the woman, which would account for her loyalty to the man. It even explained the misplaced money, for a servant who did not have a spark of guilt in kidnapping the mistress of the house would hardly feel the recriminations of stealing several pounds here and there.

There was a monetary ransom placed on Jane and Bingley had gone to fetch her, Darcy’s own wife in tow, along with their father-in-law. If all went well, Jane would be back with him and no ransom need be paid.

Darcy did not find it suitable to think of what might happen if things did not go well. He took William into his arms, in order to move to the study for another day of perusing the elder Bingley’s logs, to find a more detailed account of the terrible business between the Townsends, sending the maid on her way.

He was met in the hall by the doorman. “Sir, a letter from town.”

Which town was not said and Darcy took the envelope in hand, keeping it sealed until he arrived into the study. He was careful to set William down on the carpeting, where he would not find harm, before taking an opener to the wax seal that bore no mark he recognised.

The writing, however, became instantly familiar.
It was by Townsend’s hand.

Charles Bingley,

*Your lack of communication is most harrowing. It is my sad part to inform you that Mrs. Bingley shall not be remaining where she is for much longer. We shall be moving her once more before you permanently lose the chance of ever seeing her alive. The demand for money remains the same. It is required to be delivered in a fortnight, to the address listed below. If the authorities have been alerted, I cannot promise your Jane’s safety.*

It was not signed, but it did not have to be. The sender was clear enough and it filled Darcy with disgust to even hold a letter from the vile man. He instantly knew he could no longer sit idly by while the search for Jane continued. Even if he needed to bring William with him, he would…

No, he mustn’t. Exposing his son to such a danger was reckless and out of the question. He sighed, hoping that Elizabeth and Charles would find Jane soon enough and be back before he went out of his own mind.

This was, quite frankly, going to happen very soon at the rate he was traveling.

*

The Bingley townhome in London was a veritable mess of litter, lists, and letters. The communications between Mr. Townsend and his former clientele were plentiful and no sleep was found as they perused each of them to see whether the owners of the house were to be in the country during the season.

It had been a full day of searching and only three possibilities had been eliminated, which to Bingley, was not good enough in the least.

“This is utterly pointless,” Mister Bennet sighed, tossing another letter over his shoulder. “By the time we have read every last vowel and consonant, some proper action might be taken. Elizabeth, the authorities,” he said, quite sternly.

“No!” Bingley immediately interjected; the voice of panic. “No, he’ll harm her.” He shook his head, rapidly, taking up another of the letters and setting them down on the table. “And that is out of the question. We will find her.”

Elizabeth sat there, not saying much of anything, as though stuck in the middle between two opinions. A rock and a hard place, as it were.

“Out of the question for you, but she is my daughter,” Mister Bennet now rose to his feet. “And I will not have her safety compromised because her husband is too meek…”

“Meek!” Bingley interrupted. “I am not meek, I am concerned!”

“Too concerned to deal with this properly, to be sure.”

“Gentlemen!” Elizabeth cut them off harshly, holding up the letter. “I’ve found it.”

They both turned to look at her and by the looks on their faces, it appeared as though they were wondering if she had simply invented a solution in order to quell the bickering, but she had a look
of knowing on her face, relief masked by the happiness of finding something. She laid out the parchment upon the table and beckoned the men to read it.

Hovering over Elizabeth’s shoulders, they read the information together. “You see?” Elizabeth inquired of the two, quite proud of her findings within the seemingly endless pile of letters. “The Windsors possess a country home near the Bingleys, where Jane could be taken immediately and they also have a large manour in London. However, it was not to be in use, as they are traveling in France for the season and have asked Mr. Townsend to watch the grounds.”

“And no other family could possibly be housing Jane?” Mister Bennet ventured and though it drove Bingley half-mad, he knew they must be sure.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No!” she promised as the eagerness of her discovery shone on her face. “No, not with such perfect circumstances as this.”

Bingley snatched up the letter and began to pace around the room, reading it again and again for himself as Elizabeth focused all her attention on Mister Bennet. He hardly seemed to hear anything as they continued to discuss what to do now, for the address was known and the details of the letter were exact.

“We must rescue her,” Elizabeth insisted. “But how?”

Bingley froze. “I think I know a way.”

Mister Bennet arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Elizabeth thought it to be the wisest choice her Papa had made all day.

*

The insistent knocking on the door of the Bingleys’ home filled Darcy with a strange sort of exuberant hope that he hadn’t expected to feel, not so inflated as it was. The announcement that it was, “A Mrs. Bennet, sir,” did nothing to comfort his nerves, but rather, expounded upon them. Of course, with every disappointment came an opportunity.

He greeted his mother-in-law as quickly and politely as was possible, listening to her go on about her Jane and the danger and the impudence of Mister Bennet to simply leave as he did, but Darcy was already concocting an idea in his head.

“Mrs. Bennet,” he asked, direct and to the point. “Would you watch William while I go to London to aid in the search?” It was hardly the best situation to be in and he didn’t wish for a moment to actually leave his son behind, but these were pressing times.

Mrs. Bennet hardly took well to this request, reacting in a flurry of insistences that the spasms of worry might well cause her to faint, but Darcy was in no mood for dramatics and simply caught her gaze. “I can go and help find Jane,” he assured her. “But you must watch my son. Is that understood? No harm is to come to him.”

“Mister Darcy,” Mrs. Bennet remarked, quite pluckily at that, and in a moment, Darcy saw a glimmer that not all of Elizabeth’s personality came from her father, “I am very adept at caring for children. I raised five girls, I can handle one boy.”

“In that case,” Darcy replied, with a nod, “William should be no trouble. I shall write,” was his
terse last words to his mother-in-law before he gave orders that a carriage be readied while he said goodbye to his son temporarily.

He would be back, no matter what he would have to face in order to return.

*

The pacing about Jane had become cloying in recent hours and though she tried her best not to mind it, her irritability was quickly making itself known by the expression upon her face. Truly, no other time would she have minded, but currently, she was kidnapped, pregnant, and vastly ill to the stomach and they keptickering about her, back and forth.

“She is not ready,” Mrs. Brown was pleading, a hand on Jane’s shoulder, as though comforting. “She is far too ill to make the journey to the next home, you must consider the child.”

“If we do not move her,” Mr. Townsend murmured, his deep and soothing voice clipped and harsh, “then all shall be for naught!”

“You think that they…” Mrs. Brown trailed off, her gaze turning down upon Jane and she flinched mildly to be under such harsh scrutiny. She did not wish to be in such a situation and only wished to be back at home, with Charles at her side, keeping her warm. She closed her eyes, imagining the look upon his face when she told him the wonderful news that they had finally succeeded and such warm and good thoughts kept her strong through the dire times.

She watched Mrs. Brown rise to her feet, going to Mr. Townsend and whispering in a pitch too soft for Jane to make out the words. All she could think and pray was that Charles had not put himself in harm’s way. Oh! Not after everything she had done to prevent that!

“No,” Mr. Townsend murmured after a moment. “No, we won’t be going just yet.” He locked eyes with Jane. “You’ve earned yourself a two day reprieve, Mrs. Bingley. Do enjoy it.” He bowed, as though he owed her such manners and she could not tell, then, whether the bile in her throat was from the sickness or in reaction to that horrid man.

Mrs. Brown lingered in the doorway, smiling at her serenely.

“Do not think,” Jane mustered up her reserves of strength, “that I shall ever let you have my child.” The firmness of her words belied a deeper strength to her than most people ever saw, or was privy to know of. Such times, however, called for desperate measures.

Mrs. Brown kept a firm hand on the doorknob and Jane did not flinch, not once, even when she saw the look of anger channeled back her way. “We shall simply see.”

And with that, she departed, leaving Jane merely to the silence and her sickness.

*

Outside the stately manour sat an empty carriage.

Beside it stood a man with a newspaper; clearly older than the other two with him. He casually rested against the lamppost, reading of the current events of London as he kept a wary and watchful eye on the residence. A tap on his shoulder nearly set him off guard, but he exhaled when it was merely one of his companions on the trip. “Have you seen anything?” Bingley hissed, adjusting his top hat in his hands and wringing the life out of it before replacing it on his head to
mask the rather obvious colour of his hair from anyone who might dare look out the window.

“No, I have not,” Mr. Bennet replied, a displeased tone echoing in his words. “Where is Elizabeth?”

“I’m here, Papa,” she answered the question before Mr. Bingley could. She handed them each a part of her outfit – a book to her father and a purse to her brother-in-law – as she dug out a piece of paper from the pocket of her coat. “Aha,” she murmured to herself, taking each item back. “I spoke to the nearest shop, to see whether your servants had been buying food locally,” she informed Bingley.

“And?” he inquired, eagerly.

Elizabeth smiled; a wide smile, full of knowing and success. “And Mr. Townsend has been in for milk and bread and tea twice this week,” she reported. “The milk has been delivered to that home, the precise one we thought,” she relayed, her voice in a hush. “We’ve the right place! Now we just have to get Jane out!”

“And how do you propose to do that, Lizzy?” Mr. Bennet archly inquired. “Shall we scale the walls? Perhaps Mr. Bingley is well-suited to it, but in my old age, I find I am not spry enough.”

“No, this is what we need a diversion for,” Mr. Bingley said, sounding rather like a young boy, excited to reveal the grand plan of his miniature wooden toy soldiers before marching them into battle against Caroline’s poppets. “I did think upon calling Mrs. Townsend for the help. Surely she would help us to distract them long enough to creep in through a back door or window and get Jane away?”

Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet both turned upon Bingley. “Have you asked her?” Elizabeth prodded after a long pause.

A flicker of uncertainty came over Bingley’s face, and he shook his head. “No, not yet, I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea.”

“Go,” Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet directed at once, voices stern and loud. It did not take much more than that for him to hurry off down one of London’s busy streets, back in the direction of Mrs. Townsend’s home.

Elizabeth exhaled, staring up at the large home, surrounded by fencing and large trees. Her father must have heard her, because he kept a steady hand on her shoulder. “Do not worry so,” he advised, leaning in to confide in her. “Constant anxiety can cause freckles.”

“Not to mention becoming Mama,” Elizabeth added dryly, but with a loving smile as she leaned in against her father’s hand for comfort. “She will be all right. I’m sure of it. We simply need some help.”

*Darcy sat in the carriage along the seemingly interminable ride to London, not caring much for the nature about him, though Elizabeth had once remarked upon it favourably, comparing men and mountains and saying it was something she had once heard.*

He had tried her very hardest to persuade her to allow men to win in that competition and it was with a very thorough kiss that he had won that battle. The carriage hit a rather large bump in the
road and he grimaced, peering out the window and knocking on the glass partition.

“How much longer?” he demanded.

“Several hours yet, sir,” his servant reported.

Darcy sat back, sighing, once more retreating into his memories in search of something to while away the time.

* Bingley knocked with such vigour on Mrs. Townsend’s door that he feared he might bring it down with his fervour. He was sure that despite having bathed properly the evening before that this morning, he reeked of desperation. It was several minutes again before the door was opened for him and he smiled weakly. “I’ve come back,” he announced to Mrs. Townsend, taking off his hat and bowing for her.

“Mr. Bingley,” she greeted. “Would you like to come in?”

“I am afraid my visit must be short. I have come to ask a favour of you that I realise I have no place in asking. However, it is my Jane,” he pleaded, mustering a wary smile, trying to convince her, though he had yet to ask the favour. “And I would do anything for her. Even pose strange, forward questions.”

She smiled, rather sadly at him. “You know,” she mused. “You’re very much like your father at times.”

Bingley paused, confusion flooding his expression, but he could not ask further questions about that. “Will you help me get Jane back?”

It did not take but a moment for Mrs. Townsend to consider and she reached out to clasp his hand, nodding. “Of course, dear,” she confirmed. “Your wife need not pay for my mistakes.”

He did not puzzle out what mistakes those might be and instead focused on the relief that flooded him whole at the promising news. If all went well, he would see Jane within forty-eight hours, yet.

** The next morning was a beautiful one and the sun spilled in the open window. Jane had opened it herself just the slightest to experience a little bit of breeze, for it did calm her stomach and alleviate the sickness. She sat up in bed, the white sheets pooled about her and the way the sun hit them, made it seem like she was a shining angel lying in bed.

There was a knock at the door, which meant it was Mr. Townsend. Mrs. Brown never did knock. He entered and primly bowed for her and Jane turned her gaze away, refusing to acknowledge him as he did such a thing. “We’ll be moving tomorrow. The carriage is prepared,” he informed her brusquely. His mood seemed dour, and she hadn’t an idea why.

Jane just kept her gaze down on the sheets, so resplendently white and beautiful, trying to guide her mind to something far more positive than the thought of being taken somewhere else. Perhaps it would be even farther than she was now and Charles would never find her. A flutter of panic coursed through her at the very thought and she tried to suppress it before it encouraged about
bout of sickness.

He studied her pallor and nodded once. “You look improved.”

“I do not feel it,” was all she said in return. “Perhaps it is because I am being held prisoner for my child.”

He barely smiled in return. “Such things do happen.”

He left with another bow and Jane did wish she had something with which to throw at the door. She also wished she had the temperament that would encourage her to throw things. As it was, she merely sat in place and repressed all the horrid feelings trying to find their way to the surface. She did believe that he would get his just payment in the end for what he and Mrs. Brown were doing to her family.

She simply had to believe.

She overheard the sound of the bell ringing and wondered at what was happening. The sound of shouts came next and after that, the panic in her stomach quickly swarmed and overwhelmed her from head to foot.

*

Bingley returned with Mrs. Townsend at his side at the early hour of six in the morning. Nearly everyone in their party was very much groggy, but Mrs. Townsend seemed chipper, against all odds. “A good cup of coffee,” she advised to Elizabeth, who was yawning away and trying to pull herself from her dream of her husband and son. She had dreamt that they were reunited and Jane was perfectly safe. “It is the best remedy.”

The four of them sat in Bingley’s townhome and Bingley paced back and forth, unable to remain still. “Sit,” Mr. Bennet instructed firmly and as though it were a magical word, he did just that. He did so, all the while looking about the room with a look on his face as though he was wondering if he was being chastened, not unlike a little boy. Elizabeth merely rubbed at her eyes and sipped at her tea, trying to rouse herself to alertness. It was a very important day. Mrs. Townsend had agreed to ring the door of the manor and distract the occupants of the house while Bingley rescued Jane from the back door, Elizabeth stood watch, and Mr. Bennet manned the first of two carriages. One was to be a decoy sent to the market while the other went back to the townhome.

Elizabeth rose when her tea was through and the clock struck seven. “We had best get moving,” she advised, her nerves daring to play with her, as if dissuading her from the plan of the day. The group of them had decided against the gun that Bingley kept for hunting in the townhome. The thought of resorting to that kind of violence sent chills down Elizabeth’s back and she was grateful that Darcy was not around for this.

She hoped he was safe at the Bingley home, for she could not imagine experiencing this horrid ordeal without being able to return home to him and William, both safe and sound.

Bingley rose to his feet once more, running both hands through his hair. He had an anxious look on his face and he nodded. “By noon, she’ll be back in my arms,” he promised.

Mr. Bennet watched the conversation and grasped his jacket. “All this talk,” he remarked. “I am beginning to think we shall never be away.”
It was he that led the group out of the home, Elizabeth last to lock up the townhome with the high hopes that Bingley was truly right when he said that within the short span of several hours, Jane would once more be with them.

The carriage ride to the Windsors was shorter than she recalled and she watched the sky as it passed, her thoughts turning back to Darcy as they were wont to do. She thought of the way his hair mussed so completely after a good night’s sleep and the tendency he had of speaking in his sleep, soft mumblings of his day. She missed his kisses and the way he held her at night, palms splayed softly against her stomach.

The yearning for her husband was becoming an ache in her stomach and it only drove her to become more determined to rescue Jane. If she missed Darcy this much, she couldn’t begin to think how it must be for her sister.

She turned to Bingley as they pulled up before the Windsors home and she laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “She’ll be back with you soon enough,” she promised, giving her brother-in-law a kiss upon the cheek as she was helped out of the carriage by her father and they parted in different directions.

It was time.

*

The ride had become smoother in recent hours and Darcy took that as a sign of hope. He’d broken his reverie, thinking of precisely how he would kiss Elizabeth when they were reunited, and turned his attention to the horizon.

“How long now?” he inquired.

“Two hours at the outside, sir,” his servant informed him.

Darcy settled in for the last bit of the long haul, already planning to go directly to the Bingleys townhome to offer moral support and if it was necessary, whatever brute force he could offer in defending his family from harm.

*

Mrs. Townsend approached the door with a little bit of lift in her step. She had not seen her wayward husband in nearly twenty-two years. While he had kept his job, she had lost hers and had needed to build up her life from scratch. It was not impossible, but it was not something she had chosen.

She rang the bell and waited quite patiently, her back to the door.

When it opened and she turned to see who it was, her smile widened. “After twenty-two years,” she remarked, pushing inside the house. “I found you. I think, my dear, that it is finally time that you and I had a talk.”

Mr. Townsend simply gaped, shouting for Mrs. Brown to join them.

It seemed they were not expecting company.

*
Bingley slipped in through the back door and hurried out when a maid came his way and he cursed as his plan seemed to shatter. It was Elizabeth’s ingenuity that saved them both in the end as she pointed to the trellis and sent him climbing up to the room with the open window, wherein he could traverse through the house from that room.

He climbed and avoided the thorns of the roses growing on the trellis as best he could, but still, he found himself pricked. He would be injured a thousand times over for Jane, though, and so, kept climbing without pause.

He swung himself over the windowsill and found himself crashed upon the floor of the room. Wincing, he picked himself up, hoping that the residents of the house did not hear him. It appeared though, that there was enough shouting happening in the foyer to keep them distracted.

He stood, frozen in place, for there was his wife at the door, peering through a crack to see what all the commotion was about.

“Jane!” he exclaimed, dashing over to her side and picking her up in his arms, hugging her tightly as he twirled her about and kissed her firmly on the lips without waiting a single moment. He did love her so thoroughly that he could not bear to delay it.

She appeared ill, however, and she clung tightly to him. Had they been mistreating her? A flash of anger coursed through him at the mere thought and he picked her up in his arms so she would not need suffer any longer.

“Charles!” she remarked, with just as much enthusiasm and relief. “Oh! Charles, I have wonderful news.”

“Jane,” he whispered, warning her as he crept into the hall, descending the back stairs and keeping out of sight. All the while, he held her close in his arms and stole kisses at every opportunity. “We must escape, we may talk later.”

“Charles! I…”

Her sentence was swallowed by another kiss as he hurried out the back door, shouting to Elizabeth to ready the second carriage. He only hoped that Mrs. Townsend would make it out safely, but she had assured him earlier that she would and that Bingley was not to worry about her for a moment.

He set her down on her feet and looked her over, beaming widely. He had his Jane back and it was simply the very best of days. He promptly swept her up into another tight embrace, keeping her near before her vehemence demanded that he step back. “Jane?” he inquired, now truly concerned. “What is the matter?”

“You must listen,” she insisted, eyes wide. “Charles,” she announced, a delighted look on her face.

“Charles!” Elizabeth shouted from the carriage. “We have to leave. Now!”

Bingley turned back to Jane and took her hand. “Come,” he urged, already running off. “We have to leave, before anyone gets injured. Your father is…”

“Papa!” Jane exclaimed with worry, interrupting him.
“…already on his way. It will be all right. We are meeting at the townhome.” He kissed her once more for good measure as they hurried along towards Elizabeth and he wondered at just what was so important that Jane had been so insistent to let him know. It would wait, however.

First, they needed to seek safety.

* 

Through the carriage ride to the townhome, Jane continued to try and tell both Charles and Elizabeth about her condition, if only because the bumpiness of the roads led to a terrible sickness and she could barely hold it back. Charles kept his arms about her as if she was hopeless and helpless and could not fend for herself and though she might have protested, it was quite nice to simply indulge.

“No, we cannot go straight to the townhome without a plan,” Elizabeth was insisting, her husband and her sister amidst a heated argument. “Papa will be there, but we have no manner of idea what that horrid man and his pernicious accomplice will do.”

“It is safe,” Charles was insisting. Jane merely took another deep breath when the carriage was heavily disturbed by a bump and the tea she’d partaken in just that morning threatened to rise. She even held a hand to her mouth. “Jane, darling, are you all right?” she was asked, for Charles must have seen.

“Charles, please, can you stop arguing with my sister for a moment and please talk to me?” she encouraged in a low and serious tone.

Elizabeth met Jane’s gaze and they exchanged a momentary silent conversation that spanned from ‘what’s wrong?’ to ‘no, I’ll tell you later’ and from ‘are you sure?’ to ‘yes, of course I am!’

Charles took both of her hands in his and met her eyes. “Jane, you may tell me anything and I would be happy to hear it,” he announced.

Even Elizabeth seemed eager to hear it, for she leaned forward and rested one hand on Jane’s knee in support. It all seemed right, Jane thought, to tell them at this moment. She was nervous, but the sickness had abated enough that it would be pleasant and they had enough time to simply sit and enjoy the news.

“Sir?” The servant steering the carriage cut Jane off before she could even speak. “I think there may be a problem.”

Charles seemed to have trouble deciding whether to look at Jane or answer the call, and so Jane knew she must keep quiet for another moment while he dealt with this issue. She gave him a nod and a gentle prod. “Go ahead,” she urged in a whisper. Charles opened the door of the carriage when it was safe to say that they had stopped and Elizabeth crawled over to take Jane’s hand in hers.

Jane regarded her sister with a smile, meeting her eyes. “I am glad to be safe again,” she remarked with a happy laugh; one full of relief and longing to say her secret. It would not be right, though, if Charles did not hear it first.

Elizabeth did not seem content to simply hold Jane’s hand and enveloped her in a tight embrace, keeping her so close that Jane could smell the faintest hint of Mr. Darcy’s cologne attached to
Elizabeth’s coat, not yet washed away. “Oh, Jane!” Elizabeth murmured. “You must never do that to us again, especially not to me. I cannot think of life without you. You are such a good Aunt to William and my very best friend.” She hugged Jane tighter and tighter until Jane could barely but breathe. “And my very favourite sister, of course.”

Jane, though, was all too grateful for the contact and hugged back tightly. “I promise, I shall not let that happen again,” she murmured, words only for Elizabeth to hear. “Where is Mr. Darcy?” she inquired with worry ever-present in her tone. “I would hate to have parted you from him, it was hardly my intention!”

Elizabeth scoffed at that, a dubious expression upon her face. “Jane,” she remarked. “Honestly, I daresay you didn’t intend to be kidnapped,” she chastised, affectionately embracing her once more. “Please do not worry yourself over the choices I made to come rescue you. I am sure Fitzwilliam would have done precisely the same, had it been Georgiana.”

Something must have slowly made sense in Elizabeth’s head, for her expression took on a thoughtful visage, almost as if calculating.

“Jane,” she remarked slowly. “Why did they take you? And what precious item did they have stored in that room with you?”

Jane should always have known that her sister would be the first to put the pieces together. She truly had the wit that most women only longed for and most men could not compete with. It was a lucky thing that Mr. Darcy was as intelligent as he was, for Lizzy deserved only the best.

The door was pulled open and Charles crawled back inside. “There is a foreign carriage outside the house. Your father is here as well. We must hurry,” he insisted, taking Jane’s hand and beckoning Elizabeth as well. “We think it’s only Mrs. Brown.”

“And what of Mrs. Townsend?” Elizabeth inquired. “And her wayward husband?”

He shook his head, picking Jane up into his arms without a word and carrying her as though they were just married and there was a threshold to conquer. She allowed it, if only that he was helping her out of the carriage and he did put her down after a few steps. “Neither is about,” he remarked. “Which only makes the situation worse.”

Jane exchanged a worried glance with Elizabeth and she did want to tell them how very dangerous her abductors were and the threats they had made to her husband, her family, and the extended family members as well. “Charles,” she pleaded, holding onto his hand to prevent him from going inside just yet.

Elizabeth, however, was harder to persuade. “I will simply go see,” she assured, giving Jane’s arm a reassuring squeeze and a smile aimed in Charles’ direction, as if to promise that everything would be all right.

She was away quietly, her dress lifted up so the hem did not trail along the ground and collect mud (which was, Jane noticed, a habit that she had picked up since marrying the well-to-do Mr. Darcy and at times, Jane wondered if her sister even realised how she had changed).

“Jane,” Charles tugged on her hand. “Come. We’ll take you upstairs where you will be safe. Now that we have you back, they are no longer a threat! They will pick some other family with money and affluence.”
Her dear, dear Charles. Jane looked him in the eye and clung to his hand tightly, shaking her head. She knew now that she had to make him understand, even if it did render him useless and speechless. “Charles, it is not that they want riches.”

“Then what?” he asked, easing closer. “Jane, why would they take you and leave such letters without ulterior motives?”

“They want our child.”

Charles stared at her in confusion, peering down to her stomach (as though he perhaps expected it to have inflated) and then up at her face (as if to see if perhaps her nose would grow if it were a myth) and then lower and he shook his head, blinking rapidly. “You?”

“Yes.”

“Us? We?”

“You and I, yes,” Jane confirmed, voice serene and even.

Charles let go of her hands and stared at her with a look of incomprehension that Jane wondered if she should repeat her words to see if they were actually in English or if she had just thought they were.

“You,” he repeated, the word a soft exhalation as his gaze dropped to her stomach.

“Charles!” Jane protested with a relieved laugh. “I’m pregnant. Please, say something, else I might think I have robbed you of the ability to speak!” She met his eyes. “I cannot go in there, Charles. It is our child they want most of all. They are angry with your father and they want to take it out on us.”

A striking look of bravado overcame Charles’ features and his posture even straightened some. “Jane, I will protect you,” he announced firmly, eyes darting to the house. “I’ve the hunting guns inside. If they even so much as try anything, I shall put a stop to it.”

Jane was nervous, yet, but she put all her faith in her husband, knowing that if he had a plan, then she must trust him. It was within the vows she had taken to cherish and to obey and he had taken the same and he would protect her, without a doubt. She nodded, taking hold of his hand, but he paused in his step and turned to kiss her so vehemently that Jane wondered what had come over him!

“Charles!” she protested, gasping.

His hands were already roaming to her stomach. “Can you feel anything yet? Of course you wouldn’t. It’s far too early. Have you been faring well? Are you feeling well? Jane, you must tell me everything,” he urged eagerly and anxiously.

“Papa!”

The worried cry came from inside the house and it was most certainly Elizabeth’s voice, shouting in horror. Jane’s excitement (and Charles’ too, by the look on his face) faded immediately and was replaced by worry as they immediately dashed towards the house.

It was not quick enough.
The sound of two gunshots being fired echoed loudly all about them and then Elizabeth shouted again. “No!” That single word, screamed into the air and driving fear into Jane’s heart, accompanied by an icy chill down her spine. She hurried inside as fast as she could, but Charles was faster than her.

There were no more shots fired after that.

**

Ten Minutes Earlier

Darcy arrived to a suspiciously quiet Bingley townhome, which was hardly the best of signs that things were going well. If nothing else, he had expected to arrive to find Charles pondering over comically ineffective plans (and truly, he expected to find Elizabeth there as well. He loved his wife more than he could even find the words to say, but he knew her character well and that she was prone to doing anything for her elder sister).

“Sir, what shall I do with the carriage?” his man inquired as Darcy charged on forward into the home, frowning a little.

He was being so hotheaded that he was missing his surroundings, not even taking the time to pay attention to the details. He turned his attention to his own carriage, forcing himself to keep his wits about him. “Keep it around the side,” he advised.

His coach nodded and gave the horses a nudge as Darcy turned his attention to the surroundings. There was a strange coach beside the Bingley’s own and from the house, when he listened far more carefully, he could hear the sounds of glass breaking and what appeared to be a disagreement that was escalating by the second.

Something was amiss.

Darcy threw caution to the wind and charged into the home, ready to help in whatever way he could.

*

One Hour Earlier

Mrs. Townsend stood upon the doorstep, staring at her wayward husband, who merely stared back at her. “What are you doing here?” he rasped, grabbing her by the bicep with a great degree of force. She wrenched herself politely from his grasp and stared him down, not flinching once, even as he snapped, “Follow them!” to Mrs. Brown, the woman that Mrs. Townsend chiefly suspected was encouraging her husband’s affections.

She simply watched him sadly. “I never thought you could be this horrid. All this because…”

“Because Bingley ruined our lives,” he spat back at her. “Got you pregnant, drove us apart, drove you out of his home. All while the three children looked upon us so derisively. He said you could keep the girl, but those children would have hated her. And it would never have been my daughter.”

“So you’re going to steal a child because I lost mine?” It was truly piteous and sad, but she was
still trapped in the past, amongst heavy and horrid memories. “That poor girl does not deserve what happened to me.”

“It hardly matters now,” he spat back at her. Mr. Townsend raised his posture high. “It’s all over. Jane Bingley will provide us a daughter and the unfortunate younger Bingley must die.” He said it so casually, as though he were simply introducing a guest. “Without her husband, I daresay the widow Bingley will do whatever we please.”

She tried to stop him, but he shoved her against the wall, a firm hand about her throat.

“No,” he instructed, very calmly. “I would not protest in such a way if I were you.”

She swallowed hard, feeling the force of his hand upon her neck.

“Are you going to behave?”

It was only the pressure of his hand restricting her, but Mrs. Townsend wished more than anything else that she could have spit directly in his face. As it was, she simply nodded. “Yes,” she hissed out, voice raspy. He released her and she sank down to the floor, watching his every move. All he did, however, was turn to the window and place his hands heavily upon the ledge.

“Mrs. Brown is after them,” he assured her calmly. “Everything will be back on track momentarily.”

True to his words, Mrs. Brown was en route to the Bingley townhome in the black carriage (its only defining mark was the age of the object, which dated it back near twenty years). She set each of her things upon the top of it, drawing on her gloves and withdrawing a pistol from inside the hearth of the carriage, briskly walking inside and was pleased to find the door already open.

She found an elderly man standing in the midst of the room, looking at what appeared to be a hunting gun.

Mrs. Brown raised the pistol at him. “I would not do that,” she warned. The man raised his hands up in the air, offering her an indescribable look that she could not quite merit as fear or anger. It should have been fear. She had the gun and all the power. “Now. Where is Mrs. Bingley?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” he replied. But his gaze shifted just slightly behind him.

Mrs. Brown approached, gesturing to the door to the kitchen. “Is she in there? Are you hiding her?” Her voice was shaking, like a volcano ready to erupt and there was no telling at which moment things would become unsafe. “What have you done with our chattel?”

“She is nothing of the sort,” the man said warningly. Mrs. Brown paused and raised the gun with its’ sights set properly on the man’s forehead. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously as she tried to recall if she had ever seen him before. His face was slightly familiar and there was a resemblance of a sort.

“Who are you?” she inquired flatly. “What are you doing here and who are you?”

“I am simply minding the house,” he replied. “Now, if you would put down the gun, I am sure we can reach an accord. A peaceful accord.”

She did not lower the pistol but one millimetre, unwilling to give her ground when she was sure
that there was someone else about. And when the inquiring voice came, sounding ‘Papa!’, Mrs. Brown smiled slowly, knowing now that she had Elizabeth Darcy in the home and that the tide had turned in her favour.

“No more questions,” Mrs. Brown informed him.

* 

Elizabeth heard the voices and hurried inside, hearing Jane and Bingley behind her, discussing something quite heady, as she could hear Bingley’s shock about the matter. But as she ventured further inside the house, she became more concerned for her Papa. “Papa!” she called out, tugging off her gloves and entering the main sitting room to find a gun being pointed directly at her by a familiar face. The very woman who had been assigned to assist her with William, the odious Mrs. Brown. She scowled mildly.

“Mrs. Darcy,” she greeted her pleasantly. “Good of you to join us. Your father, then, I presume? Then you may both tell me where Mrs. Bingley is, before I kill the both of you.”

“We would never do that,” Elizabeth insisted and was too proud and strong to put her hands in the air. She was not that weak.

She heard the sound of something creaking and apparently, so did her Papa and Mrs. Brown, for they both turned towards the door and the gun was lifted once more, but this time, not at her.

“Do you have anything left to say to your father?” Mrs. Brown inquired coldly.

“You would not.”

“Tell me where Jane Bingley is,” Mrs. Brown demanded.

“What do you want Jane for! She’s done nothing!” Elizabeth insisted, her voice rising slightly in the anger of the moment. She could hardly help it and in her fervent arguing, did not even see the shadow of someone entering the room. “She is innocent.”

“She has something that Mr. Townsend wishes and I am to fetch it for him!” Mrs. Brown said, with a maniacal laugh. “Once we have her child, then we will be happy. Don’t you see? That is all we need to be happy.”

Elizabeth stared, almost frozen in shock. Jane’s child? Jane was pregnant? She certainly hadn’t told Elizabeth anything of the sort.

“You’re mad,” Elizabeth remarked, staring at Mrs. Brown in horror.

The gun was raised again at Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth stared at him, shaking her head. “Papa! No!” she shrieked as Mrs. Brown took aim and then two shots ricocheted in the air. Elizabeth had covered her ears and closed her eyes, breathing in shakily. The very moment there was silence, she rushed over to Mr. Bennet’s side, but he was not upon the floor as one would expect.

“Let go of me,” Mrs. Brown was protesting, apparently fighting with someone. Perhaps Bingley?

Elizabeth stared at Mr. Bennet with deep worry. “Papa, are you all right? Are you hurt?”

“I am as fine as I can be, Lizzy,” he assured her quietly, sounding slightly shaken by the
encounter. She nodded and embraced him tightly, pressing a kiss to his forehead before turning to thank Bingley for saving her father’s life when she saw the most surprising thing she had ever expected to see.

“Darcy!” she reacted with shock, nearly sprinting over to his side. “What are you…” She slapped him across the cheek. “You were supposed to be watching William!” And then she kissed him firmly on the lips, even as he was keeping hold of Mrs. Brown by the wrists. “Thank you for saving Papa’s life.”

“My pearl,” Darcy remarked quietly. “If you could contain your happiness and your anger for a moment, we must tie this woman up.”

Elizabeth nodded, fetching rope from one of the drawers while Mr. Bennet brought over a chair for them to use. “Where did you come from?” she asked of her husband, when Mrs. Brown was properly tied up. Even though her father was standing there, she could not stop herself from cupping his face with both her palms, leaning in for a long and slow grateful kiss, never happier to see him than she was in that very moment. It did not matter where he came from because the most important thing was that he was there.

When she released him, he took one of her palms and kissed it gently. “Do not be mad,” he pleaded. “I left William with your mother at the Bingleys and I came straightaway to help.”

“Whatever anger will surely be gone,” Elizabeth reassured, “For you saved not only Papa’s life, but my own. And Jane’s, to be sure.”

“Where is your sister, Elizabeth?” Mr. Bennet inquired, peering around the rooms.

Darcy peered past the both of them, noting the kitchen door opened. He slowly wandered past them and pushed open the door the full way to reveal Jane and Bingley in the kitchen, Bingley with his hands over his wife’s ears, staring at Darcy. “Is everyone okay?”

Elizabeth peered over Darcy’s shoulder (her hands wrapped about his waist) and Mr. Bennet joined them in the doorway, as if eavesdropping on a private conversation. Elizabeth pushed past her husband and easily pushed Bingley away to hug Jane tightly, easing back. “You’re with child!” she remarked in awe. “Jane! Why did you not tell me!”

“I hardly knew,” Jane protested mildly, her eyes wide. “I would much rather have told you than had the news relayed to me by my kidnappers, Lizzy, to be sure.”

Bingley was the only one in the room frantically moving about, by the sounds of it, and Elizabeth turned to regard him, half-wondering if he understood that things were now under control. “Bingley, what’s the matter?” Darcy inquired.

“Mr. Townsend is still at large,” he informed them. “We have to go to the authorities. Now.”

He pushed into the main room and Elizabeth noted the way he froze in his steps, frowning as though there was not the happy news of Jane and his conception. “Elizabeth? Darcy? Mr. Bennet, sir?”

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked, releasing Jane (but keeping their hands entwined).

“Why is there an empty chair with rope strewn about it in my sitting room?” he asked flatly. “And where is Mrs. Brown?”
A week had passed between the great escape from the Townsend’s prison for Jane and the arrival back to Pemberly with every party safe and sound (though wholly on edge due to the unknown whereabouts of both Mrs. Brown and Mr. Townsend). The settling was quite awkward at first, as no one knew precisely what they might talk about.

Though, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet did not appreciate propriety as much as the Darcys and Bingleys did. It quite often showed, as Darcy had such an astute way of pointing out.

“Jane!” Mrs. Bennet announced happily, when everyone was settled. “Come, let us see how far along you are!” Each day was a crow of this familiar song, as far as Darcy was concerned. He had endured a very long, terribly unpleasant conversation with Elizabeth regarding his failures in leaving William with his grandmother while he joined them to find Jane. Darcy, most pointedly, did not remind Elizabeth (his most dear, darling pearl) that were it not for him, things might be very, very awry.

Jane, the poor thing, looked exhausted. Charles had inquired as to why his wife was so wan the other night over glasses of port and Darcy had informed him that it was a natural step in the progression of a woman with child.

Elizabeth herself had not risen from bed for days during the early weeks.

He had assured his closest friend that Jane would feel much improved in the weeks to come and had hinted at the revival of spirits that most pregnant women experienced in the midst of their expectancy. That had seemed to lift Charles’ spirits and he heard no more complaining from the man.

Jane consented to her mother’s close scrutiny while Darcy and Elizabeth quickly escaped from the room to have their own private conversation in the hallway, punctuated by soft kisses (as they were hidden in the alcove and could not be seen). He clasped her hands tightly and smiled warmly.

His love for her had much improved over the course of the past several weeks when he had realized that what had happened to Jane might have happened to Elizabeth and though he was sure it was simply his paranoid mind at work, it made him all the more grateful for every additional moment with his wife.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth observed, a wicked tone in her voice. “Whatever do you have in mind for this alcove?”

“I assure you, only the most proper of things,” he replied, much amused by the implication. He did have news, in the most serious of lights, and wished to express it to his wife first and foremost before everyone else heard of the news. “The post came in this morning with an interesting item.”

“Oh?” Elizabeth prodded, and though she appeared to be waiting patiently for his news, her thumb was rubbing gentle circles upon his wrist, much in the way he had expressed to liking.

“It appears that Mrs. Brown has been found guilty,” he remarked, a settled smile on his face. “The authorities have found her and charged her with the crimes of the sternest degree.”

“And what of Mr. Townsend?” Elizabeth hurried to ask. “What of him?”
“He has disappeared,” Darcy remarked, resting his hand upon the small of her back. “This does mean that we may live in relative safety.” And it also meant that his worries for the safety of both his family, the Bingleys, and the Bennets could not be quieted. “Lizzy, I am sure he will be found.”

“And found guilty,” Elizabeth swiftly remarked, vitriol in her voice. “That man is nothing but a crude example of the whole…”

“Elizabeth, my dear,” he said, stern and patient, “I beg of you to not insult the entirety of my sex when I am standing right here.”

“Do not worry so,” she whispered, rather impishly. “You were to be an example of your gender.”

“Very good, then,” he said, his mood much improved. Though he did not wish to move from their comfortable position and privacy, he could overhear Mr. Bennet staring in with poor Charles regarding the heir and what he was to be named, all the while Mrs. Bennet lectured Jane on the necessities of a safe confinement.

“My poor sister,” Elizabeth remarked, for she could clearly hear every word for herself. “I suspect her calm demeanor will not last so very long if Mama does continue at this game.”

Darcy leaned in for a lingering kiss, eternally grateful for his wife and her wit, her charm, and her calmness of mind. “Perhaps we might rescue them?”

“Perhaps,” she agreed, mocking his tone. She took his hand and led him back into the room. “Mama!” she remarked loudly, her voice interrupting all previous conversation. “Papa! Darcy has good news. Don’t you, Mr. Darcy?” she inquired politely, using proper names for such a proper occasion with such good news.

She made her way to Jane’s side and Darcy watched his wife the whole duration of his announcement, watching the way Elizabeth embraced her sister with such love and relief.

He was beginning to understand home and family, just the slightest bit more now, helped by his wife.

*

It was nearly eight months and a half to be precise, but it was upon that day that young William Darcy, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy and her husband traveled to the Bingleys estate once more. The young boy was now excitedly in the process of learning as many words as he could, babbling them out with such speed and dedication to the process of learning that both Elizabeth and Darcy could be nothing but wholly proud.

Jane delivered a healthy child, a little girl whom they named Charlotte (after much encouragement from Elizabeth). Though Jane confessed many years later that she had not rested comfortably since the kidnapping, she admitted that the day that she gave birth, she felt as though everything would change for the better.

“Congratulations,” Elizabeth remarked, when she finally had her sister and her niece all to herself and all meddling family members and husbands had been put into the hall.

Jane gently rocked the tiny newborn in her arms, peering upon her with such wonder and
amazement. “Thank you,” she whispered, as though terrified to wake up Charlotte. “Oh! She is so beautiful.”

“The spitting image of you, you know,” Elizabeth observed. “Perhaps a bit of her father in her mouth and eyes, but her demeanor is all of you.” She smiled wickedly. “She shall have to beat away the boys as she grows, just as you had them flocking to your skirts.”

“Do not be so silly, Lizzy,” Jane chastised. Elizabeth rolled her eyes, wondering if ever her sister would accept a compliment for what it was.

“She’s beautiful,” Jane repeated softly, staring down at her child in awe.

Elizabeth could not be prouder than she was at that moment. She leaned in, quite mischievous as she wrapped a loving arm about her sister. “Good,” she praised. “Because quite soon, you’re going to be an Aunt again, so I am very glad you appear to enjoy babies.”

Jane turned quickly, her eyes alight with wonder. “Does Darcy know?”

“No yet. I did want to tell you first,” Elizabeth admitted, beaming widely as she let out an excited laugh. “Perhaps a girl, to rival the beauty of yours, though mine shall never come close and I will simply have to settle for her to have the wit of her mother and the quizzical brow of her father,” she teased.

“Lizzy,” Jane chastised, but did giggle herself. The movements gently roused Charlotte and Elizabeth eased away from the bed to let her sister and her niece have a moment of solitude together, the very first in a long line of them. Elizabeth lingered in the doorway to watch her sister.

There were no further worries of finance, no worries of safety, and she was happy in such a way that it was visible, even. It was more than Elizabeth could ever ask for and she was content to say it. She closed the door behind her and made her way to find her husband and tell him the encouraging news.

With a little luck, Elizabeth though, her own pregnancy would be just slightly less turbulent than Jane’s.

But then, all good things came with a price.

THE END

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